The Case of the Green Gown

by splix

Summary

...Watson had at that time deserted me for a wife, the only selfish action which I can recall in our association. I was alone.

---Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier

Notes

Many, many thanks to Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet for friendship, infinite patience, beta, and Britpicking.
It wasn't the most vulgarly expensive house on Charles Street, which was saying something, Mycroft supposed. Even done up in fairy lights and garlands in deference to the season, or perhaps simply to the idea of general festivity, its classical façade remained graceful and serene, a testament to solidity and craftsmanship, a sturdy bulwark against an ever-encroaching horde of plate glass and raw metal and polished concrete, oddly lavatorial in a city he'd always considered beautiful beyond compare. He'd never admit it to the house's owner, but it soothed him to come here.

"I'll be half an hour at most," he informed the driver as he opened the door. "Circle if you must, but stay available."

"Yes, sir."

Mycroft stared up at the house and drew a deep sigh. If he had considered this a social obligation, he'd certainly never have come, but the object of his mission had proved disturbingly elusive of late. Cornering prey in its den was the obvious but hardly ideal move; with any luck she wouldn't suspect his motives until it was too late.

"Bugger," he whispered, and then strode to the doorstep.

He felt besieged at once; the place was choked with laughing, shouting, chattering humanity, tuxedoed, gowned, bejewelled, perfumed. Mycroft scarcely had room to hand his invitation to the eager young man who materialised at his side, gloved hand extended as if in supplication or perhaps benediction. He managed to ease his topcoat off by dint of holding his arms down at his sides like a tin soldier and shrugging, and the young man deftly accomplished the rest, slinging the coat over his arm. "Lady Howe?" Mycroft asked.

"Sorry, sir?"

"Where is Lady Howe?"

"Oh! She's in the drawing room, sir. Through there." The young man pointed, giving Mycroft a brilliant smile. His teeth were unnaturally white and straight, like a film star's.

Mycroft shot his cuffs and pushed determinedly through the crowd. He recognised some faces and nodded without smiling, refusing social ingress. He noted a few raised eyebrows in his direction and ignored them too, though he didn't begrudge them. It had been years and years since he'd been to an official Christmas function, let alone a smart gathering like this.

A tray was proffered by another white-toothed young man. "Champagne, sir?"

Mycroft took a glass. "Thank you." He sipped: good. Brut, not that sickly sweet stuff. He drained the glass, set it on a table next to a cachepot of fragrant, fragile narcissi, and kept moving.

There she was, in a corner, one hand resting on the lid of a piano, the other gesturing with a glass of champagne. The diamond bracelet on her wrist refracted the lights of a tall Christmas tree, sending tiny myriad pinpoints of brilliance onto the wall and ceiling. She leant toward the man speaking to her and laughed.

For a moment Mycroft simply watched her, cataloguing each movement. When he'd had enough, he
stepped forward. "Lady Howe."

She froze for half a second, an almost imperceptible reaction. Then she turned her head and smiled up at Mycroft. Shorter than average, she had a trick of imperiously tipping her chin upward and fixing her gaze even further up, as if other people were irritating and deliberate in their greater height. "Mycroft Holmes! My goodness. Here I've been inviting you to my parties for years and you've never come to a single one until now. May I introduce Lord Lindsay Sherwood and his divine wife Elise? Or do you already know one another?" She turned to the man beside her. "Are you acquainted with Mycroft Holmes? He's –"

"May I have a quiet word with you? It won't take a moment."

Lady Howe's smile stayed nailed in place. "Mycroft, don't tell me you've come to talk business – not looking the way you do. You're simply marvellous in evening dress."

Mycroft offered Lady Howe a frosty smile of his own. "Three minutes of your time only. I'm afraid it can't wait."

"There's dancing after dinner."

Mycroft didn't deign to respond.

"Oh, if you insist. Just for a moment, though. Lindsay, Elise – I know I saw Snaffles and Win here. Win has the funniest story about Nice – go find them, I'll catch up with you in two shakes of a lamb's tail." She sidestepped them and swept through the crowd gracefully, managing to chat here and there without stopping for so much as a second.

She led Mycroft through the corridor, into a library, mercifully deserted, and from there into a smaller room fitted with a little William and Mary writing cabinet and two leather chairs. She seated herself, her long autumn-green dress rustling as she crossed her legs. The pointed tip of one green shoe poked out from the hem. "Well?"

Mycroft clasped his hands behind his back. "I heard an interesting rumour today, Meredith."

"I'm sure you have, if it's dragged you out of your cave to come to one of my parties."

"It seems a piece of long-missing art has surfaced."

She frowned and abruptly rubbed at her nose. "Sorry. I think I'm getting a cold. What piece?"

"As I said, it's only a rumour. But early reports indicate the possibility that it's An Angel with Titus' Features."

"Oh." Meredith Howe rose to her feet. "Oh."

Mycroft watched her carefully. "This is news to you, I take it."

"Yes." She looked upward, past him. "Where was it found?" she asked in a much softer voice.

Perhaps – perhaps she was telling the truth after all. "Derry."

Her painstakingly made-up face sagged. She rubbed her cheek hard, as if she were scrubbing something away. "Oh."

"I don't need to tell you what the implications of this discovery are if this gets out, Meredith. And if the piece is authenticated, given the circumstances of its most recent provenance –" Mycroft shook
his head. "God help us all."

"Why? Mycroft, where was it –"

"Call him." Mycroft's voice was soft but implacable. "If he wants a meeting, I'll give it to him. We've got to nip this in the bud."

"I haven't spoken to him in over a year." She rubbed her face again and opened and closed her hands rapidly, then pressed them together.

Mycroft refrained from a sigh of impatience. They knew each other well enough to dispense with prevarication. "He's got a soft spot for you. Find him."

"I'll try. Excuse me, Mycroft – I'm not feeling well." She opened the baize-covered door and waited for him to step out. "I will – tomorrow. I can't drop everything now, not with two hundred people here. Surely you understand that." She smiled. "Even you, you old hermit. Go on – have some nibblies and something to drink. Get some value out of that outfit. You look splendid." She clutched the side of the door and rubbed her cheek again, spoiling her makeup.

"Are you quite all right?"

She nodded and attempted another smile, but it looked like a grimace. "I will be. I'm going to run upstairs and fix my face."

"It really is urgent, Meredith."

"I'm taking it seriously, Mycroft. I promise."

"All right." He turned and walked through the library.

"Mycroft!"

Mycroft turned. "What is it?"

Meredith Howe gave him a mock military salute. "Merry Christmas."

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"Is it high enough?"

Mary, gingerly holding a double armful of boxwood garland, paused and considered. "Just a titch higher, I think."

"Here?" John lifted the string of lights until they were nearly flush with the mirror frame.

"No, you've got to drape them."

They had this conversation every year. Either John's memory was going or Mary's choice of placement was totally arbitrary, because no matter that the mirror got a swag of lights every damned year, it never seemed to be in the same configuration. Swagged, draped, looped – he wished she'd do it herself. "Here?"
"No, a smidge higher."

"Uh-huh. How much is a smidge?"


"Mary –"

"Two and a half inches."

"Right. That I can do." John raised the lights again. "Here?"

"Perfect." Mary nodded in apparent satisfaction. "Looks fabulous."

"You're just saying that."

"Yes, I am. Get out of the way, I'll do it. Switch places with me." She held up the boxwood garland.

John hung the lights on the corner of the mirror and got off the step-ladder, taking the garland carefully from Mary's hands. She had tied little sprigs of holly and the tiniest clove-studded satsumas to it at intervals. "This is nice."

"Thank you. I hope it lasts and the bloody satsumas don't get shrivelly before Christmas Day." Mary ascended the step-ladder and draped the lights over the mirror. "How's that?"

"Oh, God, how the hell would I know?" Suddenly John frowned. He bent and sniffed at the garland. "This smells like cat piss."

"Yeah, a little. Don't worry, it'll calm down in a few hours. I was working by the window, and the sun was shining on it, so it got a bit warm."

"That's nice. Very Christmasy. It's got that meth-lab charm going for it."

"Deck the halls with smelly cat pee, fa la la la la…." Mary stepped down and took the garland. "John. Relax."

"I am relaxed," John protested. A lie, and not even a good one.

Mary sighed. "I told you that you didn't have to do this. You can still back out, but…I want to see her. She's the only family I've got now, beside you and Nora." She transferred the garland to the coffee table and laid her hand on the side of his cheek. "I know how upsetting this must be."

"It's not. I'm okay." John took a step back, saw the sudden hurt in her eyes, and leant forward to kiss her mouth. "I am. And you smell of cat pee now, you know that?" He poked her tummy.

"Yeah, you love it. I'm going to douse myself in it every night now. Turn-on. Hot, hot, hot."

"Mum."

Eleanor slouched in the doorway in an oversized jumper, black tights, and a short, fluffy pink skirt. Her soft brown hair, cut to just below her ears, was drawn back with a pink Alice band.

"Yes, darling?"

"Is this all right?"
John squinted. "Is that my jumper?"

Nora sighed. "It doesn't fit you anymore, Dad." She shook her head at him, not with contempt or rebellion, but with a weary patience, as if John was a terribly slow learner. And she was right – it had got shrunk in the wash accidentally, but it was the principle of the thing.

"You look adorable," Mary said. "Do us a favour and open that tin of lemon biscuits on the worktop. Get the crystal plate from the top right cabinet and set them out. Make them look nice."

"Okay." Nora trudged to the kitchen, her clompy shoes thudding on the parquet.

John turned to Mary. "That skirt is too short."

"She's wearing tights. And you can't see her bottom, so relax."

"She's nine. And if you let her wear it now, she's going to want to wear it outside."

"It's winter, John. She's not going to wear it with bare legs."

John pressed his lips together. Mary was obdurate on the matter of Nora's clothing. "Fine. You know best." He turned away and picked up another strand of lights.

"John."

"What?" John carefully disentangled the strand.

"Let's not, all right?"

He sagged. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm a little on edge."

"I know." Mary took a step forward and enfolded him in her arms, resting her cheek against his back. "I know. Look, you've always been... amazing. Don't think I don't know that. I know this was out of the blue, but she tracked me down, she wanted to see me, meet you and Nora. It's going to be... she's going to call me Annie, John."

John stiffened. He didn't want to hear any of this.

"She's going to bring up events I've never talked about and people you don't know. You don't have to stay. I'll make an excuse for you. I don't mind. And I'm sorry it happened, but it has happened, and I've got to get this over with."

"Okay. Okay." John took a deep breath and turned. He smoothed back a lock of Mary's hair. "You haven't got any other... never mind. It's okay." He'd spent nearly ten years in silence, and they'd managed remarkably well in that time. And if at times he was resentful, or uneasy, he'd kept his lip buttoned. He'd made her a promise, and he didn't break his promises lightly.

Mary smiled. "Besides, she knows lots of rich people, some with pull at St Teresa's."

"Okay, we're definitely not discussing that right now." He brandished the lights. "Right, she's going to be here soon. Let's get this place glittering and impress the hell out of her."

*
The visit with Mary's Aunt Trish was surprisingly pleasant. She was a short woman, even smaller than Mary, with piles of blonde, expensive-looking hair, lots of jewelry, and an ankle-length fur coat. Her accent was American but John couldn't tell what region it was from – Southern, maybe, or Midwestern? She called Mary Annie, as Mary had warned him, and had referred to a few distant relations, but had mostly chattered about her experiences in London and Paris and St. Moritz. She'd gone into swoons over how Nora was Mary's spitting image (spittin' image was how she'd put it) and had rhapsodised over how cute and darling and adorable the house looked. John thought they were euphemisms for 'minuscule' but couldn't be sure.

The best thing about the visit was that it was brief, as Trish had other appointments. She tip-tapped toward the front door in precariously high heels, holding Nora's hand. "Now you call before I go, we'll have tea. Nora, have you ever had tea at the Connaught? It's so fancy, you wouldn't believe it. They've got a harpist and all kinds of little sandwiches and cakes that look like a pile of itty-bitty sugary presents. Then we'll go shopping, you and me." She put her hands on Nora's shoulders, hardly needing to bend down to kiss her. "Give me a hug, you pretty, precious girl."

Nora, never the most demonstrative child, actually put her arms around Trish's shoulders and offered a friendly if not enthusiastic embrace. "It was very nice to meet you."

"Oh my God, she's so cute. That little accent!" Trish turned to John and flung her arms round him as well. "It was so good to meet you, John. You take care of these girls, you hear?"

"I will." John patted her back – it was like stroking a five-foot-tall rabbit. Though it was probably a posher fur than rabbit. "Lovely to meet you too."

"All right." Trish turned to Mary. "You come here." She hugged Mary tightly. "This week, okay? I'm only here 'til Friday."

"Promise," Mary said, and held Trish away. "Thursday. 'Bye. Love you."

John discreetly drew the curtain back a handspan to watch the silver Rolls move down the street. "Jesus. Where does all the money come from?"

"Her first husband was in oil. Died youngish, left her everything."

"First?"

"Yeah, she's had a few, apparently." Mary began to gather up cups and plates. "Give me a hand?"

"Mum," Nora said, "why'd she call you Annie?"

"I told you – that was what my family used to call me, Nora. It was a nickname. Like yours."

"But Annie isn't short for Mary. It's long for Ann."

Mary laughed. "Could be short for Annabelle."

"Yeah, I suppose." Nora took the last lemon biscuit from the plate. "Can we really go to tea at the whatever?"

"If you get your schoolwork done on time this week, yes. I have a short shift on Thursday. Mind your manners and get your work done and you can see how the other half lives. Well, the other point-five percent." Mary folded a rucked-up woollen blanket. "Kiss your dad good night and brush your teeth. I'll be there in a bit."
Nora squeezed John around the middle and scrunched her nose. "'Night, Daddy."

John rubbed his nose against hers, fragrant with shampoo and that ineffable child-scent that was slowly, sadly diminishing. Short skirts and fading baby-smell; his heart clenched tightly enough to give him pain. "'Night, sweetness." He watched her bounce away. Almost ten, but already she had moments of adult seriousness that disquieted him. And sometimes, she was as silly and giggly as a toddler. The dissonance frightened him a little.

He took the soiled dishes into the kitchen and washed them as Mary helped Nora get ready for bed, then headed into the bedroom. He had a full roster the next day — that was good. Staying busy was good. Excellent, in fact.

After brushing his teeth, he stripped to his boxers and t-shirt and crawled into bed. He picked up the *Lancet* he'd been reading three nights running and turned to an article on maggot therapy. As he saw the accompanying photograph, a nostalgic smile crept onto his face.

"You look happy."

John looked up. "Oh, yeah, just…drifting a little." He watched as Mary began to strip to her undies. "Trish was nice," he offered.

"Yeah, she is. Not much different from what I remember."

"She's not a lot older than you are."

"Mm – fifty, fifty-five, maybe? She was my mum's youngest sister." Mary unhooked her bra and slipped a nightie over her head. She hiked the skirt up, pulled off her panties, and tossed them into the bathroom hamper. Grabbing a bottle of lotion from the dresser, she massaged some into her hands and elbows.

"She didn't talk about your family a lot."

Mary shook her head. "We talked about all that when we met for lunch last week."

John felt the old anxiety rising again, a chattering little imp of doubt. "Did you ask her not to talk about them in front of me?"

"John…." Mary got into bed and pulled up the duvet. "Yes, I did. Does that upset you?"

"No. No, not really. It's just…it's a bit weird, that's all. You're sure you haven't got any other family lurking about?" he joked.

"I'm sure." Mary pressed against him and draped an arm over his chest.

He lay the *Lancet* on the bedside table and stroked from her shoulder to her hip. Mary's hand slipped lower, over his stomach, under the waistband of his boxers, closing round his cock. "Oh." He closed his eyes for a moment to feel the length of her body against his, her softness, the heat of her, the movement of her hand. He was ready almost immediately. He pulled his boxers down, rolled atop her, tugging the nightie upward. In, in, in. He moaned quietly.

"That's it. That's – ah, God, yeah." Mary undulated beneath him, her thighs gripping his hips.

Good. It was still good, it was brilliant, in fact. John thrust and thrust and finally shuddered and groaned as he came. He held Mary closely, burying his nose in her neck, inhaling her fragrance, always more complex than soap or perfume or food.
"I love you, John."

"Love you too." And he did. She was a closed book, but he loved her.

They disentangled. Mary rolled over and went to sleep. John righted his boxers, picked the *Lancet* up again, and returned to the world of maggot therapy.

He told the niggling little voice of doubt, very firmly, to shut the hell up.

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His breath whistled out of his lungs as he ran, his feet splashing in freezing puddles of filth that didn't bear thinking about. The path ahead of him dipped downward into utter blackness, but that was fine; he knew every last scrap of Finsbury Park like the back of his hand. The tube station wasn't far away, and that was reassuring. Less reassuring were the pounding footsteps behind him, gaining on him. Five men, two decidedly armed.

There was the entrance to the tube station. He put on a burst of speed, and his foot slipped over something slimy. He skidded, his knee hyperextended with a sickening pop, and he crashed to the cold ground.

And they had him.

They hauled Sherlock up by his coat and dragged him, gasping with pain, into a clump of bushes. They flung him to the ground, and one of them – Conran, Freddy Conran, Sherlock remembered – straddled Sherlock's body and pulled a gun from the waistband of his tracksuit bottoms.

"You fucking *cunt.*" Freddy Conran's breath was a nauseating admixture of curry, beer, and poor dental hygiene. He shoved the barrel of the weapon into Sherlock's mouth, splitting his lip and knocking against his teeth. Sherlock tasted metal and oil and tried not to gag as the bore pushed against the back of his throat. "Where's the fucking case, you fuck?"

*Oh, for God's sake!* Surely Conran didn't expect an answer, what with the trifecta of his stinking breath, his heavy body crushing the air from Sherlock's lungs, and the gun he was shoving into Sherlock's mouth. In any case, the answer wouldn't have pleased him.

Where was the god-damned Met squad?

One of the other thugs kicked Sherlock in the shoulder. He wore trainers, and Sherlock had his coat on, but it was still hard enough to hurt. Sherlock grunted, and his teeth clacked hard on the gun barrel. He hoped it wasn't too sensitive.

"Fuck off, Wes!" Conran snarled. He pulled the weapon from Sherlock's mouth and placed the barrel against his forehead. "I'm going to ask you one more time, you poncy fuck. Where's the case?"

Sherlock drew a shuddering breath. "It's at my flat."

"What the fuck's it doing there?"

"What the fuck do you *think* it's doing there?" Sherlock retorted. "I want a cut."

Conran snorted. "You?" He shook his head in disbelief. "That's the way you've been working all
these years? The fucking papers make you out to be a saint."

"Don't believe everything you hear." Sherlock felt a little more at ease; Conran was listening. And from further away, he heard the sound of quietly approaching footsteps. "You can't get to the case unless I take you. It's wired."

"Christ. Maybe I like you after all." Conran shook his head again and slipped the weapon back into his trousers.

_Didn't click the safety. Pity if it discharged and blew his balls off._ Sherlock smiled and closed his eyes just in time to avoid being blinded by the brilliant white light flooding the tiny copse.

"Freddy Conran!" Undisguised footsteps, considerably more than five, and the now-welcome sound of readied weaponry. "Hands where we can see them."

Conran froze. "Fuck," he whispered, and slowly raised his hands. There was a flurry of movement as he was dragged away from Sherlock's body and his cohorts were apprehended and rapidly disarmed.

Sherlock lay still for a moment, listening to a distinctive set of footsteps. He turned and opened his eyes. "Evening, Donovan. Took you long enough."

"It was going fine until you decided to lead them on a merry chase through Finsbury Park."

"Clearly you still haven't sorted out the meaning of diversionary tactics."

"Sod off, Sherlock." Donovan holstered her weapon.

"Gladly." Sherlock wanted to get up, but he wanted to do it away from Donovan's too-sharp gaze. He folded his hands atop his chest and waited.

"You planning to sleep here tonight?" Donovan inquired nastily.

"Problem?"

"There's a law against vagrancy. Also, it's going to hit below zero tonight."

"I'm fine, thanks."

Donovan snorted elegantly. "You're hurt, aren't you?"

"Certainly not."

"Bollocks. Give me your hand."

Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes. Clearly she wasn't going to leave until _he_ did. "I'm not hurt," he muttered, and pushed himself up. He balanced on his good leg and bounced up nimbly, then set half his weight on the bad leg and almost went down again. Sally Donovan caught his arm and, momentarily forgetting pride and dignity, Sherlock clung to her for support.

"You idiot," she said softly, and turned to address a man in uniform. "Jennings, get me a car."

"I'm fine," Sherlock insisted.

"Mm." Donovan blew a curl away from her face. "Course you are."
"Right, get out of my car. You stink," Donovan said, rolling up to 221B. "Did you roll in dog shit or something?"

"Not deliberately," Sherlock replied, rubbing his eyes. He'd been up for nearly thirty hours and was beginning to feel it. Actually, he'd begun to feel it five or six hours ago – if he hadn't been fatigued, he'd have outrun Conran and Company faster, he wouldn't have slipped, and he wouldn't have needed rescue from the Met. Damn it. "Oh – the case is in Stewie Graves' flat, under the floorboards, along with the heroin. Two hundred kilos, if Stewie hasn't tried to offload some of it himself, and God knows he might have done, considering how stupid he is."

"Okay. I'll send a team straightaway. Do you need help getting upstairs?"

"No," Sherlock snapped. He opened the door, swung his legs out, and carefully exited the car in an effort to spare himself further humiliation. Not a serious injury, the doctor at A&E had said – the staff had iced it and bandaged it tightly and given him a painkiller, and then advised him to use the RICE method of treatment. He would, they asserted, be right as rain in a few weeks.

A few weeks.

"Sherlock!"

"What?" Sherlock leant down, scowling.

Donovan stared straight ahead. "Well done."

"Oh." Sherlock cleared his throat. "Thank you."

"Night."

"Good night, Donovan." He closed the door and slowly made his way up the stairs.

The flat was cold; he'd neglected to heat it in his preoccupation with the case. He turned the gas up, limped to the wall socket, and plugged in his little strands of Christmas lights illuminating the window and mantel. An experimental sniff informed him that Donovan hadn't been exaggerating. He smelled terrible, and the odour emanated from his coat – probably he had landed in something whilst crashing to the ground. With a sigh, he shrugged out of it, balled it up inside-out, and stuffed it into a bin bag for cleaning.

Wrapping his woolly plaid blanket around himself, he went to the sofa and dropped onto it with an ungraceful plop. Too tired to eat or even to make himself a cup of tea, he sorted through nearly a week's worth of post. Three magazines, one box of lab equipment, seven consultancy requests, one – One Christmas card.

Sherlock's heart beat double-quick for a moment as he tore the envelope open and pulled out a single sheet of photo paper. There they were: the Watson family, wearing Santa hats and grinning at the camera. Well, John and Mary were grinning. Eleanor was unsmiling, her expression more than a bit sulky, as if she knew damn well that posing for a Christmas card in a stupid Santa hat was absolute rubbish. He couldn't help but approve.
Merry Christmas From The Watsons! the card blared across the top. Sherlock turned it over.

To Sherlock – hope your Christmas is merry and bright.

John
Mary XOXO
Nora

The message and John's name was in his handwriting; Mary and Nora had added their own signatures.

He flipped it over again and stared at the photo for a long time. He rose painfully, limped to the mantel, and set it beside the cards from Lestrade and Mike Stamford and Anderson. He collapsed on the sofa again, curled up as much as his bad knee would allow, and slept.

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The insistent shrilling of the phone woke him from a deep sleep. Blinking, disoriented, he reached for it and squinted at the readout. Two o'clock, and Mycroft.

"What, Mycroft? I was sleeping."

"That's nice. I need your help, Sherlock."

"Why? Are you trapped in a bathtub filled with mincemeat?"

"I haven't got time to joke. There's a car waiting downstairs."

Much as Sherlock hated to admit it, even to himself, he was exhausted. "Can't it wait?"

"I need you here before the police come." Mycroft's voice vibrated with an urgency Sherlock had rarely heard before. "Please."

Thank God for adrenaline; it flooded his veins, sending him into full, if precarious, alertness. "On my way."

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Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

As ever, profuse thanks are due to Kimberlite and vilestrumpet for their close, careful beta and Britpicking.

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He'd chosen the wrong time to turn up, that much was obvious; the corridors were full of grinning, jabbering lunatics with arms full of Mylar balloons and stuffed toys, dashing to and fro and embracing each other indiscriminately. Sherlock could have easily bypassed the neonatal unit's security system, but John had been unreasonably on edge the past few weeks and turning up at two in the morning might have set him off again.

Sherlock made his way down the chilly corridor until he found the correct room. No, that wasn't right – there was a very young Indian woman in the bed, nursing an infant. She glanced up at him incuriously.

"Sorry, I'm looking for Mary Watson's room."

"Hey," came a whisper, and John peered out from the dividing curtain. He put a finger to his lips, but with a sideways toss of his head indicated that Sherlock should come in.

Sherlock pulled the curtain aside. Mary was in bed, asleep, but John was awake, with a tiny pink bundle cradled in his arms. He looked exhausted and deliriously happy. "Hello, John."

"Here she is." John angled the bundle toward Sherlock.

There wasn't much to see. A swaddled bit of pink angora, a red face with tightly closed eyes, a fluff of indeterminately coloured hair peeking from beneath a soft cap. Looked a bit like a newborn rat, actually. "Everything went well?"

"Yeah. Great." John beamed. "Had her first meal a little while ago. She wouldn't eat at first, but she's doing great now. Want to hold her?"

Sherlock hesitated a second, then nodded and set his parcel down on Mary's swing-out table/cart contraption. He took off his gloves.

"Sanitise," John said softly, nodding toward a bottle on the table.

Obligingly, Sherlock cleaned his hands and held them out.

"Okay. Nice and gentle, and make sure you support her head. Right in the crook of your elbow. There you go." John laid the bundle in Sherlock's arms.
Six and a half pounds at most, and clearly content with her recent meal – she hadn't so much as
flickered an eyelash as Sherlock accepted her. The blanket that enfolded her like a wonton wrapper
was a hand-knitted gift from Mrs Hudson, judging by the faint scent of Kasbah Nights that clung to it
as well as the drifting bits of pink wool that had intermittently clung to Mrs Hudson for the past two
months. Sherlock examined her nose, a little button of a thing like Mary's, and her mouth, a
minuscule rosebud, too early to tell which parent it favoured. He dipped his head and sniffed.
Combination of hospital cleanser, vernix caseosa, and amniotic fluid.

"What do you think?" John inquired softly.

Mary's pregnancy had been perfectly normal. Summer conception, love amongst the roses.

Sherlock touched the tip of his index finger to the baby's nose. She slept on, oblivious to his
prodding. He looked up at John's tired, happy, slightly anxious face. "Well done, John," he
murmured, and saw John's shoulders drop a bit, as if he were relieved. Sherlock's breath stuttered
for a moment, then relaxed. It was fine. It was good. Mary had given birth to John's baby, a healthy
girl. Good. "What name did you decide on?"

"Eleanor," John said. "Eleanor Anne Wilhelmina Watson."

"Bit of a mouthful," Sherlock observed.

"We'll probably end up calling her Ellie. Want me to take her back?"

"No, I'm fine."

"Sit down," John said, and pointed to a recliner. He whisked a pillow and blanket away from the
chair – he'd spent the night, obviously – and ushered Sherlock to it. "She must like you. The midwife
was holding her, trying to help Mary feed her, and she wouldn't stop screaming."

"Sensible girl." Sherlock smiled at John.

"She probably just knows how impatient you are." John smiled back, then chuckled. He clamped his
hand over his mouth to stifle a full-out giggle, then covered his face. When he took his hands away,
his eyes were wet. "Oh, God, Sherlock! I can't stop looking at her. She's…she's the most beautiful
thing I've ever seen. She's so little, so perfect. How'd I get so lucky?"

"There's no such thing as luck," Sherlock began, then realised that he was on the verge of saying
that babies were born every day, and it wasn't exactly a singular event. But he caught himself and
stepped hard on his flippant reply. The past few months had been hectic, often horrible, and in the
strange pockets of isolation he'd experienced, Sherlock had had time to think about things best left
unsaid, even between friends. Perhaps especially between friends. And John was happy; Sherlock
had never seen him weeping with happiness, but the bright gleam in his eyes was unmistakable.

And finally, what had the last few months of Sherlock's life been for, if not for John?

"No such thing," Sherlock repeated. "We make our own luck." He nodded down at Eleanor.
"Obviously."

John beamed again, his smile brilliant enough to illuminate the entire room.

In the bed, Mary stirred and opened her eyes. She groaned slightly, then said, "Sherlock?"

"Hello, Mary. Congratulations."
She smiled and stretched her arms. "Ooh, that aches. Is she asleep?"

"Yeah." John moved to the bed and clasped Mary's hand in both of his. "I put her in his arms and she didn't let out a peep."

"Ah, she's behaving herself for her Uncle Sherlock. She knows he's hard to impress." Mary pressed the button to raise the head of the bed. "I'm parched, love. Would you –?"

"Yep." John poured her a cup of water from the plastic pitcher on the table. "There you go." He held on to her hand as she drank, and kissed her cheek when she put the cup down.

Sherlock scrutinised their faces, then looked down at the cause of their joy, who had opened her eyes. They were a greyish blue and seemed to regard him curiously, though he likely wasn't more than a huge dark blur to her. Nevertheless, he brought her closer, holding her gaze. "Maybe you are a lucky little thing," he whispered. Eleanor yawned widely, exposing pink gums and a wee tongue along with a slight odour of colostrum, and closed her eyes again. Sherlock smiled at John and Mary. "I've bored her. Sauce for the goose."

"I should probably try to feed her again," Mary said.

"Right." Sherlock got up and brought the baby to Mary's bedside. "Here you are."

"Thank you." Mary squeezed his hand. "Thank you for coming. I know you're busy."

"Yeah," John said. "God, yeah. Anything new?"

"Not much," Sherlock said. "The Met found a setup in the middle of Fulham with enough electronic firepower to hijack the airwaves, but nothing solid yet." He rolled his eyes. "Of course they found it last week and failed to make any obvious connections. I'm headed down there tonight. Shouldn't take more than a few hours."

"Great," John said. "I'm sure you'll turn something up."

Sherlock buttoned his coat. "You'll be back in time for her next feeding. Mary, I've brought –"

"Wait – what?" John peered at Sherlock incredulously.

"Fulham," Sherlock repeated, and turned to retrieve John's coat. "Mary, you don't mind."

John uttered a nervous laugh. "Sherlock, I can't go with you."

Sherlock paused, John's coat in his hands. "Why not?"

"Why not – in case you hadn't noticed, we've just had a baby."

"And?"

"And, I'm not fucking – sorry. I'm not going anywhere, Sherlock." He shook his head and laid his hand on the baby's pink-swaddled body. "Sorry."

A strange, tingly chill descended over Sherlock, as if he were coming down with flu. But his brain was ticking at the double.

Of course. Of course.

It was hardly to be wondered at that John wanted to spend time with his new family. It was a shock,
and Sherlock should have known it would happen. Hadn't Mycroft warned him? Hadn't Mrs Hudson? But he'd barrelled on, blind and stupid, and here he was, and there they were, and he should have seen it coming. Stupid, stupid.

He feigned a grin. "Obviously. Yeah, I know. Can't tear yourself away. Of course not."

John's face had sagged a bit. "It's just –"

"No. No, I know." Sherlock dropped John's coat on the recliner. "Erm...I'll brief you, if you're interested." He stuck his hands in his pockets to retrieve his gloves and withdrew them along with a folded envelope, a year's subscription to a nappy service. "Here – this is for you. And the tin," he said, indicating the Fortnum and Mason carrier bag on the table.

One-handed, Mary slid the tin out. "Piccadilly biscuits. Sherlock, you're a gentleman and a prince. Give us a kiss."

Sherlock bent and kissed her cheek, then rubbed his fingertips over the soft angora wrapping Eleanor's feet. He nodded at John. "Take care of them."

"Let me know what happens," John said, a hint of some undiscernible emotion in his voice.

"Absolutely," Sherlock said, and made his way out, past the now-sleeping Indian woman, back into the corridor, out of the security gate, into the lift, out the door, onto the street. He drew his coat closely around himself against the wet, biting wind and hailed a taxi. "Fulham," he said, climbing into the cab, and gave the address.

Numb, he sat back against the seat, remembering Mycroft's harsh words just before Eleanor's birth.

"I've given up any attempt to dissuade you from your entanglement with the Watsons, Sherlock. I will say this: you will realise, not long from now, that in the face of family relations, your own self-importance becomes a pitiful thing, and they will wound you – not deliberately, but with kindness and a contempt you won't understand until it's far too late. I've done what I can, brother. I can't do any more."

"Shut up, Mycroft," Sherlock muttered. The cabbie looked over his shoulder, and Sherlock shot him a freezing glare full of hauteur. But an odd, niggling fear glimmered underneath.

He'd never expected John to fully understand the implications of what he'd done to Magnussen, why he'd done it. He'd never expected thanks, nor a reward. But he wanted...he would have liked....

Something. Something else.
"And why is there a delay?" Sherlock glanced round the house at what appeared to be the detritus of a well-attended Christmas bash. "Good God, is this why you're dressed up? You actually went to a Christmas do?"

"In a manner of speaking. I was here, then I left – and returned a short while ago. Come upstairs, Sherlock." Mycroft spun on his heel and rapidly ascended a curving flight of stairs, balustraded with elaborately carved wood that glowed from years of faithful oiling and polishing. "Come on, don't dawdle."

Sherlock followed behind slowly, affecting indifference to cover his injury. He should have taken some more paracetamol – his knee had transitioned from a low mutter to an insistent whine. He caught movement out of the corner of his eye and turned to observe two men and a woman in waiter's clothes, watching him anxiously.

Mycroft saw them as well. "I've instructed them to hold off on clearing, naturally. What have you done to your leg?"

"Drop it. Whose house is this?"

"Meredith Howe. Lady Meredith Howe. She's – she was – an art and antiquities expert, and sometime associate. She was particularly adept at procurement." Mycroft reached the top of the stairs and waited for Sherlock.

It was galling to actually be slower than the fat, bald git. "Procurement. Is that shorthand for 'thief'?"

"No." Mycroft hesitated. "No. All of her transactions involved an exchange of goods for currency."

"What are you trying to cover up?" Sherlock paused on the top step to catch his breath. Damn it.

Mycroft pursed his lips. "I don't know yet." He swept a hand down the corridor. "This way."

They went through a sitting room that wouldn't have looked out of place at the Hermitage, crowded with paintings and objects and delicate seventeenth and eighteenth century furnishings. Beyond that was a bedroom more austerely appointed, but still clearly expensive, swathed in apricot silk, then a dressing room painted bright scarlet and lined with shelves and built-in wardrobes reaching from floor to ceiling. At last they entered a bathroom of brown marble and copper fixtures, with a dead woman in a green evening gown crumpled next to the toilet.

There was a sharp smell of vomit and a fainter odour of faeces in the air. Sherlock sniffed and glanced into the toilet. "Did you flush?"

"The maid did."

Sherlock crouched next to the corpse. His injured joint groaned in protest; reluctantly he lowered himself to his good knee and balanced cautiously. "The maid found her? Where is she?"

"In hospital. She began feeling ill about an hour ago, after getting Lady Howe's body cleaned up."

"Poison?"

"I think that's a reasonable point of departure," Mycroft said, and continued to talk as Sherlock examined the body. "I had a conversation with Lady Howe this evening at about nine-thirty and left at approximately nine-forty. At ten past one I received a telephone call summoning me back. It seems Lady Howe shut herself in her bathroom shortly after I left and didn't re-emerge. Her maid had been busy working in another part of the house, and became concerned after Lady Howe's PA asked the
maid where she was. The PA and the maid came back to this suite of rooms and knocked insistently
but received no reply. After some time had passed – I can't say how much – the maid used her own
key to let herself in, and discovered Meredith on the floor."

"Meredith," Sherlock mused.

Mycroft ignored this. "Evidently the pair of them attempted to revive her, but she had likely been
dead for at least an hour, according to the PA, Georgina. Georgina called me –"

"Is Georgina on your payroll as well?" Sherlock interrupted. He bent to pick up a stray hair from the
bathroom floor. It was short, black, unlike Meredith Howe's pinned-up auburn waves.

"One can't be too careful, Sherlock."

"So the PA called you to clean up. Obviously Lady Howe was in the middle of something big. What
did the two of you talk about?"

Mycroft perched on the edge of the deep copper bathtub. "That's not relevant at this juncture. Let me
back up a moment. During that time, the party ended, and the guests departed with no apparent
concern that their hostess had disappeared – not uncommon at large events with a great deal of social
circulation. Meredith was known to vanish for hours on end, talking about art with this or that client
or acquaintance. It was her great passion. Even the last stragglers failed to comment on her absence.
While the guests were leaving, the maid cleaned Meredith up in an effort to restore a bit of dignity,
and subsequently felt ill. Georgina called me, I came here and called you. That's where we are."

Sherlock leant forward and sniffed Lady Howe's partially open mouth. Vomit, traces of Lancôme
lipstick. Lower down, Annick Goutal perfume - *Heure Exquise*. Dried sweat, body lotion,
antiperspirant, soap. He shook his head. "I need to examine her closely. I need a kit. Call Lestrade,
tell him to send one tech."

"No."

Sherlock turned and frowned at Mycroft. "No?"

"No. I wanted you to see her, and to observe what you can. We're leaving in ten minutes. The police
are due in twenty. You'll have access to the forensic lab as you please when they've gathered
physical evidence, but I need you to work quickly now."

"Thanks for the luxury of time!" Sherlock snapped. "What the hell's going on here, Mycroft?"

"I think it's very clear how she died, little brother, and quite candidly I don't really care who
killed her. I only have one question, and it's this: why did she permit it?"

"Obviously she didn't know about it."

Mycroft shook his head and withdrew a mobile from his inner breast pocket. "This was on the
vanity. She'd called a number at ten o'clock, but failed to alert her maid or call for help, even after
repeated bouts of vomiting and diarrhoea. Even if she didn't realise that she'd been poisoned, she
must have known she was terribly ill. Why, in a house full of people, did she allow herself to die?"

Slowly, Sherlock heaved himself to his feet. "Why do I have the feeling that you already know?"

"I have my suspicions. I need you to prove me right. Or rather, prove me wrong. I never thought I'd
say it, but that is my fervent hope."
"And you're not planning to give me any hints, is that it? Work it out on my own?"

Mycroft tossed Sherlock the mobile. "Start here."

Sherlock put the phone in his pocket. "What sort of game is this?"

"A rather large-scale game, little brother. Roughly twenty-five years of relative peace disrupted in a matter of weeks."

"Never mind, forget I asked," Sherlock replied, rolling his eyes. "It's always a crisis with you, and yet somehow the world keeps turning." He inspected the body on the floor again. Lady Howe was curled up as if she had died in terrible agony, and yet her face was serene. Sherlock dropped to the floor again. "Her makeup's worn off. I don't see evidence of dried sweat on her face, but it's on her body —" He nodded at the décolletage of her green dress, "and it's stained her dress." He looked closer. "Someone's wiped her makeup away. No…it was the maid, wasn't it? She massaged Lady Howe's face. Did the expression of pain upset her?" he inquired sardonically. It was possible. Most people thought death, even excruciating death, involved a gentle fluttering of the eyelids and a last sighing breath, which was rarely the case.

"You'll have to ask her."

"Where's the PA? Georgina?"

"Gone."

"Dead? I assume she handled the body as well. That was sloppy, Mycroft."

"No, not dead. Gone. Missing."

"Abducted?"

"Possibly. Or fled."

Sherlock sighed and examined the floor surrounding Lady Howe. "Someone's cleaned the floor very recently, Mycroft." Sherlock got up, made his way down the corridor and the stairs, ignoring his knee, and cornered the still-chattering waitstaff. "Where's the cleaning crew?"

"They won't be here until morning, sir," one of the waiters said.

"None of them were here earlier?"

"No, sir. They only come once a day."

"Go into the kitchen and bathrooms and take out everything that's been used for cleaning and polishing and put it into bin bags. Use gloves – oh, never mind, I'll do it myself. Don't touch anything." Sherlock limped back upstairs and into the bathroom, where Mycroft was still perched on the edge of the tub, texting. "Someone wanted to hide something." He rummaged beneath the sink and found some bin bags and cleaning supplies, though they appeared unused. Nevertheless, he bagged and sealed them as best he could, and tore through the other rooms of the house accordingly, snatching up every damp cloth and brush he saw.

When he came back into Lady Howe's bathroom, Mycroft was on his mobile. His head was bent, and he massaged the bridge of his nose with his fingertips. "Very well. Thank you." He rang off and looked bleakly at Sherlock.
"What?"
"The maid's dead."

Sherlock heard trampling footsteps and voices below stairs. "Damn."

"Give me the phone," Mycroft said. He stuffed it back in his pocket and nodded at Sherlock's collection of bin bags. "They won't let you go with any of that. Come on, let's leave."

"Mycroft, what—"

"Let's leave. Now, Sherlock."

*

Mycroft's car took Sherlock to 221B. To Sherlock's surprise, Mycroft instructed the driver to wait and insisted on accompanying Sherlock upstairs. Sherlock made the laborious climb in silence, his cheeks burning at the knowledge that Mycroft was assessing him and finding him wanting.

Sherlock fitted his key in the lock. "I hope you're not planning to spend the night. The sofa's not terribly comfortable."

"Not at all. I want a word with you." Mycroft followed Sherlock into the flat, sniffed fastidiously, and grimaced. "You should invest in a cleaning team."

"I don't want anyone disturbing things." Sherlock flung his coat over John's old chair and sank into his. His knee sighed in relief.

Mycroft kept his topcoat on. "I'm going out of town for a few weeks. Dubrovnik, Kiev, Moscow. I hope you'll have some answers for me when I return."

"You've been very cloak-and-dagger about all this, Mycroft, but frankly I can't see much motivation. Was she a friend of yours? Girlfriend, maybe?" Sherlock teased.

"No. Just a colleague." Mycroft didn't rise to the bait. He took the phone out of his pocket, examined it a moment, and laid it on the mantel beside the photograph of the Watson family. Staring at the picture, he picked it up. "Have you heard from John lately?"

"No."

Mycroft nodded and set the photo down. "Meredith's full title was Special Projects Procurer. Her chief role was that of a private buyer of lost items – specifically, items illegally acquired during the Second World War. She was personally responsible for the restoration of over fifty priceless works of art. Some of them were returned to family branches of private owners, some repatriated to national museums, and some have simply been stored."

"If she'd found over fifty pieces, there'd be a hue and cry, and surely repatriation of art would make worldwide news. Why the secrecy?"

"Politics," Mycroft said with a sour smile. "We do not wish to make waves. Some – many, actually – of the pieces were in places and hands best not publicised, and all parties generally agreed that quiet transactions were best."
Sherlock sat back, waiting for Mycroft to continue. His body was winding down again; he yearned for sleep.

"After an acceptable interval of time has passed, some of the restorations will indeed be publicised, but the origins of the pieces will remain vague. Today, though, I received a disturbing piece of news, and I can't help but connect it with Meredith's death."

"Which is?"

"Another painting has surfaced in Ireland. In Derry, to be exact, and moreover, there are whispers of more pieces – not just paintings, but sculpture, objets, furnishings, and so on. A large trove, in fact. I cannot confirm it, but my source is solid. I want you to investigate, and if there is a connection to her death, I want you to find it." Mycroft tucked the ends of his cream-coloured silk scarf into his topcoat. "Sherlock, there's more to this than a simple case."

The proposition was mildly interesting, but that was all. "Oh?"

"You may encounter old ghosts." Mycroft walked to the door. "Not to alarm you – ghosts they may be, harmless and ephemeral. However, I urge you to exercise caution."

Sherlock stretched. "You're becoming silly and sentimental in your old age. There are no ghosts."

"That's what I'm afraid of." Mycroft opened the door. "I'll be in touch, little brother. Sleep well. Mind your leg."

"Good night, Mycroft," Sherlock drawled, and slumped further down in the chair. He yawned, then got up, found some paracetamol, and dry-swallowed four. His knee complained as he went to the mantel and picked up the phone. He gave the Watson family photo another glance, then took the phone to the sofa and collapsed, working his feet out of his shoes but not bothering to remove his coat or scarf.

The thing needed charging, but there was enough juice to check the last number, and it wasn't password-protected. Sherlock noted the time – half four – but never mind; better to startle the recipient. Sometimes that revealed compelling information. He found the last number called and redialed.

"You have reached the main office of Chelmsford City Racecourse. The office is now closed. Please call during our normal operating hours of nine o'clock A.M. to six o'clock P.M. and someone will be happy to assist you. Thank you."

Sherlock rang off and gazed at the readout, frowning.

Calling a racecourse at ten o'clock in the evening. Not what he'd expected.

He set the phone on the coffee table, pulled the blanket over himself, and slept for nearly twelve hours.

* 

There was a little park at the end of John's road, a pocket-handkerchief-sized square of greenery that nonetheless was pretty and tranquil. John and Mary had taken Nora for endless walks round the tiny
duck pond, read book after book to her on the plush grass, picnicked in summer, and admired the fairy lights and ornaments that bedewed the trees in winter. John wended his way down the path toward the house, taking his time. Nora was at her Swimming Nature class until they picked her up at seven, and it would be a late dinner.

The evening was dark and cold, and the lights looked glorious. There were still clumps of snow here and there from the storm that had kicked up a few days before – someone had even built a snowman next to the duck pond, though it was sadly dilapidated now, its stick arms drooping forlornly toward the ground. John popped a breath mint before heading toward the house, visible through the trees. The front room light was on; Mary hadn't gone to fetch the little one yet.

A smell of cooking enveloped him as he stepped inside – a rich scent, olive oil and tomatoes and spices. "Mary?"

"Bedroom," Mary called.

John hung his coat and muffler and went into the kitchen, lifting the lid of the pot on the range. Steam bathed his face, along with the fragrance of simmering sauce. "Yum." He put the bottle in the fridge and went to the bedroom, where Mary sat on the bed in a jumble of boxes and carrier bags, a bemused expression on her face. "What's all this?"

Mary's brow creased. She met John's eyes for a moment, then lowered them again. "Trish sent some presents to us. Mostly for Nora."

"That was nice. What'd she send?" John moved closer. "Harrods."

"Yeah."

"What's wrong? You'd rather she sent something from Primark?" John joked.

Mary shook her head. "You're not going to like it."

"Did she get my size wrong?"

"No." Mary lifted the cover from a large box. Atop a sizeable stack of clothing was a raspberry-coloured velvet dress with a dainty white lace collar.

"Well, that's pretty. Wait." John thumbed beneath the dress. "How much – how many dresses did she buy?"

"Seven."

"Seven dresses, Jesus Christ. From Harrods?" John lifted the top dress and looked at the tag. "Christian Dior?" He looked at the one beneath it, a Black Watch plaid wool with black velvet trimmings. "Chloe." The one beneath that was red. "David Charles." And beneath that, Mini Preen, Burberry, Dolce and Gabbana – names he'd seen in shop windows and in the fashion magazines Sherlock used to read, God only knew why. "How much did these cost?"

"I didn't ask."

John's attention drifted from the dresses to a large carrier bag on the floor beside the bed. "And what's that?"

"More clothes."
"For you?"

"For Nora. Jeans, tops, tights. There's a darling little lilac-coloured coat...."

"We just got her a coat. Mary, that's too much. It must have cost a fortune, all this. Hundreds of pounds."

Mary kept her gaze fastened on the dresses.

"More?"

"Maybe."

"Thousands?" John felt a little sick. Thousands of pounds on clothes? "Mary, did you let her buy all this stuff?"

Mary met his eyes. "She doesn't have any other family, John, and she's got lots of money."

"Please tell me you didn't go shopping with her." John felt his blood beginning to boil. He picked up the carrier bag and started taking things out. Jumpers, jeans, skirts, little lace-trimmed nighties. He squinted at one of the tags that hadn't been removed properly. "Three hundred pounds – for a nightie, for fuck's sake? Are you planning to take her to meet Prince George, set the two of them up?"

"Come on, love. Don't be like that." Mary took the nightie from his hands and began to fold it.

John clenched his fists. They weren't dead-broke; they both worked, and even though the mortgage was astronomical and he'd been spending a bit more than usual lately, they covered expenses and had money for treats now and then. Neither of their demands were grandiose, and Nora hadn't yet hit the age where material wealth mattered a lot. But in the two weeks that Mary's Aunt Trish had been in London, she and Nora had spent time with her, soaking up the unattainable atmosphere of complete luxury. Nora had come home chattering about the delights of tea at the Connaught, hampers from Fortnum and Mason, and the pretty dresses at Harrods and Harvey Nichols. And Mary had been banging on about sending Nora to St Teresa's School – more than five thousand a term in fees alone, not including room, board, uniforms, excursions – and in bloody Surrey, close but not close enough for a daily back-and-forth drive. They'd argued over it numerous times and it had come down to two points of contention: it was far too expensive, and he didn't want Nora to leave. She was nine, he'd argued – wouldn't she be a surly teenager storming out of the house soon enough?

All this finery seemed like a capitulation on Mary's part, an acknowledgment of yearning for the unattainable. "Mary, we can't accept this. Tell Trish thank you, but we've got to send it back."

"She's gone back to the States."

"Hasn't she got a phone number?"

Mary gazed at him pleadingly. "John, I can't ask her to take it back. She made a huge effort picking it all out. She got me a dress, and you –" She rummaged in another bag and pulled out a short navy wool coat with smart military detailing. "It's gorgeous."

John touched it; the wool was sturdy, but wonderfully textured, obviously expensive, the sort of thing Sherlock would have bought without a second thought. He flashed back to something Sherlock had once said about buying less but making sure it was the very best – that from a man who owned eight dressing gowns. "I'm not wearing it."

"For Christ's sake." Mary laid the coat down and slid off the bed. She gathered up a stack of boxes,
apparently sized for each garment Trish had purchased for Nora. The stack would reach the ceiling. "It's a gift, John. You're not taking charity."

"I didn't say that." Though he'd thought it.

"Can you tell me something? Is there some reason your daughter shouldn't have pretty things?"

He couldn't believe her sometimes. "Jesus Christ, don't play dense, Mary. That's not what this is about. Of course I want her to have pretty things, but she can get pretty things from Marks and Spencer, or Debenham's. She's a normal little girl – she likes to run and play in the mud. You want her muddying a four hundred pound pair of jeans? You don't even own an item of clothing that costs four hundred pounds."

"I do now," Mary said softly.

"I'll bet you do. Send it back. We're not keeping any of it."

Mary's mouth tightened. "I'm not going to."

John wheeled on her. "We could finish paying the house off with all this shit, Mary! This isn't the life we lead!"

"What bothers you so much about this, John?" Mary took a step closer, her hands knotted, mirroring John's. "They're just things."

"If they're just things," John mimicked viciously, "then you shouldn't have any difficulty taking them back."

Mary's face softened. "Look. I know why you're angry."

He didn't know why, but her calm expression and sympathetic tone enraged him. He held himself still. "Really."

"You feel guilty."

"What the fuck are you talking about?" John felt his face going red, a traitor's blush.

"Money. You've been –"

"What? What have I been?"

Mary turned away, shaking her head. "Nothing. Never mind. I'm going to fetch Nora." She began to pile clothes back into boxes and bags.

"I'll go."

"It's quicker if I drive –"

"Don't bother." John turned on his heel and went back to the front room. He collected his coat and slammed the door on the way out.

*
Nora was tired, glassy-eyed on the ride home. Too weary even to chirp about her lesson, she leant against John's arm, the damp ends of the hair sticking out of her cap darkening John's parka.

*My fifty-pound parka.*

John closed his eyes and sighed. His hands itched, but he kept them firmly in his pockets. It was too late, anyhow….

He wasn't certain how he'd come to this. Every morning he awoke with a heart filled with anticipation, as if his sea of dreams and fancies had borne him closer to the horizon of some genuine excitement, but seconds after awakening, the truth dawned, and he realised where he was: in bed, in a house, his wife and child nearby, an ordinary day ahead, a corridor of days behind closed doors that proved identical no matter which door he opened. And though he loved Mary and Nora fiercely (even though his fights with Mary made him furious) and he told himself he was content, his heart knew the truth.

Oh, God, he hated it, and loathed himself.

His phone was a heavy weight in his pocket. He took it out, keyed in his password.

He'd been so careful; he used a separate account, and it wasn't much. It hadn't been much. Lately, little amounts had been adding up. Had Mary looked at his phone? She'd always respected his privacy, but….

The screen flashed.

*skyBET*

John's chest tightened. He glanced down at Nora: fast asleep. He typed rapidly, and the screen flashed again.

1:00 Leicester, Hurdle, Class 4, 2m  
1:30 Leicester, Hurdle, Class 5, 2m 4f 110y  
2:05 Leicester, Handicap Chase, Class 4, 2m  
2:35 Leicester, Handicap Hurdle, Class 4, 2m 4f 110y  
3:10 Leicester, Handicap Chase, Class 4, 2m 7f 110y  
3:40 Leicester, Handicap Hurdle, Class 5, 2m

*Place a bet of £1.00 to watch this race*

He tapped the link, and the tightness in his chest began to ease.

*
Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

As always, thanks to kimberlite and vilestrumpet for amazing and lightning-fast beta and Britpick, and for being generally excellent as well. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*

December 2015

"Mary –" John heaved the teetering pile of boxes and carrier bags back into the tiny wardrobe with his shoulder and closed the door. "I thought you said the lights were in there."

"If you recall, I said they might be there. It was far from a definitive statement." Mary lounged on the sofa, nursing Nora.

"We need a bigger place."

"I think we just need to organise a bit better. Get rid of some stuff."

"In all our free time, right?" John moved to the sofa and thumped down next to Mary. He stroked the soles of Nora's feet, warmly clad in fuzzy purple pyjamas, and turned to the basket of unfolded laundry, picking up a tiny yellow jumper with woolly red bobbles. "Is this new?"

"New-ish. Got it from Grace's mum, Jen."

"She's going to eat the bobbles." John folded the little thing. "Where are those fucking lights?"

Mary lifted Nora a bit higher. "Try the shed."

"It's pissing out," John said querulously, folding a set of pink overalls.

"Wait until it stops, then. Or don't bother. The tree's up, the window's done. You don't have to do the hedge."

John mated a pair of green socks. "Yeah, I know. This kid's got more clothes than you and me combined."

"Second-hand, mostly, and thank God for that. She grows out of them in three weeks." Mary slid her hand from beneath Nora's bottom and laid it on John's thigh. "John. It's okay."

"I know."

"He runs off all the time. You know that. He'll phone."

"I know." John blew out a breath. "It's been a day and a half, though, and he said he'd phone –" He shook his head. "He's an inconsiderate arsehole."
Mary laughed softly and righted Nora, who was sleepy-eyed and quiet as always after nursing. "Yeah, and you wouldn't have it any other way." Defly, she re-fastened her brassiere – it was black with pink lace, sort of sexy for a nursing bra. She saw him eyeing it and gave him a sideways grin. "What about a tumble after the sprog goes down? Take your mind off your troubles."

"Yeah." John leant forward to kiss Mary's neck. She was wearing the perfume he'd got her for her birthday – he couldn't recall the name, but it smelled like commingled violets and something sweet and almost creamy like vanilla. "That sounds good."

Nora made a rude noise, and Mary laughed. "That's romantic. You're on poo duty tonight, chum."

"Right. Give her here." John stood and took the baby in his arms. "Check the rice, would you?" he called over his shoulder, and carried Nora into her tiny nook of a bedroom. He laid her on the changing table and tickled her under the chin. "Let's see what horrors you've unleashed, you little monster."

Placing his palm lightly on her chest, John reached for a nappy. They hadn't quite come to the end of the nappy-service subscription Sherlock had bought for them, but they'd switched to disposables after a few months. It was bad for the environment, totally guilt-inducing, but the service only picked up once a week, and oh, Christ, the smell of week-old dirty cloth nappies! John had got used to bad smells, both in his profession and avocation, but opening the pail to put a freshly soiled nappy in was a task he'd come to loathe and dread, and Mary had reluctantly agreed. So disposables it was, and Sherlock hadn't noticed – or if he had, he certainly hadn't seemed hurt by their decision to switch.

"You always save the poo for me. Do you wait 'til it's my turn, or what?"

Nora gave John a grin, exposing her sharp little milk teeth, and babbled agreeably.

"Yeah, thought so." John removed the soiled nappy and cleaned her bottom. As he pulled the fresh nappy open, his phone rang. "Bugger." He reached in his pocket and checked the readout. "Oh, f –" Sighing, he answered. "Hello?"

"All right, John?"

"Hi, Billy. Look, I'm sort of busy, so if it's not urgent –"

"Yeah, it is a bit. It's about Shezza."

John clamped his lips together and hissed an impatient breath through his nose. He hated that nickname. "What about Sherlock?" Billy Wiggins irritated him profoundly. It wasn't just that he was a habitual drug user and a possible source of temptation and relapse for Sherlock, though that certainly didn't help matters – it was more that he'd managed to insinuate himself into the warp and weft of Sherlock's life with astonishing ease. Sherlock maintained that Billy had always been around – John simply hadn't taken notice of him. Maybe that was true. When John had complained about Billy to Mary, she'd teased him for being jealous, which was rubbish. He couldn't quite equivocate, though, which was even more annoying than the teasing.

"Right. He's been after that people-trafficking gang, down in Lambeth. They was from Chechnya, he reckoned, and –"

"When did he say that?" John said sharply.

"Yesterday. I seen him yesterday morning, 'bout ten, half ten. Anyways, one of my mates, Karen, she's a regular too, she seen him going into this business park in Wandsworth last night, but he didn't come back out. An' I phoned him, but it just goes straight to answerphone."
"Yeah, me too," John said, frowning. He cradled the mobile against his shoulder and arranged the nappy under Nora's bottom. She squealed and waved her arms. "Business park? What business park?"

"It's called Garratt Business Park. Light industry, wholesale, a bit of retail. You might call your pals at the Met – there's some fifty or sixty different outfits there."

John bristled at the implication that he couldn't handle a possibly dangerous situation himself. And Sherlock was slippery – the odds were good that he'd just been following up on a tip. Had he mentioned Wandsworth? He'd thought the ring was located in Lambeth. "Maybe she just didn't see him come out. What was she doing there, anyhow?"

"Scoring ice, I think."

"Oh, she sounds reliable," John snapped. God damn it, and it was Christmas Eve. "Thanks for the tip, Billy."

"You gonna call the fuzz, John?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I guess so. Thanks." John rang off and set the phone down. He leant down, kissed Nora's nose, and buttoned up her pyjamas. "What's that arsehole done now?"

Nora smiled at him.

Christmas Eve, and he was headed to Wandsworth to follow up on the tip of a meth-head. They'd followed the case to Lambeth, but last night he hadn't been able to accompany Sherlock – had Sherlock mentioned Wandsworth? He didn't think so – because Mary had had a late shift and he'd had to pick Nora up from day care. He couldn't exactly tote her around on cases in a sling.

"Jesus." He scooped Nora up. She grabbed his ear and gave it an eye-watering tug. "Come on, baby." He carried her into the front room. "Mary?"

"Yeah!" Mary came into the room in her wet-weather coat, now soaked, triumphantly brandishing a box. "They were in the shed."

"Billy Wiggins called. Some meth-head on his network saw Sherlock go into a business park in Wandsworth, but he didn't come out again. She might have nodded off and not seen him, but...."

Mary shucked her coat and held her arms out for Nora. "Do you want a lift?"

John's heart swelled. Christmas Eve, and she was offering to drive him to Wandsworth. He put Nora in her arms and kissed her mouth. "Love one. And I owe you a tumble as soon as I get back." And maybe he'd surprise her a bit early with her Christmas gift.

"I'm holding you to that."

He went into the bedroom for his weapon. He loaded it, found two extra magazines and slipped them into his pocket. In the next few months, if not sooner, he'd have to buy a child-proof box for it. He made a mental note, put on two extra layers, and went back into the front room.

Mary held Nora – now firmly zipped into her warm down-filled outerwear – in one arm, her keys in the other. "Should we wait for you?"

John considered. "No, you can just drop me. I'll call if it starts getting late."
"Okay. Off we go, then."

*

"Okay, I'm stumped," John said after fifteen minutes of driving around the business park. "Which one is it?"

Mary leant forward over the steering column, squinting into the rainy night. "How big did he say the operation was?"

"He estimated five, six people per week, mostly adults." John scrutinised the storefronts carefully as they made another slow, but not too slow, circuit through the park. Most were dark, shut up on Christmas Eve. "If the centre of operation's here, then they've got to feed them, house them – there'll be a guard, maybe two."

"And they'll park in the rear, likely, so as not to attract attention," Mary said.

"Let me out, love. I'll have a look round."

"No." Mary negotiated the car around a turn. "It won't be a chain, and it won't be a commodity like food – too many possible drop-ins."

In the rear seat, Nora started to cry.

"Shh, shh," John said, reaching back and trying to soothe her by rubbing her tummy. Nora smacked his hand and wailed. "What do you reckon – that copy-machine place?"

"No – it's got that fence enclosure in the back, too skinny for a vehicle. It's right up against the building, see?" Mary had to raise her voice to be heard above Nora's howls.

"Yeah, you're right," John said with a sigh.

Mary stopped the car and cut the headlights. "What about there?" She pointed at a party-supply place, its lights still on. "Flashy car in the drive, Chinese restaurant next door. Easy to feed people. Watch it for a minute while I calm the beastie."

The lights went out. As Mary sang to Nora and tried to placate her with her rattle-cum-chew toy, John waited, watching the entrance anxiously. At last a lone man emerged from the building, got in his car, and drove away.

"Shall we look round back?" Mary asked.

"Okay. Leave the lights off."

They drove to the rear of the building, but it seemed totally deserted. They moved on, passing a pipe works, a removal service, a bakery, a casket company. "Smuggled in the caskets?" John guessed. Behind him, Nora shrieked. He patted her tummy again, distantly marvelling that less than a year ago, he'd treated each instance of her crying fits as if it were a national crisis. "Mary, you'd better drop me and get her home. She's tired."

"Okay. Where do you want me to leave you?" Ahead of them, a Land Rover swung into the lane that led behind an industrial laundry.
"Right here," John said slowly. He peered at the laundry. It was run-down compared to its neighbours, and there was a forbidding notice attached to the fading sign that read TO THE TRADE ONLY. "Doesn't look very prosperous, does it?"

Mary considered the dilapidated façade. "I wouldn't send my sheets and tablecloths there. And if I did – they'd pick up, wouldn't they?" She pointed to the truck parked in front. Its logo, which read Top Drawer Laundry Service. "So customers aren't near the place much." In the rear seat, Nora's screaming continued unabated. "We're going, sweetheart. Just a minute."

"Be easy to smuggle people in and out in those big hampers. And I doubt that Land Rover was lost." John unbuckled his safety belt. "Get out of here. Call Greg, see if he can send a couple of unmarked cars, but tell him to wait for my call."

"I'll tell him to wait, but if he doesn't hear from you in half an hour, he's got to start looking for you," Mary said, and darted a quick kiss on his cheek. "Be careful, love."

"I will." John turned and stroked Nora's tear-streaked, outraged face. "See you in a while, darling." He got out and made for the darkest corner of the building. Mary's car slid quietly away.

The rain had gone from downpour to torrent, blowing nearly sideways, battering John with vindictive force. He blinked water from his face and crept alongside the corrugated-steel structure, reaching the rear and peering round. There was another truck in the rear, and the Land Rover, now empty, was beside it. No other vehicles – that was a good sign.

John took a deep breath and moved toward the door.

*  

He'd been right; Sherlock would be proud of him, if only he were around. One guard lay on the ground, groaning in pain, his hand a shattered mess of blood and bone. The other, scarcely more than a kid, had surrendered immediately and was babbling a stream of unintelligible words.

Training his eyes on the young man, John scooped up the first guard's gun, clicked the safety, and tucked it into one of his capacious pockets. "How many people have you got stowed away here?"

The young man shook his head and backed against the wall, continuing to talk.

"Let's pretend you can understand me," John said, and aimed his weapon between the man's eyes. "Where... have... you... hidden... the... people... you've... kidnapped?"

Shaking his head again, the young man cut his eyes left. As John started to turn his head, the man made a broad swiping motion behind his back. John reacted, stepping backward and refocusing the Sig. He shot at the first gleam of metal, and the young man shrieked in agony, dropping to his knees. The weapon he'd concealed dropped to the concrete floor and discharged into the wall. There was no ricochet; the hollow-point bullet tore a jagged hole in the steel and left the smell of tortured metal and gunpowder.

"Arsehole," John muttered, and picked up the second gun, putting that one in his pocket as well. His coat was getting heavy. He got his back against the wall, then fished his phone out and dialled Lestrade. "Greg – it's John. Yeah, I got two of them. Unless someone's hiding, I think that's the night crew here. They're both wounded. Yeah, please do. No, not yet. He's got to be here somewhere. I'm
going to have a look around. Okay. Bye."

The building was large, but seemed to be a simple layout. The machines lined two walls, tables and rolling hampers littered the majority of the floor space, and there was an office along the third wall. John went to it, tried the door handle, and found it open.

As he opened it and quickly stepped aside, he smelled pizza. The guards hadn't been eating it, so....

There was no sound, no movement. Still standing to one side, he fumbled for the light switch, found it, and turned the light on. Empty, only a desk, a chair, some filing cabinets, and an empty pizza box.

John frowned and glanced about. There was another door near the desk. He readied his weapon and moved alongside the door, then turned the handle and flung it open.

There was a high-pitched squeal, then silence.

"Come out now!" John listened and heard a faint scrabbling, then a soft sob, a girl's voice. If someone was waiting with a weapon, he didn't want a hostage situation. "Sherlock?"

No answer, but there was a noise of slow, hesitant footsteps. Then a thin hand, fingers splayed, chipped pink glitter varnish on the nails. The sobbing grew in pitch and intensity.

John hesitated a moment, then grasped the narrow wrist and yanked the girl toward him. She screeched and struggled, but no-one appeared behind her. Not a hostage, then. Good. Good. John let her go and held up the hand not holding the gun. "Sorry. I'm sorry. It's okay. It's okay."

He got a good look at her: pallid, thin, blonde, in a cropped pink jumper and an abbreviated miniskirt. She sank to her knees, her hands held up, and cried, getting a word in what sounded like Russian out now and then.

"It's okay," John said again. "Are there...are there other people in there?" He pointed to the door. She nodded, and John went in cautiously. He pulled up short, appalled. Huddled against the wall was a frightened group of...two teenaged girls, a boy of perhaps fourteen, a little girl no more than seven or eight. John's throat clenched in rage. "It's all right," he said, holding up his free hand. "I'm a friend. Do...do any of you speak English? Erm...Angliiski?"

One of the girls raised a trembling hand.

"Okay." John pitched his voice lower, forced it into a calm, steady channel. "What's your name?"

"Katya."

"Katya, I'm John. I'm here to help you. The police are on their way. They're going to get you out of this. Is this everyone – all of you?"

Katya nodded. The others stared at him in silence. The little girl appeared to be nearly catatonic.

"Good, that's very good. Are you all able to walk?" The likelihood that they had been sexually abused was high, but getting them out was the first priority. "I want you all to stay together, okay?" He turned and saw the girl in the pink jumper hovering near the door. "Your friend is brave. You're all very brave, Katya. This is almost over. Do you understand me?"

Katya nodded again. Tears filled her eyes.

"Katya, was there another man here yesterday? Tall, with curly hair –" John made a fluttering
motion next to his ear. "- and a long dark coat?"

"Yes."

"What happened to him – do you know?"

"They caught him."

Panic filled John's chest. "Okay. He was a friend of mine. Do you know what happened to him?"

Katya shook her head. "They were going to kill him. They were waiting for –" She frowned and made an impatient gesture with her hand. "Later. This day."

"Tonight? Is he still here?" John looked over his shoulder. "Did they...okay. I'm going to look for him. Stay here. I'll be back, I promise. You're safe now."

John found a roll of tape on the desk and went back to the laundry area. The second guard was unconscious; the first was still awake, but sluggish. Still, he managed to glare at John as he approached.

"Where's Sherlock?" John pointed the gun at the man's head.

"Fuck you," the man groaned.

"Fuck you," John replied. "You have five seconds to answer me before I shoot you." He lowered his aim. "You're not going to need your cock in prison. You know what they do to child molesters there? Okay, here I go. Five, four, three –"

"Truck!"

"Truck. Front or rear?"

"Rear." The man curled up, cradling his mangled hand. "I'm going to kill you."

"Yeah, maybe later." John dragged the unconscious guard close and used the tape to bind the pair together at wrist and ankle, then and went outside. It was still pouring. The truck sat silent, looking as if it hadn't been driven in years. "Sherlock?" he called, and ran to the rear door. He fumbled with the latch. "Sherlock?"

A faint bang sounded from inside the trailer compartment.

"Sherlock! Hang on, this fucking door –" After a brief tussle, John managed to pull the door up. "Sherlock – oh, God!"

The light from the laundry door's overhead lamp faintly illuminated Sherlock, lying on his side, bound, gagged, and blindfolded with tape. A muted noise of indignation emerged from behind the tape.

"Jesus, are you okay?" John scrambled up and into the trailer, hastening to Sherlock's side. "Hold on, let me get this –" Gingerly, he found the end of the tape wrapped round Sherlock's lower face and pulled gently. "Probably going to hurt. Sorry." He unwound it with care, surprised at the quantity the traffickers had used. Likely Sherlock hadn't been mouthier than usual, but tolerance levels varied. He peeled it away from Sherlock's face and saw that they'd crammed his mouth full of cloth, enough to make his cheeks bulge. "Okay, then." He pulled it out – a stained tea towel – and dropped it to one side. "You all right?"
Characteristically, Sherlock's first words weren't an outpouring of gratitude at being rescued. "Those arseholes," he croaked. "Untie me!"

"I'm getting there, Bossy Knickers," John said, concealing his relief. Distantly, sirens blared. "Ah, good."

"Lestrade?"

"Yep."

"Hmph," Sherlock snorted, and wet cracked, chapped lips. "This is just one depository, John. They're –" he coughed explosively, curling into a ball and groaning.

"Steady on," John said, and scrambled round Sherlock's body to undo the tape binding his wrists.

"They've got boltholes all over the city," Sherlock went on. His voice sounded funny and choked. "At least ten. They move forty to fifty people every month, filtering them here and there. Domestics, hard labour, sex slaves, the lot."

The sirens drew closer. "There were five kids in there."

"They were all sex slaves."

John's stomach clenched. "Even the…the little girl?"

"Especially her, I think. Aren't you done yet?"

"I'm working on it," John snapped, then remembered that despite Sherlock's callousness, he'd just saved at least five young people from sexual slavery. He pulled the tape from Sherlock's wrists, freeing him. "There."

"Ah –" Sherlock's body tensed as he brought one arm round. "Hell."

"You sure you're okay?" John asked, then saw a flash of red and blue. "Hold on a second." He leapt up and went to the edge of the trailer. Bright light blinded him, and he waved his hand.

"John?"

"Yeah!" John shelved his hand over his eyes.

Greg Lestrade shouldered through the phalanx of police. "The kids inside?"

"The inner office. Careful, they're traumatised. The guards are taped together inside the main room. I've got Sherlock with me."

"He okay? You need help?"

"No, I'm good. He's fine."

"Right, catch up in a bit." Lestrade took his team inside, and John returned to Sherlock's side. Sherlock was sitting up, struggling with the tape wound round his eyes. "Sherlock, you'd better wait until we can get that off with solvent. You're going to tear your eyebrows and lashes out."

"I don't care," Sherlock snarled weakly.

"You will when you wind up looking like Ziggy Stardust," John returned calmly. He hadn't realised
how tense Sherlock's absence had made him until now. He took Sherlock's arm. "Let's get up, come on. I'll help you out."

Sherlock got up, then staggered sideways and fell.

"What the –" John noticed a dark stain on Sherlock's shirt. "Sherlock, what the fuck?"

"It's nothing."

"Fuck that, it's nothing – what happened?" He sank to Sherlock's side. "Stay still."

"One of them knifed me. It bled for a while and then stopped. I'm fine."

John fumbled for his keys and closed his hand round the little LED torch attached to them. He shone the light on Sherlock. "Fine my arse. Jesus Christ." He played the beam over the floor and saw a congealed pool of darkness where Sherlock had lain. "Fuck. You stay still. Stay still!"

He jumped out of the trailer and ran to one of the police cars. He quickly explained that Sherlock needed an ambulance and then went back to the trailer. "Right, just hang on and don't move. Sherlock?"

Sherlock was still and quiet.

"Oh, fuck."

*

It was a fairly deep stab wound, but they'd missed major organs, thank Christ. One transfusion, fifteen stitches, and a dressing later, and Sherlock was resting in a bed. They'd got the tape off his eyes without ripping his eyebrows or eyelashes off, and though he was pale and exhausted-looking, he was perfectly lucid and relatively composed.

"I called your brother."

Sherlock sighed and closed his eyes. "Why?"

"Because you were supposed to go to your parents' house tomorrow, remember? I didn't want to call them at this hour, so I called Mycroft."

"He's not coming, is he? I can't deal with him now."

"No, but he'll be here tomorrow. With your parents."

Sherlock lifted his head from the pillow and glared at John. "Thanks ever so much."

"You're welcome." John smiled.

"There goes any hope of a quiet Christmas," Sherlock muttered. "Talking of which, weren't you and Mary meant to attend services tonight? Peace, love, and crass commercialism?"

"She's picking me up in a bit, but I think we'll skip services. It's a little late." John stretched and yawned. It was ten o'clock, and he felt like curling up and sleeping. "Seriously, though, Sherlock –"
you did a really...you saved those kids tonight. And probably lots of others."

"Mm."

John smiled, but shook his head. "Don't do that. I...I was thinking. That could have been Nora, you know? Kids get abducted all the time."

"It's statistically less likely than it seems, John. Child abductions by strangers are rare. Ninety-four percent of child abductions are carried out by a family member." Sherlock examined the needle in the back of his hand. "And Nora hardly fits the profile of an at-risk child. You needn't worry. Playground bullies and food allergies are far more threatening."

John rubbed his eyes, chuckling. "Okay, thanks for that. You're missing the point."

"Am I?"

"Yeah. Never mind. You did a great thing tonight."

"Oh, yes. Lying tied up in the back of a truck – clearly one of my greatest achievements."

"You found them, Sherlock. That's the point. And I owe Billy Wiggins an apology for being short with him." Shamed, he glanced up at Sherlock's face. Sherlock was looking at him intently. God, he was so....

So what?


Sherlock's eyes softened just a bit, and he gave John a smile. "Thanks."

"I've got to go. Our neighbour's watching the kid, and I don't want to keep her waiting. We'll stop by tomorrow if you're still here. Text me." John got up and headed to the door.

"John."

John stopped. "Yeah?"

Sherlock had that look on his face, that odd open look that made him seem younger and uncertain, as if Sherlock Holmes could ever be uncertain of anything. "Thank you. For tonight."

"Yeah. Of course."

"Merry Christmas."

John smiled, but inwardly he hesitated, remembering Christmas the year before. Last Christmas had been...he'd gained Mary back, and lost Sherlock momentarily, and though all was well, nothing was the same. But it was okay. It was good.

"Merry Christmas, Sherlock."
John stretched out in the bath and stopped up the dripping tap with his big toe. "I hate that."

"Shower, then." Mary came into the bathroom in a pale-grey dressing gown and nightie, a matched set. Her hair was wet, and her skin glowed with cleanliness.

"Nope."

"You're doomed to suffer," Mary said. She sat on the toilet lid and crossed her legs. "He's really okay?"

"Yeah, he's fine. Or he will be." John reached out and grasped Mary's hand. "I can't get it out of my head. They were kids, Mary. One was...I don't know, eight. Nine. Something."

"They're okay now, though," Mary said. She leant down and brought his hand to her lips, kissing it, a gesture he liked. "You and Sherlock saved them."

"He did."

"But if you hadn't found him, they might be dead and Sherlock with them. You're a good team."

"Yeah." John sighed, then braced his hands on the edge of the tub and got up.

Mary grabbed a towel from the rack. "Let me help." She unstoped the tub, then got to her knees and dried John's legs carefully. "Do you like that soap I got? Coconut oil. Very moisturising."

"Smells good," John said. "Mm, that's nice."

Mary stroked John's inner thigh. "Is it?" She put her lips against the sensitive skin there and kissed him.

John's breath hitched in his throat, and he shivered. Slowly, he clasped the back of Mary's head and guided her closer.

* 

The little box was in the drawer of his night table. He slid it open and pulled the box out. "Merry Christmas."

Mary's eyes lit up. "Oh, John —" She reached for it and clasped it in her hands. "You want me to open it now?"

"Yeah." John grinned, pleased at her obvious excitement, and sat up. "Open it."

She undid the ribbon and neatly pulled off the paper, then opened the little black velvet box and gasped. "Oh —" Prising up the backing, she lifted the necklace and held it to the light, letting the square aquamarine, held by two diamonds, twirl slowly on its platinum chain. "Oh, John. It's gorgeous."

"You like it?" John beamed.

"Put it on me." She handed him the necklace and turned. He fastened it round her neck, and she jumped up to admire it in the dresser mirror. "Oh my God, it's gorgeous. I love it. Thank you." She
turned back to him, gloriously naked except for the bit of glittering jewellery. "What do you think?"

"Beautiful," John said, and opened his arms.

"Wait. I just want to look at it." Mary turned from side to side, admiring it. "Oh, John, it must have cost a fortune."

"Yep. I actually sold your car to pay for it. They're picking it up day after tomorrow."

"Ah, it's worth it. We can take the Tube," Mary said with a chortle. She lifted the chain, watching the gem glow in the lamplight. "The colour! My favourite."

"I know. Come here."

Mary climbed back into bed and straddled his thighs. Her skin was warm and soft. "Same colour as Sherlock's eyes."

A cold chill passed through John's body. "I – yeah, I reckon it is. Never noticed."

"That's because you see, but don't observe," Mary mocked lightly. He'd told her about Sherlock's myriad put-downs, and that one had particularly amused her.

"Hm." John grasped her hips. "I observe that there's a naked woman on my lap."

"Well, that's a start." Mary wound her arms round John's neck. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas."

It was. A year on, and it was.

*

"Sorry, sorry, sorry!" Molly came flying down the hall, burdened with a rolling case and two carrier bags. "Took forever to find all my stuff, and then they had to clear me upstairs. A very suspicious lot." She looked around. "Never been here before."

"Mycroft wanted privacy," Sherlock said, relieving her of the carrier bags and glancing inside. "I told you they have equipment."

"Yeah, but I like my own. Where are we headed?"

"This way." Sherlock moved down the damp stone corridor with its rows of identical doors.

Molly trotted to keep up. "You're limping."

Sherlock heaved a sigh. "No, I'm not." He'd wrapped his knee with a compression bandage and that had helped, but it still hurt.

Molly apparently decided not to push the issue. "What does he need privacy for?"

"This isn't an autopsy, just an investigation. Also, apparently the subject was a close acquaintance."

"That's nice."
Sherlock smirked. "Don't let him hear you say that."

"Not likely," Molly said. "I've only met him once. What, he doesn't like to admit that he's got friends? Sounds familiar."

"No, he'd die if he heard himself described as nice."

"Well, that's familiar too."

Sherlock made no reply. He stopped at a door and pushed it open. "Here we are." The room was kitted out like an ordinary autopsy theatre, with the latest lab equipment and banks of brilliant lights. The body bag containing Lady Meredith Howe's remains lay on a central table. Sherlock switched the lights on and moved briskly to the lab setup, powering on the computers and scopes.

Molly stepped in, dragging the rolling case behind her. "Hm."

"This should be adequate."

"Oh, yeah, absolutely." Molly heaved the case up onto a lab table. "Oh!" She pointed to Lady Howe's green dress, swathed in plastic and hanging from a hook. "God, I saw that out of the corner of my eye and it scared me."

"Mm."

"Pretty."

"Pretty lethal," Sherlock replied. "The lining's saturated with aconitine, enough to kill six or seven people. I'm amazed that no-one else at the party besides the maid died. There don't seem to be any guests who reported even mild symptoms, odd considering the intensity of the dose."

"Maybe she wasn't the hugging sort."

"That's one thing in her favour," Sherlock said. "Come on, let's get going."

*

"What are your Christmas plans?"

Sherlock bent over the scope. "Plans? I haven't got any. Why?"

"Well, if you're not busy tomorrow, we'd love you to stop by for dinner. I'm cooking."

"I'll be busy with this tomorrow. Thanks all the same. Besides, I've eaten your cooking before. Plate this, please." Sherlock pointed to a sample of tissue.

"That's not fair. It was my first time making crispy duck." Molly took the sample to her own lab table.

"It was burnt black on the outside and raw inside. I vomited for two days." Sherlock moved his head back and scowled. His close vision wasn't...no, it was fine. Fine. He glanced up at Molly as she came back for a slide. "Molly, are you pregnant?"
"God, Sherlock!"

Sherlock inspected her closely. "You haven't gained more than five pounds –"

"Two."

"But your waist is noticeably thicker. Breasts are bigger, even in the surgical gown. And your gait is clumsier than usual."

Molly's face turned a mottled red. "Trust you to notice a thing like that."

"Hm. So are congratulations in order, or condolences?"

"Congratulations, you idiot!" Molly said, shaking her head. Then she laughed. "Gosh, you know how to make a girl feel good."

"Hardly a girl. You've left it a little late, haven't you?"

Molly's mouth dropped open. "That's none of your business, Sherlock!" She clapped the slide onto a tray. "Okay, fine. We've been trying for four years, okay? And I'm not even forty yet, for Christ's sake."

"Well. Congratulations. Lestrade must be pleased."

"He doesn't know yet, Sherlock. Please don't say anything to him." Molly arranged the sample on the slide and put the tray beside Sherlock's scope.

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow. "Presumably he's intimately familiar with the contours of your figure, Molly. Your condition is going to make itself apparent soon enough. What are you – two months gone?"

"Six weeks. I'm waiting 'til tonight to tell him." Molly's face was bright red as she busied herself with another skin scraping. "It's a surprise."

"Mm. Perhaps I'll stop by later in the week, when he's heard the happy news." A Christmas dinner with two disgustingly cheerful, glutinously sentimental parents-to-be sounded excruciating.

"Fine. The invitation's open, though, just so you know." She bent close to the corpse. "Sherlock?"

"Yes?"

"Her toes are broken."

"She was lying on the floor," Sherlock said. "She might have tripped on the dress. She had that bruise on her chin, consistent with a fall."

"Both big toes."

Sherlock turned, frowning. "Are you sure?"

"Look." Molly demonstrated, moving the woman's toes at an unnatural angle. "That's a little weird. Maybe she convulsed? She'd have been in a lot of pain."

"Maybe." Sherlock got up and went to the table, gritting his teeth at the throb in his knee. He probed gently at the woman's feet, bending her toes back and forth. "Third toe on the left foot's broken too. Wouldn't have seen bruising because of the lividity, the downward position of her body."
"You said she died during her own party."

"Mycroft thinks she chose to die. Wouldn't call for help," Sherlock murmured. "Or…couldn't, maybe. Maybe she was kicking and struggling. The maid was with her…." He lifted the limp hand. "Did we get fingernail scrapings?"

"Yeah, it's…tray twelve, I think. It's labelled."

Sherlock grinned. "Molly, you might have just made my Christmas."

"You're welcome. Does that mean you'll be over for Christmas dinner tomorrow?"

"Ha. Not a chance."

*

John buttered a piece of toast and set it on Nora's plate. "Strawberry or orange marmalade?"

"Strawberry."

"Coming up." John found the jam and a spoon and placed it beside the toast. "Scrambled or soft-boiled?"

"Scrambled," Nora said. "Can we wake Mum?"

"Let's give her a little more sleep, love. She had a long day yesterday." And he wasn't quite ready for a clash so early in the morning. Sometimes marriage was blissful, but often it was a silent, armed détente interspersed with uneasy truces. He'd never expected perfection; his own parents had done battle on a regular basis, and his principal model was unstable. Short tempers and recriminations seemed more frequent of late, though, and it bothered him. There didn't seem to be any solid reason for it. "You finish your breakfast and have a bath. If she's not up by the time you're dressed, you can wake her."

"Okay." Swinging her pyjama-clad legs back and forth, Nora sipped at her milk and paged through her book. John glanced at her now and then as he cooked her breakfast and found himself astounded by the changes that had manifested in her. Almost ten, getting taller, though considering her parents she'd never be a giant. Already her face was losing its baby roundness, and her temperament, always veering toward serious, was even more grave and thoughtful. Hers wasn't a demeanour that most teachers and babysitters found endearing; with adults she was a bit vague and dreamy, preferring books to conversation. But she got on well enough with her school friends and swimming pals, and was especially tender with younger children. She'd never expressed a desire for a little sister or brother, but now and again John caught her looking at babies and toddlers with a yearning and wistful expression. At times John regretted not having had another child. Too, he wondered how much surface tension Nora had absorbed from his quarrels with Mary. They tried to restrain themselves until she was out of the house, but it wasn't always possible – some of that had to rub off.

John slid the scrambled eggs onto her plate. "Brown sauce?"

"Tabasco."

John puckered his mouth. "Good lord. With strawberry jam?"
She fixed him with a gaze of endless patience. "I like Tabasco."

He held up his hands in surrender. She was an adventurous eater for a nine-year-old, and that was all to the good – much better than a kid who only ate fish fingers and cheese toasties, at any rate. "Okay, okay…." Rummaging through the cupboard, he found the bottle of pungent sauce and put it on the table, watching in dismay as she upended the stuff over her egg. "It's your stomach, miss."

"Yum."

"Maybe I'll get you a big bottle for your birthday." John sat at the table with his own eggs and coffee.

Nora beamed at him. "Do it, Daddy!"

"Eat before it gets cold."

Obediently, Nora went to work on her eggs and resumed reading. John opened the paper, scanning it idly.

"Merry Christmas…."

"Mum!" Nora scraped her chair back and ran toward Mary, hugging her. "Merry Christmas! Can we open presents?"

"Did you finish your breakfast?"

"Almost."

"Well, finish up and then we'll see." Mary crossed to John and caressed his shoulder. "Merry Christmas, love."

He looked up at her and understood that they were back at détente. They hadn't discussed the clothes that Trish had purchased for Nora, and Mary hadn't put them beneath the tree – he'd have noticed a pile like that. He decided to say nothing if Mary brought them out. It was ridiculous and exorbitant, but if Trish wanted to piss her money away on clothes for a little girl that would likely fit her for all of a year, that was her affair and Mary's. "Merry Christmas." He smiled, and half-rose to plant a kiss on her cheek. "Hungry?"

"Yeah, but I'll just have some toast. I think I know a young lady who's eager to tear some presents open." Mary grinned at Nora, who grinned back unabashedly.

"Can't think who that would be," John said.

"Thanks for letting me sleep," Mary said, tousling Nora's hair.

"Daddy said you had a long day yesterday."

"I did! I worked late and then finished the shopping, and I was knackered when I came home. So I appreciate you letting me be a slugabed." Mary went to the coffee pot and poured a mug. Her dressing gown sagged around her. She maintained it was comfortable as anything, but it was a bit sad-looking, so John had got her a new one of raspberry-coloured merino with a satin shawl collar. He hoped she liked it.

"You're welcome, Mum." Nora finished her toast. "I'm ready."
Nora was delighted with her gifts: two sets of books – a popular series about a family of ghosts, the premise of which John found utterly perplexing, and a set of books about a young girl who was a world explorer; a scarf, hat, and mittens in candy-floss pink; a chess set – she didn’t play but John intended to teach her; the Mah-Jongg set she’d begged for; a little gold necklace holding a cartouche spelling out her name in hieroglyphics; a stuffed penguin (she slept surrounded by her stuffed animals, careful to have all of them touching her so none of their feelings would be hurt); and a stocking packed with a chocolate orange, nuts, little girly hair ornaments, a Rubik’s Cube, and a few other bits and bobs. She sat back amongst a pile of torn paper and sighed in contentment. "Best Christmas ever." She turned the cube’s moving rows back and forth.

"I'm glad, darling," Mary said, resplendent in her new dressing gown. "What do you think, John? Best Christmas ever?"

John smiled. "Top ten, at least." He stroked the soft wool of the jumper Mary had bought to replace the shrunken one. "Thank you."

"I've got a bit more for Nora."

Nora perked up visibly, and John's heart sank. She was going to give her the clothes. All that excess would put the gifts they'd selected so carefully in the shade. Maybe not, though – she was just a kid. She wouldn't care that the stuff had come from Harrods, or that they were all expensive brands. "Ah. What did you forget?"

"It's small." Mary slid a little flat package from between the cushions of the sofa and handed it to Nora. "Open it carefully."

Nora's eyes shone as she prised up the tape and slid out a little blue book. She opened it and flipped through. "What is it?"

Mary briefly met John's puzzled gaze before turning to answer. "It's called a trust fund, darling. You had a bit of money put into it when you were born, and again when you reached the age of seven. But now you have quite a bit more. Look at that."

"Six thousand eight hundred and twelve pounds," Nora read. She stared at the book, her lips moving silently. "This is mine?" she asked after a moment.

"It will be, nine or ten years from now. You can use it for university – that would be the wisest thing to do. You can have a little fun with some of it, too. But it's all yours – neither Daddy nor I can touch it."

"Wow. I'm a millionaire." Nora paused and considered. "A thousandaire."

Mary laughed and winked at John. "Yes, you are. Merry Christmas."

John felt the last remnants of ice in his heart thawing. He winked back.

"Thanks, Mum." Nora embraced Mary, then turned to John and hugged him fiercely. "Thanks, Daddy."

"You're welcome, darling. Merry Christmas. Go have a shower now, all right? Brush your teeth well."
"Okay. Can I have some chocolate orange when I'm done?"

"After lunch."

"All right." Nora gathered up her loot and headed for her room, a skip in her step.

John and Mary sat at opposite ends of the sofa. John stroked the soft wool of the jumper and then reached over to Mary's thigh, caressing it. "You know you didn't have to do that."

"No. I know. But you're right. It was too much stuff, it was too extravagant. If she got holes or stains in those clothes I'd never be able to relax. I'd probably have a nervous breakdown."

She was exaggerating. He knew she'd have loved to dress Nora up in those pretty things. And they had been pretty. They were beautiful things, and clearly beautifully made. It wasn't who they were, though – he hoped Mary saw that. "This'll last forever, though," he said, tapping the blue book.

"Or at least 'til she blows it on a weed-and-vodka bash when she turns eighteen," Mary laughed. She grew serious. "I didn't take it all back, though."

"No?"

"No. I kept the dress Trish got me. And the coat she got you."

John sighed a little. The coat had been gorgeous, but he hadn't even given himself the luxury of trying it on. "Oh, Mary…I don't mind about the dress, but… ."

"You deserve a treat," Mary said fiercely. "We both do. The stuff I took back came to more than four thousand pounds. That little lilac coat alone was almost a grand. I'm going to tell her that the money came from Trish and then have her write a nice, nonspecific thank-you note."

"Clever." John leant forward and kissed Mary's mouth. "All right. I'll keep it. And I want you to find a decent tailor."

"Why? I think it'll fit you perfectly."

"Because I'm going to take you to dinner, and you're going to wear that dress. And then maybe I'll rip it off your body afterward."

"Oh, you sweet talker, you." Mary wrapped her arms round John and kissed him deeply.

As John returned the kiss, relief suffused him, and pleasure, and love. He didn't need anything else. He had all he wanted and needed.

*

Even if the ground had been soft enough to plant something, Sherlock wouldn't have bothered – plants required more maintenance than he was willing to undertake, and the only organisms he'd had complete success coaxing into growth were moulds and fungi. He laid the bouquet of roses between the two gravestones and stepped back, examining them.

"Is this your first time seeing the stones?"
Sherlock didn't turn. "What are you doing here?"

"I could ask you the same question, but I should think the answer's obvious," Mycroft said. He bent and placed another bouquet of roses on the grave – creamy white against Sherlock's scarlet offering. "The stones needed a visual inspection, and it's dreary to have a grave without flowers at Christmas."

"They're dead. They don't care whether or not we bring flowers."

"Yet here we are." Mycroft extracted two cigarettes from a chased-silver case and offered one to Sherlock, who accepted. He lit them both and drew deeply. "What do you think of the stones?"

"The names and dates are correct."

"They're rather handsome, don't you think?"

"As tombstones go," Sherlock replied with a shrug. He'd have died rather than admitted it because it really was a fanciful notion, but he preferred old-fashioned tombstones with ornate carving and macabre imagery. He'd gone along willingly enough with Mycroft when the time to choose them had come, though – his parents had opted for simplicity. Square stones, names and dates, husband and wife of. He suspected that his brother would have preferred a more elaborate stone as well, but Mycroft had been determined to honour their requests.

"One reads about couples going within days or weeks of each other, but I don't suppose it happens very often," Mycroft mused. "I wouldn't have thought Mummy the sort to pine away."

"She didn't pine." Sherlock took in a bracing lungful of smoke. "She went briskly and without a fuss."

"You don't think her death was precipitated by Dad's?"

"Mycroft, I've always suspected that iron carapace of yours enclosed a gooey centre; now I'm sure. Don't be such a romantic, for God's sake."

"Very well." Mycroft carefully ground his cigarette into a frozen mound of earth on a fresh grave and returned it to the silver box. "Have you made any progress on Meredith's case?"

"Meredith," Sherlock said. "Yes, I've made some progress on Meredith's case. Why aren't you in Moscow, by the way?"

Mycroft refused to be drawn. "The situation is on a temporary hiatus. Well?"

"Well, it was aconitine that killed her, but I think you're wrong that it was a voluntary death."

"Oh?"

"Yes."

There was a thirty-second pause, and then Mycroft said, "Feel free to volunteer the information whenever you'd like."

Sherlock snorted in amusement. "Broken toes. And two broken fingers, as it turns out. Even if she was convulsing, that's extraordinarily violent activity. Any luck finding her PA? I wouldn't mind asking her a few questions, now that the maid is dead."

"Not yet. What else?"
"She dialled a racecourse shortly before she died. Apparently."

Mycrof frowned. "A racecourse."

"Yes. Chelmsford City. Was she terribly keen on horses? Wanted to get one last bet in before kicking off?"

"Not to my knowledge." Mycroft gazed meditatively at the two graves. "She named me her executor."

Sherlock knew Mycroft wasn't talking about Mummy. "Why?"

"Let me know what you turn up, Sherlock. Don't conceal anything, please."

"Naturally not. Solve the case, Sherlock; the rest is none of your bloody business." Sherlock turned on his heel and began making his way through the stones, his shoes crunching on the frozen grass.

Mycroft caught up with him quickly. "You're still limping."

"I am not," Sherlock growled. "Will you kindly bugger off?"

"Would you like to have a Christmas drink at the club?"

"Certainly not." Sherlock pinched the end of his cigarette out and stuck it in his pocket.

Mycroft caught Sherlock's arm and pulled him up short. "Sherlock –"

"What?"

"This is important," Mycroft said softly. "Please investigate the racecourse."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. Mycroft hatched plots like eggs, and revelled in secrets. It was his nature and inclination. He concealed; Sherlock revealed. It had always been that way. "I didn't say I wouldn't."

"Good." Mycroft still held on to Sherlock's arm. "Keep me posted. And be careful."

"Of what?" Sherlock yanked his arm from Mycroft's grasp. "Ghosts?"

Mycroft didn't appear to take offence. "Perhaps." He reached into a pocket, pulled out a pair of soft leather gloves, and drew them on. "The Dickensian sort, I fear."

"Oh, God." Sherlock stalked through the maze of tombstones. "Merry Christmas, Mycroft!"

*

The temperature dropped dramatically that night, and a mixture of snow and sleet buffeted the windows of 221B. Sherlock made a pot of tea, dragged out his violin, and played for a while, wandering round the flat, now and then watching Baker Street turn white and still.

Playing 'The Holly and the Ivy,' he stopped in front of the mantel and gazed at the portrait of the Watson family.
They'd only had one Christmas together at Baker Street, he and John. Seemed ages ago now. He remembered the little drinks party they'd had, though; it had been dreadful, but John had been enthusiastic. He'd even persuaded Sherlock to play for the tiny audience.

*Marvellous!*

Sherlock segued into another tune, dredged up from the past.

*We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
We wish you a merry Christmas
And a happy New Year.*

*

Chapter End Notes

This story will resume after the New Year. Happy holidays to those who celebrate, and thank you for reading.
"Look, just calm down, okay?"

"Damn it!" Sherlock kicked an overturned rubbish bin, sending it skittering down the street.

"Oi! That's my neighbour's, you know." John righted the bin.

"Well, what's it doing on the street two days after rubbish collection?" Sherlock snarled over his shoulder.

"I don't know. They're lazy, what can I tell you?" John hurried to catch up. "You don't have to cause property damage."

Sherlock dragged his fingers through his hair. "He's out there, John. He's taunting me, and I can't – I can't make it all come together."

"Yeah, maybe. There really hasn't been anything since that broadcast, and that was a dead end… have you considered that it's somebody else, maybe? Someone just trying to wind you up? It's not as if you haven't got other cases on demanding your attention. What about that stolen jewel?"

"Oh, God, boring!"

"Don't you think that if he were actually alive, he'd be, I don't know, causing more mischief? You haven't had any really solid clues, Sherlock. You're chasing shadows." John stopped in his tracks. "It's been almost two years. Time to let it go, yeah?"

Something in John's tone made Sherlock turn and inspect him. "You think I'm being obsessive."

"I didn't say that."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. "You don't have to."


"Good. As long as we've got that sorted." Sherlock trotted up the steps of John's house. "Just because he hasn't made a move you think he's still dead. Typical."

"That's the way it usually works with dead people. Wasn't there some American general who said something about no action being an ominous development in itself? Sort of paranoid, don't you
"Think?" John pushed past Sherlock and let himself in. "Just us!"

"In the kitchen!" Mary called.

Sherlock glanced around, taking in the details of the Watsons' new house. It was sparsely furnished, the contents of their previous flat spread over a much bigger house. They'd made an effort to make it look nice, though – the walls were painted in bright, warm colours, and there were green plants near every window. Stacks of folded laundry, mostly Nora's things, sat on almost every available surface.

"Hey there, you two." Mary darted a kiss onto John's cheek, waved at Sherlock, and sat at the table, picking up a tiny plastic fork and spearing thin wheels of carrot for Nora, who had her mouth open like a baby bird. "What's happening?"

"The usual." John jerked a thumb at Sherlock. "This one's not happy with the cases he's being offered, so he's sulking."

"John thinks I should take on every case I'm offered to keep from being bored," Sherlock said. He eased out of his coat, draped it over the back of the chair, and sat.

"Mm. Surely, though, being busy would keep you from being bored?" Mary inserted another orange circle into Nora's mouth.

Sherlock wondered if Mary had accepted every assignment that had come her way. He'd be able to work it out with a bit of effort...but he'd stopped digging into Mary's past. He'd done it once, and John had chosen to ignore it. Which was fine. It was a very pointed signal to stop, and despite John's assumptions to the contrary, Sherlock could occasionally take a hint. "I enjoy the luxury of picking and choosing," he said.

"Anything to eat?" John opened the fridge and peered inside.

"Whatever's there." Mary smiled at Sherlock and reached out to pat his hand. "Something good will come along."

"None too soon," Sherlock muttered.

John emerged from the fridge with a container of yoghurt. "Want some?" he asked Sherlock.

"No, thanks."

"Tea?"

"No, I won't stay. Just popped round to say hello to Mary and the sprog." He smiled at Mary. "You look bright-eyed today."

"I am. Had some nice news today." She beamed at Sherlock and John. "Got a job."

John stopped, the yoghurt in one hand, a spoon in the other. "A job?"


"I thought you'd decided not to bother anymore," John said.

"Well, I had done, but this sort of dropped into my lap." Mary frowned. "What?"

"No. Nothing." John sat at the table and spooned up yoghurt. "Sounds great. What about Nora?"
"Well, there's nursery. She's almost two now –"

"Probably be as much as your salary, the cost of it all," John said. "Why bother?"

Mary's mouth tightened for a moment, then she smiled. "Well, the salary's actually pretty nice. And I'm looking forward to going back to work, John."

"Sure, yeah." John got to his feet and dropped the spoon on the table with an unnecessarily loud clatter. "I mean, we've discussed this already, but if you want to change your mind, I guess that's fine." He walked out of the kitchen toward their bedroom.

Mary, bright red, drummed her fingers on the table a moment. She gave Sherlock a tight, false grin. "Hey, would you watch Her Majesty for a minute? She's in a good mood, but just give her more carrots if she starts fussing. Thanks." She pushed her chair back and left. The bedroom door slammed. "What the hell, John?"

"Keep your voice down."

"You keep your –" Another door closed loudly – their bathroom. Their voices bounced off the tile, loud and indistinct at once.

Sherlock turned to Nora, who was watching him curiously. "Want to go for a walk? Yeah, me too. Come on."

*

She didn't so much walk as stagger, and she was far too little for Sherlock to stoop and hold her hand, and furthermore she refused to be carried, alternating between slithering out of Sherlock's arms like a wet noodle and going stiff as a board, so they settled on a compromise: he walked at a snail's pace, and she clung to the hem of his coat and toddled along with determination.

It was a peculiar thing, and one on which he had very little data but for a few online excursions into conflict in marriage. It was highly, highly dull information and seemed general to the point of absurdity, and yet there were categories in which John and Mary could be neatly slotted, from the arguments he'd witnessed: money, jobs, children, chores, and so on. He'd never have dreamed of arguing with John about such trivial matters when they'd lived together. Of course, they hadn't been married – that was different. Probably.

John and Mary seemed to fight frequently, but did that mean their marriage was in trouble? The truth was, he had no basis of comparison.

Well, only one.

Reluctantly, he dug his phone from his pocket and dialled a number.

"Hello?"

"Hello."

"Darling! Hold on just a tick, I've got a cake in the oven."

"It won't take a minute –" But it was too late: Sherlock's mother put the phone down with a clunk.
He sighed and shook his head. Still time to ring off. He glanced down at Nora, who beamed up at him, flashing her small teeth.

She held up one mitten hand. "Up."

"Oh, now you want to get up. Too much walking?" Obligingly, Sherlock scooped her up in one arm. She clung to him like a limpet.

"I'm back. How are you, sweetheart?"

"Fine. I was just –"

"Have you spoken to your brother recently?"

"No. We –"

"I rang and rang yesterday, and he simply refused to pick up the phone. Your dad was anxious to speak to him – we were hoping you could both stop by this weekend before we head to the States. This is quite timely, actually. I'm cooking lasagna – you could take some home. And chocolate cake, since we won't be here for your birthday. Is Sunday all right?"

"No, I –"

"Oh, come on, darling. Two o'clock? It won't be all day, and I promise I'll keep Mrs McKechnie out of the house. I know she gets on your nerves."

"Mum!"

"What, love?"

"Look, I've got to ask you a question. Christ, I can barely remember it now."

"First sign of old age, dear."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "This is purely for…erm, lacking empirical data, I need some anecdotal evidence. It's about you and Dad."

"All right. What's the question?"

"When you were first married, did the pair of you fight a lot?"

"Oh, Lord. Cats and dogs, darling. All married couples fight. Mind you, I think your dad sort of enjoyed it."

Sherlock recoiled. "Oh, if you could spare me the disgusting details, please." Nora squawked, and he joggled her a bit.

"Who's that? Is that Nora?"

"Yes."

"Oh, put her on! I want to say hello."

"Mum, she's not even two and you've seen her a handful of times. She doesn't know who the hell you are, and is much less able to conduct a telephone conversation with you."
"Put her on now, William."

"Oh, for God's sake—" He held the phone to Nora's ear. "It's for you."
He kept her from actually grabbing the thing and hurling it, and heard his mother cooing shrilly over
the speaker. Nora gurgled and cooed in response, and made an enthusiastic lunge for
Sherlock's hair, grabbing a fistful and yanking with vigour. Sherlock's eyes watered.
"Okay, that'll do." He rescued the phone.
"It's me, you can stop babbling."

"Oh, fine. She's a darling. Give John and Mary my best. Are they the reason you called?"

"Well—" Sherlock was caught out. He glared at Nora. "Possibly. They're squabbling a bit."

"It'll pass, love. It almost always does. They love each other so much – you can tell, it's so obvious."
Sherlock took a deep breath. "Yes. Yes, it is."

"It's all right to call me if you want a bit of comfort, dear. Honestly."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Unaccountably, Sherlock found himself bristling.

"Nothing. Will you be by on Sunday?"

No. "I'll think about it."

"Tell your brother, all right?"

"Goodbye." Sherlock rang off and stuffed the phone in his pocket. He shifted Nora in his arms and
began walking rapidly. She swayed a bit off balance and complained. "Sorry." He supported her
back, holding her more carefully, but she continued to wail. "Oh, stop squalling, for God's sake!"

A smartly dressed woman passing him gave him a hard, disapproving glance.

"Oh, relax. She's not mine," Sherlock snapped.

"I ought to call child protection on you," the woman retorted.

Sherlock considered the woman for a few seconds. "Considering that you have a habit of leaving
your fourteen – no, thirteen – yes, thirteen-year-old daughter in the hands of an au pair who's a
habitual user of MDMA and who makes a practice of borrowing your clothes on the sly as well as
filching spare cash from your handbag, I'd say that would be a singularly ironic gesture on your
part."

A strange look crossed the woman's face. "How do you—"

"I'd phone home if I were you," Sherlock called, strolling away, Nora still screaming in his arms.
"You'll probably catch her trying your shoes on." He joggled Nora a bit more. "Shh. Shhh."

Unimpressed, Nora continued to screech.

Sherlock stopped and spoke quietly but firmly into Nora's ear. "Now look here, you caterwauling
little beast. If you don't shut up, I'm never going to take you for a walk again and you'll have to
spend all your time with your parents listening to them bicker, and frankly I can't think of a worse
fate for someone who can't open a door on her own."

Miraculously – well, no, there were no miracles – amazingly, Nora quieted and fixed her attention
on Sherlock. Tears brimmed in her eyes, her flushed cheeks were salt-streaked, and her bottom lip
was wet with drool, but she was silent, for the moment.

"That's better." Sherlock fished in his jacket pocket and found a handkerchief. He blotted her tears, her lower lip, and her snotty nose. "You're going to have to get yourself under control. It's never too early for a little self-discipline, you know."

Nora gurgled and grabbed at Sherlock's hair again.

"I have no idea what you're trying to say. Stop pulling my hair." Sherlock shifted her away, careful to support her back. "I also haven't the faintest idea why your parents fight so much. There, I've confessed two instances of ignorance to you. Don't tell anybody or this is the last walk we take. Got it?"

She gave a shriek – not a protest, more of a bizarrely cheerful vocalisation.

"I'll take that as a yes."

*

John and Mary were at the kitchen table when Sherlock and Nora returned. Mary got up and held her arms out. "There we are. Gosh, you're both rosy-cheeked. Thanks for bundling her up."

"That's all right. It's getting chilly out." Sherlock handed her over; surprisingly, his arms were sore. Nora was small, but solid. "I'd better go."

"I'll walk you out." John rose and shrugged into his parka.

"Bye, Sherlock. Thanks." Mary kissed his cheek. "Say bye-bye to Uncle Sherlock, Nora."

"Bye-bye," Nora said, waving.

Sherlock touched the tip of Nora's nose with a gloved finger. "See you soon." He followed John out and down the stairs.

"Sorry about that," John said.

Sherlock shrugged. "It happens. All married couples fight."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know, but..." John sighed heavily. "It's just growing pains, I guess. Sometimes I feel like she doesn't – well, forget it. Like I said, growing pains. Anyhow, she's going to take the job. It's good money, and probably time Nora started socialising with kids her own age."

"I suppose so."

"It'll all sort itself out. Look, Sherlock...try to think about something besides Moriarty, yeah? You know what he's – what he was like. He couldn't resist getting your attention. That thing – that was just somebody's stupid stunt. Not that I'm sorry, because it brought you back." He shuffled his feet and then chuckled. "Hey, have you ever considered that it was Mycroft who did it?"

"Don't think I haven't," Sherlock said, grinning faintly. "It's not his style, though. Mycroft prefers oblique behaviour to flashy theatrics. Generally."

"No trouble."

"Something interesting will come along soon. Text me."

"Of course." Sherlock gazed at John for a few lingering seconds. There was a brief spasm in his chest that he hoped didn't show on his face. He nodded, turned on his heel, and walked away.

* 

He wasn't an habitué of racecourses, but Chelmsford City looked pretty bog-standard as they went: lots of people who couldn't afford to bet grimacing and shrieking their winnings away, lots of people who simply enjoyed watching horses run at fatiguing and possibly organ-failure-inducing speeds, and a small group of overdressed idiots in a corporate enclosure drinking hot toddies and simpering at each other. He'd arrived at the end of a meeting, excellent timing to have a look about without attracting attention.

Who had Meredith Howe phoned at ten o'clock in the evening? First things first: find the main switchboard and follow the lines outward if necessary. She'd dialled the phone tree, not a specific line, but the duration of the call had been one minute and forty-three seconds – thank goodness for no password protection – longer than the racecourse's automated message. So had she waited a bit to hang up, or had she actually spoken to someone?

Sherlock shouldered his way past the hordes of disappointed losers and went into the ticket office, twinkling a smile at the harried-looking ticket agent. "Hi there." He pulled out Howe's phone and scrolled through the calls, feigning mild confusion. "I got a call from…let's see…this number." He showed the agent the phone briefly, covering the RECEIVED heading, and recited the number for good measure. "I'm not sure exactly…is it here? Did it come from this office? I've called it back, but I just got the answerphone and thought I'd…" He smiled again and shrugged, all charming helplessness.

The ticket agent shook her head. "Yeah, that's not here. I mean, you can get to the ticket office from that number, but that line's in the business office. Near the grandstand, that way." She indicated the direction with one orange-taloned finger.

Fake fingernails, placed to hide or control a biting habit. Trichitillomania, indicated by patchy bald spots imperfectly concealed by gravity-defying teased hair. Incipient alcoholic, too – probably the nervous tension of a racecourse was a perfect storm of poor choice of occupation, but he wasn't a work experience counsellor. Sherlock grinned. "Thanks so much," he said, and left with a friendly wave. He made a beeline for the grandstands and stopped short at the sight of a familiar figure, who stopped short at the sight of Sherlock, his mouth open in a comical expression of surprise.

"John," Sherlock said so softly that no-one, even standing next to him, would have heard.

John blinked, then hastily stuffed some paper into his pocket and moved toward Sherlock, limping slightly.

And why is that? Sherlock wondered. His own knee was feeling just fine – only two weeks after the rugby-tackle and he was right as rain again. Stupid A&E twits, what did they know anyhow?

"John," he said, a bit louder, though still inaudible over the crowds. He put his hand out, and as John
clasped it, that old familiar frisson shivered through him.

Damn it.

He beamed to cover his discomfort, quickly taking in John's appearance: new stress lines on face – he'd seen John a few months ago at his mother's funeral and these appeared to be very new, probably due to the fact that he'd backed a losing horse and had been scowling and shouting his disapproval. Faint smell of alcohol on breath – Guinness, three pints, recently imbibed, further assuaging the loss. Casual clothes, careless, almost shabby for John who, while never quite in line with Sherlock's sartorial tastes, always dressed at least decently – yes, almost shocking for John. Trousers a bit faded, small reddish spot on the jumper (looked like a curry stain), shoes unpolished. John was a stickler about polishing his shoes and had even, during his tenure at 221B, set aside time to polish not only his, but every pair Sherlock owned on alternate Sunday evenings, placing them in neat rows. Holdover from the army. Decidedly not au courant, Dr Watson – except for the coat, a new and very smartly styled melton wool, more expensive than John's usual tastes. A Christmas gift, then, from Mary. Well. She could afford it.

And the furtive way John had stuffed the papers into his pocket – guilty, and the way his eyes searched Sherlock's now, a bit anxious, likely hoping Sherlock hadn't seen the gesture…ah. John Watson had become a racing aficionado. Chelmsford City racecourse, in Essex, a bit out of the way and not one of the smarter courses, less likely to run into colleagues or friends. Sherlock glanced down at John's hands, new depressions and indentations, signs of stress. He'd traded one sort of gambling for another.

"Sherlock!" New calluses on John's hand as well, smooth in the centre, rough at the edges – more phone usage than usual. "Jesus, what are you doing here?"

"Would you believe me if I told you I was just having a day at the races?"

"Not for one second," John laughed, and for a moment it was as if nothing had changed. Then John withdrew his hand and unconsciously touched the pocket that held his racing forms. His losing forms. John often gambled but seldom won. Poor substitute for the real thing.

"It's for a case," Sherlock said easily. "Some fool's errand Mycroft's got me running."

"Wow." John gave another laugh, this one not nearly as sincere, and took a step back. He looked Sherlock up and down, smiled tightly, and shook his head. "Out here?"

"Mm-hm." Sherlock glanced round, casual and indifferent. He brought his gaze back to John, and there was that frisson again without the added fillip of flesh-to-flesh contact. God damn it all. "Come here often?"

John moved back another half step. "Me? Not a lot. Sometimes. Why?" He lifted his chin, half-challenging, the defensive posture of the addict: What if I do? What do you want to make of it, Sherlock?

"On the sixteenth of December, someone called the course's main office number. Perfectly ordinary, except it was ten o'clock on a Saturday night and this person was at her own rather glitzy Christmas party. It wasn't the ticket office, which wouldn't have been open in any case, and I very much doubt she called to chat with a member of the cleaning staff or one of the chip shop workers. So who would she be calling? Any notion?"

"Well, that day –" John stopped and cleared his throat. His face flooded with colour. "A lot of times, especially round Christmas, the club bar and restaurant has dos – a lot of corporate functions, private
parties, that sort of thing. And if it was a race meeting day, it might have been a membership-only bash. Lots of posh types abound then."

"Was it a race meeting day?" Sherlock asked gently.

John turned an even brighter red. "Might have been," he muttered, and shuffled sideways. "I ought to –"

"Do you know anybody who works here?"

It was the wrong thing to ask. John's stance became even more pugilistic, his chin more sharply outthrust. "Why would I?"

Abruptly, Sherlock wondered what John's most dominant emotions had been on the occasions he'd found Sherlock high. He hoped to God it was nothing like the sudden horrible roiling of his stomach and an awful sort of…Christ, it wasn't pity, was it? John Watson was many things, but never pitiable. He scrambled to salvage things. "I thought maybe you could wheedle me past the lions and help me get a look at guest rosters. It would save some time." He waited, shamelessly daring to hope after such an impulsive offer. It had been years. Years now. John wouldn't…he wouldn't….


Sherlock tossed off a graceful, indifferent shrug. "No bother. I'll manage." He clasped his hands behind his back and squeezed them together, tightly enough to hurt. "Got your Christmas card. Thanks for that."

"Yeah." John was looking at him, that old expression that Sherlock had cherished even when he didn't realise it. "Yeah, of course."

"How is Mary? And Nora?"

"They're good. Really good. I'll say hello to them for you."

"Do that." Sherlock's chest felt leaden. "Give them my best. Well – I'd better be off."

"Okay." John put his hand out again. "Great to see you."

Sherlock took it. Oh. "You as well. Take care of yourself."

"Yeah. You too." John nodded, pulled his hand away, and left quickly, not looking back. Did he know Sherlock was watching? Was he afraid to give a glance back for fear of the old life tempting him?

Did it matter?

Sherlock watched until John was out of sight and even then kept watching, straining for a glimpse of the back of his head, a flash of a familiar gesture. But no – he'd been swallowed irretrievably by the crowd, lost in the sea of horse-enthusiastic humanity.

He wheeled and peered at the grandstand, then let his gaze wander over the other buildings, stopping at a soaring edifice with broad picture windows. Well-dressed people milled behind the glass, eating hors d'oeuvres and swilling wine. Maybe John had something there. He was awfully comfortable with the ins and outs of the place, comfortable enough to know there was some sort of event taking place on the date Sherlock had mentioned.
Funny that John had stopped himself. He ought to have known that Sherlock wasn't the condemning sort. Maybe it had been too long for John to remember that, though. And as for passing judgment on his gambling addiction, well – Sherlock had his own socially unacceptable habits, and still indulged them now and then.

"You've got a job to do," Sherlock muttered. "Stop dithering and do it."

A man passing gave him an odd look and hurried by.

Sherlock blew out a breath and headed for the offices. Time to charm the figurative pants off whoever passed for a catering manager and find some sort of guest list for that evening. It would have been more fun with company, but needs must, after all.

*

His leg hurting – it had been hurting for a few months now, and he'd decided that it would go away if properly ignored, but it hadn't, not yet at least – John hurried to the main gate. He could all but feel Sherlock's gaze boring into his back, but he wouldn't turn, not for a million quid.

He waited until he got to the gate, and then turned.

Nobody. Just nameless, faceless bodies full of laughter and chat or rage and gloom, depending on the horses they'd backed.

"Jesus," he muttered, laughing a little. *Arse.* As if he'd expected Sherlock to come dashing after him – well, it wasn't entirely out of character. But too much time had elapsed, too much had happened.

The laughter drained out of him, leaving a knot of anger in his chest. Stupid – Christ, why was he being stupid? It wasn't as if Sherlock had done anything wrong, or even unusual. He'd been cordial, breezy even, he looked fine – his hair was shorter than John had ever seen it and his gait was a bit funny, as if he'd hurt his leg but was doing his best to play it off – and obviously he was working, so it was business as usual; they'd both got on with their lives. So what right had John to be angry? It wasn't as if he wanted Sherlock to be miserable. Much.

Last time they'd seen each other was at Mrs Holmes' funeral in early September. It had been a beautiful day, the air unusually warm, almost syrupy – John had been steaming in his suit, sitting beside Mary in the church, watching the back of Sherlock's head from ten pews away. The church hadn't been full – Mrs Holmes' contemporaries were few in number and practically doddering. There had been several academic types, former pupils and junior faculty during Mrs Holmes' time, judging from the muted pre-service conversation. Greg Lestrade had been there, and Molly of course, both of them still in a charming and yet slightly nauseating honeymoon glow despite the fact that they'd been married three years. There were no friends present, it had seemed, for Mycroft – not surprising. In the receiving line, Mycroft had spared John and Mary a razorblade of a smile and an icy nod. Cold bastard. John hadn't missed Mycroft at all in the intervening years. Still, the wintry reception had cut, just a little.

He'd watched Sherlock, or the nape of Sherlock's neck, the rigidity of his posture. He'd searched for signs of grief, of suffering, but Sherlock had been resolutely dry-eyed and calm. Both Holmes brothers had, and John hadn't been surprised, really. Afterward, at the reception in the church hall – little sandwiches and cakes and tea laid on by some Women's Institute ladies – Sherlock had grasped
his hand warmly, kissed Mary's cheek.

John. Mary. Good of you to come. Thank you.

That had been all. No time or space for more, but afterward, John had that clenched fist of anger in his chest, a weird, sick feeling as if Sherlock had….

Had what? He wasn't sure. Didn't matter. Too much time, too many events had passed. And he'd done so well avoiding Sherlock, for the most part.

John stood clinging to the gate. What would happen if he went back to Sherlock and let him have it? Oh, he knew. Sherlock was as histrionic as it was possible to be, but God for-fucking-bid if John so much as raised his voice – Sherlock's reactions to John's rare bursts of emotional agitation had been supercilious amusement, bored irritation, or blank confusion, not necessarily in that order or all at once. John had hated that.

He hated that Sherlock looked absolutely great, not as if no time had passed, but great nonetheless, because time adored Sherlock and treated him gently. He hated that Sherlock had seen, with that fucking annoying keen-eyed perception, exactly what John had been up to. He hated the silence – the old Sherlock wouldn't have hesitated to point out John's habits with glee, as if John himself didn't know what he'd been doing for most of the afternoon. He hated the gentleness in Sherlock's voice, the tolerance. He hated that Sherlock had extended an enticement of a case like a man offering a very old dog a bone. And most of all, he hated his own longing, the burn in his chest, the anger that after five years, John Watson still fucking cared. How utterly sad and pathetic.

Unbidden, John's left hand clenched and unclenched. He looked down at it, stretched it out, and smiled grimly. Old habits died hard, didn't they.

Fuck it.

He took three steps toward the path to Chelmsford Station. Then he wheeled, pushed through the still-streaming crowds, and hurried toward the grandstand.

Turn around. Turn around, you arsehole, turn around now, what the ever-loving fuck are you doing?

John was running now, heedless of his leg. Truth be told, it didn't hurt much. He nearly collided with a trio of old parties in tweed caps comparing notes.

"Hey, steady on there!"

"Sorry –" He couldn't stop. He skidded on a slick patch of grass, kept going. He finally reached the grandstand and, chest heaving with exertion, craned his neck to look around.

But of course, Sherlock had already gone.
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

Many thanks are due, as ever, to kimberlite and vilestrumpet for beta and Britpick.

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November 2018

There were distinct variations in Sherlock's manifestations of impatience, and John had categorised them all. There was the theatrical boredom with criminals he considered incompetent, involving slumped shoulders, copious eye-rolling, and long, cheek-puffing exhalations of breath. There was his peevishness with John's slowness and stupidity, characterised by shoutiness and insults. His discomfort at misjudging a moment, usually in a social or personal capacity, was compounded by digging himself deeper with more faux pas or simply storming away. Then there was his frustration at his own terrifyingly swift brain when he couldn't fit every piece of a case into its proper niche – at those times he was all elegant rage, stalking around and muttering to himself. John had it all sorted.

Except for now. Now he and Sherlock were sitting side by side – well, sitting side by side in that they were sat next to each other, tightly and inescapably bound to steel-framed chairs. John had been covertly attempting to squirm free for roughly half an hour, but Sherlock had scarcely moved – indeed, seemed entirely indifferent to the whole affair, which seemed to be escalating as John had heard the words "van" and "Thames" in the same sentence, seldom a happy coincidence when dealing with criminals. It was just a wee bit disconcerting.

Granted, the case was centred round a half-billion pound investment fraud scheme, not murder. But as it turned out, white-collar crime was about to become red-collar crime, and John thought that might merit Sherlock's attention if not his fascination, especially since he and Sherlock were the imminent victims. John kept his mouth shut with difficulty, trusting Sherlock to handle things, at least until John worked himself free. It would have been nice if Sherlock had made some effort to escape, though. Instead, he just sat slumped in his chair, his expression that of a man half-heartedly wondering if he'd left the lights on in his flat.

Garrett Brody sat cross-legged in an absurdly large gilt chair, reading a newspaper, glancing at Sherlock under arched brows, and looking a bit like a low-rent Bond villain. John supposed Sherlock had a point in not taking him very seriously. His henchmen had brought them to his house, a very nice red brick in Wetherby Gardens. Well, maybe he was new to violence since investment fraud was his thing.

"So, Mr Holmes." Even Brody's voice was affected, a crisp staccato tenor. "According to the Times, Lord Moran is being released tomorrow. It seems your skills as a detective aren't quite equal to your reputation."

Sherlock sniffed in obvious disinterest, and even John had to stifle a yawn. What was news to Brody wasn't news to him or Sherlock; Sherlock had been fighting for weeks, but there had been discrepancies found – new Underground footage, clearly dated, of Moran exiting the Tube, not
headed for the bomb car. The remote device had been planted on him, and he'd been threatened to keep it or pay with his life. The discrepancies had been retroactive, obviously fakes, Sherlock had insisted, but there was nothing for it – Moran's legal team had won. Sherlock had seethed, but Mycroft had promised to keep a weather eye on Moran. No more to be done.

"Oh, dear," Brody said. "Will the Times want a quote from you? Pity you won't be there to give them one."

Sherlock said nothing. John glanced at him and took it upon himself to speak. "I expect they'll be wondering where he is, yeah. So will the Met."

Brody folded his newspaper and set it on a fussy little table next to an ormolu clock. "Not for long." He consulted his watch. "Another half hour or so, I think. Really, Mr Holmes – nothing to say? First Moran, now this. I think I'm probably doing you a favour – you're not half as bright as the papers make you out to be. Tant pis - you could have emerged from this a good deal richer, instead of dead. You still can, you know."

Sherlock slumped a little lower in his chair and eyed the ceiling reflectively.

A spasm of rage crossed Brody's face, and he nodded at one of his goons, who frowned ponderously.

"What?"

"Hit him, for Christ's sake," Brody hissed.

John pressed his lips together hard to keep from laughing, but the goon's fist crashing into Sherlock's face put paid to that. "Hey!"

"Shut it," the goon snarled, and Brody grinned, obviously thrilled to be privy to actual violence.

Sherlock let out a shuddering breath, but stayed silent. He glanced at John - I'm all right - and glared at Brody.

Satisfied, Brody got up and walked to Sherlock. "Last chance, Mr Holmes. Otherwise, my men will be dropping you in the Thames. I'd join them – I wouldn't mind watching you drown, but this is a new suit and I'd hate to get it wet. So...are you in?"

"No thanks," Sherlock replied, as casual as if he'd refused an offer of a cup of tea.

"Fine," Brody said, gritting his teeth, his colour altering dramatically and all pretension of suave villainy departing. "Fucking drown these stupid fucking sods." He pivoted on his heel and left the room. John almost felt sorry for him – his eagerness for banter was pathetically obvious.

There was a bit of clamour as the henchmen scurried back and forth, during which John leant as close as he could to Sherlock. "You okay?" he whispered.

"Fine."

"I'm not sensing a lot of engagement on your part."

"I was thinking about beans on toast. I'm hungry."

"Ah. You thirsty? Because I think we're in for a dunking."
"So it seems." Sherlock's gaze wandered back up to the ceiling.

John looked up, but saw only intricate moulding and a rock-crystal chandelier. "Any ideas?"

"One or two."

"Care to share them?"

"No."

John blew out a breath. "Okay...." There was no time for more conversation, as the henchmen had returned and proceeded to cut the ropes that bound John and Sherlock to their chairs. The men hauled them up, their hands and feet still tethered, and dragged them through the kitchen, out the rear garden door, through a steady rain, and into, as promised, the back of a van, dropping them unceremoniously to the floor. One of the thugs climbed in and crouched across from them, holding them at gunpoint and grinning. The others banged the doors shut, leaving them in the dim light of a hanging lamp. The van lurched into life and rolled away.

"Is the Sainsbury's Local on Regents Place still open?" Sherlock wondered aloud.

John flexed his wrists again and winced at the pain and the sensation of a thin, slippery trickle of blood. "Erm...I don't think so. The Euston Station one might be."

Sherlock sighed. "Damn. I really fancied some beans on toast and I just remembered I'm out of bread."

"Tesco's might be open. I think it's close to midnight now, though."

"Oi!" the thug snarled. "You talking some kind of code?"

Not too bad a guess; anyone listening to their conversation and witnessing their predicament would have thought them utterly round the bend. John was used to Sherlock's situational non-sequiturs, though, thought nothing of them, and made nothing of them.

"Code," Sherlock said. "You think it's necessary to use words of more than one syllable around you? Don't flatter yourself. I just want beans on toast, you moron."

The man frowned in momentary puzzlement and then seemed to comprehend what Sherlock was saying. "I'll break every bone in your body, you snotty fuckwit."

Sherlock let out another sigh and leant his head against the van. "Really hungry."

"Shut the fuck up!" the thug roared, then snickered. "You can eat your beans and toast in hell."

John and Sherlock glanced at each other.

Slow on the draw. John's glance said. Sherlock shook his head minutely, and John heaved a resigned sigh. Sherlock had something in mind, but John couldn't think what.

After a short while, the van stopped, and there was scuffling outside. The thug went to the door and opened it, jumping out and slamming the door shut again.

Sherlock sniffed. "Battersea Bridge."

"Oh, Jesus," John said, struggling harder. "Sherlock, if you've got a plan, now would be a really good time to let me in on it."
"Don't try to attract attention, John. Don't call for help, don't struggle."

"Have you got a knife or something?"

"No. Are you familiar with glide swimming?"

John shook his head, bewildered. "Glide swimming? No, I've never even –"

The van door opened, and three large silhouettes appeared in the doorway. John instinctively scrambled backward, but one of the goons clambered in and dragged him out. "Get your hands off me, you –" The man cracked him smartly across the jaw, setting his head to spinning. Through the ringing in his ears he heard traffic zooming past and wondered that nobody stopped to investigate what surely must have looked like assault and imminent murder. He wobbled on his still-bound feet and would have fallen had his assailant not pulled him up by his jacket. He gritted his teeth to keep from crying out – not that anyone would have heard. There were no pedestrians, only drivers with windows tightly drawn to keep out the rain.

Beside him, another goon dragged Sherlock from the van and without hesitation hauled him toward the railing of the bridge. **Oh, God, no –**

Against his own better judgement and Sherlock's warning, John began to panic. "Wait! Let him go! Look, I'm sure we can work something out –" The fist crashed into his jaw again. John bit the inside of his cheek hard and tasted blood.

Sherlock looked over his shoulder. "Relax, John. It's okay."

"Yeah, John!" one of the men crowed. "It's okay, love. Don't worry."

The men heaved Sherlock up, onto the ledge. "Relax your body, John," Sherlock called, and then – just like that – they pushed him over the side.

"No!" John strained against his captor, which gained him nothing. "You fucking bastards –"

"Go on – him next."

"No –" John struggled with all his might, but he might as well have been a sardine struggling against a shark. They pulled him to the edge, lifted him, and he felt himself flying through empty air. He twisted, righting himself intuitively, and must have shouted, but the wind and rain rushed past his ears, deafening him, and then he crashed, feet first, into the water.

**Cold.** It was so cold, nearly stopping his heart, and as it engulfed him he screwed his eyes shut and closed his mouth, but water shot up his nose all the same, and his throat constricted painfully. He thrashed, trying to kick with his feet, but he couldn't, how could anyone swim with their hands and feet tied, he wasn't a goddamned fish, and he churned his legs desperately but felt himself plummeting further and further down.

Sherlock. Sherlock was drowning too, had drowned, couldn't save them both.

**Nora. Mary.**

If he didn't open his mouth, didn't trigger laryngospasm, and kicked hard enough, he might make it to the surface, buy himself a little time. They'd thrown him off near a pier, he'd seen that much, and he could get there by floating if he relaxed as Sherlock had said, but he couldn't fucking **swim** and he was going to die, stupid embarrassing way to go **oh God Sherlock please**
Something struck his head, and there was sudden agonising pain in his scalp, the stinging of a hundred angry wasps. He opened his mouth and the water flowed in, striking his vocal cords, and he sucked in a mouthful of Thames and there was too much carbon dioxide in his bloodstream and he was fucked.

He felt his body relax involuntarily, and all sensation faded.

**Sorry, Sherlock. Sorry.**

*

Funny thing – he was dreaming that Sherlock was kissing him. Urgent, passionate kisses, no tongue, but steamy just the same. Then he was shoving John back and forth. A bit rude, that.

"John. John!"

He opened his eyes and saw nothing. Still asleep.

Sherlock shoved him again. John heard him curse, a staggering torrent of obscenity and profanity.

"One, two, three. One, two, three. One, two, three."

On and on and on. Another kiss? John couldn't be sure. And then, an overwhelming surge of nausea. He heaved, and felt himself flung over. It came out of his mouth and nose in a foul rush and his stomach clenched. For a moment it felt like the drowning again, and he clutched at air and felt something soft, squishy. He tried to cry out and couldn't.

"John. It's all right." Sherlock grabbed his hand, squeezed it. That was Sherlock's hand, cold but solid and strong. "It's all right."

Is it? He wasn't certain. He threw up again, just to be sure. He felt cold fingers invading his mouth, tasting of mud, cleaning out the vomit.

"It's all right," Sherlock said again. "Help's on the way." A hand cupped John's cheek, caressed his face. "You're okay. You're okay. You're okay." He said it so many times John was finally reassured. He was okay.

And so he allowed himself to drift.

*

John slid wearily into the cab and was about to bid Sherlock good night when Sherlock climbed in beside him. "Budge over, John. 221 Baker Street, please," he called to the driver, and shut the door.

Blinking, John moved. "But I…I should –"

"Mary's in New York, and Nora's with the sitter, and you're practically dead on your feet," Sherlock said. "Besides, my flat's a lot closer."
“Hmph. Didn't think you even heard me earlier.”

“What?”

“Well, I told you all that, and you didn't even bother to answer.” Bemusedly, John listened to his own voice, slow and raspy, as if it were a 45 RPM record played at 33.

“Just because I don't respond to your endless tales of babysitting woes doesn't mean I'm not registering the information.”

“You had me fooled,” John replied, but honestly he wasn't able to work himself into even a mild state of tetchiness. He settled back for the short, familiar ride to Baker Street, exhaustion and a pleasant nostalgia flooding his system.

When they arrived, Sherlock paid the driver, an astonishing courtesy considering the source, and clambered quickly out of the car, holding his hand out for John. When John wouldn't take it, Sherlock grasped his arm and hauled him up.

“Jesus, Sherlock. I'm not incapacitated.” John frowned and wrenched his arm away, then marched up the stairs in front of Sherlock after he'd opened the door.

“You look awful.”

“And you smell awful.” The hospital staff had given John dry scrubs to wear home, but Sherlock was still in damp clothing smelling of Battersea mud and filthy river water. Belatedly, a twinge of remorse shot through John's stomach. Typical Sherlock, not seeing to himself. "You're going to get chilled in those clothes."

"My cleaner's not going to be happy with me," Sherlock admitted. He pushed past John and fitted the key into the lock.

**God, look at this.** John hadn't much reason to actually venture into 221B in a year or more; Sherlock usually came to him to discuss cases, as well as to see Mary and Nora, and John wasn't quite sure how they'd drifted into that particular arrangement, but he didn't suppose there was any real reason to change it now that it had been well established. At any rate, the flat hadn't changed much. A bit messier, not much smellier, nothing really unusual except that walking in had felt like coming home, more than any other place he'd occupied.

He set the plastic hospital belongings bag containing his damp clothes on the kitchen table. "I should call Mary."

"By all means."

"Erm…could I use your phone? Mine's knackered."

Sherlock's mouth quirked up on one side. "I don't know how many times I've told you to get a waterproof case." He pulled his phone from his pocket and handed it over.

"Smug arse," John muttered. "Go change, you stink." He waved Sherlock away and dialled Mary's number. It was half two in the morning, which made it half eight in New York. With luck she'd be at dinner, or relaxing in the hotel.

Mary answered, her voice a bit wary. "Hello?"

"Hi, love – it's me. I'm on Sherlock's phone."
"Oh, hi! Something wrong with yours?"

John hesitated. "It got wet."

"Silly man. I think it's still under guarantee, though, so not to worry. How are you? What are you doing?"

"Well, I'm here at Sherlock's. Spending the night. We were on the fraud scheme case, and it ran late."

"Ah. Is that how the mobile got wet?"

"Possibly." John laughed a little.

"Do I want to know?"

"Definitely not."

"Oh, you. So Nora's with Phoebe?"

"Yeah. She's going to get her to nursery in the morning. How'd the surgery go with Mrs What's-Her-Name?"

"Van Dorn. It – Christ, it's after two there! You sure you're okay? You sound a bit funny."

"Just tired." John slumped into his chair. What used to be his chair, anyway. "Tell me about your day."

"Oh, it was wonderfully scintillating. Mrs Van Dorn is down two millimetres on her nose, and up several dozen on her lips, or so it seems. I expect her to quack tomorrow."

"I didn't think Dr Wonderful did that kind of stuff." John had met Mary's employer, Tim Liddell, on a few occasions, and he seemed like the Platonic ideal of a plastic surgeon: friendly, reassuring, blindingly handsome, sickeningly rich. He was licensed to practise in London, New York, Los Angeles, and Monte Carlo, hence Mary's absence.

"Not really. He did do a Restylane injection – subtle, though. Of course she won't think so. Twenty quid says she winds up going to someone else in six weeks because Tim won't give her more. Did you get any supper?"

"No. I'm starving, though." John rubbed his stomach absently. Now that the worst was over and the adrenaline had drained from his body, he realised he was ravenous. Too bad Sherlock's fridge was unreliable at the best of times. "You?"

"Steak, darling. Some place called Smith and Wollensky. You could serve an entire turkey on one of their plates."

"I'm jealous."

"Get some sleep, okay? I'll see you on Tuesday morning. Call tomorrow if you want."

"Okay. Sleep well. Love you."

"Love you."

John rang off and cradled Sherlock's mobile in his hand for a moment, listening to the faint patter of
water as Sherlock showered. Therapy hadn't changed him into a navel-gazer, but he was a bit more introspective than he'd been ten or so years ago, at least, and at the moment he perceived that he was occupying a space that was entirely worthwhile. He had Mary and Nora, he had his work, and he had Sherlock and their cases. It was more than he could have asked for and certainly more than he'd even considered demanding. He was a lucky sod, when one came right down to it.

Enveloped in a warm fog of contentment, he heaved himself up and went to the fridge, glancing inside. No body parts in the immediate eye-line, but there was a suspicious-looking jar full of a cloudy fluid and something pink floating inside that he didn't care to investigate. He shut the fridge and went to the bathroom door. The shower had stopped. "Sherlock?" He knocked. "Have you got anything to eat?"

"What?" Sherlock's voice was muffled – he was brushing his teeth.

"Food. Have you got any food?"

"Hang on," Sherlock said, and the door opened. He peered out a bit irritably. "I didn't hear you."

"I'm famished. Got anything to eat?" John couldn't help it – he swept his gaze downward, from Sherlock's face, strangely naked-looking beneath his wet, scraped-back hair, down his torso, pink and beaded with water, to the towel wrapped round his hips. He met Sherlock's eyes again. "Besides whatever's in that jar."

"Oh, that's a tongue." Sherlock turned back to the mirror. "I think there might be pot noodle in one of the cupboards. Check the date on it, though."

"Okay." John half-turned, and then halted. He squinted. "What…Sherlock, what's that?"

"What's what?" Sherlock rubbed a brush over some shaving soap.

"On your back."

Sherlock froze for a second, then glanced over his shoulder and looked down, his expression vaguely puzzled. "Oh. The scars? That was Serbia." He went back to his shaving.

John looked at the ridges of scarring, hatchmarked lines spanning Sherlock's back. Serbia? When had he been in Serbia? The scars weren't recent, and he….

Oh, God.

Unaccountably, John felt his hands curling into fists. Anger: not on Sherlock's behalf, but at Sherlock. Secretive, stubborn bastard. "What happened?"

The taut edge to John's voice made Sherlock turn around again. He regarded John impassively. "I was an idiot. Got caught, and they beat me awhile. It didn't last. I got out, naturally." He smiled, tight-lipped, and turned back to the mirror. "Look in the top right cupboard."

Sherlock's shoulder blade shifted as he began to shave, and John watched for a moment, remembering that he'd thought that Sherlock was kissing him. Stupid. His gaze wandered back to the scars. When had Serbia happened? As soon as Sherlock had disappeared? Later? What else had he endured and not discussed?

"Make me some as well, would you, John?"

"Yeah." John straightened, suddenly conscious of an uncomfortable stirring in his cock. "Yeah,
okay." Quickly, he went to the kitchen and rummaged through the cupboards, looking for anything nourishing. He found two containers of pot noodle and went to work, glad Sherlock wasn't there to see his abrupt movements or the humiliating blush on his cheeks.

*

It was half three before John rose to go to bed. He stretched and yawned. "Erm…I don't suppose the bed's in my old room."

"Oh, it is." Sherlock was lounging on the sofa in pyjamas and what looked like a brand-new deep green dressing gown, apparently contemplating his bare toes. "It's under a pile of stuff, though. Books. Clothes. Boxes. A mould farm. Maybe a few samples of grave dirt. On second thought, you might want to take the sofa."

"I doubt we'd both fit," John blurted. Oh, fuck. "Sorry. Sorry, I'm exhausted." Gingerly, he tongued the inside of his cheek where he'd bitten it, feeling raw shreds of skin.

Sherlock only chuckled. "Take my bed."

"No, no, you don't have to –"

"I'm not inclined to move." Sherlock curled up on his side. "Toss that blanket over me, would you?"

"Are you sure?"

"Of course. Hurry up. I want to be down at the Met by ten. Brody doesn't know we're alive and Lestrade promised me I could visit him. Can't wait to see his face." His eyes closed, Sherlock grinned.

John sighed in resignation and fetched the woollen plaid blanket from his chair. Carefully, he draped the blanket over Sherlock's body and tucked it under his feet. "Sorry," he said again. "I do that for Nora. She likes her feet snug."

Sherlock's eyes were open again. "Thank you."

John had the impulse to stroke Sherlock's head and clasped his hands behind his back. "Hey, Sherlock – thanks for tonight."

"Glide swimming, John. You should learn it. And really, there was nothing to worry about. Only stupid criminals toss victims into water without weighing them down first."

"Yeah. Seriously, though – thanks. I didn't think I was going to make it."

Sherlock was silent for a few seconds. "Don't be ridiculous, John. I wouldn't let you drown. I know how hopeless you are at swimming in any case."

An hour before John had been sublimely content. Now there was a funny ache in his chest, and an odd sort of letdown deeper in. "Yeah. I know you wouldn't."

"Good night."

"Night, Sherlock." John couldn't help himself. He reached down, rucking up the blanket, and
squeezed Sherlock's upper arm, his fingers brushing against the soft fabric of Sherlock's dressing gown. He re-ordered the blanket and straightened. "Night."

"Mm." Sherlock's eyes were closed again.

John turned out the lights automatically – it had been almost five years since he'd lived at Baker Street and he still remembered the exact placement of the lights – and went to Sherlock's room. He slipped under the covers immediately and burrowed into the pillow, not wanting to look around at Sherlock's room, but he caught Sherlock's scent on the pillow and only half-consciously inhaled.

*

It was John's turn to pick up Nora after swimming classes and he didn't want to go home and turn right round again, so he stopped at the pub. He'd been stopping by the pub a lot lately, but it was convenient and anyway he usually only had one pint, sometimes two. It was a decent place in a quiet neighbourhood near the pool, and while he'd established a nodding acquaintance with some of the other regulars, he hadn't made a move to join them. He'd take a magazine or a book and read. It was a nice way to wind down from the day, actually.

The time was dragging tonight, though. He was working on a piece for possible submission to the RAMC Journal about combat wound care, and while he'd never considered himself a stellar writer – his long-abandoned blog had been testament enough to that, and did anyone even write blog entries anymore? – he was having trouble coming up with even the simplest words after the initial burst, about two hundred words' worth. He'd intended the piece to be a passionate defence of suturing as opposed to polymer glues, but he couldn't think of a title, much less an eloquent summation of superior methods of wound closure.

Scowling, he turned over a leaf in his notebook and examined the feverishly scribbled notes he'd made a few nights ago.

*Dexon Maxon PDS
silk nylon prolene
Mattress – BEST
Call Mike re. hemostasis
predictable degradability
Aesthetic considerations – soldiers no less worthy
possible mental stress
No second intention in combat? – maybe*

When he'd written that, he'd had every damned paragraph in mind and now, despite his intimacy with the topic, it might as well have been written in Farsi for all he could piece it together. Maybe it was age.

He glanced at his watch for perhaps the tenth time and closed the notebook. He upended his glass, finishing the pint – second pint – and heaved himself out of his chair. He'd go a bit early, watch the end of Nora's lesson. He wasn't mad about the other parents and avoided them in the main. Some weren't bad, true, but most of them were friendly on the surface and ruthlessly competitive underneath, eager to one-up each other, to brag about how brilliantly their little Poppy or Isabella or Lily had done on the speed test or underwater timing or in ballet/gymnastics/Early Medieval Literature. They lived vicariously, and John found it perplexing and a bit pathetic. The trouble was,
most of the girls were nice little things – it was their parents who annoyed him.

The gym was scarcely a stone's throw away, and he found himself at the doorstep in no time. He was surprised to see Nora sitting on a bench, already dressed and chatting with another little girl, Amelia, whilst Amelia's well-dressed father sat a short distance away, engrossed in his phone. At John's approach, Amelia's father – what was his name? He'd forgotten, but he was a barrister or a government flunky or something – looked up and gave him a thin smile. "There you are."

Nora waved. "Hi, Daddy."

"Hi, love." Nonplussed, John returned the smile. "Am I late?"

"Well, not ordinarily. Anna had an engagement this evening so she let everyone out early."

"She didn't say." Or Mary had neglected to tell him, which wasn't like her.

Amelia's father stood and pocketed his phone. "Well, she announced it just before class." The unspoken reprimand of Which you'd have known if you stayed to watch the lesson like a decent parent and not buggered off to the pub like a common sot hung in the air.

"Okay," John said evenly. "Thanks for staying with her. You ready, darling?"

"Yep." Nora jumped up and scampered over to John, grabbing his hand. "'Bye, Amelia. See you tomorrow."

"'Bye, Nora. 'Bye, Dr Watson."

"Good-bye, Amelia." John smiled at her and gave her father a nod. "Thanks again."

"Well, I didn't want to abandon her. She doesn't seem to have a mobile." Clearly he wasn't ready to let it go.

John was about to ask him if he wanted to bill for his valuable time, but refrained. Just. "That's kind of you. Come on, sweets." Hand in hand, he and Nora headed for the Tube. "You could have phoned, Nora. Borrowed a friend's phone or something." He and Mary had gone back and forth about getting her a mobile. She was nine – all right, almost ten – and it just seemed too early. Mary had contended that it was a necessary thing, and maybe she was right after all.

"I wasn't bothered, Daddy. We weren't even there five minutes." Nora hitched her gym bag higher on her shoulder.

"Ah." Caught out, Mr Snooty. "Want me to carry that for you?"

"No, I've got it."

"Did you have a good class?"

"Yeah, it was fun. We did racing dives. Janey got a new kitten."

"Oh? What's its name?"

"She's a girl, and her name is Peggy," Nora informed him.

"Excellent name." John guided Nora onto the carriage and found a seat. He listened to her soothing chatter and hugged her close. This life, this routine, was good, exactly what he needed to assuage the occasional unwelcome burning of his heart. He wished to God he hadn't seen Sherlock the other day.
It was easier to picture him distantly and sometimes in the papers. Secure in his imaginings, Sherlock could remain a remote, cold figure, somebody he once knew. Seeing him in person, up close, knowing that he'd got on and was continuing to get along, that was a different kettle of fish altogether.

"Daddy?"

"Hm? Yeah, love?"

"What's wrong?"

John touched her straight little nose. "Nothing, sweetheart. What makes you ask?"

"You look cross."

"I do? Well, I had a rough day at work. Lots of sick people. Happens in the winter, you know. Lots of flu, bronchitis, other respiratory trouble. There was a little girl about your age with a very nasty flu. It's worrisome. I'm glad you're so healthy and strong."

Nora was not to be distracted. "Work's making you cross?"

John pressed his lips together. "Well, that and a few other things. It's difficult to explain." She eyed him reflectively, not speaking, and John, never the confessional sort, found himself saying, "I saw an old friend the other day."

"Who?"

"Erm…." John rubbed a hand up the side of his face, feeling the faint prickle of beard. "Do you remember Sherlock Holmes?"

"Sure I do," she replied a bit haughtily, as if to assert that there was nothing at all wrong with her memory, thank you very much indeed. "The detective. You used to be flatmates. Mum cuts stuff out of the paper sometimes when he's in there."

"Of course you do. My apologies. Well, as I said, I saw him a few days ago, and it…I suppose it churned some old feelings up."

"What kind of feelings?"

John shrugged. "Oh, I don't know. It's a bit complicated." He focussed on Nora's eyes, dark hazel and alert. "Have you ever felt two ways about a person?"

She considered a moment. "I don't know. I guess so. Lucie and I were mad at each other before Christmas and we're friends again now, so maybe. Are you mad at him?"

"Not anymore, but a few years ago we had a falling-out."

"What about?"

He was beginning to be sorry he'd said anything. "Grown-up problems, that's all."

"And now you're not friends?" Nora slipped her hand into his, an unconscious seeking or granting of comfort.

"Well…not really. We're not angry at each other anymore, but we're not exactly good friends, either."
'Do you want to be friends again?'

*There's the rub.* "Sometimes. Sometimes not. That's why I feel two ways about him."

"Can't you just ring him and say you want to be friends again?"

John's stomach clenched around the two pints he'd drunk. What on earth would Sherlock say if he did that? He had offered the case, but surely he hadn't meant it. He feared a rebuff, and feared kindness more. "Oh, darling, it's not that simple. Come on, here we are." They got off the carriage. John dropped his pub change into the cup of the homeless man who often occupied the grating near the tube station.

The man saluted him. "Thank you, sir. Hello, love."

"Hello," Nora said, but grasped John's hand a little more tightly. As they walked along, Nora skipped and muttered a song under her breath.

They reached the house in good time. A delicious perfume of cooking hung in the air. "Kofta! Yum yum yum." Nora tore off her coat and hat.

"Don't leave them on the floor – Nora!"

"Sorry. Hi Mum!"

Mary popped her head out of the kitchen. "Hello, darling. How was swim?"

"Good." She brushed a kiss over Mary's cheek. "Kofta?"

Mary tousled her hair and winked at John. "Yes. Ready in about twenty minutes. Is your homework finished?"

"Yeah. Can I watch television?"

"Yes." Mary swatted her bum and spoke to John. "I'm headed for Paris on Wednesday. Just heard, sorry."

"That's okay." Despite their recent warmth, John couldn't help the small dart of relief at the news. A little break would be good – it would help him re-focus. "I haven't got anything on."

"Oh, thanks. I'll make it up to you with the swim pickups."

"Don't worry about it." He offered Mary a smile. "Want any help with dinner?"

"Nope, got it under control. Go make sure she's not watching porn."

"Right." John drifted into the dining room that they'd converted into a modest home theatre – well, it was a home theatre in that it had a large television and a comfortable sofa. Nora was sprawled on the sofa watching an incomprehensible cartoon. "Hey. Mind if I join you?"

"Nope." Nora moved over a bit.

John's hand hovered over his pocket. Little Lamb was a 4-7 favourite for Chelmsford City on Wednesday, freshening up after a disappointing run in the last mare's hurdle, but –

No. *Fuck.*
He clenched his hands together.

"Dad?"

John unclenched his hands. "Yeah, love?"

She frowned at him, and he marvelled at how, when she was puzzled or angry or upset, she resembled him more than when she was smiling. Genetics was a funny lottery. "Nothing." She turned back to her programme and watched in silence.

They were alike in many ways, he and his wee daughter. He leant over and gave her a kiss on her warm temple, smelling faintly of chlorine, and she smiled at him, forgiving his faults.

He managed to stay off the phone for the rest of the night.

*

Only powdery old ladies write cheques to Harvey Nicks. Ergo, Gwendoline Rice is the killer. Arrest before departure to Mallorca. SH

They're on the way. Molly said you guessed about baby, sneaky bugger. Pint this weekend? My treat.

I don't guess. Possibly. Text me Saturday. SH

Sherlock set the phone on the table and stretched out on the sofa, considering his dinner options. There were the contents of his fridge – nil, actually, so that was out. There was the usual fish and chips from the shop round the corner, only a text away. There was a Speedy's sandwich and crisps, another text away. And there was the five-hundred quid voucher to Corrigan's Mayfair, the gift of a grateful client. 'Take your best lady friend,' the client had said, to which Sherlock had responded with a wintry stare. 'Or your best fellow.' Sherlock said nothing. The client had loosened his tie and swallowed. 'Or they might deliver. I'll make certain they do.' So there was that.

The phone pinged with a text from Mycroft, hot on the heels of the four unanswered calls he'd made. Sherlock picked up the phone.

Are you free for dinner?

Sherlock sighed.

No.

The car's outside. Don't keep me waiting.

Muttering, Sherlock got up and limped to the bedroom.

*
"Thoughtful of you to join me, Sherlock, especially as you seem to have been very busy the past few days."

"Oh, think nothing of it." Sherlock spooned up tomato bisque and sipped daintily. It was delicious. Mycroft had recently acquired a new cook; he must have been doing double duty on the workouts because the amazing food didn't seem to be showing up on his figure.

"Where have you been, incidentally?"

"Believe it or not, I do have a few other cases on, Mycroft."

"More pressing than mine, I take it."

"Hard to believe, I know, but as it happens, yes. Caught a killer this afternoon."


"I hate plaice," Sherlock declared sulkily, though he thought the cook probably wouldn't make too much of a hash of it. "And Cook? Cook, your Lordship? Doesn't she have a name?"

"May I remind you that you could have had a knighthood as well? There's no need to mock mine."

"Why in God's name would I want one?"

"Why indeed. The cook's name is Madame Charbonneau. And you'll love her plaice, it's an absolute delight." Mycroft set down his spoon as the dining room door swung open. "Ah, here we are. Thank you."

Sherlock watched in silence as Mycroft addressed the server – footman, oh dear – and accepted his food. He'd taken on even more of a ponderous demeanour in the past few years, and the knighthood was likely part of it. Doubtless he'd go on serving in His Majesty's Government until he was kicking up daisies, and he'd grow more pompous and obnoxious with each passing year, and he'd probably be a life peer and holder of some order titles as well at the end of it all. But then Mycroft always had relied on external motivation. A very insecure man, was Mycroft Holmes.

"Well," Mycroft said, once the young man had departed. "Have you made any progress?"

"I sent you the guest list from the party held the same night of Meredith Howe's bash."

"I saw that you sent it," Mycroft parried. "Does it have any bearing on the case?"

Sherlock took a forkful of plaice, which was indeed delicious, cooked with a mustard and tarragon sauce and served alongside crushed potatoes and bright, crisp asparagus. He chewed and swallowed, and drank a bit of wine. "Mm."

"Sherlock?"

"I gather you didn't look at it."

Mycroft set his fork down. "Why do you think I engaged you for this?"

"God." Sherlock took out his phone and found the list. "Right, here we go. It was a Dedalus Communications do, their annual Christmas thing. The usual assortment of information systems movers and shakers, boring lot. Nick Dedalus, Jane McDougall, Nishi Mahto, et cetera, et cetera. Some of them with art connections, mostly unschooled buyers and largely modern stuff, not Lady Howe's milieu at all. Until this." He enlarged a highlighted name and passed the phone to Mycroft.

"Lord Moran, as was," Sherlock said. "You couldn't be bothered, so I did a bit of digging. He'd lost all credibility when he was imprisoned, naturally, but when he got sprung he landed on his feet. Got in on the ground floor of Dedalus and it's been up, up, up ever since."

"Yes, I know that."

"And he's been quiet, you know that too. No further contact with North Korea, at least. But did you know that he's been buying art at auction under condition of anonymity?" Sherlock grinned at his brother's expression of surprise.

"And how did you discover that, may I ask? Not your homeless network, surely?"

Sherlock's grin widened. "Oh, you are a snob and a half, Mycroft. You know, if you mingled a bit more with the great unwashed you wouldn't need a knighthood to feel better about yourself. Of course it was the homeless network. Who better than invisible citizenry to watch the comings and goings of the great and would-be great? Addresses given at docking bays, loose talk in back alleys, illicit tips – you never have given them enough credit."

"Fine," Mycroft said impatiently. "What's the connection to Meredith?"

Sherlock raised an internal set of eyebrows at Mycroft's familiar use of Lady Howe's name. It wasn't the first time. "Well, Lord Moran's tastes in art are catholic, but as you can see from the photographs of his family's home –" Sherlock took the phone and called up a saved site. "Obviously the most favoured stuff is pre-Enlightenment. And where, brother dear, is his family's home?"

Mycroft groaned softly. "County Londonderry."

"Just so." Sherlock pocketed his phone and took a heaping bite of potatoes.

"Sherlock, I want you to drop everything else and concentrate on this."

Sherlock frowned. "Mycroft, every case you give me seems to concern the fate of the free world, and yet –"

"Stop. Stop it," Mycroft said. "I'm not asking you to solve it in a week. This is more delicately calibrated than you realise. Pursue it."

"If it's so urgent, why don't your people go after it?"

"Any whiff of official intervention might scare the perpetrators. I need you to be careful. Start with Moran. He's changed since prison, you know. If you've seen recent photos, you wouldn't understand, as he's as flamboyant as ever, but prison broke him, as well it might. Get what information you can, Sherlock. Don't speak to him unless you must, but if that's the only way to obtain what you need, then you must."

"He can't have kept his hands entirely clean. He might be broken, but that doesn't mean he's not clever." Sherlock dropped his napkin on the table and pushed back his chair.

"Not staying for dessert? It's lemon chiffon cake with Chantilly crème."

"Get Cook to wrap a piece up for me," Sherlock said. "I'm off."

"Very well," Mycroft replied. "Did you learn anything else at the racecourse?"
Sherlock paused and examined Mycroft carefully. He had half a mind to say that he'd seen John, but John's name never inspired kindness lately – or what passed for kindness with Mycroft, at least. They hadn't discussed the rift beyond a passing mention; Mycroft had simply shrugged and said he seemed to recall telling Sherlock that it wouldn't last, and Sherlock hadn't shoved Mycroft's head against the wall as he'd probably deserved, even if he had been right.

"Not much."

"I see. Well…carry on, then. Report when you have something."

Sherlock couldn't resist a grin. "Aye, your Lordship."

"That's Sir Mycroft to you, little brother." Mycroft patted his mouth with his napkin.

"That'll be the day."

*
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

Grateful thanks are due to my superfine beta/Britpicking team, kimberlite and vilestrumpet.

* 

April 1999

Mycroft extracted a cigarette from his pack, lit it, and inhaled with tremendous satisfaction.

"I do wish you wouldn't smoke." Meredith waved a hand in front of her face – unnecessary, since the smoke was drifting away from her.

"So do I." Mycroft regarded the cigarette ruefully. "Filthy habit."

"Oh, good, you agree." Meredith plucked the cigarette from his hand, leant over him, and stubbed it out in the cracked china cup on the night table. "Look at you, you don't even have a proper ashtray. I've never witnessed such vigorous denial. I see right through you, you know." She flopped back beside him and pushed her hair, a glorious red nimbus, away from her face and from beneath her neck, spreading it out on the pillow.

Mycroft flicked a glance at her and then stared up at the striped canopy of his ancient campaign bed. "I won't smoke if you don't try to psychoanalyse me."

"Fine."

"Good. Let's talk about something more pleasant. How is Christie's?"

"Oh, as ever. Hardwick and Knowsley are terrible bores, Wilton's a tyrant, Petersen's so sly he can hide behind a corkscrew, and the other girls pretend to be terribly busy when actually they're just making lists of dinner-party guests to telephone and gossiping over other friends' sex lives or lack thereof. I think I'm the only bride of art in the pack, honestly."

Mycroft picked up a skein of her hair and admired it in the slanting early-evening sunlight. "Trust me, your work ethic means you'll outlast those silly girls, and you'll get the plum assignments, too. I'm sure you'll be far too glamorous to associate with the likes of me in no time." Not all aristos were vapid, Meredith being a prime example. Her quick wit carried a charming gravity beneath it, and she'd never been flighty, unlike a great many of the other people they'd known at uni. If she was also maddeningly elusive, he admired her for it nonetheless.

Meredith laughed, a funny deep rolling chuckle out of tune with her small frame and girlish looks. "Too glamorous for you? Doubt it. You're Daddy's fair-haired boy. Still...still, we had an interesting client the other day. A little old lady in a tattered sable coat, clutching a brown paper parcel to her chest. Of course, none of the other girls could be bothered, so I saw to her myself, and what do you suppose she had?"
"A lost Da Vinci," Mycroft returned.

"Not a bad guess. It was a small piece, about a foot square, a portrait of a woman holding a dulcian."

"What on earth's that?"

"It's a musical instrument, like a bassoon. The woman holding it – she's plump and rosy-cheeked, and smiling – a real smile, not a portrait smile, if you know what I mean. The colours are vivid, and the brushstrokes look almost hasty, but there's such virtuosity in it, such vivacity and humour." Meredith sat up, and the bedclothes fell away from her breasts. "I think it's Frans Hals, but of course it'll have to be authenticated. There's no visible signature, but the frame is much newer than the painting."

"I see. That's exciting, certainly." Distracted by the sight of Meredith's breasts, Mycroft reached out and fondled one, cupping it gently in his hand.

"Are you listening to me?" Meredith demanded. She turned round and pressed herself against the length of Mycroft's naked body.

"Of course. Frans Hals. Go on," he said, though he felt himself getting hard again. Meredith rubbed her hand over his belly, and he sucked it in instinctively.

Meredith leant down and kissed the too-yielding flesh. "Oh, don't do that, Mycroft. You're lovely exactly as you are."

She wasn't patronising him, but he couldn't bear the attention. "Go on with your story. I'm listening."

"Hm. All right. So the painting's lovely, but the story behind it is more interesting. It seems the lady's sister Agnieta was the unwilling lover of an SS officer during the occupation of the Netherlands. Apparently she could have been a poster child for the Nazi Women's League – blonde, blue-eyed, and I suppose the SS pig thought so too. He kept the family from starvation for a year, until Agnieta killed herself. But before she did, she entrusted her sister with a painting the pig had looted from a Jewish family's home. You can imagine what happened to the family."

"Yes," Mycroft murmured.

"The pig had stolen so much he didn't notice the loss, and the woman held on to it. She tried to find the Jewish family's survivors, but had no luck. She brought it to Christie's because she's running out of money. Isn't that extraordinary?"

Mycroft nodded. "It is, actually."

"I'm looking for the family myself. I want them to have the piece."

"And if they're all dead?"

Meredith shook her head. "There must be some extant family out there. What good is the information superhighway if you can't make use of its services? If I have to buy it myself, I might. I might anyway."

Mycroft opened his mouth to speak, then hesitated. He liked Meredith tremendously and didn't want to alienate her.

"What?" Meredith lay down again and draped an arm over Mycroft's chest. "You want to say
"Well." Mycroft cleared his throat. "Is there a chance that this is a personal matter?"

Another laugh rolled out of Meredith's narrow body. "You great fool, of course it's personal. How can it not be?"

Carefully, Mycroft laid a hand on her hip and caressed. "Don't be cross. I was only curious."

"I'm not cross. I'm half Jewish, Mycroft. These things matter very much to me. It's not distant history. It's immediate and present. There are so many pieces unaccounted for because of Nazi plunder – not just from Jews, either, I'll have you know. But I'd be lying if I said that loss didn't matter the most to me."

"Perhaps you should make it your field," Mycroft said. "You have the necessary resources, and passion for the work." In his very infrequent flights of fancy, he sometimes imagined himself and Meredith, if not working together, then sharing a similar devotion to their work whilst cohabiting. Even…yes, even married. It wasn't entirely preposterous. Her father, Oliver Howe, had recruited him from university upon her recommendation – of course, he'd proven himself, but a leg up certainly hadn't done him any harm. They were well-suited in many ways. Her politics were more leftist than his, but she was intelligent and charming and had good taste, he fancied her body, and she had seen through his stiffness and shyness when he'd first come to uni and had even managed to coax humour out of him now and again. She didn't seem inclined to settle down, but perhaps that would come in time.

She was still. "Perhaps I should." She sat up again, her marvellous hair tumbling down her back. "I'll think it over. Let's change the subject. Are you peckish? I could phone for takeaway."

"In a bit." Mycroft longed for another go. He stroked the small of her back; her skin was velvety. "What did you have in mind?"

"Don't know. Oh, talking of which – I swear I saw your brother last week, but it's not hols, so…." She trailed off when she saw Mycroft's face. "It mightn't have been him, though."

Mycroft rubbed his eyes. "I'm sure it was."

"Is he all right?"

He never spoke to anyone but Meredith about Sherlock. He trusted her implicitly. And he would never introduce them – though if he and Meredith were to marry he supposed that would become a bit awkward. Might be inevitable. "He's upright and breathing – that's a start." Mycroft sighed heavily. "He's indulging in all sorts of rubbish – evidently these new drugs are so dynamic they only need single letters to identify them. X, E –"

"That's the same thing," Meredith murmured.

"And now there's something called Special K – it's a bloody horse tranquiliser. It's not even illegal to possess, for heaven's sake. And he boasts about them. Christ, he won't go home on weekends or holidays because he knows my mother will know something's wrong with him, so he comes to London and stumbles through my door with pupils the size of dinner plates and smelling awful and trying to cadge money from me. Apparently he's found other digs."

"But it mightn't have been him."

"I wouldn't bet on that. Thank God he's at least getting along at university. I've managed to keep the
worst of his escapades from my parents, but if his marks slide, I'm not certain what else I can do."
"Use the tools you've got to hand. Kidnap him and threaten him," Meredith suggested with a grin.
"Don't think I've not considered it," Mycroft muttered. "He doesn't intimidate easily, I'm afraid. It
wouldn't make the slightest difference."
"I do hope he doesn't get hurt."
"One can't rely on Sherlock not getting hurt, the careless, selfish little bugger."
"Oh, Mycroft." Meredith nestled closer to him. "You're doing what you can to look after him. I'm
sure he'll be fine."

"Maybe," Mycroft conceded grudgingly, and stared into the middle distance. Maybe kidnapping him
was a good idea after all. A week in an isolation cell with water and plain rice would drive anyone
round the bend – Sherlock, with his constant need for diversion and stimulation, would be utterly
mad within two days. Scared straight, wasn't that the phrase? Christ, what on earth was he going to
do about that stupid boy?

Meredith caressed his belly again, and let her hand drift lower. "With you protecting him, I wouldn't
worry."

Mycroft wasn't above being mercenary. He kept silent and still, and let her caress him until he was
hard and ready again. He took her swiftly, gathering her close and kissing her and successfully
driving all thoughts of Sherlock from his consciousness.

*

Thursday was John's early afternoon, and he planned to savour it. The day was sunny and bracing;
he thought he'd put on his trainers and jog in the park for a bit, then head back home for a light lunch
and dinner prep – hand-made pasta and his special sauce with bits of sausage and lots of pepper and
Parmesan cheese, which Nora adored but Mary didn't care for, so it was just as well that Mary was in
Paris. Then he'd collect Nora from school, they'd have a nice supper, and in the evening he'd break
out the chess set he'd got her for Christmas and teach her the fundamentals. It was about time she
learned a bit of critical thinking. Then he'd work on the RAMC Journal article a bit more before bed.

It was nice to have a pleasant evening planned out. And, he realised with a flash of guilt, it would be
especially nice to have Nora all to himself. They didn't have deep talks or anything, but the dynamic
was different when it was just the two of them. And to be fair, he supposed it was different when it
was just Mary and Nora together. Sometimes he saw Nora struggling to please both of them when
they were all together and things were strained – and things seemed strained a lot just lately – and it
broke his heart. He and Mary had tried to discuss it, but it hadn't ended well the few times they'd
made the attempt.

He whistled a little trotting up the steps, and fitted his key into the lock. Stepping inside, he heard a
rustling and froze.

Someone was in the house.

John scanned quickly for the nearest weapon. There was an iron candlestick on one of the shelves in
the lounge. He left the door ajar and crept toward it, stepping deftly over the creak in the floor near
the entrance.

"John?" Mary popped her head out of the bedroom doorway.

"Jesus!" John slumped and breathed hard. "I thought you were a burglar. What are you doing
home?"

She bit her lip. "Come on into the bedroom," she said, and disappeared without another word.

Puzzled, John closed the door and shrugged out of his coat, tossing it on the sofa – bad example, but
Nora wasn't around – and went into the bedroom. Mary was moving around, pulling things out of
dresser drawers and tossing them onto the bed, where her suitcase – the big one, not the overnight
she usually took on her stints – sat open, half-filled with unfolded clothes, none of them scrubs.
"What's going on? What happened to Paris?"

Holding a fistful of bras and underpants in her hands, Mary sank to the bed. "I had some…news."

"Nora?" A quick rush of adrenaline made John light-headed.

"No, no. It's my aunt. Trish. She died yesterday morning. Or…yesterday morning in St. Louis, I
guess." She let out a shuddering sigh.

"Oh…." John went to the bed and sat beside Mary, taking her hand. "Was she ill?"

"Yeah. She'd been sick for about a year." Mary pressed her lips together. "She didn't say a word
about it when she was here."

"That's why she took the trouble to find you." John put his arm round Mary's shoulders and kissed
her cheek. "I'm sorry, love."

Mary nodded. "Her solicitor called me. Her lawyer." She uttered a strange little laugh. "Tim said it
was all right to come home. John, I'm going to go to the funeral."

"Okay." He took a breath. "Do you want me and Nora to come along?"

She studied his face. "Do you want to?"

Christ, no. To meet near or distant relations, old friends, people who knew Mary Morstan as
someone else? Annie, for God's sake? What would he say to them? She'd have to give him a crash
course on her early life, and Nora would want to know why he didn't already know the proffered
information, and it would dredge up so much, Christ no he didn't want to. "If you want me to."

"I don't really want to take Nora out of school." Mary squeezed his hand. "You don't mind staying,
do you?"

Relief made him weak. "No, it's okay. Probably better in the long run. I'd hate to…inconvenience
you or get in the way. And you're right, Nora shouldn't miss school. I doubt she'd want to, anyway,
no matter how glamorous St. Louis might be."

"It's not all that glamorous," Mary said, and her breath shuddered. She dragged the knuckle of her
index finger beneath one eye, smearing her light makeup a bit.

More comfort seemed to be in order. John hugged her closer and kissed her cheek. "Sorry, darling. I
know you were just getting to know her again."
"She was always sweet. She never asked many questions." Again, that hitching, quivery laugh. "Oh, fuck." Mary wrapped her arms around John and rested her head on his shoulder. John held her close and kissed her hair. She squeezed him tighter; he took it as an invitation and kissed her again. Mary raised a tear-streaked face to his. "John, this is…awful, but would you…would you…." She kissed his mouth, first tentatively, then fiercely. Her hands fumbled at the buttons of his cardigan.

It was probably wrong, taking advantage of her vulnerability, but John wanted her then and there. Now. Right now. He pulled her to the floor and yanked at the waist tie of her scrubs. She seized his hands, crushing them over her breasts and moaning loudly enough for him to think she was in pain. "Are you –"

"Do it." Mary unbuttoned and unzipped his trousers, thrust her hand inside, and wrapped it round his cock.

"Fuck, fuck –" Clumsily, he pulled down her scrubs and the scrap of pink panties she wore. He spread her knees apart, lifted her, and plunged in. She was ready for him, and he encircled her with his arms, groaning and thrusting until he came with a low roar of relief. He wanted to collapse, but she wasn't done, so he plowed deep and hard, panting with exertion, until she tightened around him and cried out.

John let himself go limp and closed his eyes. He couldn't quite bring himself to look at her. "Sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay." She embraced him tightly and pressed her face into his neck. Her lips moved against his skin, but no sound emerged over their breathing.

They lay still until John started to get cold on the floor. "We'd better –" He got up with another groan. Fucking on the floor lost some of its allure the closer one got to fifty.

"Yeah. I've got a flight at seven from Gatwick. Best I could do." Mary sat up and, still on the floor, wriggled into her undies and scrubs. "I've got to finish packing and shower."

John buttoned his trousers. "Want any help?" He held a hand out.

"Erm…." Mary took it and sprang up. "You can chat with me while I get ready. How was your day? Did Beauchamp come back from Aruba?"

"No – tomorrow. I'll have to look at about seventy-five thousand boring snaps of white sand and blue water."

"He never notices how bored you are, does he? God." Mary rolled a pair of dark trousers. "Oh – hey, would you reach into the wardrobe and get my dark-blue dress, the silk jersey?"

"Silk jersey," John mused, and opened the wardrobe door. He took out a dress. "This one?"

"Yeah, thanks. And the black wool crepe, with the stand-up collar. I don't know how that's going to pack, but it's the best thing I've got for a funeral."

John pulled the dress out. "You wore this one to Mrs Holmes' funeral."

"I didn't have to pack it, though. I suppose I can steam it at the hotel." Mary, an expert packer after years of accompanying Tim Liddell around the world, quickly and efficiently rolled thin, dark jumpers, underwear, a pair of jeans, a skirt. She stopped. "John."

"Yeah?" He liked watching her pack, the same way he enjoyed watching her cook. She was fast and
competent, good at almost anything she decided to do. He always liked watching competent –

*Oh, shut the fuck up.*

"There's something else."

"What?"

"Her lawyer told me that I was one of her beneficiaries."

John smiled a little. "Did she leave you her millions?"

Mary shook her head. "I don't know. But he said it would be worth my while to attend. Trish wanted me to, and I think there's going to be some informal reading of the will later in the week, and she wanted me there as well. Apparently she…she called me night before last, but I missed the call. I was planning to ring her back when I got home from Paris, but…" She lifted one shoulder in a shrug, but her eyes shone too brightly. "*C'est la vie*, I suppose. Could you get the black heels with the straps out of there?"

"Don't blame yourself," John said softly. "You didn't know." He found the shoes and laid them on the bed.

"No. But I won't be able to forget that." Mary shook her head. "Right, I think that's about it. I'll wear my good coat on the flight. Her lawyer's booked me at the Four Seasons if you can't reach my mobile." She paused. "Should I take a hat? I don't think Americans wear hats to church much nowadays, even in St. Louis."

"Well," John said, "you could impress them, then. You look nice in hats."

Mary smiled. "Thanks, darling. Maybe a small one. The little cloche on the shelf."

"The what?"

"Cloche." Mary mimed pulling a hat down. "That little plum-coloured one, with the feathers on the side. It's in the blue box."

"Cloche," John muttered. "Okay." He pulled the blue hatbox from the shelf and opened it, taking the hat and handing it across the bed.

"Thanks."

"No problem." He went to replace the lid and noticed something crushed at the bottom of the box. Frowning, he pulled it out. "The hell…?" He recognised it all at once, and couldn't quite get his breath to say anything else.

Mary glanced at the dark-blue scarf. "Oh, that's Sherlock's, isn't it?"

A little shudder rippled through John's insides. "Yeah. Jesus. He lent that to me…must be five years ago. Six, maybe."

"Probably he never missed it," Mary said. "I expect he had dozens."

"Yeah, probably." John lifted it close to his nose.

"Does it still smell like him?"
John jerked the scarf away and bunched it in one hand. Instant heat rose in his face. "Yeah. Noxious chemical compounds and rubbish skips, mostly. Your hat doesn't smell, does it?"

Mary sniffed at the hat. "No, smells fine."

"Good." John balled the scarf up and tossed it to the floor of the wardrobe. "I'll let you shower. Do you want something to eat before you go?"

"Would you make me a sandwich? I'm not sure I'll get anything decent on the red-eye."

"Ham and cheese, cup of tea?"

"Builder's tea, please. Thanks, love."

"Mm-hm." His heart pounding, John went into the kitchen to make the sandwich. He paused in the centre of the corridor and pressed his hands to his overheated face.

*Why can't you just fuck off and let me be? Please. Please just let me be.*

*Lord Stephen Moran's London pied-á-terre was a flat-fronted four-storey Georgian in Prince of Wales Terrace, a handsome place and well-kept. Sherlock rang the bell and waited.*

At length a small, neatly made man with a bristly mustache poked his head out the door. "Yes?"

"Sherlock Holmes to see Lord Moran."

The butler, major-domo, indentured servant, whatever, sniffed audibly and surveyed Sherlock with distaste. "I'm afraid Lord Moran isn't receiving visitors, sir. If you'd care to leave your card —"

"I haven't got a card."

"I'd be very glad to take your name and telephone number."

"Tell him it's in connection with the death of Meredith Howe. I think he'll want to speak to me. Tell him my name."

The man's pinched face curdled even more. "Wait here, please." He closed the door with a firm but sedate click.

Sherlock whistled idly and gazed round. Ah, there was the camera, set deep into the entablature. He wondered if Moran was watching him; just in case, he offered the lens an inane grin and noted the cars. Moran was decidedly at home — there was his Mercedes parked at the kerb. No other obvious surveillance; he'd led a quiet, uneventful life since his release from prison, except for the surreptitious art purchases.

The door opened again. "Come in, please." The butler stepped aside, and Sherlock walked in, coming face to face with Lord Stephen Moran.

He hadn't aged well in the nine years since he'd been sentenced: he was gaunt and somewhat stooped, and despite his ultra-fashionable and more than a little flamboyant olive-coloured
windowpane checked suit, appeared sickly and even fragile. Prison must have been hard on him, Sherlock reflected without sympathy. "Lord Moran."

"Sherlock Holmes," Moran said tonelessly. He shrugged into a camel-hair coat the butler held open for him and took a pair of soft leather gloves from the man's hand. "We've never been formally introduced, have we? But then you don't really need introductions, do you – a man of your stature. Or infamy, however you prefer to put it."

"Neither do you," Sherlock replied. "You're quite well-known yourself."

"That was an impressive collection of evidence in court," Moran said. His voice was soft, controlled, the voice of a man long accustomed to an audience. "You're concise and efficient when it suits you, it seems. Well done. I'm afraid I haven't got time to chat, though. I have an appointment."

"Yes." Sherlock consulted his phone. "Venable House. You're having a look at the Titian there. Not to worry – they're not expecting you for another hour. Surely you've got fifteen minutes to chat about an old friend."

Moran pressed his lips together and took a breath through his nose. He glanced at the butler, then handed his gloves back. "We'll just be a few moments, Melville."

"Very good, sir." Melville gave Sherlock a stony glare.

Sherlock beamed. "I'll keep my coat, thanks."

"This way." Moran gestured down the corridor, tiled in black and white marble and lined with paintings and gilt-edged silverbacked mirrors, delicate tables that seemed to be anchored to the floor only by the frivolous and no doubt priceless objects on their shining surfaces, bronze sconces, pedestalled sculpture, and a wealth of other obscenely expensive trinkets.

Sherlock followed him into a dim room and stood in its centre as Moran went to the window and drew back the curtain, revealing more large paintings, more absurd furniture, more – he stopped, transfixed by the sight of a violin atop a soft cloth.


"Yes," Sherlock replied in an equally hushed voice. God, it was dazzling. He ached to pick it up, to run his fingertips over the glowing wood, to draw out what must be an incomparable voice. "Do you play?"

"I do," Moran said. "I have a Strad and an Andrea Amati, but this is sturdy enough for daily use." Moran gestured to a chair upholstered in primrose velvet. "Sit."

Reluctantly, Sherlock wrenched his gaze from the glorious instrument, but held his ground. "You were well-acquainted with Meredith Howe."

"Naturally I was," Moran said. He seated himself and crossed his legs, folding his hands atop one knee. "I was devastated to hear of her death."

Reluctantly, Sherlock wrenched his gaze from the glorious instrument, but held his ground. "You were well-acquainted with Meredith Howe."

"Naturally I was," Moran said. He seated himself and crossed his legs, folding his hands atop one knee. "I was devastated to hear of her death."

Sherlock saw the faint tremor in Moran's fingers and the sweat gleaming beneath the signet ring on his right hand. "You considered her a friend?"

"Inasmuch as she had friends, yes. I suppose so. A colleague, really, though. At times I facilitated her acquisition projects, when I was in a position to do so."
"Had you spoken with her recently?"

Moran smiled thinly. "Are you asking me if I spoke to her just before her death, Mr Holmes?"

Might as well get right to it. "Yes. Specifically, an hour or so before her death."

"I was at a Christmas party the night she died," Moran said. "Chelmsford City, a corporate do."

"Dedalus Communications."

"That's right," Moran said. "There are still a few reputable people who are willing to be seen with me. You seem to have taken care of the rest."

"Oh, don't thank me, Lord Moran," Sherlock said. "You managed that on your own. I just kept the Met and the courts up-to-date on your activities. It's not your usual crowd, is it – IT swots and social-media kingpins?"

"No, it's not. Or rather, it wasn't. Some of them are newly rich, though, and keen to invest in art. I'm an expert, and a consultant, for a price." He offered Sherlock another narrow smile. "Like you."

"Hardly," Sherlock said. "Back to the question."

"Yes, of course. I didn't speak to her that night. I'd switched off my mobile – it was too noisy to hear properly at any rate. The music was quite loud." Moran hunched a little in his chair. "Later that evening when I'd got home, I saw that she did dial my mobile. I understand she attempted to reach me via the telephone at the racecourse itself, but I never received the message."

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. Sweat had appeared at Moran's temples and just above his upper lip. "Too warm for you, Lord Moran?"

"Yes. I probably should have removed my coat."

"So you didn't speak to her. Were the two of you working on anything together at the time of her death?"

"No." Moran lifted his chin and regarded Sherlock steadily. "Why?"

*Lying.* "Are you familiar with a painting entitled *An Angel With Titus' Features*?"

Moran shook his head. "Of course I am. Mr Holmes, are you here to accuse me of something? Complicity in Meredith's death? Art theft? Overcharging my clients? I'm afraid your fifteen minutes are just about up."

"You're guilty of something, though, aren't you?" Sherlock drifted closer. "I remember your trial quite well, Lord Moran. You had the same sort of reaction then, though I admit you kept admirably silent, for the most part. The sweating, the palsied fingers...you're holding your body tense as well. I can practically see the vibration. Guilt doesn't sit well on you. If you have something to disclose, you might as well do it now. I can't imagine you'd enjoy another four years in prison, away from all these beautiful things."

"You fool," Moran murmured.

Sherlock froze, then recovered himself quickly. "I'm a fool, am –"

"Fool," Moran said with quiet vehemence. "How much time do you think I spent in prison, Holmes?"
"Four years." Sherlock scowled.

"Five days," Moran said, standing up. "Are you listening to me? Five. Days." He smiled; the smile wrinkled his face into a hundred deep seams and his eyes glittered like chips of ice. "Not that that matters, really. My reputation's been utterly ruined. My wife left me and took the children with her. I haven't seen them in almost ten years. My former friends cut me dead in the street. But I stayed out of prison, and I've got all this." He waved a hand expansively at the room.

"And how did you manage that?" Sherlock inquired. He watched Moran carefully; probably the man was attempting to divert Sherlock with a politician's oleaginous skill, but even so, this revelation was an interesting tidbit.

Moran gave a dry barking laugh. "I made a deal with the devil."

Right. Round the twist, then. "So you've got friends in high places. Well done, you."

"North Korea, Holmes? A bloody bomb in Parliament? For Christ's sweet sake, if you were any sort of detective you'd have researched my family, my heritage. You'd know damned well that I'd never…I couldn't--" He broke off, gasping, and fumbled a tiny bottle out of his waistcoat pocket, extracting a pill and dry-swallowing. His face twisted, and he gasped for breath again.

Nice performance. Sherlock had seen better acting, and better props: he'd once encountered an eighty-year-old multiple murderer who could produce a blue-faced coughing fit to rival any fin de siècle tuberculosis ward. He sighed. "So you're innocent. I see."

Moran clutched the back of a chair, and his breath wheezed in and out of his chest. "No. You don't." He coughed harshly for a full minute, and straightened with dramatic effort. He pulled out his phone and dialled a number. "You're so bloody arrogant and blind, and you still don't see it."

"Enlighten me, then."

"I won't. You can pursue me if you like. You won't get anywhere. If you really were as brilliant as you claim to be, you'd go to the source of it all, but you won't see it." He moved toward the corridor.

Sherlock had had enough oblique raving. "Were you involved in Meredith Howe's death?"

Moran stopped and gave another papery chuckle. "Of course I was. But not the way you think, you bloody fool." He stepped aside as the butler entered the room, a small but efficient handgun pointed at Sherlock's midsection. "And now, I think you had better leave. Melville will show you out."

"Come along," Melville said shortly.

Sherlock went, unafraid but not particularly keen on getting shot for the sake of one broken-backed toff's ravings. Melville opened the door, but Sherlock stopped at the threshold. "So. What is the source of it all, Lord Moran?"

Moran shook his head slowly. "Londonderry."

Sherlock frowned. "Your house, or --" He stumbled as Melville shoved him out with a great deal of strength for a man his size, and turned his ankle on the stone steps. He felt his knee give way again, but grabbed the short balustrade, just managing to keep from face-planting onto the ground.

"Bugger."
Angrily, Sherlock limped up the stairs and into 221B. Stupid, pointless errand. Moran was obviously a jittering bundle of acquired neuroses and a self-aggrandizer to boot, and Sherlock was about five seconds away from calling Mycroft and washing his hands of the whole ridiculous affair. Besides the brotherly harangue, he hadn't a particle of motivation – it wasn't even an interesting case, didn't amount to bugger-all in the diversion department. Dead woman, missing art, addled ex-convict, who cared? He yanked his phone from his coat pocket.

The doorbell rang, one long and insistent buzz.

"Oh, piss off," Sherlock growled, and dialled Mycroft.

It rang again, longer this time.

"Please leave a message at the tone," Mycroft's voice said smoothly.

"Oh, God –" A third shrill, someone leaning on the bloody thing. Sherlock limped to the window and tugged it up. "What, for God's sake?"

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock's heart stuttered. He shielded his eyes from the late-morning sun. "John?"

It was John. Dressed a bit better than he'd done at the racecourse, bundled up against the sudden cold snap and looking…well, looking like John.

"Erm…can you come down for a minute? I've got something of yours."

Sherlock nodded, then remembered his knee. He didn't want John to see him limping. "I'm in the middle of something. Can you come up?"

John hesitated. "Yeah. Yeah, sure."

"Fine." Sherlock slammed the window shut and stood very still, waiting.

*
It was a great pity, Sherlock reflected, that it was Mrs Hudson’s eyesight that was starting to deteriorate and not her hearing. Any minute now he expected to hear her charging up the stairs, demanding to know what on earth Sherlock thought he was doing mucking around with the kitchen shelves and there’d be damages tacked on to his rent and he’d rue the day and so on and so forth. Deaf as a post, she’d never have been the wiser. It wasn’t his fault that the sodium hydroxide had tipped and eaten through the cupboard shelves, after all.

Well, maybe it was his fault, indirectly. He hadn’t meant for the stuff to spill, it had just happened. And he was replacing the damned shelf, so she had nothing to complain about. Naturally, the cupboards had been built to spec sixty years ago, so he couldn’t just pop into an IKEA and get what he needed – he had to build them from scratch. Muttering, he settled his goggles, then drilled a hole into the centre of one of the new cleats. Good, perfect. He picked up the second cleat and drilled, the drill whirring loudly over the beat-heavy dance music resounding through the flat.

And, there she was. A loud, insistent knocking – no shouting, of course. Mrs H had her passive-aggressive moments. Last week she’d brought him a batch of oat biscuits with deliberately burned bottoms – silent payback for the shower leak the month before. Some people preferred pinprick warfare.

Sherlock sighed, set the drill down, and got to his feet, brushing sawdust from his dressing gown. "Coming," he said. The knocking got louder. "Coming, I said! God!" Scowling ferociously, he muted the music, pulled the door open, and blinked.

"Hey," John said, and shifted the plastic carrier bag in his arms. Glass clinked within.

Still frowning, Sherlock lifted his goggles, pushing them atop his head. "Hi."

John smiled tautly. "Mind if I doss here tonight? Brought some beer." He reached into the bag and produced a four-pack of Fuller’s. There were two more in the bag, judging by the size and weight.

Sherlock took a half-step closer and relieved John of the four-pack. Even without the abrupt request he’d have known that John and Mary were fighting again. John smelled like the Hare & Billet, not far from their house – distinctive odour of their Wednesday speciality, mussels and chorizo potage. Whether he’d eaten it there or his clothes had simply absorbed the aroma was more of a dicey question as any smell of it on his breath had been obscured by the two – no, three – shots of Talisker he’d downed in quick succession. Then there was the mélange of mud from the park on Wricklemarsh Road and petrol fumes from the 386, and the hastily done-up jacket, the end of his
collar half-tucked into John's jumper. He'd left home in a hurry and got as far away as possible.

There was no point in saying all that to John, though – his eyes were practically shooting sparks and his lips were pressed together in a way that indicated that he was at the end of his tether. "Come in," Sherlock said instead, with deliberate nonchalance. "You can help me put this shelf together." John would have disagreed, but Sherlock had learned a thing or two about treading carefully when John was angry.

"Fine." John stripped off his jacket and slung it over a kitchen chair. "What are we doing, then?"

"The shelf gave way." Sherlock indicated the semi-dissolved shelf with a sideways thrust of his chin.

John squinted. "What the hell happened to it?"

"Minor accident, caustic soda. It was due for replacement anyway."

"Okay. What do you want from me?"

Sherlock sucked in his lower lip and regarded John for a moment.

"What?"

"Nothing." Sherlock shook his head. "Get me four three-centimetre screws out of the mug there."

John fished through the mug – his old mug, in fact, lacking its handle. "Look, Sherlock, I don't want to talk about it, all right?"

"We're not talking about it. Get me the screws."

"I mean – Jesus Christ!" John banged the mug down on the table. A few screws and nails jingled musically inside the porcelain. "I say one thing – one bloody little remark, and she flies off the fucking handle. What the fuck, I can't say anything?"

Sherlock cleared his throat. "I thought we weren't talking about it."

"And then she's giving me that look, like I'm the irrational one, when I'm just fucking reacting to what she's said. It's so manipulative, it's driving me round the bend, I swear to God."

"Mm," Sherlock replied. A few weeks after John and Mary had got married but before the shooting incident, John had stormed over in a rage over some trivial affair – a less than effusive thank-you note Mary had written for a terrible wedding gift from Harry, a scratched silver plate that had belonged to their mother – and Sherlock had helpfully pointed out exactly why the matter was so trivial – Harry had wrapped and sent the thing in the midst of a bender and likely didn't recall that she'd even sent it. For some reason, John hadn't appreciated Sherlock's analysis, and had raged at Sherlock for a few moments after storming back out. Later Mrs H, having heard the racket, had offered Sherlock some unsolicited advice (actually, all of Mrs H's advice was unsolicited): Nod and hum and say nothing. Take no sides. Be diplomatic. Offer a listening ear and a broad shoulder and no more.

Astoundingly, she'd been right. The technique had worked marvellously, and after every blowout, John and Mary reconciled sweetly and thanked him for being such a good friend. Although of course Sherlock had been proved correct when Harry called a month or so later asking if John had borrowed the silver plate.

John opened a beer and tipped a sizeable quantity down his throat. "Christ. I can't fucking win."
“You’d better start from the beginning,” Sherlock said, and picked up the mug, stirring the nails and screws inside to locate what he needed. Drinking on a Wednesday night – John had an arrangement to work four ten-hour days, Monday through Thursday. Had he called in sick already, or was he planning to? From the looks of things, he was prepared to get thoroughly pissed.

"Right." John took another swallow. "It was a shit day at work. This woman brought her kid in, a little boy, round eight or nine, and it's obvious someone's beaten the shit out of them both. But no, he fell down the fucking stairs, and when I asked her – fuck. Anyway, it was a bad day, and I get home and Mary's sitting at the table reading a manual for a juicer."

Sherlock tilted his head inquisitively to one side.

“That's right. This big fucking behemoth, brushed steel and red ceramic, to make fucking juice. I asked her what it was and she said ‘Oh, it's a juicer, John, it's for both of us!’" John's voice had risen, mimicking Mary's viciously. "Then I look at the receipt. Two hundred and fifty quid."

"I see," Sherlock said, though he didn't see at all.

John shook his head. "No, you don't. I can tell. Almost three hundred quid for a juicer! Stupid god-damned gadget that'll get used for a month and then probably take up space until she hauls it to a charity shop. That's some spendy juice, Sherlock, in case you hadn't realised it. So that just took up two hours of my life." He rubbed his eyes and slumped into the chair beside him.

"You had a two-hour fight over juice?"

A laugh hiccupped from John's throat. "When you put it like that…no, it wasn't just that. You know how it goes. You start fighting about juice and two hours later you're ready to split your belongings down the middle and take off with the kid."

"Hm."

"I know. It's ridiculous." John took another drink and slid a beer across the table. "Don't make me drink alone, Sherlock."

Amiably, Sherlock uncapped the bottle and drank. He was bored with the shelves, anyway. "Are you short of funds, John?" He did some rapid figuring. He'd had a few high-yield bonds that Seb Wilkes, now top brass at Shad Sanderson, had reinvested for him, and they'd done very well. He could afford to liquidate. In fact, he didn't much care if John borrowed it and never paid him back. It had been a long time since Sherlock had been anything close to insolvent.

"No, it's not that, not really. I mean, we're not rich, you know that, and Christ, the mortgage takes pretty much all of my salary. But Mary makes a decent wage. She just got a pay rise, in fact. It's just the principle of the thing, you know?"

"She's not ordinarily a spendthrift."

"No," John admitted. "She got most of our furniture from Gumtree, and she doesn't spend a lot on herself. But it was just…she could have mentioned it, you know? We could have discussed it."

Sherlock's phone buzzed with a text. He took it out of his dressing gown pocket: Mary.

Is he with you?

"Do you want a sandwich?" Sherlock asked, strolling to the refrigerator. He opened the door and affected to gaze inside. Yes, don't worry. I'll send him home safely in the morning."
"No, I'm good, thanks. Had a toastie at the pub." John swilled more beer and stifled a burp.

Hadn't eaten the potage, then. His phone buzzed again.

**KEEP HIM.**

Sherlock slipped the phone back into his pocket. "Fine, I'll just make one for myself, then." He took out cheese and chutney, rummaged bread out of the breadbox.

Another buzz.

**Sorry, I didn't mean that. I'm just angry. Thx for keeping him tonight. You're a love. XX**

"Who's texting?" John wanted to know.


John chuckled. "Just like any other day, then."

"Precisely." He'd distract John with a case, but he hadn't anything on, and wasn't inclined to dig through the backlog of boring requests. He'd just...enjoy John's company for the evening. They didn't spend lots of time together outside of cases, certainly not lazy evenings just drinking and chatting, so tonight would be a novelty, of sorts.

He would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't looking forward to it, just a little.

*

"SNAP!" John bellowed, slamming his hand atop the pile of cards. The bottles on the floor beside him jumped a bit.

"You pushed the cards to the side," Sherlock accused John, stabbing a finger in his direction.

"I did not."

Sherlock folded his arms across his chest and focused imperfectly on John's triumphant grin. "You did."

"Ha-ha," John crowed. "Read 'em and weep, my friend." He swept the cards up and stacked them neatly. "Come on, what have you got left – six? Ten? Let's go, let's go."

"This is stupid," Sherlock declared. A few games and beers ago he'd kept precise track of the card order, but now he couldn't quite recall it. They'd moved to the floor half an hour ago and that had disrupted Sherlock's concentration. Jack eight deuce three ace seven? Or was it Jack three deuce seven ace? Statistically, logically, he should have been winning.

"C'mon, one more time, let's go." John threw a card down. Three.

**Aha.** Three deuce seven Jack eight ace, that was it. He sized up the proximity of John's hand, narrowed his eyes, and tossed down a three. "Snap!" He slapped his hand atop the two cards half a second before John's came down, closing tightly over his.
“Shit!” John swayed a little, and his hand tightened on Sherlock's. "Well...shit."

Sherlock grinned lopsidedly and looked down at John's hand. "My cards, I believe."

"You cheat."

"I don't, either," Sherlock replied with enormous dignity. "I'm just much, much better at recall than you are."

"Which explains why you lost the last three games."

"Hmm. Do you want to keep humiliating yourself now that I've got a second wind?" John's hand on his was warm and solid and oddly comforting.

John shook his head. "Nah. I think I'll quit while I'm ahead."

"You're not ahead."

"Yes, I am." John lifted his hand to down the last of his beer and set the bottle beside the other empties. "Shit, all gone. How many did you have?"

"Three. And a half." Sherlock blinked at the empty bottles. "Maybe four and a half. No, three and a half."

John sighed. "I'd better call in." He fished his mobile out of his pocket and squinted at it. "Shh."

"I didn't say anything."

"I'm going to fake being sick. Don't interrupt." John dialled and waited a moment. "Yeah, hey, Morgan. Sorry for the short notice, but I've got some kind of bug, I think. Been vomiting for two hours already."

Sherlock stifled a snort of laughter with his palm, and John bit his lip and made a 'go away' gesture at him. Sherlock giggled, inadvertently drooling a little on his hand.

"I don't think I'm going to make it in tomorrow. Yeah, I know. No, right. Oh, I know – I just hate to leave you short-staffed, but it's been a bit nasty. Oh, you can? Great. Can you hang on a second?"

He covered the phone and bent over, his face red with poorly contained mirth. "Shut up, Sherlock!"

"I am, I am," Sherlock stage-whispered. He sobered up. "Continue."

John began to tremble. Red-faced, he shook his head. "Can't."

"Oh, God." He snatched the phone from John's hand. "Dr Beauchamp? Sherlock Holmes here. I'm afraid John's indisposed at the moment. If he's able to call you back I'll have him do so – otherwise you should simply assume he's too ill to come to the telephone. Sorry about that."

There was a brief silence, and a startled voice replied, "Erm...that's –"

"Fantastic, I think that's everything. Good-bye." Sherlock rang off and chucked the phone into John's lap. "There, that's sorted."

John wiped tears of mirth from his eyes. "Jesus, how do you do it?"

"Easy." Sherlock smiled.
Sniffling, John dragged a tissue from his pocket and wiped his nose. "I needed this. Thanks."

"I don't mind once or twice. More than that and we'd have to come up with something more creative than vomit. Morgellons disease, maybe. That should have everyone backing away from you and refusing to make eye contact."

"No, I mean for tonight. For everything." John, still a bit pink, met Sherlock's gaze squarely. "Thanks for listening to me vent, and putting up with me."

"Ah. Well." Sherlock shrugged. "It's fine."

"I miss this, you know." John indicated the flat with a slightly unsteady hand. "Just...you know, just being here. With you. It's nice."

"Oh, I know," Sherlock replied, all airy nonchalance, concealing a peculiar little corkscrewing pang in his belly. Maybe it was all the beer. They didn't talk about missing each other. No reason, really. They saw each other all the time. What was to miss?

John was playing with the deck of cards, shuffling them together with clumsy determination, eyes fixed on his task. "Do you miss me? Having me about?"

"Why would I?" Sherlock said, voicing his earlier thought. "I see you at least once every few weeks. More if we've got a case on." That was right. Felt right in his mouth.

"Well, I miss it." John kept shuffling.

Sherlock scoffed. "Miss 221B, John? The mess, the noise, the smells, the dodgy plumbing? Me keeping you up at all hours? I'll be the first to admit that your current routine is one of extraordinary insipidity, but if you had to come back to this, it would drive you round the bend much more quickly than the purchase of a two hundred fifty quid juicer. There was that little twist again. Of course there were times when he missed John, that he'd been the tiniest bit...not lonely; resentful, maybe. That was it. He'd started John off in a way, pulled him out of his self-imposed quagmire, but just because he'd done that, it didn't mean that Sherlock controlled him or had the right to think he did. John wasn't a mere adjunct – Sherlock had discovered that quickly enough – and had gone in his own direction. And that was fine. It was good. They were still friends. Best friends, in point of fact. There was no point in getting maudlin over it all.

"Yeah. Maybe." John set the cards down with a sigh. "I'm knackered."

"I'll make up the sofa." Sherlock propped himself upright, one hand on the coffee table, and rose gingerly. His head swam.

"No need." John slithered to the floor. "I'll sleep right here."

"You'll freeze, and you'll be achy in the morning and blame me for it. Get up."


Sherlock held his hands out. "Come on. Up."

"Ohh..." John heaved another sigh and held his hands out. Sherlock caught hold of them and pulled, lifting John to his feet. "Jeez, careful, Sherlock!" He braced his hands against Sherlock's chest and swayed, coming to rest against Sherlock's body. "Fuck, my head."

"Sleep now, or it'll be worse tomorrow. I'll get you some water."
"No. I'll piss myself and it'll get on the sofa." John leant against Sherlock, resting his forehead on Sherlock's shoulder. "Don't move."

"I don't think you've quite reached the incontinence stage yet," Sherlock said, but held still. John's proximity was amusing and disturbing at once. He patted John's back briskly. "Come along, John."

"I'm telling you, you can't move. I'm going to have to sleep like this." John's voice was muffled in the fabric of Sherlock's jacket.

"And how am I supposed to sleep?"

"You lean against me, I'll lean against you. We'll prop each other up."

"There's a height-weight imbalance," Sherlock informed John. He turned his head slightly and inhaled the scent of shampoo and not-dreadful aftershave. "You've gained two pounds."

"Fuck off."

"It's true."

"Seriously, Sherlock. Don't move."

"John –" Sherlock felt John's hands grasp his lapels, pulling them closer together. "John."
Sherlock's head tingled a bit, vaguely numb, as if he were coming down with the flu John had lied about. He didn't know what to do with his hands; they fluttered uncertainly for a moment, coming to rest on John's upper arms. "You're very, very drunk."

"Fine by me," John said. "Aren't you?"

"Not as much as you are."

"Let's sleep it off, then." John's fists tightened on Sherlock's lapels. "Sherlock?"

Sherlock could scarcely hear John. The blood thundered too loudly in his ears. He felt it travelling down his neck, into his chest, his arms, lower pathways oh for Christ's sake. "What?"

"I miss you."

"I know." Sherlock took a quick, light breath. "I miss you too." He closed his eyes and felt John pull away.

Oh. There it is, then. That's done.

John's lips touched his, lightly.

"J –" But he couldn't finish. John was kissing him, a light, close-mouthed, tender kiss, and his arms wrapped round Sherlock's body and held on.

* 

Oh. Oh....
Sherlock kept his eyes closed. It wasn’t real, could not by the greatest stretch of the imagination be considered real, and if he opened his eyes, if he dared to breathe, the moment’s fragility would shatter, and now John was moving a bit against him, enflaming those lower pathways just a bit more, and now he felt the tip of John’s tongue and parted his lips ever so slightly without opening his eyes and without breathing. He wouldn’t resist, wouldn’t help, because none of this truly belonged to him, and he refused to tip the balance, even though he could have used his greater height and clearer head to his advantage, drawn John in, demanded a stronger touch, pushed him away, anything at all, but he held still, only opening his mouth when John’s tongue probed deeper, but still gently, between his lips. A low sound emerged from his throat, half gasp, half groan, and his hands tightened on John’s arms because he felt the clamour of arrival at a destination he’d yearned for but never approached even in the depths of his boundless imagination because one shouldn’t pine after the unattainable; acknowledge it distantly, yes, note and categorise and tuck it firmly away because there were practical goals and there were absurdities and impossibilities and this fell distinctly into the latter category, and his hands moved up and cradled John’s head, his short soft hair, his warm skin, the better to dive deep and plunge –

John pulled away, panting.

Sherlock’s heart plummeted. He opened his eyes.

"Sherlock…" John's gaze was over-bright, brimming with high emotion.

If only. "John," Sherlock said, his voice emerging painfully raw. "We can’t."

The hope in John's eyes flickered and died. "But…but it…it doesn't have to…mean anything, if you don't want it to."

That corkscrew again, much crueller this time. "You're drunk."

"I'm not that drunk."

Which was probably true. "That's precisely why. You've got a wife. A child. We couldn't do that to them, could we?" But he could have done. If only they hadn't stopped. If only. "We'd regret it." John would regret it, at least. Regret, and then resent.

Finally, better to have John at a distance than no John at all. He’d tried that, and it hadn’t worked.

John's face crumpled. He stepped away and let go of Sherlock’s lapels. "Oh, God."

"It's all right."

John shook his head. "Jesus Christ. Sherlock. I'm sorry. I didn't mean –"

"I know."

"I'm a fucking idiot." Crimson, John staggered to the sofa and dropped onto it with a thump. He peered at Sherlock with an expression so beseeching that Sherlock had to look away. "Fuck. I'm so sorry, Sherlock, I'm –"

"It's all right," Sherlock repeated dully. He leant down and picked up bottles.

"I'll go."

"Don't be stupid." Sherlock even managed to infuse his voice with light scorn. "You'll fall down the steps and I'll have to haul you to A&E and then Mary will kill us both."
"Mary," John whispered. "Fuck. Sherlock, please don't – please, for fuck's sake, don't say anything to her."

Sherlock stretched his lips into a smile. "God, no. Go to sleep, John." He took the blanket from John's chair and tossed it toward the sofa. "See you in the morning."

Moving with deliberation, Sherlock set the bottles on the kitchen table, skirting the shelving mess, and hit the light. He went into the bathroom, turned the light on, and closed the door behind him.

His mouth looked just a bit swollen, but that was all.

No, scratch that. His trousers looked a bit swollen as well.

He covered his face with his hands and slid to the floor, his back firmly pressed against the door. He reached up, turned the light out, and sat in the darkness for a long while.

*

When Sherlock strolled into the kitchen, John was perched on the edge of the sofa, cradling his head in his hands. "Tea, John?"

"Ugh."

"Maybe you should sleep a bit longer."

"No." John shoved himself off the sofa with what seemed tremendous effort. "No, I've got to get back." His voice sounded thick, and his right cheek was red and faintly imprinted with the texture of Sherlock's lumpiest sofa pillow. "I'd better…I'll just head home. Thanks. Need the loo." He stumbled into the bathroom and closed the door. From behind it came the sound of John urinating.

Sherlock readied the teakettle and leant against the worktop, staring at the mess of shelving without really seeing it. No point in doing anything with it today; his own head was giving him what-for and he couldn't have abided the noise. Lucky Hudders, maybe she'd bring him some unburnt biscuits.

John came out at last and harrumphed. "Better go." He went to the door.

"It's cold," Sherlock said, glancing at the window. Tiny pellets of rain and ice pattered against the glass. "Didn't you bring a heavier coat?"

"No, this is good."

"I can lend you –"

"No, I'm good." John smiled falsely. "I'll make a run for the tube."

Sherlock looked for his phone. "I'll call a cab."

"Nope!" John edged closer to the door. "Thanks all the same."

"All right." Sherlock nodded, then moved to the coatrack and snatched his scarf. "Take this, at least. Wrap it…." He moved to drape it round John's neck and then simply gestured, faltering. "Round your throat. It'd be pathetic if you actually got sick after faking it."
"Okay." John took the scarf and wound it round his neck. "Thanks." He stared at the floor for a few seconds. "Sherlock…sorry about last night."

Sherlock snorted. "I'd already forgot. Will you be at home this weekend? Lestrade says he's got something particularly interesting but of course he didn't bother saying what it was. Says he needs to clear things before bringing us in. I think that's shorthand for tidying Forensics' mess, actually."

"Yeah." John sniffed and opened the door. "Yeah, I should be. Text me."

"Right. See you soon." He turned back to the kettle.

The door closed, and John's footsteps receded.


Already deleted. Not a problem.

The kettle whistled its high-pitched screech, hurting Sherlock's eardrums. He removed it from the ring, got the tea steeping, and found the milk. Setting it on the table, he brushed against an empty beer bottle, and it fell over. Gently, he righted it.

If not deleted, then certainly deleting. Soon.

*

You numbskull. Just leave it at the foot of the stairs and go.

John twisted the carrier bag in his hands and stared up at the façade of 221. How many years since he’d been inside? He didn't actually want to go in, to take in the air of the place and remember what it had been like. Shouldn't have come at all, but he'd removed the tangible objects of memory from his life a long time ago, and the scarf…it was stupid, demented, but it felt like some sort of talisman. If he got rid of it altogether, maybe the slate would be wiped clean. Or something.

Idiot.

Well, he'd come all this way and he didn't want to just pitch the thing out. It had probably cost a fortune. He pushed the door open and went inside, up the stairs, and into the flat.

Sherlock was standing in the middle of the room, his hands jammed in his pockets. "Hello, John."

"Hey." John wet his lips and glanced round the room. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"Good." He brought his focus back to Sherlock's face and there was that same little stab he'd felt at the racecourse, seeing Sherlock in the flesh again. Well, get a good look, because this is the last time you do something like this again. No reason, anyhow. "How are things?"

"Fine." Sherlock was peering right at him, his expression only mildly curious.

"Good. Good." John produced the carrier bag and held it out. Sherlock didn't move, so he stepped closer. "Erm – Mary found this, or rather I found it in some of Mary's stuff. Forgot you'd lent it to
me. Sorry about that."

Sherlock took the bag and opened it, withdrawing the scarf. "Wondered where I'd left that," he murmured.

"I know it wasn't the only one you owned, but still. Sorry." John shifted from foot to foot.

"Thanks." Sherlock tossed the scarf onto the table and continued to inspect John with a faintly remote air, as if he were a stranger Sherlock couldn't be arsed to scrutinise closely, a boring would-be client.

John scratched at the back of his neck. "How's your case going?"

"Case?" Sherlock frowned as if he'd never heard the word.

"Yeah, the one you were on the other day, at the racecourse. Mycroft's fool's errand. Wrapped it up already?"

Sherlock gave a shrug. "Oh, that. I was just about to call Mycroft, actually, and tell him I can't be bothered with it."

"Boring?"

"Well, yes, but Mycroft insists on making mysterious noises in order to entice me into pursuing it."

John chortled. "That sounds familiar." He looked round the flat again. "Not a lot's changed here. Same furniture, all that."

"Yes. I don't see the point in getting something new if what you've got works perfectly well."

Glancing at the sofa with its worn fabric and lumpy, sagging cushions, John raised a mental set of eyebrows. Bourgeois of him, but honestly the place looked as if it could have used a good cleaning. Motes danced in the shaft of light from the open curtains and the bookshelves were furred with dust, and the room needed prolonged airing. But maybe it had always looked that way, smelled that way, and he just hadn't noticed. It hadn't mattered. "As long as it's comfortable." He turned back to Sherlock, who hadn't moved.

"It's comfortable enough."

It was time for John to make some pleasant noises and take his leave. He cast another look round the flat. It had never really been his at all, now that he looked at it objectively. It had always been Sherlock's; Sherlock's needs and wants, his tastes had always dominated, and John hadn't made his presence known there, much. Come to think of it, he didn't make his presence known at home much, either. Mary and Nora's tastes prevailed there. Partly it was that he was neat, disciplined, and minimalist before it became a fashion, but he'd always had more than a dash of transience in his nature, as if he was ready to pack up at a moment's notice. But then, that was a soldier's existence, wasn't it? He supposed he'd just got used to that life.

He was sorry he'd come. He should have just popped the scarf in the post. "Well, I'd better be off. Have to get to work."

"Would you like a cup of tea? It won't take a minute."

John shook his head. "No, I'm already a bit late."
Sherlock pressed his lips together and nodded. "Of course. How's the practice going?"

"It's good. You know…not terribly thrilling, but it's a living."

"Yes," Sherlock said quietly. "I imagine so."

John remembered Sherlock's uncharacteristic and penetrating gentleness at the racecourse, as if he'd seen into every one of John's habits, his frequently visited websites, the two thousand pounds he'd lost last year. Or possibly, the extra pint, sometimes two extra pints, that he'd imbibed the last eight or ten times he'd visited the pub – not a lot, but enough to make the waistband of his trousers tight and send him resentfully to the park for evening jogs. Sherlock's voice, quiet as it was, felt like a reproach, and John wasn't prepared to humbly accept reproaches from Sherlock Holmes. It was pointless to belabour what couldn't be undone, but that didn't mean all was forgiven. "Yeah. Well, at some point you realise that you've got responsibilities. You grow up a little. Just a little." He smiled, but bitterness flooded his stomach. How fucking pompous he sounded. "I'll see you, Sherlock." He wheeled and headed for the door.

"John!"

Don't turn. Don't.

John turned. "Yeah?" He put his hand on the doorknob. Leaving. Can't make me stay.

Sherlock took two limping steps forward. "Have you ever seen a case of aconitine poisoning?"

"Are you okay?" John frowned down at Sherlock's leg. He'd been limping a bit the other day, but this was much worse. "Did you sprain something?"

"It's nothing. I tripped. What about it, John – can you recall any instances of that particular toxin?"

"Erm…yeah, a couple. Don't you remember those blowgun murders?"

"Oh, yes." Sherlock's mouth turned up on one side. "'The Deadly Darts.'"

"One of my better titles." John couldn't help cracking a grin.

"If you say so. It's a painful way to die, isn't it?"

"Jesus, yeah. Stomach pain, vomiting, diarrhoea, the lot. Is that what your case is about? Someone got poisoned?" His heartbeat quickened. Shit.

"Mm. The murderer was creative, at least – soaked the lining of an evening gown with the stuff. Took a couple of hours to really penetrate, but death followed in short order. The victim had skin under her fingernails – not her own, I suspect. It's still out for testing, but Mycroft seems to think that she allowed herself to die."

John shook his head. "I don't get it. Suicide?"

"I don't think so. There was a party at her house the night she died – in fact, it was in full swing as the death throes occurred." Sherlock smiled. "Funny that nobody heard her, isn't it?"

"Yeah." John removed his hand from the doorknob and saw what he was doing. Hastily, he grabbed it again and tugged the door open. "Wow, that's quite something. Good luck with it."

Sherlock let out a little breath, nodded, and pressed his lips together. "Yes. Thanks." He held his hand out. "Thanks for bringing the scarf. It was my favourite."
"Oh. Yeah, no problem." John took Sherlock's hand, squeezed briefly, and dropped it. "See you." He hurried downstairs and out into the fresh air.

He was halfway down the street before he found the courage to stop and crane his neck in the direction of Sherlock's flat. That cool, remote invitation – and it had been an invitation; John mightn't have been brilliant like Sherlock, but he wasn't a moron either – had set off a mad, noisy carillon in his heart, and he had to leave.

It had been his own fault, though, stopping by and thinking himself invulnerable.

*Enough. It's done.*

*"Daddy?"

John glanced up. Nora hovered in the doorway, slight and small in her pale-blue dressing gown. "What is it, love?"

"Can we read a bit before bed?" She held a battered copy of *Treasure Island* in one hand.

"'Course, darling. Be there in a minute."

"Will you do the voices?"

"Absolutely. Give me two minutes."

She was silent for a moment. "Okay."

*Build your own custom racecard!*

*Foxcroft 9/2*

*Mademoiselle du Barri 5/1*

*Bob's Your Uncle 6/2*

*Carlow's Fortress 8/1*

*Total stake: £100.00*

*Potential return (subject to maximum payment rules): £550.00*

*"Those of you travelling outside the St. Louis metro area – be careful! The plows can't keep up with the white stuff. Last night's storm dumped ten inches on us and we're due for another pounding tonight, up to six inches. Here's KMOV's Fran Gilbert to tell us all about it. Fran?"

Mary snapped off the radio and negotiated her rental car onto the exit ramp, blinking hard. She hadn't slept on the flight and her attempt at a nap in the bland but perfectly adequate room in the Four Seasons had been an utter failure. Gritting her teeth, she squinted at the flat, snowy landscape and counted the days.
It was typical suburbia: she passed a Shell, 7-11, Chevron. Wal-Mart, Sam's Club, Home Depot, McDonald's, Arby's, Payless Shoes, a cinema multiplex, a Target, Starbucks, Mattress Discounters, Men's Wearhouse, Dress Barn.

*Jesus, I hate it here.*

Another ten minutes passed before she found the Graham-McCune funeral home; it was pretty, actually, nestled in a few acres of what was probably nice parkland in spring and summer. She parked her car in the near-empty lot, adjusted her hat, and swung her high-heeled feet out onto carefully salted blacktop. Thoughtful. Though if they'd been really thoughtful they'd have left it icy, then they might have had a few more clients. Probably some lawsuits too, though.

A young woman in a sober navy suit and a neat blonde French twist greeted her as she walked in the door. "Good afternoon. How may I help you?"

"Hello." Mary took a quick breath. "I'm here for Patricia Alland."

"Mrs Watson?"

Mary nodded. "That's right."

"I'm Lori Finch, the associate service director. Will you follow me, please?"

Mary trailed the woman down a series of forgettably decorated halls, past viewing rooms with discreet signage advertising the corpse within. Only a faint murmur of conversation floated from a single room; glancing in, she saw a few old men in VFW caps sitting near a burgundy casket and chatting in desultory fashion. Korea? Vietnam? Did Vietnam vets belong to the VFW? Seemed like such a relic of an institution. Nice, though, honouring fallen comrades.

"Right this way," the young woman murmured, and opened a door.

Mary's breath caught as she approached the open casket – done up, sitting on a catafalque, but still clearly collapsible, flammable. Miss Finch stood a respectful distance away; Mary wanted to turn and tell her to go away, fuck off and leave her alone, but…probably not a good idea.

She drew closer, and stopped.

*Oh, God.*

It was a wax-doll version of Trish. Petite, pretty, wearing a raspberry crepe dress – Lanvin, probably, she'd said she had a weakness for Lanvin. Hair done, makeup in place. Tears blurred Mary's eyes.

She reached toward her, touching the collar of the dress, tugging it down.

Miss Finch darted close. "Ma'am –"

"Sorry." Mary pulled her hand back. "I just wanted to –"

"Yes, ma'am. It's best, though, to perhaps touch her hand or her cheek. It's…"

"I understand." She'd seen enough. Not even the best undertakers could perform outright miracles.

Miss Finch coughed quietly. "I'll give you a few moments of privacy before we begin the committal. If you're certain nobody else is coming…?"

"I'm certain," Mary said without turning. "Thank you."
"Can I get you anything? Some coffee, water, fruit juice?"

You can get the fuck out. "No, thank you."

"Step out when you're ready and we'll begin."

Mary waited for the door to close and pulled Trish's collar down once more. Her throat closed. She sucked in a harsh breath through her nose and fumbled a tissue from her coat pocket. Tears rolled down her cheeks, and sobs racked her frame.

It wasn't fair, it wasn't fair, it wasn't fucking fair.

*
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

So many thanks to my fantastic beta/britpicking team, Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet. <3

* 

March 2015

He had a view, which he'd gathered was a luxury. What he saw from his thirty-by-thirty centimetre shatterproof and wire-mesh glass square, though, was unutterably bleak: grey snow on the low scabrous hillsides, crooked waves of link fencing, a pall of grey sky, drifts of charcoal-coloured cloud from the coal-fired power station a few kilometres away. Given the choice, he might have opted for a blank wall instead.

He'd been here four days, and the shock was beginning to wear off. He'd been assigned to what his barrister had called the smarter wing of the prison, but tangible evidence of smartness was sorely lacking. It was a single cell, with a lumpy little bed, a desk, and a chair; he'd been allowed a selection of books, and he had a decent cash allotment for snacks and sundries. Which was fortunate, as the food was inedible – last night, he hadn't even recognised the whitish mess that had been slumped onto his plate alongside a slice of fatty ham and a ladleful of peas, and this morning's breakfast, porridge and two links of sausage, had nauseated him. The company was…well, they were criminals. Menacing to the last, staring with piggy little eyes, scarred, tattooed, shaven-headed or shaggy, often missing teeth. It was just as well that he'd been ostracised at meals and during the exercise period – except for this morning, when one of the prisoners, a man shorter than himself but twice as wide, had hissed in his ear.

---Watch your arse, you fucking Taig.

Despair was taking the place of his initial shock with a chilling inexorability that frightened him even more than the implicit threat of the man's words. He'd been abandoned, and if he didn't get stabbed with a homemade knife or raped in the showers, he still had to endure this place for the next twenty-seven years.

Twenty-seven years. Even the words had a clanging finality. He'd be a doddering old man upon release, the best years of his life long past. His children would be middle-aged. They hadn't understood what was happening to him, but then they hadn't had much time to process the situation; Elise had whisked them off to her parents' house in Nice before he'd had the opportunity to explain. There was every chance he wouldn't see them for years. The thought was intolerable.

Distantly, he wondered about suicide. It seemed by far the most peaceful solution, if not the easiest, but surely better than being trapped in this human stockyard for the next twenty-seven years.

His cell door swung open, the metal hinges groaning in protest. "Moran."

Stephen rose to his feet and faced the guard, a tall squarish man with pink scalp showing through
his flattened blond hair. "Yes?" Already his voice sounded rusty and disused.

"Visitor to see you, your Lordship."

He frowned, but ignored the taunt. "Who?"


"I don't know anybody by that name."

"Must have slipped your mind. He's on your visitors list."

"That's a mistake." Stephen turned back toward the window. "And I didn't request a pastoral visit."

"Suit yourself. I don't mind telling him to bugger off."

"Wait." Stephen moved quickly toward Willoughby; just as quickly, the guard removed the baton from his belt. Stephen stopped, his hands held up cautiously. "I'll see him." Might as well; his visitors list was pitifully thin. His family was ignoring him, and he was persona non grata in polite society. Maybe a pastoral visit would be a blessing in disguise, as it were.

Willoughby shrugged and gestured for Stephen to precede him. He banged the cell door shut, and the sound caromed off the bilious green walls. Nudging Stephen with his baton, he set a rapid pace. "Not one of your co-conspirators, then, your Lordship?"

Stephen didn't answer. He marvelled that he'd seen the day that he was looking forward to a visit from a priest.

"Oi, I'm talking to you, spudfucker."

"I don't know him," Stephen replied through clenched teeth. At lunch yesterday, he'd noticed the other prisoners giving Willoughby a wide berth. No point in antagonising him the very first week, certainly, but he'd be damned if he was going to kowtow to the man or attempt to curry favour. "Sorry."

"Thought all you Fenians knew each other. Well, never mind. Stop here." Willoughby halted at a door and punched numbers in on the keypad next to it. "You've got half an hour."

Stephen faced Willoughby. "Visits are an hour."

"For you, they're a half hour." Willoughby grinned at him and pushed the door open. "Go on."

Stephen entered the visitors' room and froze as his guest rose to his feet. Well now.

Father McGuire, tall, lean, blue-eyed, smiled at him, a dazzling smile. "Stephen. You won't remember me. We met —"

"I remember you," Stephen said. He sat, a cold chill suffusing him.

"Well. It's grand to see you. It's been a long time."

"It has indeed."

Father McGuire took his seat and folded his long white hands together. "Thank you for allowing me to visit you."
“Funny,” Stephen replied with an icy smile. "I don't recall requesting pastoral care."

"Perhaps you forgot that you'd ticked the box. Understandable," Father McGuire said warmly, reaching out to clasp Stephen's hand.

"No touching!" Willoughby barked.

Father McGuire held his hands up in the same gesture Stephen had used a few moments ago. "Sorry. My fault altogether." He turned his attention back to Stephen. "How are you, Stephen?"

"How should I be?"

"I know." Father McGuire sighed. "It's a dreadful, dreadful thing you've done, Stephen, and you must naturally accept the penance for it. But you must also keep faith. The Lord hasn't abandoned you."

Stephen's stomach twisted, and the hair on the back of his neck rose up. "Hasn't he?"

"He has not. The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound.' Isaiah, chapter sixty-one, verse one. Trust in the Lord, Stephen. He will not let you languish."

"I can't say the Lord's done a lot for me recently, Father."

"The reward for piety is often delayed, but it does come. I must go now – I've a pressing appointment in Birmingham. But I hope you'll permit me to return.” Father McGuire's blazing blue eyes met Stephen's and held them.

"The devil hath power to assume a pleasing shape," Stephen whispered.

"That's not Scripture."

"No," Stephen said. "It's Shakespeare."

Father McGuire beamed, blindingly handsome. "Wise fellow, for an Englishman. May I return?"

Stephen teetered on the brink of a precipice. Twenty minutes ago he'd pondered suicide and lamented the loss of his robust years in this hellhole. Now....

"Stephen?"

He leapt. "Yes." He drew a deep, shuddering breath, laid his palms flat on the table, and nodded. "Yes, come back."

Father McGuire made the sign of the cross over Stephen's head. "I'll say a decade of the rosary for you tonight, Stephen. Don't despair." He rose gracefully to his feet and smiled at Willoughby. "Thanks very much." Willoughby snorted and opened the door, and Father McGuire pivoted. He wore an old-fashioned long cassock over his shirt and trousers, and it flowed down his tall body, giving him a romantic air. "Please tell me you haven't been mistreated. Prisoners, authorities...."

Stephen glanced at Willoughby. "No mistreatment to speak of."

Father McGuire gave him another melting smile. "Very well. I shall see you soon. God bless." He left in a swirl of black.
“Short and sweet. Good. Let’s go,” Willoughby said, and Stephen rose, meek as a lamb, and went back to his cell.

The view hadn’t changed, but the day had grown immeasurably darker, and he couldn’t warm up. He shrugged into a cardigan, one of the few items of clothing he’d been permitted to keep in his cell, and rubbed his hands together, then pressed them to the glass, watching the condensation creep past his fingers.

Another line of Shakespeare came to him – not Hamlet this time, but Macbeth.

**Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from my hand?**

*

Liberty came at eleven o’clock the very next night.

His cell slid open, and another guard, unfamiliar to him, appeared in the doorway. “Lord Moran. You requested a pastoral visit.”

Stephen’s pulse pounded in his throat. He threw his bedcovers aside, struggled into the cheap trainers they’d provided for him, and followed the guard down the hallway, back into the visitor’s room. The keypad beeped softly as the guard punched in numbers, and the door clicked open.

“Make it quick,” the guard said, and waved him in.

Trembling, Stephen faced the figure inside and gasped.

He’d expected the devil, but saw only himself. “Jesus Christ almighty,” he breathed.

The man facing him stood mother-naked, a pile of clothing in his arms, black shoes discarded on the floor. “Get undressed and put this on. You’ve got three minutes. Hurry.”

Stephen shook his head. “How…how did they….?”

The naked man – they could have been twins, down to the brown birthmark on his shoulder, but Stephen had only one brother and he wasn’t a twin, not nearly, good Christ – grinned at him.

“Amazing what they can do with surgery nowadays,” he said. Christ, even the voice was similar. “A few years and a few million pounds, Lord Moran. Don’t fret about me. Get dressed!”

Stephen’s fingers fumbled at the buttons on his shirt. He stripped and put on the man’s clothes – a clerical outfit, how very droll – as his doppelganger hurried into the prison uniform. He adjusted the collar, tied the shoes, and straightened.

“Good,” the man said. “We’re settled. One last thing. Willoughby, yes?”


“Anyone else?”

“No.”

“Right. Not to worry. He’s finished.” The doppelganger drew a finger across his throat and opened
the door. "Ready."

"That way, Father," the guard said, gesturing down the hallway opposite the cells.

Stephen hesitated.

"Hurry."

He went. One foot followed another, the soles of the slightly too-small shoes scraping on the raw concrete. Two metres, three metres, four, five. A barred door buzzed open, startling him. He kept walking, faster now, afraid he'd be snatched back. Another guard stood beside a heavy door. "Father."

Stephen nodded, unable to speak.

The door opened, and a blast of frigid air rendered him breathless. He saw piercing white light, heard a whirring roar. Instinctively he moved closer, a diplomat's familiarity with the brightness, the noise taking over his numbness. A hand came out, drew him into the helicopter, and they were off. He closed his eyes and waited.

Two and a half hours later, they landed. He alighted onto soft ground, drew deeply of the air.

Home at last.

Round headlights flared into life, and a figure clambered easily out of the waiting car and moved toward him. Tall and lean, blue eyes, brilliant smile. Named after a warrior saint, but not Michael, though he should have been: the conqueror, the slayer of the serpent.

"Stephen." The tall figure embraced him. "Heaven bless you, brother."

Stephen wanted to weep, but clung to his brother instead. "Sebastian."

*

Mycroft had breakfasted late at the club – a very satisfactory breakfast, an omelette aux fines herbes with mushrooms and a grilled tomato – and so had missed Sherlock's two telephone calls. He climbed into the car and dialled back. When his brother answered, he said, "I hope you have some news for me."

"Yes, I have. I'm dropping the case."

Concealing a heavy sigh by holding the phone away, Mycroft massaged the bridge of his nose.

"You there?" Sherlock's voice filtered sharply through the speaker.

Mycroft brought the phone back to his ear. "Yes. May I ask why you've decided to drop it?"

"It's not at all interesting, that's why."

"You haven't got anything else on," Mycroft said. "Nothing as remotely engaging as this."

"Untrue. I'm re-stringing my violin this afternoon. Totally absorbing. And then I might go to the park
and feed the pigeons."

"Would it help if I said the case was personally important to me?"

"Not really."

Mycroft ground his teeth in frustration. "Or if the problem therein grows, it could mean upheaval in England itself?"

"Nope."

"Could I at least give you a bit of additional background, brother dear, that might pique your interest?"

Sherlock let out a long, gusting sigh. "If you feel like expending your precious breath, Mycroft, go ahead. It's not going to change my mind."

"I told you what Meredith did – repatriating stolen artwork, and that An Angel With Titus' Features turned up in Derry. Meredith acted on tips from one of our offices, but her actual methods of procurement were largely unknown to me." Mycroft gave a dry chuckle. "She said I was better off not knowing, and I was inclined to agree. She could be…passionate about her projects, and I think she used an intermediary of sorts."

"Intermediary." Sherlock sounded half-asleep.

"Violent, at times," Mycroft said.

"Mm."

"It seems that not all of the prior owners of these stolen works survived after the art was obtained," Mycroft said. "As it also happens, many of them were quite well aware that they were in possession of stolen goods."

"And so the ends justified the means," Sherlock said.

"If you like." Mycroft paused, watching the city pass by through the tinted windows of his car.

"Then perhaps dear Meredith just got a taste of her own medicine."

"You said her toes were broken."

"Fingers too," Sherlock said. "Did the DNA samples from the skin scrapings come back?"

"I expect them imminently."

"Have you found her PA – what was her name?"

"Georgina. And no, not yet," Mycroft said. "But it seems that not all of her background is checking out. You may have been right about that."

"Thought so," Sherlock said. "Here's what happened, Mycroft: an angry relative or friend of one of the people Lady Howe had dispatched got his or her revenge and the PA was in on it – probably offered a small fortune to finish the job. Nazi gold, maybe," he said, and Mycroft could practically hear the smirk over the phone. "The poison wasn't working fast enough, maybe Lady Howe was trying to call her friend Moran for help – maybe he knew something, since he helped her with her procurements, but then the PA came in to make sure the job was done correctly, held her down and
waited until she was dead to call you and divert suspicion. She's probably sipping cocktails in Belize right now. Nice bit of hiring there, brother dear."

"Moran," said Mycroft, diverted. "Did you speak to him?"

"Ye-es," Sherlock intoned. "He's probably involved in some way, but he's half round the twist. He's a bundle of sticks in an expensive suit and he's close to a mental breakdown. If you're going to arrest him, do it before he snaps altogether and gets off on a defence of insanity or automatism."

"What did he say, Sherlock?"

"It was pure palaver, Mycroft. He said he was involved in the Howe affair but not the way I thought, not that I told him a thing, and that he'd made a deal with the devil."

A chill wound itself round Mycroft's spine. "He did?" he asked softly. "What else?"

"Oh, apparently he was only in prison for five days," Sherlock replied. "Anyhow, if that visit was meant to entice me somehow, it's failed. Even if he was involved, he's done now. And so am I."

Mycroft sat silently and wondered if perhaps he'd done the wrong thing. Maybe it would be better if Sherlock stayed away from this case after all. But there was only so much Mycroft could do, difficult as it was to admit – Georgina was proof of that, after all.

Sherlock's safety against England's. Not an easy decision.

"I'm concerned about this…encroaching ennui of yours, let's call it," Mycroft said at last. "Is there some concrete reason for it?"

"Encroaching?"

"Yes. Something far afield of your usual juvenile boredom. Is something bothering you?"

An irritated hiss of breath issued from the speaker. "Oh, don't let's get psychological, Mycroft," Sherlock said. "Look…I'm sorry. I just can't bring myself to care about any of this."

"It wasn't always this much of a struggle."

"I wasn't always –" Sherlock broke off. "Good-bye, brother. Call me when you've actually got something interesting to pursue." He rang off abruptly, leaving Mycroft with dead air and a flashing screen.

Mycroft slipped his phone inside his breast pocket as the car came to a stop. He got out and stepped into the entryway of his office, a hushed world of soft-spoken diplomacy and muted urgency, politesse holding back chaos, accompanied by mailed fists in velvet gloves.

Derry.

He went into his office, beckoning to Anthea. She followed, her high heels clicking on marble tile, and stopped beside his desk, tablet in hand.

"Grade four surveillance on Lord Stephen Moran. Current residence Prince of Wales Terrace; expand the net to residence in Londonderry. Get me the Deputy First Minister on the phone and arrange for whoever's heading up Culture, Arts, and Leisure to come immediately. And get me Edwards from SIS."

"Right away, sir." Anthea hurried off.
Yes. Maybe it was propitious that Sherlock had backed out, and that Mycroft hadn't revealed more. Once Sherlock had got the bit in his teeth, it was impossible to dissuade him. Best that he stay away from Moran, for the time being.

Mycro said he'd made a deal with the devil.

A great pity, Mycroft reflected, that the devil was so slippery when one actually sought him out; he tended to appear when one was least prepared.

And Mycroft should have known. He'd been searching for years.

*

"You've got two choices for supper – creamy chicken and veg over rice, or teriyaki chicken and veg over rice."

Skipping and holding John's hand, Nora considered the options. "Can't we have kebabs?"

The thought of even doing creamy or teriyaki chicken was exhausting. John wondered if there wasn't something he could just pull out of the fridge and throw on a plate. "We don't have any skewers."

"Patel's has them, Dad. They're right round the corner."

"I'm knackered, love. We'll have kebabs on Saturday night, okay? And easy on the shoes there, we just got those and you're scuffing them already."

"Fine," Nora said sulkily, and stopped skipping. She slipped her mittened hand out of John's. "You're cross again."

"I am not," John said with as much patience as he could muster. "Come on, give me your hand. It's dark and there's lots of traffic."

Nora grasped John's hand. "Whatever."

John halted in his tracks, dragging Nora to a stop. "Eleanor. I told you I don't like that. It's dismissive." He stood still, frowning down at her.

"Sorry."

"It's all right." He began walking again.

"You are cross, though," she muttered.

John laughed. "I'll give you cross." He swooped down and blew a raspberry on her round cheek, prompting a giggle. It was amusing, and a little scary, how well she knew him. "When did you get so observant?"

"It's your face," Nora said.

"Hm. Good deduction." A tiny dart of discomfort struck him, but he ignored it. "So what's it to be? Creamy or teriyaki?"
"Teriyaki. What's for pudding?"

"A banana."

"Blech." The skip was back in Nora's step. John decided not to chide her about her shoes. "Did you talk to Mum today?"

"No, I couldn't get hold of her. We'll try her right before bed. It'll be mid-afternoon there."

"How many hours behind is she?"

"Seven." John hitched Nora's bag over his shoulder.

Nora slowed her pace a bit, then stopped skipping altogether. "Daddy?"

"Yeah, love?"

"Did they bury Auntie Trish or cremate her?"

"I think they cremated her."

"And then will they dump her at sea?"

John smothered a chuckle. "Erm...well, they'll probably bury her ashes, or put them in an urn. That's a kind of covered jar. And I don't think she specifically asked to be buried at sea, though she might have done. But they'd have to go a long way to do it, because St. Louis is in the middle of the United States, more or less. It's at least a thousand miles to the ocean in either direction." He hugged her shoulders.

"Mum's not going to bring the urn back with her, is she?"

Nora's tone was a mélange of trepidation, mild disgust, and intrigue, a perfectly healthy nine-year-old reaction to the prospect of death and cremation, in John's opinion. At nine, Nora had never experienced death firsthand, nor been to a funeral. John had done several times over at her age. That was extended Catholic families, though. He wasn't sure that it had done him any harm, but he wasn't really sorry that Nora was still so innocent. "I doubt it. I think they'll probably bury the ashes in St. Louis."

"Okay."

"Okay. You hungry, poppet?"

"Yep." They rounded the corner onto Wricklemarsh Road. The house lay beyond the park, its peaked roof just visible over the denuded trees. They drew closer, and Nora let out a squeal. "Mum's home!" She tugged at John's hand. "Come on, Daddy!"

"All right, all right..." John broke into a jog, dismayed that it took some effort. He'd been letting physical exercise slide a little lately with the exception of his occasional evening runs, and even those had been getting further apart. Nevertheless, he kept pace with Nora, and they made it to the fully-lit house in a flash. John tried the knob, found it locked, and got his keys out as Nora hammered on the door. "Hey, hey, hold on, I'm coming!"

A shadow appeared at the door, and it opened. There was Mary, in dark trousers and a high-collared tea-coloured blouse. She bent and clasped Nora in her arms. "Ahh, there she is! Hello, darling!" She smiled up at John. "Hi, love."
"Hi. You're back early, aren't you? No wonder I couldn't get hold of you." He gave her a one-armed hug and kissed her cheek.

"Yeah, a bit. Let's get in, it's cold." Mary held the door open for them, then closed it and pulled the curtain. "I was famished, so I started dinner. Creamy chicken with veg and rice, hope that's okay." She smiled at them both. The makeup round her eyes was a bit smeared, and tiny threads of red marred the whites of her eyes.

Nora pulled a face, but John frowned at her warningly. "Sounds great," he said. "Do you need help?"

"No. Sweetheart," Mary said, turning to Nora, "why don't you go have your shower and by the time you're through, dinner will be ready."

"Are you crying, Mum?"

Mary tousled Nora's hair. "A little. I'm still sad about Auntie Trish."

Nora put her arms around Mary gently and patted her back. "It's okay to be sad, Mum."

John went to the fridge and got a beer for himself and Mary, not wanting to intrude on the moment. He watched them from the corner of his eye, though, and was so proud of Nora he almost cried himself. Maybe it was just the age, the cusp of adolescence or some such, but she surprised him constantly. He hadn't been that gentle or insightful as a kid, not that he recalled; whatever their problems, they'd done well with Nora, or they'd been incredibly lucky.

Mary hugged Nora tightly and buried her face in the smooth brown hair. "Thank you, love." She straightened and smiled. "Go on now. Dinner in a bit." She swatted Nora on the bum and turned back to the cooker, lowering the heat below the rice pot incrementally.

"Here," John said, handing Mary a beer.

She smiled at him wearily. "Thanks."

Following an impulse, John kissed her on the cheek. "Sorry."

"Thanks. It's okay. It's just…." Mary looked over her shoulder. "It's been a bit of a whirlwind." She sat at the table and prised open the beer with the church key John set on the table. "I'm still sorting it all out in my head."

"Was it…was it bad?"

Mary let out a sigh. "She hurried things along."

Puzzled, John shook his head. "I don't…oh, God. You mean she –"

"She knew she was sick, and ended it," Mary said. She took a deep swig and set the bottle down. "It was upsetting."

"God. I'm sorry, Mary." Fleetingly, John wondered how she'd done it, but couldn't ask.

She shook her head and opened one hand in a gesture of futility. "Can't do anything about it now."

"Was there…did you see other family?"

"No." Mary took another drink. "That's it. Trish was it. Just me at the funeral home, and after a little
"Jesus." John reached out and grasped Mary's small hand, massaging it gently. His own family had fallen away in fits and starts over the years; now there was only Harry, still wandering in and out of bouts with the bottle. He wondered if Harry would come to his funeral, if he died first. He'd go to hers. Bad as the blood sometimes—often—was between them, she was still his sister, and he owed her at least some loyalty. Trish had been rich—where, then, were the friends an affluent woman ordinarily had in droves? Her dead husband's family? Hangers-on, the sycophants that rich people always seemed to shoulder? She certainly hadn't seemed the loner type.

Mary picked at the label on the bottle of beer with the nail of her index finger. She never polished her nails, but now they were varnished a soft, glossy pink. "John."

"Yeah, love?"

"The lawyer read her will to me."

"Oh, yeah," he said uneasily. He'd had a few drifting fantasies about Trish leaving Mary millions, but hadn't allowed more than that. "How'd that go?"

Mary took a deep breath. "She left me some money. A lot of money."

John nodded. "Okay. How much?"

"Well." Mary took another drink, then set the bottle down and looked John in the eye. "Five million pounds. Give or take."

The breath left John's body in a rush. He actually felt his mouth drop open. He exhaled sharply. "Five," he gasped.

Mary nodded, her expression grim. "I know."

"Five. Five million. Jesus fucking Christ."

"Yeah, that's what I said too."

John couldn't begin to wrap his head round a sum like that, it was so utterly improbable. In his brief reverie, after Mary had mentioned the will, he'd imagined one or two million, but in reality he thought they'd get a few thousand and they'd be lucky for it. A couple of house payments, at best, and that was nothing to sneeze at.

But five million pounds.

Mary touched his hand. "What are you thinking?"

He shook his head. "Are you—were you the only beneficiary?"

"No." Mary shrugged. "There were some friends she'd made bequests to, not that any of them showed for the committal, some charity bequests, a big chunk to her lawyer, but...." She shrugged again, gently. "Last surviving family."

"Jesus Christ."

"I thought about it the whole way back," Mary said, and squeezed his hand. "I know it hasn't sunk in for you. And the will's not been probated yet—there are still some formalities, but her lawyer said everything was aboveboard. He said he'd been working on it with her...before....and that they'd
ironed most of the details out. She'd already sold her house and liquidated most of her assets. She wanted to make things as easy as she possibly could, she told him. I can probably expect the transfer within eight to twelve weeks."

"Did he know that she was going to…that she'd planned to…." Top herself was the wrong thing to say.

"I don't know." Mary got up and checked the rice, then opened the range to peer at the chicken. "This changes a lot, John."

For one bizarre, half-giddy moment, John thought that Mary was going to ask him for a divorce. In a flash he saw himself in a tidy little flat, getting Nora half-time, working at the surgery. What the hell, maybe he'd call Sherlock again. Old times' sake.

God, you're an idiot. "Like what?"

Mary went to the fridge and took out a packet of mixed vegetables. "We can pay off the house, for one thing."

A compound of relief and disappointment flooded John's system. "Yeah. Yeah, definitely."

"And I can take early retirement."

"That'd be fantastic, if you wanted that."

"I do. I think I'm ready," Mary said. She tore the plastic open and poured the vegetables into a saucepan. "I'll have to do it gradually, but I think it's time." She turned away. "And I want to send Nora to St. Teresa's."

John sighed. "Mary…."

"Look, I know you don't want to do it, but it's an excellent school. You've seen the reports, John. She's so bright, she needs an environment where she'll flourish. And she'll be –" Mary hesitated. "I think she'd be really happy there."

"She's happy here," John said.

"Just think about it. We wouldn't do it until next term."

"If at all." John was determined not to send Nora away. He'd known people with money, shuffling their kids off to boarding schools and eventually developing the same sort of relationship with them that a sturgeon had with one of its millions of eggs. He wasn't about to let that happen to his daughter. He wanted to watch her grow up, not hear about it in a fucking text message.

"Okay. Just give it some thought." Mary returned to the table and sat again, resting a hand on John's arm. "I know it's huge, and I haven't given you time to consider anything. I'm sorry. Look, I was thinking of something else."

John thought about five million pounds. Jesus. "What?"

"I was thinking that maybe you and I – or all of us – could maybe go away for a while." She squeezed his arm. "A trip round the world, maybe. France, Italy, Africa, India. Anywhere you wanted to go. You could retire too, you know, with that much money. We wouldn't have to live like kings, but everything would be sorted." Her eyes searched his.
The idea didn't immediately appeal to him. He'd travelled extensively, and he didn't want Nora out of school. "Yeah. That…"

"And maybe we could sort some things out as well, you and I."

He smiled at Mary, stemming a sudden tide of inexplicable panic. Brilliant. Brilliant first reaction to the prospect of really making things work again.

What the fuck was wrong with him? He still loved her. He should have been overjoyed at the idea. Money and a working marriage was loads more than most people had. Then why, why for fuck's sake, was his heart stammering in his chest and why did he feel horribly constricted?

"That'd be great." He caressed her hand and got to his feet. "I'm going to wash up. I'll be back in a bit." He gave her another quick, reflexive smile, and fled to the loo.

He turned the light on, closed the door, and stared into the mirror. Sweat beaded his upper lip. He wished he'd drunk the rest of his beer. Fuck.

Reaching into his pocket, he found his phone and pulled it out.

*Chelmsford City Handicap Chase*  
*Racecard*  

*Online betting has rarely been so easy!*

"Fuck!" John threw the god-damned phone against the wall. Breathing hard, he dragged his hands through his hair and closed his eyes. His chest hurt.

Who cared if the fucking phone broke? He could afford a new one.

It had been a while, certainly, since he'd cleaned the flat, but even Sherlock had to admit the place was looking uninviting. He couldn't carbon-date the layers of dust, but he was able to detect distinct strata – perhaps it was time for a quick tidying. Mycroft had, a few years ago, reluctantly offered the use of his cleaning service, but Sherlock hated strangers touching his things, and the idea of people shifting and displacing his perfectly ordered possessions (to him, anyhow; who cared if nobody else understood his filing systems?) was unacceptable. He opened the curtains, raised the window sashes, then rolled up his sleeves and got to work.

Four hours later, he'd located an American Bowie knife (murder weapon, he'd meant to return it to the Met ages ago), one of his Moroccan slippers (he'd tossed its mate out last year), a tennis ball (another murder weapon, one of dozens, used to dispatch a moderately well-known tennis pro. The murderer had cleverly injected the balls with Aspergillus fumigatus spores, released when the pro's racquet had struck the balls. Unfortunately, the murderer was the pro's manager and had neglected to wear gloves, and they'd both succumbed to the fungus. Idiot), a yellow sippy cup that had belonged to Nora Watson, a Carolingian silver denier (gift of a grateful client), a grey silk high-heeled shoe (origin unclear), several packs of elderly cigarettes, and two hundred twenty-seven pounds and assorted change. Pity the place wasn't much cleaner, and the muttering in his knee had ratcheted to a
high-pitched whine, but it had been a fun afternoon.

And it had taken his mind, briefly, off Mycroft's patronising airs, poorly disguised beneath a thin veneer of brotherly concern. Encroaching ennui – what did he know? One opened the OED to the phrase "emotionally stunted" and found Mycroft's face instead of an entry.

Ennui...well, no more than was ordinary. And the irritating Nosy Parker was right: Sherlock hadn't anything much going on at the moment, but he would have happily spent the entire year cleaning the flat rather than listening to his brother's tiresome exhortations and ominous, yet thoroughly vague, predictions about the threat to the United Kingdom, good God. As if Mycroft didn't have enough to keep him occupied on a global level, he had to try Sherlock's already limited patience with the monotonous peregrinations of his thoughts on a near-weekly basis.

Sherlock pocketed the silver coin and tossed the sippy cup in the bin. For a fleeting second he thought about fishing it out and returning it to John, but Nora was nine, hardly drinking from sippy cups any longer, so he let it lie in the bin, probably with the powdered remains of milk still clinging to its plastic walls.

Unbidden, his eyes fell on the scarf John had brought back. He'd flung it over the back of a kitchen chair the day John had stopped by and there it was a few days later, but he'd glanced at it every time he'd been in the kitchen. Looking at it had set off a funny little discordant peal of bells in his stomach, but that was...commonplace.

He reached out and stroked the soft wool and then picked the scarf up, holding it to his nose. He smelled dust and a bit of perfume – not Mary's old Claire de la Lune, but something richer, smokier, with benzoin, tolu balsam, fig leaf, and Rosa Indica caryophylllea. A sophisticated fragrance; her tastes had changed. He couldn't smell his own scent on it at all, nor John's.

Sherlock dropped the scarf back on the chair. Given the last few years, perhaps it wasn't unusual that occasionally that peculiar irrationality would come back to plague him now and then. They'd left things undone, after all. He'd just got comfortable with their friendship and Moriarty's threat had blown everything to hell. Then those two years, then back to London to discover that everything had changed.

And amazingly, shockingly, foolishly, he'd been surprised by that. He'd negotiated the next four years gingerly, and then it had all been blown to hell again. It was easier, more comforting, to keep his own reassuring company, far better than terrifying, rancid bitterness or the icy numbness that had encapsulated him for too long after that second upheaval.

A knock sounded at the door, and Sherlock scowled. He'd left the downstairs door undone hauling things out, but most people weren't rude enough to come in. He flung the door wide, preparing for a few well-chosen and scorching remarks to send whoever it was packing.

John stood at the top of the stairs, mouth firmly compressed, hands stuffed in his coat pockets. He blinked at Sherlock. "You're filthy."

"Yeah, hi. Look, I was thinking. It's possible that your murder victim might have had temporary trismus. It's not entirely unheard of." John met Sherlock's eyes and then looked away, concentrating on a spot just to the right of Sherlock's neck. "Most aconitine poisoning presents as a combination of neurological, cardiovascular, and gastrointestinal features, but it's not impossible. There's conium, and that disrupts the central nervous system and causes ascending paralysis. Depending on the strength of the aconitine dose, the victim might have experienced some paralysis, which could
explain why nobody heard her. It's hard to scream for help through clenched jaws." John's face had
grown steadily more crimson throughout his speech. He fell silent, then sniffed. "Erm… I did a bit of
research on it last night."

"Well," Sherlock said. "That's… that was generous of you."

Something in John's eyes flickered, and his brows drew together. "Yeah. Well, for what it's worth."
He shrugged and half-turned. "I'd better –"

"It doesn't explain why several of her toes and fingers were broken, though," Sherlock said. "And it
doesn't explain why she tried to phone Lord Moran a half hour or so before she died. Nor why she
was actually murdered in the first place."

"Moran?"

"He's reinvented himself as a small-time art buyer," Sherlock said, matching John's shrug with one of
his own. "Apparently he helped her acquire pieces looted during the second World War and restore
them to the families and institutions who'd had them stolen."

A small but genuine smile appeared on John's face. "And that bored you?"

"Mycroft tried to get me interested in the case, but you know Mycroft – everything he says gets
filtered through nine layers of cotton wool. He's congenitally incapable of arousing my interest in a
case."

"Then it's just you being stubborn."

"Not at all," Sherlock protested, and saw the tiny grin stretching a bit wider. "Well, maybe." John
laughed, and Sherlock's chest loosened. "Possibly. Don't tell him."

John shook his head, still smiling. "It sounds really interesting to me."

"If it's so interesting to you, maybe you should investigate it with me." As soon as the words had
leapt out of his mouth, Sherlock's stomach curdled in horrified denial. John hadn't assisted him with a
case in four years, not since their falling-out. In all that time, Sherlock hadn't dared to approach him,
hadn't dared to ask, because he knew what the answer would be. And people were prone to
nostalgia; even after the failure of their friendship, John might have held on to some sentimental
notion of the power of their bond, and seeing Sherlock at the racecourse might have stirred those
notions. Probably the scarf had been a pretext, but he'd left – and here he was, back again.

*It doesn't mean anything.*

The silence stretched out between them, a horrible eternity of wordlessness as they stared each other
in the eye.

_He'll laugh. Politely or with a sneer, he'll laugh and say No thanks, Sherlock, see you around, and
turn and walk away, and that'll be it, because he'll have realised that he doesn't want any part of me,
even if he came back, even if he's smiling now. Give it up, you moron. Give it up._

Sherlock took a step backward, steeling himself for the blow.

"Maybe I should."

_Oh._
Sherlock casually put one hand on the doorframe to keep his bad knee from buckling. He cleared his throat. "Well. Can you meet me late tomorrow afternoon? The body's in an intelligence research lab, and I'd have to get you clearance. Mycroft's being very broody over the whole thing."

John shuffled his feet. "You don't think he'd lock me out?"

"Not if he wants me to work on the case. And he does." He smiled at John. Why now, John? he wanted to ask. What had Sherlock done, or not done, to provoke this visit? He couldn't trust it. It was transient. The entire experience was transient. That was all right. It was fine. Just a little while would be perfectly fine. He tamped down the delicious flood of possibility that entered his bloodstream in a dizzying rush.

"Yeah," John said slowly. He'd turned red again. "Maybe I will. Just this once. Where should I meet you?"

"I'll text you the address. Same number?"

"Yes. It hasn't changed."

That stung, though Sherlock couldn't think why. He'd been there the whole time, maybe that was it, and they'd spent years not speaking. "Good." Just this once would be fine. Fine.

"Okay. Text me." John started down the stairs and halted. "Sherlock?"

"Yes?"

John peered at Sherlock over his shoulder. "We can't…I don't want to talk about the…the past. All that stuff."

"I understand."

"Good."

"Besides…it was my fault, John," Sherlock said. "I was wrong."

John pressed his lips together and stared down at his feet. "I know."

An all-too-familiar fear coiled round Sherlock's spine. "I'll see you tomorrow – around five?"

"Sounds good." John seemed about to say something else, then apparently decided against it. "See you tomorrow. 'Bye." He trotted down the stairs and left, closing the door carefully behind him.

Sherlock stood stock-still, aware of the sound and rhythm of his rapid heartbeat, the dust on his skin, the faint dampness of his cotton shirt clinging to his body, the sudden firing of sensation and emotions emerging from the depths of years.

There was no higher power nor collective wisdom in the universe; there was only information atop information. And if anyone had accused Sherlock of shaping the words thank you with his lips, he'd have denied it vehemently.

Just as well nobody was looking.

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September 2014

No-one, Mycroft thought, could accuse Charles Augustus Magnussen of exquisite taste in his interiors. His house, a huge heap of Italianate marble outside, had been gutted inside and transformed into what looked like an annex of the Tate Modern – wide swathes of polished stone floor, low, sprawling contemporary furnishings, and massive artworks of unfettered ugliness. Mycroft seated himself on a curved chair of plum-coloured patent leather and prayed that he wouldn't slide off. A bit ostentatious to keep Appledore, his pied-á-terre in CAM Global News, and this house too. "It's very good of you to see me."

"Not at all. It's an honour." Magnussen sat opposite Mycroft. His eyes, enlarged behind his thin spectacles, regarded Mycroft with what seemed to be veiled wariness. A large bruise flowered on the side of his jaw. "Allow me to say how sorry I am about your brother. I sent him several bouquets of flowers. Not, of course, that it compensates for his misfortune. How is he?"

"Stable," Mycroft said, clamping down on a sigh, and crossed one leg over the other, folding his hands atop his knee. Three days after Sherlock's shooting, Mycroft's chest still felt the iron bands of worry and anxiety compressing hard enough to hurt. Sherlock's condition had stabilised, and he would recover – but the uncertainty of the affair had lingered, leaving Mycroft shaken. Sherlock, endlessly resourceful, wasn't indestructible, difficult and painful as it was to admit. "He'll recover in time."

"Wonderful. I'm delighted to hear it." Magnussen smiled using only the lower portion of his face. His steady, unblinking stare – a bit reptilian – continued to assess Mycroft. "I don't flatter myself that you're merely here on a social visit, Mr Holmes. I know your time is nearly as valuable as mine, so let us get to the point."

"Yes. Let's," Mycroft replied, ignoring the back-handed compliment. "I've read your statement to the police –"

"Naturally."

"—And there seem to be a few inconsistencies in your explanation of what happened that night," Mycroft said. "Would you care to explain?"

Magnussen's eyes widened slightly behind the spectacles. "Inconsistencies?"
"Yes. For instance, my brother was shot, whilst you were merely pistol-whipped. Why is that?"

"You're asking me to explain someone else's motivations, Mr Holmes," Magnussen said. "I'm afraid I'm not able to do that."

Mycroft's patience began to ebb away. "My brother was shot, Mr Magnussen, and almost killed. Yet you survived unharmed. Now, if the assassin had broken into Sherlock's flat and shot him there, I mightn't be surprised. I would like you to reconstruct the events of that evening for me so that I can understand what happened. I would also like any CCTV footage you have of that evening. My sources at the Met inform me that you've failed to comply with their request in that regard."

Magnussen drew a handkerchief from his inner breast pocket and blotted his palms. "The Met will learn nothing from the footage. Nevertheless, I'll be happy to give them what I have. Bear in mind that it's private footage, Mr Holmes. Your brother gained access to my flat via deliberate deception; evidently he tricked my PA into believing he would marry her. The poor girl is shattered, as you can imagine."

"I'm afraid I can't imagine it," Mycroft said drily. He had a great deal of difficulty believing that Sherlock, his fair acting skills notwithstanding, could convince any woman that he was enamoured of her. "And if you're implying that Sherlock is guilty of some sort of crime that would eclipse the shooting, I may as well tell you that some of the freedom your news organisation enjoys at present would be in dire peril if you attacked him. Kindly don't test my patience."

"Very well," Magnussen said, "since we're being honest with each other. You're aware that I use information judiciously, Mr Holmes. The shooter had come in an attempt to frighten me away from a particular series of events – it would be an infelicity to be specific, and it isn't relevant in any case. Your brother simply walked in at a bad time. My attacker saw him and panicked, shot him – obviously not recognising him – and knocked me unconscious. I didn't tell the police why the shooter was there. You can guess why. If I'm to remain useful to you, it would be best if that information remained between us."

Mycroft watched Magnussen carefully, knowing neither of them were being honest. "I see. So you were not personally acquainted with the person who shot my brother?"

Magnussen lifted one shoulder in a faint shrug. "A hired gun, no more. Your brother was spectacularly unlucky."

"And there's no reason that you would want him harmed."

"Mr Holmes." Magnussen smiled in what looked like genuine amusement, then winced at the pain in his jaw. "Forgive me. I understand that it amuses the young man to solve crime, and I can't help but approve – it makes for good press, and it makes the Met look like bigger fools than they already are. Frankly, I think he's wasting his talents, but that's his choice. But the idea that I would want him harmed – good heavens, why?"

Mycroft concealed his antipathy with a pleasant smile. Why, indeed? If Magnussen wasn't aware of Sherlock's prying before the shooting, he certainly was now. He wasn't at all curious about Sherlock's scheme to get into his flat? Absurd. "That's very good to know," he said, rising to his feet. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Not at all," Magnussen said, and walked Mycroft to the door. "I'm delighted that your brother is on the mend. Perhaps I'll pay him a call when he's up to seeing visitors."

"Lovely," Mycroft said without enthusiasm.
“Thank goodness it wasn't fatal,” Magnussen went on. "And that his friend – the little man, what's his name?"

"John Watson."

"Yes. Dr Watson, isn't it?"

"That's right."

Magnussen smiled and opened the door, letting in the sounds of birdsong and the faint, ever-present roar of London's great beating heart. "Yes, thank goodness he was unharmed. A tremendous relief that there wasn't more bloodshed. Good-bye, Mr Holmes. I hope we have the opportunity to meet again under more auspicious circumstances."

"Good-bye, Mr Magnussen." Mycroft went to his car and climbed inside. He frowned up at the deceptively ornate façade of Charles Augustus Magnussen's house.

Beside him, Anthea coughed discreetly. "Sir?"

"Bart's," Mycroft said. "And have Dr Watson meet me there."

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"Lucky for you I was already here," John remarked, his expression sourly triumphant. He set a polystyrene cup on the waiting room table. "Saved you the trouble of having your jack-booted thugs pick me up in a big black car."

"Yes, isn't it. Where were you when my brother was shot, John?"

John scowled. "Seeing to his...girlfriend," he said, making air quotes with his fingers.

Mycroft dismissed this with a wave of his hand. "It took you several minutes to get to Sherlock. Didn't you hear the report of the gun?"

"Yeah, I heard it, Mycroft." John took a step forward, his fists clenched at his sides. "That's why I went to look for him. That's a big penthouse, in case you hadn't noticed."

"I must say I'm positively astonished that nobody seems to have seen the shooter clearly."

"I asked Magnussen who shot him, and he didn't answer me. Why don't you ask him? Better yet, why don't you go out and look for whoever it was instead of wasting your time here? Have you even bothered to look in on your brother? You pretend to be so god-damned omniscient – make yourself useful. I came here to see Sherlock, not bicker with you." He turned away and walked toward the door, flexing his hand.

"John."

John came to a halt. His shoulders slumped. "What?" he asked without turning.

"I need your help if I'm to discover who almost murdered him."

"Mycroft...." John sighed and half-turned, resting a hand against the door frame. "I didn't see who it
was. I'm not the detective Sherlock is, I'm just...." He sighed again. "When Sherlock's properly conscious and feeling well enough to talk, ask him who it was. I'm sure we're both missing a million clues." Mycroft frowned thunderously, and John's weary face crinkled into a smile. "Don't be offended, for God's sake. It's not your area. You hate legwork. Sherlock told me."

"I see," Mycroft said stiffly. "Yes. Yes, that's probably the most sensible course of action."

John nodded. "Come on. They'll let two visitors into the ICU at a time."

"All right." Mycroft followed John through the dreary corridors until they came to the glassed-in cubicle that served as Sherlock's room. Sherlock lay asleep or unconscious, his skin nearly as white as the cotton blankets that covered him, his hair lank and matted from days of neglect, his lips dry, his body utterly still.

Mycroft's stomach did an unhappy flip-flop. The last time he'd seen Sherlock this defenceless, Sherlock had been six years old; he'd fallen prey to meningitis, and Mycroft had come down from school alone because his parents had been afraid to leave Sherlock alone in hospital even for an hour. He'd read up on the disease on the train, and was armed with plenty of information, but knowledge and information hadn't prepared him for the sight of his little brother hovering close to death. Medical science had saved Sherlock then and now, and the horrible, roiling nausea at the sight of Sherlock so pale and still was just as acute as it had been so many years ago.

He'd always done what he could to keep Sherlock from harm's way, no matter how strenuously Sherlock had objected. He'd extricated him from what seemed countless dangerous scenarios (though really it had probably only been five or six. Sherlock was generally clever enough to wriggle his way off thin ice), cheerfully ignoring Sherlock's squalling ingratitude. Now....

Now it seemed he had Dr Watson for that. But Dr Watson hadn't managed to save Sherlock this time.

Mycroft turned his gaze on John, standing near the head of Sherlock's bed, one hand lightly grasping Sherlock's arm, his thumb rubbing back and forth over the Tyvek identification band encircling Sherlock's wrist. He thawed, just a little. "He'll be fine, John."

John nodded shortly, his mouth compressed so tightly that the skin around it was white. "I know. I know he will."

"I apologise if I was unduly...caustic."

"No, no. Don't apologise. I – I'm kicking myself for not being with him. Not that I had my gun, anyway." John emitted a mirthless chuckle. "Sherlock told me to leave it at home."

"Why?"

"Who the hell knows? I can't remember if he said why. Probably thought I'd set off the metal detectors. Wish I'd ignored him." John took his hand away from Sherlock's arm and leant on the bedrail. "Christ."

"At least you were there to call the ambulance," Mycroft offered. That was slightly comforting.

"Yeah. Magnussen was cowering in the corner, I don't suppose he'd have done it." He looked up at Mycroft with over-bright eyes. "You know, when I saw Sherlock laid out on the floor like that, I reckoned he was...I don't know, he'd been punched out or something. Then when I saw the blood...." He shook his head. "When the ambulance took him away, I thought, just for a second, that he was faking it again. I was ready to kill him myself, and then I thought, fuck, if he dies, I'll never —"
He let out a peculiar choked noise and shuddered. "Sorry. I'll be right back." He left the room abruptly.

Mycroft edged past the bulky clinical workstation and the softly beeping machines monitoring Sherlock's vital signs, glancing up at the flat panel display. Normal, all things considered. He briefly considered the masses of flowers in the room – some from Magnussen, evidently – then took John's place at the head of the bed and gathered Sherlock's hand into his own.

Sherlock didn't respond; his fingers were limp, a little chilled. Mycroft chafed them gently. "I told you to stay away from him, you little halfwit," he whispered. "Why won't you even listen to me?"

Naturally there was no reply.

Mycroft's chest ached. "You're so bloody stubborn. And you need a shave. And your hair's far too long. You look ridiculous." His breath shivered out of his throat, and a drop of wetness appeared on Sherlock's hand. Absently, he wiped it away. "Sherlock."

"Infirmity doesn't suit you," Mycroft said softly, and bent low, pressing his lips to Sherlock's forehead. He cupped Sherlock's cheek and kissed him again, then straightened and walked out of the room.

John sat on a low bench near the door, red-eyed, chewing on his lower lip and looking miserable.

"John."

"Yeah." John looked up.

"You'll tell me, won't you, if he says anything when he awakens?"

"Yeah, of course."

"And if anything happens to jog your memory about that night...anything at all...do let me know. You have my number."

John nodded. "I will."

"Very well." Mycroft paused. "Thank you for staying with him. He'll appreciate that." He regarded John's worn face, his red eyes. "My best to your wife."

"Thanks." John managed a little smile and a half-hearted wave. "See you."

Mycroft nodded and glided out, leaving Sherlock in John's hands, and in the care of the ICU. Despite his brother's frightening condition, he would heal in time.

God help the shooter, for Mycroft would see to it that no-one else did.

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Sherlock was already waiting when John arrived at the address Sherlock had texted him, a massive and intimidating pile of grey stone. "Ah, John, there you are."
"Not late, am I?" He'd delayed hailing a cab, and once in, he'd argued with himself – was this a good idea? No, it probably wasn't – but in the end, he'd urged the driver to step on it, and his heart had thundered in his chest.

"No, you're right on time." Sherlock beamed at him and held out a gloved hand.

John wrung Sherlock's hand, irrationally glad for the barrier of the leather glove. "So, it's all right if I go in?"

"Oh, yes, it's all arranged." Sherlock started up the stairs, clinging to the iron handrail.

A faint annoyance swept through John – just back at it, then, are we, like no time's passed at all? – but that was getting off on the wrong foot. He could be a grudgy arsehole, or he could take a deep breath and tread carefully. He needed a distraction, and if he was honest, he was tired of being angry. Sherlock had admitted fault. It was done. Maybe.

He followed Sherlock up the stone steps. "That knee's not in good shape, is it?"

Sherlock glared at John briefly over his shoulder. "It's getting better."

"Tripped, you said."

"Skidded, actually. It's fine. I've wrapped it."

"Using the RICE method, I hope."

Sherlock actually laughed. "Yes, Dr Watson." They'd reached the top. Sherlock threw one of the doors open – modern glass, incongruous in a structure at least a hundred fifty years old – and sauntered inside as best as he was able. There was a wall of security glass, a metal detector, and a guard in a navy suit. Sherlock produced a folded sheet of paper and handed it to him.

"IDs, please, gentlemen," the guard said politely. John and Sherlock handed over their identification, and the guard waved them through the metal detector. "It's lower level, Laboratory 3B, Mr Holmes."

"I know the way, thank you," Sherlock said airily, and beckoned to John. "Let me bring you up to speed, John."

John listened as attentively as he could, but there was a part of him that was marvelling at all this. Gobsmacked, actually. It really was as if no time had passed – Sherlock was explaining things at his usual rapid-fire pace as they moved through the anonymous, mostly empty corridors. Well, limped was probably a better description for Sherlock's gait; John couldn't remember ever having to slow down so that Sherlock could keep pace with him. It was odd. Otherwise, everything was the same. They were both older, yeah – John saw pearly threads of grey scattered in Sherlock's hair, and the sight of it squeezed John's heart a little and sent his gaze toward Sherlock's bad knee. It was the lightest frosting of time considering that Sherlock seemed to have more lives than an entire family of cats, but it didn't seem possible that age would ever catch up to him. Still, his enthusiasm hadn't shifted a bit, and his eyes were as bright as ever, dancing at the prospect of an interesting case.

Was it an interesting case? John realised his attention had drifted a bit. "So wait – what did Lord Moran do for her?"

"According to his own rambling account, he aided her efforts. What that might actually mean is muddled – honestly, John, he was scarcely coherent – but she phoned someone at Chelmsford City just before she died, and he seems the most likely candidate. You were right, by the way. It was a Christmas do for some corporate types. Tech industry."
"So what was Lord Moran doing there?"

"Well, I did a bit of digging. He was an early adopter in Dedalus Communications – got in on the
ground floor as an investor and it paid off handsomely. Not that he had much to worry about,
considering the family coffers. He wasn't short on walking-around money. So it stands to reason that
he was there." They came to a set of lift doors, and Sherlock pressed the button.

"But you think someone went rogue and took revenge on her," John said. They got into the lift.
"That's a pretty nasty way to do it."

"Yes, it's a bit Byzantine, isn't it? Maybe whoever did it couldn't afford a hired gun. Maybe there is
no horde of Nazi gold." Sherlock snickered.

"Nazis," John mused. The lift, small, ancient and wheezy, began to move, pushing downward.

Sherlock sighed. "That's Mycroft being a romantic, or perhaps just overselling the case. Highly
unlikely, even if the pieces stayed in the hands of descendants of thieves, that they'd actually carry on
their ancestors' sympathies. Probably something much duller. Lib Dems or something, who knows."
He clasped his hands behind his back. "God, this lift's slow."

"You still wear the same coat," John murmured.

Sherlock glanced down as if surprised. "Same style, mostly. There are a few modifications." The lift
churned to a stop, and a little bell went off. "Finally!"

The door slid open, and there was Mycroft Holmes, leaning on his umbrella, his coat looped over the
other arm, his countenance extremely displeased.

"Oh, God, what are you doing here?" Sherlock demanded.

Mycroft ignored Sherlock altogether. "Dr Watson," he said flatly. "How nice to see you again after
all this time."

"Are you going to let us out of the lift?" Sherlock asked.

"I want you to know –"

'Bye, Mycroft." John snorted laughter and put a hand to his mouth to stifle the sound.

The tip of Mycroft's umbrella suddenly knifed into the closing aperture, narrowly missing spearing
John's shoulder. The door shuddered to a halt and opened again. Mycroft lowered the umbrella, put a
hand on the door to stop its progress, and turned his gimlet-eyed stare on Sherlock. "As I was saying,
I want you to know that I was extremely reluctant to grant Dr Watson access to these laboratories."

"I'm right here, Mycroft," John said. "You don't have to talk about me in the third person." He never
could take Mycroft seriously. He wasn't a patch on Sherlock for flamboyance, but when it came to
drama, the pair of them ran neck and neck.

Mycroft bared his teeth ever so slightly. "Yes. So I see."

Sherlock heaved a sigh. "Oh, shut the hell up, Mycroft, and get out of my way." He pushed past
Mycroft and hobbled out of the lift.

"Nice to see you too, Mycroft," John said, following Sherlock.
"It's been a long time." Mycroft followed them down the grey corridor that smelled faintly of chemical preservatives. "I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about why you've deigned to grace us all with your presence."

"I didn't have anything else on," John replied. It was weird, but he actually felt...better, or easier, with Mycroft there. The air wasn't so charged. Probably he was imagining that. Also, it was something of a relief, somehow, to watch Mycroft and Sherlock bicker. There was a peculiar comfort in it. That was a little weird too, admittedly.

"Oh, what a shame. Sherlock."

"What?" Sherlock stopped at a door with a keypad entry and punched in a series of digits.

"I have two pieces of news for you."

"Hurry up, then, get on with it. We're busy."

"The first piece of news is that the piece we discussed -" Mycroft glanced at John.


"Yes. Evidently it had surfaced briefly and is now missing again. It may have gone missing before Meredith's death, in fact. I want you to look into that."

Sherlock gave Mycroft a look of mock slack-jawed amazement. "Missing, not missing – your contacts aren't the most reliable, are they?"

"Perhaps if you'd moved on this a bit more quickly -"

"What's the second piece of news, Mycroft?"

Mycroft sighed. "The DNA tests came back. It seems that the skin under Meredith's fingernails was not, in fact, Georgina Cantwell's. We're still checking databases." He cleared his throat. "It also seems that Georgina Cantwell is not her real name, but we're working on that.

"Mm. Shocking," Sherlock said.

"Additionally, it appears that she may have taken a flight to Belfast the night Meredith died. Charter flight, a small firm from the West Riding."

"Wait," Sherlock said. "You...you don't think that those two events could possibly be connected, do you?"

John chortled openly, then bit his lip to stifle another outburst.

Mycroft glared at him, then turned his attention to Sherlock once more. "Frankly, I'm shocked that you've bothered to come back. Wasn't it yesterday, or no – the day before, can't quite recall, that you told me you weren't interested in the case? That it was appallingly dull?"

"Shut up," Sherlock muttered, his brow clouding.

"Were those the words you used? Or was it – wait, it was that you couldn't bring yourself to care? Yes, I think that was it. And yet here you are. Shocking." Mycroft smiled pointedly at John.

John had the feeling that he was meant to feel insulted, but that wasn't the case. Sherlock had told him that he was planning to drop it – and besides, it wouldn't have been the first time Sherlock had to
be chivvied into taking a case. Sometimes it required a crowbar, in fact.

Unless he was only doing it because of John. But that didn't seem likely.

Did it?

John peered at Sherlock, who had gone a bit pink. He'd never thought that Sherlock might have missed him. Their break had been so final. But at their last few meetings, Sherlock had been so….

At the racecourse, yesterday, and even today, John had avoided looking Sherlock full in the face for more than a few seconds. But now, he wanted to catch Sherlock's eye; Sherlock was glaring at Mycroft, though.

At last, he found his voice. "Do you want him to work on the case or not, Mycroft? Sherlock said it was important to you." Both brothers glanced at John as if startled. John straightened to his full height. "Well? Either you do or you don't."


"Fine," Sherlock said. "You can arrange two tickets to Belfast, then, care of the same firm that shuttled the elusive Ms Cantwell."

"Two?" Mycroft inquired.

"Wait—" John began.

Sherlock rounded on John. "Naturally. You're coming along, aren't you?"

John hesitated. Popping here and there in London was one thing; it held a minimal weight of commitment. Going to Belfast, or Derry was entirely different. The pair of them on a case – was there really anything to be gained by it? What if it dredged up the past? *Shouldn't have come*, he berated himself. *Knew it was a mistake. You're a fucking idiot. We were both living our lives as best we could, and you had to give in to a stupid impulse because he stuck his hand out and beckoned. Christ, can't you resist the slightest temptation? SUCH a fucking idiot.*

He opened his mouth to refuse, and heard himself saying, "I'd have to find someone to lend a hand at the surgery."

"I'll wait," Sherlock said. "It shouldn't take you long to do that. Mycroft can sort out the tickets and accommodations in the meantime."

John felt sick. It was happening too fast, he couldn't absorb it, it was at its heart a terrible imposition. And oh dear God, he wanted it so badly.

"Give me a day to work it all out," he said, each word dragging him closer to a precipice. He saw the edge and leapt. "We can leave day after tomorrow."

Mycroft gave a long, low sigh. "Very well. Sherlock, may I have a word with you?"

"No," Sherlock said, and turned to John. "I think under the circumstances, we can put off examining Lady Howe and her effects. She's not going anywhere at the moment – probably, anyhow." He smirked at Mycroft and headed for the lift again, his limp slightly less pronounced. "Come along, John."

They didn't speak in the lift, or in the corridors heading back toward the street. They collected their
IDs from the guard and went back outdoors. The sky had turned darker, and rain threatened.

John took a deep breath. "Sherlock…"

"I'll see you day after tomorrow, John. Shall I have you picked up? It's easily managed." Sherlock looked him in the eye, and though he didn't step close, as was his old habit, he didn't release John from his gaze.

"No, I…I think I'll just meet you at the train, or the airfield, or whatever. Erm, text me the details."

"Right," Sherlock said softly. He smiled at John. "See you then."

John nodded and descended the stairs quickly so that Sherlock wouldn't catch up with him. He didn't look back, and after fleeing the claustrophobic enclosure of government edifices let himself be absorbed into the city crowds. He slowed his pace, walked more easily, and blew out deep soothing breaths.

His heart fucking hurt. But his blood sang.

*

"Hello!" The front door banged shut.

"Hey, love!" John called. "We're in the kitchen." He opened the oven and checked on the food. "Clear your stuff away, sweetheart," he said to Nora, dawdling over her maths. "We're about ready to eat."

"I'm finished anyhow," she said.

"Think carefully about that statement," John replied. "I'm checking your work after supper."


"Better." John turned the kebabs over for one last warming and then opened the top shelf, flipping the chapatis over.

Mary bustled into the kitchen, bearing a box from the sweet shop near her office. "How goes it tonight?" She kissed the top of Nora's head and dove in for a brief peck on John's cheek.

"Great. You hungry?"

"Famished. I almost ate the entire box of baklava."

Stricken, Nora spun in her chair. "Baklava?"

"It's not all gone," Mary teased, and wrinkled her nose at Nora. "Silly, it's all here, three huge pieces."

Nora made an appreciative gurgling noise. "Dad's made chicken tikka kebabs and chapatis."

"And a salad," John said. "Nora, love, get that out of the fridge, would you? And clear your books, I've told you once already."
"Right, looks like you've got everything under control," Mary said. "Do I have time for a quick shower?"

"Very quick," John said. "Five minutes, tops."

"Yes, sir." Mary dashed out the door, followed by Nora lugging her books out. A minute later, the pipes groaned, then thumped briefly with the pressure of running water. They needed attention; the pressure was diminishing, and the plumber had diagnosed an extensive and expensive problem that apparently originated outside, with a snaking tree root as the culprit.

Won't be a problem now that we're millionaires. John's mouth twisted into a rueful smile. He still couldn't quite grasp the concept – it was too unreal. They hadn't said anything to Nora, agreeing to wait until everything had been settled. And maybe, after all, it wouldn't work out. There was no point in counting chickens or plumbers' estimates until the money was actually in the bank.

It had been a more eventful week than most. He couldn't help beaming a little as he set the table.

"What's so funny, Dad?" Nora had come back from her room and was peering at him curiously.

"Been a funny sort of day, that's all." John tweaked Nora's nose. "Would you fill the water glasses?"

He started pulling the kebabs from the lower oven and putting them on a large green serving platter. The food was on the table by the time Mary came into the kitchen, glowing with cleanliness and wrapped in her new merino dressing gown. John kissed her. "You smell good."

"I think that's the chapatis."

"Good enough to eat, then."

"Really?" Mary arched her eyebrows and gave John a lascivious grin. "Well, then." She sat at her place and reached over to squeeze Nora's hand. "And how was your day, miss?"

"Jenny said my gainer was lots better. I need a new suit, though. The blue one's split on the side."

"Well, we'll see. I might be able to mend it. I swear they make those things out of paper now." Mary lifted the salad bowl and served Nora, John, and herself.

"What about you?" John asked, sitting. "Good to be back at work?"

"It was, actually," Mary said. "Very little drama today. Two blepharoplasties, a tummy tuck, and three Restylane injections. Easy-peasy. You?"


"No! Where?" Mary took a bite of her chicken. "Oh, that's good."

"Whitehall," John said casually. He inserted a big bite of salad into his mouth. Was he nervous, telling Mary? A little, he realised, but the nervousness was eclipsed by excitement, the old rhythm of adventure. "I actually took that scarf back to his flat, and he invited me to look in on a case he's working on."

"Wow. That was nice of you. How's he doing?"

"Great. Well, you know Sherlock." Oh, you're stalling, aren't you? "Erm…in fact, he invited me to go to Ireland with him day after tomorrow. For the case."

"Did he?" Mary took another bite.
"Yeah." John's stomach plummeted downward for a second. "I'm going to go."

Mary set her fork down and stared. "You are?"

John nodded. "Yeah. I got Colleen Maddox to fill in for me. You haven't got anything on, have you? You're not headed anywhere?"

"No." Mary shook her head, her brow creasing. "No, I haven't got anything on. So... just like that? That's --"

"Thought you were cross with him, Daddy," Nora piped up.

Relieved for the momentary distraction, John turned to Nora. "I still am, a bit. But I decided to talk to him."

"Are you glad you did?"

John smiled. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good."

John turned to Mary, who was still peering at him intently. "Are you okay with that?"

"Yeah. Yeah, sure." Mary smiled. "I'm just surprised, that's all. No, it's great. Why don't you bring him round? He hasn't seen Nora in ages and I'm sure she'd love to meet him. Or see him again. Do you remember him, sweetheart?"

"Not really," Nora said.

"Ooh, don't tell him that," Mary said with a laugh, and winked at John. John chuckled and winked back.

"I'd like to meet him again, though," Nora said.

"Well, maybe afterward," John said. "I think we'll be in Ireland for a few days, and he's a pretty busy guy. But I'll try to rope him in at some point. He used to take you for walks, Nora, when you wouldn't sleep. Up and down the street in the cold air, with you all bundled up. You co-operated with him, but not with me or your mum. I bet he'd love to see you."

"Yay! When'll you bring him?"

"Maybe next Sunday, all right? No promises."

"Okay, good." Nora turned contentedly to her food.

"Good," John agreed.

*

"So what's the case?" Mary called from the loo.

"It's really something." John said, stripping off his shirt. "Some art dealer got poisoned, and Sherlock
thinks that Lord Moran is involved. Remember him, the tube bomber? Or previous suspect tube bomber. I still think he did it."

"And you're going to Ireland."

"Yeah. Derry, actually, by way of Belfast. You're sure it's okay with you?"

"Yes." Mary came out of the loo wearing a short nightie of teal silk. "I think it's great. Maybe just the thing you need."

John turned to her and gave her a tight smile. "Why's that?"

"John." Mary sighed. "Come on, okay?"

"No," John said. "Why don't you tell me why I need this?"

"This is why," Mary said. "Because you get defensive at the least little thing." She moved close to him and put her arms round him; he stood stiff and unyielding. "I want you to be happy, love. When you were talking about him at the table…you looked really happy, happier than you've looked in a long time."

Ashamed, John let his body relax and wrapped Mary in an embrace. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be angry at me."

"I'm not. I'm…I don't know. Maybe you're right. I didn't mean to take it out on you." He kissed her neck, and slid his hand down her back to fondle her backside. "I'm an idiot."

Mary kissed John's mouth. "Still think I smell good enough to eat?"

John laughed. "Yeah, I think so."

*

Afterward, Mary curled up close to him. "All's forgiven, then?"

"Of course." John turned from his magazine to kiss her forehead.

"No, I mean between you two. Whatever you fought about."

"Oh." John exhaled. "Erm. Well, we'll have to see." He hadn't told Mary the cause of the rift. He had a right to keep some things private, and she'd never pressed him for details. She knew better.

"You took the first step," she said sleepily. "I'm glad I asked you to pull that hat down."

John kissed her again. "How are you, anyhow? You doing okay?" He felt doubly ashamed that he'd treated her shabbily; she'd just lost her only living relative, after all.

With her sharp instincts, Mary seemed to know exactly what he meant. "Yeah, I'm okay. It comes and goes. And this money thing – it's bizarre. I don't know."

"It'll be okay," John reassured her.
"Yeah, I know. Eventually. 'Night, love." She kissed his shoulder and rolled over, switching her light off.

"'Night." John stared at his magazine, not really seeing the words or pictures printed on the page. He knew he should have been thinking about Mary, her grief, their changing financial situation, but his brain kept leaping ahead to the day after tomorrow. Almost tomorrow, in fact.

Almost.

*

Though he tried for an air of nonchalance, Sherlock couldn't quite keep his eyes off John, who'd elected to sit in the row opposite Sherlock since they had the plane practically to themselves. There was a woman with two Abyssinian cats (heavily medicated but still complaining mournfully at their plight) who'd spread the cages and her possessions across two rows and was now watching a television comedy with an annoying laugh track on her tablet – otherwise, the flight was empty. They hadn't, unfortunately, been able to secure seats with the charter firm; a two-aeroplane outfit, they'd informed Mycroft's assistants that they wouldn't be available for another two days, but the pilot would be happy to speak with Sherlock then. Hence, they'd been obliged to take a puddle-jumper commuter flight, which Sherlock suspected was Mycroft's revenge for showing him up in front of John.

Totally worth it, in Sherlock's opinion.

Sherlock scrolled through his emails and flicked a glance at John, who was deeply embroiled in a medical journal – at least was trying to give that impression. But he hadn't turned a page in more than ten minutes, and Sherlock knew John was a faster reader than that. Not much faster, but still.

"Good article?" Sherlock ventured.

"What? Oh, yeah." John offered Sherlock a quick smile and dropped his eyes back to the journal. "Yeah, I'm trying to write an article for the RAMC Journal on wound closure, and this is just a...you know, a reference. I've sort of fallen out of the writing thing, but I thought I'd give this a try. Stay in the game a bit. Been a while since I've...erm...written."

How well Sherlock knew that. "Wound closure," he said thoughtfully.

"Yeah, particularly combat wounds. Glue's fast, but a good field surgeon can close someone up just as quickly, and there's no reason for field surgeons not to be good. The poor ones wash out pretty damn fast."

"I think you might be overestimating most field surgeons' capabilities, considering the number of casualties that occur in any theatre of war," Sherlock replied with casual negligence, and returned to scrolling through his emails, though he was angled toward John and able to watch him through his eyelashes.

"Jesus, Sherlock, it's stressful enough without -" He broke off. "Are you just trying to wind me up?"

Sherlock smirked and kept scrolling. "Wanted to make certain I was still in practice."

John snorted loudly, but didn't seem upset. "Anyway, the deadline's at the end of the month and I've
only written the intro. *I'm* not in practice." He cleared his throat and stared down at the book again. "How long is this flight?"

"We've got another hour to go," Sherlock said.

"Right."

Silence fell between them with a leaden thump and made itself at home.

John stretched his legs and yawned. He set the magazine aside and drummed his fingers on the armrest, then stretched his neck, angling his head from side to side. He flexed his ankles, then massaged his left hand.

Sherlock watched him out of the corner of his eye. *Oh, John….*

He'd come. At least he'd come. Sherlock had spent the last fifteen hours sleepless, his heart thudding uneasily, wondering if John would cancel at the last minute. He'd composed a thousand replies to an imagined text from John: *Sorry, Sherlock, can't get away after all. Sorry! Take care. John.*

*Don't give it another thought, John. Best to Mary and Nora. SH*

*Glad you texted – was just about to text you. Mycroft was only able to manage one ticket. Worked out for the best. SH*

*Not surprised. Sorry to disturb. SH*

*Go to hell, you miserable bastard. SH*

*That's perfectly okay. Maybe another time. SH*

*There's a ticket at the FlyIE counter at Heathrow if you change your mind. SH*

*For God's sake, I SAID I was sorry. SH*

*Please please please please please please come. SH*

*I don't suppose you can remove that stick, it's been up there so long. SH*

*Fine. SH*

The text had never come, though, and Sherlock had all but run into the terminal to see John waiting at the ticket counter, his hands stuffed into his pockets, baggage at his feet. He wore dark jeans and a woollen jumper in a delicate biscuit brown, and the new Melton wool coat, and though the fit of his clothes had always been approximate at best – everyone on Earth could benefit from a decent tailor – to Sherlock, he looked absolutely wonderful.

Now, however, John was clearly uncomfortable. Was he regretting his decision to accompany Sherlock? Wouldn't be too surprising. It had been a bolt from the blue. Perhaps the jab about surgeons had been ill-timed.

He tried again. "Erm…how's Mary?"

"Good. She's good. She just –" John bit his lip.

"Yes?"
"She's been really busy at work. A little stressed, I think."

"Still with the plastic surgeon, is she?"

"Yep."

Sore subject, obviously. Sherlock edged away. "And Nora?"

John beamed. "She's great. She's a good student, doing well in her swimming lessons, and she's growing like a weed."

Better. "Got a picture?" He couldn't ever remember asking to see a photograph of anyone for reasons outside a case. But this was different.

"Yeah." Still beaming, John dug in his pocket and produced his phone. "Got a folder full."

Oh, fantastic. Sherlock knew what Nora looked like, or had known; he hadn't seen her in person since she was...four? Five? Something. He'd seen the Christmas card snaps, after all, and didn't want to see an entire album's worth of photos. One or two, yes. Maybe. "Great." He leant across the aisle.

"Here – this is at school last month, their Christmas production. You can't really see her, she's in the back row. Not much of a singer, I guess." John scrolled past. "Oh, here. This is New Year's Day. She's all dressed up for church."

Sherlock took the phone from John's hand to study the picture, the first time he'd really done so. He hadn't focussed on her in the Christmas snapshots. She was in a poppy-red dress with a vivid pink slash of ribbon around the dropped waist; she wore black tights and black shoes and a serious expression. Sherlock enlarged the photo. Her eyes were hazel, the same shape as Mary's, but John's DNA was there in the roundness of her face and her tiny chin and the texture of her hair.

Amazing, the way genetics worked. Sherlock was an almost perfect amalgam of his parents. He'd teased Mycroft for years about being left at the Holmes doorstep wrapped in newspaper until Mycroft had produced a mouldering photograph of one Routledge Wakefield Holmes, balding, bewhiskered, and choleric in appearance – in short, there was a terrifying resemblance. Naturally, Sherlock had then accused Mycroft of Photoshopping the picture, whereupon Mycroft had presented a raft of documentation – birth registry, marriage certificate, war service records, et cetera. Sherlock had parried with the assertion that Mycroft could have had all that stuff made up, but he'd eventually conceded that Mycroft was actually a Holmes by blood. It had been a fun game while it lasted.

With John's permission, he scrolled through the endless pictures of Eleanor Anne Wilhelmina Watson. She was on her own in most of the photos, or with friends, but there were a few with Mary, and some with John. Her smile was very like Mary's. She was small-boned, like both of them. Still, she'd grown rapidly.

"She looks like you both," Sherlock said softly.

John leant closer. "What's that?"

"I said she looks like both of you." Sherlock handed the phone back. "She's lovely, John."

"Best thing I've ever done."

Sherlock smiled. "You have every right to be proud of her. Maybe I could meet her. Again."

John nodded. "She'd love that." He put the phone in his pocket. "I'd like it too."
"Okay." Sherlock picked up his phone again.

This time the silence settled more softly between them.

*

The car Mycroft's people had arranged for them was a Citroën, so ridiculously small that Sherlock's knees banged against the steering wheel – another piece of petty revenge, he suspected. He almost admired Mycroft for it – his brother was the master of the death by a thousand cuts. "I can't wait to see the hotel," he muttered, and started the car.

On the drive into the city, Sherlock filled John in on most of the details he hadn't mentioned the other day. "Mycroft has some personal connection to the case, which explains his insistence. Evidently Lady Howe named him her executor, which leads me to believe he was probably holding something over her head."

"No. You don't really think so, do you?"

"With Mycroft, who knows?" Sherlock shrugged. "Well, probably not, but I won't rule it out altogether. Of course he hasn't told me more about that. Leave it to Mycroft to withhold pertinent details until the last possible moment and sometimes afterward."

"Fancy that," John said drily.

Sherlock gave him a sidelong glance. "I don't do that."

"Yes you do."

"Hardly ever." Sherlock checked his GPS. "This should be it…damn it. I think my phone's going on the blink. It's been losing its charge fast for the past few days, and now the bloody GPS isn't coming up. John, plug this address in." He tossed the phone in John's lap.

"Okay." John started typing.

"Did we pass it?"

"Give me a second, for Christ's sake – oh. Yeah, we did. Erm, two streets back, and turn left. Well, right if we're turning around."

Sherlock scowled. "Thought so." He navigated through the chaotic early-afternoon traffic, found a roundabout, and made his way back toward the first address. "This is where Mycroft said the painting had been discovered, or at any rate where it was when he got the tip about it. Now it's gone, of course. The owner, as was, is named Kerstin Tresler, born 1945 to Gerhard and Roderika Tresler. Gerhard was a very minor Schutzstaffel officer, mostly a paper-pusher for the Ahnenerbe."

"What's that?"

"The Ahnenerbe was a pseudoscientific institution of the Nazi regime, principally dedicated to proving the superiority of the Nordic races. Heinrich Himmler was the founder and titular head and obviously a complete idiot. Some of the experiments in concentration camps can be attributed to them. Cold-water immersion and outdoor exposure to test human resistance to extreme temperatures,
experimental drugs, measurement of Jewish skulls, that sort of thing."

"Nice," John muttered.

"Tresler was a small cog, but smart enough to escape before the Allies got to Berlin," Sherlock went on. "He fled to Argentina with his family. Kerstin's brother Rudolf died of a fever, and eventually the family made its way back to Europe, jumping from country to country, always a step ahead of the Nazi hunters."

"Pity."

"Gerhard died in 1961, and Roderika died in 1972. Kerstin moved to Ireland in 1973, and has been living in the same flat ever since. Right there." Sherlock pointed at a sagging brick building and cut the engine. "We'll just have a quick word before we go to the hotel. I suspect she's not going to have a lot to tell us – she's almost eighty and apparently isn't in possession of many of her faculties, but she is still alive, which is more than can be said about a lot of people from whom pieces have been reclaimed." Sherlock got out of the car and moved toward the building. His knee was starting to hurt again.

"You're here to harass an old lady, Sherlock?"

"Oh, you make me sound terrible, John." Sherlock threw the door open, releasing the mingled fumes of stale food, primarily some horrid boiled cruciferous vegetable, cigarette smoke, and urine. He held the door for John and led him down a bilious yellow hallway that had probably been intended to convey a cheerful, sunny mood when it had first been painted, likely in the mid-Sixties judging by the age and layers of chipping. "Maybe a little."

"It's not her fault her father was a Nazi."

"No, but she didn't rush to get rid of the painting, did she? And surely she couldn't have been totally unaware of its provenance." He stopped at a door and knocked loudly. "She's probably deaf."

The lock rattled. "Who's that?" a deep, gruff voice demanded.

"Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. We've –"

"Hold on." The lock rattled some more, and the door opened a crack. A woman peered out, her face almost level with Sherlock's. "The detectives?"

"That's right," Sherlock said smoothly. "We've come to –"

"Come to find out about the painting, I expect." The woman drew on a Gauloise Brune and blew out a cloud of smoke that smelled simultaneously rank and divine. Her made-up eyes scrutinised Sherlock narrowly, but without evident hostility or suspicion.

"If you have a moment," John put in.

The woman's regard slid to John, then she shrugged. "You're not the first and you likely won't be the last. Come in." She pulled the door open and stepped aside.

Sherlock moved into the gloomy flat. If the building was a stately ruin, the flat was a decaying time capsule; faded floral wallpaper surrounded heavy, dark furniture nearly a hundred years old, the pictures on the wall were yellowed photographs and ponderous oils – except, Sherlock noted, there was a clean spot, about fifty by forty centimeters, where the Titus painting had likely once hung. The only concession to modernity was the large flat-screen television propped on a walnut credenza.
Even Ms Tresler looked like a relic from a bygone era: exceedingly thin and very tall, draped in an ancient absinthe-green silk dressing gown printed with cherry blossom branches, she had thin blonde hair – dyed, the roots were pure white – and intense blue eyes, faintly rimmed with encroaching cataracts, that watched both Sherlock and John with interest as she puffed on her cigarette.

*Probably would have made a perfect model for an SS Women's Corps recruiting poster.*

"I've read about you two in the papers." Her voice, a peculiar mélange of Irish and German accents, rasped out of her narrow chest, and her breath smelled of gin.

"Is that right?" Sherlock inquired without interest. "I do have some questions about the painting."

"Yeah, it's gone." Tresler gestured carelessly to the clean spot on the wall. She moved to a mauve damask curtain and jerked it open. A shaft of pale sunlight brightened the room, not flatteringly, Sherlock noted. Dust motes danced frantically in the air, and the poor condition of the furnishings was in glaring evidence now. Sherlock glanced round the room and saw stacks of dirty dishes, crumpled tissues, containers of pills, empty glasses, a bin bag in the kitchen doorway half-filled with gin bottles. "Five weeks ago, right before Christmas."

"Right around when Lady Howe died, then," John said.

"Mm," Sherlock agreed. "Your father gave you the painting?"

Tresler grinned, revealing two rows of perfect dentures. "Gave me, yes, I suppose he did. It was passed down."

"Do you know its origins?"

Kerstin Tresler moved to a pink slipper chair and sank into it. She tapped her ashes onto a chipped china plate. "You know I was born the year the war ended."

"And?"

"I was sixteen when my father died," she said. "He never mentioned a word about it. We'd always had it, just…." She shrugged. "Hanging on the wall. It was a painting. Nothing special."

Sherlock examined the clean spot. There was a plain hook in the centre of the square. No evidence of violence in its removal; it looked as if someone had simply lifted it off. Any restorer who got his or her hands on it, though, would probably have a coronary event when they saw the years and layers of cigarette smoke they'd have to remove.

"Hang on just a minute," Tresler said. She got back on her feet, wheezing, and made her way out of the room. Sherlock heard her rummaging around in a wardrobe.

"That," John said, *sotto voce*, "is an excellent example of the need for smoking cessation."

"I haven't smoked in years," Sherlock said. "Besides, there's the dozens of litres of gin, I think that probably enters into it too." He gestured at the bin bag on the floor.

"God." John shook his head. "See any clues? Anything particularly interesting?" He poked his finger at a hi-fi system from the mid-Fifties. "Look at all those records."

"Just varying strata of filth," Sherlock said. "And you always said 221B was messy."

"She's got you beat there, I admit it."
Tresler came back holding a wooden chest about the size of a breadbox. She plunked it on the coffee table and sat on the sofa. "So. You want to know about the origin of the painting. If I knew it came from a dead Jewish family, is that it?"

"That's about right," Sherlock replied. "And if you did know, why you chose not to give it back."

Tresler fished in the pocket of her dressing gown and produced the Gauloise Brunes. She took one out, lit it, inhaled, and coughed for a full minute. "Christ almighty," she muttered, and inhaled again. "Mr Holmes, when my father died, my mother gave me this." She opened the lid of the box and angled it toward the sunlight.

Sherlock crouched and inspected the objects inside. Militaria, mostly – shoulder boards and pips, a belt buckle, collar tabs. A pair of field glasses, its case emblazoned with a swastika. A porcelain mug with the SS insignia. Lapel pins, badges, a printed silk handkerchief commemorating the 1936 Olympics, the swastika flag glaring out from its background of red. A dainty gold necklace with a fleur-de-lis pendant worked in tiny diamonds.

"That's foul," John whispered.

Tresler looked up at him. "Sixteen. I was sixteen when she gave me these things and told me how proud I should be of my father, how courageous he was. You know what I thought he did for a living? I thought he was a diplomat, that he moved us around from posting to posting and only worked erratically. But my mother told me the truth. Sixteen. You want to know where that necklace came from?"

"I think I can make a fairly accurate guess," Sherlock said. He picked it up gently and turned it over, discerning a faint inscription on the back of the fleur-de-lis. B.S.L. 1928

Tresler blew out another jet of smoke. "I kept it. I kept it all. The painting, she told me about that too, and I thought I'd get rid of it all when the old bitch died, but by then…." She shook her head. "I was afraid. They'd hanged Eichmann ten years before, you know. And the Mossad was all over the news. I thought they'd hang me too. So I kept it."

"Do you have more stolen art?" Sherlock inquired sharply. "Anything else?"

She shook her head. "It's all flea market shit. You can have it, though. Be my guest." She chuffed out a harsh laugh and coughed again.

"What about the theft? From you, that is." Sherlock replaced the little necklace and got to his feet, dusting his hands off. "Tell me what happened."

"Not much to tell," she said. "I was watching the news —"

"What time was it?" Sherlock interrupted.

She considered. "Two, three in the morning. Something like that."

"You're a light sleeper, are you?" John asked, his tone considerably less kind than before.

Tresler met John's gaze evenly. "Wouldn't you be, Mr Watson?"

Sherlock had to give her credit for a still-sharp mind. "Go on," he said.

"I was watching the news, and my door opened."
"They had a key?"

"It wasn't locked," she said indifferently. "I was here, on the sofa, and a man and a woman came in."

"What did they look like?" Sherlock asked.

"They wore masks. Balaclavas. The man was tall, the woman was short. They had dark clothes. Only the woman spoke. She talked like you," she said to Sherlock, a touch of contempt in her voice. "Cut glass."

"What did she say?"

"She said that they'd come to repossess the painting, and that I was to remain very still and not call for help. He was going to tie me up, or shoot me, I think, depending on my reaction – he seemed nervous – but I told them they were welcome to the fucking thing. I think that might have surprised them. They lifted it off the wall and left. That was it." She drew on her cigarette again; it had burnt nearly to her fingers. "Then last Sunday some people from the First Minister's Office and the Department of Justice came to see me. I played stupid."

John moved a step closer to her. "Why didn't you give them the box? Tell them what you told us?"

Tresler stubbed the second cigarette out. "I don't expect you to understand. You haven't got the least idea of what it is to have to live two lives." Laboriously, she got to her feet, closed the lid of the box, picked it up, and proffered it in Sherlock's direction. "Take it. I don't give a damn anymore."

Sherlock took the box. "Ms Tresler, you had a companion, Eamonn Reilly. He doesn't live with you any longer?"

A veil fell over Tresler's eyes. "He's in hospital. He had a stroke two weeks ago."

"You're aware, of course, that he was Provisional IRA?"

Kerstin Tresler looked Sherlock directly in the eye. "Yes."

"That's interesting," Sherlock remarked. "Is that childhood conditioning that draws you to hateful militants, or just —""

"Get out," she said tonelessly, and walked to the door. She opened it, waiting.

Sherlock sauntered to the door, still holding the box. "Keep your calendar open. I might have more questions for you. Come along, John." John followed in evident confusion, his eyes moving from Sherlock to Kerstin Tresler and back. "Good afternoon."

The door slammed behind them, and the lock rattled.

John frowned at Sherlock. "What the hell was —"

"Shh." Sherlock went out to the car and set the box onto the back seat, next to their bags. He got in and started the car. "Now. What?"

"What? What was that IRA stuff all about, that's what!"

"Just a little pebble in the pond," Sherlock replied, and pulled into traffic. "We'll find out if there's a ripple tonight. We're going to visit Mr Reilly in hospital."

"Okay," John said, and was silent for a few minutes. "Told you."
"What?"

"Withholding details."

Sherlock waved a hand. "Pfft." He pulled his phone out and hit the GPS tracker. "Damn it! John, give me your phone."

"I'll navigate," John said, wrestling his phone from his pocket.

"No, I will." Sherlock snatched the phone and held it away.

"You're driving!"

"Can't follow someone else's directions," Sherlock said, thumbing the phone on. "No password, John? Honestly."

"Yeah, yeah. Fine. Just get us to the hotel. I'm starving."

Sherlock eyed John's faintly burgeoning potbelly. "Really?"

"All right, shut up."

"Hm." Sherlock eyed the GPS and veered right.

"What are you going to do with the box?" John asked. "It's creepy as all hell."

"There are a few museums who might be interested," Sherlock replied. "The necklace, though, straight to the Jewish Museum. Maybe they can trace its origins."

"God." John rubbed his eyes. "She was fucking creepy too."

"Her parents were the Nazis," Sherlock pointed out. "Is it fair to blame their children for their crimes?"

"Maybe not," John admitted. "I don't know. You feel like you've got to blame someone, though. And what you said about the IRA —"

"Just feeling her out. I don't think she's a secret Nazi, if that's what you're saying."

"No." John was quiet for a moment. "It's still creepy, though. You keep the box in your room. I don't want to touch it."

"All right." They pulled up to the hotel – not the nicest establishment in town, but not horrible; Mycroft must have wearied of petty revenge. Sherlock got his bag and the box, gave the keys to the valet, and checked them in. Adjacent rooms, en suite bath, perfectly adequate. They got directions to a variety of nearby restaurants, obtained their key cards, and went in search of their rooms. "Right, freshen up and I'll meet you for lunch in twenty minutes," Sherlock said.

"Okay. See you in a bit." John smiled at Sherlock, looking a thousand times happier and more animated than he had at the racecourse.

*You've missed this, John. Admit it.*

Sherlock went into his room and dropped his bag on the floor and placed the box on the bed. He pulled his phone out. "Oh, bugger." He'd kept John's by mistake.
He turned to exit the room, and a flash of movement caught his eye. "Wh –"

A fist made of iron slammed into his midsection, and something dark fell over his head – a cloth sack or pillowcase. Sherlock gasped like a fish, reeling from the blow, and tried to call out.

*John*

He hadn't actually said anything – he couldn't breathe, let alone shout. Hard hands shoved him up against the wall, a heavy body pressed him into the unyielding surface. Sherlock scrabbled at the cloth over his head and inhaled a peculiar scent.

*Halothane. It's Halothane.*

"John –" he tried to shout, but his head was dragged back, and a thick hand clamped over his face. He sucked air in through his nose and staggered.

*Dizzy*

"Mr Holmes." The voice was odd, echoey.


"Listen closely, because I'm only going to say this once." Irish accent, not Northern. Western. Galway, or thereabouts. "Go back to London. Stop messing around here. Go tonight."

The smell was overwhelming. He couldn't keep his feet. The bad knee buckled.

*Going to pass out.*

"You can remember that, can't you? Be a good lad, now, and don't struggle."

He struggled anyway, and moaned under the cloth and constricting hand. *Built like a labourer. Callus on hands, scratching. Fabric.*

He was sinking.

"Tonight, Mr Holmes."

*Tonight.*

*John*

*

Chapter End Notes

If you're reading, I'd love to know what you think. Comments are always appreciated! Thank you. :)
Chapter Notes

Thanks are due, as ever, to Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet, best beta/britpickers ever. All errors are always mine.

*

October 2013

John sat, flexed his fingers, and laid his hands on the arms of the chair. "So."

Ella crossed her legs, settled her writing pad on her lap, and offered John an encouraging smile. "How are you, John?"

"Good. Really good."

"It's been an eventful time for you, hasn't it?"

She'd seen the news. Of course she had, everyone had. "Yep. Pretty...pretty crazy, I guess."

"I saw it on the news last week. That police inspector, you've mentioned him a few times --"


"Yes," Ella said. "He seemed very happy to have Mr Holmes exonerated."

"Yeah. Well, he would be." John gave an indifferent shrug. "Anyone who thought that Sherlock was really guilty of kidnapping and child endangerment is an --" He broke off, heat rising from his chest to his face.

"Is a what?" Ella probed.

"Idiot." John chuckled. "That's something Sherlock would say."

Ella let it pass. She re-crossed her legs and consulted her notes. "When it seemed Sherlock had died, you had a very difficult time accepting his death. Now, as it happily turns out, he's alive and quite well and intends to continue his consulting work."

"Yeah, evidently."

"Are you planning to resume assisting him?"

"No, I don't think so."

Ella scrutinised John's face for a moment. "How did you feel when you found out that he was alive?"
“Surprised,” John said shortly.

“Tell me about that.”

John folded his hands into a tight knot. "Not that much to tell, really. He decided to surprise me – coincidentally, it was on the night that I decided to propose to Mary, which actually shouldn't come as a surprise because his timing has always been bloody horrible. He showed up at the restaurant in the Landmark, disguised himself as a waiter, painted on a stupid fake moustache, did a stupid fake French accent, and –" John made an upward spiraling gesture with his right hand. "That's about it."

Ella nodded calmly. "How did you react to that?"

"I throttled him," John replied with, he thought, admirable and equal calmness. "Then they threw us out of the restaurant and we went to a sandwich shop. Then he was his typical smart-arse self and I throttled him again. They threw us out of there, so we went to a kebab place. Then, you know, more of the same, so I head-butt him. Then Mary and I left. That's about it."

"Bit violent," Ella said.

"Yeah, well – he had it coming."

"What did he say that made you so angry?" Ella asked.

John sighed. "I can barely remember now, it was just such typical Sherlock. Well, he kept making fun of my moustache, for one."

"You're not wearing a moustache," Ella pointed out.

John lifted his hand to his upper lip. "No – no, I shaved it. Mary doesn't like it much."

"What else did he say?"

"It was more what he didn't say," John said. He unfolded his hands and rested them on the arms of the chair again, but grasped the edges firmly. "He kept giving me these bollocksy excuses about why he'd gone without saying anything." "The Times said he'd been away doing some classified consulting work for the MoD." "That's close enough, I guess," John muttered. He'd likely never hear the real story in any case, and he didn't care enough to ask again.

"You didn't believe him?"

"No, it's not that."

Ella made a note on her pad. She tilted it away from John and laid it face-down on her lap. "But you're still angry at him. Is it because he didn't tell you why he was leaving? That he let you think that he was dead?"

Exhaling through his nose, John shook his head. "Two years, and not one word. Not one fucking word to me in all that time. His brother Mycroft knew, Molly Hooper knew, half his fucking homeless network, presumably the stuff at Bart's, and I'm sure a hundred other people that I can't think of at the moment."

"It's very hurtful when you feel as if someone doesn't trust you. Especially someone you trusted so
"Yeah. Yeah, I guess that's it." John shook his head. "He could have called, just once. Sent a note in his handwriting, unsigned. Something."

"Do you think there was something in the nature of his work that might have precluded communication?"

John snorted. "This is Sherlock we're talking about. He'd have found a way, if he really wanted to."

Ella scribbled something on her pad. "And Mary. What about her?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you were planning to propose to her the night that Sherlock returned."

John cleared his throat. "Yeah, I was. Didn't happen that night, obviously."

Ella made another note. "So you're...waiting until a more propitious time to try again."

"Yeah, it's a – a timing thing, you see."

"Mm. Well." Ella smiled at him. "It's a bit premature, but congratulations."

"Thanks." John smiled, and took a deep breath. "Yeah. Yeah, it's going to be good."

"Oh, I'm sure it will be." Ella smoothed the skirt of her dress, a full-skirted silk in brilliant blues. "You said you had no plans to resume your work with Sherlock. And you are busy, it's true – you've got your own practice now with Dr Cheong – that's right, isn't it?"

"Yes. It's, erm, right near Woodside Green."

"And that's where you met Mary."

"Yes."

"Very nice." Ella smiled again, reassuringly, and consulted her notes again. "So you're working full time. You've got a girlfriend, almost fiancée. You've taken interest in some professional organisations – you do some work with Doctors of the World, you've become more active with the RAMC Association, looks like you help to staff a volunteer hotline for veterans with PTSD?"

"That's only once a month," John said.

"What do you do for fun?"

John shrugged. "I'm pretty busy, so honestly the most exciting thing Mary and I get up to is a video and a pizza on Saturday night. No, that's not strictly true. We do go out to a pub now and then, but she's not a party girl, and neither am I. A party guy, that is. Not a party girl."

Ella chuckled. "And what about on your own? What do you do for recreation on your own?"

"Eh...sometimes I go to a racecourse, place a bet now and then."

"How often is that?"

"Once a month, I guess. Probably less than that, actually."
"But overall, you'd say that you've got quite a bit to occupy your time. To fill the space that Sherlock's absence left."

"He didn't –" John broke off. "Yeah, I guess."

"Has he asked you to join him in solving cases again?"

"Not in so many words," John said.

Ella tilted her head inquisitively. "What do you mean by that, exactly?"

"Well. He said there was a terrorist attack imminent and he 'needed my help,'" John said, making air quotes with his fingers, "but it was more like a summons. He didn't actually ask me."

"And you said no?"

"That was when I head-butted him," John admitted.

Ella sighed a little and twirled her pen in her fingers. "So you haven't really resolved your anger."

"No," John snapped. "I suppose not. Well – Christ, would you? I mean, he jumps off a fucking roof, there's no fucking pulse because he's rigged something up so it seems as if he doesn't have one, and then two years later he swans back in and says 'Oh, hi, John, London's about to be attacked and your moustache is stupid. Oh, by the way, I'm back. Sorry for not saying anything about it, but you know how it is – you're unreliable, so I couldn't tell you.' Jesus Christ!" John slammed his hand down on the chair arm hard enough to hurt. He winced and folded his arms.

Ella appeared to ignore the outburst. "He said you were unreliable?"

Deflated, John shook his head. "He said it was Mycroft's idea not to tell, but Sherlock doesn't cooperate with him even when he agrees with him, so I don't see how –" He shook his head again. "It's not important."

"But it is important that your anger is unresolved, John. You said he did actually apologise to you?"

"He said 'sorry.' If you call that an apology, I suppose he did."

"But you didn't accept it.""

"No," John said stonily.

"Is it because you didn't think it was a sincere apology?"

"I don't know," John said. He wanted to leave, and hoped his hour was nearly up, but Ella didn't keep a visible clock in her office and he didn't want to check his watch – too obvious. "Maybe it was, for Sherlock. Who knows? It's not like he apologises often, so it's hard to tell."

"Do you think you'll be able to forgive him?"

"I don't know." John clenched his fists, but they were tucked under his arms, so Ella couldn't see. "Why should I? He's an arsehole. He doesn't deserve forgiveness."

"Why is that?"

"Because he –" John bit his lip.
Ella waited.

John exhaled sharply. "Because he drove me round the bend all the time anyhow, and I don't need to trot at his heels anymore. I've got my job, I've got Mary. I don't need his rubbish apologies."

"You were going to say something else."

"No." John shook his head.

Ella waited in silence, watching him.

"It's –" He pressed his lips together and stared up at the ceiling.

"Take your time, John."

"If…if he didn't bother to get in touch with me in two years…" Horribly, John felt his eyes stinging and stared upward again for nearly a full minute. He recovered himself and smiled at Ella. "If he didn't bother to do that, and if he doesn't want to tell me what happened or why I didn't merit telling, then maybe I don't – didn't – matter to him as much as I thought I did. And you know what? That's fine. At least I know now. I was just his flatmate, that's all, and company when he solved cases. It's fine." He smiled again. "I hadn't sorted it out in my own head, that's all."

Ella, still watching him, closed her notebook. "John…when the pair of you were living together, I didn't see much of you."

"No, I was…I was pretty busy."

She nodded. "Yes. You were. Let's shift things for a bit. Tell me about Mary. What was her reaction to Sherlock's return?"

"Oh, she said she liked him, nutter that she is. God. Of course, she always goes with the flow." John relaxed and talked volubly about Mary, happy for the directional change in conversation. Anything to stop talking about Sherlock, already.

*

John shucked his jacket, then went immediately into the tiny loo to wash his face and hands. He felt grubby and vaguely malodorous, as if the dirt and miasma of Kerstin Tresler's flat had followed him out, clinging to his hair and skin and clothing. As he scrubbed his hands, he lifted his arm to his nose and sniffed the sleeve of his jumper. Fine; it was just his nasal passages suffering, in all likelihood.

That box that she'd given Sherlock: who'd have kept such a thing? She'd kept it for more than fifty years, knowing how vile the contents were. If someone had given it to John, he'd have rejected it violently, or at the very least got rid of it at the first opportunity. Surely there were history museums in Derry who'd have been happy to get that sort of gruesome memorabilia, long after Eichmann, Mengele, Klaus Barbie, all those bastards were dead. She could have left it on the doorstep, but instead, she'd kept it.

Have to wonder about someone like that.

John dried his face and hands and decided to change his jumper after all. Then he'd give Mary a ring.
She'd be at work still, but he'd leave her a message if she didn't pick up. She hadn't said much to him about this excursion, probably sensing how delicate it all was, but she'd been curious and she'd want to know what was happening. And he was anxious to tell her.

He pulled his jumper off and draped it over a clothes hanger. He opened the window, hooked the hanger onto the latch, and left it to air out a bit. Struggling into his other jumper, the new one Mary had got him for Christmas, he caught sight of himself in the mirror. His hair was awry, but he looked…he was flushed, and his eyes were bright, and the expression in them was alert and he looked…well, different.

*Obvious. You're excited. It's been a while since you've done this.*

He was predictable, true. He'd caught Sherlock glancing at him a bit smugly now and then; their banter had been almost relaxed. In some ways it was as if no time had elapsed at all.

Not *quite* true, though. There was still a gap, even though they'd both appeared to have bridged it temporarily. It wasn't going to go away, even with an interesting case, no matter how many cases they worked on together. They could paper it over for a while, but it wasn't a permanent solution.

"Fuck it," John muttered. He didn't want to think about it now. Let it lie for just a while longer. It couldn't get any worse at this point, anyhow. He was, he realised, having a wonderful time, and he didn't want to spoil it with reality, not yet.

Raking his fingers through his hair, John went to the bed and picked up his jacket, searching the pockets for his phone. "What the –? Oh, fuck's sake…." He pocketed his key card, stalked to the door, and threw it open, moving across the hall to Sherlock's room. "Sherlock?" he called, knocking. "You've got my phone."


Nothing.

"I'll be back in five minutes."

John went back into his room and picked up a folder stuffed with takeaway menus. He paged through them idly. Chinese sounded excellent. No, maybe curry, some ultra-hot stuff. Or a pizza, maybe, he hadn't had pizza in forever. Actually, at this point, he didn't much care – despite Sherlock's snotty remark and dubious expression, John's stomach was making plaintive demands for just about anything. In another five minutes he'd start gnawing on the folder of menus.

*That's enough time. He got up and went back into the hall. "Sherlock? You in there?"

He wouldn't have gone out. Sherlock wasn't as opaque as he pretended to be. He'd have told John if something new had developed…wouldn't he?

"Sherlock? You've got my phone. Open up!"

Nothing, and nothing. The smooth surface of the door repudiated John's earnestness and annoyed the fuck out of him.

"God damn it, Sherlock…." Uneasily, John looked around, afraid to hammer on the door lest the hotel staff come. No, that wasn't right. Something wasn't right.

He turned on his heel and went to the reception desk. A bored girl played on her phone and gave him only a perfunctory smile as he approached her. "May I help you, sir?"
"Yeah." John turned on as much charm as he could muster. "I came in with my friend, Mr Holmes?"

"Yes, sir."

"He put his key card next to his phone, and it's a bit…erm, buggered up," John said. He could have just asked them to open the room, he realised belatedly, but evidently he'd slipped back into stealth mode with no effort whatsoever. "Could I get another one for him?" If they questioned him, he'd just resign himself to the staff opening the door.

"Yeah, sure." The girl opened her desk drawer and got a new key card, fiddled with the card machine for a moment, and handed the card to John. "Tell him to bring the old one when he's got a moment."

"Will do. Thanks." John beamed at her, but she'd already gone back to her phone. Funny; he'd become almost invisible at some point. He'd noticed it in the past year or so – women never gave him a second glance, or almost never. Probably Sherlock still drew attention – he was still glamorous, with the coat and hair and all.

John trotted back to Sherlock's room. "You'd better not be in there, ignoring me," he muttered. "Already." He inserted the card into the lock, saw it flash green, and pushed open the door.

He wrinkled his nose at a familiar sharp odour he couldn't quite place. "Sherlock?" he said softly, holding a hand to his nose. "Sh –"

Sherlock lay prone and still on the floor half in and half out of the loo, dark fabric covering his head.

"Sherlock!" John dropped to his knees and tore the fabric away. "Oh, Christ!" The smell was coming from the fabric, a black pillow-case of some cheap, shiny material. Sherlock's eyes were closed, and he wasn't moving. "Sherlock!"

All at once he recognised the smell. "Shit." He got to his feet – one of his knees creaked alarmingly – and took the pillow-case to the window. He opened the window, tossed the fabric onto the little metal grate that probably held flowers in summer, then went back to Sherlock, prising his mouth open to check for vomit. "Good." He grabbed Sherlock under the armpits and hauled him up with a great deal of effort. "Oh, fuck's sake." The case had been loose over Sherlock's head, and it hadn't been ten minutes since they'd parted, so there wouldn't be any irreparable damage beyond some irritation of mucous membranes, probably, maybe nausea and a headache as well. The effects of halothane didn't last terribly long – twenty to thirty minutes at most.

He struggled to get Sherlock's coat off, then eased him onto the bed and rolled him onto his side, arranging his limbs in the recovery position. The open window delivered a chilly breeze into the room along with a bit of rain. That was all right. Fresh air, fresh air was good. John pulled Sherlock's eyes open; the whites were horribly red, but his pupils contracted satisfactorily. "Excellent," John muttered, and went to the bathroom to wash his hands and get a fresh flannel. He ran it under the tap, wrung it out slightly, and brought it back to the bed. Sherlock let out a wordless groan. "You'll be okay," John said, though he was certain Sherlock couldn't hear him. "I'm going to rinse your eyes just a bit." He bathed Sherlock's eyes, letting water from the cloth trickle into the corners, heartened when Sherlock's eyelids responded by screwing themselves shut instinctively.

Sherlock groaned again, and he moved his head, trying to evade the water.

"Sherlock, listen to me. Can you hear me? It's okay. It's okay. Just lie still a bit and let the water work, all right? Shh." He looked round the room, remembering he should have checked for an intruder, but he hadn't even considered it. There wasn't any place to hide, though – the loo was tiny,
barely large enough for one person, the wardrobe hung open, and....

John scouted rapidly for a usable weapon. He saw the creepy Nazi box still on the bed and opened it, wincing as he thrust his hand inside. His hand closed around something smooth and cylindrical – a fountain pen, carved with sort of Art Nouveau swirls and emblazoned with an SS death's head. Charming. He uncapped it, crouched on the floor beside the bed, and yanked up the blue bedskirt.

Nothing. Lots of dust, though; his abrupt movement released a choking little cloud. He coughed and climbed back on the bed, dropping the pen into the box and closing the lid. Well, that was sorted, at least: no potential assassins in the room any longer. Sherlock was stirring, muttering unintelligibly, and his brow was knotted. John laid a hand on his forehead. "Shh. I'll be right back, okay?"

Making sure he had Sherlock's key card, he went back to the reception desk. "Hi again," he said to the incurious clerk. "Have you got a first aid kit? An eyewash station?"

The girl finally gave him her complete attention. She set the phone down. "I've got both. Is everything okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, everything's fine. My friend got a bit of...erm, product in his eyes, and it's stinging him. So if you've got some eyewash, that'd be great, thanks."

"Should I call a doctor?" The clerk rose to her feet and backed toward a door behind her.

"No need. I'm a doctor. If I could get the eyewash...."

"Yeah, sure, hold on a minute." The clerk ducked through the door and disappeared. John heard some rattling, and a moment later she emerged with a large plastic bottle. "Here you go."

"I'll probably be using quite a bit. He's sort of uncomfortable," John said apologetically.

"Not bothered, we've got plenty. I hope he's okay."

"Yes, he'll be fine. Could I get him a cup of tea?"

The clerk pointed behind John. "There's the stuff behind you on that table. I made a pot about twenty minutes ago. Biscuits too, in the dish."

"Oh, brilliant. Thanks so much. Erm...you didn't see anybody leaving about ten minutes ago?"

She shrugged. "People come and go all the time."

"Yeah, of course. Sorry. Thanks for this." John brandished the bottle and went to the tea station. He poured a cup for Sherlock – milk and sugar – and black coffee for himself, and nicked a couple of biscuits, then went back to Sherlock's room. Sherlock's eyes were open, and he was struggling to get off the bed. "Stay still," John commanded, and put the refreshments on the table.

"Uhnf."

"Yeah, I know. Stay still anyhow, I've got eyewash." John gently pushed Sherlock back to the bed and fetched a hand towel from the bathroom. "Open your eyes as much as you can. This might sting."

Sherlock obeyed, blinking blearily at John. John poured the eyewash and caught Sherlock's hands as they flew up. "No, don't rub. Here." He folded the towel over Sherlock's eyes. "Blink. Let that stuff work."
"John." Sherlock sounded a bit croaky.

"What?"

"Havgo." *Have to go.*

"Nope."

"Zgettway." *He's getting away.*

"Yep."

"Shit."

That was clear enough. John smiled. "How's your throat?"

"Sore."

"Thought so. I brought you some tea." He took the extra pillow and propped it beneath Sherlock's spine, angling him upward. "Do you think you'll be sick if you drink just a little?"

"No."

John wasn't sure if that was a refusal of the tea or Sherlock's assertion that he wouldn't throw up. "I'll get the bin." He fetched the little plastic-lined bin from the loo and set it next to the bed. "Okay. Drink a bit for me, okay? Keep that towel on." John picked up the cup and held it to Sherlock's mouth. "Small sips." Obediently, Sherlock sipped. "Good. Very good."

"Did you see him?" Sherlock rasped.

"No. I didn't hear you, either. Why didn't you yell out?"

"Tried."

"Oh." John glanced at the box. "What did he take?"

"What?" Sherlock's hand came up, groped, and managed to pull the towel from his face. He scowled at John through red, teary eyes.

"Do you think he stole something?"

"Oh. No." Sherlock sniffled and dabbed at his eyes gingerly. "Just a warning. You know." He groped for the cup, but John held it firm, so he bent and sipped again.

*Christ, that didn't take long.* "What'd he say?"

Sherlock flapped a hand in dismissal. "Oh, you know. Go home before it's too late. Et cetera. He was from Galway. Or close to it. Labourer, callused hands, scratched on the cloth." He sighed and sipped again. "I'm perfectly capable of holding my own teacup, John."

"All right, just be careful. Don't talk so much." John handed over the cup and picked up his own coffee. It was still hot, but he drank off half the cup in a draught, then ate two biscuits in quick succession. "Fairly typical scare tactic, then?"

"Mm. Typical, but not original. Obviously, I'm ignoring it." Sherlock took a deeper drink of the tea.
John bit back a smile. "Obviously."

"How long was I out?"

"Dunno. Ten minutes, maybe twelve. Not long. Sherlock, don't rub your eyes."

Sherlock scowled ferociously, then sank back against the pillows. "Well. I suppose he's long gone."

"Suppose so." John ate the last biscuit, waiting for a snippy comment, but the halothane must have been fairly concentrated, because Sherlock scarcely even glanced his way. His hair was mussed, wet in the front and plastered to his forehead. There was a delicate web of wrinkling round his eyes, and tiny fissures scored his skin here and there, but otherwise, same old Sherlock. John shivered, and Sherlock shivered as well, possibly in sympathy. Sherlock drained his tea and set the mug onto the night table. It rattled and almost fell over.

"Whoa, steady on." John inspected Sherlock. "Are you...you're pale. Are you going to vomit?"

"No." Sherlock shook his head and clenched his teeth. "I'm just cold."

"Oh." Damn right Sherlock was cold; his body was trembling. "Okay. Your core temperature's dropped a bit, but we'll bundle you up and the tea will help." He pulled off Sherlock's shoes.

"I'm fine -"

"Uh-huh." John dropped the shoes to the floor and took the loathsome box off the bed, setting it on the table that doubled as a desk. "Get under the covers. I'll be right back." He went into his own room and pulled the duvet from his bed, bundling it and taking it back to Sherlock's room. "Sherlock, under the covers, please."

"I'm fine," Sherlock said, a querulous note in his voice. He swung one leg off the bed, then the other, and sat up, shaking. His teeth chattered. "Just need to move around a bit."

"What you need to do," John said, "is get back into bed and sleep for a few hours. Jesus, you're a terrible patient, you know that? What did you do all these -" He cut himself off and dragged the bedclothes down, tugging them from beneath Sherlock's bum. "Come on, back in." Gently, he pushed Sherlock down and covered him up, then laid his own duvet atop Sherlock's and tucked it round his body the way he did with Nora. "Nice and warm. We'll have some hot soup for dinner."

"Won ton." Sherlock's eyes were drifting closed again.

"Yes, if that's what you want. And lemon chicken. You still like lemon chicken?"

"Mm."

"Okay, then. You just sleep." John smoothed the blankets up, snuggling them close to Sherlock's neck. He let his hand linger on Sherlock's shoulder, just for a moment, then turned away.

* 

"Hey, you."
"Hey!" Mary's voice faded in and out. "…got…signal…on."

John waited a moment. Something about some of the machines in Tim Liddell's surgery did funny things to mobile reception; he knew by now that Mary had to go to a spot near the rear door to talk.

"Sorry. How's it going? I'd hoped you'd call."

"Good. How are you?"

"Fine. Busy day here, nothing unusual though."

"Did Nora get off to school all right?"

"Yes. And Maggie's going to pick her up after swim, so no worries there. You sound bright-eyed and bushy-tailed. How's His Nibs? You two tearing up Londonderry?"

John chuckled. "He's... pretty much the same, really. And it's been exciting so far."

"Already!"

"Yeah, in a manner of speaking." Briefly, he relayed the events of the early afternoon. "He's all right," John said. "Just having a sleep right now. His temperature dropped, but I just checked on him and he's not shivering, so that's good."

"Jesus, John – are you okay, love? You're not hurt?"

"Me? No, I'm fine."

"Why was... why do you think he was attacked?"

John glanced over at Sherlock, who was still sleeping soundly. His mouth was slightly open, and John swore he saw a bright thread of saliva stretching from the corner of Sherlock's lips to the pillow. *Should take a photo of that.* "Just a scare. He told Sherlock to go back to London. I guess our arrival isn't exactly a secret."

Mary exhaled loudly. "You be careful."

"Don't worry."

"I'm worried." She paused. "Watch your back, all right?"

"I promise," John said, feeling peculiarly cosy and contented. Not that it was comfortable to have Mary fretting, but it was nice to be fussed over a bit, and he wasn't worried for himself. Sherlock, now... how had he managed not to get himself killed in the past four years?

*Oh, you're that indispensable, are you?*

"Sorry, love. What?"

"I said try to call tonight. Nora will want to speak with you."

"Absolutely. About seven-thirty?" John asked. "Make sure her homework's completely done, Mary. She's getting lazy with maths. Check it."

"Yes, sir," Mary replied cheerfully. "I've got to get back to work."
"All right, darling. Talk later."

"Ta-ra, John." Mary rang off.

John slipped his phone into his pocket and went off to grab a few more biscuits; he had the feeling that Sherlock was going to sleep for a long time.

* 

He hadn't been wrong – Sherlock didn't wake for another four hours. It was fully dark when he finally began to stir. John stepped into the corridor and went back to his own room to place the takeaway order and phone Nora briefly, and by the time he returned, Sherlock was propped up on his elbows, blinking. "Hey. Feeling better?"

Sherlock frowned and stretched his neck, moving his head from side to side. "Yes."

"I just ordered dinner. Should be here in about twenty minutes – they're just up the street."

"Fine." Sherlock pushed off the covers, rose gingerly, and limped into the bathroom, closing the door behind him. He came out after a minute and thumped back onto the bed. "Did you question the desk clerk?"

"Question her about what?"

"The intruder," Sherlock replied with exaggerated patience. "Did she see anything?"

"I didn't breathe a word about the intruder," John said. "Thought you'd prefer it that way. You never like involving the police unless it's absolutely necessary." He peered innocently at Sherlock. "Or has that changed?"

"No. Quite right. Well done, John." Sherlock lay back, folding his hands over his chest and staring up at the ceiling.

John watched him in silence, torn between laughter and bemusement. Sherlock was behaving… naturally, more at ease than before. John was beginning to think the rift had been entirely one-sided. "Would you like a lily and one of your good suits?" he inquired after nearly ten minutes had passed in silence.

Sherlock lifted his head. "What?"

"Never mind. What are you thinking about?"

"I'm wondering why a West Country labourer with sheep dung on his shoes was called in for a job that theoretically any Derry bruiser with a need for some quick cash could have done."

"Sheep dung?"

"Can't you smell it?" Sherlock dropped his head back onto the pillow.

"Fortunately, no."

"More to the point, who hired him?" Sherlock wondered aloud. "Mycroft upped surveillance on
Moran's place in Derry, but…" He gestured imperiously toward his coat, which John had slung over the room's single chair. "Hand me my phone, John."

John dug in the pocket and tossed the mobile, which Sherlock caught neatly. Reflexes still sharp. "Is the text function working?"

"Mm…seems so. If not, I'll use yours." Sherlock set the phone on the night table and sat up. He offered John a funny upward twist of his mouth, not quite a smile. "Having fun yet?"

John leant back in the chair, folded his arms, and crossed his ankles. "Well, it's been a while since I've lugged you around. Almost forgot that you're heavier than you look."

Sherlock's brow laddered. "At least I didn't have to lug you."

"Not with that knee."

"It's all muscle," Sherlock replied sulkily.

John took his own phone out and idly flicked through his texts. "Heavier than I remember, that's all I'm saying."

"Then your memory must be disintegrating."

"Mycroft's looking quite fit, I noticed." John hid his smile.


"Sherlock, Mycroft is not fat. I've known him for thirteen-odd years, and he's never been fat in all that time."

"Well, he used to be," Sherlock said under his breath.

"When you were kids. That's just you being a mean little bugger."

"He used to call me stupid."

John studied Sherlock's face. "You must have hated that," he said, keeping his voice benign. He'd had lots of time to consider his friend's quirks of personality, even when he was furious with Sherlock. There hadn't been much permanence in Sherlock's life when it came to friends; he'd pushed most of them away, sometimes deliberately, sometimes inadvertently. Sherlock wasn't easy to take, even when he wasn't actively insulting. It seemed as if he'd mellowed, a bit, but maybe that was just what passed for uncertainty with Sherlock Holmes. People didn't change much, in John's experience; they just became more themselves, and no matter how lonely somebody was, loneliness wasn't an excuse for rudeness or cruelty.

Sudden, bitter shame wormed its way into John's stomach. He'd known how lonely Sherlock was. Down deep, he'd always known that. He'd often wondered how it was that nobody else had seen through Sherlock's arrogant posturing and bad manners.

Takes one to know one, maybe.

Sherlock sniffed. "He couldn't catch me when I put snakes and frogs in his bed. Not a bad trade-off. Anyway, you're wrong. He's secretly fat. I'd bet a tenner that he wears corsets and girdles."

John had a fleeting and vaguely horrifying image of Mycroft in a pink satin corset, then in one of
those beige shapewear things that Mary wore when she put a tight dress on – Spanx, wasn't that what it was called? He guffawed, clapped a hand over his mouth, and tried to repress a spume of giggles.

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow at him, then grinned. "Do tell. What colour is the corset?"

"Pink," John gasped, wiping his eyes.

"Thought so." A knock sounded at the door, and Sherlock rose to his feet. "Ah – food, yes?" He opened the door, extracted his money clip, and handed over a few bills. "No change, thank you." Returning to the bed, he set the carrier bags down. "Mm. Come and eat."

"You don't have to ask me twice." Finding his order – spareribs and rice with a side of stir-fried veggies – he dug in happily. They ate and drank in silence for a while. Surreptitiously, John watched Sherlock eat his soup and chicken, watched the bits of food disappearing into Sherlock's mouth. A funny pang overtook him, and a spreading ache.

Sherlock wiped his mouth with a paper napkin. He met John's gaze and smiled, almost shyly.

"Yeah," John said. "I'm having fun."

"Good." Sherlock turned back to his meal, picking up another piece of chicken and inserting it between his lips. He chewed and drank cold tea, reading the menu that had been stapled to the bag. "So am I," he murmured.

The ache became warmth. John smiled down into his food.

"Good."

*
"This room wants warmth," Meredith remarked, seating herself on Mycroft's Chesterfield.

"I can light a fire."

"No, I mean in mood, silly. Look, I know you keep saying you want to economise until you buy a house, but that doesn't mean that your flat has to have the ambience of a hotel room. You have to furnish your house with something, after all. Why not start now?"

"May I remind you that you helped me choose half the furnishings in here?" Mycroft handed her a whisky and sat beside her.

"I mean art, objects, things that have beauty and meaning and that proclaim who you are to the world."

Mycroft sniffed. "I know who I am, and I'm not planning to invite the world into my flat, thanks." He shifted on the sofa; the little box in his pocket was digging into the flesh of his hip.

Meredith laughed. "Crikey, you are a stuffy old man, Holmes." She poked him in the side. "Right – since you're obviously not going to take the plunge, I'll see what I can do about making things a bit brighter. Do you like engravings? We've got some beautiful aquatints in. And Fairfield has a George Duncan Beechey I think you'd like. It's all very traditional and non-alarming, don't worry – nothing after 1900." She sipped at her whisky and grimaced, then set it down.

"Would you like something else?" Mycroft asked.

"No, this is fine."

"You look a bit weary. Was it a very tiring trip?"

Meredith sighed and tucked a strand of hair behind one ear. She crossed her legs, marvellous in sheer black hosiery, and juggled one foot in its high-heeled black velvet shoe. "It was," she admitted. "It was tiring, and emotionally draining. Seeing the piece – a Chagall, Mycroft, not your taste at all, but so beautiful – and seeing how carefully it had been kept and cleaned, getting it out, and then returning it to the Kempinski family...my God, yes, it was tiring. I'd love to sleep for weeks, but I've got things to do." She picked up her whisky and sipped again.

His hand almost unconsciously drifting toward his pocket, Mycroft watched Meredith closely and...
stepped on his disappointment. He'd been hoping to discover whether she was wearing stockings –
the thought of her white thighs framing the black straps of a garter belt was nearly too exciting to
bear – but suggestinglovemaking seemed downright unchivalrous given her admission. Perhaps a
bit later she'd be amenable. "Dare I inquire as to the actual acquisition process?"

"You dare not," Meredith said, and patted his thigh.

"This…facilitator of yours. You're certain it's safe to accompany him?"

"James? I didn't accompany him, he wasn't there. I went with his associate, or his lieutenant, or
whatever. He goes by Sebastian. Just Sebastian, like Madonna. Stunning man, beautiful voice, lovely
Irish lilt, but I'd lay odds he went to Charterhouse, from the accent. James is the brains of the outfit,
and Seb is the muscle." She waggled her eyebrows.

"Seb," Mycroft echoed.

"Mm. Are you jealous?"

"Rather." Mycroft smiled to hide his annoyance.

"I've never even seen James, only spoken to him on the telephone. I expect I'll meet him soon
enough. He's expressed interest in assisting with other acquisitions."

Mycroft drained his own glass. "And what does James get out of this?"

"I pay him," Meredith said. "The next piece we're after, a Miró, belonged to a family with no
surviving descendants. I'll give him a commission from the sale, atop the agreed-upon fee."

"What's his surname? Or is he like Madonna as well?"

"Are you planning to investigate him?"

"Would that be a problem?"

Meredith chortled. "Mycroft Holmes, are you being proprietary?"

"Not at all," Mycroft replied stiffly. "I simply think it's prudent to know with whom you're
associating. That's not unreasonable, is it?"

"Last month you met a man in Budapest whose code name was Scimitar, and you had no idea what
his real name was, as I recall," she pointed out. "Scimitar, for God's sake."

"That's different," Mycroft protested. "I'm –"

"Careful," Meredith murmured. "Don't spoil my dream with a generous helping of some dusty old
chauvinism."

Mycroft scowled. "This is art, not espionage."

"In fact, it's both. But never mind." She leant over and kissed his cheek. "I'm not in danger, if that's
what you're worried about. Seb is well-armed, believe me."

"Good Lord."

"It's just a precaution, darling."
"I should introduce you to Sherlock," Mycroft muttered. "He has a penchant for danger as well."

"Maybe you should," Meredith said. "I'm beginning to despair of that ever happening, though. Are you ashamed of me?"

"Not of you, no. Sherlock's... he's difficult to tolerate at the best of times. He has a nasty little trick of making people feel terrible about themselves."

Meredith cocked her head in an inquisitive fashion. "Are you implying I couldn't handle him?"

"You could, I think," Mycroft said truthfully. The time was right. It was an excellent opening. An introduction to Sherlock, possibly a small New Year's gathering at his parents' house – God knew he'd rather keep her away from that appalling ménage, but it couldn't be helped, unfortunately. They had got on rather well when his parents had come up to town, even if Miss Saigon had been utterly abysmal. Meredith had been an awfully good sport about spending the afternoon with them. Yes, she'd hold her own with Sherlock. The miraculous might even occur and they'd like each other. Mycroft put his hand in his pocket and took a deep breath. He considered getting down on one knee, but he didn't think she'd appreciate that – she might even laugh, and he couldn't bear even gentle mockery at a time like this. "Meredith," he began, "we've been seeing quite a lot of each other."

"Oh, I know. I think people are starting to talk." She smiled and stroked his cheek.

Mycroft resisted the impulse to close his eyes, however briefly, just to feel the softness of her hand and exclude all else. "Would that be so awful?"

"Not at all. I don't mind if you don't."

"That's good news," Mycroft replied, and drew the small purple box from his pocket. "Because there's something rather important I've been meaning to ask you."

Meredith looked down at the box. She met Mycroft's eyes for a moment, and while he wouldn't have characterised the expression on her face as abject horror, it certainly wasn't ecstasy or delight. "Oh – Mycroft –"

"I know it's likely a surprise, but I... hope you'll do me the honour of becoming my wife." Oh, God. It sounded so stuffy and Victorian, but it was done, it was out, and he wished with all his heart that her expression would change. "We're well-suited, you and I, and I think that we'd have a wonderful future together." She said nothing; in an agony of haste and embarrassment, Mycroft opened the box and showed her the ring, a discreet one and one-half-carat diamond of extraordinary quality and brilliance. "It's your size. Will you try it on?" He dared another look at her face.

"Mycroft. Oh, God...." Meredith closed her hand over his, gently pushing his fingers away from the ring. "Darling. Darling, listen to me." She sighed, and squeezed his hand. "I'm so fond of you. You're marvellous, and God knows I can talk to you the way I can't talk to most men I've dated."

Mycroft held very still, his vision blurring, ice spreading outward from the centre of his chest. His hand leached the warmth from hers. Never having trusted his own emotions, much less those of other people, he could scarcely fathom the sudden grotesque turmoil that churned in his belly. "Yes. We get on well."

"We do, and I thought... it's my fault, I didn't make it clear, but I thought... your work, you're so dedicated to it."

"Yes?" How ragged he sounded.
"So am I. This work, the rigour of it, the tension, the emotion – it takes most of my energy, and I don't have enough left over…Mycroft, I don't want to get married. I don't have it in me to divide myself between my work and a husband."

An oceanic roaring thundered in Mycroft's ears. "Yes, but... as you say, I'm dedicated as well. You can't think I'd make untoward demands upon you, Meredith, or expect you to be any sort of traditional wife. We'd have help – hire a cleaning service, perhaps a cook as time passed." He closed his mouth with a snap. He was discussing drearily elaborate notions, domestic things that would surely bore her, but how else was he to persuade her? He peered into her eyes, pleading silently, abasing himself as he'd never abased himself before.

"How long would it be before we started to resent each other, darling? Both of us dashing about, never seeing one another, never meeting family obligations. And eventually you'd want to settle. You've as good as said so, and I don't give a damn if I never have a permanent residence." She wound her arms around his neck and drew close, her perfume tantalising his nose. "I adore you, Mycroft, but marriage – I can't. Please, please understand."

Slowly, his arms stole round her waist, and he held her close and kissed her. "I care about you," he whispered, "desperately."

"Oh, Mycroft...." Meredith held him away. "I care, too, but don't you see? Caring doesn't help."

He'd misjudged, and fallen wide of the mark. There was affection in her eyes and voice, and tolerance, and tenderness, but that was all. How badly he'd misread things, and what a fool he'd been.

For form's sake, he pursued for another half hour, incantatory argument that circled the drain. The flame had been extinguished, though, dying from lack of nourishment.

*

He rarely used his somewhat battered Volvo, much preferring the twenty-minute Tube journey to Whitehall, but it came in handy for occasions like this, horrible as they were. He got out of the car, making a mental note to have whatever it was near the exhaust that was rattling so badly checked next week, trudged up the path to the house, and entered without knocking.

"Mikey, there you are!" Mummy, in a beaded sort of tunic and a paper crown, beamed at him. "I'd about given up on you. Wash up and give your dad a hand in the kitchen, would you? He's fussing over the turkey; honestly, he discovered that one could find recipes on the internet and now he's got sage and oysters and sausages and apples and I don't know what else in there, it's absolute chaos. Your brother's in your room, he's been in there most of the morning. Have you got any laundry that needs doing? You're pale, maybe the three of you could go for a bit of a walk." She ceased her endless litany and peered at him closely. "Are you all right, darling? I thought you'd be bringing Meredith up."

Mycroft set his bag on the floor. "It wasn't firm. Besides, we're not seeing each other any longer."

"Oh, dear. Did you quarrel? Love, that happens, you've just got to be patient. Lord knows your father and I have been through one thing and another, and in the end –"

"I am telling you now, and I'd be obliged if you'd actually listen to me – Meredith and I are no
longer seeing each other. Please remember that and don’t mention it again." Mycroft pulled his
gloves off and threw them on the sagging sofa. He picked his bag up again and stalked toward the
room he and Sherlock had shared and still, to his eternal annoyance, did, if only occasionally. He
turned the handle and pushed, but the door stayed closed.

Frowning, Mycroft looked down and saw a rolled-up towel protruding from beneath the door.
Typical. He leant on the handle and gave the door an almighty shove, and it opened with a groan.

Sherlock was at the open window, fanning the air with his hand. His eyes were bloodshot, the pupils
dilated, and smoke eddied round his head. "You fat git. Don’t you knock?"

Mycroft didn’t bother with a loud sniff; the reek of hash overpowered the scent of roasting turkey.
"Having fun?"

"I was until you showed up." Sherlock stuck his head out the window, presumably to see if the joint
had set fire to the shrubs. "Christ, that was an entire spliff. Fucking waste of money."

"Why don’t you dive after it?" Mycroft put his bag on the bed, already regretting having made this
journey. A takeaway meal, some good music, good whisky, and a book would have been immensely
preferable to this excuse for family camaraderie.

"Don’t tempt me," Sherlock retorted, and turned back to Mycroft. "Mum’s made mince pies – don’t
eat them all." He moved closer and narrowed his eyes. "Bad shaving job, Mycroft. And is that...."
He leant toward Mycroft’s shoulder and sniffed delicately. "Is that perfume? Nice stuff, too – Annick
Goutal." Sherlock smirked. "Your lady love, is that it? Or so you say – Mummy and Dad said they
met her, but they’re probably just covering up for you and going along with your little fiction. It’s a
good one, though – well done. It must be hard being a twenty-eight-year-old vir –"

Mycroft darted forward, snatching a fistful of Sherlock’s jumper and shoving him backward, hard
enough to send Sherlock crashing into the scratched bureau. Books and geological samples, little
bell jars, stacks of newspaper articles, magazines, an ancient tyre pump, photographs, writing
instruments, and dozens of ampoules lifted from school shuddered as the bureau teetered; a quarter
of the detritus slid off and crashed to the floor.

"You disgust me," Mycroft said, and there was just time for the shock on Sherlock’s face to transmute
to hurt before Mycroft turned, picked his bag up, and left.

"Mikey? Mikey, what was that noise? Mikey, where are you –"

Mycroft was in his car and halfway down the drive before he’d realised he’d left his gloves behind.
They’d been a gift from Meredith – Italian driving gloves, smooth black leather.

A bit flash for him anyway.


Asprey’s took the ring back with scarcely a murmur. Mycroft appreciated their discretion.
Replete and with only a slight headache to attest to the excitement of the afternoon, Sherlock reached
down for his shoes. "Ready to go, John?"

"Go where?" John scooped rice into his mouth.

"Altnagelvin Hospital. Eamonn Reilly's in…. " Sherlock consulted the information Mycroft had
given him. "Ward 40, room 312. South wing."

John's face furrowed. "Are you feeling well enough to traipse around? Anyway, it's late."

"You haven't got anything better to do. Come on, let's go." Sherlock pushed himself off the bed,
picked up his coat from the chair, and shrugged into it, dropping his phone into the pocket.

"Hang on." John put his food down. "Let me see you walk."

Sherlock waved an impatient hand. "I told you, I'm fine." And he was. He was feeling marvellous,
actually, and they'd lost far too much time already.

"I'm not moving a muscle until you walk," John replied. "Oblige me, okay?"

Sherlock heaved a loud sigh and rolled his eyes to the ceiling, but walked the extremely short
distance to the door, then came back to the bed. "Happy?"

"Delighted. You're walking like you're on a ship in a storm, you know. Are you wrapping your
knee?"

"Yes, for God's sake!"

"Show me."

Sherlock hadn't been bullied by John in ages and would have died rather than admit that it was
giving him a pleasant sensation of nostalgia because if there was one thing he was not it was
nostalgic, so he sighed again, rolled his eyes for good measure, and propped his foot on the bed,
pulling up his trouser leg. "There."

John peered at the wrapping. "Jesus, is that how they taught you to wrap it? Take it off."

"John, we're wasting time."

"I'm staying right fucking here until you unwrap that bandage, Sherlock. No wonder it's still giving
you trouble." John licked his thumb – distracting gesture, that; even speckled with sauce, John's
hands managed to suggest strength and gentleness at once – and got up with a little grunt. "Have to
wash my hands. Sit down and unwrap."

Sherlock sat and unhooked the little metal clasp from the bandage. He unwound it, trying not to
watch John, who'd left the loo door open, but failing utterly. He thought he was doing well, though.
Although his heart fluttered with anxiety and even the furthest peripheries of his body felt hyper-
alert, waiting for God only knew what, he maintained a cool, effortless demeanour and even allowed
himself a little supercilious amusement. John seemed to have shrunk a centimetre or so as well as
having gained a few pounds. The overall effect was slightly comical. His haircut was too short, and
obviously done at one of those mass-market discount salons. The colour had dimmed as well – so
much more grey than a few years ago. He scrubbed at his hands fussily – good God, it wasn't
surgery, John….
He imagined those hands shackling his wrists to the mattress, his mouth on Sherlock's, tasting of soy sauce and garlic from the vegetables, the coarse fabric of his dark denim jeans scraping against Sherlock's wool trousers, a rough and thrilling friction.

"Got it off? Good." John dried his hands and knelt on the carpet in front of Sherlock. "Here, give it to me." Sherlock handed the crumpled bandage over. "You've got to roll it properly first," John said, demonstrating. "Nice and tight. Okay, straighten your leg, but not completely. Does it hurt?"

"No."

"Good, that's good. Okay, start at the back, and move down low." John began to swaddle Sherlock's lower leg. "After you do this bit, you move up, but it's got to bend, so you don't want to wrap the kneecap itself and compress it more. Like this. Didn't they offer you a brace?"

"I didn't want it," Sherlock said. Nice to have an excuse to watch John's hands.

_God, stop it._

"Pull your trousers up a bit higher. Probably it's better to take them off first, makes everything easier." He met Sherlock's eyes and smiled briefly before his gaze slid away, back to his work. "Then secure it here. Have you got the clip?"

"Here." Sherlock held it in his hand, palm-up.

John took it and secured the bandage. "There should be just enough room to tuck a finger beneath the bandage. Okay, stand up."


"It's supposed to be tight."

"Well, I can't feel my foot."

"Tell you what. If you can't feel your foot in half an hour, you tell me, and we'll fix it." John got his coat. "Ready?"

Sherlock frowned. "You've become extraordinarily unsympathetic. Do you treat all your patients like that?"

"I just know horseshit whinging when I hear it," John replied, and his face cracked into a grin.

Sherlock's mouth twitched, and his heart double-thudded. "Fine, you've called my bluff. Let's go."

He led the way out of the hotel. The wrapping actually held his knee firmly, and he didn't feel so much as a twinge. He'd acknowledge that later – though not much later, he thought. There had to be something at the end of all this to balance out this unexpected bliss, but he'd face it when the time came and not a moment before.

* 

"So," John said, keeping an eye on the map on his mobile, "we're going to visit a stroke victim who's elderly, and who in all likelihood won't be able to speak or move."
"Yes." Sherlock negotiated a roundabout, whizzing through it at top speed and nearly colliding with a bicyclist in a dark hoodie and track bottoms and no reflectors or lights on his bike or person. The cyclist flipped him off and zipped away.

"And you think this is going to be helpful in some way?"

"Absolutely."

"How?"

Sherlock turned into the hospital car park. "Well, he'll be able to react, even if he can't speak. With the right questions, I should be able to get some answers." He found a spot quickly and pulled in. "Come on."

"Uh-huh." John got out of the car. "What kind of questions?"

Sherlock joined John and held the door open for him. "You know how unlikely actual coincidence is."

"I guess."

"Well." Sherlock rubbed his hands together. "It may be coincidence that in the early 1990s, Lord Stephen Moran, then a very young MP indeed, was one of the principal intermediaries during the back-door talks that were taking place between the IRA and the British government. Partly because his constituency was in Derry, but also because he had ties to the IRA."

"Who?"

"Don't know," Sherlock said. They came to a lift, and they got in as the doors slid open. "It's never been disclosed, and even Mycroft doesn't know."

John gave a short bark of laughter. "Christ, imagine that."

"Lord Moran had five siblings. Three sisters, one older, two younger. The oldest is a countess, living in Yorkshire. The middle is married to a builder, pots of money, and the youngest is an administrator for a mental hospital in Enniskillen. Another sister was born dead. A brother, eight years younger than Lord Moran, was killed in a car bombing at the age of seventeen in the late 80s. A Protestant faction claimed responsibility for that one." The lift bell chimed softly, and Sherlock held the door open for John. "Lord Moran must have decided at some point to play both ends against the middle despite that, and in this case it worked out for him, the IRA, and the British government. The terms were negotiated successfully, and the IRA's been reasonably quiet since then."

"But he kept his contacts nevertheless."

"Oh, yes." Sherlock stopped outside Eamonn Reilly's door and spoke sotto voce. "If you Googled the name Eamonn Reilly, you wouldn't find much, but he's famous nevertheless in his part of the world. Participated in a number of attacks over the last fifty years, but he's never been caught red-handed and his alibis are always watertight. Makes you wonder if he's got someone powerful looking after him, doesn't it?" He smiled at John and stepped into Reilly's room, turning on the overhead fluorescents. "Good evening, Mr R —"

The room was empty; the single bed within was stripped down to its plastic casing.

"Wrong room?" John inquired.
"No." Sherlock checked his phone. Email was still working, even if his GPS and power was spotty. "This is the right room. 312." He strode to the cupboard and tore it open. There were clothes inside, hung neatly on pegs: a tweed jacket smelling strongly of Gauloise Brunes, a pair of trousers, belt threaded through the loops, a pair of shoes, a flat cap. "What the hell?"

He turned to John, but John was no longer there. "John? Damn it…." Yanking the cap off the peg, he turned it backwards and placed it on his head. He searched the pockets of the jacket and found a pair of reading glasses. Perching them on his nose, he strode into the hallway and accosted a nurse. "Sorry, sorry to bother you." His accent was Dublin. "My uncle Eamonn was here, Eamonn Reilly? Do you know where he is?"

The nurse, young and diminutive and keeping one eye on her rolling monitor, scarcely gave him a second glance. "If you're family, you'd have to be on his next-of-kin list to get information."

"Yeah, I know, but I've come a long way and it's late and I don't want to wake them. Can't you tell me? I swear I won't breathe a word to anybody," Sherlock wheedled.

"Check at the station," the nurse said, pointing to a desk, and trundled by with her monitor.

Nonplussed, Sherlock went to the desk, spotting John in conversation with another nurse. She smiled at John and leant forward in a confidential manner. "You're where?"

"Pulmonary," John said, and took a sheaf of papers from her outstretched hand. "Thanks very much." He gave the paperwork a cursory glance and sighed. "That'll do, I suppose. I'm sorry to hear it. Sweet man, you know."

Sherlock edged toward the door, watching intently. This was a rare sight, and he had no intention of missing it.

"I'm sorry. He was here a while. Wasn't verbal, but we did what we could." The nurse tapped the papers on the desk to straighten them.

"I'm sure you took wonderful care of him…Fiona." John smiled, nodded, and turned away. "Let's go," he muttered, and pushed through the doors of the Stroke Unit.

Once they were safely in the hall, Sherlock took the cap and spectacles off and tossed them into a bin. "Dead?"

"As a doornail. Died this evening, recorded at eighteen-sixteen."

"Time of death?"

"Same, more or less. They attempted resuscitation to no avail."

"Cause?"

"Intracranial haemorrhage," John said. "Same thing that put him in here."

"Bugger." They got into the lift. Sherlock was silent a moment. "Well done, John."

"Thanks."

Sherlock pressed his hands together and stayed quiet for the duration of the lift ride and walk to the car park. "So it was a severe stroke that put him in hospital to begin with?"

"Yeah," John said. "He'd been in for two weeks and he'd had another smaller stroke between the
first and last. It was only a matter of time before it killed him."

"Still…bit of a coincidence that it killed him tonight, don't you think?"

John stared at him, his face orange in the sickly glow of the overhead lights. "You don't believe in coincidence."

"Exactly. Want to do a little housebreaking?"

John's eyes gleamed. "How's the knee? Up to it, you think?"

"Let's find out."

*

Breaking into Lord Moran's house proved absurdly easy; it was getting there that was almost impossible. Once they'd driven out of Derry, John's GPS became unreliable, leading them over ridiculous one-lane unlit roads that seemed to loop endlessly around Lough Foyle. After depending on the stupid GPS for far too long, Sherlock decided to trust his bump of location instead.

"You've never even been here," John protested as Sherlock shoved John's phone into his own pocket. "We'll be driving all night."

Sherlock flapped a dismissive hand. "Relax, John. We've just got to get back on the R238. I'm sure I saw a sign for St Francis Road there."

John leant over. "How much petrol have we got left?"

"Don't you trust me?"

"Nope."

"We'll be there in twenty minutes." Sherlock turned on the radio to forestall further argument, and the wipers to clear the drops that had begun to spatter the windscreen.

Forty-five minutes later, John turned the radio down. "Sherlock, give me my phone."

"We're almost there."

"We're almost out of petrol, is what we are, it's pissing out, and you've been on this road twice already. I'm getting sick of looking at that pub we just passed." John reached into Sherlock's coat pocket and wrestled his phone out. "Right, let's see where we're heading…." He fiddled with the phone.

"Don't put the voice thing on."

"You don't like hearing you're wrong."

Sherlock gave a disdainful sniff. "Just tell me where to go."

"Okay. Let me look here. About half a mile up this road, there's a fork bearing right. Bear right."
"I didn't see a sign."

"Private road, maybe."

"Mm." Sherlock turned up the wipers and leant forward, peering through the rain and darkness. "All right, I see it." He slowed to a crawl, veered right onto a forestry, pitch-black road, and cut all but the fog lamps.

"What are you –"

"Don't want to broadcast our arrival, do we?" Sherlock drove at a snail's pace. "How much further?"

John shielded the light of the phone with his hand. "Five hundred metres at most."

"Good. I hope you've got sturdy shoes on." Sherlock swung off the road into a green thicket, just managing not to get the car stuck between two close-set trees. Silently he blessed Mycroft for arranging the Citroën instead of a Range Rover. "Let's go."

They felt their way through the leafy darkness, following the road but keeping to the wooded area, steadily pelleted by rain and slipping on mud and vegetation. Sherlock's knee was beginning to ache despite John's expert bandaging, but he kept as swift a pace as he could, determined to go faster than John. This was heady stuff, and he didn't want to spoil the moment by being an invalid. He quickened his steps and slid sideways, pinwheeling his arms for balance.

John caught his gloved hand. "Steady on," he said softly.

"There it is," Sherlock said, and reluctantly disentangled his fingers from John's to point ahead. "That clearing – see it?"

"Yeah. Don't kill yourself getting there. You okay?"

"I'm fine," Sherlock said, and surged on. "Come on, John!"

They paused at the edge of the clearing and surveyed the property, a large Palladian house of grey stone at the other end of a vast carpet of greenery. Sherlock saw a lake on one side of the house – man-made, the dernier cri to some Victorian who couldn't bear the thought of not being close to a body of water, never mind that Lough Foyle was no more than three miles away – and what must have been ornamental gardens on the other, though now the shrubberies and flower beds were overgrown, a wilderness. The house itself was utterly dark and in some disrepair – in the hazy and elusive moonlight, Sherlock noticed bits of crumbling stonework and damage to the roof. Evidently Lord Moran didn't spend much time here: judging by his London residence, luxurious and well-kept surroundings were important to him. But that didn't mean he didn't use the place when necessary.

He gestured silently and led John round the perimeter of the property and into the gardens. They picked their way through a small orchard of pear trees, past the entrance to what looked like a hedge maze, and into a jumble of thickly weeded flower beds. They reached the house, pausing beneath a porte-cochère. Sherlock rested against the thick stone for a moment. He should have taken some paracetamol before they'd left.

"You okay?"

Sherlock nodded and pushed his wet hair out of his eyes. "Doesn't look like anyone's home."

"Round back?"
John's posture was tense and alert; he looked ten times as energetic as Sherlock felt. A little dart of panic implanted itself inside Sherlock's stomach. Christ, was this what it was like to get old: discomfort and lethargy where there'd once been nothing but springiness and verve? Intolerable. It was the novelty, the rediscovery of having a partner, undoubtedly. For four years he'd been on his own, and now he had to make allowances again. But now John was lighter and faster on his feet than Sherlock, grey hair and incipient potbelly notwithstanding. Wouldn't Mycroft be amused!

Without replying, Sherlock led the way to the rear of the house.

The likeliest entrance seemed to be a conservatory attached to the house, with an elderly, easily picked lock. Sherlock motioned John close. "Hold the light for me." As John held his phone over the lock, Sherlock found his pick and inserted it, feeling gently until it creaked open. "Got it! Come on."

They tip-toed through what must have been a century of gardening detritus, pallets of pots, broken furniture, stacks of flagstone and tile, shattered glass, until they reached the door to the main house. It opened easily, and Sherlock pointed at the floor. "Wipe your feet."

The corridor they entered was dark and cold. "Bloody freezing." John muttered.

"I don't think anyone's here," Sherlock said, and pulled his own phone from his pocket. He turned the light on and moved down the hallway, shining his light this way and that. "Small wonder Lord Moran doesn't live here year-round. The heating bills alone would wipe him out by April."

"He should do like other toffs and rig it up for visitors." John drew a handkerchief from his pocket and blew his nose.

"Maybe he's not willing to invest the capital. Or maybe it's convenient as it is." Sherlock stepped into a room and shone his light inside, playing the beam over furniture covered with sheets.

"Why's that?"

"Mycroft was concerned that the Titus painting was found in Derry. He implied, in imitable Mycroft fashion, that it was a matter of national security. Given Moran's connections on several ends, it's possible that he's up to no good once more."

"You don't think he's got bomb makings here, do you?" John joked. He opened a door and shone his light in. "Drawing room?"

Sherlock peeked in. "Morning room."

"How do you know?"

"All those windows. Gets the eastern light."

"La-di-da." John moved across the hall. "Nice stuff, though." He turned his light onto a marble bust of a man in an eighteenth-century hairstyle and what appeared to be a naval uniform. "So should I be looking for anything in particular? You think Moran sent someone to take the Titus painting from Kerstin Tresler?"

"The painting was taken five weeks ago. Mycroft heard about it a few days later and went to see Lady Howe immediately. She was murdered that same night – quite premeditated, since someone went to the trouble of soaking the inside of her dress in aconitine in enough time for the poison to set in before she put it on for her Christmas do. Eamonn Reilly had his stroke two weeks ago."

"I can go back to the stroke unit," John said. "Find out what his prior health record indicated."
"Good. He was elderly, but there's still a possibility –" A telephone shrilled from somewhere inside the house.

John clutched his chest. "Jesus Christ."

"Down there," Sherlock said, pointing, and moved in the direction of the ringing.

"What the hell are you doing?" John demanded in a hissing whisper.

"Come on!" Sherlock ducked into the room with the phone, a book-lined study. The phone, a mid-twentieth-century heavy plastic model with a dial instead of a button-pad, continued to ring. "Damn it," Sherlock muttered, as John skidded to a halt beside him. "I was hoping there'd be an answerphone."

"He's got a landline for a house he never uses," John said.

The phone stopped ringing. Sherlock glanced around and sniffed. "John."

"What?"

"Gauloise Brune."

"Huh?"

Sherlock shone his phone-light round the room. "Someone uses this room." He swept the beam across the desk and drew a gloved finger across the leather blotter. "It's not dusty." Moving across the expanse of faded Persian carpet, Sherlock sniffed intently. "Same smell…." He opened a large cabinet and illuminated it. Stacks of paper, blue leather ledgers, all dusty and unused. "Start looking around, John."

"What am I looking for?"

"Well, the painting, obviously, but anything else of significance. And whatever it is, it smells like Kerstin Tresler's brand of cigarettes." Sherlock opened a drawer of the cabinet, finding more paper.

John sighed. "Right, okay…." He began riffling through the desk drawers.

Sherlock followed his nose, but he'd lost the scent – it had faded into the background. Annoyed, he went to another cabinet and began opening drawers, then took his glove off and felt along the tops of the books on one of the higher shelves. Something skittered over his hand; he shook it off and continued. "The dimensions, John, are –"

"Wait." John was on his knees, crouched behind the desk. He pulled out a square parcel roughly the size of a chessboard, wrapped in a fragment of ragged wool. "This smells like cigarettes."

"Oh, brilliant, John. Well done indeed." Sherlock moved toward him, and saw a sudden splash of light through the half-drawn curtains.

John saw the flash as well. "Shit, shit."

Above the rain, Sherlock heard the sound of a motor cutting off. "The morning room. Quick!"

"Fuck –" John struggled to his feet, parcel in hand.

Sherlock grasped his hand, yanked him up, and pulled him from the room and down the corridor. "Left. Left!" They ducked into the morning room and took refuge between the wall and a large piece
of furniture, possibly a sideboard, draped in a sheet. Sherlock motioned John down and crouched himself, and his knee gave way. He thumped to the floor ungracefully.

"You okay?" John whispered.

"Shh." The knee throbbed synesthetic orange and yellow. Sherlock clenched his teeth and rode the wave until it calmed a little.

The front door creaked open and then banged shut. Brisk footsteps headed toward them and then veered off. Sherlock saw a faint glow of light and hoped it wasn't bright enough to see damp footprints or any other evidence of their presence. He wasn't quite prepared for a scrap in his condition, loath as he was to admit it. At least John was with him. Together they could likely meet all comers, but he preferred to avoid whoever it was in the study.

The phone began to shrill again. Sherlock felt John start in surprise and squeezed his leg in warning.

"Hello?" The voice was male, Irish-accented, middle-aged. "Stenie! Where've you been, I've been trying to – Steenie darlin', calm yourself." There was a pause. "All right, just – why didn't you call my mobile? I've been trying to reach you. No. No." Another long pause followed. "You mustn't worry about that. I've got that end of it handled. You don't think I'd let anything happen to you, do – Steenie, for the love of God, go home and have a drink. Have two. No, I'm not going to stay the night, it's a fucking tomb. When was the last time you spent the night here? Jesus, just walking in the door gives me the creeps."

Stenie?


"All right. No, I'll be here for another week at least, sorting shite out. What? No. I'll see you both then. Look, I'm going to finish up here and then I'm going back home, it's late and I'm exhausted. Right. Right. I'll speak to you tomorrow. 'Night." The phone clicked down.

Sherlock waited, but heard only the rain pattering against the glass of the windows, and John's breathing.

Someone who knows Moran intimately, someone accustomed to giving him advice, to protecting him. Check on his network – friends, close acquaintances, extended family.

The tread of footsteps sounded again – across the carpet, into the corridor, up the stone staircase. Lug soles, reasonably heavy. Balanced steps, quick up the stairs, probably about thirteen stone, give or take. Familiar with layout of the house –

"Let's get the fuck out of here," John whispered.

Good idea, actually. Sherlock got to his feet, putting his weight experimentally on his bad knee. Not too bad, all things considered. "Front door, John."

"Front door, are you fucking joking?" John kept his voice to a whisper but pointed above his head in a stabbing, emphatic gesture. "What if whoever that is happens to look at his car or whatever?"

"Come on. Bring the package." Sherlock turned and moved quickly – relatively – past the study, where a lamp glowed golden, making the room friendly and inviting, and toward the massive front door. He opened it carefully, ushered John through, and closed it as silently as he could. Hurrying down the steps, he made a beeline past the black Mercedes SUV in the circular drive and broke into a run, ignoring the protesting of his knee.

They streaked across the huge lawn and back into the wood, darting through the trees and
underbrush. "Who the hell was that?" John demanded, his breath coming in harsh gasps.

"Haven't the faintest idea," Sherlock said, trying to sound nonchalant. "I'd rather be well away before he discovers we've taken that painting, though. Hurry, John!"

Slipping and sliding, they made it to the car. As Sherlock fumbled for the keys, he felt a sharp searing pain in his back, and every muscle seized. He opened his mouth to cry out and fell forward, slamming into the car. He heard a guttural cry – *John!* – and the rush of footsteps, the sudden jostling and heat of multiple individuals crowding his now-prone and paralysed body.

"Just relax, gentlemen," a voice said, and a hot sting pierced the flesh below Sherlock's ear. "This will only take a moment."

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Chapter 12

Chapter Notes

Many, many thanks, as ever, to Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet for beta and britpick. <3 All errors are always mine.


*

14 April 2020

Somehow, it was the colour that irritated him more than anything else.

He came home shortly after four – they had a weekend trip planned to the Cotswolds and Fann had generously shooed him out, telling him she'd see him Monday. He'd whistled on his walk home from the station and passed the vivid scarlet Mini Cooper, admiring it briefly before trotting into the house.

Mary was on the phone; she beamed at him and waved. "Yes. Yes, absolutely. Thanks for that, you're a perfect love. No. I owe you. Yes. I've got to run – Himself just popped in. I will. Yes. Thanks. Talk soon – bye." She set the phone down and wrapped John in a hug. "Hi! You're home early."

John gave her a lingering kiss. "Fann told me she'd cover. Is Nora at Jenny's?"

"Yes, she's all set up. That's fantastic! Bags are packed and in the car. Do you want a sandwich before we go?"

"No, let's just eat when we get to the hotel. I'm ready."

"Excellent." Mary pinched his bum. "Let me get my handbag and we'll hit the road." She disappeared into the kitchen and returned with her bag, her keys, and a light jacket. "Off we go."

John locked the front door. "You got the back?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good." John came down the front walk. "Where's the –" He saw Mary standing beside the red Mini. "Oh, Christ. Did it break down again?"

Mary smiled. "Yeah, but no worries – we've got this one."

Instantly, the zest went out of the day. "Jesus. How much is it going to cost?" His footsteps started to drag. "Mary, maybe we shouldn't go."

"We've had this reservation for yonks, and we haven't had a weekend together in almost a year. Come on, let's just go." Mary reached out and tugged on John's hand.

John allowed himself to be drawn close to the car. "I don't know...." It had been ages since they'd had more than a day together, and he'd been looking forward to this almost-five-day weekend since
they'd made the reservations. They needed a bit of time together to focus entirely on each other. Things had been...well, they were never perfect, whose life was? But they'd been squabbling about ridiculous, petty stuff lately, and they both agreed that they needed to get away from ordinary life for a little while. Mary was right. He opened the car door and inhaled that peculiar new-car aroma, then saw the little plastic butterfly ornament that Nora had painted in infant school dangling from the mirror. "Personalised it, did you?"

"It's ours."

John frowned. "What's ours...?" He stared at the butterfly ornament, twirling slowly, its messy green and pink-glitter wings winking and flashing in the sunlight, then at Mary's face.

*

John poured himself another Jameson's, a double this time, and stared out at the car, brazenly red amongst the sober blacks and blues and greys of the other vehicles on the street. "So I apparently don't rate even a brief consultation."

Mary was on the sofa, her expression mutinous. "John, last time the car broke down, what did you say?"

"How the fuck am I supposed to remember what I said?"

"You said, and I quote, 'Oh, for Christ's sake, Mary, I don't want to think about the sodding car.'" She mimicked his intonation, biting the words off and spitting them out.

"Oh, I see. You've been hanging on to that, have you? Just waiting for it to break down again so you could throw it back in my face."

"I've tried to talk to you about it! First time it was the alignment. Then the brakes. Then the alternator. Then the manifold and the exhaust. This time it was the starter. The thing was used when we bought it, John, it's almost fourteen years old and we're always sinking money into it. Jesus, I just wanted a car that we can drive without fear of breaking down on the M25."

"That you can drive," John said, pointing at Mary. "You." He swallowed half his whisky, wincing as it burned its way down his oesophagus.

"Oh, God. Give me a break, John."

"I'm perfectly happy with the Tube. Besides, you know that red cars get stolen first. You know that, right?"

Mary folded her arms and crossed her legs. "We need the car. And we have insurance to protect against theft."

"Mm-hm." John turned away from her and faced the window again. Sometimes he forgot, or managed to put out of his mind, that Mary was, in fact, American. She'd never dropped her accent, not once, and in almost every way she'd assimilated herself perfectly, because God knew that he'd watched her carefully during that first break before resolving to forget, but it came out in funny ways. This, for instance. They lived in London, not far from a Tube station, supermarket, pharmacy, all sorts of conveniences, but she insisted on having a car, not caring what a luxury it was.
All at once, she was behind him, placing a hand between his shoulder blades. He hadn't heard her approach. "John," she said softly. "Love, come on."

He pulled away. "You come on," he snapped, banging his glass down onto the window sill.

"Jesus," Mary breathed. "Jesus fucking Christ. We are not fucking poverty-stricken, John. We can afford a car."

"Oh, yeah! I mean, what's another twenty thousand quid? Shit, I think Nora's got that in her piggy bank. Or did you break it open already?"

"I don't even know what that's supposed to mean. I can't talk to you when you're like this." Mary wheeled and stalked away.

John followed her into the kitchen. "It's just nice to know that suddenly major purchases are none of my god-damned business."

"I tried to tell you." Mary opened the fridge and took out a jar of pasta sauce. "I have attempted I don't know how many conversations on this very topic, and every single time you've either ignored me or muttered something noncommittal just so I'd shut up. It is not going to break the bank." She set the jar on the worktop. "John, just stop and be calm a minute."

"Don't tell me to be calm." He felt the blood pounding in his temples, increasing the headache that had begun upon consumption of his first swig of Jameson's, four or five swigs ago. "After this...do not tell me to be calm."

Mary shook her head. "Okay. Would you like to stop mingling assets? Maybe that's the solution. That, or just forget the whole thing, because if you think I'm going to take the car back, you can think again."

A nearly sub-aural rumbling filled John's ears, pushing outward. Mary's cool, measured insolence and refusal to see her own injustices in the face of his anger had shielded him from guilt, but the sudden shaking in her voice and the words – she'd never mentioned a split before. John took a deep breath and began to count to thirty. At seventeen, his mobile rang.

He turned, glad for the sudden reprieve. He needed a moment, just a moment. "Hello?"

"John."

John let his shoulders slump. "Hey, Sherlock. Look, I'm kind of in the middle of –"

"It's Mrs H."

"What about her?"

There was a pause and a soft intake of breath. "She's dead."

"Oh. Oh, Jesus." He turned back to Mary, who frowned questioningly at him. He held up a finger: **Wait a minute.** "When?"

"Yesterday. I think. I'm at Bart's now." There was another pause, and Sherlock's voice came back, soft and hesitant. "John, would you...could you come?"

John hesitated, meeting Mary's eyes. "I...."
"Please." Sherlock's voice shook. "Please."

"I'll be there as soon as I can."

*

"We have entrusted our sister Martha to God's mercy, and we now commit her body to the ground: earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust in sure and certain hope of the resurrection to eternal life through our Lord Jesus Christ, who will transform our frail bodies that they may be conformed to his glorious body, who died, was buried, and rose again for us. To him be glory forever."

"Amen."

Out of the corner of his eye, John watched Sherlock: stiff, straight-backed, dry-eyed – the same posture, and facial expression, come to think of it, he'd worn throughout most of John and Mary's wedding. His special-occasion face, maybe. He'd been all business once John had arrived at Bart's, too, the hesitancy he'd displayed over the phone transmogrifying into frosty composure. It was simultaneously unsettling and reassuring, mostly reassuring; John was able to focus on the particulars of Mrs H's post-mortem affairs, having guided a number of individuals and families through the very same process. Now it was Sherlock's turn. Mrs H had no surviving family and Sherlock had taken on the mantle himself. 'Long-term tenant' wasn't exactly 'next of kin' but it had had to do. John hadn't really done much himself, just keeping Sherlock company and clarifying some of the endless reams of paperwork Sherlock had doggedly plowed through that night both at Bart's and back at Mrs H's flat, but he'd been glad to lend whatever support he could.

Sherlock had turned a willfully blind eye to Mrs H's increasingly frail and declining health, though to give him credit he hadn't expected or demanded snacks or housekeeping services in the past few years. John had seen it, though, the same fragility he saw in many of his geriatric patients, a slow, sometimes resentful and stubborn, sometimes gentle withdrawal from quotidian concerns, a turning inward, and finally, resignation. Mrs H hadn't changed dramatically, but she had changed; John had watched as she'd readied herself to die. It was sad, but that was the way of things, always. Inevitable.

It didn't stop John from blowing his nose and dabbing furtively at the corners of his eyes as he tried to listen to the droning of the vicar, who managed to give the impression during the service that he hadn't known Mrs Hudson at all, and that this was just another dreary imposition in a day chock-full of them. It wasn't the service, which was bog-standard. It was the sight of Mrs H's casket, covered with flowers, already lowered part-way into the grave. It was Mrs Turner, ninety-three and wearing a dramatic broad-brimmed and veiled black hat, her lipstick and eyebrows drawn crookedly with the poor eyesight and unsteady hand of the aged, and possibly, a weary, indifferent nod to the formalities of life. It was Mr Chatterjee, in white, standing apart from the crowd. It was the crowd itself, such as it was – a bare handful of people, mostly acquaintances, a few close friends. Maybe that was all right. It was probably a bigger crowd than John would get at his own funeral. It was Mrs H herself. She'd been a good person, a lovely person really, and just because death was inevitable didn't mean it was fucking fair.

He swiped at his eyes again, and Mary's hand slipped into his.

They'd both gone back to work the day after the fight; Mary had accompanied Tim to Bruges for two days, a relief, John had admitted to himself. They'd circled each other warily the past few days after
her return, engaging in their usual post-quarrel behaviour – all civility when Nora was about, though John was sure Nora sensed the tension. How could she not, for Christ's sake? When Nora was out of the house or in bed, Mary acted as if nothing had happened, and John avoided her, answering her in monosyllables, refusing to look her in the eye, snapping the light off as soon as he climbed into bed, keeping his distance. Maybe it wasn't healthy, but he couldn't bring himself to behave otherwise. Ella – whom he hadn't seen in a few years – would have urged him to break his own shell, to talk to her. He couldn't, though. He needed time to process, to be angry, until he could put the incident behind him. And he would, with time. He always did.

Mary squeezed his hand, a tentative, gentle pressure. John hesitated a moment. He could pull his hand away, solidifying the icy barrier between them, or he could return the pressure, indicating that all was forgiven, or at least that a reconciliation was on its way. Since they hadn't discussed the topic of the car or the fight again, their last words were still hovering between them.

Did Mary want out of the marriage?

The thought of it made him ill, and the worst bit was that the feeling was a compound of apprehension, resentment, and...Christ, it was, it was relief. It wasn't just that they always seemed to tread upon each other's nerves or something as clichéd as they were moving in opposite directions. Something had been indefinably not quite right for a long time, possibly from the very first. And it wasn't even the AGRA thing, as he'd resolved to put it behind him forever.

Did she owe him an apology for a life she'd abandoned, though, or was he being an irrational arsehole? And – lest anyone forget – she'd shot Sherlock. Nearly killed him.

Surgery. Oh, Christ, Sherlock.

On the other hand...on the other hand, there was Nora. John loved her more than anything or anyone in the world, and Nora thrived on the happiness of her parents, and was obviously, obviously, who was John kidding about sensing tension, distressed when they quarreled. Oughtn't he to work at the marriage? Wasn't marriage always work, on some level? Or would it be better if they were parted? Maybe things would be more peaceful. Maybe they'd manage as friends better than they had as spouses.

He couldn't think about it now, not at Mrs H's funeral. The vicar was wrapping up, and it was time to move on to the next act of the process.

John decided to extend an olive branch. He wrapped his fingers round Mary's hand and squeezed back. Mary glanced at him and smiled.

Oh, God. He did love her. She'd brought something of himself back when Sherlock had disappeared, and he'd always be grateful for that. And they still made each other laugh sometimes, and he loved sex with her. And the car – fuck's sake, the old one had been on its way out. And he'd got used to the convenience of a car, if he were entirely honest. He'd been taken off guard, and she should have consulted him, but he'd overreacted.

It wasn't all bad – if it were bad more often than good, then parting would seem the automatic correct choice. But it wasn't. He was...reasonably happy, at least. What more could he ask for? It was more than a lot of people had.
The service ended – no decorous silver spades of earth pattering down on the casket, John noticed – and the mourners filed out of the graveyard. Mary, still holding John by the hand, led him past a clutter of old and new stones. She looked pretty and smart in a plum-coloured suit he’d never seen before – maybe she’d bought it especially for the funeral – and the small black velvet sort of beret she sometimes wore to church. Her shoes, modest black heels with a strap across the instep, sank slightly into the damp grass and earth of the graveyard.

There was to be a small reception or gathering in the church hall, sandwiches and cake and tea laid on by Mrs Turner and the members of Mrs Hudson’s bridge club. Sounded awful, but it would be rude not to at least put in an appearance.

They reached the church doors and John turned to speak to Sherlock, but Sherlock wasn’t there. Frowning, he craned his neck and saw him still standing beside the grave.

Mary followed his gaze. "You think he’s okay?"

"Who knows?" Sherlock and expressivity were uneasy neighbours. He had so few friends, much less friends who prompted outward affection, and on the one occasion he’d discovered that an uncle of Sherlock’s had died, his father’s brother, Sherlock had merely shrugged and said that the man had been an habitual tax cheat and philanderer, and that any public display of grief was purely for show and he’d no intention of participating in such a ludicrous façade. So that had been that. Actual emotion…the few times John had experienced it had been weird, to say the least. "Maybe I should check on him."

"I can’t imagine he’ll want to socialise with the book club set."

"Bridge," John corrected. "Yeah, you’re probably right. Maybe I’ll see him home."

Mary nodded. "Want a lift?"

"He might want to stay a while." As John said this, Sherlock fanned out his coat and sat on the grass beside the grave. "Yep, looks that way." Besides, if Sherlock rode home in the Mini, then he might remark upon it, and that was a can of worms that didn’t need opening right now.

"All right. I don’t feel social myself. I’ll head home and fetch Nora at Jenny’s. Should I keep dinner?"

"No, don’t wait up." John smiled at Mary, then darted a kiss on her cheek.

She beamed at him. "Right. Don’t let him do anything mad. I’ll see you when I see you." She let go of his hand and veered away from the church, toward the bright red Mini gleaming in the patchy sunlight.

John watched her for a moment and then moved back toward Mrs H’s grave, picking his way through tombstones, absentmindedly noting names and dates. Devoted husband and father. Faithful wife, taken in childbirth. Beloved brother, lost in the Great War. Four generations of a single name, a family exceptionally loyal or exceptionally lacking in imagination. An infant’s pathetically small grave, a little carved lamb folded atop the tombstone dated 15-27 December 1972. There were fresh flowers on the grave. A Celtic cross with a fleur-de-lis at its centre, its date weathered beyond reading. So many lives, well or poorly lived, long and short. The great inevitable.

As he drew closer to Sherlock, he remembered his own grief at Sherlock’s falsified death. Oh, God, he’d grieved, his heart a charred bit of bloodless carbon. Mrs H had been good to him, even though he’d distanced himself from her. The memories had hurt too much. Was Sherlock remembering that now?
— I asked you to stop being dead.

— I heard you.

"Hey," John said softly, not wanting to startle Sherlock.

"Thought you'd gone," Sherlock replied, not moving.

"Yeah, well...I had done, but I reckoned I'd come back for a bit. Unless you wanted to be alone."

Sherlock hesitated just a moment. "No. Stay."

"All right." John lowered himself to the grass, wincing a bit at the damp. He examined the casket, a simple polished wooden box, covered with flowers. Not too fussy: mostly modest little floral tributes, his own and Mary's included. There were two showy arrangements, though — an enormous spray of white lilies and stock, and another of huge, dark-red velvety roses that emitted an intense aroma. The fragrance almost, but not quite, covered the odour of freshly turned earth.

"Mycroft sent those," Sherlock said, pointing to the lilies and stock.

"That was nice of him."

Sherlock snorted. "Leave it to Mycroft never to miss an opportunity for a grand gesture."

John smiled. That was a bit ungenerous, but not entirely inaccurate. "It was still nice. He didn't have to do it."

"I suppose not," Sherlock said grudgingly.

"Who sent the roses?"

"Don't know."

"Mr Chatterjee, maybe," John hazarded.

"No. His is the one near the foot there, the mixed purple flowers. Her favourite colour." Sherlock sighed a little and leant back on his hands.

John glanced at him. "You holding up okay?"

"Fine. She lived a long, full life. It's a blessing that she didn't suffer an extended illness. She's in a better place now. Everything happens for a reason. It was just her time."

Stifling a grin, John blew his nose. "Did you count the clichés?"

"I lost count," Sherlock said. "I got light-headed from all the hot air."

"You've had a rough few days," John said, for the first time observing bluish smudges beneath Sherlock's eyes. "Feel like going for a bite to eat?"

"God, no. I couldn't abide more small talk with the bridge club and the Reverend Mr Put-Upon."

"I was thinking of something more along the line of Chinese takeaway at Baker Street."

Sherlock glanced at John. "Don't you have to get back to work?"

"Took the day off," John said. He didn't elaborate; no point in telling Sherlock about the aborted trip
to the Cotswolds and the free time he hadn't used. "Tomorrow, too. Decided to make a long weekend of it."

Pressing his gloved hands together, Sherlock contemplated the grave for a moment. "All right," he said softly. "Let's go."

*

In the light of day, it was a lot easier to see the results of Mrs H's long absence: dust furred every surface, dishes sat stacked in the sink, carrier bags of clothes – washed and folded, at least – littered the front room floor, books, journals, and papers teetered in impossibly tall piles, as if Sherlock had dared them to tip over, sheet music lay whole and crumpled around the stand in what looked like sacrificial offering, and there was a funny smell in the air. Not funny amusing, either.

God, it felt good to be back here.

John set the food and beer gingerly onto the only bare spot on the kitchen table, eased off his topcoat, and pulled out a white carton. "This one's yours," he said, handing it over.

"Thank you." Sherlock pushed a clamp, a burner, a plate of slides, and a few beakers aside. A foul smell drifted from the brownish semi-solid mass in one beaker.

"Maybe move that one to the sink," John suggested, his eyes watering.

"Ah. Good idea." Sherlock removed the offending container and then busied himself with the Guinness, setting one open bottle in front of John. "There you are."

"Thanks." John sank into a chair opposite Sherlock and regarded the meal. He lifted his bottle. "A toast, I think. To Mrs Hudson."

"Mrs Hudson," Sherlock echoed, and touched his bottle to John's. They drank, and set their bottles down with a simultaneous clink. Sherlock's mouth turned up on one side, and he bent to his food.

John ate quietly, enjoying the food, the silence, and the odd feeling of peace that always stole over him at 221B. Maybe it was, as one ex-girlfriend – had it been Alice? Jeannette? He couldn't remember – had scornfully asserted: that it was a refuge from reality, where he and Sherlock played detective, a childish complicity full of in-jokes and code words and silences that kept secrets. There was some truth in that, maybe. He hadn't come here much since Nora's birth, five or six times a year, if that often, and there was, certainly, an element of relief from ordinary responsibility, but more than that, the place was just comfortable. He'd had some of the best times of his life here, and if he couldn't pay tribute to that, then what was the point of attaching memories to a place anyhow?

Sherlock picked desultorily at his crispy duck with pancakes, and finally pushed his cartons away and sighed.

"Not good?" John inquired.

"Not really hungry."

"Ah." John tried not to peer too closely at Sherlock's face. "Erm...do you want to call for something else?"
“No.” Sherlock toyed with his chopsticks and tapped the table. “Mrs H left this to me.”

John took a swallow of beer. "The table? That was nice, I guess." Probably just prudent on her part. If any potential buyer knew about the staggering variety of bodily fluids and sundry other suspect liquids that had sloshed onto its surface over the years, they'd have turned tail and fled.

"Not the table, John. The flat. The whole house, actually."

"Wh – oh my God." John set the bottle down carefully. "Really?"

Sherlock fixed John with an expression of irritation. "Why on earth would I lie about that?"

"No, it's just…wow. Jesus." John groped for something else to say. "That was generous."

"I can't think who else she'd have left it to," Sherlock said. "Mrs Turner's getting on herself, Mr Chatterjee's wife would have found out about a bequest that size, and her bridge club is comprised of complete idiots. Even she knew that."

"Are you going to keep it?"

Sherlock gave him a don't-be-a-fucking-idiot look. "Obviously I'm going to keep it."

"You think you'll move downstairs? It's a bigger flat."

"No."

"Ah. Rent it out, then?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Doubt it."

"The money might come in handy. Upkeep's expensive."

"I'll manage."

John supposed he would, at that. Sherlock always managed to live in style. Not everyone would agree with John's definition of style; probably nobody would, in fact. Except Sherlock. "Did you know about that? Before she died, I mean."

Sherlock pressed his lips together hard enough to force the colour out of the surrounding skin. "No," he said, and got to his feet, pushing his chair back noisily. He left the room without another word, and his bedroom door closed firmly.

John continued to eat his shrimp curry. He picked up a book from the floor and examined the cover. L'Exécution. He opened it, saw it was in French, and set it down again. He found a copy of Computer Law & Security Review, turned to an article on smart surveillance, and began to read, picking at Sherlock's duck between every few bites of his own food.

After a while – half an hour at least, John noticed, checking his watch – he realised Sherlock was still in his bedroom. Full, casting a guilty glance at Sherlock's denuded food containers, he got up and went to Sherlock's door, knocking quietly. "Sherlock? You asleep?"

Sherlock didn’t respond. John considered simply leaving, but then thought better of it and carefully turned the handle, opening the door. "Sherlock?"

The room was dark except for a sliver of watery light filtering from the space between the heavy curtains. Sherlock sat motionless on the bed, his hands clasped tightly in his lap. He didn't look up at
John or acknowledge him in any way.

John edged closer. "Hey. You all right?" As he drew nearer, he saw Sherlock's face, streaked with tears. "Hey." He crouched in front of Sherlock and tentatively touched his knee.

Sherlock offered him a poor attempt at a smile. "She texted me the morning she died. She'd made oatmeal biscuits and wanted me to have some. She couldn't make the stairs."

"Ah." John nodded solemnly. "She made terrible oatmeal biscuits."

"Bloody awful. They tasted like doorstops." Sherlock gave a hitching little laugh; his shoulders trembled, and a strangled noise escaped his throat.

"Oh...oh, now...." John struggled up, sat beside Sherlock on the bed, and rubbed Sherlock's upper arm. "Come on now." He felt his own throat tighten, and tears stung his eyes. His hand moved to Sherlock's back, and then Sherlock turned and clung to him, shaking, his tears wetting John's neck.

"John." Sherlock's arms wound tightly around John's body. "I didn't...I never...." He made another choked noise.

"It's okay," John murmured. "It's okay. She adored you. And you loved her. She knew that."

"No. No."


Only once before had he embraced Sherlock – at his wedding, in front of a hundred guests. And though he held Sherlock to soothe him, and though his own grief was genuine, John couldn't help but concentrate of the sensation of Sherlock pressed close to him, his scent, the sensation of his skin, his tears. A tender power coursed through him, and he turned his head and put his lips to Sherlock's ear. He didn't move; he hovered, breathing him in, waiting for long but peculiarly blissful minutes as Sherlock's soundless weeping subsided, and steadfastly ignoring his own arousal.

At last Sherlock pulled away with what seemed like reluctance. "Sorry," he muttered, and scrubbed at his nose.

"It's okay." Before John could stop himself, he reached up and brushed his thumb beneath Sherlock's eye. He drew back. "Do you want to lie down for a bit?"

Sherlock was already sinking down toward the pillow. He gave a short, disbelieving laugh. "I'm done in."

John smiled. A good cry usually worked a treat. He bent to remove Sherlock's shoes and pull up the crumpled duvet. "You could probably use the sleep." He smoothed the duvet over Sherlock's body and took a tentative half-step backward.

Sherlock's hand shot out from beneath the duvet and caught John's wrist. "John."

"What is it?"

"Will you stay?"
"Erm…in here?" Sherlock didn't answer, nor did he release John's wrist. "Okay, sure." He sat on the bed again and patted Sherlock's hand. "I'll stay."

"Thank you." Sherlock withdrew his hand, curled up, and closed his eyes. In what seemed like seconds, his body melted into the limp relaxation of slumber, and his breath slowed and evened.

John watched him awhile. When he was sure Sherlock was fast asleep, he got up, careful not to jostle the bed, and went back into the kitchen. He looked at the detritus of the meal, then caught up his topcoat.

He stood frozen for a full minute. Then he set his coat down again, and tiptoed back into Sherlock's bedroom, closing the door behind him. He took off his jacket, folded it, and draped it over a chair. He unknotted his tie and worked his feet out of his shoes. Cautiously, he turned down the duvet and climbed into bed beside Sherlock.

With the barest movement, he traced the pad of his thumb over Sherlock's lower lip, pausing to feel the warmth of his slow respiration.

The food and emotion had worked on him as well; John felt his eyes drifting closed.

*

It was nearly dark when he opened his eyes, and Sherlock was still asleep, though he'd migrated to the middle of the bed and clung limpet-like to John's side, one arm thrown over John's chest. Groaning a bit, John lifted Sherlock's hand and checked the time – just after five.

The movement woke Sherlock. He lifted his head from the pillow and blinked blearily. "Uh?"

"Budge over, you're crushing me," John said.

"Sorry." Sherlock moved, and John stretched his limbs and sighed, disinclined to rise.

It wasn't the first time they'd shared a bed, or such close proximity. Circumstances had forced them together, literally, a number of times. Once, breaking a counterfeiting ring in New Mexico, they'd slept back-to-back in a cave, surrounded by the bones, Sherlock had later discovered, of a long-extinct ground sloth; once they'd been forced to sleep on a dirty and stained with God-knew-what mattress in an abandoned torture chamber in Malmö; and there was the time they'd been tied together for almost twenty-four hours before Lestrade had rescued them. And that had been at Baker Street. A bit embarrassing.

Of course, nothing untoward had ever happened. Though sometimes John thought he wouldn't have minded if something had, but no, Sherlock had never seemed interested. There was that time…two years ago, God, had it been that long? They'd been drunk, and they'd kissed, but nothing beyond that, and no mention had been made of it since.

John strained to see Sherlock's face in the growing darkness. "How are you?"

"Fine," Sherlock replied, his voice a little rusty.

"Good." John let his eyes unfocus – it was getting too dark to see anyhow – and retreated to a few hours before. Was it terrible to dwell on Sherlock's vulnerability and to savour the past sensation of
his warmth, his tears, the strength of his arms wrapped round John's body? It wasn't that he wanted Sherlock to feel bad; it was just that holding him had felt, oh, God, it had felt amazing. He felt his cock getting hard and moved further away. "Well. I should probably...."

"You're leaving?"

"Well. Not if you don't want me to." Furtively, he reached down and rubbed a hand against the bulge in his trousers, a quick appeasement. Maybe he could escape to the loo for a bit to relieve himself.

"Please don't."

It was wrong, wasn't it, this sensation, here, now? Though he'd heard his share of blushing confessions.

---Me and the missus, we just…it were right after the funeral, with twenty people downstairs in the lounge eating and drinking, and I never seen her like that, she were a wildcat. You don't think there's sommat wrong with her?

And John would trot out the old saw about celebrating life in the midst of death, and honestly, that was about all it was, the weird simultaneous need to stake a ferocious claim on living and succumb to la petite mort. If he'd have gone home with Mary, they'd probably have fucked, and it would have been good – passionate and just a bit rough.

Guilt pecked at him with its sharp little beak. He didn't have the excuse of drunkenness this time; he'd only had one beer. And his cock was pushing against his pants and if he didn't get out and take care of it immediately he was going to have trouble walking in a moment. "I'm just going to –"

Sherlock grasped his upper arm. "Don't go."

"But –" And he said no more, because Sherlock's mouth engulfed his.

John lunged forward, kissing back hard enough to make their teeth clack together, but he didn't give a damn – he was too eager to regain what he'd stupidly thrown away years ago.

I knew it. I knew it.

He unfastened his trousers, pulled down his pants, then grasped Sherlock's hand and drew it downward, placing it against his cock. Sherlock moaned into his mouth and jumbled for John's hand. Afraid the moment would shimmer into reality all too quickly, John reached for Sherlock's trousers, unbuttoning and unzipping and thrusting his hand past soft, clinging cotton to the hot, hard prick beneath. Sherlock's long fingers encircled him and tugged, tentative at first and then with greater urgency and authority.

"John...."

"Oh, God –" John had Sherlock's cock in his hand, he was stroking and pulling, and he felt Sherlock's body pressing closer to him, taut muscles straining, Sherlock's mouth ripe and full against his, the lush heat of his tongue and the dangerous edge of teeth. He tangled his free hand in Sherlock's hair and plundered Sherlock's mouth. He wanted to fuck it, to see those lips wrapped round his prick, but there wasn't time, no time for anything but this molten glow between their hands and mouths. He couldn't hear the rough slapping rhythm of their strokes; he only heard his own heartbeat roaring in his ears and just beyond that, Sherlock’s moans, and he'd never even dreamt he could inspire those sounds, but then the pressure gathered in his cock and one final stroke and he plummeted over the edge, gasping, tightening his hold on Sherlock's prick and moving faster, faster,
until Sherlock gave a stifled cry and John felt wet warmth trickling over his fingers.

He shuddered and collapsed against the pillows, his breath shivering in and out, his muscles relaxing with agonising slowness. He kept his hand on Sherlock's prick and the other in his hair, and before Sherlock could recover himself, pulled him close for another kiss, this time far gentler than their first.

Sherlock pulled away, his eyes wide, reflected in the dim light bleeding in from the half-open bedroom door. "John."

"Shh." John put his finger to Sherlock's mouth.

Slowly, Sherlock uncurled his hand from round John's cock. He turned over, fished for something on the floor, and came up with what looked like a t-shirt. He wiped his hand off and silently offered it to John. John cleaned his hand, and Sherlock tossed the shirt on the floor again. Sitting up, he unbuttoned his shirt – neither with undue haste nor seductive languor – and tossed it to the floor. Off came his socks, then his trousers and underwear. He knelt on the bed, silhouetted in the darkness, and pulled the duvet down to expose John's body. His hands closed on John's crumpled trousers and tugged downward.

"I can't," John croaked. "Not so soon."

"I don't want that. Pick yourself up."

"Okay...." John lifted his hips and let Sherlock divest him of trousers, socks, and underwear. He lay passive and still as Sherlock unbuttoned his shirt, then struggled out of it himself. "What are you --"

Sherlock lay next to him, yanking the bedclothes up again, and then drew him close, fitting their naked bodies together. He hooked a leg over John's hip, then buried his face in John's neck.

John wrapped his arms round Sherlock's upper body again. They were sweating, a bit sticky, faintly aromatic. Sherlock's cock, now limp, pressed against his thigh. He'd be hard again in no time. But Sherlock, true to his word, made no further attempts at seduction. He merely lay close to John, and in moments, slept again.

John lay awake a while longer. Likely Sherlock hadn't slept in days; this wasn't an entirely unfamiliar pattern. Well, not all of it, at any rate. He stared up at the ceiling, his heart still racing, and tried to fathom what had just happened.

And how it might happen again.

* *

He awoke in full darkness, disoriented and uneasy. Reaching out with one hand, he felt the empty place beside him in the bed, then heard Sherlock pottering in the kitchen. Sitting up with a groan, he felt for the light and turned it on.

His body ached from the unfamiliar bed and the sudden strain on his muscles. "Christ," he muttered. It wasn't as if he didn't have regular sex with Mary – still, he ached as if he hadn't done it in years. Lots of tension, evidently.
John lurched out of bed and found his clothes, hurrying into them as quickly as he could. He brushed inexpertly at his trousers, but they were rumpled beyond repair. "Fuck." Raking his fingers through his hair, he lurched out the door and into the corridor.

Sherlock turned as he came into the kitchen. He was barefoot, wearing his blue silk dressing gown over what appeared to be nothing at all. "You ate most of my crispy duck."

"Yeah." John cleared his throat. "Yeah, sorry. I got hungry."

"No wonder you've gained weight."

"Sherlock —"

"Nine pounds, John. That's almost two pounds a year. In ten years, you won't be able to tie your own shoes."

"Don't exaggerate."

"Mm." Sherlock turned away and buttered a slice of toast. His arse, limned in silk, looked fucking delectable.

*Oh, Christ, oh fuck oh FUCK.* What the fuck had they done? And more importantly, what were they going to do about it now? "Sherlock."

Sherlock turned and met John's eyes. They were bright, alert, lacking the glaucous veil that fell over them when Sherlock was feeling particularly obtuse. He swept his gaze down John's front, and then smiled, an oddly naff but totally endearing grin that John couldn't help return.

"Oh, God." John covered his face for a moment, then laughed.

"Are you sorry?"

John shook his head. "No. Are you?"

"No." Sherlock bit into his toast and chewed.

John took two steps forward and kissed Sherlock's mouth. Sherlock swallowed his toast and kissed back. John closed his eyes. I'll sort it out somehow. It just proves everything, all along...I'll have to tell her, but it'll be okay. We can share Nora, maybe we'll be good friends, but this is right, this is good. He pulled away and wiped his mouth. "Bit crumby."

"Sorry."

"I have to go home."

Sherlock's face changed. "John —"

"Hang on," John said. "Don't say anything. It'll be okay."

"John, about Mary. I have to —"

"Hey." John reached up and covered Sherlock's mouth with his fingers. "Sherlock, listen to me, okay? Just listen to me for a second. I need to ask you a favour." Sherlock lifted his eyebrows, but John kept his hand still. "Don't say anything. Please. Just give me a few weeks, all right? This isn't
going to be easy for any of us."

Sherlock grasped John's hand and pulled it away from his mouth. "It's not that, John. It's –"

"**Please.** Please, Sherlock. I'm begging you. Whatever you have to say – can it wait for two weeks?"

An expression of pain crossed Sherlock's face. He swallowed. "Two weeks."

"That's not all that long." Fierce happiness flooded John's veins.

"No." Sherlock pressed his lips together. "No, I suppose not."

"Sherlock…I want you to know that this – tonight – it means everything to me. Everything." He shuddered, afraid of saying too much, but needing to know. "I hope…do you feel the same way?"

"Yes," Sherlock said quietly. "Yes, John."

"Okay." John placed his hand on the small of Sherlock's back and drew him in for another kiss, dizzy with joy. He was being a wretch and a prick, but how the fuck could he not have seen, why had it taken so god-damned long? Was there a chance that Mary felt as trapped as he did? And oh, Christ, wasn't that a prickish thing to hope for, but he couldn't help it. He took a step back with effort. "I've got to go."

Sherlock clasped his hands together, a single tight fist at his mouth. "Okay."

John picked up his topcoat and opened the door. "I'll see you." He yearned to go back for one more kiss, but forced himself to close the door and trot down the stairs.

Nine pounds, ha. He was lighter than air.

*

"Hey," Mary said sleepily. "What time is it?"

"Almost midnight," John said, quickly stripping out of his clothes. He'd have to send the suit to the cleaners at once – it was beyond crumpled.

"How's Sherlock doing?"

"He's…okay. You know Sherlock."

"Yeah. Poor thing. She was like his mum, wasn't she?"

"More than his own mum, in a way," John said. "I guess it suited them both." He tossed his shirt and underwear into the hamper and made a mental note to do the laundry himself.

"You coming to bed?"

"Yep. Just going to grab a quick shower first." John slipped into the loo and ran the water. He stood beneath the hot spray for ten minutes, washing the day off reluctantly. It didn't seem real, but the odd muscle aches remained, vestiges of years of longing released in a few moments.
He dried off and got into clean shorts and a t-shirt, then crawled into bed.

Mary snuggled close. "Want to take the day off tomorrow?"

"Oh, God. Can't. Fann's got an appointment midday." He forced himself to hold her, though it felt dishonest, entirely wrong. He'd have to tell her soon. This weekend, perhaps.

"Bugger. Maybe next week?"

He doubted she'd want to take a day off next week. "Sure. Check your calendar."

"I will. 'Night, love." She kissed his cheek.

"'Night."

John held Mary until she fell asleep, then pulled away, staring upward into the room's inky blackness. He wasn't tired at all, and he was an entirely different man from the one who'd accompanied Mary to the funeral in the new red Mini. Or he'd discovered himself, unearthing the secret he'd hidden and trampled for almost ten years. There hadn't been time to marvel at it then, but now he closed his eyes and felt certainty, truth, and that earlier joy, undiminished and unconditional.

In the darkness, he smiled.

Sherlock.

*

John awoke with a stiff neck, a dust-dry mouth, and a headache throbbing behind his eyes. He covered his eyes with his arm and turned, burrowing back into his pillow.

Pillow?

He sat up abruptly, groaning at the knives slicing into his head. "Fuck's sake...." Squinting, he peered around and saw the faintest light illuminating a chest of drawers, a large television, a desk and chair. Slowly his synapses began to fire properly and he realised he was in a hotel room, but oddly, not his hotel room. What the hell was going on? The last thing he remembered was a jolt of pain and Sherlock, falling –

Sherlock!

Throwing back the covers, John lurched out of bed, tripping over something, staggering forward a few steps, and bracing his hand against the wall. He turned back and saw that he'd tripped over his own shoes, laid out neatly at the foot of the bed. He was dressed except for his coat, which was draped over the desk chair, and the shoes.

Was he in a hotel after all? The room had that sterile, anonymous look – neutral furniture, tasteful but dull, a plain duvet, tiny, astringently neat waste bins – but how the fuck had he ended up here? He went to the door, fully expecting to find it locked, but it opened easily, and he found himself in a carpeted corridor near a lift and a vaguely Art Deco wall sconce next to a framed print of a vase of flowers. The only anomaly was the large man in black clothes and a watch cap, whose hand drifted to his hip as John wheeled drunkenly toward him.
"Dr Watson?"

"Who the hell are you?" John inquired. Under the circumstances, he decided, courtesy wasn't required.

"I'm Teeling, sir." Perfectly polite, Irish accent, dark eyes that watched him carefully. "Can I assist you?"

"You can tell me where Sherlock Holmes is."

Teeling pointed to the door next to John's. "He's in there, sir. Here, I'll let you in." He produced a key card from his pocket and slid it into the lock. It glowed green and clicked open. "There you are."

Deflated but still a bit belligerent, John glared at Teeling before pushing the door open, revealing a room identical to his own. Sherlock lay on the bed, his expression sulky. Mycroft sat in the desk chair, the epitome of smug.

Oh, I might have known. Ignoring Mycroft, John wobbled toward the bed. "Sherlock. You okay?"

"Fine," Sherlock said. "How are you?"

"Headachy."

"Trapanal will do that." Sherlock swept a hand out. "You're pale. Sit."

John sat on the bed and glared at Mycroft. "Trapanal? Really, Mycroft?"

"Evidently Mycroft doesn't seem to know what his left hand is doing." Sherlock smirked at his brother.

"Oh, shut up, for God's sake," Mycroft snapped, and crossed his legs at the knee, displaying a handsome burgundy sock above a highly polished brogue. He wore country clothes: Tattersall and tweeds and a knitted burgundy tie. John wondered if he'd changed for the flight to Ireland. Didn't seem far-fetched. "If you'd bothered to brief me, this wouldn't have happened."

John rubbed his eyes. "What the hell is going on? What time is it, anyhow?" He checked his watch. "Jesus, half three. No wonder I feel like shit."

"Mycroft had a surveillance team watching Moran's house," Sherlock said. "Letting them know we planned to investigate, as he asked me to must have slipped his mind, because it took them nearly an hour to realise who they'd grabbed. They had to change direction and take us somewhere less… dungeonish." Sherlock sniffed. "I must say it's not much of an improvement."

"I was under the impression you were investigating the site of the theft," Mycroft said primly.

"How slow do you think I am?" Sherlock demanded. "God, Mycroft. Why'd you bother coming if you're just going to slob behind me and annoy me?"

"What makes you think I wanted to fly out here at this hour, Sherlock? Trust me, you're far too old for nursemaiding."

"Why don't you shove your brolly up your arse?"

"Keep it down," John implored. "So did they grab that guy as well? The one who made the telephone call?"

John grinned, then laughed despite his headache. "Ah, God. I need some paracetamol."

"I'm sure Mycroft can organise that for you," Sherlock said. "Or maybe straight to Fentanyl, Mycroft?"

"If you're quite finished?" Mycroft replied frostily. "No, John, they did not apprehend whoever was in the house with you. As you two were fleeing the house with a wrapped parcel, my team made a quick assessment and decided to concentrate on you." He coughed and flushed. "Obviously, they made a miscalculation. Unfortunate."

"So who was it?"

"I'm afraid we don't know. Yet." Mycroft's flush deepened.

"Whoever it was, he was very familiar with Lord Moran," Sherlock said. "Called him Steenie. Family member, maybe?"

"We're investigating. The car had no identifiable plates, and visibility was poor because of the rain. They couldn't get a clear shot of his face."

"Well, bugger." John brightened. "At least we got the painting, though."

"Mm." Sherlock unfolded his frame and lounged across the bed. "Mycroft?"

Mycroft emitted a long and theatrical sigh, then rose and picked up the painting. He handed it to John unceremoniously.

John examined the piece, blots of bright colour on a whitish-grey background, surrounded by a simple gilt frame. "Erm...I thought it was supposed to be a Rembrandt."

"Obviously," Mycroft said in a waspish tone, "you managed to steal the wrong painting."

"Oh." John met Sherlock's eyes. Sherlock winked at him. John's stomach did a funny little flip-flop. Probably the aftereffect of the drugs.

John turned to Mycroft. "Sorry, I guess."

"Well." Mycroft sat again. "All is not lost. It seems that piece is a –" He pulled his phone out and consulted it. "An Ernst Wilhelm Nay. The Nazi Reichsministerium für Volksaufklärung und Propaganda included the piece in its notorious Degenerate art exhibition in 1937 and subsequently confiscated the painting. So congratulations – you did manage to liberate one missing piece."

"Well done, John," Sherlock said.

"Thanks," John said, and couldn't contain a smile.

"Of course, the Rembrandt is still missing," Mycroft said. "Fortunately, I'm giving you both the opportunity to rectify the error. You two are going back to the Moran house tomorrow – or later tonight, actually."

"I take it the gentleman who spoke to Lord Moran, if that was indeed Lord Moran, is no longer there," Sherlock said.
"We're checking the telephone records," Mycroft said. "And no, he is not."

"Lost him in the rush to apprehend us, didn't you?" Sherlock let out a bark of laughter and a high-pitched little sigh. "Oh, Mycroft. Well done."

"Your attention to this matter is appreciated," Mycroft said stiffly.

"Oh, naturally," Sherlock said. "Delighted. Aren't we, John?"

"Sure," John replied, bemused. "Where are we, anyhow?"

"City Hotel," Mycroft said.

"It's much nicer here than our other digs, isn't it, John? I think we'd rather stay here tonight, Mycroft. Also, my phone is on the blink. I need a new one."

"Fine." Mycroft rolled his eyes and rose to his feet. "I'll have your things moved at once. I'm going back to London. Going forward, I expect situation reports, Sherlock."

"Would daily sit reps suffice, or would you prefer them on the quarter hour?" Sherlock inquired, but Mycroft only slammed the door in reply. "Don't forget the paracetamol!" he shouted. "Oh, never mind, we'll get some from the front desk."

John rubbed his eyes. "I need a cuppa."

"Excellent idea." Sherlock lifted the phone and ordered tea, biscuits, and paracetamol. "The best thing about this sort of hotel is twenty-four hour room service. To a limited degree, at least."

"Mmf." John lay back on the bed and closed his eyes, shielding them from the light with his arm.

"John."

John kept his arm over his eyes. "What?"

"Are you really ill?"

"Just a headache."

"Good. Get a good night's sleep. We've a lot to do tomorrow."

John felt the bed shift, and the light went out. He lifted his arm. "What are you doing?"

"I'll use the other room and tell the staff to let themselves in with the tea. You sleep."

"No, I'm okay –" John struggled to sit up, but Sherlock put a restraining hand on his shoulder. "What are you going to do?"

"Just some research," Sherlock said.

A diffuse, shimmering uncertainty shifted John's insides. "You can stay in here if you want to read."

"No," Sherlock said gently. "Sleep, John. We'll be quite busy tomorrow."

John couldn't decide if it was kindness or condescension colouring Sherlock's voice, but his head was throbbing again and he was too tired to sort out the difference. Obediently he lay back, covered his eyes again, and listened to Sherlock's soft tread across the floor, and then the quiet click of the
door closing behind him.

* 

"I want you in bed with lights out by nine sharp." Mary said. "I've got a conference with Miss Price at eight, and we've got to be out of here by seven-thirty. She's making a special accommodation for me and I don't want to be rude." She opened the door, picked up the post, jamming it into her bag, and turned on the light.

"Oh, Mum – nine-fifteen? Please? My homework's done, I just want to read a bit."

"You can read through dinner."

"Yes! What are we having?"

"Portobello burgers. Go wash up, love."

"Can I have Tabasco?" Nora wheedled.

"If you want." Mary swatted Nora's bum. "Go." She watched Nora skip away, then sighed and started dinner, chopping, slicing, and stirring, moving with rapid precision. She set the burgers to cook low, gathered up her bag and cardigan, and went into her room to change.

She slung her handbag onto the bed and stripped out of her scrubs. There wasn't time for a shower. Bath tonight, she decided, a long hot one with the ginger salts she loved but John thought were sickly sweet. She slid into a long-sleeved t-shirt and flannel pajama bottoms and thumped onto the bed, fighting the urge to call John again. They'd spoken only a few hours ago, though.

God damn it.

Sighing, she upended her bag. The thing had to be cleaned out, and the only way to do it was to scatter the contents and force herself to clean. She moved the post aside and noticed a large, square envelope among the circular adverts, credit card offers, and charity requests. She picked it out and held it between two fingers.

Her name and address was written in gorgeous, flowing calligraphy, black ink on heavy cream-coloured stock, and a wax seal fastened the back flap closed. Looked like a wedding invitation. She broke it and pulled out the card.

On the front was a willow tree with lilies at its base. A black bird sat on one of the low branches. She opened it and sucked in her breath.

A photograph of Trish was inserted into tiny slots on the left side of the card. On the right was a message in the same swirling calligraphy.

With deepest condolences for your loss

It was unsigned.

Mary stared at the picture of Trish. It was fifteen years old, maybe more, judging by her hair and clothing. She was smiling; her hair was pulled up in a severe twist, and she wore a tightly fitted black jacket. Her hands weren't visible, as the photo had been cropped, but a scope was just visible at its
She remembered the scope well. It was a Leupold, outstanding clarity and durability. She remembered the photo, too: she’d taken the fucking thing herself.

*With deepest condolences for your loss*

"Mum!"

Mary jumped. "Jesus, Nora, don't scare me like that!"

"I think the burgers are burning."

"Shit!" Mary leapt up and ran into the kitchen just as the smoke alarm went off, shrilling at ear-splitting volume. She grabbed the handle of the smoking pan, threw open the back garden door, and set the pan onto a paving stone. "Shit, shit, shit."

Nora poked her head out the door. "Are you okay, Mum?"

Mary turned and grinned cheerfully at Nora. "I am. I just forgot to put my shoes on and I'm freezing. Let's get back inside." She herded Nora in, left the door open, and flapped at the still-shrilling alarm with a tea towel until the smoke dispersed and the fucking thing stopped blaring.

Nora was watching with interest. "Wow. That was loud."

"So. That was incredibly stupid of me," Mary said. "Right, important lesson – never neglect cooking food, no matter how low you've got it set."

Nora's face was the picture of woe. "What are we going to eat now?"

"Ham and cheese sandwich?"

"Woo! Can I have Tabasco?"

Mary laughed. "You and your Tabasco. Yes, you may. Go back to your book, I'll have it ready in two shakes of a lamb's tail."

After Nora was safely back in her room, Mary fetched the heavy envelope and card, took a lighter out to the garden, and burned it over the barbecue, watching the edges curl and crumble, watching bright flecks of fire drifting up into the cold night.

*With deepest condolences for your loss*

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Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

As ever, I owe so many thanks to Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet for fantastic beta and britpicking skills. * mwah *

Some readers have expressed confusion over the flashback dates. Accordingly, I have made date headers that precede the flashbacks for each chapter. I hope this helps!

Thanks very much. :) * 

Summer 2014

As it turned out, Lestrade was handy in a pinch and, to Sherlock's surprise, handy for more than clean-up duty after a case. He'd evidently seen John's twitching and hand-wringing, and had gently guided both John and Sherlock into a dreary little meeting-room just off the south transept, redolent of ancient burnt coffee, chalk, and damp wool, the sort of room reserved for gatherings of drying alcoholics, junkies, over-eaters, and sex addicts. And possibly nursery care during services, judging by the box of battered toys in one corner. "Right," Lestrade said, reaching into his pocket and producing a hip flask, "thought you might need this. I'd say a pre-ceremony drink is in order."

Sherlock cocked an eyebrow. "Does that help with job stress, Lestrade?"

Lestrade fixed Sherlock with a baleful eye. "You gave this to me, if you recall. It was a gift from that handbag designer bloke who was accused of fu – erm, accused of having an affair with Arkady Luzhin's wife, remember?"


"John, honestly...." Sherlock muttered.

"And no, I don't carry it all the time," Lestrade went on. "I only brought it because I thought the groom might need it. And it's going to be a long day."

"Thanks," John said, and reached for the flask, but Sherlock deftly grabbed it first. "Hey!"

The flask was silver, encircled with a wide band of crocodile skin. A monogram on silver plates adorned both sides of the thing: SH. "Hm."

"Give me that," John said, snatching it back. He unscrewed the top and took a drink. "Ah. God, I needed that."

"Not to worry," Lestrade said. "You'll be fine."
"It's not as if any of this is a surprise, given that you've been preparing for months," Sherlock added. "And lest we forget the rehearsal that took place less than twenty-four hours ago."

John sighed. "Sherlock –"

"You've memorised entire medical texts and you still can't seem to recall which of the bride's fingers gets the ring. But at least you don't have to walk down the aisle and embarrass yourself the way the bridesmaids do. Their procession looked like a rugby scrum. Bit unseemly. Not sure the rehearsal helped much."

"I can't hit him, can I?" John asked Lestrade.

Lestrade pulled a face, then shrugged. "I'd look the other way. Wedding present."

"Of course, if you're nervous about Mary turning up late, you've good reason to be. The seamstress was still letting her dress out last night, and her shoes are nearly a half size too small – she was wearing them to break them in yesterday but they were hurting, and she's probably sent one of the bridesmaids to buy a pair of throwaway shoes at the last minute. Also, she over-tweezed one eyebrow and she's likely trying to make the other one match. With luck she won't have plucked them out altogether, though I wouldn't put money on it. Then, there've been three major accidents on the A30 in the past two weeks alone, and evidently there's some music festival this weekend that's bottlenecking traffic, not to mention the possibility of several thousand intoxicated drivers exponentially increasing the risk of traffic casualties."

John's mouth hung slightly open. "Thanks, Sherlock. I feel so much better."

"Oh, don't mention it."

"Sherlock –" Lestrade thrust the flask in Sherlock's face. "Have a drink, for fuck's sake."

Obediently, Sherlock took the flask and sipped. He was feeling a bit queasy himself, though he couldn't think why. It wasn't as if he hadn't known this day was coming.

Lestrade draped a companionable arm round John's shoulder. Amazing how some people managed casual affection with such ease. "Look, John, everything's going to be fine. Have a good time today, yeah? It's an all-day party for you and the missus. Missus-to-be."

John gave Lestrade a tight smile, took the flask back from Sherlock, and drank. "Yeah, I know."

"It's afterward you've got to look out for," Lestrade said darkly, then caught himself. "Sorry. It's going to be brilliant. You two are really...suited for each other." He glanced at Sherlock.

Sherlock sighed. Last night, after the substandard rehearsal dinner of greasy little game hens and pommes frites, he'd gone back to Baker Street and regaled Mrs Hudson with UK divorce statistics, opining that John and Mary were paying an exorbitant amount of money celebrating something that statistically had only a fifty-eight percent chance of enduring until death, so why didn't they simply live together? Mrs H had replied, with a vehemence that startled and silenced Sherlock, that tomorrow was John's wedding day and no-one wanted to hear divorce statistics on his wedding day, that it was a little late to be going on about that now, and that if he'd wanted to make some sort of stand, he should have done before John and Mary had had the bloody banns read, so Sherlock was to shut his gob if he knew what was good for him.

Grudgingly, Sherlock had taken Mrs H's advice – mostly to prevent another outburst; why she'd got so emotional he couldn't imagine – but statistics didn't lie. Still, it was clear that John and Mary were very fond of each other, given the amount of cuddling and snogging that went on between them. And
certainly Mary seemed to enjoy Sherlock's presence well enough. At least she didn't sneer at him or roll her eyes like some of his other girlfriends had done.

Funny, he hadn't paid much attention to her at first, thinking she was just another in a very long line of girlfriends. Time had passed, though, and Mary was still there. And John had been...well, very affectionate with her, obviously, and serious about the aborted wedding proposal, and the whole affair had been settled almost as soon as Sherlock had arrived back at Baker Street. Which was fine. It was fine.

Lestrade was still eyeing him. "What are you staring at?" Sherlock snapped.

"Crikey, nothing," Lestrade said, holding up both hands in a warding-off gesture. "Guess I'll head back out there. Give you two a moment." He clapped John on the shoulder, then drew him into an embrace. "It's going to be fantastic, mate. Best luck."

"Thanks," John said, and watched Lestrade's retreat. He turned back to Sherlock and smiled. "So."

Sherlock attempted a return smile. "Well."

"Sherlock...okay, look. Greg said that you've been working on a best-man speech."

"I believe that's one of the duties of a best man, John."

John nodded and clasped his hands together in front of his mouth. "Yep. Yes. It is. I just...I don't want you to...I mean, try not to...."

Sherlock folded his arms. "To what?"

"I don't know. Just - oh, fuck it. Never mind. It's going to be great." He chuckled. "I doubt anyone will forget it, whatever it is."

"Well, naturally," Sherlock sniffed, and cast a critical look at John. "Your tie's crooked."

John yanked the knot up, making it worse. "Never thought we'd be doing this. How's that?"

"Appalling. Hold still." Sherlock reached out and guided the knot a little lower. He fanned the neck and ensured that the tail was tightly tucked. "Doing what?"

"This." John waved a hand, but held perfectly still otherwise. "A wedding."

Sherlock wasn't sure which pairing John meant by 'we.' John and Sherlock, or John and Mary? He was about to ask for clarification and then decided against it. "Considering the endless procession of girlfriends in your life, John, I think that a wedding is likely an inevitable outcome."

"That's just it. I never really thought I'd meet someone for forever, you know?"

Ah. The latter pairing, then. "Well. Mary's got several qualities that make her an ideal...partner for you. Obviously there's the professional angle. You can always talk about some patient's gallstones if you run out of pillow talk." Sherlock surveyed John's front, nodded, and stepped back.

John chortled. "Jesus, I hope not." He grew serious. "Sherlock...you do like her, don't you? I never asked because...well, all sorts of reasons, I guess. But I'm asking now."

Sherlock peered into John's eyes, faintly anxious, threaded with red. Drank too much last night, hardly slept, slightly dehydrated. Cut himself shaving, overdid it on the aftershave, missed a spot
It was the dullest of clichés, but knowledge was power, and Sherlock had always wielded it with precision but not much regard for whom it might have cut. John had pointed that out to him several dozen times, and mostly, Sherlock had blithely ignored him. So if he quoted divorce statistics, if he mentioned the ten or twelve argument triggers he’d heard the two of them setting off already, if he informed John that Mary was duplicitous by nature, it would be nothing out of the ordinary: Sherlock being Sherlock.

But if that were true, it was also true that Sherlock was taking more care with certain matters of late. He was ever so slightly more cautious with circumstances surrounding John’s feelings, nebulous and often volatile as they were. And as Mrs Hudson said, it was John Watson’s wedding day. He knew now why she’d been so forceful. He knew.

And there wasn’t a thing he could do about it now.

"Of course I like her," Sherlock said, and clasped his hands together behind his back, squeezing hard enough to hurt. "Don't be ridiculous, John."

John's shoulders sagged in relief. "That's good. Good." He sank into a metal folding chair. "You know, sometimes I wonder what...erm, what would have happened if you'd stuck around."

Sherlock didn’t answer, because he couldn’t. He couldn't gather enough breath to speak.

"Yeah, I know you had your reasons," John went on, waving a hand. "I just wonder, that's all."

What on earth did that mean? Nothing, surely. "John, you're not getting cold feet, are you? It's quite common to have pre-wedding anxiety, evidently. There are a number of reasons why you'd be –"

"No." John got up with a scrape of metal against stone and began pacing. "No, I haven't got cold feet. No." He took a deep, shuddering breath.

"Good." Sherlock caught his eye and tilted a half-smile at him. "I don't know what we'd do with all that cake."

John laughed and covered his face. "Oh, Jesus."

"Coo-ee!" Mrs Hudson, in a tremendous hat, bustled through the door. "John, darling, the bridesmaids’ car just arrived. Mary’s on her way."

"Yes." John lurched toward the door. "Good. Right." He turned to Sherlock and Mrs H. "How do I look?"

"Smashing," Mrs Hudson assured him.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock considered John for a few endless seconds. "Smashing," he echoed softly.

"Okay." John took another deep breath. "We're on, I reckon." He pivoted on his heel and vanished through the door.

Through the thundering in his ears, Sherlock heard the organist striking up Charpentier's 'Trumpet Tune in D.' He closed his eyes and listened. There was a cipher in the swell – the organist hadn't caught it quickly enough. Could pose problems for the Marcello recessional. Ah, there, she'd caught
“Sherlock?” Mrs H put a hand on Sherlock's arm. “Ready to head out, dear?”

Sherlock opened his eyes. “Yes.”

“Are you all right, sweetheart?”

Good question. He wasn't really prepared to approach the correct answer. But it didn't matter now, did it? Too bloody late. Now, the only thing that mattered was John's happiness. He wouldn't spoil that, not if he could help it.

The organist began to play Handel's 'Arrival of the Queen of Sheba.' Bright and effervescent, the music spilled into the tiny church and echoed off the stone walls.

Time to go.

"Outstanding." Sherlock looked down at Mrs H and offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"It's going to be lovely." Mrs H slipped her arm through his and sighed a little. "You'll see."

*

Sherlock woke at ten, ordered coffee, performed necessary ablutions, and waited for John to wake up. At ten past eleven he accepted a package that turned out to be his new phone and began transferring his data. Peckish at eleven-thirty, he ordered two sandwiches, one plated, one wrapped, which arrived at eleven-forty-eight. At ten past twelve, hunger sated, he could wait no longer, and phoned John.

"H'lo?"

"Are you still asleep?” Sherlock demanded. "Come on, we've got a million things to do today."

"Oh, Jesus. What time is it?"

"Half twelve. Almost."

"I was sleeping off the Trapanal," John said, his voice still sleep-fogged and raspy. "Have you been waiting long?"

"Hours now."

"Okay, okay. I've got to shower. Eat something."

"Hurry. I've ordered a sandwich for you already, it's wrapped. You can eat it in the car."

"Fine. Give me fifteen minutes."

"Ten. We're losing the day," Sherlock said, and rang off, pleased. True, John had always been slightly more biddable in the mornings, but the past twenty-four hours he'd been so very agreeable, if a trifle aloof – perhaps he'd missed Sherlock's company as well as the adventures they'd had. It seemed too much to even dare to hope for, an indulgence of the worst sort, and when one came right
down to it, foolish besides. Likely when this was over, John would realise anew that as much as he missed the adventures, he was too comfortable with his life to upset it chasing criminals, that it was dangerous and he wanted to avoid danger for the sake of his family, and that Sherlock hadn't changed and was still an annoying arsehole.

He set the phone down and pressed his fingertips together lightly. The impulse to say something, to tip the delicate balance of the last few days into something more visceral, was strong. Certainly they couldn't sidestep the last few years forever. Hadn't it been only yesterday that he'd resolved to let things fall as they might? And hadn't that destructive impulse, right or wrong, been the very thing that had resulted in four years of silence between them?

"Stupid," he whispered, and lay back on the bed. So stupid, not to understand the havoc he'd wrought until it was far too late. Stupider still to carelessly burn a hundred bridges and expect the hundred and first match he'd tossed not to kindle.

Enough: there was nothing to be gained by constant rumination. He closed his eyes and thought about the odour of Gauloise Brunes emanating from the wrapped Ernst Wilhelm Nay painting.

A knock sounded at the door. "Sherlock?"

"Yes." Sherlock leapt up, more nimbly than yesterday as he'd bandaged his knee according to John's instructions, and went to the door. John was in a plaid shirt and jeans, and the smart wool coat. He'd hurried through his shaving – small dot of shaving cream near his ear – and smelled of the hotel's shampoo. "Afternoon, John. Feeling better?"

"Yeah, all things considered. Thanks." John blew out a breath. "Well, we might as well go, if you're ready."

"Good." Sherlock turned back for his coat. He snatched it up, slipped it on, knotted his scarf, and grabbed the sandwich he'd ordered for John. "Here. Eat it in the car."

John accepted the sandwich. "I need coffee."

"There's a coffee shop in the lobby." Sherlock ushered John to the coffee shop and left him to make his choice while he fetched the car. Disappointingly, Mycroft hadn't switched out the Citroën, but one couldn't have everything. He pulled up to the drive just as John was emerging from the hotel.

"Okay," John said as soon as he'd settled in. "Back to the Moran house?"

"Not yet," Sherlock said. "First we're heading back to Kerstin Tresler's flat."

"God, do we have to?" John unwrapped his sandwich, a bacon, cheese, lettuce, and tomato toastie, inspected it briefly, and took an enthusiastic bite. "Mm."

"I have a theory."

"You think she's going to talk to us? Her boyfriend just died of possibly mysterious causes, remember? She might even be making arrangements for him."

"Well, if she's not home, that saves us from having to make conversation."

John sipped his coffee. "Looking for something in particular?"

"I don't think she was lying when she said that was the only major piece she had in her possession, but I don't think it's the only stolen piece she's had in her flat. Did you smell the paper that wrapped
the painting we took? Smelled just like it."

"Didn't notice."

"I think she's got quite a bit more to tell us." Sherlock drove in silence for some time, then pulled up to the dingy row of flats. He glanced at John. "You've got crumbs on your chin."

"Shit." John pulled the mirror down and brushed at his chin with his hand. "Hey, how are you? Did you sleep okay? You got a dose of Halothane and Trapanal within a twelve-hour period – that's a bit worrisome."

"Oh, I'm fine, thanks. Let's go." Sherlock got out of the car.

It was true. He hadn't felt this good in a long time.

* 

"Who is it?" Tresler barked from behind the door.

"It's Sherlock Holmes and John Watson," Sherlock replied, removing his gloves. "We'd like a word."


"Really, John."

The door opened, and Ms Tresler peered out. She was fully made up, as before, her hair had been newly coloured – the roots were freshly blonde, and the acrid smell of dye clung to her head despite the cloud of Mitsouko that surrounded her – and she wore a navy wool suit that, though beautifully kept, appeared to date from the late Sixties. "Mr Holmes. How nice of you to visit me again," she said flatly.

"It's not really a social call."

Tresler snorted. "Never is. Come in." She held the door open and ushered them inside.

She'd evidently made some effort to clean. The plates, glasses, and assorted rubbish had been cleared away from the surfaces in the flat, and the bags of gin bottles were nowhere in sight. Too, the curtains had been pulled open to let the light in. The effect was unflattering, but admittedly brighter.

"I understand your companion died last night."

"That's right." Tresler closed the door and went to the walnut credenza. She picked up a pack of Gauloise Brunes and extracted one. "Cigarette?"

"No, thanks."

"They called me at eight-thirty, nine, thereabouts. Stroke." She tapped the cigarette on the surface of the credenza and lit it with an old-fashioned silver table lighter. "I picked his things up this morning and made arrangements for cremation."

"How did you meet?" Sherlock asked.
Tresler lifted her painted eyebrows and chuckled. "Why?"

"Just curious. Was it a mutual interest in art?"

"Eamonn didn't give a damn about art." Tresler seated herself on a sofa and crossed her legs. Her feet, shod in pointed alligator pumps, were exceedingly long and narrow, as if she'd worn restrictive shoes her entire life. "We met on a boat to Holyhead, in fact, in 1968. There was a music festival on Anglesey, and we were both headed there. A bit prosaic." She shrugged.

"When did Mr Reilly begin moving looted artwork?"

Tresler chuffed out a smoky laugh. "Mr Holmes, such curiosity. What do you imagine you know?"

"Oh, I'm not in favour of imagination, Ms Tresler. Facts are usually so much more illuminating. I'm curious, for example, about Mr Reilly's death mere hours after we spoke to you. I'm curious as to why I was attacked yesterday afternoon in my hotel room. And most of all, I'm curious about a painting that turned up in Lord Moran's house – you do know who Stephen Moran is, don't you?"

"The MP, I take it. Or former MP, I suppose." Tresler drew on her cigarette again and leant forward to tap the ash into a pink porcelain ashtray on the coffee table.

"That's the one. We recovered a painting there that clearly had been in your home, an Ernst Wilhelm Nay. Degenerate artist, not extraordinarily well-known, but the piece was one of the works lost during the Second World War. Brown paper wrapping, steeped in Gauloise Brunes. I see you've tidied up a bit, good work, but I seem to recall some crumpled brown paper of the same type lying on the floor. You don't think it's a coincidence, do you?"

Tresler smiled through a haze of smoke.

John drifted toward the window. "Do you know Lord Moran?"

"I've never met him."

"Mr Reilly knew him well, though, didn't he?" Sherlock demanded.

"Well enough."

"Are you concerned about your personal safety, Ms Tresler?"

"Not particularly." Sherlock seated himself opposite Kerstin Tresler. "No-one broke into your flat weeks ago, did they? You and Mr Reilly had some sort of arrangement with Lord Moran." He looked into Tresler's opaque eyes and saw her lack of fear, her stony indifference. "But something went wrong, because Mr Reilly's dead now, and you're cleaning your flat. Expecting visitors, are you?"

"Possibly." Tresler finished her cigarette and stubbed it out in the ashtray.

"They won't be happy with you when they come. You've let the cat out of the bag."

"I'm almost eighty," Tresler said. "Eamonn was eighty-seven. He'd had strokes before. He wore special undergarments so that he wouldn't get piss on his trousers. I have emphysema and lymphoma. The fucking doctors don't expect me to live more than ten months. And now you and your friend are sticking your noses into a bad business, Mr Holmes. We're all on borrowed time, one way or another."
Sherlock smiled. "Well, if you haven't got anything better to do, you might as well talk to me."

"While I'm still alive, you mean?" She laughed again; the laugh turned into a wracking cough. "I'm having him cremated tomorrow. There's a charity shop coming to pick up his things on Thursday. Such a...dramatic life, and at the end he was pissing through a catheter and eating through a straw. Undignified." She offered Sherlock a simulacrum of a smile, her dentures flashing. "Don't get old, Mr Holmes."

"It's preferable to the alternative."

"Well, we'll see about that, I suppose. I'll be back in a moment." She heaved herself off the sofa and left the room, walking slowly.

John seated himself in the chair next to Sherlock. "If she comes back with another box of Nazi stuff, I'm gone."

"She's not afraid," Sherlock mused.

John looked round the flat. "No. Maybe fear wears out when you get old. And she's sick. Maybe she's just tired of living."

"Why would living tire anybody?" Sherlock murmured. He couldn't fathom it himself. There was a world surrounding them laden with secrets, with extraordinary thrills, enigmas just waiting to be prised apart, to yield to the correct amount of persuasion and pressure. The day he lost interest in the treasure trove presented to him would be the day he'd wind himself in a shroud and climb into a grave. And he felt that especially keenly today, with John beside him.

"Because it's really exhausting sometimes, Sherlock."

Sherlock peered at John. "Why do you --"

"Here." Kerstin Tresler came back into the room and tossed a little book toward Sherlock.

He caught it deftly and scrutinised it. It was an address book, cheap blue leatherette cover. Opening it, he paged through the book, inspecting the names and addresses written with blue ink in a flowing, feminine penmanship. The names were overwhelmingly male, the addresses scattered across the globe. Many of them had outdated postal codes and places; he saw an address for Zanzibar, one for Rhodesia, two in Czechoslovakia. The majority of the names and addresses seemed to date from the late 1950s, though the ink used throughout was consistent. "Your mother's handwriting?" he inquired.

"How did you know that?"

Sherlock shrugged. "The cover is Presstoff, a synthetic popular in Nazi Germany when leather was rationed. It doesn't hold up all that well in moisture – tends to delaminate, but all things considered it hasn't weathered badly. The paper stock is roughly from the same era. You were a bit young to be writing letters to someone in Gwadar – it was absorbed into Pakistan in the fifties. Also, whoever wrote this was left-handed; all the bars crossing the letter T end with the point on the left. Your dominant hand is the right one." He passed the book to John.

"Impressive, Mr Holmes."

"I suppose you're going to tell me that this is your parents' network of SS friends."

"Oh, Jesus," John muttered.
"That's right," Tresler said. "The papers didn't lie about your abilities, Mr Holmes."

Sherlock shrugged. "They usually downplay them, actually."

Tresler laughed again. "Dr Watson, would you be kind enough to fetch my cigarettes?"

John scowled, but got up and retrieved the pack and lighter, setting them on the coffee table. "You know, you'd have an easier time breathing if you cut back a bit."

"I'm sure I would," Tresler said, fishing another cigarette from the pack. "But at this point, I don't really care."

"Clearly," John said, and sat again. He opened the address book and paged through it. "These are all escaped Nazis?"

"Oh, it's not nearly as dramatic as it sounds. It's not as if there were secret meetings in jungle palaces with swastika banners and hidden portraits of the Fuhrer. Some of them ranked high, but mostly they were men like my father – functionaries who were smart enough to wriggle out before the Allies caught them. They changed their names, lived quiet lives, died quiet deaths." Tresler inhaled and blew out a plume of smoke that twirled itself lazily into an arabesque, eddied by some unseen ventilation. "And most were never caught. If you look on the left side of some of the entries, you'll see small circles drawn beside them. Those were the ones who disappeared, publicly or mysteriously."

"What a shame," John said sardonically.

Tresler's mouth twisted to one side. "My mother gave me the book. If I ever needed shelter, help, a little money – not a lot, mind – I had these people. Reliable friends. Of course, I didn't know who they were until after my father died and then I didn't want any part of her schemes."

"Then why'd you keep the book?" John asked, his tone sharply edged.

No, Sherlock realized, not sharp: furious. He leant back in his chair, folded his hands together, and observed John's tense posture. There was something refreshing in John's moral outrage – yes. It was honest. The ethical codes of most ordinary people were steeped in utter hypocrisy. Sherlock had gone without John's barometer of conscience for so long, and indifference and laxity, or cynicism, he wasn't sure which, had hardened his carapace. It wasn't cracking, was it? Could that be a good thing? It felt…not terrible, at least.

"I had an idea," Tresler said. "A scheme of my own. I'd turn the book in to Interpol, or to the Mossad, or some news agency, and every fugitive Nazi my parents knew would be exposed. Didn't last, though. I never went through with it."

John's posture remained rigid. "Why not?"

"I got scared," Tresler said simply. "Some of them, my mother told me, got away with fair sums of money, jewels, objects. Paintings. Some of them were still well-connected. The Church, governments who didn't mind harbouring Nazis, organised crime syndicates. I didn't want any information traced back to me."

Sherlock leant forward. "You had your own sort of revenge, though, didn't you?"

Tresler smiled. "In a way. Some of those addresses were in England, Ireland, Wales. Eamonn's organisation needed money. I gave him some addresses. He did what he needed to do to obtain funds."
"So looted Nazi wealth bought IRA weapons," John said. "That's nice."

"You have to admit there's a certain pragmatism to the operation," Sherlock said.

"Jesus," John breathed.

"Fairly steady source of income, was it?" Sherlock asked.

"Eh-" Tresler made a fluttering gesture with her hand. "It was only occasional. Not many people ended up in the UK."

Sherlock paged through the book. "Did your mother keep the addresses updated?"

Tresler nodded. "You'll see some updates. When people moved – and most preferred not to, evidently – they changed names. After she died, that was it. I wonder if there are other books with our names in them."

"What happened after the ceasefire?" John asked. "What's this book got to do with now? The Titus painting?"

"Easy enough," Sherlock said. "Someone got wind of it, probably via Mr Reilly's boasting. He was notoriously prolix and indiscreet when it came to his business. Amazing that he didn't end up in the boot of a car with a bullet through his head. Someone saw the book, did his or her homework, and Mr Reilly and Ms Tresler wound up as temporary curators of a large cache of stolen art. Were you well-acquainted with Lady Meredith Howe, Ms Tresler?"

Tresler shook her head. "I don't know the name."

Sherlock showed her a photograph. "You don't know her?"

"I've never seen her before. We dealt with a friend of Eamonn's, a young man. Tall, good-looking. Irish, but with a fancy accent. Almost English. Eamonn hated that, but the young man was…I don't know. Sympathetic."

"So who ended up profiting the most from this little venture, Ms Tresler?" Sherlock asked.

Tresler drew on her cigarette. "Not me, obviously. Look around you."

"I don't understand," John said. "You said most of the paintings have been repatriated, or ended up in museums. How does someone profit from that? The commissions can't be all that high, even if some did get sold at auction."

"They can if someone's selling on the quiet," Sherlock said. "I doubt all these names are the entirety of fugitive Nazis. There were thousands, some who had enormous caches of knowledge. Picture it, John – you're on the run, and you can't take loads of art and objects with you. But you know where it is – buried in mines, under abandoned factories, in church crypts, in the cellars of great houses. Assuming many of those pieces are quite well-hidden, what would you do about it?"

John furrowed his brow. "I guess I'd…wait, and see if I could find a trustworthy friend to get them to me piecemeal."

"Would you trust anyone that much?"

"Hardly anyone." John smiled; his eyes twinkled.

Sherlock couldn't quite meet that gaze. He looked down at the book, thumbing through it again. "So
"I'd sit on the information, then, until things had really settled. Then I'd…" John trailed off, and stared at Kerstin Tresler, who stared back stonily. "I'd probably tell my kids, if I had any. That way they could retrieve them…it would be a lot easier as time passed. Jesus…"

Sherlock got to his feet and slipped the address book into his pocket. "So, Ms Tresler. What happened after the ceasefire? After relaxed EU regulations made it easier to travel without interruption or undue prying?"

She sighed. "If you think I made a single penny of profit, Mr Holmes, think again."

"I'm sure you didn't. And I'm sure Eamonn didn't use your particular knowledge unless he absolutely had to. You did tell him about it, didn't you? Where was your father's stash?"

"A motor works in Essen. Three hundred metres underground. It's all gone now. The Rembrandt was the last piece, and the most valuable. It was the only one my father brought along with us."

"You shouldn't have trusted him to keep his mouth shut. He told your young friend, didn't he? And by the time you realised what was happening, it was too late. Think of the loss – probably millions of pounds of art, all with flea market bills of sale, or smuggled in suitcases, or concealed behind other pieces. And the other names in here," Sherlock said, patting his pocket, "other hiding places, more people to intimidate. And whoever it was is still profiting. They let you live as long as you didn't talk about it, and acted as a way station, and they reaped millions in private sales. You've got nothing to gain by protecting them, and everything to lose."

"I don't care," Tresler said, and stood. John followed her lead. "It doesn't matter. You're right about most of it, Mr Holmes, but I'm finished talking. For good, I think. That suits me. I'm exhausted."

Sherlock pulled a pen from his pocket, found a blank corner in the address book, and wrote his number down. He tore the scrap off and set it on the coffee table. "Do call me if you happen to think of anything else."

"Don't count on it."

"Come along, John." Sherlock headed to the door, then turned back. "Your friend. Or Mr Reilly's friend. What was his name?"

"I never knew his full name. Eamonn called him Seb."

"Seb," Sherlock said thoughtfully, shaping the name in his mouth. "Thank you. Good afternoon."

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John didn't speak until they'd swung onto the motorway going toward the Moran house. "Well. That was about as creepy as I'd expected it to be."

"I think you're fixated on the Nazi thing," Sherlock said, keeping his eyes on the road.

"The Nazi thing, yeah – the Nazi thing, Sherlock." John exhaled heavily. "You've got a list of fugitive Nazis, an entire fucking book of them in your pocket. You don't find that creepy?"
"John, anyone who might have been directly involved with the Third Reich is long dead. Kerstin Tresler was born in 1945 – she's almost eighty, for God's sake. If there are any living Nazis from that era, they're probably blind, deaf, paralysed, and incontinent. Hardly a threat to the nation."

"Yeah, but some of them had kids, Sherlock. And maybe most of them were like her, even though she was creepy, admit it – but what if they weren't? What if they got indoctrinated or something?"

Sherlock glanced over at John. "You've been watching too many movies. I'm not saying there aren't Nazis, but they don't need the excuse of parental dogma for virulent hatred."

"I still say it's weird," John muttered. "How'd you know she didn't tell us the whole truth the first time?"

"I know a liar when I see one, John," Sherlock scoffed, and then caught himself, not daring to give John another sideways look. It was true, though – some of the coolest dissimulators on the planet had tried his patience, and he'd shown most of them up. Kerstin Tresler was an amateur. "She was protecting Eamonn Reilly, and the painting we found proves it," he went on. "The smell, the scrap of paper in her flat – it was next to the gin bottles – and as long as he was alive, she had no intention of betraying him. I have to give her some credit for loyalty, I suppose. And it wasn't as if she was profiting from the sale of the work."

"From the state of her flat, probably not," John said. "She'll have an inventory of the artwork somewhere, I'd bet. She kept the book, she'd have kept the list."

"Oh, that stuff is long gone," Sherlock said. "Those sales wouldn't have gone through Christie's or Sotheby's. They would have been sub rosa, offshore transactions most likely, buyers who didn't give a damn about the original provenance of the work. I doubt anyone would be able to locate them, much less repatriate them."

"Someone will know," John said. "Someone had to act as a middleman. That man she mentioned. Seb."

"Mm. Maybe. What interests me is what Meredith Howe had to do with the whole affair. Someone killed her over the Titus painting. Why?"

"Maybe she was going to blow the whistle," John hazarded.

"Could be."

"At least the old lady gave you some useful information."

"People actually like confessing secrets. Why do you think the Catholic Church has been in business so long?"

John chuckled. "I don't know about that. I haven't been to confession in years."

"You should go back. See what you're missing."

"Yeah." John laughed uncomfortably and fell silent, staring out at the countryside stretching before them in heavy, sodden greens under a lowering grey sky thick with clouds. Here and there were small flocks of sheep grazing beside low stone walls, their sides bright with neon branding paint.

Amazing that Sherlock's considerable will didn't quite extend to easily keeping his mouth shut. He burned with curiosity about John's remark in the flat, that life was exhausting. Because John had chosen his life. If ever he'd stood at a crossroads, he'd not tarried long; he'd chosen a direction and
walked away, and if he was unhappy and exhausted, who did he have to blame but himself?

But he'd been happy once. Sherlock didn't have to be a psychiatrist or therapist or whatever to tell that John had been happy at Baker Street. And he'd looked that way yesterday, even today – quite a contrast from that day at the racecourse. Upset, gambling, drinking, unkempt. All it had taken was one invitation, and he'd had purpose again. Probably it was a strain on his average mind, God knew that life in a surgery prescribing asthma medication and probing beneath people's armpits wasn't taxing, but at least his compact, clever hands knew their business. Sherlock's knee felt just fine, even in the stupid tiny car.

"Shit," John said suddenly. "Forgot to call Mary."

"Call her now," Sherlock suggested. "Quickly, though. We're fairly close to Lord Moran's house."

"Are we?"

"Easier to find in the daylight."

"Dear God, I can't believe you admitted that," John chuckled, and pulled his phone out. "Fuck, I can't get a bar. I'll wait 'til we get back to the hotel."

Sherlock thought for a moment, then probed as delicately as he could, against the cold whisper telling him to keep his gob shut. "So she likes her work?"

John didn't reply immediately. "Yeah, she's been there, what, seven years now, almost eight. She gets to travel quite a bit. Tim's qualified to practise in a number of countries, so that's a treat for her."

"That's nice," Sherlock said, biting the inside of his cheek.

"Yeah." John opened his mouth as if to say something else, then closed it again.

Sherlock maintained a prudent silence. See? I can keep my mouth shut.

"I actually met a family member of hers," John said after a little while.

"Is that right?"

"Yeah, her aunt. Trish, or Patricia I guess. She died just a little over a week ago. I guess she came to see Mary because she was sick and wanted to reconnect."

"Mm."

John sighed. "She was nice."

A delicate little double helix of conjecture and suspicion began to crystallise in the back of Sherlock's mind, twining its way around the dusty and cobweb-ridden but still tender past. Keep your mouth shut, keep it shut for God's sake. He resorted to inanity. "It's good that they got to…erm, reunite."

"Yeah." John looked at his phone again, then tucked it back into his pocket. "I'll call her later."

"Just as well. We're here."

"How do we know that nobody's home?" John inquired.

"Mycroft's people did reconnaissance. Let's hope they're not quite as incompetent as they were last night. By all reports our man in the luxury vehicle left in the very small hours of the morning."
"That's good news, at least."


"You all right?"

"Fine."

"You wrapped it properly, didn't you?" John demanded. "Just like I showed you?"

"Yes, yes," Sherlock snapped. "Of course, if you'd been up in time, you could have helped me with it."

"I love how your bad knee is suddenly my fault," John said, though he sounded far from upset. "It's not as if I took a mallet to it. Face it, Sherlock, you're just getting –"

"Don't dawdle, John." Sherlock limped across the grass and made a beeline for the conservatory. He got in using the same method from the previous evening – much easier now – and led John into the house.

"So what are we looking for?" John asked.

"More art, ideally," Sherlock said. "The man who was here last night didn't realise anything was amiss. According to Mycroft's people, he didn't leave in a particular hurry, and he wasn't carrying any parcels."

"What about stuff hanging on the walls already?"

"Photograph it," Sherlock replied. "Unlikely that they'd trouble to hang it – I think this is a way station and no more – but one never knows. We'll split up and meet back here in half an hour. I'll go upstairs, you stay down here. Let me know if you find anything particularly interesting."

"Right. See you in a bit," John said, and headed off down one cavernous corridor.

Sherlock waited until John was nearly out of sight and then began the laborious climb up the stone staircase. Stupid buggery knee. Despite the wrapping, it was decidedly aching again. He'd have to visit the doctor once he got back to London. Perhaps even an orthopaedic surgeon – annoying.

Methodically, Sherlock moved from room to room, opening drawers and wardrobe doors, turning up carpets, and tapping on panels. It wasn't difficult; most of the rooms were under-furnished, as if someone had moved things out piecemeal for other residences or for sale. What was left was good quality – Sherlock recognised a few Adam pieces, a Hepplewhite Georgian chest, two French Empire chairs – but most of it was battered, used by generations of Morans.

Sherlock paused to examine a portrait hanging on one wall. It depicted a dark-haired, pale-skinned woman in a full-skirted late eighteenth-century dress of butter yellow, creamy pearls at her throat and adorning her ears. A smile curved her red-lipped mouth, but her expression was distinctly unamused.

"Pardon my hand," Sherlock said to the portrait, and lifted it from the bottom, setting it on the floor. The square of wallpaper behind it was bright and clean – it had hung on this wall for at least seventy-years, judging by the age of the paper. Carefully, he re-hung the piece, straightening it and flicking at the dust with his gloves to even it out. "Can't imagine what you've seen here. No wonder you look cross."
"Sherlock! Sherlock!"

Cold terror pierced Sherlock's spine. He wheeled and sprinted from the room, ignoring the howling in his knee. He skidded on a carpet runner, righted himself, and tore down the two flights of stairs. "John? John! Where are you?"

John emerged from one corridor, breathing hard, his face ashen. "Sherlock. The kitchen." Without another word, he turned and ran off, leaving Sherlock to follow.

Sherlock forced his breathing to even out and willed his heart to resume its ordinary systole and diastole. At least John hadn't been attacked, though –

"Sherlock, come on!"

"I'm coming! What the hell, John?" Sherlock limped into the kitchen, practically unchanged from its original 19th century configurations. An Aga stove and a rounded refrigerator from the 1950s were the only concessions to modernity. He saw nothing amiss. "What?"

John gestured to a door. "In here." They went into a butler's pantry, denuded of its silver and serving implements and account books. A new-looking chest freezer sat against one wall, plugged into an elderly die-cast electrical outlet and humming quietly. John went to the freezer and lifted the lid. "Look."

"Oh. Oh."

Inside the chest, grotesquely folded and bluish-grey in hue, was the body of Lady Howe's elusive PA, Georgina.

*
Chapter 14

Chapter Notes

A million skillion thanks to kimberlite and vilestrumpet for beta, britpick, and general awesomeness.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*

21 April 2020

"John, I need you now."

It wasn't the first time that Sherlock had summoned John using those exact words, and it wasn't even the first time that John's mind had wandered into mildly naughty double-entendre territory, but given that it had only been a week since the day of Mrs H's funeral, it certainly wasn't out of the realm of possibility that John would entertain the notion that Sherlock had meant something besides the usual come-to-a-crime-scene-at-once demand.

Except it hadn't meant anything naughty at all, of course. Sherlock could be depressingly literal.

"Okay, you've got my mobile number. I'm going to leave it on, so if you need anything at all, just ring me, it doesn't matter what time it is. You're sure you don't mind staying the night?"

Mrs Pringle smiled. She was a bit dotty, but Nora and Mary both seemed to adore her, and she was patient and sweet, and more importantly, willing to look after Nora on short notice. "Oh, don't worry, love, Nora and I will be just fine. We get along quite well, don't we?" Nora nodded emphatically. "See? Run along now."

John hesitated. "You're certain I can't give you a little —"

"Go on, shoo," Mrs Pringle said. "Maybe you'll bring that handsome Mr Holmes by. I'd love to meet him someday."

John couldn't keep a stupid proprietary grin from stretching his mouth. "Well, maybe one day. He's sort of a grumpy bugger." He didn't add that Sherlock was his grumpy bugger. Might have been too much.

"Right. Well, I'll be home by seven at the very latest. Thanks again, Mrs Pringle, you're an absolute star. 'Bye, darling – see you soon." He planted a kiss on Nora's soft, round cheek, and headed out to meet Sherlock.

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"Think I'll call it 'Sixteen Thatchers on a Dead Man's Chest,'" John said. "How does that sound?"

"Ludicrous," Sherlock retorted, scrolling through his emails. "Like all your titles. Besides, the busts weren't on the guard's chest, they were scattered in bits around him. And it was just one bust of three destroyed, not sixteen, for God's sake. Weren't you paying attention?"

John refused to budge. "I think it sounds great. Maggie was the devil incarnate, but I don't know that it's worth breaking up public property as a means of protest. Kind of closing the stable doors after the horse has bolted at this point anyhow, isn't it?"

"It's not politically motivated, John. The killer was looking for something, and it was a murder committed without premeditation. The guard obviously caught him in the act of destroying the bust. What provoked the vandalism, though – ah, here we are." Sherlock opened the cab door and hopped out, leaving John to pay the fare.

The bill settled, John climbed out of the cab and followed Sherlock up the stairs. By the time he reached the flat, Sherlock was already on the sofa, his hands palm to palm, a faraway look in his eyes. "Here," John said, setting the carrier bag containing Sherlock's fish and chips onto the table. "I'll make tea." He shucked his coat and put the kettle on, taking his time, feeling his breathing ease the way it always did at 221B.

He hadn't told Mary. Not yet. Oh, he'd envisaged a hundred different methods of confession since that night a week ago, his imagination only compensating for his revelation, not Mary's reaction. He couldn't quite get it right in his head.

---Mary, I have something to tell you. I'm just going to come out with it. I'm in love with Sherlock.
---Mary, we haven't been really happy for a long time, have we?
---Mary, it's over. We just fight too god-damned much, and it's bad for Nora.
---Mary, you know I love you, but it's...it's Sherlock. It's always been Sherlock.
---Mary, I think we need a break from each other. It might just be temporary.
---Mary, I cheated on you with my best friend.
---Mary, the last thing I want to do is hurt you....

There wasn't a way to tell her without cruelty, and without hurting Nora in the process. Without damages both large and small. Once he started it, there'd be no return, he knew that – the possibility of talking about a temporary separation was right out. It would be divorce, a final severing of their relationship, only Nora connecting them. There would be all sorts of entanglements: emotional, legal, financial; there would be explanations to Nora, to Harry, to the entire fucking world.

But he had to do it, he had to. His heart had been on the verge of bursting for the better part of a week – he couldn't go much longer in silence. And he wanted to make up for lost time. So much lost time. He'd always be grateful to Mary for getting him through the worst of his grief, for giving him Nora, but it wasn't fair to anybody to keep lying. He couldn't bear it. She was in New York with Tim, off again after only a few days home, but she'd be home in two days.

John glanced at Sherlock, lying full-length on the sofa, still in his coat and scarf.

He had to tell her. Had to.
The tea was ready. John sloshed milk into two mugs and poured the tea, then took one to Sherlock. "Hey. You asleep?"

Sherlock opened his eyes. A small smile teased at the corner of his mouth. "No."

John's heart stuttered in pure joy. He bent and kissed Sherlock's mouth, felt Sherlock's lips part, and wound up kneeling on the floor, still clutching Sherlock's tea in one hand as they kissed. He pulled back and tentatively brushed Sherlock's hair away from his face. "I've been waiting all night to do that."

"You took your time." Sherlock's eyes sparkled.

"Sorry." John bent and kissed him again. He was half-hard by the time he moved away, scarcely steady enough to set Sherlock's cooling tea on the table. "Drink your tea," he croaked. "Have you got ketchup?"

"Above the sink," Sherlock said. His lower lip was flushed and wet, ridiculously alluring.

They ate, sitting side by side on the sofa and watching television, some mindless programme about footballer wives abandoned in a South American jungle. John wasn't sure if it was supposed to be fictional or not. He was too distracted by Sherlock's proximity to concentrate on the screen or taste his food or even swallow properly. He wanted to grab Sherlock by the shoulders, pin him to the sofa, kiss him limp and fuck him senseless, but he wasn't certain that Sherlock would go for that sort of seduction. He had about a seventy percent success rate with it, Mary included, but pouncing on Sherlock just seemed sort of weird, as did the tender courtship brand of foreplay. His only encounters with members of the same sex had been precipitated by alcohol, and getting drunk first didn't seem like a viable option. He didn't want to be drunk, anyway. He wanted to be present for every moment. He'd waited long enough. Too fucking long, too fucking clueless, both of them, to realise what had been in front of their faces for years.

Another programme came on, a comedy about a shoe salesman's romance with a make-up artist at a posh department store. John couldn't bear it any longer. He snatched up the remote and turned the telly off.

"I was watching that," Sherlock protested.

"Really. What just happened, then?"

"Anya just told Clive she didn't think hot pink was his colour at all. Then there was a lot of canned laughter."

"Never mind that for a minute, okay? I want to talk to you." John set the remote control down and folded his hands together. "Erm...Sherlock. I haven't been able to stop thinking about you."

Sherlock peered directly into John's eyes, his expression vaguely suspicious. He pressed his lips together, opened his mouth, then closed it again. He took a short breath and said, "So have I. About you, that is. Thinking about you."

John chuckled, relaxing a little. "Good. That's good. It's just...I haven't got round to telling Mary yet. I wanted to, but...it's hard to find the right time and place. And I haven't even thought about what I'm going to say to Nora. None of this is easy."

"I didn't think you had."

"Why?"
Sherlock shrugged. "Saw it on your face when I pulled up in the taxi. You were apprehensive, a bit guilty. You kept flexing your hand. You didn't know a thing about the case, so it had to be something regarding what happened between us last week."

"Sherlock, I love you," John blurted.

An expression of shock widened Sherlock's eyes, and his mouth dropped open.

"Oh, please tell me that's not a surprise," John muttered with a groan.

"No. No, I...I just didn't expect to hear it, John. You're reticent when it comes to expressing tender emotion, although you're very generous with your affections when it comes to Eleanor." Sherlock laced his fingers together and studied John as if he were a not-terribly-interesting specimen on a slide. "Erm...as it should be, I suppose," he added.

"Okay," John said, and waited. Sherlock continued to study him. He waited a bit more. "Well?"

"Well, what?"

John spread his hands. "You're leaving me out in the wind here, Sherlock."

Sherlock's nose crinkled. "What? Oh. Oh! Well, obviously I love you, John."

"Obviously?"

"It wasn't obvious?"

"Not to me." John felt himself grinning. He couldn't help it. Of course this was the way it would go. Of course.

"Well, you've never been particularly observant. I suppose I can't fault you for not noticing."

John laughed and wrapped Sherlock in his arms, then kissed him. "What a git you are," he said when he came up for air. "Really." Sherlock said nothing, but cupped John's face with his hands, the tips of his long fingers delicately exploring the texture of John's skin. It tickled a bit; nobody had ever done that to him before. John turned his head and kissed Sherlock's palm. "Right, okay. How long has it been?"

"Difficult to say."

"I don't believe it. Difficult for you?"

"Well, there was a brief period of infatuation, and I can't name the precise moment when infatuation transmuted to something much deeper, but to the best of my recollection it was a month after you moved in. Possibly six weeks."

"Jesus," John said. "Kiss me again, you git." He suckled on Sherlock's lower lip before delving deeper, half-delirious with pleasure. He remembered, with a painful suddenness, what it was like to watch Sherlock kissing Janine, how his guts had clenched at the sight of it, how poorly he'd concealed his shock and dismay — though Sherlock hadn't seemed to notice. Maybe he wasn't as keen an observer as he thought, or maybe he'd just been too wrapped up in the effort of deception. Either way, it had hurt like hell, and he'd never dreamed he'd be here, now, claiming Sherlock's mouth and touching him, even if it was through three layers of clothing. It was about time that they headed for the bedroom, wasn't it? He wanted to feel Sherlock's naked body. He wanted to kiss him and suck his cock and take Sherlock and be taken himself. Too soon, maybe. Did Sherlock keep lube

This time Sherlock pulled back and placed his hands flat on John's chest. "John. John."

"Hm?"

"Look, John…I'm not certain it's a good idea to carry on this way."

John's cock disagreed strenuously. "Why?"

"The less you have to tell Mary, the better. You're a terrible liar, and if you say that we only had one
encounter, you'll feel much less guilty. Confessing to a string of them will only harden Mary's heart
and make you feel worse about the whole thing."

An irrational stab of anger pierced John's middle. Who was Sherlock to moralise? And what did he
know about confessions of infidelity, anyway? Well, besides the times they prompted crimes of
passion, which was actually a lot. Still, it didn't seem quite fair.

"You're angry," Sherlock said.

"No." John shook his head and sighed. "No, I'm not. Not really. A little upset and…thwarted, I
guess, but not angry. You're right. You're right. Me dragging this out isn't going to help things at all,
is it?"

"I'll go with you if you like." Sherlock said. "To tell Mary."

John let out a laugh of shock and disbelief. "Jesus, no! No," he said more gently. "I appreciate the
offer, Sherlock, but I've got to tell her on my own." He laid his hand on Sherlock's cheek and rubbed
his thumb over Sherlock's lower lip. "Can I do this?"

"Yes." The tip of Sherlock's tongue flicked against John's thumb.

"Cheeky." His erection flagged a little. Disappointing, but Sherlock was right after all. Damn it. "Is
that what you were going to tell me about Mary? That you'd go with me to see her?"

Sherlock compressed his lips and looked down at John's knees. "No."

"What, then?" Sherlock wouldn't meet his eyes, and a small knot of worry coalesced, taking the
place of his earlier anger. "Sherlock?"

"Never mind," Sherlock muttered. "It's not important."

"It is to me."

"You're not going to like it."

John let his hands drop into his lap. "What?"

Sherlock exhaled slowly and met John's eyes. "She's working again."

"Working – yeah, she's in New York."

"No," Sherlock said. "Her old job."

John scowled, shaking his head. The surgery? Was that what he –
"Sherlock?" His voice felt half-trapped in his chest. "What do you mean?"

"You know exactly what I mean, John."

Her old job. Not the surgery. Not the clinic job she’d had when they’d met. Her old job. "No." He shook his head, laughed. "No, Sherlock. Come on."

Sherlock didn’t reply, only fixed John with that unblinking stare. Not the drilling-holes-into-him stare, a stare that was tinged with some softer emotion. Regret? Compassion?

"I’d know."

"All those trips, John."

John shook his head again. "No. All those trips are with Tim. He’s got I don’t know how many practice privileges all over the world. Now if you told me she’d been having an affair with him, that’s something else. I might believe you." He smiled, just to show Sherlock that it was okay.

"No, John."

John’s back stiffened, and his hand twitched convulsively. "Sherlock – Jesus."

"It’s true."

"Is it?" John got to his feet and walked to the window. He looked down at Baker Street, still humming with traffic. "Is it really. How?"

Sherlock sighed. "Where did she say she was last week?"

"Erm…Brussels. No. No, Bruges."

"She wasn’t. She was in Asia."

"Out with it," John snapped.

"Fine. Her suit. It’s brand-new, a Row knockoff, custom-tailored, but not for Mary – the bust darts are too low and the skirt was just re-hemmed. The stitching’s distinctive, machines that are prevalent in Hong Kong as well as the hand finishing on the notions. The fabric, that plum wool crepe, was in stores last year – even on sale, it would be hard to find a suit in that material. She bought it new, though, at a tailor’s, probably someone ordered it and then left without paying, so the tailor sold it at deep discount. Check the label inside, you’ll likely see the origin of make. She was hot in the suit at the funeral, sweating a bit, and under her perfume there was a hint of kaffir lime, galangal, and fresh curry leaves, a cultivar found mostly in Cambodia. Also traces of water spinach, though she might have washed her hair or body in trakuon-saturated water rather than ingesting it, I couldn’t quite tell. Then there was the smell of permethrin. She left in a hurry, no time for vaccines, so whatever she was wearing was saturated with the stuff. There aren’t a lot of luxury plastic-surgery clinics that require heavy applications of insect repellent, so far as I know."

"Sherlock. Stop. Stop! Look. You can get curry anywhere. And she did go to Hong Kong last year."

"But the suit was new. She hadn’t worn it before. She’d just taken it out of its plastic, and the last person to work on it was a resident of Hong Kong; they’d got a splash of egg tart custard on the sleeve. Mary didn’t notice it."
A loud clanging filled John's head, an admixture of rage and denial and despair. He turned away. He'd never seen the suit before. That was true, at least. "She's...she wouldn't do that, Sherlock. She wouldn't. She promised."

"Did she?" Sherlock asked softly.

"She's in New York," John said, faltering. "with Tim."

"I'm sorry, John." Sherlock's voice was nearly a whisper.

"She promised, Sherlock." John rubbed his leg. "I'm not...no. That's bullshit, all of it."

"John," Sherlock said. "She had gunshot residue embedded on the inside of her left wrist."

"That's bullshit!" John roared. He struck out at Sherlock's music stand, knocking it over with a clatter, scattering sheet music everywhere. "We have a daughter, for fuck's sake. She wouldn't do that. She'd never do that to Nora...to me."

"I saw it, John." Sherlock rose to his feet. He stood straight and tall, but his hands were at his sides, defenceless. "And I wouldn't lie to you."

"Fine. Fine." John whipped his phone from his pocket. "It's about lunchtime in New York. She's probably done with whatever they had going today. I'll call her. I'll call her, and I'll show you...fuck's sake..." John dialled, mangling the number twice with shaking hands. On the third try he got it right, and the phone began to ring. Once...twice...three times....

"Hello?"

John held the phone away to prevent a loud gust of relief from escaping and shot a triumphant glare Sherlock's way. "Hey, love."

"Hey! How are you?" Mary's voice, sweet and warm, fell pleasantly on the ear.

"I'm good, good. Out with Sherlock. Nora's got Mrs Pringle staying with her."

"Ah, that's nice. Did you get her to take any money this time?"

"I thought I'd slip a tenner in her pocket when she wasn't looking," John replied. "How'd it go today?"

"One lipo and four Botox shots. This afternoon we've got a thigh lift and laser facial. Very exciting."

**She could be lying. Mobile phone, she could be anywhere, doesn't matter.** He could get her to call from the hotel phone, but he didn't have a plausible excuse – no. Another idea struck him. "Actually, I didn't call to speak to you."

"Well, since this is my phone, who else were you expecting to reach?" Laughter tinged Mary's voice.

"Tim, in fact. I've misplaced his number or deleted it." Silently, he blessed his occasional racquetball matches with Tim, who always bested him without fail. "Wanted to ask him something. A stupid question, but now that I've got you...."

"Do you want me to have him call you?"

"No, no – isn't he there?"
“Well, he's in the next room. I think he's eating lunch.”

“I won't be a minute. Walk and talk to me.”

“Okay. How was Her Majesty today?”

“Great.” John prattled about Nora for a moment, turning away from Sherlock, who was watching intently, not moving a muscle. Show you, he thought incoherently. Prove it, she wasn't lying to me, we've got a kid and a life and I'd fucking know and I don't even know why I'm doing this, the whole thing's rubbish and I should hang up right fucking now and forget the whole thing.

“Here he is,” Mary said brightly.

“Hello?”

John's stomach plummeted in relief. "Hey, Tim. John. Sorry to disturb your lunch.”

“Not to worry. I'd heard this deli did amazing pastrami sandwiches, but honestly I've had better in Chiswick. What's going on?”

“Yeah. You know when we met up a few weeks ago? I lost my good claret tie and was wondering if maybe it got into your bag by mistake. I've got a conference coming up and wanted to wear it.” A piss-poor excuse, probably, but the best one he had. He wasn't Sherlock, after all.

“Hm. No, don't think so, but I can have a look when I get home. We'll be back by Friday afternoon. Text me so I don't forget.”

“Great, thanks. Sorry again. Can I speak to Mary?”

“Can do. 'Bye, John.”

“'Bye,” John echoed. His legs were rubbery.

“Hiya.”

“Hi. Hey, as long as you're in New York, grab Nora a t-shirt or something, would you?”

“Yeah, okay,” Mary said. "One of those 'I Heart New York' numbers? Pink, maybe?"

“That sounds good. Call me tomorrow, okay?"

“Okay. Will you be home so I can talk to Herself?”

“I'll make sure of it." John paused. Their telephone conversations, which had gone on for ages in the early days, even when they'd only been apart for a few hours, were now conducted with brisk, impersonal efficiency, as if they were business partners in a venture doomed to fail and they knew they were only postponing the inevitable. Maybe he'd blamed too much of that on Mary. "I'll talk to you tomorrow.”

“Righto. Love you.”

John hesitated for a heartbeat; two heartbeats. "I love you too," he said, and rang off. He stood still for a moment, facing Baker Street, away from Sherlock, trying and failing to corral the seething maelstrom of rage and confusion that threatened to topple him. Part of it was Mary, of course – her actions had set a precedent that placed suspicion well in the realm of plausibility.
But it wasn't only Mary.

"Thanks, Sherlock." His voice, when it emerged, was dry and devoid of emotion. "Thanks for that." He turned and faced Sherlock, still standing beside the sofa.

Sherlock lifted his chin. "I'm not wrong."

"Mary's in New York. Tim was in the next room, eating a pastrami sandwich. That's really cloak-and-dagger stuff, isn't it?"

"When does she get back to London?"

"Friday."

"Check her wrist, John – the left wrist. The residue will still be embedded there."

"A couple of months ago, you thought a cocoa spill was a bloodstain."

"The light was bad." Sherlock was implacable. "This was broad daylight, John. It's not a mistake."

John shook his head, totally wrong-footed, his anger wobbling back and forth. Certainly it wouldn't be the first time Sherlock had been wrong about something. He'd been right about Mary before, but this time, no, fuck no, it just wasn't possible. She couldn't hide something like that. And Nora. She'd never, never take that life up again now that they had Nora. "Is this the first time you've noticed since – since that last time?"

Sherlock sighed. "I haven't seen her much."

"Oh, bollocks," John spat. "Ten seconds, that's all you'd need. Right?"

A flush spread across Sherlock's cheeks. "Maybe I turned a blind eye."

John gave a disbelieving bark of laughter and began to pace back and forth, treading on Sherlock's sheet music. "You, missing an opportunity to show someone up? I don't believe that, not for one fucking second."

"Check her wrist, John," Sherlock said quietly. "The proof's there."

"You're god-damned right I'm going to check her wrist," John said. "Jesus, you certainly picked a –" John broke off, freezing in his tracks. "Oh, Christ. Jesus Christ." He turned to Sherlock. "Tell me this wasn't convenient."

Sherlock scowled. "I don't know what you mean."

"God," John breathed. "It was timed really well. Especially on the heels of the whole we-should-wait scenario."

"She was in New York today," Sherlock said. "But a week ago, a bit more, John, I promise you, she was –"

"In Hong Kong. Right. Right. Sounded convincing. I mean, what better way to make sure that we split up, given that it almost happened last time? Why wouldn't it work a second time?"

Sherlock's posture stiffened. "You're saying I was lying that first time, is that it? And Mary went along with it just to please me, I suppose? Don't be stupid, John. Even you –"
"Even me." John curled his right hand into a fist and punched his palm. Sherlock flinched. "Even I, fucking saddo that I am, could figure out that you were telling the truth the first time. This time it just slots a little too neatly into place. You've pulled some underhanded stunts before –"

"For God's sake, John –"

"Shut up!" John roared. "Just shut the fuck up, would you?" He strode to the bookshelf and swept his hand out, knocking seven or eight dusty hardbacks to the floor. "I don't know why I thought you'd changed at all. You're the fucking genius when it comes to sorting out a crime, but you don't know the first fucking thing about human relationships. We have a daughter, a five-year-old daughter, and Mary loves her – more than she loves me, and that's fine. But she wouldn't jeopardise things by…by going back to shooting people for a living, and you've gone soft in the head if you think she would. If not for me, then for Nora."

"You're not thinking rationally, John," Sherlock said. His face was very white except for the two blotches of colour on his cheeks. "Sit down, and I can explain –"

"Yeah, analyse me some more, Sherlock. Tell me the real reason I'm with her, that I'm attracted to dangerous people, that I chose her. Probably I knew the whole thing was going to fall apart eventually, is that it? Hm? So…so I could be with you?"

"No-one had to twist your arm a week ago."

"Fuck off! You manipulated me, start to finish. You just don't stop, do you? You wouldn't know a genuine emotion if it walked up to you and punched you in the face, but you thought at least – at least you could keep me around so there'd be someone to kiss your arse and call you brilliant because you've driven everyone else away."

Sherlock took a step forward. "John –"

"Don't you come near me." John stabbed a finger at Sherlock, freezing him in place. He saw Sherlock's eyes redder and swim with distress. "Don't. Just don't. You think I haven't seen that before? Heard it, at Bart's, on the fucking Tube carriage? Jesus, is anything about you real?"

"Mary's been avoiding me for at least two years," Sherlock said. "Maybe more. She knew I'd work it out, she's not an idiot. Don't delude yourself, John. There's more, I can prove it to you, I swear –"

"I'm not the deluded one," John said. "You can fuck off." He marched toward the door, brushing past Sherlock. Sherlock caught his arm, and John shook him off with a violence that sent Sherlock staggering back a step. "Stay the fuck away from me."

"John, wait. Please."

He pounded down the stairs and slammed the door hard enough to rattle it in its frame. Mrs Hudson would likely come running out – no, Mrs Hudson was gone. Mrs Hudson's departure had precipitated this mess.

On the tube, his phone chirped Sherlock's ringtone four times. He ignored it. It chirped four more times, then four more. He sat frozen, staring at nothing, absently massaging his left hand.
Mary and Tim came out of the arrivals gate, laughing and chatting. Mary wore a scarf John had never seen before, pale blue cotton printed with red roses, and her hair had been freshly coloured. She caught sight of John, and her face lit up. She trotted toward him and wrapped him in an embrace. "You nutter, what are you doing here?"

"Thought I'd pick you up." John buried his face in her neck, inhaling the scent of her perfume.

"You're an angel." Mary kissed his cheek and turned to Tim. "Look, I've got a welcoming committee."

"Lucky you. I haven't been met at the airport in years. Hello, John." Tim clapped John on the shoulder.

"Hi, Tim. Hey, no need to hunt for that tie. I found it on the wardrobe floor after all."

"Glad to hear it." Tim's beatifically handsome face crinkled into a reassuring smile. "Can I give you two a lift home? I've got my car."

"No, thanks very much, though. We've got to pick Nora up from swim."

"Right, understood. Well – thanks, Mary. See you Monday morning." Tim lifted a hand in farewell and strolled off, hitching his no doubt ruinously expensive carry-on bag over his shoulder.

Mary kissed John again. "This is a treat. What's the occasion?"

John wrapped an arm round Mary's waist. "I thought we could fetch Nora and then go out to eat, the three of us."

"I've got a better idea. Why don't we fetch Nora and stop at Tesco for one of those piri piri chickens and some salad things? I just want to shower and put on a t-shirt and tracksuit bottoms and be totally lazy."

"All right," John agreed. The knot that had constricted his chest for two days was beginning to loosen. He relieved Mary of her bag and they began walking toward the exits. "How was the flight?"

"The usual." Mary laughed. "I've got used to flying first class, I've become a princess. Poor Tim – if he ever has to economise and fly in the cheap seats, he's going to have to listen to my complaining." Her manner was easy, natural, utterly relaxed. She had her left arm flung round John's shoulder, which John had always found curiously intimate in a casual way.

"Life is hard without mimosas and hot towels."

"God, seriously," Mary laughed. "Poor me."

John hugged Mary's waist and casually turned his head. He'd intended to wait, but he couldn't wait any longer. He stopped, took Mary's arm from round his shoulder, and brought her left hand to his mouth, kissing it. He turned it over.

Her wrist was the colour of cream, with a faint blue tracery of veins. Perfectly unblemished.

John kissed her wrist, and the knot in his chest loosened altogether, though another knot formed in his stomach. Sherlock had called him thirty-seven times since Wednesday, but John had ignored his calls and texts, not even looking at the messages.

It wasn't just that Sherlock had been wrong – John could have forgiven that. In fact, it would have
made great fodder for teasing, and annoyed Sherlock no end. It was the calculation behind the bomb he’d dropped that rankled. Why’d he done it? Was he so insecure that he thought the only way to bind John to himself was to make him hate Mary? Was it just another social blunder in a long, long line of social blunders? Or had it been prompted by some darker motive?

Sherlock knew that John had never so much as glanced at the thumb drive with the information he’d evidently prepared with painstaking care. Hating Mary for shooting him certainly wasn’t preposterous, and subsequently building a case against her was understandable. But had he nurtured that hate for five years? John wasn’t so egotistical that he thought Sherlock had been yearning for him all the while, his confession notwithstanding, but there was a possibility that he’d cultivated his antipathy and waited for an opportune moment.

Two days ago they’d confessed that they loved each other. An hour later they weren’t even speaking. And John’s heart still burned with anger.

Mary was smiling at John. "Now what was that?"

"I missed you," John said.

Sherlock had said he’d fallen in love with John a month or so after they’d moved in together. For whatever reason, John hadn’t responded in kind, and now he was glad he hadn’t.

He’d fallen in love with Sherlock the day after they’d met.

"I missed you too," Mary said, and leant in to kiss him.

In two days he’d begun to think of Mary with more gentleness. They were suited in so many ways. Their tastes were similar in food, in furnishings, in music. She made him laugh. They were still sexually compatible. She was patient with him, far more than he was with her. They’d built a life together. And then there was Nora.

The thought that he’d nearly thrown all that away terrified him, made him feel ill, and everything that had always annoyed him about Sherlock came rushing back to his memory, overwhelming whatever affection he still clung to. His unending supercilious behaviour. His rudeness. His cruelty. His slovenly habits, aside from his personal hygiene. His total disregard for John’s feelings. And his sly manipulation. That, above all.

How could he love someone like that? He was deluded, wasn’t he?

No more.

He grinned at Mary and kissed her forehead. "Let’s go home."

* 

That night, he deleted every one of Sherlock’s texts unread, then blocked his number.

*
John ripped off a used length of sanitary paper from the examining table and launched it at the waste bin. "Whoosh."

Fann Cheong came in bundled up for the outdoors, voice recorder in one hand, stethoscope tangled in the other. "Right, here's one for the books. I just had to explain to a twenty-eight year old man that the condom goes on the penis only and does not get stretched over the testicles as well."

"Oh, Christ. Well, on the upside, I'll bet sex is going to be a lot better for him from now on."

"Twenty-eight, John. Where was he during his sex ed classes?"

"Probably wanking in the loo."

Fann laughed. "Maybe. Are you done?"

"Yeah, last one was a no-show."

"Want a lift? It's freezing outside. Think it might snow."

John shrugged into his coat. "That'd be great, thanks." He strolled down the corridor with Fann and waved goodbye to the receptionist. "It was so busy today I didn't get a chance to chat with you. How was it while I was gone? Did Colleen manage all right?"

"Oh, it was fine, no problems at all. You were in an awfully good mood today – the trips must have done you good. Was that you singing a little while ago?"

"Erm…." Heat crept into John's cheeks. "Maybe. Billie Holiday. It's been stuck in my head all day. Sorry, I didn't think I was that loud."

"These Foolish Things," Fann said. "Thought so. Don't apologise. I like when you're happy, even if your voice isn't a patch on Billie's."

"Nobody's is," John chuckled.

"You could have taken another day, you know. I can't remember the last time you had a real holiday."

"I don't know if you'd call it a holiday, actually," John said. "We worked. After a certain point there isn't a lot to do, though, and you sort of have to let the machine take over." That was true enough. Once they'd found the PA's body, speed had been essential: Sherlock had called Mycroft, Mycroft had called his people, and within an hour, the house had been crawling with quiet, serious types and Sherlock and John had been on their way to the airport after Sherlock had extracted a promise from Mycroft that Sherlock would be allowed to examine the PA's body. Sherlock had been occupied with his phone on the flight and Mycroft had met them at the airport and whisked Sherlock away. One of Mycroft's ominous black cars complete with silent driver had given John a lift home. It had been a lonely ride, and he hadn't heard from Sherlock since.

_Doesn't mean he never wants to see you again. He's just busy, that's all._

Fann was right – it was painfully cold outside. John appreciated the warmth of her car. They chatted about work for the duration of the ride, and only when they pulled up to John's house did Fann return once more to the subject of John's brief leave of absence. "You really do seem refreshed, John. I wish you would take more time for yourself."

John cocked an eyebrow. "You're sick of me, is that it?"
"Yes. Get out of my car." Fann smiled. "I mean it, you know. You prescribe holidays for stress relief, but you never take your own advice."

"I'll try," John said. "Thanks for the lift, Fann." He climbed out of the car and went in, grateful for the warm air that greeted him. "I'm home!"

"Hi!" Mary called from the kitchen. "You hungry?"

"Starving!" John hung his coat and went into the kitchen. Mary was whisking something in a bowl, and Nora had her homework spread out on the table, but appeared to be doodling instead of working.

"Hi, Daddy."

"Hello, my love." John kissed Nora's cheek. "Oh, you're so warm. Come here, let me –" Teasingly, he put his cold hands on Nora's cheeks.

Nora let out a squeal and wriggled away. "You're cold! You're like icicles!"

"Come on, warm me up." John sat and pulled her onto his lap. "Ah, you're toasty."

Obligingly, Nora pressed her hands to John's ears. "Better?"

"Mm, not yet. I need immediate administration of kisses before I succumb to hypothermia." John puckered his lips. Nora planted a loud kiss on John's mouth and rubbed her nose against his. "I think it's working. One more." He hugged Nora tightly and kissed her fragrant hair. "Did you have a good day at school?"

"It was all right."

"Just all right? That won't do. It should be brilliant, extraordinary."

"Friday will be better," Nora said confidently. "Miss Price and Mr Beale are taking us to the Natural History Museum. We're going to see the new dinosaur exhibit."

"Ah. That will be brilliant. I expect a full report." John turned his attention to Mary. "How about you – good day?"

"It was brilliant and extraordinary," Mary said, and poured eggs into a glass dish.

"What's that?"

"Bacon and veggie frittata."

"Ew," Nora said.

"You've never even had it," Mary said. "It's fluffy and delicious, and you're going to love it."

"Hakuna frittata," John said, and Nora giggled. "Your mum's right, you'll love it – it's like scrambled eggs."

"Are you going to invite Sherlock for dinner?" Nora inquired.

John hesitated. "Erm…well, would you like that?"

"Yes."
"Sherlock is very busy," Mary said, "and I don't want you to be disappointed if he doesn't turn up, Nora. But if he does come, you'll address him as Mr Holmes. Politely. Understood?"

Suddenly entranced with the notion of witnessing a conversation between Sherlock and his daughter, John stifled a grin. "I'll ask him, but we won't be upset if he doesn't come, okay?"

"Why wouldn't he come?" Nora wanted to know.

"Because he's busy," Mary said sharply. "I just told you, Nora."

"He is," John agreed. "But we'll worry about that another time." After all, there was no guarantee that Sherlock was amenable to spending more time with him, no matter how cordially the last forty-eight hours had gone. "All right, finish your homework." He lifted Nora from his lap, amazed at her solidity for such a little mite.

Mary set the bowl in the sink. "Actually, this should be ready in twenty minutes, so clear your things up and wash your hands. You can watch television until it's done. John, could you set the table?"

"Will do." John helped Nora stack her books and took them into the living room, then came back to wipe the table down. "You okay?" They hadn't talked much since John's return; she'd had a long day at work yesterday and had come home and collapsed, and they'd only exchanged a quick greeting and a kiss earlier in the morning. John examined her face; she seemed tense and unhappy, and she punctuated her movements with a little more sharpness and clatter than usual.

"Yeah, I'm okay. Actually…actually, I'm a little off-balance."

"Yeah, I noticed," John said. He went to the cupboard and took out the plates. "What's going on?"

"Trish's lawyer called me this morning, and said that the transfer of funds should be complete by early next week. Faster than he expected, obviously."

John was jolted back into reality. He'd hardly given Mary's inheritance a second thought while he was with Sherlock, except for that hesitation about telling him. Why he'd hesitated anyhow….

"It's a little…weird, all of it," Mary said. "I've been thinking about it a lot."

"I can imagine," John said. "Do you need to do anything? Go back and sign –"

"No, I did that in St. Louis. It's all done. I'm going to arrange for the house to be paid off as soon as the transfer takes place. And then…I really do want us to go away for a while, John."

"But Nora's still in school."

Mary sat at the table and let her shoulders slump. "I know. But we can…arrange for something. I'll drill her, arrange for tutoring – I don't know. We'll work something out."

"We don't have to decide this minute, do we?"

"No, not this minute. But soon. If we do, we'll all need vaccinations, maybe visas – I'd like to move on it quickly."

John watched the lines between Mary's brows deepen. "Vaccinations? Where, exactly, are you planning to take us, Mary?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying it won't be a bad idea to be prepared. Is that wrong?"
"Hey, hey. Calm down. I'm curious, that's all."

Mary gave a long sigh. "I know. I'm sorry." She laughed a little. "You'd think that inheriting money would make you carefree."

"You're in a terrible hurry," John ventured jokingly. "The money's still going to be there, won't it?"

Mary gave him a tight smile. "I just want to sort it out."

"Okay —" John's phone chirped with a text.

**Lord Moran mysteriously disappeared. Coincidence? SH**

John grinned. **Definitely a coincidence.**

_Can you come back to Whitehall tomorrow night?_

_I have to pick Nora up from swim first. 730 OK?_

**Perfect. I'll be waiting. SH**

John slipped his phone back into his pocket and noticed Mary watching him. No, not exactly – her eyes were unfocussed, her mouth downturned. "Hey," he said, catching her hand. "It's going to be okay."

Mary grasped his hand and smiled. "I know. I know it is."

*

Chapter End Notes

The case in the flashback is lifted almost wholesale from ACD's _The Adventure of the Six Napoleons._
Chapter 15

Chapter Notes

Effusive thanks to Kimberlite and vilestrumpet, for beta and britpick. You are the very best. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

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August 2014

"Oh, what? What, for God's sake?"

Mycroft said nothing – just stood there, all pinstripes and paisley, a tiny smirk on his fat face, his umbrella resting against his shoulder in what he probably imagined was a jaunty fashion. Sad, so sad.

"I'm busy." Sherlock swung the door shut, but not before Mycroft stopped the swing with the flat of his hand. "Are you deaf?"

"I heard you perfectly well. Are you going to make me stand on the doorstep or are you going to invite me in? I'm not particularly keen on your landlady hearing every word of our conversation."

"Mycroft, nothing you have to say is of any interest to her whatsoever."

"Nevertheless."

Sherlock lifted his eyes to the ceiling, exhaled loudly, and opened the door wider. Mycroft stepped inside and, as always, scanned the flat rapidly, distaste puckering his mouth. "Sit," Sherlock said. "I imagine that trek up the stairs must have left you breathless."

"Why, thank you, brother dear," Mycroft said, and seated himself in John's chair. Well, scratch that. Wasn't John's chair anymore. "How have you been?"

"Busy, as I said. Is that all?"

"I've not seen you for nearly three weeks, nor have you replied to my voicemails or texts. The MOD is interested in the information you obtained on Baron Maupertuis, and the Under Secretary's office has asked me to expedite matters. They would like you to pay them a visit this week, preferably within the next two days. It's an hour of your time, Sherlock. From the looks of things, you're not otherwise occupied."

"An hour," Sherlock snorted, slumping into his chair. "The last time I 'visited' the MOD, I was there for nearly twenty-two hours." He glanced down and saw a stain on his dressing gown. "Bugger." Cobalt hexammine chloride, or maybe just a curry stain. Desultorily, he licked his finger and rubbed
"They value your skill set, Sherlock. I don't see why you insist on being obstructive. Besides, it's in
your best interests as well. If that was indeed the last piece of Moriarty's network, then I should think
you'd be keen to have the matter sorted for good."

"I'm not keen, as it happens," Sherlock said. "If the MOD's so desperate for information, let them go
to Vučić themselves. Not that he'll tell them anything."

"Hence the necessity of your visit, brother dear," Mycroft said with a costive little smile.

"Oh, Christ. I'll think about it."

"Thank you." Mycroft made no move to leave.

"Something else?" Sherlock inquired.

Mycroft looked round with slow, deliberate ostentation, appraising and clearly finding things
wanting. "This flat is filthier than usual. I was going to have a cigarette, but I'm afraid the place
would be consumed in moments. Would you like me to have a hazmat team called in? It's not a
problem."

"Oh, how droll." Sherlock glanced indifferently at the mess. "I'll get to it."

"One of these mountains of rubbish might slide and crush you. Think what the papers would say."

Any number of witty rejoinders about Mycroft dying in an avalanche of cream tarts and Hobnobs
came to mind, but Sherlock wasn't in the mood to spar. "I'd be dead, so I doubt I'd care."

Mycroft narrowed his eyes. "Your hair needs cutting, and your nails haven't been trimmed for three
weeks."

"Two."

"Twenty days."

"Eighteen."

"I do hope you haven't taken to storing your urine in jars in the refrigerator," Mycroft said, and
paused. "Though honestly that wouldn't be too much of a leap."

Ennui filled Sherlock's legs with sand. He stretched them out and wriggled his toes. "Mycroft, if
there's nothing else —"

"What is wrong with you, Sherlock?"

Sherlock stopped in the middle of a yawn and glared. "There's nothing wrong with me."

Mycroft lifted one eyebrow and drew his handkerchief from his breast pocket. He dabbed delicately
at his nose and sniffed like an eighteenth-century dandy. "Is this self-neglect an indication of some
greater issue?" He focussed his gaze on the spot on Sherlock's dressing gown.

Sherlock fought the urge to cover the stain with his hand. "What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"Are you brooding, brother dear? A bit self-indulgent of you, isn't it?"
"Mycroft –"

"I saw John's blog. Or rather, your entry on John's blog." Mycroft shook his head and clicked his tongue. Patronising sod. "I did tell you."

Sherlock stood. "Haven't you got a country to run? Emerging nations to overthrow? Well done for getting so much accomplished in a day that you've got time to sniff around after me, I suppose."

"That's what happens, Sherlock," Mycroft said. He stayed firmly planted in his chair. "Ordinary people. They fall in love, get married, have children, cars, mortgages. They move on."

"It was a joke, you nosy arse. Get out." Sherlock marched to the door and flung it open.

Mycroft finally took the hint. Ponderously, he rose to his feet and strolled to the door. "I realise the truth is painful, little brother, but perhaps next time you'll think twice before such unwitting transparency. And do try to remember you're the one who decided to leave without so much as a word to him. I think if you'd asked, he'd have followed you to the ends of the earth."

Sherlock clamped his lips together and drilled Mycroft with a glare.

A soft sigh issued from Mycroft's chest, and his shoulders slumped. He got down two stairs and turned back. "You know where to find me. May I tell the Under Secretary that you'll call on her?"

In answer, Sherlock slammed the door. "Arsehole."

Stalking to his bedroom, Sherlock shrugged out of his dressing gown and left it puddled on the floor half in and half out of the room. He stripped out of his t-shirt and pyjama bottoms and surveyed himself in the mirror for a long moment.

Eleven days he'd stayed in London after the leap from Bart's roof. Enough time to plan with Mycroft, notify his parents, catch up with the homeless network. Enough time to watch John grieve.

Not an hour passed in those eleven days when he hadn't had to forcibly refrain from texting John.

---Not actually dead. Taking Moriarty's network down. Meet me at this address now. SH

Would he have come? Sherlock thought so. Oh, he'd have been angry, no question, but the anger would have dissipated quickly enough in favour of the work. It always did – John was sensible that way. They'd have had a marvellous time....

In his mind's eye, Sherlock had seen the yawning bore of a long-range rifle, and tiny red dots dancing over John's major organs. Funny – John was safer with Moriarty alive. Moriarty would have maintained the game, knowing how valuable John was to Sherlock. It was a terrible mistake, allowing him to know that, but what was done was done. Alive, Moriarty might have held off the worst. But dead, he'd give no further orders, and John would be no more than a moving target.

It couldn't be borne. And so he'd left without a word.

On the twenty-seventh day after his jump, en route to Kolkata, he'd received three texts.

---I know you're not there. I just can't

---Please Sherlock.

---I miss you.
And then a fourth.

---Mycroft, if you kept his phone, just fuck off.

Sherlock had laughed, then the breath had left his body in a single choking gasp. He’d curled up on the narrow seat of the slow-moving train redolent of warm bodies and sweet milky tea and stared out at the sweltering night, a hot, hard sphere of misery burning in his chest.

And of course he hadn’t told John any of that. Even when there had been an opportunity, what was the point?

Sherlock turned away from the reflection of his naked body. He rifled through his bureau drawers, found underwear, drew them on. He slipped into tracksuit bottoms, a loose shirt, a hoodie, socks, trainers. In the back of his bottom drawer, beneath stacks of pyjama bottoms, his kit: thin rubber tubing, five sterile needles, one of his mum’s silver spoons, stolen long ago. Who said he wasn’t sentimental?

He tucked the kit into one of the capacious pockets of the tracksuit bottoms and fetched his phone, finding Lady Smallwood’s number.

---On my way. I’ll be in touch. SH

There was a new text from John. Sherlock hesitated, then opened it.

---We’re back! Great time on Sex Holiday, VERY FUNNY. Anything on?

Sherlock stared at it, absorbing the words. Then he deleted it, pocketed the phone, and left, locking the door carefully behind him.

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"So what happened?" John asked, drawing on a pair of nitrile gloves. "Did he run, or did someone snatch him?"

Sherlock neatly caught the pair of gloves John tossed his way. "Steenie Moran? Oh, he fled, no question. The house is dark, staff is gone, no evidence of a struggle, his phone is still in the house according to Mycroft – likely he’s got a burner phone for emergencies. I think our friend in the luxury SUV tipped him off. Someone must have been watching the house. That, or Mycroft trusts his own people far too much."

"Don’t tell him that."

"Please. First chance I get, John. Get your mask on." Sherlock adjusted his face mask and goggles, then lifted the dress from its hook and laid it out on the porcelain table. He clicked on the high-powered light, drew off the plastic, and bent close to the dress, seeking out irregularities.

John let out a low whistle. "That’s quite sexy."

"That’s the back of the dress, John."

"I knew that," John said a bit too quickly. "I like that low-cut back stuff."
"Mm." Sherlock unzipped the dress, turned it inside out, and began to cut out the silk lining.

"So does Mycroft want you to look for Moran?"

"Yes, but this is a priority, along with the autopsy. Evidently Lady Howe was a non-practicing Jew, but her will stated that she wanted to be buried in accordance with Jewish law if possible. It's not entirely possible, obviously, but Mycroft doesn't want to delay any longer. He's become terribly shirty about her wishes. Bag this, please." He removed the lining from the dress and handed John the outer shell.

"At least she had a plan in place." John slipped the green dress into a large evidence bag. "We haven't got one."

"Who cares?" Sherlock turned the light onto the autumn-green lining. "Once you're dead, you don't have to worry about it. All that fuss is for the people left behind, anyhow. Let them take care of it."

"While they're grieving? Don't you think it's a weight off their mind to have it sorted beforehand?"

"If that sort of thing matters to you."

John chuckled. "I'll bet Mycroft's got his funeral all spelled out. Carriage hearse, four black horses with plumes, choir at Westminster, Archbishop of Canterbury officiating."

Sherlock gave a snort of laughter. "I'll have him cremated without ceremony and scatter him in Croydon, just to spite him." He spied a hair on the silk and tweezed it off. "Black."

"Georgina's hair was black. The PA."

"So it was. Would you grab some bindles?"

John went to the equipment table. "Why aren't you doing the analysis here?"

"I prefer Bart's. They just got some new spectrometers, too. Keen to try them out."

"Molly still there?"

"Yep."

"How is she?" John handed Sherlock a pharmaceutical bindle and dropped a glassine envelope on the table.

"Pregnant." Sherlock dropped the hair into the bindle and sealed it. "Bag that."

"Wow. She must be happy. Greg too."

"I suppose so."

John bagged the bindle and labelled the envelope in his tidy block handwriting. "Well. Give them my best. Oh, hey. Erm...Nora was...that is, I was wondering if you'd like to come to dinner. At the house. Nora's anxious to see you again."

Sherlock hesitated. "Is she? I can't imagine that she remembers me at all."

"You're not exactly easy to forget."

Sherlock met John's eyes, but John's gaze slid away quickly. "I see. Well, I'll certainly give the
matter some consideration. Will Mary be there as well? John's gaze came back to Sherlock, and Sherlock waited, tensing internally for a scathing retort. You think I'd bring her anywhere near you after what you said about her?

"Yeah, of course." John's eyes crinkled in a smile. "I think it'd be good. Don't you?" His voice held the faintest plea.

Still a sore spot. It would always be a sore spot. Sherlock could pick at the scab, nearly healed by the sound of things, or he could gauze it over and preserve the peace. "That would be lovely. Let me check my calendar. Oh, God, talking of calendars – Mycroft's team brought the PA's stuff, and there's a date book in it. It's on the table in the corner. Will you start looking for anything pertinent to the events surrounding the murder? Hers or Lady Howe's." He couldn't quite bear John's eyes on him any longer.

"Sure." John went to the table and snapped on a light. "Hey, Sherlock?"

Sherlock tweezed a long red hair from the fabric. "Yes?"

"It's – I've really had a good time, the past two days."

Oh.

He was still, waiting for the inevitable follow-up. But I've got a life, a wife and a kid, and I can't keep doing this. It was fun, though, just like old times. Sudden misery clawed at his insides. "Yes," he said softly, forcing the word out. "Like old times."

"Yeah." John let out an abbreviated chuckle. "So…if you want to keep doing this, after this case I mean, then I'd be – I'd like to. If you're all right with that."

Sherlock's stomach knotted even tighter. He opened his mouth to speak – That's fine, John, I realise you've got obligations - and then stopped short. What had John said?

"Of course, if you'd rather not, that's okay."

"If you'd like that, John, I'd be delighted." Sherlock closed his eyes. Oh, God, he had heard correctly, hadn't he?

"Great." John's voice smiled.

Sherlock opened his eyes and saw that John had pulled down his mask and was grinning at him – a large, rather silly, and entirely marvellous grin. Sherlock felt an idiotic grin stretching his own mouth and he supposed John must have seen his eyes through the goggles and over the mask, because John's grin got even bigger in response.

"We'd better get on with it," Sherlock said at last.

"Yeah. Yeah." John turned back to the table, rummaging through the PA's possessions. "The two of us against the world," he murmured.

Sherlock's heart stuttered into double-time before settling. Oh, John.

"Right, okay – here it is." John found a large leather book and began paging through it. "Lots of stuff here."

"Concentrate on late November to her last entries in December. Notes, receipts, appointments –
anything at all." Sherlock scraped up some amber-coloured crystalline particles from near the waistband and bagged it. He found more black hair, more red, and some blond. "Dry cleaners, John. Check for a dry cleaner's receipt."


"It's got a smooth weave. Very crisp." Sherlock checked the gown's label. "McQueen. Good, John. Date?"

"Erm, December sixth. Two –" John made a funny choking noise. "Two hundred seventeen pounds. Two hundred pounds? To clean a fucking dress? What's it made of, gold?"

"No, it's silk gazar. Couture cleaning is expensive. There's hand beading on this thing, and the entire dress is hand-sewn as well. You can't just toss it in the washing machine."

"Excuse you. Christ, that's crazy." John laughed. "Still, maybe I'll find that out for myself."

"Hm?" Sherlock bagged another blond hair.

"Oh…Mary got me this coat for Christmas. Harrods, cost the earth, I take it."

"I saw it," Sherlock said. "It's very smart."

"Thanks. Funny thing about that…." John trailed off.

"Yes?"

"I just haven't had a new coat for a while, that's all, much less a spendy one like that. I think Mary thinks I'm cheap. Maybe I am."

Sherlock smiled. "I don't recall many extravagances on your part. And you did always worry about money. Perhaps 'miserly' is a better word."

"Golly, thanks," John replied drily.

"Would you meet with the flight crew who transported Georgina to Ireland? They'll be in London for a few days." Sherlock paused. "If you have time, that is."

"I'll make time."

"Thank you, John." Sherlock bent closer to the gown's lining. He scowled, then took off his mask and sniffed at the silk.

"Don't do that." John came closer, the date book in his hand. "She used the same sort of pen throughout."

"Any evidence of stress around the date of the murder?" Sherlock sniffed again.

"Not obvious. Hey, quit sniffing at it. You're not meant to be that close to it."

"It's not the aconitine, it's the perfume," Sherlock said. "Annick Goutal…Heure Exquise. Smelled it on her the night of the murder, but it's…it reminds me of something, I can't think what."

"Mind palace?"
"Not worth it right now," Sherlock said, and replaced his mask. "Still, maybe later. Put that book down and make yourself useful. There's a ton of hair that needs bagging."

"You're the one who wanted me to look through it," John replied mildly, and set the book down. Sherlock beamed down at the silk lining of the gown that would yield up its secrets soon enough. Once more, the game was on.

*

It was half eleven when Sherlock trudged upstairs, hungry and a bit cross. John had had to leave at ten, Molly hadn't been at Bart's, and the security guard was an utter moron, had no idea who he was, and wouldn't admit him into the lab. Resentfully, Sherlock had taken his leave and picked up sausages and chips to eat at home. He tossed the bag of evidence on the kitchen table, tossed the greasy food bag next to it, and tossed his coat over a chair.

A metallic click sounded from near the front window. Sherlock froze.

"Mr Holmes." The standing lamp went on, illuminating a tall, burly man in his mid-fifties. Sparse blond hair, extensive facial scarring on the left side, one eye showing the milky glaze of inflicted blindness. He held a Ruger Mark II in one hand, a sleek cylindrical suppressor at the bore.

Sherlock recognised the voice, as well as the distinctive smell of West Ireland mud and sheep dung. "I wasn't expecting company."

"Don't worry, I'll not be long. Hands up, thanks."

Sherlock lifted his hands in the air. There were several items close to hand that he might employ as weapons, but he was too far away from the man to use anything effectively. The forceps, perhaps, flung with speed and precision. He moved closer to the table. "I'm not armed."

"Yeah, I know. Have a seat." The man stepped a few paces closer.

Sherlock pulled out the kitchen chair and sat. "Nice of you to drop in all the way from Derry, though I don't know if that necessarily excuses the breaking and entering."

"You're funny. Right, so." The man flung something light into Sherlock's lap. Sherlock looked down and saw a long white plastic cable tie. "Be a good lad and secure your right wrist to the chair, will you?"

_Hell._ Sherlock picked up the cable tie and stared at the man. The forceps were almost directly behind him.

The man stretched his arm out. The star-shaped bore of the suppressor yawned, waiting to discharge. "Don't dawdle. Right now."

Sherlock placed his wrist against the metal bar of the chair and looped the plastic round it, fitting the end into the lock. He pulled. "Happy?"

"Tighten it. Stop fucking around."
Damn it, damn it. Sherlock obediently tightened the loop. "There."

"Right, now keep the other hand down." Sherlock complied, and the man stepped behind him and swiftly fastened another tie round his left wrist. The man moved round the table and out of kicking range, seating himself in Sherlock's chair. "Now. We're just going to have a chat, yourself and I."

"Oh, pity. I thought you were going to treat me to another dose of Halothane. I don't know you well, of course, but I'm fairly certain that unconsciousness is preferable to –"

"Shut the fuck up," the man said amiably enough, but the gun stayed pointed at him. "I'm just here to deliver a message, Mr Holmes, and here it is: drop the case. Stay out of this one."

Had his hands been bound together by a single zip tie, Sherlock could have broken free with ease. Having each wrist tightly secured to a depressingly solid length of unbreakable metal was another matter. "Did Lord Moran send you?"

"Does it matter?"

"It's an academic question, I reckon," Sherlock conceded. "Still, you can't blame me for being curious. Bad accident, was it, with the eye? Firing pin after a hard recoil? Must have hurt."

The man smiled. "Not bad. They said you were sharp."

"Who's that?"

"I'm still not a bad shot, even with one lamp, Mr Holmes. Might shatter your thigh, or your kneecap, and your leg's fairly dodgy already."

Sherlock tilted his head to one side and tugged futilely at the plastic tethering his wrists. "How do you know that?"

"Watched you – yourself and Dr Watson."

"That's really interesting," Sherlock lied blandly. "It's not Lord Moran after all, is it? No, he's got enough clout to pull someone local to do the job if he wanted to threaten me. You actually are a sheep farmer, aren't you? Dirt under your nails, sheep dung on your shoes – and on your clothes, too, not sure if you knew that or not. But this was important enough, or well-paying enough for you to drop the lambing or shearing or whatever to go to Derry and then follow me to London. Clearly you're accustomed to handling high-powered weaponry although that ruined eye doesn't say much for your common sense. So – former soldier or hired gunman. Low on funds judging from the state of your boots, so obviously you were eager enough to accept this assignment. But who would hire someone like you, I wonder?"

"I should have brought gaffer tape for your mouth," the man said glumly.

Sherlock shrugged. "You're not the first person who's said that."

The man rose heavily to his feet. "All you have to do is drop the case, Mr Holmes, and I won't bother you again. But if I have to, I don't mind telling you there's a lot of money in it for me." He went to the door. "Give me a head start before you yell for help."

Sighing, Sherlock squirmed, managing to turn the chair. "I'm not going to yell."

"That's a sensible lad," the man said approvingly. "Now for your own safety, Mr Holmes, listen to me. Your safety, and your friend's."
"Friend?"

"Ah, now, don't act the maggot, Mr Holmes. You know who I mean. Dr Watson."

Sherlock frowned. "Dr Watson hasn't worked with me in years."

"He was with you in Derry, so."

"Yes," Sherlock said. "He was." He was silent a moment, staring at the man's hands. A tickle of suspicion began in the back of his brain. "Not a soldier. A soldier of fortune. Isn't that right?"

The man smiled.

"Who sent you?" Sherlock demanded, twisting at the cable ties.

"Don't make me come back now, Mr Holmes."

"No. Wouldn't dream of it," Sherlock snapped, and watched the man leave. He heard his heavy tread descending the stairs, and then bumped the chair close to the table. Awkwardly, he stood, hunched over, and groped for the triangular file dead centre on the table. Thumping down again, he sawed at the tie until it snapped free, then worked on freeing his other wrist.

"God damn it," he muttered, rubbing his sore wrists. The tickle was there again. Thin evidence. Very thin. Not Lord Moran – he had more money than he knew what to do with, and wouldn't hire a one-eyed sheep farmer to do his dirty work. Not the man in the luxury SUV – he hadn't seen Sherlock and John, unless he'd had surveillance on them in the house – unlikely, considering the careless storage of the PA's body. One of Eamonn Reilly's friends – that was a vague possibility, but Reilly was dead and Kerstin Tresler appeared to have nothing left to lose.

"Hell," he said softly.

Still rubbing his wrists, he went to his coat and found his phone. He fired off a text.

*Dinner sounds fantastic. Name the date. SH*

He set the phone down next to his now-cold sausage and chips, and for once in his life, desperately hoped that he was wrong.

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Chapter End Notes

The blog entry referenced in the chapter is [here](#). Shorter chapter this time, but I'm headed out of town and I wanted to get something out so there wouldn't be too great of a gap. All comments will be answered as soon as I can get to them. And if you've left a comment and/or kudos on this piece - thank you so very, very much. They mean the world to me. :)
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Grateful acknowledgment to kimberlite and vilestrumpet, my most excellent beta/britpick team. Thank you!

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25 April 2020

"Oh, for fuck's sake."

He should have known that anything more complicated than boiling bags was going to be too bloody much, but he'd needed something to do with his hands, and he hadn't cooked a real dinner for ages and pesto sounded like just the thing on a chilly night, but since when were they out of pasta? They never ran out of pasta, it was a fucking staple, the sort of thing that was always in the pantry along with sugar and tea and rice.

Well, a snotty voice replied, its tone and timbre disturbingly familiar, maybe if you'd bothered to do the shopping this week, John, rather than sitting on your arse and sulking –

"Fuck. Off," John muttered, and banged the pantry door shut. "Nora? Nora, put your shoes on." He grabbed his jacket from the hook beside the door and strode out of the kitchen. "Nora?"

"What?" Nora sat on the sofa, placidly watching Julie Andrews magically restoring order to an untidy nursery.

"Put your shoes on, we've got to run to the shop for pasta."

"I'm watching Mary Poppins."

"Well, pause it. It's only going to take a few minutes."

Nora scowled at him. "I don't want to go. I want to watch this."

"Come on. I've got the sauce going already."

"I don't want to!"

John snatched the remote from the sofa and turned the movie off. "Get upstairs this minute and put your shoes and coat on. Now!" He jabbed a finger at the doorway. "Now, I said."

Nora dragged herself up, her lower lip trembling. "I was watching," she said reproachfully. Her eyes beneath the fringe of dark-blonde hair brimmed with tears.
"Go." He followed Nora to the stairs. "Oh, never mind. I see you didn't hang your coat or put your shoes away." Tight-lipped, he held her coat out and got her shoes on in the blink of an eye, then took her by the hand and headed to Tesco Express. Nora's reluctance made her body heavy, and John resisted the urge to bark at her again and tug her along. "Nora, pick your feet up when you walk."

"I am."

"No, you're not, you're –" John sighed loudly, then halted in his tracks. He bent and put his hands on Nora's shoulders. "Look at me. Come on, look at me, love." Nora kept her eyes fastened on the ground and shook her head. "Sweetheart…I'm sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"But you did."

John's heart twisted painfully. Probably every parent was unreasonably biased when it came to their kids' emotions, but he would swear, hand to heart, that Nora, like any person grown or small, had her unlovely moments. Still, emotional manipulation wasn't one of her less desirable characteristics. She wore her heart on her sleeve and pointed it out if one failed to see it – an amazing personality trait considering her parents. "I did," he said, "and that was wrong of me. I'm having a bad day, but that doesn't mean I need to take it out on you. I'm sorry. Will you forgive me for that?"

Still staring at the ground, Nora nodded.

"Can I have a kiss?"

Sniffling, Nora wound her arms around John's neck and planted a damp kiss on his cheek. Stricken with remorse, John swept her up and hugged her fiercely.

Fuck Sherlock, and fuck this whole fucking mess.

"I love you, darling. I do. I love you very, very much." Snuggling his daughter, John carried her to Tesco and let her pick out the fluted campanelle that she liked rather than the usual vermicelli and chose some banoffee pie as a treat for afters. Hand in hand, they skipped home, and opened the door to an acrid smell. John dropped her hand and rushed into the kitchen. "Oh, God –"

The pesto was burnt, as was the saucepan.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," John chanted, and took the sauce off the range. "Fuck."

Nora came in, her coat still on. "Did you burn it?"

John ground his teeth. "Yes. I did."

"Are you cross again?"

Cross? No, darling. I mean, I'd like to hurl this across the fucking room and then maybe bash it over somebody's head, nobody in particular, mind you, but I'm not cross at all. Why do you ask? He counted to ten. "A little, but only at myself. This was entirely my fault." He managed a smile.

Nora considered him for a moment. "Okay," she said at last. "It smelled nasty anyhow."

"It certainly does now," John conceded.

"Can I go finish the movie?"

"By all means," John said. "Off you go. We'll just have marinara." He plugged the sink and ran
some cool water, then put the saucepan in, wincing at the sizzle.

The front door opened and closed. "Hello! John? What's that smell?"

"In the kitchen!" John called, but he was drowned out by Nora's exclamation of greeting. He left the pan to cool and found a jar of pasta sauce, then fished another saucepan from the pantry.

Mary came in, taking off her coat and slinging her bag over one of the chair backs. "What's that smell?"

"A sad attempt at pesto sauce," John said, and banged the saucepan on the range a bit harder than necessary.

"What happened?"

"I didn't do the shopping this week and we were out of pasta, so Nora and I went to get some, and I left the fucking gas on, Mary. What do you think happened?"

"It was a simple question. Don't bite my head off." Mary opened the fridge and took out a bag of carrots and a container of hummus.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, all I'm doing is snapping and apologising lately." John uttered a despairing little laugh and twisted the lid off the jar.

Mary put her food down and turned to the sink. Quickly, she ran water into the new saucepan and set it on the range. She gently prised the jar from John's hands. "Sit down, love."

"No, I'm –"

"Sit." Mary steered him toward a chair and gave him a little push. "I'll do it." She began preparing the sauce, ten times faster than John would have done. "Look, I didn't want to pry, but you've been on edge the past few days. You haven't been eating much, and I know you haven't been sleeping well."

"Really?"

"Yeah, really." Mary pulled cheese from the fridge. "Do we have pea pods?"

"Freezer, I think."

"I'll mix those in." Mary kept her back to John as she worked. She knew him well enough to realise that hand-holding and mushy face-to-face urging wouldn't get him talking. "Is it work?"

"No." Twenty Questions wasn't an option. John took a deep breath. "It's...Sherlock and I had a falling-out."

Mary went still for a moment, then turned. "Oh, John...you know what he's like...."

_You're fucking right I do._ He met Mary's steady gaze for a moment, then dropped his eyes. It was too complicated, too ugly. He could never explain it, obviously, but he had to tell her something... some version of the truth. "I just – I got tired of his bullshit. All of it. I'm fucking sick of it, I'm done."

He groped for something else. "Besides, it's too much. I have to start being an adult. Sherlock doesn't know the first thing about that. Hell, I almost got my head shot off last month, and I have to stop being so bloody selfish and start thinking about you and Nora."
Oh, you pathetic fucking liar.

Mary's forehead laddered in consternation. "What happened, love?"

John opened his hands. "I woke up. That's all."

"You don't want to talk about it."

"I really, really don't." He met Mary's eyes full-on. Even if Sherlock had been dead wrong this time, it was still true that Mary understood secrets, and not prodding at sore and sensitive spots.

Sherlock had made John doubt Mary with his clumsy, ham-fisted attempt to drive a wedge between them. And for a moment John had fallen for it, like an idiot. As if Sherlock hadn't ever tried to pull the wool over John's eyes a hundred times before, and mostly succeeded. Half the time it wasn't even for anything useful, it was just Sherlock proving for the millionth time that he was the cleverest person on the planet. Well, fuck him and fuck his pathological need to be brilliant. Had those few moments of...of intimacy they'd shared even been genuine, or was that just Sherlock proving that he was capable of bedding John? John hadn't been too slow to miss the occasional sly dig Sherlock had taken at John's sexuality. And he'd texted and phoned John repeatedly the past few days because he couldn't bear not having the last word or a chance to gloat.

But ultimately, the fault was John's. Because he'd been so addled for so long, so fucking blind, that he'd almost lost sight of his family. His real family.

Even casual flatmates didn't pretend to be fucking dead and then traipse around the world on some self-imposed secret mission.

"Okay," Mary said, and turned back to her cooking.

By the time dinner was ready, John had pulled himself together a bit. He set the table, got Nora to wash her hands and face, and participated in the meal, forcing himself to smile and laugh and ask about Mary's day. It was all right. He'd be all right.

"I'm off tomorrow, so I was going to head out for a late coffee with Lucie and Meg," Mary said, clearing the table. "Unless you'd rather I didn't."

"God, no," John said. "Don't be silly. Go. I'll put the sprog to bed."

She peered closely at him. "You sure?"

John nodded and pulled Mary into his arms. He kissed her neck, the little tender spot behind her ear, and breathed in the warm scent of her skin. "Love you."

"I love you."

When she'd gone, John made quick work of getting Nora into bed, though he took care to read an extra story to her in penance for his surly mood. He trudged downstairs and turned on the television, idly flipping through channels until he found horse racing. Good enough, sort of exciting. Got the blood moving a bit.

Watching with wandering attention, he allowed his thoughts to drift back to a few weeks ago: Sherlock vulnerable (finally, he'd thought then, finally) and their mouths exploring each other, their naked bodies fitted together, so oddly familiar and so new at the same time, and he'd felt each breath, his and Sherlock's both, and the darkness and quiet had enveloped them and it had been so, so very....
His hand went to his pocket, found the smooth oblong of his phone, and then retreated.

On the screen, a horse surged into the lead, faster and faster, toward a win.

*

He didn't need to tidy, he knew that. Sherlock had never given a damn about fussily neat interiors. Just the same, John darted about, uncharacteristically nervous, plumping pillows and straightening up surfaces that had already been straightened up, because there was nothing left to do. He'd come home early, stopping at a bakery for a little chocolate layer cake, and prepped the salad and lasagna, the sort of food Sherlock liked when he was in eating mode. (Of course Sherlock was still ridiculously fit, the bugger – if John didn't know that Sherlock handed his clothes down to his homeless network after a couple of years' wear, he'd swear that Sherlock was still wearing the same stuff he'd had on the day they'd met.)

Once he'd put the lasagna in the oven to bake, he'd cleaned up a bit in the kitchen and front room, set the table, then headed upstairs for a shower. He'd shaved twice and changed clothes three times, settling on a dark blue jumper over dark blue jeans, partly because the jumper was a favourite, and partly, pathetically, because it was a bit slimming. Turning sideways in the mirror, John had contemplated his silhouette with some chagrin. Fuck it – if Sherlock was going to say something about the weight he'd put on, John would come back with a crack about his dodgy knee. Mycroft had never risen to Sherlock's baiting, but John wasn't above a smart-ass remark or two. Oddly, the thought had cheered him. He'd laughed, put on the soft moccasins Mary had bought him for his birthday, and gone downstairs to resume work on his adhesive versus sutures piece for the RAMC Journal.

Mary and Nora had come home an hour later, as John, having got four hundred decent words down, was rapidly flicking through television channels and finding nothing. "Smells grand," Mary had commented after Nora had kissed John and thundered upstairs.

"Yeah. Should be good, I think. I didn't overdo the garlic this time. Oh, fuck, I forgot the –"

"I got it," Mary had said,brandishing a long paper parcel. "I'll slice it and put it in the oven when he turns up. You look nervous."

"A bit," John had admitted. "It's been a while."

"It'll be great. I'm off to wash away the day and get Herself cleaned up as well. She couldn't stop dancing about and asking me all sorts of questions about him." Mary had wiggled a farewell with her fingers and gone up, leaving John alone with the telly and the scent of cooking lasagna.

Now John stood in the centre of the front room, looking this way and that for stray bits of ordinary house-mess. As he moved to fan out the magazines on the coffee table, the doorbell shrilled once. John jumped like a scalded cat. "Jesus Christ –"

Relax, for fuck's sake. It's just dinner. You've spent two days with him, you've both been on your best behaviour, he's not about to say anything stupid at this date...with luck...oh God....

This rousing sermon delivered, John hastened to answer the door.

"Hello, John."
Oh God. Thank Christ that certain involuntary physical reactions – a sudden quickening of the heart, for instance – were invisible. "Hey. Come on in."

Sherlock stepped inside and thrust a bunch of white flowers at John. "For Mary," he said, then helpfully added, "Flowers. And, erm…some wine." He showed John a bottle of red.

"Oh, that's perfect," John said, taking the flowers and wine. "We're having lasagna. Here, let's have your coat."

As Sherlock slipped out of his coat, John caught a faint whiff of some nice-smelling cologne or aftershave, and saw that Sherlock's hair was just a bit damp. Heartened that Sherlock might have primped a bit himself, John hung the coat on a hook and gestured toward the front room. "Why don't you have a seat? I'll find a vase for these."

"Thank you." Sherlock seated himself on the sofa and folded his hands on his lap, looking oddly like a candidate for a job interview. He peered round the room. "You've added some things."

"Yeah, I guess everybody eventually fills their space, no matter how big it is. I'm just sort of relieved we're past the stage of prams and nappy bags and wheeled toys everywhere. Occasionally there's an explosion of stuffed pets, but mostly they're contained." He stuck his nose into the blooms. "That's lovely. What are these?"

"I have no idea," Sherlock replied. "I pointed to them and the shop assistant wrapped them up."

"Okay," John chuckled. "Back in a moment." He went into the kitchen and set the wine on the worktop, then hunted for a vase that would fit the armload of creamy white blossoms. Did they even have a vase? Neither of them were really the cut-flower sort, though Mary would sometimes bring in loads of lilacs from their tree in the back garden. What did she put them in, though? John opened cupboards, but nothing looked appropriate.

The three of them hadn't been in the same room in four years. No, that wasn't right – he and Mary had gone to Mrs Holmes' funeral (They'd missed Mr Holmes', but had sent a card). That hadn't even been a conversation, really. Sherlock had thanked them for coming, and they'd both murmured politely in return before being shuffled off by other mourners, not to mention Mycroft's frosty expression. Christ, what if this had been a huge mistake? Even if Sherlock had admitted he was wrong, there was nothing to stop him from dredging up the past, in front of Nora no less –

"Sherlock!"

John nearly tripped dashing into the front room, skidding to a halt just in time to see Sherlock rise and greet Mary with kisses on both cheeks. "Mary. You're looking very well." Sherlock glanced at John and smiled a little. "Much more fit than John, I must say."

"Oh, go on, now." Mary flapped a hand at Sherlock in burlesqued modesty. "You're looking rather wonderful yourself. You haven't changed a bit." Still holding one of Sherlock's hands, she stepped back and looked him up and down. "We didn't really get to chat at your mum's funeral. I'm so sorry, Sherlock. She was lovely, truly she was. Always so kind to me."

John looked away for a moment. She mightn't have been if she'd known you shot him, darling.

"Thank you, Mary." Sherlock turned to John. "No vase, John?"

"Erm – no. Couldn't find one." John stepped into the room, feeling as if he were intruding upon a private moment. "Look what Sherlock brought for you, Mary."
Mary gasped. "Stephanotis! Gosh, masses of them! Sherlock, you are naughty. Thank you so much." She took the flowers from John and buried her nose in them as John had done. "Mmm. Isn't that gorgeous? I'll go find something for them. Would you like a drink, Sherlock?"

"I'm fine, thanks." Sherlock sat down again and resumed his folded-hands pose, looking expectantly at John.

John stuck his hands in his pockets. "You didn't have any trouble finding the place?"

"I've been here before," Sherlock reminded him.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know. I just thought – never mind. Nora should be down in a bit. She was really excited that you were coming. Her birthday's in a few weeks and she hasn't so much as mentioned that, but your visit was a state occasion."

"She'll be ten."

"That's right."

"Mycroft gave me a book on communicable diseases on my tenth birthday," Sherlock remarked, a faint smile on his face. "Lots of illustrations."

"Well, I hope you don't mind if I don't send him an invitation to her party."

"God, no. Mycroft detests children anyhow."

Mary came back with the flowers, now neatly encapsulated in a heavy cut-crystal vase. "There we are." She set them on the coffee table and straightened, smoothing the skirt of the pale-grey dress that skimmed her figure prettily. "Thanks again, Sherlock, they're glorious. Did you bring that wine?"

"Yes. Hope you drink red."

"It's perfect. I've pulled the lasagna out and the bread's in the oven. We should be ready to go in just a moment. Nora!" Mary called. "Come on down, love, we're about to eat!" She smiled at them both. "Want to bring the lasagna in, John? I'll get the salad and vino. Sherlock, have a seat anywhere – we don't stand on ceremony."

John followed Mary into the kitchen and grasped the lasagna pan between two oven gloves.

"He looks good," Mary commented softly, opening a drawer and pulling out the corkscrew.

"Yeah. Yeah, he hasn't changed a lot. 'Course, we only saw him a couple of months ago, he didn't look much different then, either."

"The light's back in his eyes," Mary said, and scooped up the wine and salad and left the room.

John carried the lasagna to the dining room and set it on a trivet. "Lasagna à la Watson. Spinach, sausage, and a ton of cheese." He lit the candles on the table and turned the lights down.

"Fantastic," Sherlock said. He'd taken the wine and was easing the cork from the bottle.

"You used to gorge on this stuff after a case, remember?" John chuckled, then cleared his throat. "Nora! Dinner!"

Nora peeked into the dining room, then took a tentative step in. She wore John's shrunken jumper and a short tiered skirt of purple velveteen. She stared at Sherlock but said nothing.
"Nora," John said gently, "come say hello to Sherlock." He reached out, caught her shoulder, and drew her close. She nestled shyly against him. "Sherlock, you remember Eleanor."

Sherlock set the bottle down and inspected Nora for a moment. He put a hand out. "Hello, Nora."

"Hello, Mr Holmes." Nora gravely put her little hand into Sherlock's.

"Is that one of your father's jumpers?" Sherlock inquired. "It looks vaguely familiar."

Nora nodded. "It got small in the wash."

"I think it suits you," Sherlock said, and let her hand go. He returned to the task of getting the cork out of the bottle, succeeding just as Mary emerged from the kitchen with a plate of warmed bread. "Nicked this from Mycroft's cellar. He'll never miss it." He poured wine into glasses and handed them to Mary and John.

"We should toast," Mary said. She gave Nora a glass of water and lifted her own glass. "To old friends."

"To old friends," Sherlock echoed.

John's stomach did a funny flip-flop. "Cheers," he said, and took a large swallow of what was probably the loveliest wine he'd ever drunk. He wondered how much the bottle had cost. "Well. Let's dig in, shall we?" He served generous portions and everyone began to eat.

"Mm. That's fabulous, love," Mary said. "You've outdone yourself."

"Thanks. Slaved all afternoon over it." John smiled.

"It's perfect," Sherlock said. He kept his eyes on his food. "Did you make any progress with the flight crew?"

"I don't know if you'd call it progress," John said. "I did talk to the pilot, though. He said Georgina hardly said a word to him and she was the only passenger. There wasn't a flight attendant or co-pilot – he was alone. He did say that a man met her in a black SUV, though. Unfortunately, he didn't get a look at the man's face or recall the make of the vehicle – it was dark and raining and visibility was poor."

Sherlock frowned. "That's annoying. Still, could be the same SUV from the Moran house."

"No idea who it might have been?"

"Not yet. Nobody in the immediate vicinity owns a black Mercedes SUV, and according to the intel Mycroft's people collected, the Morans keep themselves to themselves when they're at the house."

"Morans?" John asked. "Plural?"

"Ah – good thinking, John. Brother-in-law, perhaps? Certainly anyone familiar enough to call Lord Moran 'Stenie' has some degree of intimacy with him. We'll look into it."

"Nobody's found him, then? Lord Moran?"

"Nope," Sherlock said. "So much for Mycroft's grade four surveillance." He broke a piece of bread and buttered it.

"And no news on the –" John checked himself before uttering the word 'autopsy.' He wouldn't mind
explaining it to Nora, but not during dinner – though to be fair, she seemed to have a high tolerance for gory details. Her latest ambition, to hear her tell it, was to be a doctor – specifically, a surgeon. Still, some explanations were best reserved for after mealtimes. "The lab results for Lady Howe?"

"Still waiting. Molly said she'd call me if anything unusual came up. I don't expect anything but the aconitine."

"What's aconitine?" Nora piped up – softly, though, as if she expected to be ordered out for some indiscretion. She wasn't accustomed to company, John realised – neither he nor Mary really hosted gatherings at their house. When Mary socialised, it was with the people from Tim's surgery, and John wasn't much for gadding about – getting to a racecourse now and then was about as exciting as things got for him in the intervening years between his adventures with Sherlock.

Though he hadn't even thought about racing in a week or more, he realised.

"It's a poison," Sherlock said, "derived from a plant, the family Ranunculaceae. It's also called Wolfsbane. It causes the ventricles to –"

John cleared his throat loudly. He glanced at Mary, who was silent, but whose eyebrows were climbing toward her hairline.

"Oh." Sherlock pressed his lips together. "Sorry."

"To what?" Nora inquired.

"I'll tell you about it some other time," John said.

"Sorry," Sherlock said again, addressing Mary. A slight flush had appeared on his face.

"It's okay," Mary replied, and patted Sherlock's hand. "Another time. Actually, Miss Nora wants to be a surgeon, so between you and John, she'll be keen to hear lots about the sort of work you do. Appropriately edited for now, obviously."

"I don't want to be a surgeon anymore," Nora declared. "I want to be a pathologist."

Amused, John turned to her. "You do? You know what a pathologist does, don't you?"

Nora gave him one of her exaggeratedly patient expressions. "They work out what makes people sick, Daddy. In a laboratory."

"It's a very useful profession," Sherlock said.

"I should take her to meet Molly." John took another sip of the wine.

Sherlock nodded. "I'm sure Molly would be delighted."

"How is she?" Mary asked. "You still keep in touch with her? I saw her at your mum's funeral, but we didn't have a chance to speak."

"Oh, yes. She's very well, still blissfully married to Lestrade."

"They're expecting," John informed Mary.

"Isn't that lovely!" Mary exclaimed. "Give them my best."

"Of course," Sherlock said, and took another bite of lasagna. "Really excellent, John."
John beamed. "I'm glad." If all this was more than a little weird, it was also fantastic, in its way. It wasn't as if he wasn't aware that he missed Sherlock's presence in his life – he'd merely pushed it to the back of his mind – but having him at their dinner table, chatting, convivial, relatively at ease, filled him with simultaneous gratitude and regret. Sherlock's absence, their rift, had created an unhealed wound far worse than the time he'd spent thinking Sherlock was dead. At least then he'd made an attempt to move on. The past few years had festered, embittering him, making him small and mean. He wished he had the opportunity to make a different choice, but lacking that, at least he could try to make up for lost time.

"Oh," Sherlock said, "forgot to mention: I had another visit from our Halothane-toting friend from Derry."

John furrowed his brow. "What are you – oh my God! What happened? When?" He turned to Mary. "That…excitement I told you about, the day we got to Derry."

"Are you okay?" Mary asked.

Sherlock sniffed disdainfully. "Perfectly all right. A bit of enforced detention, nothing more. Got a good look at him this time, though. Late middle age, blind in one eye, sheep farmer."

John blinked. "A sheep farmer."

"Mm. Apparently his post-mercenary retirement occupation," Sherlock said.

"Moran?"

"I thought that initially. Makes sense if he didn't leave Derry. But importing him from Ireland, where he had to go to some effort to either conceal or obtain a weapon? Doesn't follow."

"Did someone try to kill you?" Nora asked.

"Not this time," Sherlock replied. "Just a threat. Nothing to be concerned about."

"Actually, it is," Mary said. "Someone threatening you is always a cause for concern." She looked at John pointedly. "Isn't that so?"

John glanced at Nora before answering. She was rapt, staring at Sherlock with large eyes. "Erm…well, yes, you're right. It's never a good idea to ignore a threat. You've got to be careful – not everyone in this world has good intentions." He gave Sherlock a pleading look. Help me out, I've got an impressionable kid here.

"Ah. That's true, John. One shouldn't be entirely careless. The world's full of violence, lies, and treachery. Sometimes I'm amazed we've lived as long as we have."

John sighed and covered his eyes with a hand. "That's not –"

"Of course, your father's more than capable of taking care of himself. I've lost count of the number of times that he's kept me out of danger as well."

Nora's eyes got bigger. "When?"

"Another time," John said. "Anyone for seconds? Not too much, we've got to save room for cake."

The rest of dinner went reasonably well. Mary made decent social chatter, inquiring after Sherlock's quotidian life and health and sharing an anecdote about work. John chimed in with a few of his own,
and the topic of death threats was, as it were, laid to rest. John served cake and coffee, and let Nora have a tiny cup, a great treat for her. They moved to the front room, and presently Mary sent Nora for her bath and instructed her to bid Sherlock good night.

"Good night, Mr Holmes," Nora said. "It was nice to meet you again."

"You've got a birthday approaching, haven't you?" Sherlock asked.

Nora nodded. "The seventeenth of February. Mum says we might go on holiday."

"That sounds lovely. Good night, Nora." He gave her a little wave and watched her retreat. "I should be off as well."

"Already?" John asked, disappointed.

"I want to get to Lady Howe's dry cleaner first thing tomorrow morning," Sherlock said. He cleared his throat and blushed slightly. "I've also got an appointment with an orthopaedic surgeon."

"Good," John said.

"What's wrong?" Mary wanted to know.

"He's got a dodgy knee, but he's been a stubborn bugger about getting it looked after," John said.

"I reckoned I couldn't have you nagging me every time I saw you," Sherlock said, and got to his feet. "Could I use your loo?"

"Yeah, use the one in our bedroom – Nora's probably in the one at the top of the stairs," John said. "End of the hall, the light's on the right, loo's on the left."

"Thanks," Sherlock said, and went upstairs, slower than usual.

"Ah, I see. Bit of a limp," Mary said.

John turned to Mary. "What was that about a holiday?"

"What?"

"What Nora said. About going on holiday for her birthday."

"I told you I wanted us to take a holiday."

"In five weeks? When were you going to let me in on that?" It wasn't a dreadful notion; Nora hadn't been abroad for more than a two week spell, and of course her outlook required broadening at some point, but he couldn't understand Mary's insistence, and besides, he'd just begun to reconnect with Sherlock. He didn't want to upset what still felt like a fragile balance between them.

Mary folded her arms and crossed her legs. "John –"

"I said I'd think about it," John said, pitching his voice low. "I didn't agree to it."

"Is that a fact? Well, I didn't agree to you running about with Sherlock again. You just decided to do it, out of the blue."

"Is that a problem for you, Mary?"
Mary sagged, sighing. "No. Not really. I'm glad you're seeing him again – you've been happier, I can tell. Maybe ease up on the death threat chat, though."

"Yeah, sorry about that." John rubbed his eyes. "Look, I don't want to fight. It was a nice evening. Let's just…de-escalate. We'll talk about the holiday. I promise."

"I don't ask you for a lot, John." Mary put her hand on his.

"I know. I know." John kissed her cheek. There was something about that, wasn't there? They'd never asked much of each other, after their first estrangement. There had always been something disquietingly careful and invisible between them, as if each of them realised that any excessive demand would be too much. They were generally considerate, polite, conscious of not overburdening each other. At least it felt that way, thinking about it.

Sherlock's voice resonated against the walls as he descended the stairs. "When? Both of them?" He paused halfway down, silent for a moment. "Yes, obviously I know what it means. I'll be there tomorrow at ten. Meet me this time – I don't fancy standing round and having some idiot of a guard toss me out on my ear. Right, okay." He rang off and stuffed his phone in his pocket, a frown furrowing his brow and wrinkling the top of his nose.

"Everything okay?" John asked.

Sherlock shook his head. "That was Molly. They found atropine and pralidoxime in Meredith Howe's blood. It was –" Sherlock gestured toward the inside of his arm. "It was administered intravenously. A sizeable amount, apparently, but not enough to save her."


"It doesn't add up," Sherlock said. "Why would she have that at the ready unless she knew about the aconitine? Then why poison her at all? And then she ran – no, John, I don't think it was Georgina."

"Who, then?"

"I don't know." Sherlock took his coat from the hook and shrugged his arms into the sleeves. "I'll text you. I think we need to investigate the racecourse again."

A flush crept into John's face. Mary didn't know about the racing. "Yeah. Text me." He and Mary got up to see Sherlock off. "Do you want a lift home?"

"No, I'll get a taxi. Thanks all the same. And thanks for dinner." Sherlock bent and kissed Mary's cheek. "Lovely to see you again."

"You too, darling." She hugged him. "Thank you for the flowers and wine. Good night."

Sherlock shook John's hand. "I'll be in touch."

John gave Sherlock a brief nod and savoured the pressure of his hand. "Okay. Good night."

The door closed behind Sherlock, and Mary went to the coffee table and gathered up the flowers. "I think I'm going to put these in the bedroom. They smell so good."

"They smell expensive," John joked. "What did you call them?"

"Stephanotis," Mary said, heading upstairs. "I'll be back to help you clear."

"Okay." John went to the dining room and began to collect the soiled plates and cutlery. He finished
the last of the wine in Sherlock's glass and closed his eyes, letting the taste linger on his lips.

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Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

So many thanks to Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet for amazing beta and britpick.

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25 April 2020

"Mr Holmes, my name is Judith Delafield. I'm calling because someone – one of my employees – is attempting to sabotage my reputation and I need your help to discover who it is. I'm willing to pay you to expose him or her and bring them to justice. Please call me as soon as—"

Delete.

"Hey, Shezza, it's Billy. Haven't seen you about and I just thought –"

Delete.

"Hi. It's me. Molly. Erm, we found bits of vitreous china embedded in Jimmy Holzer's scalp. So… hope that helps. Erm…I've got some news, sort of big news, so call me when you've got a moment. 'Bye."

Noted. Explained reason for missing toilet tank lid. Nearest thing to hand as Holzer was likely fishing stash of heroin from tank at time of murder. Molly's news unquestionably regarding Lestrade. Delete.

"Hello, darling. Your dad and I were just having a chat and we were saying it's been ages since the four of us had a nice dinner together, so we thought we might come up weekend after next. I'm sure Mikey will have some idea of a –"

Delete.

"Mr Holmes, it's Rebecca from Jeeves. We've got your clothes ready for delivery – just let us know what time is most convenient. I'm here until six – call or text 020 7235 1101. It's always a pleasure working on your wardrobe! Hope to hear from you soon. 'Bye!'"

Noted. Saved. Though he doubted the sincerity of the sentiment.

"Good afternoon, Mr Holmes. I have a situation of the utmost delicacy that cannot be discussed over the telephone. Please phone me back at –"

Delete.

"Sherlock, why in God's name are you not answering your –"
"Mr Holmes, my name is Karl Wainwright. I think it would be advantageous to both of us to work together. I am a professional psychic who –"

Sherlock hissed out a sigh and flung his phone to the sofa. Stupid, so stupid. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d checked each message so intently, but on the off chance that John called from a phone Sherlock didn’t recognise…or relayed a message through someone else….

Stupid. After four days it seemed abundantly clear that John had no intention of ringing Sherlock from his mobile or any other phone, nor did he plan to send a message through an intermediary. And apparently he was blocking Sherlock’s calls and texts.

A week, Sherlock told himself. Once a week had passed without John contacting him, he’d find John and speak to him in person. Only a face-to-face meeting, seeing him, hearing his voice, would mend the rift. Perhaps Sherlock would simply grab John and kiss him breathless. That might be a good opener. Though John might just punch him.

Briefly, he’d considered having John abducted in order to swoop in and rescue him, thus compelling John to realise how much he needed Sherlock. He’d even gone so far as to make discreet inquiries with Angelo, who still had plenty of underworld contacts.

"Sure, I know a few fellows who can help you with that," Angelo had said. "Who do you want grabbed?"

Sherlock had contemplated the menu in front of him, though he knew it by heart. "John Watson." A prolonged silence had forced Sherlock’s head up. "What?"

"I thought he was your best mate."

"He is. Well, he’s actually not speaking to me at the moment."

Angelo had given him a look of mingled pity and confusion. "You sure?"

Heat had flooded Sherlock’s cheeks. "Actually, never mind. I’ll have the chicken piccata, please."

Moronic idea. Kidnapping didn’t frighten John any longer, if it ever had. Kidnapping Nora would have frightened him and he’d be grateful for her rescue, but if John ever found out that Sherlock had been behind it, he’d never forgive Sherlock and would probably want to murder him for good measure. So that was out. No, face-to-face confrontation was the only way they’d sort this out. How, Sherlock wasn’t sure.

His phone pinged with Mary’s ringtone, and he started, shocked, before diving to answer it. Mary, calling him? "Hello?" Maybe John was with her. Maybe he’d challenged her, demanded an explanation, and they’d hashed it out and she was phoning him to concede. Maybe –

"Sherlock? It’s Mary. I’m outside. Can I come up?"

Sherlock could scarcely hear over the savage thundering of his pulse. "Are you alone?"

"Yes."

He swallowed. "Right. Come on up." He hit the buzzer and opened the door, watching as she came
up the stairs. It was too dark to meet her eyes, but she moved steadily, with purpose. He stepped aside to let her in and closed the door.

Mary scanned the flat and then faced him, her eyes betraying nothing. "Have you got a few minutes to chat?"

"Yes. I'll take your coat." He took the scarlet wool coat from her and hung it on a hook. She was dressed casually, neatly, in cream-coloured cord jeans and an oversized Aran jumper. She held her shoulder bag close and kept her grey scarf wound round her throat. "Sit. Would you like some tea?"

"No, thanks." Mary took John's chair and sat straight-backed, waiting.

"That's a pretty scent," Sherlock remarked as he took his seat. His heart still hammered wildly.

"Oeillet Bengale."

"Expensive."

Mary's mouth twitched on one side. "Yes." Her eyes bored into him, faintly challenging now. The slight betrayal of emotion centred Sherlock a bit. Other people were meant to be off-balance. That was good. Manageable. "What brings you here, Mary?"

A real smile appeared on Mary's face, though it didn't reach her eyes. "You saw the burns."

"What burns?"

Mary gave a small mirthless laugh. "Touché, I guess. You know, you're not as good an actor as you think you are."

"Neither are you," Sherlock retorted. "If you're going to shoot me, just take the gun out of your bag and do it." Wordlessly, Mary opened her handbag and took out a small Ruger, placing it on her lap, safety on. Sherlock stiffened, and an icy finger of genuine fear traced the length of his spine. He didn't have anything even remotely comparable close to hand, and he couldn't match her speed. "John might find my murder a bit suspicious."

"I saw you notice at the funeral," Mary said. "What I can't understand is why you were stupid enough to say anything about it."

"Maybe I don't fancy keeping your secrets for you when you're too careless to conceal them properly. How did you hide the burns, incidentally?"

"I work for a plastic surgeon," Mary said. She leant back, regarding Sherlock with cool composure. "He's heartbroken, you know."

"At least you know why," Sherlock said. His pulse still fluttered uneasily. "Is that why you're here? To tell me John's heartbroken?"

"I came to talk some sense into you," Mary replied. "To come to an agreement."

The most unhinged notion implanted itself in Sherlock's brain: John had told Mary about their sexual indiscretion and they'd agreed to some sort of compromise. "An agreement about what, exactly?"

"You admit that you fucked up, Sherlock. You're not perfect – you make mistakes now and then. Maybe your eyes aren't quite what they used to be. Whatever clues you gathered to reach that
erroneous conclusion, you admit that they were long shots, that you made them up, something. You convince John that you were wrong."

Sherlock curled his fingers round the ends of the chair arms. "In other words, you want me to lie to John."

"Essentially, yeah."

"I think I'll leave that to you. You're so good at it."

"Don't be such a hypocrite," Mary said coldly. "You're no stranger to lying to him when it suits you." Sherlock opened his mouth to equivocate, but she barrelled on, relentless. "You have no idea what your leaving did to him, how much he suffered while you were trekking around the world on your stupid secret mission." She slid a hand diagonally across one thigh, producing a whispering rasp against the texture of her trousers. "More than anything, he wanted you back. I knew that. I was okay with it. It was the biggest condition of our relationship, but I was okay with it, because I loved him – and besides, you were dead." She let out a bitter chuckle.

"I apologised to him," Sherlock said. "He forgave me."

"Yeah, he told me about that," Mary said, with an expression that indicated she was unimpressed with the method of delivery. "You wrung a moment-of-death forgiveness out of him. Nice."

Sherlock's face burned. That was none of her business, and besides, John had forgiven him. Did the circumstances matter? He returned to his earlier point. "So you're just going to lie to him – for how long? The rest of his life? Or just until his suspicions eat away at him and he cracks beneath the strain?"

"If he has doubts, then you're to blame."

"If he has doubts, it's because you've set a precedent," Sherlock snapped.

Mary was silent for a moment. "Maybe," she acknowledged finally. "Yes. You're right." She picked up the gun. Sherlock froze, but she slid it back into her bag. A very nice bag, Sherlock noticed, expensive saddle-coloured leather with brass hardware. She closed the clasp on the bag. "You're right. Jesus Christ, Sherlock, I wish you'd stayed dead."

"You had your chance."

"Yeah, I know." Mary shook her head. "I like you. That's the problem."

Sherlock's fingers relaxed slightly on the chair arms – only slightly. Mary was calm, collected, but most intelligent assassins for hire were. "You won't kill me, because it would wound John."

"If I were to do it, now would be the best time," Mary said. "You know that, don't you? He'd grieve, he'd be remorseful, but he'd always remember that your last words to him were accusations about his wife, the mother of his child. If you're not going to let this go, Sherlock, then you need to stay away. And if you don't stay away, then I'm going to lose what affection I still have for you. And just so we're absolutely clear: if that happens, then I won't have any problem killing you. None whatsoever."

"It must be terrible knowing your hold on him is so tenuous."

Mary sighed. "You don't get it, do you? And you should, you of all people."
"Why don't you enlighten me?"

"You read whatever was on that data stick," Mary said. "Probably it wasn't everything, but it was enough to incriminate me, extradite me, put me behind bars for the rest of my life if it got into the wrong hands. That's not relevant now. What's relevant is why I left."

Sherlock frowned. "But you haven't left."

Mary held up a hand in prohibition. "Can I finish?"

"Please."

"I was tired. I was thirty-one and I was fucking exhausted. I had some money – not a sockful, but enough to live comfortably for a long time, and I came here –" She shrugged, "To lose myself, or find myself again, I don't remember anymore – it was an age ago. I retrained as a nurse, found locum work here and there, got a job at John's surgery. That changed everything. John changed everything."

Sherlock held very, very still. He'd never sought happiness, thinking it fleeting and pointless, or illusory, and so perhaps he hadn't been quite equipped to recognise or understand it when it was in his grasp. The benefit of hindsight was such, however, that he realised now what Mary was saying was purest truth: John had changed everything. And Sherlock had either taken this for granted, or pushed it away deliberately, thinking (knowing) it couldn't last. Was it possible to be more stupid? He thought not.

"It's a mistake, though – falling in love. For people like me, anyhow." Mary levelled a pointed but inscrutable look at him. "Huge mistake. I'd never really done it before, you know, so I lied my way through the first couple of months. Every little thing that went awry, I thought I'd bolt, that it was pointless and not meant to be, but...funny. I found myself wanting to be the person John thought I was."

"Because you couldn't be yourself," Sherlock said.

Mary smiled mirthlessly. "I can't remember the last time I was myself."

"I think I'm seeing the real Mary Morstan now," Sherlock said. "Sorry, no – my mistake. The real Annalise Greta Alland."

Slowly, Mary's smile dissolved. "Don't call me that again."

Sherlock crossed one leg over the other and folded his hands atop one knee. "So you shed your old life."

"That's right. And then you turned up." Her mouth tightened. "That first night, he wouldn't – couldn't stop talking about you. He was furious, absolutely beside himself. I had to stop him from going to your flat and beating you senseless. I was afraid – not for you, but for him, for myself. I thought that glamour of yours would be too much for him to resist."

"But he loved you," Sherlock said. A worm of bitter jealousy nibbled at his insides.

"Yeah. He did. So everything was okay, until the night of the wedding."

"When you learned you were pregnant."

"Yes."
“I noticed that you didn’t seem especially thrilled,” Sherlock remarked.

“’Not especially thrilled’ is an understatement and a half,” Mary said. “I was fucking horrified. We’d been careful. But John…Christ, Sherlock, you saw his face. He was ecstatic, and all I wanted was to make him happy, to keep being Mary. So I kept it. And she’s beautiful.” For the first time, Mary’s face crumpled, though she didn’t cry. “I’ve never had any real generosity in my heart before John. I’d never give anyone a single thing without counting the cost to myself. I was hollow. But then he came along, and then Nora, and I….” Mary looked away for a moment, then turned back to Sherlock. “She’s so beautiful. I’d be lost without her. We both would.”

“When did you resume your profession?” Sherlock asked. “I presume there was at least a year or two break for your pregnancy and nursing and whatnot.”

“That’s irrelevant,” Mary said, waving a hand dismissively.

“Fair enough. Why, then?” He’d meant it to sound accusatory, but the words emerged with a wounded softness that Sherlock could scarcely credit to himself. “If you love John so much, then why did you resume a life you knew he’d detest?”

“It’s not your business,” Mary said, crossing her arms. “Not even a little bit.”

Sherlock sat back and scrutinised Mary silently for a moment. At last he shook his head. “You’re afraid.”

“Oh, God.” Mary rolled her eyes. “You have an overactive imagination, Sherlock.”

“I haven’t got any imagination at all,” Sherlock said. “I’ve got data, though, right in front of me. You’re an accomplished liar, Mary, but you’ve not quite mastered it yet. Your body language – it’s the most obvious giveaway. You’ve got your arms crossed over your chest, protecting yourself. Your feet were planted directly in front of you, parallel to each other, and now they’re braced apart as if you’d like to take flight. Your pupils are dilating. There’s a muscle twitching in your right cheek. And when you were talking about Nora, you had three distinct microexpressions….” Sherlock leant forward. “Someone’s threatening her. And John, too.”

“I’m leaving,” Mary said, getting to her feet. Sherlock leapt to his feet as well; in an instant Mary whipped the firearm from her bag and pointed it at Sherlock. "Sit down."

Sherlock lifted his hands and took his seat again. "Don't be stupid, Mary."

"There's a four-pound pull on this, Sherlock. Don't fuck with me."

"Who is it? Who's blackmailing you?"

"Jesus, Sherlock, shut up."

"Someone like Magnussen?"

Mary gritted her teeth. "No. Nobody like Magnussen."

Still holding his hands out, non-threatening, conciliatory, Sherlock said, "Don't let's repeat that, Mary. I can help. I won't let whoever it is hurt Nora, or John, or you. I promised you that. I still mean it." And that was true. Even if it meant the end of him and John together, he would keep that vow. He’d pushed too hard, too fast, and yes, that had been a mistake; however, he was prepared to live with the consequences. But not the permanent loss of John, not that.
A deep sigh escaped Mary's chest. The weapon wavered ever so slightly. "I see why he loves you so much."

Sherlock froze. Did she know...had John told her about what had happened on the day of Mrs Hudson's funeral? "He's my best friend. I don't want him hurt any more than you do."

"You know what your problem is, Sherlock? You really do think other people are stupid."

"What —"

"Oh, come on. I'm not an idiot."

"I never thought you were," Sherlock said.

"Hard to believe," Mary said with a grim chuckle. "He's in love with you, Sherlock. And you're in love with him. It doesn't take a genius to see it."

Sherlock's heart thudded unevenly.

"You thought I didn't know."

"Mary...." He had no idea what he was going to say. Denial? Defiance? Guilt?

Mary shook her head. "Don't. I don't know if the pair of you have done anything about it, and even if you have, it's beside the point. Do me a favour, though – don't tell me. The point is, he wouldn't be so hurt if he didn't love you, and even if that fucking kills me to admit, it's still true. So...." She angled the gun back at his face. "Are you prepared to lie to him?"

Sherlock stared not at the small bore of the Ruger, but into Mary's eyes. Slowly, he lowered his hands. "I think I've lied to him enough."

A heartbeat passed; two. The gun didn't waver. "Then you'll have to stay away."

"The suspicion will eat at him, Mary. Even if I hadn't told him, you'd have revealed yourself eventually. And he'd try to stop you, or whoever's blackmailing you."

"He doesn't want to believe it. It's amazing, the lengths people go to in order to reinforce a conviction. He's not going to mention it, ever. He'll sweep it under the rug, because that's what we've always done, and life will go on as usual, the way it did before you came back. But Sherlock, if I ever hear so much as a whisper that you've interfered, I will kill you. It won't be surgery this time. I won't waste your time or mine with elaborate threats, but I promise you that."

"I appreciate your candour," Sherlock said.

"Just so we understand each other." Mary backed to the door and opened it. "Good-bye, Sherlock."

"Good-bye, Mary."

He waited until her footsteps receded, then went to the window. He watched her emerge from 221 and step onto the pavement to hail a cab. One pulled up almost immediately, as if it had been circling for her. She glanced up at the window, then stepped into the cab and closed the door. The taxi pulled away, disappearing into evening traffic.

Sherlock wrenched his phone from his pocket and began a text.

**John, call me immediately. Urgent, regarding Mary.**
His thumb hovered over SEND.

Surely it was all in the open now. Mary knew about them; if she suspected it before, Sherlock's silence had convinced her. Her failure to behave like any ordinary scorned or hoodwinked spouse spoke volumes about her sangfroid. Possibly he'd been wrong - perhaps it wasn't the commonality of an attraction to danger in those closest to John; perhaps it was that they declined invitations to vulnerability over and over again.

There were ways and means of following Mary undetected. Phone intercepts, hacking, the homeless network: Sherlock needn't be directly involved at all. He could gather that evidence and present it to John. John had believed him once, though it had taken a hell of a lot of convincing. He'd believe Sherlock again, in time.

He wasn't afraid of John's anger; John's anger was transient. He wasn't afraid of dying, though he'd prefer to avoid it as long as possible.

It's amazing, the lengths people go to in order to reinforce a conviction.

John had already chosen Mary over him: not once, not twice, but many times. Every day for the past six years, John had chosen Mary. Even after Mrs Hudson's funeral, he'd chosen Mary, despite his assertion to the contrary. If Sherlock hadn't opened his great gaping maw and fallen in, who knows what might have happened, but still –

Sherlock looked down at his text. Vulnerability beckoned.

Delete.

*

"Righto." Dr Roche, irrepressibly friendly and disconcertingly young (in the past few years he'd begun to notice that a good number of not totally incompetent professionals were considerably younger than himself. He wasn't sure whether to be amused or irritated by this), slapped a series of X-rays onto the illuminated view box. "As I said, this is just confirmation of what I'd expected to see, given the symptoms you've described, Mr Holmes, but I prefer to be thorough." She pointed at a section of the X-ray. "Have a look at this. Do you see that little protrusion there? That's an osteophyte, otherwise known as a bone spur. Also, if you look here, you can see that you've experienced some diminishment of the cartilage – not unusual for an active, healthy individual, but obviously it's best to nip this sort of problem in the bud to prevent further injury. So, to summarise – the knee's banjaxed, but not irreparably." She gave him a wide smile.

Sherlock didn't return the smile. "What next?"

"How much does it hurt on a scale from one to ten right now?"

Was there anything to be gained from lying to her? Probably not. "Three and a half."

"And how bad does it get?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Pain is temporary."

"That's very profound. Also not necessarily true. Give me a number."
"Seven," Sherlock replied with a scowl. "Sometimes eight."

Dr Roche nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. You can take paracetamol at the moment. No more than four grams a day if you can help it, and be sure to space it out for the sake of your tummy. I'll give you a scrip for a knee brace and some capsaicin cream as well, and we'll get you scheduled for an injection of corticosteroids." She gave him a searching look. "What's wrong?"

What was wrong was that his body was betraying him with its unreliability. The discomfort was irritating, but ultimately irrelevant. Sherlock imagined having to chase down a criminal, or run away from one, and failing, his knee giving out and spilling him onto the pavement, resulting in losing his quarry or being overtaken. Neither prospect was acceptable. "How long does the injection last?"

"Depends on the person. Usually anywhere from three to six months. If it's not effective, I'll consider surgery, but let's try some non-invasive treatments first." She went to her tablet and made some notations. "Setting up the scrips now, and we can likely get you in for the injection in a few weeks. Have you got someone who can escort you home that day, stay with you for a few hours afterward?"

"Why?"

"It's certainly not common, but it's possible that you could be a bit dizzy following the injection. It's best that you rest, and it's always nice to have a family member or friend to hand so they can fetch and carry for you." She grinned again. "Never hurts to take advantage once in a while."

Sherlock tried to picture Mycroft fetching and carrying for him and failed. He thought of calling John, but that would be too much of an imposition. "No, I haven't got anybody."

"Not a problem," Roche said cheerfully. "We'll arrange for you to rest here for a few hours. Okay, your prescription's set up, and Marcy at the front desk will get you sorted with an injection date." She put her hand out. "It was very nice to meet you, Mr Holmes. It's not often I get to treat a celebrity. Please don't let the fact that you've got an injury bother you – it's mostly ordinary wear and tear, and a perfectly normal part of the ageing process."

*How the hell would you know? You just got out of nappies.* "Thank you," Sherlock replied, and shook her hand. "Are you particularly interested in cephalothoracopagi?" He pointed to the engraving on the wall, an anatomical lithograph of skeletal conjoined twins. "The Hunterian has some marvellous specimens."

Her smile dimmed a bit. "Yes, I've seen them. Wonderful collection." She guided Sherlock to the door. "This way. I'll see you in a few weeks, Mr Holmes."

Sherlock arranged his appointment, two weeks and four days away, first thing in the morning and then caught a cab, instructing the driver to head to Bart's. He sat back, allowing himself to brood. Stupid traitorous bodies; today was the first obvious step, he supposed, along the long, slow, inevitable slide into decay. Not that he'd ever expected to live long enough to see dodgy knees, grey hair, a bad back, any of that rubbish. Soon enough he'd have to have his trousers let out to accommodate continence pants – no, the day that happened, he'd check out.

He sighed, thinking of his father. He'd been mostly hale and hearty well into his eighties and then had declined with astonishing speed, diagnosed with congestive heart failure and dead three weeks later. Maybe that wasn't a bad way to go – no dreary lingering, but enough time to get one's affairs in order and say goodbye.

*Goodbye to whom?* There was John, of course, if they kept to their current trajectory…no, unlikely. Besides, John drank too much and would probably give himself a rage-induced stroke within the
next twenty years. And then Mycroft. Statistically, Mycroft would likely go first, and even were that not the case, they had very little to say to each other. Neither had ever been a dab hand at sharing their feelings, and the occasional outbursts of fraternity usually culminated in embarrassed silence and one or the other leaving abruptly. Well, millions of people flourished alone, either by choice or necessity. He'd manage – he always did. He didn't particularly relish the thought of dying alone in 221B only to be discovered weeks later when the smell drifted out of the house, but he'd be dead and wouldn't give a damn, so what did it matter?

As the cab pulled up to Bart's, Sherlock's mobile buzzed with a text. He paid the driver with one hand and caught up his phone with the other.

Skiving off work today. Where are you?

Sherlock smiled. Bart's.

I'll see you there in 20 minutes. Don't leave without me.

I'll be here. Sherlock tucked his phone back into his pocket and headed for the pathology lab.

Molly, sipping from a travel mug, waved at him blearily. "Morning."

"I need a favour," Sherlock said without preamble, and slipped a glassine envelope from his pocket. "I need DNA analysis on this."

"What is it?"

"Hair." Specifically, blonde hair that he'd obtained from one of the pillows in John and Mary's bedroom the night before. "I need a comparison analysis against the hair collected from Lady Howe's dress lining."

"Yeah, okay." Molly took the envelope and tucked it into the pocket of her lab coat. "I'll send it out with this afternoon's stuff. It might take a few weeks – they're backed up."

"That's fine." Sherlock could have chivvied Mycroft to expedite the process, but he realised that he wasn't especially eager for quick results. He hadn't begun to delve into the murky waters of what might happen should his suspicions prove correct – after all, someone else might have known that he and John had travelled to Derry, the hotel where they'd stayed, the particular room Sherlock and not John occupied, and subsequently sent the sheep farmer and former soldier of fortune to threaten Sherlock. "Mind if I work a bit?"

"Sure, come on."

Sherlock noted Molly's greenish complexion as well as the smell of lemon balm tea drifting from her mug. "Morning sickness already?"

"Ugh, don't talk about it." Molly waved a hand. "All I can eat is rice and plain chicken and this stuff. Greg does acupressure on my hands after I throw up, but it doesn't always help. The nausea usually passes after a few hours, though." She slid her ID card through the reader, and the lab door clicked open. "The powers that be gave me a respirator with organic vapour cartridges while I'm working with Formalin, so that's nice, at least. Right, you go ahead and get started – I've got to throw up again." She disappeared through another door.

Sherlock stared after her for a moment, then got to work, sifting through his prepped material and readying it for the spectrograph. He'd planned to spend the entire day in the lab, but as John was headed to Bart's, he'd have to change his plans, a not unpleasant prospect. He could organise and do
some data collating while he waited. He picked up a plate with green silk fibres and contemplated it.

Perhaps he'd ask Mycroft to expedite the DNA analysis after all. He didn't like the little needle of suspicion that pricked at him; there was every possibility that he was wrong, and what if his own personal prejudices were interfering with his process? He hadn't been able to shed the low-grade anxiety that had gripped him since the sheep farmer's visit. Once he sorted this question out – one way or the other – everything would be easier.

*If it is true, it's hardly a surprise, is it? Their orbits were too close. Collision was inevitable.*

"Christ," he muttered, and shook his head angrily. He bent and focussed.

Molly returned, looking more cheerful. "Better."

"Ah. Good." Sherlock scanned her up and down. "Is there, erm…is there anything I can do to help? Something to eat? Cold compress?"

"Nope, I'm good. Thanks, though." There was a knock on the door, and Molly went to answer it. "Oh my gosh – John?" She drew John into an embrace, and John hugged her back tightly. He caught Sherlock's eye over Molly's shoulder, and offered him a bashful grin.

"Hi, Molly. God, it's good to see you."

"You too!" Molly held John away, then glanced back at Sherlock uneasily. "Are you – did you know that…ah….

"I invited him," Sherlock got up and sauntered toward them as best as he was able. *Should have stopped for paracetamol.*

"Oh! Oh, that's – are you two together again? Erm, working together, I mean?" A deep flush suffused Molly's cheeks.

John shuffled his feet. "Yeah, I reckon so. You look great. Hey, Sherlock told me you were expecting. Congratulations. To both of you."

"Thanks." Molly beamed, rubbing her belly. "It's early days still, but we're excited and everything's going well so far. Bit of tummy trouble, but that's all."

"I'm sure it'll be great." John beamed back, including Sherlock in his smile. "I didn't know you were working. I didn't mean to bother you."

"Not at all," Sherlock said. "I'll get to it tomorrow. I've lost my ID but I'm sure Molly will leave word, won't you, Molly?"

"Sure." Her eyes moved back and forth between Sherlock and John as if they were playing tennis. "Gosh, it's like old times, isn't it?"

John ducked his head and then grinned at Sherlock again. "Yeah, it is a bit."

"Why don't you two come over for dinner on Saturday night?" Molly asked. "I've been begging Sherlock for months but he keeps dodging me. Maybe if you come as well, John."

Sherlock hesitated for an instant. It was too close, possibly, on the heels of last night's dinner, and even as thrilled as he was to have John near him again, his tolerance for social excursions was low at the best of times. Still, it mightn't be long until John decided to part from him permanently, so
perhaps he had better make the most of his time. God, what the hell was he doing? "Sounds lovely. John?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I'd like that." John stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I can come back, if you want. If you're busy."

"No, no." Sherlock snatched his coat from a nearby table. "Come along, John. We've got to take advantage of your truancy. See you tomorrow, Molly. Wear your respirator."

"I will. 'Bye." Molly waved cheerfully.

They went out and found a cab in short order. "8 King Street, St James's, please," Sherlock said as he climbed in.

John followed. "You've still got that thing."

"What thing?"

"Cabs. You can always get a cab in seconds. Nobody else can do that. I've never worked that out."

Sherlock blinked. "Hadn't noticed."

"Of course you hadn't." John sat back and looked out the window. "Thanks for coming over last night."

"Certainly," Sherlock said. "Thank you for inviting me."

"Nora was excited about it," John said. "Her first grown-up dinner party."

Sherlock groped for something appropriate to say that wouldn't inadvertently insult John. "She was very well-behaved."

"Yeah, she's not much of a chatterbox," John said. "She observes, though. Like you." He smiled.

"I doubt I was ever that quiet."

"Yeah, probably not." John chuckled. "Anyway, it was a good time, thanks again. Mary was glad to see you as well."

"It was lovely to see her." Not entirely a lie.

"She promised Nora that they'd look up some stuff on you together – the old blog, some news articles."

"Good. Mary can help her avoid the tabloids."

"I know. 'He Made Me Wear the Hat.' 'Shag-a-lot Holmes.'"

Sherlock snorted. "Nothing could be further from the truth." He saw John's smile grow strained and hurried to change the subject. "You know you don't have to go to Lestrade and Molly's for dinner. I mightn't. I'm not certain that I can bear two hours of the pair of them cooing and allogrooming. Puts me right off my food."

"No, I'd like to. Mary's always telling me I should socialise more, so…." John shrugged and turned back to stare out the window.
Sherlock looked down and saw John's hand on the seat between them. What if he were to simply cover it with his own – would that be an extraordinary liberty, or would John appreciate it?

Oh, God, don't be an idiot.

He could head off a good deal of unpleasantness by instructing the DNA diagnostic centre to ignore the blonde hairs and focus on the dark, or by simply ignoring or concealing the results himself, should they prove incriminating. The past several days had been –

Blissful.

– very pleasant indeed, and he didn't want to alienate John. On the contrary; his companionship was –

Inestimable.

– agreeable after such a long absence.

But if Mary was guilty? What then?

The cab rolled to a halt, and Sherlock swiped his account card and thanked the driver. He got out and joined John, who was staring up at the façade of Christies.

"What's this, then?"

"A little digging into Lord Moran's art activities. Come on." Sherlock strode in and politely demanded to see the managing director, shamelessly wielding an ingratiating smile and his own name. In moments a small, tidily composed man in an indigo suit and a mustard-coloured tie emerged from a gleaming doorway, his arm outstretched in pre-emptive greeting.

"Mr Holmes, delighted to meet you. Emerson Guthrie. I'm a great fan of yours." He grasped Sherlock's hand and pumped it twice before dropping it. "And this is Dr Watson, of course. Heavens, I didn't think you two were still a team! Come in to my office, please." He ushered Sherlock and John through a series of galleries until they came to a back corridor. He opened one door and swept his arm out. "Please. Sit. Tea? Coffee? A glass of wine?"

Sherlock strolled to a chair and sat. Guthrie's office was painted the deep brown of bitter chocolate. Paintings, sculpture, objects, and rare books littered the place like exotic afterthoughts. He made no move to speak until John and Guthrie had seated themselves.

"Tea?" Guthrie repeated. "Dr Watson, tea?"

"No, thank you," John said. He tugged at the bottom of his jumper and crossed one leg over the other, glancing at Sherlock. "We won't be long." He darted an inquisitive look at Sherlock: Right?

"Well, it's certainly a pleasure," Guthrie said. "It's not often we get a chance to –"

"I'm interested in one of your associates, Mr Guthrie," Sherlock interrupted. "Not on the books, as such – more of an unofficial liaison."

"Certainly, certainly," Guthrie said, folding his hands on his gilt-edged leather blotter. "We have several hundred such individuals in the UK and –"

"Lord Stephen Moran."

Guthrie's face sagged. "Ah. Well. As to that –"
"He's made a number of connections, both to private and auction buyers, often in conjunction with Lady Meredith Howe."

"Of course," Guthrie intoned, bowing his head slightly. "A terrible loss. A very fine woman, and a tireless advocate for victims of Nazi plunder."

"Mm. I noticed, whilst perusing your back catalogues, that a good number of unclaimed pieces – all of them, actually – were guaranteed by a third party." He didn't see so much as feel John's confusion, and turned to quickly explain. "The sale of art is such a speculative venture. It's common practice to sell a work prior to an auction to a third party at a minimum price, creating a reserve price to fall back on. Sometimes the house guarantees a work, but it's much more desirable, not to mention reassuring, to get a third party to guarantee."

John's brow furrowed. "Oh."

Guthrie dialled up his smile. "That's correct. It's common practice, as you say."

"The guarantors earn fees whether or not the painting sells, correct?" Sherlock inquired.

"Correct. It's a high-stakes game, Mr Holmes."

"And sometimes, funnily enough, the buyer is Lord Moran."

"Lord Moran has excellent taste," Guthrie conceded with a nod.

"Guarantors can earn millions on a single piece."

Guthrie's smile soured a bit. "That's possible, but not common."

"Not once has Christies guaranteed a piece procured by Lord Moran and Lady Howe. I call that unusual, don't you? And the guarantor's split with the house is what – fifty-fifty?"

The smile disappeared entirely. "It varies from guarantor to guarantor. Remuneration can be netted against the final purchase price – we state that quite clearly on our catalogues. And in any case, I'm afraid that information is confidential. We're a private firm, Mr Holmes, and not obliged to disclose our financials."

"Nevertheless, someone's making a nice commission on these pieces, and furthermore, the identity of the guarantor is always kept confidential on the Moran-Howe acquisitions. Sounds like a pattern to me." Sherlock gave Guthrie a winning smile.

"I'm very sorry." Guthrie got to his feet. "I wish I could help, but as I've said, it's confidential. I'll show you out. If there's ever anything else I can –"

Sherlock stayed seated. "It's one person, isn't it?"

Guthrie sighed. "Again –"

"Yes, you said. Confidential. But it's truly astounding what one can glean from casual observation," Sherlock said, drawing a data stick from his pocket and leaning over to place it on the blotter. "Or CCTV cameras. The images on the stick correspond with the sale dates of the art – facilitated, for lack of a better word – by Lord Moran. You'll notice Lord Moran in most of them, accompanied by a young woman bearing a rather unwieldy briefcase which seems to be noticeably heavier after leaving. Now, I haven't attempted facial recognition software because I'd rather not tell the Met that you failed to cooperate with me, should this go to trial. It's going to trial eventually, by the way. Not
sure if I mentioned that."

His complexion unflatteringly ashen against the indigo suit, Guthrie shook his head. "It's all perfectly legal."

"Never said it wasn't," Sherlock said. "I assume she's a supernumerary, so we can skip her and move directly to her employer."

"I can't," Guthrie whispered. "I'd be sacked, or worse."

*Or worse?* Sherlock rose to his feet. "If you'd prefer prison, that's perfectly fine with me. Good day. John –" He turned and drew on one glove.

"Wait!"

Sherlock pivoted on his heel. "Yes?"

Beads of sweat stood out on Guthrie's brow. "I can't tell you his name, but I...he works very often with Lord Moran. He's...he's not terribly communicative." He strode to the door and opened it. "Please – go."

Drawing on his other glove, Sherlock went to the door, John close on his heels. He left without a word and retraced his steps through the galleries. "Uncommunicative," he murmured. "Uncommunicative."

"So it's a man," John said, "And what – he doesn't talk much? Can't write? He's a recluse?"

"Uncommunicative," Sherlock said. "Uncommun -- *oh.*" He hurried out the door and thrust his hand out for a cab.

"What?" John skidded to a halt. "What?"

Sherlock wheeled on John. "When Moran got out of prison, he sank the last of his money into a communications startup called Dedalus. They started out as a small cybersecurity firm but branched into telecom, dark fibre, a dozen other ventures. The company went public a year and a half ago – the IPO was three-point-something billion."

"Uncommunicative," John said. "I get it, I get it."

"There's more," Sherlock said as the cab pulled up. *Did* he manage to procure cabs more quickly than other people? Odd.

John climbed in beside him. "What else?"

Sherlock clasped his hands gleefully. "The do that Lord Moran attended on the night of Lady Howe's death?"

"Yeah?"

"Hosted by Nick Dedalus, of Dedalus Communications."

*
For all that Sebastian was Stephen's junior by twelve years, Stephen was still – rightly, he decided – a little afraid of him. He watched Seb's lean, taut frame poised against the window and fancied he saw, even in the statue-stillness of his posture, a thrumming tension, a coiled menace waiting for the proper provocation. Yet Seb was rarely visibly angry and never impulsive; he wore his malignity with grace and a certain élan.

"That's fine," Seb said into the phone. "No. No, I understand. Don't give it another thought. Right. No, if I need you, I'll call. Okay. Good-bye." He rang off and tucked his phone into his pocket. "Steenie, calm down. You're vibrating, blurred around the edges."

Stephen stood and paced, rubbing his hands together. He hated this flat just outside of Stoke-on-Trent, its views nothing but ugly industrial structures and sagging abandoned factories, damp, dreary, squarely proportioned, utterly devoid of beauty and charm. But it was safe. Thank the Lord for His myriad wonders. "Sorry. The sudden move's got me a bit rattled."

"You'll be back to London in no time." Seb went to the freezer and pulled out a bottle of vodka. He poured two generous dollops in glasses and handed one to Stephen. "Come on now. Na zdorovie."

Stephen downed the syrupy-smooth liquid and let out a harsh breath. "And you're playing your cards close to the chest, Sebastian. Some things never change, do they?"

"You said you didn't want to know details." Seb reached out and caressed Stephen's hair. "It's a long game, Steenie darlin', and it's going entirely to plan. That's all you need, isn't it?"

"I don't suppose I'll want to know how many people are going to end up dead as a result of this."

"We'll minimise collateral damage. But yes…there'll be a butcher's bill at the end, no question." Sebastian turned away and went back to the window. "Tell me I don't have to remind you to be grateful for what you've got."

"No." Stephen retrieved the bottle and poured a triple. He drank. "You don't." Sebastian was right. Stephen had made a deal, after all.

What did it profit a man if he gained the world, and forfeited his soul?

*
"Hello, hello!" Rosie poked her head into the lunch room. "Hey, love, sorry, but Tim asked could you do an intake in Room Three? I hate to bother you but he asked for you especially."

"No bother," Mary said, closing her magazine and gathering up her empty yoghurt and salad containers. She quickly rinsed and recycled, then briefly looked at herself in the mirror, smoothing her hair and uniform – a long-sleeved black wrap-style knit top and loose black scrub trousers. While she wasn't a fan of the colour, the fit was nice and flattered all the nurses, regardless of size. She checked her teeth for stray spinach and hurried to the central station, grabbing a tablet from the charging dock. "What's the name?" she asked Rosie, logging in quickly.

"Erm…no name. Tim wanted him seen straight away."

Mary was nonplussed. "He's not in the system yet? Is that usual?" She'd only been at the clinic for seven weeks, and still hadn't sorted out all the vagaries in their procedures. Given that most of their clientele were posh, vain, and skittish in equal measure, this information wasn't shocking, but she was eager to get everything right.

Rosie shrugged. "Dunno. Tim said Louise would sort it out, but he had to finish up with Ms Guinness. Male patient, that's all I know."

"Ooh. The PM."

"Don't think so."

"Michael Fassbender?"


Mary sighed. "Too bad. Right, okay. Should I start charting him myself?"

"Probably." Rosie pointed to Room Three and grinned. "Have fun."

"Thanks." Mary went to Room Three, tapped twice, and pushed the door open.

The patient, seated, stood as she entered and offered her a smile. He was slight, blond, with
strenuously white skin and large pale eyes semi-concealed behind the sort of tinted aviator glasses Bono had worn in the early noughties. He was dressed quietly but expensively, in a dove-grey cashmere pullover and dark grey trousers, and as he stretched out a hand, Mary caught a whiff of some marvellous smoky cologne. "Mary Watson," he said with a smile. "How do you do?" His voice was a soft tenor, his manner slightly shy.

Mary liked him at once. She returned the smile and briefly touched her name badge before shaking his hand. "That's right. I didn't get your name."

"It's Nick. Nick Dedalus."

"Great. Have a seat there, Mr Dedalus, and we'll get started." She sat and whipped out her tablet, logging in again. Surreptitiously, she examined him, trying to guess the reason for his visit. She'd made a game of it since beginning at the clinic, and roughly eighty percent of the time she'd managed to nail the reason even before the patient opened his or her mouth. This one...his face was fairly symmetrical. Nose small and well-formed, chin not jutting but not underslung either. Eyelids didn't droop. Jawline restructuring! Had to be it. His jaw curved softly, just enough to render him a bit passive-looking. He was still dressed, of course, but she'd wager that he was looking for a bit of tummy sculpting as well, some high-definition liposuction. "First-time patient?" she asked, plugging his name in.

"No. Tim's done some work for me before," Dedalus said.

"Do you go by Nick or Nicholas?"


"Ah. I read a few of his short stories in university, but never - oh, there you are. I was under the impression that you weren't in the system. Sorry." Mary scanned his chart. Forehead reduction and hair graft, ear reshaping, eyelid lift, a bit of filler. A frequent flier. "Okay, then." She gave him her full attention. "So what brings you here today, Mr Dedalus?"

He smiled gently. "I'm looking for something entirely new."

Oh dear – he was part of the mid-life crisis set. She'd been at the clinic just long enough to realise that it never boded well when a client said she or he wanted a complete change. Tim was fantastic at adjusting their expectations, but there were always one or two frustrated souls, usually in their mid-to-late-forties, who wanted to look like movie stars. In those instances, Tim generally suggested talk therapy, and managed to suggest it so unobtrusively that they often came back weeks later with gifts – champagne, theatre tickets, and so on, which Tim ended up handing out to stuff along with additional luxurious bits and bobs he received from other patients. Mary and John had dined out on a Palomar voucher last Thursday thanks to Tim and a grateful client. She decided to tread cautiously. "We'll do our very best to meet your expectations. It's wonderful that you've come back – I'm sure Tim will be delighted. Could you be a bit more specific about what you'd like done?"

"Oh, you know...I want that same sort of feeling that I had when I was a kid – that life was nothing but possibility. Remember that?"

"Honestly, not really," Mary said with a laugh. "I can hardly remember what I had for breakfast."

"Did you always want to be a nurse?" Mr Dedalus' fingers, well-manicured and slender, traced slow figure eights on the polished walnut tabletop.

A chatty one, then. Maybe that was why Tim had wanted her to see Mr Dedalus – she was the first
Resigning herself to postponing the chart updates she'd planned for the afternoon, Mary answered truthfully. "No. Actually, I came to nursing late. I love it, though – wouldn't trade it."

"Do you feel like it utilises all your talents, Mary?" Mr Dedalus pulled his phone from a pocket and began scrolling and tapping.

Mary frowned. "Most of them, sure." She bent to her tablet. "Now, what were you thinking about, exactly? You said 'entirely new' – does that mean you'd like to build on what you've already had done, or do you want to –"

"I want to talk about you, Mary." The tone of his voice didn't change; it was still friendly, diffident. But…

Mary looked up and saw Dedalus holding his phone, staring at her with an intensity she didn't like at all. Slowly, she got to her feet. "I'll just fetch Tim for you, then, shall I?"

"How's Nora?"

Mary froze in her tracks.

"How's she adjusting to…Listfield, is it?" Dedalus went back to his phone. "No, no – Lingfield, that's right. She's only been there a few weeks. She okay? No tantrums, whinging, regressive bed-wetting?"

Frost travelled through Mary's veins at light speed. "Who the hell are you?" she whispered.

"Oh…no, she looks okay. Happy, healthy. She looks a lot like you." Dedalus smiled and showed her his phone. Onscreen was Nora, in the centre of a small thicket of toddlers, all playing with soft blocks and shrieking and babbling agreeably.

She'd always controlled her temper well; the combination of cool head and steady hand was her stock in trade, but when this man, this stranger showed her her own daughter in real time, the pink dress Nora had chosen this morning from the two Mary had presented belling prettily around her dimpled little knees, molten rage replaced the frost and her fingers curled into claws, itching for the cool, reassuring weight of her Ruger. That was her daughter, her baby. "Who the fuck are you?"

"Oh, we've never met." Dedalus set the phone on the table, letting it play, the high-pitched giggles issuing with perfect clarity from its little speaker. "That's a bit loud. Let me…." He turned the volume down. "That's better, isn't it? Gosh, she's an adorable wee poppet, isn't she?"

Room Three was a consulting room, no different from the rest in the clinic: tasteful, done in white with touches of black here and there, and a few green plants. Nothing harmful to hand except maybe one of the potted plants, and even that would only cause concussion. But one didn't concuss the perpetrator of a hostage situation, and that's what this was, wasn't it? And really, she should have known that this would happen eventually. Didn't matter who he was – CIA, NSA, the black ops division near the Four Corners, so shadowy they didn't even have an acronym – she knew the time to pay the piper had come. She'd been living on borrowed currency for far too long. Smart people in her profession didn't have companions, partners, spouses. And they certainly didn't have children.

"What do you want?" she asked finally, her voice a crow's rusted cawing.

"Ah," Dedalus said with a smile that seemed oddly familiar. "Good girl. Now you're asking the right questions. I need you to go to Serbia and kill someone for me. A few someones, actually."

Mary could barely gather breath to speak. She glanced at Dedalus' phone, but the screen had gone
into sleep mode and the piping little voices were no longer audible. "Why...why me?"

"Because I believe in having the very best. I'm a conspicuous consumer, but I've got the money to indulge myself, so I don't feel a bit guilty about it."

"I know who you are," Mary blurted. Dedalus lifted his eyebrows and cocked his head sideways. "The tech guy. With the yacht." It had been a year ago, maybe two: at the house, Sherlock had been there, and one of those vapid entertainment programmes had come on the telly, featuring Dedalus taking his newly purchased yacht to Ibiza or Mauritius or some exotic place, accompanied by models and pop stars and five-hundred quid magnums of champagne. Mary, John, and Sherlock had all sneered with varying degrees of contempt. It had only been remarkable because they'd all agreed on how pathetic it was. But evidently he wasn't as vacant and shallow as he'd appeared.

"That's right."

"How did you know about me?" The agencies themselves never leaked, but a former agency employee might have done, unlikely as it seemed. There had been a few rivals along the way. But officially, no...surely Magnussen hadn't been right.... "Magnussen?"

Dedalus tipped his head back and laughed. "Magnussen? Charles? Oh..." Dedalus lifted his hand and wiped at his right eye underneath the spectacles. "Charles was an amateur, God forgive me for speaking ill of the dead. Really he was. That's, erm...that's cute, though."

She wasn't playing games with this prick. "I'm retired."

"Oh, Mary, Miss Mary. Nobody really retires from this game. You know that."

There was some truth in that. People in her profession were alley cats, living and usually dying violently, and rarely of old age. A cold resolve began to crystallise in her chest: she'd kill Nick Dedalus for threatening Nora, with a song in her heart and a smile on her lips. He'd caught her off guard, but that wouldn't happen twice. "So who is it? And what are you offering? I don't do charity work."

"Ah, now we're talking. I'll have someone drop by with the details."

"Not at home," Mary said sharply.

"God, no. Don't be silly. Here, Mary-Mary-quite-contrary. As to payment...." Dedalus tapped at his phone again. "It's three people, so what do you say to twenty-five thousand for each? Plus expenses."

"Serbia, are you fucking joking? Forty-five thousand," Mary snapped.

Dedalus gave her a wide, unsettling smile. "You drive a hard bargain."

"I'm worth it." She imagined putting a hollow-point bullet through his forehead and watching his skull explode into wet little shards. "But you must know that, or you wouldn't have come looking for me." Maybe she'd shoot him in both kneecaps first, watch him writhe and plead.

"Thirty-five thousand. Take it or leave it."

Sudden blinding pain throbbed behind Mary's eyes and she tasted a sharp metallic tang on her tongue. "If I leave it, you'll kill my daughter. Isn't that right?"

"No," Dedalus said. "No. I won't kill her." He set his phone down. "You really don't know who I am,
"I've seen you in the papers," she said, and held Dedalus' gaze through his tinted lenses, unnerved by his stare. She'd had her share of creepy and intimidating individuals as clients, but their common denominator was that they were never willing to do wet work themselves. They were sometimes highly visible, often powerful, always rich, but they never had the spine to kill. It meant a good living for her, but she'd never been able to shake her disdain for them.

This one, on the other hand….

"Look harder. And try to think of something else besides shooting me in the head – I can read you like a book. Come on now."

Mary's hand curled again. She wanted to snatch up Dedalus' phone and find Nora, find whoever was filming her, fucking murder them, but she had to be patient. "Did we go to high school together?"

"Getting warmer. I'm an old pal from way back when. Well, a few years ago, anyway. And not your pal, as such, but still."

Mary shook her head. "I don't...."

"Let me take you back a bit. When did Charles first contact you?"

"Right after...it was 2014." Right after she'd started seeing John, she'd been about to say, but she wouldn't say John's name in front of this man. John wasn't part of this, even if Nora was, and he wouldn't be if she could help it. She held his name like a talisman.

"How do you suppose he found out about you?"

"He had friends in low places." Mary sat back. She'd find her rhythm with this psychotic fuck. Dedalus smiled. "Yeah, I suppose he did. It was right after you met Johnny, wasn't it?"

**Fuck you.** She shrugged. "Maybe."

"Johnny was so sad." Mary didn't reply, but she could feel veins pulsing in her neck and brow.

"He'd lost his buddy –" Dedalus was almost crooning. "—and you comforted him like the good, harmless little girlfriend you were. But nothing lasts forever, does it?"

"What," Mary asked, "is the point of all this?"

"God, you're slow on the draw. Figuratively, anyway. I told Charles about you. I sent him sniffing in your direction. Did he touch you, when you two spoke? Did he lick you? He had a thing for that."

Dedalus grinned again, showing perfect but oddly long teeth.

"I don't know you," Mary whispered. Predator's teeth.

"I'm going to have to draw a picture for you, I see. Okay. Any 'before' shots of me in my file?"

Mary frowned, then bent to her tablet and searched Dedalus' file. "No."

"Why is that, do you think?" Dedalus inquired, making an exaggerated pout.
Mary stared at him.

"You think Sherlock's the only one to come back from the dead?"

A pal from way back.

Not your pal.

Oh, Christ. Jesus Christ.

"You're…." She'd never seen him, not in person, only in photos and video, but there it was – the hairline lowered, ears changed, eyelids and cheeks restructured, subtle chin implant. Contacts, or radical laser pigmentation. Dark hair to blond. Mary forced the name out through frozen lips. "Moriarty."

He gave her a slow, sarcastic clap. "There you are. Got there at last."

They'd thought Moriarty had resurfaced, after the Magnussen thing. Sherlock had searched for the better part of two years, often neglecting other cases, but he hadn't found anything conclusive, not even a long-cold trail. A prank, he'd been forced to conclude at last, someone playing a joke. Distracting him, John had said, from more important things.

"But…Sherlock saw you shoot yourself."

"Yeah, and Johnny saw Sherlock hurl himself off a roof and splatter six storeys down. People see what they want to see, honey." Dedalus – no, Moriarty – got to his feet and strolled to the window. "I've been lying low, and I'm going to keep it that way. Sort of tired of publicity; I'm not a fame-whore like some people I could name."

Mary's mind raced. Tell John. Tell Sherlock. Take Nora away immediately, hide her. They'd corner him, and Mary could kill him – repayment for Magnussen. She owed him, after all. She wasn't going to live in fear for John's life, for Nora's.

"You could tell Sherlock," Moriarty said. "I'd find you, though. Find your little girl. I said I wouldn't kill her, but –"

"But you'd get someone else to do it," Mary said.

"Oh, no. I'd make sure she lived. I'd just give her to a friend. He's fond of little girls. Very fond, if you know what I mean. He'd pay close attention to her. She'd never be alone. She's so small – little girls shouldn't be left alone." Moriarty offered her his vulpine grin again.

Mary kept her seat and her outward calm, willing the primal fury back, calling upon years of training in dogged patience. "You're dead if you or anyone else ever puts so much as a finger on her. You know that, right?"

"After we see to little Nora, we take John. Does he still have nightmares?"

"Dead."

"Same goes for the police."

"Is it Sherlock? Is he the one you want?" Because she loved Sherlock, in her way, and she owed him – only she knew how much – but she'd do what she had to do in order to preserve her family.
Moriarty shook his head. Straight, glossy blond hair fell into his eyes and he tossed it back with an affected little flick of his head. "I'm done with Sherlock. I fiddled with him a bit, but God, it's like watching one of those Jack Russell dogs run in a circle. Gets exhausting. No, I've gone on to bigger and better things. I've embraced the global economy, and I want your skill set. Frankly, I thought Charles would make better use of you, but he just wasn't the businessman I thought he was." He walked closer to Mary, though prudently far enough away that she couldn't reach him in an instant. "It's a simple business arrangement, and the pay's good. And you can't refuse. That's the long and short of it, so do us both a favour and say yes, because I've got a car waiting outside."

Frantically, Mary calculated. One job. She could do one job, and then she'd kill him. How she'd manage to explain her absence to John, she didn't know, but she'd sort it out somehow. Thirty-five thousand times three was a tidy sum – she'd put it in a separate account, pay down the house incrementally, save some for Nora. She wouldn't live beneath a threat. "All right. When will I hear about arrangements?"

"Within a few days. And I can see your brow furrowing, that slow grinding clockwork in your skull ticking. Don't worry about John. You work for a surgeon licensed to practise in several countries. Don't quit your day job, as they say."

Slow-dawning horror trickled down Mary's spine. "Did you...." How had she heard about this job? Not a listing online, or in the newspaper. A friend of a friend of a friend...word of mouth. Whose mouth?

"Yep." He picked up his phone and woke it up. "Gee. Looks like she's having her nap now." He showed the phone to Mary. A bright red dot hovered just below the base of Nora's spine. "Isn't she an angel? 'Bye, sweetheart. I'll be in touch." He sauntered past her and went out, closing the door with a soft snick.

Mary sat frozen for a long minute. Her mind was ticking; not as slowly as Jim Moriarty thought, but a steady, calculating pace down several trails of possibility. Moriarty's corpse lay at the end of each one.

At length she got up and left the consulting room. Tim stood at the end of the corridor, his handsome face white and drawn. She stared at him. "You too," she said dully."

"I'm sorry, Mary," Tim said. "He...my kids...."

She held a forestalling hand up and walked in the opposite direction. Maybe at some point there would be time for sympathy, even empathy, but not now. Not now.

Somehow she got through the rest of the day, even managing to joke and smile. After work she collected Nora from nursery, carrying her, clinging tightly to her on the walk home. She began the preparations for dinner, slicing, stirring, chopping methodically as Nora played contentedly in the kitchen with her stuffed toys, talking in her scarcely comprehensible tiny-person chatter.

When everything was in the oven or on the stove, a half hour before John was due home, Mary took out her phone and dialled a number she hadn't used in years.

"Trish? It's Annie. Hi. I know, too long. How are you? Great, that's great. Yeah, I'm...actually, no. Trish, I need your help."
Dedalus Communications (tabloid efforts to nickname it DedCom upon its emergence had fallen oddly flat, and that was the extent of John’s knowledge of the firm) was headquartered in the top eleven storeys of a shiny East End high rise built three or four years before. Its culture, as far as John was able to determine from the two hours he and Sherlock had loitered in the lobby so far, was the touchy-feely sort – the mood seemed loose, with jeans-and-trainers-clad employees lingering in the lobby pub, sprawling on sofas, playing videogames (there were several huge monitors and lots of consoles in the lobby, along with squishy beanbag chairs) or kicking footbags. A hair salon-cum-massage-spa sat at one end of the lobby, crowded with more employees, all distinguishable by the bright green ID cards hanging round their necks, suspended from bright green lanyards. A loose card, stuffed in a forgetful employee's back pocket: that was Sherlock's quarry. Relaxed as the atmosphere appeared to be, no-one entered through the glass doorway leading to the offices without swiping their card. Swiping out wasn't a requirement; employees entered through one door and left through another. Someone leaving for the day, Sherlock said, who wouldn't miss their card for some time. Then, it was just a matter of deft pickpocketing.

Sherlock handed John a large mug of sweet milky tea and sat beside him on one of the sprawling sofas. "Free. I think we need to return the mugs, though."

"Brilliant, I'm parched. Thanks." John took the tea and sipped; it was excellent.

Like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat, Sherlock produced a paper bag from one of his capacious pockets. "Thought you might be peckish, too. It's a ham and cheese toastie."

John's stomach growled in appreciative anticipation. "That was free, too?"

"Apparently. The man at the counter didn't ask me for money. And he told me to have a fantastic evening."

"Well, if we hang around and wait for supper, maybe it will be." John tucked into the sandwich, which was even better than the tea. "Nothing for you?"

"Coffee," Sherlock said, nodding toward the mug on the spotlessly clean low table in front of them. "Nick Dedalus might be profiting from looted art, but he seems to be giving some of it back, at least."

"Look at these kids," John remarked bemusedly. "Haven't they got jobs to do?"

"They're doing them." Sherlock leant back against the comfortable sofa. "They're the reason the IPO was more than three billion pounds."

"Lucky little sods."

"Most smart tech outfits have been participating in this sort of employee culture for years," Sherlock said. "The rest of the world still has to catch up. What's the matter, John – no gaming matches in the surgery?"

"We haven't got time for that," John retorted. "Besides, can you imagine an old-age pensioner catching me playing videogames in my office when I could be checking beneath his armpits for swollen lymph nodes?" He glanced over at Sherlock, who had pulled out his phone and was scrolling through it, apparently – possibly, maybe – keeping one eye on the crowd. When Sherlock was in stakeout/sloth mode, it didn't seem possible that he bounded around London almost too fast to see. Except lately. "Speaking of surgeries, what did the orthopaedic surgeon say?"
"Oh…." Sherlock snorted negligently. "I've got to get a brace and some cream and I'm having an injection done soon. Nothing earth-shattering."

"Those injections can be tricky," John said. "Do you want me to come with you, see you home?" He closed his mouth with a snap. Well, that was presumptuous.

Sherlock gaped at him for a moment, evidently just as surprised. "That's – that's not necessary, John."

"Is Mycroft looking after you?"

"It's an injection in the knee," Sherlock replied with enormous hauteur. "I very much doubt I'm going to faint in the taxicab."

"Ha," John said sourly. "I had a footballer for a patient, solid, muscular bloke, who had one of those injections, insisted on walking home and did just that. Vasovagal syncope – it happens. He went arse over tit and broke his arm and dislocated his shoulder. If Mycroft's not planning to be there, I am. The last thing you need is a broken wing. You're already a grouchy bastard, can't imagine you with two debilitating but non-life-threatening injuries at the same time."

Sherlock heaved a dramatic sigh. "Very well. If you must. Honestly, John." He was silent for a moment. "Thank you," he added quietly.

"Don't mention it." John tried to hide his grin in a bite of his sandwich, but it emerged anyway.

It was ridiculous, wasn't it? If someone had walked up to John at this very moment and said John, where would you like to be, and what would you like to do? John would say Here, now, and this. The sudden illicit elation he'd felt upon calling Fann and begging off was nothing to the contentment that glowed like hot embers as he sat on this comfortable and expensive sofa in a corporate playground, watching grown men and women chatter and cavort like ten-year-old kids.

Christ, the time I've wasted.

But he couldn't go down that road again, endless and strewn with pitfalls as it was, providing neither shade nor rest. Last night he'd tantalised himself with thoughts of Sherlock – specifically, with thoughts of ripping off Sherlock's clothes and the two of them going at it with grinding, sweating urgency, the sort of porny groping and gasping they'd never indulged in, because there hadn't been time for exploration before everything had gone to hell. Eventually John had had to go into the loo for a quick and silent wank. Mary had been asleep, and it would have been weird and wrong to wake her for a fuck.

John let out a deep breath and glanced at Sherlock. Their timing had always been dreadful, even when things had been good and it had just been the pair of them.

Concentrate on now, you arse. Don't think about what can't be.

"Oh, what about the dry cleaner?" he asked, because he couldn't bear the sudden silence between them, with Sherlock the innocent party, and because his prick was starting to swell in his pants and he had to think of something else or risk embarrassment if they suddenly got up and moved around.

"Not much," Sherlock said, scanning the crowd once more. "A woman fitting the erstwhile Georgina Cantwell's description dropped off and picked up the gown, which would be helpful if she were alive to question."

"Has Mycroft ID'd her yet?"
"Not yet. Can't think what's taking him so long. Fates of nations, and all that." Sherlock flapped a hand. "Ah... look, John. There, by the first game terminal." He pointed unobtrusively at a short young man with messy dark hair, hefting a huge backpack over his shoulder with one hand and stuffing his badge into his back pocket with the other. "Wrinkles on his clothes, bloodshot eyes, periorbital oedema, drooping coiffure, unsteady gait – he's just pulled an all-nighter and he's heading home for a long sleep. Stay here – I'll be right back." He got up and slipped into the crowd before John could protest.

Best not to protest, though. When Sherlock chose, he was as slippery as slippery could be. John watched in silent admiration as Sherlock sliced through the throng and fell into step just behind the young man, overtaking him and then veering away within a few seconds. In under thirty seconds the entire caper was complete, and Sherlock was thudding onto the sofa next to John once more, grinning in triumph.

"I'd steal one for you, too, but we don't really need two," Sherlock said. "Budge up close behind me and we'll just slip through. Ready?"

"I guess," John said. "But what's the plan once we get inside?"

"The attack direct," Sherlock said. "Dedalus has an open-door policy, according to news stories. Employees evidently stroll in at all hours to brainstorm, ask questions, complain, and so on. A few pointed questions ought to get some answers, or at least some revealing non-answers." He got up and waited for John to do the same. "By some amazing coincidence, there was a flurry of recovered artwork just after he founded his company in 2014. Pity Meredith Howe isn't alive to answer questions either. I doubt she's as innocent as Mycroft believes." He headed for the employee entrance.

As instructed, John stood close to Sherlock as Sherlock swiped the purloined card over the digital reader. The light blinked green, and the glass door unlocked with a click and a hiss. They strode through, John almost tripping on Sherlock's heels, and made for the lift, getting in with a bevy of laughing young men and women. "What do you know about him?" John murmured. "Dedalus?"

"Not a lot," Sherlock said. "One of those reclusive, anti-social tech types. Shuns publicity except for a few company dos, talks through the corporate mouthpiece. Photo..." Sherlock pulled up a picture of Dedalus on his phone, a slight blond man in his mid-thirties or thereabouts, wearing sunglasses, dark cuffed jeans and a battered tweed jacket, unsmiling but waving to the camera. "No spouse or companion, no children. Typical."

John shrugged and handed the phone back. "Might just be private. Maybe he had a thing with Lady Howe."

"He had some sort of thing, that's true." The lift stopped at several floors before finally coming to a full stop at the penthouse level, a massive glassed-in affair with, Sherlock said, three hundred sixty degree views of the city. "According to the schematics, his office is at the far southeast corner." They walked through a huge open-plan office, returning friendly nods, until they reached the southeast corner.

More glass enclosed the office of Dedalus Communications' CEO, and the door was indeed open, but a hand-lettered cardboard sign on a string hung from the nameplate emblazoned with the name Nick Dedalus read simply OUT.

John glanced at Sherlock. "Okay. Plan B?"

Sherlock frowned, glanced around, and pushed the door open. Before he took a step over the
threshold, a young woman with vivid blue hair and a matching dress glittering with paillettes approached them. "Hi! Nick's in Belgium until tomorrow afternoon."

"Oh – drat!" Sherlock turned and stuffed his hands into his pockets. "I'm labouring under a misimpression, I think. Johann and I have come today from the Berlin office to speak to him." He'd assumed a very faint and not unbelievable Teutonic accent.

"Oh, no!" the young woman cried in what seemed genuine distress. "He sent a memo out last Tuesday about it…"

Sherlock smote his head. "I did read that, but I thought he would be back today."

"Crumpets! Will you still be here tomorrow?" The woman turned and smiled at John, who smiled back without speaking, not confident in his ability to fake an accent. "He doesn't really do appointments, but if you can give me some idea of a time, I can check with him…"

"I will," Sherlock replied enthusiastically. "But you needn't bother. I have other engagements to occupy my time. What time tomorrow afternoon will he return?"

"Oh – three, maybe three-thirty. I can text you, if you like?"

"No, no need. We mustn't take up any more of your time," Sherlock said with a broad smile, and patted John on the shoulder. "Mitkommen, Johann." He wheeled and marched back toward the lift, leaving John to follow.

John caught up with Sherlock. "Johann? Really? I couldn't be the bloke just giving you a tour?"

"Relax, John." Sherlock stabbed the lift button, betraying a bit of impatience.

"Well, what now?"

A furrow appeared above Sherlock's nose. "I'll think of something. But John…she's lying, or at least shading the truth. Someone else was in that office just a few moments ago."

*

Jim sat back from the monitor and watched Sherlock Holmes and John Watson trudge to the lift, stymied by a cardboard OUT sign and an eager-to-please product counsellor. "Would you look at the pair of them, Seb. Like a couple of kicked puppies."

"They'll be back," Sebastian said, not moving from the window.

"Well, of course they will. Sherlock's nothing if not persistent. Slow, but persistent, God love him."

Sebastian scratched idly at his chin, producing a harsh rasp of fingernails against stubble. "You think he's catching on?"

Jim turned from his fascinated scrutiny of Sherlock. It had been so long since they'd been face-to-face, indulging in their own little folie à deux. It had been tempting to stay in the office, to see how long he could pull off the charade before Sherlock realised who he was. In the end, he'd opted to play it out just a bit more. They'd meet eventually. They had so much to talk about, the two of them. So much lost time to make up. So many lessons Sherlock had to learn.
Sebastian was watching him, his lean body, just this side of gaunt, stretched across the long window seat, his sky-blue eyes perpetually alert. Jim had tried for that shade of blue but the best they’d managed was a mottled bluish-grey – pity.

"No," Jim said. "Not yet. He will, though. He's getting so much closer. How's dear Stephen?" he asked, changing the subject.

"Brittle."

"But not broken," Jim murmured.

"Not yet." Seb sighed.

Blood and bond: such a terrible weakness. Even Jim wasn't entirely immune to that lure. There was Seb, for instance. Nearly half their lives they'd been close, and Jim repaid loyalty with loyalty. And then there was Sherlock, and that was altogether a different kettle of fish, wasn't it? They were dark stars, the pair of them, born of dark matter, and how they blazed in a world ill-equipped to endure their peculiar brilliance. There was loyalty in that bond as well, even if it was unrequited. Jim had never abandoned Sherlock, even if Sherlock had abandoned him. But Sherlock understood him, and that mattered almost as much as their shared destiny, and would hold true when everything Sherlock cherished was reduced to cold ash and remembrance.

"Keep him whole," Jim said. "Just a little while longer. This will all be over soon enough. One way or the other."

*
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

So many thanks to Kimberlite and vilestrumpet, my ultra-excellent beta/britpick team.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*

7 November 2013

Embedded in the ceiling, precisely above the sofa, in fact, were forty-five six-centimetre drive pins, all deployed from a powder-actuated nail gun liberated from a member of the vor v zakone in 2010; the pins were the result of a desultory but successful experiment testing the gun's range and accuracy after one of the vor's compatriots had turned up dead in the Thames with fifteen drive pins pounded neatly into the eyes of the Virgin Mary tattoo on his chest – coincidentally, directly into his heart. Either Mrs Hudson had never looked up at the ceiling (possibly prudence on her part, and luck on Sherlock's, given the number of variegated stains, punctures, and gashes there) or she'd simply left them out of a sense of nostalgia after he'd gone. Either way, it was an odd sort of comfort to see them there, certainly more comforting than the words on his laptop screen.

Reluctantly, but inevitably, Sherlock went back to the column, probing at it the way a tongue will automatically probe at a bit of rough skin on the roof of one's mouth.

He'd done it to save us but he hadn't trusted us enough to tell us what was really going on. Not sure I'll ever truly forgive him for that….

I was out having dinner with my girlfriend when he sauntered back into my world. He was dressed as a waiter. BECAUSE HE THOUGHT IT WOULD BE FUNNY. He genuinely thought it would be funny to surprise me.

At first, I didn't really welcome him back into my life. I couldn't. I mean I know he's a psychopath and I've accepted that but what he did this time, it was too much.

Oh, and in other news, I've got engaged. But, it's not something I'm really going to talk about much here. I want to keep some things private. I will say, though, she's the best thing that's ever happened to me. Sorry, Sherlock :)

So, yes. It's all good. Better than good. It's bloody brilliant. #sherlocklives means #johnwatsonlives.

He'd read it once and managed one acerbic comment about John's writing style before pushing it away to concentrate on his breakfast, a mug of lukewarm porridge with too much milk. Mechanically, he'd eaten; mechanically, he'd moved through the familiar patterns of nearly-
forgotten ordinary mornings: shower, shave, dress, sort through the boxes of books he’d ordered (leisure time to read now, an extraordinary luxury he hadn’t quite appreciated before his global mission), restring his violin, the poor neglected thing, page idly through the mind-numbingly large stack of cold cases Lestrade had delivered (hadn’t the Met managed to solve anything since he’d left?), shoo Mrs Hudson and her endless fussing away every few hours (not that it wasn’t nice to be coddled, just a bit). Distantly, he’d perceived that in his chest there was a peculiar churning turbulence, but he’d been careful to elude a more thorough examination of what was probably a physical reaction, a slow seismic return to the old routines after two years of rough living, constant danger, and an unceasing lack of quotidian stability.

The bell rang, one short, sharp, impatient burst, and Sherlock’s heart stuttered: John. He closed the laptop, shoved it under the sofa, and stared up at the nails, folding his hands together over his chest.

"Sherlock?" John knocked on the door. "You home?"

"Come in, John."

"Hey!" John shucked his coat and hung it over the back of a kitchen chair. "What are you doing?"

Sherlock indicated the teetering pile of cold cases with a nod. "Contemplating Lestrade's massive backlog of unsolved crime."

"Just contemplating them?" John chuckled. "Not actually doing anything about solving them?"

"There are seventy-three of them," Sherlock replied. "I've only just catalogued them in order of urgency." He lifted his eyes toward John for the first time. "Why, what are you up to?"

"Just, you know, came to say hello."

"Hello."


Was it a sigh of pleasure? Resignation? Irritation? Sherlock gazed at John peripherally and saw that he’d stretched his legs out, lounging almost, and that the tips of his fingers caressed the worn fabric of the chair. A little smile curved his mouth upward. Pleasure. Good. That was good.

"So," John said.

Sherlock didn’t reply. He wanted to simply savour this moment for what it was: a bit of quiet comfort, a bit of the old days back in his possession. It was stupid, and he wasn’t a creature of nostalgia, but still…still.

"We did it."

Impossible, perhaps, not to be infected by nostalgia despite his inclinations and efforts. People traded on it so desperately; it became its own dreary force of conventionality. Remember when we…?

"Sherlock? Did you hear what I said?"

"Hm?" Sherlock met John's gaze, and an exquisite pain sliced through him, burning but not cauterising. "Sorry, what?"

"We did it." John beamed.
Sherlock stared blankly. "Did what?"

"The engagement."

Sherlock frowned. "I don't...oh, did you put a notice in the papers?"

"No!" John sighed again, this time decidedly impatient. "No, we just got engaged. Properly engaged, last night. I popped the question, gave her the ring, all that. Without interruptions this time." He gave Sherlock a pointed look.

Ah. "Ah. I see. Well. Congratulations, then." Sherlock mustered a quick smile and a nod. "I presume it was slightly less elaborate this go-round."

"Yeah. Also, the element of surprise was gone," John replied, a touch of acid in his voice. "I managed to hide the ring in a pint of honeycomb crunch, though."

"Oh, God."

"Hey," John said sharply. "Shut up. Anyway, it was romantic."

"Best of all, I wasn't there to bugger it up for you."

"True."

"Especially as I seem to be the human equivalent of heroin."

"Sherlock." John heaved himself to his feet and perched on the edge of the table. "About that. I just meant that...I don't know. It's hard to stay away from you, that's all. You swanned in and —"

"Don't be ridiculous, John. As I said, your writing hasn't improved."

"I meant like a drug in a nice way," John joked feebly.

"Hm."

"That was a joke."

"I know." Sherlock resumed gazing at the ceiling. Gradually he realised that John was staring at him. "Have I got marmalade on my face or something?"

"No." John stuttered out a laugh. "No, it's just that there are so many...I mean, sometimes I still have to remind myself that you're actually here. Not dead. At first, when you —" He laughed again. "Never mind."

Sherlock turned to peer at him. "What?"

John flapped a dismissive hand. "It's stupid. It's just...right after you...left, I'd come back here and -- and talk to you, you know? I mean...shit, half the time I'd talk to you and you wouldn't answer me anyway, so this was no different. Except this time you weren't really here."

"Sorry," Sherlock said quietly.

"No, no. That's not why I'm telling you. It's just that you've been back less than a week and it's going to take me some time to get used to it. You were busy running round the world and taking out Moriarty's network and I was --" John shook his head. "Anyhow, it's been a busy week. Maybe one day you'll tell me what you were up to. I mean, I'd like to hear about it."
"It's not very interesting, but I'll tell you whatever you'd like to know," Sherlock said. He'd been able, for one brief and contextually frightening but still peculiarly lovely moment, to touch John gently as he lay half-conscious, drugged and suffering from smoke inhalation. He wished he'd had his gloves off. "I suppose you'll go in for some obnoxiously large do, a cake and Mary in a big meringue of a dress and all that."

"We haven't really decided yet." John said with a silly grin.

"Yes, plenty of time for that. Meanwhile...." Sherlock reached out with one languid hand and pulled the top folder from the stack. "I think we can solve this one by teatime, if you're not otherwise occupied."

"Yeah," John said. "Yeah, let's. I'm not busy."

"Good." Sherlock lifted himself up, and couldn't prevent wincing as one of the stitches on his back pulled against the torn skin.

"You okay?"

Sherlock rose easily to his feet and smiled. "Fine."

*

There was every chance that someone would recognise him, even in a fake Burberry mackintosh and flat cap, faded jeans and trainers, even if he weren't doing something spectacularly stupid. He'd played for distance by slicking his hair back with lots of product glop and wearing a stick-on soul patch and goatee and ended up looking like a low-rent stage villain. Well, tant pis, it wasn't as if he was meeting the Queen tonight.

He opened his clamshell burner phone and sent a text.

**Hi im here**

A minute passed, then another. Sherlock was ready to turn on his heel and leave when the door buzzed and clicked. He grasped the handle and went in, climbing fourteen grotty flights of stairs to the top floor, flat 7E.

The door opened and a very young man poked his head out. "Fred?"

Sherlock slipped into an Estuary accent. "That's right. You Justin?"

"Justy." The young man smiled and opened the door wider, standing aside and inviting Sherlock inside. "Come on in."

The flat was a minuscule bedsit, dominated by a large bed with brass head and foot rails, surprisingly clean given the generally decrepit state of the house. The bed was neatly turned back; a few imitation-silk scarves hung artlessly over the brass, ready for use. A large unframed poster of a group of young male pop stars hung on one wall and a triangular *Give Way* sign hung on the other. Sherlock turned his attention to the young man. He was slight, short, with a tangle of sandy hair and a roundish face. A black t-shirt clung to his narrow torso and loose tracksuit bottoms hung from his pert backside. Fine if one liked that sort of thing, Sherlock supposed. He looked a bit different from
his photograph, though. Disappointingly so, in fact.

Well, what had Sherlock expected, honestly?

"Take off your coat," Justy said, holding his hand out. "I'll hang it. Still pissing out, I see."

"Yeah. Yeah." Sherlock slipped out of the mac and handed it over to the young man, who hung it on a hook beside the door. He took his hat off as well and hung it on one of the brass finials of the bed. "Erm. Nice place."

"Yeah, you can just about walk a metre in any direction." Justy went to a tiny refrigerator in the corner. "Fancy a drink? I've got beer and vodka and tonic."

"No," Sherlock said. His breath shuddered out of his chest. At least he hadn't been recognised. "Is it all right if we just –"

"Yeah, no worries." The young man seemed amused. "First time?"

"It's been flippin' ages."

"That's all right, then." An affable smile crossed Justy's face. "Probably it'd be good if you paid straight away. Then we can get on with it."

"Right, right. How much was it again?" Sherlock reached for his wallet.

"Fifty quid for an hour. Two hundred for the whole night."

"Okay." Sherlock handed over two twenty-pound notes and a tenner.

Justy glanced at Sherlock's hand. "You married, then?"

Sherlock offered Justy a bashful grin and shoved his beringed hand in the pocket of his jeans. "Yeah. She doesn't know I'm here."

"Well. Your secret's safe with me, and I'm clean and I insist on a condom anyways." Justy pulled off his t-shirt and yanked down his tracksuit bottoms, revealing a very small pair of skintight black briefs and a very large bulge. He stepped out of the puddled bottoms and sidled close to Sherlock, tilting his head up. His chest and belly had been smoothly depilated; a fine blond down clung to his legs. "You're a nice-looking bloke."

Mistake. The word clanged in Sherlock's head.

There had been two encounters in the past two years: one in Macau, one in Tunisia, neither with the slightest whiff of emotional resonance, which had been exactly as he'd wanted it. Contrary to what those who bothered to think about Sherlock's sex life believed, he wasn't beyond the baser desires; he simply needed relief so infrequently that there was hardly any point in bothering. Usually his right hand did the trick, not to put too fine a point on it.

Tonight, though...he'd spent the day with John, solving a murder surrounding an estate dispute in Reigate Terraces. One scrap of paper, ball of twine, falsified Gumtree advert, and attempted strangulation later – gingerly and almost unconsciously, Sherlock massaged his throat, still aching – and the matter had been cleared up entirely. And once again John had pulled him from the fire, as if no time had passed at all, as if there'd never been any hard feelings between them.

The case was simple enough, hadn't required his full attention. He'd had time to appreciate John's
presence, to revel in his nearness, even to surreptitiously breathe in the never-to-be-discarded compound of John's scent. He hadn't permitted desire to manifest itself physically, not until after he'd sent him on his way, back to the flat he shared with Mary, and was on his own again at Baker Street. And suddenly, he'd decided that tonight his right hand wouldn't do.

"What do you like?" Justy murmured, toying with the top button of Sherlock's dilapidated Henley shirt.

Sherlock swallowed past the ache in his throat, and tried to summon desire for the young man. There had been a suggestion of familiarity in his online photo, no more, but now, nothing. Still, he made an effort. He'd come all this way. "What do you do?"

"Lots. I don't do arse-to-mouth or rimming unless you wash up really well – and I've got to watch. Sorry, I'm a bit of a clean freak. I don't do felching or scat. But anything else is pretty fair game." He moved up against Sherlock, undulating his lower body gently against Sherlock's hip. "Oral. I'm good at deep-throating. Anal. Intercrural. Frot. Nipple play. Spanking, bondage, breathplay. A little pain is all right. You can fist me if you want – I can take it. If you want it silent, or noisy, I'm cool with either. I'll sit on your face, or you can sit on mine. Name it, and it's open for negotiation."

Sherlock had closed his eyes and was imagining the list recited in a different voice. It was working; his cock began to throb. "Why don't we –" He gasped as a hand slipped over the front of his jeans and fondled. "Why don't we start with oral and we'll – we'll see how it goes."

"Do you want me on my knees?"

Opening his eyes, Sherlock saw that Justy was already sinking to the floor and undoing the button of Sherlock's jeans. "That's fine," he muttered. He heard the metal teeth of the zipper yielding beneath Justy's fingers – Justy, he didn't like that name, he decided; it was the name of a sixth-form rugger who had three girlfriends, none of whom knew about the other two, and who routinely cheated on exams. Sherlock covered his face with his hands and exhaled sharply as the hands tugged his jeans and underwear down over his hips to mid-thigh. "John," he whispered into his hands.

"I'm going to make you feel amazing."

"Could you not talk?" Sherlock snapped, taking his hands away from his face and glaring downward. "Sorry. Sorry, I –"

"No, it's all right." The young man pressed his lips together and made a zipping motion. He bent to his task again, taking Sherlock's half-hard cock in his hand and pouting his lips just over the head. Sherlock groaned as a warm, wet tongue tickled at the head of his cock. "Oh –" He shuddered and curled his hands into fists at his sides. Looking down, he squinted, letting his vision blur. It was a bit easier. The shoulders were narrow with youth, the hair more luxuriant, but at this angle it wasn't impossible to imagine. The tickling became a steady lapping, wet heat coating his cock and then transmuting to a gentle sucking motion. A hand came up and cupped his balls, lifting them, stroking the skin with faintly calloused fingertips.

**Guitar player.** Sherlock quickly looked round, saw the case upright in a shadowed corner, and almost laughed. Christ, he couldn't turn it off, could he? Determinedly, he let his eyes blur again and stared down at the bent head. "John. John." The young man moaned softly in response, the reverberation humming over Sherlock's cock. Sherlock tangled his hands in the sandy hair and guided John's head closer, forcing his mouth more widely open. He was getting close; sweat beaded his forehead and rolled south between his shoulder blades. He thrust his hips forward once, twice –
“Stop,” he rasped. He grasped a lock of Justy's hair and pulled hard enough to sting. "Stop!"

Justy pulled away and stared up at him, untroubled, as Sherlock struggled to gather his breath and wits. Slowly, he wiped the back of his hand over his mouth. "What next?" he inquired softly.

“No." Sherlock fumbled his underwear and jeans up, zipping and buttoning clumsily. "I can't. I can't." His heartbeat thundered in his ears; his mouth was parched. He licked his lower lip compulsively and stepped back. "I can't."

"Was it something I did?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No. You were fine. It was all – it wasn't you." He snatched the cap from the finial and jammed it onto his head. Sweat itched his upper lip; distantly, he wondered if the goatee was slipping. Didn't matter now. He grabbed the mac from the hook and opened the door. "Sorry."

"Come back, if you want. I don't mind."

A deranged laugh spiralled in Sherlock's chest but didn't quite escape. How could he have ever thought that there was a resemblance to John? Wasn't even close. "Right, sure. Maybe sometime. 'Bye." Sherlock slammed the door and raced down the stairs three at a time. Stupid, stupid, oh dear God so bloody stupid.

Halfway to Thornton Heath, Sherlock realised he couldn't very well walk all the way back to Baker Street. He veered east, found the West Croydon station, and slumped onto a bench, waiting for the 11:45.

He couldn't ever remember feeling so sordid and tawdry, not even at his most desperate scrabbling for a fix; God knew he'd been in some cesspits before, bargaining with everything he'd had. And it wasn't the transactional component of the evening, though he'd never paid for sex before and didn't intend to do it again. No, it was the pretence, the piss-poor attempt at substitution. And Christ, what if he'd been caught? He could just imagine the headlines: Returned Roper Rogers Rentboy. Mycroft would hold it over his head forever. He imagined John's reaction as well: sneering, or exasperated, or God forbid, pitying.

Hot shame flooded him, and he leant his cheek against the cold, dirty brick wall.

The night he'd returned, in the restaurant, he'd scarcely defended himself from John's anger, hadn't resisted much, if at all, when John attempted to throttle him. John's therapist would have probably said that Sherlock was subconsciously agreeing that he'd deserved punishment for abandoning his friend, but that was the most specious argument. The truth was more and less obvious at the same time: coming from John, that had been an embrace of sorts, and Sherlock had been deprived of embraces for far too long.

Sherlock pushed the thought away and stared out at the platform, at the knots of erstwhile passengers waiting for their train. Kids, mostly, in pairs and trios, laughing and groping and shoving each other; on another bench, a furtive-looking man anxiously texting; beside him, a homeless woman whispering to herself, her hands wrapped round a steaming polystyrene cup. Life, his London, adventure everywhere. It hadn't been the first time an experiment had failed. There were lessons to be gleaned from even failed experiments, and this one was: Accept No Substitutions.

From now on, his hand would have to do.
"So how did you know someone was just in the office?" John leant against the wall of the lift, dapper and trim in his smart coat. "Could have been anybody, you know. That girl with the blue hair."

"I don't think so. She came from the opposite direction." Sherlock shoved his hands deep into his pockets. "Did you notice the laptop on the desk?"

"Not particularly."

"Of course not. The office was dark, but the laptop was open, and the screen cast a glow onto the opposite wall. It hadn't gone into sleep mode. It was a top-of-the-line model, too – ultra-thin and light and about a thousand quid a pop. Dedalus Communications employees have most of the mod cons, but judging from the other computers in the office space, only the top banana has the thousand-quid version."

John shrugged. As the lift door opened, he stepped back and held the lift door so Sherlock could exit first. "His PA might have been using it."

"What PA?"

"The girl with the blue hair?"

"You didn't notice her badge, either," Sherlock said. "Her name's Adela and she's a product counsellor."

"Fine," John sighed. "You think he was dodging you, then?"

"Yes." Sherlock strode through the glassed-in exit and tossed the purloined ID badge into a decorative planter. He stopped outside the building and stared upward.

"What's up?" John wanted to know.

"Something else. Whoever was in there was probably a man – traces of fragrance, oud and incense and saffron. I don't know the label, but it's a blend usually marketed to men. Chewing gum, too. Spearmint." Sherlock frowned up at the building.

"Should we wait around, see if he comes down?"

"If he's avoiding us I'm certain he's got other ways of slipping out. Probably CCTV, as well."

"Bugger," John said. "What now?"

Sherlock sighed. "I've been meaning to go to Lord Moran's and poke around a bit. Are you game?"

"More breaking and entering? Sure, let's go," John said, and stepped into the street to hail a cab.

Sherlock waited beside him, turning to watch the foot traffic in front of Dedalus Communications. A Greek food truck painted blue and white squatted next to the kerb, sending out aromas of souvlaki, moussaka, and halloumi, reminding Sherlock he hadn't bothered with any of the free food. He tilted his nose and sniffed as a woman walked by munching on an enormous gyro.

Funny thing, fragrance: for most people, it was far too entwined with memory and emotion to be
truly useful, bypassing rationality and practical cognition and slipping into neural hardwiring where deep memory slumbered. Dogs, who generally existed in the moment and whose sense of smell was easily exploited (if their grasp of scent was tied to emotion, they weren't letting on, and humans certainly hadn't yet sorted it out), were generally trusted with scent identification, but people, with their volatile and unpredictable emotional behaviour, explicitly weren't. Sherlock, naturally, wasn't susceptible to the same sort of random, flailing free association. Usually.

The smell of that spearmint gum, though….

"Sherlock."

"Hm?"

"Cab's here." John stood beside the cab with the door open.

"Right. Right." Sherlock climbed in and gave the driver Moran's address.

"Came pretty quick," John said. "Probably saw you standing there in a fog, though. What's on your mind?"

Sherlock shook his head. "Nothing." He whipped out his phone and began texting Mycroft.

"So what are you hoping to find at Moran's?"

"Ideally, a definitive connection between Dedalus and Lady Howe. I'm going to get Mycroft to get his people to scramble the security alarm. Time he got off his fat arse and actually did some work on this case himself." John let out an amused snort, and Sherlock glanced over at him, pleased that he'd made John laugh. His glance evolved into a thorough examination from beneath his eyelashes. John, in his smart coat and bad haircut and his ten extra pounds, emanated a quiet power merely sitting beside him, and it took Sherlock a moment to see it through a sudden odd cloud of pervasive warmth and contentment that he eventually recognised as safety. And as much as he'd derided nostalgia in the past, now he accepted it, not wallowing, but dipping a toe in and finding it not unpleasant. It wouldn't do to immerse himself, though; whether or not those blond hairs proved to be Mary's, he'd have to hurt John again, one way or another. Too much lay between them. There was nothing for it – he'd have to re-establish his old carapace, the armour of his solitude.

Not yet, though. Not quite yet.

John's mobile buzzed, and he pulled it from his pocket, reading a new text. He sighed heavily.

"Everything all right?" Sherlock inquired.

"Yeah. Yeah." John's mouth thinned into a stern line, and he stared out the window for a moment. "That was from Mary. She, erm…she inherited some money from her aunt."

"Mm. Tax problems? Left you with eighteen pounds and change?"

"Ha. No, actually. No. It's…it's quite a bit more than that." John stared down at his phone, rubbing his thumb over the case.

Intriguing, that silence. "Is it gauche to ask how much?"

"Five million," John said without looking up. "Give or take a few hundred thousand."

A distant alarm bell began clanging in the back of Sherlock's brain. He silenced it. "That's quite
John let out another snort, this one mirthless. "Yeah, you could say that."

"Well. I expect the two of you have plans, then. World travel? Buy a yacht, maybe, or two rooms and a bath in Kensington?"

"Funny," John said. "Mary wants to travel. She's keen on doing it soon, and then she wants to send Nora to this posh school in Surrey. I guess she's done a lot of research on it, but I'm not keen. It's in bloody Surrey, for one thing."

"You could always move there," Sherlock pointed out. "Transform yourself into a country squire."

"Yeah. Get a Volvo, a couple of Labradors, some tweed jackets, join a shooting club…Christ, can you imagine? I couldn't do it, Sherlock. Couldn't leave London. Could you?"

"Bite your tongue." Sherlock smiled, though a little needle of regret pierced him. They'd only been a few miles apart for those four years of silence. He'd had his work, before John and after John, and its essential nature hadn't changed regardless of whether or not he had a companion, but sharing it had been – oh, God, what a sentimental idiot he was turning into. Porridge for brains. "So, London, and keeping Nora out of the posh school. What else?"

"You know, I hadn't really thought," John said. "Pay off the house, I reckon. There'll be enough to set Nora up when she's ready to leave the nest – she won't have to live in a cesspit. That's nice. Otherwise, I don't know. It's Mary's money." He flexed his hand, then drummed his fingers on his thigh. "It was a pity, though – Trish, that's her aunt, was nice. A little on the excessive side, but I guess you'd have to be with that kind of dosh to throw around."

"You got to know her well?"

"No. Only met her once, in fact. She re-connected with Mary just this past winter, right before Christmas. She was sick, but she didn't let on." John fell silent again.

Sherlock processed this information, sorting through the information he'd obtained on Mary. Several aunts and great-aunts on both sides. Pamela, Julie, Debra, Nancy, Denise, Rebecca, Stephanie, Margaret, Louise, Stella, Agnes.

No Patricia. No name that could have contained 'Trish' as a derivative.

The alarm bells came back with a vengeance. "Well," Sherlock said lightly. "You're rich. Congratulations are in order, I suppose."

"Yeah. Thanks." John turned to look Sherlock full in the face. "Funny. I've always thought that life would be a lot easier if I had more money, but –" He shrugged. "I'm still getting used to the idea, I guess."

"It certainly makes living easier," Sherlock said. "I expect you'll get used to it soon enough."

"Probably," John said. "I'll be complaining about how the servants are giving me cold toast and not putting enough of a shine on my shoes in a few weeks." He smiled, but it was a reflexive motion, not reaching his eyes. "Sherlock, did you…?"

Sherlock waited for John to finish. When no answer was forthcoming, he prompted John gently. "Did I what?"
John shook his head, then waved his hand airily and gave that reflexive smile again. "Nothing. Nothing."

*

A tall woman, solidly built and wrapped in a long camel-hair coat stood on the doorstep of Lord Moran's house, impatiently rifling through her handbag.

"Oh, dear," John said. "Company."

"That's Aisling FitzSimmons – Lady FitzSimmons, as was. She's Lord Moran's eldest sister."

"Is she coming or going?"

"Only one way to find out," Sherlock said. "Well – come on, John." Sherlock dashed out of the cab, leaving John to pay the driver. He approached Moran's house briskly. "Lady FitzSimmons?"

Lady FitzSimmons started and clutched her handbag close to her chest. "Yes?"

"Is Lord Moran at home?"

Lady FitzSimmons' eyes narrowed, and two vertical lines appeared between sharply pencilled brows. "No, he isn't. And even if he were, you wouldn't be welcome here, Mr Holmes."

"Ah, we'll dispense with the introductions, then. I don't know if you realise it – actually, you probably do if you've finished stuffing that bit of correspondence in your handbag – but your brother is wanted for questioning in regard to a murder." He turned to John, just walking toward them. "John, Lady FitzSimmons and I were just discussing Lord Moran's whereabouts."

"We weren't, in fact," Lady FitzSimmons replied icily. She snapped her handbag closed and directed her glacial grey eyes at Sherlock. "My brother endured years of hell thanks to you, Mr Holmes. Years. Oh, he was exonerated as we all knew he would be, but prison broke him. He can't hold his head up in public for the shame. His wife and children are long gone – he hasn't seen his children in nearly ten years. And our family name's been dragged through the mud. Thanks to you."

"He seems to have done well nonetheless," Sherlock said, craning his neck exaggeratedly toward the roof. "Lovely house, rich friends, a thriving consultancy outfit, a little shady art dealing on the side."

Lady FitzSimmons shook her head in slow, scornful negation. "You couldn't bear being wrong about him, could you? So now you're skulking round – were you planning to go through his rubbish bins, like some grubby tabloid journalist? Good luck to you."

"Is that bit of scribbling on that paper in your handbag Steenie's current address?" Sherlock held a hand out, palm up. "That was your notepaper – cream linen, deckle-edged. It's not his writing paper – his is grey, with a plain monogram top centre."

"Get away from me," Lady FitzSimmons hissed. "And it's Lord Moran."

"'Steenie' is just for intimate friends, is that right? Or is it a family nickname?"

"Where did you hear that?" Lady FitzSimmons demanded.
Sherlock smiled. "Family, then. You wouldn't be possessive of it otherwise, would you? And not extended family and casual friends, either – people can be so funny about nicknames, can't they? Casual friends get so excited about calling people stupid names – Googie or Tiger or Snaffles. Tightly knit families close ranks on that sort of thing, though; they bristle when one exceeds boundaries. You wouldn't have asked me where I'd heard it if it was the sort of nickname that found its way into the society pages. So Steenie is only Steenie to a rare few."

Lady FitzSimmons clutched her handbag tighter and pushed past Sherlock, just close enough to – yes, perfect. She marched toward an unfussy black sedan. The driver waited beside the car – clearly a hired driver from a limousine service, judging from the plates and the lack of concern for his passenger's security. "He certainly wouldn't permit you to address him so familiarly."

"Lady FitzSimmons!" Sherlock called. The woman stopped, but didn't turn around. "Tell Steenie that the net is closing around him. We're very close to bringing Nick Dedalus down as well. I know he's frightened – his supply is dwindling now that the IRA connection is all but severed." Sherlock saw her back stiffen. Interesting. "Time's dwindling too, Lady FitzSimmons. Tell him."

She turned back to face him. Her cheeks were pale, her lipstick a thin red gash. She crushed her gloved hands together. "You're carrion," she spat, and climbed into the car. Sherlock watched the car drive off and merge into traffic, disappearing into the grey afternoon.

"That went well," John remarked.

Sherlock dug his phone from his coat pocket and began texting rapidly. "Better than I'd hoped. First of all, it gave Mycroft ample time to get the alarm disabled. Second, she just told us that Moran's nickname isn't commonly used among friends, so the man in the Derry house was either a family member or a really intimate friend. I'm betting on family. Third –" Sherlock finished his text and produced a key from his other pocket. "I stole the front door key from Lady FitzSimmons' coat pocket." Sherlock's phone buzzed.

Alarm disabled; proceed at will. Also, I'd like you to join me for dinner this weekend.

Sherlock left the text unanswered and fitted the key into the front lock, gratified when the door swung open smoothly, to perfect silence. "Thank you, Mycroft." He held the door open for John.

"You don't think we should follow her? Maybe she's going to wherever Moran's hiding out."

"He's not in town. She's just come in, and she's staying at the Dorchester – there was a key card from the hotel in her handbag and a train ticket in her pocket next to the keys. The wallet in her bag was thin, so she's not a saver of receipts and tickets and so on, and the ticket itself was relatively unwrinkled, therefore it's likely that it was recent. We can find her later if we need her. She's doing him a favour of some kind, picked up a note or letter from his house. On Lord Moran's stationery. That's what she was stuffing into her bag along with her own notepaper."

"Wondered how you knew what colour he used. Hey, thanks for making me pay for the taxi," John said, peering around Moran's elaborately appointed house.

"You can afford it." Sherlock took off his gloves and stuffed them in his pockets.

John sighed. "Why did I know you were going to say that?" He didn't sound upset, though, and when he met Sherlock's gaze, his eyes twinkled. That was good. Very good. "Jesus," he said, looking around again. "This place is like a museum."

"Yes. Try not to break anything." Sherlock drew off his coat and draped it over the back of an
Empire-period mahogany and bronze fauteuil. "Moran's office is probably on this floor somewhere. Start digging. Look for Dedalus letterhead, any mention of art, personal correspondence." He started down the hall.

"Where are you going?"

"To look at something. I'll be along in a moment." Moving deliberately, Sherlock went into the room where he and Lord Moran had held a brief and unilluminating conversation. He turned on a lamp and smiled as he saw the little inlaid table holding a cloth-covered object.

Reverently, he drew the cloth back, revealing the Nicolò Amati. He drew his fingertip across the satiny golden-russet maplewood and sighed softly. There was a silver bow next to the instrument, beautifully kept and of excellent quality if not nearly as staggering as the violin.

It was too tempting not to pick it up. Sherlock picked up the bow, sniffing at it: the rosin was fresh enough to use without fear of damage. He tightened the bow, then lifted the Amati carefully, fitting it between his shoulder and chin. He drew the bow across the strings once – oh, God. Dazzling.

He tightened and tuned the strings minutely, making the most cautious adjustments possible. Setting the bow against the strings again, he played a few arpeggios, wondering what would suit this exquisite instrument best. Something of his own? No…something to reflect his current mood, something light-hearted. Ahh – he had just the thing: Boccherini, passacalle, Madrid. Short, sprightly perfection.

Another few musicians would have helped, but lacking them, Sherlock closed his eyes and hummed the bright opening guitar notes, allegro vivo, then put bow to strings, launching into the cello part, crisp and vivid. He segued into the violin's section, then returned to cello, all the while humming the guitar counterpoint. The Amati sang, its voice spiraling sweetly through the room, spilling its notes into the corridor, starry jewels scattered into the air.

Sherlock picked up the violin's voice again, putting a little extra vibrato on the final notes and ending with a flourish. He stood still for a moment, breathing softly, his eyes closed.

"Gorgeous."

Startled, he turned and saw John in the doorway, his hands clasped behind his back. "I didn't hear you."

"I miss that."

Heat rose into Sherlock's cheeks. He lifted one shoulder in a negligent shrug. "I'm rusty."

"Didn't sound that way to me."

"Well. Thank you." Sherlock set the Amati on its soft cloth and loosened the strings and bow. "Back to it, I suppose. Did you find his office?"

"Oh, yeah. Come look." John led the way into a generously sized chamber panelled in rosewood. Flush against the wall stood five Edwardian-era wooden cabinets, two metres high and a metre wide, fronted with pale, swirling marquetry. "No computer. Just these."

"Charming. Are they locked?"

"Yep. I jimmed one of them." John tossed a Victorinox knife to Sherlock. "Here you go."
"Thanks. We'll worry about the repair bill later." Sherlock went to the last cabinet on the right and
found the stainless pin, then inserted it into the lock. "Find anything interesting?"

"It's sort of a mess," John said, flipping through hanging folders full of correspondence. "I mean,
there's a system – it's filed according to date, looks like, but it's a bunch of business and personal and
all sorts of stuff. Here's a reminder card from his dentist dated December 1997."

"We needn't look back that far," Sherlock said as the lock gave with a satisfying click. "Nick
Dedalus was a nobody before he hit it big, and it's unlikely that he moved in Moran's circles. Moran
claims he was out of prison in five days, so let's go back ten years and no further. If he's moving left
to right, this cabinet's the most recent one." He pulled the bottom drawer open: empty. He moved to
the next drawer, and the next, and the next. "Or the next cabinet, perhaps," he muttered. Spying a
library ladder next to a wall of books, he dragged it to the cabinets and climbed up, opening the
topmost drawer. "No luck. Next cabinet it is."

John, meanwhile, had picked the lock of the cabinet next to Sherlock's. "Here we go. This stuff is
from last year."

"Look for art-related correspondence. Christie's, Sotheby's, any mention of paintings or sculpture or
objects." Sherlock took a hanging folder to the desk and began rummaging through it.

Moran didn't save advertising circulars, but it looked as if he didn't throw any other post away.
Sherlock sorted through a stack of Christmas cards, enough to put paid to Lady FitzSimmons' claim
of Moran's pariah status. There was a card from Meredith Howe, with the brief, unilluminating
message Happy Christmas – fondly, Meredith. There was a card from the Mayor's office. A few
addressed to "Uncle Stephen." A card from Dedalus Communications, the front picture Dedalus'
logo, a stylised drawing of a winged man, wearing a Santa hat – how droll. Inside, the standard
corporate holiday wish, and underneath, in neatly inked capitals, Beannachtaí na Nollag – St Nick.
Beneath the writing was a smiley face.

"St Nick," Sherlock murmured, and put the card aside. He went through more items – invitations to
Christmas and New Year's parties (there was the Dedalus racecourse do invitation – Sherlock put
that aside as well), dry-cleaning receipts, letters from his solicitor regarding his protest against a
neighbour, evidently a famous movie actor who wanted to build a greenhouse atop his roof and spoil
the views, theatre and ballet tickets, bread-and-butter letters thanking him for a dinner, utility bills,
cancelled cheques…. There was a letter from Christie's, confirming his fee for the facilitation of a
painting sale: Lovis Corinth, Girl Braiding Her Hair. Fee, ten thousand pounds. Public sale,
purchaser disclosed. Another, David Hoyer, Self Portrait. Fee, eight thousand six hundred fifteen
pounds. Public sale, purchaser disclosed. Another, Egon Schiele, Girl In Black. Fee, sixty thousand
pounds. Private sale, purchaser undisclosed. Lord Moran certainly made a nice living.

"What about these?" John asked, showing Sherlock some similar letters.

Sherlock got his phone out. "I'm forwarding Mycroft's list of plundered art. Start checking pieces off.
Look for a connection to Dedalus, or Meredith Howe."

"Yeah. Here's one. Erm, fee seventeen thousand pounds – shit! Purchaser, estate of Bärlau family,
represented by Meredith Howe."

"Mm. She acted as a go-between for families of Holocaust victims. Nothing to indicate any sort of
disagreement?"

"Doesn't look like it."
"What's the date?"

"September 9 of last year."

"So presumably, if there was some sort of falling out that precipitated her murder, it happened after that. She did send him a Christmas card, not that it's overflowing with warmth. Keep looking, John." Sherlock found another Christmas card with a saccharine Nativity scene on the front: a dishwater-blonde, pale-skinned Mary and sappily doting Joseph looming over an impossibly rosy-cheeked blond infant Christ. Sherlock opened the card.

*Dearest Steenie - Nollaig shona dhuit. S.*

"Steenie," Sherlock said.

"What's that?"

"Don't stop looking for a connection to Lady Howe or Dedalus, John. Give me your knife again." Sherlock took the knife and went to the first cabinet.

"There's tons of stuff here," John said plaintively. "It's going to take forever."

"It's not even three o'clock, John," Sherlock replied. He pulled open the middle drawer of the first cabinet and began digging. This correspondence dated back to the early eighties, what looked like the end of Moran's university years and his tentative wading into the muddy political pool. Lots of copied letters of introduction, dinner party invitations, scribbled notes from Uni chums, dutiful letters from distant relations, notices of political dos, welcome-to-the-club letters from House of Lords peers – boring, boring, boring. More political correspondence, letters of support from both Catholic and Protestant clergy, a fund-raising request from the Derry Widows Association, a charity that assisted the families of men killed in Northern Irish conflicts (IRA widows, Sherlock surmised from the tone), more personal letters. Stephen, Lord Moran, Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, Stephen, Lord Moran, Dear Sir, Stephen. Not a Dear Steenie in sight.

"What are you looking for over there?" John inquired.


"Boyfriend?"

"No. Moran had a wife and children."

"Not that that matters," John muttered.

Sherlock stopped, not daring a glance over at John, though he yearned to. Too dangerous. "Yes. Yes, of course." He resumed his search and after ten or fifteen minutes of fruitless digging pulled out a letter written on ruled paper torn from a school exercise book.

*Dear Steenie,*

Excellent.

*Dear Steenie,*

*I hate it here. Its complete BOLLOCKS. Classes are boring, the foods not fit for dog meat, and the dormitory smells like a week old wank, its disgusting. Theres no fucking hot water!!! Did they not*
have hot water when you were here? Why didn't you tell me you bastard?!?! The only things that
are even remotely alright are Lit because Welles remembered you and likes me and he likes Yeats
and Heany like you said. And I'm doing archery instead of rugger and that's cool. But the fucking hot
water, I hate you.

I went to the library and saw the carving. They'll probably frame it once you make Lords. Everyone
here is a swot or a thicko & I can't stand it. When I come home for Xmas I'm going to put dog turds
in your shoes for not telling me any of this. Tell Mum to send me some of Niamh's bread and Mr
Mahoneys cheese and some tuck because I CAN'T EAT THIS CRAP.

Love, Seb

Seb.

Sherlock took the letter to the desk and compared it to the handwriting on the Christmas card. Nearly
forty years separated the two writing samples, and though the size and slope had changed, becoming
neater, slightly cramped, the general formation was similar. It wasn't enough, though. He went back
to the first cabinet and continued to search.

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock froze. "Oh. Oh!!" "I think I found something."

"Mum," Sherlock said. "Tell Mum to send bread. His younger brother, Sebastian."

John frowned. "What are you going on about?"

"Look, John, look for God's sake!" Sherlock waved the letter impatiently. "This is a letter from Lord
Moran's younger brother Sebastian, written in the early eighties, addressed to 'Dear Steenie.' This –"
He picked up the Christmas card. "—is a Christmas card addressed to 'Dear Steenie' from someone
called 'S.' Look at the handwriting."

John examined the letter, then the card. "Well, I'm not an expert, and that's a long time, but they look
similar."

"No wonder Lady FitzSimmons was so surprised to hear that name. Hardly anybody calls Lord
Moran Steenie."

"So it was his brother in the SUV? That explains how he got into the house so easily."

"It does. Except if you recall, Lord Moran's brother was reported killed in a car bombing in the late
eighties." Sherlock tore open another drawer and began extracting piles of cards. "Sympathy cards –
sorry for your loss.' Such a senseless tragedy.' Et cetera, ad nauseam."

John slowly took the card from Sherlock's hand. "Wait, wait – you said that Lord Moran was
instrumental in the IRA back-door talks in the 90s."

"Good," Sherlock said with a grin. "You're following."

"And Eamonn Reilly was a key IRA figure." John's mouth fell open, and he shook his head. "Shit."

"I've still got my notes on Moran at Baker Street," Sherlock said. "Clean up as best you can and
come on!" Sherlock dashed out, moving from room to room, looking for personal photographs. Seb.
Where was Seb Moran?

In a bedroom, on a dressing table in a silver frame, was a photograph of a group of children in the dreary, thick garments of the late seventies. There was a teenaged Stephen Moran in a pair of hideous tartan trousers and a polo-neck jumper, with dramatically feathered hair. There was a surly young woman, clearly Aisling Moran-FitzSimmons, and two other girls, all three in drab-coloured woollen dresses, and a very small boy in shorts and a cable-knit jumper, with reddish curling hair and bright blue eyes, the only smiling member of the family.

"There you are." Sherlock kept looking, but found no other photographs resembling another young Moran male.

"Sherlock? You upstairs?"

"Coming!" Sherlock pounded down the stairs. Halfway down his knee twinged sharply, and he gasped.

"You okay?" John's face creased in anxiety.

"Fine." Sherlock stayed upright long enough to head outside, hail a cab, and climb in without collapsing onto the seat. Once in, he blew out a sigh of relief and surreptitiously flexed his knee. Stupid treacherous bodies….

John was peering at him curiously, but said nothing for several moments. At length he turned to Sherlock. "I don't know if you heard, but I found something –"

"Not now, John. I want to focus on this." Sherlock withdrew both pieces of correspondence from his pocket and stared intently. The gross features looked similar, even accounting for the wide timespan between them, but there were stylistic differences. He should have looked for more correspondence, another Christmas card or two. Presumably he wasn't writing long, chatty letters from his digs in the IRA. It wasn't altogether impossible, though….

"We're here," John announced.

"Fantastic," Sherlock said, and threw the door open, leaving John to pay.

"Sherlock, for God's sake –"

Sherlock merrily ignored John and bounded up the stairs – admittedly not at top speed, but not bad. Where were his notes on Moran? In John's old room, that was it, stacked on the bed under a few layers of things. Well, a few dozen layers possibly.

Impatient, Sherlock pushed the door open and stepped inside, and turned just in time to see something large and black heading for the side of his face. The sound and sudden sickening impact of what felt like a rubber mallet collided in his skull just behind his left ear, and he gave a strangled cry before toppling to the floor like a felled tree.

Through the pain in his head he heard the soft snick of the closing door and a pair of heavy booted feet moving toward him. "Sure I can't fuckin' believe what a desperate eejit you are, Mr Holmes, you and that gammy leg of yours."

Sheep farmer. Sherlock tried to turn and crawl toward the door. "John," he groaned. "John." He wanted to roar it, to bellow loudly: John, RUN!

The sheep farmer yanked him up by the collar of his coat. The pain spiked in his head, far worse
than his bad knee, and he struggled not to vomit. Distantly, he heard footsteps ascending the stairs.
"John –"

"Oh, fuck's sake —" A heavy arm crushed Sherlock's windpipe, and he felt himself dragged up against a broad chest. "You're fucked next time I see you," the voice whispered in his ear, and the arm let go and heaved Sherlock forward.

Sherlock's head struck the doorjamb, and he saw an entire constellation sparkling before one of the stars went supernova and he saw nothing at all. He heard John's exclamation of anger and surprise, though, and the retreating heavy footsteps, out the window, the metallic rush of the fire escape. He permitted himself to grey out for a few moments, undone by weak relief: John was safe.

*

"Jesus fucking Christ." John helped Sherlock sit up. "Slowly, slowly. Was that him? Same Galway bloke?"

"Mhm." Sherlock leant against the door. His head pounded rhythmically. "Same."

A hiss of a sigh escaped John's nostrils. "Well, he got out the fucking window. Slippery bugger." He probed delicately behind Sherlock's ear, pulling away when Sherlock let out a muted yelp. "Sorry. No, don't try to move." Strong hands held Sherlock's shoulders down. "We'll get you onto the sofa in a bit, check you out. Get your bearings first."

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut and winced as the pressure spiked again. Afraid he was going to vomit, he took a deep breath, then another, then another.

"Good. Keep breathing." John's fingers closed round Sherlock's wrist and found his pulse. "Someone's not keen on you. You think they saw us go into Moran's house, whoever it was?"

"No," Sherlock said. He peered blearily at John. "Are you all right?"

"Am I all right – Sherlock, you –" John laughed, then took Sherlock's face in his hands. "You –"

Sherlock reached up and clasped one of John's hands. "You're all right."

"Yeah, I'm – I'm fine." John drew closer, then pulled back. "Oh, fuck," he whispered, and scrambled to his feet. "Do you have ice in the freezer, packet of frozen peas, something? I want to get that swelling down."

Sherlock closed his eyes. "In the drawer."

Fuck.

*

Chapter End Notes
I've quoted extensively from John's blog; the entry is here.

The brief recounting of Sherlock and John's case is lifted from ACD's The Adventure of the Reigate Squire.

The music Sherlock plays is from Boccherini's String Quintet in C Major, No. 6, Opus 30. You can listen to it here. It may be familiar if you are a fan of the film Master and Commander.
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

As ever, huge thanks to my beta/britpicking team, Kimberlite and Vilestrumpet. <3 Also, as ever, all mistakes are mine and mine alone.

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8 July 2018

At Langley, a rumour had swirled about for a long while: it was Trish Alland who'd introduced the tiny granules of polonium 210 into Aleksandr Litvinenko's tea. Of course, she hadn't been going by Trish Alland then; they'd called her by her real name, Dorothy Olszewski. She'd taken the name Patricia Wyatt Alland when she'd left the CIA, claiming Mary's real last name as her imaginary first husband's. A tribute, she'd said, to their years of friendship. She'd always had more than a touch of the theatrical about her.

She knew how to keep her mouth shut, though. Whenever the topic of Litvinenko came up, she'd laugh and shake her head. "C'mon, you guys. Sasha was on our team. That week, anyway." And everyone would roar. She'd never actually denied killing him, though. And she'd always been good with non-ballistics.

"What do you think?"

Mary bit into a tiny Yorkshire pudding with a sliver of Kobe beef atop it, leant back, and surveyed the pale-grey dress that Trish had zipped onto her small, muscular body. It was floaty silk, with three-quarter sleeves and a sedate mid-calf hem. "It's pretty."

Trish scowled and surveyed herself in the three-way mirror of the luxurious fitting room done in melting shades of chocolate and caramel and cream. "Pretty, but...come on, I didn't drag you here to be diplomatic."

"Okay, fine. It looks like it's meant to be ironic or something. Like you should be wearing a pearl choker and heels, and have a Hoover in one hand and a martini in the other for your husband when he comes back from a hard day at the office and wants his pipe and slippers and his twelve-ounce steak."

Silently, Trish stared at her reflection for a few seconds. "Jesus, you're right. Next." She unzipped it, stepped out of it, and tossed it onto a chair before reaching for the next one, a full-skirted raspberry crepe dress with long, tight sleeves and a deep scoop neck. "What time do you have to go?"

"Nine, ten, something like that." Mary finished her minuscule pudding.

"Good – then you're free for an early dinner."

"Isn't what's-his-name picking you up?"
Trish shrugged. "The ballet starts at eight, the hotel's six blocks from Lincoln Center, and he's got a car service. We can eat at Asiate, or in my room - whatever. The food's good."

"Okay. I guess I'd better stop eating this stuff, then." Mary glanced regretfully at the plate of canapes and pushed it away. "Pink? Really?"

"I love pink! And it's dark."

"It's a little fou-fou. Especially since you went blonde."

Trish surveyed herself, sighed, and unfastened the dress. "I'm a Texan now. Big blonde hair is a thing down there."

"Maybe with cheerleaders." Mary settled deeper into her chair, enjoying herself tremendously. She hadn't made lots of female friends in their new neighbourhood in Blackheath – the other mummies weren't quite her speed for one reason or another, though she did her best and made casual lunch dates with some of them outside Nora's play-dates. Even the bright ones left her cold, and they probably sensed that she wasn't terribly forthcoming. Couldn't be helped. Being with Trish was entirely different; they were completely honest with each other, and Trish was full of laughter and fun. She wished they were able to get together for more than a few surreptitious days every few years. The last time they'd met, Trish had come to the hospital the day after Mary had given birth, while John was home, showering and changing. A two-hour visit, cuddling Nora and catching up. Mary had wanted her to stay longer, but Trish had demurred, and sadly, Mary had realised the practicality of her refusal.

"Cheerleaders, my ass –" Trish turned at a knock on the door. "Oh, reinforcements." She slipped a cream-coloured cotton dressing gown over her pink thong and bare breasts and opened the door, admitting a saleswoman with a double armful of dresses. "Thank you! Could we get that taken away –" Trish pointed to the tray of food, "and maybe get some coffee?"

"Tea for me, please," Mary said.

Trish grinned. "Tea for my Limey friend."

"Of course." The saleswoman scooped up the tray, smiling at Trish as she stole a little pastry.

"Anything appealing yet?"

"Everything's been vetoed so far. Good thing I trust your taste," Trish added, giving Mary a mock scowl and popping the pastry in her mouth. As the saleswoman left unobtrusively, she stripped out of the robe and slung it over a chair. "Tea! Jeez, you've really assimilated. Your accent hasn't slipped at all."

"I haven't used anything else in four years. It's just easier not to have to switch back and forth."

"Yeah, that makes sense. Every once in a while I can feel Pennsylvania coal-cracker straining at the leash, and I have to squish it down before I tell someone to outen a light or to get me a coupla-two-tree pierogies." Trish got halfway into a beige lace dress, then changed her mind. "Makes me look like a corpse, I can tell already. Aren't you going to get anything?"

Mary laughed. "Where would I wear a three-thousand dollar dress?"

Trish examined the price tag of the beige lace. "Five thousand five hundred, excuse you."

"My point stands."
“I saw you eyeing that nice tan bag downstairs. And I need some fragrance. You could get some perfume.”

Mary hesitated. She didn't spend much on herself; maybe she deserved a treat. “I don't know.”

“Come on. John won't notice. He doesn't pay attention to that stuff, does he?”

“Not really.” John sometimes commented on her clothes, but only to say she looked nice – specifics weren't really his thing. She hadn't modified her wardrobe much since they'd met, and she didn't have a passion for clothes – she liked to look good, and liked pretty things as much as anyone, but she wasn't like Trish, the insatiable clotheshorse. Hell with it. She’d get the bag and some fragrance, maybe a nice lippy too. Wasn't as if she couldn't afford it. "Sherlock might, though."

“Yeah, maybe.” Trish lifted an appreciative eyebrow. "God, I wouldn't mind meeting him."

“Never.” Trish was as accomplished a liar as Mary, but thought of Sherlock scrutinising Trish made her want to shudder in horror.

“You don't trust me around him?”

“You're retired. I think you've forgotten how to dissemble.”

“Ha,” Trish said flatly, picking up another dress. "Unlikely. Still, I wouldn't mind. He's hot, in that weird horse-faced English way. He's still single, huh?"

“So far.” Sherlock would be single forever, Mary thought, unless she and John split up, and even then, he might not say a word to John, he'd been silent for so long. The unfeigned longing in his eyes the night of the wedding was a little...she'd felt sorry for him, but that didn’t mean she’d been inclined to share.

Trish pulled the dress over her head. It was chartreuse shantung, with exaggerated, stiff hip panniers, the sort of thing that someone like Tilda Swinton could pull off, but nobody else. "No."

“No,” Mary agreed.

“So how long are you going to keep balancing this?"

“I've done recon, as much as I can, anyhow,” Mary said. "He's protected. Not to mention he's got that brooding fuck Seb with him all the time. Sorry."

“Eh, no worries – that was a long, long time ago, and it was exactly twice.” Trish replied, and seated herself on an overstuffed ottoman. "Sweetie, he's fucking with your head. You know he hasn't got you under 24/7 surveillance. You know that, right?"

“Yeah,” Mary said morosely. "Just eighteen hours a day, that's all."

“Come on –" "

"Last time he saw me, he had this little split-screen setup on his mobile – John at work, Nora at school. For a second – just a split second – I saw the sight on the back of Nora's head. He asked me if I'd ever seen a pomegranate dropped from a thirty-storey building."

"Cocksucker," Trish breathed, and took Mary's hand in hers, squeezing it. Mary felt the strength in her grip, the smooth, hard callus built up by years of firearm use. "I'll do it. I've said it before, but I'm saying it again. I will blow his fucking head off."
There was a knock on the door, and the chirpy saleswoman popped in with a tray. "Coffee, tea," she said, and put the tray on the table.

"Thanks, darlin'," Trish said. "Give us about fifteen-twenty minutes, okay?" She waited until the woman had left, then turned back to Mary. "I mean it. Say the word."

Mary bit her lip as tears dammed up in her eyes and throat. She shook her head and breathed through her nose. "I love you for that. But I can't let you. If anyone found out, they'd come after you too."

"He's got you scared, Annie, and that makes me fucking sick with rage. He's not going to hurt that precious baby of yours. Or John."

"I can't risk it." Mary heard her voice rising, half-hysterical. "I can't!"

"Okay. Okay." Trish rubbed her hand. "I get it. I do."

"You don't, though." The tears spilled, and Mary brushed them away with an abrupt gesture. "You don't, because you're smart enough not to make yourself vulnerable. I made this bed, and now I've got to lie in it."

"And you're not going to tell John any of this."

Mary shook her head. "It'd be another betrayal. He forgave one; he wouldn't forgive two. And even if he didn't see it that way, can you imagine his reaction? He'd want to kill Jim. He'd do something rash, and I couldn't bear it. Either way, I'd lose him."

Trish sighed. "And Jim knows that."

"I can't lose him, Dot. I love him."

"I know," Trish sighed.

They'd discussed John before, and Mary didn't want to discuss him again. She exhaled sharply and squeezed Trish's hand. "I'm okay. And I'm going to kill him. I am, I swear it. But I've got to be careful."

"Then let me help you."

"You have helped me. You let me cry on your shoulder and didn't call me a fucking idiot like I deserve." She took Trish's other hand. "I'll catch him on the hop one of these days, but I've got to get him comfortable first. I can do that." Mary laughed a little. "And you know what? The money's been good. Fantastic. I've pulled down half a million already."

"Dollars or pounds?"

"Pounds."

"Nice," Trish said. "Did you tell John that you'd –"

"Christ, no. I'm squirrelling it away. Eventually I'll tell him...something. Make up a dead relative. A rich dead relative." She laughed again, concealing a faint prickle of unease. John had never read that data stick. Sherlock had, but dead relatives came out of the woodwork all the time. Or maybe she'd make up a winning American lottery ticket. She'd work it out when the time came.

Trish had risen to her feet and was trying on another dress. She straightened it over her hips and
tilted her head at herself in the mirror. "Hmm...."

Mary got up and stood beside Trish, eyeing her in the three-way mirror. The dress was indigo silk crepe, with a lace overlay in the same colour and a demure high white organza collar. Fitted, long-sleeved, it stopped just at the knee. "I like it," Mary said. "Sort of sexy schoolmarm."

"It does things for me," Trish agreed, and turned, examining the rear view with pleasure.

"Hold still," Mary said, and gently took Trish's blonde mane, piling it up and then pulling it into a neat chignon. "There. And the highest heels you can possibly walk in."

"That's pretty high. No platforms, though. I hate platforms. I feel like a goddamn Clydesdale in them." Trish looked at herself a bit longer, and said in a British accent every bit as good as Mary's, "By George, I think she's got it." She turned to Mary. "Look, why don't you come back to the hotel when you're through? I'll get rid of what's-his-name after the ballet and tell him I'll see him tomorrow. We'll have champagne and snacks and get facials and watch a dumb movie. Please?"

Mary relented easily. "Absolutely. Sounds nicer than my hotel."

"Excellent. Let's go eat. But first we're going to get you that bag and some perfume."

*

The assignment was close to the Chelsea Piers, in a sagging pink-granite faced brownstone that hadn't quite caught up to the boutiques and posh eateries surrounding it. Mary rang the bell and stared unblinkingly at the greasy young man who answered. He wore a trilby hat, strappy undershirt, and a thick mustache, and looked like a furtive cousin of Freddie Mercury.

"Morstan?"

"Yep."

"Come in." The young man escorted her inside a narrow hallway and led her to a tiny cage lift. They took it down three storeys; Mary felt a subway train rumbling beneath her feet. Down another corridor that hooked left and then right, and at last they stopped at a door. The man unlocked it and let it swing open.

Inside, in a tiny room sheeted in plastic and walled with bales of what appeared to be used clothing, was a man lying on the floor, illuminated by a single hanging naked yellow light bulb. Mid-forties, in a suit, duct-taped at ankle, knee, wrist, and mouth, he might have been handsome, but it was difficult to tell; his face was a bloody mess. As the man caught sight of them, he moaned feebly and kicked his legs.

"Noisy fucker," the young man said. "Rich, too. Had seven hundred cash in his wallet and a cool fucking watch. Guess he's not used to rough treatment. He's the head of Baring Pharmaceuticals, CFO or something. I guess he was undercutting –"

"I don't give a fuck who he is," Mary said, and pulled her Ruger. The man on the floor flailed as hard as he could and gave a muffled scream. The greasy little sod put his hand on her arm, and Mary froze him with a look. "Move your hand."
The young man recovered himself quickly, smirking, but took his hand away. "Nuh-uh." He disappeared into the dark corridor and came back with a cylindrical object. "Use this."

Mary looked coolly at the oxyacetylene welding torch, then at Hipster Freddie's face. "No."

Hipster Freddie waggled the blowtorch to and fro. The man on the floor screamed again. "Boss's orders. He said if there's any evidence of a bullet wound, there's no paycheck in it for you."

Mary shrugged and re-holstered her weapon. "I guess I'm not getting paid, then." She walked out the door.

"He said you'd say that," Freddie called after her. "He said to give you this."

Turning, Mary saw something white in Hipster Freddie's hand. She took it – an envelope – and tore it open, withdrawing a single thick sheet of paper, a black bird engraved or embossed at the top left of the sheet. She read the words on the paper.

Do it, sweetie, for your little pomegranate. XOXOXO JM

Underneath the figure was a smiley face. Mary closed her eyes briefly and pocketed the sheet. In the baled and plastic-coated room, the man kept shrieking and shrieking.

"I need the gun," Freddie said. "I'll give it back, promise." Sighing, Mary handed the weapon over, but not before emptying the magazines and pocketing them as well. "He said to take your time. I'll be right upstairs if you need anything."

"What could I possibly need from you, you little weasel? Besides, doesn't he want you to watch?"

His smirk was less forceful now. "Not in my job description." He turned and walked away.

Mary took the blowtorch, then went back into the room and closed the door, listening to Hipster Freddie's diminishing footsteps. Didn't have the stomach for what was about to happen. She regarded the man on the floor impassively as he pleaded noisily, but incoherently, and then realised she'd seen him on telly – he'd been reported as skipping out on the pharmaceutical company he ran with boatloads of cash and an avalanche of crooked deals slowly sliding downward.

It didn't matter, did it? Maybe the telly reports had been true, maybe not. Most people involved with Jim Moriarty weren't upstanding citizens, but some were. Some were innocent bystanders. But it didn't fucking matter.

Mary stripped off her coat, crouched on the floor, set the blowtorch down, and touched his arm. "Hey. Hey. Relax. I'm not going to hurt you."

He cast a wild look at the blowtorch, then back at her.

"Yeah. That was just for show. Sit up, okay? Let's sit up, get that tape off your face." She patted his arm and smiled. He gave her a look, frantic with hope and desperation, then struggled to sit up, grunting. Mary helped him up, then moved in front of him. "Good, that's good. Let's just get this off." She settled to her knees and put her fingertips on either side of his head. "This might hurt for a second, but I'll try to be gentle." She sized him up, slipped her hand into her pocket, curling it round the magazine, and then delivered a reinforced snapping punch to the tip of his chin, sending him reeling backward onto the cement floor. Swiftly, she straddled his chest, grasped his hair, yanked his head up, and slammed – once, twice, three times: snap, crackle, pop.

She got off his chest and leant against the plastic-covered, baled clothes, breathing hard. After a
moment, she set about dislocating his shoulders and knees — that, combined with the head trauma,
was reasonable injury for anyone trying to escape death by blowtorch.

After a minute, she turned the blowtorch on.

After ten minutes, her phone buzzed with a text. She fished it from her pocket with one hand.

**Hey sweetheart, how are you?**

**Almost finished here. Can I call you in a bit?**

**Yes. Remind me to tell you about the banana.**

**Is that a double meaning? ;)**

**Ha! You'll find out.**

**K. Talk soon. xx**

After half an hour, the door opened. Mary was shrugging her coat on. Hipster Freddie looked down
at the floor and blanched. "Holy shit."

"Give me my gun."

Curd-white, Freddie handed the weapon over. "You are one stone-cold bitch. I'm impressed." He
took a step into the room and nudged at the man's head with the tip of one dirty trainer. The head
rolled five inches to the right and stopped on the man's nose, squashing it a bit.

Jim wasn't stupid; probably he'd wanted Hipster Freddie to watch. But Hipster Freddie didn't have
the stomach for watching, and if he wasn't telling, neither was Mary. She could have told Freddie to
be careful, or he'd end up at the wrong end of a blowtorch one day, but Freddie would have to take
care of himself. She had problems of her own.

She headed out of the building and toward the M23 stop.

All in a day's fucking work, wasn't it?

*

"I don't want it."

John crossed his legs at the ankle and laced his fingers together over his stomach, settling deeper into
the uncomfortable waiting-area chair. "Doesn't matter." Idly, he watched a man with steel-grey hair
and a fake tan angrily stripping off a gold watch and all but throwing it at the young woman in a fur
coat and heels trotting beside his bed as they rolled toward Radiology.

"I feel fine."

"You feel fine," John mused. He dug his phone out of his pocket, turned on the camera, and reversed
the view, handing the phone over to Sherlock. "Look at yourself. Look at your pupils. That's a pretty
extreme disparity in size. If you've got a brain bleed, you're going to be sorry you didn't get an MRI."
Sherlock waved the phone away irritably. "Don't exaggerate, John."

"You're being stupidly resistant to this, and I can't think why." John ignored Sherlock's raised eyebrows and the expression that meant Obviously you can't and slipped the phone back into his pocket. "I mean you were never this stupid about getting injuries treated before, which leads me to believe you took a harder knock than you think."

Gingerly, Sherlock touched the goose egg on his forehead, partially covered by his hair. "And in two places, no less."

"Twice as good a reason for you to get an MRI. You'd think that you'd be more careful about the housing for your loaf. So shut up, would you?"

"All right," Sherlock agreed almost meekly.

John glanced at him. "Now you're really terrifying me," he said, heartened when Sherlock smiled. "How's your headache?"

"Nasty," Sherlock admitted, hunching deeper into his coat.

"Are you cold? Want a blanket?"

"No, I'm fine."

A man and a woman, both in scrubs, approached the waiting area. The woman nodded briskly "Mr Holmes? I'm Shannon. Kevin here and I will be helping you through the MRI, and then Dr Majumdar will meet with you to interpret it." She turned to John. "Dr Watson, yes? You'll wait for him?"

John stood. "That's right. And yeah, I'm here for however long he needs me."

The other radiology tech, Kevin, grinned. "Wow – Hatman and Robin in the flesh." There were no words for how stupid that moniker was, so John simply offered Kevin a tight smile. Kevin seemed to realise that his overfamiliarity was inappropriate and turned his attention to Sherlock. "Well. Let's get you in, shall we?"

"Fine," Sherlock said wearily, and glanced up at John, his cockeyed pupils making him look a little odd, sort of Bowie-esque. "You don't have to wait."

"Just shut your gob and get in there. And cooperate with them." John clapped Sherlock gently on the shoulder, careful not to jar him. "I'll be right here." He watched the techs wheel Sherlock away and realised that he was flexing his hand. He put it in his pocket, letting his fingers curl round the silicone-coated oblong of his phone and stay there.

He'll be fine. And he would be. Of course he would be. Sherlock might joke about being indestructible, but John couldn't envisage a world in which Sherlock was permanently sidelined by an injury. Funny though – more than a few times over the past four years he'd come across some exploit of Sherlock's in the tabloids and muttered darkly to himself, or to Mary. "Surprised he hasn't had his head bashed in yet." "Probably end up with a broken neck carrying on like that, silly nutter." Et cetera, et cetera. It wasn't that he'd really wanted Sherlock hurt – it was his own bruised ego talking, indignant that Sherlock had seemed to get on just fine without him.

Which was rubbish, wasn't it? Sherlock had got on fine before John, and he'd get on fine after him, too. He was stupid, wanting so badly to be needed that he blotted out the fact that Sherlock was usually capable of handling himself in a tight situation. Sherlock had managed well enough during
those years he'd been away, and evidently it had been harrowing at times. Sherlock had never really explained those scars on his back, averring that John would have been bored senseless by a recitation of events that Sherlock himself could scarcely remember, so insignificant were they. And if Sherlock wasn't in the mood to talk, then silence was the order of the day, so John let it alone. Sometimes he wondered about them, though.

His phone rang, startling him. He pulled the phone out and didn't recognise the number. "Hello?"

"Daddy!" Nora's voice was higher-pitched than usual. "Guess where I'm calling you from."

"Hmm, let's see. Are you on a tropical island drinking coconut milk and dabbling your toes in the ocean?"

Nora giggled. "Noooo! Guess again."

"The top of the Eiffel Tower?"

"Nope."

"Are you in Tibet? You sound very far away."

"No! Give up?"

"Yes, I give up. Tell me where you're calling from, darling."

"My phone! Mummy got it for me this afternoon."

Well. That didn't take long, did it? He realised he'd never replied to the text Mary had sent about the transfer being complete. "That's lovely. I hope you said thank you."

"I did. I took some video of a cat in a shop window. Want me to send it to you?"

John checked his watch. "That would be lovely. Can't wait. Erm, tell your mum...no, never mind. Is she nearby?"

"She's downstairs making dinner."

"Okay, I'll give her a call. I won't be home for dinner, and maybe not tonight."

"Why not?"

"I'm at the hospital with Sherlock, sweetheart. He got hurt, and I want to make sure he's okay."

"Who hurt him?"

Nora sounded more curious than concerned, which was entirely right, as she hardly knew Sherlock at all, but John stifled a sudden laugh – she sounded oddly like Sherlock. He wondered if Sherlock would have been amused by that. He thought so. "A bad person."

"The sheep farmer?"

Startled, John was silent for a few seconds. "What?"

"You were talking about the sheep farmer the other night. He gave Mr Holmes halothane," Nora said, mispronouncing the word slightly, as if it were the shiny bit that went round an angel's head. "I looked it up. Mum said you can't really get it anymore, it's illegal."
"It's legal for people like doctors and vets and so on," John said. "And it's not commonly used these days – that's what Mum meant. There's a drug called isofluorane that's more popular, mostly because the body eliminates isofluorane much more easily."

"Mum said he didn't mean to kill Sherlock anyway, just scare him."

"That's right. This time I think it was a bit more serious, though. Sherlock's got concussion, so he's having an MRI right now and then I'm going to see him home and make sure that he's okay. It'll take a while, probably all night because I'll have to wake him at intervals, so I don't think I'll see you until tomorrow. Hey, didn't you have swim today?"

"Nope, got cancelled. They're doing something to the pool. Do you want me to take the phone to Mum?"

"No, I'll call her on her own. I love you, poppet."

"Love you, Daddy. See you tomorrow."

"Give us a kiss?" Nora made a loud kissing noise, and John returned it. "Bye, love." He rang off, then phoned Mary.

"Hey," Mary said. "Where are you?"

"Hospital," John replied, and explained briefly. "I don't want to leave him without making sure I can rouse him, so I don't think I'll be back tonight."

"Okay. I guess you got the text?"

Involuntarily, John's mouth tightened. "I did. It's all sorted?"

"Yep. I did a bank transfer for the house, so everything else is…we're good to go."

John didn't want to talk about going anywhere. "And you got Nora a phone."

"Oh, did she call you?"

"Yeah, she did. She was really excited." John felt himself thawing on the subject of the phone. It was a practical thing to do, and smart of Mary. Nora was growing up, that was all there was to it, and he couldn't push back the tide forever.

"They set everything up in the shop and sent us on our way. You should see her with it – we got a purple glittery case for it with her name in silver. She tried to act cool about it at first, but then she was taking videos of everything, including random shots of the fridge and the car tyres. The novelty will probably wear off next week, but for now –" Mary laughed.

"She promised me a cat video," John said.

"Ah. Be prepared for five minutes of a marmalade cat sleeping in a window. Thrilling cinema."

Beyond her voice, John heard the sounds of Mary in the kitchen: the fridge door opening and closing with a rattle of glass bottles and jars, a metal spoon against the cast-iron frying pan, a cupboard door creaking. They were comforting sounds, familiar, and prompted a peculiar sensation of anger that surprised John with its intensity. He didn't want to talk to Mary any longer. "Well, I'd better be off. Don't wait up, okay?"

"Okay. Give His Nibs my best. I'm sure he'll be fine."
"Oh, he will be. I'll tell him, though."

"Hey, let's go to dinner tomorrow night, the three of us. Somewhere horribly posh to celebrate this nouveau riche thing."

"Sounds good." It sounded awful, though he couldn't say why. "See you tomorrow."

He rang off and let the phone rest in his lap as he watched the comings and goings of the radiology staff and patients. It was relatively quiet; the desk clerk chatted with a lab tech, occasionally gesturing at the telly, where a rugby match played with the sound off, and an old man on a gurney lay partially concealed by a curtain, presumably waiting for a procedure. No excitement, no drama. Sherlock was probably bored out of his skull having to lie still for twenty minutes. Techs usually offered music to patients, but if a patient chose anything but metal, they had a hard time hearing it over the unbalanced washing machine thudding of the MRI scanner.

He didn't want to go to dinner tomorrow night. He didn't want to go home, full stop. He wanted to pick up Nora and…and what, exactly? Take off on a trip around the world? No, he didn't want that – Mary did. He didn't want to go back to work on Monday, he didn't want night after night of comfort and familiarity, not –

"Fuck," he muttered, and rubbed his eyes. Christ, didn't Mary get bored? Did the mundanity of ordinary life never back up on her? What would have happened if he'd taken the flash drive Sherlock had offered him and he'd read it? He'd known what she'd done, details wouldn't have mattered. But maybe knowing them would have helped; maybe they could have discussed them. Maybe if they had, things would be different today.

_Different how, you fucking moron?_

John couldn't stop the discontentment that gnawed at him. Probably therapy would be a good thing to try again, to make sense of everything. Maybe he'd make an appointment with Ella, if she still practised. He'd fallen out of touch with her.

Nora's cat video had arrived. Dutifully, John watched. As Mary had said, it was indeed five minutes of a large ginger cat snoozing in a shop window. He was entertained by Nora's cooing and exclamations of endearment, none of which the cat heard. The video ended, and John texted a reply.

_Excellent cinematography! And a very pretty cat._

The reply came less than a minute later. _Can we get a cat?_

_You know your mum's allergic._


Presumably that wasn't good, but he didn't know quite how to respond to it. _See you tomorrow love xx_

He still had fifteen minutes or so to go. He took out his phone and opened up the web. His last saved page was William Hill, but he didn't want to look at racing forms, even though that had always soothed the itch before. He considered texting Mycroft to tell him Sherlock was in hospital, but hell, Mycroft probably knew already, and there was no guarantee that he wouldn't shoot the messenger. Mycroft hadn't been especially pleasant to him the other day. John couldn't see Sherlock blaming him for their rift, much less telling Mycroft about it, but no doubt Mycroft drew his own conclusions, and John wasn't in the mood to set him straight.
Lacking anything else to do, John went to Barclays and logged into their account to look at the balance.

£4,537,894.09. And that, apparently, was after the house payment. And their credit cards – it looked like Mary had paid all of them off in one fell swoop. And their energy and utilities bills. They were solvent. Flush. Filthy fucking rich.

It probably should have made him happy.

He logged off, put his phone back in his pocket, and waited for Sherlock.

*

"I'm falling apart, John," Sherlock announced from the sofa.

"Mm-hm. Bit melodramatic." John poured tea and plopped two spoons of sugar into Sherlock's.

"It's true," Sherlock insisted. "First the knee, now this. I've been hit much harder and emerged with nothing more than a headache. Not even that, sometimes. Now I'm just rotting, and it's ridiculous. Is this what happens with age? I thought it might be a slow downward slide. Do you know that this morning I woke up with my back hurting?"

John set Sherlock's tea on the table next to him. "I'd bet a hundred quid that you're overcompensating for your trick knee. Once you get that sorted you'll be back to normal."

"Doubt it." Sherlock sipped at his tea. "Thank you."

"Yeah, of course. Have a bit of that, then I'll help you to your room."

Sherlock scowled. "I don't need help. I'm not a complete invalid."

"Thought you were falling apart." John bit back a smile.

"Oh, shut up." Sherlock took a deeper drink and set the mug on the table. "John, we've got to go back to Ireland. Kerstin Tresler mentioned a Seb, do you remember? Eamonn O'Reilly's associate. We've got to dig up the story surrounding Sebastian Moran's death. She'll know something."

Sherlock got to his feet and took a wobbly step toward the door. "She—"

"Whoa, hey!" John caught Sherlock's arm and steered him toward his bedroom. "You're not going anywhere for at least a week. You heard the doctor – rest and quiet. You're lucky there wasn't a brain bleed – you're not even supposed to be reading. I think you should see about getting some sort of security system for the house, though. That's twice that guy's broken in."

"I'll look into it." Sherlock allowed himself to be propelled into his room. "She's a thousand years old, though, John – she could die at any minute."

"Who, Dr Majumdar? She's not that – oh, you mean Kerstin Tresler. I think you can afford to wait a week. She'll be fine. Come on, let's get the coat off." He tugged lightly at Sherlock's collar.

"Chance would be a fine thing," Sherlock grumbled, sliding his arms out of the coat. "She didn't expect to live long."
"You'll work something out." John slung the coat over a chair and looked round the room; it hadn't changed much, if at all, in four years. With a pang John realised that the last time he'd seen it was just before their awful fight.

Shit.

Sherlock dropped ungracefully to the bed and bent to remove his shoes, grunting slightly.

"Hey, wait." John gently pushed him upright, then down, against the pillows. "I'll do that." He untied Sherlock's shoes and slipped them off, then set them just beneath the bed. "Want some pyjamas?"

"No, I'm fine." Sherlock's eyes were already closed.

"Okay." John covered Sherlock with the sheet and duvet, then opened the window a crack. The lock, he noticed, was broken. "I think this is how your friend was getting in. You've got to get that fixed."

"Mm."

"Right, some other time. I'll be back in two hours." Sherlock made no response. John watched him for a few seconds, then tiptoed out, leaving the door open. He dropped onto the sofa and glanced at his watch: half eight. He took out his phone and set the alarm for ten o'clock, then snapped on the telly, switching channels and finding nothing interesting. After a few moments he settled on an old black-and-white film, then lay on the couch under the old tartan blanket and drifted off.

*

"Sherlock." John tapped Sherlock on the shoulder. "Sherlock, wake up."

"Mn?" Sherlock's face was half buried in the pillow.

John turned the bedside lamp on and sat on the bed. "C'mon, Sherlock, wake up. I want to check your vitals."

Sherlock rolled over with a groan. "I was sleeping."

"I know. That's why I'm waking you up. Come on, sit up, would you?" John laid out his impromptu kit – thermometer, stethoscope, and blood pressure cuff, all generously lent by Dr Majumdar. "It won't take a minute – then you can go back to sleep," he coaxed, hooking the scope round his neck.

"Tired."

"Up," John said sternly, and Sherlock finally obeyed with a groan. "Thank you. Unbutton, please." Swiftly, he seated the scope in his ears and laid the drum against Sherlock's chest.

"Cold!" Sherlock yelped.

"Sorry, I'll warn it next time. Shh." John listened, then straightened. "Okay, turn round a bit so I can listen to your lungs."

Sherlock obliged with a long-suffering sigh. "You woke me for this?"
"Yep. Shut up." He listened. "Good. Excellent. Temperature next." He pushed Sherlock's hair away from his brow and swiped the thermometer. Sherlock watched him intently, unmoving, his lips tightly pressed together. John met his eyes for a second, then looked away, taking his hand from Sherlock's head and turning his attention to the thermometer. "Thirty-six point seven, that's good. Blood pressure." He busied himself with the cuff, wrapping it round Sherlock's arm and pumping. "One-seventeen over sixty-five. Nice. Let me look at your pupils, then you can go back to sleep." He turned on his phone light. "This is going to be a bit bright." He shone the light into Sherlock's eyes, watching their response. The enlarged one seemed a bit smaller than before, judging from the little hazel blot on Sherlock's iris that John used as a measurement, and both reacted to the light. "Good. How's your headache?"

"Not bad."

"That's good news. I think you're improving."

"That means you won't wake me again."

"No, that means I'm happy for the next two hours. Go back to sleep, I'll wake you at midnight or thereabouts."

"Silly," Sherlock muttered, sliding back onto the pillows.

"Good night, Sherlock." John shut the light off and went out, smiling.

*

"Again?"

"'Fraid so. Up."

"Ridiculous," Sherlock muttered, struggling into a sitting position.

John clucked in sympathy. "I know, arrested sleep doesn't half take it out of you. I'd have thought you'd be used to it by now, though, given your usual sleep patterns."

"Only on a case."

"Yep." John warmed the stethoscope in his hand. "When was the last time you weren't on a case for more than a few days at a time?"

"When I got sh – it's been a while." Sherlock didn't meet John's eyes, and John supposed he'd walked into that one. "I do sleep," Sherlock added witheringly, "when I'm undisturbed."

John set the scope against Sherlock's chest. "Nice deep breath. Good. Another. Now normally." He listened to Sherlock's lungs, then picked up the thermometer. "Want to pull your hair back for me?" That first time had been unconscious – he'd touched Sherlock's face and hair without thinking. Now it felt odd, slightly artificial. Sherlock obliged without any discernible change in expression. "Good. Blood pressure." It was good, and Sherlock's blown pupil hadn't diminished, but it wasn't larger. "You seem fine. I'll let you sleep three hours this time."

"Oh, do you dare?" Sherlock mocked, but there was a twinkle in his eye. "You're certain you don't
want to make it an hour?"

John stifled an impulse to hug the silly bugger. "Go to sleep, you git."

*

John started awake from a combat dream, sitting up in the near darkness. He gasped at the sight of Sherlock sitting cross-legged in his battered leather chair, his hands folded together in contemplation. "Jesus, you scared me half to death."

"Thought I'd save you the trouble of waking me."

"What time is it? Did I sleep through the alarm?"

"No. It's twenty past two," Sherlock replied.

"Can't you sleep? Are you groggy at all?"

Sherlock seemed to consider this for a moment, then shrugged. "I'm not tired any longer."

"Still —" John pushed the tartan blanket away. "You should be resting, Sherlock."

Sherlock gazed at him silently for a moment. He'd changed, John saw, into a t-shirt, pyjama bottoms, and his dark red dressing gown. "I'm perfectly all right, John, but I appreciate your concern."

John stumbled into the bedroom for the kit and came back out, switching on a lamp. "How's the head?"

"Head's fine."

"Well, let's see." He put Sherlock through the vitals ritual once more, then nodded in satisfaction. "Well, that eye's getting better bit by bit and your vitals are fine, so I think it would be okay to let you sleep 'til morning – say seven o'clock."

"Are you leaving?" Sherlock asked.

John hesitated. "Erm…not unless you want me to. I told Mary not to expect me until tomorrow. Or later today, I guess."

"All right," Sherlock said. "Good."

John found himself unexpectedly warmed by that last. So often, to John's annoyance, Sherlock had acted as if he were only partially engaged with the rest of the human race and when he was it was usually as an observer; he had a permanent ticket that allowed him to withdraw at will. Even at the height of their friendship, Sherlock was frequently checked out. But that made his moments of honest communion that much more precious, and the tiny accolade thrilled him, absurd as it seemed and probably was. "So what were you doing?"

"Thinking."

"About the case?"
Sherlock unfolded his hands and placed them on the arms of the chair. "Among other things." He tapped his fingers against the worn leather.

"I guess I can't stop you from doing that, can I?"

Sherlock laughed a little. Thin colour had come back to his face, making him less haggard. "Absolutely not."

John went back to the sofa and sat. He closed his eyes for a moment and breathed in the familiar scent and dust of 221B, and nostalgia struck him, so powerful that it brought a lump to his throat. He sat in silence, scarcely able to breathe, certainly unable to speak.

This is what it's like to realise where and when you were happiest. And what it's like to know it can never be yours again. He had more than many, many men could have possibly asked for – it was greedy and foolish to want more. He knew that. You've fucked it up. Oh, God, you've fucked it up. "Sherlock."

"Yes?"

"I'm sorry."

A flicker of a frown crossed Sherlock's face and disappeared. "Sorry for what?"

"For…." John groped, and got to his feet, pacing. He'd never been good at speeches, at talking about what lay in the corners of his heart. He forced the next words out. "For being an arsehole. I…I never wanted to stop being friends. Even if we didn't have, erm, anything else, we were always friends first. I could have done everything differently that day. I was selfish, and fucking stupid, so fucking stupid. There were a dozen things I could have said, and instead I –" He continued pacing, unable to meet Sherlock's gaze, and then realised he had to. He stopped in front of Sherlock's chair and dropped into a crouch. "I fucked it up. Being here, with you, seeing all this – I threw away four years, and I can't… I can't bear to think of it, Sherlock. You were the one who apologised, and it should have been me."

Sherlock pressed his lips together, the colour deeper in his cheeks. "John, there's nothing to apologise for."

"There's everything to apologise for," John said fiercely. He couldn't quite mention Mary yet. That was still a sore spot. Perhaps it would be a sore spot for some time, but meanwhile he could try to atone for his behaviour, just a little. "Four years. I've regretted every moment of it. I don't want to live like that anymore, Sherlock. I need…I'm begging you to forgive me. Please."

Sherlock gave a quick, negative shake of his head, as if to wish John away. John's heart plummeted toward the floor. But then Sherlock's eyes met his. "I forgive you," he said softly.

"So am I," Sherlock murmured, and rose to his feet. "I think I'll try to sleep again."

"I'll wake you at about seven."

"All right. Good night, John." Sherlock snapped the lamp off and left, leaving John alone in the
John covered his face with his hands. It was all right; it wasn't perfect, but nothing was. They were friends again, though, really and truly. It might take some time to become at ease with each other, but that would come in time. He wiped away the wetness from his eyes and lay down.

Deep inside, he felt a dry crack in his heart begin to mend.

*

"Sherlock?"

"Mm?"

"Come on, it's almost seven. Let me do your vitals." John peered through the gloom of Sherlock's blackout-curtain-shrouded bedroom, his kit in his hands. "Budge over a bit." He sat on the bed.

Sherlock sat up, rubbing sleep from his eyes. "I think I managed REM sleep."

"That's good." John smiled at Sherlock. His choked confession seemed like a dream now, though he wasn't sorry for it. Perhaps that sort of confession was best saved for late hours and swathed darkness to conceal the raw and naked emotion prompted by heart-rent polemics. He felt a bit bruised, but lighter. Decidedly lighter. "No headache?"

"No."

"Good, that's good," John said, a bit too jovial. He warmed the stethoscope drum. "Pull up your shirt, would you?" Sherlock obeyed, and John placed the drum against his chest, listening to its strong, steady rhythm.

Sherlock's hand closed over John's.

Puzzled, John looked up. "Sherlock, what…." He just made out Sherlock's eyes in the early-morning grey; outside, rain spattered against the window. He tried again. "What…." The drum of the scope was still pressed against Sherlock's chest. John felt...no, heard...Sherlock's heartbeat quicken, infinitesimally.

"Sherlock."

Slowly, Sherlock reached up and brushed the pad of his thumb over John's lower lip.

John leant forward over the abyss of four years and pressed his mouth to Sherlock's.

*

Mary hit the snooze on her phone, half-squinted at the gloomy dawn, and listened to the patter of rain on the roof. She rolled over, burying her face into John's pillows. Ten minutes, and she'd get up, start
breakfast, get Nora to school, head to work. Tim had a complicated rhinoplasty at ten, and she was leaving straight away afterward to come back home to chart possible itineraries. The next few weeks were going to be slippery, and she couldn't afford to fuck up. Fucking Declan though…..

She'd told him, explicitly: do not touch John. Do not even come close to John. If you hear John approaching, leave immediately. Declan was smart enough to keep a second method of egress handy, and so far he'd managed, even if he hadn't even managed to scare Sherlock. That wasn't a surprise. She wanted him hurt, though, even disabled. Temporarily would be perfectly acceptable; permanent would be less desirable, but still acceptable. He was too close, and she supposed that had to happen eventually. Didn't mean she had to like it.

The sound of Nora's alarm, a high-pitched shrilling, pierced her thoughts. God, how could she stand that? It was a Hello Kitty clock, though, and Nora refused to part with it. Maybe Mary could persuade her to find something more soothing on her new phone. The plumbing thudded dully in the walls. *Have to get that fixed.*

And then, she thought: *What the fuck for? We're leaving.*

Groaning, she rolled over and picked up her phone. She'd got a text during the night. As she thumbed the notifications on, her heart double-timed.

Sherlock.

Steeling herself, she opened the text. He'd sent it at midnight. Had John been there? No. Couldn't have been.

*You should have done it yourself, Mary. SH*

Mary erased the text without replying. Unwillingly, she smiled. Sherlock had balls; she'd give him that much. "God damn it, Sherlock. God damn it."

She sent a text to Declan.

*£££ in Euston locker. I'll handle the rest. Thanks love. M xx*

*

Mycroft stepped off the treadmill and trotted into the morning room, where breakfast was waiting: scrambled egg whites, turkey sausage, an indulgent crumpet with butter. Blotting the sweat from his brow with the towel hanging round his neck, he sat and examined his food with pleasure before turning to the folded *Times* beside his plate.

He opened it, wincing at the feel of ink beneath his fingers. A pity one couldn't ask the help to iron the pages any longer – that was, evidently, a bridge too far, but as long as newspapers were printed with ink, one ran the risk of stained fingertips. And he disliked wearing gloves to read. He settled into the financial section, forking up a generous helping of egg white.

His phone buzzed with a text, and he frowned, picking it up. Unknown number. Annoying – as many precautions as he took to keep his number private, he couldn't prevent the odd misdial. He opened the text.
Mycroft scowled ferociously, then took a bite of sausage before sending a reply. *You have the wrong number.* He put the phone down and returned to the stock pages.

The phone buzzed again. "Oh, for heaven's sake…." He picked it up and opened the text.

*Oh, I don't think so, Mr Holmes. :)*
Hi all,

I'm having some medical issues [nothing major, but uncomfortable and annoying] and have an impending family visit, so it will be a few weeks before I'm able to work on this again. It's vexing and incredibly frustrating, but I hope you'll be patient with me. I will post as soon as I'm able - thank you very much for reading, and I hope you continue to hang in there. :)

Thanks again,

Alex
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Deepest gratitude to Kimberlite and vilestrumpet for stellar beta and britpick.

* 

13 January 2015

"Where is he?"

"Why, Mycroft," Meredith said drily, stepping out of Mycroft's path as he pushed his way through the door, "how nice to see you after almost two years of no communication whatsoever. Won't you come in?"

Mycroft nearly collided with a Jacobean console and forced himself to a halt. He rarely, if ever, moved without deliberation, and the tangible evidence of his internal chaos was disconcerting. Slowly, he laid his umbrella on the console, rested his fingertips upon the worn wood, four centuries of sturdy English craftsmanship lovingly polished with oil, and gazed at the still life that hung above the console, a dark Flemish conglomeration of gloves and pottery cups and ripe fruit. He took one deep breath, then another. "You're not a fool, my dear, so please don't behave like one. It's unbecoming."

"As unbecoming as forcing one's way into a friend's home and making demands?"

"You knew he was alive, didn't you?"

Meredith went still, then sighed, shook her head, and left the entrance hall, disappearing into the drawing room.

After a moment Mycroft followed her, catching the faintest whiff of Heure Exquise, intoxicating as ever. He caught sight of her standing beside the fireplace – while it couldn't have roasted an ox, it certainly would have accommodated a smaller bovine – and his heart twisted into a painful knot. She still had power over him; Christ knew he'd never admit it again, but it was true. "Tell me, Meredith."

"What is it you want to hear, Mycroft? Yes, I knew he was alive, and no, I didn't tell you. I might have done, had I known the extent of his involvement with your brother – who I didn't realise was alive for two years, thanks very much. You're not the most faithful confidant yourself, darling."

"I assumed you read the papers."

"Of course I do – but they mentioned Sherlock almost in passing, as one of the expert witnesses in his trial. God, Sherlock's been mentioned so many times in the papers, why on earth would I pay special attention?"
"So he's never mentioned Sherlock in your conversations?"

"You're overestimating our relationship," Meredith snapped. "He doesn't confide in me any more than you do."

Mycroft ignored the dig. "For two years my brother chased James Moriarty's confederates round the world, dismantling his empire -- and it was an empire, I assure you, though you may have been well aware of that already. One of his closest associates took Sherlock captive and tortured him savagely as I watched." He took a step closer to Meredith, staring down at her. "You cannot imagine what that felt like."

Meredith returned the stare. "I can't, but I imagine Jim did."

"He had no idea I was there," Mycroft retorted.

"No." Meredith shook her head. "No, Mycroft. That's not what I mean. I mean that he must have ordered Sherlock's capture and torture at some point, knowing you would find out. He never discussed Sherlock with me, and why would he? I've never even met him. But he did talk about you."

Mycroft scowled. "Me?"

"He intimated that you were responsible for some sort of injustice against him."

"I can't possibly think what he might have meant," Mycroft said icily. "I've scarcely spoken more than a few words to him. Moriarty, his eerie placidity intact after weeks of deprivation and, yes, outright abuse, had leaked just enough to give him and Sherlock some solid information, but...."

Oh, Christ Almighty, but Mycroft had never expected Moriarty to play the same game. Sherlock had seen him die. So he'd said. Possibly he'd been distracted by the thought of having to deceive John, at the mercy of his own tumultuous and foolish emotions. He should have checked, made certain, done a dozen things they'd all been too arrogant and confident to do. Moriarty's death had flustered Sherlock, thrown a spanner into his works, but there had been time to thoroughly examine the body afterward even in Sherlock's absence, to run DNA tests, to begin at the head, and no-one had; Mycroft bore some culpability for the error as well. They'd underestimated Moriarty, he and Sherlock both.

Had Moriarty masterminded Sherlock's capture and torture? Had he known about Mycroft's infiltration, the rescue? Had he, perhaps, permitted it? Ludicrous. And yet --

"More secrets, I suppose. Well, never mind." Meredith's voice intruded upon Mycroft's rumination. She laid a hand on his arm. "Sherlock might intrigue him, possibly even fascinate him, but he's only ever talked about you with me."

"In what context?"

"Just what I told you, really. I don't think he knows that you and I were in a relationship, and it never went beyond a few bitter, innocuous comments. Still, I've never heard him exhibit interest in another human being, so that alone rang a bell. I told him if he attempted to harm you, there'd be hell to pay."

The thought was laughable, but Mycroft was unexpectedly touched. "Don't cross him, Meredith. Tell me when you last saw him, what you spoke about -- everything you can remember."

A cynical half smile crossed Meredith's face. "And what do I get in return?"
"What do you want?"

Meredith's fingers drifted to the high collar of her prim aubergine silk dress and unfastened two buttons. "Come upstairs."

*

Mycroft laid his hand upon Meredith's belly, feeling the flesh yield slightly beneath his touch. While Meredith's assertion that they hadn't spoken in nearly two years was correct, he'd kept tabs on her. Her work with Nazi plunder had only expanded in depth and breadth, occupying almost all of her time; nevertheless, her social life was dizzying, except for a few months in late 2013, when she'd undergone a hysterectomy following the discovery of fibrous masses attached to her uterine wall. She'd travelled extensively as per usual and had had brief sexual relationships with the UAE Minister of Finance, a Swiss university lecturer, and an American painter. Mycroft had scanned that last information only briefly. He wasn't the sort to pine, but he'd never quite...well, perhaps it was true that one never quite forgot first love, clichéd as the sentiment was.

Meredith opened her eyes and turned her head to scrutinise him. Her hair was a glorious nimbus of red against sheets the colour of milky tea. "I thought you were asleep." She covered his hand with hers and squeezed briefly.

"I was."

She gave him a cynical half-smile. "Do me a favour and don't get right to the questioning. Give me the illusion that you came for the pleasure of my company."

"Very well." Mycroft reached out and drew her close, spooning up against her and savouring the sensation of their bodies fitted together. He reached up and fondled one small breast, then pushed aside some of her hair to kiss her neck. "I've missed you."

"Which is why you've overwhelmed me with visits, I suppose. I've tried to phone, you know. Your staff is incredibly obstructive."

"They're paid to be obstructive."

"Hang on to them, then. They're doing a fantastic job." Meredith laughed a little, then nestled closer to Mycroft. "I've missed you as well. I wish you'd told me more about Jim a few years ago. I might have been able to help."

Mycroft kissed her neck again. "The less you knew, the safer you were."

"You're being melodramatic again."

"Not at all." Were he truthful about the high-profile people involved with Moriarty, whether by fair means or foul, she would have been shocked, and might betray that knowledge in her next meeting with Moriarty, a dangerous prospect for her. Plausible deniability was her most valuable asset in dealing with him, and Mycroft wasn't interested in apprehending him immediately. Better to find out what he'd been up to whilst Sherlock had been dismantling his networks. "He's a dangerous man. I'd prefer you didn't speak to him again."

"He organised two procurements for me last year, Mycroft. Dangerous or not, he's helped restore
plunder to its rightful owners."

"At what cost?"

"Monetary, no more." Meredith moved away from Mycroft and sat up, pushing her hair behind her ears. "Think about that before you decide to clap him in prison forever."

Mycroft remained where he was. "Your preoccupation with justice is blinding, Meredith. You can restore every missing piece of art, every plundered trinket, to its rightful owners, or their families, but it won't bring back six million souls. And James Moriarty's involvement in your work doesn't make him a saint by any means, believe me."

A sad smile curved Meredith's mouth. "I know that. I'm sure he knows it too. We all compartmentalise, Mycroft. You most of all, perhaps. Do you know I used to believe you were...well, if not altruistic, at least as interested in the pursuit of justice as I was? I was naïve, but I was young, and admittedly I haven't been exposed to the scenarios you must encounter daily, but you can't pretend you haven't condoned or facilitated atrocity."

"I act upon the directives of Her Majesty's Government."

"Tarted-up atrocity, then." Meredith pulled the sheet and duvet up and lay down again. "Call it what you like."

Mycroft sighed. "I presume you're coming to some sort of point."

"Only that none of us have clean hands. It's true that my work has led me to unsavoury company, but so has yours – even more so. If Jim Moriarty were at all useful to you, you wouldn't think twice about dealing with him as often as necessary. Actually, you should have utilised him when you had the chance. I'm sure he's got loads of information you could have used."

"You're telling me that you intend to continue associating with him."

"As long as it's necessary."

They were well-matched, Meredith and Mycroft. A great pity that they would never amount to more than what they had at the moment. "He's a threat to my brother. You do realise that, I hope?"

Meredith reached out and smoothed Mycroft's hair. "Surely not the only threat. I expect Sherlock has made more than his share of enemies."

"No, not the only threat – only the most dangerous one."

"Jim has other interests now, I think," Meredith said. "He's not in England any longer."

"Have you actually seen him?"

"No. I've only spoken with him in person a few times. He's nearly as shadowy as you are." Meredith smiled. "Mycroft, what would you do in any case? Have him murdered?"

Mycroft lay back in bed and propped his arms behind his head. "It's a thought." Moriarty was a patient man, if utterly mad. Naturally Mycroft was accustomed to juggling a dozen delicately balanced geopolitical scenarios at once, but it wasn't easy to manage all that whilst knowing his brother's bête noire was alive and well and likely plotting terrible revenge. This time, sabotaging Sherlock's reputation wouldn't be enough for James Moriarty; no, there would be, Mycroft suspected, a far greater reckoning.
There had to be a medium ground between enforced paralysis and an all-out manhunt. And Sherlock – would telling him help or hurt matters? As it was, Moriarty was still a ghost, a wavering phantom on a million television screens.

"I'll help you," Meredith said with a sigh. "It'll cut off a major source of information for me, but your brother's safety is more important. What do you need?"

"No," Mycroft said. No. Perhaps this could all be worked to advantage. Magnussen's death spun in advantageous fashion: information on the suffering and heartbreak he'd instigated could be released, and public opinion would help blacken his name forever. Monetary bonuses to those who witnessed his murder, favours to others. Presumably Moriarty would surface again, but other clues could be strewn in Sherlock's path to keep him occupied. And Sherlock would be able to stay in England. Mother and Dad would be delighted, and the leaden weight in Mycroft's heart could dissolve. Of course Mycroft would help Sherlock if he was in terrible danger, but the best thing to do now was divert the course, just a bit. James Moriarty was a spider, but spiders' webs always had distinctive patterns, and in time, the pattern would reveal itself. Then Mycroft could act, with or without Sherlock's knowledge. "No, Meredith. Leave it be. Do tell me if you speak to him again, though."

Still, wasn't it odd that Moriarty had chosen that precise moment to reemerge? It was almost as if he'd known....

"If you say so." Meredith turned toward him and climbed atop his body, fondling his cock with a quick, light touch. "Promise you won't leave right away."

Mycroft gasped and dug his fingers into Meredith's soft skin. "I promise."

*

Sherlock hadn't much use for passivity. Even his moments of physical inactivity were laden with purpose and their own peculiar brand of industry: cogitation, processing, connecting fact to fact, axons to dendrites until order had been established, gathering restorative energy through breathing and digestion and sleep. The very thought of inertia was maddening.

He'd been seized by impulse and touched John's mouth, fully expecting to be repudiated – gently, knowing John was in caretaker mode – but expecting it nonetheless. But John had kissed him. Was kissing him. And now Sherlock sat uncharacteristically still, genuinely shocked, letting John slowly explore his mouth. He opened his lips slightly as John's tongue touched his, but couldn't kiss back.

It won't last. Can't last.

And of course, it didn't. John pulled away; breathless, stricken, Sherlock could only watch.

John pulled the stethoscope from his ears and shook his head. "Sherlock, Jesus...."

Mute, Sherlock mirrored John's little head-shake. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'll do anything, please don't stop –

"What are we doing?"

Sherlock pondered the question briefly. "Kissing."
"I can't." John's body was still, but harsh respiration issued from his chest, as if he'd just run kilometers without stopping.

"Oh." Sherlock wanted to nod calmly, to respond with something that at least approached maturity and wisdom.

---Totally understandable. Sorry if I crossed a boundary.

---You're right. You're married, it's very wrong of us to even contemplate this.

---That was the very definition of a mixed message, John, but if that's what you want....

---It's just as well. You see, I think Mary might have murdered Mycroft's chum. I won't know for certain until the DNA match comes back. What DNA match? Oh, the hair I pulled from Lady Howe's dress and the hair I got from Mary's pillow. Didn't tell you about that, I know. Or about the text I sent a few hours ago. There's actually a lot I haven't told you. I'm sorry.

He did not, however, say any of those things. What he said was a single syllable, embarrassingly whiny and childish even to his own ears. "Why?"

John set his stethoscope aside and took Sherlock's face in his hands. "Abysmal fucking timing, Sherlock."

"Wh-what?"


A few synapses sizzled and expired. "Erm...no." He blinked, awash in confusion and trying to read John's twisted little half-smile and reconcile it to what sounded like warmth in his voice.

"Pity." Now John did smile, a huge, delighted grin that lit up his face.

"Oh --" Sherlock lunged forward and kissed John hard. Their teeth banged together gracelessly, but Sherlock paid it no mind. "I see." He wrapped John in his arms, felt John's arms surrounding him in turn, and the lump of scar tissue that had passed for a heart, pressing coldly against the insides of his chest for four years, began to beat with purpose again. He kissed John's neck and buried his face in John's shoulder, his breath shuddering through his body. "John. John." John didn't speak; he crushed Sherlock close, his respiration harsher still, and Sherlock realised that he was weeping. "John --" he said softly, faltering, feeling tightness in his own throat, prickling in his eyes, and a hazy, wondering gratitude. This couldn't last – decidedly not – but he would treasure it as the great fleeting gift it was. "John."

At length John drew back again, his eyes wet. He sniffled, then offered Sherlock a shy grin. "Sorry." A tremor of apprehension shivered through his voice.

Sherlock returned the smile, and the thought struck him: he could sweep everything about Mary under the rug. Go to her, offer his silence for hers, strike a deal. Would she be amenable to a deal? He thought not, but he could be persuasive. And she had so much more to lose. Maybe. He leant close to kiss John's mouth again, gentler this time, a soft brush of the lips. "Don't be sorry." I should have kissed you the first chance I had and saved us both lots of time. I'm sorry, John, I'm sorry.

"Four years," John said. "I wasted four years."
"That doesn't matter now."

"Why'd you leave?" John gripped Sherlock's upper arms, his fingers digging in painfully. "Why, Sherlock? For fuck's sake, why wouldn't you tell me?"

"You're not still angry about that, are you? I apologised, John. If –"

"Yes, I'm still angry," John snapped, shaking Sherlock a little. "I'm still fucking angry. I know I should have got over it a long time ago, I know that, I know, but I haven't done. I am still pissed off, Sherlock. I don't want an apology, I want an explanation. If you…if you loved me the way you said you did that day –" John shook Sherlock again.

"That hurts," Sherlock murmured, buying time, knowing exactly what day John meant. That fight, that horrible quarrel when Sherlock had made himself vulnerable by confessing the extent of his adoration, only to have John repudiate him utterly.

John let him go. "Sorry. I'm sorry, I'm sorry…." He gathered Sherlock into his arms again, embraced him gently, and held him away. "I'm sorry. I just…please, I just want you to be honest with me. Please. Did you really not trust me, or think that I couldn't keep my mouth shut?"

"I trust you more than any other person who walks or has ever walked this earth, John. Surely you must know that."

"Then why –" John's mouth tightened. "Two years, Sherlock."

Sherlock sighed. "You never guessed?"

"I mean –" John gesticulated with one hand. "I could make conjectures, but you always tell me – no. No, I never guessed."

"I was afraid for you," Sherlock said simply. There. It was out.

John shook his head, his eyes narrow and suspicious. "Why?"

"Moriarty." He explained in as few words as possible. No, he hadn't been transparent; yes, he'd deceived John. But to have John under constant threat was untenable – the only solution was to leave until Moriarty's network had been eradicated and John was safe.

John listened in silence. When Sherlock had stopped speaking, he took one of Sherlock's hands in his and turned it palm-up, pressing his thumb lightly to its centre. "Sherlock, when have you ever seen me unable to take care of myself?" He smiled. "Okay, apart from a few times, I admit it. Seriously, though –"

Sherlock shrugged impotently. "I couldn't worry about you and dismantle Moriarty's work as well. I needed you as far away from me as possible. I knew I'd come back. I didn't realise it would take so long." You're my weakness, John. And I will not have you harmed.

"I could have helped. I would have faced anything with you."

Sherlock pressed his lips together and stared down at the wrinkled bedding. The horrible tightness in his throat returned.

"Don't do it again." John put a finger beneath Sherlock's chin and lifted it, then mimicked Sherlock's earlier gesture, moving his thumb over Sherlock's mouth. His eyes were swimming with tears. "Don't you ever, ever do that to me again."
"I promise," Sherlock said, and John's arms went round him once more and held him.

Resting his head on Sherlock's shoulder, John sighed. "I know we've got lots to talk about, but…I can't right now. Mary, she's…not today, at least."

"It's all right." It wasn't a conversation Sherlock was eager to have immediately either. Ever, actually. The day John discovered the truth about Mary would be the end between him and Sherlock, if not the end between John and Mary. Sherlock wouldn't blame him for it – it would be one more thing they'd both concealed from him, both of them treating him as if he were too frail or stupid to understand the truth. Maybe neither of them deserved forgiveness for that. He'd hold his tongue for as long as he could. If there was a way to extricate Mary from this mess, he'd find it for John's sake.

Even if she's sent a sheep farmer to rough you up?

Sherlock smiled and touched the goose egg on his forehead. He couldn't help admiring her, wrong-headed as she was; or maybe it was because she was so wrong-headed that he admired her. He'd meant what he said when he told John that he'd chosen Mary, though it had made him so angry. People were never really keen on seeing own their true colours nailed to the mast.

"Lie down with me," Sherlock said, and urged John down, facing him. "You must be tired."

John glanced over Sherlock's shoulder at the window, slate-grey and spattered with rain. "It's a good day to sleep." He reached up and tugged at a lock of Sherlock's hair. "You're resting today. Don't think you're going to do anything else."

"If you insist, Doctor."

"Jesus, I missed you." John ran the back of his hand over Sherlock's cheek. "I was so…you were just across town all the while, and I…it was killing me."

Hence the gambling, the drinking. It could have gratified his ego to know that John was falling apart without him, but instead the knowledge left him unhappy and bereft. All that time wasted.

"You know that day we met up at the racecourse – I'd had...well, a couple of pints too many. And let's just say it wasn't the first time I'd been there." John offered Sherlock a crooked smile. "You probably worked that out the moment you saw me, though."

Sherlock smiled. "Well, that and you've got several betting apps on your phone."

"Yeah, yeah," John laughed, but his face had gone noticeably pink, even in the grey light of the bedroom. "I used to read about you in the papers and online. Not a lot, it was too…but sometimes, yeah. You never worked with anybody else."

"John...replace you? Are you mad?" Sherlock settled deeper into his pillow. "Besides, I tried that once with Molly. Disastrous."

"Couldn't have been that bad."

"It wasn't good."

"At least you picked someone else who was in love with you. You've got a knack for that."

"Oh, honestly, John. I think she fancied the idea of me. I can't imagine her being here at 221B for more than a few days without wanting to kill me."
John chuckled. "You realise being in love with you and wanting to kill you are not necessarily mutually exclusive."

"I'm not dead yet. That must count for something."

"Come here," John said, and kissed him again. "That's the last time, I swear." He gathered Sherlock close and held him, his nose and mouth pressed against Sherlock's neck.

John's proximity was maddening, but Sherlock forbore from saying so, and willed his erection down, trying to think of something sweet and tender to say and coming up blank. He could reprise part of his best man’s speech, as that had contained every drop of his heart's blood and then some, but the timing might be off, and John would probably remember at least some of it, even paraphrased. Could be awkward.

John's hand stroked Sherlock's back and slid beneath his t-shirt to caress the ridged skin. "Tell me about this."

Sherlock hesitated. "I told you before – it happened in Serbia."

"Yeah, you weren't really specific. When were you in Serbia?"

"Right before I came home. There was a gentleman – well, not a gentleman at all, as it turned out, the last sentinel of Moriarty's Eastern European network. He caught me on the hop, unfortunately." He saw John's mouth tighten. "That was the only time that happened. I was…a bit tired, I suppose."

"You said they beat you," John said flatly.

"Yes."

"Fists don't leave scars like that."

"Well, it was a mixed bag, John. Fists first, and I think they used an extension cord at one point – felt like that, anyhow. I managed to get out, obviously." He didn't add that Mycroft had expedited the process. He'd been well on his way to escaping. Probably. Almost certainly.

"Christ," John exhaled. "Christ, Sherlock. I wish you'd told me. Taken me with you."

"I wish you hadn't left, John. It was good to have had you there," Sherlock admitted.

"I wish you hadn't left, I…oh, fuck." John rolled onto his back and pressed the heels of his hands into his eyes. "If you hadn't left I wouldn't have met Mary and we wouldn't have had Nora. And I love her, Sherlock, every bit as much…she's my life. I'm so fucking confused."

"I'm not making demands, John." It wasn't a difficult thing to say, even if it wasn't the truth. Better to enjoy temporary bliss whilst they could. How long could he lie? Months, years? And when would Mary realise what was happening? Oh…she already knew.

That explained the 'inheritance' and Mary's sudden desire to travel, to remove John from Sherlock's vicinity. God, of course. What sort of payout had she got for this? Or was it simply that Sherlock was on the case and would inevitably solve it?

"I've got to sort it out," John said. "I've got to…Mary and I, we're – I'm not sure what we have anymore. It's been a long time since we've really – fuck!" He sat up. "I'd be lying if I said I didn't feel
something for her, and we've got a history, and Nora. But it's not the same." He bent close to
Sherlock and gently smoothed the hair back from Sherlock's forehead. "It's not the same, you know?
I've not given this a lot of thought because I never thought it would be possible, but here you are.
Jesus."

It was tempting to be flippant, to pass things off with a joke…so easy. But Sherlock remembered all
the times John had been earnest, needing more than Sherlock could give, and he remembered John's
face at his ersatz grave, wracked with grief, and speaking to a friend he thought was dead, begging
for his return. Seeing that had been a gift in its way, but it had been a gift that had wrenched away far
more than it had bestowed. And so he'd turned away willfully, had hardened his heart and fixed his
purpose and not once had he permitted himself to think about John's loss and grief. Human emotions
were still woefully puzzling in their unpredictability, but John Watson was a puzzle worth
unravelling. No matter what happened weeks or months from now, he would be as truthful as he
could. "John, I'm not going anywhere. I swear it."

"Oh, Sherlock –" John kissed him again, lingering, his tongue slipping into Sherlock's mouth,
suckling gently. He pulled back, shuddering. "We've got to stop."

"My head's hurting," Sherlock said ruefully. "Probably just as well."

"I'm sorry –"

"Don't be." Sherlock flexed his neck from side to side. "I should probably sleep a bit."

"Would you –" John faltered. "Could I stay a while?"

For an answer, Sherlock pulled John down beside him. Tentatively, he snaked an arm around John's
waist. John nestled close, and Sherlock breathed easily and slept.

* 

There were two messages on the phone when Sherlock woke at noon. One was from the
orthopaedist's office wanting to know if he could come in the next day as they'd had a cancellation;
the other was from Mycroft demanding that Sherlock call him immediately.

Nothing from Mary, Sherlock noted, accepting the mug of tea John handed him. And Mycroft could
wait. "Dr Roche wants to know if I can go in tomorrow. You don't have to come – I know it's short
notice."

"Fuck it. I've got plenty of time. I'll have to pick the little one up from swim tomorrow evening,
though."

"That's fine. Thank you."

The phone chirped: Mycroft. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"He's just going to keep calling," John said.

"Let him."

The phone stopped before the answerphone picked up, then began to chirp again. "I'm just going to
"Turn it off," Sherlock said, picking up the phone to do just that.

"Maybe it's about the case."

"Doubt it. But we do have to go back to Derry, John, and as soon as possible. Or I could call Ms Tresler tomorrow, I suppose, but it's not the same."

"Let's worry about that tomorrow. You hungry?"

"I could eat something, I suppose."

"What have you got?"

The phone chirped again, this time with a text from Mycroft. "Pain in the arse," Sherlock growled, and looked at the phone.

*Annalise Greta Rundstrom Alland*

Sherlock set the phone face-down and smiled at John. "We'll get takeaway. Order whatever you want. I've just got to answer Mycroft before he burns London down looking for me." He got up a bit unsteadily and went into the bathroom, closing the door and phoning Mycroft, his heart pounding wildly. "Mycroft."

"Brother dear," Mycroft said without enthusiasm. "I thought that would get your attention."

"What about it?"

"You and I must have a conversation, Sherlock. The sooner, the better, I'm afraid."

"Not today. Not tomorrow, either." Too soon. It was all too soon.

"Tomorrow night," Mycroft said. "You should be fairly recovered from your injection by then."

"Oh, of course that was you," Sherlock said scornfully. "King of the petty detail."

"My car will pick you up at seven. We'll have dinner. Any preferences?"

"Sausage rolls and Jaffa cakes," Sherlock said.

"Oh, for God's sake," Mycroft intoned. "Be ready promptly at seven, Sherlock." Mycroft rang off.

Sherlock set the phone on the sink, shivering with cold. If Mycroft knew the truth about Mary – and he did, of course, everything, no doubt about it – he would be merciless. If Mary had murdered Lady Howe, his intimate friend, he would be unstoppable.

But then who had administered the atropine and pralidoxime? The PA? The maid? Someone had tried to save her. Someone….

Sherlock slipped the phone into his pocket and washed his hands, stalling for time, staring into the mirror. Tomorrow night would require caution, delicacy, stealth, outright lies if necessary. It couldn't fall apart so quickly.

A faint smell of sandalwood drifted to his nose from the soap. A comforting, familiar scent: his dad's aftershave had been sandalwood and leather. Mummy had worn lilac scent. Together, they formed their own unique compound, unforgettable.
Sandalwood and...no, not lilac. Iris. And galbanum, rose, vanilla, hyacinth.


A faint tap sounded at the door. "Sherlock? You okay?"

Sherlock took a deep breath, composed his features into an agreeable mask, and opened the door. "Fine."

"I ordered Chinese."

"Brilliant. I'm famished."

John gave him a shy smile. "It's on me. I'm loaded." He went into the kitchen.

Sherlock followed, pretending he had the luxury of time.

*
"Crikey," Mary whispered, gazing up at the edifice of the house on Charles Street. She'd never been to a private house this grand – not through the front door, anyway. She composed herself, shifted the carrier bag in her hand, and rang the bell. In less than a minute it swung open, revealing a tall young woman in a sober dark dress, her blonde hair scraped back from her face. "Hello," Mary said briskly. "Karen Cedric. Ms Howe's expecting me."

The young woman smiled. "Yes. Please come in." She stepped back to admit Mary. "Lady Howe's in the library. I'll let her know you're here," she murmured.

"Sorry, Lady Howe." Mary tried not to gape at the soaring centre hall, glowing wood lined with what was probably millions and millions of pounds' worth of paintings and vases and statues. What Mary didn't know about art could have filled several books, but she wasn't such a country bumpkin that she didn't recognise the best stuff when she saw it.

"May I take your coat?" The young woman opened her hands. "Dreadful weather."

"Oh, I won't be staying, thanks."

"Ms Cedric?"

Mary turned and saw a petite red-haired woman in a honey-coloured woollen dress approaching her. "Lady Howe?"

Lady Howe smiled. "That's right. Won't you come in for a moment?"

"Well, I –" Mary frowned slightly. Socialising wasn't part of the gig – she wanted to drop off the package and go. And she had Christmas shopping to do. "I haven't got much time, I'm afraid."

"Just for a moment." Lady Howe's voice was low and musical, out of tune with her small figure.

Mary relented. "All right." She gave up her coat and crossed a few acres of elaborate carpet to the panelled door Lady Howe held open. "Thank you."

Lady Howe's smile deepened a bit. "Please, sit. Tea, please, Lydia," she said to the young woman, and closed the door behind her before seating herself on a leather Chesterfield across from Mary, staring at her so intently that Mary felt like a zoo exhibit. "Thank you. I realise this is a bit unorthodox, but I was curious to meet you. And I wanted to thank you – I know this is outside your stated purview." She gestured with a hand toward Mary's Debenhams carrier bag.

"Right," Mary said, and gently laid the bag on the table. "There you are."

"I'm so excited I can hardly breathe," Lady Howe said, and withdrew a box that had once held the PC monitor Mary had bought the year before. She loosed the flaps and pulled out the package, wrapped to her written specifications, then opened a small box on the table and took out what
looked like a scalpel and carefully sliced through the tape, bubble wrap, and cardboard. "Oh, God." She picked up the painting, holding it carefully by the worn gilt frame. Tears filled her eyes.

"It's the right one, I hope," Mary joked nervously.

"Yes indeed," Lady Howe murmured. "Are you familiar with Caravaggio?"

"Not much," Mary admitted. "I saw a film about him years ago."

"Ah, with Sean Bean?" Lady Howe asked. Mary nodded. "That was quite something, wasn't it? He had such a recklessly beautiful youth. Well, the film was right about his associates. This is thought to be a portrait of Fillide Melandroni, a very popular courtesan of the era. You see the flower she holds? For years it was maintained that it was orange blossom, the symbol of wedded fidelity, but a prominent Caravaggio scholar insisted that it is in fact jasmine, the symbol of erotic love. No respectable married lady would be painted with jasmine." Lady Howe smiled and stroked the frame reverently. "God bless Caravaggio – he had no compunction about depicting angels and saints modelled after pimps and prostitutes, and so beautifully. It needs restoration, but even so, regard the clarity of the light, the depth and textures of the golds and browns, the color in her cheeks." Lady Howe paused and whisked a handkerchief from her skirt pocket, dabbing at her eyes. "Forgive me. I'm not sure you realise what an enormous service you've done. This was believed to have been destroyed in a fire in Berlin at the end of the Second World War, but here it is. Staggering."

"You're certain it's real?" Mary asked.

"I've got a team of authenticators at the ready, but given what I know about the man from whom you liberated the portrait, I'd say it is."

Mary's curiosity got the better of her. "How do you mean?"

"Well —" Lady Howe paused as the tall young woman entered the room with a heavily laden tray, setting it on the table. "Thank you, Lydia. Milk or lemon, Ms Cedric?"

"Milk," Mary said, settling into her chair. Had this well-dressed, clearly well-bred, and even more clearly rich woman, not Jim Moriarty, paid for the job Mary had just done?

Lady Howe poured tea and passed Mary a plate of elaborately iced little cakes. "It may seem difficult to believe, but neo-Nazism is alive and well."

"It's not difficult to believe at all," Mary said, taking a cake.

"Yes. Given the climate of the world, perhaps you're right. In any case, the man you…ah, dispatched…was of Norwegian parentage, and his grandparents were enthusiastic Nasjonal Samling members – that was the Norwegian fascist party, a temporary puppet government during the Second World War. They were tried and imprisoned as collaborators, but had sent their sons, very young but Nazi functionaries nonetheless, away before the regime collapsed. The sons escaped to Chile, where they lived quite comfortably, bore children of their own, and never truly abandoned their doctrine of hatred." Lady Howe paused and sipped her tea. "One of those children, Albrick, made his way back to Norway and was heavily involved with the national socialist movement there. He's been instrumental in the burning of churches, attacks on mosques, and the firebombing of the Jewish old-age pensioners' home in Bergen last year. So you see, you've actually done the world a favour."

Now it was clear why Lady Howe had invited her in. Mary wiped her hands on an embroidered linen napkin. "I did a job."
"An important job. And you've restored a masterpiece."

Mary smiled and stood. "I get it."

Lady Howe rose as well. "Would you –"

Mary held up a forestalling hand. "Look, you seem like a decent person. And I don't doubt that Albrikt Vikernes was a bastard of the first order. You don't have to justify anything to me. Tell yourself whatever you like so that you can sleep. It gets easier, believe me." She gathered her handbag and gloves.

Lady Howe coloured a deep red. "You're right," she said softly. "I'm sorry."

"It's fine," Mary said. "Sorry, I've got to go."

"Please." Lady Howe rested a hand, innocent of nail varnish and decorated with a large emerald, on Mary's arm. "Please stay for just a few more minutes."

"I really have to –" Mary looked into Lady Howe's hazel eyes, saw tears, and impatience flooded her. This wasn't her problem. She'd be paid within two days and shut of it altogether, and Lady Howe's guilt was her own affair. She felt herself beginning the process of detachment that had become second nature over the past twenty-three years.

"Please, Ms Cedric. Just for a moment."

Unwillingly, Mary sat. Lady Howe was right. This wasn't in her purview. She didn't speak to clients; she kept her distance, always and forever. They weren't her contemporaries, and in their secret hearts they despised her and held her in contempt for doing what they hadn't the stomach to do themselves. They sneered under their smiles to cover their guilt, as false as any legend Mary adopted or ruse she employed. And now this one wanted to be absolved. It wasn't her fucking job, and she wasn't a therapist or a goddamned priest.

But she sat, because for a' that and a' that, they had this killing in common, and living with secrets was poisoning her drop by drop. "Lady Howe –"

"Meredith," Lady Howe said. "Please call me Meredith."

"Meredith, then. You've never done anything like this before."

"No." Lady Howe – Meredith – shook her head. "Never. I've...I've allowed some brutality to occur, and I'm not proud of it. This, though...." She blew her nose and wadded the handkerchief into a tightly clenched fist. "I've crossed a line, and I can't go back."

"Maybe you feel guilty because the painting might be a fake," Mary suggested.

"No, it's not that. I've been keeping tabs on him for years now. He's a poor financial manager, and over the past two decades he's had to sell some of the pieces his family acquired courtesy of Nazi plundering. I've managed to get some of them back to the families to whom they belonged – they've all been authenticated, and several were priceless. The authentication is a formality. This particular painting was in the charge of a family who had two disabled children, and the children were subjected to a number of experiments. Perhaps you've heard of Josef Mengele."

"Yes."

"Neither child survived."
"I see." Vengeance was as good a reason as any to kill. If anyone harmed Nora, she wouldn't think twice about murdering them.

"It doesn't matter," Meredith said. "It doesn't bring those children back." She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear; the emerald on her finger flashed in the firelight. "I've done an unforgivable thing."

"Killing a Nazi isn't unforgivable."

Meredith shook her head. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked you to – I am trying to justify this, and it's not your problem. You did the job you were asked to do." She smiled a little. "I have a friend who's very... compartmentalised, I suppose you'd say, and his job requires some very difficult decisions. I know many of them are absolutely necessary. I've always wondered how he manages to separate himself from them."

"It's not easy," Mary said.

"No," Meredith replied. "I expect not, and when I think about it, it actually explains a great deal." She sighed and glanced to her left, where a number of silver-framed photographs reposed on a side table, then stood and walked to her desk. "I'm sorry to have kept you. I was assured that your fee was adequate, but I'd like to give you a bonus." She opened a drawer and withdrew a sheaf of notes.

Mary got to her feet. "It's not necessary..."

"I insist. I also hope you're interested in more work. I assume you have a fairly wide-ranging skill set."

"It depends on what you need."

"Theft. No blood."

Mary shrugged. "I'd need details, but it's a possibility."

"Could I have your mobile number?"

"I'd rather the method we used for this job," Mary said. It was a pity; Meredith Howe seemed nice enough, but Mary didn't need the complication of an emotionally bereft client with her mobile number, however rich.

Meredith nodded. "Jim. All right." She walked over to Mary and handed her the cash. "Thank you."

"Thanks." Mary tucked the money in her pocket and picked up her handbag. "I'd better go."

"You might want to find alternate employment," Meredith said. Her gaze went to the photos again. "I don't think Mr Moriarty is altogether reliable."

Mary followed her gaze. There were four photos: a much younger Meredith astride a horse, dressed in hacking jacket, breeches, and boots; a laughing young man in a jumper and cords, collar points askew; a wedding photo with Meredith as one of the bridesmaids; and an older couple in formal clothes. "You might be right," she said, and then froze.

Compartmentalised. Difficult decisions.

The photo was twenty years old, perhaps more, but the face was essentially the same.

Fuck.
"I've got to go," Mary managed, and walked to the door, looking for other methods of egress out of habit, her heart hammering in her chest. She wasn't armed; she'd meant to stop at the bank before shopping. She forced herself to smile at Meredith. "Thanks."

"I'll be in touch," Meredith said, and held out her hand. If she was an actress, she was a good one; she was absolutely cool and collected. She'd been almost distraught earlier…no. Had to be a coincidence.

But wasn't Sherlock always saying there was no such thing?

She kept her back to the wall while Meredith fetched her coat (what had happened to the PA, Mary wondered) and looked for cameras, doors, furniture large enough to provide cover. Paranoid? Me?

She all but snatched her coat from Meredith's hand and quick-stepped to the door.

"Can I give you a lift? I have a car."

And a driver, too, no doubt. "No thanks. I'll grab a taxi. 'Bye." She was out the door and halfway down the street before Lady Howe could utter a word. She caught a cab on Queen Street. "Blackwall Yard."

Fumbling her phone from her bag, she sent a text.

*

He sat on a bench wrapped in a long black coat and scarf, Bono-glasses in place, blond hair whipping about in the wind. "Sit. And make it quick, it's bloody freezing out here."

Unwillingly, Mary sat. "Don't send me to her again."

"Why not?" Moriarty inquired. "I didn't think you girls would make a love connection or anything, but –"

"You know why not," Mary spat. She waited, but Moriarty said nothing. He stared out at the river, tilting his head upward as a gull wheeled overhead. "Mycroft Holmes." She'd scarcely recognised him, he was so young in the photo, and the smile made him another person altogether. She'd managed to avoid him fairly well; they'd only met in person twice, and he'd practically ignored her both times.

"Ohhh. Yeah, they're fuckbuddies."

"Jesus." It was difficult to imagine Mycroft Holmes being anyone's fuckbuddy.

"Yeah, no kidding. I wouldn't fuck him myself, but there's no accounting for taste, I guess. I mean, look at who you married." Moriarty pulled a container of gum from his pocket and offered it to her.

Mary shook her head in refusal and let the jibe pass. "It's too close."

"That's not my problem."

"Did you set that up?"

Moriarty stared at her. "Duh - of course I did, you nitwit." He popped a piece of gum in his mouth.
"You know what I mean." Bastard. Fucking bastard. She could kill him right here in broad daylight. Get him to his knees, three blows to the spine, walk away. She itched to do it. But he had fail-safes, watchers, bodyguards probably posted down the street with high-powered field glasses and even higher-powered weaponry. And despite Trish's averral that she was paranoid, she knew they watched her too, and John and Nora as well.

Moriarty stood. "Look, honey, it's a small world, you know that. You're just going to have to get used to a little discomfort, that's all. You did the job – congratulations, by the way. I knew Albrikt a bit – what a prick. Anyway, it's done and you got paid. How did you know she was fucking Mycroft? Did she tell you?" He pulled a face. "Thought she was more discreet."

"There was a photo of him in her library."

"Aw, that's sweet." Moriarty strolled down the quay and beckoned for Mary to follow. "A couple of things, Miss Mary. First, don't start coming apart on me. You're tougher than that, and smarter, though not much, granted. Second, don't make connections that aren't there."

"Hard not to," Mary said. "You were so fixated on Sherlock –"

"Oh, Jesus, give me a little credit!" Moriarty cried, throwing his hands up. "Do I look like I give a shit about him? That I haven't got anything else going on? I'm sure Sherlock's given you his side of things, that I was obsessed with him, blah blah blah. That ego of his, honestly! I'm running a communications empire, sweetheart, and I haven't got time for old grudges. Which brings me to the third thing." He stopped and turned to face her. Taking his glasses off, he moved closer until the tips of their noses touched. "Don't you ever fucking summon me again."

"How do I know you're not playing some sort of game?" Mary whispered.

Moriarty stepped back and smiled. "You don't." He put his glasses on and walked away. "Or do you? It's all so confusing, isn't it? Happy Christmas – my best to Johnny and the poppet."

Mary stood still, fists clenched, tears blurring her vision.

*

She opened the door to the smell of hot chocolate and chips, and the sound of Paul McCartney's god-awful chirpy Christmas song. "I'm home!"

"Mummy!" Nora, in her pyjamas, a silver tinsel garland wreathing her head and another clutched in her hand, embraced Mary's legs. "You were gone for years and years!"

"Years and years? My goodness, that is a long time." Mary set down her packages, purchased with Lady Howe's bonus, and caught Nora up in her arms. "How beautiful you look! Are you a fairy or an angel?"

"A Christmas angel," Nora said, and planted a wet kiss on Mary's cheek. "I made a halo for you too!"

"Well, let's put it on, then." Mary put the wreath on her head and carried Nora into the front room, where John was setting LED candles in the window, and Sherlock was looping silver metallic shredded tinsel onto the tree, what looked like one painstaking strand at a time. Both wore tinsel
wreaths on their heads as well. John blew her a kiss, and she grinned at him. "Look at this, an entire club of angels!"

"Collectively, it's a host," Sherlock said, and stepped back, tilting his head to one side to survey the tree. "I don't know."

"It looks great," John said firmly, and stretched out an arm to Mary. "You were gone so long, I started dinner. Chicken and chips."

Mary set Nora down and embraced him. "Sounds delicious."

"Did you get everything done?"

"Just about. The shops were mobbed; it was just as well you didn't come. Looks like you've made tremendous progress here. Everything looks beautiful." She went to ruffle Nora's hair, but Nora had darted away and was accepting the red star-shaped ornament Sherlock handed her.

"Nora and Mr OCD here are in charge of the tree. He's choosing the branches, and Nora is hanging the ornaments. It's going to be the most symmetrically decorated tree in all of recorded history."

Sherlock gave John a withering look. "I can hear you perfectly well, even over this din."

"Thank you!" Mary exclaimed. "Worst Christmas song ever."

"I like it," John protested weakly.

"Nora's doing extremely well," Sherlock said, and scooped her up into his arms. "This one goes high. That branch there." He pointed to a branch near the top of the tree, and Nora carefully looped the wire onto it. "Excellent."

John hugged Mary close and kissed her cheek. "You're frozen. Want some hot chocolate?"

"Love some. I'd better put the pressies away before Herself realises they're just sitting out."

"Right, off you go." John swatted Mary's bum and moved toward Sherlock and Nora. "Which one's next? What about that silver one – that went on our tree when I was a kid. It's older than I am."

"Really – had they invented glass back then?" Sherlock asked.

"Oh, shut it."

Mary turned and got the parcels from the hall, then went upstairs. She put them in the wardrobe in the spare room and locked the door, then went into the bedroom, shedding her coat and gloves and handbag. She pulled the remainder of Lady Howe's five-thousand pound conscience money from her pocket and transferred it to a box of tampons in the bathroom.

Her phone chirped with a text. She gritted her teeth when she saw the sender, and opened it.

*Happy Christmas to Sherlock too. XXXX*

Mary took a deep breath, then another, then another. After ten deep breaths, she felt steadier.

Let other people fold, let them dither and crumple. She'd do her job and do it goddamned well and look for an opportunity to murder Jim Moriarty. The sooner it happened, the better, but if not, she'd bide her time. Two could play a long game as well as one.
"Mummy!" Nora called in her piping voice. "Are you coming down?"

"Be right there, sweetheart!"

She went into the loo to wash her face. The tinsel garland sparkled on her head.

Some angel you are.

*

John snorted disgustedly behind a copy of *Hello!*. "Prince George already breaking hearts' – he's ten, for God's sake." He flipped impatiently through the magazine. "Bunch of identical blondes with spray tans and augmented chests. Why am I reading this crap?"

"It was on top of the stack and you were too lazy to look for something more interesting," Sherlock replied. He squinted at his phone, then held it further away.

"Do you need reading glasses?" John inquired.

"Certainly not," Sherlock snapped.

"I have them. No shame in it, you know."

"Talking of eyes, John – a witness to a murder took a tumble down a flight of stairs and fractured her supraorbital foramen, zygoma and the base of her skull."

John bit back a grin and resisted the urge to keep teasing Sherlock about his eyesight. "Pushed?"

"Possibly. There was a deliveryman moving past her, and he jostled her, she said. She also reported a break-in during the previous evening. After the accident, her sight began to fail. She's now entirely blind and doctors are blaming it on the fall."

"Could be," John said. "Optic neuritis isn't uncommon after a fall like that. Inflammation can be nasty."

"She fell on the right side of her face, but she's blind in both eyes."

"Have you seen her medical history?"

"Not yet. I'm looking at methyl alcohol –"

"See if she's got any degenerative diseases first," John said, and tossed his magazine down. "You all right?"

"Fine." Sherlock sighed and pocketed his phone. "Thank you again for coming with me." He peered closely at John. "You look tired."

"Yeah, I am a bit," John said. "Tossed and turned last night. Thinking." He smiled at Sherlock, who blinked, looking uncertain. "About us." He hadn't slept at all, in fact, torn between elation and apprehension. For the second time in his life he was contemplating a life with Sherlock, but this time – he hoped – it would be for good. Nora was older now, perhaps more fragile, but was any time optimal for parents to break up? Maybe when the kids had moved out of the house. In any case, he'd
find some way to explain it to her. And maybe Mary would take it well. Surely she knew that things hadn't been great for some time. She had money, lots of it – she could go wherever she liked, see Nora whenever she liked. Everything would be okay.

A strange expression had settled on Sherlock's face. "John –"

A nurse popped his head in the door. "Sherlock Holmes?"

"You're on," John said, cursing the nurse's timing.

Sherlock got to his feet. "Come with me," he said, and turned to the nurse. "It's all right, isn't it?"

"Yeah, sure," the nurse said. "We use ultrasound, not fluoroscopy."

"Great, thanks," Sherlock said. "I need the moral support. I'm terrified of needles."

John let out a bark of laughter and got to his feet. "Right, I'll catch you if you pass out from fear." He followed Sherlock into the treatment room, noting that he was limping badly. Sherlock introduced him to Dr Roche and he shook her hand. "Hope it's all right if I stay."

"Perfectly all right. It's an honour to meet you, actually. I've only ever read about you online. It's a treat to have the pair of you here." She waved at a chair. "Have a seat over there, and Mr Holmes, I'm going to have you take your trousers off and hop onto the table here."

A bit bemused, John took Sherlock's coat and held it on his lap as Sherlock stripped his trousers off and got onto the table. The nurse gave Sherlock a blanket and adjusted the table so Sherlock could sit up, and Dr Roche took a seat beside her ultrasound machine and squirted some gel onto a swab. "Righto," she said, "let's just get some of this muck on you and have a look at what we'll be doing."

She ran the probe over Sherlock's bare knee, watching the display intently. "Ah, there he is. Good."

She marked the spot and wiped Sherlock's knee clean, then sterilised it. "Ready? Here's the anaesthetic. This might sting a bit."

The nurse patted Sherlock's shoulder. "You'll be okay. Let me know if you're getting dizzy."

Sherlock looked over at John and winked.

John felt his face slipping into a moronic grin. He couldn't help it. His heart abounded with joy and pride and delight when he looked at Sherlock, and if it was futile and stupid to bemoan the time they'd lost, he could damn well relish the time they shared now.

"There we are, very good," Dr Roche murmured. "Next one. This is to draw out a wee bit of fluid."

"There's another one," Sherlock said.

"What's that?" Dr Roche asked.

Sherlock nodded up at a framed X-ray on the wall. "A cephalothoracopagus. You must be very interested in them. Can't imagine you see many in this line of work, orthopaedics notwithstanding."

Dr Roche smiled briefly. "Those are mine. Were mine."

John sighed a little and groped for something to fill the mortifying silence. He looked at the X-ray; it almost looked normal – a single skull with only small ridges over the occipital midline, two ears, and what looked like a wide ribcage until one's eyes dropped to the double set of legs. He shuddered in sympathy.
"I didn't realise," Sherlock said. "I'm sorry."

Dr Roche shook her head. "It's all right, Mr Holmes. How could you know? Those little ones – " She gestured with her gloved hand. "They're the reason I'm in orthopaedics, those poor little bones. Okay, one more needle. Ready?"

"That must have been very difficult," John said gently.

"Yes," Dr Roche said. "Do either of you have children?"

"I've got a little girl," John said.

"So have I," Dr Roche replied. "There's nothing more wonderful, is there?"

"That's true," John said, and fell silent. It had been a long time since he'd dealt with truly bad news of the medical variety. Of course he saw his share of suffering among his patients, particularly the elderly, but the really rough stuff was routinely shuffled off to specialists. He found he didn't have professional banter at his disposal. The little he knew about cephalothoracopagus twins was that the prognosis was almost invariably poor because of severe brain malformations. If she'd carried them to term, they certainly couldn't have lived more than a few weeks.

They'd got lucky with Nora, hadn't they? She was physically healthy, bright, happy-hearted, no emotional issues thus far. If he split with Mary – no, when he split with Mary – what sort of damage would that incur? He'd love her no less no matter what, but he didn't want to cause some sort of downward mental health spiral.

People divorced all the time, though, didn't they? And kids turned out just fine, in the main. Besides, what sort of damage would he and Mary do if they stayed together? This sudden influx of wealth could cause all sorts of problems, perhaps turn their present state of low-level squabbling into something sharp and fierce. He felt it already: Mary's insistence that they take a long holiday, her insistence that Nora go to St Teresa's. Those difficulties would only intensify with time.

He had to tell her. Soon. Before she solidified plans to leave.

Shit.

"There we are," Dr Roche said. "You can put your trousers on, Mr Holmes. I'm going to have Robbie take you into the next room for a bit – he'll take your blood pressure and give you an instruction sheet." She peeled off her nitrile gloves and tossed them into the bin. "The most important thing to remember is that you rest that knee for two days at least, and no strenuous activities for a week."

"Strenuous in what way?" Sherlock asked, slipping his trousers back on.

"Running, intense cycling, that sort of thing. Walking is all right, but nothing beyond a light jog."

"Mm," Sherlock said.

John had heard that noncommittal noise before. "Don't worry, I'll see that he follows instructions," he said, shaking her hand. "Thanks, Dr Roche." He took a quick look at the X-ray before ushering Sherlock out the door. Christ, life was unpredictable. Best to take the good things and hold them close.

He had to tell Mary soon.
Robbie the nurse whisked Sherlock through his temperature (slightly elevated), blood pressure procedure (normal), and post-operative instructions. Sherlock seemed abstracted and ignored the printed sheet proffered to him until John took it ostentatiously. "Thank you. Ready to go, Sherlock?"

"Hm? Oh – oh, yes. Let's go." He got up from the chair and swayed.

"Okay, okay," John cautioned, grasping Sherlock's arm. "Careful."

"I'm fine." Nevertheless, Sherlock moved in step with John's slow and deliberate pace. "It feels better."

"Yeah, that doesn't mean that you take off running after we leave." John manoeuvred Sherlock outside. "Have a seat and I'll find a –" Sherlock ignored him and raised an imperious hand; a taxi slid to a stop. "Amazing," he grumbled, and slid in beside him.

They sat in silence for some time. Sherlock seemed sleepy; his head bobbed forward once or twice, and his eyes were, as far as John could tell, unfocussed. Could have been the effect of the shot, or maybe Sherlock hadn't got much sleep the night before himself. It was oddly exciting to speculate that Sherlock might have spent the night thinking about him.

"You okay?" John asked softly.

"Yes."

"I've got most of the day free. I've got to pick up Nora at seven, but before that –" He waved his hand. "If you want some company."

Sherlock nodded, not looking at him.

"I'm knackered, actually," John said. "I could use a nap." He was tired, but he said it more for Sherlock's benefit; Sherlock looked as if he was about to drop to sleep on the spot.

Sherlock only nodded again, and they continued their ride in silence. John looked out the window; the rain had begun again.

After a while he felt Sherlock's hand curl over his. He didn't speak, or look at Sherlock, but returned the faint pressure, his heart quickening.

*

John woke and checked his watch – half two – and then turned to Sherlock, still asleep, his mouth half open. He wanted to touch Sherlock's lips but didn't like to wake him and so contented himself with watching him in the half-light of the bedroom. There was a steady ticking in the back of his mind, a halfbaked desire to call Mary at once and get it over with. He tempered his desire and expectation with difficulty and told himself he had time.

The rest of your life begins today. Stupid thought, but not totally inaccurate. Everything would change soon. Was there any way to be really ready for it, and did that even matter? Ever since the day that Sherlock had invited him to investigate Lady Howe's death, John had felt the grey bubble that had enclosed him for so long – a bubble that had taken ten years to utterly encapsulate him, and at such a stealthy pace that he'd scarcely realised it was there – begin to dissolve, and he'd tried to
appreciate the change from moment to moment because it was so tentative. But now, there didn't seem a need for that clenching preparatory feeling, that perpetual anticipation that always seemed to spoil the present. He had now, and he had the future.

He couldn't resist, and reached out to touch the springy curl that fell over Sherlock's forehead. Sherlock shifted and opened his eyes. "Sorry," John said, only half meaning it.

"What time is it?"

"It's only half past two."

"Dark outside," Sherlock said, and closed his eyes again.

"How are you feeling?"

"Excellent."

"Good."

Sherlock opened his eyes and smiled. "How are you?"

"Fantastic," John said. "Glad you got the shot."

"Yes. Probably the right thing to do."

"Sad about Dr Roche's twins," John ventured.


"Really makes you want to seize the moment." Sherlock didn't respond. "Or not." Sherlock frowned more deeply. "Sherlock?"


"What?"

"Lord Moran. The day I went to his house, he told me that if I was really brilliant I'd go to the source of it all. I asked him what that was."

John propped himself up on one elbow. "What was that?"

"Londonderry. And he said he'd made a deal with the devil. Obviously he was trying to tell me about his brother, but he was afraid, or hesitant to betray him – we've got to go back. Tomorrow."

"I've got to go to work tomorrow," John said, and saw Sherlock's scowl intensify. "But I've got loads of time stacked up. I can take a short holiday. Fann will be amazed."


John smiled at Sherlock's urgency and touched the drooping curl on his forehead again. "Why'd you cut your hair?"

"Mm?"

"Your hair," John said. "It's shorter than I've ever seen it."

"Ridiculous mop," Sherlock said. "Anyhow, it's not that short. Still a lot longer than yours." He let
out a heavy sigh. "John."

"Yeah?"

"Don't tell Mary. Not right away."

John bit his lip in consternation. "It's not a conversation I'm looking forward to, Sherlock. But I've got to tell her soon. She wants to go away, and she might be filthy rich, but I don't want her to have to unpick her plans."

Sherlock reached down and grasped John's hand. "Can you put her off for two weeks?"

"Why?"

"I just need to sort some things out," Sherlock said, a pleading note in his voice. "I wouldn't ask if it weren't important."

Trepidation filled John's heart. "You're – you are serious, aren't you, Sherlock?"

"Considering how thoroughly I cocked things up the first time, I'd be an idiot to try this again and not be serious."

"You didn't cock things up – I did."

Sherlock shook his head. "It wasn't just you."

"Well, whatever the case," John said uneasily, still remorseful and guilty enough to not want to rehash that night, "I'm nervous, that's all. Mary's not the only one I've got to explain things to, and it's...I'm having trouble working it out in my head."

"Yes, of course," Sherlock murmured. "Eleanor."

"I wonder if she knows," John said. "Christ, I've tried to hide it from her, the way we go at it sometimes, and how bitter it can be...both of us have. I wonder if she knows, though."

"Of course she does, John," Sherlock replied crisply. "Children aren't crowded with adult concerns – their powers of observation and perception are far greater than most people would prefer to believe."

"That's reassuring," John said drily.

"It ought to be. She won't be as surprised as you think."

"Maybe. What do you – I mean, it's early days, but do you think you could stand having a kid around now and then?"

Sherlock's brow contracted. "She might not want to be around me."

"You're not worried about that?" John touched Sherlock's cheek with affection. "She likes you. She was asking all sorts of questions about you the day after you came by for dinner."

"She likes me because I'm not supplanting her mother."

"You wouldn't be, though." John hesitated. "Well – it wouldn't be like that exactly. Let's not worry about it now." He drew close to Sherlock and kissed him. "When was the last time you ate?"

"Why?"
"Because I'm famished."

Sherlock stroked John's upper arm. "I have a better idea." A slight catch in his voice brought it low, nearly inaudible.

John's mouth went dry. "What?"

"Why don't you have a shower?"

Confused, John said, "I had a shower this morning."

Sherlock's eyes glittered in the grey light. "A very thorough shower."

I – oh. Oh. Heat travelled north, into John's face, and south, into other regions. "Oh. God. Erm. Are you…are you sure?"

"Of course I'm sure."

"No, I mean are you feeling okay?" It was a little bit early, John thought dazedly. Concussion, the injection –

"No headache," Sherlock said. "And I don't have any intention of putting my knee under strain. Or anything else, to be perfectly honest. This is about you, not me." He gave John a grin that was simultaneously carnal and innocent.

"Jesus," John whispered. "Erm, okay." He got off the bed clumsily. "I'll just – are you coming?"

"Eventually, I hope."

"No, I mean – " John got the joke a moment too late and chortled, feeling no end of a fool. "Oh. Yeah, yeah. I mean the shower, are you –"

"You can attend to me tomorrow or the next day," Sherlock said. "Fresh towels in the cupboard."

Okay. Good. Yeah. Okay." John went into the loo and stripped with slippery, trembling fingers. He ran the water, then got in and showered, soaping up and washing, then sliding his fingers inside, trying to ignore his already hard cock. He turned the water temperature down, gasping as it got cold, and rinsed. Stepping out, he fished a towel out of the cupboard and stole a fresh toothbrush from a neat stack, dried off and brushed his teeth. When he went back into the bedroom, the towel wrapped round his waist, Sherlock was naked, the sheets and blankets flung aside. John paused and stared.

"Christ."

"Come here."

John obeyed, letting the towel drop to the floor. He climbed onto the bed and straddled Sherlock, shivering as his damp skin pressed against Sherlock's warm body. "Oh, Sherlock –"

Sherlock slipped from beneath John deftly. "Lie face down." He stroked John's back in small circles, moving with slow reverence. He touched John's wet hair, the nape of his neck. His fingers, strong and capable, traced over John's flesh so lightly it was hardly a touch at all.

John couldn't suppress a groan as Sherlock's fingers moved down his vertebrae. "Don't stop…I mean, do what you want, whatever –"

"Shh." Sherlock's hands, both hands now, moved lower, over the small of John's back and clasped John's arse. He massaged gently, his fingers digging into John's flesh, then slipping between his
upper thighs and urging them apart.

"Oh God." It was bliss and it was torture at the same time. John shifted, allowing his now-stiff cock to press upward, between his belly and the softness of Sherlock's bed. His hips undulated, and he ground himself into the bed, then let out a yelp as he felt Sherlock's lips against his inner thigh. "Christ!"

Sherlock was kissing him and kissing him, his tongue darting out and flicking against John's arse, his thighs, his balls. His hair tickled between John's legs, and the heat of his breath warmed pockets of John's skin and turned the rest to gooseflesh. Sherlock rubbed John's back with his hands, slid them down his hips and grasped his arse. "Hold very still."

"What are you –" John lost the ability to speak as he felt Sherlock spreading him, and then the hot, wet press of Sherlock's tongue inside him. He moaned, grinding harder into the bed and trying to push back against Sherlock's mouth. He hadn't expected this; he'd never had this done before, never. It was exquisite, shocking, exhilarating. Spots and stars whirled in his vision. "Sherlock –"

Sherlock's mouth withdrew. "Up on your knees, John. Touch yourself."

Dizzy, John scrambled up and eagerly grasped his own cock as Sherlock's tongue resumed its delicate, insistent exploration. He couldn't last; he stroked and tugged and pulled, and in moments came with a hoarse cry, spilling into his hand. Shuddering, he stayed still, on his knees, and felt coolness wash over his skin as Sherlock withdrew. The bed dipped, and John tumbled down, gasping, wet with mingled sweat and dampness from the shower. He lay still, still breathing hard, listening to Sherlock in the loo.

After a moment, Sherlock returned and climbed into bed, fitting himself against John's body. John turned and kissed Sherlock's mouth, tasting his herbal tooth powder. He held Sherlock tightly, burying his face in the smooth curve of his neck. "Jesus, Sherlock," he muttered. "Where did you learn that?"


"I'll leave it to you."

"Not sure I can top that. Is your knee okay? Did you –"

"It's fine." Sherlock leant down to kiss John's mouth. "I don't think I'll be disappointed."

John smiled. "No. I've learnt a thing or two myself, actually."

"I look forward to it."

"I love you," John said. "I love you, Sherlock."

There was a strange expression in Sherlock's eyes. "Oh, John…." He let out a shuddering exhalation, then kissed John again.

Perfect. It was perfect.
"We're home!" John called, and closed the door behind him. He helped Nora out of her soaking coat and gave her the takeaway bag. "Sweetheart, take that into the kitchen, okay? Give me your bag, it's wet. Take off your shoes." He hung her things, then struggled out of his coat.

Mary came down the stairs, pulling a cardigan on. "God, you're drenched!"

"Yeah, it's pissing out." John brushed a kiss across her cheek. "Got colder, too."

"You could have taken a cab."

"No, that's –" Expensive and pointless, he'd been about to say, but they could afford it now, couldn't they? Well, he'd barely got used to the fact that they had money, let alone become accustomed to living like people with money. "I didn't think of it."

"Thanks for picking up dinner."

"Yeah, of course." John followed Mary into the kitchen, uneasy, but loose-limbed and delightfully sore at the same time. Sherlock had lavished another two hours of attention on him, evidently without getting uncomfortably hard himself and refusing John's offers of reciprocation. It was just as well, given the recent concussion, but John was determined to repay him tenfold, a hundredfold, whatever it took to get Sherlock to become the same sort of sweating, thrashing mess that John had been not three hours ago. He couldn't wait.

As they ate, he made banal chatter, wondering if what Sherlock said was right – was Nora really aware of the undercurrents between him and Mary? Part of him hoped that was so; the other part dreaded it. He watched her closely. Almost ten – it would be hard on her, this decision, whether or not she intuited something was wrong.

"How's Sherlock?" Mary asked.

"Good. Great." John felt himself starting to smirk and bit the inside of his cheek hard. "The injection went fine – with luck he'll be bounding about in a week or so."

"Fantastic." Mary turned to Nora. "How'd the maths exam go?"

"Good." Nora twirled her fork in her chicken curry, extra hot, over jasmine rice. "It was easy."

"I'm happy to hear that," John said. "Aren't you glad we revised? Makes things so much easier, doesn't it?"

Nora shrugged, but looked pleased. "I guess."

"You guess." John teased, tousling her hair. The doorbell shrilled. "I'll get it." He got up and opened the door to a Royal Mail courier. "Hi."

"John Watson?"

"That's me."

The courier proffered a plastic-coated C4 envelope in one hand and a delivery information device in the other. "Sign here, please?"
John signed and took the envelope. "Thanks. 'Night." He closed the door and looked at the return, a Tower Hamlets address he didn't recognise. No name. Tearing the plastic with a fingernail, he opened it and withdrew another envelope with a hand-written message.

_HAPPY SNAP FOR YOU. :)_

"What is it, John?" Mary called.

"Mail. I'll be right there." Frowning, he opened the envelope and withdrew a large photograph, a blonde woman in a black dress lying on her back, eyes closed. John squinted and held the photo away. There was something odd about the woman's angle, her –

"Jesus," John gasped.

Her head was separated from her body.

"What the fuck...." John flipped the photo over, but it was blank. He looked inside the envelope: empty. He stared at the photo again, and suddenly clamped a hand over his mouth.

He recognised her.

Heart hammering in his chest, John stood still, letting Mary and Nora's voices wash over him, trying to establish himself in reality again.

_She knew she was sick, and ended it_, Mary had said.

_She hurried things along._

John closed his eyes for a moment and leant against the wall, breathing hard. He turned the photograph toward the envelope and went into the kitchen. "Nora," he said softly, "go upstairs and read for a bit, okay? Get ready for bed."

Nora peered at him curiously. "It's only eight."

"Do it now," John said. "Now, love." He pulled Nora's chair out. "Go on. I'll be up in a bit."

"Fine," Nora said, and sighed dramatically.

Mary sat silently at the table and watched Nora's slow departure. After what seemed like a very long time, she turned her attention to John. "What is it?"

John willed himself to calm. "I don't know," he said, and dropped the photo, face-up, on the table. "You tell me."
March 2015

Stephen hadn’t been back home since Mother had died eight years before, and he’d preferred it that way. There was no doubt that the house (the only great house for miles and miles around that was still actually a residence) was still beautiful, its lines graceful and sturdy, its furnishings impeccably pedigreed if scuffed and threadbare from generations of use, but he hated being inside it. It stank of futility and loss and doomed loyalties, and yet here he was, breathing it all in again.

"God, you’ve got a face like a wet weekend," Seb said, tossing a holdall onto the yellow sofa. "You act as if you’re in prison." He sighed. "It’s a joke, Steenie. Look, I know the place is a bit dreary, but that’s why it’s perfect. No-one ever calls or visits. You can lie low until this blows over."

"That man." Stephen sank onto the sofa. "He looked exactly like me. Where did you find him? How did you –"

"Don’t fret about that," Seb said, unbuttoning the long cassock. Underneath he wore a black jumper and black jeans tucked into black Doc Martens, a holdover from his adolescence. "He’s being well paid to sit in prison and be you."

"For how long, for God’s sake?"

"For as long as it takes to clear your name." Seb balled the cassock up and tossed it onto the floor, then sat beside Stephen, grasping his hand. "Don’t give it another thought. You’re free, that’s what matters now."

"Grand. Do you know how often I heard ‘Paddy’ and ‘Taig’ in there?" he demanded. "In five days? What if someone tries to harm him, Seb?"

Sebastian’s face darkened, but his response was softly uttered. "He can take care of himself, Steenie." There was rage in his voice, that ever-present and ever-simmering rage, but also faint contempt, the unspoken acknowledgement that Stephen had always been soft. And it was true. If Seb was Oliver Mellors, assured and capable with his deliberate patois of rough talk, then Stephen was Clifford Chatterley, cut-glass voice, paralysed and unmanned. Yet they’d been raised identically—public school (for polish, Mother had said, never knowing about the boys who’d sneered at his name, his faith, his accent. He’d never been quite good enough and had never been able to forget it, but he’d never said a word about it to her), dancing and music lessons (Seb played the harp beautifully and danced with a graceful, light step), regular catechism, altar service, Scouting Ireland
– all in accordance with their mother's stringent expectations of a well-to-do Catholic gentleman's conduct. They couldn't have been more different, though, in the end, and neither of them a shining example of Christian manhood.

"Fine," Stephen muttered. "Never mind it, then."

Seb sighed and got to his feet. "Mrs O'Neill's cleaned rooms for you – bedroom, music room, library, and dining room – and she'll be by to light the fires and see to your meals and laundry. We moved most of your clothes here as well, and your Amati and lots of books. Laptop and phone in the library. Don't use the house phone, and be sure to keep the other doors closed. You know how Aisling whinges if the heating bills get too high."

"Christ." In all the confusion, Stephen hadn't given a thought to his sisters. "Does she know? And Darcy and Clodagh, did you –"

"Of course they know," Seb said. "They'll be by in a few days." His phone chimed with a text. He checked it and tucked the phone back into his pocket. "Stenie –" A loud knock sounded at the door.

Stephen froze. "Who the hell is that?" Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, why was he here? It wasn't preposterous that the police would come to Derry to look for him. He had enough money to go somewhere less conspicuous and far more pleasant – Spain or the Portuguese coast or California, somewhere warm and lush and half a world away from the long arm of the English law.

"Sit tight so," Sebastian said. "I'll get it."

He hadn't much choice. Fretfully, he pulled at the collar of the priest's shirt until it came loose. The fabric of the shirt and suit was cheap synthetic, the shoes could have been safely cleaned with a steel-wool soap pad. He rubbed his eyes. It was nearly dawn, and he was exhausted and hungry. Maybe, in his own clothes and with a cup of tea and a slice of bread and butter in him, he'd feel better. More himself. None of that would bring Agnes or the children back, but the quick-march of dehumanisation via incarceration had already thoroughly trampled him, and he needed small comforts before he could begin to think about trying to woo her back. He'd never given a damn about prison reform as an MP despite Seb's exhortations; maybe he should have done.

Stephen heard two sets of footsteps, and his heart contracted painfully. At this hour, who the hell else –

"Your Lordship!"

Frost infiltrated Stephen's blood. He knew that hateful sing-song. Slowly, against his will, he turned his head. "God almighty."

"Well," said Jim Moriarty with a sly, falsely modest smile, "almost." He stuffed his hands into the pockets of his coat and strolled into the room, looking about with interest. "Always wondered how the other half lived. This isn't at all like the place I lived as a kid, I can tell you that."

Stephen slowly rose to his feet and turned to Seb, who hovered in the doorway, carefully watching them both. "You brought him here. Jesus, how could you?"

"Ooh, that stung." Moriarty deposited himself daintily into a wing chair and crossed his legs. "Never mind, though. How does it feel to be a free man?"

"Oh, I've got you to thank for that, have I?" Stephen's terror communicated itself as sarcasm; his earlier hunger and thirst dwindled to an iron knot of discomfort in his stomach. He'd been abysmally stupid. Of course Sebastian didn't have the power or money to command an escape of that
No. He'd have taken the rope Seb had thrown him just the same. He only wished he'd realised that Seb had thrown it around his neck.

"Obviously you do." Moriarty wriggled more deeply into his chair, that mad smile contorting his face. "Only you're not being terribly grateful, Steenie."

Hearing the diminutive spat out of Moriarty's mouth made Stephen want to vomit. "I'm sorry, I didn't realise gratitude was in order, especially as you were the one who effectively allowed me to be imprisoned in the first place."

"Come on now. That was Sherlock. Let's lay the blame where it belongs."

"Who tipped him off about North Korea?" Stephen demanded. "So few people knew. Odd."

Moriarty pulled a face of mock innocence. "Haven't the foggiest, really, but I think the temper's a bit misplaced. You're lucky Seb's my friend, a stór." He pointed to the sofa. "Sit down. We're going to have a chat, me and yourself."

Stephen sat, and Sebastian came to sit beside him, grasping Stephen's hand. "Listen to him, Steenie –"

"Tell me what he's got on you," Stephen pleaded, his hand tightening on Seb's. "Tell me. It must be something. You're too intelligent to believe anything he says about the brotherhood and a free and independent Republic and the starry bloody plough. You know he doesn't believe a word of it."

"He finances it," Sebastian said. Two spots of colour burned high on his face. "It amounts to the same thing."

"A pragmatist, is our Seb," Moriarty said. "So loyal, though. I reward loyalty, Steenie. In case you weren't aware."

Stephen held his tongue. Sebastian was indeed pragmatic, but pragmatism wasn't his salient quality. He was chiefly an embittered romantic, drowning in poisonous reverie. Romance wasn't always snowdrops and poetry; sometimes it was bloodshed and riots and slogans scrawled on walls. A hundred years ago he'd have been a Fianna boy, a Citizen Army recruit, won over by rhetoric and the aroma of home-made explosives crammed into tea tins. Worse, Jim Moriarty knew it – it was how he'd wormed himself into Stephen's life. I see your brother's alive, Your Lordship. And such a busy little bee – isn't that himself stuffing a holdall into the Carpetright display? No, the one on the right. I'll bet the PSNI would love to get their hands on this photo. Don't you think? Do you want to discuss it?

If Stephen told Jim Moriarty where to go, Seb's loyalty wouldn't matter one whit. Moriarty would toss him aside like yesterday's rubbish. He'd seen it happen to others...to himself, for God's sake. And it would never, ever end.

Moriarty's voice, soft as a caress, cut into Stephen's thoughts. "You didn't much like prison, did you, Steenie?"

There it was. Moriarty knew. Whether he'd revealed his softness unwittingly or whether Sebastian had told him, he knew that Stephen would languish and fail altogether in prison. He collected weaknesses and gorged on them like a vampire feasting on blood, and like a vampire, he stayed lean and eternally hungry.
“What do you want?” he asked dully.

Sebastian smiled. "It's a brilliant scheme, Steenie."

"It is." Moriarty positively glowed with happiness. "I've decided to really embrace the wonders of technology."

Stephen listened, and fancied he felt the final expiration and downward trajectory of his soul.

* * *

"I'll tell Sir Mycroft you're here, Mr Holmes," Mycroft's butler murmured, taking Sherlock's coat. "Please wait in the library."

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "He knew when I was expected and probably the moment I set foot inside," he said. "Tell me, did he scurry upstairs when the car pulled up just so you could announce me?"

The butler's face was impassive. "He asked me to inform him when you arrived, sir."

"Fine," Sherlock sighed. "Tell him I'm here." He went into the library, thumped into a wing chair next to the glowing, deliciously warm fire, and glanced round indifferently. This room, indeed Mycroft's entire house, was a paean to traditionalism and self-conscious, infinitely dreary good taste. No doubt Mycroft had sensibly scorned the services of an interior designer and selected most of the furnishings on his own, having memorised the contents of his club and a hundred other great houses, but there wasn't a single scrap of whimsy or idiosyncrasy to be seen, unless he was as prudish as one of their Victorian forebears, the sort who never so much as sneezed in public but who had a locked cabinet full of pornographic books and photographs. That might almost make him bearable, come to think of it.

Sherlock's gaze fell upon a painting over the mantel, a rendering of the old Battersea Bridge. It wasn't extraordinary in any particular detail, but the bluish-yellow colouring of it, the composition, and the mood were vaguely soothing, and its size made it a perfect counterpoint to the heaviness of the carved mantel. Mycroft had chosen and placed it well.

"Ha," Sherlock said sourly. Mycroft hadn't chosen it at all, had he? No. He'd had his own locked cabinet after all.

Impatiently, Sherlock checked his watch and stretched luxuriously. His knee felt marvellous, its old flexible, reliable self once more. Three cheers for modern medicine. And the two-plus hours eliciting interesting noises from John hadn't hurt either.

He hadn't intended to be deceitful, but it would be a lie to say that he hadn't acted with complete deliberation and a measure of self-interest this afternoon. He'd yearned to give John pleasure, yes; more than that, though, he'd calculated the time they had together and realised that it was dwindling rapidly. If they went back to Ireland first, found Sebastian Moran and his unstable brother, assuming the pair of them were the ringleaders of the operation, then perhaps the question of Mary as trigger would be incidental.

Depending, of course, on what Mycroft had to say. If he'd expedited the DNA search...an entirely likely if thoroughly unpleasant possibility. Where the hell was the miserable git?
But even if he was able to minimise what he suspected was a very deep involvement in this case,

some sort of reckoning was at hand. Mary wouldn't be pleased with him, for one thing, and even if

she wasn't feeling vengeful, she could make matters difficult, for John at the very least. Sherlock
doubted she would shoot him again, but one never knew. And then there was Eleanor. John and

Mary would fight over her, certainly. Who would Nora choose? She hadn't seemed to prefer one

parent to the other. If she wanted to stay with Mary, John would be inconsolable, and that was

unacceptable.

"Sherlock."

Sherlock jumped and glared to cover his startlement. Mycroft had long ago perfected the art at
entering and leaving without fuss; doubtless he'd heard a great many incriminating conversations that
way. It was a quality of his that Sherlock had emulated, obviously without saying a word to him
about it. He didn't need a head more swollen than it already was. "God! I've been waiting ages, Your
Lordship."

"Four minutes," Mycroft said, and closed the library door behind him. He went to the sofa and sat.

No cosy pairs of wing chairs for Mycroft; no intimate chats in front of the fire, sharing from a bottle
of whisky or even a bowl of crisps. Mycroft was alone with his tasteful, immaculate furnishings in
this over-large, terribly grand, and sterile house. It was almost pitiable. "Dinner in half an hour.
Madame Charbonneau's made an excellent beef Wellington."

"You didn't invite me here for beef Wellington."

"I said dinner. Didn't I?"

"Spit it out, Mycroft," Sherlock snapped.

Mycroft scowled. "I hardly think I need to."

"Then I suppose we haven't got anything to talk about," Sherlock said, and made as if to rise.

"Very well," Mycroft said, holding up a hand. "Your friend's wife."

"Mary."

"Annalise, in fact." Mycroft offered Sherlock a glacial smile. "It seems she has a rather colourful and
chequered past."

"Yes," Sherlock said. "She does."

Mycroft withdrew a data stick from his inner breast pocket. "You might find this instructive."

"I compiled my own ten years ago," Sherlock replied. "So…no. I probably won't."

"Have you updated it recently?" Mycroft peered closely at Sherlock.

Sherlock shrugged. "I know she's working again. The details are irrelevant." Mycroft pressed his lips
together and closed his eyes briefly. "What?"

"I always thought it was curious that you were never able to identify the individual who shot you at
point-blank range," Mycroft said, and slipped the stick back into his pocket. "It's interesting that you
chose to protect her then, and that you're choosing to protect her now. What is she to you,
Sherlock?"
"Just what you said," Sherlock replied. "My friend's wife." Mycroft said nothing, but stared acutely at Sherlock, his hands folded neatly, complacently in his lap. Sherlock stared back. Lovely – they could go on like this for hours and often had, many years ago. Sherlock had never won, though, his natural impatience with speech always overcoming his desire to best his brother. This time he'd wait until sunrise if need be. Mycroft would have to show his hand.

Mycroft sighed. "Do you know, for the first time in my life, you're an enigma to me?"

Sherlock felt the corners of his mouth turn upward, against his will. "Do tell."

"I realised it from the very first day, you know. The pair of you, running round town like schoolboys. You thought he was an interesting novelty, didn't you? You didn't think he'd last. You'd done such an admirable job of driving everyone else out of your sphere, and they all left with alacrity. Not John Watson, though."

Sherlock didn't let his gaze waver, but only just. And Mycroft, that podgy bastard, was right. Not John.

"You were transparent that night, Sherlock, quite...quite aglow with hope."

"Oh, please," Sherlock muttered, rolling his eyes.

"Don't," Mycroft said sharply. "Don't try to play me for a fool, Sherlock. You have associates, contacts, informants, allies. You haven't got a single friend who's lasted more than a few months until John Watson limped into your life."

"Why were you so unhappy to see him that first day at Whitehall, then?" Sherlock demanded.

Mycroft shifted gears smoothly. "What did I tell you the day you staged your death?"

"You asked if I realised how inconvenient it was to travel with cash."

"Not that. I told you to carefully consider the cost of what you were about to do." Mycroft got to his feet and went to the table behind the sofa, pouring two glasses of whisky. He crossed the room and handed one to Sherlock. "I'm not sure you listened to me."

"I never listen to you." Sherlock took the glass and drank half the whisky in one go.

"Evidently."

Sherlock couldn't bear the look of...God, was it sympathy...on Mycroft's face. "So what's it to be, Mycroft? Are you going to have her shot? Or me, for withholding information from you?"

"You didn't reveal her identity when she shot you for John's sake. You killed Magnussen for John's sake. Why are you still protecting her?"

He knows. He knows she killed Meredith Howe. "If you have something to say, just say it, Mycroft."

"Did someone hire Mary to seduce John?"

Sherlock gaped at Mycroft. "What?"

"You heard me."

Sherlock got to his feet, finished his drink, and set the glass on the mantel. "I heard you, but astonishingly I don't understand what the hell you're talking about, possibly because you're babbling.
What on earth gave you that idea?"

"In your research," Mycroft persisted, "did you see any evidence that theirs was not a chance meeting?" Daintily, he plucked Sherlock's glass from the mantel and examined the wood for condensation.

"No. Did you?"

"Nothing obvious. I thought it was a bit too neat that she was acquainted with…with Charles Magnussen, who was inordinately interested in information that I possessed – information that could only be obtained through you. You don't find that unusual? Bit of a coincidence?"

"The universe is rarely so lazy," Sherlock parroted automatically. "Magnussen was the linchpin, not Mary. He had something on everyone, absolutely bristling with information, you know that – it wasn't as if he made a secret of it, either." Mycroft wasn't saying anything about the Howe case. He didn't know. Maybe there was still time to undo things. He'd call Molly, have her cancel the DNA test on the blond hair, tell Mary to get out of the country for a while, lie low, leave Nora with John.

Not entirely inconvenient, come to think of it.

Mycroft went back to the sofa and set Sherlock's glass on a tray. "You spent the afternoon with John, didn't you?"

A blazing-hot flush crept up Sherlock's neck. "Naturally. He accompanied me home after my injection."

"Brother…." Mycroft's face still wore that unbearable expression.


Mycroft frowned. "Sorry?"

"Otherwise known as the five-minute Christmas. You remember – you came in and shoved me up against the chest of drawers and left."

"Ah, yes," Mycroft said, giving Sherlock his icy smile again. "The year I came in to find you smoking marijuana in Mummy and Dad's house."

"It was hash, but again, never mind that. You were upset that day – you had on the same clothes you'd worn the night before, and they were rumpled. Not from sleeping, you obviously hadn't slept that night given the red threading in your eyes and the swelling beneath – the wrinkles in your clothes were from sitting and standing, pacing in fact, for a long period of time over that awful purple carpet in your flat, there were fibres all over the fabric of your suit. You'd made an effort to comb your hair, but you hadn't washed your face, telling, but not too bright, brother dear – you had inadequately eradicated lipstick traces on your cheek and neck and the fragrance of Heure Exquise permeated your skin and clothes – your clothes, particularly your suit coat, the pocket of which bulged in the shape of a ring box." Sherlock paused. "You didn't stay long, but it was long enough to understand what had happened. Meredith Howe had refused you that evening."

It was Mycroft's turn to flush. "I fail to see," he said, "what that has to do with anything."

Sherlock hesitated. Here was unfamiliar territory for both of them; in their adult lives, neither had ever professed to affection, let alone an interest in other human beings greater than detached curiosity, and even that had been treated with a modicum of suspicion. And Mycroft, in his way, had attempted to be gentle with Sherlock.
"Goldfish, Mycroft. You were meant to be above all that," Sherlock said softly.

Crimson, Mycroft turned and went to the window, drawing the curtain aside with one hand. "And you've discovered that I'm human after all – just like you. How appalling."

"It must be old age."

"Or youthful indiscretion."

"She made you her executor. She trusted you."

"Not with everything, unfortunately."

The bitterness in Mycroft's voice sent a pang of remorse to Sherlock's heart. "Sebastian Moran."

Mycroft glanced at Sherlock incuriously. "What?"

"Lord Moran's younger brother was supposed to have died in a car bombing as a teenager, but he didn't die – either he survived the bombing or it was staged, but he's alive and well and I'm certain he's connected with extremists – maybe the Real IRA, maybe another faction, but he's alive, Mycroft, and working for or with his brother, who's conveniently missing. And both of them are connected with Nick Dedalus from Dedalus Communications – Moran got in on the ground floor and did rather well because of it. Dedalus is Irish, so his biography says – it's a thin reed to hang your hat on, but it's possible there's a double connection there. Dedalus could be funding Moran's art purchases – someone's funding extremist groups in Northern Ireland. One of Moran's connections was a major player in the backdoor talks, and so was Moran – not a coincidence. Something went wrong between Moran and Lady Howe…Meredith. I just need to go to Ireland to –"

"Sherlock."

Sherlock frowned. "What?"

"Drop it."

"Drop it –" Not good. Had Mycroft decided to pursue the matter on his own – Christ, did he know about Mary after all? What had he meant by Mary being set up to meet John? He'd ask, but he didn't want to alert Mycroft to any other statistical anomalies – maybe he'd unearthed another Magnussen connection Sherlock had missed the first go-round. No, he couldn't allow that to happen. "I can't drop it, Mycroft. I'm too close. I can have all this sorted within the week."

Mycroft took his phone from his pocket, looked down at the dark screen, and then replaced it. "Sherlock, when this began, I told you to beware of ghosts."

"Seb Moran – did you already know about him?"

"I'm afraid I've lost my appetite," Mycroft said. Two hectic splashes of pink still stained his cheeks. "I'm not feeling well."

"Mycroft –"

"Sherlock, drop the case. I insist." Mycroft walked to the door. "I'll have the car brought round. Good night, little brother." He closed the door.

Sherlock followed him out; he was halfway up the staircase. "Mycroft. Mycroft! I'm going to Ireland tomorrow. I don't need your permission to do it." Mycroft stopped for a moment. Sherlock swore he
saw calculation in the set of his brother's shoulders, then resignation. "A week. That's all I need."

"Three days," Mycroft said. "That's all you have." He went upstairs without another word.

Unexpectedly exhausted, but filled with cautious triumph, Sherlock turned to leave, snatching his coat and scarf from Mycroft's butler. He left the warm house and took a bracing lungful of cold air before trotting to the car idling at the kerb.

As he slid in, he saw someone in the passenger seat. A light clicked on, illuminating Lord Stephen Moran.

"Mr Holmes," Moran said. "A word, please?"

Belatedly, Sherlock realised that he hadn't climbed into Mycroft's car. "Is this a word or a kidnapping?"

Moran smiled. "Just a word." He leant forward. "221B Baker Street, please."

Sherlock shrugged and closed the door, and the car slid into traffic.

*

Lord Moran didn't speak a word on the drive to Baker Street, presumably because there was no partition between them and the driver. That was perfectly acceptable. Sherlock wasn't in the mood for chatting just yet.

He hadn't asked Mycroft how he'd discovered Mary's identity, but that wasn't necessary; it was only surprising that he hadn't discovered it sooner. What disturbed him was Mycroft's question about Mary being placed. Sherlock had considered it when he'd first learnt her true identity, of course, but it was only the thinnest shred of possibility. Magnussen could have placed her, hoping to get to Mycroft through John somehow, counting on old loyalties, but that didn't fit Magnussen's modus operandi. He'd rarely orchestrated, preferring to gently shake his loathsome tree of blackmail and threats and let the ripest fruit fall into his hand. Still, it was a possibility. To what end, though? Magnussen was dead, and Mary was working for the Moran brothers. And though Lord Moran couldn't intimidate a small child, much less Mary Watson née Morstan née Alland, perhaps Sebastian Moran, intimate friend of upstanding citizens such as deceased terrorist Eamonn O'Reilly, could. It was a comparative rarity for one hired killer to blackmail another, but most paid assassins didn't have families, hostages to fortune.

Poor foolish Mary, thinking she could leave her life behind.

The most important matter at hand was that Mycroft didn't know about Mary's involvement with Lady Howe's death (as he certainly would have said so if he did), and Sherlock intended to keep it that way. And perhaps now that Lord Moran had come to see him, he wouldn't need three days to solve this. He could wrap it up tonight.

The car pulled up to 221 and Sherlock got out, breathing deeply of the rain-washed air. Lord Moran opened the opposite door, not bothering to wait for the driver who attempted to get the door for him. "I'll text you when I'm ready to leave," he said, and moved round the back of the car to join Sherlock. "Mr Holmes. After you."
As the car pulled away, Sherlock noted the slight drag in his speech, the faintly glazed expression, a faint whiff of alcohol. Evidently Lord Steenie Moran had indulged in a cocktail of Diazepam and Balblair before his visit. Sherlock hadn't been wrong about Moran's crumbling hold on reality. "Have you been to Mycroft's house before?"

Moran gave him the smile that failed to flatter him, ageing him into a prematurely old man, but it still held a politician's soulless charm. "In all my years in Parliament, I'm certain your brother's never hosted any remotely social gathering at his house, and he certainly didn't conduct business there. I've never met him at all, in fact, though I knew him by repute."

His Lordship's words had the ring of truth, Sherlock realised. Mycroft was hardly a social butterfly. "Fair enough."

"If you're asking how I knew his address, however," Moran added, "you must remember that I was once privy to a great deal of sensitive information. I might have come down in the world, but I haven't eradicated all that information entirely."

"Very pragmatic."

"Isn't it," Moran agreed, and gestured toward the door. "Please."

Sherlock led the way upstairs. "Tea?" he inquired, unlocking the door.

"No, thank you. If you have something stronger I'd not say no."

Sherlock calculated for an instant. Lord Moran was pre-oiled, but he was still maintaining fairly steady control over his faculties: his speech was only slightly slurred, and his gait was steady. Thus, a little more social lubrication couldn't hurt. "I think I can manage something. Please sit." He hung his coat on the hook and headed for the kitchen.

"Thank you." Lord Moran removed his coat and gave the sofa an anxious glance before carefully draping the coat over the sofa's arm and seating himself gingerly. "Isn't this...cosy."

"Thank you," Sherlock replied. "Might want to move away from the centre – the springs are starting to emerge. You'll ruin your trousers." He fished out a bottle from a cupboard and shook the amber liquid inside. With luck Lord Moran's taste buds had been dry-iced an hour or so ago. He blew the dust from two tumblers and poured.

"I think I expected something different. Steel and glass and lots of exposed industrial tubing."

Sherlock handed Moran a glass. "Are you disappointed?"

"Charmed, actually. It's a bit...ah, ramshackle, but...yes, charming, on the whole."

"I certainly haven't got the art and objects that you do."

"No, you don't," Moran said. He took a drink and fixed Sherlock with a steely glare. "Which brings me to the reason for my visit, actually. You broke into my house, you and your friend."

"True," Sherlock acknowledged.

"Did you not think I'd have security cameras?"

"Considering the preponderance of valuables, I'm not surprised."

"Christ," Moran said softly. He took another drink, draining the glass. "I could have you arrested,
"Interesting," Sherlock said. "Are you going to?"

Moran stared at him, then looked away. "You ruined my life, Mr Holmes."

"I think you did that the moment you decided to accept cash for your country's secrets. Then again, on our last meeting you seemed to indicate that you hadn't done so willingly. I admit at the time I thought it was twaddle, the ravings of a man who'd been broken by prison, but that wasn't the case. You also mentioned your family." Sherlock smiled. "You'll be glad to hear that I did my research. Staunch Catholics, the Ó Móráins, but friends of the Crown since the Hanoverian succession thanks to timber exportation. The Ó Móráins effectively helped to deforest Ireland. Congratulations on that, by the way – you profited marvellously. Suppose someone had to, though."

Moran glowered. "They did not –"

"It must have been a terrible blow to your family's pride when your younger brother Sebastian became caught up in republican paramilitary organisations. Still, family ties trump even patriotism at times. You arranged his disappearance, didn't you?"

Setting his glass on a stack of magazines, Moran sighed. "It was...yes, he'd fallen in with a dreadful crowd. I couldn't change his mind. It would have been too great a scandal to allow him to operate openly. Falsifying his death was the best thing to do under the circumstances."

"He must have been awfully persuasive. He brought you round to his way of thinking – didn't he, Steenie?"

Moran shook his head and chuckled soundlessly. "Is that what you think?"

"You said you made a deal with the devil."

"You listen, Mr Holmes," Moran said. "I'm impressed. Most people don't. Did you enjoy playing my violin?"

"Very much. It's a beautiful instrument."

"You play well. Not brilliantly, but competently enough. Your fingering needs work, particularly your little finger." Moran held his glass out. "Could I trouble you for a refill?"

So his taste buds had been obliterated, obviously. Sherlock offered his own glass. "Take mine. I'm not going to drink it."

"Thank you." Moran sipped delicately this time instead of bolting it.

"The devil is your brother, I take it."

"I acquired that violin from a woman in Argentina, the daughter of a physician – well, a race hygienist, as he was known during the Third Reich. This woman had no idea what the violin was worth, nor how it was obtained. I bought it for a song." Moran smiled. "Comparatively and figuratively speaking."

"You funded paramilitary groups with looted art profits."

"A great deal of that art found its way back to its rightful owners," Moran said. "The violin was one of those pieces that unfortunately had no surviving owners to whom it might have been restored."
Meredith Howe was instrumental in finding those families." He took a deeper drink. "She did important work."

"Until someone removed her from the equation. You? Your brother? What did she do that was so threatening, Lord Moran?"

"I don't know." Moran finished the drink and set the second glass beside the first, avoiding Sherlock's eyes. "I...she was a friend."

"Why do you think she tried to call you on the evening of her death?"

"I don't know."

Sherlock decided to shift gears. "Does your friend Nick Dedalus know?"

Moran stared down at his hands. "I noticed you took the invitation."

"Quite a number of connections between the pair of you," Sherlock said. "You were a ground-floor investor in Dedalus Communications and made out very nicely indeed when the IPO took off. There were a number of plundered art restorations connected with Lady Howe when Mr Dedalus emerged into the communications market. He's also an art collector, funnily enough. And you facilitated a number of nameless third-party guaranteed auctions, all high guarantees and high sales." Sherlock took his phone out and pulled up a spreadsheet. "None of your other confirmed clients have sales that match those extraordinary sums. So Mr Dedalus, a countryman of yours, ambiguous background, some years younger than yourself...tell me, Lord Moran. Would Nick Dedalus happen to be a relation?"

Moran's head jerked up and he gaped at Sherlock. "Relation? Oh, dear God. You think Seb is Nick Dedalus?" Moran smiled, then began to laugh. "Oh, God."

Annoyed, Sherlock sat and waited for the storm of mirth to pass. "I notice you haven't answered my question."

"True. True." Moran wiped his eyes, pulled out his phone, and fiddled with it, sending a text. "Would you like to meet my brother, Mr Holmes?"

"I would," Sherlock said. "Very much." He heard booted but agile footfalls on the stairway. "Ah. He was driving, wasn't he? Waiting for you to summon him."

"Good," Moran said. "That's very good."

Three sharp raps sounded at the door, and Sherlock got up, glad his knee felt spry once more. It wouldn't do to be seen hobbling toward the door like an invalid. He opened it and saw a tall, lean man, blondish, pale-eyed, in dark clothing. His left hip was canted slightly, weighted by a semi-automatic sidearm, but his hands were empty, held easily at his sides. He didn't resemble the blurry Wikipedia photo of Nick Dedalus. "Sebastian Moran, I presume."

"Mr Holmes. Quite an honour." His Irish accent was far more pronounced than his brother's, and it was decidedly the voice of the man who'd come into the Moran house the night Sherlock and John had been there. "May I come in?"

"That depends," Sherlock said. "Are you planning to shoot me?"

Sebastian Moran laughed. "I could have shot you when you opened the door."
That was true enough, Sherlock decided, and stepped aside. "Come in."

"I won't stay long," Sebastian said, walking into the room and looking round. "Did you ask him, Steenie?"

"Not yet," Lord Moran said.

"Ask me what?" Sherlock inquired.

"It's about Mr Dedalus. He'd like to meet you if you have a bit of time."

Sherlock closed the door. "I would. Unfortunately he stepped out the day John and I went to see him, so I didn't have the pleasure." Crossing the room, he went back to his chair. "By the way, does Mr Dedalus employ Mary Watson, or do you?"

Lord Moran frowned. "I don't know who that is." His speech was shakier than before.

"Mary – yeah, that's Mr Dedalus." Sebastian seated himself beside his brother. "You can ask him about her yourself, though."

"I'll do that." He thought about texting John, but it would be better to find out what he could about Dedalus first. Still, best to feel things out here even before that. "You don't mind if I invite John along, do you? I'm certain he has a few questions of his own to ask Mr Dedalus."

Sebastian Moran shook his head. "Actually, Mr Holmes, I think it's best if you don't tell anyone where you're headed."

Sherlock's phone was in his coat across the room. Bugger. It's a kidnapping after all. "All right. Would you like a drink? Your brother seemed to enjoy his quite a bit."

Lord Moran stood, grabbed for his coat, and missed. "Come on, Seb." He tried again and managed to snag it clumsily. "Time to go, Mr Holmes."

Sherlock got to his feet, and Moran drew his weapon, pointing it at Sherlock. "Steady on, Mr Holmes. Nice and slow."

"That's not necessary," Sherlock said.

"I'll be the judge of that, I think," Moran the Younger replied evenly. "Hands up."

Sherlock held his hands up. "Where are we going? Dedalus Communications?"

"No," Sebastian said. "Derry."

Not optimal. "I see."

"Are you carrying a weapon?" Sebastian asked.

"No."

"Any weapons in your coat?"

"No." Sherlock had become fairly proficient at texting whilst his phone was in his pocket. He'd text Mycroft; even if the message was garbled, Mycroft would work it out, and Sherlock's phone was traceable.
"Right, so. Get your coat."

He would have liked to have texted John. But there were sure to be unpleasant revelations at this meeting, and it was just possible that John wouldn't be an asset. Too, it was possible that Sherlock could sort things out before John discovered the worst. He didn't want Mary to suffer, whatever she'd done. He had no faith in her and precious little love any longer, but she was still tied to John through marriage, through Eleanor. It was naïve optimism to believe that their parting wouldn't be acrimonious, but a tiny shred of hope remained that Mary would be grateful to Sherlock for preserving John from the bulk of the truth. Sherlock would remind her, if necessary. He wasn't above that.

Sherlock slipped into his coat. Behind him, Sebastian was helping Lord Moran to his feet. Sherlock pivoted on his heel. "You don't use Diazepam frequently, do you, Lord Moran?"

"Steenie was a little reluctant," Sebastian said, draping Lord Moran's coat round his brother's shoulders. "That was to help him relax a bit. Downstairs now. Not too quickly."

They went down the steps, out the door, and onto the street. A car idled at the kerb, a different car than Lord Moran's, with an unfamiliar man behind the wheel. Lord Moran climbed unsteadily into the front, and Sebastian gestured for Sherlock to precede him into the back seat, though he'd prudently pocketed his weapon. If there was a time to run, it was now, but Sherlock's curiosity overcame him. John would have disapproved. He got in, and Sebastian slid in beside him.

"I suppose we're flying to Derry," Sherlock said, slipping his hand inside his pocket and thumbing his phone into life. Something quick - Abdctd L'Derry Moran - that should do it. He pressed the text function.

"That's right," Sebastian said. Something flashed in his hand.

"What –" Sherlock pulled away too late to prevent something sharp from jabbing into the flesh beneath his ear. Instinctively he grabbed for the handle, jerking his hand from his pocket to yank the needle out. The door was locked, and Sebastian Moran held the injection pen in his hand. Sudden warmth flooded Sherlock's body. "Christ, what did you –"

"Sorry," Sebastian said with a shrug, dropping the pen on the floor of the car. "That's the way himself wants it."

"I was coming willingly," Sherlock said, his tongue feeling heavy; he wasn't certain he'd even articulated that correctly. "Why the hell…the hell would…." He grasped for the rest of the sentence and felt it slide away from him. He scrabbled again at the door and couldn't get his fingers to close round the handle.

"He's a wee bit theatrical. Not my cup of tea, but he's the boss so." Sebastian had drawn his weapon once more and was pointing it at Sherlock's heart. With his free hand he reached into Sherlock's pocket and withdrew his phone. "I'd say it's nothing personal, but that'd be a fucking lie. Trying to send a text, were you? Nice try." He tucked the phone into his own pocket. "I'd say I wasn't looking forward to this, but that'd be a fucking lie too."

With a tremendous effort, Sherlock focussed on Lord Moran, staring straight ahead in the front seat. "Lord. Lord Moran." Sherlock's mouth was desert-dry. "You can't…do this….""

"I'm sorry," Lord Moran muttered.

Derry. Sherlock could scarcely summon a coherent thought. The source of it all, Moran said. Why
"Oh, I don't think so, Mr Holmes. :)

There was a chance he could be wrong, albeit a very slim chance. The tone, the insolent little smile, the contents were so blatantly willful. And the blackmail and coercion.

Mycroft's headache intensified. *Lest we forget.*

That Mary Morstan had once been, and possibly still was, an assassin, was irrelevant. She was a trigger-puller, not a crucial figure in the least. He'd utilised more than one such individual during his tenure and knew well enough that they rarely met their true employers. And Mary had been the one to shoot Sherlock…obvious now. All to keep John Watson from learning the truth, Sherlock and Mary engaged in an undignified tug-of-war over a man who…well, he must have had some extraordinary qualities aside from a peculiar taste for violence; Sherlock wouldn't be so ridiculous about someone so nearly *completely* ordinary. And Sherlock had clearly forgiven Mary, or brushed the attempted murder aside for reasons best known to himself. It was purest farce, but it was Sherlock's affair.

This was something else: a deliberate taunt. Why now, though?

Had Mary and John's meeting been chance, or a feat of engineering? Sherlock hadn't seemed to know.

"Damn it," Mycroft whispered, and threw the bedclothes aside. He found his phone and dialled. "Have you established a trace yet?" He listened and shook his head. "Don't stop until you've found something. Right. No, absolutely not. Not until I tell you. Yes." He rang off and pulled the message up again.

*Oh, I don't think so, Mr Holmes. :)*

His efforts to find Moriarty had become halfhearted. Moriarty hadn't made an overt move; Mycroft had almost believed Meredith's assertion that he wasn't interested in criminal activity any longer. But then Meredith had always wanted to believe the best about people. It was her most foolish trait.

Mycroft sighed past the sudden tightness in his throat. He couldn't focus on her now. She'd have chided him, said that he should properly grieve her and get it done with, but he held grief in abeyance. When he discovered why she'd died, then he'd grieve her. And he trusted Sherlock to find the answers. Whether it was Moran or some other individual or agency, Sherlock would root it out. And then Mycroft could grieve.

He set the phone face down and climbed back into bed, but stared into the darkness for a long, long while.
A thin, vaguely alarming sound, like splintering glass, resounded noisily in Sherlock's skull even before he was fully aware of it. The sound grew louder and louder and then stopped, leaving blessed silence in its wake and bringing Sherlock to partial awareness.

He squeezed his eyes shut, conscious of a punishing headache.

*Chemical cosh. Sedative and paralytic, possibly vecuronium bromide and* – The splintering noise crashed through his skull again. He pressed his lips together, fighting the urge to be sick.

After a few moments the noise subsided again, leaving only the headache in its wake. Sherlock opened his eyes and saw only blackness. He blinked and felt something soft over his eyes.

*Blindfold.*

Cold, he tried to tuck his hands under his arms and discovered that they didn't move. He tugged. Tape. He felt the stickiness, smelled the chemical adhesive. Each wrist taped to the arm of a wooden chair. Ankles similarly fettered. Several strips round his chest as well.

Despite the pain in his head he smiled a little. Nick Dedalus must have been awfully paranoid if he didn't believe a gun-toting Real IRA extremist could keep him safe from Sherlock Holmes. Not a bad reputation to have, on the whole.

His body ached – from the drugs or had he been sitting for hours? Experimentally, he shifted, but there was no give in the tape. He wouldn't get free without hours of squirming or unless someone cut him loose. He inhaled and discerned the aromas of damp concrete walls, earth, mildewed cardboard, old books, something bright and metallic, and machine oil. Not particularly helpful, but random guessing pointed to the Moran house – a cellar, perhaps.

A faint, stealthy scrape sounded in the next room.

"Who's there?" Sherlock called, startled by the crack in his voice. Christ, they'd drugged him with elephant sedatives or something. "Moran?" Probably Sebastian; likely Steenie was sleeping off his drug and drink cocktail.

"No."

Sherlock jumped at the electronic crackle that preceded the distorted voice echoing from a speaker in the upper right corner of the room – a small room, judging by the sound bounce. Distorted. Theatrical indeed. "Who is that?"

"Does it matter?"

"I won't play games," Sherlock croaked. "If this is one of the Morans, I know your voices. If it's Dedalus, come out and face me."

"If you say so."

The voice stopped, and as several long minutes dragged by, Sherlock waited. Finally his patience dwindled and dissolved altogether. "Where are you?" he called. "You're boring me." He tossed his head, trying to dislodge the blindfold, but it stayed firmly tied. "Moron!"

More time passed. Just as Sherlock was about to hurl boatloads of invective despite a head that felt as though someone had cut it off, stuffed it full of tiny icicles and miniature cymbals and cannonballs and tossed it down a flight of stairs, a door creaked open and he heard deliberate footsteps coming toward him, leather soles gritting against the concrete floor.
Sherlock inhaled the odours of spearmint gum and a men's fragrance, oud and incense and saffron. "Mr Dedalus," he said, imbuing his words with scorn. "All this is a bit much, isn't it?" The footsteps ceased a metre away, and Sherlock heard a soft, shuddering intake of breath. "Let's get it over with."

The footsteps started again.

A shiver of commingled annoyance and anticipation coursed down Sherlock's spine, and then he flinched involuntarily as a pair of arms encircled his upper body from behind, and lips brushed against his ear.

"Did you miss me?"

*
"Well, if it isn't my favourite little assassin. Come on in, honey."

Mary moved across the room lightly, a small smile nailed to her face. She wondered sometimes how it was that Sherlock had prevented himself from simply shooting Moriarty in the head when he'd had the chance. She hated everything about him: his beady eyes, his slouching posture, his rat-like smile. She hated his cologne, the smell of his chewing gum, the obvious care he took with his wardrobe and grooming. She hated his smug little cadre of lackeys and hated that she was one of their number. But most of all, most of all, she hated his voice, that droning, mocking sing-song, the proverbial nail on a chalkboard – how had Sherlock tolerated it? Genius aside (and he was a genius, the most brilliant person she'd ever met, bar none) he was a collection of irritating tics and idiosyncrasies, and the sooner he was wiped from the face of the earth, the better. Shame she hadn't been able to usher him out thus far.

She nodded at Seb Moran, sitting in half-shadows, coolly observing her over his phone; he nodded back. They'd always accorded each other professional courtesy, but his alliance with Moriarty made him only slightly less repugnant than Moriarty himself.

"Been a long time, Miss Mary," Moriarty said.

"Not so long," Mary replied neutrally. Not long enough.

Moriarty, sitting in a low leather chair, his legs crossed at the ankle, held up what looked like an art catalogue. "Ever heard of Paris green?"

"No."

"Copper acetoarsenite, a compound of copper acetate and arsenic trioxide. It used to be used as an insecticide and rodenticide."

"Is that right?"

"Mm-hm, true. They called it Paris green because it was used to keep the rat population down in the
sewers of La Ville Lumière." Moriarty thumbed through the catalogue and opened it to a photograph of a nineteenth-century dress, bright green silk with a low-cut bodice and lace collar. "It was also used as a clothing dye. Pretty, isn't it?"

Mary looked at the vivid full-skirted frock. "Very pretty."

"And toxic, too. Imagine – your best dress, the one you wear to church on Sundays and to every party, is slowly poisoning you to death. All that arsenic absorbed through the skin – ooh. It would take a long, long time to die. It's all about quantity, you know. The greater the concentration, the faster the expiration. I quite like the idea. Kind of like the Radium Girls. Years painting watch dials with a teeny-tiny brush, ingesting teeny-tiny bits of radium –" Moriarty stuck his little finger up and touched his tongue to its tip. "And one day, your lower jaw just falls off." He let his mouth fall open, then smiled widely.

Subtle as a grenade, was Jim Moriarty. "You have a job for me?"

"You never were terribly chatty," Moriarty remarked, holding his hand out, palm upturned. "Yes, as a matter of fact. Seb?"

Seb Moran rose easily and placed a large brown glass bottle in Moriarty's hand. "Careful."

Moriarty rolled his eyes. "Yes, thank you, Seb." He tilted the bottle this way and that. "Aconitine. Know it?"

Mary shrugged. "Sure. Not the most efficient stuff to poison somebody with."

"Yeah, I know." Moriarty held the bottle out. "All yours."

"Who is it?" Mary asked, taking the bottle. She picked up a section of newspaper from the table beside Jim (Dedalus Communications Rolls Out Wing4, the headline read) and wrapped the bottle before slipping it into her handbag.

"Meredith Howe." Moriarty returned to the catalogue, paging through it idly. "She's giving a little soiree in a couple of weeks, and according to Georgina she's already chosen her dress. It's going out for cleaning next week. After Georgina retrieves it, she'll pass it to you the morning of the party. You treat it, give it back to her. Easy-peasy."

Mary balanced firmly on the soles of her feet and repressed the shudder of horror that wanted to have its way with her. "You want me to soak her dress in aconitine."

"The lining, the bits her skin will actually touch, not the outside. Is some part of the plan unclear to you, Miss Mary?"

"Do you know what that will do to her?"

"Erm…yeah," Moriarty replied. "Why do you think I'm asking you to do it?"

Mary clasped her gloved hands together, conscious of the slight irritating grind of suede on suede in the sudden quietness of the room. She'd done seven…no, eight jobs for Meredith Howe using Jim Moriarty as an intermediary. Straighforward burglaries, for the most part, very little violence. Though Lady Howe still thought Mary's name was Karen Cedric, they got on well – not friends, but friendly. Lady Howe was a decent person, generous with bonuses for nonviolent retrievals.

It shouldn't matter, Mary told herself. She'd been inured to the guilt or innocence of Jim Moriarty's victims for a long time. It shouldn't matter that she knew Lady Howe, and more accurately, that she
knew Lady Howe probably hadn’t done anything wrong. She wouldn’t ask. She wouldn’t.

"Something wrong?" Moriarty asked, all ersatz solicitude.

"What’d she do to you, Jim?" Fucking idiot. She’d never hated herself so fiercely.

A smile stretched out Moriarty’s mouth and creased his cheeks. "What do you care, sweet pea?"

She scrambled. "Mycroft Holmes might."

Moriarty grimaced. "Oh, God. They’re not still together, are they?"

"She still has his photograph in her library."

"I wonder if that's because she knows he'd be horrified to have his photo placed anywhere besides surrounded by a trove of intellectual prowess, or if she knows it would be too icky to put him in the bedroom," Moriarty mused.

"You want him to know."

Moriarty shrugged. "Eventually he'll find out. Do you think he fucks other people? Hard to imagine, isn't it?"

"Why this?" Mary gestured at her bag. "Why not a straightforward job?"

Moriarty got to his feet. "Because I want it to fucking hurt, that's why. Other than that, it's none of your business...sweeheart. "He reached up and patted her cheek. "Just do your job." Mary kept her face stony and still; Moriarty watched her, smiling. "It bothers you, doesn't it?"

Someone with less control might have grasped the nearest available weapon – in this case, a beveled crystal plate holding a number of Rigaud candles – and smashed it into that smug, smiling face. But Mary held her tongue and her temper, and half the reason she did was that she'd dug this hole herself. She might have ended it earlier, but if she were truly honest with herself, she'd have to admit that she'd only half-heartedly looked for opportunities over the past few years; her resolve had crumbled. Because she'd readily complied with every order Moriarty gave, John and Nora remained unharmed. Too, the money had been enticing. She had millions, enough to give Nora the most comfortable life possible. Simple greed, yes, but also....

Also, she was bloody good at her job. So good that only the two most brilliant minds in Britain and possibly the world had been able to ferret her out. Neither of them had betrayed her, nor, when the opportunity had arisen, had forced her to truly face the consequences of her actions. And neither had John. For a moment – a tiny, searing, infinitesimal moment – she was angry about that, but that was a lie, wasn't it? She scarcely thought about the bodies she left behind, much less her gently rotting system of ethics, so what was the point of being angry at anyone for not telling her explicitly to stop? Moriarty had kept silent for his own benefit, Sherlock for John's, John for hers.

Jesus.

She'd gone on so long she barely comprehended her own weariness any longer.

Jim Moriarty returned to his chair. "You haven't talked to Sherlock in a while, have you?"

"Not for a few years. Why?"

"No reason," Moriarty said with a shrug. "I suppose that means he hasn't spoken to Johnny, either."
Moriarty smiled. "Probably for the best. I always wondered about the two of them. If they were -- you know...." Moriarty waved his hand: comme ci, comme ça. "Did you ever wonder that?"

"No," Mary said. "I never did."

"Oh." Moriarty pulled a face. "I thought that was maybe why they'd broken up. Lovers' tiff. You've never talked much about it. Wait -- didn't you go to his mummy's funeral?"

Mary smiled serenely, wanting to stuff a kilo of Semtex down the bastard's throat and set it on fire. "That's right. She'd always been nice to me."

"Amazing, considering you --" Moriarty cocked his index finger and thumb and pulled an imaginary trigger. He crossed his legs at the knee and peered at her inquisitively. "Her precious baby and everything."

"I thought you weren't interested in him anymore."

"Well, to be perfectly honest, I have kept minor tabs on him over the years. He's gone a bit soft, wouldn't you say? A bit boring and safe?"

"He broke up a terrorist ring a few weeks ago," Mary replied. It wasn't as if she hadn't kept tabs on Sherlock as well.

"Oh, who couldn't have done that," Moriarty said, rolling his eyes. "They practically drew a map to their door! Ooh, Sherlock Holmes saves London again. Whooppee." He leant forward. "You think he'd be able to cope with a real act of terrorism? A great big one? Something that really takes the biscuit?"

Mary's heart beat in a new, uneasy rhythm. "Like what?"

"Oh, that'd be telling, wouldn't it?" Moriarty leant back again. "Just wondering, really."

Mary shrugged as if the conversation bored her. "What night is the party?"

"Georgina will text you the morning of, don't worry. Go on, off you pop." Moriarty made a shooing motion at her and went back to perusing his catalogue. "See her out, Seb."

Seb Moran went with her to the door. "Have you got plans for Christmas?"

"Family," Mary said through a tight throat.

"Family," Mary said through a tight throat.

"Grand, me too. Going abroad or staying home?"

"Staying home."

"Good idea." Seb opened the door, letting in wet, chilly November breezes and the faint rush of traffic. "Stay close to home. We'll be needing you. Ta, Mary."

"Cheers then, Seb." Mary left Jim Moriarty's Highgate house, keeping her handbag carefully cradled against her body. She got into her car and set off for home, but detoured, driving past Meredith Howe's house on Charles Street and then parking a short distance away. Lights glowed softly in the windows, cosy against the darkening skies.

Jim Moriarty never did anything by accident. The questions about Sherlock, choosing her for Lady
Howe's death when Seb could have done it, an act of terrorism that took the biscuit, that mad glint in his eye. If he had indeed taken a renewed interest in Sherlock, what might that mean for her, given that Moriarty was highly aware of Sherlock's vulnerabilities?

She thought she already knew the answer to that.

Mary rested her head on the steering wheel and closed her eyes. She'd been complacent too long, hadn't she? The only surprising thing about this was that it hadn't happened sooner. The question was: what could she do about it?

With trembling hands, she reached into her bag and pulled out her phone, her hand brushing against the newspaper-wrapped bottle. With trembling fingers, she plugged a number in and waited. "Dot? Hi, darling."

Trish's voice was simultaneously pleased and cautious; their telepathy was still there, after years and years. "Hey there, honey. What is it?"

"You know that...that thing I said I'd never ask you to do?"

There was a moment of silence on the other end before Trish spoke. "When do you want me there?"

*

John took a seat opposite Mary and watched her face as she looked at the picture. She swallowed, and her brow contracted. She reached out and turned the photo face-down on the table, the folded her hands in her lap, keeping her eyes lowered.

"You don't seem surprised."

Mary didn't speak for a moment. She compressed her lips into a grim line. Her skin had gone pallid. At last she stared John in the face, her gaze direct and uncompromising. "John. Don't."

John nodded. By all rights he should have been feeling something other than this strange submerged calm. Anger, humiliation at being a dupe, sour triumph that deep down, his suspicions had been confirmed yet again. He felt none of that, not yet. "She's not your aunt. Not a relative at all."

"No."

"Work colleague, I take it?"

Mary traced a fingertip over the back of the photo and sighed. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me."

"Fine. Yes, a work colleague. And a good friend."

A good friend. So close that the dead woman, 'Aunt Trish' had willingly conspired to make a fool of John, to pull the wool over his eyes. A tiny spark kindled in John's gut. "How long had you known her?"

"Since the late 90s," Mary said. "We were at Langley together."
"And after that?"

Mary held his gaze. "We stayed in touch."

"You know what I mean."

"Why don't you just say it?"

John let his breath hiss through his nose. "All right," he said evenly. "Were you still working with her?"

Mary's eyes changed a bit, faintly approving. "Yes."

"And that money. All that money. That's not an inheritance, is it?"

"No," Mary said. "It's not."

"Jesus," John breathed. "Jesus." He got up, went to the worktop, and poured himself a generous helping of pinot. He took a deep swig. "He was right. The whole time, Sherlock was right. You've been lying to me for – how long? Our whole marriage?"

"John." Mary's eyes pleaded, but her tone was calm. "Let's not. Not with Nora right up –"

"Don't worry. I'm not going to raise my voice." John finished his wine and sat opposite Mary once more. "I'm not going to lose it, even though I know it's what you want so that you can prove how unreasonable I am and how rational you are. Nora's put up with enough from both of us, she doesn't have to hear this. I wouldn't do that to her."

"Let's go for a walk. I'll call Mrs Pringle; she can sit here for a few hours, and we can –"

"No," John said. "We're going to sit here, you and me, and talk about it right now."

Mary shook her head. "Jesus Christ. Fine. Talk, then."

This is it, John realised. The end. I didn't want it this way. I didn't fucking want it this way. "So was it the entire time – you, working?"

"No," Mary said. "No, not the entire time."

"How long, then?"

"Seven…eight years." Mary's face was stiff and expressionless, and she spoke as if she were dictating notes, clear and concise. No hint of shame or regret shadowed her voice, and her posture was erect, defiant.

"How? For fuck's sake, you had a job."

"Tim knew."

"Tim knew…how? What, he let you work locum while you were globetrotting off to shoot people in the head?" John yearned for another drink. "Christ al-fucking-mighty. That's a recurring theme in my life, isn't it? John's not to know. Don't tell John."

"Don't," Mary said sharply. "I can't stand it when you're self-pitying. You see what you want to see, John – you always have. And don't be a hypocrite. You've been lying to me as long as we've known each other."
John stopped short, his incipient fulmination of rage caught off-guard. "Lying about what?"

"Sherlock."

Hot blood surged into John's face. "You're the reason we didn't speak for four years. Did you know that? He tried to tell me about you, but I wouldn't fucking listen. Didn't want to believe it, because I thought –" He broke off, conscious that he was about to say something far too incriminating, although Mary was on the right track. She was no fool.

"What did you think?" Mary was watching him carefully.

"I didn't think you were capable of that level of dishonesty, Mary."

Mary laid her hands flat on the table, her fingers splayed out around the photograph. "I went to see him the day after you two had that fight, you know. I knew he'd guessed. I knew why you'd quarrelled. I went to threaten him, and if that didn't work, to kill him." Her eyes clouded. "I gave him a chance to take it back, and he wouldn't. Even when I made it clear that I knew about the two of you, and that didn't enter into it, he wouldn't. So what does that tell you?"

"It tells me that he cared about me. About not wanting to deceive me."

"Even though he had no problem deceiving you for two years. Letting you think he was dead."

"That's in the past. The way your history was. Or so I thought." John felt fury surge again, and then diminish, leaving him with nothing but regret that burned hotter than his anger. He'd lost four years of Sherlock's friendship and love, and Sherlock had been right all along. And worse, had taken the blame for the rift.

"You slept with him today, didn't you?"

Surprised, John looked up at Mary. "Yes."

Mary nodded slowly and let out a sigh that seemed to come from the tips of her toes. "Thought so."

"You think it's a betrayal, Mary?"

"Do you?"

John thought carefully before answering. "Maybe."

Mary got up and went for the bottle of wine. She poured herself a glass, and then poured more into John's glass before setting the wine on the table between them and sitting once more. "You've always loved him."

"Yes." John lifted the glass to his lips and drank.

"I was just a stopgap, is that it?" For the first time there was bitterness in her voice.

"No. I loved you." John took another drink. "Maybe it eases your conscience to think that I didn't, but I did. Very much."

Mary looked down. When she looked up, her eyes were full of tears. She took a sip of wine and set the glass down carefully. "Jesus, John. I would have told you –"

"No," John interrupted. "No, you wouldn't have told me a thing, not if it weren't necessary."
"I can't make you believe anything else."

"Mary, I don't have to believe – I lived it, for Christ's sake! You shot Sherlock so he wouldn't tell on you!" Mary put a finger to her lips, and John quieted, nearly laughing at the absurdity of all this. He reached out for the photo, but Mary put a firm hand on it. "What is this? Hm? Deal gone bad? Revenge?"

Mary glanced down at the photo. "Revenge."

"And someone sent it to you. So what's your involvement?"

Mary kept silent, taking another sip of wine.

"You have a daughter," John said, half-whispering so that he wouldn't roar. "A nine-year-old daughter. Did you ever stop for one fucking minute to consider that she might be vulnerable?"

"Do you really think I'm so goddamn stupid that I didn't consider it?" Mary snatched up the photo and began methodically shredding it to confetti.

"Doesn't look that way, does it?"

"Whatever you say, John."

"Don't you fucking dare – you know what, never mind. I'm not even interested in this."

"You're not interested?" Mary's face blazed. "You were so desperate to find out why Sherlock had skived off for two years without a word to you, and now –"

"He did it to protect me," John said. "Me, and Mrs Hudson, and Lestrade, and maybe his brother. Is that why you did it, Mary? Or were you just keen on the five million pounds? Hm? Sherlock didn't lie to my face for ten years." He pressed his hands together to keep from slamming them down on the table. "You know something? When he tried to tell me – and no way was I believing him because my wife wouldn't deceive me like that, not after doing it once before – I felt like the world's biggest fool. That is nothing, nothing compared to how fucking foolish I feel right now. So thanks. Thanks for that." He saw Mary's face crumple, and felt a vile little dart of satisfaction lodge into his heart.

"John," Mary said softly. "I didn't have a choice."

"I don't believe that. You've always got a choice, and you, Mary, you've got more than most."

"Listen. John, listen to me. I can fix this."

John wanted to get up and walk away, yearned to go back to Sherlock's. But he couldn't, could he? No. He had to be a fucking adult and see this through to the end, and the end, it seemed, was very near to hand. "Wasn't it enough, the money I made? I could have got a second job, if that was it. You never seemed to care about things all that much, I didn't –"

"God, no." Mary wiped at her eyes. "John, please."

"It was me. I wasn't enough for you."

"That's not true."

"You missed it, your old life." Mary was silent, and John took that as affirmation. "Sherlock was right about that too." He put his face in his hands, but the tears wouldn't come. "I can't," he said, and took his hands away. "I can't do this anymore."
"Give me a week, John. Five – no, three days. Please."

"I can't. I can't. It's over, Mary." He took a deep breath. "You have to leave."

"John –"

"And I'm keeping Nora."

Mary got to her feet. "No."

"Look at that." John pointed at the pile of shredded photo paper. "Whoever sent that sent it to our house, Mary. That means they know where you live. They know you've got a family. They're probably keeping tabs on you. Whatever this is... however you plan to fix it, you're not doing it while you live under the same roof as my daughter."

"But you'll keep her and what – drag her along to crime scenes with Sherlock?" Mary's fists were clenched.

John's sense of underwater calm had returned. "You go, or I will, but either way, Nora's staying with me."

Mary closed her eyes for a moment, then turned and went to the pantry, fetching the dustpan. She wore a fitted green t-shirt and scrub bottoms from work, and flowered clogs. How many times, John wondered, had she claimed to have gone off on a trip with Tim while in actuality going somewhere else? Hong Kong, at least once, according to Sherlock.

Mary brushed the photo confetti onto the dustpan, then tipped the pan into the rubbish bin. "All right," she said softly. "I'll go pack a bag and give Nora a kiss. I'll tell her I've got an emergency surgery trip."

"Yeah. She's heard that before."

Mary didn't reply, but gave John a reproachful glance over her shoulder.

"Jesus," John muttered. As if he was a fucking ogre, tearing her away from her daughter. No, fuck that. Anyone mad enough to send a photo of a decapitated woman to Mary via Royal Mail courier was mad enough to take further steps down the road. No, Mary would have to leave, and he hoped whoever was watching her saw her leave. He could take care of Nora himself. Still, might not be a bad idea to hole up in a hotel for a while.

Better yet, somewhere familiar.

He reached into his pocket for his phone.

You home?

A minute, two minutes passed with no reply. He poured himself another glass of wine and texted again.

Had it out with Mary. It's all up in the air but I think this is it.

No reply.

You were right about everything. I'm sorry. I am so sorry.

He finished the bottle – only a centimetre or two left anyhow.
OK I'll try you tomorrow. Sleep well.

He shoved his phone in his pocket, then took it out again.

Love you.

Mary came back into the kitchen dressed in dark, form-fitting clothes and carrying a small overnight bag. She looked good. "I told her I'd be gone about a week."

"Whatever it takes," John said.

"John." Mary moved across the kitchen and crouched beside his chair, resting her hand on his thigh. "We need to talk about this when we're both... when things have calmed down a bit. I still love you, you know. Very much."

Her eyes, full of sorrow, stirred the last of John's compassion, but he couldn't forget why she was leaving, why all this was happening. "How could you have lied to me for so long, Mary?"

"I'm sorry."

"So am I," he said. "But it's too late for that."

Mary nodded and stood straight. "I'll talk to you soon." She reached down and kissed his cheek.

John wanted to embrace her – he didn't hate her, he was too weary for hatred, and she was leaving without a fuss, far more mature than he'd have done – but he didn't. He held himself stiff and unyielding, unforgiving, a grudge-holder. "All right. Call me."

"Okay. I'm going to take the car."

"Fine."

"Bye, love." Mary waved at him and exited the kitchen.

John waited until he heard the soft click of the closing door, and then breathed again. He waited a few more minutes, then set to tidying the kitchen, turning the dishwasher on, putting away leftover food, wiping up crumbs. He emptied the rubbish bin of its bag and took it to the large bin in the back garden; Nora would never see the photo, and she'd been taught not to open anything not addressed to her. Of course, if whatever lunatic who'd sent this mailed something to her – well, John would simply have to monitor the post, that was all.

Jesus Christ.

Half-stuporous with wine and exhausted from fighting, he dragged himself upstairs and into Nora's room. She was asleep, the blankets pulled up to her chin. John bent and kissed her, a fierce protective anger surging through him and making him unsteady.

"Sleep well, darling."

*

Safe in the well-lit, temperature-controlled confines of her storage compartment in Forest Hill, Mary
laid out her kit rapidly and methodically. There was no time to be angry at John for his refusal to listen or compromise; no time for self-recrimination, though there was a truckload of that just waiting round the corner for when she had a free minute; and certainly no time to curse Jim Moriarty for changing the rules of the game or even to think about why he'd done so.

It was a likelihood that he was watching, even in here – she'd set thread traps and had a GPS bug detector on her phone, but it still wasn't utter paranoia to believe that he'd evaded them and set a camera up somewhere. Mary packed lightly: her field glasses, her combat blade, her Karambit, her Glock, and more than adequate ammunition. Carefully, she strapped her vest on – better than nothing at all. But surely he knew. He knew she'd come to him. It was a gamble; if he wanted her to turn up on his doorstep only to have some sniper blow her head off at a distance, he wouldn't have bothered to stage the courier delivery.

Divide and conquer? Maybe….

Mary pulled out her phone and hovered her thumb over the dial. The lines of communication weren't entirely cut. Even during their worst fights, they'd extended each other a rudimentary courtesy, if only for Nora's sake. She changed her mind and sent a text instead.

*I'd feel better if you both slept at a nice hotel for a few nights.*

While she waited for the response, she sent a text to Tim, informing him that she'd be stopping by within an hour. Immediately after she sent it, she received a reply from John.

*I can take care of her.*

Mary pressed her lips together and bowed her head over the phone. *Oh, John.* From most men that would be a bit of chest-thumping, an assertion of manhood, but from John it was a simple statement of fact. And it was true that if Moriarty wanted to grab John and Nora, some posh hotel in the centre of London wouldn't stop him. He'd once had a South Korean diplomat snatched in the middle of Harrods, and no-one had blinked an eye. She'd have to trust John at his word.

Bit late for that now though, wasn't it?

"Yeah, no shit," she muttered, and sent a return text.

*Okay. Please do.* That would be enough, she thought, to keep him alert. It was the hardest thing in the world to fight off the nihilism that threatened to creep over her, the drum tattoo of *nothing you do to protect them matters*, the brilliant job that Jim Moriarty had done on her head, because she'd seen him at work long enough to know how much of it was true: his watchers, his muscle, his tech toys. She'd never used a Dedalus phone, no matter how many times he offered – and perversely, never forced on her – and had actively discouraged John from buying one despite their attractively low price and dazzling features that included an array of spyware, of which MI5, MI6, the FSB, CIA, and the NSA were altogether ignorant – especially pathetic because it had become the phone of choice in most of those agencies. What Jim Moriarty didn't know could fill a Post-it note.

Moving faster, she zipped up her carryall, wrenched a pullover on, and slipped into her oversized cashmere blazer. In her dark clothes and with the leather carryall, she looked like any other smart traveller. She closed and locked the storage door and drove to Tim Liddell's house in Chiswick. He was waiting on the steps, all but sweating and wringing his hands.

"Mary –"

"Inside," Mary said curtly, and gestured at the door. He ushered her into the living room and
switched on a light. "Sit down," she said, and pointed to a chair.

Tim sat. "What's going on?"

"I need your charter service. I've got to get to Derry ASAP."

"Why?"

Mary stared. "Sorry?"

"Sorry, I mean – it's short notice."

"Yeah, I know. Can't be helped, and I can't fly commercial." She nodded at her carryall. "I need it now."

"Okay. Let me arrange it. Just give me a few minutes." Tim fumbled out his phone – a Dedalus phone, of course – and found his flight app. "Right, okay. Tonight?"

"An hour, no more."

"Okay." Sweat began to bead on Tim's brow as he finalised the necessary details. "Right, okay. Erm, Biggin Hill, an hour. They can do it. It's an extra three thousand for short notice."

"Stick it on my tab," Mary retorted. She sat back and watched Tim make three attempts to slide the phone into his pocket before giving it up and setting it on the sofa beside him. "So how long have you known?"

"Known what?"

"I'm going to meet him."

"I didn't."

"Tim." Mary shook her head sadly. "You're transparent, you know. Did you know I'd be by?"

Tim couldn't meet her eyes. "He said you might be."

Mary sighed. "Yeah. I thought that might be the case." A tired, mirthless smile stretched her lips. She'd thought that Sherlock had been the biggest threat to her marriage for so long – Sherlock under the shadowy grey London sky, recklessly pursuing the murderous, the larcenous, the malicious, and never once pausing to look up to examine that shadow. Poor Sherlock. She owed him an apology. "I need a few favours from you, Tim. And that's it. We're done, you and me."

"You're leaving the surgery?"

"Yeah. I'm retiring." Mary stood up and looked round Tim's luxurious house. She and John had eaten dinners here. Nora had met Tim's kids and played with them. She'd even kept up appearances at Tim's practice, assisting here and there, keeping records, chatting with the other nurses, no different from the rest of them, and Tim, to his credit, had treated her with the same avuncular affection he'd shown them all, but she didn't know him, not really. She'd never bothered to try for friendship, to find out exactly what had bound him to Moriarty, what Moriarty had said to force Tim to entrap Mary into the job. What did it matter, in the end? "We've both made a lot of money."

"If I could have done it differently –"

"You probably wouldn't have done," Mary said wearily. She longed to lie down and sleep, but she
couldn't. John was right. People didn't change, they just became more themselves. She'd have lied to
him over and over, and being sorry for it now didn't help, and wouldn't ever mend their tattered
bond. "Don't kick yourself over it now, Tim."

Tim sat hunched forward, his hands clasped tightly between his knees. "I'm sorry. For all of it."

"It's all right."

He looked her full in the face, and for the first time in a long time his eyes were unclouded by forced
duplicity. "What do you need?"

*

She leant back in the luxurious leather seat, listening to the discreet whine of the engines. Nice. She'd
always appreciated travelling in style, never taking it for granted, remembering all too well riding
hundreds of miles concealed in the boot of a car or in the lower hold of a filth-infested tanker. Needs
must. No, this was infinitely preferable.

The first officer ducked her head into the cabin. "We're ready to depart, Ms Watson. Would you
mind buckling your safety belt and placing your bag on the floor?"

"Of course. Thanks," Mary said, fastening the belt and setting the bag down.

"We've got a bit of a wait on the runway, but we should still be in Derry within two hours. Have a
pleasant flight."

"Thank you." Mary let her head fall against the seat and closed her eyes. Just for a minute, until
they'd achieved liftoff. Even a ten minute power nap would do wonders.

The gathering speed of the jet woke her. She glanced at her watch: twenty-five minutes she'd been
asleep, and she felt totally refreshed. Good. She glanced at the carryall, then out the window, seeing
only the rushing runway lights on the airfield. Then the nose lifted, and the jet ascended smoothly
into the evening sky.

Mary leant over to see the brilliant lightshow of London tilting beneath them. She watched and
watched until the lights grew dim, then drew her phone from her pocket.

*

Nora eyed the white carrier bags on the table with suspicion. "Takeaway again?"

"Yeah. Sorry, I didn't have time to do shopping, and we didn't have much in the fridge." John
emptied the containers onto plates, put the plates in the microwave, and turned the oven on to heat
them.

Nora opened the refrigerator. "We've got loads of stuff."

"Well, if you'd like a sandwich or some scrambled eggs, then I'll be happy to make something for
you. But this is Singapore fried rice with extra hot sauce from Sun Ya, which I happen to know you
like, so you're welcome to eat that as well." John gave Nora a tight smile. He'd scarcely concealed
his growing irritation throughout the day at the surgery, only just managing not to snap at his patients. He and Mary had exchanged a few texts since she'd gone, enough for his apprehension for her safety to dwindle. Shortly after her departure he'd been struck by a fit of remorse. He hadn't wanted an explanation, but whatever she was doing surely wasn't child's play. Her text about the hotel had simultaneously reassured and angered him – *you got us into this fucking mess and now you want me to kip at a hotel?* he wanted to reply, but hadn't – and later he'd texted again.

*How long do you think this will take?*

She'd replied within two minutes. *Three days tops. I will explain everything. I promise.*

And it wasn't explanations he'd wanted, nor apologies, but he wasn't sure what it was he actually did want. Time, certainly, and a bit of distance, so that he could process everything. No arguments about the question of Nora's custody until Mary could prove beyond a reasonable doubt that she'd given up the assassin's game. Of the two people he'd loved before Nora, both had betrayed his trust, but only one had restored that trust, even when John had refused to understand it completely. Perhaps in time Mary would do the same. It was too much to hope for right now, but he had to hope for it. She was the mother of his child; they had to sustain some sort of relationship.

"Did you get two extra hot sauces for me?" Nora asked.

"Ye-es, I know your tastes, your ladyship. Go put a jumper on, it's chilly in here. And make sure you wash your hands." John went to the fridge and got water for Nora and a beer for himself. He cracked it open and leant against the range, waiting for the microwave to finish. Cursing himself silently, he dragged out his phone and checked for messages – no more from Mary, and worse, none at all from Sherlock. Sherlock hadn't reacted at all to his news, either positively or negatively, and hadn't responded to two more texts from John. John hadn't wanted to inundate him, but it would have been nice to have heard *something*. Maybe Sherlock needed to think about things too, though – or maybe he was bitter about John having wasted four years. John wouldn't have blamed him for that.

*Fuck.*

John slipped his phone back into his pocket and dug out chopsticks and napkins, arranging them at the table. He set the hot food at their places. "Nora! Come on down, everything's ready!"

"Okay!" She pounded down the stairs – amazing that a small girl could make so much noise – and sat at the table, wearing John's old shrunken jumper. "Can I have juice?"

"No, drink the water." John sat and unfolded his napkin. "That was a really lovely dive you did at the end tonight. What's that called, when you grab your knees?"

"Pike position," Nora said through a mouthful of food.

"Swallow first, please."

Nora frowned. "Well, you asked."

"I'm happy to wait until you're finished chewing," John replied, doing his best to keep a bite from his words. None of this was Nora's fault.

Nora swallowed exaggeratedly and took a drink. "Pike position," she said, enunciating clearly, as if John had never heard the words before.

"Better. Anyway, as I said, it was very nice. When's your next meet?"
"February. Right after my birthday."

"Ah, yes." John smiled at her. "Been thinking about that. What sort of party would you like? I thought you could have some friends over here, or we could take a few to a restaurant, if you like. Or…." John propped his chin in his hand. "I thought you might like to do a Mad Science party. I've been looking into it and it seems there's a two hour lab option. You learn all about chemistry and physics and do experiments – what do you think?"

Nora's eyes shone briefly, but then she shrugged a bit. "Dunno. My friends might not like that."

"Well." John strove to maintain a pleasant tone. "It's your party, not your friends'."

"I think they'd rather do a party bus. Poppy and Chloe are doing party buses for theirs."

"I see," John said, dismayed. "Wouldn't you prefer something different?"

"Dunno." Nora took another bite of food.

"Anyway, no need to decide immediately. We've got a week to think about it. I've been looking at the reservation site…." John trailed off, watching Nora's face. A year ago, she'd have been bouncing in her chair, if not shrieking (she was never a shrieker, for which John was perhaps selfishly grateful) about a party, any party, and now she was shrugging like a hostile teenager. And party buses, for fuck's sake? With strobe lights and mocktails and a pole for ten-year-olds? Not if he had breath in his body.

"When's Mum back?"

"She said three days at most." John took a deep swallow of his beer. He and Mary hadn't discussed telling Nora anything; they'd have to hash things out before speaking to her. And he didn't trust himself, at the moment, to stay neutral about her. His bitterness wouldn't help Nora in the least.

"She didn't take her med bag."

John blinked. "What?"

"Her bag. It's in the hall." Nora placidly took another bite.

"I guess she'll have to borrow stuff from Tim. It's not the first time." At this, Nora lifted her clear hazel eyes to John's, and though he tried, he couldn't read the expression in them. Possibly he was just being paranoid. "Why don't you text her and let her know?"

"I did. She said she had a spare one." Nora hardly blinked.

"Ah. There you are, then." Faintly unnerved, John returned to his meal, taking up a forkful of lo mein but not bringing it to his mouth. "Did she say anything else?"

"Just hugs and kisses."

"Okay." He steered the conversation into more general areas – Nora's schoolwork, Mrs Pringle's elderly cat – and soon the odd feeling passed. He thought briefly about Sherlock's assertion that kids knew more than they let on. It wasn't entirely implausible, though his own childhood was no model. His parents had waged open warfare with no pretence of concealing their true feelings. He hated the thought that Nora might be suffering in silence, and possibly holding back for her parents' sake. Neither he nor Mary wanted that, no matter how bad things were. 

"Jesus."
Nora pushed her nearly-empty plate away. "I have to finish my homework, Daddy."

"Okay." He watched Nora get up from the table, then caught her delicate wrist in his hand. "Come here a second, sweetheart." He enfolded her in a tight embrace and kissed her soft cheek. "I love you so much."

Her arms wound round his neck, reassuring him, and she smacked a wet kiss on his cheek. "Love you too, Daddy."

Bemused, John let her go. She was growing up too quickly. He wished he could slow time down and watch her closely, be with her every possible moment. Sighing, he cleaned the table and washed the soiled glasses and cutlery, then dropped onto the sofa with a fresh beer and turned on the television, flicking through channels, stopping at an oddly familiar fuzzy photograph.

" – magnate said, in a statement, that the Dedalus Wing4 would revolutionise communication as we know it."

Ah, of course – the elusive Nick Dedalus. John squinted at the photo. Surely the news outlets had a better one?

The picture changed to two newsreaders. "I'm sure we're all looking forward to that," one said to the other.

"I can't wait to upgrade!" the second newsreader said brightly.

John rolled his eyes and flicked through to a black-and-white movie, starring absolutely nobody he recognised. He dug out his phone again and sent what was probably a pathetic text.

*Hey. Everything ok?*

He stared at the phone, willing a response. After a minute, the phone lit up. *Sherlock.* Eagerly, John fumbled for the reply.

*You bet. Congratulations!*

John frowned at the phone. Another text came through.

*You gave that bitch what-for, John. Now we can be together!*

"What the fuck is this?" John murmured.

*In fact, why don't you come and find me?*

Another message came through, this one a photo. Uneasily, John opened it. It was two pictures, pasted together. He enlarged it.

"Jesus fucking Christ."

Ten seconds later he was reeling upstairs, his heart hammering so intensely he thought it might burst from his chest in a violent spray of bright arterial red. "Nora? Sweetheart? Get your shoes on, okay? And get your coat."

Nora, lying on her tummy, glanced up at him incuriously. "I'm not finished with my homework."

"Yeah, I know, sweetheart, but we've got to go. Come on, no arguments. In fact, why don't we just take a few extra things –" He swept into her room, jerking open her bureau drawers and pulling
clothes out.

"Dad?"

Beside Nora on the bed, her phone pinged with a text. John lunged for it and snatched it up. Unknown caller. He stuffed it in his pocket. "Now, darling." He kept his voice calm, though he followed the path of her eyes and saw them trained on his left hand – flexing, twitching. Shit. "Come on. Where's your overnight case?"

"In the wardrobe," she said, climbing slowly off the bed. John wasn't sure if that was fear he saw in her eyes, but it was something already far too adult for a nine-year-old girl.

*

The edifice of the house was intimidating, as was the man who answered the door, but John politely bullied his way inside, conscious of Nora's confusion and growing apprehension and insisted on waiting. He and Nora sat on a slippery upholstered sofa and listened to the delicate chiming of a clock, the crackling of the fire on the hearth.

"Daddy, what are we doing here?"

"I just need to speak to this man, Nora. And…well, I might need to…." John drew a deep sigh. "Nora, love –" Footsteps in the corridor interrupted him, and he leapt to his feet.

"John." Mycroft pushed the door open, glaring, and then caught sight of Nora. "What on earth?"

*
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

As always, bushels of humble thanks to kimberlite and vilestrumpet for being the best beta/britpick team in the universe. xoxoxo

See the end of the chapter for more notes

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May 1990

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In the four months they'd lived in the house on Fahan Street, Maire Cathleen Campbell Moriarty had descended the staircase only a bare handful of times. She claimed that it was too damp and chilly and what reason had she to go into the cellar anyhow, but Jim knew it was the smell keeping her out. Besides the expected odours of concrete and mould and dirt, there was another smell, like meat gone off or spoilt tins of fruit – a charnel-house smell. Really, though, it was dead mice, Jim thought. He'd seen their droppings here and there, and a few bits of shredded newspaper and foam and cloth they'd likely used for nests. He'd wrinkled his nose at it at first, but it had become almost comforting to him if not exactly pleasant. He inhaled it as he crept down the stairs, nearly trembling with excitement.

Setting his schoolbag on the dirty floor, he reached up and pulled the chain to turn on the light, a single naked bulb that cast a sickly-yellow illumination no more than a metre in any direction. It was enough, though. He crouched, unzipped his bag, and drew out the copy of British Butterflies: Being a Popular Handbook for Young Students and Collectors he'd been protecting for the better part of a week. Lifting it to his nose, he inhaled deeply. It too had a cellary sort of smell, musty and ignored, but it would never be really ignored, not anymore. He sat back on his heels and let it fall open to the page he'd read most.

Many lepidopterists still use the laurel jar. This is usually made of a wide-mouthed glass pickle jar, with a patent lever stopper, the latter rendering it much more nearly air tight than a cork hung. The laurel leaves must be picked in dry weather at the end of May or beginning of June when the young shoots are tender and full of sap. Then the shoots and leaves should be laid on a newspaper and pounded well with a hammer until they are thoroughly bruised. These should be placed in the bottle until it is about three parts filled, then covered with blotting paper.

Kevin Moloney was exactly the sort of lumbering mediocrity who thought pinning butterflies to boards was an acceptable biology project, except he preferred to do it while the butterflies were alive. He also thought that twisting Jim's arm up behind his back until Jim let him copy his notes, homework, and exams was a great way to get better marks in biology. And it had worked for a
while, until Jim had turned Kevin Moloney's narrow, stuffy little bedroom into a laurel jar. Hadn't been difficult. Jim had taken the book, one of a few Kevin had resentfully borrowed from the library and never opened, as a souvenir.

He sniffed at it again – there ought to be a perfume, he thought deliriously, made up of the smell of old books – then opened the lower drawer of the old, sticky cupboard that had served as his wardrobe until they'd moved here and he'd used the built-in in his room. He only had two souvenirs, including the book, but already he felt as if it were a collection. It felt coherent, and right. Prayerfully, he ran his fingertips down the length of one of the trainers, and picked up one of the loosened shoelaces, rolling it between his fingers. He set the book beside it and admired the little tableau.

"Jimmy?"

"Christ." Jim slid the drawer closed as quietly as he could, picked up his bag, and ran lightly upstairs. "Mum?" The boys at St Columb's laughed at his poncy half-English accent, at his small frame, at his insistence on calling his mother Mum and not Mam or Ma or Mammy. At least they didn't call him Paddy or Taig the way they had back in England, but he hadn't lost the invisible KICK MY ARSE sign on his back. Too bad he couldn't put them all in laurel jars.

He closed the cellar door behind him. His mother was sitting at the kitchen table, dressed for work and sorting through the mail, a distracted expression on her face. "You're home early."

"What on earth were you doing down there, love?" Maire's clear brow knitted, and she pushed black curls away from her eyes. She'd had her hair cut into a short, sharply angled bob a few weeks ago – it made her look glamorous and cool and, she said, got occasional favourable comments at Austins, where she sold cosmetics and perfume. It was different enough to get herself noticed in this bit of Derry, where most of the women went about in tight, nasty permanents – in London, nobody would have looked twice except for the men who leered at all pretty women. And Maire was prettier than most.

"I thought I'd left a t-shirt in one of the drawers. Couldn't find it, though." Jim slid into the chair opposite her. "Why're you early?"

"I stopped in for a chat with Father Gilbert." Her eyes, mascaraed and china-blue – how he wished he had blue eyes like hers! – bored into his.

Jim's heart larruped a bit. "What about?"

"Your A-levels. Father Gilbert said it's been years and years since he's seen anyone as brilliant as you, love. Particularly in maths. 'Profoundly gifted' is what he called it."

"Oh." His heart settled into its normal rhythm. "That's nice."

"He said you could easily get into Cambridge. Or MIT in America, if you wanted that. Even as young as you are."

Jim bit his lower lip, feigning deep thought. It wasn't as if he hadn't considered it, but university didn't seem important in the grand scheme of things. As far as he could tell, people at university were no less stupid and inconsequential than anyone at St Columb's or St Paul's – mainly, they were able to drive cars and drink legally, neither of which was a significant improvement for anyone.

Still, maybe if he went to uni, he'd be thought of as inconsequential. All those people, so much older – they'd ignore him, leave him safely alone for a few years, giving him a chance to...to settle, and
sort out what he really wanted. Right now, he wasn't certain, and staying at St Columb's, wanking for the next few years, wasn't an option.

"It would be good for you – university, I mean," Maire said, reaching out to touch Jim's hand. "There'd be more people like you, bright people. You'd find a crowd of your own."

Jim squeezed his mother's hand briefly. She meant well, he knew that, her poor little slow-ticking brain. She couldn't help who she was any more than he could help who he was. "Yeah, maybe."

"You didn't tell me Kevin Moloney was your lab partner."

Startled, Jim gaped at Maire and realised his hand had tightened a bit. A swift, icy spike of terror pierced his middle. He swiftly rearranged his features and grasped her hand a bit more tightly before letting it go. "Yeah, he was. It was…wait, I did tell you, at the beginning of the term. Remember? He had the haircut that was sort of 50s?" Jim gestured at the top of his head.

"Did you?" Maire frowned. "I don't remember."

He couldn't lay it on too thick. He shrugged. "I thought I did."

"You weren't close, though?"

Was she watching him more closely than usual, or was he being paranoid? He looked her full in the face. "No, not really. He ran with a different crowd. He was all right, though." As long as 'all right' meant suspending Jim head-first over the toilet and threatening to dunk him, then yes, Kevin Moloney was definitely all right.

Maire pushed herself up from the table with a weary sigh. "I've got to get back to work. There's last night's stew in the fridge – you can warm it up, can't you, love?"

"Sure, Mum." He observed her carefully. Something was wrong. She wasn't quite meeting his eyes.

"I'll be home at nine-thirty." Maire collected her handbag. "Think about Cambridge, darling. It would…I think it would change things for you. For the better, I mean." She still wasn't looking at him. Had she descended the stairs noiselessly as he'd gazed at his treasures? No, that third step always creaked, he'd have heard. But…BUT….

"I will, Mum."

"You're so intelligent, love. You can do anything. Anything. You don't have to stay here. Shake the dust off and…and live your life." She waved at him; no kiss. "See you later."

"Bye, Mum," Jim whispered, half-frozen with fear. He waited, stiff and unmoving in his chair, his heartbeat thrumming in his ears, until she'd left, locking the door behind her, and then ran to the front window. There she went, curls blowing in the breeze, skirt whipping round her legs, down the street, round the corner to the bus stop.

He let the curtain fall and uncurled his left hand, absently noting the red half-moons his fingernails had dug into his flesh. Father Gilbert, that miserable bastard, had noticed Kevin pushing Jim in the hall, and Kevin had got away with a reprimand. He'd said something to Mum – that had to be it. Had to. Had to.

"Fuck, fuck. Fuck." Jim's voice trembled with tears. He double-checked the lock and went back down the cellar stairs, turning the light on again, pulling the sticky drawer open.
There they were: the butterfly book, and Carl Powers' shoes. He knelt and touched the book. Having them close by, touching them, made him feel better. Soothed. But he couldn't keep it up, not if he maintained his present trajectory. Two in a year…he'd have more stuff than he could possibly explain. What if they moved again? Mum wasn't nosy, but if she came down here to look for a string of fairy lights for Christmas, or wanted to donate stuff to an Oxfam shop, she might see his things.

She might have already seen his things.

"Fuck." A tear coursed down Jim's cheek; he dashed it away in fury.

He couldn't keep this stuff. That much was clear. Tomorrow, after school, he'd go to Foyle Road, near the bus station, where the junkies and derelicts camped out. No-one would notice him burning the book in one of the metal bins. Reluctantly, he slid the book back into his bag. It wasn't clever of him to keep these things, he knew that. It was sentimental. Stupid. He looked at the shoes.

No. God, no. He couldn't get rid of them. Not now, not yet. He'd worked things out so beautifully, and no-one had been the wiser.

Well. Almost no-one. There had been that toff in the Charterhouse tie, nosing round the pool, taking a fucking bus to St Paul's in Sussex to poke and ask questions about the shoes. Someone from Charterhouse, maybe the headmaster, had come to pick him up, all but dragging him off by the collar. Jim had been almost sorry to see him go, even as he'd quivered with relief; it was odd to see someone else who wasn't a complete idiot.

He'd worked too hard to just throw them away.

An idea sparked. He ran upstairs, out to the garden, and snatched four bin bags, a torch, the hammer, and the shovel from the shed, then dashed back down and carefully wrapped each shoe, careful not to disturb the caked mud in the treads. He moved to the far corner of the cellar, examining the cracks in the concrete-slab floor. They were loose, as if they'd been cracked, pulled up, and then re-fitted without benefit of mortar. The smell was worse here.

"Give me a lever and a place to stand," Jim said softly.

Mum was right. He could do anything. Anything he wanted. He just needed to keep his mask on. He needed to not get caught, ever. And he needed a long enough lever, and he could move the world.

Carefully, using the claw end of the hammer, he prised up a small chunk of concrete, then a larger one, then a larger one. The smell grew stronger, noxious waves of foulness rolling over Jim, strong enough to make him gag. He aimed the torch, and his eyes widened at the disclosure beneath the concrete.

"Oh my God."

Half-delighted, half-revolted, he reached down and removed a small object, holding it up to the light. He didn't believe in God, or Jesus, or signs and miracles.

But maybe there was such a thing as destiny.

*
"Here's a thought, Jimmy: next time you pretend to shoot yourself in the head, find a softer spot to land." Sebastian dabbed at the back of Jim's head with cotton wool.

"Because that wouldn't have been obvious at all, having a pillow on the ground." Jim winced. "Christ. Is it going to need a stitch?"

"Don't think so. I reckon a bit of glue will do the trick."

"Glue! What am I, a nursery craft project?"

Seb reached over Jim's shoulder and plucked another square of cotton wool from the tray on Jim's lap. "You don't trust my field medic experience. Would you rather I took you to hospital?"

"Oh, shut up."

"Well, then," Seb replied amiably, and pressed the new square to Jim's scalp. "Here, be a good lad and hold this tightly for a minute." He patted Jim's shoulder before leaving and whistled merrily on his way out and down the stairs. Violence always made Sebastian happy.

Jim pressed the cotton wool to the back of his aching head and peered round his mum's bedroom, virtually unchanged since the day he'd moved out. It was still frilly and feminine, all ersatz Laura Ashley chintz and machine lace and white laminated faux French Provincial furniture, and at one time he'd thought it was beautiful, though time, distance, and taste enabled him to see how sad and tawdry it truly was. He'd bought the house seven years ago, just before she'd died, over her protests, but she'd been glad for it, and proud of him. Poor Mum.

And poor Jim. What an anticlimax of a day this had turned out to be. The sour taste of failure was sharp on his tongue. He'd thought better of Sherlock, really he had. Even at the last second, listening to that ridiculous one-sided phone call, he'd thought that Sherlock hadn't planned to go through with it. He'd stayed still for nearly a minute after it had happened, hardly blinking, unable to believe that the idiot had actually jumped. Hadn't he read Romeo and Juliet, for Christ's sake?

Then he'd heard the commotion, and he'd crept to the ledge and looked down. A gathering crowd, hospital staffers, Johnny-boy, and Sherlock.

Jim sank to the bed, breathing in the dust from the old matelassé counterpane. "Idiot," he moaned. Maybe he shouldn't have goaded Sherlock so much. After all, Sherlock had a really fragile ego, poor lamb. Loads of insecurities. Certainly Jim hadn't given him a lot of wiggle room...but he had given him some, that was the problem! Maybe that was it, really: Jim was disappointed that Sherlock hadn't been sharp enough to come up with another solution besides dying. Sherlock had been a modestly bright amateur at best, and Jim, with characteristic optimism, had hoped for more. How depressing.

"Right, here we are," Seb said, bustling back into the bedroom. "Sit up now, will you."

"It's all over, Seb."
Sebastian was unperturbed. "Sit up or I'll clip you round the ear." He sat on the bed and patted Jim's back. "Come on now, up you get. Over to the light."

Jim obeyed with a groan. "What am I going to do now?"

"Take a holiday." Seb gently moved Jim's hand from the back of his head and began to dab at the gash.

"Ha-ha. Hilarious."

"I'm not messing. Jesus, you've been after him for what, a year, year and a half now? He's dead, Jimmy, he took the leap. Nothing left for you to do, unless you want to send flowers for his funeral, and that might look a bit funny coming from another dead man. Hold still, I'm putting the glue on."

"I didn't think he'd jump."

"He wasn't as smart as you, Jimmy. He never was. Sorry you feel bad about it, but there's nothing to be done now. It's over, just like you said."

Seb always got to the heart of things, without kowtowing or kissing arse. "Maybe I will take a holiday. Somewhere remote. Exotic. Have you ever been to the Himalayas? Maybe we should go, the two of us."


"Believe me, I've not forgotten," Jim said. "And if I were to match wits with anyone...but Mycroft's not like Sherlock at all. He's a plodder. He doesn't react to anything – dullest man in England. That was the best thing about Sherlock – he was never boring, really. He had a spark, Seb. Such fun to watch him."

"He might be angry that you got Sherlock to jump. You could lord it over him for a while."

"But I'm dead, so who cares?" Jim reminded Sebastian. "I might toy with him, but not now. I haven't got the heart."

Sebastian clapped Jim's shoulder. "All done. Lie still for a bit. I've a mouth on me. Are you hungry?"

"Yeah, I suppose so."

"Anything in particular?"

Jim realised he longed for something comforting. "Fish and chips from Donaghy's."

"Righto. You lie still for a while, and I'll be back shortly."

Jim curled up on his mother's bed and stared glumly at the dirty window. Being in this house wasn't helping his misery; it brought back all those years of exposure to myriad untender mercies, waiting in the chrysalis of youth until he'd been able to claim independence for himself. Youth was entirely overrated.

He closed his eyes and tried to sleep, but couldn't; over and over, in his mind's eye, he heard the clunk of Sherlock's phone, and saw him fall. He heard John Watson's desperate, anguished cry. He
imagined himself reaching out, snagging the back of Sherlock's coat, and Sherlock sliding out of it; he imagined himself reaching out and grasping a handful of air. He tried to picture another scenario: grabbing hold of Sherlock's coat, yanking him back, Sherlock tumbling backward, half-crushing Jim beneath his weight. "You stupid... stupid gobshite," he whispered. Was this grief? He hadn't even felt like this when his mum had died.

Sighing, he stared out the window at the grey Derry sky. He wasn't sure why he'd kept the house, except that he was a bit of a sentimentalist and it had such an interesting history. It was a good place to lie low. Cannily, he'd transferred all his properties to one of his holding companies, with an imaginary owner of record. Though he'd never actively banked on it, he knew the day might come when he'd be forced to disappear, as Seb had. He swore, though, that he'd never live entirely in the shadows the way Seb did. He had no intention of forgoing life's pleasures just because he was dead.

So that was his next move: re-organising, coming back to life. He'd had a few irons in the fire for some time. Now all that remained was choosing which of them he'd like to pursue with enthusiasm. Eventually, anyway. He needed some time to regroup.

He dragged his phone from his pocket and logged into Bart's security system, their CCTV footage. It was a wee bit morbid, true; he'd admit that readily enough. But as Jim from IT, he'd been able to watch Sherlock at work for so long, and if Sherlock knew, he evidently didn't care – at least he'd never mentioned it. And now he never would. Sad.

He found the CCTV and selected the exterior camera: there was the staff, hauling Sherlock's corpse onto a gurney. God, so still and pale. Awful. He switched to the interior cameras, and there they were again, hustling him into an operating theatre. It was almost touching that they'd tried so hard. And then, a half hour later, wheeling out his sheet-draped body, down toward the morgue. Depressing, so depressing.

He faffed about, moving from camera to camera. No Mycroft, but that shouldn't have been a surprise. They weren't particularly close. There was John Watson, led out of Bart's by a doctor and what looked like a counsellor of some kind, touching his arm [Johnny hated the touching, it was so obvious, looking at his haggard, shocked face] and talking to him reassuringly. They ushered him into a cab [a different exit, not the bloodstained pavement they hadn't yet been able to scrub clean] and sent him on his way. Poor Johnny. There was Molly, getting into a lift with another doctor, and leaving the hospital alone, her eyes bright. Just outside the doors, she looked over her shoulder and touched her fingers to her lips, closing her eyes briefly. Poor Molly. So boring, and now so alone, just like Jim. Well, they had that in common, if nothing else.

Wait.

She wasn't crying. She didn't even look sad.

Sebastian re-entered the bedroom, bearing two plastic carrier bags. "I didn't bother making tea. There's Club Orange in the fridge."


"There's a ringing endorsement." Seb set the bags on the shabby dresser. "Back in a flash."

Jim wasn't listening. He backed up the recording and watched her exit the lift. Her eyes sparkled, even in the crap resolution of the CCTV footage. A girl's eyes didn't sparkle when the love of her life had hurled himself six storeys downward and splattered on the pavement. Not unless she was gone in the head, and she wasn't. He'd dated her long enough to realise how completely ordinary she
Molly looked back over her shoulder. Her hand went up to her mouth – not wiping anything away, not stifling a hiccup or a belch, but touching her lips, gently, delicately. What sort of gesture was that, anyhow, with that drippy expression? It was as if she’d just been kissed or something. And no tears, not a single one. That didn’t fit.

He backed up and watched again. Her brisk walk, that sudden turn, the way her eyes closed. Weird, just….

Back again, to the footage of her getting into the lift. The doctor with her, not speaking to her, but walking beside her, surgical cap, scrubs, lab coat, booties over shoes –

"Jesus." Jim began backtracking frantically.

Sebastian came in with the drinks. "What are you doing?"

"Seb." He was manic, sweating. The cut on the back of his head throbbed like a rotted tooth. He didn't care. "Seb, that's him. That's him." He flew through the footage. "Jesus Christ almighty. Right, look – look, he's tucked his hair up, but look at the shoulders, the hands, for God's sake. Oh my God, oh my God." He kept backtracking. "Go get me my fucking laptop, Seb."

"It's right here." Calmly, Sebastian retrieved Jim's bag from beside the door.

"Right, right...." Jim booted up the laptop and got into Bart's security. "Look. Beginning of shift, here's the employee entry. No-one matching that build." He went back to his phone, where he'd frozen Molly and her mysterious companion. "Look at the back of his neck. Look at the way she looks up at him. Seb –"

"Jimmy..."

"Shut the fuck up, Seb. It's him." He went back to the footage of the staff wheeling Sherlock inside. "He's not moving. Too hard to tell, but it doesn’t matter. Look at Molly." He seized the laptop once more and returned to Molly's exit from Bart's. The picture was larger, clearer. "She ought to be in tears, Seb, or at least melancholy."

"This is your one, the one you dated," Seb replied, bemused.

"The very same. Look at her face." He slowed the footage down. Molly, glancing over her shoulder, then touching her mouth, then closing her eyes. Not looking up at the spot from where Sherlock had jumped, nor at the spot where he'd landed.

"You said she fancied Holmes, didn’t you."

"Now you're catching on."

"Back it up." Seb watched, then said. "Well now. She's not exactly grieving. Still – he was a prick to her, wasn't he? Maybe she's not broken up about it after all."

"She's a doormat, Seb. Look at her." He watched until she walked out of camera range. "Practically skipping. Give me the food, I'm starving. And go get your tablet. You've got work to do." As he and Sebastian ate, they combed through the footage, looking for a hospital employee with the same physical characteristics as Molly's friend. "No front shot. Smart...."

"Jimmy."
Jim looked up. "What?"

"Here. He's leaving."

Heart pounding, Jim held his hand out for Seb's tablet, and saw the white-coated doctor leaving Bart's and getting into a black car. An instant later, a hand shot out the window, pitching the surgical cap to the ground. The car pulled away. "Run the plate, Seb."

Seb took the tablet back. A moment later he met Jim's gaze. "MOD."

Jim clasped his hands together and closed his eyes in utter ecstasy. "Oh, Sherlock."

*

He caught a glimpse of himself in the bathroom mirror and paused, still unaccustomed to his new look. Tilting his head this way and that, he scrutinised himself closely. "Seb. Is it true that blonds have more fun?"

"I don't think hair colour enters into it," Sebastian said. "Jimmy, come on in here. I've got a feed working."

"Do you see him?"

"I'm still working the camera. Hold on."

"Let me know when you see him," Jim said, and glanced morosely round the opulent bathroom of the Maharajah Suite in the Leela Palace. The suite was cool and comfortable if vulgar in the extreme, and he'd scarcely left it since coming to New Delhi. The city itself seethed with life and heat and corruption like any good-sized city, and he had any number of associates here who would have welcomed him with open arms, but this time he kept himself to himself, relying on Sebastian as his conduit to life outside the suite. It was just as well; he had a lot to oversee, and while he delegated properly, he couldn't withdraw from his new ventures altogether, as tempting as it was.

Tonight, though, he'd make an exception.

He smoothed the sleeves of his greige linen suit and glided into the sitting room. "Any joy?"

"Not yet."

"You sure you got the dose right?"

"Yeah, no worries there. He's been doing skin pops with complete brown-sugar shite. Thought he'd have better taste. I reckon since he just wrapped up that case he'd be ready for a bit of a kip. Raghu's a good salesman, don't worry."

Jim threw himself on the sofa next to Seb. "All of this is pointless if he decides not to show up."

Sebastian fixed him with a funny look: You're being obsessive but fuck it, you're the boss. Jim knew it well. "He'll show."

"Hm." Jim tilted the laptop toward himself, surveying the scrawny bodies of all ages stretched out on rag mats on the floor. "Christ, what a hole. You'd think he'd be afraid for his life. Or have higher
"He's a junkie," Seb replied philosophically. "Selfish radge cunts, the lot of them. I never knew one who wouldn't sell his mam into slavery if he was down to his last skin pop. The only difference with Holmes is that he's not skint, ever."

"Lucky boy," Jim murmured. "I suppose Big Brother keeps him in funds."

"Maybe. He's some cute hoor, though. You read the Nepal report, didn't you? Accepted payment from the monks in opium."

Jim smiled. "You've got to admire a man who knows how to barter."

"That's him."

Jim moved closer to the laptop and watched. "God, it is. Look at him!" He watched eagerly as Sherlock, in a loose-fitting white shirt and trousers, seated himself on one of the mats and took out his kit. He rolled up one of his sleeves and bound a length of tubing tightly round his upper arm, then began to cook up his shot. "Let's go. Come on."

* * *

Outwardly calm, inwardly trembling, Jim moved the cloth curtain aside. "Stay outside, Seb."

Seb leant nonchalantly against the wall. "Call me if you need me."

"I'll be fine." Jim stepped into the stinking closeness of the den, breathing through his mouth to avoid the miasma of body odour, waste, rotting teeth, and what was very likely someone's festering open wound. Nimbly, he stepped over prone and supine bodies, once or twice treading on a limb, but nobody gave as much as a whimper, lost as they were in their collective morphia haze. He stopped at Sherlock's mat and crouched beside him.

"Hey there, Sleeping Beauty." Sherlock was decidedly down for the count; the dose Raghu had sold him would knock him flat for the better part of the day and night. There wouldn't be any lasting damage, at least not in terms of Sherlock's tolerance, which was, to Jim's mind, scarily high. Still, who was he to judge? Everyone had their vices. Sherlock was his.

Jim dug his phone from his pocket and turned the light on, aiming the bright whiteness to illuminate Sherlock's face. He didn't look bad, all things considered. Thinner than the day he'd jumped, well over a year ago now, hair tangled and quite long, a faint scrub of beard. Very faint – there were no hipster lumberjack beards in Sherlock Holmes' future. He lay on his side, lips slightly parted, no movement in his eyes. Jim reached down and prised one eye open. "Ooh." Complete miosis, his pupils almost nonexistent. Must have been a grand dose altogether. He let Sherlock's eyelid roll shut and contemplated him with tender regard.

It was such a temptation to just scoop him up, let him awake, watch his confusion and ultimate realisation. Sherlock's confused face was just adorable; he looked like a little baby lamb. Just the thought of it made Jim want to writhe with delight. But Sherlock was so very determined to eradicate every last shred of Jim's empire, and to his credit he hadn't been doing a half-bad job, though it was a shame that he never really noticed how easily Jim's individual cells collapsed, how few personnel remained. Probably Sherlock had managed to rationalise all that, but still, he'd been accomplishing
his mission.

None of that meant that Jim was pleased with Sherlock, of course. Sherlock had undone a good deal of painstaking work, and even though Jim's interests had diversified, he hated to see waste. For that reason, there would be some surprises for Sherlock. Serbia, for one thing. He would make sure that Baron Maupertuis didn't let Sherlock off the hook easily. And then, when he came back, well...there would be other surprises, not necessarily of Jim's making. Johnny Watson, chiefly, and the getting-on of Johnny's life. Johnny was doing just fine without Sherlock these days, because Johnny had a new girlfriend, who was proving to be a bit of a cipher. What would Sherlock think of Johnny having a girlfriend? Much less one whose history only went back a few years? Interesting to ponder, wasn't it?

He reached down and wound one of Sherlock's too-long curls round his index finger, tugging lightly. He'd love to take a photo of Sherlock, fast asleep, and send it to Mycroft Holmes, without a word of explanation. Mycroft deserved a good scare. He wouldn't send it...but wouldn't it be nice to have a little keepsake of his own?

Jim switched on his camera and began taking photos, mostly of Sherlock's face, but also his sandal-clad feet, his hands, loosely curled in narcotic sleep, a long shot of his whole body. He shut the camera off and leant in close, sniffing at the base of Sherlock's throat. Nothing much, an arid effluvia of warm skin and dried sweat and the curry Sherlock had eaten yesterday. Daringly, he touched his lips to Sherlock's throat, resting them against the slow-pulsing vein. "So nice," he whispered.

He was so glad – so very glad – that Sherlock hadn't died that day at Bart's, even if it was a teeny bit disappointing that Sherlock didn't realise that Jim was alive. Sherlock, for one brief moment, had outthought Jim, had pre-empted Jim's fake suicide by planning his own. It meant the world to Jim, truly.

Jim drew back and rested the palm of his hand on Sherlock's cheek. "I have to go, love. Won't be seeing you for a while." He had work to do on the other side of the world – San Francisco, then New York, then Bruges, then London. He had a new identity to assume, and a new game to play. Sherlock would be involved eventually, but for now there was a new empire to build, bigger, shinier, scarier, and Sherlock wouldn't know until the world crashed down around him and left him in ruins.

This time, though, they'd both live to see it happen.

*

"Well? What about it?" The arms tightened fractionally about Sherlock's upper body and there was a deep nasal inhalation, a drawing-in of scent. "'Cos I missed you, you know."

Sherlock didn't answer. Ice enclosed his limbs, froze his tongue, paralysed his brain into a simpleton's fog of denial. His body knew the score, though; it had tensed hard enough to hurt, and the faintest tremor began having its way with Sherlock's limbic system.

"Sherlock?"

God. God, what a fool he'd been. Stupid, lazy, complacent. All this time, practically right beneath his nose.

"Sherlock? Are you recharging your batteries or having a nap?"
Sherlock forced his body to relax against the threat wrapped round him so intimately. He took a silent breath. The mingled smell of mint gum and expensive cologne drilled a hole into Sherlock’s olfactory nerve. “Jim.”

"There you are! Thought you’d died of shock."

"Don't flatter yourself." Good. That was good. Talk until he sorted this out in his head.

"That's my boy.” The arms unwound themselves from his upper body, and there was the brief shriek of wood against concrete, a chair. A hand brushed up his face, then tugged the blindfold down.

Sherlock blinked against the light – not a bright light, but jarring nonetheless against his still-aching head – and squinted until the figure opposite came into focus. Blond hair, the hairline lower, blue eyes, but not so changed that he didn’t recognise Jim Moriarty beneath the cosmetic work. Sherlock studied him, his neural net fighting to enclose an overwhelming tide of new information. For ten years, ten bloody years, Jim Moriarty had been masquerading as a tech genius. His mobile phones, cheaper, smarter, and sleeker than Apple’s, had swamped the planet. The design and capabilities had captured the luxury trade; the price had captured everyone else. Every copper at the Met had a Dedalus phone. Mycroft had a Dedalus phone.

He did his best not to struggle against the tape binding him to the chair, not that struggling would have done him a bit of good. "I can't say the new look's much of an improvement – Nick."

Moriarty, straddling his chair, leant forward and propped his arms across its back. "Considering your taste in men, I'll take that as a compliment. Tell me, you're not really surprised to see me, are you?"

"Not entirely," Sherlock said, and managed to sound disinterested. "You did make that little video some years back. Couldn't bear to be ignored."

"And you didn't ignore me. *Au contraire*, darling. You scoured England, dashing back and forth like a little ferret in his little cage, back and forth and back and forth and back and forth and back and forth." Moriarty grinned. "It was just to feel you out, see if you were clever enough to actually find me. Loads of fun to watch, for a while anyway. After a couple of months it just got embarrassing, though."

Heat crawled up Sherlock's neck. "Now why don't I believe that? Such an outsized ego for such an –" He let his gaze flick contemptuously up and down. "Inconsequential person."

Rage danced in Moriarty's bizarre, pale eyes, and then he smiled gently. "Ah, now, Sherlock, we're just bickering, and we've moved beyond that, haven't we – you and me? You never were keen on old-married-couple dynamics."

Sherlock tried to twist one wrist, but it didn't budge so much as a millimetre. "Fair enough. Will you answer a few questions?"

"Oh, you're going to interrogate me? Well, all right." Moriarty practically wriggled in his chair in delight. "Fire away."

"Mary works for you."

"That's not a question."

"Right. Mary works for you, doesn't she?"

"She does," Moriarty said. "Years now. But I can tell you she doesn't come cheap. Competent help rarely does. You know," he added, leaning forward confidentially, "you probably shouldn't have told
Johnny-boy about her little moonlighting gig. Might have saved you both some grief, huh?"

That those words came from Moriarty's lips and Sherlock was forced to listen, that Moriarty had been the author of their pain – all three of them, Sherlock, John, and Mary, sweet Christ – that it was true - it was too much. Sherlock hurled himself forward with all his might, intent on smashing his forehead into that grinning face, but the tape stopped him, and the chair remained fixed. He choked off a cry from the pain of sudden impact force, realising the bloody chair had been bolted to the floor.

Moriarty uttered a high-pitched giggle. "Oh my gosh. Your face, Sherlock." He sobered quickly. "I mean it, though. How many years was it that the two of you didn't speak? And all because the great detective Sherlock Holmes can't keep his big fat gob shut. I mean, it's bad enough that you fell for that sad little spud of a man, but you had to blab because you thought that would seal the deal between the two of you."

Sherlock contained a snarl. "That made you happy, knowing that, did it?"

"Certainly. Certainly it did. I was practically creaming my pants when I found out. Now I've got a question for you. How long did you spend after that convinced you were right?"

Oh, God, for one free hand. Sherlock made a vow to himself: Jim Moriarty was not getting out of this alive. One way or another, Sherlock would see him dead.

"Come on, tell Daddy." Moriarty's voice had dropped into a low, insinuating murmur. "Confession's so good for the soul. Be fair, now – I answered one of your questions. How long? Or – you don't still think you're right, do you?"

Sherlock stared stonily at Moriarty. He couldn't free himself without help. He had to manufacture some sort of pretext, create a distraction. If Seb Moran was still in the vicinity, that might pose a greater problem as Sherlock was unarmed. But there was some sort of usable metal in this room – Sherlock discerned its bright tang, overlaid by oil. If Lord Moran was still about – a possible hostage, perhaps, a human shield. It could be done. He just needed a bit of time. And if he played the game correctly, he would get exactly what he needed. "John deserved to know about Mary."

"See, that's just like you, Sherlock. You just can't compromise. You'd be a failure in business."

"Why don't you tell me about business, then?"

"Hmm. Trying to distract me? Fine, we'll come back to the Watsons. What would you like to know? I won eleven Small Business Award of the Year trophies before our IPO. That was fun. Kind of getting back to roots."

"Actually, I was more curious about Meredith Howe and the painting."

"Ohhh. Yeah. You want to see it? It's upstairs."

"I'd love to." Sherlock tensed his muscles, straining against the tape, and then relaxed. The light was just dim enough that Moriarty couldn't see exactly what he was doing. With a few hours of alternating stress and relaxation, the tape would loosen enough for him to wriggle free. "Not at the moment, though. You had Mary kill Lady Howe. Why?"

"Oh, Sherlock, you don't really want to hear all that."


"You're so boring," Moriarty sighed. "You've got even more boring over the past thirteen years, if
that's possible. I can't believe I was ever remotely interested in you."

"No? You're welcome to cut me free and drop me somewhere. Where are we, by the way? I hear traffic, but this isn't London, is it?"

"Nope." Moriarty sat up and looked round the room, giving Sherlock the opportunity to do the same. He couldn't see far beyond the radius of meagre illumination the light bulb provided, but it was a cellar of some sort, with cracked concrete floors and block walls, and a stack of wooden crates against one wall. "Actually, we're in Derry, and this is my house. My old house, that is. My mum and I moved here after the Carl Powers thing."

"Ah." Sherlock tilted his head to one side. Just past Moriarty's chair was a flight of stairs, only faintly visible in the dimness. A slice of light played down the narrow staircase. Plenty of opportunity there to overpower Moriarty, smash his head against the stairs, break his neck, leave him bleeding and mangled. "Did your mum know about Carl?"

A thin smile curved Moriarty's mouth. "What do you think?"

"She might not have done at first," Sherlock said. "You were a weedy thing back then, too, weren't you, Jim? A target for bullies, that rabbity little face of yours just begging to be punched. Maybe she moved you out of England because it was the 80s, a tough time for any little Irish kid in the midst of English boys bigger and stronger than him." Sherlock was warming to his subject. "But that couldn't have been the end of the killing. You'd got a taste for it, right after the first time. You shut Carl up nicely. That was what power felt like, for the very first time in your miserable blot of a life. But you were clever, that was the problem. Weedy and clever, and the only way you could express all that helpless rage was by doing someone else in. And luckily for you, you managed to find your way into another boys' school where there had to have been a high percentage of bullies. So what was it – one per term? Maybe two or three? And your mum, eventually she started to suspect. Maybe even blamed herself. Not surprising, given the state of her marriage –" Moriarty's hand flashed out and cracked Sherlock across the face. Sherlock's head snapped back. He tasted blood on his mouth. "Not far off, was I?"

Vivid blotches of colour stood out on Moriarty's cheeks. "Pace yourself, honey. Don't piss me off all at once."

Sherlock licked his lower lip and offered Moriarty a sneering smile. "Why's that?"

"It'll lengthen your lifespan, just a wee bit." Moriarty returned the smile. "Told you I was going to kill you someday, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did, come to think of it." Sherlock's lip started to throb, keeping time with the pounding in his head. "Not sure this is the special occasion you had in mind, though."

"Oh, but it is. It really is." Moriarty settled back into his chair. "Want to hear something funny? We didn't know it when we moved in here, but there are seven bodies buried in this cellar. Found them almost by accident. Must have been the mid-80s, because everything was still pret-ty smelly, if you follow, but by the looks of their clothes they were squaddies. The orange kind. Oh, the Troubles, the Troubles." He exaggerated his accent, shaking his head in mock regret. "You think their mothers miss them?"

If seven British soldiers were buried beneath the house, then odds were that the house was located in one of the areas of Derry that had been traditionally Catholic in the 80s. The city was predominantly Catholic now, but –
"Bogside," Moriarty said, interrupting his thoughts. "God, Sherlock, smoke's practically coming out of your ears. I didn't hit you that hard."

"I didn't take you for someone with political convictions," Sherlock said.

"Well, I'm not, not really. Sometimes it's convenient though." Moriarty tapped his fingers on the chair. "It really is a special occasion."

"Tell me about it." Sherlock tensed and relaxed again. Keep Moriarty talking, let him blather on until Sherlock managed to free his hands. Keep him close, even if it made Sherlock a punching bag for the next hour or so.

Moriarty grinned lavishly. "I hardly know where to begin."

"Lady Howe," Sherlock prompted.

"Oh." Moriarty rolled his eyes. "All right, whatever. We worked together."

"Yes. You profited nicely from all the art auctions she facilitated."

Moriarty scowled. "If you know all this, why are you asking me? Are you just trying to prove how smart you are? I thought we'd moved beyond that, Sherlock."

"Sorry." Sherlock raised his hands, taking the opportunity to wrench at the tape. It was warming, softening infinitesimally. "Please, go on."

Mollified, Moriarty relaxed. "Yes, I made a pretty penny. Funnelled it here and there, but you probably know that."

"Real IRA."

"Among other politically inclined organisations."

"Otherwise known as terrorist cells."

"Well, let's not split hairs," Moriarty replied with a pout. "But yes. Your pal Mary helped, too. Meredith had her obtain several pieces. One of them was that Rembrandt you and Johnny have been looking for."

Sherlock remembered Kerstin Tresler's description of the people who'd removed the painting. "There was a man, too. Talked like cut glass, Ms Tresler said."

"Seb. He's frightfully posh when he wants to be. The two of them made an efficient pair, I have to say. I should have teamed them up more often. Not that it was a problem taking the piece from Little Miss Reichsdaughter."

Though it was satisfying, in a sense, to receive confirmation of his suspicions, Sherlock was heartsick nonetheless. If only Mary had told him the truth the night they'd spoken. If only she'd trusted him. If only John had really listened to him – together, they could have helped her, protected Nora, for there was little doubt that Moriarty had threatened the child, and John as well – nothing was beneath him. If only he'd kept his mouth shut and sorted matters out before blundering ahead and assuming John would be willing to both listen and deal with the problem of Mary's return to her former profession. If only, if bloody only. "So what was it that Lady Howe did that merited a murder?"
"Oh. A little bookkeeping error." Moriarty shrugged.

"What sort of bookkeeping error?"

"Well. Apparently she followed the transactions, the different institutions of deposit, and realised that they led to some very specific places. And then she was dumb enough to ask me about them." Moriarty clicked his tongue. "Not very bright."

"Clearly she didn't know you well."

"Clearly. So she had to go. It was fun watching Mary's face when I told her to kill Lady Howe – I think they got on rather well, those two. And the method, oh dear. I admit, that was a wee bit nasty of me."

"So what specific places did the money lead to?" Sherlock tensed and relaxed again. Patience; hurrying would get him nowhere fast.

Moriarty scooted his chair a bit closer to Sherlock and bent forward confidentially. "Funny; they were all cities with Dedalus stores."

Sherlock cast back to what he'd read about Dedalus Communications. "Six hundred-odd stores, mostly in shopping malls. Fifty…yes, fifty-six flagship stores in major metropolitan areas."

"Yeah. We're not quite that other company, but we're edging close. Or we were, anyway." Moriarty sighed.

"Why?" Sherlock inquired. "Did your stock drop a few points?"

Moriarty shook his head. "In fact, we're introducing a new model in two weeks. Business has never been better."

"Oh, yes," Sherlock said with a yawn. "The Wing something."

"Wing4. Let's play connect the dots, Sherlock. Or rather, you play, I'll just sit here and wait." Moriarty glanced at his wristwatch. "You've got thirty seconds. After that I have John's brains blown in as his little girl watches. Start…now."

Sherlock wanted to kick Moriarty in the teeth. He squeezed his eyes shut – God, his head ached – and concentrated. Dedalus Communications wasn't suffering financially. They were neck-and-neck with Apple, rolling out a new mobile phone, huge memory, amazing screen resolution, 3D and projection capability, cheap data plan. Launch parties, special celebrity guests, the lot. Moriarty was funnelling massive commissions and sales monies to terrorist cells in cities with Dedalus stores. Bookkeeping…there had been something incriminating in that paperwork, enough to prod Meredith Howe into confronting Moriarty.

Oh, dear God.

Sherlock opened his eyes. "You're going to sabotage your own stores."

Moriarty looked at his watch again. "Seventeen seconds. Not too bad, I guess."

"The launch parties. There'll be thousands of people there. The flagship stores, shopping centres…"

"And there's going to be a party at each and every store. Early projections indicate that people intend to start camping out a week before the launch. It's going to be huge." Sherlock tugged involuntarily
at his bonds; Moriarty saw it and laughed. "I've been planning this for years, Sherlock. Years and years. We've both kept busy, haven't we?" He reached out and patted Sherlock's cheek.

"What," Sherlock managed through frozen lips, "some sort of incendiary device?"

Moriarty smiled, glancing down modestly. "In every store. Enough to take out half a kilometre in all directions."

"And who's going to take the credit? The Real IRA?"

"Oh, come on," Moriarty said, rolling his eyes. "They haven't got their shit together enough to do that, nobody'd believe it. But yeah, Derry, Galway, Belfast, and Dublin will be the first to go – just long enough for people to start blaming the Real IRA. And then, one after another, boom, boom, boom." He clapped his hands together softly.

"They'll evacuate," Sherlock said. "The news will spread fast. It'll be viral within ten minutes."

"Sherlock, Sherlock, Sherlock. You poor eejit. Don't you keep up with tech news? Dedalus Communications is the biggest manufacturer of sim cards in the world now. Dedalus snapped up optic nerve technology after GCHQ abandoned it. Dedalus willingly opened its servers to the NSA and was remunerated handsomely, and not with cash, Dedalus is the largest aggregator of dark fibre in Europe, North and South America, and Australia. Dedalus is seething with metadata. Good God almighty, how do you think I got control of every bloody television in the UK? And that was ten years ago. Ten years, Sherlock. You have no idea what I can do. I could black out the world, if I had a mind to." Sweat stood out on Moriarty's brow. "And I do, as it happens. But I'm going to let the information out a bit at a time. There are so many little groups of madmen just waiting to be acknowledged, and they're all going to have their day in the sun. And the chaos that will ensue as the world tears itself apart…." Moriarty pressed a hand to his chest and closed his eyes. "Sublime. Discordiam concitare."

Sherlock remembered his own phone – not a Dedalus. And GPS enabled. John didn't have a Dedalus either. Eventually, he would notice Sherlock was missing. He could tell Mycroft. Even if Mycroft had a Dedalus phone, they'd be able to find him. He just had to play for time. "And I suppose you expect me to watch."

Moriarty's eyes darkened. "No, Mr Bond. I expect you to die!" he shrieked, then giggled. "Just kidding. Of course I expect you to watch. I'm not going to kill you right away. I think Johnny might show up, if you're lucky. And Miss Mary, too. Both armed and dangerous. What if they shot each other? Gosh."

No. Sherlock would have to escape first. But he couldn't stop every goddamned loaded Dedalus store in the world on his own. "Disappointing, Jim."

"Oh, come on. It's genius. You know what's disappointing? The papers tried to call us DedCom way before plan. It's the kind of name that just begs for a joke like that." Moriarty laughed. "Ooh. Too soon?"

"Not soon enough," Sherlock retorted. "And what about Nick Dedalus? Don't you think attention will turn your way?"

"Yes. Right. True." Moriarty tapped his chin and frowned. "Hm."

"Oh, for God's sake," Sherlock snapped, wrenching at the tape again. "Can we not, please?"

"Have it your way." Moriarty got up and turned his chair around, then sat again, crossing his legs at
the knee. "Nick's going to die in the London blast. Terrible tragedy. And when it comes out how much intel Dedalus had, there's going to be a serious inquiry. Entire governments will be blamed – the US and UK, mostly. They're such grand pals, those two great nations. I expect your big brother will take some heat. But by then it'll be too late to stop the paranoia, munching its way into the world's bloodstream like a little rogue cancer cell. Things should be at stage four within a couple of months, I'd say."

"Oh, dear," Sherlock said. "Won't it upset you to lose that fortune?"

Moriarty smiled gently. "Dedalus is hardly my only source of funds. Even the art thing was just a little sideline. Trust me, I won't be skint. It's nice of you to be concerned, though."

"No, you won't be, will you. You've got another identity lined up somewhere else, and a convenient plastic surgeon to tweak your looks. Smart of 'Nick' to be camera-shy."

"A change in hair colour's all I need, really," Moriarty said. "I admit, it's not terribly convenient to keep dying and coming back as other people. Much easier to die and disappear altogether, like Seb, or to die and come back as yourself, like you." He folded his arms. "Talking of which, let's catch up. Has it been nice having Johnny in your life again?"

The tape was warming with each tiny stretch. Sherlock might get his arms free within half an hour. "Marvellous. Could I have some water? I'm a bit dehydrated from the chemical cosh."

"Hmm. Let's talk about you for a bit first. Then I'll think about it. So are you two Love's Young Dream?" Moriarty paused. "Middle-Aged Dream, that is. Have you patched everything up between yourselves?"

"Yes. Does that bother you?"

A little smile played over Moriarty's mouth, but his eyes stayed glacial. "No. I'm just glad it finally happened. I mean, it had been so long."

No thanks to you, Sherlock wanted to snarl, but schooled his face into pleasant neutrality. "And you? Any significant others, or are you still friendless and alone?"

Moriarty clicked his tongue reproachfully. "Now, now. And what about Mary? Is she okay with the two of you…erm, pairing up again? Don't tell anyone, but I think she might be the insecure sort. And of course, they've got that little girl. At the moment, anyhow." Moriarty sighed. "You know, I thought that you might get a bit more lively these past few weeks, but you really have slowed down. It's sort of sad."

"Sorry to disappoint."

"That's just it, though. You've always disappointed me, Sherlock. Always. All that do-gooder stuff, that was one thing, but you've never really made use of all your talents. It's distressing to see so much wasted potential. You know anyone who's really smart is looking after themselves, but you've never done that, have you? You live in a dump, you're a part-time smackhead, you scrabble after dreary little criminals, you choose the world's most boring companions for friends."

"And yet you're still fascinated with me," Sherlock said drily. He wished his head would stop throbbing.

"It's your good looks." Moriarty leant forward and pinched Sherlock's cheek hard. "Maybe you're right. I never did find anyone to be the calming yang to my raging yin. For a long time, I thought it might be me; I confess I've got a bit of a temper, and it's caused me some difficulty now and again."
But then I thought, well, I've got my work, and that's really all I need. You know how that is, don't you? But then I found you, but you're painfully slow to get the hint. Still, I gave you every opportunity, to be fair. I'll say this: you really did impress me with that jump from Bart's roof."

"Likewise," Sherlock said. "You pulled the wool over my eyes with the gun."

Moriarty smiled. "Why, thank you. Took some practice, but it worked out in the end. Do you know I followed you? I watched every step you took to tear my work down. Good job, by the way."

Sherlock stilled. "You watched."

"Every little bit of it." Moriarty took his phone from his pocket. "I've got my own folder for you. Look." He began to scroll through photographs. "Here's you at the last meeting with your brother. Looks like he wants to hug you, but you're having none of it. Oh, here's Copenhagen, this is Madrid, here's New Delhi – God, Sherlock, you wore that stupid coat in September, amazing. Ah…here's Dhaka."

Impassively, Sherlock regarded the photograph of himself half-stumbling from a doss house. Even from a distance he looked disreputable: unkempt hair, wrinkled clothes, unshaven, eyes at half-mast. "You must have had a lot of time on your hands."

"Oh, don't be a complete narcissist. I had people watching you, Sherlock. Every little move. You never wondered why you met with so little resistance demolishing my schemes, either. That's what I mean about disappointing. Oh, here's Tunisia. You're having coffee with a woman. She looks familiar, doesn't she?" Jim enlarged the photo. "Why…why, yes, she does! And here's you leaving her hotel." Moriarty grinned. "Well, well, well. I confess I'm surprised, but I suppose even Sherlock Holmes has to satisfy an itch now and then. How is she, by the by? Are you still in touch with her?"

"Not recently." Though he intended to check on her when he made it out. Irene was almost infinitely resourceful, but so was Sherlock, and he was in desperate straits now. He twisted his wrists again. "I'd appreciate that water."

Moriarty's eyes darkened, and he leant closer. "You remember the last time you and I sat across from each other, Sherlock? Hm? You wanted everything to be clever. You wanted me to be able to control the world with a few lines of computer code, and what do you know – now I do. And I waited; years and years, making everything perfect, so you could appreciate it. And now here you are, duller than ever, but I am not going to be disappointed by this meeting. I refuse." He stood up, pushing his chair back, and went to the staircase. "I'll get you that water."

Sherlock watched Moriarty ascend the staircase. He glanced round quickly, seeing the dull gleam of metal in one corner, an aluminium pipe. It would have to do. He torqued his arms in opposite directions, bearing down with all his strength, and strained his legs against the tape. For an instant it occurred to him that Moriarty might have a camera watching him even now, but he didn't care; surely it was a reasonable expectation that he might try to escape. "God, come on," he muttered, twisting harder.

The upstairs door creaked, and leather-soled shoes began the descent. Moriarty. Then another, Vibram soles, then two more, heavy lug-soled rubber. Sherlock stopped struggling as Moriarty came into view, two litre bottles of water in hand. Sebastian Moran and two other distressingly strong-looking men followed behind.

"Here you go." Moriarty handed one of the bottles to Seb, then untwisted the cap of the other and held it for a moment. "Sherlock, you are pleased to see me, aren't you? You spent so long looking for me, after all."
"Delighted," Sherlock said, eyeing the group warily. "Couldn't be more pleased. Let's chat some more."

"Mr Holmes is thirsty, lads," Moriarty said. "Let's give him a drink, shall we?"

The two men stepped forward, and Sherlock shrank back involuntarily. "This is hardly neces—" He clenched his teeth hard as one of the men grasped a handful of his hair and dragged his head backward until he was staring up at the yellow bulb overhead. "You never could do anything on your own, Jim. You've always needed your little army of thugs."

"Shut the fuck up, Chinless Wonder," One said, and gave his hair an extra hard twist.

Sherlock grunted in pain and cut his eyes left. Two produced a dark piece of cloth from his pocket and shook it out. *Oh God.* "Pathetic, Jim," Sherlock sneered, yanking frantically at his bonds.

"Shh," Moriarty said. "I'm filming this."

The cloth settled softly over Sherlock's face. Christ. He thrashed, trying to wrench his head free from the punishing grip on his hair, but Two – callused hands, ground-in odour of thermite – grasped him beneath the chin and pushed his head further back, forcing it against the hard wood of the chair.

"Nice and still," Two murmured. "There we are."

Sherlock heard the faint crackle of recycled plastic as one of the bottles passed from hand to hand. He could try rhythmic breathing, but he suspected that they'd put a stop to that. Heart thundering in his chest, he waited, recalling only too well the sensation he was about to experience again. "This is a bit cheap for you, don't you think?" He tasted dust on his lips from the cloth.

"Nah," Moriarty said. "It's fun. It was fun in Serbia, too, watching you. Twenty whole seconds before you started screaming, Sherlock. That's impressive. Beats the time in clinical conditions, you know. I still have the video. Think you can beat your own time?"

Sherlock thrashed fruitlessly again. "Don't," he said. "Don't do this."

"Seb?"

A faint scraping noise sounded to Sherlock's left, and he jumped. Moriarty giggled. Sherlock gritted his teeth and forced himself to hold perfectly still. *Be calm, for God's sake. He's not planning to kill you. He's going to keep you alive and conscious enough to watch what he's doing, and presumably protest or fight. This won't last long.*

The memory of the last time, though – he hadn't been able to delete it entirely, the terror and nausea, the overwhelming sensation of suffocation.

*It won't last. It won't last.*

The bottle crackled again. Sherlock felt dampness, then wetness, and then a diffused and dust-gritted stream of water flowing into his nose and mouth. He clamped his mouth tightly closed and exhaled harshly through his nostrils.

A fist slammed into his solar plexus. Sherlock gasped, sucking in the drenched cloth and pulling in water through his nose. It cascaded in, flooding his sinuses, a stiletto-sharp pain. He clawed frantically at the air, twisting as hard as he could, but the water flowed relentlessly, stifling his air, drowning him.
"Okay."

They released Sherlock's head and pulled the cloth away. Sherlock spluttered and gasped, trying not to sob aloud. He bent forward as far as he could and vomited water between his knees, then stayed hunched over, shivering and coughing, his brain stuttering through some semblance of rationality.

*He's trying to disrupt and disorient you so you can't think your way out of here. Don't let him. Don't. John's in danger, and Nora, and Mary. You're no bloody good to them curled up and crying.*

"I think that'll do for a while, lads," Moriarty said. His voice sounded very far away. "Let's give him some time to think, shall we?" He put his fingertips beneath Sherlock's chin and gently lifted his head. "That was just for starters, love. There's more where that came from."

Still trying to gather breath, Sherlock merely met Moriarty's gaze. It was enough, he thought, not to look away at the moment.

"Still thirsty?" Moriarty waited. "No? Good. See you in a while. Oh, and you can try to break free, Sherlock, but even if you do, there's no way out of the cellar. Trust me, you're going nowhere." He slid his fingers up and cupped Sherlock's cheek. "Not at the moment, anyway." Moriarty turned and left, followed by Moran and the two thugs. The light overhead went out.

Sherlock tried to control his trembling with little success. It was, he realised, a panic-induced response to torture, made worse by familiarity and anticipation. In Serbia, they'd waterboarded him four times in twenty-four hours, making it clear that it was hardly the beginning of his interrogation, a tactical error on the part of his captors. He'd steeled himself and kept silent; perhaps if they'd told him it was the only torture he'd receive, he'd have talked. This was the same. He had to bide his time. They'd bound him to the chair in his shirt and trousers, no socks or shoes or jacket or coat, but likely those things were still on the premises, and his phone with them. The GPS was activated; Mycroft would –

Unless Moriarty's scrambled Mycroft's phone.

He twisted his wrists again. *Psychological warfare. Even if there's no way out of the cellar, I can arm myself. The length of pipe. Break the light so we're on an even playing field.*

And eventually, John would realise that something was wrong. Moriarty had implied that they would be arriving separately, at odds.

*Please talk to her, John. She's got used to lying, but so have we all.* Mary hadn't killed him after their confrontation, despite Sherlock's feelings for John. She'd tried to scare him during this case, but hadn't gone beyond that. And Sherlock was sure that she'd been the one to administer atropine and pralidoxime to Lady Howe in an attempt to reverse the poisoning. If she and John worked together, if they found Sherlock, they could bring Moriarty down. If only they would speak to each other....

Sherlock tugged against the tape again, but his limbs were shockingly weak. He took a deep breath, coughed explosively, and tried again. He had to gather his strength. He couldn't rely on Mycroft or John or Mary to rescue him.

Though he desperately wished they would.

*
They'd left him so long that he'd fallen asleep, and he couldn't tell how long it had been – the chemical cosh had done a job on his circadian rhythm. He woke with a start and blinked, disoriented in the darkness. His head still ached, and added to that were cramps in both calves and thighs from sitting still for so long, and burning sinuses from the waterboarding. He needed to urinate, but thought he could hold out for a few hours longer.

Back to work. He resumed his twisting and tugging, moving steadily and methodically. As he worked at the tape, he mentally calculated what it would take to notify each metropolitan police force in a Dedalus store city, and the likelihood of their rapid compliance. There were certainly some countries who'd be hostile to a warning coming from UK intelligence, but Mycroft would work something out. He'd be doubly willing once he discovered that Moriarty was responsible for Meredith Howe's death. Sherlock supposed he should say something consoling about that, and distract Mycroft from the fact that it was Mary who'd actually done the deed. Surely the attempt at an antidote would be a mitigating factor.

The cellar door opened, the light went on, and Moriarty and his friends came down the stairs again. They all wore different clothing. Sherlock had been here longer than he'd suspected. He wondered if John had tried to call.

"Morning, sunshine," Moriarty said cheerily. "How are you?"

"Fantastic, thanks for asking," Sherlock replied. Best not to ask for a drink, he decided, though he mightn't have a choice there.

"Sleep well?"

"Like a top."

"Good." Moriarty seated himself across from Sherlock again, whilst the others gathered round Sherlock's chair. "Ready to get out of that chair?" Sherlock chose not to answer, and Moriarty grinned. "Well, our little lab rat's learning, isn't he? Good boy."

Sherlock returned the smile. "The next time you die, I'm going to stand over your corpse and make certain you're dead."

"Ooh, feisty. Incidentally, it seems Johnny and Mary had a little spat. She's gone off looking for me, but hasn't found me yet. Obviously. Johnny's home with Nora. Well, he's headed to work after he leaves Nora at school." Moriarty took out his phone and showed Sherlock a live feed of a brick building, its pavement crowded with parents and children. "There they are." As Sherlock watched, John bent and planted a kiss on Nora's cheek, then flicked the bobble on her hat. "Aw. Sweet, aren't they? Not very bright of him to leave her so vulnerable, though."

Unexpected rage lent strength to Sherlock's horribly cramped body. He surged forward, snarling; the tape had considerably more give and Sherlock's teeth got nearly close enough to bite before Moriarty scrambled up and backward, knocking his chair over.

"Touched a nerve, did I?" Moriarty laughed, but there was no mistaking the fleeting expression of alarm on his face.

Sherlock sat back, chest heaving. "If you harm her – if you or your vile excuses for arse-kissing lackeys lay so much as a finger on her – then I'll kill you with my bare hands. I promise you that."

"You see? That's exactly what I mean! You've got so dull, Sherlock. It's not like you're her father or anything." Moriarty brushed off the lapels of his suit. "Hey, I've got a question for you. Without
getting indelicate, what do you think of BDSM?"

Sherlock scowled. "Sorry?"

"I mean, I don't know if you and Miss Adler really got into it, but she certainly seemed to enjoy it. What do you think of it?"

"It's ridiculous," Sherlock said.

Moriarty smote his forehead. "Thank you! I completely agree!" He took a set of keys from his pocket and unlocked a door that Sherlock hadn't been able to see in the darkness. "Right, lads, get him up."

The two thugs moved forward, each producing a jackknife. Sherlock tensed, but they only cut the tape free and dragged him up. He swung at Two, but he was weakened – hungry as well as cramped and thirsty – and Two caught his fist and wrenched his arm behind his back. Together, the pair frog-marched Sherlock through the door Moriarty had unlocked. Sherlock took the room in and froze.

The room was kitted out as a small but functional dungeon. There was a round padded bench, a small cage, a St Andrew's cross, and a steel bar with welded rings suspended from the ceiling rafter. Against one wall hung a variety of restraints and implements of punishment. The entire room appeared to have been soundproofed. It might have made Irene Adler's heart sing, but Sherlock took a dimmer view. "Well-equipped for someone who's not an enthusiast."

"Well, that's just it, Sherlock." Moriarty stroked the black vinyl barrel-shaped bench. "The thing with BDSM is that it's so fake. It's so boring. Playacting, for God's sake. Ow, ooh, safeword, safeword!" He nodded to One and Two, who dragged Sherlock to the hanging bar and, despite Sherlock twisting his body to and fro in an effort to escape, cuffed his wrists to the rings with heavy leather cuffs, then fastened his ankles to rings in the floor, spread widely apart.

Moriarty watched in evident satisfaction. "Dumb as the whole scene is, the accoutrements come in handy. Thank you, lads, that'll do. Back upstairs with you." The men departed, leaving Sherlock, Moriarty, and Moran.

Sherlock closed his eyes. Phase Two, he supposed, a beating of some kind. He was mildly surprised that Moriarty hadn't attempted to duplicate the Serbian dungeon setup, not that this was a vast improvement. He felt a whisper of movement along his back and opened his eyes, trying to twist his neck enough to look over his shoulder.

Moriarty stood behind him with a pair of silver scissors. He opened and closed them with a whicking noise. "I didn't think you'd take your clothes off voluntarily. Might want to hold still – wouldn't want to cut you." He sliced up the back of Sherlock's shirt. "Mm. Nice. You always did have good taste in clothes."

"What sort of incendiary devices have you got planted in the stores?" Sherlock asked, determined to ignore the sensation of chill metal against his skin. "I assume they're already there, well ahead of the launch."

"Oh, yes, they're there. Delivered by DHL, if you can believe it." Moriarty chuckled and cut one of Sherlock's sleeves off. "The managers think they're lithium batteries. Do Not Open Until Christmas."

"How many can you detonate at one time?"

"Are you trying to distract me, Sherlock?" Moriarty cut Sherlock's other sleeve off, sending the remains of his shirt fluttering to the floor. He moved to the waistband of Sherlock's trousers. "Hate to do this – looks like silk and cashmere, am I – oh, I am right. Sorry." He cut into the fabric, slicing
down one leg, through outer fabric and lining.

Though Moriarty's touch was as impersonal as a medical tech, Sherlock's skin crawled, and he breathed harshly through his nose. He felt cool air as Moriarty pulled his trousers away and did his best not to flinch as the scissors made quick work of his underwear. He met Seb Moran's chilly gaze. "Enjoying this?"

"Not yet," Moran replied.

The scissors clattered to the floor, and Moriarty's arms encircled Sherlock once more. Sherlock endured the unwanted embrace silently, his mind racing. Were the bombs already on a timer? Unlikely, given the method of delivery. A member of one of Moriarty's cells would have to come in to each store to assemble or ready the device. If they were static now, all the better. He felt Moriarty's hands moving up and down his belly and over his hips.

"Oh, I've missed you, Sherlock," Moriarty whispered.

Sweat beaded between Sherlock's shoulder blades and accumulated above his upper lip. He was prepared for all sorts of humiliations, but he hadn't thought Moriarty would sink this low. He'd never been sexually assaulted, but that seemed a distinct probability now.

Moriarty's arms unwound from round Sherlock's body. He stepped back and perched on the padded bench, taking his phone out. "I did put a few Wing4s into production," he said. "You wouldn't believe the resolution on this thing, Sherlock." He aimed the camera. "You're on, Seb. Sherlock, this bit's for Seb, just so you know."

Sebastian Moran stepped forward and took a thin, flexible cane from the wall. "You ruined my brother's life, Mr Holmes."

Ah. Physical punishment, not sexual assault, then. It was a tossup as to which was more painful, though the latter wasn't necessarily out of the question yet. Sherlock managed a derisive snort. "He ruined his own life. With some help from you and Jim, obviously."

"No." Moran shook his head. "You did that. He's a soft-hearted fellow, you know. I don't think he could bear knowing what I'm going to do to you, even for all you've fucked him over. So I'm not going to tell him. He's got a bit of a guilty conscience as well."

"Can't think why. It's not as if it was his fault your father cheated incessantly on your mother, or that he died under mysterious circumstances. Everybody knew what a bastard he was – there weren't a lot of condolence cards in that cabinet of yours, likely because everyone knew your mother was well rid of him. But there was something a bit funny about the way he died –" Sherlock's last words left him in a rush of air as Moran swung the cane, searing Sherlock's upper thigh.

"Told you he'd know," Moriarty said. "I helped out with that. It was how we met, really."

"I'm not fucking listening to his shite," Moran said. He plucked a white silicone gag from the wall and strode to Sherlock. "Open your fucking mouth."

Sherlock spat – not much, as he hadn't eaten or drunk in hours – but it was satisfying nonetheless to see Moran's expression of surprise. His brief moment of triumph was upended by Moran's fist plowing into his belly. As he thrashed and gasped for air, Moran pushed the ball into his mouth and fastened it behind his head. It was uncomfortably large, stretching his jaw almost to dislocation. Sherlock tossed his head, trying to dislodge it. Mortified, he realised he was beginning to drool.

Moriarty surveyed him dispassionately, head tilted to one side. "You know," he said conversationally,
"a group of British soldiers caught me once with a couple of mates. For once I wasn't doing a bloody thing, but they hauled me in for a few hours all the same. Wouldn't tell them who I was. They stripped me naked and beat me. It hurt like all fucking hell, Mr Holmes."

Sherlock flicked a glance at Moriarty, who was still filming, a wide smile on his face.

"This is going to hurt you."

Moran swung.

*

He couldn't think clearly at all, and had stopped trying altogether.

He suspected that night had come and gone, but he couldn't be certain; the only certainty in his existence at the moment was pain. His body felt swollen and feverish; he swore he felt each stripe on his skin, and there must have been more than a hundred. His rotator cuffs were strained past endurance, his hands numb and half-frozen. His face and jaw hurt enough to wring tears from his eyes. His genitals throbbed in time with his heartbeat, and he half-remembered his bladder letting go when Moran had beaten his balls. Moran had, in fact, beaten him everywhere except the soles of his feet, and had far more finesse than his blunt, brutish Serbian torturers. He'd kept it up for hours, seemingly tireless, impervious to Sherlock's muffled pleas and screams.

A tear slid down Sherlock's nose and he drooled helplessly, though he'd have thought that there wasn't a drop of moisture in his parched body.

Escape seemed less and less likely. They hadn't wanted anything from him. There were no threats, no demands for information, no sense of failure underlying Moran's relentless punishment. There was no particular ingenuity in his method. There hadn't even been a sense of entertainment; Moriarty had watched with enthusiasm for a while, but had left, leaving Sherlock alone with Moran, who'd continued his assault without words. At last the beating had stopped. Moran had strapped a blindfold over Sherlock's face and abandoned him to darkness and his distress. After several unsuccessful attempts to free himself, Sherlock had tried to sleep in his painful tethers, but relaxing meant pulling on his shoulders, resulting in anguish.

The novelty in abusing him would have to end at some point. Two weeks remained until Moriarty's planned act of terrorism. Surely they wouldn't want him a broken wreck when it happened. He couldn't allow the same to happen to John. Or Mary.

There was a faint crashing noise like splintering glass. Sherlock picked his head up, straining to hear past the thick padded walls. A heavy thud sounded just above him. A body, falling to the floor.

Sherlock held perfectly still, listening over the protests of his battered form. Hope surged, leaving him breathless. Let it be someone who can help me. Anyone, I don't care who it is. Please, please.

He waited long, agonising minutes. Finally, he heard the door creak open, and a gasp.

"Sherlock."
Chapter End Notes

The bolded paragraph in the first section is from *Butterflies: Being a Popular Handbook for Young Students and Collectors* by James William Tutt.
Chapter 27

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Just before Christmas  

*  

"Sitrep, darling."

There was a pause, and then Trish's voice filtered softly through Mary's earpiece. "Highly unsatisfactory. She's Miss Popularity. I can't even get near her."

"Well, it is her party." Mary crouched among the hulking shapes of furniture concealed beneath dust sheets. "How does she look?"

"All right. No visible symptoms yet."

"Good. That's good," Mary replied, though she wasn't reassured. Lady Howe's PA (and Jim Moriarty's officious little fuck of a stooge) Georgina had insisted on standing by and watching as Mary had dosed her dress and had gone so far as to test the strength of the solution in the bottle. Just to make sure, Georgina had said with a smug smirk, that Mary hadn't watered it down. Mary had refrained from knocking all Georgina's teeth out, but it had been close.

Both Mary and Trish were carrying syringes of atropine and pralidoxime. Ideally, Trish would introduce herself to Lady Howe and manouvre her into a secluded space to tip her off as quietly as possible and administer the antidote to the aconitine; less ideally, Lady Howe would begin to feel the effects of the aconitine and excuse herself to the loo, where either Mary or Trish or both would interrupt her there.

"This is quite a glittering assemblage. Literally – I just saw a woman in a tiara." Trish paused. "And a Valentino. Nice one, too."

"Any security?"

"I'm looking…nope, none in this room anyway. Not a rented tux in sight. Shit."

"What?" Mary demanded.

"She's got a guy with her – they're heading into the library. Shit, shit."

"Fucking hell," Mary muttered. "Right – we've only got a twenty-minute window at the outside. If they're not out in ten minutes you've got to go in there and get her out somehow. Keep an eye on the door."

"On it."

As Mary waited, she checked and re-checked her kit. The dose was correct, but if they couldn't administer it in time, they and Lady Howe were fucked. Mary had her car nearby; the plan was to get Lady Howe to Biggin Hill, where Trish had called in a favour to charter a plane to France where Lady Howe could lie low and recover in safety.
Whatever happened, though, it was the end of Mary's collaboration with Jim Moriarty. The day after she'd received her commission to kill Lady Howe, she'd begun her homework and had managed to establish better than fair traces on his activity. She'd known about his places in London, Paris, Stockholm, Venice, San Francisco, and Mauritius, but it had taken some digging to find his little pied-a-terre in Derry, the squalid little house that had been his boyhood home and that listed an H Campbell Moriarty as the owner of record. Surprise, surprise – there was no such person as H Campbell Moriarty, but Jim's middle name was Hubert, and his mother's maiden name had been Campbell.

It was difficult to believe Jim was that careless. That egotistical – perhaps.

Mary had swept the house for bugs and then wandered freely from room to shabby room, trying to imagine a young James Moriarty living there, going to school and eating meals like a regular kid. It was a hard sell, knowing him more intimately than she'd ever wanted. There weren't many personal effects besides a few changes of casual but expensive clothes, and a crate of Kalashnikovs in the cellar, a modest stash if not an ordinary home security system. But the house had recently been used, there was food in the fridge, and the timespans where Jim was unreachable fit the patterns of travel he'd have had to use to get to Derry.

She was coming for him.

"Oh my God," Trish said quietly. "It's Harry Epner."

Mary frowned. "Who?"

"You remember. He took out the FSB station chief in Seoul in '08. Jesus, he looks old."

"We all look old, Dot."

"Speak for yourself. Oh, oh – here she comes." There was a pause. "She keeps rubbing her face."

"Christ," Mary muttered.

"Okay, she looks purposeful, heading for the stairs."

"How's her colour?" Mary inquired, compulsively re-checking her syringes and vials.

"Pale, but that could be the lighting. Yeah, she's heading up. You'd better get in there. I'm following her."

"I'll be there in a second. Don't touch her until you get gloved up, whatever you do." Mary smoothed on a pair of long, tough nitrile gloves and gathered her kit, then headed down the narrow side stairs – probably servants' stairs at one point. She did quick reconnaissance, saw nobody in the hall, and was about to head to the master suite when she saw Lady Howe round the corner, moving unsteadily, her face strained. She grasped the doorknob to her rooms and let out a shuddering sigh.

Mary moved forward quietly. "Lady Howe."

Meredith Howe jumped. "Christ!" She peered at Mary in the dim illumination of the corridor. "Who's – Karen? What on earth?" She clutched the handle more tightly and scrubbed at her face.

"I need a word," Mary said in a harsh whisper. "Now." She pushed the door open, grabbed Lady Howe's arm, and propelled her inside. Closing the door firmly behind her, she spoke in the lowest pitch she could manage. "I need you to get that dress off right now."
Lady Howe's face screwed up, half outraged, half amused. "What? Look, I'm not feeling well, and this is a bad –"

"It's been treated with aconitine, a strong poison," Mary said, and moved past her to the bedroom to empty her kit on the bed. "I've got something to counteract it, but I need you to take that dress off right now. Now, God damn it!"

Her eyes wide and frightened, Lady Howe reached behind her to undo the zip of the gown. The crisp silk rustled as she eased it down and stepped out of it. "I feel sick. Nausea."

Mary took in Lady Howe's dishabille – no slip, just a black bra and panties and green shoes and her sparkling jewellery. Even in the subdued light, she saw the red telltale rash on Lady Howe's belly and upper thighs. "Yeah, not surprising. Let's get to the loo so I can give you the shot."

Three quick and two slow knocks sounded at the door, and Trish walked in, her hair up, easily two hundred thousand pounds in diamonds encircling her throat, and a voluminously skirted dress of cornflower blue swishing as she made her way toward Mary and Lady Howe. "What can I do?"

"Wash your hands – you touched the doorknob. Then get gloved." Mary grasped Lady Howe's wrist and all but dragged her into the bathroom. "Pack a bag for her – we've got to leave ASAP."

"Got it."

While Trish washed her hands, Mary steadied Lady Howe. "Right – sit on the toilet, Lady Howe."

Lady Howe was crimson. "I...I have to...."

"Do what you have to do." Mary turned her back as Lady Howe pulled her underwear down and sat. She turned the shower on cold and got the first shot ready, expressing some pralidoxime into the shower stall to get the air out. She turned back to Lady Howe, who was shaking, her lips pressed firmly together. "It's okay. It's okay. We're going to get you out of this. I need your arm."

Lady Howe extended one white arm. "It's Jim. Isn't it?"

"Yes. Slight pinch here." Mary briskly found a vein – thank God Meredith Howe had good, strong, visible veins – and depressed the plunger.

"I'm going to be sick," Lady Howe said faintly.

"One second." Mary finished the first shot and withdrew the needle, then snatched up the small waste bin – a hammered silver bucket – and handed it to Lady Howe, who promptly vomited into it. Mary compressed her mouth and sighed through her nose. Not good. Fuck. She got the second shot ready.

Trish came into the bathroom, surveyed Lady Howe, who was vomiting again, and went to the sink. She rummaged in the lower cupboard, found a face flannel, and wrung it out beneath the tap, then moved to Lady Howe's side and bathed her forehead and cheeks. "Try to be calm, honey," she murmured softly. "Let the meds do their work."

"It hurts," Lady Howe whispered.

Mary and Trish looked at each other over Meredith's head. "I need your other arm," Mary said, aware her voice was shaking. "Let Dot hold the bucket for you."

"Wait, wait. " Lady Howe bent forward, groaning. She held out her other sweat-glazed arm and
feebly flushed the toilet with her free hand. "Sorry."

"Don't you worry," Trish said. "You're going to be all right. We're going to get you out of here. I've got a place in Besançon, real private. There's a doctor there ready to take care of you, a nice clinic where you can recuperate. It's going to be all right, don't worry."

Lady Howe held still while Mary administered the second shot. "I need my phone," she said. "By my bed. Will you get it?"

Mary's heart larruped uneasily. "Why?"

"I have to call Stephen." She looked up at Mary. Sweat ran freely down her face, spoiling her makeup. "Stephen Moran. Please."

Seb's brother. Mary debated a moment, then went into Meredith's bedroom and got her phone from the bedside table. She went back into the bathroom, where Meredith was vomiting again. Trish smoothed her hair back and shook her head. "Bad idea," she said softly.

Mary frowned. "Give me your password, I'll dial it."

"He doesn't have a mobile." Meredith wiped her mouth with the damp flannel. "He's at Chelmsford, a…a Dedalus do." She managed a wry smile.

"Oh, no," Trish said. "No way." She left the bucket in Lady Howe's shaking hands and went to the sink to pour a glass of water. She took the bucket from Lady Howe and handed her a glass. "Drink this," she said. "You've got to get that shit out of your kidneys." She steadied Lady Howe, who was swaying. "Come on now."

"Why do you need to phone him?" Anxiously, Mary watched for signs that the antidote was doing its work, but Lady Howe's skin remained clammy, her breath was short, the nausea obviously continued unabated judging by the way her face contorted itself involuntarily.

Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Mycroft. He knows the painting was found. I don't know how. I didn't tell him. Someone slipped up."

Trish scowled. Mycroft Holmes? she mouthed at Mary.

Mary nodded.

FUCK.

"He's –" Lady Howe took a sharp, shallow breath. "He's already connected it to Jim, but he can't move too fast. Jim's planning something, I didn't tell Mycroft…but Steenie can slow it down, hold things up. Please."

"I don't understand –" Mary began, but shut up and handed Lady Howe the phone, watching her fumble at the screen. "Do you know the number?" Lady Howe shook her head, and Mary gently took the phone and looked the number up, then called it and handed the mobile back. Lady Howe took it with shaking fingers and waited for an answer.

"Anything?" Trish asked.

Lady Howe doubled over, groaning, and dropped the phone. As Trish steadied her, murmuring
consolingly, Mary picked it up and put it to her ear.

"You have reached the main office of Chelmsford City Racecourse. The office is now closed. Please call during our normal operating hours of nine o'clock A.M. to six o'clock P.M. and someone will be happy to assist you. Thank you."

Mary rang off and set the phone on the sink. "I'm sorry."

"Annie, I think we need a plan B," Trish said quietly.

Mary surveyed Meredith Howe's condition. "Right. Okay. We'll take her to hospital." The dose should have worked, though. It should have fucking worked.

"Let me get her a robe or something," Trish said, and moved toward the door. "Jesus Christ—"

Mary turned to see Georgina standing in the doorway, wearing a snug cream shantung dress cut like a cheongsam, a Smith and Wesson .38 in her hands pointed directly at Trish. "Georgina—"

"Who are you?" Georgina inquired coolly, ignoring Mary.

"I'm the girl who's going to tear your face off if you don't get out of my way," Trish replied just as coolly.

"Mm. No," Georgina said with a smile. "You go for your weapon and I'll shoot her, Mary. Actually, take it out slowly and kick it over here." She waited for Mary to obey, then glanced at Lady Howe. "Lady Howe, are you feeling all right?"

"Georgie," Lady Howe rasped, "I need a...a doctor. Could you...call 999?"

"Step aside, Georgina," Mary said.

"No, I think we'll just wait here," Georgina replied, and widened her stance slightly. "Shouldn't be more than fifteen minutes or so."

Meredith Howe wrapped her arms round herself and leant forward, shuddering and groaning. "Oh, God. Georgie, call Mycroft. Please. Please."

Georgina's smile widened. "I will. In just a few minutes." She gestured sharply at Trish, who was edging toward her. "Back up. I have no compunction about shooting you in the head."

"Be kind of loud, wouldn't it?" Trish said, but backed up a pace. "Even with the party and all."

Mary stayed where she was and held her hands up. "Georgina...she's sick. We've got to get her to hospital."

"Of course she's sick. You bloody poisoned her."

Mary couldn't bear to look back at Lady Howe's face, but she felt her shock and horror. "There's still a chance to save her life."

"You tried that, I see," Georgina said, nodding to the kit on the sink. "Jim thought you might."

Mary and Trish exchanged a quick glance, and Mary backed up, moving closer to Meredith Howe, who was vomiting into the bucket again. "Explain."

"I dosed her champagne," Georgina said. "Precaution."
"Little shit," Trish said. "You're dead."

"Not me," Georgina said archly, and nodded toward Lady Howe, who was tipping sideways. Trish caught her and lowered her to the floor. Lady Howe's respiration had gone shallow and rattly; her sides heaved, and sharp-smelling sweat coated her body. She convulsed violently, her hands and feet slamming against the stone floor with audible cracks.

"Jesus." Half-numb, Mary sank to the floor, grabbing blindly for the wet flannel to bathe Meredith's face. "I'm sorry," she whispered, tears blurring her vision. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry." But Meredith was unconscious now. Mary grasped her wrist and felt her pulse, thready and seeming to diminish second by second.

"Too little, too late," Georgina said. "I'm going back to the party; I just wanted to check on your progress. It was at Jim's behest, you know. You can faire ses adieux or whatever you please." She turned on her heel and walked out quietly, closing the suite door behind her with a click.

Mary stared down at Lady Howe, willing her to open her eyes, to respond to the antidote she'd attempted, but knew it was pointless. In a moment a rattling exhalation emanated from Lady Howe's chest, and her body settled slowly and heavily against Trish's dress.

"Shit," Trish muttered softly.

"Go back to your hotel, Dot. Get on the next plane out of here."

"Not on your life. We're going to see this through."

Tears poured from Mary's eyes. Crocodile tears. "I can't."

"I'm going to Derry day after tomorrow. You don't have to like it, but both of us have to wipe this place down and get the fuck out of here now."

Mary took the flannel and carefully wiped Lady Howe's face, smoothing out the furrows in her brow. She'd picked the wrong time to start counting human cost now. "Okay. Okay. Let's go."

She and Trish cleaned up as best they could, wiping the space down for any possible prints. Mary tucked the flannel in her pocket. "Text me when you get to your hotel."

"Don't worry about me," Trish said. "I'm going out the front door."

"Georgina--"

"She's not going to try anything. Her part's not done. You're not thinking straight, Annie. Moriarty anticipated your move, and she's still dead. He's won. If what you say about him is true, he'll probably just have a good laugh about it." She shook her gown out and twirled. "Any stains? Anything?"

"No. You give yourself the dose I mixed as soon as you get back. Her skin--"

"I will. Now get out of here. I'll see you at the Connaught with the little one." Trish made a shooing motion.

Mary looked at Meredith Howe, curled up on the bathroom floor, one more dead innocent: all in a day's work.
She let herself into the house quietly and found Mrs Pringle in front of the television, knitting. "Everything all right?"

"Oh, goodness yes," Mrs Pringle replied with a smile. "Quiet as anything. Nobody stirred once."

Mary returned the smile. Of course not. Nora was a heavy sleeper, and she'd dosed John's tea with a light sedative. "Great."

Mrs Pringle leant forward eagerly. "How'd the consult go? Was it someone very famous?"

"Well," Mary said, feigning hesitation. "I can't discuss names, but yes, it was a rather famous telly actress, did quite a bit of shrieking about her thin lips and huge hips. We had to do a few injections and some emergency lipo. But that's why they pay lots of money, for that sort of service." Mrs Pringle's eyes gleamed, and Mary almost felt sorry for her. It took so little to excite some people, such small tidbits of information to make them feel special.

"Dear me," Mrs Pringle clucked, and rose to her feet. "I'd better be off, then. You're probably exhausted, poor thing, rousted out of the house practically in the middle of the night."

Mary laughed humourlessly. "I am, yeah. Thank you so much, though. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it." When they'd reached the door, she slipped twenty quid into Mrs Pringle's hand.

"Oh, love —"

"Take it," Mary said. "Please."

"Oh, you're just too sweet for words. Thanks ever so much, darling." Mrs Pringle gave her a dry kiss on the cheek. "And it's never any trouble. I hardly sleep at all these days. That's how it is when you get old — you don't need sleep, not really. 'Night, love."

"Good night." Mary closed the door, then checked and double-checked the lock, then the back door, then all the downstairs windows. Her phone rang, and she looked at the readout.

**Unknown number.**

"Hello?"

"Hey, sunshine. Nice try."

Mary closed her eyes. "She didn't deserve to die. You know that better than I do."

"Do you have any idea what I do to people who disobey me?"

**Disobey** him, as if she were a fucking dog. "You kill them. Slowly, I'll bet."

"Well, sure. But first I kill their families."

Mary went cold. She should have strangled Georgina. Let the police solve two murders. She and John and Nora would be long gone.

Moriarty let out a long, theatrical sigh. "Well. It's your first transgression, and she is dead. We just intercepted a 999 call. So well done, sweetcakes. Butter wouldn't melt in your mouth, as they say. I'll
let you off this time."

"Great," Mary said tonelessly.

"Just one question."

"What?"

"Who was your friend?"

Someone who's going to make sure that you're just as dead as Lady Howe in a few days, Jim. Pity it won't be the nice, slow, painful death you deserve. "A friend from the CIA. I enlisted her to help out."

"We need to curtail this little independent streak of yours, Miss Mary. Let's meet in a few weeks, yes?"

"Whatever you say." She would spit on his grave and smile.

"Okay then. Night-night, sweetie darling." Jim rang off, leaving her with dead air.

Carefully, Mary pocketed her phone. She lay down on the sofa and covered herself with the afghan Mrs Pringle had knitted for them. Before John woke, she'd go upstairs, change into her nightie, and crawl into bed, and he'd be none the wiser. Right now, she needed to be far away from her husband and child. One day, as soon as she could, she'd begin to make amends, but now, right this moment, she couldn't bear tainting them with her presence.

She lay awake, watching night give way to a frosty winter dawn.

* 

Neither Mary nor John were particular fans of theatre, but just last year Tim had given her tickets to Hamlet at the Donmar, set in the Maratha Empire, with a famous actor in the lead. The production had been all right – the sets and costumes were fantastic and the actors had been good – but the character of Hamlet had annoyed her so much that during the interval she'd almost begged John to leave. John had clearly been enjoying the play, though, so she'd sat through the rest of it in quasi-agreeable silence, grinding her teeth. Do something, she'd wanted to shout. Quit fucking around and get off your arse and kill your uncle, kill yourself, just stop fucking whinging about everything!

Only now, sitting in her rented car a street away from Jim Moriarty's childhood house, did she realise what a god-damned hypocrite she'd been. She'd vacillated for years, hating Moriarty but at the same time content to take his money as long as he wasn't hurting her family. She was even afraid to tally up the number of years and kills and missed opportunities she'd amassed since the day Jim had appeared in the surgery; the number would be far too appalling to contemplate. She was loathsome, and if she were honest with herself she'd say she really didn't deserve to be forgiven for everything she'd done, and what she was about to do would only go the smallest way toward making amends. But it was better than nothing, and long past time besides. Hamlet would have agreed.

Mary opened the window a crack and listened to the beginning of the dawn chorus in the low clumps of shrubbery that surrounded a hunched-together row of grotty little council flats. She checked her watch – nearly half five. She sipped at her coffee, surveying the flats, watching two sets
of young men weaving toward each other, bottles in hand. They talked in too-loud voices, a nasty
counterpoint to the birds who were effectively doing the same thing – *oi, this is my turf, so fuck off!*
Birds, at least, sounded prettier.

Dispassionately, she waited to see if the chest-thumping and howling would come to blows, but after
a few moments the parties fell back, snarling and muttering before slinking off in opposite directions.
Mary rubbed her eyes and took a deeper swig of her coffee. It had been a hell of a long night, and it
wasn't over yet. Time, in fact, to get this show on the road.

She exited her car and locked it, then moved steadily and purposefully north toward Fahan Street. At
this hour, still dark, only a few people were about: a small covey of homeless people shuffling along
with their belongings and two undernourished-looking dogs; a girl and her boyfriend, the girl leaning
over to throw up, and the boy holding her hair back; and two middle-aged men heading her way.
One grinned at her, exposing small, irregular teeth like crooked tombstones. "Where you headed,
sweetheart?" Mary didn't so much toss him a look, but kept moving. "Ugly cunt," she heard, hurled
like a rock.

*You sad fucking wanker.* As she walked, she rested her hand on her Glock and listened intently, but
the footsteps kept moving south, along with a few more imprecations. Good. She needed no
distractions.

In moments she reached Fahan Street and kept to the shadows as she approached Jim's house. Earlier
reconnaissance had revealed one person inside, and quick texts to her contacts in the other cities
where Jim was likely to be had proven unfruitful. It was here, it had to be here. Odd as it seemed,
this was the place where he felt safest, his home ground. Not entirely stupid – it hadn't been easy to
find and it wasn't as if he had a huge office and tons of equipment, just his little laptop and a phone.
And from there, access to anything he desired. A terrorist plot to take the biscuit, for example.

There it was. Silently, she screwed her suppressor into her Glock and fished out the key she'd had
cut. A television was flickering in the front room, and a human-shaped shadow shifted, slumping
down further in a sofa. Mary went round to the back garden, climbed the fence, and sprayed silicone
lubricant on the hinges before fitting the key into the lock. She pulled down her balaclava, swung the
door open, and stepped over the threshold.

She crossed the kitchen, glad the telly was turned up loudly enough to mask any creaks or groans the
floor might have made beneath her weight. Pausing by the door, she watched the man engrossed in
what sounded like a nature programme about deep-sea life. His face, unremarkable except for a large
drooping moustache like a frontiersman's, glowed blue in the light of the television. His weapon, a
beemoth of an S & W, sat on a glass-topped side table a half metre from his hand, doing him
absolutely no good at all.

Too easy.

Mary readied her stance. "Hey," she said softly.

The man glanced up, startled. Mary gave him two seconds to register the slight figure sheathed in
black standing three metres away. She watched him fumble for his weapon and shot. His body
careened backward, knocking over the chair where he sat, and sending the glass-topped table
crashing to the floor.

Mary surveyed the damage quickly. The table was a loss, but there was no blood on the chair, at
least. The same couldn't be said for the wall behind him. Dark though the paper was, it wouldn't
conceal everything, particularly not the bits of brain spattered across its surface. "Shit," Mary
muttered, and ran to the kitchen for some rags. She found some beneath the sink and perfunctorily
wiped up the mess, then wadded the rags and bunched them beneath the gaping hole in the man's head. No telling when Jim was due back, but it was better if he didn't notice the mess immediately. She ran back to the kitchen and found plenty of bin bags, then went into the bathroom and ripped the shower curtain liner out of the bath. Taking her supplies into the front room, she set about wrapping the man's ruined head in the bin bags and rolling his body in the liner. She dragged the corpse across the kitchen and heaved his body into the space between the wall and the rubbish bin, then went back into the front room to clean up some more, gathering the glass and righting the furniture.

It was getting light. She moved faster, shoving the bag of glass and the table base into the outside bin, then scrubbed hurriedly at the stain on the wallpaper once more. Satisfied that it was as good as a hasty cleaning was going to get it, she set up laser tripwires on the front walk and just inside the front door, scooped up the dead man's firearm, and locked the back garden door. Then she crept downstairs carefully, leaving the light off.

The cellar was practically empty but for some old furniture covered in dust cloths and plastic bags of what looked like blankets or old clothes. Last time she'd been down here, there had been a fairly new-looking partition – newer than the rest of the house at any rate – secured by a locked door she hadn't had time to force. It was likely storage for weaponry; she smelled metal and machine oil and the similar greasy tang of C-4 plastic explosive. It was also likely that whatever was in there would give her some advantage. It was a pity, honestly. She longed to make Jim's death slow and painful, but it would probably have to be relatively quick. She didn't have the means to kidnap him. But obliterating this house where his rotten soul had festered along with his foul body might go some way toward giving her a little peace.

She moved toward the door and tried the knob, prepared to pick it, but it swung open easily. She stepped inside, fumbled for the light, and gasped.

"Sherlock." Mary hurried to his side, swiftly registering the dozens of swollen stripes on his naked body, the purpling of his hands, and his trembling exhaustion. "It's okay, it's okay. It's Mary." She unstrapped his ankles first, hissing a little at the raw circlets of red round each one. His wrists were too far out of reach; cursing under her breath, she looked about and saw a leather-covered bench. She dragged it to the centre of the room and leapt up onto it. "I'm going to undo your wrists. Just hang on, all right?" Fleetingly, she realised that she'd have to think about what this scenario meant for everyone, but not at the moment.

Mary undid one clasp, and Sherlock's hand fell to his side. He let out a small, hurt noise, and though God knew that he'd fucked things up for her more than once, not all of her heart had turned to stone. She was afraid to rub his back comfortingly, so she settled for a steady, soothing stream of talk.

"Right, I'm going to undo the other hand. Try to stay upright, okay? It's going to hurt, but I don't want you to hit your head." She unfastened the second clasp, and as Sherlock swayed, she hopped off the bench, caught him round the waist, and lowered him to the floor.

Sherlock breathed heavily through his nose, making sounds that sounded almost if not exactly like sobs, and Mary's heart, unbidden, tied itself in a knot. Sherlock was indefatigable, steel enclosed by skin, and she couldn't bear those noises. Quickly, she reached behind his head to unbuckle the blindfold. He blinked and squinted as it came off, then tried to raise his hands to undo the gag, but there was no strength in his bluish-purple fingers.

"I've got it, I've got it," Mary whispered, and undid the buckle, then slipped out the gag, wet with saliva and thin blood from the corners of his mouth. Sherlock coughed feebly and let out another shuddering half-sob. Unable to meet his eyes, Mary grasped one of his icy hands and massaged it. "It's okay. It's all right, sweetheart." Sherlock didn't reply, but leant against her, letting her support him. A tide of the greatest self-loathing she'd ever known swamped her, and bile rose in her throat.
"Thank you," Sherlock rasped.

Christ. How would she live with herself now? There was only one way. Mary grasped Sherlock's other hand. "Sherlock. Sherlock, listen to me. He's coming back, isn't he?"

Sherlock shifted and moaned a little. "I...yes. Don't know when."

"Do you know when he left?"

"No." Sherlock shivered against her.

"Okay. Look, we've got to get you walking, get you out of here. I'll get you to hospital." She paused. If Jim came back and discovered Sherlock gone and one of his henchmen dead, that would fuck her plans up, fuck everything up. He couldn't be allowed to escape, not now, especially not with John and Nora vulnerable. But Sherlock needed medical attention. *Fuck, fuck, fuck.*

"You came to –" Sherlock coughed again. "Kill him."

"Yeah."

"You've got to." Sherlock's hand grasped hers without strength, but there was no mistaking its urgency. "He's got bombs in every Dedalus store." He took another shuddering breath, pushed himself away from her, and met her gaze squarely. His eyes were red and swollen, and as lucid as ever despite the pain he must be feeling. He spoke with obvious effort. "They're not scheduled to detonate for two weeks. If you kill him and Moran now –"

"Seb?"

Sherlock nodded and winced. "We keep it quiet and get a chance to prevent major upheaval."

Mary shook her head. "But you're –"

"I'm all right." Sherlock closed his eyes and let out a coughing laugh. "Well, obviously I'm not one hundred percent."

"You're still about seventy-five percent ahead of most people." Sherlock smiled at her, flinching a little as his dried, cracked lower lip started to bleed, and shame surged anew. They'd been friends once. Even after she'd committed an unforgivable sin, Sherlock had forgiven her. "Sherlock – I swear before God I didn't want this to happen." Too little, too fucking late though.

Sherlock nodded. "I know."

"Okay." Mary thought fast. "Okay. I've got a car. I'll bring it round, and you can rest there. I'll give you a weapon –" The gigantic Smith & Wesson would come in handy. "—and you phone for help. Are your clothes here?" She'd been careful not to look at his body, not only because the sight of all those stripes made her ill – Seb, that was clearly his handiwork, of course he was with Jim – but also because it was painful to see Sherlock stripped and helpless. She hadn't realised how powerful her perception of him had become, that she couldn't bear to see him defenceless.

"Maybe in the other room."

"Right." Mary got to her feet and went into the main portion of the cellar, aiming her phone light here and there. She didn't see Sherlock's clothes, but she saw the source of the odours of plastic explosive she'd detected: looked like a hundred kilos of C4, stacked against one wall. She pulled a sheet from a hulking object that turned out to be a wardrobe, shook out the dust, and brought it to
Sherlock. "I don't see them. Let's use this for the moment. Can you stand?" She held a hand out. "Use the bench, too." She helped him up and wrapped an arm round his waist again to steady him. "Sorry, I don't think you could manage clothes anyhow."

"Where's John? Mary –"

"He's at home. With Nora," Mary said, battling the terror that threatened to choke her. "Should I call –"

"No. If what Moriarty says is true, he's got eyes and ears on most mobiles. Possibly even encrypted ones. I don't want to risk alerting John. The further away they are, the better." Sherlock began to limp toward the door, still holding on to Mary. "Mary…I'm going to stay here with you."

"No."

"Yes," Sherlock insisted. "He's coming back with Seb Moran and his other thug and God knows who else. We've got to be prepared. And we can't miss." Slowly, Sherlock toiled up the staircase.

"Did he say where he was going?"

"No. But I can't think he'll stay away too long." They reached the kitchen, and Sherlock lowered himself into a chair, shaking. "Sorry, I've got to –"

"Yes." Mary took a deep breath. "You rest a bit. I'm going to go downstairs again – there's some useful stuff down there, I think."

Sherlock, looking round the kitchen, nodded abstractedly, then stilled. "Yes. Do that."

"You okay?"

"Fine." He pushed himself up and moved toward the garden door. "Go, hurry."

Mary took the Smith and Wesson out of her jacket and set it on the table. "Take that." She turned and ran lightly down the cellar stairs once more and had a look at the C4. There was no telling if she had enough time to set up discreetly placed detonation points, and the stuff was stable enough that shots fired into it wouldn't set it off – besides, she didn't want to trap herself and Sherlock, either. She threw aside a canvas tarp and found the crate with disassembled Kalashnikovs, untouched since her last visit. That wouldn't bring the entire Derry police force screaming down on their heads, would it?

Fuck it. There wasn't anything else to use; better a bloodbath than letting him live. She gathered up the components for two AK-47s and assembled them quickly, moving by instinct and touch in the dim cellar light, soothed by her own rapid movements. Here was what she knew, maybe the only thing she knew, in the end, and though it had destroyed her life and her marriage, she'd rain down hell on Jim Moriarty and spit on his corpse.

As she was scooping up extra magazines, her phone pinged softly; the first set of tripwires had been triggered. She tore up the stairs. Sherlock was standing, leaning heavily on the worktop, the handset of an ancient avocado-coloured telephone in one hand. "They're coming."

Sherlock set the phone in its cradle. He wrapped the sheet tightly round his body, hissing a little, then picked up the S&W as the front door creaked open. He and Mary took up positions on either side of the kitchen entryway.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Moriarty's voice sang out.
Mary's heart sank. *Camera. Of course.* She tightened her grip on her Glock and prepared to shoot.

"Oh, come on, you two. Or else Johnny Boy gets a lump of lead in his thick skull."

Mary froze, but Sherlock shook his head. His eyes telegraphed the message: *bluff.*

"Go on, Johnny. Take a step forward."

There was a creak and a muffled footfall.

*Lying, Mary thought frantically. Has to be.*

"Say something."

There was a long pause, and then:

"It's me."

*

"I need a word," John said as pleasantly as he could, though there wasn't much point; it wasn't as if he dragged Nora off to strange, luxurious houses on a regular basis.

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows and looked down his nose. "About?"

John chose his words carefully. "Sherlock seems to have…erm, gone astray." Aware he had Mycroft's attention at last, he inclined his head toward Nora. "Is there somewhere that Nora can sit quietly while you and I have a chat?"

Mycroft turned to Nora. "Eleanor, isn't it?" Nora nodded silently. "Follow me, please." He led John and Nora down the wide corridor to a sort of parlour, with soft, pale velvet sofas, a crackling fire, and a large armoire that he opened to reveal a television. He handed Nora the remote control and gestured to the sofa. "You can watch television if you like. Would you care for something to drink? Tea, or milk, perhaps? Something fizzy?"

"No, thank you," she said softly, glancing at John with an air of faint reproach, as if to ask why they'd come to such an unbearably stuffy place.

"Very well. I'll be in the library, John. Third door on the left." Mycroft turned and left the room.

John waited until he had gone, then turned to his daughter. "Just sit here and watch telly, love. I'll try not to take too long."

"Is that Mr Holmes' father?"

A grin spread over John's face. "No. That's Sherlock's older brother Mycroft. I'm sorry, I should have introduced you." He couldn't bear to look at Nora's suddenly too-old face any longer. "I'll be back in just a bit, all right? You stay here and watch telly. Whatever you like." He fled and found Mycroft in the library. Mycroft had put his coat on and was examining his phone. "Mycroft."

Mycroft set his phone on a side table. "Do you know who it was that took him?"
"I…it seems crazy." He pulled out his phone and pulled up the messages from Sherlock's phone. Flushing, he showed Mycroft the texts. "Erm…about the context –"

Mycroft waved an impatient hand. "He didn't send these."

"No. And the photos…." He opened the photos: one of two men holding down a clearly straining third whose face was covered with a dark cloth – but the clothed figure and hands were easily identifiable. There was no question as to the man's identity. The second was appallingly clear: Sherlock, naked, restrained, and beaten, his body covered in angry red stripes.

Mycroft's lips thinned into a stern line and his cheeks paled. "This address –"

"It's Lord Moran's house in Derry. But, Mycroft, the texts. The tone…"

"Yes." Mycroft leant back in his chair, folding his hands and crossing one leg over the other. He gazed at John. "Very distinct."

John hesitated. "I'm going to sound like a lunatic."

Mycroft's mouth twisted slightly. "Go on."

"It sounds –" John uttered a harsh laugh. "It sounds like Moriarty." Mycroft's expression didn't change. He remained silent as John scrutinised him. "Mycroft. Tell me he's not alive."

Mycroft sighed. "I told Sherlock there would be ghosts."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"Very simply, it means James Moriarty is alive. We thought we were a step ahead of him, falsifying Sherlock's death; however, it seems he was a step ahead of us instead. He's been dormant for a long time, but apparently he's decided to emerge from the shadows again. This –" He gestured toward John's phone. "—is a bold gambit."

John tamped down a surge of anger at Mycroft's sangfroid. "So you spent ten years sitting on the knowledge that he was alive the whole time? And you didn't do a goddamned thing about it? Did you even bother to tell Sherlock?"

"The world has changed in the past decade, John, even if you haven't managed to move forward. The mere existence of James Moriarty is not enough to constitute a crisis. Diplomatic initiatives worldwide in China, North Korea, Russia, and most of the Middle East are delicate at best and on the verge of utter collapse at worst. Egypt and Israel are at each other's throats once more, and the United States continues in its grand tradition of playing global police force with its usual staggering ineptitude. You can't possibly expect me to consider him a priority, particularly since he hasn't made an overt move in more than ten years."

"An overt move – he is torturing your brother." John pulled the second photo up again and shoved the phone in Mycroft's face. "And that's your piss-poor excuse, that you were busy? Jesus Christ!"

A flush crept up Mycroft's neck and stole into his cheeks. "I'll send a team at once, of course."

"Don't bother," John spat. "I'm going."

"Rushing to the rescue?" Mycroft sneered. "Is this not a bit too convenient, Dr Watson?"

"What do you mean?" There would be no value in punching Mycroft's smug face. Unfortunately.
"What I mean is that text wouldn't have come to you two months ago. How does Moriarty know that you and Sherlock have...reconciled?" Mycroft spoke the last word with withering contempt.

Now John felt his own cheeks flooding with heat. "I don't--"

"Understand? Of course you don't. Perhaps you should ask your wife. She seems well-acquainted with Mr Moriarty."

"That's not true," John whispered.

"I'm afraid it is." Mycroft's eyes drilled into John's. "In fact, she's worked for him for well over seven years now. In further point of fact, I wonder if she didn't facilitate this operation of his. Were you aware that she occasionally worked for Lady Howe, acquiring art?"

John shook his head. He groped for a chair and sat. "She didn't...we never...." Was it Moriarty who had sent the photograph, who had killed Trish? She'd said she was resolving the issue. Did that mean she was going after Moriarty? Surely she hadn't helped him kidnap Sherlock.

She did shoot him, though.

He couldn't think of that now. "I'm going to get him back."

"No," Mycroft replied flatly. "I'm sending a team."

"Guns blazing? Mycroft, that's insane. Moriarty texted me, not you. If he's got something up his sleeve, then it's better if it's just me. He won't feel threatened. If he sees an armed response team, Christ knows what he'll do."

Mycroft folded his hands together and furrowed his brow in thought, and in that moment the resemblance between brothers was unmistakable. "If you do this, you realise you may be confronting your own wife."

"Whatever she's done, she'd never--" John rubbed his mouth. "I'll bring him home, I swear it, Mycroft."

"Very well. I'll send a small detail, two people at most. They'll trail you at a distance. And you'll wear a wire."

"No wire," John said. "But the detail's all right."

Mycroft sighed. "And your daughter?"

"Would you--" John hesitated. "Would you look after her? If it is Moriarty, I'm afraid he'll try...try to get at her."

"You want me to babysit," Mycroft said, incredulous.

"I know it's a lot to ask."

"Never mind. I'll look after her." Mycroft rose to his feet and went to the door. "I'll make the arrangements. Go speak to your daughter."

John rose as well. "Thank you. Mycroft?"

Mycroft turned back. "Yes?"
"I'm going to kill him."

Mycroft nodded soberly. "I think that would be best," he said, and left the room.

John found his way back to where Nora was watching television. "Hi, sweetheart."

"Daddy, can I have my phone? I'm bored."

"A little later, darling. Maybe Mr Holmes has a spare tablet or laptop you can use." He wanted no errant text messages from Moriarty to reach her – and now he was sure down to his bones that Moriarty had sent those texts and photos. "Listen, Nora. I've got to go away for a bit. Just...maybe a day or two at most."

Nora shut off the television and gave John a long, searching look. "Is Mr Holmes in trouble?"

"Budge over," he said, and sat beside her, taking her hand. "Yes, darling. A lot of trouble, I think. I'm going to try to help him."

"Can't Mrs Pringle stay at home with me?"

"No, love. I want you to stay here. You'll be – you'll be comfortable here, I promise. I know it's a bit strange, but try to make the best of it."

Nora's eyes watched him intently. "Are you in trouble too?"

John leant down and gave Nora a fierce hug. "No. No. I'm fine." He held her away. "You stay here, and I promise I will be back as soon as I can. Give us a kiss, all right?"

Nora obediently kissed him and slumped in her seat, but didn't take her eyes off John. "I don't want to stay here."

"And I'd rather you didn't have to. But you have to be a brave girl for me. When Sherlock and I come back, we'll be lazy slugs and do nothing but eat cheese toasties with Tabasco, all right? Sherlock loves cheese toasties, you'll have to make him some."

"Are you taking my phone?"

"I don't know," John said. "Why?"

"I wanted to call Mum."

Sudden nausea rose in John's belly. "Well, she's probably asleep right now, and she'll be busy with Tim tomorrow. When I get back we'll call her together, all right?"

Nora sighed. "All right. Hurry, Daddy."

"I will," he promised. *I don't have a choice.*

*

"Still with us, Dr Watson?" That was Henreid. Or Farrow. John forgot who belonged to which name.

"Negative," came the second agent's voice. No, that was Henreid. She'd introduced them both as he'd stepped off the plane: Lance Corporals Henreid and Farrow. "No vehicles. Recent tyre tracks, though."

"Got the place in my sights," Farrow said. "No activity."

John stifled a tremor. Somewhere in that house, Sherlock was a captive, in Jim Moriarty's power. Moriarty might well have a small army lying in wait, but John doubted it. They'd done a concentric reconnaissance of the perimeter and if Henreid was to be believed, they had every electronic detection and tracking device it was possible to possess. There had been no camera interference, no laser wires, no sound detection; the place might as well have been deserted. They couldn't have left already?

John checked his watch: almost five. By the time Mycroft had arranged everything and they'd set off, it had gone one in the morning and they hadn't touched down at Derry Airport until half three, after delays on the tarmac. Moriarty could have decamped, but surely he'd have waited for John, who had texted a terse reply – I'll be there.

Oh, goodie had been the response. And then a second and final reply:

Come alone.

He'd had plenty of time for reflection on the plane, time enough to circle half a hundred trajectories of Mary's possible thought processes before reaching the baffled and furious conclusion that he didn't know her at all. And yes, so much of that had been a willful shutting-out of truth and fact; he loved her, and her past didn't matter to him, no matter what Sherlock had said. He'd managed to tell himself that for years, even as it niggled and ate at him – not in his brain where, once the notion had mutated into true suspicion, he could have clearly told it to sod off, but in his heart, where malignancy was checked by her daily affections, by his own, by their mutual love for Nora.

Oh, Christ. Nora.

Ten years they'd been husband and wife, and they'd raised a daughter. And nearly all this time she'd worked for Moriarty, knowing he was alive, knowing his antipathy for Sherlock. Knowing, for fuck's sake, what a psychopath he was. Maybe plotting with him to take Sherlock's life, at some point. And even when Sherlock discovered the truth about her, he hadn't realised who her employer was. He'd never have let it go otherwise.

I didn't have a choice, Mary had said. Was that true? Certainly blackmail and extortion wasn't beyond Moriarty; he delighted in those things. It was more than plausible that Moriarty could have threatened Mary's family, but there were probably a score of professionals out there just as good that Moriarty could have employed. Moriarty was perverse, though. He'd have been thrilled to find out about Mary's past.

Where was Mary at this moment? In the Moran house? Stalking Moriarty on her own?


"Say again, Dr Watson?" Farrow's voice crackled slightly.

"Disregard," John said. It didn't matter, none of it, not right now. Ruminating was only going to distract him. He needed to focus and get Sherlock out. "Any movement?"
"Negative," Farrow said. "Nothing visible in this AO. Approach with caution."

John had reached the edge of the house, and crept toward the front door. "Henreid, identify your position." He raised his weapon. "Henreid, I say again: identify your position."

In the surrounding trees, birds had begun to rustle awake; a few sweet notes pierced the cool pre-dawn air.

"Henreid." Farrow's voice was calm. "Identify your position."

Apprehension unspooled itself in John's stomach. He should have come alone as Moriarty had instructed. He'd told the agents the content of the last text, and they'd only shrugged in response. "Henreid."

"Do not approach the house, Dr Watson," Farrow said.

"Go back to Derry, Agent Farrow."

"Dr Watson, I insist that you return to the rendezvous point."

"Get your arse out of here," John hissed. He quietly ascended the stone steps. "I'm coming to back you up. Do not move until I arrive."

_Christ._ He couldn't look after them now – they'd have to fend for themselves. John grasped the large brass handle and turned it, and the door creaked open, revealing only a pitch-black corridor. He immediately slid to the side and waited.

There was a moment of agonising silence, and then, a familiar voice, with a mocking intonation like Boris Karloff's. "Come in, Johnny boy."

"Where's Sherlock?" John snapped.

"Come in and see, said the spider to the fly."

"I'm not playing your game. Send Sherlock out and I won't drill half a dozen holes in your head." Sweat beaded at John's temples and between his shoulder blades.

"Oh, but you've got to. I've got your pal." A little giggle punctuated the last word.

"I want to speak to him before I come in."

"No can do. He's in the cellar."

John calculated for a moment: would Moriarty bring him out all this way just to shoot him? And Farrow hadn't come to assist either. _Fuck it._ John, weapon drawn, stepped into the corridor. For a split second he looked down, expecting to see red dots dancing over his chest, but there was nothing, only darkness. And then, a small bright light went on – a phone, illuminating a pale face.

"Hi, Johnny."

John squinted. "Moriarty…?" It looked like him, a little. But this Moriarty was blond, and wearing glasses.

"Used to be. You can call me Nick now. Old Nick. Old Scratch."
Reeating his weapon and widening his stance slightly, John frowned. "Nick. What the – oh, Christ." All at once it was clear, and he understood perfectly. Sherlock would have been proud, maybe. All those grainy pictures, the secrecy, the connections to Moran, all of it. "Nick Dedalus. Jesus Christ, it was you."

Moriarty smiled. "Well done you. And a bonus point for not actually having to have both names before working it out. Big step for you, sweetheart."

Games, always fucking games. John was sick of it. "Where's Sherlock?"

"Ooh, yeah. About that. He's not here. I knew you'd disobey orders, Johnny. Told you to come alone, didn't I?" Moriarty clicked his tongue reprovingly.

"Look, just let them go."

"I did, sort of. Agent Henreid is choking on her own blood back by the conservatory, and Agent Farrow is breathing his last on the lawn, a Sarin casualty. A few more people and we'll have a Cluedo game. What do you think?" Moriarty's smile was ghastly in the light of the phone. "Dr Watson in the kitchen with a rolling pin?"

"I could shoot you here," John said.

"Ye-es, you could," Moriarty said. "But then you'd never find out where Sherlock is. It's already been a day or so since he's had any water. To drink, that is. How long do you think he'll hold out? I bet he's in a lot of pain."

"Stop it," John hissed. "Take me to him, now."

"Why, sure," Moriarty replied. "All you had to do was ask. But isn't there another question you want to ask me?"

John ground his teeth hard. "Where's Mary?"

"There you go. Truth is, I'm not sure. I lost track of her in Switzerland. But I'm pretty sure we'll see her soon. She's not best pleased with me."

John blinked. Switzerland?

"Now I've got a question for you. Where's that adorable moppet of yours?"

It took everything John had not to shoot Moriarty on the spot. "With Mycroft."

"Ah. Nice." Moriarty sounded admiring. "I'll bet he's delighted to be babysitting. What if both of you die? Does he get to keep her?"

Raw panic flooded John's belly. "Shut your mouth."

"Ooh, okay." He looked up, past John, his eyes dreamy behind his tinted lenses. John started to pivot a second too late. Something that felt like a brick crashed into his skull, and he saw the gritty marble tiles of the Moran entry hall rising to meet him.

*
"John."

Go away. Fuck off.

"Jeez, John. Come on, I'm bored." A foot prodded his calf ungently.

John cracked an eye open, then squeezed it shut again. His head throbbed unmercifully. He lay still, listening and assessing his own aching body. Raging thirst assailed him, and his wrists were pinpoints of agony. There was a chair supporting him, though, soft and fairly comfortable – no, he realised; a car seat. He was in a moving car. He felt the smooth hum, smelled leather upholstery and something else. Mint.

Oh, fuck.

Reluctantly, John opened his eyes and saw the back of a head, dark, short hair, thick neck, unremarkable. Adjusting his eyes to the dimness of the car, he made out a face – a lean, blondish man with sharp features. He also discerned a black hole, .50 calibers if he wasn't very much mistaken. And he didn't think he was. He reckoned that the firearm had been the hard object that had knocked him unconscious, and that the man holding the weapon was the elusive Sebastian Moran.

John flinched backward and felt a bite of pain at his wrists. Unyielding plastic, uncomfortably tight.

Fuck, fuck, fuck.

"Well, here's our little hero, awake at last!"

John turned his head and gazed blearily at Jim Moriarty. He'd had plastic surgery of some kind. Several kinds. Besides the hair, the eyes were pale, and the face had been reshaped a bit. He didn't look like the old Moriarty any longer, but it was unmistakably Moriarty, and doubly unnerving.

"Come on, up and at 'em, soldier. I want you cognizant and walking. You wanted to see Sherlock."

John struggled into a more upright position. He chose not to speak, but blinked hard, trying to clear his aching head.

"Heavens, where are my manners? Sebastian Moran," Moriarty said with exaggerated courtesy, "may I present the redoubtable John Watson? John, this is Seb. Do you remember him from the pool?"

John squinted through the throbbing pain. Yes, now that face looked familiar. He remembered the man, lean and taciturn and efficient. He'd strapped John into the Semtex. Bastard.

"Won't take us long to get home. My old digs in Derry, that is. It's where Seb and I met – sort of his home town as well. I think Mary might be there, too. I'm not sure she's minding her manners, either. The motion detectors are going bananas." Moriarty smiled. "Oh, and we pulled your wire, so nobody's tracking you now. You are just so predictable, Johnny – it makes me a little sad."

John sighed silently. Christ, Mary, why didn't you tell me? Why? I could have helped. Sherlock could have helped. Moriarty had threatened her, or John, or Nora, or all three, clearly – that was his modus operandi, never known to fail, and Mary had been susceptible to it. Mary, who was so resourceful, but who had weaknesses no assassin should ever have.

"Still, I guess Sherlock likes that – you probably never surprise him. It's why you've flown under my radar for so long – you haven't been worth the effort of attention."
Would Mary help Sherlock, or hinder him? Sherlock knew about her secrets and had kept them long ago; that was his only hope now. He didn't think that Mary would feel vengeful about his and Sherlock's relationship, given that she'd said she'd known...but he didn't really know *her*, did he? He didn't know her at all.

"You're probably glad about that, aren't you?" Moriarty reached out and placed his hand flat on John's chest. "Being unnoticed, being Mr Average." John forced himself not to move, not with the yawning bore of the .50 still trained on him. Moriarty's hand was warm, the fingers brushing lightly against the wool of his jumper. "Ahh." Moriarty closed his eyes briefly. "Listen to that: the rhythm of a heart in distress. That tiny bit of syncopation really satisfies the ear." He took his hand away.

Exhaling deeply, his head still ringing, John looked out the window. They had reached the outskirts of Derry.

Moriarty was right about one thing: he *was* Mr Average. He didn't know how the hell he was meant to get out of this, let alone rescue Sherlock who was presumably in no shape to come up with a plan or assist him. He didn't know what Mary was up to. He hadn't permitted himself to think about how long Sherlock had been Moriarty's unwilling guest and exactly what Moriarty had done to him. Sherlock's nakedness wrenched at John. God help Moriarty if he'd –

"You ever hear the old saw about how some people are so brilliant, but can't manage to tie their own shoelaces?" Moriarty inquired, interrupting John's train of thought.

John looked back at Moriarty, doing his best not to be unnerved by the familiar voice issuing from that altered face. "Yeah."

"That's you, a pair of shoelaces. I can't quite work you out. You're no shining star in the brains department; you're nothing to look at – even less now." Moriarty glanced contemptuously at John's slightly spreading midsection. "And you and your little wifey have bugged Sherlock over on I've lost count of how many occasions now. It's boggling. Even to me."

Heat rose in John's face at that last. "Sorry."

"He keeps forgiving you, though. So either he's dumber than I thought, or he's just that pathetically lonely, or you're a tiger in the sack." Moriarty smirked. "I don't know. I hope to God it's option C. Gross as that is to contemplate."

"You're right," John said. "I don't deserve him. I'm not brilliant or fantastic-looking, and I've hurt him more than once. And I don't know why he cares for me. I'm lucky, that's all I know."

Moriarty's smirk gentled. "Your luck's run out, honey." The car drew to a stop in front of an unprepossessing little house, scarcely visible in the early dawn. Moriarty got out, and the two men in front exited the car as well.

John stayed put, unable to reach the door on his own and not anxious to begin this confrontation, to see what Moriarty's dystrophic heart and malignant brain had cooked up for him and Sherlock. And Mary. Had he tormented her for years? Had she attempted to tell John in some coded fashion and had he been too thick to work it out? Or had she simply suffered in silence, never mind the haul of millions? Surely she'd have preferred a quiet life. She wasn't acquisitive, never hungered after luxury nor begrudged it in others.

Sebastian Moran opened the rear door and gestured at John with the .50. "Out."

With some difficulty, John swivelled his legs out the car and slowly rose to his feet, wincing at the...
tingling in his legs. His head still hurt where Moran had clocked him, and he was thirsty; but worse than all that, he was frightened. He hadn't a plan. Mycroft had no idea where he was, now that Moriarty had taken his wire and murdered the security detail. He stumbled as Moran hauled him out by the arm and half-dragged him to where Moriarty and the other thug stood waiting.

"We have to assume she's heavily armed, Jim," Moran said in a low voice. "And that Tadgh's incapacitated."

John realised they were talking about Mary.

"She won't shoot," Moriarty said. "We've got Johnny. Wish we had little Nora too, but all in good time." His smile gleamed in the half-dark. John lashed out with his foot, but not quickly enough. Moriarty danced back, giggling, as Moran yanked John backward. "Nice try, Johnny!"

"Go fuck yourself," John spat.

"I'm going to keep you alive just long enough for you to see your daughter's face when we introduce her to her new daddies. Seven or eight of them," Moriarty said, rage swiftly supplanting his jollity.

"You're dead," John promised.

Sebastian Moran sighed impatiently. "Let's get this over with." He motioned the driver toward the rear of the house, then shoved John up the front walk, keeping his weapon at the back of John's neck. "No sudden movements now. Sure Mary's a crack shot, but like as not she's a wee bit skittish at the moment."

John thought Moran sounded admiring. "You're friends, then?" he asked.


"More than that?" Moriarty asked brightly.

"Nope."

"Oh." Moriarty seemed disappointed. John would have paid dearly to be able to punch him in the face. "Righto. Open the door, Johnny."

John put a hand out and turned the knob. The door swung open, and he stepped over the threshold into a small and slightly shabby front room: ordinary if dated furnishings, faded ivy-and-floral wallpaper, a vague smell of disuse. The carpeted floor creaked beneath his feet.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" Moriarty called merrily.

There was no response. The room beyond, likely the kitchen, was dark.

"Oh, come on, you two. Or else Johnny Boy gets a lump of lead in his thick skull."

John's heart stuttered in his chest as Moran placed the bore of his weapon firmly against his head. Was Mary here? Or Sherlock? Maybe they'd gone already. He hoped so. He prayed that was the case.

"Go on, Johnny," Moriarty said, giving John's shoulder a gentle push. "Take a step forward."

John obeyed, his breath catching as he moved away from the gun.

"Say something," Moriarty urged.
He opened his mouth to gather breath to speak. His tongue was a slab of rock, his mouth sand. "It's me," he rasped. *Please let no-one answer. Please let them be gone.*

There was a rustling of movement, then Mary appeared in the door, weapon poised to shoot. "John. Are you all right?"

"Yeah," John said, hardly believing any of this. "I'm okay."

"Aw, that's nice," Moriarty said. "Now put the gun down or Seb shatters his head. His skull's thick, but not *that* thick."

"No," said a deeper, more sonorous voice, and Sherlock stepped into view, wrapped in a striped sheet knotted at his waist and holding an enormous handgun with a trembling arm. "You put the gun down. *Seb.*" His voice was roughened and strained. "I'm tired, and I can't guarantee I won't hit Jim somewhere permanently disfiguring instead of just killing him." He looked tired; exhausted, in fact, about to drop. But his eyes met John's for a split second, and the resolve in them was unmistakable.

"I guess we've got a standoff," Moriarty said pleasantly.

*No. *There was the thug in the rear of the house. But Mary and Sherlock both had their backs to the wall. Good. Nonetheless, John signalled at the kitchen with his eyes and a slight incline of his chin, hoping they'd understand.

"What's the plan, Jim?" Sherlock asked. "I assume you've got one."

"Well, I wasn't sure if Mary would break you out," Moriarty said. "You know, the woman scorned and all that. I guess that's one in the eye for me. See that, John? See what I mean? Mary too. I don't get it."

John held Mary's gaze. "I didn't know it was him," he said. "I'm sorry."

"I couldn't tell you," Mary said. There were dark circles under her eyes visible beneath her light makeup. She turned to Moriarty. "You know it's over, right? You're not getting out of here alive."

"Oh, sure I am," Moriarty said. "Me and Seb and Johnny and Sherlock. Did you kill Tadgh? I see Sherlock's got his gun."

"Yeah," Mary said. "He's wrapped in a tarp out back."

Moriarty let out a little chuff of laughter. "It does my heart good to see families pull together in times of crisis. You know John left his daughter with your brother, Sherlock? It might be the smartest thing he's done in his whole life."

John saw Mary's mouth turn up on one side.

"Very good, John," Sherlock said hoarsely.

"It won't matter, of course," Moriarty went on. "We'll get to her one way or another. After all, Mycroft appointed Georgina as Meredith's PA. For protection. And he never knew."

"Why'd you kill her?" Sherlock asked.

"Because she was a fucking idiot, like most people," Moriarty said savagely. "She should have taken care of Miss Mary and her buddy the night of the party, and she decided to strategise instead. Bad call."
"Because Mary tried to save Lady Howe." Sherlock shifted his stance slightly, using the wall as support. "You were the one who administered the antidote – or tried."

"Yes," Mary said. "It cost my friend her life."

"Oh, boo-hoo," Moriarty sneered. "Killers who try to make friends are idiots. Killers who have families – I don't think there's even a word for how moronic that is." He seated himself on a wing chair upholstered in mauve velveteen, insouciantly ignoring the weapon Sherlock pointed at him. "Mary, you'd done so well up 'til then. I thought you were hard, but you're just one more silly, snivelling, sentimental girl, aren't you? It's depressing – almost as depressing as Sherlock here being totally defanged over the last ten years."

"That just eats you up, doesn't it?" John said suddenly. Aware that the gun was still pressed to his head, he turned his head with aching slowness. "It bothers the hell out of you that Sherlock isn't twisted, the way you'd like him to be. That he's got family, friends, people who respect and admire him. And he's never stopped fighting people like you – he's moved on from you, in fact. You thought he'd mourn you, maybe? Obsess himself with solving your disappearance?" John smiled nastily. "You think you're anything more than a problem to be solved, that you actually mean anything to him. You couldn't be more wrong."

All the colour had gone out of Moriarty's face. He got to his feet. "I'm going to fuck the entire world, Johnny Boy," he said softly, his teeth clenched. "He's gone soft, and I've got much, much bigger fish to fry." He looked at Moran. "Shoot him."

"Don't," Mary snapped. "You're outgunned, Seb."

Behind John, Moran shifted uncertainly. "Jim, you said –"

"I don't care what I said! Fucking shoot him, Seb!"

"Wait," Sherlock said, and held a hand out. "Listen."

Everyone stilled, and John heard, distantly, the whine of police sirens.

"Oh, God in heaven," Moriarty sighed. "Nice try, Sherlock. Full marks."

"Do you still tap landlines, Jim?" Sherlock's voice sounded fainter, as if he were about to keel over. John glanced at him worriedly; both of Sherlock's hands now held the gun, and his arms trembled.

Moriarty tilted his head to one side as if he hadn't heard the question properly. "Sorry?"

"Probably not. They're practically antiquities now, aren't they? Hardly any left in the UK or Ireland, certainly. Dotty elderly ladies who never made the transition to mobiles, mostly. Or holdovers like my brother, still attached to the past in one way or another. Oh, he's embraced technology to an extent, but he doesn't much care for it, honestly. I think he'd prefer the telegraph or carrier pigeons." The sirens grew louder. "So he's got a landline. And then there's your mum. She never got rid of hers, and you never bothered to disconnect the line. Not that you ever made any calls on it – the buttons were stiff, hadn't been used in years. But you paid the bill along with all the other bills here. This place is a graveyard for all sorts of corpses, isn't it? Those soldiers under the cellar floor. The evidence of your first kill – you kept the shoes here, and probably a few other trophies until your mum caught on to what was happening in that head of yours. This furniture, still smells like Jardins de Bagatelle, you couldn't bear to get rid of it. There's a school photo of you on the fridge. And then there's the outdated technology – stereo, boxy telly...landline. Sentiment gets the best of all of us from time to time." Sherlock smiled shakily. Sweat stood out on his brow. "It's over."
Moriarty took a single shuddering breath, then smiled. "You think they won't know? The minute I land in NSY, it's going to happen ahead of schedule. All my operatives know that."

"Bullshit," Mary said over the now-loud drone of sirens. "You haven't needed to bluff in so long that you've forgotten how."

The sirens cut off, and muffled sounds of activity filtered through the walls. "James Moriarty," called an amplified voice from outside. "This is PSNI. The house is surrounded by authorised firearm officers. Step outside with your hands clearly visible."

"Jim," Seb Moran said. As he spoke, a weapon discharged outside. Instantly, Mary tensed, and Seb Moran wrapped an arm round John's neck and held the weapon to his temple. "Micko. Fuck."

The other thug. John held himself stiffly, the bore of the weapon digging into flesh and bone. "Sherlock," he said. "Kill him."

"Shut the fuck up!" Moriarty shrieked. "Fucking shoot him, Seb!"

Moran's body shuddered. He clicked the safety off with his thumb.

John looked at Mary, then at Sherlock.

"James Moriarty. This is PSNI. Come outside with your hands visible."

"If you shoot him, Jim dies," Sherlock said. "I'll kill him."

"You couldn't hit the lake from the dock in your state, Mr Holmes," Moran said. "If your brother's organised all that, you go out there and tell them that we want passage out, or your friend ends up with half a head."

"Give me the gun," Moriarty demanded, holding his hand out to Moran. "Now."

"Get back, Jimmy," Moran said. The safety clicked on again, and Moran's grip round John's throat loosened.

"Don't you fucking move, Jim," Mary said.

Moriarty bared his teeth. "I said give me the fucking gun."

John, caught in between them, glanced at Sherlock.

Sherlock held three fingers up. Vatican Cameos, he mouthed, and counted down with his fingers. Three, two –

"Now!" Moriarty screamed, and lunged.

Obediently, John dropped, slithering and then hurtling down to the floor, and the world filled with fire. A heavy body toppled onto him, knocking his head against the floor and crushing the breath from him. He gasped and struggled, his arms thoroughly trapped.

It was Kandahar all over again, heat and volleys of fire and the taste of dirt in his mouth, the synaptic circuits that controlled logic and higher thinking on pause, yielding to fight-or-flight, but he could neither fight nor flee and, stunned from the second blow to his head, he was only dimly cognizant that situational awareness was on standby. Muted roaring filled his ringing ears, a crash, shouting voices: Get down, get down, get down. He felt something warm and wet on his face.
The weight on his body lifted; he groaned at the pain in his shoulder. Someone cut the plastic zip ties from his wrists, and his hands dropped nervelessly to his sides. He groaned again.

He felt Sherlock's hands on his face. Unmistakable. He opened his eyes.

Sherlock's face was bloodied, his hair soaked, like the day he'd –

Sherlock! He was deaf from the fire. He sat up, conscious of a dozen black-clad legs surrounding him. He reached out to touch Sherlock's face. Are you –

I'm all right.

Good. That was good.

Sherlock's face crumpled. John –

Someone in black interposed himself between them. No. Sherlock – He turned, fighting the arms that reached for him, and then he saw her.

No

They muttered words he knew: contusions, CT scan showed no focal clot at present, additional intracranial pressure monitor, somnolent state. They brought him tea, blankets, urged him to sleep. Nothing was happening at the moment. He needed to rest. The neurosurgeon was on her way from London, best in the UK. Nothing to be done now but wait. She was receiving the best care possible.

He forced himself to calm down and process what they were saying, synthesise it into something manageable. Everything around him moved with a dragging underwater slowness. Unbearable. He pressed his hands around the polystyrene cup of lukewarm tea and it cracked, spilling onto the blankets. A tech fluttered round him, cleaning up the mess.

"I want to see her," he said. "Please, could I just see her?"

A hurried confab was held, reluctant permission granted. A tech and a nurse escorted him to her room.

There she was: still, so still, and so white, nearly as white as the bandage that encircled her head. Surrounded by poles and monitors and ventilator, she was wired and intubated everywhere: EKG, endotracheal tube, nasogastric tube, IV catheter, Foley catheter, compression stockings, anti-embolism wrappings.

John moved closer. Her feet were bare. He touched them, distressed at how cold they were. Gently, he rubbed them, looking at them and not her white face nor her imprisoned body. She'd painted her toenails, a vivid, cheerful pink like the summer roses she grew in the back garden.

"Mary," he said softly, but she didn't reply.
He rubbed her feet until they brought soft socks and slipped them on, then moved him away, back to his own room. Did he want to call his daughter?

Not yet, he said, not yet. Wait for the neurosurgeon.

He greyed out; hours passed, or days, and then a woman was talking to him, white-coated, faint accent. Dr Choudhury, the neurosurgeon. Two other doctors with her, both male. They'd repeated the CT scan, a clot in the left temporal lobe. Her heart rate had slowed, her blood pressure had risen, as had the intracranial pressure. The clot needed to be evacuated at once. Had she his permission to do so?

Permission granted, he said, or something like it. He scrawled his signature on a form one of the doctors proffered.

They nodded their concurrence and left.

John picked up the phone and dialled.

*
I hate that this has to go out as a chapter and maybe get people's hopes up, but I don't know how else to do it.

I just wanted to apologize for the delay on this - it's not common for me to have huge delays between chapters, but I've unfortunately been having a rough time lately and I need a bit of a break. I promise to return to this as soon as I possibly can.

Be well, and back soon, I hope.

xoxo

Alex
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

With most humble gratitude and thanks to kimberlite and vilestrumpet for their infinite patience, sharp eyes, and gentle corrections. <3

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

*  *

1 April 2010; 2:00 a.m.

*  *

"Fancy a cup of tea?" Sherlock brandished the kettle.

"Actually," John said, "I could do with something stronger. There's some vodka in the freezer." He blew out a sharp breath and dropped into his chair. "Jesus. My legs are still rubbery."

Setting the kettle gently on the worktop, Sherlock frowned. "Erm. About that. I was out of medical-grade ethanol a few days ago, and —"

"No." John gaped, his face comically slack-jawed. "No. Tell me you didn't use it in an experi—"

"Obviously I'll replace it, John. I just hadn't got round to it. We've been busy. And it turned out to be a fairly decent substitute."

"Missing the point," John sighed, and leant back in his chair, closing his eyes. "It was nice vodka, too. Fine. Whatever. Tea's fine."

Sherlock inspected him for a moment, then crouched and dove into one of the lower cupboards, shoving boxes and tins aside until he found what he'd sought. He straightened, blew the dust from the bottle that had been a gift from a grateful client and poured two generous dollops of whisky into their tea mugs. Tucking the bottle under one arm, he brought it and the mugs into the front room and offered one to John. "Here. It's not vodka, but you might find it adequate."

His brow furrowed, John accepted the mug and sniffed suspiciously at the liquid, then took a cautious sip. "Wow." He sipped again. "That's... that's good."

Sherlock tasted the whisky. "Not bad," he allowed. He thumped into his own chair and toed off his shoes, suddenly conscious of a not unpleasant aching fatigue suffusing his bones. It had been a long couple of days culminating in peculiar triumph. He knew he wouldn't sleep much tonight, though; tonight was a night for cogitation. Moriarty. This could be fun, a genuine challenge. One didn't end a game before it ampèd up – God, they'd just got started! He knew about Sherlock, so much, he'd
done his research, nobody else had, and that was flattering, admittedly.

I've given you a glimpse, Sherlock, just a teensy glimpse of what I've got going on out there in the big bad world.

That alone meant Moriarty hadn't any intention of killing him tonight. Probably. Probably. There was a moment there, just a moment –

"Sherlock?"

"Mm?"

John's face was drawn, pale and exhausted. He took another sip of the whisky. "Why the hell didn't you run when I told you to?"

Sherlock stared at John intently. He didn't need to ponder the question, but pretending to do so was as good an excuse as any to study John whilst he was fairly unguarded.

They'd only been flatmates for a few months, but that in itself was notable because Sherlock hadn't ever had a flatmate who'd lasted more than a few weeks at most. And it was true that John's admiration was flattering, but Sherlock had been admired more extravagantly by people whose opinions (at least in Mycroft's estimation) really mattered – generals, diplomats, captains of industry, heads of state (dull). John didn't kowtow to him or kiss his arse – quite the contrary, he'd invited Sherlock to do so once or twice. His wasn't a scintillating intellect; competent, yes, but dazzling, no. John's habits were mostly neat, unobtrusive, occasionally fussy. He was casually affectionate with Sarah in a way that sometimes made Sherlock's heart twist a bit, but that was neither here nor there. John was perfectly ordinary, and for all his tremendous abilities and because he was unwilling to delve into the unpredictable clockwork of human emotion (Jim Moriarty had been right about the ridiculous lump of muscle situated on the left side of Sherlock's chest), Sherlock couldn't quite work out what made him so extraordinary, but he knew that he would never, ever abandon John Watson to danger while he had breath in his body.

"It would have been unwise," Sherlock said at last. "Strategically and tactically."

John appeared to be satisfied with that answer. He lifted the mug again. "Well, then. Cheers. And thank you."

"You're welcome." Sherlock touched his own mug to John's, and they both drank. Sherlock watched John surreptitiously now, noting that his left hand was certainly steady enough. "You're sure you're all right? He didn't hurt you – before?"

"No. I mean –" John rubbed the back of his head ruefully. "They banged me on the head, I guess, but they knew where to hit me to knock me out fast, 'cos it doesn't even hurt anymore, really. Or those huge washes of adrenaline overrode the pain." A lopsided smile crossed his face and he took another drink, then extended his mug. "Right. Hit me up again."

Sherlock poured another slug.

"He's not going to stop, you know."

"Moriarty? No, I reckon not." Sherlock sat back in his chair, rested his mug on the arm, and steeped his fingers. "John...you know you're not obliged to stay. I know that must have been...frightening."

John sniffed, pursed his lips, then gave Sherlock a wry smile. "I don't recall you holding a gun to my
head to keep me here."

"I think you know what I mean."

"Yeah, I do." John sighed and scratched his cheek, his blunt, neat nails making an unexpectedly noisy rasp in the quiet of the room. "Before you arrived, I thought... I was certain I was in for it tonight. All that fucking Semtex, Jesus. And he, Moriarty, he was just... round the twist, you know? I thought that was it. Good-bye, John Watson, we hardly knew you. I suppose Harry would get everything, not that I've got much to give her."

Sherlock thought about John's meagre possessions. "No, I suppose not. But all the more reason to really think about—"

"I thought about it," John said. He set his mug on the floor and leant forward, his clasped hands between his knees. "I'm in it for the long haul. If you'll have me."

Utterly unaccustomed to declarations of loyalty, Sherlock sat in silence. A funny lump occluded his throat. He managed a nod, then gave a loud sniff and cleared his throat. "Well then. All right. I reckon I've got used to the blogging thing anyhow."

"Or 'inflicting my opinions on the world,'" John said with a grin. "Tetchy bastard."

Sherlock flushed. "John, I—"

John laughed and waved a hand. "Shut it. I'm knackered." He stood up, and Sherlock stood with him, swaying a little from the twenty-five year-old single malt. He gazed up at Sherlock for a moment, and a strange expression crossed his face. "Sherlock..."

They were standing close; Sherlock smelled John's cologne and the faint tang of sweat. "What?"

Taking a step back, his face red, John shook his head. "Nothing. G'night." He waved and made his way upstairs slowly, his tread dragging up the risers, the door finally clicking closed.

Sherlock stood still, shocks of heat and cold travelling through his body. When he spoke, it was a whisper even he could scarcely hear. "Good night, John."

*

The staff at Altnagelvin had administered a very soothing dose of oxycodone and had also deemed it necessary for him to be given twilight sleep whilst they cleaned up Seb Moran's handiwork, but owing either to an error in the anaesthetist's calculations or simply to Sherlock's constitution, he didn't proceed beyond modest anxiolysis and heard their jocular chattering as the surgical team, seven men and women, commenced their work. He was perfectly amenable to listening. Could be entertaining.

---Jesus, what happened to this one?

---Why's the monitor so fucking dark? Fix that.

---Torture. Whipping.

---I can see that, thanks. Angle the screen toward me.

---It's Sherlock Holmes.
---The detective?

---Is there another Sherlock Holmes? Of course the detective for fuck's sake.

---Someone had a hell of a grudge.

---Jaysus. It's everywhere. What a fucking mess.

---Superficial, mostly.

---Give me a better light.

---Still. Nasty.

---Had to happen sometime. Guy like that's bound to make his share of enemies, yeah?

---It's a bloodbath down in A&E. Five or six of them brought in as well. Three dead I think?

---They brought his pal in too, that Watson fella.

---He dead too?

---Dunno. Bloodbath like I said.


---Mr Holmes. Mr Holmes. It's all right. Don't fight, you'll just hurt yourself. Let us get this on you. Let us –

---God damn it!

---It's okay – it's okay, I promise you. Just breathe in – you've got to hold still. Breathe in and count backward from ten. Mr Holmes, please –

---The IV –


*

"Sherlock."

He opened his eyes and saw a frosted light panel over his head. Curtains surrounding him, an IV pole, a rudimentary monitor, a dark blur on his left side smelling of faintly damp wool, more than one draught of The Macallan, Blenheim Bouquet, and the faintest whiff of jet fuel.

He closed his eyes again.

"You're in Altnagelvin Hospital in Derry."

"I know where I am," Sherlock rasped.

"Evidently you required additional sedation. It seems you made a fuss of some kind."
Sherlock ignored that last and turned to glare at Mycroft. "Where's John?"

"A few storeys below you, utterly unharmed."

Relief trickled into Sherlock's veins, more soothing than the oxycodone tablets they'd given him hours ago. He smiled and closed his eyes again, and then remembered with a jolt. "Mary?" he whispered, struggling to sit up.

Mycroft put a hand out. "Sherlock, don't – you've just woken."

Sherlock swatted Mycroft's hand away irritably. "Where is she?"

Shaking his head, Mycroft sighed. "She's still in surgery. It will be several more hours until we know anything."

"Tell me what you do know." Sherlock shifted and winced, suddenly aware that the medical team had wrapped his entire body in gauze and that it was beginning to ache again. He felt something sticky underneath the soft wrappings.

Mycroft let out another long sigh and offered a succinct explanation of Mary's condition. Not a bullet in her brain, then; shrapnel, or some glancing material from a ricochet. But enough to cause permanent damage, or kill her. Enough.

Sherlock was silent for a long while, staring out the window. A leaden rain had begun to thump dully against the glass. "What do they say her chances are?"

A space of two heartbeats preceded Mycroft's answer. "Only fair."

"The Dedalus stores?"

"Contained."

"And Moriarty?"

"Alive. In custody. As is Stephen Moran. His brother Sebastian expired in the ambulance."

"Ghosts," Sherlock said softly, bitterly. He turned and stared into Mycroft's eyes. "That was what you meant."

Mycroft's cheeks turned red, but he didn't drop his gaze. "Yes."

"You knew. You knew he was alive all along. And you did nothing."

"What would you have liked, brother mine?" Mycroft let out a nasty chuckle. "Did you want me to shoot him in the head?"

"Right," Sherlock said. "Right. That's my department, isn't it? I'm the unstable one. Besides, we can't have that. Can't get your hands dirty. Just like Jim." He leant back against the pillows. "Get the hell out of here."

"It's unfortunate that your friend's wife was shot, Sherlock. But I hardly think she's an innocent party. After all, she shot you, didn't she?" Mycroft got to his feet. "Why did you protect her – for John? What in God's name –" He heaved an impatient breath. "I admit that I underestimated him. We – no-one expected him to flee the limelight, since he so obviously craved it desperately. I had no idea of the extent of his patience. I accept responsibility for that. But I thought…I thought you would be diverted, if you looked for him…."
Sherlock grasped the side rail of the bed and struggled up again. "You let the trail get cold. Good God in heaven." His lips, dry and half-frozen, refused to work properly; he moistened them with a nearly as dry tongue. "Did you strew a few half-dead red herrings in my path as well, to divert me? Baby brother can't be trusted as far as you can throw him?"

Mycroft took a step forward and pointed a finger in Sherlock's face. "You were obsessed. You abandoned everything to chase him, to close his operations down. Your work, your home, your family, such as it was and for whatever it was worth. Even your dearest friend, Sherlock, even John. Good Christ, couldn't you see what Moriarty did to you? He succeeded beyond his wildest dreams. He made you his puppet and fed on every self-destructive tendency that you possess in such lavish abundance. He separated you from everything you held dear, and I swore that despite your own efforts to the contrary I wouldn't stand by and allow that to happen again."

Crimson-yellow streaks of agony and rage clawed up Sherlock's back, souvenirs of Moriarty, Moran, and Mycroft by proxy. His hand fumbled out and closed on the first thing it found, a covered tray of food, and flung it across the room, where it crashed against the wall. Milk and soup and bright red jelly splattered over pale blue. "Get out," Sherlock hissed. "Get out, get out."

A burly male orderly popped his head into the room. "All right?"

"Slight accident," Mycroft replied calmly, and reached for his topcoat. "Please ring for the custodial staff." He walked out the door, brushing past the orderly without a backward glance.

The orderly sauntered into the room. "Was that you, then, or was that him?"

"I need a drip," Sherlock said through gritted teeth. "My wounds hurt. And I need to know what room John Watson is occupying. Immediately."

He sank back against the pillows, ignoring whatever the orderly was saying, ignoring the steadily increasing rain, and focusing on the pain in his body, because surely it was the pain that was causing the grittiness in his eyes and the tightness in his throat and chest and surely a very large helping of oxycodone or morphine or fentanyl or any fucking thing would take that away, and preferably sooner rather than later. He just needed to know where John was; just knowing that he was nearby would ease it all a bit.

*

"Sherlock?"

Sherlock opened his eyes and saw John standing over his bed, wearing a scrub top and looking exhausted. For one hazy, disoriented moment he thought they'd assigned John to look after him, and that was pleasant and reassuring; he relaxed, smiled, and closed his eyes again. Then he remembered what had happened. He opened his eyes and half-sat up, groaning involuntarily as the bandages abraded his back. "Mary."

John's hands settled themselves ever so lightly on Sherlock's chest. "Lie down. She's out of surgery."

"Is she –"

"She's not conscious." John looked shattered and old. "She's in ICU. We're just…we're waiting to see how the next forty-eight hours go."
The rain had slowed to a fine mist, and night had fallen. Fog clung to the yellow arc lamps in the car park. He looked back at John's scrub top. There had been so much blood. Mostly Moran's – Sherlock had watched half his head shear away – but Mary's blood too, a dark puddle widening beneath her head, soaking into her hair.

Sherlock closed one of his hands over John's and squeezed gently. "Sit down."

"Okay." John dragged one of the uncomfortable hospital chairs, surely meant to prevent overlong visits, to Sherlock's bedside and dropped into it with a sigh, rubbing his eyes with the heels of his hands.

"Is Eleanor here?"

"Yeah. Yeah. She's in a –" John waved his hand. "They've got a sort of family room setup here, with minders and cots and things like that. She finally went to sleep after Mary got out of surgery. I can't stay for more than a few moments, I don't want to be away from her too long." He rubbed his eyes again. "Thank God she went to sleep. I was close to asking for a sedative for her. Not that she was screaming or anything, she was just silent and still. Scared the shit out of me."

Sherlock nodded and reached for the button to angle the top half of the bed up so he was in a semi-sitting position and could see John without straining his neck. "Have you slept at all?"

"Can't." John shook his head. "Dunno, maybe I will when I go back down there. Couple of hours, who knows. Don't worry about me. I came up to see you. How are you feeling?" He made an abbreviated gesture and then pulled his hand back. "All that was so…erm, chaotic."

"I'm all right." Sherlock shrugged, and the bandages abraded his back again. The petroleum jelly or whatever emollient they'd smeared underneath had dried. "I'll be fine, John." Silence fell between them, peculiarly awkward given the violent intensity of the past few days. "Thank you."

"What for?" John was looking down at his hands; his voice emerged rusty and hollow from his chest.

"For coming after me."

John pulled in a harsh breath through his nose, and his shoulders shook. "I should have listened to you. You tried to tell me about Mary, and I –"

"John –"

"I told you to fuck off. And you were right. You were right, and I was wrong." John let out a cawing sob and clapped a hand to his mouth, bending his head to his knees.

Sherlock pressed his lips together but couldn't prevent the itch in his eyes or the burning in his throat. He looked up at the ceiling and let the tears fall, cooling as they trickled down his temples and disappeared into his hair. "John," he said softly, and held his hand out. "John, please…"

John grabbed for Sherlock's hand and buried his face in the bedclothes, keening. "I'm sorry, Sherlock. I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Mycroft's words came rushing back, sending hot tendrils of guilt and shame into Sherlock's neural pathways. How much damage had his pride and stubbornness caused? Could he have ended all this much sooner or prevented it altogether? He could scarcely bring himself to pick up his hand and rest it on John's head; when he finally did, John's weeping intensified. Oh, John. Forgive me.
"Why –" John fumbled for a tissue, wiped his nose, and cleared his throat. "Why didn't she tell me that Moriarty was threatening her, Sherlock? Why didn't she tell us? We could have helped her. You could have done."

"She was afraid for you, and for your daughter, John. Moriarty knew her pressure points, he – oh, God."

Wet-eyed, John frowned. "What?"

"He placed Magnussen to intercept her. He began this long ago." Sherlock shook his head. Moriarty had hinted around that yesterday, hadn't he? But Sherlock had been too thick-witted to work it out. "John…you're not to blame for any of this. I am. And Mycroft."

John smiled wryly. "Yeah, he said he knew Moriarty was alive and kicking. He tried to keep you out of kicking range."

"Is that what he told you?"

"No, but that's what he does, yeah?" John let out a little chuffing laugh. "Oh, Christ, Sherlock. It's a huge fucking mess." He sniffled and wiped his eyes again. "Sorry for breaking down like that."

"It's all right." Sherlock's wounds were beginning to hurt again. They were giving him pain pills every four hours, but they weren't quite as effective as he'd have liked. "John – maybe we should have Mary airlifted back to England. If she –"

"No, it's too risky to move her. Besides, this is a good facility. The neurosurgeon flew in from London. There's nothing they can do for her in London that they can't do for her here." John looked around Sherlock's room reflectively. "What are they doing for you?"


John gazed at Sherlock intently. "Moriarty beat you half to death, Sherlock. The bastard was going to finish the job, him and his friend."

"Possibly. I wasn't interesting to him any longer."

"He needs to be stopped." John's eyes darkened.

"Focus on Mary, John. She needs you now."

John looked down at his knees again. "And what about you, huh?"

Sherlock mustered a smile and put it into his voice. "I'll be all right. Go to Mary. Make sure you're there when she wakes up."

Sighing, John pushed himself to his feet. He clasped his hands behind his back. "Sherlock…."


"Okay. I'll try to check back in a bit." John hesitated, then bent and tenderly kissed Sherlock's cheek. "See you later."

Too surprised to respond, Sherlock sat in silence as John left, then touched his fingertips to his cheek.
John's phone was battered and outdated, according to Nora, but it was still perfectly serviceable. There were also a few hundred photos on it, about half of them of Mary, and Nora scrolled through them over and over until the battery had flashed low and John had had to beg for a charger at the nurses' station. One of them kindly phoned down to IT and found one that was compatible, and since then – hours ago – Nora had sat with the thing plugged into the wall and scrolled endlessly through the pictures when they weren't allowed in the ICU. John supposed it wasn't the healthiest behaviour, maybe even was pathological. *Fuck it.* He was glad now he hadn't updated the phone or got rid of the pictures.

He paged through a magazine without seeing any of the pictures or articles. His last conversation with another doctor on Mary's case (he'd forgot the name of the doctor, a tall, stooped, wiry man with wire-rimmed spectacles), seven hours ago, clanged noisily in his head, obliterating any hope of distraction.

---*Dr Watson, Mrs Watson is experiencing a sudden increase of intercranial pressure. We're getting her back to surgery. Dr Choudhury is going to attempt drainage, but if she's not satisfied with the response, then she thinks that decompressive craniectomy is in order. I'll need your permission to do that.*

---*Jesus. John had groped for a chair, and the doctor had steadied him with a hand beneath his elbow. He'd looked over at Nora, fast asleep, curled up on her cot beneath two white cotton hospital blankets, cuddling John's phone. Dark smudges had marred the delicate flesh beneath her eyes, and her skin was wrongfully pallid, as if she'd been imprisoned in darkness for months. His poor baby.*

---*Of course we'll keep you informed as quickly as we can.*

---*Thank you. John had swallowed past a tremendous lump in his throat. Has she...is there a prognosis?*

---*Dr Watson, it's simply too early to tell at this juncture. If you could just sign here, time is of the essence....*

Now he sat paging through this goddamned stupid magazine, waiting as Dr Choudhury sawed his wife's head apart.

How many stupid, meaningless arguments had they had over nothing? All his petty bitching, his moods and exasperations and resentments. Certainly every couple had them, but if he'd been more patient, listened, watched her carefully...if he'd read the contents of that thumb drive instead of pitching it away and sweeping her past life under the rug instead of confronting it, talking it out, maybe he wouldn't have stored grievances. And worse, hurt Nora in the process. God knows what damage they'd done, and if Mary...oh, God.

*God, please. For Nora, please, if for nobody else. I swear I'll make things right, I'll tell her I won't....*

John dragged a crumpled tissue from his pocket and scrubbed at his eyes and nose, sniffing quietly so he wouldn't wake his daughter. *More of the last ten years, that's what you're begging for?*

If it made Nora happy, then yes. He'd try, for her. If there wasn't another way. Oh please God let there be another way. Please.

"*Dr Watson."*
Dr Choudhury stood in the doorway. She was in scrubs and a white coat; no gown, no cap, her hair in a twist. Small-shouldered and broad-hipped, she beckoned to him: out here, please.

Ice flooding his limbs, John stood and glanced back over his shoulder, where Nora slept on. He tiptoed into the corridor and closed the door. "Tell me." Dr Choudhury pressed her lips together, and that gesture, tiny as it was, told.

"Drainage and craniectomy were unsuccessful," Dr Choudhury said softly. "Mrs Watson ceased triggering respiration on her own forty minutes into the craniectomy and failed to respond to attempts at revival. I performed a neurological examination and apnoea test, followed by blood gas analysis. Pupillary and ocular movement tests were negative, as was facial sensation and motor response and pharyngeal and tracheal reflexes." She touched John's arm. "I'm very sorry."

John let his breath out in a great shuddering gasp and found that his legs couldn't support his weight any longer. He slid to the floor, and Dr Choudhury crouched next to him.

"Dr Watson? Can I get you some water?"

"No." How parched and ragged he sounded. Unnatural. "That's…." He turned his head to look at Nora through the glass wall. She slept on, peacefully oblivious. "I don't need anything."

"We're observing her for inconsistencies. Dr Kelly and I agree that five hours will be a sufficient period of observation, but given her injuries, I don't think we're wrong." Her hand was on his arm again, warm and soft. "Her records indicate that she's an organ and tissue donor."

"Yeah," John murmured. "We both are."

"In that case, if there's been no change following the confirmatory testing, we'll get her to a private room on a ventilator so that you and your daughter can have some time with her before we begin surgery."

"Surgery," John said blankly. "I – oh. Yes. All right." Surgery was a nice word for what really took place, necessary and altruistic as organ and tissue donation was.

"I can have a counsellor sent up here," Dr Choudhury went on. "Someone qualified to speak to children."

"I'm qualified to speak to my own daughter."

"Of course," Dr Choudhury soothed him. She got to her feet and held out her hand. John got up on his own, bracing himself against the wall. "I'll be back in a few hours, Dr Watson. I'll let the staff know to help you in any way they can."

"Thank you." John wasn't looking at her. He was watching Nora, who had opened her eyes and was watching him.

*

The nurses or techs had taken care with the room. Mary was still wired up: there was the ventilator, the EEG, the bedside monitor, but she looked all right, as if she were just sleeping. A soft cap covered the aftereffects of the surgery, and a pink blanket had been pulled up to her chin. Instead of
fluorescent lights, there was an incandescent lamp in a corner, and a pretty bouquet of pink roses on the ledge beside the window.

John forced himself not to grip Nora's hand tightly. He followed the organ donation specialist nurse into the room and stood at the foot of Mary's bed.

Nora had taken the news with so little reaction John had feared that she hadn't comprehended what he'd told her, and now, as she saw her mother, she emitted a soft, high-pitched succession of whimpers, like a small hurt animal, and it took a moment for John to discern the meaning behind the sounds.

"Mummy, Mummy, Mummy…"

Her cries tore through him, shredding him from his throat to the pit of his belly, and he gathered her close and then picked her up. "All right, darling. All right." Tears choked off the rest of his words; he buried his face in her fragrant hair, and they wept together.

The nurse brought an armchair to the side of Mary's bed, and he sat, Nora clinging to him tightly, reminding John that Mary had called her Nora Barnacle when she was tiny because of her mighty grip. Long minutes and the first storm of Nora's grief passed. Only the first storm. Christ have mercy.

At length she twisted to look at her mother again, and glanced questioningly at the nurse, who seemed to be mildly psychic. "You can touch her hand, sweetheart, and her face, very gently. You can kiss her."

Fresh tears welled in Nora's eyes, but she slid from John's lap and took Mary's hand. "She's warm."

"The machines are helping her stay warm," the nurse said.

"Oh." Nora looked over her shoulder at John, her expression troubled, then back at the nurse.

The nurse smiled, her seamed face wrinkling. "You can ask any question you want, love."

"Will it hurt when they do the surgery? Is the surgery what…what kills her?" The tears rolled down Nora's cheeks.

The nurse shook her head, and John was suddenly grateful for her presence. The organ surgeon and the nurse had explained things to both of them in a simplified fashion, but Nora had got things switched round. He couldn't have answered that question coherently. How was he going to manage the next few months alone? How could he explain what had happened to his daughter? He'd only given her the most rudimentary explanation, that there had been an accident, an explosion, that a piece of metal had struck her skull. She would have more questions, pointed, painful questions. How could he tell her any version of the truth?

"Not at all. Do you remember when I said we'd turn off that machine there?" The nurse pointed to the ventilator.

Nora nodded.

"That's what's keeping her body warm. After we turn the machine off, we'll take her body to the operating theatre. I promise you it will not hurt her."

"Okay," Nora whispered.

The nurse produced a pair of scissors and a large glassine envelope. "Would you like a lock of your
mummy's hair?"

"Yes." Nora began to cry again.

The nurse cut two locks of Mary's hair and put them in the envelope. She laid the envelope on a table and smiled gently at John and Nora. "I'll let you have a bit of time with her."

*Don't go*, John yearned to beg, but he nodded stoically and got to his feet as the nurse left. He rested a hand on Nora's shoulder, and stroked Mary's soft cheek with his free hand. "Do you want to kiss her cheek, darling?"

Nora's shoulder heaved with silent sobs. She asked for so little, his small quiet sweetheart. She was so brave, so strong, and in that moment he understood Mary's ferocious silence to protect her, to save them all, even if it had meant Mary's life. He understood, and he forgave, but it was too late for that.

John picked up his daughter and held her so that she could kiss her mother's cheek for the last time.

*"As we gather to commend our sister Mary to God our Father and to commit her body to the earth, let us express in prayer our common faith in the resurrection. As Jesus Christ was raised from the dead, we too are called to follow him through death to the glory where God will be all in all."*

Sherlock, positioned across the grave in order to keep a weather eye on John and Nora, pulled his coat more tightly round himself against the wind tugging it outward, and wrenched his gaze away from father and daughter for a moment to squint at the sullen, slate-coloured sky, from which a frigid rain fell, or blew sideways with extreme prejudice.

He wiped a bit of rain from his eye, and something dark obscured his view: plain, hand-stitched and rolled black silk. Without looking to the side, Sherlock stepped away from the taut shelter of Mycroft's umbrella – *fuck off, brother mine* – and returned his attention to John and Nora.

They stood huddled together under a much cheaper umbrella provided by the funeral directors, both resplendent in their dark Sunday best, both still and silent and shattered by grief. Major Sholto stood to John's side in a dark dress uniform – didn't the man own mufti? It seemed like a fetish at this point – and Harry Watson, fiddling with the clasp of her handbag and looking like she needed a drink very badly, flanked Nora.

Few others had remained for the committal ceremony. Lestrade and Molly; an elderly woman, probably a neighbour, who had wept ceaselessly; Mycroft, that fat, faithless bastard; and Mary's dermatologist employer and his staff. The dermatologist, his eyes fogged by benzodiazepines, had kept glancing over his shoulder during the funeral mass as if he'd expected to be gunned down.

*Don't worry, doctor. The only danger you're in is overdosing on lorazepam.*

Notably absent was the small knot of men and women who had sat together in the south transept of the church, soberly and expensively dressed but smelling collectively of Ballistol weapons emulsifier beneath their pricey mingled perfumes and colognes. One or two of them had given Mycroft curious if respectful glances, but they had kept themselves to themselves and had vanished immediately after the mass.
Sherlock didn't suppose Mary would have been disturbed by the low turnout. On the contrary, she'd likely have laughed and cocked a cheeky, cynical eyebrow. Who cares, Sherlock? Life's not a popularity contest, is it? Besides, I've probably got a better showing than you will when you take the big dirt nap.

Probably true.

The priest, shivering beneath his own umbrella, droned on. "Because God has chosen to call our sister Mary from this life to himself, we commit her body to the earth, for we are dust and unto dust we shall return. But the Lord Jesus Christ will change our mortal bodies to be like his in glory, for he is risen, the firstborn from the dead. So let us commend our sister to the Lord, that the Lord may embrace her in peace and raise up her body on the last day."

Sherlock examined John's face. Did those words comfort him? Did they comfort Nora? He couldn't imagine it, and it didn't seem so. But a small, irrational part of him hoped that it was so, even if Sherlock himself thought it was rubbish. John needed comfort and strength, and anything that might grant that was all to the good.

He wished he'd been of more help. He'd got a text from John, two words: She's gone.

Sherlock had phoned immediately, but it had gone straight to voicemail. So he'd replied via text: Where are you?

Busy. Paperwork.

Let me help.

No. You rest. I'll see you soon.

John, I'm so sorry. A limping, inadequate consolation.

I know. And then: Thank you.

And that had been all. He'd refrained – barely – from pester John, and had received terse details about the service via text. There had been no viewing of the body, merely promession followed by the funeral mass and committal.

"Dear friends, in reverence let us pray to God, the source of all mercies," the priest said. "Gracious Lord, forgive the sins of those who have died in Christ. Lord, in your mercy…"

"Hear our prayer," John and Harry murmured.

"Remember all the good they have done. Lord, in your mercy…"

Lestrade, Molly, and the weeping neighbour joined in. "Hear our prayer."

"Welcome them into eternal life. Lord, in your mercy…"

"Hear our prayer."

"Let us pray for those who mourn. Comfort them in their grief. Lord, in your mercy…"

Sherlock heard Mycroft beside him. "Hear our prayer."

His last exchange with Mary had been one of accord, of friendship. She'd sacrificed herself for John, but also for Sherlock. She needn't have done. After everything, he'd been fond of her. And he
believed that in her way, she'd been fond of him.

He swallowed hard and stared down at the raw earth that would cover her.

The priest had closed his breviary and was saying the final prayer. "God of holiness and power, accept our prayers on behalf of your servant Mary. Do not count her deeds against her, for in her heart she desired to do your will. As her faith united her to your people on earth, so may your mercy join her to the angels in heaven. We ask this through Christ our Lord."

Almost unbidden, Sherlock found himself responding with the others.

"Amen."

*

He lingered near a gnarled yew, unsure whether John wanted to be left alone but unable to leave without speaking to him. There would be no ritual of food afterward, which would have scandalised Mrs Hudson no end. The mourners simply left after a brief word with John and Nora. The funeral director was the last to go, indicating that the car would take John and Nora home whenever they wished, and then picking his way through the tombstones and slippery grass.

Sherlock stepped out from behind the tree before he overheard anything uncomfortably intimate. "John."

John, his arm round Nora's shoulders, looked up. "Thought you'd gone."

"Erm, no, not quite yet. I thought perhaps…you and Eleanor might like to come back to 221B and have lunch with me if you haven't any other plans."

Nora glanced questioningly at John, but John shook his head. "Thanks, Sherlock, but we're just knackered. Besides, our neighbour Mrs Pringle's made us enough food for an army. We'll never be able to eat it all." He smiled wanly. "Another time. Thanks all the same."

Sherlock returned the smile, though it was less a smile than an automatic reflex, devoid of any true humour. "All right. If you need anything at all, my door's always open. Tea, a book to borrow, Cluedo…"

John mustered a chuckle. "Thanks." He frowned at Sherlock suddenly. "Hey, where's your umbrella? You're going to catch your – you're going to get chilled. How are you feeling, anyhow?"

"Much better," Sherlock said, almost truthfully. The worst of the lacerations had healed, mostly, even if he was a mess of scabs – they'd fade, the dermatologist had told him, and if they didn't there were measures they could take – but his knee was a foul mess from overstraining it during his imprisonment. He was due for surgery next week. Boring. "Thank you."

"Well…we'd better go soon," John said.

"Yes. Yes. I'll leave you to it," Sherlock said. He half-turned, then turned back to Nora and crouched, ignoring the sudden howling in his knee. "I'm so sorry about your mummy. She was a very good friend to me and I'm going to miss her."
Nora nodded, and tears welled in her eyes, spilling over easily. "I miss her too."

Carefully, and slowly enough for her to back away, Sherlock gathered Nora into his arms, and she climbed into them willingly, squeezing him round the neck. John held the umbrella over both of them as Sherlock stroked her silken hair and rubbed circles against her wet wool coat. He stayed still, holding her, until she withdrew, and only then stood and embraced John. John was stiff and embraced Sherlock awkwardly because of the umbrella. "Thank you, Sherlock."

"Anything you need, John. I mean that."

"Thanks." John stepped away. "I'll...I'll text you. Soon." He didn't quite meet Sherlock's eyes as he spoke.

"All right." Sherlock tipped a wave at Nora and pivoted on his heel, attempting a casual stroll out of the churchyard whilst his knee screamed the mad scene from *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

Maybe it was just as well. He really was in pain. He'd go home, put away the plates and cutlery and napkins and all the folderol he'd set out and eat some of the stuff Angelo had sent over, and maybe one of the little patisseries from the French bakery that had delivered an assortment of pretty treats. And then he'd set aside the package he'd wrapped in stiff iridescent purple paper for Nora's birthday, a compound microscope, easy to use, but well-constructed and sturdy enough to stand up to whatever a ten-year-old child could visit upon it. Probably she wouldn't want gifts at the moment anyhow.

Mycroft was waiting outside the gates. Sherlock did his best to sail by despite the shrieking knee, but Mycroft caught his arm. "Sherlock."

Sherlock shook free violently. "Let go."

"I need to speak to you."

"But I have nothing to say to you."

The set of Mycroft's mouth was grim. "You needn't say a word. All you have to do is listen."

Sherlock sighed and rolled his eyes, but as Mycroft leant forward and spoke softly into his ear, he found himself unbending.

Mycroft pulled back. "Will you?"

"Yes."

* 

Mycroft leant forward, offering his iris to the biometric scanner, and waited whilst it performed its dispassionate analysis of his identity. The access light switched from red to green, and the thick glass door slid aside with a barely audible hiss. Mycroft nodded briefly to the soldier on duty, then began his trek down the corridor.

Some time ago, this narrow concrete-walled hallway had held the worst of the worst: all terrorists apprehended in the United Kingdom, pending trial or extradition or trade. More recently, the UK had
initiated a quiet policy of mutually assured destruction, including but not limited to terrorists' families via clever and stealthy abduction. It was astounding how quickly a Tube bomber folded when he saw his wife and children water-boarded in front of him. Of course it wasn't utterly foolproof, but it had done wonders to reduce the number of incidents in the UK. Of course, His Majesty the King and the Prime Minister had plausible deniability; humanitarianism was the public order of the day. Poor sods.

Today the corridor had only one occupant, provided with a plastic mattress on a shelf protruding from the wall, one cold meal per day, and paper-muslin prison pyjamas that tore too easily to make an effective suicide rope. One would think that being a prior guest would have dissuaded him from making a return visit, but some people never learned.

"Well, well, well. If it isn't Mikey Holmes." Behind an expanse of thick Plexiglas, James Moriarty lounged negligently on his cot, swinging his leg back and forth, back and forth. His voice issued through a speaker set into the wall. "Nice of you to come and see me. I've been sort of lonely."

"Have you indeed?" Mycroft inquired. "What a shame."

"Where are we, anyway – Pindar? Seems a bit familiar." "So it should. You've been here before."

Moriarty smiled through a two-week growth of beard, though his suavity was diminished; dark circles marred the skin beneath his eyes, and he'd lost weight. "Thought so. Different cell though, unless you've redecorated. Kind of a Jean Genet vibe you've got going here. Missing a few things, though – like access to a solicitor." Moriarty's smile thinned. "People are going to wonder where I've got to."

"Nick Dedalus was taken into custody following the discovery of multiple detonation devices in all Dedalus flagship and satellite stores," another voice said. Sherlock detached himself from a shadow, leaning on a cane and walking with care. Mycroft nodded in greeting, and Sherlock returned the nod.

"Oh, boy," Moriarty sighed. "You've got it all worked out. Congratulations."

"You're the one to be congratulated, Mr Moriarty," Mycroft said. "You hid in plain sight for years, and constructed a communications empire whilst doing a remarkable job of persuading those who knew your other identity to keep it secret. In short, you embarrassed me profoundly."

Moriarty offered Mycroft a modest smile. "Thanks. But hey, at least you're the smart Holmes brother. Sherlock's just the pretty one. And neither of you is all that bright. Sad." He turned his attention to Sherlock. "How's Miss Mary?"

"Dead," Sherlock replied.

"Ooh, and you are just cheesed off, right? Your best friend's wife pushing up daisies? Puh-lease. I did you a favour, Sherlock. Left the road wide open for you and Johnny boy. That's what you wanted, wasn't it?" Moriarty put on an expression of mock innocence. "Besides, she'd have got herself topped eventually. Professional hazard and all that."

Mycroft felt Sherlock's rage swelling and gestured briefly with his hand. "Your friend Sebastian Moran is also dead."

"Well." Moriarty's foot stilled, but his countenance remained serene. "That's the way it goes."

"And Stephen Moran is in custody once more."
Moriarty gave a mad giggle. "Might want to put a suicide watch on that one. He hates the bin more than anything."

"He was actually very accommodating. We found the bunker under the Moran house thanks to his assistance," Mycroft said, and the first satisfying reaction from Moriarty manifested itself in slightly flaring eyes. A soft and almost creamy pleasure wound itself round Mycroft's spine and settled there. "Quite a sizeable number of excellent pieces, according to Lady Howe's database. Including the Titus painting."

"Lady Howe." Moriarty recovered himself, grinning. "So many people dead, eh? Did you tell baby brother the real reason you never bothered coming after me, Mikey?"

Flushing, Mycroft glanced at Sherlock. "It was more expedient to allow you to –"

"Oh, come on." Moriarty rose from his plastic mattress and drew close to the glass, placing his hands flat on the clear surface. "The problem with you boys is that you're just sooo sentimental. Mikey knew Meredith Howe was doing business with me, Sherlock. He just didn't want her hurt. Except he should have known...everyone gets hurt eventually. Right, Mycroft?" His grin widened. "His fuckbuddy was more important than you, Sherlock. He couldn't admit that to you – I bet he couldn't even admit it to himself. Hope that doesn't bruise your itty-bitty feelings too much."

"I did tell her it was extremely unwise to get involved with you," Mycroft murmured.

"But I threw you a tasty bone here and there, through her. An arms deal here, a little terrorist cell there. Of course you knew that. That was why you let it dangle so long. So to speak. And never a word to baby brother, who can't take care of himself." Moriarty beat a frantic tattoo on the glass with his fingertips and spun around, dancing close to Sherlock. "How far do you think you'd have got in Serbia without Mycroft, Sherlock? Not half a kilometre, I promise you that. How are you healing now, by the way?"

"Mycroft," Sherlock said.

"Yes?"

"I owe you an apology. I was very foolish to believe that there was any substance to this man beyond the momentary diversion he provided."

Moriarty's eyes widened. "Substance? Are you having me on? I am the emperor of one of the planet's biggest communication conglomerates."

"And you're perfectly willing to blow it all to hell – why? Vengeance? Perversity? Ennui?"

"All of the above will do." Moriarty went back to his mattress. "Let's face it, boys. It's a dull old world. Might as well entertain ourselves while we're here. Now that you've queered this particular plan it'll have to be something else, but don't worry. I've got time. I expect I'll be out of here in...oh, three or four weeks. Unless you two have another clever roof-jumping plot up your sleeves, in which case it'll probably be sooner. Yes? No?"

"No," Mycroft said, and drew his phone from his pocket. "Enough people have died because of you, Mr Moriarty. It's time to put that to a stop."

Moriarty put his hands behind his head. "You know prison won't hold me."

"I'm well aware." Mycroft dialled a number. "Holmes here. Begin the sequence, please." He nodded at Sherlock and stepped back.
Sherlock stepped toward the Plexiglas panel. "Jim."

"Ye-es, darling?"

"You murdered Mycroft's dearest friend, and my best friend's wife. What made you think that we could possibly forgive that?"

Moriarty heaved a sigh. "Oh, come on, Sherlock. You're not going to invoke ordinary sentiment at this late date?"

"When Mycroft first proposed coming here today, I suggested the use of hydrogen cyanide. I thought it was poetic justice, given your involvement in exploiting the tragic legacy of that smuggled artwork. But Mycroft argued against it. Lucky you."

Slowly, Moriarty sat up. "Say again?"

"Oh, I think you heard me." Sherlock smiled. "Actually, my first suggestion was garroting you with wire myself, but that would have required too much explanation and paperwork. Apparently, according to Mycroft, there's some legal loophole for using nerve gas. The details were dull – you understand."

"You're going to kill me. You. Moriarty giggled. "Uh-huh."

"Eventually we agreed that Sarin was the best method of disposal. Are you familiar with it?"

Moriarty cast a wild look at Mycroft. "You're just going to let him –"

"We can cut off your speaker at any time, Mr Moriarty," Mycroft interposed smoothly.

Moriarty tightened his mouth and said nothing.

"As I was saying," Sherlock said, "Sarin's probably the best way to go. It's not dignified, but it's effective. First your chest will tighten up. It'll feel like someone's giving you a nice, cosy embrace, probably the sort you never had after your mum passed on. But then, as the acetylcholine builds up in your body, your secretions and smooth muscles will have a field day. Your nose will run, your eyes will water, you'll drool and probably vomit. Then your bladder and bowels will evacuate. You'll convulse, become paralysed, and then die." Sherlock smiled. "But don't worry. It shouldn't take more than ten minutes."

Moriarty came back to the glass. "You can't do that."

"We're doing it. You may have noticed that the airflow has stopped, that it's a bit stuffier in your cell. When Mycroft receives his confirmation code – which shouldn't be in more than a minute – he'll give the go signal. Then they'll send the gas in through the air vents. It's odourless and tasteless, so you won't know until you start to salivate. Any last words, Jim?"

"Yeah," Moriarty said. "Yeah, I've got a word for you. There are about two thousand people who are going to be asking some pretty difficult questions about why I've disappeared, and more to the point, why I didn't receive…." He took a deep breath, and shrieked: "due process!"

"Those same people will be vulnerable to accusations of collusion if they were truly close to you," Mycroft said. "More likely, they'll be scrambling to distance themselves from you, maintaining that they never really knew Nick Dedalus, that he hired outside talent for certain projects, that he kept very much to himself. His suicide will come as a surprise, but I assure you that no-one will mourn." His phone buzzed, and he picked it up. "Proceed, please."
Moriarty slammed on the glass with both hands, leaving streaks of sweat. "You FUCKS." He backed away, paced restlessly for five seconds, then turned to them once more. "You know Dedalus is worth billions. I could let you in on some of that. All of it."

"It was worth billions," Sherlock remarked.

"Okay, okay. I can make restitution to John. Jeez. It wasn't as if you were crazy about her, Sherlock." Moriarty uttered another giggle. "Look, you're not still peeved over the beating? God, it couldn't have hurt that much. You look fine."

"I feel fine."

"Okay. Wait. Everyone has his price, you're not that special a snowflake. What's yours?"

"You're paying it now," Sherlock said softly. "I couldn't be more pleased."

"You can't do this. You can't do this!" Moriarty shouted, his voice distorting through the speaker. "Someone else has to be listening. This isn't legal!" He bent over for a moment, unable to get his breath.

"It's beginning," Mycroft murmured.

Moriarty screamed and laughed and sobbed, clawing blindly at the glass, at his face and hair. He convulsed on the cold concrete floor of the cell as the neurotoxin did its work. Wordlessly, Mycroft and Sherlock drew closer together, watching and listening as Moriarty's screams became groans, and then grunts.

Then, at last, at long last, he was still.

*

Mycroft's car drew up to the kerb at the Richmond Terrace entrance to the Ministry of Defence. "You're certain you wouldn't like a lift?" He stopped short of inviting Sherlock for a late dinner, though God knew Sherlock looked as though he needed a good meal; his face was terribly drawn and pale. Whatever they'd participated in today, the rapprochement between them wasn't yet complete. Perhaps it never would be now.

"No. No, I think I'd like to walk. Doctor's instructions anyhow." Sherlock tapped his leg with the cane.

"Very well. Sherlock…" Mycroft hesitated. "Thank you."

Sherlock shook his head. "Too little, too late. And too many ghosts now."

"Yes. Yes, I suppose so," Mycroft sighed. "Good night, Sherlock." He climbed into the car, and watched Sherlock limp down the road, aided by his cane.

"Shall I follow, sir?" his driver inquired.

Mycroft rubbed his eyes and chuckled. He'd been thinking that very thing. "No, no. Drive home."

As the car crawled past Sherlock, Mycroft watched Sherlock pull his phone from his pocket and sighed again.
"Tread softly, brother mine.

*

"'At once!' cried Frodo. 'Why, I thought you were staying on for at least a week. I was looking forward to your help.'

'I did mean to, but I have had to change my mind. I may be away for a good while; but I'll come and see you again, as soon as I can. Expect me when you see me! I shall slip in quietly. I shan't often be visiting the Shire openly again. I find that I have become rather unpopular. They say I am a nuisance and a disturber of the peace. Some people are actually accusing me of spiriting Bilbo away, or worse. If you want to know, there is supposed to be a plot between you and me to get hold of his wealth."

John's phone buzzed with a text. "Hold on, sweetheart." He groaned and sat up, extricating his arm from beneath Nora's neck, and pulling his phone from his pocket with a hand that had gone half numb.

_JM dead. Mycroft and I have seen to it personally. SH_

John blew out a breath and laid the phone face-down on the night table. Was he meant to reply to that?

_Great news, thanks._

_You should have waited for me._

_I wanted to do it myself._

_Too late now._

He squeezed his eyes shut. Sherlock meant well, and John appreciated the news. It was just –

"You okay, Daddy?"

Nora's sweet face was looking up at his, and her little hand was on his chest. Of course she never said a word, but she was watchful, as if John was the next one to be snatched away from her unexpectedly. It couldn't be borne. Tomorrow he was calling Ella to see if she could recommend a decent child psychologist. He couldn't cope with this himself.

"Fine, sweetheart. Where were we?"

"A plot to get Bilbo's wealth." They had read the trilogy once before, a few years ago, and she'd read it on her own twice.

"Oh, of course. Right.' Some people!' exclaimed Frodo. 'You mean Otho and Lobelia. How abominable! I would give them Bag End and everything else, if I could get Bilbo back and go off tramping in the country with him. I love the Shire. But I begin to wish, somehow, that I had gone too. I wonder if I shall ever see him again.'

'So do I,' said Gandalf. 'And I wonder many other things. Good-bye now! Take care of yourself! Look out for me, especially at unlikely times! Good-bye!'
Frodo saw him to the door. He gave a final wave of his hand, and walked off at a surprising pace; but Frodo thought the old wizard looked unusually bent, almost as if he was carrying a great weight. The evening was closing in, and his cloaked figure quickly vanished into the twilight. Frodo did not see him again for a long time."

*

*Can you stop over today, 5 pm or so?*

Sherlock's heart leapt, but he forced himself to sit still for thirty seconds before replying. *Of course. See you then.*

Nine weeks had passed since the funeral, and they hadn't clapped eyes on each other once. Given the past four years, it wasn't extraordinary, but it had cut keenly nonetheless. Still, Sherlock had kept his distance, exercising the greatest self-control he'd ever mustered in his entire life. He'd confined his communications to texts, and that, at least, had meant they were talking to one another, after a fashion.

*What is the lowest systolic numerical reading that indicates hypertension? SH*

*140 to about 160 depending on a few factors.*

*Thanks.*

*You could have looked that up.*

*My laptop's across the room.*

*Haven't you got a phone in your hand?*

*I was busy texting you.*

Ten minutes had passed before John's reply.

*Okay then.*

It was better than silence, which would have been utterly unbearable. Sherlock had issued a few invitations: to lunch, to dinner, to tea, a trip to the zoo with an additional invitation to Nora, an excursion to the Natural History Museum, all of which John had rebuffed. Gentle rebuffs, but rebuffs all the same.

Flailing, Sherlock had complained to Molly. "He's ignoring me. I must have made him angry."

Maybe it was the text about Moriarty, though Sherlock wasn't about to mention that to Molly. Surely John would have wanted to know, though?

Molly had shaken her head. "He's grieving, Sherlock. Give him some time."

"Well, how much time, for God's sake?"

"Sherlock!"

Right; he still had a few things to learn, apparently, one of which was that grief hadn't a timetable. It
wasn't as though he hadn't grieved himself. But burrowing into his house and cutting himself off from life wouldn't help John, or Nora for that matter. It certainly wouldn't bring Mary back.

Three weeks ago, Sherlock had dropped by unannounced in the evening, bringing the microscope he'd purchased for Nora's birthday. The house had been dark, but he'd rung all the same, waiting for fifteen minutes before giving up and leaving the package on the doorstep. He'd texted so as not to alarm John.

_The garishly wrapped package is for Eleanor, from me. Belated birthday felicitations. SH_

A reply had come a few hours later.

_That's really sweet Sherlock, thanks. Sorry we missed you. No explanation of where they'd been, though it could have been as simple as dinner or Nora's swimming practice. John had always been succinct to the point of brusqueness in his texts, but never evasive. However, per Molly's advice, Sherlock had decided to leave it alone._

Three days later he'd received a handwritten letter, in purple ink on lilac paper:

_Dear Mr Holmes,_

_Thank you very much for the gift of the microscope. Dad said it's a very nice one and I can use it all the way through university. Thank you also for the slides and specimens. My favourites were the fish scales and glucose and grasshopper wing. I know I'm going to have lots of fun with it and learn a lot as well._

_Thank you again._

_Sincerely yours,_

_Nora Watson xxx_

Sherlock had carefully folded up the letter and tucked it behind the cover of his battered copy of _Pinocchio_ before placing the book back onto his shelf.

It would have been the most disingenuous sort of thing to say that he hadn't hoped the gift would effect a thaw of some kind, but things had gone on just as before. Sherlock had thrown himself into work, tackling cases at the Met with an enthusiasm and ferocity that had startled even Donovan into bemused silence. It hadn't lasted, though – how could it? Most of the cases were absurd and dull in the extreme. The last one was some dimwitted, xenophobic hydraulics engineer who'd got his thumb cut off in a lift thanks to a mysterious foreign national, and he hadn't even stayed to finish reading that one. He'd hit a wall.

But now this text had arrived, and Sherlock found himself neatening his hair, which he'd allowed to grow a bit longer lately, dressing with more than usual care, pulling out his newest shoes, and tamping down a minuscule flutter in his stomach.

He arrived at the house on Wricklemarsh Road promptly at five o'clock and knocked on the door, which John opened just as promptly. Sherlock had a second to survey him before John spoke or gestured.

John had lost the slight potbelly he'd put on, and more weight all over his body, but the loss didn't particularly flatter him; he looked gaunt and a bit pallid, as though he'd spent far too much time in darkened rooms. He'd cut down on the drinking – the tiny angiomass Sherlock had noticed on his skin a few months before had flattened and faded, and apart from his pallor his skin was clear and no
longer puffy. His trousers and jumper were just slightly too large, making him look as if he'd dressed up in someone else's clothes. But his eyes warmed at the sight of Sherlock, and he stepped forward, enclosing Sherlock in a tight if far too brief embrace.

"Hey." John took a step back and swept a hand out. "Come on in. Let me take your coat. How's your knee – feeling okay?"


"Yes," John said lightly, "yes. Excellent observation. Come on in the kitchen. You want a beer?"

"All right." Sherlock followed John into the kitchen, which had been all but denuded of its cheerful furnishings. The table and chairs were still in place, but everything personal was gone. Mary's cookbooks, the jars shaped like assorted fruits, Nora's drawings, all gone. A box of pizza sat on the worktop; containers of takeaway bulged a tied bin bag on the floor outwards.

John opened the refrigerator and took out two bottle of Fuller's, handing one to Sherlock. "There you go."

"Thanks." Sherlock opened the bottle and sipped cautiously. A funny sinking sensation had begun to fester in the pit of his belly. "How are you?"

John shrugged. "You know. Or maybe not. I've got some good days, some bad days."

"And Eleanor?"

John's mouth tightened. He sat at the table opposite Sherlock and set his beer down without tasting it. "She doesn't say much. I've got her in counselling – that's where she is now. I think it's doing her good, but...who knows?" He shook his head, picked up the beer, and sniffed at it before replacing it on the bare table again.

After Molly had chided Sherlock for insensitivity, he'd done his research, coming up with a handy guide of proper things to say to a grieving spouse. None of them really seemed to apply to John, but he searched and dug up one cliché that might possibly do the job. "You did the best you could, John. That's all anyone can do. You mustn't flay yourself now."

John stared at him. "Did you get that out of a book or something?"

"Sort of," Sherlock admitted.

John sighed and began to peel the label from his bottle of beer. "No, Sherlock. The point...the point is that if either of us had done our best, then maybe Nora would have two parents right now. We'd be sniping at each other, but at least Mary would be alive." A bitter smile stretched his mouth.

"You can blame yourself until the end of time, but it won't change a bloody thing," Sherlock said bluntly. "Did you tell Nora that?"

"No, of course I didn't!" John snapped.

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow and took a drink. "Maybe you shouldn't say it to yourself."

"Smartarse," John muttered, and finally took a brief swallow from his own bottle, then wiped at the
beads of condensation on the glass. Sherlock had never seen him so fidgety. "I'm trying to do what's best for her now. I don't even know. Hoping the move will help." He kept his eyes trained on the bottle.

"Have you sold the house already?"

"Yeah. Some young couple from East Ham, no kids. They want to renovate." John looked around. "Just as well, I guess."

An idea sprang half-formed into the forefront of Sherlock's mind and he clasped his hands together hard under the table to keep from blurting it out. "I imagine you've picked out a place to live already."

"Yep. Spain."

Sherlock's stomach shrivelled into a hard little knot. "Spain?" he repeated stupidly.

"For a while, anyway," John said with another shrug. "Somewhere warmer for a while, somewhere not…connected with anything. Then, I don't know. We might travel for a few years."

An immediate cry of protest rose up from Sherlock's throat, but he choked it back. **Making a scene won't help. Calm, rational discussion, that's the way to go.** "And Eleanor's amenable to that?"

John's eyes narrowed, and his posture suddenly went ramrod straight. "What do you mean, amenable?"

"Well. Her friends, her swimming, her education, for starters."

"Yeah. Yeah." John slumped down again. "I'm hiring a tutor. Sort of a tutor-slash-nanny. Or au pair, or governess, or whatever they're calling them now. I'm still looking at CVs, but I should be making a decision in a few weeks."

Sherlock nodded calmly. "I expect you can afford that now."

John stared at Sherlock for a long time without speaking. Sherlock wondered what he'd said to offend John and was about to ask when John stood up. "Stay here for a second." He left the room and went upstairs, returning with a slim tablet that he opened up onto the table. Sitting down heavily, he began typing, then pushed the tablet over to Sherlock. "Have a look at that."

It was a bank statement page, a simple one with the balance on top and transactions below. Sherlock read the top figure, then read it again. His mouth dropped open. "Is that correct?"

"Yep. Not a typo."

Sherlock shook his head. "Twenty-two million. Where did it come from? You said —"

"Yeah, what – five? Turns out she had more in a Swiss account. And she had this friend – it's a long story, but this friend, colleague, left her all her money, so…the night before…before all that went down with Moriarty, she flew to Zurich and had it transferred. So we're ridiculously rich now, Nora and me. Big fucking deal." John shook his head. "She knew, Sherlock. She knew it was the fucking end of it all, and she never said a word."

"She saved us both," Sherlock said quietly. "And Eleanor too."

John nodded. Stiffly, he picked up his bottle, then hurled it at the opposite wall. Glass shattered and
beer sprayed in all directions. "God damn it!"

Sherlock wiped his cheek and blinked beer out of his right eye.

John let out a harsh, dry sob and rested his head on his arms. "Fucked it up. We fucked it up."

For a very long moment, Sherlock sat frozen, uncertain of himself and his power to help. Molly had said that the only thing to really assuage grief was time, and that had felt true for Mrs Hudson, for his parents, but this – Mary hadn’t died of age-related illness, and Sherlock had had a hand in her death besides – what in God’s name was he supposed to do? John was clearly in the Anger stage of the Kubler-Ross model of grieving, flawed as that probably was, and though Sherlock didn’t fear John's anger, he did fear doing something to alienate John for a long time.

Eventually he did the only thing he could think to do: he got out of his chair and moved close to John, resting a hand on his back. John turned and grasped Sherlock round the waist, burying his face in the scant flesh of Sherlock's hip. Sherlock stroked John's hair and shoulders. "I wish I could have done more, John."

"Oh, God, so do I," John mumbled. "I don't know what the fuck she was thinking." He pulled away and rubbed his eyes. "Sorry about the bottle."

The moment was broken. Sherlock sat and proffered his beer. "Want to throw this one?"

John gave a wan chuckle. "No thanks."


"God." John shook his head. "I – Sherlock, listen to me." Tentatively, he reached out and grasped Sherlock's forearm. "Listen. You mean more to me than anyone except Nora, and – and Mary. But I can't. I can't. I've got to get her away from here. She needs a change of scenery. Even her therapist said it would be a good idea for a while."

"A while, not –"

"And I can't stay. I've got to give her the best life I possibly can. And that means keeping her as safe as I possibly can." John withdrew his hand and stared miserably at the tabletop.

"Safe," Sherlock repeated.

"Yeah."

"Away from me, you mean?"

"I didn't –"

"John, Moriarty is dead."

"I know." John met Sherlock's gaze. "I know that. But what about next time? Some copycat, or…I don't know, someone who thinks he can get leverage against you by hurting someone you're close to? I can't risk that. Not my little girl. She's all I've got."

Sherlock turned his face away. How could he fight that? And John was right. From the moment at the pool, when John had stepped into the light strapped into a Semtex vest, Sherlock had known that
love was the most precarious sort of vulnerability. Wasn't that why he'd left John after the jump from Bart's roof, after all?

He nodded and managed a slight smile, though it cost him the last of his strength and grace. "Of course. I understand completely."

John looked puzzled at Sherlock's easy acceptance. "Do you? I don't –"

"No, of course I do. She's your only child, it's natural you should want to protect her." Sherlock got to his feet. "When are you leaving?"

"Erm…next Tuesday. Late morning. If you want, we could have breakfast…"

"Certainly. Certainly." He couldn't bear that. "I'd better be off. You probably have to fetch Eleanor."

"Oh, God, yeah," John said, looking at his watch. "Yeah. Erm, do you want to share a cab?"

"No, I'm still under orders to walk as much as possible," Sherlock said, twisting frozen lips into a horrifying grimace that he hoped passed for a smile. "Thanks, though." He accepted his coat and thrust his arms into the sleeves. "Well. Text me, yes?"

"Yes, yes. Absolutely." John hesitated, then pulled Sherlock into another embrace.

Sherlock endured it, and found it within himself to bring his arms round John's body. Oh, God almighty, John, don't do this to me. He pulled away first and tossed off a jaunty wave. "Bye."

"Sherlock?"

"Yes?" Sherlock stood still, looking out at the darkening street – though not so dark lately: spring was on its way.

"About Moriarty. I never thanked you for that."

Sherlock turned back to John. "It wasn't just for you," he replied coolly. "It should have been done a long time ago."

John winced a little. "Well. Thanks all the same."

"Of course." Sherlock hesitated. "Good night, John."

He made his way firmly down the front walk, out to the road, and toward the little green and a taxi stand. At the last moment he passed the taxi stand, moving automatically, steadily, relentlessly, back toward the centre of London, back to 221B and its cavernous, yawning silence.

*

A thousand times Mycroft had yearned to change the settings on Sherlock's text messages – to silence them, in fact. He told himself that would relieve him of numerous burdens. But in truth, he'd never be able to relax; he saw himself checking his phone in perpetuity. Better to have the jarring and vaguely upsetting Bartók ringtone he'd chosen. It suited Sherlock down to the ground.

He smiled apologetically at the woman across from him. "Pardon me, Madam Chancellor."
Emergency line." He opened the text and read it with a sinking heart.

*Salvia Divinorum 15x 70 mg*
*Secobarbital 300 mg*
*Flunitrazepam 15 mg*
*Diamorphine 700 mg*

"Oh, Christ," Mycroft whispered, and typed, with a shaking hand: *Where are you?* He got to his feet. "No, please, don't get up. I do apologise, but this can't wait. Undersecretary Mbanefo and Mr Pennington will take you through the rest of the agreement, and I will be back as soon as it's humanly possible."

The Chancellor nodded pleasantly. "Of course. Until then."

Mycroft nodded round the table and left the room as quickly as dignity permitted. "Car," he barked at Anthea, and dashed down the hallway. The Bartók phrase rang again, dissonant, shivering down his spine.

*Home.*

"Good," Mycroft breathed. "Good."

*

Without waiting to knock, Mycroft burst into the flat (unlocked – despite a half dozen security measures, Sherlock would never learn), expecting to see his younger brother sprawled on the floor, probably unconscious, likely bleeding from the nose and possibly frothing at the mouth. What he saw was Sherlock fully dressed, perched on the sofa, nose buried in a book.

Sherlock frowned. "You never knock."

"Get your coat."

"Why?"

Mycroft clenched his teeth. "We're going to hospital so you can drink a few litres of charcoal and have your stomach pumped, that's why. Get your goddamned coat, Sherlock."

Sherlock tilted his head to one side, blinking innocently. "I haven't taken anything yet."

"But –"

"Oh." Sherlock waved a negligent hand. "You're always going on about the bloody list, so I thought I'd just…I don't know. Tell you in advance."

Mycroft willed his heart to slow to a reasonable rhythm. "I was under the impression that you were already at death's door." He began to remove his coat, then looked down at the shabby armchair, thought better of it, and sat gingerly.

Sherlock turned a page in his book. "What gave you that idea?"

"Previous experience."
"Anecdotal data."

The coffee table in front of the sofa held the contents of Sherlock’s text and their assorted methods of delivery. Mycroft eyed them with distaste and then examined Sherlock, who was insouciantly turning pages in his book – *Pinocchio*, the worn copy he’d adored as a child. *Do I look that stupid? Or is it a game?* "Would you like me to stay?"

"Entirely up to you, Mycroft. I got Jaffa cakes." Sherlock nodded toward the kitchen.

"No, thank you. I was in the midst of a meeting with the German chancellor, you know."

"Well, if it's important, you'd better go back."

"Sherlock!" Mycroft thundered, and Sherlock looked up at him, startled. Only then did Mycroft truly see Sherlock's countenance – not the aftereffects of the severe beating he’d received, for perversely, Moriarty hadn’t damaged his face – but the new dark smudges beneath his eyes, the dreadful hollows of his cheeks, all too suggestive of the skull beneath the skin, the lack of vivacity that permeated not just his face, but his entire body and spirit. *Oh, Sherlock.*

Sherlock took a deep breath and closed the book, setting it beside him.

"It's John," Mycroft said.

"He's leaving for Spain," Sherlock said. "Today. In an hour." He pressed his lips together. "He wanted me to have breakfast with him and Eleanor this morning, see him off properly, but I begged off."

"When you say he's leaving, I assume that means –"

"For good," Sherlock replied. "He's sold his house. Got rid of all his furniture, put most of his stuff in storage."

"That foolish, foolish man," Mycroft said, and shook his head.

"Don't blame him. It's not his fault." Sherlock drew his knees up and encircled them with his arms, hugging them close. "He wants to keep his daughter safe, he can't be blamed for that."

"Safe," Mycroft snorted. "Does he intend to enclose her in a plastic bubble? Achieve immortality somehow?"

"Mycroft –"

"Don't," Mycroft retorted. "I understand that he's grieving, but that makes him no less a fool. Tell me, Sherlock – did you listen to him spout that nonsense?"

Sherlock shrugged. "A bit."

"And you allowed it to defeat you."

"He's right," Sherlock snarled, leaping to his feet. "And you were right – about caring. Jesus Christ, for as many times as you've said it, you’d have thought it would have sunk in at some point."

Sherlock stalked into the kitchen and banged the kettle on the cooker. "Tea?"

"Why not?" Mycroft rose as well and strolled to the window. He parted the dusty curtain and peered down at the street. Sherlock's London was buzzing, buzzing, but he was disconnected from it. Entirely unacceptable.
All at once Sherlock was at his side. "I thought of offering to… I don't know. Scale down. But I couldn't, not for long. The boredom would kill me, and ultimately I'd…." He swept a hand toward the coffee table. "And what good would that do anyone?"

"None at all," Mycroft agreed. Together, they watched the traffic on Baker Street. A cab drew up and disgorged an elderly couple; the sturdier of the two women held out a steadying hand for the frailer one, and they half-tottered down the street. "I was wrong, Sherlock."

Sherlock half-turned. "About what?"

"About caring. Withheld because of pride or stubbornness or hurt, and one tells oneself that it's not truly necessary, that it becomes a distraction or an annoyance. When abeyance alchemises into rigidity and permanence, and when one's mask and suit of thorns melds into the flesh..." Mycroft shook his head again.

Sherlock's head was bowed, his fists near his mouth. "I can't. Eleanor. He told me –"

"I had an interesting conversation with her when John was searching for you," Mycroft interrupted. "Well. As interesting a conversation as one can have with a ten-year-old child. She asked some very pointed questions about where her father was going, so eventually I got a bit weary and told her the truth."

"What did you say?" Sherlock looked horrified.

"Nothing graphic, for goodness' sake. I said you'd been kidnapped and John was rescuing you. She said that her mother collected news clippings and web articles about the pair of you, and that you often saved each other from one sort of danger or another. And that you were both brave."

In the kitchen, the kettle had begun to whistle. Sherlock frowned. "Hold that thought." He strode away, and Mycroft went back to his contemplation of Baker Street. Sherlock returned with tea and handed a mug to Mycroft. "And?"

Mycroft shrugged. "I said she should be proud of having such a brave father, and she said she was." He took a sip of tea and met Sherlock's gaze. "Do you understand?"

Sherlock's eyes became suspiciously bright. He looked away, and one hand darted up and quickly swiped beneath his eye. He swallowed and then looked at his watch. "Mycroft –" he began hoarsely.

Mycroft pulled his phone from his coat pocket. "Yes, yes. Go on."

"Has your car got a –" Sherlock twirled his finger.

"No need for haste; I'll make the necessary arrangements. Just get there."

Sherlock banged his mug on the windowsill, leaving a splash of tea on the woodwork and curtains. He dashed to the rack, tore his coat from a hook, and hurried into it, throwing the door wide open. Funny – no evidence that he'd ever had a bad knee. Perhaps psychosomatic arthroscopic injury was contagious. "Do you want to –"

"I'll call for another car. Go, Sherlock."

"Right, I'm gone." Sherlock pounded down the stairs, and then back up. He hovered in the doorway. "Mycroft….""

Mycroft scowled. "Are you going, or do you plan to stand there and waste time making a scene?"
Pivoting on his heel, Sherlock ran down the stairs.

Mycroft watched Sherlock hurl himself into the car, and the car slid into traffic. Sedately, he sipped his tea. *I love you too, you little nitwit.*

* * *

"Dr Watson." The charter airline's sole flight attendant was blonde and petite, dressed in a short-skirted red uniform vaguely reminiscent of a 1960s stewardess. "I'm so sorry to have to tell you this. We're experiencing some electrical issues and Captain Vaughan estimates that our takeoff will be delayed by an hour." She smiled, professional and apologetic.

John contained his sigh of annoyance and returned the smile. "No problem."

"Can I get you a cocktail while you wait? Something for the young lady?"

"I'll have some sparkling water," John said. "Sweetheart, do you want some as well?"

Nora shrugged. "Okay," she said unenthusiastically.

The flight attendant leant down as if she were about to impart a particularly juicy secret. "We have Orangina if you'd like."

"Okay."

"Fantastic. Again, I'm so sorry for the inconvenience," the flight attendant said, and turned on her heel.

"It's fine," John said, unsure if she'd heard. He'd only been filthy rich for a few weeks; he had no intention of turning into one of those snarly bastards who berated the help about every little inconvenience that fell across their path. Though it was amazing, he marvelled, how gently cushioned his life had become in such a short time.

Packing had been simple. He'd called a company who specialised in organisation, and two efficient young women popped round and took all of Mary's things, with the exception of her jewellery, and boxed it up for Oxfam. Another company had come by and packed everything else that was personal and had taken it to a storage facility where, John mused, it would probably sit for ten years, undisturbed, until he had the courage to toss it all. The furniture had been taken to Oxfam shops as well, along with all the electronics and housewares. They'd start fresh in Barcelona, John decided.

Now they had this entire small jet to themselves, the very lap of luxury. Their hotel suite in Barcelona was theirs for a month, ample time to find a flat. John had arranged for an agency in Barcelona to send a number of bilingual au pairs for interviews during their stay. Even Nora's therapy was on track – Maria, her therapist, had agreed to video sessions once a week.

It was true that Nora wasn't wild with joy about the move, but she hadn't kicked up a fuss either. She'd asked about a new school, and had received the news of a tutor silently. She hadn't mentioned the swimming at all, and John gathered that she wouldn't miss it. But if she did, there were certainly swim clubs in Barcelona – it was on the ocean after all, surely there was lots of swimming to be had.

"How are you doing, darling? Good book?"
Nora nodded without looking up from her tablet. "It's all right."

"That's a ringing endorsement."

She kept her face turned downward. "Is an electrical problem dangerous?"

_Ah._ "Well," John began, "it can be, if it's not caught in time. Fortunately, airlines are very cautious, and that's why we're still on the ground. They need to make sure everything's absolutely perfect before we take off, so it's _not_ dangerous. Don't worry. It's going to be a great flight. I'm excited to see Spain, aren't you?"

Nora nodded again. "Yeah."

"It's going to be great," John repeated, and tousled her hair. Nora looked up and smiled at him, and he sat back, reassured, and stretched his legs. It _was_ going to be fine. This was exactly what they needed. It would have been nice to say goodbye to Sherlock, but he'd texted – not even a call – saying he couldn't make it, and John hadn't bothered to reply. If Sherlock was going to be a goddamned infant –

"There we are," the flight attendant said, wheeling up a little tray with a bottle of fizzy water, a bottle of Orangina, and two ice-choked glasses. She laid things out on the small table in front of them and placed a selection of sweet and salty packaged snacks within reach as well. "We've got beautiful weather for our flight, so once we're aloft, we should be able to make up some time in the air."

"That's nice, erm…Christina," John said, squinting slightly as he read her name tag.

She beamed as if he'd performed a feat of amazing dexterity. "It _is_. Can I get you anything else?"

"No. No, we're fine. Thank you." John nudged Nora slightly.

"Thank you," Nora echoed.

"Oh, you're _very_ welcome," Christina said with a gleaming smile. "I'll let you know when we're sorted – until then, there's an assortment of films and music, and some reading material." She pointed at a cabinet across the aisle. "The list is on top." She glided away again and pulled the curtains closed behind her.

"Great." Awareness dropped like a boat anchor thudding into the ocean floor. Her friendly solicitousness was because he had money, lots of it. Not because he was interesting or good-looking or funny or smart, but because he had obscene amounts of cash. And it was going to be like that in Spain, or wherever they went, their paths smoothed by millions of pounds. Not that it wasn't nice to be fussed over, but…oh well. There wasn't anything for it, was there?

John poured Nora's drink and then his own. "Want some?"

"Not right now. Can I take my seat belt off?"

"No, just leave it on unless you need the loo."

"Where is it?"

John jerked a thumb backward. "Behind us." He sipped his water and pulled out his phone, checking for messages. Molly had texted him.

_Send photos from Spain. Much love to you both! Molly xxxx_
He smiled. Molly had been exceptionally solicitous and sweet after the funeral, and good to Nora as well, and Nora had liked her. She'd liked Greg too, and had got amusingly blushy around him, the charming old fox.

That was it for text messages.

*What else were you hoping for?*

More. He was hoping for more, he could admit that much to himself. But in the end, if Sherlock couldn't manage to say goodbye, John would have to live with it. He'd scarcely reacted to John's announcement at all. John hadn't expected *sturm und drang*, but... something more than what he'd got. Sherlock *had* said he'd miss John terribly, it was true.

*Christ, you're an idiot.*

There was some murmured conversation at the fore, and then the high whine of the entry door. John sighed and took another sip of his water. He'd bet that they'd be on the tarmac for two hours at least. But it was better, he reminded himself, than going through a load of airport nonsense.

The curtains swished open, and John's heart stuttered.

"John."

"Sherlock? What the f – what are you doing here?" Some infinitesimal part of John's heart began to glow with warmth despite the brusqueness of his question; Sherlock had come to say goodbye after all. He wasn't as indifferent as John had feared.

Sherlock strode toward him, looking like the Sherlock of old, looking resplendent. He took the seat opposite John and then looked at Nora. "Hello, Eleanor."

Nora had put down her tablet and was staring at Sherlock in fascination. "Hello, Mr Holmes."

"I got your thank-you letter. It was very nice."

"I love the microscope. We're taking it to Spain." Nora glanced uncertainly at John.

Sherlock nodded thoughtfully. "I see."

John finally twigged. "There wasn't an electrical problem at all."

"No, I'm afraid not. Necessary ruse." Sherlock crossed his legs at the knee and folded his gloved hands in his lap.

"You could have just come to breakfast, you know," John pointed out.

"Well, why be conventional?"

John grinned. "True."

"John." Sherlock leant forward. "I've come to ask you not to leave London. Stay. Stay with me, you and Eleanor both."

Beside him, John heard Nora take in a quick breath. His heart clenched, but he shook his head. "I... I wish I could, Sherlock, I do. But we need the change of scenery. Both of us."

"Consider your daughter, John. Spain isn't home to her. Living among strangers, a different
language, a tutor, away from her friends – what sort of life would that be?"

John stood up. "Could I have a word with you outside?"

Sherlock looked confused. "But I –"

"Outside," he hissed, stabbing a finger toward the cockpit. Obediently, Sherlock rose and moved through the dark blue curtains. John turned to Nora, who looked frightened. "We'll just be a moment, darling. Stay here, all right?"

"Okay," she whispered. Tears started to well in her eyes.

John's fists clenched. He'd beat Sherlock senseless for making Nora cry. He pushed through the curtains, ignoring Christina the over-friendly flight attendant, and stormed down the stairs. Sherlock was waiting on the tarmac, his hands clasped behind his back. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Trying to talk some sense into you."

"Jesus Christ. Why do I –" John threw his hands up. "Do you honestly think I don't know what's right for my daughter?"

"John." Sherlock took a step forward and grasped John's shoulders. John tried to struggle away, but Sherlock held him fast.

"Let me go, for fuck's sake –"

"John, listen to me. Listen. Can't you see that she's doing her utmost to make you happy? She'd follow you into Hell itself if that's where you wanted to go because she loves you more than anyone on this stupid godforsaken planet and because you're all she's got now. She adores you, she worships you, but she belongs here. Her life is here. Your life is here." Sherlock's eyes burned brilliant blue, the fine web of wrinkles around them making them somehow even bluer.

John shook his head. Sherlock was right. He'd known it all along, and he'd told himself lie upon lie because Nora had accommodated his every wish, and he'd used that in his grief and pain, and he'd tried to assuage hers, but Christ, he hadn't done a very good job, had he? In fact, he'd been piss-poor at it. "I…I can't even fucking look at her, Sherlock, I see Mary, and I feel like I've failed her in a million ways. I feel like leaving’s the only way to start fresh." Tears choked him, and he dashed at his eyes.

"You're a brilliant father. That doesn't mean you won't make huge errors now and again." Sherlock stepped back, took a clean handkerchief from his coat pocket, and handed it to John.


"There's something else."

"What?" John blotted his eyes again and blew his nose. "What else did I fuck up?"

"Not you. Me."

John shook his head. "I don't –"

"I did say it, a bit, on the day of your wedding. The speech."

John chuckled. "I always wondered if you were high that day."
"That day, no." Sherlock smiled ruefully. "Can't say the same for that night."

"Sorry," John winced. Sherlock hadn't said goodbye that night, and John and Mary had been caught up in each other, but John had wondered, nevertheless.

"Sorry?" Sherlock repeated. "What on earth for? I failed to speak up so many times that I actually became comfortable with it. I told myself that your emergence in my life was an accident of circumstance and that friendship was perfectly acceptable. I hadn't the courage to hurdle my own obstacles. I declared my adoration for you to a room full of people. What more perfect barrier could there be?"

John shuffled his feet in discomfort. "Sherlock –"

"Wait – let me finish. And then I used Mrs H's death to my advantage." Sherlock's cheeks were bright red. "I don't mean that I wasn't grieving, but…I could have stopped it that night, and I didn't."

"I could have stopped it too," John reminded him gently. "It wasn't as if you forced me."

Sherlock dismissed that with a wave of his hand. "I was jealous. I loved Mary, but I envied her. I could have said nothing –"

"It wouldn't have changed anything," John sighed. "Sherlock, that's just it. I mean, that's part of it, anyhow. The way she died – I meant that. I can keep Nora safe, I've got the money to do it, but you – you put yourself in harm's way all the time. If something happened to you, I couldn't…I couldn't face it. Not again."

Sherlock moved close to John again and unexpectedly took John's hand in his. The candlepower in his face still burned, but at a lower wattage. "It's true life is full of risks. You can go to Spain, John, and wrap yourself and Nora in cotton wool, but it doesn’t mean there won't be heartache, or uncertainty, or even harm or death."

John's eyes burned. He nodded.

"Those things are always easier to bear with people you love, and who love you. And I do love you, John. So very much. I couldn't bear it if you left."

John sniffled. "Sherlock –"

Sherlock took John's face in his hands and kissed him, the softest brush across the lips. "Don't leave."

"Sherlock." John threw his arms around Sherlock. "I love you."

*I love you I love you I love you

They both said it, enough to make up for all the times they hadn't.

*

John pulled the curtain aside. "Nora. Sweetheart. Come on."

Nora, her eyes red, stayed in her seat, shrinking. "Where?"
Sherlock moved past John and put his hand out. "Back to London. If you wish."

Nora's eyes shone, and she put her little hand in Sherlock's large one. He undid her belt with one hand, scooped up her purple backpack, and drew her down the aisle, then guided her down the stairs toward the black car that waited at the end of the runway. She broke free from Sherlock's grip and ran.

"Jesus Christ," John said. "I sold the fucking house. What am I going to do? Where the hell are we going to live?"

Sherlock smiled, a trace of his old smugness returning. "Fortunately," he said, "I have the perfect solution."

*

"Well," John said, surveying the maelstrom around them a bit dismally, "I suppose that's it."

Sherlock set a box onto the floor near the front door. "You could have had professional organisers in. Don't know why you didn't."

"Yeah, I know. I wanted to do it myself." John looked round, rubbing his elbow. "Jesus, I don't know where to begin though."

"Probably best if we put things away before uncovering the furniture and so on," Sherlock said. He nudged another box with his toe.

"Yeah. Yeah." John smiled a little sadly. "It all looks so different, doesn't it?"

Sherlock nodded. Mrs Hudson's flat, unrented and untouched since her death, had been turned into Nora and John's new digs. Once her things had been cleared out -- and she was a dear, that was unmistakable, but neither John nor Sherlock had wanted most of her possessions, so off to Oxfam they went -- the graceful proportions of the flat had been revealed. John had the carpets pulled up, revealing handsome oak underneath that had only to be sanded and refinished to a wonderful dark-honey gloss. New pipes and wiring went in, the kitchen was overhauled, and crumbling walls had their paper carefully removed and were replastered where necessary. John chose new paper and paint in cheerful, bold colours, and Sherlock dragged him to Harrods, Heal's, Bonham's, Selfridges, Roche Bobois, and a half dozen other shops to furnish the flat. John was giving half of his fortune to Doctors Without Borders, and there was still plenty left for Nora's future and a very luxurious redecoration, never mind supporting him in style for the rest of his life. "It does," he agreed. "But I think Mrs H would have liked it."

John thumped onto the new sofa, concealed by a dust cover. "I have to keep an eye on the time. Have to fetch Nora at four." He grinned wryly. "You had to move us a million miles from Blackheath."

"It's only for another year and a half," Sherlock said with a shrug. "You might as well start looking for a decent secondary day school for her if you insist on keeping her at home."

"I'm not shipping her off to boarding school, Sherlock."

"Never did me any harm."

John raised a skeptical brow. "No?"
"No! Quite liked it for a while there, in fact. Then it got deadly dull – I realised all my schoolmates were utter morons." Sherlock sat on the sofa beside John and opened a box. "This is…kitchen linens. Yes. Tea towels, napkins, curtains, the lot. We should probably launder these first." He saw John staring into the middle distance and closed the box. Too soon for all this domestic folderol, maybe, but he couldn't really camp out on the floor, could he? "Sorry if I'm…if it's a bit much."

"No. No, it's good," John said, patting Sherlock's thigh. "Good to get it all done in one fell swoop. I just…I just keep getting flashes of the way things used to be. Not just with me and Mary – with me and you, too." He looked Sherlock full in the face. "It's a bit scary sometimes. A lot's changed."

"Yes." Sherlock sat back on the sofa, his hand almost unconsciously moving to the old wound in his chest. Just lately, it seemed as if the bones round it ached in the damp. Paired with his knee, it made for a truly dreary little cocktail of bodily decay.

Much had changed indeed, and life had scarred them both. Sherlock knew now that he wasn't indestructible – oh, far from it. It was possible to wound him, to cause him nearly intolerable pain, to blot him out altogether. If he'd clawed back to life any number of times, it was for the man sitting beside him on the sofa, contemplating which box to open next, which freshly papered and painted room to tackle, the man who would, in two hours and despite having a vast fortune, take the Tube to fetch Nora from school, and take her to swimming practice.

How ordinary. Dull, even.

He wouldn't have traded it for anything.

Sherlock took John's hand and urged him up gently. "Come on."

"Oh, God. Can't we just sit a moment longer?"

"I'm calling organisers. This is ridiculous. Will you come upstairs with me?" He increased the pressure on John's hand incrementally.


"You're not ready."

"No, I am, I –" He wet his lips. "I've got to be on the Tube by three."

"I'll call a cab for you." Sherlock bent and kissed John's mouth. "Come on." He led John upstairs to 221B, into his bedroom, and closed the door. Then he kissed John again, his mouth and neck and ear, and explored John's roughly shaven jawline, his throat, the tender vertebral bump at the top of his spine.

John tugged at his t-shirt, and they tumbled down onto the bed. Feverishly, John yanked at Sherlock's pyjama bottoms until they came halfway down, twisted round Sherlock's knees, and then his hand went between Sherlock's legs, grasping his cock and pumping, leaning down to demand a kiss, his prick stiff in his trousers and rubbing against Sherlock's bare thigh.

"Slow down a bit," Sherlock whispered against John's mouth. "We've got an hour at least."

"I – I'm trying –" John replied shakily, then moved away, sitting up with a groan. He pulled off his shoes and socks, then wriggled out of his jeans, jumper, and t-shirt.

Sherlock reached out and stroked his back, shedding his pyjama bottoms with his free hand. He wanted to drink John in slowly and touch every bit of his skin, rough and smooth, but he knew that
this would be brief, of necessity, and he'd leave off exhortations to slow down for another time. "The
night table."

John obligingly leant over and opened the drawer, extracting a bottle of lubricant. He turned and
grimmed at Sherlock. "This a new bottle, then?"

"Brand new," Sherlock said, and let his thighs sprawl open. "Touch me."

Even in the dim light, John's face was flushed. He grasped Sherlock's knees, pressed them wider
apart, and lowered his head.

Sherlock gasped, then sighed, and then moaned. He tangled his fingers in John's hair.

John came up for air, red-faced and sweating. "Sherlock, I want…." He paused, clearing his throat.
"I want to fuck you."

"Be generous with the lubricant," Sherlock said. "It's been ages."

"Right. Okay." John opened the bottle and slid his hand over his cock, stroking and rubbing. He bent
to kiss Sherlock's mouth, all demand. "Are you ready?"

"Yes."

John slowly pushed Sherlock's knees up to his chest. "Does that hurt you?"

"No."

Are you okay?"

"Yes." Sherlock bit his lip and waited as discomfort gradually gave way to faint arousal as John
drew back and pushed forward again. "Yes, that's better."

"I'll be careful."

"Don't worry." The sensation was becoming pleasurable; he'd nearly forgot, it had been so long. He
grasped his own cock and pulled. "Harder, harder."

John's hips slapped against his flesh, damp now with sweat, and as he drove into Sherlock's body,
riding him hard, they heaved together, slamming the headboard against the bed. Sherlock's thighs
and belly tensed, his fist tightening, and he shuddered, crying out as he spilled over his half-clenched
fist. He lay in a pleasant daze as John stabbed his way to climax and then sagged, turning his face
aside and pressing it against Sherlock's chest.

Sherlock reached up and stroked John's sweaty hair. "John, that was marvellous, you –" He paused.
"Are you all right?"

His face still pushed against Sherlock's chest, John nodded. "Yeah," he said, his voice muffled. "I'm
okay. I'm going to…." Carefully, he pulled out and caressed Sherlock's inner thigh. "Sorry, I'm –"

"Never mind," Sherlock said. "I'll wash the sheets." He saw a silvered trail on John's cheek. "You're
not all right." He sat up, conscious of a dull ache in his back and thighs and a sharper one in his anus.
Distantly, he wondered if he'd bled, but mentally waved the thought aside and caught John's hand.
"Was it too soon after all?"

John shook his head. "How soon is too soon? A month, a year, what?" He swiped at his eyes. "It's
just…none of this happened the way I thought it would."

"I don't understand." Sherlock frowned in puzzlement. "What did you think would happen?"

"I don't know, I just thought it would…I thought the marriage would wink out or maybe get intolerable, I don't know. That I'd end up miserable." John buried his face in his hands for a moment. "It wasn't all bad, though, you know? Even when it was, it wasn't. And I feel fucking disloyal for even doing this."

Sherlock wasn't sure where John was headed. "We needn't do anything that makes you uncomfortable, John."

"No, that's…that's not what I mean. I mean…how do you do it? How do you love two people at the same time?"

"Ah." Sherlock propped himself up on his elbows. "Well. Certainly I'm no expert on these matters –"

"Christ, I wish I had something to record what you just said," John said with a hitching laugh.

"Shut up," Sherlock said, swatting John on the arm. "As I was saying, I'm no expert, but the notion of one lid for every pot or whatever that stupid saying is seems ridiculous to me. Mrs Hudson used to jabber on about that from time to time, and it was rubbish then and it's rubbish now. Clearly a great many people are capable of loving more than one person – sometimes one at a time, sometimes more. It's nothing to feel guilty about."

John wiped his eyes and offered Sherlock a slanted smile. "So you'd have shared me with Mary?"

"If she'd been agreeable, certainly. I can't imagine who would have initiated that conversation, though."

"And if…if she'd lived?"

Sherlock shrugged helplessly. "Well…I'd still be here." He looked John full in the face. "It wouldn't change my utter adoration of you one iota."

"Jesus, Sherlock." John shook his head. "You're great with her. Don't think I haven't noticed. I don't know if that's a special effort, but I've noticed."

"She's your child, John. And we got along like a house on fire before our unfortunate contretemps. No reason that shouldn't continue."

"Yeah. Yeah." John was grinning now. "Yeah, I think it's going to be okay."

"So do I." And that was purest, unvarnished truth. Whatever domesticity meant to Sherlock Holmes and John Watson, it surely didn't include stasis. It wasn't the end of their adventures by any means; there would be more cases, many more, and it would have been a lie to say that the spice of danger didn't still beckon – he was only human after all. An extraordinary human, true, but human nevertheless. They fought the good fight, he and John, and being on the side of the angels had to count for something, sometime. If that meant an ageing body with all its attendant indignities, then so
be it. He had John. Wonderful, irascible, brave John Watson, who guarded his heart almost as fiercely as Sherlock guarded his own, but who finally, after so many years, had come back home.

Sherlock opened his arms. "We've got a bit of time yet. Let's make the most of it."

*

A wilting bouquet of scarlet roses sat atop Meredith's grave. Mycroft leant down and inspected them, recognising the style of the florist, and smiled unwillingly.

_Thoughtful, brother mine._

The last drifting bits of Meredith's estate had been collected, neated, and sorted. The art had been disposed of, charities had received their appropriate bequests, the last fauteuil and rock-crystal chandelier sold in lieu of inheritance, for Meredith Tamar Howe had been the last of her line.

Mycroft thought Meredith would have approved of the way he'd managed the sordid affair of the stolen art. Each piece they'd rescued was headed either to families who'd owned them at the time of their seizure, or to museums, guided by appropriate cultural liaisons. Except for the Rembrandt. There had been no family to claim it, and so Mycroft had asked for the piece himself, as a memento in lieu of the not-unimpressive reward that the Crown had offered him for services rendered, etc. Upon his death it would pass to the National Gallery.

Sherlock had been offered a reward as well, and had turned it down in typical scornful Sherlock fashion. Mycroft, however, was more prudent and far cleverer, and had requested a piece from Stephen Moran's fabulous collection of _objets_ forfeited upon his conviction and imprisonment. Moran, oddly contented in his small cell, had even signed off on the piece, shrugging ("It's just a _thing._") and so an Amati violin would find its way to Sherlock's flat on his next birthday. Mycroft was certain that Sherlock would be properly ungrateful, and all would be well.

He laid the bouquet of white roses next to the red roses on the grave, then stood back and contemplated the headstone. It was slender and graceful, delicate Art Nouveau lines cut into the pale marble, along with her name, the dates of her birth and death, and a simple Star of David.

The cemetery was deserted but for a few birds timidly chirping the last of their morning songs in the trees, black-branched and budded with pale green. A snatch of melody caromed in his head, an Irish tune, of all things, about a man visiting his dead love's grave – a sentimental bit of drivel.

_And I shall hear though soft you tread above me_  
_And all my grave will warmer, sweeter be_  
_For you will bend and tell me that you love me_  
_And I shall sleep in peace until you come to me._

Ridiculous maudlin stuff –

Mycroft clasped his hands together tightly round his umbrella and drew in a deep breath. Gradually, he collected himself.

He would see that the grave received proper looking-after and come back in a few years, perhaps, when time had begun its ineffable work.
"Goodbye," he said softly, and then added, "my love."

He turned on his heel and picked his way through the wet grass toward the brick path, back to London.

End.

Chapter End Notes

John and Nora read from The Fellowship of the Ring.

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Thank you so much for reading. I hope you enjoyed the story.

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