A River Without Banks

by Chryse

Summary

"You love this, being Sherlock Holmes."

He had once. When had it all gone so wrong?

Fully completed, not a WIP. Updates will post twice a week.

Notes

First off, PLEASE READ THE TAGS. The majority of this story is actually fairly cheery (really! I did the math!), but the first half has a lot of angst, so be warned. The really hairy stuff is limited to one section. I will post warnings for that part separately, and will provide an option to skip it and get a summary for anyone who prefers. UPDATE: I have an ask box now, so if you would like information on specific details, email me at askchryse@gmail.com. I have learned through experience that the more specific your question, the more satisfying the answer--that way I avoid inadvertently missing (or spelling out in undesired detail) your
specific squick. As always, I assure you that there WILL be a happy ending, by which I
mean John and Sherlock, together exclusively and forever, world without end, amen. (Just so
we’re clear.)
There are also a couple of things I couldn’t come up with a way to tag. I’ll place warnings on
the relevant chapters just in case, although I doubt they will be a major issue for most people.
There is also recurring mention of a serial killer who targets pregnant women (NOT Mary),
so if that is something you find difficult to read about, please be aware that it is going to come
up.
So now that I’ve scared everyone else off, welcome, Dear Reader! I’m going to save
discussion of the inspirations and influences of this fic until the end because it will make more
sense that way and be less spoiler-y, but there are a few references in the text that you’ll catch
if we’ve read the same stuff.
Chinese translation by the brilliant ninijuliet: HERE
Now also available in Russian thanks to the talented never v hudo: HERE
"You name it, the world is aflame. We always have a mix of complicated interests. That's not unusual. What's unusual is there's this outbreak of violence and instability everywhere."--Gary Samore, former national-security aide in the Obama administration, to the New York Times, July 22, 2014

Life, to be sure, is nothing much to lose
But young men think it is, and we were young.
--A. E. Housman

"Not a peep," the man with the scarred face said, leaning against the wall by the basement door. "If he’s really back—" He lowered his voice, even though there was no one else within earshot. "—then nobody around here’s heard about it.”

Sherlock nodded. It had been the same all night. Actually, it had been the same all week. If Moriarty had really returned from the dead, he had a peculiar way of declaring himself open for business: no one in Sherlock’s extensive network of criminal contacts had had any sign of him.

“All right,” he said. He held out a folded note, but the man shook his head.

“Didn’t tell you anything worth that. Didn’t tell you anything at all.” There was the sound of a flurry of punches from below and a muted roar: the small crowd sensing blood. “Ah, I’d best be getting back.” He turned to go and then hesitated, looking back at Sherlock in the dim light of the corridor. “You might look up that lot at the old Masonic temple, down by the river. I’ve heard tell some of his old associates are part of that.”

“The Scowrers,” Sherlock said. “I’ve checked. They seem as ignorant as everyone else.”

“You believe them?”

“They asked me to hide them in case it turned out to be true.”

The man gave a short bark of laughter. “Good enough. If I hear anything, I’ll ring.”

“Thank you,” Sherlock said. He watched as the man pulled the door shut behind him, then walked out into the cold alleyway behind the building, considering his options. These were dwindling rapidly, as he had essentially exhausted both his homeless network and his usual sources, and the night was wearing on toward morning. He decided to head for a part of town where he could get a cab for Baker Street. Maybe a walk in the frozen air would clear his head. He cinched his scarf and almost said “Let’s go,” before he caught himself: John was not here, John was not going to be here, not anymore.

Sherlock pushed down the sudden sharp stab of loss—every time, it still hurt, every time he
remembered John had moved on—and strode purposefully toward the road. He had not seen John or spoken to him since their aborted farewell on the tarmac a week ago, and before that he had not seen him since the disastrous events of Christmas Day. It had been Mary who had come to see him in the holding cell, alone.

“He’s still angry, isn’t he,” Sherlock had said.

Mary had sighed. “He’s angry at life for not working out the way he wanted it to, which is stupid and childish. And he’s angry at me, but he can’t be angry at me now he’s decided to commit to this—to me, to us, to our child, our family—so, yes, he’s angry at you instead. He thinks he doesn’t want the drama anymore.”

Which was, frankly, unfair, Sherlock thought, pulling his coat more tightly around him as he strode through the frozen slush. It was enough to make one believe Mycroft was right about caring. There was a sudden gust of cold wind and he tucked his chin down into his scarf, curling his gloved fingers inside his pockets. He’d been out all night and was starting to think his toes might be permanently frostbitten. A few more streets, he thought tiredly, and then a warm cab home.

Sherlock longed to be curled up by the fire in his pajamas and dressing gown with a cup of tea, but he was too exhausted to fill the kettle and the thought of pulling off his clothes in the predawn chill of the flat was even worse. He left his coat on as he pinned his latest set of notes to the already crowded wall instead. He could not shake the feeling that the whole thing was an exercise in futility. He had been convinced for days now that the whole thing was most likely an elaborate hoax.

“Don’t say that,” Mycroft had almost snapped. “Don’t even think it. You’d be back on that plane in an instant.”

Sherlock stared at him, a suspicion too ridiculous to take full form hovering on the edges of his mind. “You didn’t…”

“Of course not. And no one else would have reason; hardly anyone knew of the arrangement in any case. We’d hardly made a public announcement of it.”

Mary and John knew, thought Sherlock, but that way led to suspicions he really couldn’t let form. Mary had cut her old ties. He believed it. He had to, or there would be no way he could get on that plane when the time came.

“Our best chance is if the broadcast repeats. I’m watching for it this time; if they repeat the transmission, we’ll be able to pinpoint who’s sending it.”

And they had. A week to the day after the first broadcast, the same message had played again, forty-five seconds of Moriarty’s gleeful jeering interrupting every programme on every network, carefully timed to peak evening viewing for maximum impact. Sherlock had rung Mycroft immediately, only to be told curtly that he would be notified as soon as Mycroft had anything to relate. With nothing else to do, he’d bundled into his coat and headed out for yet another round of questions.

Sherlock checked his phone again—still nothing—and leaned his head briefly against the wall. It was impossible: if Moriarty was back, he had to be somewhere, someone must have seen him, but how was he back at all? Sherlock had seen him die. He had stood inches from Sherlock, looked into his eyes, and blown out the back of his head. How was he back? How?

Sherlock turned away from the flat’s silent reproaches of his failures—the wall of dead ends, John’s
empty chair—and lay back on the sofa, wrapping his coat tightly around himself. He needed to think. This accumulation of negative data had to mean something; there had to be a pattern; he just had to find it. If only he weren’t so tired.

*You love this, being Sherlock Holmes.*

He had once. When had it all gone so wrong?

Sherlock had meant to spend the time puzzling out how Moriarty could have faked so spectacular a suicide as blowing out his own brains, but he hadn’t slept in days and he slipped into the dream as though falling into a deep, dark well. At first it was almost a good dream: he could hear John’s voice, calling to him, and John’s voice was not as it had been so often since Sherlock’s return—a little strained, too-tolerant, that sharp edge to it—but as it had been before: pleased, admiring, affectionate. He tried to go to him but John’s voice changed and he was angry, so angry, angrier at Sherlock than he had ever been and Sherlock knew why. He had failed. He had done the wrong thing, made the wrong decision, it had all gone to hell Mary and John and the baby, the baby, and then it was dark and he was alone. Utterly, terribly alone. He couldn’t bear it. Sherlock turned frantically, searching, but he was alone in the dark and suddenly he knew what the dark hid: the cellar, the table, the men, the *pipe*—

Sherlock jerked awake, gasping, and then jerked away again in shock when he realized that Mycroft was directly over his face, hectoring away in his most sanctimonious and annoying voice.

“Sherlock Holmes, wake up. There are lives hanging in the balance whilst you lie here—including your own, as I should not have to remind you.”

“Go away,” Sherlock managed. He pushed himself upright. His brain felt thick and fuzzy, shreds of dark dream clinging to it like fog.

Mycroft sat back on the coffee table and looked at him. “Serbia?” he asked as though inquiring about a mutual and rather uninteresting acquaintance.

“No,” Sherlock said shortly. Coffee, he thought. He stalked to the kitchen with as much dignity as he could manage, set the coffee going, and went to wash. When he returned Mycroft handed him a full mug, sweetened exactly as he liked it, and carried on stirring his own cup.

Sherlock gulped half of it down in one go and immediately felt better. “What are you doing?”

“Adding milk.” Mycroft tasted, then added a bit more. “Obviously.”

“I don’t have tinned milk.”

“No, I’ve taken to keeping a few tins in the car. I have no intention of ever sniffing anything in your refrigerator again.”

Sherlock tried to remember the last time he had opened the refrigerator. He couldn’t. “Leave the rest here, I’ll have it in my tea later.”

Mycroft gave him a thin smile and carried his coffee to the lounge, settling into a desk chair with an air of conspicuous politeness that annoyed Sherlock more than if he had sat in John’s. Sherlock took his own coffee to the window and looked out, still feeling slightly heavy-headed. The day was January-grey and dreary, passers-by below huddled into coats as they scurried through the cold. Sherlock glanced at his watch: nearly noon. He had slept longer than he realized. He downed the rest
of his coffee, refilled his cup, and settled into his own chair. “Did you locate the source of the transmission?”

“Yes. We’ve arrested the person who broadcast it.”

“Not Moriarty.” Mycroft would have said at once if it had been.

“No. The person who broadcast the transmission refused to identify herself, so we entered her fingerprints into the database and immediately found a match. According to her fingerprints, she is a woman named Victoria Trevor. Does the name mean anything to you?”

“Victoria Trevor,” Sherlock repeated in surprise. “Yes, of course. I knew her at university. She was finishing her PhD in physics when I was reading chemistry.” Sherlock had not thought of Trevor in years. He remembered her as silent and thin, fair hair cut in a chin-length bob she had probably worn since childhood, always dressed in twin sets or neatly pressed blouses and cardigans. Pearls and matching earrings. She had been entirely focused on her work, which was the only reason Sherlock knew her at all: a gradual acquaintance born of always being the last two people in the research building. “What would she be doing with a video of Moriarty?”

“An excellent question, and one which she has so far refused to answer. In fact she will say nothing except that she wishes to speak to you. The problem, however, is that she is not Victoria Trevor.”

Sherlock frowned. “You just said that she was.”

“I said that her fingerprints identified her as Victoria Trevor. She isn’t. For one thing, Victoria Trevor is currently working at a private research facility near Lincoln. And by currently I literally mean currently—we’ve had agents on her since last night.”

“What’s the other thing?”

“That,” Mycroft said, setting down his coffee cup and rising to his feet, “is something you are going to have to see for yourself. Ready?”

Sherlock followed Mycroft down the corridor of the nearly-deserted holding area, footsteps loud against the concrete floor. Mycroft stopped in front of the only occupied cell and said politely, “Good afternoon.”

The woman in the cell did not answer him. She stepped closer to the bars, tipping her head a little to study Sherlock, and Sherlock saw her clearly in the fluorescent light. She was as pale and angular as he remembered, sharp eyes even lighter than his own, pearl earrings and sharp-edged haircut the same—for all he knew she was even wearing the same silk blouse and cardigan. But her hair was entirely white, and her face deeply lined. The woman in the cell was at least twenty years older than Sherlock.

Sherlock blinked several times, trying to process, knowing the truth already even as the larger part of his mind refused to accept it. “Mr. Holmes,” the woman said. “You’re looking very well. I don’t know that I would have recognized you.”

“It’s been a long time,” he said neutrally.

“Longer for me than for you, I think, if we’re counting from Oxford.”

“Mmm.”
She smiled very slightly, pushing a strand of hair behind her ear with one finger as she always had, and it was that more than anything that made him believe. “You should cut a fringe,” he said, almost a reflex.

“But then I would have to remember to trim it.”

Sherlock grinned. He couldn’t help it. He grinned because Trevor had once been the closest thing he had to a friend, and seeing the warmth in her eyes made him realize that he could badly use a friend. He grinned because this was amazing, the most fascinating and interesting thing that had happened in ages, and he couldn’t wait to hear more. And, of course, he grinned because this was going to blow Mycroft’s narrow little mind entirely. He turned to Mycroft and said, “It’s her,” and had the satisfaction of seeing Mycroft’s mouth drop open in shock.

“I really need to speak with you,” Trevor said. “I’d invite you in, but I’m afraid my current accommodations lack sufficient seating for guests.”

“Mycroft, find us a conference room or something, will you? Trevor and I need to talk.”

“In privacy,” she added.

“He’ll just listen in.”

Mycroft finally seemed to realize he was gaping. “If you will excuse us a moment,” he said to Trevor and dragged Sherlock off down the hall. “What are you,” he hissed. “you can’t—how can you possibly be taking this seriously?”

Sherlock had never seen his brother too flustered to complete a sentence. He looked at Mycroft with a surge of unfamiliar compassion. “Because I’m a scientist,” he said gently. “You’re a… He hunted for a flattering term. “…statesman. You decide how the world should be and you make it that way. Scientists know that the universe is bigger than we can possibly imagine, and it can always surprise us.”

Mycroft stared at him unhappily. “You really believe this is Victoria Trevor,” he said. “Even though all records say that Victoria Trevor was born in 1974. Even though a woman all her colleagues seem to believe is Victoria Trevor is sitting in a lab in Lincolnshire right now.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply.

Mycroft rubbed at the back of his neck, looking unhappy. “All right. I’ll make arrangements to have her released—it’s hardly likely she poses much of a threat in herself. And you needn’t worry about my eavesdropping; I haven’t the leisure. I don’t think you realize, Sherlock, that there is enormous pressure on me to resolve not only this issue with the Moriarty transmissions but with Mirzayev. I’ll do what I can, but we’re running out of time.”

They ended up at a safe house of some sort, completely unremarkable from the outside, decorated in a beige blandness that put Sherlock’s teeth on edge. Two of Mycroft’s exquisitely polite minions accompanied them, apparently to make tea or fend off any threats, as the occasion required. Sherlock felt they might as well take advantage of the tea and had a plate of biscuits sent into the study as well.

“All right,” Trevor said, setting down her teacup. “Do you remember what I was working on at university?”

“Temporal physics,” Sherlock said. He had a faint but clear memory of a damp spring night, drinking
coffee, Trevor’s swift fingers sketching equations on a page as she talked. “You had developed a theoretical model for treating time not as a linear constant but as a variable in a system.”

“Yes. I’ve advanced beyond the theoretical now, obviously.” That faint smile, a little wry this time. “Well, not now. It took me nearly fifty years to get to this point. On the strength of my dissertation I was offered a position at the government facility at Baskerville. After about ten years I had developed a prototype, and we started testing in mice. That’s when the trouble started. “

“You tested time travel on mice?”

“Of course I did. The IRB was hardly going to let me use human subjects. And it wasn’t time travel as you’re thinking of, not like this—I just told you I only perfected the actual mechanics for this in the past few years. What we did then I called wrinkling, after the book, A Wrinkle in Time. Do you know it? It was my absolute favorite as a child.” She looked at Sherlock’s blank face. “No. You’re more the Harriet the Spy type anyway, I suppose.”

“Trevor,” Sherlock said in exasperation, “you are babbling. You never used to babble.”

“Well, I’ve got old, Holmes. Never mind. In a wrinkle, one doesn’t travel physically to a different point in the time stream the way I have. If I had wrinkled, I wouldn’t be here talking to you while my forty-year-old counterpart works in Lincolnshire. I would be my forty-year-old counterpart in Lincolnshire. The calculations involved, the energy required—it’s all far less complex if you go only into your own past.”

“But would you know that you had done it?”

“No, you wouldn’t. You wouldn’t carry the memories of what had happened to you later in the time stream, although you might retain faint impressions at a subconscious level.”

“So you sent mice back in their own pasts.”

“Yes. And it worked, too, exactly as predicted. But there were two unanticipated problems. The first was that there were adverse effects—the mice did not react well to being moved about in time. They stopped eating, became aggressive, self-mutilating and so on. We tracked them out several months—some of them years—and the interesting thing was that not only the subject mice were affected but also their close contacts—cagemates, for example. I was sure this was a problem only in lower intelligence subjects and that if we expanded trials to higher order primates it wouldn’t occur, but the IRB didn’t agree. As it turned out they were right, though I refused to believe it at the time. There seemed to be a few factors involved. For one thing, the animals who were already unstable were much more likely to be affected. When we replicated the trials in chimps, those who were already moody or aggressive were more likely to suffer from the temporal displacement effect. Also, it turned out that there was an inherent integrity in the original time stream, so the greater the deviation, the greater the effect on both the primary and secondary subjects.”

“So if, say, a murderer went back—if he wrinkled,” Sherlock said, “and he killed someone else, the negative effect would be felt not only by him but by the now-surviving victim.”

“Exactly, although that’s hardly the example I would have used. Really, Holmes, where do you come up with such things? It didn’t matter in any case as the IRB refused to clear further studies and so Baskerville pulled the plug on the project. They would have been delighted for me to stay on and work on something else, of course, but I couldn’t bear to give it up. By incredible good luck—or so I thought at the time—I was offered a generous grant at a private facility to continue my project. And the funding for that…”
“Moriarty,” Sherlock breathed. Of course Moriarty would have seen the potential in Trevor’s work, and he certainly wouldn’t have been bothered by the risks.

“Yes.” Trevor looked away for a moment, clearly thinking, then tucked her hair back again. “Now it grows complicated. Let me tell you what is known first, and then what I believe to be true. About fifteen years ago, for me—so about fifteen years in the future for you—an event horizon appeared in our solar system. To make a very long story extremely short, there had been an increase in entropy starting at the point of my initial experiments and progressing exponentially until it created a black hole. The process might have taken longer, but there was a sharp jump—an increase in the increase—about three and a half years prior to now. It was due to my work, Holmes. It turned out that altering time in a reaction produced an exponential increase in entropy, like this.” She pulled a pad of paper over and wrote out a series of equations, tapping her pencil on the relevant portion.

“But you could have corrected for that, couldn’t you? Stabilized it?”

“Perhaps. With the models I had in place, I would have had an ideal situation for testing it. Not likely I’ve enough lifetime for that now, though. You see, it wasn’t just the actual physical entropy that increased. What you might call the layman’s entropy increased also, starting from right about now. The amount of disorder and chaos reaches a sort of tipping point, and it seems that your mission is the catalyst. That’s why I had to stop you going. What you do there—it sets in place a sort of chain reaction, and things just…fall apart.” She looked at him sadly. “It hardly matters that the world is about to be swallowed by a black hole, because there’s very little left worth saving.”

Sherlock could only blink at her, stunned. In his wildest imaginings he could never have considered this. “But just stopping me now—that won’t reverse the singularity. What happened three and a half years ago?”

“I don’t know for certain,” Trevor said quietly. “But I think you can guess.”

Sherlock stared. No. This was not—she could not possibly be suggesting that. “Trevor. Are you saying that Moriarty altered time by going into his own past and killing himself?”

“Yes,” she said. “That’s exactly what I think. I think he used my prototype without my consent—or at least I quite hope without my consent—to change something in his own life, but in the process set in motion a devastating chain of events and ripped a hole in the space-time continuum.” She shrugged a bit self-consciously. “In lay terms. Oh, and I don’t think he planned to kill himself. The man was insane to begin with, that much was clear even to me. I think the temporal displacement effect undid him completely.”

“But wouldn’t we be aware of it? You said the primary time stream had its own integrity. If we’ve been affected—if I’ve been affected—by this, wouldn’t I be suffering the effects too?”

“Aren’t you?” Trevor asked, her pale eyes unblinking on his. “How have you been sleeping lately, Holmes?”

Sherlock opened his mouth, stopped, and slowly shut it again.

“How long have you been feeling it? That things have somehow gone wrong?”

“I don’t know,” he admitted, looking away. “A long time.” Since John had moved on. Since Sherlock had come back. Since he died.

“If we can fix it,” Trevor said, “we can restore the primary time stream. According to my calculations that would reverse the singularity.”
“But you don’t even know what the primary time stream is supposed to be! What if Moriarty wins? What if I’m the one who dies?”

“You might. I don’t know.”

Sherlock sat back and frowned at her. “I know I’m supposed to be a raging egomaniac, Trevor, but even I never fancied that I might be called upon to save the universe through my noble death.”

“Not the whole universe; the black hole would probably—“ She caught his look and her mouth twitched slightly. “Ah. Right.”

Sherlock exhaled a long breath. “You want me to go back. To fix this.”

“That’s why I came back, yes.” She took a sip of her cold tea and grimaced, pushing the cup away.

“Would you mind terribly if I took a bit of time to think this over? You must be starving; I’m sure Mycroft’s minions can get whatever you like to eat.”

“Actually, what I’d really like is to lie down for a bit. Spending the night being arrested and interrogated is a bit wearying at my age.”

Sherlock smiled at her. “I’m sure that can be arranged.”

The safe house had a tiny garden, barely big enough for a pair of chairs, with high walls on all sides. Sherlock stood out on the frozen grass and smoked two cigarettes down to ash, staring blankly up at the grey sky. He was almost surprised to find it still daylight; the day already felt as though it had gone forever.

What he really wanted was to talk to John. *You keep me right*, Sherlock had said, and it was true; every decision he had made without John had turned out to be rubbish. If he did what Trevor wanted he might never even meet John. The thought made him feel hollow and achy. It was worse somehow, to think that he might never know John than to know that John had left him. But what if that was the right thing to do? This was why he needed John: because he didn’t *know*. John was his moral compass, his normal people guidebook, his map to the right path.

Sherlock pulled out a third cigarette, then abruptly shoved it back in his pocket and pulled out his phone, checking the time. Not even five, Sunday afternoon, so not at work; maybe John could meet him for a pint or an early dinner. He hit the speed dial quickly before he could change his mind.

The phone rang four times and Sherlock was just wondering whether or not to leave a voice mail when John picked up. “Sherlock! What’s happened, do you have news?”

“Yes, but it isn’t—“

“Wait, hold on a minute, I can’t hear a thing in here.” Sherlock could hear a tumult of voices; perhaps already at a pub? no, the acoustics were wrong. John was moving, now there was running water and women’s voices. A kitchen. He was in a house. A door slammed and John’s voice said breathlessly, “Jesus, it’s cold out here. Did you get him?”

“It wasn’t Moriarty. It was a hoax.”

“Shit.”
“John, the person who did it—it’s very complicated, but there’s a chance that I can fix things. A lot of things. I was hoping I could see you tonight, or in an hour or so if you’re free—“

“Christ, Sherlock, I can’t. We’re at Mark and Julia’s, you remember from the wedding? They’re having a bit of a baby shower for us. Maybe tomorrow—“

Sherlock felt the cold disappointment settle into his stomach, not least because it did not escape his notice that John did not sound particularly disappointed. John, after all, didn’t want the drama.

“—no, wait, I forgot, Mike’s coming over to help us set up the cot, but—“

“It’s all right,” Sherlock cut in coolly. “I’ll text you later.” He wouldn’t.

“Sherlock—“ But then there was the sound of a door slamming again and a voice Sherlock didn’t recognize said, “There you are! What are you doing out here? Come on, John, everyone’s waiting for you.”

“Sorry, Sherlock, I’ve got to go. Listen, I’ll ring you tonight, okay?”

Sherlock disconnected without answering. He smoked the third cigarette. Then, feeling slightly queasy, he sat down in the little chair and pulled his coat tightly around himself, prepared to get advice from John in the only way left to him.

Sherlock found John in his Mind Palace in the room he had set up for him, a room that looked just as the lounge at 221B had when John had been living there. The fire was crackling, and John looked over his newspaper at Sherlock as Sherlock perched on the edge of his own chair. “So.”

“What if I was supposed to lose?” Sherlock asked bluntly. “What if I go back, and he wins, and I die?”

“Well, we’re all going to die,” Mind Palace John pointed out. “You’re going to die if you get on that plane. But it rather sounds as though you’ll be saving the rest of us, and isn’t that what you wanted all along?”

“No,” Sherlock said honestly. “I wanted to beat Moriarty.”

Mind Palace John shrugged “You did. You were a great man. Now you have the chance to be a good one.”

“But what if I’m not?”

“You could be.”

Sherlock sighed, wrapping his arms around his knees, staring into the fire.

“I couldn’t go with you in any case,” Mind Palace John said kindly, looking at him over the newspaper again. “You know that, don’t you? Even if I were really here, you have to do this on your own.”

“I’m rubbish on my own,” Sherlock said. “You know that. You’ve always known that.”

Mind Palace John rattled his newspaper as he turned the page. “Look at it this way. What have you got to lose? Beats getting on that plane.”

And that, Sherlock reflected, was true enough.
Trevor was back in the study when Sherlock returned, looking more refreshed and eating a sandwich whilst she flipped through the newspaper. “What do I need to do?” Sherlock asked.

Trevor looked up, a strand of silver hair falling across her face. She pushed it back with one finger and gave him her faint, barely-there smile. “We’re going to need your brother.”

“I have my people in position,” Mycroft said. “Are you certain that—you—have left the lab for the night?” Mycroft looked as though the very act of constructing this sentence had curdled the saliva in his mouth.

“Yes. I’m a bit of a workaholic, but I usually take Sunday evenings to have a glass of wine and catch up on my reading. Journals,” Trevor added, as though worried they would consider reading trivial.

“Very well.” Mycroft nodded to Anthea, who disappeared, tapping silently on her mobile. “They should be here within a few hours.”

Trevor frowned. “Here? I don’t think it’s going to fit. The apparatus is constructed from a converted MRI scanner; it’s quite large.”

“The cellar is rather roomier than one might expect,” Mycroft said. “I’m not worried about space. I’m worried about what you are planning to do to my brother with it. Explain to me exactly why Sherlock needs to go back to the point at which he was a university student, please.”

“I need to convince Trevor to give up her line of research,” Sherlock said patiently. “I told you before. We don’t know what Moriarty did differently or what he altered, so there’s no way to prevent him from acting directly without possibly making things even worse. But if Trevor never builds the apparatus in the first place, then he can’t use it, do you see?”

“Why can’t you do it? Wouldn’t that be much simpler?” Mycroft asked Trevor.

“I’ve tried. God, how I’ve tried. Apparently I can be very stubborn.”

Her eyes crinkled slightly at Mycroft—almost warmly-- and Sherlock cocked his head, curious, but was distracted when Mycroft said crossly, “But why Sherlock? Surely your thesis advisor, or one of your professors—“

“My thesis advisor was an idiot,” Trevor said dismissively. “I’d be far more likely to listen to Holmes.”

“Well, I can see why you two got on,” Mycroft said dryly. “But I didn’t mean this…wrinkling thing. Why didn’t you just go back entirely, the way you have to us? Surely if your, ah future self appeared…”

That, actually, was an excellent point. Sherlock was annoyed he hadn’t thought of it himself. He raised his eyebrows at Trevor, who sighed.

“I can’t get back that far. The amount of entropy produced in a temporal reaction is exponentially increased with the amount of time displaced, and exponentially again greater for a physical displacement than for a wrinkle. This—coming to you—it’s our last chance. If I had tried to go back any further from my point in time, it would have pushed us past the threshold of the event horizon. I didn’t even do any trials before I used this on myself to avoid bringing us closer.”
“I haven’t the faintest idea what you just said,” Mycroft said blankly.

Understanding something Mycroft didn’t was never going to get old, Sherlock thought happily. “Because if she had the universe would have imploded,” he said bluntly. “No, shut up, Trevor, you’ve got to use small words with him. And anyway it’s a moot point now, we haven’t the equipment and it won’t exist for another thirty years.”

“But then—you’re stuck here,” Mycroft said, looking surprised.

Trevor shrugged. “Either this works, and it doesn’t matter because we restore the integrity of the time stream and I’m back wherever I’m supposed to be, or it doesn’t, in which case I hope to die of natural causes before I reach the point I traveled from in any case.”

“I’ve got a spare bedroom,” Sherlock said. “How do you feel about solving crimes?”

Mycroft’s people arrived in a panel van a few hours later, directed by Anthea as they backed into the attached garage.

“I really don’t understand how we’re going to get this into the cellar,” Trevor said, looking around. “How does one get to the cellar, anyway?”

“Like this,” Mycroft said, and punched a code into the automatic door opener. The entire garage jolted and began to descend. A few minutes later, they ground to a halt and Mycroft punched in a second code, and the garage door slowly lifted to show a vast concrete space.

“You have an underground bunker beneath a safe house in the suburbs?” Sherlock asked.

Mycroft shrugged. “Among other places. And it has an extremely powerful generator—I imagine Dr. Trevor’s machine uses a great deal of power, and we don’t want to black out the whole neighborhood.”

Sherlock watched as Trevor went to direct the unloading and reassembly of the machine, which was unnervingly large. He felt a flash of claustrophobic anxiety. He would go into that thing and then—what? He wished suddenly he had had a chance to see Mrs. Hudson again, and Lestrade, and Molly. He hadn’t really thought about it when he’d died the first time, how it must have been for them, but now that he was on the other side of the equation he could not help but feel a stab of regret. Well, he would always have Mycroft, he thought, watching Mycroft fussily overseeing two men carrying in a sofa, on which Mycroft would presumably rest his fat arse whilst Sherlock took all the risks, as usual. He tried to pretend this thought was not actually comforting.

“Holmes?” Trevor called.

“Ready,” he said, and pushed away from the wall to join her.
“Even his iron constitution had broken down under the strain of an investigation which had extended over two months, during which period he had never worked less than fifteen hours a day and had more than once, as he assured me, kept to his task for five days at a stretch…at a time when his room was literally ankle-deep with congratulatory telegrams I found him a prey to the blackest depression.” --The Reigate Puzzle

“‘But consider!’ I said earnestly. ‘Count the cost! Your brain may, as you say, be roused and excited, but it is a pathological and morbid process which involves increased tissue-change and may at least leave a permanent weakness. You know, too, what a black reaction comes on you.”—Watson to Holmes on his drug use, in “The Sign of Four”

Sherlock Holmes pushed his stool back from the lab bench and stretched, arching his back and cracking the tendons in his neck. He straightened and was immediately hit with an overwhelming wave of disoriented dizziness, so severe that he had to grab the edge of the bench to keep from falling. What on earth? He blinked, sparkles clearing from his vision, and settled himself more firmly on the stool. For a moment he had been unable to remember where he was or what he was doing. What had brought that on?

Sherlock frowned at his watch and then out the dark window, trying to work out how long he had been in the lab. He had come over Friday evening, and he remembered a few people coming and going earlier today, so…he checked his watch again. Late Saturday. A long time, but he had worked longer without a break in the past. He had had a bump of cocaine at some point when he felt his energy flagging, but he couldn’t remember exactly when, so maybe he was still coming down. Not a lack of sleep, he’d slept Thursday night. Food? Sherlock tried to remember when he last ate. Not breakfast Friday, he’d still been sleeping, but he definitely remembered tea and toast at some point…Thursday morning? Wednesday? Sherlock brought a hand up and sniffed at his own breath. A faint whiff of acetone. Of course, that might just be on his hands from earlier, but he supposed it was just as likely to be his stupidly demanding, now-ketotic transport. Oh well, he wouldn’t mind a quick run out anyway, his back was getting stiff.
Outside the rain Sherlock vaguely remembered from earlier had stopped, although the leaves were still dripping wetly onto the grass and a low mist shrouded everything. He headed for the café nearest the lab building, but as he drew near he saw a group of young men—loud, insecure, intoxicated, regrouping from their most recent failure to find any women desperate enough to spend the night with them, and containing Sebastian Wilkes to boot—stumbling in through the door. He’d no wish to encounter that lot, so he turned quickly and made his way to a smaller café he sometimes frequented down a less populous side street.

The café was quiet, a little steamy, and, annoyingly, still quite full. Sherlock looked around to see if anyone seemed on the verge of departure and spotted a familiar fair head bent over a stack of papers. There was still a bit of coffee left in her cup, but judging by the consistency of the skim on the top, it had gone cold over an hour ago. “Would you mind very much if I joined you for a bit?” he asked. “I’ll refill your coffee.”

Victoria Trevor looked up, a sheet of pale straight hair falling over her face before she tucked it back absently. “You should cut a fringe,” Sherlock said.

Trevor tipped her head, which caused the hair to slide loose and fall forward again. “I’d just forget to trim it, and that would be worse.” She peered into her coffee with a small frown. “It’s gone cold, hasn’t it?”

“I’ll get you some fresh,” Sherlock said, reaching out. “Milk, no sugar. Right?”

“Right.” She went back to her work as he took the cup, turning to the counter to get coffee for them both and a pair of biscotti for himself. “Thank you,” she said when he returned, taking a drink and wincing when the hot coffee scorched her tongue. “Done early tonight?”

Sherlock smiled; it was nearly midnight, but that would be an early night for him. “Just taking a break. It seems I haven’t left the lab in about…twenty-eight hours? Needed some substrate. What about you?”

“I’m defending my dissertation Thursday next. The writing is done, but I’m still working on the presentation. Speaking’s not really my area.”

Since Trevor was perhaps the least talkative person Sherlock had ever met, he could certainly see the truth of that. “Do you want to run it through?” he asked. “I’m going to need at least three cups before I go back.” Sherlock was a chemist, not a physicist, but Trevor was gracious enough to give him a seat, and it would pass the time until he was ready to return.

“Oh.” Trevor looked slightly nonplussed. “Well, I haven’t my slides, but I suppose I could write out the equations as I come to them. If you really don’t mind.” Another woman might have said something about not wanting to bore him, but then that was exactly why Sherlock and Trevor found each other mutually tolerable.

Sherlock refilled his coffee, dunked his first biscuit, and sat back to listen. Ten minutes later he went to take a bite and realized that the biscotti had dissolved into mush in his cup, utterly forgotten. “Wait,” he said. “Show me the equation for that, I’m not following.”

Trevor took a fresh sheet of paper and wrote across it swiftly, gesturing as she went. “This is time, here—I can vary it using a coefficient of light speed. It would work best with a large particle accelerator so I’ve got the schematics for that in my slides, but for the prototype I’ll probably have to use magnets.”

“But that can’t happen,” Sherlock said, frowning down at the paper.
“Oh, it can. Altering time has been theoretically possible for years, I’m just the first person to work out a method for doing it.”

“No, I mean—of course you can do it, I can see that, but there’s got to be some kind of secondary effect, and you aren’t showing it.”

“There’s no effect. It’s a straightforward thermodynamic—“

“But there is! You know there must be, it’s a basic law of physics, it’s Isaac Newton.” Sherlock realized belatedly that his voice was rising, and other patrons of the coffeshop were beginning to look over at him curiously. “For every action there is a reaction. You know that, Trevor.”

“This is a reaction. Look at this equation here—it balances out, do you understand? It would work better with a really large accelerator but still—“

“No, it won’t,” Sherlock said vehemently. “Don’t you see—“

“Holmes,” Trevor said, staring at him. “What is the matter with you? Are you high right now?”

Sherlock felt himself flush. He hadn’t even known Trevor knew about the cocaine. “I’m not,” he all but hissed. “And it doesn’t matter anyway, because even if I were—“

“Holmes.” Trevor was looking down as she gathered her papers, a hint of pink on her pale cheekbones, not meeting his eyes. “I think I… I’ve got to go.”

“No. Trevor, listen. You can’t—“ his hand shot out to catch her wrist as she turned to leave, striking his half-full coffee cup and sending it crashing to the floor.

The café went completely silent, everyone watching as Trevor—her entire face now suffused with pink—tugged her wrist free from Sherlock’s numb fingers. “Thank you for the coffee,” she said softly, and walked away.

Sherlock sat frozen as the conversation around him gradually resumed, his ears still ringing with the sound of the shattering crockery. A man nipped around from the till with a broom and swept the shards up with brisk efficiency, waving off Sherlock’s mumbled apology and slapping a fresh cup down in front of him. Sherlock stared down at it, utterly bewildered. What had just happened? Why did he even care about Trevor’s research in the first place? What was wrong with him?

Sherlock tried to drink the coffee, but his throat felt as though it would close if he tried to swallow. He crumbled the remaining biscotti into little bits, turning the night’s events over in his mind. There was only one conclusion: he’d gotten bad batch of cocaine. The hit he’d taken earlier was from a fresh bag, and there was clearly something wrong with it—that was why he’d had that funny turn earlier, not to mention losing his head over Trevor’s theories. That must be it. Swiftly, before he could change his mind, Sherlock got to his feet and strode to the loo, where he emptied the contents of the little bag into the toilet, flushed it, and binned the empty bag for good measure. Then he leaned his head against the wall and tried to consider what to do. He had intended to return to his experiment, but he was light-headed and trembling from the single cup of coffee on an empty stomach and suddenly wanted only to be in bed. The experiment would wait until tomorrow. He decided to just leave the rest of his things at the lab and went straight back to his rooms, where he curled into bed sure he would sleep until midmorning and wake with a clear head. Instead four AM found him wide awake, dry mouthed and shaking, sweat drying cold on his skin from a nightmare he could not quite remember.
Sherlock stayed away from the cocaine for two days before giving in, complaining harshly about the poor quality of the previous batch before buying a new bag. Taking cocaine did not make him any less anxious about Trevor’s work, but it did keep him from sleeping, which was a significant advantage these days. He stopped attending any lectures, stopped eating, stopped almost everything except his work in the lab. People began to look at him oddly, and he realized that at some point he had apparently stopped showering too. This shamed him enough to go back to his rooms and clean up, but when he was finally dressed in fresh clothes he lay down on his bed for just a moment and woke from a dream so terrible he thought he might be sick. He washed his face again, combed his hair—which had dried mashed down on one side of his head—with a wet comb, and went back to the silent comfort of the lab.

The lab was thankfully deserted—it was later than he’d realized—and Sherlock was able to focus on his work for a while, losing himself in the complex reaction he was managing. It was almost peaceful, until the cocaine wore off. Sherlock felt the familiar miserable jitteriness creeping up on him and groped in his pocket for the bag. There was no one in sight—there was probably no one in the whole building; he hadn’t even laid eyes on Trevor since that night at the café—but Sherlock, out of long habit, took himself off to the toilets for his hit. The toilets were by the lifts, which Sherlock usually avoided—less people on the stairs—and Sherlock glanced at the large bulletin board opposite the lifts as he passed by. He froze in his tracks. There, pinned up next to the job openings and offers of used equipment for sale, hung a simple sheet of paper announcing the dissertation defense of Victoria Trevor.

Sherlock went still, heart slamming in a way that had nothing to do with cocaine. Four days. In four days Trevor would give her talk, her thesis would be published, her terrible knowledge loosed onto the world like Pandora’s box. There would be no stopping it then.

But it had to be stopped.

God, Jesus, why? Sherlock ground his fists into his eye sockets, shutting out the sight of the announcement. Why couldn’t he let this go? Why was it ruining his life? Why did he care? He didn’t know. He just knew that that it couldn’t happen. The very thought of Trevor’s work going on to practical trials made him shiver with a terror he couldn’t explain.

Sherlock turned away from the board, keeping his eyes closed as though that would somehow make the announcement disappear, and ducked into the toilet. He pulled the bag out with shaking fingers and didn’t even bother to measure out the drug, just sniffed and sniffed until his nose was running and his eyes were watering and the lights had brightened as though by magic and his mind was completely, wonderfully clear, because at last he knew what he had to do.

“I don’t think you realize exactly how fortunate you are,” Mycroft said with barely concealed impatience. The impatience grated on Sherlock’s raw nerves like sandpaper. If he hadn’t been in four-point restraints, he really thought he might have clawed out his own eyes rather than look at Mycroft’s expression of condescending concern one more minute. “Miss Trevor would be well within her rights to press charges, as would the university, seeing as how it was actually their property you destroyed. But all parties involved are willing to let the matter go and even consider your reinstatement at some point in the future, provided you obtain the help you so clearly need.”

“I don’t need help of that sort,” Sherlock snarled. “I need one of you closed-minded idiots to listen.”

Mycroft sighed. “Sherlock, you have been seen by four separate psychiatric consultants, one of whom we brought in ourselves for an outside opinion. Every one of them agrees that you are suffering from an acute manic episode with psychotic features, most likely brought on by your
escalating cocaine use. If this were not the case, you likely would be in prison right now. Instead, you are going to be spending considerable time in a psychiatric facility where your drug addiction can also be treated. Mummy is making phone calls now. This is not negotiable, Sherlock.

“I’m not addicted,” Sherlock said reflexively, although given the way he felt at the moment—furiously irritable, every nerve screaming like a broken tooth exposed to the cold—this statement was not filled with quite as much vehemence as he would have liked.

Another sigh. Sherlock scented coffee and croissants on the exhale and felt a vicious pleasure that he’d caused Mycroft to break his careful fruit-and-bran muffin routine. “Call it what you will,” he said. “But you are going, to the best facility our parents can afford. I advise you not to waste the opportunity. You have a brilliant mind, dear brother, a brilliant future. I advise you not to waste those either.” And before Sherlock could think of anything to say in reply he had swept out, leaving Sherlock grinding his teeth in desperate, unfocused rage.

Sherlock ended up spending three months at the psychiatric hospital, and he hated every minute. He had assumed that nothing in his life would be as unbearable as boarding school, but that turned out to have been optimistic: at least at boarding school he had been allowed to keep his belt and shoelaces. By the time he had been off the cocaine for a week Sherlock had slid into a depression so profound that he no longer cared whether Trevor destroyed the universe or not. He rather wished she would get on with it.

His medications were adjusted, readjusted, increased, added to; gradually the depression lifted somewhat, although whether this was due to the medication or simply the passage of time Sherlock had no idea. Unfortunately, no matter what antipsychotic was tried or how high the dosage, he remained convinced that Victoria Trevor’s work posed an existential threat. Even more unfortunately, he still cared. Sherlock was forced to give up his earlier belief that if he could only convince someone of his essential sanity they would realize he was in the right, and just started lying.

“Oh, I can’t believe now I really thought that,” Sherlock said airily to his psychiatrist. Was that the right tone? Had he been too airy? What did normal people sound like when they were being self-deprecating? He cast about a bit desperately and called up a picture of Sebastian Wilkes’ self-satisfied smirk. God, that was definitely wrong. He settled for smiling widely and rolling his eyes. “Completely mental.”

Annoyingly, the psychiatrist was making notes and not even looking at Sherlock, so she missed this performance. “I’m glad to see you’re free of the delusions even after we lowered the antipsychotics,” she said thoughtfully. “I think we can really start moving forward with discharge planning.” She looked up and Sherlock, startled, jerked the sides of his mouth up quickly into his all-better-normal-now! smile. She smiled back a little warily. “I understand you’ll be staying with your brother, and he’s been able to find you a job?”

“If you can call it that,” Sherlock said before remembering the smiling eye roll. “And we’ve agreed I’ll have my own flat, wouldn’t be good for my recovery otherwise, we rather get on one another’s nerves. He’s got me a little place in Montague Street. “

The psychiatrist frowned. “And you think you’ll be all right on your own?”

“Oh, yes,” Sherlock said, stealing a glance at the clock. Would this session ever end? His face was beginning to hurt.

“All right then. We’ll drop the antipsychotic a bit further and keep the mood stabilizers and
antidepressants where they are, shall we?"

“All right,” Sherlock agreed, smiling desperately. He was willing to do anything to get out of the hospital. The medications weren’t too bad, now; they made him rather feel as though there were a layer of invisible but thick insulation between himself and the rest of the world, but that wasn’t necessarily a bad thing. He wasn’t dreaming so much, and if everything seemed drab, and colorless, and pointless, at least that was an improvement over the harsh jagged edges that had seemed to constantly assault him before what his mother still referred to as his “bit of a breakdown”.

Sherlock was released to outpatient treatment. He went to the clinic and got his prescriptions refilled. He went to the tedious job Mycroft had found for him, cleaning the glassware and generally maintaining the chemistry labs at a third-rate technical college where at least no one expected him to talk. He sat on his dull little sofa in his dull little flat for hours, unable to muster the energy to care even about how dull everything was. He tried. He understood that the point of this futile existence was to prove that he was fixed, that he could be trusted not to get high and destroy a colleague’s work for reasons incomprehensible to anyone else, that it would be safe to let him return to Oxford for the single term he needed to graduate. But what was the point of that? So then he would be a graduate chemist, with a hopefully less dull job. It would all still be so endlessly tedious. The thought was enervating.

At Christmas Sherlock, still trying, suffered himself to be dragged along to their parents’ house to spend a few days. Being in Mycroft’s presence was still irritating enough that he roused himself to snipe a little, so the visit wasn’t unbearable. At least not until the last night when he went padding softly downstairs in search of leftover mince pies—he did eat more on the medication, which made his mother happy at least—and heard his parents talking.

“I always knew he was fragile,” his father was saying in a low voice. “I just never thought…”

“I know,” his mother answered, uncharacteristically subdued. She sounded sad in a way that Sherlock had never heard before. It made his stomach clench, and suddenly he no longer wanted a mince pie after all. “Do you think he’ll ever…” her voice cracked a little.

Sherlock heard his father’s indistinct murmur, the suppressed sound of his mother’s stifled tears. He had never known his mother to cry. Silently, he slipped back upstairs and curled himself on his childhood bed, staring at the blank ceiling, wondering if he would ever feel happy again.

In January, in the middle of the coldest night of the year, Sherlock woke to the tingle of snowflakes on his cheeks and knew with bone-deep certainty that he was not mad.

This type of realization—a sudden awareness of a truth that he had known all along—had happened before, starting when he was five (Father Christmas did not exist), and followed many times since (there was no God; his mother did not know everything; his brother did not know everything — although secretly he still wondered about that one). Just as he had on those occasions, he felt a mixture of relief and terror. Relief that he could still trust in his own mind after all, and terror that there really was no medication that would give him his old, ignorant life back. And of course the terror now was even worse because of the logic that followed on this knowledge.
Sherlock was not mad. (Depressed, maybe. A little bollocksed in the brain chemistry, maybe. But he had no problem distinguishing reality.)

Therefore Trevor’s research really did pose a threat. The fact that he could not identify the exact nature of the threat or how he knew it was currently irrelevant. *Res ipsa loquitur.*

And therefore Sherlock had to stop her.

He got up, touching his numb face briefly with his fingertips and looking out of the window at the muffled city below. He had taken to sleeping with the window open because the cold air and the contrasting warmth of his bed reminded him that he could still feel. There was a little drift of snow on the pillow. He closed the window so that now he saw his own dim reflection, rubbing at his cheek to bring the sensation back. His skin burned as it warmed.

Yes, he thought. Yes.

Sherlock stopped taking his medications. He was careful about it: he simply took the handful of pills he normally swallowed each day and flushed them down the loo. That way the levels in the bottle continued to drop at their usual pace, for the benefit of Mycroft’s frequent visits, and he remembered to refill them on schedule. The cotton-wool feeling lifted, as did the other side effects: the sleepiness and intermittent tremors and constant low-level munchies. He hadn’t really gained much weight on the meds, but he set an alarm on his watch to remind him to snack just in case—one never knew what Mycroft might notice. Sherlock had research to do. He needed his mind to be clear, even if that meant bumping up against the sharp edges and dark troughs of the world again.

Sherlock took to spending every free moment in the science library at the college, where he worked his way steadily through the physics section. He made notes of other books he needed and filled out little slips of paper requesting them. He went to Oxford to discuss his possible reinstatement for the autumn term, slipped into the library there, and read the bound copy of Trevor’s dissertation (furtively). Then he carefully noted all the citations that he had not already investigated. The dim rooms with their musty smell of books was immensely comforting, like finding a beloved childhood toy, and for a moment Sherlock thought of just letting it all go: coming back and getting his own doctorate, so he could spend the rest of his life in the safe, cozy womb of lab and library. Oh, who was he kidding? He’d go mad from the sheer monotony.

It did not take Sherlock very long to work out the problem with Trevor’s proposal; greater minds had gotten there before him. Trevor’s work had been published in the *Journal of Physics* and Stephen Hawking himself had written an editorial in which he advised against practical trials because of the risk of entropy increase. But the general consensus seemed to be that Trevor’s work was too theoretical and too small-scale to bother about overmuch. This was disheartening. Certainly Sherlock took a certain comfort in the fact that Stephen Hawking was on his side; but then, if one of the greatest physicists of the century couldn’t get anyone alarmed about the matter, then it was unlikely they would listen to a disgraced drug addict fresh from the nut hut.

Sherlock had reached a wall, and he needed a boost to get over it. Fortunately, he knew all about boosts.
It took Sherlock less than five minutes to find the man he wanted after walking into the club. He didn’t even have to buy a drink. The man was about Sherlock’s age, furtive, gloomy and spotty with an unfortunate little goatee thing that must be meant to distract the eye from his atrocious complexion. Ran off after stepfather had tried to molest him, really wanted to be a chef but couldn’t afford the training, working as a line cook and dealing on the side to try to—oh, who cared.

“I work out of the park, mostly,” the dealer said after Sherlock had collected his purchase. “Just in here tonight ’cos of the rain, yeah? Here’s my mobile if you want more.” He scribbled “Kev” and a number on a slightly damp napkin and Sherlock tucked it into a pocket. He would prefer the park too.

It had been almost a year since the last, disastrous time Sherlock had gotten high, but he wasn’t worried. This wasn’t going to be like it had been at the end, last time. He was going to be careful, methodical, just as he had when he first started using. Things would be fine. He took a carefully measured, very small amount, and in a few minutes he was pacing and thinking, his brain flying along like an airplane that had been grounded for a year, and almost immediately he knew what he had to do.

The nightmares began coming back.

According to Oxford, Victoria Trevor had gone to the Royal Observatory, but Sherlock worked out in about five minutes that she was doing no such thing. Clearly that was a front, so it must be a front for something else on the government payroll. And Sherlock just happened to have a brother who had access to all sorts of such useful information. Coincidence? As Mycroft himself always said, the universe was rarely so lazy.

Sherlock left the cocaine behind when he went to his parents’ for Easter. Mycroft probably would have smelled it on him. And anyway he didn’t need it; he was very careful, no cravings in between his carefully spaced and measured doses. On the other hand, his family sometimes induced a very similar feeling of skin-crawling irritation, so he was happy to accept his psychiatrist’s offer of benzodiazepines. He actually had another purpose in mind for them, but they might come in handy if his mother decided to start grilling him about his future.

But Easter went off better than anticipated. His family was so genuinely happy he was doing better that no one wanted to rock the boat, and one of the capsules emptied into Mycroft’s evening whisky sent him off snoring even before their parents went to bed. Sherlock waited until their room went silent just to be safe, then slipped stealthily into Mycroft’s room, filched his laptop, and worked out his password in two tries. (Napoleon, really? Was he thinking of the megalomaniac or the pastry? Either seemed likely.) Victoria Trevor was at a research facility called Baskerville, living in a flat in Exeter. Three hours from London. Excellent.

Sherlock waited until Mycroft was out of the country, called in sick, and took the early train to Exeter. He walked around until he located Trevor’s flat, in a bland street near a market square, and then caught the village bus that stopped at Baskerville. He saw immediately that Baskerville was a lost cause. The place was a fortress: armed guards everywhere, high walls and gates—he wasn’t going to be able to just waltz in there with Mycroft’s ID. He got off at the village, a self-consciously quaint little place with some sort of local mythology involving a giant dog, and had a coffee whilst he thought things over. He wondered briefly why Trevor didn’t live in the village. It was much closer,
and surely she wasn’t staying in Exeter for the social life? Just as well for him, he supposed.

Back in Exeter he bought a cheap bouquet of flowers from a market stall and slipped into Trevor’s building behind an elderly woman clutching a string bag. He picked Trevor’s lock in no time; it was a skill he’d acquired as a teenager, although he didn’t often get to use it. Sherlock realized suddenly that he was enjoying himself. Maybe when all this was over he could turn to a life of crime, since he’d clearly be brilliant at it.

Trevor’s flat was small and sunny, surprisingly pleasant, with a kind of barely-lived in tidiness. Sherlock had never seen her rooms at Oxford and he prowled around curiously, but there wasn’t a lot of information to be gleaned: she’d played the piano as a child, apparently did some yoga with DVDs, and ate a lot of frozen dinners. There were books everywhere, but the cozy little window seat seemed never ever to have been sat on. The place needed a cat, Sherlock found himself thinking.

On the train back to London, Sherlock turned his new information over in his head, thinking hard. He felt a dull headache starting in the base of his skull. If he couldn’t stop Trevor’s work, he had to stop Trevor herself. He knew it, intellectually; had gone to Exeter for the express purpose of seeing how best to do it, but he knew now he couldn’t be the one to do it. No matter what terrible things might follow from what she was doing, he could not be the one to stage her faked suicide or poison her frozen entree. Sherlock had stood in her quiet flat that needed a cat and looked at her orderly things and seen Trevor herself, her distant eyes and still face. He might be a potential master criminal, but he couldn’t be the one to kill her.

That night Sherlock had the worst nightmare yet, a terrible one where he was alone in the dark and afraid. There was pain—terrible pain—but then suddenly he was no longer alone, and for a minute he was glad, but then they were hurting him and the pain was everywhere, and the men, and the smell and the hands and the pipe.

Sherlock awoke gasping, clutching at his arm and blinking at the sting of sweat and tears in his eyes. Oh, God. He staggered out of bed, dizzy and nauseated, and stumbled over to where he kept his pills, swallowing down one of the sedatives dry and gagging at the feel of it in his throat. He got a glass of water and drank, sitting on the floor because his legs were shaking too badly to hold him. He barely managed to set the glass down without spilling it. He leaned back against the wall, trying to slow his breathing, feeling his hammering heart gradually slowing down.

There had to be another way.

“Didn’t expect you this soon,” Kev said morosely. Moroseness, Sherlock knew, was essentially Kev’s default setting, which Sherlock rather appreciated; he couldn’t imagine Kev had much reason to be cheerful, so why pretend? “All right?”

“All right,” Sherlock said, which was a blatant lie. He hesitated, but this end of the park seemed to be completely deserted: just the two of them and some fragrant lilac trees. “I might need a job done,” he finally said carefully. “Not a very legal job, if you follow me. Do you know anyone?”

“No me,” Kev said. He squinted a little, considering the problem. “I know who you could ask though. There’s a bloke who deals heroin not far from here. Those guys are tied in with all kinds of big organizations, organized crime and such. He might know somebody. He’s called Stripe.”

Stripe turned out to be a short, squat black man with a shaved head and a scar running up one side of his face. “One of Kev’s, eh?” he said when Sherlock introduced himself. “Come on in. Get a lot of business off Kev, people looking to come down so they can get some sleep. Ever done this before?”
“Er…no,” Sherlock said. Now that he was here he was realizing that he would be expected to make a purchase and establish his lawbreaking bona fides before getting anywhere. Heroin wasn’t something he’d ever found appealing, but needs must, and anyway maybe he did need something to help bring him down. He’d been going through the cocaine a bit faster than he’d liked, lately, and maybe this would help to balance him out.

Stripe demonstrated the process matter of factly and took Sherlock’s remaining money. “That won’t get you a lot, but should help for tonight, anyway. Come on back whenever you need more.”

Sherlock went back to his flat. He felt jittery and anxious, strung out and simultaneously aware of the exhaustion that lurked at the periphery of his mind. He’d been up for three days, afraid to go back to bed for fear of the dreams, but if he didn’t get some sleep soon he knew that people would start to notice something was wrong. And that was one thing he really couldn’t afford. But, still…heroin.

Sherlock looked at the bag. He looked at his bed and felt a reflexive, choking terror. He went to the tiny kitchenette and fetched a spoon.

“Actually,” Stripe said slowly, “you might be in luck. There’s a new bloke I’ve been hearing about. Fancies himself a consultant, apparently. He’s working on getting my supplier a line on a better product. From what I hear, he can sort just about anything.”

“Do you have a number for him?”

“I can get it.”

It turned out that the consultant preferred to make initial contact via email, so Sherlock stared at the bit of paper a while, bit his lip—if this was a police front he was done for—did a line, did another, and finally typed out an inquiry to dearjim1916@yahoo.com. He got a response back within hours, asking for his mobile number, and Sherlock sent it with a feeling of intense trepidation.

He expected something smooth and authoritative or at least older, but dearjim1916’s voice was light and oddly chilling, with a faint Irish lilt. He did not ask Sherlock why he wanted Victoria Trevor killed. He merely took her name and address and told Sherlock he would be in touch with a price.

At work the next day, Sherlock went to pour alcohol into bottles in preparation for the day’s labs and felt an intense stinging in his fingers. He looked at his hands and realized he had bitten his nails so far into the quick that he had gnawed the skin from his fingertips. He wore gloves, after that. They made his hands sweat.

“I’ve had a man look into your little matter,” dearjim1916 said in his singsongy voice. Sherlock clutched at the phone, sweating; it had taken the man two weeks to get back to him and Sherlock was nearly beside himself with anxiety. “He thinks it should be straightforward enough.”

“How much?” Sherlock managed, lightheaded.

Dearjim1916 told him. “Half up front, the other half when it’s done.”
“It can’t come back to me.”

The man’s laugh rang in his ears, amused and a little creepy. “Of course not, my dear,” he said. “It’ll look like a robbery gone wrong, is all.”

“I don’t want—I don’t want her hurt. I mean…”

“Not a hair on her head,” dearjim1916 sang. “How long until you can get the money?”

Sherlock thought, hard. He didn’t have that much, and getting it without arousing suspicion was going to take some planning. “A week?”

“I’ll send my man back to Exeter in a week. You put the money through the mail slot where I told you, and he’ll do it the next day. As soon as it’s done, you put the rest in.”

“All right,” Sherlock said. He disconnected, went straight to the kitchen, and tied the tourniquet around his arm.

Sherlock rang his father and told him he’d found rooms in a different part of Oxford, farther away from the labs but more removed from his old haunts. He said he wanted to buy a used motorbike to get back and forth. “I’m afraid Mummy will say no,” he confided. “She thinks they’re so dangerous.”

“I always wanted one myself,” his father said a little wistfully. “You’ll wear a helmet?”

“Of course. My brain might be a little dodgy, but it’s the only one I’ve got!” He heard the faint edge of manic desperation in his own laugh and bit his lip, but his father did not seem to notice.

“I’ll get it transferred over to your account in a day or so. Maybe I’ll come up and see you in the autumn term and we can take it for a spin.”

“That would be lovely,” Sherlock said and for a moment felt the sting of tears in his eyes, because he could see it suddenly: the mythical rooms which in his imagination looked a bit liked Trevor’s, clean and sunny; himself happy and healthy and roaring about on a motorbike, his father laughing behind him, proud of him. He made himself swallow the tightness in his throat. “I won’t tell Mummy.”

“Our secret,” his father agreed conspiratorially.

The money came. Sherlock paced around his room, edgy and frantic, wondering if he should put it through a day early, perhaps dearjim1916 would not be around to pick it up until the next day and it would be risky to leave it lying about, but what if something happened, what if he changed his mind, he needed sleep, he had just taken the last of his cocaine and now had run out of heroin and cocaine both and he was so anxious, so anxious.

Eventually he left his flat and just walked, pacing and pacing into the night. His mind seemed to be chewing on itself like an animal in a trap.

Sherlock came to the park eventually and hesitated. He could turn into the park and find Kev, buy some cocaine. He knew a hit would smooth the terror from his mind, make everything seem sure and right and inevitable. He would know he was doing the right thing. God, he wanted that, he wanted so much to be sure he was doing the right thing.
Sherlock turned instead and skirted the edge of the park, ducking down the narrow little street that led to Stripe’s dodgy flat. He handed over his money and collected a small bag. “You want to be careful with that, mate,” Stripe said, gesturing with his chin. “Remember I told you my supplier had a line on a new source? I hear that shit’s way purer than what we had before.”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, not really listening, entirely focused on the promise of the drug in his pocket. He left quickly. There was a place at the end of the alley where there was a space between two skips, just wide enough for a skinny young man to shoot up, if he desperately needed to quiet his mind before he headed home. He had noticed it before, but had never been in such a bad way. He wedged himself into the space, fumbling into his pocket and pulling out a tube of lip gloss and twisting off the cap. It was plastic, and he would burn his fingers holding it over the lighter, but it would do in a pinch. He already had syringes in his pockets, because he nicked them from the bio labs two and three at a time.

The process was messy and fumbling—partly because his hands were shaking so badly—but Sherlock managed and eventually had the heroin drawn up into his syringe. Just a tiny bit, just enough to calm his nerves enough to get home and work out what to do. He knew now he could never go through with this thing with dearjim1916, but he had no idea what he was going to do instead.

Sherlock tightened his belt around his bicep with his teeth and slid the needle into a vein, already feeling relief just in anticipation of the hit. The first sting was almost sweet, and then came the rush—so much bigger and brighter than he expected, like a wave of pure light breaking over his head and drowning out all the noise and fear and finally, his mind went quiet.

“Hold CPR,” John said.

Everyone except the nurse bagging took a step back and went still, watching the monitor, which remained stubbornly flat. Not even a blip. John hesitated, hating to give up, but he’d already tried everything—naloxone, epinephrine, cardioversion at increasing levels—without so much as a glimmer of electrical activity. The boy was gone.

“Call it,” he said finally, and heard everyone exhale, relief and regret mingled. “Time of death 5:52 AM.”

The nurse who had been bagging removed the mask and turned away, and John looked down at the still, delicate face. He knew its unearthly beauty would haunt him. John liked to think he would have cared just as much, fought just as hard, if the body on the table had been middle-aged and corpulent, but he knew that at least one part of him had been driven by a desperate conviction that something so beautiful was too precious to lose. His eyes were so blue. John reached out almost unconsciously and drew his fingers over the boy’s eyelids, closing them. The fine skin was still warm under his fingertips. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, finally turning away.

“Had a rough night,” Mike Stamford remarked when John came into the cluttered little charting room where they held signout in the A&E.

“Drug overdose,” John said. “The kid had a pulse when the paramedics got to him, but he arrested in the ambulance. We tried everything, but none of it worked.”

“Speedballing, maybe,” Mike said. Cocaine was well known to cause heart attacks even in the young.
“Maybe,” John said. He sighed. “I don’t think they’ve got an ID yet. He barely looked out of his teens.”

“I guess you’ll have to get used to that, if you end up joining the army,” Mike said. “Have you made up your mind?”

“I have now,” John said. “I was still on the fence, but that’s decided me against it. A little excitement is all well and good, but I don’t want to spend my life calling time of death on kids. I’m staying in London if I can find a good GP spot.”

“Glad to hear it,” Mike said with genuine warmth. “But not nearly as happy as Beth is going to be, I’m thinking.”

“Yeah,” John said, grinning now. “She made it clear she wouldn’t wait around if I left. Do me a favor and pretend it was all due to love of her I decided to stay, all right?”

In the park, not a quarter of a mile from where Sherlock had been found unconscious in the narrow space between the skips, newly minted Detective Inspector Lestrade stood staring down at the body of a young woman. “Crumbs,” he muttered.

“What’s that?” asked the forensics officer.

“Crumbs,” Lestrade repeated, frowning. “On her shirt.”

“You want me to bag them?” The officer leaned over to look. “You said she was a waitress, right? Stands to reason there’d be crumbs.”

“She worked at that Asian fusion place,” Lestrade said. “I don’t think they serve bread…I think these are some kind of pastry.”

“Well, I’ll bag them up so they don’t get lost. If you think of some way they’ll help catch the killer, we’ll have them safe and sound for you.”

Lestrade never did think of a way. The murder was never solved. The dead woman was the first victim of a serial killer named Michael Barnhoffer, who was never caught. He would go on to quietly kill one or two women a year until he and the woman he was stalking at the time were both killed in the bombings that destroyed the Houses of Parliament years later. His fourth victim was Beth Meyer, who had been out with a pair of girlfriends celebrating the end of their paediatrics training along with Beth’s engagement to John Watson. The ring had been on her finger less than forty-eight hours when she died. John would join the army after all, and die alone on a cold Afghan plain, many years later than he would have liked.

Half a world away, a woman with big blue eyes sat cleaning her gun. She was a soldier in a secret and very elite unit of the Australian Defense Force and she loved her job, when she got to do it, which was practically never, because apparently the vast majority of the bastards in the world were not actually bastard enough for the Australian government to want them dead. She was giving serious thought to going freelance; in fact, she had already put out some feelers. She even had an alias picked out, although to be honest she had chosen it as a child ages ago after seeing a picture of the Taj Mahal. It sounded exotic and exciting and matched her initials, or close enough.

The phone rang and she put down her gun to pick it up. “Ransome,” she said.
“Miss Ransome,” a voice she did not recognize said politely. “We have not met, but I have a situation that requires delicate handling, and I have heard that you may be interested in such a job.”

The man spoke perfect English, but there was a liquidity about the R’s that made her think he was Asian. “I might be,” she said cautiously. “What kind of terms?”

“Very generous ones, Miss Ransome, but I would prefer to discuss such things in person.”

“Of course,” Anna Grace Ransome said, trying to keep the smile out of her voice. “And actually, the name is Agra.”

Jim Moriarty did not spend a lot of time wondering what had happened to the jittery young man who wanted Victoria Trevor killed; he just assumed he had gotten cold feet. When the money did not appear after three days he rang his man in Exeter and told him to go home. He had plenty of other fish to fry.

Later, these fish would include facilitating the sale of a set of missile plans stolen from a hapless government functionary named Andrew West, which would set in motion a chain of events exacerbated by Lord Moran blowing up the Houses of Parliament. After that, the world went in a direction that could only be described as downhill. The final result might have been called World War III, if there had been enough eventual survivors to care about such things as history.

The man in Exeter was a hot-headed idiot with a lust to kill and poor impulse control. After he had spent a week trailing Victoria Trevor, he was so annoyed at being called off that he killed her anyway, just for the fun of it. Moriarty had to keep him around for a few more years because there was a shortage of good assassins in England, but eventually he was able to replace him with Agra, who was an enormous improvement. No one continued Trevor’s research, but in the end, it didn’t matter. Entropy triumphed anyway.

Chapter End Notes

Just in case I inadvertently freaked anyone out: remember, it's a time travel story! "Dead" in a failed time stream is not the same as "really dead". I promise you that no character who is currently alive on the show will be otherwise at the end of this fic.

Arthur Conan Doyle was a physician, and it's clear from reading canon that he intended to depict Sherlock Holmes as suffering from what we now know as bipolar disorder. As Watson points out to him, using cocaine is the worst possible thing one can do with a mood disorder (Watson is later successful in "weaning him from the fiend", as he so grimly puts it). BBC Sherlock hasn't really gone that direction, although there are certainly hints that Sherlock is at least cyclothymic (the milder form of BPD). This chapter is intended to depict Sherlock as he MIGHT have been suffering from both the temporal displacement effect and a more serious drug addiction, not as he actually was; in addition he never actually had the psychotic break everyone assumed he had had--he was right about Trevor's research. Bottom line: if you truly do suffer from illness, please do not stop your medication because you think you need to save the world, unless, of course, you are Sherlock Holmes.
Sherlock slammed back into himself feeling as though he had been shot through an icy waterfall. He tried to sit up, but the world tilted crazily around him. He felt as if he were going to be sick. “God,” he gasped. “Oh, God.” He was shaking violently.

“Well, obviously that didn’t work,” Mycroft remarked dryly from somewhere beyond his view.

“Be quiet, Mycroft,” Trevor said crisply. “Help him over to the sofa and get some water.”

Mycroft? Sherlock thought, briefly distracted, but when he tried to push himself up another wave of vertigo nearly drowned him. He was distantly aware of his brother hauling him up and over to the sofa, where he collapsed with his head down between his knees. Gradually the trembling eased a little. He was alive. He was all right. He was not high or in a crippling depression or terrified or desperately craving or strung out or withdrawing or coming down or any of the other awful sensations that were gradually beginning to fade from his mind.

A glass of water was pushed into his hand and he drank thirstily, aware that he was clammy with cold sweat. Better. He sat up, pushing his hair out of his eyes, and leaned back against the sofa; Mycroft reappeared with a different glass and handed him the whisky without comment. Sherlock took a generous swallow. Oddly, it helped. Trevor was watching him closely. “What happened? How much can you remember?”

Sherlock smiled a little, finding the fact that her curiosity was obviously stronger than her concern refreshingly direct. “I remember everything. Mycroft was right, it didn’t work.”

Trevor tucked her hair back with one finger and sat back. “Tell us.”

Sherlock told them. Now that he’d gotten some distance it all felt a bit unreal, like something that had happened long ago, which he supposed it had. Trevor leaned her forehead on her hand, a gesture of startling drama for her. “The drugs,” she groaned. “I should have remembered about the drugs.”

“But it wasn’t…” Mycroft looked a little out of his depth, which Sherlock could not help relishing. “It wasn’t that bad. Not the way things actually happened. Not that it was good,” he added hastily.

“No, that’s not it. You weren’t here when I explained. The temporal displacement effect is much more pronounced in people who are already mentally unstable to begin with. The drugs likely made it far worse even than that.” She looked at Sherlock, and Sherlock nodded. The worst of the nightmares he had suffered in this time stream, that feeling of things gone wrong—those had been pale and insignificant shadows compared to the horror he had just lived through.

“Congratulations,” he said, trying for a lightness he didn’t feel. “You’ve managed what Mycroft never could—I am never touching anything stronger than a cigarette again. I might even give up smoking.”

“You’re going to forget all about that in a few days,” Mycroft said, clearly not believing a word of it.

“I’m going to forget all of this, if things go according to plan,” Sherlock retorted.

“Yes, about that,” Mycroft said, changing tack smoothly. “What is the plan now? Apparently my dear brother’s powers of persuasion were not actually up to the task.”

“Do you know, I think the entropy stabilization really could have worked—I mean on its own,”
Sherlock said to Trevor. “Stephen Hawking thought so too. He said so in that editorial he published. Do you remember that? Did it happen in the primary time stream?”

“I don’t believe it did,” she said, looking surprised. “I suppose I got a lot of free publicity from you trashing my slides. You probably moved my career along quite a bit.”

“Trevor, I tried to have you killed,” Sherlock said. He was trying to sound exasperated, but the thought of what he had been contemplating still made his throat tight.

“But you wouldn’t have gone through with it.” Trevor folded her hands, thinking; the strand of silver hair fell forward again and she absently pushed it back. “Well. We’re going to need a different approach, I suppose. What do you suggest?”

“Go over the data again, about the entropy increase.”

Trevor pulled out one of her ever-present pads of paper and a silver pencil, sketching a graph with a timeline at the bottom. “We’re right here, yes? There’s a certain amount of baseline entropy, which fluctuates, but let’s assume for our purposes that’s remained essentially stable up until recently. Here’s a little blip around the start of nuclear fission and you can see that leads to a gradual increase, but as a matter of scale it’s practically irrelevant. Here’s the big jump about three and a half years ago, and here’s the second big jump right now.”

“I don’t understand,” Mycroft said. “The first increase is when you presume Moriarty…what?”

“It’s either the point to which he returned himself to the time stream when he went back, or the point at which this time stream deviated from the primary,” Trevor said. “I don’t know.”

“So we need to go back before that,” Sherlock said, thinking hard. “Something about his death, or my presumed death—that caused the deviation. It wasn’t meant to happen.”

“His death, don’t you think?” Mycroft said, but Trevor shook her head.

“We can’t know that for certain. If he hadn’t killed himself, would you still have faked your own death? That could have been the significant factor instead.”

“Then we stop them both,” Sherlock said. “We get Moriarty a different way. It shouldn’t be terribly difficult; we had dozens of other ideas.”

“Most of which were far more practical to begin with, dear brother,” Mycroft said. “You were the one who liked the ones that were all complicated and melodramatic.”

“It got the job done, didn’t it?” Sherlock said, getting annoyed. “And it’s not as though you were the one—“

Trevor held up her hand and they both immediately fell silent. “You say you had alternate plans. If I send you back far enough, you can put something else in place that will change the way your final confrontation played out?”

“Oh course,” Mycroft said.

“Let’s do it then.” She looked at Sherlock. “As soon as Holmes is ready. How much time do you think you’ll need to recover fully?”

“No need,” Sherlock said. He drank down the rest of the whisky in one go, hoping his hands didn’t tremble too obviously. “Let’s go.”
“I’m going to bring him in for questioning, at least,” Mycroft said. “This man can’t just be allowed to run amok wreaking havoc simply for the fun of it.”

“Whether you like it or not is irrelevant,” Sherlock said. “The fact is—“ He stopped suddenly, steadying himself with a hand against the desk. The room around him had blurred and greyed for a moment, an unpleasant but not unfamiliar sensation. He blinked and straightened.

Mycroft was watching him narrowly. “Ignoring the surly bonds of existence again, brother mine? I thought your live-in caretakers kept on top of such things.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock snapped, because he was, now, and anyway he had eaten that morning because John had made breakfast, but that wasn’t any of Mycroft’s business. “As I was saying, you can’t just bring Moriarty in because he’s not going to tell you anything, and you won’t be able to make any charges stick, and it will simply feed his obsession with us.”

“With you, you mean,” Mycroft observed.

Sherlock shrugged. “If you like.”

“We might be able to use that.”

“Thank you, but no. Find your own psychopathic nemesis to play with.” There had been a time when Sherlock would have been happy to keep his personal nemesis in the game indefinitely—Moriarty did keep things lively—but that had changed after the Irene Adler mess. If Moriarty was taking things to the personal, it was time to shut him down.

“Well, what do you suggest then?”

“I rather fancy the idea of setting up a rival to draw him out,” Sherlock said. “I’ve always regretted not becoming a master criminal myself. It would be rather fun to see if I could best him on his own turf.”

“Sorry, but no actual crimes will be committed.” Mycroft did not sound sorry at all. “Hmmm. Norway, I think. All that oil money lying around, conveniently contiguous with Russia…Moriarty’s still working through Eastern Europe. I’m rather surprised organized crime isn’t more of a problem in Norway, now that I think about it.”

“Maybe it is. Have your minions look into it,” Sherlock said. “And now I’m afraid you’re on your own for the time being, I’ve a client meeting back at Baker Street.”

John had really gotten into a groove on his latest case writeup, just flying along, when all of a sudden he heard the buzzer go downstairs.

“Shit,” he said, leaping up. He had completely forgotten about the client. Wasn’t Sherlock meant to be back by now? He looked wildly around the room, shoved a few dirty dishes into the kitchen, and leaped down the stairs two at a time.

“I’m sorry I’m a bit early,” the girl on the doorstep said. She beamed up at John as though John had saved her from an oncoming train, rather than opened the door on a sunny day. “I came on my lunch break, you know, and you’re closer to the station than I’d thought.”
“Of course, that’s fine—come in,” John said, holding the door for her. “Sherlock’s not here just at the moment but he should be back any time. Do you need something to eat then, if you’re missing lunch?”

“Oh, you’re lovely, but I’m fine, really.”

“Cup of tea, anyway,” John said gallantly. “I could do with one myself.”

He made a full pot, and sure enough Sherlock walked in just as John was getting out the cups. John half suspected him of lurking across the street until the perfect moment, so John could deal with all the small talk.

Sherlock took his tea, drank it down while staring unblinkingly at their client, who smiled at him adoringly, and then set the cup down with a decisive thump. “So. Miss Mason. You believe you’re being haunted.”

“Oh, Melanie, please. Yes, I do, I think I’ve got a poltergeist, or maybe a stalker.”

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, steepling his fingers. “Tell me exactly what happened.”

“Well, it’s only been a few times—three that I’m sure of, but it might have happened before and I didn’t notice. You see, at first it just moved things around in my flat—put some pictures face down, tossed my knickers out of the drawers and so on. I thought it was a robbery, but nothing was taken. So it might have moved them around before and I just thought I’d done it myself. But then the second time it broke my perfume bottles, and the last time—last week—it slashed some of my clothes. That was a bit upsetting.”

“I can imagine,” John said in what he hoped was a comforting sort of way. “Did you call the police?”

“Oh, no. My boyfriend was coming in town the next day and I had to get things tidied up. And anyway, the police couldn’t do anything if it was a poltergeist, could they? I saw a program about them on the telly.”

“Er,” John said. “I suppose not. Does the poltergeist, ah, make noise? Thumping or anything?”

“No…should it?”

“Well, I think so,” John said, feeling rather out of his depth. He glared at Sherlock, but Sherlock seemed more than happy for John to take over this new paranormal side of their business. “That’s what the name means, literally—‘noisy spirit’.”

“Oh. Well, I suppose I’ve got a polter-silent then!” She beamed brightly at John, who grinned back, although that was mostly because Sherlock had now squeezed his eyes closed as though in physical pain.

“Now you, ah, also thought it might be a stalker? Can you tell us more about that?”

“My ex-boyfriend,” Melanie said, her whole being now drooping with sadness. “I’m afraid he didn’t take it well. And he had keys to my flat, of course, but he said he’d lost them, so I never got them back. He did say he’d lost them before I dumped him, but perhaps he sensed it coming?”

John opened his mouth but Sherlock cut in impatiently. “What about the current boyfriend?”

Melanie brightened up again. “Oh, he’s got keys too. He lives out of town, you see. He’s a bit of a
secret because he’s a client—well, his firm is a client of the firm I work for, so no one can know about it. I’m sure I’m safe telling you though.” She dimpled at Sherlock, who stared at her as though she were a new species of bug.

“Has there been any pattern to the events?”

“No, not at all. Well, they’ve all been on Wednesdays, but other than that, it’s quite irregular. I worked it out with my calendar last night—“

“How very taxing,” Sherlock muttered.

“—and the first one was on the sixteenth last month, and then the sixth and then the twentieth, last week. Oh! You don’t suppose they’re getting closer together? Will it happen this week then?”

“Of course not. Your poltergeist likes the first and third Wednesdays of the month. March simply happened to have five Wednesdays.”

“Oooooh,” Melanie Mason breathed. “You are clever, Mr. Holmes! Do you think it’s significant? Maybe my building is on top of an old graveyard, and it was built on Wednesdays?”

“Ah.” John thought it best to jump back in before Sherlock recovered his powers of speech. “I think that’s—you’ve been very helpful, Miss Mason, very, er, thorough, and if I could just write down the names of your boyfriend and the ex-boyfriend, here…”

“You must call me Melanie, please! Yes, of course.” She wrote the names down in a pretty round script, added her number and address at John’s direction, and practically kissed him when he suggested that if she hurried she could probably pick up a sandwich on her way back to work.

“Nice girl,” John said, grinning, when he came back from showing her out.

“Is that what we’re calling it now?” Sherlock asked. “If she’d half as much brains as breasts she wouldn’t need me at all.”

“Oh, did she have large breasts? I hadn’t noticed.”

Sherlock tossed him a look over his shoulder as he settled himself at the desk, commandeering both John’s notebook and laptop. John sighed and left him to it, hoping he’d remembered to save the write-up he’d been working on. He gathered the teacups and took them to the kitchen, where he dumped them unceremoniously on the growing pile of dirty dishes in the sink.

“Daniel Earles is married,” Sherlock announced gleefully when John returned.

“Which one is he again?”

“The current boyfriend. The one in Bristol. I assume he hasn’t mentioned the fact, and Melanie Mason is far too stupid to look for a ring mark.”

“Oh.” John felt slightly disappointed. “So I don’t need to do any research on desecrated graveyards after all? Too bad. I rather fancied us as ghostbusters.”

“Oh, we’ll bust something,” Sherlock said. He smiled up at John, that real, genuinely happy smile that John knew only he ever saw, the one that always made his heart give a funny little squeeze. “What are you doing Wednesday next?”
It was the wife, of course. John got several good pictures of her entering the building, and Sherlock a few more through the window by the fire escape before she took out a can of spray paint and Sherlock abruptly decided that the whole thing had gone far enough, and broke in.

He might not have been so harsh if the day had gone smoothly, but Wanda Earles hadn’t shown up until early afternoon—apparently on the first and third Wednesdays her daughter went to Girl Guides after school, which gave Wanda enough time to nip up to London, wreak havoc on her husband’s mistress’ flat, and do a bit of shopping before she went back to Bristol—and it had poured rain all day. John had been snug and dry in a café with a view of the front of the building, but Sherlock had been posing as a street busker, although he’d had to abandon the busker part to keep his violin dry and settled for vagrant. So by the time he jimmed open the window and dropped into Melanie Mason’s flat he was freezing, soaked through, had skinned his hands badly when he slipped on the fire escape, and in no mood to be patient. And then Wanda Earles sprayed him with the spray paint. When John finally came panting up they were in the midst of a furious row.

“Why are you trashing her flat?” Sherlock was shouting. “She didn’t know he was married! Of course she didn’t work it out! She’s an idiot! Why aren’t you trashing your husband’s things instead?”

Wanda Earles gave up trying to tug the paint out of Sherlock’s hands and burst into tears. “What if he leaves me?”

“Then good riddance! He’s a lying adulterer! Who cares?” This made Wanda cry harder. “Oh for God’s sake—just go. Go back to Bristol and have a domestic or lock him out or hire a solicitor or whatever you people do, I don’t care. Just get out of here and leave Melanie Mason alone, or we take these photos to the police.”

Wanda fled, still sobbing, and John shot Sherlock a bit not good look he ignored in favor of digging out his phone. Which was dead.

“Oh, for—my phone is drowned!” He shook the blank screen in disbelief. Was everything destined to go wrong today? He was exhausted, he’d been sleeping badly, he was freezing and wet and his feet hurt, and now his stupid phone had given up. “Damn it. Give me yours.” He tapped in Melanie Mason’s number from memory and said, “Sherlock Holmes. Yes. No. It’s Daniel Earles’ wife. Yes, of course he’s married.” He winced and held the phone out from his ear. “You might want to have your locks changed; I imagine she copied her husband’s keys. Don’t forget to post the cheque.” He hung up and handed the phone back to John, who was looking displeased.

“Was that necessary?”

“Of course it was. Daniel would just keep lying to her otherwise. Anyway she’ll be fine, she really fancies her boss—she’s been doing this mostly to try and make him jealous. He clearly fancies her too or he wouldn’t keep her on; she must be staggeringly incompetent.” He sneezed.

John looked as though he was still trying to seem annoyed, but the corners of his mouth twitched. “We’d better get straight on home,” he said. “You’re soaked to the skin.”

Of course, they didn’t go straight home, because at that moment the door to the stairs flew open and out charged the police, looking for the shady man who had been seen breaking into the flat from the fire escape, and who was now caught red-handed with a can of spray paint that had clearly just been used to scrawl WHORE in three-foot letters over the wall behind him.
Things were finally smoothed over after John was allowed to call Lestrade, although John had a gloomy feeling they’d be regretting that call later. Judging from Sherlock’s sullen expression, he thought so too. They finally got back to Baker Street only to have Mrs. Hudson come out and scold them when Sherlock tracked water all over the stairs.

“That case was stupid,” Sherlock said. He seemed to have burned through his irritation—surprising John, who thought he had an inexhaustible supply—and now just sounded dejected.

“Oh, I don’t know,” John said. “It wasn’t bad until the police showed up.” He looked over at Sherlock, who was trying to peel off his sopping sweatshirt. Sherlock looked abjectly miserable and somehow smaller, soaked and shivering with his curls plastered down like a wet cat. “Tell you what. Why don’t you go have a good long bath and I’ll get us some dinner in? We could have pho. I could do with some hot soup myself.”

Sherlock shrugged and squelched off down the hall, limping. John knew his feet must be killing him —Sherlock bought most of his disguises at Oxfam and they hadn’t had any shoes in his size. Oh well, a hot bath and some food and he’d be back to his usual irascible self.

John didn’t expect Sherlock to be out any time soon; on a good day he took some of the longest baths John had ever seen. John had always secretly suspected he had gone to one of those boarding schools that made the boys take cold showers and sleep with the windows open and was still recovering from the experience. It seemed the sort of thing Mycroft would think a good idea, as long as he didn’t have to do it himself. So when the food came he dumped Sherlock’s pho into a pan on the stove to keep warm and ate his own in front of the telly. He was beginning to wonder if Sherlock had fallen asleep in there when he finally appeared, looking a lot happier in pajamas and his warmest dressing gown.

“There you are.” John got to his feet and collected his empty dishes. “Put your feet up; I’ll get your pho.”

The kitchen took longer than he expected, because they apparently no longer had any clean bowls. This was not even directly Sherlock’s fault, as none of them were currently being used to house any type of experiment that John could see; they were just all piled up in the sink. So the blame was probably equal, since they both tended to let the dirty dishes accumulate in a silent sort of chicken game until one of them snapped or needed a dish; and actually Sherlock probably even had the edge there, since John had a knack of timing things so that he was working at the surgery when the clean ones ran out. This wouldn’t bother Sherlock, of course—he just wouldn’t eat—but Mrs. Hudson usually turned up and chivvied him into washing up. John actually couldn’t remember the last time he’d taken a turn. And he was the one who had taken to eating cereal lately since all that eggs and toast were starting to go to his middle. In fact, every single bowl in the heap was probably John’s.

John sighed, took out the soap and sponge, and set to work. By the time he’d finished Sherlock’s soup had simmered down to where there was hardly any broth left at all and John thought he himself needed a drink. He carried out the nicely cleaned bowl and his own glass and found Sherlock half asleep on the sofa. “Sit up, I’ve got your food.”

Sherlock pushed himself upright, looking foggy, and then swung his feet around to prop on the coffee table when John sat next to him. “What took so long? Did you make it from scratch?”

“I went all the way to Vietnam for it, you ungrateful git. Here.” He handed Sherlock the bowl.

Sherlock slurped down his noodles whilst John sipped his drink, half watching the programme and half just relaxing into the warm coziness of the flat. After a bit Sherlock set down the mostly empty bowl and leaned back against the sofa, staring unseeingly at the telly through half-lidded eyes. John
thought he was going to drop off again when Sherlock said suddenly, “I don’t understand it.”

“What, this?”

“Of course not. This is dreck. I don’t understand Wanda Earles.”

John muted the telly, curious. “What don’t you understand?”

“Why go to so much trouble?” Sherlock was still frowning at the now-silent screen. “Why try so hard to hang onto him? I meant what I said—he is a lying cheat. She already has a child, she’s clearly financially comfortable and objectively good-looking so she could probably find an adequate replacement fairly quickly. Why would she want to keep him? Why do people get so attached?”

“Well.” John shrugged a little helplessly. “The heart wants what it wants, I guess. I mean, haven’t you ever wanted anybody? Even a little?” He was thinking of Irene Adler, not that he’d have the nerve to come right out and ask.

Sherlock was silent for so long that John actually began to get his hopes up. Then he said, “No.”

“Never?” John said skeptically. “Even when you were younger?”

“No.”

“Hmmm.” John looked at the silent telly also. Really? Never? John remembered his own lust-addled teenage years. It boggled the mind, but maybe Sherlock just wasn’t wired to be interested. Or had re-wired himself, more likely. Still, he didn’t want to make Sherlock feel defensive, or to admit the tiny trickle of disappointment in the back of his mind. “Just as well,” he said lightly. “Two of us bringing dates home, it might get a little crowded in the loo.”

Sherlock smiled slightly and John saw his shoulders relax fractionally. “I don’t think you need to worry,” he said.

“Good then.” John picked up the remote. “Okay if I turn this back on?”

The woman professionally known as Agra, who was currently travelling with a passport in the name of Margaret Leeds, paused in the aisle of the plane. “Is it just you on your own?” she asked the skinny girl staring moodily out the window. “I mean, is your mum in a different row someplace? I could switch if you like.”

The girl seemed startled at being addressed. “Just me. I’m fine. Thank you though,” she added.

Margaret heaved her carryon into the overhead and settled into her own seat, stowing her handbag under the seat. She was tired. This trip was the third time Moriarty had outsourced her to the Malavita. The money was good, but shouldn’t Italian gangsters really have their own damn assassins?

“I like your bag,” the girl said shyly. “Did you get it in Rome?”

“Thanks,” Margaret said. “Florence, actually. Not this trip though.”

“Do you go to Italy a lot?”

Margaret made a face. “Bit too much, lately. Work. What about you?”
“My dad lives in Rome. I spend every holiday with him. Well, I did.”

“Are your Easter holidays done already?”

“No.” The girl looked out the window again. “I made him let me go back early. His girlfriend’s having a baby, and they’re getting married.”

“Ah,” Margaret said. She considered saying some crap lie about how her dad would always love her and things wouldn’t change, but probably the dad had already tried that particular crap lie. And it was a lie, anyway. “Bastard.”

The girl turned back to Margaret so fast her hair flew around, shock and delight warring in her bony face. “He is! He’s a right bastard! He promised…” she broke off, her face working.

“Hey.” Margaret leaned over and rummaged in her purse, pulling out a box of baci. “You’re not allergic to nuts, are you? I’ve got chocolates. Have you any cards?”

“Sure.” The girl dug in her backpack and produced a reasonably tidy deck.

“Let’s play war. Winner of each round gets a piece.”

They had to wait until the plane was safely airborne so they could put down the tray tables, and then they were off and running. Margaret was surprised to find she was enjoying herself. She’d never particularly thought she liked kids, but she’d been reevaluating a lot of things about herself the past year or so. She was thirty-eight now, and she couldn’t be a badass assassin forever; she’d eventually get caught. And she was sick of working for Moriarty. At first it had seemed like a good deal, him making all the arrangements and her pocketing most of the fee, but the man was utterly mental and getting worse. Margaret had been stealthily working on her exit strategy for months now, and was just waiting for the right moment. She had a moment’s fantasy of taking the girl off with her, raising her up to be a tough bird who could shoot and cheat at cards and take shit from no man, but this girl clearly had a mum back in England. She’d be all right. Still….maybe the motherhood thing wasn’t entirely out of the question. She’d think about it.

“Ha!” the girl said gleefully. “I win again.”

“Well played, you,” Margaret said, and slid over another chocolate.

“So how are things with Herr Sigerson?” Sherlock asked. He settled into a chair in Mycroft’s weirdly subterranean office. Why did he like things so gloomy?

“Coming along. I do have other things on my plate, you know. Including tidying up after your usual foibles…Baskerville, for instance. Really, Sherlock, was that necessary?”

“Yes.” Sherlock did not want to talk about Baskerville. The hallucinogenic gas had scrambled his brain worse than anything had done since his cocaine days; he still shuddered thinking of the nightmares he’d had.

Mycroft leaned back in his chair and considered him over his fingertips. “I do have some intelligence that your little affair with the Reichenbach painting has rather drawn his attention. Well, it’s drawn everyone’s attention; the way the press is fawning over you these days I’m starting to think you actually enjoy the limelight. But apparently that art theft ring was connected to Moriarty’s network and he’s feeling a bit put out with you.”
“Then maybe,” Sherlock said with exaggerated patience, “we should start actively moving this thing forward instead of waiting for him to come to us.”

“It may be too late for that,” Mycroft sat forward, all business now. “There’s a reporter sniffing around from one of the tabloids. She turned up at our parents’ asking all sorts of questions about things she shouldn’t have been able to find out. She ran into Mummy first, fortunately.”

“What sorts of things?”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows.

“The police,” Sherlock said with a sigh. “Everyone there knows about the drugs. All she had to do was get to Donovan, or Anderson.”

“But someone had to point her in the right direction,” Mycroft said. “I think Moriarty is playing his own game now, and if that’s the case we aren’t going to have enough time to play ours out. We’re going to need a Plan B.”

“And C, D, E and F,” Sherlock said. He was suddenly just so tired of the whole thing. He wanted the business with Moriarty over and done with, so he could go back to the puzzles he loved and maybe get a decent night’s sleep for once. “If he insists on being one step ahead of us, then let’s make sure there’s a nice trap waiting for him when he gets there.”

Agra was at home the day Moriarty decided to undertake his epic crime spree, working on a paper for the master’s in nursing admin she was getting online. She didn’t hear the news until she knocked off to make herself a jacket potato for tea and turned on the telly. Her jaw dropped. What the hell?

Agra stuck the potato in the oven, wiped off her hands, and went straight to her computer to read everything she could find. What on earth was Jim up to? She wasn’t any kind of confidant or sidekick, but usually whenever he had something big cooking he called her in to watch his back. But this time he’d actually gone and gotten himself caught—gave up without a struggle, apparently—and several of the news sites hinted of some kind of “message” aimed at Sherlock Holmes. Agra pulled out her potato, piled it up with butter and salt, and ate it whilst she watched the evening news through. Nothing new. She was forced to consider the possibility that her batshit boss had finally gone right off his head, which was hardly unexpected, but it was just so difficult to be sure. If he had really lost it, she’d be best off bailing and assuming her carefully-cultivated retirement identity as quickly as possible, in case he decided to be the chatty sort of lunatic. On the other hand, if this were actually some kind of byzantine plot, trying to disappear would be a very, very dangerous idea.

Agra sucked the salt from her greasy fingers, thinking hard, and finally decided to wait it out. She already had everything ready—had done for months—so if she got the slightest whiff of anyone coming after her, she’d be gone.

“It’s all part of his plan,” Sherlock said, pacing and edgy. “It has to be. I don’t know what he’s doing yet, but it’s obvious that this trial serves some sort of purpose.”

“I’m moving things along as quickly as possible,” Mycroft said. “I can’t imagine he won’t be convicted, but it can’t hurt to be prepared nonetheless.”

“I want them watched at all times. Mrs. Hudson, John, Molly, Lestrade. He is not going to snatch another hostage as part of his little game.”
“They are being watched. You should tell Mrs. Hudson to be a bit more careful with her, ah, shopping—I should hate to squander any influence I may have on getting charges against her dismissed, especially now.”

“You’ve plenty of influence.” Sherlock pulled out a cigarette and Mycroft said, mildly, “No.”

“Fine,” Sherlock snapped and strode to the door. “I’m going home. Apparently I’m to meet with the prosecution about my testimony. John seems to think they’re worried about what I’ll say.”

“I can’t imagine why,” Mycroft said.

When the trial had reached its final, shocking verdict and Moriarty had left Baker Street, leaving a bitten apple and a half-drunk cup of tea and a cloud of palpable menace hanging in the air like foul perfume, Sherlock pulled out his phone and texted one word to his brother. *Endgame. SH*

*How long?*

*A month, maybe two. He’ll want to make me wait. SH*

*We’re not waiting.*

When other people’s lives fell apart, there was maybe a little bang at the beginning—the sound of a shot, of a bullet hitting flesh—but then mostly it was the long whimper of the invalid discharge, the half-pay pension, the limp and the tremor and the bleakness of losing everything that had mattered. Not Sherlock Holmes. When his life fell apart it was with the colossal drama of a supernova: police, press, publicity, everyone abandoning him in the end. Even his best friend. When Sherlock’s life fell apart, John thought, striding furiously toward the door of Bart’s, it took everyone else down with it. John was still so enraged with Sherlock and frantic with worry about Mrs. Hudson that he didn’t even notice the perfect timing of the cab that slid smoothly up to the curb the moment he appeared.

John was in the cab, glowering at the traffic and seething at the memory of Sherlock’s flat, distant gaze—it was better than wondering what was happening with Mrs Hudson—when he realized suddenly that they’d turned the wrong way. “Excuse me,” he said, leaning forward. “I wanted Baker Street?”

The cabbie ignored him. *Shit*, John thought, his already rapid pulse rocketing up further. Shit, shit, shit, of course he hadn’t his gun, he was under arrest when he left the flat after all and—

His phone rang. John grabbed for it, hoping it was Sherlock or, better yet, Lestrade, but the screen read *Mycroft*. He hesitated, glancing at the cabbie. The phone rang again.

“I think you’d better answer that, Dr. Watson,” the driver said politely.

John took a deep, deep breath and raised the phone to his ear. “Mycroft,” he said, cold and clipped.

“John. The man driving this car is one of my most trusted agents. He has been tasked with delivering you to a safe location. I assure you—“

“Mrs. Hudson’s been shot. I’m not going anywhere but to her.”

“Mrs. Hudson is fine. She and Molly Hooper are already at a safe house with my assistant. I’m with
Detective Inspector Lestrade, as that situation is particularly sensitive.”

John saw it all then, the whole picture in a single searing flash, and his heart leaped up in his throat. “Sherlock. Fuck. Turn this cab around right now, I’m not going to any bloody safe location and leaving him on his—“

“I can’t do that.”

“Turn the God damn cab around!” He was shouting, the terror and rage almost blinding him because he had left Sherlock, left him alone to confront his worst enemy, he’d fallen for a trick that shouldn’t have fooled a child and now Sherlock was all alone.

“John. Listen to me. One hour ago my agents apprehended snipers who had been positioned at Baker Street, at St. Bartholomew’s Hospital, and near Detective Inspector Lestrade’s residence. My brother is on his way to meet with Moriarty now. The only way he can be sure of succeeding against him is if Moriarty’s advantage is neutralized. Sherlock must know that you are safe. He must.” Mycroft’s usually dispassionate voice held an urgency John had never heard there before.

John leaned his head against the window, London blurring past in the grayish early morning. “So I’m just a pawn in your game,” he said, voice heavy with bitterness.

“Oh, no, John. You’re the king. The only piece that matters, at least to Sherlock.”

In the end John gave in. He really didn’t have a choice. Sherlock was long gone by now, and John had no idea where—for all he knew Sherlock and Moriarty were dueling at dawn in Pall Mall. He let himself be transferred over to a black car with tinted windows in an underground parking garage, driven around in circles some more, and finally taken to a small and utterly forgettable house somewhere in the suburbs.

Inside, the place reminded John of a midprice chain hotel: beige and anonymous. A pair of agents came already installed, apparently to provide John with anything he might need or to obliterate anyone who threatened him, as the case might be. John refused their offers of food or a lie-down, though he’d been up all night; he was too keyed up and anxious to sleep. He accepted the male agent’s offer of coffee and paced back and forth in the small lounge, intermittently turning on the news and then switching it off again in disgust: Kitty Reilly’s smear piece on Sherlock seemed to be the lead story everywhere. The waiting was unbearable. John thought he’d learned patience in the army, but this bland limbo was worse than anything he’d endured on his own behalf.

John was trying to decide if it was worth worsening the burning in his stomach to get another cup of coffee when there was a flurry of activity in the kitchen. The woman agent crossed in front of the lounge door, murmuring into a phone, and John was just going to follow her when the younger one—Charles?—appeared. “They’re on their way,” he reported.

“Who? Mycroft?”

“Both of them, Dr. Watson. Mr. Holmes and his brother.”

Thank God, thank God; Sherlock must be all right, he was coming here and not a hospital, he was alive so John could kill him now. Thank God. “We’re going to need tea,” he told Charles. “And I’ll take a cup as soon as it’s ready, thank you.”

They arrived surprisingly quickly; perhaps they’d taken a more direct route, or were just nearly there when Mycroft had called. John was standing in the centre of the room, waiting, when he saw
Mycroft and the woman agent cross into the dining room-slash-study and close the door. A moment later, Sherlock appeared in the doorway.

John had been all ready to rage at him in what he felt was a completely justified fury, but at the sight of Sherlock’s grey, drawn face he felt most of his anger drain away. Whatever had happened, apparently it wasn’t over yet. He took a step forward, frowning at the fine spray of blood on Sherlock’s cheek. “Are you hurt?”


“Here, sit down.” Thankful to have something concrete to do, John steered Sherlock to a chair and pushed him into it. He went to the kitchen and collected a cup of sweetened tea and a damp cloth from Charles, then returned and silently wiped the dried blood from Sherlock’s face. Sherlock was still and passive, unresisting. When he lifted the cup to his lips as John stepped back John saw that his fingers were trembling. John watched him like as a hawk as he drank down the tea, visibly calmer when he finished.

“What happened?”

Sherlock set the cup carefully on the table. His gaze did not quite meet John’s. “I met Moriarty on the roof of Bart’s. He told me that he had three gunmen, one each for Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson and you. He wanted me to jump from the roof, to validate my disgrace with a public suicide. If I did not jump, his men would shoot.”

John felt a sense of desperate relief that he’d done as Mycroft asked, no matter how much it had cost him at the time. “But you knew we were safe.”

“Yes. When Moriarty understood this, he stuck a gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger.”

“Jesus!” No wonder Sherlock was so shaken. “Is he—“

“No.” Sherlock’s voice was flat. “I tried to stop him. I grabbed for the gun, but he was too fast or too strong, and he blew out the side of his face. His jaw, I think. There were teeth.”

“So he’s…”

“Alive. I don’t know how fully he’ll recover. He was going into surgery as we arrived here.”

“Okay.” John tried to think about what to say next and failed, so he fell back on habit: “Let me get you some more tea.”

When Sherlock had drunk half the cup, John took a deep breath and said, “Okay. It’s obvious you’re ten steps ahead of me here, have been for ages, and I’m not going to pretend I’m happy about that. But this isn’t the time or the place. So just go ahead and fill me in on what happens now.”

“Well, we weren’t expecting Moriarty to try to kill himself,” Sherlock said with a flash of his usual irritation. “It’s created all sorts of difficulties. We hadn’t expected him to carry out quite so efficient a job of setting me up, either. Now with him incapacitated there’s no easy way of clearing my name, let alone proving his guilt—if anything it makes things blacker against me. In addition, we didn’t realize until last night how extensive his London network is. Most of the intelligence we’d been able to gather was on his overseas contacts and suppliers. And we really didn’t know he had penetrated the police force so extensively. There’s at least one person on the inside who’s targeting Lestrade, and we don’t know who it is…but we know he’s not the only one.”

“Jesus,” John said, staring. “The chief superintendent is on Moriarty’s payroll? I just thought he was
an idiot!”

“There’s no proof yet,” Sherlock said wearily. “He’ll block every effort to prove my innocence, and possibly destroy Lestrade in the bargain.”

“So what were you planning?”

Sherlock sat up a little, lighting up a bit as he always did when he had the chance to explain something clever. “Mycroft and I were setting up an organized crime ring out of Norway. The head of it was like Moriarty—a shadow, a man no one ever saw. It’s useful enough if you want to avoid taking the fall, but even more so if he doesn’t actually exist. The idea was that after attracting enough notoriety we would begin cutting in on Moriarty’s territory and draw him out that way, but he moved too quickly. The only silver lining to this situation is the chaos it’s going to have created in Moriarty’s organization, and that creates an opportunity for the Norwegian to move in, take over, and destroy Moriarty’s organization from the inside out.”

“Okay,” John said, feeling as though he were missing something crucial, as usual. “How does that happen if the Norwegian doesn’t exist?”

“I’m the Norwegian, John,” Sherlock said softly. “Or I will be after today.”

John turned that over in his head. He could see that it made a certain amount of sense: if nothing else, it gave Sherlock a way to disappear whilst Mycroft cleaned up the mess in London and paved the way for his return. “So we’re leaving today? What are we going to tell—“

Sherlock looked straight at him for the first time. “No. Not you. I’m going alone.”

“Oh, no,” John said. He could feel the anger returning. “Are you mad? You can’t go running off on your own pretending to be some kind of super-criminal! Why would you think that made any sense?”

“John, do you even speak Norwegian?”

“Do you?” Oh, of course he bloody did.

“Excuse me, Mr. Holmes?” It was the senior agent, the woman. “They’re ready for you.”

Sherlock got up without a word and followed her out into the hallway. John, seething, collected Sherlock’s coat where he had left it crumpled in the chair and hung it on the rack out of habit. Then he went to track down Sherlock to continue the argument, but as he stepped out in the hall he saw Mycroft sitting in the dining room command centre. John went in, closed the door behind him, and leaned on the table.

“You can’t do this,” he said without preamble. “What are you thinking? He’s not one of your agents; he’s a high-strung genius who can barely look after himself in London. He’s impatient, he’s twitchy, he fidgets when he’s nervous and he can’t even shoot straight! He’s fucking shaking right now. If you’re sending him out there, you have to send me with him.”

Mycroft looked him square in the eye. “If I thought it would protect him, I would, but you would only increase the danger. Please consider this rationally, John. Thanks to your blog, everyone thinks of you as a pair: the hero and his blogger. The two of you together are a target. On his own, he might have a chance.”

“Is that what you told him? That I’d get him caught?”
“No,” Mycroft said. “I told him he would get you caught. If you have learned nothing else this morning, John, have you not realized that my brother can act only if he knows you are safe?”

“This is wrong,” John said raggedly. “He needs me.”

“I know,” Mycroft said tiredly. “But he needs you here more.”

John turned on his heel and walked out. His stomach was churning and he could feel his hands balling into fists. He wanted to find Sherlock and talk to him, shout at him, anything to make him see sense; but Sherlock was in one of the bedrooms with a stylishly dressed woman and a multiply-pierced young man, looking over what appeared to be hair dye samples. He did not even look up when John paused in the doorway.

John went to the kitchen instead, feeling abruptly drained. Charles looked up from where he was arranging sandwiches and pastries on platters, happy at the chance to be helpful. “More tea?”

“No thanks,” John said. He tried to smile, but his face felt too heavy. “I think I’d really like to rest for a bit, actually. Think that could be arranged?”

“Of course,” Charles said. He wiped his hands quickly and led John to a small bedroom, as blandly neutral as the rest of the house. “The en suite’s just through there and it should be fully stocked with anything you might need—just shout if there’s something we missed.”

“Thank you,” John said. “Listen, if they try to leave—if Sherlock does, I mean—wake me, okay?” He kicked off his shoes and stretched out on the bed, closing his eyes. He understood, rationally, that Sherlock and Mycroft were right—Sherlock was safer on his own. But that didn’t mean he had to like it, or even accept it. It was wrong; he knew it right down to the core of his being, just as he was certain, somehow, that Sherlock knew it too.

John hadn’t thought he would sleep and he didn’t, not properly, but somehow his churning mind slid into a dark dream where he stood on a pavement and looked up at Sherlock high on the roof above. This was what would have happened if Moriarty’s plan as succeeded, he realized, at the exact moment that Sherlock said to him, “Goodbye, John,” and toppled off, coat spreading around him like useless wings.

John jolted awake, feeling shaken. Shit, he thought. He lay on the bed for a minute, feeling queasy and hungover, then lifted his wrist to look at his watch. Twelve. Noon, presumably. He felt as though he had been living in a single endless nightmare day since yesterday, a feeling not helped by the ambiance of the safe house, with its drawn blinds and diffuse beige light and endless pastries. He went into the en suite and washed his face, which helped a little. He considered the shower, but had no fresh clothes, so in the end he just brushed his teeth. He went back, smoothed the duvet up on the bed, and sat down, prepared to wait it out.

A knock came at the door.

“Come in,” John said automatically. The door opened, and a man peered round, a man who for an instant gave John a bizarre feeling of familiar—not familiar that reminded him of the time Mrs. Hudson had rearranged all the furniture in the flat. Then it clicked. “Wow,” he said involuntarily.

“Do you think it’s all right?”

Sherlock’s hair had been cut short and bleached to a pale dishwater colour a few shades lighter than John’s own. It was artfully unstyled, with no effort made to tame the natural curl, and strangely
flattering. He was wearing narrow wire-rimmed glasses that completely changed the shape of his face, and a grey jumper that made his eyes the color of smoke. He looked colourless and utterly forgettable. If John tried to grasp him, he would slip through John’s fingers like fog.

“You look a bit like a professor,” John said. “The one everyone likes well enough, but puts the whole class to sleep.”

Sherlock smiled, a little. “Good,” he said.

John had meant to rage and scold and argue, but with the echo of the dream still in his head he found his anger burned away, leaving only sadness. “How long do you think it will take?”

“Not long. A few months, Mycroft says.”

“Will you—can you write?”

“Messages. They’ll have to be encoded, but Mycroft can pass them on.”

“Mr. Holmes,” the woman called, down the hall.

“Yes. I’m coming,” Sherlock said. He turned back to John and their eyes met, and in that brief moment of naked contact John knew it had all been a lie: the not caring, the “alone protects me”, all of it. Sherlock looked at John and John saw straight down into his soul and knew that Sherlock saw into his, and neither of them could look away.

John swallowed. “Don’t do this,” he whispered.

Sherlock’s eyes. The yearning, the terror. He took a half step forward, into the room.

“Sherlock. Time to go,” Mycroft’s voice said. He sounded closer than the woman agent; he must be right by the door.

Sherlock’s gaze was still locked on John. John could not be the one to break it. As long as he held Sherlock’s eyes with his, Sherlock could not leave.

“It’s the only way to keep him safe,” Mycroft said softly.

Sherlock looked down, his shoulders slumping. He glanced back once, a single searing instant, before he turned away.

It was not until he heard the sound of the door closing that John realized Mycroft had not been speaking to him. He was on his feet immediately, but Sherlock was already gone.
When Moriarty put the gun in his mouth and pulled the trigger, Agra almost dropped the rifle in her shock. She actually looked over the sight to see if maybe it had played some kind of trick on her vision, but of course then the roof was too far for her to make out anything at all.

She’d had her sights fixed on Holmes, as ordered, but at the moment Moriarty blasted his face off they’d been only inches away, so she saw everything that happened. She looked back again and saw Holmes still standing there shocked, clutching one hand in his hair as though he could somehow pull an explanation from it. She needed to move fast. She pulled the wire from her ear—wouldn’t be getting any orders through that any more, looked like—and disassembled the rifle, packing the whole thing swiftly into the rolling case that looked like the sort used by sales reps. This was her chance. Moriarty was dead or as good as, and if Holmes’ people were any good at all they’d be moving on the gunmen that Moriarty had just told him were out there. They’d keep their mouths shut in the beginning, but one of them was bound to talk sooner or later—maybe all of them once word got out about Moriarty—and she needed to have disappeared before that happened.

Agra looked in the mirror, checking her reflection. Her mascara had smudged a little where she’d had her eye pressed to the rifle, so she licked one finger and ran it under her eye to remove the mark. Her light brown hair was shellacked into its professional twist with enough hairspray to freeze a moose, so that was all right, and her suit was still fine. She was good. She opened the door to the ladies’ and peered out into the little hallway off the main offices. All clear. She reached out, pulled off the “Out of order, maintenance has been notified” sign and tossed it into the bin behind her and stepped out, pulling the wheeled case behind her.

Agra headed to the lifts, running over the next steps in her mind and looking for danger spots: lift, street, Tube, the station, the lockers. She would exchange the rolling sample case for the regular suitcase on wheels, keeping only her purse with the emergency cash and safe deposit box keys. The suitcase had everything else she needed right down to the hair dye. Her new life was waiting, bright and enticing as a brand-new dress, and if she just kept her head and got lucky it was hers. She’d spent so much time polishing the details of Mary’s life these past two years that they were more familiar than her own—no, Anna’s—by now: left England for a gap year abroad and fell in love with Australia’s warm sun and sparkling beaches; stayed fifteen years, got her nursing license, worked here and there, lived with a surfer for a while but it didn’t work out, happy enough…but then her mum got breast cancer, and Mary Elizabeth Morstan decided it was time to come home.

Mary reached the lifts just as a pair of men in identical dark posh suits stepped out, followed by an anxious, pudgy man in shirt sleeves who was puffing slightly. His badge read “security”. Mary smiled at them brightly, but the posh men were muttering to each other about roof access, and their eyes slid right over her as though she weren’t even there.

For the first few months, it was almost fun. John really didn’t have any idea where Sherlock had gone—Mycroft wouldn’t tell him—so he was convincingly bewildered at the official inquiry. He even gave a press conference at Mycroft’s behest, where he railed righteously about the stupidity of the Met, which hopefully kept attention on him and away from Lestrade for the time being. Things were weird and unsettled and ever so slightly scary, but at least they weren’t boring. And then there was the memory of the last time he had seen Sherlock, that charged moment when their eyes met and John’s whole world tilted on its axis. The thought of it was like a tiny coal in his chest, warming him and sending a pleasurable little spark of electricity up his spine every time he thought of it. He felt a
bit as though he had met the girl of his dreams on the last day of summer holidays.

And as for that part of it...he mostly just wasn’t thinking about it. Sure, he wasn’t gay, but that didn’t mean he was totally straight either. There had definitely been a few encounters here and there, just for a lark, of course. He really didn’t know what, if anything, Sherlock would want in that direction. He didn’t know what he wanted himself. They could work all that out later.

Except they couldn’t.

Three months turned into four turned into five and that was definitely past a few months, so John took himself off to the Diogenes Club to get some answers. By now the scandal had blown over completely—everyone had moved on to the next exciting thing—and John was getting bored and restless and more than a little anxious.

“It’s going to take rather longer than I originally thought,” Mycroft admitted finally. “We’ve been very successful with the first two operations, and that’s uncovered quite a lot of information about the international network that we didn’t know. And of course the situation here requires extremely careful handling. There are quite a few of Moriarty’s employees still active and presumably working together, or the gunmen we picked up wouldn’t have been assassinated.”

“What about Moriarty? Isn’t he recovered by now?”

“Moriarty is utterly insane,” Mycroft said bluntly. “He hasn’t said a coherent word since we’ve had him. He’s in a high-security facility now and even there he spends most of his time in a padded cell in a straitjacket.”

“Shit,” John said, a little startled.

“Yes. Shit.” Mycroft said sourly. “I half suspect him of going mad on purpose just to make Sherlock’s life more difficult.”

“So what you’re telling me is, Sherlock isn’t going to be back any time soon.”

“I’m afraid not.”

“Okay then.” John stood up, disappointed but resolute. “I’m getting a job. I’m going to end up in that cell with Moriarty if I just sit in the flat all day, and our bank account’s getting a bit low.”

“You needn’t—“

John put his hands up. “Yeah, I know, but I’m not going to just sit around and let you support me, okay? I need something to do.”

Sarah, disappointingly, had no openings, but she promised to write him a stellar letter of recommendation and put the word out among her contacts. At first things did not seem encouraging —there was no shortage of GPs wanting to work in London, most with far more recent and consistent work history than he had—but then he finally landed a spot at a surgery in an outer suburb, in a largely immigrant neighborhood populated mostly by refugees. It was perfect. Except the commute. Which was hell.

Mary had been almost astonished by the ease at which she got herself hired as a nurse manager on her second try. It turned out that the surgery had all kinds of problems: the previous manager had been a disaster, turnover was high, and the patients were mostly immigrants who seemed deeply
distrustful of the staff. Mary loved it. This was exactly why she had chosen this direction for her second act: to help women and children, instead of making their lives worse by perpetuating the men’s stupid power struggles. Not that she didn’t have the occasional fantasy about blowing someone’s head off, but more often than not that was Dr. Dawson, an old-boy type who thought women belonged in the kitchen and immigrants back in Pakistan (including the ones from the Caribbean). After a month she got the backing of the relevant parties and fired him. Things improved dramatically after that, but, of course, now they had to hire a new doctor.

When John Watson walked in Mary had to fight hard to keep her face blank. She honestly hadn’t put it together when she read the name on his CV. Watson hadn’t ever particularly interested her before—her boss was the one with the Sherlock Holmes obsession; she just aimed the rifle—but she had seen him at the pool, of course, and nobody could miss the news coverage the past six months. Hopefully he’d chalk it up to that, if he noticed anything.

“So why do you want to work here?” the medical director asked, once the preliminaries had been dispensed with.

“Your clientele,” Dr. Watson answered immediately. “I was in Afghanistan with the army, and I know this population well. I understand their culture and I speak decent Pashto. I’d really like the chance to work with them as a healer, instead of being seen as the enemy.”

“I want him,” Mary said decisively, as soon as Watson left.

“Really?” The director looked surprised. “He’s only done locum work the last few years. He doesn’t have a lot of experience as a GP.”

“Yes, but that surgery he’s been filling in at loves him. And he’s the only one who really wants to work with our patient population. Everyone else just says they wouldn’t mind.”

“Don’t you think another woman would be better?”

“A woman would be nice,” Mary allowed, “but this guy speaks the language. I think that more than makes up for it.” Besides, Mary liked him. He struck her as being of the same tribe as herself: warriors turned healers, fighting not with guns but with vaccines and information, swords into plowshares and all that. “And if we’ve got to have a bloke, might as well get one easy on the eyes.”

“Do you think so?” The director looked amused. “He’s not my type, but I’m married anyway, so you can have him all to yourself.”

…so I’ve had to move out for now. It was taking me an hour and a half to get there in the mornings and longer in the evenings, and it was driving me round the twist. I’ve got a little bedsit just round the corner now. I’m over a little hole in the wall restaurant that serves the best kebabs I’ve had since Afghanistan, so all in all I’m set until you come back.

It’s freezing here; I hope it’s warm where you are. Please go and eat something for me now. Mycroft has charge of the worrying, but I do think about you, all the time. Be safe.

Sherlock finished decoding the message and just sat holding it for a while, letting the familiar words—John always told him to eat—warm him. It was, in fact, brutally cold where he was, but just now that hardly seemed to matter. The way he’d felt when John had looked at him had…terrified him, there was no other word for it, but in the same way that cocaine terrified him: because he wanted it so badly.
He wanted to see John look at him that way again.

But he didn’t know what he’d do, if he did.

Sherlock sighed. It was enough for now to know that John was thinking about him, all the time. He would be safe. He would be safe for John.

John had been working at the surgery for three months when Mary finally got the nerve to ask him out. It wasn’t really framed as much of a date: he’d mentioned the kebab place under his flat a couple of times, and she said she’d really like to try the authentic deal, and if she paid, could he do the ordering?

And then of course John asked her up for a drink, and one thing led to another. And for the first time in all of her lives, Mary was head over heels in love.

John didn’t go on the date or invite Mary up without second and third and even fourth thoughts. He knew she fancied him—he wasn’t blind—and he couldn’t deny that he was attracted to her too. That warm little spark that was Sherlock had begun fading, slowly but perceptibly, with every coded message that came, so stilted and formal, never with a reciprocal I miss you too or I think of you all the time also. John had told himself that it was just because Sherlock knew Mycroft read them, but still…it had been over a year, and Sherlock seemed no closer to returning than when he left. And what was John carrying a torch for anyway? It wasn’t as though Sherlock had ever said anything to give John reason to hope. He’d done the opposite at every opportunity.

Still. He’d planned on just keeping things friendly that night, seeing how the wind blew. But then the call to Friday prayer drifted in the window from the little storefront mosque down the street and John was reminded of Afghanistan again, of the nights before battles and how you never knew which night might be your last, and he kissed her.

Sherlock left the nondescript building in Mumbai to head back to his cheap hotel room. He’d given his report to the agent there and now said report was being encoded and sent off to London. The agent had promised that any responses would be delivered as soon as they arrived.

Sherlock felt hot and claustrophobic on the crowded street. The monastery in Tibet had seemed the dullest and quietest place on earth whilst he was there, but after nearly two months of it the din of Mumbai was overwhelming. He looked up, trying to see the way back to his hotel, and spotted a sign reading “Books”. Yes. The bookstore would be a little quieter, surely, and maybe he could take something back to his hotel room, to read until his next assignment arrived from Mycroft.

The bookstore was small and cluttered and mostly secondhand, but there was a fairly good English selection. Sherlock found a book about the Indian Police Service; that could be interesting, and then he saw a cover that looked familiar. It was a poetry book, one he remembered vaguely from school. Poetry had never held any inherent interest for Sherlock, but he never deleted it—it helped him understand the way normal people felt, a little. But he remembered something about this one, something that had particularly stuck in his mind, why? Well, he was likely to have several hours to kill, and the books were cheap. He bought them both.

Back in his hot little room, Sherlock lay on the sagging bed and flipped through the poetry book
without much interest. After a few minutes, though, he found to his surprise that he remembered many of the poems. *Others, I am not the first/have willed more mischief than they durst:/ If in the breathless night I too/Shiver now, ‘tis nothing new.* He remembered now. A.E. Housman, the poet laureate of repressed homosexuals. *And through their veins in ice and fire/Fear contended with desire.* He lay the book aside and looked at the ceiling, remembered his sixteen-year-old self finding the words so deeply meaningful, even as he had already decided to turn away from all of it. Had he really decided, though, or had it just been fear all along? He certainly felt fear now. Just the thought that the agent might be bringing a message from John later made his pulse quicken in a way not entirely pleasurable.

As though he had willed it into happening, the knock sounded at his door. Sherlock slid off the bed quickly, collected the flimsy envelopes, and returned to his bed. He decoded the message from his parents first (*Merry Christmas darling, we do hope you are safe and well—oh, he’d missed Christmas whilst in the monastery; hopefully Mycroft had given them a suitable gift from him*) and then Mycroft’s. Mycroft congratulated him on his success in Tibet and informed him he was now going to Laos. Lovely. Finally, slowly, Sherlock opened the message from John.

…*so I hope your Christmas went well, wherever you are. Mine was quite a bit better than the usual: spent it with Harry, who stayed sober, and Mary. Mary’s my new girlfriend and she managed to make it through Christmas without dumping me. In fact we’ve been going out four months and I think that’s something of a record. May have something to do with not getting texted about cases during dates all the time. It’s a bit of a relief to be honest; I was starting to think it was me they didn’t like!*

*Be careful, and don’t forget to eat. Low blood sugar leads to mistakes.*

Sherlock sat on the bed in his darkening room, flicked his lighter, and methodically burned all the messages. So it had meant nothing, after all. Sherlock had just imagined the look in John’s eyes, so long ago now. He’d been nervous and panicky and had made himself believe he saw things that did not exist. It was a relief, really. That type of thing, the caring thing—it was a weakness, and he couldn’t afford weaknesses, not in his line of work.

The paper burned down until it scorched his fingers, and Sherlock blew it out. He lay back and stared at the ceiling fan turning slowly, uselessly on the ceiling, in this hot little room surrounded by literally millions of people, and felt lonelier than he ever had in his life.

In the morning, he left the poetry book lying on the floor when he checked out.

Sherlock managed to stay sort-of dead for two years before being outed by, of all people, Kitty Reilly. Reilly was actually a fairly good journalist, who had really thought that an uncredentialed vigilante running around solving crimes with the unofficial blessing of the police was a legitimate public concern. This wasn’t America! After the whole thing seemed to mysteriously fade away in the aftermath of Moriarty’s injury and Sherlock’s disappearance, she started digging. It didn’t take her long to work out that Moriarty was exactly who Sherlock had said he was all along, and then she felt a personal responsibility to set the record straight. Her bosses initially seemed interested, but then they told her to drop it, and kept sending her off on stupid celebrity gossip stories. Of course, that just made her dig in her heels all the harder.

Her previous source, Anderson, was coming to some similar conclusions on his own. Joining forces ended in them both getting sacked, and that was when they *really* knew they were on to something.
Anderson arranged a meeting for her with Sergeant Donovan.

“Look,” Donovan said, clearly nervous. “I know there’s something wrong here, but I can’t go on record, it’ll be my job and my boss isn’t in a good place as it is. There’s only one person high up enough to ask questions without getting sacked, and that’s Gregson. You need to talk to her.”

Reilly did. And then Gregson started digging, and Reilly finally managed to sell the story freelance, and the upshot was that on the second anniversary of Sherlock’s disappearance the whole thing exploded like a bomb: the police corruption, the Chief Superintendent’s involvement with organized crime, the cover-up, even hints that Reilly’s old boss Magnussen might have a finger in a few of those pies. For the champions of truth this was fantastic—Reilly got a sweet new spot at the Guardian, and Anderson eventually got reinstated—but for Mycroft it was a disaster. He had spent two years painstakingly building a trap for the London network and now was reduced to scrambling to try and salvage what he could, like a cat trying to pounce on a hundred fleeing mice at once. He was so distracted that he made the crucial error of assuming that Sherlock’s cover would remain intact, so far away. By the time he turned to making sure, Sherlock had vanished in Serbia.

Sherlock lay on his side, trying not to jostle his back too much. He felt heavy and groggy from the painkillers. He’d tried to decline them, but Mycroft, apparently unable to bear the sight of his little brother in pain, had said curtly, “Forty-eight hours, max,” and Sherlock had given in. He still hurt, but knew the wounds would heal in time. Mycroft had nearly driven him mad initially until he realized his brother was trying to find out if Sherlock had been “interfered with”, but his captors had only been interested in information. Still a virgin and likely to die that way, so hope you’re happy about that, brother mine.

“Since now the entire Western world apparently knows you are among not only the living but the righteous,” Mycroft was saying, “there’s no reason for you to remain in the field any longer. Besides, I need you back in London. There’s some sort of underground network planning mischief, and this mess with Moriarty’s remaining organization distracted me at the worst possible time.”

“I don’t want to go back to London,” Sherlock mumbled. “I’ve nothing to go back for.” Oh God, had he said that out loud? He really needed to get off the painkillers.

Maybe he hadn’t; Mycroft said nothing, for a wonder. But as the weight of the drugs pulled him back under Sherlock felt a hand settle on the unmarked skin of his shoulder, comforting and gentle.

Sherlock refused the pain pills next morning; they gave him horrible nightmares. The pain was lessening anyway. He even managed some tea and toast. By the time Mycroft turned up he was beginning to feel a little better about the whole thing, wondering if John would still be willing to chase around after the underground network like the old days.

“I have a message from John,” Mycroft said, handing over the flimsy page. “He sent it last night after I notified him you had been retrieved safely. No need to encode it, obviously, but he asked that we do so anyway for old time’s sake.” He left after he handed it over, which should have tipped Sherlock off—of course Mycroft had read it, the nosy git—but he was too eager to find out what John said to notice.

John was delighted Sherlock was coming home, John was relieved he was safe, John was… engaged.

You really have to come home now, Sherlock, because there’s no way I’m going through this without you. And it goes without saying, but in case I need to say it: I couldn’t possibly get married
without my best friend beside me, and that’s you. Always.

Sherlock folded the paper carefully and rolled onto his back to contemplate the ceiling. He immediately bit his tongue to keep from yelping and rolled back, all the way to his front, where he pressed his face into the pillow. Best friend. He was John’s best friend. That was more that he had ever expected, and it would have to be enough.

He was grateful that Mycroft left him alone.

Mary never expected to like him. She’d planned her strategy carefully, as she knew Sherlock Holmes was a threat to her in more ways than one. John had almost never talked about him, but one night after they’d both got fairly well pissed she told him about the girl she’d kissed on a beach after a few joints (a lie, but no more so than the rest of Mary’s life in Australia) and John had admitted his own boy-on-boy adventures. “Just larking about. Nothing serious,” he’d added quickly, although Mary suspected he wouldn’t have minded something “serious” with the mysterious Major Sholto.

“And what about Sherlock Holmes?” She’d asked casually. “The papers always made it sound…”

She was braced for him to react angrily, but instead he sounded a little sad. “Yeah, everybody always seemed to think that,” he said. “For a little while I started to believe it myself. But Sherlock— he wasn’t like that. He didn’t want people that way.”

He might have been right there; Mary never really worked out whether Sherlock was ace or damaged or just scared, but below the belt clearly didn’t come into the picture with him. Above, though…Mary was there the first time they met up after two years, celebrating his return and John’s engagement in the Baker street flat with all their old friends, and she saw the yearning in his eyes. She saw the slight edge to John’s happiness too. It played right into her own plans (appear to be encouraging John to renew their friendship whilst subtly feeding his near-subconscious resentment at being left behind, distracting Sherlock by making him see her as his ally), but was unprepared for the fact that she found she genuinely liked a man everyone else seemed to regard as borderline unbearable. His sharp intelligence fascinated her in the same way it did John, at least as long as it wasn’t turned on her, and they turned out to have a nearly identical sense of humor and a shared delight in calling a spade a spade. She never felt that she had to be nice around him, and Sherlock seemed to lose his usual wariness around her, that way he had of acting as though he knew he was going to disappoint you and didn’t care. Of course he cared. But Mary adored him, delighted in every barbed word out of his mouth, and he ate it up.

And, of course, he was excellent at planning weddings.

There was only one bad moment. They had gone out shopping for bridesmaid dresses—an activity for which Sherlock turned out to have a far higher tolerance than she did—and celebrated their success after with dinner out. They had ridiculously sweet martinis that Sherlock ordered and a bottle of wine, and before long Mary was giggling like a little girl at a sleepover as Sherlock acidly critiqued some of the more hideous options and speculated darkly on which bridesmaid would get pregnant and spoil the lines of the dress (and wasn’t that ironic, in retrospect).

“Janine has to talk to Lucy ahead of time, or she’s going to try to match her nail polish and eye shadow to the dress and it’s going to be vile.”

“Oh God,” Mary gasped, tears standing in her eyes. “You’re like the sister I always wanted, you know that? I should have had you for my maid of honor.”
There was a flash of something almost too brief to see in Sherlock’s eyes and she just had time to think *oh shit* when Sherlock took a prim sip of his wine—God, he was half under the table already, he was such a lightweight—and said, “I’m certainly more a maid than Janine,” and Mary thumped her head right down on the table, laughing too hard to even breathe.

She should have told him. But she knew that for Sherlock John would always come first, just as John did for her, and she was too afraid that he would tell John to risk it. And then the decision ended up being taken out of her hands on an autumn night in a penthouse, when her past and present crashed together.

Mary hadn’t stayed alive as long as she had by losing her head. She aimed almost without conscious thought, knowing exactly where she was going to place the bullet: right lateral thorax, no vital organs but the lung that would collapse when her bullet tore through. Sherlock would barely be able to breathe, let alone talk, but he would be in no danger. She would have time to tell him to say nothing to John until she could tell explain the whole story and he would do it, motivated as much by curiosity as anything else. But it turned out that looking into the rain-clear eyes of someone she knew and loved and pulling the trigger was a lot harder than she would have thought. Her hand shook at the last minute, and for the first time in all of her lives, Agra missed her shot.

Later, in the hospital, she did tell him everything.

“*I knew you’d had a sister,*” Sherlock said. His voice was slurry and a little hoarse; he’d been intubated for three days after he bled out the second time.

“*Anna Grace had a sister,*” Mary corrected. She looked at the grey sky out the window. “*A long time ago. Our father, he…not me, he never touched me. I don’t know why.*”

“*Because she was a victim and you weren’t. You never were.*”

Mary took that in, felt the unyielding truth of it. “*I suppose so. She killed herself. I killed him. I made it look like an accident, of course. And then I left. I don’t know what became of my—of Anna’s mother. She might be dead by now. I don’t know.*”

They were quiet a minute. The morphine pump whirred and clicked.

“*Has he read it yet?*”

“No.”

“I should have told you,” Mary sighed. “*I just…I didn’t want John to know. I wanted to protect the life we had. And now what a mess we’re in: I’m no better off than I was with Magnussen, John knows anyway and isn’t speaking to me, and look what I’ve done to you.*”

“It’s all right,” Sherlock slurried. “*I’m going to fix it for you.*”

Mary glanced up sharply, but Sherlock’s eyes were closed. He seemed half asleep already, though there were deep lines of pain around his mouth. She checked the morphine pump, which he kept turning down, and covertly bumped it up a little.

“I know you’re doing that,” Sherlock said, eyes still closed.

“You need some rest.” She laced her fingers with his. “*I talked to that bloody cow Janine, did I tell you? Said I’d never speak to her again after she sold you out to the papers. I told you I should have*
“...had you for my maid of honor.”

“No,” Sherlock murmured. “Lilac makes me look sallow.”

Her mouth twitched even as her eyes blurred—bloody hormones—and she leaned forward to brush her lips against his cheek. “Then I should have changed the color,” she said softly. “Go to sleep.”

And he did fix it for her, but the cost. Oh, God, the cost.

That Christmas had been just about the worst she could remember, which was saying something, and Mary could tell that John was working very, very hard to make New Year’s an improvement. He’d cooked a lovely brunch for the two of them, with mimosas made with sparkling water, and talked about painting the nursery later and what sorts of colors she might like.

So when his phone rang and he returned it to his pocket without answering even as his face hardened, she almost didn’t ask. But it was after noon and they’d been avoiding the six-foot incarcerated elephant in the room all morning, and it was just never her way to duck a fight.

“Who was that?”

“Mycroft.”

“But don’t you want to answer it? It’s probably about Sherlock!”

“I’ll call him back tomorrow. I just—today, I just want this to be about us, all right?”

“But—“

“I don’t want to talk to him,” John said so fiercely she was startled. “I don’t want it—all the secrets, the shootings, the drama. I don’t want it any more. I made a choice. I want this.”

The terrible thing was that she understood completely. She had, after all, made the same choice. And unlike John’s, the ghosts of her road not taken had stayed dead..

She was still staring at his angry face, trying to think of something to say, when her phone buzzed. She took it out of her pocket, looked at the unfamiliar number, and held it up to John. He nodded, mouth going down into a grim line. She answered.

“Mrs. Watson,” Mycroft said politely. “I apologize for intruding upon your holiday, but a decision has been made in my brother’s case and I wanted you to be made aware.”

“No, it’s all right—thank you for calling. What’s going to happen to Sherlock?”

“He has been offered an opportunity to provide service to his country in a capacity to which he is uniquely suited in lieu of prison. He has accepted.”

“So, that means…what does that mean? Is he leaving?”

“Yes. A week from yesterday.”

“Will he be free until then?”
“He will not. However, I can arrange for visitation if you like.”

“Just a minute,” Mary said. She relayed all this to John, who shook his head. She glared at him, but he just glared back, looking stubborn.

“I would appreciate that very much,” Mary said into the phone. “And will we be able to see him off?” She put the very slightest emphasis on we. John could sulk all he wanted, but no way was she letting Sherlock go off to exile on his bloody birthday without the best sendoff she could manage.

“I will have a car pick you up. I will let you know about the visiting hours tomorrow.”

“Thank you, Mycroft.”

The sight of Sherlock in the visitation room was heartbreaking. He was so thin in the prison scrubs—he’d probably eaten nothing since he’d been arrested—and the look in his eyes when he saw she was alone made her hate John for the first time since their marriage.

“He’s still angry, isn’t he,” Sherlock said.

Mary sighed, maneuvering her bulk into the hard plastic chair. “He’s angry at life for not working out the way he wanted it to, which is stupid and childish. And he’s angry at me, but he can’t be angry at me now he’s decided to commit to this—to me, to us, to our child, our family—so, yes, he’s angry at you instead. He thinks he doesn’t want the drama anymore.”

“Well, I’ll be out of his way soon.”

“Don’t say that,” Mary flashed, hard and angry. “It’s going to break his heart when you’re gone. He knows that, I think, which is why he’s fighting so hard. He’s coming to see you off so the two of you can do that man thing where you don’t say everything you mean to each other then.”

Sherlock’s smile twitched, faint but real. “Oh, are you admitting I’m a man now?”

“I take it back, sister. You can do that English thing where you don’t say anything you mean.”

“That’s better.”

“So tell me about this secret mission. Where are you going?”

“Uzbekistan.” Sherlock leaned back in his own hard chair. “We originally heard Eastern Europe, but apparently that was one of Mycroft’s minions confusing Eastern Europe with Central Asia.”

“Well, all those former Soviet republics look alike, don’t they?” Mary said, fighting a hysterical urge to giggle. “Except maybe to Mycroft. What are you doing there?”

“There’s a man named Mirzayev—he’s some kind of an arms merchant or a warlord or some such; I haven’t really been briefed yet. Apparently some of the guns that have been coming into England are his, so MI-6 wants him out of the way. They’re worried about home-grown jihadis.”

“You can’t be serious. Your brother is sending you to infiltrate what, the Taliban?”

“No, not at all. There’s very little Islamic fundamentalism there. Mirzayev is entirely secular—he wants 72 million in this life, not 72 virgins in the next.”

“Lucky for you he doesn’t want 72 virgins in this one.” It was an old joke with them, and not
particularly funny here, but Sherlock smiled anyway and Mary was glad. “Was he one of Moriarty’s? I never heard about him.”

“No, Moriarty worked through Eastern Europe. Mirzayev stepped into the nice little opening we created by taking Moriarty’s network out.”

“Listen.” Mary leaned forward intently. “These guys think local, you know that, right? Mirzayev isn’t going to suspect you of working for MI-6. He’s going to suspect you of working for Al-Qaeda in Uzbekistan or Ivan the Uzbek or whoever his closest rival is. Get yourself in position and take out some of those guys, and you’re in. It’s the only way you’ll gain his trust.”

Sherlock nodded, but he didn’t meet her eyes. Mary knew that the two years away had hardened him but thought that, deep down, he was still the same man who had cried out in horror when Moriarty shot himself. Sherlock was no killer. If she had to bet, she would have put money that Magnussen was the only person he had ever shot in cold blood. “This is a suicide mission, isn’t it.”

Now he looked up. “Don’t tell John.”

“No,” she scooted her chair forward, as close as she could to the metal table with her belly in the way, and gripped his wrist. “No. You listen to me, that is not okay. You are my family. You are coming back. These guys are a bunch of thugs in a country nobody ever heard of, and you’re Sherlock Holmes. You’re going to work it out and come back here, do you hear? Promise me. Promise.”

He looked away but she squeezed the thin bones of his wrist, shaking it. “Promise!”

His sigh seemed to come from his very toes. “I promise.”

Mary let go and sat back. “And don’t take too long about it. You know I can’t manage the christening without you.”

He huffed out a small laugh of surprise. “That might be a while.”

“Then we’ll wait.”

Mary was right. The minute the plane lifted into the air, John felt all the anger and resentment he had been cherishing crumble away like rotten ice, and grief and regret came rushing in. He made it into the back seat of the car where Mary put her arms around him, and then he cried as he had never cried before in his adult life.

Sherlock gave himself until halfway to Istanbul to feel sorry for himself, and then resolutely turned his mind to the task ahead.

“We’ve got an excellent cover for you,” the man in Turkey said. “The best possible because it’s a real person. You’re going to be Seref Turan, who is more than happy to give up his identity temporarily as part of a plea bargain arrangement with the Turkish government.”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. “Is he going to be me?”

“No, he’s going to stay in prison. Turan was born in Turkey but moved to London with his parents when he was five. He grew up there, went to vocational school, and never gave anyone any trouble
until he was dumped by an English girl and started complaining to his friends that all Western girls were the devil’s whores. He came under the influence of a radical imam and grew a beard, to the immense embarrassment of his family, so they shipped him back to Turkey to stay with relatives. He came to his senses fairly quickly but decided he was happier in Turkey, so he’s been here ever since. Now, his uncle, Murat Turan, is a local crime boss. Seref was working for him, and a few months ago managed to get himself arrested.

“And I take it Murat Turan is connected in some way to Mirzayev.”

“Mirzayev is connected to everybody. He’s based in Samarkand—you remember the old Silk Road? Well, he’s the new Silk Road. He connects Asia and the Middle East, and from there Europe. Drugs, guns, you name it—everything goes through him.”

“So Murat is going to send his nephew off to, what? Apprentice with him?”

“No, Seref is going to be released from prison and kill a man from a rival gang in a power play. Supposedly. Actually the Turkish government is going to take out the rival gang. And then Seref—you—are going to flee to Uzbekistan and try to get a job with Mirzayev, whilst the real Seref stays safely stowed safely away in prison under a different name. He’ll be released once you’ve finished there.”

“Does Seref even know about this arrangement, or did you just negotiate it with the uncle?”

“Not sure,” the man said, shrugging. “So do you know any Turkish? No one will expect you to know Uzbek—you’ll have to learn it on the fly when you get there, just like Seref would—but you should at least be plausible in Turkish.”

“Give me a few days,” Sherlock said.

Three weeks in Turkey, learning everything he could about Turan’s operation and what he knew about Mirzayev’s—which was disappointingly little—and then another month in Samarkand, trying to find Mirzayev. He was deep cover now, carrying nothing that would identify him as a British citizen. He had no direct contact with anyone in the country. Sherlock knew perfectly well that the cavalry would not be coming for him this time if he got caught. He was on his own.

When he had been away before, Sherlock had let himself think about home and John only between assignments. He did the same now, shutting thoughts of Baker Street and his friends and family firmly away, closing up his mind palace and existing entirely in the present. He was a criminal fugitive, in a strange country, in desperate need of a job. That was all there was. It was fairly motivating. By the time he finally found what he was almost certain was Mirzayev’s compound, his Uzbek had at least improved to the point where he could carry on an awkward conversation with the guard at the gate.

“Wait here,” the guard said finally, when Sherlock had made himself understood, and a few minutes later the small door opened and a hard, middle-aged man frowned out.

“Well?”

“I am Seref Turan. My uncle is Murat Turan—he is a good friend of Mr. Mirzayev, in Turkey. I have to leave Turkey, so my uncle says I am to find Mr. Mirzayev, say I will be good worker for him.”

“What kind of worker?”
Sherlock spread his hands. “Whatever he needs. I am guard, I am driver, I am…” He pointed up to the man in the guardhouse. “Man with gun. Yes?”

The man grunted. “We’ve no job openings right now, but you never know what could happen. Try back in a couple weeks.”

The tone was dismissive but not suspicious, and at least Sherlock now knew he had the right place. He let himself look disappointed but grateful. “I do this. Thank you, sir.”

No openings: well. He would have to see what could be done about that.

Sherlock bought a pack of cigarettes—expensive ones—and a pack of rolling papers. He bought tobacco too to decrease suspicion, although he planned to re-use the tobacco from the cigarettes. He bought a few things at a chemist. Then he took a bottle from the hidden compartment at the bottom of his suitcase and set to work. When the sedative-laced tobacco was dried, he carefully rolled it into cigarettes and refilled the pack, leaving one out so it would not seem odd that the pack was opened.

Sherlock left a request at the dead drop asking for satellite pictures of the compound. When he got them, he studied them carefully until he thought he knew where the guard’s quarters were, then strolled by a few times in the twilight to be sure. He heard voices now and again, always men: playing cards and watching television, by the sounds. Bingo.

Two weeks after he had first gone to Mirzayev’s gate, Sherlock walked by it again an hour before dawn, dressed as a baker with a cap pulled low over his face and balancing a heavy tray of non. He walked as quietly as possible, though his footsteps still seemed loud on the quiet street; far better if he were never noticed at all. As he drew near the guardhouse, he let the pack of cigarettes fall softly to the pavement. Then he went back to his hotel and waited. If his luck was bad, someone else would find the cigarettes first, and hopefully not smoke them whilst driving a bus filled with schoolchildren or directing air traffic at Samarkand’s airport. If his luck was good, the guard would spot them when the sun came up, keep them, and nod off on duty.

Sherlock’s luck was good. Two days later he went back to Mirzayev’s, and this time the commander of the guards brought him to a small sitting room in the main house and said, “Wait here. It happens we have had to let someone go so you may be in luck, but Mr. Mirzayev will want to meet with you first.”

Possibly Mirzayev was busy, or possibly they were looking Seref up; Sherlock didn’t care. His cover should be good enough to withstand a casual inquiry. So he waited. He did not fidget or pace or shift around on his seat or look at his watch or play with his phone. He sat still in his chair, projecting the patience of a man who is used to spending long hours waiting for something to happen.

Eventually, the hard man came back and led him to another sitting room, far more lavishly furnished, where a compact man was talking on the phone. He hung up as Sherlock came in. Mirzayev was older than Sherlock had expected, entirely gray, with surprisingly warm dark eyes that reminded Sherlock just a little of Lestrade.

“So, you are Murat Turan’s nephew?” he asked. When Sherlock nodded, Mirzayev said with an air of friendly inquiry, “Samiralliev thought your accent sounded English.”

“It is, sir,” Sherlock said. “I live most of my life in England. My English is better than my Turkish, but both are better than my Uzbek. I apologize for this.”
Mirzayev waved this off. “I don’t speak Turkish at all, and my English is about as good as your Uzbek. So. Why do you want to work for me?”

Sherlock was prepared for this; he ran through his cover story, explaining that his uncle had always spoken highly of Mirzayev and that he had always fancied the idea of seeing Samarkand. “It is very beautiful, this city.”

“It is,” Mirzayev agreed. His warm eyes crinkled, almost disappearing behind his high, flat cheekbones. “Now that the bastard Russians are out of it, anyway. All right, Seref, I think we can find a place for you. Samiralliev?”

Sherlock was given a bed in a small ugly room with a tiny window, which he shared with a slim, utterly silent young man named Saidimir. For the first week he was mostly paired up with other guards, learning the ropes. Sherlock expected this; he kept his mouth shut and his eyes open, learning everything he could.

He was not surprised when he came back after his first shift and found his things had been searched, although he was mildly impressed that they had found the secret compartment. He didn’t mind. There was nothing in there that would incriminate him; rather the opposite, since they would hardly expect a killer to go on the run without a gun. He wondered if Samiralliev had bothered to send Saidimir out, or had him assist. He looked over at his roommate. Saidimir was lying on his back listening to music through his earbuds, eyes closed, giving absolutely nothing away.

“It’s rather fun having company out here,” Arslan said cheerfully as they sat squeezed together in the narrow guardhouse. Sherlock was thinking about whether to buy sunglasses on his next day off; the climate in Samarkand was sunnier and drier than in London, although just as chilly. “We should bring some cards tomorrow. Do you play?”

“A bit.” He would have to be careful to lose enough to endear himself, but not enough to be obvious. “Here is a car?”

“It’s a car going out, Turk. We don’t have to get too excited about that.” He leaned out the window and called down, “Hey! Rustam! Are you going shopping? Buy some new underpants, man, yours are disgusting.”

The guard riding shotgun made a rude gesture and Sherlock tilted his head, curious. He could see through the untinted windshield to the back seat: the passenger was a young woman, almost shockingly blonde, with long hair and full lips. She looked utterly bored. Russian, Sherlock thought. “Who is that?” he asked when they had shut the gate again, hoping it sounded like normal curiosity regarding a pneumatic blonde.

“Natasha. She’s hot, isn’t she? Hands off though, she’s the boss’ mistress.”

Mistress. He filed that away. You never knew what could be useful.

“Hey, Turk, get your gear,” Arlsan said, leaning into the little lounge room where they played cards in the evening. “You’re coming along tonight.”
Sherlock scrambled up obediently. “Where do we go?”

“Sheipment coming in from Afghanistan. We’re going to meet it.”

Sherlock got his jacket and AK-47 and climbed in next to Arslan in the back seat of one of the Range Rovers Mirzayev’s men favored for expeditions. He had seen other groups of men set out before but never been allowed along until now; presumably he had established himself as loyal. He had no idea what he was expected to do.

“Do we fight, what, the police?” he asked Arslan.

Arslan guffawed. “God, no, the police work for us. But this shit is valuable enough that there are plenty of people who’d love to get their hands on it. Abdulleyev is our biggest problem. That’s why we’ve got the firepower.”

“Abdulleyev. He is, how do you say, he is opponent?” Sherlock could not think of the word for “rival” and pulled “opponent” out of his now fairly extensive football vocabulary.

“He is enemy,” Arslan said grimly.

The trip itself turned out to be anticlimactic. Sherlock kept a sharp lookout, mindful of Mary’s advice, but all he saw was a warehouse in Shahrisabz, where Samirelliev paid off a pair of lorry drivers and left Rustam and Elyer to stand guard as they rattled back to Samarkand.

By the end of two months, Sherlock had established that:

--Mirzayev was running one of the biggest smuggling operations Sherlock had ever seen, moving drugs and guns through Uzbekistan with clockwork efficiency.

--The official police were completely in his pocket and did not make even the pretense of trying to stop him.

--He had a blonde mistress named Natasha.

--He never left the compound.

It wasn’t much.

“You have had success?” Sherlock asked politely, as he raised the gate for the Range Rover that had taken Natasha shopping. Elyer was in the passenger seat.

“I guess so, she has a lot of bags,” Elyer said, rolling his eyes. “Radio up to the house and have one of the guys come give us a hand carrying them in, okay?”

“Okay,” Sherlock said, but he was no longer listening. He had been watching Saidimir as Elyer was speaking, and Saidimir had been watching Natasha in the rear view mirror, and Natasha had been watching Saidimir.

Well, thought Sherlock as he waved them through. Well.
“That wasn’t lucky, that was a fucking ambush,” Arslan seethed. He was in the little sitting room drinking vodka from a glass Rustam had brought him and gritting his teeth against the pain of his arm, which had a long bullet graze on the bicep. “They knew we would be there.”

“Who? What happened?” Sherlock handed him another towel to wrap around his arm.

“It had to be Abdulleyev’s guys,” Elyer was dirty but unhurt; his eyes kept straying to the room he shared with Anvar, who had been shot in the thigh. A Russian doctor had arrived a few minutes ago and been taken back to the room by Samirelliev. A third man, Soslan, had been shot in the chest and had to be taken to hospital, a move which was usually avoided if at all possible. “But how did they know where we were going to be?”

There was a brief silence. Rustam, who like Sherlock had stayed behind, stirred uneasily. “You think there’s a snitch?”

“I don’t know. I’m not accusing anybody. But somehow they knew we’d be there.”

Nobody, not even Arslan, looked at Sherlock.

Sherlock, of course, had a very good idea of who the snitch was. He’d searched Saidimir’s side of the room whilst Saidimir was on guardhouse duty, and had found a really startling amount of cash as well as some letters from Natasha that made even Sherlock, with his limited Uzbek, blush. You didn’t need to be Sherlock Holmes to put this together, except apparently you did, because no one else seemed to suspect.

Sherlock considered just letting things play out to see if they would somehow help him, but the risk was too high: as the newest and lowest man on the totem pole, he was the natural suspect and he knew it. He went to Samirelliev and told him about the cash, but not the letters—he would try to keep Natasha out of this if he could.

Samirelliev listened, his hard square face giving nothing away. “So all you know is that he has a lot of money,” he said finally when Sherlock had finished. “That doesn’t prove anything. Maybe he is thrifty.”

“Maybe,” Sherlock said cautiously.

Samirelliev was silent a minute. “I must think on this, Seref,” he said finally. “You must know that Saidimir has worked here a long time, and Mr. Mirzayev values such long service. You should know also that he is a cousin to Gulnara Kasimdzhevna.”

“I did not know this, sir,” Sherlock said, truthfully enough. Gulnara Kasimdzhevna was Mirzayev’s wife, who lived in the country with their children. Sherlock had never seen her.

Samirelliev stood up abruptly, and Sherlock hurried to stand also. “I will think on this,” he said again. When Sherlock turned to go he touched his shoulder and said, “You did well to tell me, Seref.”

Sherlock was not so sure. He rather thought Samirelliev thought he had made the whole thing up to deflect suspicion.

“Seref Turan,” Samirelliev said, coming into the lounge. “Arslan, Rustam, you three on the sofa,
you’re with me. Elyer, you four playing cards, Saidimir—where’s Saidimir?"

“He is in our room, sir. He listens to music,” Sherlock said.

“Round him up, Elyer, you lot are going with Bekturganov.” Bekturganov was more or less
Samirelliev’s second in command.

“Where are we going, sir?” Rustam asked.

“We’re going to show Abdulleyev what happens when he messes with Mirzayev,” Samirelliev
answered grimly.
The Ghost: Part Three

Chapter Notes

WARNING: ALL OF THE HORRIBLE STUFF HAPPENS IN THIS CHAPTER. If you prefer to cover your eyes, so to speak, drop down to the comments and let me know, and I'll reply back with a summary.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Rustam drove. Samirelliev, in the passenger seat, turned around to address them: “We’re going in first. We’ve got to get the power off, and then the other car can get through the front gates. Abdulleyev’s place has a wall around it, like ours, but there’s only one building—the staff and guards stay in the main house. I’ve got the builder’s blueprints that show where the main fuse box is.”

That was clever, Sherlock thought, and Samirelliev said, “I need someone to go in over the wall and hit the fuse box.”

“Sir, I want this job,” Sherlock said immediately.

Samirelliev nodded his approval. “All right. You’re tall, that will help.”

They were silent the rest of the way. Abulleyev’s compound was on the outskirts of town, unlike Mirzayev’s, and Rustam killed the lights as they rolled slowly down the empty street. “Here,” Samiralliev said.

Sherlock got out and Arslan came with him to give him a boost. They came around to the back side of the compound, near where a door was set in the wall. Arslan tried the handle, but it was locked. “When you get the lights out, come back to this and let us in,” he said.

Sherlock nodded and slung his gun on his back. Arslan hesitated, then pulled the back of his head down and kissed him on the forehead. “God go with you.”

Sherlock smiled and gripped Arslan’s upper arm, the gesture of friendship oddly warming. He deliberately pushed thoughts of John away (Be careful. Remember to eat) and turned to the wall, stepping one foot on Arslan’s laced hands and bracing a hand on his shoulder as he heaved himself up. He got his hands on the top of the wall, felt Arslan push, and he was up, balancing briefly on top of the wall before dropping down on the inside. He crouched, feeling horribly exposed on the lighted grass as he ran bent over toward the door.

The door was unlocked and he peered inside before slipping in: an empty corridor. The fuse box was in the second room on the left. Pressing close to the wall, Sherlock darted down the hall and through the open door, which led into what seemed to be a laundry room; there were washing machines visible in the light from the hall. He scanned the walls and quickly located the fuse box, easy enough to spot even in the dim light. The labels were in Russian, but that didn’t matter. Sherlock slung his gun on his back again and used both hands to throw all the circuit breakers at once. The lights went out, and a dead silence descended as the electronic hum of the building died.

The silence did not last long. Almost immediately Sherlock heard a tumult of shouting rising from
somewhere in the building—closer to the front, it sounded like, which was good for him; he could get back outside and open the gate for the others. He unslung his rifle and darted back out into the corridor.

The gunshot was loud in the enclosed space of the hallway, momentarily deafening Sherlock. He grabbed instinctively for his own gun but something was wrong: his right arm would not move, and there was a painful pressure across his chest, as though he had had the wind knocked out of him. He was on the floor. Sherlock heard running footsteps over the ringing in his ears, then shouting; he scrambled for the gun with his left hand but couldn’t find it, and then the lights came back on and Sherlock was staring directly at the mangled wreck of his right arm. The bullet must have gone right through his humerus just over the elbow; Sherlock could see edges of bone in the torn flesh. Then the pain hit.

Sherlock gritted his teeth against the scream and was reaching across himself with his left arm—he could see his AK-47 lying on the ground just out of reach—when someone kicked him hard in the side. He did cry out then, curling around himself helplessly, and the man leaped over him and grabbed up his gun. Another man came skidding up. “What the hell,” he said, staring at Sherlock’s fair skin. “Russian?”

“Who gives a shit? Get him locked up, the boss will want to talk to him later.”

The second man holstered his handgun and grabbed Sherlock’s good arm, hoisting him to his feet. Sherlock cried out again, his knees buckling, and the man shook him: “Move it, asshole, I’m not dragging you there. Walk or I’ll shoot you in the legs and leave you here.”

Sherlock believed him. Somehow he got his balance, more or less held up by the man who was now hauling him down the hall with Sherlock’s arm slung over his shoulder. The pain was so intense Sherlock was afraid he would pass out, and when they reached a staircase and the man gave him a rough shove he ended up falling, sliding down the last few steps on his side. The man reached the bottom of the stairs and dragged him to his feet again, sweating and shaking, and then tossed him unceremoniously through a doorway and slammed the door.

Sherlock fell to his knees just inside the room and vomited, supporting his weight with his good hand, and then collapsed over onto his side. He could see nothing; the room was completely dark. No windows, one flight of stairs: he was in a room in the cellar. Sherlock just lay on his side for a few minutes, his right arm lying slack over his body, hoping that the pain and nausea would eventually recede; they did, but not much.

Think. A basement room, a door. He got himself to sitting, pushed himself backwards with his legs until he hit the wall, and used his left arm to drag himself up. He found the door and felt on both sides of it: no switch. It must be outside. He tried the knob, without much hope, but of course it was locked. Gritting his teeth, he began to feel his way carefully along the wall. The dizziness was just beginning to creep over him again when his foot struck something yielding. Sherlock leaned his back against the wall and inched his way down until he was sitting again and reached out cautiously: a bare mattress. It smelled terrible, but it was softer and less cold than the floor, and Sherlock pulled himself onto it and collapsed in a ball.

For a while he just lay there, cradling the immense hurt of his shattered arm, but after a time he had to force himself to start thinking. His mind felt fuzzy and dulled by pain, but that wasn’t going to get better. By some miracle the wound seemed to have stopped bleeding, as far as he could tell in the dark—his sleeve was stiff with dried blood but no longer felt wet. He was captured, he was in what was essentially a cell, and he was going to be interrogated: it was time to get to work.

Sherlock closed his eyes against the darkness and conjured a street in his mind. There was his mind
palace, bright and beckoning, but he turned his back on it. A high wall came up, like Mirzayev’s, but he
changed it to wrought iron and stone and covered it with ivy. He walked away down the street,
which was Mirzayev’s, and into the main house, where he had only been once. All these guys think
local. Abdulleyev’s men would not suspect he was a British agent; they might not even believe he
was a British agent. They wanted information about Mirzayev. He needed something bright and
shiny and distracting, something that would not too obviously conflict with whatever they had
already gotten from Saidimir. Something too good to resist.

Sherlock lay on the mattress for hours. He had no idea how long he was there, but it was long
enough for him to get thirsty, and to slip toward a doze a few times before the hot throbbing in his
arm jerked him back to wakefulness. His sides ached too, from the fall and the kicking, but that was
nothing compared to his arm. He was starting to wonder if perhaps Mirzayev’s men had triumphed
after all. Perhaps they had assumed that he really was the traitor and had run away; maybe everyone
alive was gone from the house, and no one would come for him at all. As the hours wore on this
thought gnawed at him so much that the sound of footsteps and voices on the stairs was almost a
relief.

The light came on—just a single overhead bulb but it hurt after hours in the dark—and he screwed
his eyes up, squinting. The room was smaller than it had seemed in the dark. Besides the mattress,
there was a bucket, a narrow table, and two chairs, so close he could have reached out and touched
them.

Two men pulled him up; there were four altogether, one obviously in charge—Abdulleyev, Sherlock
assumed—and one who was standing off to the side holding a metal pipe, or perhaps a chair leg. The
other two men pushed him into a chair and one said, “Hands on the table.”

He did it, although he had to pull up his wounded right arm with his left. The table was so narrow
that he had to splay his arms out to the side in order to get his elbows on. Abdulleyev sat in the chair
across from him and studied him. He was a heavyset man, shorter and younger than Mirzayev, with
lighter coloring but the same essential round facial structure as the others. Not entirely Uzbek,
Sherlock thought. Hot-tempered and arrogant, kept a string of whores instead of a single girlfriend,
played video games, drank too much. Nothing Sherlock could use.

“Who do you work for?”

The question surprised him. Was it some kind of test? “Timur Mirzayev.”

“No, who do you really work for.”

Sherlock felt a tiny thrill of anxiety but tamped it down—there was absolutely no way this man could
suspect the truth. He let his confusion show on his face. “Mirzayev.”

“The Russians? Are you working for them?”

“No. I’m not Russian. I’m Turkish.”

“Turkish? What are you doing working for Mirzayev?” He sounded genuinely curious.

“My uncle is a friend of Mirzayev, a colleague. I killed a man in Turkey; I needed to leave the
country. Mirzayev gives me a job.”

“How nice,” Abdulleyev drawled. “And why would he do a favor for your uncle?”
Sherlock shrugged, spread his left hand open on the table. “I am a good guard. He has opening. It is not a very large favor.”

“How long have you worked for him?”

“Three months, almost.”

Abulleyev sat back and considered him. The man with the pipe said in Russian, “If he’s a spy, he’s pretty bad at it. He doesn’t even speak decent Uzbek. I don’t think anybody’s going to pay to get him back.”

Sherlock kept his face blank, not wanting to reveal he had understood. He knew Russian was still widely spoken in Uzbekistan, although never at Mirzayev’s compound; probably some complicated backstory he didn’t know, but Mirzayev hated the Russians. Pretty women excepted, of course.

Abulleyev sat forward again. “Why did you attack my home?”

“Retribution, for when you attacked the shipment coming from China.”

“Hmm. You turned out the lights. How did you know where the fuse box was?”

Sherlock hesitated—was some builder going to get killed for this?—but he didn’t see a way out. “We had plans of the house.”

Abdulleyev’s eyes narrowed and he and the man with the pipe muttered to each other in Russian for a few minutes, an exchange Sherlock didn’t bother trying to follow. His arm was hurting terribly.

Abulleyev’s attention snapped to him again. “Where is the opium that comes from Afghanistan stored?”

“In a warehouse in Shahrisabz.” Sherlock had already decided to give that one up; Saidimir had surely told them anyway.

“And who is the contact in Afghanistan?”

Sherlock blinked. He had no idea. “I don’t know.”

Abulleyev nodded once, and the man with the pipe brought it whistling down on Sherlock’s injured arm. It happened so fast Sherlock did not even have time to flinch. He screamed, trying to pull the arm back, but Abulleyev grabbed his wrist and the pipe slammed down again, shattering his elbow. Sherlock doubled over, unable to get enough air even to scream, retching and dry-heaving over the narrow table.

Abulleyev waited until Sherlock’s moans had subsided and then gestured for the two men behind him to pull him upright. “Let’s try that again. Who is the contact in Afghanistan?”

“I swear, I don’t—” He cried out even before the blow landed this time, his whole body spasming in anticipation of the agony that exploded in his arm. “Wait! I don’t know who it is, but I know something important, something secret! I will tell! Please!”

Abulleyev hesitated, then jerked his head and the man beside him lowered the pipe. Sherlock was shaking, clutching at the table with his left hand to keep himself from falling. “The next opium shipment, the one that comes tomorrow—they do not take it to the warehouse, they are afraid, afraid of you that you know so they take it someplace else, someplace in Samarkand. I hear them talk on the phone, they speak in English and I speak English. They know this but I think they forget.”
“Where?”

“I don’t—” The man raised the pipe without even waiting for Abdulleyev’s signal and Sherlock cried, “The police station! I do not know for certain but I think this is true!”

“The police station?”

“The police work for Mirzayev, everyone says this. For one night only they will store the opium.”

“How many men?”

“At the warehouse…there are four men always, two more stay when there is a shipment. I think for police station maybe more. Maybe there is not trust.”

Abulleyev turned to the man with the pipe and Sherlock slumped, exhausted and nauseated. He tried to shift his arm to see if it would help but even that slight movement made him feel he would be sick. At least it made Abdulleyev let go of his wrist. The two men were conferring in Russian again, apparently discussing the merits of attacking the police station versus trying to out-bribe whatever official Mirzayev had in his pocket. “Please,” Sherlock said to one of the men standing behind him. “Please, water? May I have water?”

The man looked right through him as though he had not spoken at all. Abdulleyev turned back to Sherlock and said in an almost friendly voice, “Answer the rest of my questions and we will bring you water, all right? There are not many more. Tell me this. Who is the official of the police that Mirzayev owns?”

Sherlock’s already dry mouth turned to sawdust. All he really knew was what he had heard from the other guards, which was that the police were well paid not to bother them. The bit about the opium going to the station was a complete fiction, although it looked as though they had fallen for it; he could not name even a single member of the official police, let alone which might be on Mirzayev’s payroll. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

Abulleyev stood up, pulling his chair away, and for half a second Sherlock thought he was simply going to walk out. Then the table was jerked roughly from beneath his arms and he fell forward onto the floor, hitting the concrete hard and hearing his own high, desperate cry through the red haze of pain. One of the men put a foot on his back, pinning him, and Abdulleyev said again, “Who in the police? Just one name.”

Sherlock’s eyes were streaming, tears and sweat mingled, the floor cold and unyielding beneath his face. His mind was completely, horrifyingly blank, he had nothing to give them, there was nothing that could get him out of this situation. “I don’t know,” he whispered.

The man with the pipe used his boot, this time. He stomped down on what was left of Sherlock’s elbow and Sherlock’s vision went to gray sparkles, the agony so complete and all-encompassing that he did not even hear Abdulleyev’s next words until he repeated them.

“My friend,” Abdulleyev said, almost kindly. “Look at your arm. It is ruined. But you still have your fingers for now, do you see? You would like to keep your fingers, wouldn’t you? One name, and I will spare your fingers. You can even have the water.”

Broken and pinned down on the hard floor, Sherlock rolled his head slightly from side to side. He had no name to give, but he found he could not bring himself to speak the words.

“Too bad,” Abdulleyev said, and the boot came down on his hand.
Finally they left, turning out the light and plunging the room into utter blackness again. Sherlock lay
pressed against the concrete, hearing only his own shallow breathing as the footsteps receded. He
tried to find something in himself, some pride that he had successfully fed them a pack of
misinformation, some strength to formulate a plan, but there was no room for anything but pain.

After a very long while the floor began to hurt and he was able to at least contemplate trying to move
back to the mattress. He was completely disoriented, but the room was tiny; he only needed to go a
few feet in any direction and he would hit a wall he could follow. He lay still a few more minutes,
gathering his remaining scraps of resolve, and then pushed himself up on his left forearm. Slowly,
clenching his teeth and trying to ignore the way his right arm dragged uselessly, he crawled forward
until his hand struck—oh thank God—the mattress. He pulled himself onto it and collapsed onto his
back, unable even to curl onto his side.

Sherlock closed his eyes against the dark. He could think a little now. His captors were not going to
trade him or let him go; they were putting no effort into keeping him alive. They would make a few
more tries for information and then probably kill him. If he were not so badly hurt he might have
tried to work out a plan—broken the light bulb with the chair, maybe set up a trap of some kind—but
even then it would be four to one. He had no hope of getting out of this on his own. His only chance
would be if Abdulleyev were actually stupid enough to try and hit the police station, since with any
luck the police would then raid the compound and possibly find him. At this point, all he could do
was wait.

Sherlock let himself drift. He went to his mind palace, the high wall and ivy melting away like mist,
but he turned away from the door and walked around the sides to the garden. The garden was John
and Mary’s, but bigger—a bit like the garden at his parents’ home when he was a child. He made it
springtime, with lilacs and daffodils and tulips all blooming at once, but the inaccuracy distracted
him, so he took away the daffodils and tulips. He made an orchard of cherry trees instead, pink and
white blossoms cascading down and the hum of bees on the lilac-scented air. In the center of the
garden John and Mary were sitting on a blanket. They were wearing white, all of them—even John
—and the baby in Mary’s arms was wearing white too, a long dress like a christening gown.
Sherlock smiled. He sat down with his back against a tree and watched them, this family he had
given everything to protect; John and Mary cooing and making faces down at the baby to see her
smile. The baby waved her hands and laughed. She had fair hair, like John’s, in little wisps over her
head, and Mary’s big blue eyes.

Sherlock was so deep in his mind palace he didn’t hear the men coming until his door crashed open.

Sherlock’s eyes flew open, reflexively squinting, but they hadn’t turned the overhead light on. In the
dim light from the hallway Sherlock saw that there were far more of them now—seven or eight at
least—and Abdulleyev was not among them. They were also, judging by the smell and lack of
coordination, staggeringly drunk.

“Wake up, pretty boy,” one of them said, mock sing-songing. “The party’s getting a little boring, and
it’s time for you to play with us.”

No wonder Abdulleyev was an also-ran if he ran such a shoddy operation, Sherlock thought in
disgust. Mirzayev didn’t even allow drinking at the compound, although it was permissible on a
night off as long as you didn’t come back stinking drunk.

That was the last coherent thought that he had. Two of the men had heaved him to his feet, making
him cry out again at the fresh wave of nauseating pain from his arm, and pushed him face first over
the table. It was so narrow that Sherlock’s head hung right off the opposite side, making his head
swim. At first he didn’t understand, but then he felt fingers fumbling at his flies and, horribly, he did.

“No,” he said, trying to struggle, knowing it was hopeless, but the men above him were laughing and
shoving his head back down and kicking his legs apart and then there was something shoving at him
—no—and then one of the men was saying in drunken irritation, “Shit, it’s too tight.”

“Spit on it,” one of the other men advised.

There was a sound of a man hawking and spitting, and the pushing came again, wetter and
disgusting. Sherlock clenched his buttocks together frantically, his limp arm sliding painfully on the
 tabletop. The man shoved hard and for a second it hurt but then the pressure eased and the man
cursed.

“Ah, you’re putting us on, you’re cock’s not that big,” another man shouted.

Sherlock tried to get his head up. If he just got a look around, maybe he could deduce something,
something he could use—

“Here, use this,” the man who had wielded the pipe earlier said, and tossed it over.

Sherlock felt his mind go utterly blank with horrified comprehension, like a flash of blinding
lightning before the crack of thunder, and then the pain. He felt his gut spasm in an aborted attempt at
retching, but he was too dehydrated and crushed even to vomit. The man shoved him down hard
onto the table and Sherlock went limp, tried to take his mind away, tried to block it out, failed.

It went on, and on, and on. So many men. At one point one of them, drunk and impatient, came
around the table and yanked Sherlock’s head up by the hair, forcing his mouth open. Sherlock jerked
 reflexively, gagging and trying to spit, and the man pulled back and hit him solidly across the face.
Sherlock felt the skin over his cheekbone split and squeezed his eyes shut, clenching his teeth, and
the man swore and broke his nose. Blood filled Sherlock’s mouth and he could no longer breathe.
He opened his mouth on a huge gasp, and the man grabbed at his mouth and pulled and there was
more pain and blood and something chokingly huge and hard shoving into his palate. All the
remaining fight went out of Sherlock and he gave up.

Sherlock had always thought, vaguely, that at a certain point the mind could simply absorb no more
pain, that there was a sensory threshold beyond which he would black out. There wasn’t. Maybe this
was a property of his own mind, or maybe the blacking out thing was a myth, but he was aware of
every single moment for as long as the men stayed in the basement. He would remember that one
man had a high voice, that one was so short he had to kick Sherlock’s legs farther apart, the way one
cursed faster and faster until finally he stilled. He remembered the smell of vodka and blood and
sweat and the taste of semen. He remembered everything, no matter how much, afterward, he tried to
forget.

When it was over, they left Sherlock crumpled across the table like a discarded piece of clothing. The
realization that he was alone came gradually: the quiet, the darkness, the absence of brutal hands;
when he finally summoned the courage to open his eyes, the pitch black seemed the kindest sight he
had ever seen.

Sherlock curled his good arm under him, not yet ready to try to get to his feet. He was exhausted,
and hurt, and torn, and he felt that he would give literally anything for a drink of water. I’d give my
right arm, he thought, it’s no good anymore anyway, and felt a tiny bubble of hysterical laughter rise
in his throat. It broke into a sob on his next thought: Hey Mary, guess what? The sob was a dry
broken sound, loud in the silent darkness. Sherlock wanted to cry, but he seemed to have no moisture left. He wanted to go home. He wanted his flat, his sofa, his own soft pajamas and dressing gown, Mrs. Hudson putting about, John reading by the fire. He wanted his brother.

Sherlock sighed, a deep exhalation that tasted foul in his own mouth, and realized he was freezing. He cautiously bent his knees—his legs were numb—and felt around with his left hand until he found his pants and trousers puddled around his ankles, praying he wouldn’t lose his balance and crash to the floor. He got the clothing dragged up, although he almost wished he hadn’t when he felt the sticky wetness trapped against his skin. At least he was a little warmer now. He just had to get to the mattress; it would be warm in his garden.

Lying down was difficult—there was no longer any part of him that did not hurt—but his arm was still the worst, so he managed to get into a position on his left that didn’t press his throbbing face into the mattress too much. He curled up as much as he could against the cold.

The garden was warm. It was summer now. The cherry trees and lilacs had been replaced by fields of lavender and sunflowers, which bemused Sherlock; he had thought he wanted to go home, but apparently his subconscious preferred Provence. John and Mary were in the shade of a large willow tree now, and the baby was crawling—no, she was running, she was chasing a butterfly, her little feet twinkling in the grass. Sherlock stretched out and turned his face up to the sun.

Sherlock jerked awake, jolting up in a burst of adrenaline before the pain caught up to him. He sagged back against the wall and listened as another burst of automatic weapon fire sounded upstairs. Something was happening, which on the face of things could only be an improvement—although it was always possible that one of Abdulleyev’s goons might decide to cut their losses and shoot him in the head. He tensed, hearing footsteps on the stairs, and then the light came on and he threw up his arm instinctively.

The door banged open.


Sherlock lowered his arm and opened his eyes, or tried to—it seemed his face had swollen quite a bit. “I’ve got him!” Rustam shouted up the stairs. “He’s down here!”


“Bring some water!” Turning back to Sherlock, Rustam said, “They’re coming, they’ll be right down. I have to check the rest of the basement, okay?”

“No,” Sherlock tried to say, “Don’t go,” but Rustam had already left. Sherlock hoped he hadn’t heard. More footsteps and Samirelliev appeared in the doorway, his impassive expression not even flickering when he saw Sherlock.

“Basement’s clear. He’s pretty fucked up,” Rustam said as he came up beside Samirelliev.

Samirelliev nodded. “Get him upstairs. As soon as we’ve done we’ll get him back to the compound. I’ll ring for the doctor.” He stepped away and Arslan came in, holding a bottle of water.

“Hey Turk,” he said, kneeling next to Sherlock and uncapping the bottle. “You look like shit, you know that? Good thing you were so ugly to begin with.”

Sherlock tried to smile. He took the bottle, but his hand was shaking so badly he couldn’t raise it.
The tremors seemed to come from his very core. Arslan closed his hand gently over Sherlock’s and guided the bottle to his mouth, but something was wrong: his mouth would not close around the bottle. Arslan tipped it, dribbling a little water onto Sherlock’s parched tongue, and he swallowed gratefully. He managed about half the bottle before Arslan pulled it away.

“Not too much. We’ll get the rest upstairs, okay? Let’s get out of this shithole.” He slid one arm under Sherlock’s left armpit and gripped his back, lifting Sherlock easily to his feet and supporting most of his weight. He was gentle, but the movement jostled Sherlock’s arm and he felt a fresh rivulet of blood run down his leg. Sherlock heard himself whimper, a tiny, hurt-animal sound that shamed him.

“It’s all right,” Arslan whispered as Rustam helped steady his shoulders. “It’s all right, my brother. We killed those bastards, every fucking one of them. We’re taking you home.”

Upstairs in Abulleyev’s truly atrociously furnished living room—the late Abdulleyev, apparently, although the corpses were so riddled with bullets it was hard to be sure—Sherlock drank the rest of the water and downed two pain pills from a bottle someone found in a medicine cabinet. He didn’t bother to ask what they were. The pills kicked in on the way back, which was a mercy, although it meant Arslan and Rustam had to carry him in. The Russian doctor was already there, terse and efficient, and Sherlock drifted off again as his wounds were washed. He woke up briefly at the sing and burn of local anesthetic on his face—stitches, he realized blurrily—and then again when the doctor began to work on his arm.

“I can’t do much with this,” he told Sherlock when Sherlock opened his eyes to see what was hurting him now. “You need surgery, pins, things impossible to do here. I’m cleaning the open wound and then I will set it the best I can. We’ll see how it does.”

Sherlock nodded. He didn’t want to look at his arm or think about it, and he certainly didn’t want to think about what it would mean for him to lose the use of his right hand. He dozed off again during the cleaning, and woke up to find two of the men holding him down while Arslan held his left hand and told him what a huge pain in the arse he was being. The doctor bent his elbow back into something resembling a normal angle, and Sherlock screamed with every ounce of strength he had left—it wasn’t much—and Arslan said, “Ah, come on, Turk, you sound like a girl. Curse like a man,” and Sherlock did. “Fuck you,” he shouted at Arslan, clutching at his hand for dear life. “Fuck, fuck, FUCK!” It really did help.

“I’m sorry,” he managed when it was done.

“Turkish pussy,” Arslan said kindly, wiping his face off with a damp cloth.

The doctor sent everyone out and gave Sherlock an injection of antibiotics. “Are you hurt anyplace else?”

Sherlock was just alert enough now to shake his head.

“You’re sure? You don’t need any more stitches? An infection would be very unpleasant.”

Sherlock shook his head again mutely. He just couldn’t.

The doctor shrugged. “Extra antibiotics, to be safe. That arm is a mess anyway. It won’t hurt.”
Sherlock spent the next week in a fog of pain and narcotics, curled in his narrow bed at Mirzaleyev’s compound. The housekeepers brought him water and green tea, which he drank, and a lot of noodle soup which did not go as well. He started cutting down the drugs after a few days—the nightmares were highly unpleasant—and his arm hurt him constantly, a continual dull misery that gnawed away at him. He could tell the rest of his body was healing, though; the swelling around his eyes went down, and his trips to the loo were no longer horrors of blood and pus. As the fog of painkillers lifted, he realized that the other side of his room was empty. Every sign that Saidimir had ever been there was gone.

After a week, the Russian doctor came and removed the stitches from his face. Sherlock sat quietly on Saidimir’s empty bed as he worked, trying to gird himself for the inevitable examination of his arm. The housekeepers stripped his bed and silently carried the sheets away as the doctor probed gently at his face. At one point Sherlock caught a whiff of stale vodka on the man’s breath and flinched away violently, but the doctor did not seem to notice.

“Well, you are not so handsome as you were before, I think,” the doctor said finally, “but your new face has a certain character. People will think twice before they cross you.”

Sherlock supposed that many of the doctor’s patients might find this statement comforting.

“Shall we see the arm?”

They saw the arm. It was not the unbearable agony of a week ago, but it was not pleasant; his upper arm was a mass of twisted fresh scar tissue, and his elbow and wrist and hand were deformed and still massively swollen. He could not move any of it. “We will adjust the elbow, and put on a fresh splint,” the doctor told him.

After that nasty interlude the doctor left, telling Samirelliev he would be back in a week. Sherlock perched on the empty bed, wishing the women would come back and remake his so he could lie down; sitting up still hurt, and he was exhausted from his ordeal. There was a knock at the door and Sherlock looked up and quickly tried to get to his feet: it was Mirzayev. Sherlock had never seen him in the guards’ quarters.

“No, no, you must sit down, rest,” Mirzayev said, coming into the room. He perched on Sherlock’s bare mattress and looked at him with his warm eyes. “I owe you my thanks.”

“Sir,” Sherlock said, confused.

“Look what they did to you! And yet you were brave, you told them nothing of value—instead you made up this whopper of a story so that they would attack a police station!” At Sherlock’s startled expression, Mirzayev said simply, “Abdulleyev was not the only one with spies.” Sherlock flushed a little, pleased in spite of himself.

“You have done a great service for me,” Mirzayev said. He leaned forward and put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “You are not just a guard for me now, you are a son. You will stay in my house forever, even if you can never hold a gun again.”

“Sir, I will work very hard, with my left hand…” and at Mirzayev’s look, “I mean, my father, I will work hard to make you proud.”

“I am already proud,” Mirzayev said, beaming at him. He put his hand on Sherlock’s head in blessing and kissed his forehead.

Sherlock was horrified to realize that his eyes were prickling with tears. When was the last time
anyone had been proud of him, had praised him? He felt a wave of devotion for Mirzayev. “Sir,” he said, choking a little. “My father. Thank you.”

When Mirzayev was gone, Sherlock got himself under control and decided that he might as well have a proper shower and get on with getting back on his feet. He collected his things and limped down to the showers, where for the first time since his capture he took a long look at himself in a mirror. He was…unrecognizable. His eyes were still ringed with yellowish bruises, and his nose was definitely not the nose he had been born with. The smaller cut on his cheekbone was healing well, but there was a livid, jagged scar running from the corner of his mouth down toward his jaw. Sherlock already had a good ten days’ worth of stubble, but the very thought of trying to shave around the wound made him flinch. A beard might not be a bad idea anyway. He sighed and turned away.

“About time,” Arslan said when Sherlock slid gingerly into his usual place at dinner that night. “I’m sick of having to play cards with these arseholes.”

“He’s just happy because you’re the only one stupid enough for him to beat,” Elyer said, passing him a platter filled with torn chunks of non. “Tell him to go fuck himself. You want some soup?”

Sherlock smiled in spite of the way it pulled at his mouth. “I want some soup.”

Nobody mentioned Saimidir. Nobody mentioned Natasha either, and Sherlock never saw her again.

“You don’t have to,” Samirelliev said. “Mr. Mirzayev said only what you’re up to, when you feel ready.”

“I feel ready,” Sherlock said. “I practice very much with my left hand. I cannot do the big gun, the Kalashnikov, but I can do the Glock.”

“Well, let’s start out with the guardhouse. Daytime. All right?”

Sherlock liked the guardhouse. He felt safe there, with the walls surrounding him and the windows all around, where he could see the huge arc of the sky spreading out in every direction. It was better than his still-empty room, where he often woke in the night drenched in a cold, panicky sweat. On his third day one of the housekeepers came out with a plate of halva, which she handed up to Sherlock.

“Thank you,” Sherlock said, surprised.

“Mr. Mirzayev said to thank you for your brave service,” the young woman said shyly.

Sherlock felt warm in a way that had nothing to do with the bright sunlight falling on him through the window. He ate a little of the sweet and liked it, so he ate a bit more. He took the rest in for the others.

“Why do you get sweets?” Elyer said. “They never bring me any!”

“The ladies like that bad-boy look,” Arslan said seriously. Arslan had helped Sherlock to shave for the first few days, cheerful and matter-of-fact, even when Sherlock had panicked once at the feel of
Arslan’s hand on his face and jerked away retching. “They think he looks like a pirate.”

“What is this word?” Sherlock asked.

“Seref.”

Sherlock, crossing the courtyard to the guards’ quarters turned to see Samirelliev coming toward him. “Sir?”

“Mr. Mirzayev is going to his place up in the mountains for a week or so, to see his family. There’s a full staff there so most of the men stay behind, but he takes a security detail for the journey. It’s something of a holiday while we stay there. He wants you to be one of the one of the guards we take.”

“Mr. Mirzayev is very kind,” Sherlock said, “I do not wish to make bad feelings, if I take the place of another guard—“

“Seref.” Samiralliev shook his head and for the first time Sherlock saw a slight softening of the man’s expression. “There are no hard feelings. You are a good guard.”

Sherlock looked down and swallowed. “Thank you, sir.”

“We leave Saturday morning. You won’t need much; pack light.”

Sherlock hesitated, then called out as Samirelliev turned away. “Sir? The mountains, they are more cold?”

“They can be, why?”

Sherlock gestured to his right arm, which was now encased in a thick cast down to his fingertips and tucked in a sling. “My jacket does not go over. May I have leave to go for a little hours tomorrow, to buy bigger?”

“Sure. Stay a couple hours late tonight, and I’ll have Elyer cover for you tomorrow.”

In his solitary room that night, Sherlock laboriously encoded his message for the dead drop, writing with some difficulty with his left hand.

*Mirzayev leaving for Surkhandarya Province Saturday AM. 3 cars, 6 guards. Request assistance.*

He had no idea if any assistance would be provided—it was a long shot—but he was getting desperate. In four months he had been in Mirzayev’s presence exactly twice, and on both occasions he had been unarmed. Sherlock would definitely have his gun on the journey. If whatever contacts Mycroft had within this country could arrange any kind of obstacle along the road, it might provide him with his best chance at getting to his quarry. Of course, Sherlock would immediately be killed himself, but he had known that going into this. He was sorry to break his promise to Mary, but, after all, he had promised Mycroft first.

Friday night Sherlock did not sleep. He sat against the headboard of his hard little bed, legs drawn up. He wished he could rest his chin on his knees as he used to, but the dead painful weight of his right arm was in the way.
For the first time since the basement, Sherlock let himself think about home. He visited the garden, and watched John and Mary and the baby together and happy in the warm sun; they were as safe as he could make them, and there was comfort in that. London would survive without him just as she had before, he supposed. It didn’t matter. He was tired: tired of being in pain, and of being afraid, and of the dreams.

Sherlock rode in the third car with Hamza, one of the senior guards. For a little way they bumped along through the city—Sherlock hypervigilant and alert, hoping this would be taken as nervousness at guarding the boss—but then the road opened out before them and he relaxed a little, smiling up at the endless blue sky.

“You like it out in the country?” Hamza said.

“I like this country,” Sherlock answered. He did not think he had the necessary vocabulary in Uzbek to explain himself, but he tried. “I live all my life in London. I love London, but there are always buildings, and the sky is always very close, very gray. Here the sky is very big. I like this, the big sky.” He gestured out at the high steppe.

“Well, enjoy it while it lasts—we’ll be in the hills soon.”

Sure enough, the road began climbing soon after, curving around gentle slopes that stretched into rocky peaks. After a while they turned off onto a smaller road. Sherlock was on the edge of his seat again, watching tensely. He had no idea what he was hoping for—a rockslide, or maybe a roadblock—but the last thing he was expecting was for the lead car to suddenly vanish in an enormous fireball.

Hamza shouted, cursing, and yanked the wheel, sending them into a hard spin. Sherlock grabbed for the dashboard with his free hand and felt his head smack the window hard enough to make everything go black for an instant. They screeched to a stop and Hamza was out of the car and running before Sherlock could even get his bearings. He heard a burst of automatic weapon fire and flung his door open, tumbling out onto the road and ducking down behind the car for cover. He had to peer around the car to get his bearings—it was facing back the way they had come—and he turned back to see Mirzayev’s car a hundred yards away, flipped over and resting on its roof. The lead car was burning furiously just beyond it.

Sherlock took out his gun, held it indecisively, and then stuck it back in the holster; he was likely to lose his balance if he tried to run with it with his right arm in the sling. He ducked as low as he could, took a deep breath, and dashed toward the car. He heard a gunshot and saw the bullet kick up dirt just ahead of him. They’re firing low, he thought, and then the next one hit him in the thigh. Sherlock crashed forward onto his face, just managing to break his fall with his left arm, and lay stunned for a second, gasping. His mouth was filled with dirt and smoke and his leg was burning furiously.

Up ahead Sherlock heard a sound of breaking glass and looked up to see Mirzayev punching out the car’s back window with the butt of a handgun. Blood was running down his face, and he seemed to be tangled in something—his legs trapped, maybe. Sherlock tried to get to his feet, but his leg collapsed under him. He pushed up on his elbow and began to crawl one-armed, dragging his bleeding leg behind him. “I’m coming,” he cried. He had no idea what he was going to do when he reached the car, whether he was going to shoot Mirzayev or pull him free or shield him with his own body; he just knew he had to get to him. “My father, I’m com—”

There was a sudden whoosh-whoomp—an RPG. Sherlock thought in shocked astonishment, he had never actually seen one—and the car exploded. Sherlock flattened, instinctively shielding his head with his left arm, his gun falling from his hand. Chunks of burning metal rained down around him.
and he tucked his head down tighter, unable to flee. He could feel the heat from the burning car. A single gunshot sounded close behind him and he breathed out slowly, calming himself, readying for the shot to the head that never came. Through the ringing in his ears he heard a shout.

“Sherlock Holmes? Are you Sherlock Holmes?”

Sherlock lifted his head in bewilderment. A soldier was down on one knee a short distance away from him, trying to get a look at his face. A second soldier stood next to him holding a rifle aimed at Sherlock’s head, which he lowered when Sherlock looked up. The man had spoken in English.

“Blue eyes,” the man who was standing said. “It must be him.”

“Sir, are you Sherlock Holmes?” The soldier repeated, more urgently.


The kneeling soldier grinned. “We’ve come to take you home.”

In the helicopter the soldiers cut Sherlock’s trousers away, but the wound turned out to be only a long furrow plowed along the muscle of his thigh, painful but not serious. They cleaned and bandaged it with swift efficiency. Sherlock was completely silent throughout the ride. He felt dazed and numb, his mind replaying the image of Mirzayev disappearing in a wall of flame over and over and over.

At an unfamiliar airport two of the soldiers helped him limp to the toilets, where he washed the dirt and soot from his face, and from there to a waiting private jet. His seat was almost as wide as his bed back in Samarkand, and it reclined to support his stiffening leg. Sherlock let himself lean back and rested his aching right arm on the padded armrest. He had not been so comfortable in months, and as the plane lifted off he indulged in an idle fantasy that he could just stay here forever, suspended between lives, far from everything.

“Sir,” a woman’s voice came. “Mr. Holmes?”

He opened his eyes reluctantly and saw a woman holding a satellite phone out to him.

“Mr. Holmes, it’s your brother.”

Sherlock took the phone a little reluctantly and pressed it to his left ear. He heard Mycroft’s voice, more anxious and shaken than he had ever heard it, say tentatively, “Sherlock?”

The dazed, frozen feeling shattered. Sherlock began to shake, the same deep terrible chills that had wracked him when he was rescued from Abdulleyev’s house. He couldn’t speak, just clutched the phone tightly to his ear, tears running down his face. “Mycroft,” he tried to say, but the only sound that came out was a low, broken moan, like a dying animal.

Chapter End Notes

This section has one remaining chapter, and after that the next section is much less grim. Pinky promise.
The Ghost: Part Four

Chapter Notes

This chapter is loooong, but it's the last one in this section, and did anyone really want me to draw it out? Didn't think so.
WARNINGS for...well, if it's tagged and it didn't happen in the last chapter, it's probably in here. (Except the happy ending: not yet.) Also warnings for the previously mentioned pregnant-woman-targeting serial killer.
Again, I promise the next section goes to a much happier place!

Mycroft Holmes did not enjoy waiting. He rarely had to; generally other people waited for him. But he was waiting now, anxiously but with no outward show of impatience, in a dimly lit waiting area at the military hospital where Sherlock had been taken. At least he had the place to himself; it was long past midnight.

Mycroft was eying the vending machines along the far wall and wondering at what point he was going to get that desperate when the doctor strode through the waiting area door. The doctor was tall and thin, with dark eyes, but his manner reminded Mycroft indefinably of John Watson. He settled opposite Mycroft and handed him a stack of paper. “That’s what we have so far,” he said.

Mycroft did not like the thickness of the pile. “Tell me.”

The doctor rubbed the bridge of his nose. “He’s very fragile right now, psychologically. We’ve quite a good psychiatrist on staff who will see him, but it’s going to take some time. It might be best to wait until he asks to see you.” Mycroft must have frowned because the man said, “It’s not uncommon when agents have been undercover for a long period of time. He was living in his target’s household for over four months, and he seems to have developed a significant bond with the other men there. At one point he was captured in an altercation with a rival and they rescued him. So, as you can imagine, his betraying them is going to have an impact.”

Mycroft sighed. Caring again. When would his little brother learn? “His injuries occurred during this capture, then?”

“Yes. He was shot in the upper arm and beaten for information, according to what he told me. There’s significant damage to his face and arm and the care he received after was fairly rudimentary—we’ll have plastics and ortho round in the morning to see what can be done. The X-ray reports are in there.”

Mycroft flipped through the papers on his lap. Something caught his eye, making him frown down at the page. “You think he was sexually assaulted.”

“I’m fairly certain of it, judging by his response when asked. I didn’t push it. He’s going to need surgery on his arm, so we’ll do a full exam when he’s under anesthesia. We’ll test for STIs, obviously, though I didn’t mention that specifically.”

Mycroft paged back to the physical exam. “My God. Is this weight accurate?”

“I’m afraid so. He says he had trouble eating because of the laceration to the side of his mouth, but
“That shouldn’t be causing him trouble at this point. It’s more likely due to the stress.”

Mycroft made a mental note to talk to Mrs. Hudson. Perhaps he could arrange for her to prepare all of Sherlock’s meals; he could increase her allowance…

“For tonight, we’ve given him a sedative, although I don’t think that’s a good idea long-term. He had a lot of anxiety about staying here in hospital.”

Mycroft looked up. “He’s asleep right now? Sedated?”

“Yes.”

“Then I want to see him.”

When Sherlock woke, alone and disoriented in the unfamiliar room, the first thing that registered was a faint familiar scent: expensive cologne and tobacco, overlaid with a delicate perfume of London exhaust. Mycroft. For the first time, the thought of his brother watching over him while he slept seemed almost comforting.

Mycroft finally appeared a few days after Sherlock spent nine hours in the operating room trying to undo the damage wrought by Abdulleyev’s thugs and the Russian doctor. “Nice of you to drop by at last,” Sherlock said as snarkily as he could manage.

“I’ve been arranging your pardon, brother mine.” Mycroft settled himself elegantly in a chair and crossed his legs. “It’s a Herculean task, I assure you.”

Sherlock had not thought of this—naturally, since he had not expected to come back at all—and the thought of being sent out somewhere else made his heart give a peculiar stuttering flip. His face must have given something away, because Mycroft said, “Don’t worry, I’ve managed it, of course. You’re free and clear to resume your piddling about with petty criminals and so on.”

“Good of you,” Sherlock managed.

“Mummy and Father are relieved to know you’ve returned and Mummy says you’re welcome to convalesce at their house if you like. Don’t make that face, I’ve already told her you’ll be well looked after at Baker Street. They’ll probably insist on visiting but I’ll stall them as long as I can.”

“You know what I want to know,” Sherlock said. “Tell me.”

Mycroft pulled out a file—completely for show, Sherlock thought fondly—and read out, “Lily Catherine Watson, born February the first, mother and child both well. At her four month check she was healthy and thriving, albeit on the low end of the range for length. Well, she comes by that honestly, I suppose.” Mycroft put the file aside and looked at Sherlock. “I hope you understand,” he said without his usual archness, “that the fact that this room is not presently crowded with well-wishers and balloons and other horrors is not due to any overprotectiveness on my part. Your doctors believe you need time to acclimatize yourself to your return. They feel you should ‘set the pace’.”

“I’ve got one working arm and I look like a circus freak,” Sherlock said wearily. “I don’t think it’s going to be a smooth transition.”

“Don’t whinge or I’ll call in Mummy. And a Chelsea grin…it rather suits you.”
“It goes down, not up. And it’s only on one side.”

“A Chelsea frown then. Suits you even better.”

Sherlock felt his lips twitch in spite of himself. “Don’t you have some other arms merchant to unseat?”

“As it happens, I do have some rather pressing matters to attend to.” Mycroft rose smoothly to his feet. “Go easy on the morphine, I don’t fancy dealing with you going through withdrawal again.”

“I’m not taking any and you know that perfectly well, I’m sure you’ve read my entire chart. You’re just trying to annoy me into taking it.” Sherlock was no stranger to pain anymore, and he preferred the pain. The drugs seemed to destroy whatever defenses he had against the nightmares, and he would endure any physical agony to that of reliving the cellar over and over.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft said softly, “you’ve nothing to prove. You have done…remarkably well. Don’t suffer more than you have to.”

Sherlock shook his head once and looked away. He did not feel he had done well; the betrayal weighed on him like an unconfessed sin. But that was nothing his brother would understand. He closed his eyes as though exhausted by the discussion, and after a while he heard Mycroft’s measured footsteps pacing away.

Sherlock,

Mycroft said your doctors advised that we wait until we hear from you, but it’s been three weeks since you came home from hospital and if you don’t ring I can’t be responsible for what Mary might do. We know you were hurt, Sherlock, and we know your face is damaged. I promise you, I’ve seen worse. I was a soldier, remember, and so was Mary in a way. We don’t care what you look like, we just want to see you. Please.

On a gloriously fine day in midsummer, Sherlock stood on the doorstep at John and Mary’s little house trying to work up the nerve to ring the bell. He’d had flowers sent ahead of time so he wouldn’t have to fumble one-handed, but now his good hand was shaking and didn’t seem to want to obey commands from his brain.

The door flew open and Sherlock flinched back, startled, but John caught him by the left arm and drew him in, shutting the door behind him. “Come on in! I saw you getting out of the cab.” There was no shock or revulsion in John’s eyes—perhaps Mycroft had sent pictures—and his smile was huge and open and delighted, the one he had given Sherlock back when Sherlock was fantastic and amazing, before he went away and ruined everything. Sherlock had not seen that smile for a long time. Everything in him seemed to yearn toward it, like a sunflower turning to the sun. He took a shaky breath and realized the trembling had spread from his hand to his knees.

Mary came in, the baby on her hip, and her eyes went straight to Sherlock’s. Whatever she saw there made her face crumple. She stopped for a second, then came directly to him, putting her arm around his neck and pulling him down to kiss his cheek, her breath hitching in his ear. Suddenly John put his arms around him too. It was incredibly awkward what with the baby, the sling, and the three-way hug, but Sherlock felt a lump rising in his horrible, traitorous throat, and he put his head down on John’s shoulder. “Hey,” John said softly, his voice breaking a little.
Sherlock felt as though all the darkness inside him—the pain, the terror, the regret, the loneliness—were rising up, about to burst out in a great wounded howl of misery. Later he wondered if it had, if he had just let it go and cried in John’s arms until he was washed clean and empty, then maybe things might have turned out differently. But he clenched his teeth and held it in, and then the baby gave an outraged wail at being squashed. Mary let go and backed away a step, laughing a little shakily and wiping at her eyes.

“Sorry love,” she said to the baby, who frowned crossly at her.

John swallowed rather noisily and gripped Sherlock’s upper arm. “Tea?”

They had lunch out in the garden, which was far more ordinary than Sherlock had made it in his mind palace, with commonplace suburban plantings and a tiny patio. But it was warm and sunny and Lily lay on a blanket while they ate, holding her toes and babbling and rolling over for their applause.

“She just learned to do that,” John explained to Sherlock, beaming down at Lily as though rolling over were a spectacular accomplishment.

“She’s quite good,” Sherlock said politely. He had a list of things to say prepared in advance, and he trotted one out now. “Are you back at work, Mary?”

“Three days a week. Honestly, I’ve got that place so well sorted now, it practically runs itself. So I’ve got Tuesdays and Thursdays free, and I hope you’re not planning to be back full time yourself anytime soon, as I really need you to help plan the christening.”

“Oh, and you’re going to be godfather, obviously,” John added. “Did I tell you before? So you’ll practically be the star. No need to steal the show like you did at our wedding.”

Sherlock, moved and astonished, had to blink a few times. “Not godmother?” he managed finally, looking at Mary.

“Oh, that’s Janine,” she said. “We made up ages ago. I suppose I felt rather guilty that I’d only started being friends with her to begin with to get near Magnussen, so I was a bit of a pushover when she rang up going on about how she missed me. She really is my best girlfriend after you.” Mary shrugged, a little self-consciously. “I never had one before.”

“No, I’m glad,” Sherlock said sincerely. “I’d be delighted to see her again, assuming she can stand to be in the same room with me.” He meant it. Janine had always had a refreshing directness about her—she wouldn’t shy away from his altered appearance.

“Well,” Mary said, “it’s going to be a small affair, anyway, but you know I’m terrible at these things. I haven’t even looked at christening gowns.”

Sherlock could tell by the way her eyes flicked to John’s that the “small affair” idea was new and probably for Sherlock’s benefit, but John didn’t seem to mind. “I wonder if Harry will manage this one?” he said. “She’ll probably show up late and with an awful gift, like Sleeping Beauty.”

Lily, sensing she had lost her audience, fussed unhappily from her blanket. Mary scooped her up. “Time for your feed and nap, my lovey,” she crooned. “Here.” She dumped the baby unceremoniously on Sherlock’s lap. “Hold her for a minute whilst I get things ready.”

Sherlock clutched at Lily automatically with his left arm. “I can’t—” he protested in alarm.
“Oh, you’re fine,” John said, leaning back and grinning. “She’s your goddaughter; you ought to get better acquainted.”

Sherlock and Lily regarded each other. She stared at him intently for a minute, then suddenly broke into a dazzling toothless smile that made her look exactly like John. Sherlock couldn’t help smiling back. Lily did not look much like the baby in his mind palace—she was completely bald, and her eyes were John’s—but she was adorable in the way that all five-month-old babies are, and she liked him. He had made all this possible: this happy little family, the warm garden. The thought comforted him deeply.

“All ready,” Mary said, coming back out. “Oh, look, she likes you! You’ll have to come more often.” Mary gathered the baby up in her arms, where Lily turned her head to keep Sherlock in view. “You just stay where you are, I’ll be back in half an hour or so,” Mary told him. “John can clear away the dishes.”

“I should really go,” Sherlock said, getting to his feet. The visit had gone better than he had hoped, and surely it was better to leave before he did something to mess things up. “Thank you so much for having me. The lunch was lovely.”

John saw his broken, unrecognizably polite best friend into a cab and then returned to the kitchen, where he just leaned his hands on the table, staring into space. He heard Mary’s soft footsteps in the hall, but didn’t turn around. He was suddenly terrified his wife would say the wrong thing. God knew there was no right thing, but he was so on edge just now, the evidence of all Sherlock had sacrificed for them so raw and evident…he didn’t know how he would react.

Mary stopped behind him, then moved over and began scooping fruit into a smaller bowl. “I was thinking,” she said. Her back was to John. “I could make a pan of lasagna and take it over to Baker Street on Thursday. Just say I’ll be in the area and want to pop by. That should be easy enough for him to manage with one hand, don’t you think? I’m sorry I didn’t think about that with the chicken.”

“It wasn’t the chicken,” John said. He felt a sudden great wave of love for his wife. He straightened and turned, pulling her to him. “He didn’t eat anything. Not even the pudding. He just pushed it around on his plate.”

Mary put her arms around him, burrowing her face into his shoulder. “I don’t even know how his clothes stay on.” Her voice was heavy with tears. “He looks awful. I mean, I knew about his face and his arm but it’s like—he’s like a ghost of himself, like he’s just pretending to be Sherlock Holmes.”

“I know,” John said. He tightened his arms around her. “I was in a bad way when I came back too, though. He’ll get better. It’s just going to take some time.” Mary sniffled and John kissed her the top of her head. “And nobody can pass up your lasagna. He’ll be fatter than Mycroft in no time. Lucky bastard. You going to make us some too?”

“Not a chance. Not til I get the rest of this baby weight off.” She wiped at her face and sighed. “You’re sure he’ll be all right?”

“Yes,” John said with conviction, although deep down, he wasn’t sure at all.

Planning the christening really did seem good for Sherlock. They fell into a pattern, where once a
week Mary came over on her day off, bringing lunch. They ate the food looking over hymns or flower arrangements or food ideas whilst Lily played with Mrs. Hudson’s wooden spoons. Sherlock seemed to eat all right when Mary was right there and he was distracted, but Mrs. Hudson told her that feeding him other times was difficult.

“He loves that lasagna you make, dear. And he’s always loved my shepherd’s pie, and Molly Hooper brings over cakes and biscuits and all sorts of things—you know what a sweet tooth he has. But he just can’t seem to manage more than a bite or two, most of the time. Sometimes Detective Inspector Lestrade brings over a takeaway and asks him about a case—that helps a lot, that does, when he’s got something to think about.”

Mary dragged it out about as long as it was possible to draw out planning a christening. She even managed to get Sherlock out of the flat, since she insisted she couldn’t get a new dress without his critical eye.

“What about this one?” Mary asked, flinging the curtain of the dressing room aside and looking out. Sherlock was perched patiently on a puffy chair, diaper bag at his feet, jiggling the pushchair with a dozing Lily in it next to him. “If I lose that last five pounds.”

“You won’t.”

“I might!”

“Your weight is well within the normal range for a British woman your age and anyway, that extra five pounds is all in your breasts because you’re nursing.”

She flung herself back into the dressing room, shouting, “Oh God, I’m a milch cow. A great fat heifer.”

“Get the blue one. The blue one was the best by far, you know it was.”

“I can’t afford the blue one, I never should have tried it on.”

Sherlock said nothing, but the blue dress was delivered to her house the next day.

Mary was in a posh boutique goggling at the handmade lace on the christening gowns when a small boy in a ridiculous smocked romper that probably cost more than she made in a week asked Sherlock, “What’s wrong with your face?”

“What’s wrong with your manners?” Mary shot back.

The boy’s mother, a skinny bitch with a perfect manicure, swelled with offense. “Young children are naturally curious,” she said haughtily to Mary, and looked with disdain at Lily in her pushchair, gnawing happily at Mary’s takeaway coffee cup. “Have you learned anything about child development?”

“Sorry, my mistake,” Mary said to the boy. “I should have said ‘What’s wrong with your mother?’ What is wrong with his mother, Sherlock?”

“Overcompensating because she’s conflicted about stopping work,” Sherlock said. “You should go back. Your friends all find you terribly boring, and the other stay-at-home mums can’t bear your superiority complex and talk about you behind your back. Your child would be better off in a nursery anyway. He’s not nearly as brilliant as you think he is, and everyone who meets him finds
him horrifically spoilt.”

The woman’s jaw dropped in outrage. She turned to the older Queen Mum type beside her, who said, “Well, he is a bit spoilt, dear.”

The woman turned back to Sherlock with daggers in her eyes and Mary said pleasantly, “Don’t.” She smiled at her benignly, thinking about how nice it would be to shoot the posh bitch right between the eyes, and the woman gulped and fled.

Lily banged her coffee cup on the pushchair in glee.

“Lucky for her I wasn’t armed,” Mary said to Sherlock. “That was fun. Let’s go have lunch.”

But Sherlock didn’t order anything but tea, and Mary looked at his thin wrist and his shadowed eyes and the way the waiter brushing past him made him flinch and she felt a cold niggle of fear that he wasn’t going to get better. That she had been right all along: he was a delicate precision instrument, put to a blunt use, and it had broken him.

The christening itself went off without a hitch. Sherlock found the familiarity of the church service soothing in its predictability; predictability was a trait he had grown to appreciate now that he had his very own case of full-blown PTSD. The flowers and music were exquisite, of course, and Mary and Lily both looked lovely. He’d even got through the photographs after, eased by the benzodiazepines he’d taken just before leaving the flat. He’d been given the tranquilizers at the hospital and never used them—the possibility of worsening the dreams was too frightening—but he was determined to get through the day without causing John or Mary one second of anxious thought.

The luncheon at John and Mary’s afterwards was not too awful. Janine’s new boyfriend seemed terrified of him, which was pleasant, and Archie the former ring bearer found Sherlock’s new appearance a great improvement. “You look like Mad-Eye Moody,” he told Sherlock.

“Who’s that?” Sherlock said interestedly, and Archie spent the next fifteen minutes filling him in. Sherlock didn’t bother to pay attention; he was just grateful to have someone else dominate the conversation.

“All right, Archie, you’ve bothered Mr. Holmes enough now. Run along to dad,” Archie’s mum said, coming up with John. She smiled a little anxiously at Sherlock. “It’s lovely to see you again, Mr. Holmes. Did you write another song for today?”

“Well, no. I can’t play just now,” Sherlock said, wondering if she was actually that stupid or just thought it polite to pretend his sling did not exist.

“Oh, I thought maybe you didn’t need to…like Beethoven, you know, how he couldn’t hear his own compositions.”

“Not quite in his league, I’m afraid,” Sherlock said, giving John a save me now before I start talking look.

“Oh, look, I think Mary’s trying to get you over there,” John said quickly and the woman scurried off looking relieved. Sherlock exhaled in relief.

“Actually, I’m surprised you still have that,” John said, nodding at Sherlock’s sling. “Don’t they
have you in physiotherapy yet? The elbow doesn’t do well if it’s immobilized too long.”

“I go back to the specialist next week,” Sherlock said evasively. He did not mention that he had been the previous week as well, or that the results of his latest nerve conduction study had shown no improvement. Sherlock Holmes might have miraculously returned from certain death, but it appeared that his ulnar nerve would not.

“Oh shit,” John said suddenly, frowning in the direction of the house. “Somebody’s given Harry champagne. Sit tight, will you? I’ll be right back.”

Sherlock nodded absently, clutching his own full glass and watching as Mary and Lily circled closer to him. Lily looked tired and cross and itchy in her perfect dress, and Sherlock sympathized.

“Good to see you out and about,” Lestrade’s voice said in his ear as he clapped him on the back. Sherlock jerked violently, throwing up his left hand instinctively, the glass of champagne shattering on the ground. There was a second’s paralyzed silence before Lily burst into tears.

“Sorry—oh God, Sherlock, I’m sorry,” Lestrade was saying, hands spread as though to assure Sherlock of his peaceful intentions. “I shouldn’t have—”

Sherlock turned and pushed back through the house, probably shoving people rudely out of his way, but he couldn’t bear it another minute. His heart was hammering and he felt as though he couldn’t breathe. He made it to the front door, but then John suddenly appeared in front of him, putting his palm flat on the door to hold it shut and panting.

“How can you outrun me in a house?” John demanded, bending over to catch his breath.

“I have to go,” Sherlock said in desperation.

“Sherlock.” John straightened. “I know how you feel right now. I really do. I’ve been there, remember? I swear to you, it will get better.”

“I made her cry,” Sherlock said raggedly. “I frightened her.”

“Oh, she was going to cry anyway. Please, Sherlock. My sister is halfway to hammered and my wife is snapping at me because apparently her Spanx are killing her, whatever the hell that means, and the baby is having a meltdown and I was really hoping they’d all clear off and Mary and Lily would have a kip and you and me could just go for a pint.”

Sherlock dropped his head because he really didn’t want to let John down, but at this point the thought of going to a pub made him feel as though he would crawl out of his skin. “I can’t. I can’t. Please, I’ll—I’ll go with you later, another time. Please?”

In the end John let him go—what else could he do?—and when Sherlock stumbled out onto the warm street he saw the black car already waiting for him. Either Mycroft had a signal worked out with someone—Mary, probably—or he had anticipated Sherlock’s meltdown. Sherlock didn’t care. He just wanted to go home.

After the christening, things went slowly but inexorably downhill.

At first Sherlock felt he was making progress. He’d set a firm goal for himself to get back to work after the christening, and the very next day he tackled his inbox with determination. He took mostly cases he could solve without leaving the flat—he could have solved half of them just from reading
the emails—but a few were interesting enough to make him remember how much he liked a good puzzle. After chalking up several modest successes he texted Lestrade that he was available for consultations.

Lestrade texted back a dubious-sounding *No need to push things* and they had a somewhat testy exchange before Lestrade agreed to ring him if something came up. And something did: within a week Lestrade arrived at 221b completely flummoxed by a case involving a dead man and some weird ink, which Sherlock identified from the photos on Lestrade’s phone as the type used by counterfeiters. Lestrade ended by solving the murder and busting the counterfeit ring, and Sherlock was back in business.

Lestrade only rang him for his own cases, and only sometimes, and Sherlock suspected he was being choosy with crime scenes—Sherlock had yet to be called out to anyplace noisy or public. That was fine with him. He still wasn’t sleeping and was subsisting mostly on tea and biscuits. It wasn’t that Sherlock didn’t want to eat, when he thought about it—he hated the weak wasted thing his body had become—but all too often a texture or a salty taste would bring back the memory of hard, brutal flesh filling his mouth, and his throat would close. Sleeping was almost worse. He never even touched his own bed anymore; mostly he stayed up all night and catnapped on the sofa. Sometimes on fine mornings he went up to John’s old room—it caught the morning sun—and curled up on John’s long-abandoned bed, where the warm brightness and the lingering sense of John’s presence lulled him into a few hours of deep and dreamless sleep.

Now that he had such a high security clearance Mycroft occasionally sent over files for him to analyze: he was good at spotting patterns, and the work was interesting in its own way. It was something to do, anyway. Chemistry was difficult with one hand and of course playing his violin was out of the question. Mary had gone back to work full time in October, so there were no more cozy lunches. John tried to get over on Friday nights with a takeaway, but he was tired by the end of the week, and usually ended up falling asleep on the sofa. Those were good nights for Sherlock. He would take off John’s shoes, tuck him up under a blanket, text Mary, and then go to sleep in his chair. Something about John’s presence seemed to keep the dreams away. He knew John felt guilty about it though, and as time went on the visits became less frequent.

“You busy?” Lestrade asked on the phone. It was a dreary morning in November, and Sherlock was reading the newspapers in his pajamas.

“Not particularly, no. What do you have?”

“Three dead in a pub—well, a bar really—down by the wharfs. Run by Russians, or so we hear. The victims seem to be the Russians. There’s something weird about the place though.”

“Maybe they ran afoul of the Russian mob,” Sherlock said without much interest. “What pub?”

“The White Hart. Do you know it?”

Sherlock sat up. “Those aren’t Russians, they’re Ukrainians.” He did know the pub. The owners seemed to be connected to something—there had been a distinct sense of shadiness going on there for years, but he’d never had call to look into it further.

“Oh. Isn’t that the same thing?”

“Well, you might say that *now*…” And at Lestrade’s bewildered silence, “A Russian puppet government was installed yesterday. Don’t you read the news?”
“Since when do you care about world events? Anyway, there’s something weird about this place, and there’s stuff written on the wall in Russian or Ukrainian or something, and none of us can read it. So will you take a look?”

“I’ll be over in a bit.”

Sherlock had some movement in his thumb and forefinger now, and his shoulder was essentially functional, although the muscles were badly atrophied. He still had to do most tasks with his left hand though, so getting ready was a somewhat longer process than it had once been. Once he was buttoned into his coat with his gloves and scarf on he carefully tucked his right hand into the pocket of his coat. He felt less self-conscious if he just looked as though he were keeping his hand warm, rather than the arm swinging about like a dead weight. He spent the cab ride over running through everything he knew about the White Hart, and by the time the cab pulled up he was genuinely curious.

Sherlock paid, got out, and studied the building from the outside: just a pub, very old, in a row of similarly tight dingy buildings. He went inside and found himself grinning. He knew exactly what was off about the pub. Trust Lestrade to notice something was weird but not be able to work out what it was.

“What? What is it?” Lestrade asked.

“You’re right about this place. It’s bigger on the outside than on the inside.”

Lestrade hit his forehead with the heel of his hand. “Yes! I knew there was something! I just couldn’t put my finger on what.”

“Yes, as usual,” Sherlock said. “There will be an access to the hidden area, probably originally used for smuggling back when the building was first built…where are the victims?”

“Back there,” Lestrade said, gesturing. Two men lay on the floor behind the bar, shot execution-style in the head; a Ukrainian flag was ripped from the wall and hung by one corner. Across the space where it had been was scrawled a single word in Cyrillic.

“Can you read that?” Donovan asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock said, his eyes flickering about rapidly. “It means ‘finished’, or ‘done’. Was anything taken?”

“Looks like some cash—the large bills are gone from the register—and they might have taken a couple bottles of booze but it’s hard to be sure. Robbery wasn’t the motive though, there’s a safe in the office that wasn’t touched. The third victim’s in the office, by the way.”

The office was a utilitarian drab room somewhat enlivened by the dead woman lying face down over the desk. “Hmmm,” Sherlock said, stepping over to examine a collection of brooms and mops that stood in the corner of the office. “Now, why would these be here instead of in the broom cupboard?” He raised his eyebrows at Lestrade.

Lestrade looked blank. “She’d been cleaning something?”

Sherlock sighed at him, although really this would be less fun without a straight man to feed him his cues. He stepped back out into the hall, flung open the empty broom cupboard, and found the hidden lever on the first try. The back wall swung open to reveal a dimly lit staircase.

“Showoff,” Donovan said as Lestrade clapped sarcastically.
“It would have taken you lot all day to find that! If you ever did!”

“Yeah, all right, good on you,” Lestrade said. “As a reward you can go up first.”

Sherlock bounded up the stairs with enthusiasm. There was a smell tickling his nostrils that was setting off a low warning in the back of his brain, something overlying the smell of blood, something he didn’t like, but he was too curious to pay attention. The stairs opened onto a narrow corridor with rooms on either side. Sherlock stepped into the first room on the right, where the smell was strongest, and everything went to hell. He felt himself hitting the floor hard, too hard to protect his face, so his chin and knees banged down sharply, but it didn’t matter because the pain was overwhelming, they were holding him down and hurting him, the smell of blood and semen was ripe and nauseating and unbearable. A hand landed on his shoulder and he heard himself screaming, trying to get away.

Awareness came back gradually. The first thing he understood was that the floor beneath him was wood, not concrete; he could see the grain beneath his face.

He could see. He was not surrounded by darkness.

He was not in the cellar.

Sherlock took a slow, careful breath, and realized that he was not in pain, beyond the usual dull misery of his arm and the new bruises where he had fallen. He was folded over his knees with his forehead pressed to the floor, left arm over his head. He was gripping someone’s hand. John, he thought in confusion, Arslan, but it was a small hand, a woman’s. He took another careful breath, through his nose this time. Hair oil, peppermint tea, soap, perfume…something light and citrusy, pleasant. Grapefruit. Sally Donovan.

Sherlock squeezed his eyes closed for a moment, ashamed of his own weakness, then took a deep breath. This wasn’t going to get any easier if he put it off. He let go Sally’s hand, put his own down on the floor, and pushed himself up to his knees.

“You want some water?” Sally asked.

Sherlock shook his head, not trusting his voice.

“It’s just us,” Sally said. “Boss told everyone else to wait downstairs.”

Sherlock nodded. He could hear Lestrade just outside the door, talking in a low mutter on his phone. “I think it was some kind of a flashback…yeah, I know you can’t. I just don’t know what…you think so?”

Sally looked at him steadily. “You want to go home?”

Sherlock nodded again. He took Sally’s offered hand and got to his feet, feeling his knees trembling badly. He hoped he could get down the stairs without her having to hold him up.

Lestrade looked up when they came out, still on the phone, and Sally reached into his overcoat pocket and pulled out his keys. Lestrade made a what-the-hell face at her and Sally said briskly, “I’m taking him home. Back in an hour.”

Lestrade looked worriedly at Sherlock but Sherlock turned away, following Sally to the stairs. His legs were still shaking, but he made it down without falling. He felt better once he was sitting down in the car.

Sally drove in silence for a few minutes. “See anything that could help us back there?”
He almost loved her in that instant, for her matter-of-fact manner, the way she phrased the question. “The Ukrainians were running a brothel in the hidden area upstairs. I knew they’d been doing something out of there for years now, but I never really looked into it—I thought it was more likely to be drugs or maybe guns. Human trafficking; they may have been passing girls on farther down the line too. For some reason, last night, the Russians decided to wipe them out. Why now, I don’t know, whether it’s related to events in the Ukraine or not. They shot the men who run the bar and the woman who runs the brothel, and then they raped the girls, and then they shot them too.” He closed his eyes and leaned his head against the cool window. The girls’ spread bodies, over the bed.

“But wouldn’t the girls be valuable? Why didn’t they take them?”

“Logistics. Easier just to kill them.”

“Jesus,” Sally said. She was quiet for a while, frowning out the windshield as they made their slow way through London traffic.

“It’s not the Russian mob,” Sherlock said eventually, eyes still closed. “They wouldn’t have been so obvious. It will be recent arrivals, young hotheads, trying to make an impression. If you work with the Russian mob, they will probably give them up.”

“Okay. That’s good. That’s really good, Holmes. I’ll tell Lestrade.”

They reached Baker Street and Sally pulled the car over to the curb. “You okay on your own?”

“I’m fine.” He opened his eyes and fumbled with the seat belt, which was awkward with his left hand.

“Listen,” Sally said. Sherlock tensed a little. “You went through some shit. Everyone knows it. Nobody…everybody’s amazed at you. You know that, right?”

Sherlock kept his head turned away. He knew she expected something cutting in return, maybe even wanted it, but he couldn’t. He was just too tired.

“Thank you,” he said softly, and climbed out of the car and closed the door.

Mycroft did at least wait two days before he turned up.

Sherlock, lying on the sofa, heard his brother’s familiar footsteps and contemplated feigning sleep, but that would just draw things out. He was already glaring at the doorway when Mycroft stepped through. “If you’ve come about—“

“I haven’t,” Mycroft said smoothly. He crossed to the desk chair and sat down, balancing his umbrella on its tip. “I’ve come about what happened to the Ukrainians, actually.”

Sherlock frowned. “What do you mean, what happened to them? They were murdered.”

“Well, if you want to oversimplify things,” Mycroft said, studying his fingernails.

Sherlock sighed loudly. “Fine. What happened to the Ukrainians, brother dear?”

“You did. Or I suppose I should say, we did.”

“Don’t be cryptic, Mycroft, it’s beneath you.”
“Timur Mirzayev—“ If Mycroft noted the way Sherlock flinched at the name, he gave no sign. “—was essentially propping up anti-Russian movements in multiple places, including Chechnya, Georgia, and Ukraine.”

Sherlock understood immediately. “And now that he’s gone, the Russians are making their move. They’re expanding their sphere of influence. But here?”

“‘Here’ wasn’t the Russians. That was the Albanians.”

Sherlock finally sat up. “Oh, that’s rather clever,” he breathed.

“Yes. Everyone’s blaming it on the Russians. Don’t feel bad that you didn’t see it—I only know because of some intelligence we intercepted. It’s very clever; in fact…”

“…it’s a little too clever,” Sherlock finished. “The Albanians didn’t come up with that on their own. You think someone’s stepping into his place, don’t you? ‘Dear Jim’s successor, my ethnic criminal gang wants to increase our market share, what do you suggest?’”

“Actually, I believe it’s several people. Think of it as a consortium. You know we never uncovered the whole of the London network. I might have done, given more time, but that business with the media forced my hand. I think several of them are now working together.”

“The Scowrers,” Sherlock said. “Working out of the old Masonic temple near the Thames. They’re connected somehow—there were rumors they were the muscle for John’s kidnapping on Bonfire Night two years ago.”

“Yes. I think so too. The Eastern Europeans, the Scowrers, Moriarty’s old deputies—they all tie together, or they will tie together.”

“So what are you going to do about it?”

“Some highly illegal wiretaps, for one thing,” Mycroft said placidly. “But really it’s what you’re going to do about it. Patterns, Sherlock. I need you to find them. There’s no one better at looking at a mountain of data and pulling out the hidden picture. I’m going to get you the wiretap transcripts and you’re going to get a copy of every police report and complaint and you’re going to ring every unsavory lowlife of your acquaintance, and you’re going to find how it all fits together.”

“Mmmmm,” Sherlock said. He closed his eyes and tipped his head tip back as though slightly bored by the proposition, even though he was really doing it to hide his smile. A puzzle, a really good puzzle, and he wouldn’t have to risk himself at any more crime scenes to work on it. “You’d owe me a favor or two, of course,” he said without opening his eyes.

“I suppose so,” Mycroft said with the air of one making a terrific concession.

“Well, I’ll see if I can find the time.”

“Sherlock? Hey, Sherlock.” John stopped just inside the door, setting the takeaway bags down while he shucked his wet coat and shoes. “Did you forget I was coming over?”

“Hush,” Sherlock said distractedly. He was hunched over the desk in pajamas and dressing gown, his hair a wild tangle and what looked to be at least two days’ worth of stubble on his face. Every wall of the lounge was covered in pieces of paper, maps, and photographs. John shook his head fondly and carried the food to the kitchen, where he found the beer exactly where he had left it
several weeks ago and cracked one open whilst he collected plates. The kitchen was worrisomely tidy.

John heard the rustling papers still momentarily and then Sherlock’s voice said, “Wait. John?”

“Right here,” John said, sticking his head out the kitchen and grinning at him. “We texted earlier in the week, remember? I brought dinner?”

“You said Friday,” Sherlock said, frowning. “It isn’t Friday.”

“Oh, actually it is, Sherlock. Check your phone.”

Sherlock peered at the computer screen and looked up at John with such an expression of dismay that John burst out laughing. “How long have you been working on this anyway? Looks like you’re overdue for a break.”

“I could clean up,” Sherlock said, running his fingers through his rat’s nest of hair and looking vaguely repulsed at the texture.

“Don’t bother, I’ve seen you look worse. And then the food would get cold. It’s pissing rain out there so I got Vietnamese. You remember that case, the one with the poltergeist, the one where you practically drowned?”

“There was no poltergeist,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes. He pushed his laptop aside and went to clear off the sofa so they could eat on it.

“What are you working on anyway?” John asked as he carried the food in. He was glad he’d thought to get something easier to eat one-handed than pho. “Is it for a case?”

“Just a project for Mycroft.” Sherlock settled into the sofa with his food balanced on his knee. John turned on the television, trying to watch Sherlock surreptitiously without Sherlock noticing, which was no mean feat. Sherlock was as gaunt and hollow-eyed as he’d been since his return, but at least he was eating some of the food, and on the surface he seemed no worse off than the last time John had seen him. He knew Sherlock’s breakdown at the crime scene had spooked Lestrade badly. Truthfully, hearing about it had spooked John too, but he hadn’t wanted to make matters worse by making a fuss.

They ate in a companionable silence punctuated by Sherlock’s occasional acid commentary. When he’d finished, John placed his plate on the floor and stretched his legs out on the coffee table, nursing his beer. Mary had told him it was fine if he stayed over; she’d actually encouraged it, saying she was sure Sherlock felt safer, and John thought she was probably right. He remembered how his own nightmares had abated when he lived with Sherlock and came back full force when he left. They’d never really stopped again, although he never mentioned to Mary that her presence apparently wasn’t as effective at keeping the bad dreams at bay. These days his nightmares seemed to have a fairly equitable distribution among Afghanistan, bad things happening to Sherlock, bad things happening to Mary, and bad things happening to Lily (that one currently had the edge). And then there were the dreams he never mentioned even to his therapist: the outlier dreams that weren’t nightmares at all, but soft-edged snippets of a life where he’d stayed with a Sherlock who wanted him. No house, no mortgage, no up-every-three-hours feedings, just adventures and excitement and at night Sherlock’s elegant unmarred body in his arms. You didn’t have to be Freud to figure those out.

All in all, though, John enjoyed his weekends with Lily and disliked the grubby feeling he had going home in his Friday clothes next day, so he was taking it slow with the beer. He’d mentally left the possibility of staying open if Sherlock seemed shaky, but he seemed all right. Or as all right as
Sherlock got these days, anyway.

Sherlock set his own half-finished plate aside as the programme ended and went to the kitchen. “Tea?” he called.

“I’m good with the beer, thanks.” John wondered if he should offer to help, but judging from the sounds coming from the kitchen, Sherlock was getting quite knacky at navigating life left-handed. “There’s nothing good on. Can I look at your inbox?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said after a brief pause. John heaved himself up and settled at the laptop Sherlock had left open. It was impossible to tell if Sherlock had been taking cases, or just deleting pleas that didn’t interest him, but John was always hoping to find something good enough to catch his interest. It was an old habit.

“Hey, did you see this one? This guy thinks his girlfriend was murdered by her family. He thinks they’re just pretending she’s still alive.”

“I did see that one. He’s probably right, actually.”

“So are you looking into it?”

Sherlock appeared in the kitchen doorway with his cup of tea, right hand tucked in his dressing gown pocket. “No,” he said. “I’m not taking cases anymore.”

John frowned and looked up at him, but Sherlock cut him off wearily. “Don’t.”

“Don’t what?”

“Don’t say it.”

“You don’t even know what I was going to say.”

“Of course I do.”

Of course he did.

Give it time, it will get better; the same things John had been saying to him for months. “It will,” he said firmly. “Remember, Sherlock, I’ve been th—“

“No.”

“What?”

“No,” Sherlock said simply. “You haven’t.”

John stared at him. Sherlock looked back steadily. What the hell did he mean? John hadn’t been there. Hadn’t he? Unless…

John swallowed, suddenly feeling a hot prickle of sweat on his neck. He really didn’t know anything about how Sherlock had gotten his injuries. Mycroft had told him that his arm had been badly damaged, that his face was permanently scarred, but nothing about the circumstances, and John hadn’t asked. Mycroft had made it clear that he, not John, was Sherlock’s caretaker now; John, with a wife and new baby and full-time job, was hardly in a position to argue. Lestrade had said, almost reluctantly, the victims had been raped and he saw that and he just lost it, and John had dismissed it. But now Sherlock was looking him in the eye and saying that what had happened to him was different—worse—than a career-ending physical injury.

John wanted more than anything for this conversation not to be happening, for the reason for it not to
have happened, for Sherlock to get better. But wanting wouldn’t make the terrible suspicion in the back of his mind go away. Maybe he couldn’t help, but Sherlock needed to know he was there.

“Look,” he said, stumbling a little. He looked away and tried again. “Sherlock, if you ever want, if you need to, talk about what happened, you know I’ll, I’m, er, I’ll listen.” He took a deep breath and looked up at Sherlock.

Sherlock’s forehead had wrinkled, an expression so familiar that John felt himself smile even as his heart ached. He knew that expression: it was Sherlock’s *please explain this bizarre proclivity of normal people* face.

“Why on earth,” Sherlock said in honest bewilderment, “would I want to talk about it?”

“Well.” John huffed out a half laugh, feeling some of the tension drain away. “Yeah, you wouldn’t, I guess.”

“No,” Sherlock said definitely.

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

They looked at each other a moment longer, and then John tipped his head toward the sofa and said, “Coming back?”

They watched television for another hour or so. John didn’t register a thing on the screen. He tried to act as though he were just tired after a long week, but he had a suspicion Sherlock saw right through his inattention. *I don’t.* Sherlock had said, over and over again; there had been only that one time, so many years ago, when John thought maybe he glimpsed a look in his eyes that said *I might.* But no: he didn’t. John hadn’t realized, until Sherlock left again, how much he had longed deep down for things to have turned out differently, and how much he had actually resented Sherlock for not returning his feelings. That was all done now, of course; John loved his wife and daughter, and the regrets had largely lost their sting. But he knew with a bedrock certainty that if there had been anyone for Sherlock it would have been John, and for *that* to have been taken from him because of what he had done for John…

Eventually John sensed Sherlock’s carefully slouched posture relaxing into genuine lassitude, and he let himself drift off on the sofa, even though he knew his neck would hate him in the morning. It seemed the least he could do.

Mycroft woke in the middle of the night to the sound of his phone ringing, an event that never failed to send terror spiking through him: this was it, this was the call he had been dreading his entire adult life.

Except yet again it wasn’t, not this time. The voice on the phone was Sherlock’s, but he was so agitated that Mycroft had difficulty at first understanding what he was saying.

“Sherlock. What are you talking about? Calm down.”

“Mary!” Sherlock shouted into the phone. “They know who she is! You have to get people over there, right away—“

“Who knows who she is? Start at the beginning, please.”
Mycroft could practically hear Sherlock’s frustration buzzing over the connection, but he drew an audible breath and said in a somewhat calmer tone, “Baldwin and McGinty. I worked out a few days ago that they’re thinking of cutting out the others. Then they started talking about bringing someone in to eliminate them, and then in the transcript I was working on tonight—oh you can look at it later but they’re clearly talking about her, they know she’s retired and married with a child and if she doesn’t do what they want—“

“All right,” Mycroft said, cutting him off. He rubbed at his forehead. It never occurred to him to doubt Sherlock’s analysis; his brother’s ability to cope with daily life might be crumbling, but no one was better at looking at reams of apparently unconnected information and making sense of it. “Where are you now?”

“On my way over in a cab, of course.”

That had been what Mycroft was afraid he would say. “You’re not planning to—“

“Of course not, I’m just making sure everything looks normal. The last transcript I have is from two days ago.”

“Very well. Stay out of sight; it wouldn’t do to have you getting arrested whilst I’m trying to get matters arranged. I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

Sherlock was beginning to lose feeling in his feet when his phone finally buzzed in his pocket. He had to fumble awkwardly with his frozen fingers before he could answer. “Mycroft?”

“Sherlock. Where are you?”

“In the privet,” Sherlock said, pleased to have evaded his brother’s eye. “I’ve a good view of the back of the house from here.”

“For God’s sake, get in the car. You must be freezing.”

Sherlock was actually quite cold, and his teeth were chattering when he stumbled into the car. Mycroft looked at him and sighed. “In about two minutes, my people are going to arrive and set up on the street. I’m already arranging to have agents watching at John and Mary’s workplace and the child’s nursery and to get more long-term arrangements in place here for tonight.”

“Long-term?” Sherlock said, his voice rising. “We need to take care of this!”

“And you’ve been sitting in a hedge for an hour whilst I’ve been on the phone, so by all means tell me how exactly we are going to manage that. You’ve had plenty of time to think about it.”

The truth was that Sherlock had spent most of his time trying alternately not to panic or freeze; he hadn’t really had time to come up with a plan. He was not about to admit that to Mycroft, however. “Two criminals are planning to double-cross several more criminals,” he said as confidently as he could manage. “It practically solves itself. Now let’s get someplace with hot drinks to talk about it.”

Right on cue, a lorry rumbled around the corner and stopped near a fire hydrant. Two men in bright vests got out, opened the hydrant, and then got back in and sat in the lorry.

“Is it always your people doing that?” Sherlock asked Mycroft.

Mycroft shrugged. “Most of the time. Why else would they just let it run?”
“Lestrade.”

“Sherlock!” Lestrade sounded pleased and surprised. “How are you doing?”

Sherlock ignored this. “Baldwin and McGinty.”

“How?”

“The two men murdered in Chelsea, obviously. Ring any bells?”

“Not my case,” Lestrade said. He sounded as though he were chewing something.

Sherlock sighed. “So if I happened to have information that pointed to the killers, you wouldn’t want it?”

“Well, I didn’t say…wait. Are you serious?”

Sherlock took the phone away from his ear and stared at it. Had Lestrade always been this dense?

“No, it’s just…I didn’t know you were still…that’s great, that’s really good. Okay. Tell me what you know.”

The problem had been eliminated, but still the anxiety remained.

Sherlock didn’t tell Mary. He knew she believed that no one was left who knew enough to connect her to Agra and Moriarty, but Sherlock himself had always worried about loose ends—if Magnussen could find out, someone else could too. He began spending more and more time obsessively tracing everyone he could identify that had ever had even the slightest connection to Moriarty. He didn’t uncover any new threats, but far from calming his fears, he worried more and more about what he might be missing.

Sherlock took to making the long journey out the John and Mary’s house several times a week, usually late at night, occasionally during the day. If Mycroft knew he was doing this, he never mentioned it.

On a bitterly cold night in January, Sherlock was frowning over a stack of old arrest reports on his desk when he heard the bell go downstairs. He almost ignored it—occasionally clients still turned up, even though he had posted what amounted to a “Closed for business” notice on the website, and they were notoriously hard to get rid of—but the bell sounded again and it belatedly occurred to him that it might be John without his keys, so he went down.

“Happy late birthday,” Sally Donovan said. She was wearing a red woolen cap pulled over her dark hair, which was beginning to dust with snowflakes from waiting outside. She was holding a cardboard box. “I’ve brought you a present.”

Now that Lily had stranger anxiety and Molly had a boyfriend, Sherlock’s list of visitors had dwindled to an occasional Friday-night drop-in from John. John looked after himself (and sometimes Sherlock, if it had been a particularly bad day), so Sherlock no longer remembered the niceties of
hosting—if he had ever bothered to learn them, which admittedly was debatable. He therefore could think of nothing else to do but hold the door and follow Donovan upstairs, intrigued and a little wary.

“Can I make a cuppa?” Donovan said, dumping the box unceremoniously on the cluttered desk. “It’s wicked cold out there.”

“I’ll do it,” Sherlock said, basic courtesy surfacing someplace in the back of his brain. Mrs. Hudson must be out, or she’d already be yoo-hooing in with biscuits. He went to the kitchen and followed the familiar routine of kettle and cups, looked vaguely and unsuccessfully around for something to go with the tea, and carried it out.

Sally was spreading out files on the desk, having shoved all of Sherlock’s papers onto a chair. Sherlock didn’t mind; he would have done the same thing himself in her place. He put her cup down and tugged a second chair round.

“So I have a friend,” Sally said, picking up her tea with an appreciative mmmm at its warmth. “She was a sergeant when I started out, really clever, taught me loads. Rosalind Corwin. Her husband got sent to America for two years with his job and she took leave and went with him. She decided this was her big chance to try her hand at writing, which she always wanted to do, so she made friends with a copper there, looked into a cyberbullying case, and wrote a book. Not a trashy true-crime thing, a good book. She sold it about the time her husband was finishing up and she decided she like being a writer in America better than she liked being married to him, so she stayed. We kept in touch—she comes over every year or so, and summer before last I went out for a month and we went all over the west in a convertible.” Sally smiled at the memory.

“Is there a point to all this besides proving there is actually a human being on another continent who finds you bearable?” Sherlock asked.

“Stop being rude and I’ll get there, yeah? So when we were on the road trip she got to telling me about a case she had looked into in Texas. A bloke there was on death row for murdering his pregnant wife, because if you kill an unborn child it’s a capital crime in Texas, and Roz was looking at death penalty cases for a piece she was writing for the New Yorker. But the more he looked at this guy, the more convinced she got that he was actually innocent. Turns out practically nobody thought the guy did it, including the wife’s family. All the evidence was circumstantial—he’d had an affair a couple of years back and the other woman was back in town sending emails, so the prosecution made out that he’d wanted to get out of the marriage, didn’t want the kid, but didn’t want a divorce because the wife had serious money. But even the ex-mistress said there’d been nothing between them.”

Sherlock was getting interested in spite of himself. “So if not the husband, and not the mistress—I assume they checked that much—then somebody else.”

Sally leveled her finger at him. “Got it in one. Roz thought if she could find some similar cases maybe she could pressure somebody into taking a second look. And she did—she found two. But one of the cases had already been solved, supposedly, although what she found put that into question too, and nobody she talked to wanted to mess with two cases that already had convictions.”

“So what am I supposed to be doing?”

“Roz said there was something weird about the crime scenes. She couldn’t put her finger on it, she just felt like there was something off about all of them. I told her about you, and said maybe I could have you take a look some time if you got bored, and when we got back to Atlanta she made copies of the photos. I brought them back and then rather forgot the whole thing, but I was doing a great clean in my flat after Christmas and found them. So. What do you think?”
Sherlock set his tea aside and looked at the crime scene photos, which were arranged in three neat piles on the desk. He spread each pile out and looked at it, then took several photographs and placed them side-by-side, and finally took three of the pictures and laid them out in a row.

“Look at these. What do you see?”

Sally leaned over his shoulder, frowning in concentration. “Looks like all three women were murdered in the baby’s room. They look like nurseries to me.”

“Which should have been enough in itself,” Sherlock agreed. “The Texas police must be spectacularly closed-minded, especially given the near-identical mutilation of the bodies. But your friend is right, there’s something else. Something is missing in each room. Do you see it?”

Sally stared a moment, then shook her head, clearly frustrated.

“The cot,” Sherlock said. “The rooms are ready and furnished, except for the cot.”

“Maybe they just hadn’t got it yet? Or put them together? I hear they’re a nightmare.”

“This one has a mobile already hung,” Sherlock said, touching one photograph with his fingertip. “And in these two you can see sheets—in both of them. Both women had sheets ready to make up the baby’s bed, but there’s no bed.”

“How on earth do you—” she cut herself off, clearly simultaneously realizing the answer and wondering if this were a sore subject for some reason. “Right, John Watson. I don’t have kids, obviously; nor does Roz. We didn’t notice.”

“It’s definitely a serial killer. And there are more victims.”

“How do you know?”

“The dates. Two a year apart, then a three-year gap? They don’t work that way. There will be at least one more killed in that time frame. See if she can find another, and maybe the idiots in Texas will take her seriously.”

“That’s fantastic,” Sally said and Sherlock looked up. He’d gotten caught up in it for a bit, interested in the case, but now he was forcibly reminded that this—puzzles, admiration—was no longer his life. “No, really, I mean it!” she said defensively, misinterpreting his expression.

“Yes,” he said, emptiness settling in him like a weight. He was suddenly acutely aware of how much he missed John, and not just for his praise. “Well. Maybe your friend will dedicate her book to you.”

When she’d gone, Sherlock carried her empty cup to the kitchen and washed it, carefully drying and setting it away. He could feel the sharp edges of loneliness and sadness scraping at him. Once this might have been a danger night, but not anymore; he didn’t even like to take his prescription tranquilizers and sleeping pills because of the dreams. This was a different kind of danger.

Sherlock dried his hand and looked at his phone. John had made it clear—abundantly, repetitively clear—that Sherlock could call him at any time, day or night, and Sherlock knew that Mary fully supported him in this. But it was a weeknight, late, and John would have had a long day and would be working early in the morning. Maybe it would be enough just to see him, through the window.

Sherlock went into his bedroom to change into warmer and less conspicuous clothes. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and regarded his reflection dispassionately: emaciated chest marked by the bullet and the chest tubes, the withered wreck of his arm, his scarred face. He barely
recognized himself. It seemed fitting. He was to have died there in Uzbekistan, and for all intents and purposes he had. Mycroft hadn’t saved him. He’d just brought back his ghost.

Sally turned back up in February, on a much warmer evening just after Valentine’s Day. Sherlock missed her when she first came by. He was spending most of his time now watching over John and his family, following them about to be sure they were safe until they appeared tucked in for the evening. Mrs. Hudson came bustling into the foyer when he returned to Baker Street.

“Sherlock, dear, Sergeant Donovan was here. I told her you’d likely be back quite soon, so she said to tell you she was going to eat and she’d bring you back dinner.” She frowned up at him. “You’d better change out of those things or she’ll think you’re a burglar.”

“I will.” A six-foot skeleton with a scarred face tended to stick in people’s memories, so Sherlock had been employing all sorts of disguises in his covert surveillance. He just had time to get himself divested of his fake beard and into his usual clothes before Donovan came up the stairs two at a time, bearing a fragrant bag and laptop case and clearly excited about something.

“You’re set up for Skype, yeah?”

“That laptop there.” Sherlock made room on the desk. “Would you like tea?” he asked, pleased with himself for remembering.

“No thanks, I’m fine.” She pushed the laptop toward him so he could log in, then tapped away on the screen. “Hey,” she said, grinning at the screen in a way Sherlock had never seen before, the smile transforming her stern face into something bright and lovely. “Roz? I’ve got him right here. This is Sherlock Holmes. Holmes, Rosalind Corwin.” She stepped away, pulling up a chair to the side.

“Mr. Holmes,” Roz Corwin said, smiling up at him. “A pleasure to make your acquaintance.” She was older than he had expected, with sensibly short fading ginger hair and smile lines around her eyes.

Sherlock settled into his seat. “I gather you have found another case.”

“You were absolutely right. There was already a conviction in this case too, and it didn’t get a lot of attention—small town, a lot of meth, lots of dumb guys hurting women. But the details were exactly the same. I sent Sally the crime scene photos—she’s getting them up on her laptop now.”

“Got them,” Donovan said. She turned the laptop to face him and he leaned over, studying the screen. He could see immediately that this victim had been of a lower class; the bedroom furnishings were cheap and the carpet atrocious. But the key facts were the same: strangled woman, abdomen cut open to remove the fetus, blood everywhere, no cot.

“It gets even better,” Roz Corwin said, speaking quickly in her excitement. “All four women had ordered cribs from the same place—Planet Baby. That’s a big outfit so it’s not entirely strange, but there are lots of other places to get cots—a cot is a crib here. This last victim in particular seems more the Walmart-on-layaway type. And of the families I talked to, three of them remembered that there was some sort of delay or problem with the cot. One of the victims was actually at home that day because she was expecting the cot to be delivered, but the police never followed up on it because the cot wasn’t there! Can you believe it?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, ignoring Donovan’s huff. “I take it you tried taking this back to the police and they’re still ignoring you?”
“Not yet. I was hoping to get a bit more first. But the thing is, Mr. Holmes, I’m not a trained investigator. I mean, I found this much, but I don’t know where to go from here or who to talk to, and I think the police are already writing me off as a crank. But you are an investigator. The family of the victim in the original case I got involved with—Araceli Hernandez—wants to hire you. They’ve got heaps of money and Araceli was their only child, and they’d love to use it to find her real killer.”

For a minute Sherlock felt the longing flare up like a spark in him, wanting that bright yummy bonbon of a serial-killer case, but even as he reached for it the little flame flickered and died. It was hopeless. He couldn’t even manage the Tube these days, let alone a transatlantic flight.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “I was injured last year, and I’m somewhat retired from active casework now.”

“Oh, I am sorry. Sally did say I shouldn’t get my hopes up, but…”

“If I think of anything else useful I will tell Donovan, of course,” he said quickly, wanting to get the conversation over.

Sally was quiet as she packed her laptop away. Sherlock could feel her disappointment, whether for him or in him he wasn’t sure, but at least she didn’t try to say anything encouraging. When he walked her down to the front door he said, “Thank you.”

“For what, wasting your time?”

“For not saying anything stupid,” he said. “No one else seems able to resist the temptation.”

That got a smile out of her, as he knew it would. She really did have a lovely smile. “Don’t go soft on me there, Freak,” she said, which made him smile a little in return.

“I’ll do my best.”

When she was gone, Sherlock went slowly back upstairs and slid the uneaten fish and chips into the bin. He’d once loved fish and chips, but the single time he had tried it after his return had triggered one of the worst flashbacks he ever had. It was the salt, he supposed.

There was nothing special about the day it ended—no particular trauma, no anniversary or flashback. He just woke in the morning and knew that he was done. He had reached the end of the line and it was time to exit the train.

The previous day had been fair, unseasonably warm for March, though today was dark and wet. John had ridden his bike, yesterday. Sherlock had been watching when he came home, Mary and Lily already back and waiting for him outside in the sunshine. Lily had just learned to walk and she was toddling determinedly on the pavement, clutching at Mary’s hand, when John came around the corner. “Dada!” Lily cried, and John’s whole face lit in a beaming smile.

That night, dozing off on the sofa, Sherlock had dreamed. It was not one of his usual nightmares but a good dream, in which it had been Sherlock at whom John smiled with that joyous smile. “You’re beautiful,” John said and in the dream he was, his body strong and healthy and unmarked, and he reached both arms for John and John had laid him down gently as though he were precious. John traced his fingers down Sherlock’s face and neck and over his chest, his touch warm, and Sherlock arched his back and opened for him.

And then he woke alone in the dark rain, and John was gone.
He’d thought, mostly, he never wanted such a thing; certainly he’d said as much. Yet if he were honest with himself—and when was he going to be honest if not now?—he knew the truth was that he had been afraid to want it. But there had been that moment once years ago, when he had even thought John might want him too; what would have happened if he had been brave, just that once? If he had said, “I love you, wait for me”? If he had never left at all?

He would never know. That door was closed for him now, in every sense.

Sherlock got off the sofa and went to get ready. He showered and shaved with care, dressing himself in the best of his suits that still fit. When he was perfectly groomed down to the mirror shine on his shoes, he came back out to the lounge to find his tea and biscuits waiting, and he smiled a little. He drank the tea whilst writing his letter to Mycroft, carefully, since writing left-handed was still something of a challenge. The content itself took no time. He had written this note in his head many times, and the words of absolution and gratitude came easily. When he had done he folded the note carefully, wrote Mycroft’s name on an envelope, and placed it on the mantel. Then he placed his hand on the mantel and closed his eyes, summoning up the image of a vast clear sky, and for the first time since the plane had landed he let himself think their names: Mirzayev, Samirelliev, Rustam, Elyer, Arslan. I’m sorry, he thought; meni kechiring. In his mind’s eye he lifted the words up and let them go, watching them float higher and higher until they dissolved into the infinite sky.

He wrote another note, directing the police to contact Lestrade and enclosing both his own identification and Lestrade’s warrant card, and tucked it into his pocket. Mycroft would probably insist on seeing his body anyway—actually a lot of people might, that was the problem with having disappeared once already; they might have to display him in public like Lenin—but his brother would be spared the official identification. He was leaving the flat out of a similar impulse to keep Mrs. Hudson from finding him.

Sherlock put on his coat and scarf and tucked the supplies carefully in his pocket. He had been preparing for this day for a long time. There had been nights when knowing he had everything he needed to end it at any time was all that kept him going, an irony he thought John, with his illegally retained service gun, might have appreciated. He picked up his gloves, which he wore now year-round to hide his curled right hand, but thought better of wearing them.

Outside the rain had slackened to a thin mist, and Sherlock made his way briskly to the park, feeling the cold damp air fresh on his face. He should have felt apprehensive, he thought, or sad, or something, but strangely he didn’t feel anything. It wasn’t the dead emptiness of the past several months, though. He felt…peaceful, and for the first time in a very long while he was no longer afraid. His destination was the little grove of trees where he had met Lestrade, so long ago. His first murder. He didn’t know why he had chosen this particular spot, although obviously it was a good place for a body to go unnoticed for a while; sentiment, maybe, or perhaps he just wanted to remind the world that although he might not always have been a good person, he had done some good things.

Sherlock sat down with his back against a tree and unbuttoned his right cuff. He pushed up his sleeve and looped a rubber tourniquet a few inches above his wrist, propping his limp right hand on his knee and pulling the tourniquet tight with the left. There was no need to slap the skin; he was so emaciated that the vein on the back of his hand stood out like a hosepipe. He took the syringe, already filled, and slipped the sharp bevel into his vein. The rain had picked up again, and he felt the drops falling from the branches onto his bent neck. He had just enough time to pull the syringe free and drop it—he didn’t want to be found like a junkie with a needle hanging out of his arm; he didn’t know why he cared about that, but he did—before he was sliding backward, away from the tree’s support and down on his back on the damp ground, rain filling his open eyes like tears.
“How are my girls?” John asked, coming into the kitchen. Mary, as usual, had left work before him and picked up Lily, who was now busily banging pot lids together whilst Mary pulled chicken out of the refrigerator. He swooped Lily up and tossed her toward the ceiling, and she shrieked in terrified delight.

“Doing well, one of us has a new tooth,” Mary said, setting the chicken down and bending to look in the crisper. “Did you see Sherlock today?”

“No, but I’m not as good at spotting him as you are,” John said. He balanced Lily on his hip and made a wide-mouthed face at her, trying to get her to open up and show him the tooth. Mary had made Sherlock right off the bat, of course—she wouldn’t have lasted long in her former life if she hadn’t been able to spot a tail, particularly an amateur like Sherlock—and they’d talked to Mycroft. Mycroft had obliquely explained that Sherlock had developed something of a fixation with the Watsons’ safety and offered to “take steps” if his presence became troublesome. That was the last thing either of them wanted, so they just covertly kept an eye on him.

“You should text him later, make sure everything’s okay,” Mary said. She put a pan on the stove and poured in a little oil. “Maybe go round on Friday.”

“Don’t we have that thing, that brunch thing on Saturday?”

“Oh right. Well…” She shook her head suddenly. “You know what? Screw the brunch. If we’re late, we’re late. Sherlock’s more important. And you don’t have to stay over every time, you know.”

“I know, I never mean to, I just drink a couple beers and then—hey.” John removed his work ID from where Lily had pulled it triumphantly from his breast pocket. “You’re getting as bad as Uncle Sherlock. Go bang some pots.”

He was straightening up from setting Lily back on the floor when his phone rang in his pocket. As he pulled it out he saw Mary’s head come up, like an animal scenting danger, and suddenly he felt afraid.

He looked at the name on the screen and then met Mary’s eyes. The phone in his hand rang again and he had a sudden desire to throw it, not answer it, never hear the words that would tell him that he would never text Sherlock again, that it was already too late.
The Blue-Eyed Stranger: Part One

Huge thanks to everyone who has been commenting, especially on the last section, which inspired a level of passionate feeling and brilliant analysis that just blew me away. You all are truly amazing! I try very, very hard to respond to every comment, so if I missed doing so to one of yours—particularly if you left one on an earlier chapter while most of the commentary was coming in on the last one—please accept my apologies and know that it was a tragic oversight and that I did read and appreciate it. This section doesn't have the unambiguous happy ending, but, as promised, it's a nice little break from all the angst.

Sherlock gasped. His whole body shuddered with violent spasms, as though trying physically to throw off the hold of the other time stream. He barely made it up onto his side before he was sick. Dimly he was aware of Trevor’s crisp voice issuing directions and then Mycroft was sliding an arm under his shoulders. Sherlock jerked away instinctively, but the grip of the memories was already loosening, and Mycroft’s touch was no more abhorrent than it had ever been. He let himself be helped to the sofa where he slumped back, eyes closed, letting the miasma of the other time steam drift off him like fog. His breathing gradually slowed and he became aware of his own body, strong and essentially whole, and he realized he was opening and closing his right hand. He opened his eyes. “Tea,” he said hoarsely. “And food.”

“I'll ring for some sandwiches,” Mycroft said, turning away, but Sherlock caught at his arm.

“No,” he said, “fish and chips.”

“Sherlock, it’s—“ but Mycroft caught something in his face and stopped. “All right. Fish and chips.”

“I wouldn’t mind some fish and chips myself,” Trevor said. “It’s been ages.”

The tea came a few minutes later and Sherlock drank it down gratefully, feeling parched. God, it was good. How had he never appreciated this, just being able to enjoy the taste of a cup of sweet tea? Not to be constantly on edge, to be able to move without pain? He was so lucky, and he had never realized until now. Mycroft brought him another cup without a word and he drank this one more slowly, savoring the sweetness of it.

They went upstairs to the dining room for the fish and chips, sitting around the table and eating in a companionable silence. Sherlock felt ravenous and relished it, eating every bite of his food and licking the greasy salt from his fingers. Even Trevor ate a fair amount, apparently inspired by his enthusiasm. Of course, as soon as he finished he felt exhausted in the way he used to after a case, all the adrenaline faded away, wrung dry. He still had to tell his story though.

Sherlock was glad he had had the time to think about how to convey his experience; they didn’t need to know all of it, and it was clear from the way Mycroft was rubbing his face afterward that his heavily edited version had been bad enough. “Is that what happened?” he asked Trevor when he had finished. “You said the world fell apart. Was it really due to Mirzayev’s death?”
“Partly,” she said. She looked at Mycroft, hesitating.

“You might as well tell us,” Sherlock said wearily. “If we ever fix this it won’t matter, and if not it doesn’t sound as though he could make things much worse than he did the first time.”

“You’re right. Yes, Mirzayev’s death did destabilize the situation in Eastern Europe, although I don’t think anyone could have foreseen how expansionist Russia would become in so short a period of time. It proved critical because NATO deployed troops to Poland and Germany. There was a great deal of posturing on both sides, and whilst everyone was distracted, China declared war on Japan.”

“Oh,” Mycroft said in the tones of someone unwrapping a surprising birthday gift.

“It all fell apart after that. India sided with China and that got Pakistan involved—Pakistan was actually the first to launch nuclear weapons, although they weren’t the last. The Middle East was destroyed along with a great deal of the world’s oil supplies, and Russia and China ended up at war with each other…the only real surprise was that the Americans stayed out of almost all of it. Who would have predicted that World War III wouldn’t involve America? They went isolationist instead. John Watson rejoined the Army and between that and Mycroft pulling strings his wife and daughter were able to get visas for Canada, although we don’t know what happened after they left. Dr. Watson was killed fairly quickly, of course.”

Something that had been niggling at the back of Sherlock’s mind coalesced into certainty. “You’re working together,” he breathed.

“What?” Trevor said, but she had absolutely no experience at dissembling.

“You and Mycroft. Aren’t you? In the time that you come from. I can tell by the way you talk to him that you haven’t just met in the past few days. You went to him, or were steered to him, when you realized you might have played a part in what happened, but he’s the one who pinpointed this particular incident. Patterns.” Sherlock smiled humorlessly. “It’s what we’re good at, after all.”

Trevor sighed, looking at Mycroft. “He’s right. I wanted to go to you from the first—tell you something only you would know, something of that sort—but you—he—the future you—convinced me it would backfire. He said that you would think that you—” her hands made it plural—“were motivated by a desire to save Sherlock.” Her expression showed her displeasure with the hash of pronouns.

“I’m perfectly fine with being saved,” Sherlock said a bit more fervently than he intended. “Is that—what happened in the time stream where we kept Moriarty alive—is that what really happens to me, if I go?”

Trevor looked at him in silence a moment, her gaze unwavering. “It doesn’t go well for you,” she answered quietly. “Let’s leave it at that.”

“Well,” Mycroft said suddenly, “clearly we’re going to need a different approach.”

“And what do you suggest?” Sherlock said a little snappishly.

“At the moment, I suggest—no, I insist—on some rest. You’re dropping in your seat, I could do with some sleep myself, and Dr. Trevor must be fatigued. We’ll reconvene in the morning and come up with a fresh course of action.”

Sherlock wanted to argue out of habit, but he found he was too exhausted. No sense cutting off his nose to spite his face, he decided, and let Mycroft’s lackey steer him to a bedroom so boring he thought the surroundings alone would put him to sleep. As he fell into bed he worried that he might
dream, but strangely the thought held none of its usual terror. He realized that on some level he was thinking about the dream he had had on the last night of his other life. Which was ridiculous. If he had ever thought about John that way he had given it up long ago, and certainly John had never thought about him that way, and anyway John was married, and anyway Sherlock didn’t want anything like that.

Didn’t he?

There were no dreams. Sherlock woke a few hours later to the diffuse pale daylight feeling fantastic, far more refreshed than he really should, and ready to tackle the problem afresh. He availed himself of the well-stocked en suite and bounded out to the dining room, where Mycroft and Trevor were having coffee.

“The wonderful thing about Tiggers,” Mycroft muttered, frowning down at his laptop.

What was he on about? Sherlock ignored him and fetched himself a cup. Trevor was reading the newspaper, so he sat down next to her.

“That must be fun,” he said, indicating the paper. “Do you already know what’s in it?”

“Well, I know about the baby,” she said, absently, turning the page. “I can tell you the gender and name if you want to make a fortune on the betting.”

“Oh, Mycroft will know all that anyway. He likely knew about the pregnancy before she did,” Sherlock said. “I know when to go next.”

That got both their attention. Mycroft actually looked up from his laptop. “Oh?”


They both looked at him blankly. “Who?” Mycroft said.

“Carl Powers,” Sherlock said impatiently. “Remember? He was Moriarty’s first victim—well, we assumed so, anyway. The boy who drowned in the swimming pool after Moriarty laced his eczema cream with botulinum toxin. Moriarty was the one who spiked the medication and then stole his shoes so the traces of toxin wouldn’t be found. I thought it was suspicious and tried to get the police to look into it further, but they ignored me.”

“I remember,” Mycroft said slowly. “But when the police reopened the case as part of the Moriarty bombings, they never found any trace of Moriarty.”

“Nobody ever found any trace of Moriarty before the bombings, period,” Sherlock pointed out. “In retrospect, maybe we should have pushed that angle harder.”

“So you think you can solve it now? Then? As a twelve-year-old?”

“I know I can,” Sherlock said. “I just have to be more persistent this time.”

“But sir,” Sherlock said impatiently, fiddling with the telephone cord, “there has to be reason the shoes were taken. I’ve been doing some research, and—“

“Look, lad,” the kindly voice of the desk sergeant said. “I told all this to the DI in charge the last few
times you called. They’re closing the case. There’s no evidence of foul play.”

“There’s no evidence because someone stole the evidence,” Sherlock said in exasperation. “Did you tell the DI my name? If he would just talk to me, I’m sure I can convince him something’s off.”

“I’ll tell him about the shoes again, just as I did the last time,” the sergeant said. “Tell me your name?”

“Sherlock Holmes.”

“Spell that for me, lad?”

“Same as it was the last time,” Sherlock said crossly, and hung up.

Sherlock pulled his bony knees up and rested his chin on them to stare at the pay phone mounted opposite in the tiny wooden cubicle. His head was aching, and he’d felt distinctly woozy whilst he was on the phone. He had not eaten either his breakfast or lunch, as both had been nasty, but perhaps some dinner might not be a bad idea. At least some bread or pudding.

Stupid police. Why had he wasted time calling them? They clearly lacked the brains to see what was right under their noses. Sherlock considered going to London to argue in person, but that would be difficult to pull off, and just as likely to be unsuccessful. No, he was just going to have to solve this case himself. And that would mean going to Brighton. How would he get to Brighton? Did anyone go there? What on earth was in Brighton?

Sherlock took himself off to the library, his favorite place at Eton, and pulled out an atlas and a smattering of reference books. Brighton had beaches. Brighton had the University of Sussex. Brighton had…wait a minute.

Sherlock stared into space a minute, eyes flicking back and forth, until he saw the picture in his mind where he had just seen mention of the University of Sussex: on the notice board in the music corridor. Yes. That would do nicely. The application date was in only three days, but Sherlock had always thrived under pressure; he would be fine. He just need to get back to the phones in time to catch his father before his mother came home—Father was always easier to talk round than Mummy, who tended to ask too many shrewd questions.

Sherlock was in such a hurry that he forgot to keep an eye out, and he ran right into three other boys from his year, who hated him. This was not unusual. Everyone in Sherlock’s year hated him.

“Oh look, it’s little girlie Sherlie,” Bruce said, twisting Sherlock’s arm up behind him and causing Sherlock to drop his book bag. Despite the pain, Sherlock found himself rolling his eyes: girlie Sherlie, really?

“Have you been curling your hair, Sherlie?” Norton said in mock admiration. “You look ever so pretty.”

“That’s why he doesn’t play any games,” Davis said. “He doesn’t want to get himself mussed.”

“Do you think he wears girl’s knickers?”

“Oh, good question,” Bruce said with enthusiasm. “Let’s find out.”

Sherlock glanced around at the boys desperately as he struggled, but he had been at school for several months now, and had already used all the deductions he’d been able to make about this lot. Except…he’d been saving it up for a really desperate circumstance, but this was starting to look
“Do your friends know you still piss the bed?” he asked in a clear, carrying voice, twisting around to look at Bruce over his shoulder and nearly dislocating his arm.

Bruce froze for only an instant, but his bright red blush had already betrayed him. “Is that true?” shouted Norton, clearly delighted. “Is it, Bruce?”

Bruce let go of Sherlock’s arm to lunge for Norton and that was all the opportunity Sherlock needed. He snatched up his bag and eel between the two boys even as the two of them crashed into each other, and then he ran for it. He would pay for that later, no doubt, but now he was free and with any luck the three of them would be too busy with their own spat to chase after him.

“You want to go orchestra camp?” his father repeated in stunned astonishment. For the third time.

Sherlock couldn’t really blame him—he had spent the previous twelve years of his existence furiously rejecting any activity involving other children, including the Eton orchestra, but enough was enough. He was going to be late for dinner in a few minutes. “It’s a Young Composers Workshop.”

“I had no idea you were interested in composing.”

Neither had Sherlock. “I think it will be an interesting challenge,” he said. “And anyway presumably the others there will actually be decent musicians, so playing in the orchestra might not be too bad.” Which might even be true, come to think of it.

“Well.” There was a note of pleasure creeping in amongst the amazement in his father’s voice. “I think that sounds lovely. Let me talk to Mummy and see what she thinks.”

Sherlock exhaled a breath he hadn’t known he was holding. “I need the cheque in two days to post with my application,” he said quickly, “but I’ve got to run now, I’ll be late for dinner.” He hung up the phone on his father’s querying voice and grinned at the wooden wall. He knew he’d managed it; his father would have convinced himself this would be the making of Sherlock by the time he got round to telling Mummy. Now he just needed to compose something for his application and tape himself playing something suitably dazzling by day after tomorrow. Piece of cake. Filled with delight at his own cleverness, Sherlock opened the door of the phone cubicle and came face to face with Bruce.

Sherlock’s roommate at the workshop turned out to be a sallow, dark-haired boy named Jonathan, two or three years older than Sherlock and just as sullen. The two of them glared at each other in mutual antipathy until their parents gave up trying to make them chat and left to go to dinner in Brighton.

“What are you doing here?” Jonathan demanded as soon as the door closed. “This is one of the most selective programmes in the country. I’ve never seen you at any of the junior camps.”

Sherlock shrugged. “I got in.”

“What do you play?”

“Violin.”

Jonathan narrowed his eyes. “Don’t think you can waltz into first chair just because you’re some
kind of prodigy.”

“I don’t want to be first chair,” Sherlock said, which was true enough. “I wouldn’t play in the stupid orchestra at all if I didn’t have to. I just want to compose.” Which, surprisingly enough, was also true. He’d enjoyed writing the piece that got him in, and had noodled around with a few other compositions in the intervening weeks.

“Well,” Jonathan said, arms folded across his chest and glowering. Sherlock had the impression that his disinterest in competing with Jonathan for concertmaster had rather taken the wind out of his sails, and he didn’t know what to say next.

“Well,” Sherlock answered haughtily, and turned his back.

Sherlock was a little anxious that the workshop was going to be just as hateful as Eton, judging by Jonathan’s behavior, but he needn’t have worried. Most of the other students were indeed far older, but they were used to prodigies—or had been prodigies themselves—and they treated him well enough. Jonathan needn’t have worried either. It was apparent on their first day that he was miles better than Sherlock—in fact, Sherlock realized that for the first time in his life he was actually going to have to work to keep up. It was a novel sensation, not entirely unpleasant. Jonathan thawed quite a bit after that and on the third day he actually said awkwardly, “Going over to the practice rooms? We could go together.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said, surprised. He looked up from where he was digging through his trunk in search of his swim things. “I’m, ah, taking a bit of a break, actually. Thought I’d go for a swim.”

Jonathan looked astonished. “Are we allowed?”

“Oh of course.” Sherlock had no idea if this were true, but if not, he wasn’t letting that stop him. It belatedly occurred to him that he was expected to make a reciprocal friendly gesture. “Would you like to come too?”

“No thanks. I really want to work on that Bach.”

“All right.” Sherlock collected his things and straightened. On impulse, he said, “You’re going to be first chair. The only other person good enough is that ginger girl with the braces, and she’s too high-strung to be concertmaster.” So was Jonathan, but he did a better job at covering it up. Sherlock was not sure most people would perceive that as a compliment, though, so he didn’t say it.

“Thanks,” Jonathan said, started and pleased. “I’ll, ah, save you a seat at dinner, shall I?”

Sherlock blinked. “Thank you,” he said. Was that sufficient? Was he meant to say something else? Perhaps punch Jonathan’s shoulder in a show of masculine fellowship? Oh, this was wasting time. “See you later,” he managed and ducked out the door.

Sherlock spent half the bus ride to the aquatic centre analyzing the conversation and exhaustively reviewing everything he had said for anything idiotic, alternating with bouts of annoyance at himself for caring what a boring violin-obsessed moron like Jonathan thought about him. He finally managed to clear his head and focus on the case, which was the real reason he was even in Brighton, after all. Reconnaissance first. He paid for a visitor pass at the desk—fully intending to nick someone’s membership card at the first opportunity—and scouted around the building. There was a still a small memorial to Carl Powers set up at in the foyer, complete with information about how to donate to the scholarship fund established in his name, which made Sherlock roll his eyes. You could tell just from his pictures that Carl Powers had been an arrogant git, not the treasured member of society the memorial made him out to be.
Carl’s former teammates had already finished practice for the day, according to the schedule on the training pool door, and the training pool was currently occupied by pensioners swimming laps. Sherlock wandered out to the paddling pool, which was fairly crowded for such a cool day. He settled himself near a large family with a harried mother, who would not think twice about one of their membership cards disappearing; she had the look of someone who lost things constantly.

“I don’t want to swim,” whined Sherlock’s quarry, a fat boy with milk-white skin who looked as though this was the first time he had removed his shirt in his life. “Why can’t I just stay home?”

“Because then you’ll just watch telly and eat crisps,” his mother snapped back. She was trying to wrestle a small child into some sort of flotation device. “You need to get some exercise.”

“I’m not swimming,” the boy said sulkily.

“Suit yourself,” his mother said, pulling another pudgy pale child to its feet. They were like a family of marshmallows, Sherlock thought. “We’re going in. Stay here and be bored if you like.”

The rest of the family trudged off toward the water, but the fat boy stayed stubbornly where he was. Sherlock’s hopes sank, but then the boy stealthily slipped some money out of his mum’s handbag and waddled off in search of a snack. Sherlock rolled to his front, trying to look as though he were just trying to sun himself, snaked out one long skinny arm, and snagged the boy’s membership card where it lay on his discarded t-shirt. Ian Braithewaite. Excellent.

Pleased with his success, Sherlock sat up and rested his chin on his knees as he surveyed the pool. A lot of families and small children, paddling about. A large group of athletic-looking teenagers, clearly morons, splashing in the deeper end; the swimming team? He’d need to get here earlier and watch the team leave practice to be sure. Some girls with orangey-looking fake tans; dull. Sherlock was studying the teenagers again when he felt a prickle as though someone were watching him. He flopped onto his back again, casually, and rested his head on his bag while he examined his neighbors through slitted lids. There. A pale dark-haired boy, about Sherlock’s age, sitting alone in the shade of a small tree, watching him.

The next day Sherlock arrived early enough to watch the swim team leave practice and head for the outdoor pool, memorizing faces and duffel bags and scanning for possible weaknesses. He didn’t find much, so the next day he arrived even earlier—he’d skived off lunch—and slipped into their locker room, which he surreptitiously searched. By the fourth day, Sherlock was ready. It was a good day for his purposes, sunny and almost hot, so the pool would be crowded. Sherlock took along the biggest book he had—it was his chemistry textbook for next year—and opened it up as he came through the pool gate, purposely dawdling along with his head down so that it was inevitable that one of the boys on the swim team, coming in from the building entrance, would bump into him.

“Oi, watch, it, you little shite,” the older boy said as Sherlock dropped the book on his bare foot. He swore.

Sherlock looked down to hide his grin as he scrambled for the book: this one had been his preferred target from the first, as he had bully written all over him. Along with roid rage, Sherlock thought gleefully.

The boy, who was roughly twice Sherlock’s size, grabbed for the book and held it over Sherlock’s head. “Little bastard, you didn’t even apologize,” he said angrily. “I’m not sure you deserve to have this back. What do you lot think?”
“Keep it,” one of the others advised. “Teach him some manners.”

“Throw it in the pool!”

This possibility had not occurred to Sherlock. He leaped, but the book was out of his reach, and the others laughed. “Give it back,” Sherlock hissed, “or I’ll report you for using steroids.”

The boy’s eyes went wide and Sherlock added swiftly, “Though you ought to stop. Your acne would clear up loads.”

The boy’s shocked look changed to one of fury. He shoved the heavy textbook into Sherlock’s middle with such force that Sherlock doubled over, all the air knocked out of him. “Stay out of my way, pigmy,” he said and shoved Sherlock hard in the direction of the pool; Sherlock just barely saved himself from tumbling in. He stayed doubled over for a minute, trying to catch his breath, hearing the boys’ laughter as they moved away. He straightened carefully and, trying to look as though he were just trying to get to the nearest open space, staggered over and collapsed next to the dark-haired loner by the tree.

The boy watched with detached amusement as Sherlock panted, trying to keep from vomiting, and finally got himself enough under control to spread out his things. He preferred to be in the sun, but he put his towel in the shade today, since it would get him closer to the boy. He clearly wasn’t on the swimming team, but he was here every day staring at the crowd like a game hunter; maybe he knew something.

“What did you say to that arsehole?” the boy asked finally, when Sherlock had himself settled. He had a lilting, Irish voice. “The one who took your book.”

Sherlock looked over as though he hadn’t realized the boy was there. “What? Oh. I told him I’d report him for using steroids.”

The boy’s face lit with malicious glee. “How’d you know that?”

Actually Sherlock had found the evidence in his locker—what an idiot—but the signs were there if you knew where to look. He shrugged, saying nothing.

The boy studied him for a moment and then stuck out a hand. “James Allen.”

Sherlock took it. “Ian Braithewaite,” he said, remembering his cover just in time.

“Do you live around here?”

“No, I’m at a summer program at the university. My parents made me come. You?”

“Yes.” James Allen did not elaborate, just continued to study Sherlock with his unsettlingly bright eyes. “Where do you go to school then?”

“St. Albans,” Sherlock answered. “What about you?”

“Well… I was at school in Belfast, but I came here to live with my grandparents last winter. I had tutors then, but we’re going to give the local comprehensive a try this fall.” His tone was slightly mocking.

“Why’d you leave Belfast?” Sherlock asked bluntly.

“Had a bit of trouble at my old school.” James was still smiling, but there was something cold in it
now. “Everyone thought it would be best for me to have a fresh start.” That mocking tone again.

“God, I’d love to leave my school,” Sherlock said with complete truthfulness. “It’s full of morons and mouth-breathing idiots, and that’s just the staff.”

James shrugged. “I doubt it’s any better here. You saw what those louts are like.”

“Why do you come here every day then?”

“I used to swim in Belfast, so my grandparents put me on the team here, but I didn’t like it. So I quit, but I never told them—they wouldn’t be pleased, they want to think I’m settling in. My grandfather still drops me off for practice every day and then picks me up later after I’ve had plenty of time to lark about with the lads.”

“Not bad,” Sherlock said with admiration. “Gets you out of the house a bit.”

James smiled. It was not a pleasant smile. “Exactly,” he said. “Do you smoke?”

“Ah…not really, I mean, I haven’t tried it much.”

James Allen grinned at him. “Come on then, and I’ll show you.”

Sherlock did not go to the pool on the weekends—James would not be there, as the swim team did not practice—and then the next Monday it rained all day, so he stayed back then too. This turned out to be just as well, as the composition instructor asked him to stop by for a word during free period. Sherlock went into this meeting with a great deal of trepidation. His previous experiences of chats with teachers had been universally negative, but to his surprise the teacher had nothing but praise for his efforts.

“You’ve really got quite a gift for this,” the man said, as Sherlock flushed in surprise. “Your work is extraordinary for having no prior formal instruction. Are you planning to submit a piece for consideration for the final concert?”

“I thought first years usually don’t, sir.”

“Well, most of our first years aren’t up to much but solos, but I think you could put together something for a string quartet if you’re really motivated. Some of the older students do a full work, but they’ve often written a lot of it before they arrive, you understand.”

Sherlock immediately decided that he would write a full orchestral work.

“Here.” The teacher piled a stack of books onto Sherlock’s arms. “I think you’ll find these interesting.”

“Thank you, sir,” Sherlock said, still a bit dazed that no one was threatening to ring his parents, and staggered off. He almost ran into Jonathan in the hall, heading for a practice room.

“Everything all right?” Jonathan asked him. “What did Talbert want you for?”

Sherlock and Jonathan still spent most of their time in each other’s presence in an awkward but not antagonistic silence, so Sherlock thought for a moment that he was talking to someone else. He hesitated, not sure if the truth would jeopardize their détente or truce or whatever they had, but Jonathan really wasn’t all that interested in composing—he was at Sussex because he thought it
would look good when he applied to conservatory.

“Nothing much,” he said cautiously. “He thinks I could have a piece in the concert, maybe. He’s loaned me some books in case I want to write a piece for a quartet.”

Jonathan merely nodded. “That bit you played this morning was quite good. It was better than anyone’s, not just the first years.”

Sherlock stared. Was Jonathan taking the piss? He wasn’t. He really thought Sherlock had done something well, and apparently this didn’t make him want to beat Sherlock to a pulp. Sherlock had no precedent for such a thing. How was he supposed to respond?

Fortunately, Jonathan didn’t really seem to know what to do with the conversation either, for he said abruptly, “I’m off to practice,” and disappeared into a room.

Sherlock, relieved and embarrassed and with a tiny spark of pleasure in his chest, lugged his books back to their room, already thinking about what he could do with a concerto and eager to dive into the new books. He got so caught up that he almost didn’t go back to the pool next day.

Sherlock didn’t like to examine his growing relationship with James too closely. At first he’d seemed only a potential source of information, someone fortuitously similar enough to Sherlock to be easily manipulated. He was coming to realize that he was genuinely fascinated by James: he didn’t like him, exactly, but he was drawn to the other boy’s intelligence, and to the streak of darkness in him, an edge of danger that drew Sherlock like a magnet.

James had told him all about his grandfather, who was retired and spent his days reading the newspapers and eating tinned soup (“He might as well already be dead,” James said in disgust). Sherlock in turn told James about his perfect, patronizing prig of an older brother. They shared stories about school. Sherlock had never really spent much time loathing his teachers the way he did his fellow students—they were idiots, most people were idiots; it wasn’t anything personal they had against him—but James talked about his masters back in Belfast with a venom that was slightly unnerving; Sherlock did not know whether it was a cause or effect of being kicked out. James spoke of his mother rarely but with a casual viciousness, referring to her as a slag and bitch; his father he mentioned not at all. Sherlock largely kept quiet about his own parents, whom he found essentially acceptable, and at any rate clearly a huge improvement on James’ family.

“My grandmother is a pharmaceutical researcher,” James told Sherlock one afternoon. “She works with poisons. One of them can paralyze you, but if you inject it into just one nerve, it would only paralyze that nerve. Wouldn’t it be lovely to be able to paralyze someone’s mouth?”

“I suppose,” Sherlock said slowly. His mind had snagged on the image of a boy frozen, slowly sinking in a pool. He brought himself back to the conversation quickly, filing the thought away for later. “My mother was a mathematician,” he said. “She gave it up when Mycroft was born though.”

James gave a hoot of laughter. “My grandmother would never do that,” he said. “She left my mother to raise herself, much as she’s doing me. She’ll never retire.”

“I suppose it must be very interesting, working with poisons,” Sherlock mused.

“If you could poison someone and you wouldn’t get caught,” James said, his dark unblinking eyes fixed on Sherlock’s, “would you do it?”

Sherlock shut his eyes against the sun, giving the question serious consideration. Would he? No,
probably not. He wasn’t above moral qualms, for one thing, and he also knew that deep down he really did care what others thought. It would be far more satisfying to prove himself superior to the boys at school, to have their genuine respect—morons though they may be--than to have them just, well, vanish. Although he wouldn’t mind a little suffering. Paralyzing their mouths didn’t sound bad at all, as long it was easily reversible, of course.

“Well? Would you?”

Sherlock felt a sudden chill up the back of his neck. Was this actually a rhetorical question? The image of the boy sinking into the water flashed into his mind again.

“Course,” he said finally, not opening his eyes. “If they deserved it.”

“I asked my grandmother if I could go to St. Albans with you,” James said. The day was overcast and they were sitting behind the pool wall, furtively smoking cigarettes. Sherlock had gotten a lot better at this since his first attempt, but he almost choked at James’ announcement.

“What did she say?” he managed, His heart was pounding.

“No.” James was not scowling as Sherlock did when he did not get his way; he was staring into space with a cold, dead look in his eyes that Sherlock found deeply unnerving. “If I do well this year they’d consider a boarding school, but not this year.”

Sherlock exhaled in a puff of smoke. “Well, keep your nose clean then,” he said casually. He had no idea what he should say. Who would have thought investigating a murder would require so much…socializing?

James flicked a narrow sidelong glance at him and Sherlock tensed, sure James would notice something amiss, but James said only, “You’re letting that burn down,” and Sherlock jumped a little and knocked the long ash loose.

On the bus going back, Sherlock turned the issue over in his mind. He had never had a friend in his life, and now James, clearly, felt them to be friends. Did that make them friends? Certainly he felt a connection to James he had never felt with anyone else, and the thought of having James at Eton with him had an undeniable appeal. But at the same time…even if he hadn’t suspected James of murdering Carl Powers, something about James chilled him. He thought about how he had never realized that he had always been lonely, until this summer. He thought about how James seemed the same. And for some reason, he thought about sallow, unattractive Jonathan, probably saving him a seat in the dining hall right now, even though he and Sherlock would likely not exchange a single word the entire meal.

Sherlock leaned his head against the bus window and closed his eyes. He heard the burr of the engine and the rumble of the tyres, and then he realized he was hearing music: his loneliness and un-loneliness humming in counterpoint in his head. All of a sudden, Sherlock had his concerto.

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock had been rather expecting the composition teacher to call him over at some point today. He followed Mr. Talbert docilely, though his stomach was jumping with nerves. He thought it would be ridiculous for him to try to seem as though he didn’t know why he was being pulled aside, so he settled for trying not to appear smug.
Mr. Talbert stopped and turned to face him. “You wrote a concerto. A violin concerto. Three movements.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, suddenly nervous. Did Mr. Talbert not like it?

“You wrote a concerto for an entire orchestra.”

“Should I have not?” Now Sherlock was getting worried.

But Mr. Talbert looked amused. “There are no limitations on what you can write, Sherlock. But there are limitations on what we can play. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but we’ve mostly string players and pianists at the workshop. You’ve written parts for woodwinds! If I’m not mistaken, you even have a celesta in here.”

Sherlock flushed, feeling foolish. “I didn’t really think about that, sir. I just wrote down the music that was in my head.”

“Sherlock,” the teacher said kindly. “This is an extraordinary accomplishment. I only wish we could play it as it’s written. Did you actually do all this since you came this summer?”

“I wrote most of it last weekend, actually,” Sherlock admitted. He had stayed up for three days, writing feverishly in one of the practice rooms until he’d fallen asleep in there with all the lights on very late Sunday night. “That’s why it’s a bit rough. I can polish it up a bit and take out the…extra parts.”

Mr. Talbert tilted his head. “Remind me, where are you at school?”

“Eton, sir.”

“They have a fine music programme there.”

Sherlock looked at the floor, saying nothing.

“But if you’re interested in composing…the Cathedral Conservatory Preparatory is the best in England. Most start there at eleven, but I’m fairly certain they’d take you. I’ve a friend there and I might have her come for the concert, if you’re interested. Can you get your changes done in the next few days? I’d like to be able to get it copied so we can start work on it. You’ll still be able to make changes for a bit, obviously.”

“You want the orchestra to perform it for the concert?” This was what Sherlock had been hoping for all along, of course, but he wanted to make sure he wasn’t leaping to conclusions.

“Definitely. I can’t wait to hear it. I assume you’ll want to play the violin solo?”

“No,” Sherlock said. He’d thought about this a good deal. “I want Jonathan to play it. He’s better.”

“What are you doing?” James said petulantly. “You’ve been scribbling away for ages.”

“Sorry. It’s, er, homework,” Sherlock said. He tucked the pages back in his folder and shoved it into his bag. “Thought you were sleeping. I’ve got a bit behind on my work, but I didn’t want to miss coming.” His smile felt rather forced, but James did not seem to notice.

“Well, good,” he said, sitting up and leaning back against the wall. The day was bright but cool, and they were out in the sun. Sherlock sat against the wall too, following James’ gaze to where the
swimming team boys were rudely catcalling at some girls shivering in bikinis.

“Are those boys from the swim team?”

James’ mouth twisted. “Yes. Morons.”

“I can see why you left.”

They were quiet a few minutes, basking in the sunshine.

Sherlock tilted his head back against the wall and closed his eyes. “So how would you do it?”

“Do what?”

“Poison somebody and not get caught.”

“Oh, that.” James did not shift his position, but Sherlock could sense his heightened alertness, like a predator at a water hole. “Well, putting it in their food would be the best way, wouldn’t it? Hard to pin on anyone.”

Sherlock scoffed. “Most of those would be obvious, and they’d be easy to find on a post mortem.”

James was not the only one fascinated by poisons.

“Only if you know what to look for,” James pointed out.

“Insulin would be good.”

“Needle marks.”

“But it’s a subcutaneous needle, they’d be really small.”

“How are you going to going to convince someone to let you stick them with a needle?”

Good point. “In their medicine, if they take medicine. An asthma inhaler.”

“No, they’re pressurized. You can’t get anything else in. Maybe a capsule…”

Sherlock was shaking his head. “I tried that once. They don’t go back together, and how do you get it back in the blister pack?”

“You tried it? Who were you going to poison?”

“My brother,” Sherlock admitted. “I wasn’t going to poison him, I just wanted to replace his antihistamines with our father’s sleeping pills so he’d fall asleep in school.”

James hooted with laughter and Sherlock grinned a little.

“If you had a cream or a salve,” James said a few minutes later, his voice idle. “If the skin was broken, then the poison would get in their system that way.”

Sherlock frowned. “It would have to be a very strong poison.”

“Oh the right circumstance.”

The boy frozen, drowning. Sherlock felt a shiver run up the back of his neck, not entirely unpleasant. He was sitting next to a murderer. Did Carl Powers have some kind of skin condition? He must have done: Sherlock would need to go through his clippings again. Actually, now that he thought about it,
wasn’t there something, something about the missing shoes…

“They’ve gone,” James said suddenly, breaking into Sherlock’s line of thought. “Want to go swim for a bit?”

Sherlock opened his eyes. “Yes.”

“I don’t understand why anyone would take them,” Lucy Powers said. “He loved those shoes, but they smelled awful. He had eczema on his feet and wet socks made it worse, so he never wore socks. The smell of those things could blind an elephant.”

“Sherlock?”

Sherlock tensed out of habit, but the voice was a girl’s; girls usually didn’t beat one up, at least in Sherlock’s experience. He didn’t think he’d done anything to enrage any girls lately, but you never knew.

The girls calling to him was Emily Chiang, one of the cellists. She had written a beautiful adagio that would probably be the penultimate piece in the concert; maybe she was angry his concerto was in the last spot?

“Hey,” Emily said, catching up and smiling at him. “Listen, your concerto is amazing, it’s really fantastic, but… I’m thinking…”

“That I’m underusing the cellos?”

Emily laughed. “How’d you know? Not underusing exactly, but I think you could be using us better. Don’t get mad; Vivaldi neglected the low strings too. It’s a violinist’s blind spot. You think we’re just there to keep the beat, and that’s true, the low instruments are the heartbeat of a piece—but if you use us to balance the violin you’ll get a much richer effect.”

“In the second movement, you mean?”

“No, not the second movement, though I think you’d be better there with a bit more violas. In the first movement where you have the big violin solo, I could be totally wrong, but it sounds to me like the violin is meant to sound lonely there. Is that right?”

Sherlock blinked. “You could tell that?”

“Didn’t you want me to? The listener, I mean?”

“Well, yes, but…”

“Sherlock, this is a workshop for orchestra nerds. We’re obsessed with something other kids think of as practically a dead language. We all know lonely when we hear it.”
“Oh,” Sherlock said lamely. It had truly never occurred to him that someone like Emily could be lonely.

“If you give the cellos a bit more voice there, it will heighten the effect of the violin,” Emily explained. “You can make it sound even more alone, or the music more sad. Cellos are great for sad. That’s the beauty of an orchestra—you have more than one voice. The violin still has the solo, but it doesn’t have to say everything by itself.”

Sherlock Holmes, who had spent most of his life assuming that everyone around him was a useless idiot who had to know less than he did, asked, “Can you show me?”

“Where were you yesterday?” James asked. They were out behind the wall smoking.

“Kept in. I got in trouble,” Sherlock lied easily. Well, it had certainly been true in the past, and he hadn’t specifically said he’d gotten in trouble yesterday. “I got here early today though.”

“Mmm.” James seemed a bit distant today, cooler than usual. Sherlock couldn’t bring himself to care much. He was getting tired of this game they were playing, but he couldn’t seem to stop; James still held a strange fascination for him. Besides, he needed just a bit more, or he wouldn’t be able to get the police to pay attention.

They smoked in silence for a bit and then James suddenly said, “Have you ever been with anyone?”

“What? No. Of course not. Have you?” James was thirteen to Sherlock’s twelve; it was possible.

“Once or twice.” James’ face twisted in a slight sneer. “Girls back home. Silly babies, they were.”

“Wait, when you say you’ve been with them, you don’t mean…do you?”

“Just snogging.” James stubbed his cigarette out against the wall. Then he took Sherlock’s out of his fingers and took a long drag off of it, holding Sherlock’s eyes, and stubbed his out too. Sherlock couldn’t seem to look away from his face.

James reached out and gripped Sherlock’s chin in his hand, hard. He leaned forward and pressed his lips to Sherlock’s. In contrast to his squeezing grip his lips were loose, almost flabby, and Sherlock’s immediate impression was of revulsion coupled with a deep curiosity. James opened his eyes and Sherlock quickly closed his own, and then James did it again, this time forcing his smoky tongue into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock jerked back, appalled.

They stayed there like that a moment, inches apart and both breathing hard, and then James let him go and turned away. “Doesn’t mean anything,” he said in his chillingly light voice. “I’m only playing with you.”

“Rupinder?” Sherlock said. It suddenly occurred to him that this might be the first time in his life he had ever approached another student; usually he was either avoiding or downright fleeing them. Oh God, what if she laughed at him? Or worse, turned away and laughed with her friends?

“Yes?” Rupinder wasn’t laughing, at least not yet. She was actually starting to look a bit worried at the way he was just standing there, having apparently been struck mute.

Sherlock took a deep breath. “I want—I think the second movement would be better with a bit more
viola and I wondered if you would be willing to play some of it with Jonathan this afternoon so I
could see how it would sound.” He had blurted this out in a rush and now felt his face flush fiery red
—he really hoped she wouldn’t make him say it all again.

“Oh,” Rupinder said, blinking, and then, “Oh, I see, of course! Are you still making changes then?”

“I have until tomorrow, that’s when Mr. Talbert is sending it to be printed.”

“I’d love to. Right after lunch?”

“Yes, Thank you,” Sherlock managed, still slightly dazed at his own daring. “The small practice
room.”

“See you then.”

“I probably won’t be able to get back after today,” Sherlock said next afternoon. “We start twice-
daily rehearsals next week.”

He felt James glance at him. “But next week’s your last week.”

“I know.”

The day was dark and lowering, with threatening clouds and a quick breeze picking up. Mothers
were beginning to gather their things, calling to children to come and dry off.

There was a long silence.

“Come home with me,” James said abruptly. “We’ll tell my grandfather that the pool closed—it will
any moment anyway. I’ve got—” he hesitated a brief moment. “There’s something I want to show
you.”

The shoes. Sherlock felt the knowledge like an electric jolt up his spine. James had the shoes at his
house. He was going to show him. He was going to tell. Finally.

And Sherlock realized abruptly that he didn’t want to hear it. If James told him, then to go to the
police would be a betrayal, and somehow he knew he couldn’t do it. More viscerally, he was afraid.
Afraid of James Allen, with his murderous heart and cold eyes and invading tongue. It was one thing
to sit here in a public place and chat, but quite another to go to his house.

“I can’t,” he said, surprised at the calmness of his own voice. “If they close the pool I’m expected to
come back straight away. They’ll make all sorts of fuss if I disappear.”

“I didn’t think you cared about a bit of fuss,” James said, his fathomless dark eyes pinning Sherlock
in place.

“I’ve managed all month without having them ring my parents,” Sherlock said. “I’d rather not have
them brought in now. They have a tendency to overreact.”

James did not blink or twitch so much as a muscle on his face. He just kept staring at Sherlock,
probing his gaze, looking for what lie or tell Sherlock did not know. He looked back steadily.

“Well,” James said. He smiled suddenly, a falsely sweet thing more terrifying than the stare. “I’m
sure we’ll meet again.” He held his hand out, still smiling, and Sherlock took it.
“I’m sure we will.”

Chapter End Notes

A couple of quibbles with the Carl Powers case as described in TGG. Eczema is rarely found on the feet in adolescents. I think Carl Powers actually had a condition called juvenile plantar dermatosis, which is very common in adolescent swimmers, because frequent occurrences of wetting and drying make it worse. Barrier creams and sometimes topical steroids are used to treat this, so James could still have spiked the medication. Leading to my second point of contention: I’m fairly sure this method of killing someone wouldn’t actually work. Carl Power’s feet MIGHT have been paralyzed, but not his legs—he should still have been able to get to the side of the pool before he drowned (even if he HAD been entirely paralyzed, wasn’t anyone watching this race? Surely they noticed when a boy stopped swimming and sank?) I’m a little unclear what was supposed to have happened to Connie Prince—the implication was that she actually died of botulism misdiagnosed as tetanus, but why didn’t she seek medical attention? She would have been seriously sick. Believe me, I know absolutely nobody cares at this point—I just couldn’t resist pointing it out.
The Blue-Eyed Stranger: Part Two

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The night of the concert, Sherlock was so nervous he forgot his shoes. Jonathan made a disgusted huff and sent him back, but at least he didn’t laugh, for which Sherlock was grateful. The butterflies waxed and waned throughout the concert—it was better when he was playing—and by the time Emily’s adagio rolled around he was feeling shivery and lightheaded. The adagio was a chamber piece for six strings, so Sherlock settled back in his seat and closed his eyes, letting the gentle music wash over him. The cello did not sound sad here; it sounded warm and steady and soothing.

All too soon the applause came. Sherlock swallowed, feeling numb, and made his way to the conductor’s spot, checking his feet as he went—he had a sudden irrational terror that he had somehow left his shoes behind again. He reached the front of the orchestra and stared at the little sea of faces turned up to him. This was all a colossal joke, it had to be. He was going to raise his hand and they were all going to—to fart in unison or—burst out laughing or—

Emily and Rupinder were smiling up at him encouragingly, but it was Jonathan who saved him. Sherlock heard him sigh loudly and glanced over to see Jonathan give him an exasperated look that clearly conveyed get this show on the road already so I can blow everyone away with my dazzling solo. Right. Jonathan would never let anything get in the way of showing off. Sherlock took a deep breath and felt his ears buzz, raised his hand, and they began.

When the concerto finished Sherlock released an enormous breath—was that that same one he had taken at the beginning? had he been holding his breath the entire time? he felt as though he had—and heard a great wave of applause. He suddenly realized he had no idea what to do next. Did he walk off, or go and sit down in his seat with the second violins? He blinked dizzily. Emily was making a gesture with her hand that looked like shoo. Walk off then? Sherlock looked to Jonathan, who rolled his eyes in disgust and pointed behind Sherlock. Sherlock turned around and saw that the audience was on its feet. They were standing up and clapping. They were giving him a standing ovation.

Afterwards Sherlock gulped punch and let himself be hugged by his delighted mother and clapped on the back by his father. Even Mycroft seemed proud, which was a first in Sherlock’s experience. Emily and Rupinder came up and hugged him too, which made him squirm, and Jonathan sighed as though dealing with Sherlock were an enormous pain in his arse and said, “Not bad for a little kid.”

“I’m not little,” Sherlock said indignantly and then in a rush, “Your playing was brilliant.”

Jonathan actually smiled. “Thanks.”

Mr. Talbert came up with an elegant, silver-haired woman in tow. “Mr. and Mrs. Holmes,” he said. “This is Dame Audra MacDougall, of the Cathedral Conservatory Prep, and she would very much like to have a word with you.”

Going to the Cathedral Prep was loads better than Eton. Emily and a few of the others went there too, and that helped Sherlock keep from sliding back into the defensive solitary arrogance that had been his default setting most of his life. His family (meaning his mother and Mycroft) had been adamant that Sherlock’s traditional education not suffer, and after his unique needs had been understood arrangements were made for him to take advanced science classes at a nearby secondary
school. The other students there were all idiots of course, but he was getting along well at the Prep, and that was what he cared about. For the first time since primary school, Sherlock was happy.

So he was completely taken by surprise to be called to the headmaster’s office early in October. This had been a regular occurrence at Eton, but he honestly couldn’t imagine what he’d done to get in trouble this time.

“Ah, Sherlock,” the headmaster said when Sherlock was shown in. She was smiling reassuringly, and Sherlock assessed instantly that he was not in trouble—this was something else. Probably something to do with the two men in the office: one tall and immense, the other dark-eyed and handsome. Police, Sherlock thought, and his heart began to thump uncomfortably.

“This is Detective Inspector Jones and Detective Sergeant Lestrade,” Dame Audra told him. “They’ve promised me that you’re in no trouble. I’ve reached your parents in America, and they’ve given permission for you to talk to them as long as I remain with you in your parents’ stead.”

“All right,” Sherlock said, his voice creaking a little with anxiety.

“Do you know why we are here, Sherlock?” Detective Inspector Jones asked. His loud, almost booming voice seemed too large for the small room.

Sherlock considered trying to brazen it out, but if they’d managed to track him this far it would probably just make him look guilty. “I assume you’re here about James Allen, sir. About the anonymous letter I sent to Scotland Yard outlining exactly how he killed Carl Powers and explaining that he almost certainly had the missing shoes in his home, which would likely still bear traces of the poison he used as well as his fingerprints.”

Jones deflated a bit. “Yes. The team who initially handled Powers’ death was disinclined to reopen the case based on what they saw as a prank, so we were asked to bring a fresh set of eyes to the matter. We—well, really Lestrade here—thought it bore looking into and it turned out that you were correct in every particular. We arrested James Allen after we found the shoes, but he’s claiming that he was set up. He is very insistent that a friend of his named Ian Braithwaite sent the letter and planted the evidence, after killing Carl Powers himself.”

“I met with Ian Braithwaite,” Lestrade said. “He was adamant that he had barely been to the aquatic centre all summer and that he had never met James Allen, and his mother backed him up. We took a picture of him back to James and he was a bit startled. He admitted that he had never seen Ian Braithwaite before, but he gave us a description of the boy he had known: slight, dark hair, very blue eyes.” They all looked at Sherlock, with his very blue eyes, and Sherlock looked at the floor. “I went to the music workshop, although honestly I thought that was likely to be a lie as well, and of course they wouldn’t just hand over a list of the attendees that summer. But when I asked the director if they’d had anyone who matched the description I saw that he knew who I meant, and he was willing to identify you to me based on that. I remembered your name right away from reading the old case file. They should have listened to you last spring, looks like.”

“I didn’t kill Carl Powers,” Sherlock said in a rush. “I couldn’t have done, I was at Eton when he was murdered, there’s loads of witnesses. And I didn’t set James up. I just didn’t tell him my real name.”

“Why not?” Lestrade asked. He seemed as though he genuinely wanted to know.

“Because he frightens me,” Sherlock said, looking him straight in the eye. It was the truth, if not the reason he’d lied in the beginning, but now he wanted very, very much for James not to learn his real name.
“He should frighten you,” Jones rumbled. “We’ve been talking to Belfast about Mr. Allen. Nasty piece of work, he is. Locked a teacher in his classroom and set fire to the school.”

“Allegedly,” Lestrade said quickly. “There’s no proof. That’s why he wasn’t taken into custody there, though he was expelled from the school.”

Sherlock felt his eyes grow huge. It seemed hard to breathe all of a sudden. What had seemed like a bit of a lark when he set out for Brighton had become something far darker and more dangerous than he had reckoned with. What if James…

“Why don’t you tell us everything,” Jones said, “right from the beginning.”

Sherlock did. He couldn’t deny that deep down he’d secretly hoped for this: the chance to show the police he’d been right all along, to lay out in detail all his dazzling deductions. The only bits he left out were the kisses, since the very thought of talking about them made him feel hot with embarrassment, and the smoking, since he wasn’t sure if it might get him in trouble.

“My goodness,” the headmaster said when Sherlock finally wound down. “You haven’t come here to solve a crime, have you?”

“No, ma’am,” Sherlock said, squirming into an anxious knot in his chair. “I really want to be here. It was just a lucky accident for me that I realized that at the workshop.”

“You’re never to do that again or I’ll turn you over my knee myself,” Jones boomed.

“But it was well done.” Lestrade said with a smile to Sherlock. “As long as it was just the once, mind; don’t make a habit of it.”

“We’ll need to get you to give an official statement, but we’ll do everything in our power to keep your name out of everything. It should be easy enough, especially as you’re underage.” Jones stood, his plump complacency reminding Sherlock strikingly of Mycroft. “We’ll be in touch,” he said to the headmaster, and sailed majestically forth, Lestrade bobbing like a tugboat in his wake.

“Sir,” Lestrade said to his boss on a damp afternoon the following spring, “now that this is wrapped up, I thought I’d make the trek over to that music school tomorrow and tell the boy, if it’s all the same to you.”

Athelney Jones looked up in surprise. “Why go all that way? I was planning to ring the headmaster.”

“He might have some questions. I think it would set his mind at rest if I assured him Allen won’t be able to find him. We wouldn’t have a case without him—we wouldn’t even know we’d had a murder without him, so it seems fair enough.”

“I suppose,” Jones said reluctantly. “Well, we’ve nothing on tomorrow but paperwork so I suppose you can be spared. No larking about now.”

“No, sir.”

Lestrade had not seen Sherlock Holmes for several months, and was amused to see that the boy had grown several inches and his voice cracked on every other word. His hands and feet seemed enormous on his skinny frame, like a half-grown Labrador. The famous blue eyes were as penetrating as ever, however.
“Congratulations on your engagement, Detective Sergeant,” he said, settling into his chair.

Lestrade was delighted. “How on earth did you know that? Never mind, it’s not as much fun if I know how. Like a magic trick, yeah? I’m here about James Allen, as I’m sure you’ve gathered.”

All of Sherlock’s confidence vanished and he fidgeted in place worriedly. “Has he got free?”

“No, not at all. He’s agreed to a deal and he’s gone to juvenile prison til he’s twenty-one. Your name doesn’t appear anywhere in the official records of the case—you’re listed as a confidential witness and your identity is sealed by court order. He won’t be able to find you through the legal system when he gets out, should he be inclined to try.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said. He looked simultaneously relieved and—surely Lestrade was imagining this—a little sad. Lestrade thought of James Allen’s cold dead eyes and had to fight the urge to scoop up this gangly, delicate kid and hide him away forever.

“Listen,” Lestrade said. “I know you’ve got a brilliant career planned out as a musician—“

“—or a chemist. I haven’t made up my mind yet,” Sherlock said quickly.

“—or a chemist. But if you ever decide you’d like to turn to the crime thing instead, look me up. We could use your brains on the force.”

“I’ve seen that for myself,” Sherlock said, but he was smiling and Lestrade knew he was pleased with the compliment. “I’ll certainly keep it in mind, Detective Sergeant.”

“Take care of yourself,” Lestrade said, gathering his coat and looking down at those cut-glass eyes, and Sherlock looked up at him and said, “Thank you.”

When Sherlock was fifteen, a violist named Anna kissed him at a Christmas party, and Sherlock kissed her back in the spirit of inquiry but found the experience disappointing. When he was sixteen, an oboe player named Aislin kissed him after a concert, and that seemed much more promising, until he abruptly realized that what was making him hard was the Irish lilt of her sultry voice and not the words she was crooning (a description of the charms of her extremely adept mouth). He pulled away in horror, all desire fled, and had to plead a concert-induced migraine to get free.

And then that summer his family went to Greece on holiday.

Sherlock did not want to go to Greece. “Is Mycroft going?”

“Of course he is,” his mother said, exasperated. “That’s why we’re taking this holiday. He’ll be abroad for his work for two years, and then when he gets back you’ll be at uni, and we never have another family holiday!”

“Good,” Sherlock muttered under his breath and then louder, “But I was selected for the Queen’s Scholars in chemistry! I’m meant to be at Cambridge this summer assuring my future!”

“Why do we need all these scholars and workshops?” his father asked. “When I was a lad we spent our summers lazing about and enjoying the holiday.”

“Yes, we know, dear,” Mummy said distractedly. “Sherlock, I know the chemistry thing is a great honor, but family first. And that’s that.”
That was that. Sherlock knew better than to try to argue with his mother, so he packed his bags with ill grace and grumped off to Greece.

He spent a few days sulking in his room, pointedly buried in chemistry texts, but he gave it up after a few days of his family ignoring him. He waited until his parents had departed with another English couple to see some old church and Mycroft had gone off to do whatever he did all day (sit in a café eating cakes and plotting world domination, presumably) and slipped out.

He had to admit, the island was rather pleasant. The sun was bright and warm, the buildings picturesque...he was bored already. Sherlock found a small shop and bought a fizzy drink, then wandered the beach for a while. He liked the beach. It reminded him of some of the more deceptively simple violin pieces: uncluttered yet beautiful, with the waves providing a soft rhythm underneath. He let his mind drift in the thought, the way it did when he was letting a new composition come together.

After a while Sherlock realized he was thirsty and decided to return to the shop for another drink, and maybe some cigarettes, since then he would smell of smoke and Mummy would be caught between scolding him and being secretly relieved he had finally left the house. He had to wait in the shop, as the girl at the till was trying to deal with a boy about Sherlock’s age, who spoke English with a very heavy French accent and no Greek at all.

Sherlock stepped outside with his drink and his cigarettes and then realized he had no lighter, so he turned to go back in the shop. The boy who had been in front of him was leaning against the wall drinking from his own bottle, and when he saw Sherlock turn he said, “Friend. You buy for me also? Please?”

“Cigarettes? Pour quoi?”

The boy looked immensely relieved. He was about Sherlock’s height but broader and more tanned, with dark brown eyes like melting chocolate. “I can’t make her understand, my English is too bad,” he said in French. “And this way if my parents ask if I bought cigarettes I can say no.”

Sherlock had rather decided at school that all the sex-romance-kissing nonsense was something to entertain lesser minds and did not really interest him, but looking at this boy, with his molten eyes and smell of sun-warmed skin, made him suddenly realized he had been working from an incomplete data set.

The boy’s name was Phillipe. His entire extended family—multiple cousins, aunts, uncles, and an imperious grand-mere, were all staying in an enormous house near the beach, and rarely inquired into his activities as long as he turned up for dinner. Phillipe took Sherlock to a tiny little cove, only accessible at low tide, and said, “We can smoke here and no one will notice. It’s our own private beach.”

Sherlock hadn’t smoked since Brighton, and it soon became apparent that Phillipe was not much better at it. They smoked one cigarette each, wriggling slightly closer together as they sat side by side on the sand, and then gave up the smoking in unspoken agreement. By this point their bare sandy legs were pressed right up along each other, and Philippe angled his body a little bit toward Sherlock and said huskily, “Shairlock, may I…”

“Oui,” Sherlock breathed and then they were kissing. Oh, yes, this was loads better than kissing girls. Why on earth hadn’t he thought to try this before writing the whole thing off? Philippe’s tongue in his mouth did not feel like a distasteful invasion but like something delicious, like butter and honey, like...Sherlock rather gave up on coherent thought at that point.
They kissed until the waves were licking at their feet and the sun was dipping toward the water and then scrambled back toward the road, planning to meet back up again the next day. At the road Sherlock began to turn toward his own house but Philippe stopped him by putting his hands on his waist, pulling Sherlock closer to him, and then kissed him deeply. Sherlock felt his whole body flush with heat and he forgot all about the road, wrapping his fingers around Philippe’s biceps and giving himself up to the kiss. A passing car honked.

Sherlock and Philippe jumped, startled, and then pulled apart as slowly as melting taffy. Philippe licked one more quick kiss to the inside of Sherlock’s lips before finally breaking free, squeezing his waist and saying shyly, “A demain.”

Sherlock arrived home to find the rest of his family having drinks on the terrace. His mother looked up and smiled. Mycroft took one look at him—hair stood on end, sunburnt, reeking of cigarettes, lips wildly swollen, still slightly hard—and opened his mouth, but Mummy said pleasantly, “Mycroft, drink your wine.”

Sherlock and Philippe met every day. A week or so into their relationship Philippe’s parents had a fête on the beach, with some other families and a cook from the village and a bonfire, and Philippe invited Sherlock to come also. The ladies of Philippe’s family approved of Sherlock’s good looks and everyone approved of his excellent French, and then they all stopped paying attention to the two boys at all, and Philippe took Sherlock’s hand and whispered, “Allons-y.”

They lay in the dark on the sand on a blanket in the cove, surrounded by more jagged rocks that would shield them from view if anyone decided to go for a moonlit stroll. They had never been so private before, and before long Philippe was caressing Sherlock’s bum through his swim trunks and Sherlock was winding his leg up over Philippe’s, and then they were grinding together and it was marvelous.

“Have you ever…”

“No…have you?”

“With a girl once. With boys only kissing.”

“Do you want to take these off?”

“Oh my God, yes,” groaned Philippe, and so they wrestled off their swim trunks and Philippe grabbed Sherlock’s arse and pulled them together again. Sherlock had to bite down on Philippe’s broad shoulder to stifle the sound he made, and they rolled around and ground against each other on the blanket until Philippe ended up on top of Sherlock, rutting against him, and got his hand down to wrap around both of them. Sherlock caught on and twined his long fingers over Philippe’s broad ones, and they both came about ten seconds later.

They panted into each other’s ears for a while, until Sherlock began to wriggle because he was getting squashed. Philippe rolled off and they kissed sloppily for a minute and then Philippe said, “Let’s put our trunks on and go in the sea. We can wash all this off.”

Of course once they were in the water and clean they ended up kissing again, and before long Sherlock had his arms around Philippe’s neck and his legs around his waist and Philippe had his hands on his arse and his tongue halfway down Sherlock’s throat, and they barely made it to the blanket before they were both sticky again.
Sherlock bounded into his room from the shower. He was in an excellent mood. Phillipe had got two bicycles from someplace, and they were going to take a picnic and ride up into the hills today. Of course the actual reason for this was to find someplace deserted enough that they could get each other’s clothes off and have as many orgasms as possible, but they’d told their parents they were sightseeing.

Sherlock pulled on his clothes and went to stuff his pajamas under his pillow. Something was already there. Sherlock frowned and lifted up the pillow: a box of condoms. He dropped the pillow. Carefully, as though the condoms might bite, he lifted up the box and stared at it. Mycroft! Nosy interfering git. Sherlock knew perfectly well the importance of safe sex, but he had no immediate plans to engage in any activities requiring…these. He went to toss them in the bin, but thought better of it and tucked the box into a pocket of his suitcase. Then he went off to spend the entirety of breakfast glaring at his brother.

“What was he in a strop about this morning?” Mycroft asked when Sherlock had finally slammed his way out.

“Oh, he’s fine,” Mummy said. “Do you want to go to the market with us later?”

Mycroft shrugged. “Perhaps.”

Mummy collected a laundry basket and went to Sherlock’s room, where she gathered up socks and t-shirts from the floor and pulled up the covers on the bed. The box of condoms was gone. She smiled a little, relieved, and opened the window wider to air out the vague smell of sweaty feet that always seemed to linger in teenage boys’ bedrooms.

It was 1993, a bad time to be mother to a gay son. All you could do was buy him condoms, and hope.

Philippe left a week before Sherlock. They spent their last afternoon in their little cove, ending up, as usual, sticky with sweat and sand and salt and whatever residual semen they didn’t manage to wash off.

Philippe’s melted-chocolate eyes seemed even more melting than usual. “Shairlock…”

“Non,” Sherlock said, kissing him softly but chastely on the lips. “It was beautiful and wonderful and perfect. Let’s not spoil it by trying to make it last, when we know it can’t.”

Philippe sighed against his lips, tears brimming. Sherlock, who had lifted this little speech wholesale from an American paperback he found in the lounge of their rented house, felt immensely pleased with himself and filed it away for future use.

“I will always remember you,” Philippe swore.

“And I you,” Sherlock breathed. Well, he would. But truthfully Philippe had begun to bore him when they weren’t snogging (which to be fair was most of the time). His interests mostly ran to pretentious French literature and musical theatre, neither of which Sherlock found remotely tolerable. He hoped Philippe was going to be ready to let him go sometime soon—his skin was itchy and he was going to be late for dinner. “Always.”
Philippe kissed him again, deeply, and yes it was a good kiss, but honestly…oh good, it seemed this was a farewell kiss. Finally Philippe disentangled and they made their way hand-in-hand to the road, kissing one last time as they parted.

Sherlock turned and waved a last goodbye at the curve in the road, keeping his face mournful, and then bounded off happily for his house. He still had a week left, and he planned to spend the whole time drinking fizzy sodas and writing Aegean. He already had the melody in his head.

In the winter of Sherlock’s final year, the director of the senior orchestra decided that they would put on Ralph Vaughn Williams’ song cycle On Wenlock Edge. They worked on the instrumental part for a few days before the tenor joined them. Sherlock had seen the tenor—a tall boy named Tiernan, with dark blue eyes and thick honey-colored hair—around school, but because Sherlock took his academic courses separately he had not had a lot of interaction with the voice students. Tiernan was going to sing his part through with the piano first so the orchestra could get a feel for the tempo.

“Pay attention,” Sherlock’s music stand partner, Mandie, hissed as Sherlock slouched back in his seat to think about his latest chemistry project.

Dull, Sherlock thought. Singing did not particularly interest him; all that over-emoting. He let his eyes glaze a little, mind wandering, until it suddenly dawned on him that Tiernan was looking directly at him as he sang. “Oh, when I was in love with you,” he warbled soulfully. What the…Sherlock became aware of Mandie dissolving in silent giggles next to you. “He fancies you!” she managed under her breath.

“Oh shut up,” Sherlock hissed, but Tiernan had his full attention now. He smiled when he saw Sherlock’s gaze sharpen and Sherlock dropped his eyes, feeling himself blush a deep flaming red. There had been a few snogging sessions with various schoolmates since he’d been with Philippe (and one hopeless but furious crush on a muscular, obviously straight teaching assistant at the college where Sherlock was now taking chemistry classes) but nothing that made him feel hot the way Tiernan’s gaze did.

When the rehearsal was over he dawdled, taking his time about packing up his music and violin, and sure enough Tiernan came over. “Sherlock, yeah?” he said. “I’m Tiernan. I was wondering…would you maybe work with me on the pacing? I don’t want to be the one throwing the whole thing off, do I?”

“Sure,” Sherlock said. He was blushing again. “I’ve nothing on tonight if you…”

“Brilliant. Practice room 3?”

That evening Sherlock cleaned his teeth carefully and considered the odds of Tiernan doing something unbearably soppy, like actually trying to take his hand while he sang, “Take my hand quick and tell me/ What you have in your heart.” Probably about even, he decided. He also decided this would not definitely be a deal breaker, depending on how the rest of the night played out. As it turned out he needn’t have worried. Tiernan was a good deal more confident of his own charms than Sherlock, and forbore musical seduction in favor of pulling Sherlock into his lap and snogging him senseless. Before the week was out Sherlock had received his first blow job in the very same practice room, and within a fortnight had reciprocated—with more enthusiasm than skill, but not for long. He was a very quick learner.

They were by this time having most of their encounters in Tiernan’s room, since Sherlock liked to be
able to escape back to his own room after and Tiernan had a higher tolerance for gamey sheets, but they happened to be in Sherlock’s on the night that Tiernan spread Sherlock’s buttocks, rubbed his thumbs over his untouched entrance and groaned, “Ah Jesus, Sherlock, I want to fuck you so much. God, you make me crazy.”

Sherlock considered. He’d been thinking in that direction for a while now too; why not? “Have you done it before?” he asked.

“No. I want it to be with you,” Tiernan said breathlessly. “But I haven’t got…”

“I do,” Sherlock said a little smugly. He disentangled himself and dug out the long-hidden box of condoms. Did these things expire? It had been a year and a half…well, Tiernan had just admitted to being a virgin too, it shouldn’t matter.

Tiernan looked at the box a little doubtfully. “Don’t we need something else?”

“It says the condom is lubricated,” Sherlock said. He was impatient now, hot and throbbing and wanting, and he rolled over onto his front and spread his legs. “Come on, put it on.”

Tiernan got the condom on and got into position behind Sherlock, nudging the tip of his cock against Sherlock’s tightly furled anus. “Does this hurt?”

“Of course not, I can’t feel anything, you have to push it in!”

Tiernan pushed and Sherlock yelped. “Christ!”

“Ah Jesus, Jesus,” Tiernan gasped. “Am I hurting you? Oh God Sherlock, you feel so good, you’re so good…”

“Shut up and be still,” Sherlock moaned. Bloody hell, that hurt. Was it supposed to hurt? He tried to relax. Tiernan was practically trembling with the effort to keep from moving, and after a few minutes the sting lessened. “Okay. Just a bit.”

Tiernan rocked forward the tiniest increment and Sherlock breathed hard into the sheets and Tiernan immediately stilled again, kissing the back of Sherlock’s neck and panting into his ear until Sherlock said, “Again.” It went like that for a bit and Sherlock was just beginning to relax into it when he said, “All right,” and Tiernan pushed forward a little harder than previously and suddenly gasped, “Ah Jesus Sherlock, I’m going to—“ and thrust.

Sherlock howled in pain and Tiernan groaned, pulling back a little and shoving forward again and then again, damn it, OW! Sherlock finally got enough breath to yelp “Stop!” but by then Tiernan had managed to stop himself, collapsing on top of Sherlock and moaning into his ear.

“Oh for God’s sake, get off me,” Sherlock said, muffled by the mattress. “Did you just bloody come? You didn’t even—“

“I’m sorry,” Tiernan gasped. He rolled off and out, making Sherlock shout again and curl onto his side. “Ah fuck—“ he grabbed for something and Sherlock realized he had let the condom come off. Brilliant, now the mess would be all over his sheets. “It’s just—I looked down and I saw myself going into you, my big cock in your sweet little arse, you should just feel how fantastic you feel, you’re so amazing…”

“Well, if you work out a way I can fuck my own arse please let me know,” Sherlock gritted out.

“I’m sorry,” Tiernan said again. He stroked Sherlock’s face and hair, brushing gentle kisses over his
forehead. “I wanted to make it so good for you, I really did. Let me make it up to you, let me suck you off, please?”

“All I want right now is a very hot shower,” Sherlock said. The burn was beginning to subside a bit, but he had definitely lost any further interest in the proceedings for tonight.

Tiernan fussed over him until Sherlock finally managed to get rid of him and limped off for the desired hot shower. He was still sore the next day, but he didn’t think there had been any major damage, and he started considering the question of whether he wanted to try it again. Maybe it would have gone better if at least one of them had had some prior experience…well, he didn’t think Tiernan would appreciate Sherlock suggesting that he go practice elsewhere, so it was clearly up to Sherlock to find out where they had gone wrong.

On the next possible occasion Sherlock took the bus to a bookstore in a certain part of town—his past experience had taught him that almost everything could be found in books, but in this instance he rather doubted the library would have the relevant material, so this was the next best thing. He skulked around for a bit until he found the section he wanted and ducked down behind a shelf, settling cross legged on the floor and pulling one of the books into his lap.

“Can I help you?”

Sherlock jumped where he sat, spilling the book and feeling his face flame, He couldn’t run for it—he was in a corner of the store. For once in his life his usually inventive mind went utterly blank.

“Ah,” the clerk said, looking down. He was about ten years older than Sherlock, slender and pierced, and his smile was kind. “First time?”

“Trying to decide if there’s going to be a second, actually,” Sherlock admitted.

The clerk laughed. “That bad? Those diagrams are fairly helpful, but it really comes down to two things: preparation and lubrication. You can’t overdo either. And condoms, obviously. Every time no matter what.”

“Well,” Sherlock said, reassured by the clerk’s matter-of-fact cheerfulness, “we got the condom part right, anyway.”

“Ooh.” The clerk winced. He looked down at Sherlock, fidgeting in his pile of books, and lowered himself to sit facing him. “How about I give you a few pointers?”

When Sherlock left the bookstore he went straight to the chemist’s before he could lose his nerve. He collected razor blades he didn’t need, shampoo he didn’t like, mouthwash, and finally took a deep breath and grabbed a bottle of lube off the shelf. Hopefully the cashier wouldn’t notice amongst all the other things. The cashier rang everything up without batting an eyelid, and Sherlock marched out with his purchases feeling immensely adult.

The second time went much, much better.

Sherlock’s relationship with Tiernan the Tenor lasted until they left school. Tiernan was clever enough if not brilliant in the way Sherlock was, and, true, he was a little cocky and arrogant, but he had a deep and abiding love of music that surpassed even Sherlock’s own, and overall Sherlock did not find him completely tiresome. Also he was a terrific shag, once he was trained up properly.

On their last night Tiernan took Sherlock bent over his messy bed, shifting and angling himself until
he was rubbing his cock over Sherlock’s prostate on every long slow stroke, and before long Sherlock was scrabbling at the sheets and moaning in incoherent pleasure. “Ah, Jesus, you’re close, I can feel it,” Tiernan gasped. “Do it, don’t touch, I want to make you come just from my cock, do it.” He gripped Sherlock’s hips and thrust hard and Sherlock did, crying out in desperate pleasure as he came. He had to admit, Tiernan had gotten really good at this.

After, when Sherlock would have cleared out, Tiernan pulled him into his lap as he had their first night together. As a general rule Sherlock was not a cuddler; he didn’t see the point once orgasm was over, he preferred his clean empty bed, and he tended to go stiff and prickly when touched. But it was their last night together, so.

“I’ll never forget you,” Tiernan said, rubbing his cheek against Sherlock’s curls. “No matter how many others come after, we’ll always be each other’s first, won’t we?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes a little, though only because Tiernan couldn’t see him. He rather thought Tiernan ought to make hay whilst the sun shone; his height would stave it off longer than most, but he was going to go to fat eventually, and then he’d be just another corpulent tenor chasing the pretty boys in the chorus. “Yes, we will.”

“I got you something,” Tiernan said. He reached over to the table and handed something to Sherlock: a book.


“You don’t remember, do you?” Tiernan sounded amused, fortunately.

“Young, not really my area,” Sherlock admitted.

“Look.” Tiernan flipped pages and then tapped the poem he wanted with a finger. Sherlock recognized it at once: it was one of the six that made up On Wenlock Edge.

Oh, when I was in love with you,

Then I was clean and brave,

And miles around the wonder grew

How well I did behave.

And now the fancy passes by,

And nothing will remain,

And miles around they’ll say that I

Am quite myself again.

Sherlock actually found himself smiling a little. Maybe poetry wasn’t as useless as he had always thought. He felt a surge of affection for Tiernan. “But I haven’t anything for you,” he said.

“That’s all right. When you’re a famous composer you’ll write an opera for me.”
“Of course I won’t,” Sherlock said, not caring if Tiernan saw him roll his eyes this time. “I’m never going to write an opera. I don’t even know if I’m going to be a composer. I don’t even know if I’m going to be a musician.”

“You’ll always be a musician,” Tiernan said with utter assurance. “Even if you’re something else.”

“Music and chemistry?” his father said, shaking his head a little. “Isn’t that a bit much? There are only so many hours in the day.”

“Exactly,” Mycroft said. Mycroft had recently returned from wherever he had spent the past two years—Sherlock hadn’t bothered to remember—and was as annoying as ever. “And the more of them Sherlock spends productively occupied the better. It’s not as though he’s going to sleep in them.”

Sherlock glared. Mycroft surely wasn’t talking about—he couldn’t possibly know about the drugs; there had only been a few times, experimenting: marijuana no, ecstasy very much yes, but only occasionally. Must be the other. He decided the best defense was a good offense: “If you’re talking about the fact that I’ve been engaging in consensual, responsible sexual relations with other men, then rest assured that I have every intention of continuing to do so at Oxford, and with as many people as possible given the constraints of my schedule.”

Sherlock’s father sank from view behind his newspaper like a submarine submerging.

Mycroft actually looked flustered, to Sherlock’s intense delight. “Oh, for heaven’s sake, Sherlock,” Mummy said crisply. “We’re all delighted that you have a healthy sex life, but there’s no need to discuss it at the breakfast table. Now eat your toast.”

Sherlock’s father turned out to have had something of a valid point. Reading chemistry at Oxford was a good deal more demanding than taking a few classes at a local college, and his music studies were equally daunting. Sherlock had to work hard, but he liked it that way. Mycroft may have had a point too: he was never bored or stressed enough to resort to drugs; just the occasional tiny hit of cocaine now and again if he had to work through the night more than twice running. He did manage to find time for sex, though he had neither the time nor the inclination to pursue another relationship; there was no need in any case. Sherlock in his Oxford years was luscious, all long limbs and crystal eyes and soft lips, and everyone wanted a taste.

He never thought about James Allen. On the rare occasion something reminded him of that summer he would immediately turn his mind away, the combination of fear and guilt like a wound that had never quite healed. The guilt of betrayal was overlaid now by a sense that he himself had profited by proving James’ crime; he did think sometimes of how things would have gone for him had he remained at Eton: a hated loner, unable to connect with anyone, restless and miserable and lonely.

On a damp April evening Sherlock stood up from the lab bench and stretched his back, ready to wrap things up for the night. He went to the loo to wash his face and then leaned against the wall by the lifts idly reading the notice board and trying to decide if he wanted to stop off for some coffee and a snack. He couldn’t remember the last time he had eaten, and he was going to a drinks party... maybe just a quick bite.

Crossing the damp grass he saw, too late, that he was about to run into Sebastian Wilkes and his future Masters of the Universe posse.
“Sherlock!” Sebastian hailed him, a bit too eagerly. Drunk and unsuccessful then. “Come out with us! We’re having no luck at all tonight, you can help!”

Sherlock sighed to himself. One time he’d done Sebastian the favor of pointing out a handful of girls whose standards were low enough (or their interest in future earnings high enough) to spend an evening pretending to enjoy listening to Sebastian talk about himself, and now Seb was convinced that Sherlock could somehow produce willing sexual partners out of thin air. “Sorry,” he said, plastering an insincere smile on his face. “Running late. Maybe another time!”

Well, he couldn’t go to that café now. Fortunately there was another one nearby. But when he ducked inside the café was still quite crowded, and he realized he’d have to beg a seat from somebody. He looked around, hoping to spot someone he knew, and spotted the smooth pale head of Victoria Trevor bent over her work. He made his way through the crowded café. “Would you mind terribly if I joined you? I’ll refill your coffee.”

When he came back Trevor moved her things over to make room, pushing her light straight hair behind her ear with one finger. “You ought to cut a fringe,” Sherlock said, smiling.

“But then I would have to remember to get it trimmed.” She took a drink of her coffee and said, “Done for the night?”

“I’m on my way to a party…your lot, actually, it’s some physics people. I think that Danish postdoc is going to be there.”

“I thought he was straight.”

“So does he, but he’ll know otherwise after tonight.”

He got a half eyebrow raise for that. Trevor always evinced a slightly mystified tolerance for his extracurricular activities, as though he were a new species theoretically interesting but outside her field of study: genius promiscuous. “So what are you doing next year? I heard you were offered a spot at Stanford.”

“I deferred. I have a two-year fellowship with the BBC Symphony Orchestra.”

“Oh, right, you do that music thing as well, I’d forgotten,” Trevor said as though Sherlock had proposed starting a punk band in his garage. “Won’t you miss chemistry?”

Sherlock shrugged. “If I did chemistry I’d miss music. This way I can put off deciding for a bit. What about you? I saw on the notice board you’re defending your dissertation soon.”

“Yes. I’ve been offered a post-doc place here, but I’m rather hoping to secure something where I can get more funding for the next stage of my work.”

“But Trevor,” Sherlock said seriously, “If you stay here, you’ll be a don. You were born to be an Oxford don.”

“No,” Victoria Trevor said. She tapped the stack of papers in front of her with the tips of her fingers. “I was born to do this.”

Meanwhile.

James Allen was released from juvenile prison when he turned twenty-one. He was placed in a
halfway house for young offenders called New Horizons, and received vocational training in IT at a nearby polytechnic. He was well-behaved and industrious and his counselors were full of praise for his efforts at rehabilitation. This was all nonsense, of course; James had spent his time in prison honing the sociopath’s best weapon, a superficial but soulless charm. He deployed this not only in deflecting suspicion but in pursuing his real aim: tracking down the boy he still thought of as Ian Braithwaite. His efforts, however, were completely unsuccessful. St. Albans was a dead end—James was able to get pictures of all the boys who had been students there in 1989, and Ian was not among them. Another lie, James thought. He had even less luck with the music workshop, which had switched to computerized records a few years earlier and seemed to have no idea how to find anything from 1989 at all. He even cultivated a young clerk at New Scotland Yard, but that dead end proved the most dead of all: Lestrade had kept his word on that. James was stuck.

James’ mother had married some poor idiot and moved to America with him; she had not bothered to keep up with her incarcerated son after that, and James had not heard from her in two years. His grandfather had died and his grandmother had subsequently retired to a one-bedroom cottage near the sea, where she made it clear that there was no room for James. When he was nearing the end of his stay at New Horizons she sent him a check for ten thousand pounds, which they both understood to be a signal that she had washed her hands of him.

James knew it was a bit of a cliché, but in the end he did it anyway: he went back to Belfast in search of the father he had never met. He knew very little about his father beyond his name, which was Jim Moriarty, and his former employer, which was the IRA. His parents had never married and Jim had gone to prison before James was born. He rather hoped his father would still be in prison—at least he would have had a good excuse for never bothering to find his son, not that James could really blame the man for abandoning James’ mother—but he turned out to be a fairly successful figure in the Belfast underworld. Jim had turned to straightforward criminal work following his release, abandoning the IRA but using his old contacts to move guns and drugs, which proved a good business decision after the Good Friday accords.

Jim had a reputation, and he had contacts, but he lacked vision and the kind of cold-blooded determination James brought to the game. They were a match made in heaven.

Sherlock stepped out of the back door of the concert hall, hunching his shoulders to block the wind as he lit a cigarette. The night was warm but breezy, and he had to cup his hand around the lighter. He had already smoked two cigarettes by the time he reached the Tube station. The smoking was really getting a little out of hand, but the truth was that Trevor had been right: Sherlock was bored. He’d spent the evening trying to work on his new composition, but the boring hatefulness of everything seemed to drag him down like a weight.

At first his freedom and abundant leisure had seemed delightful; he’d even considered finding himself a boyfriend, but most of the people he met barely held his interest long enough for a one-night stand. He was turning to the cocaine more and more now, and he knew perfectly well that particular path led nowhere good. His tiny stipend wouldn’t even cover the rent on his Montague Street bedsit—he couldn’t afford to burn through his trust fund. Sherlock considered lighting another cigarette, but he was almost at the station now. He supposed he could always leave his fellowship a year early—it was supposed to be an honor, not a prison sentence—and go on to Stanford, but he was worried that after the initial excitement of being in a new place with a lot of new Americans to shag wore off chemistry alone would no longer be enough either.

Well, he definitely needed the cocaine tonight. He really needed to get somewhere on this damn rhapsody. Maybe he should write something else instead, like a funeral mass...he certainly wasn’t
feeling very rhapsodic. Sherlock got off the Tube and headed for the park, already fumbling around for another cigarette even though he knew Kev was waiting with the cocaine just minutes away.

London never got really dark, not even very late at night, and when the damaged bit of shrubbery caught his eye Sherlock didn’t even have to squint to make out that something was off over by the little grove of trees. Something dragged over there, he thought, something that had…struggled?

The young woman was under the trees. She was lying on her back, partially hidden from view, very obviously dead—although Sherlock touched her bruised neck anyway, just to be sure. The skin was cool. Oh—he supposed that meant the murderer had cleared out then, which possibly he should have considered before. Sherlock took his phone out to call 999 like a good citizen, but then the light from the screen fell on something on the woman’s shirt and he forgot all about calling.

Detective Inspector Lestrade strode into the park feeling a jangle of nervous anticipation. This was his first call since he’d been made DI, and it sounded promising: a dead young woman with a creepy bloke still crouching over her with the uniforms arrived. He squared his shoulders and said to the sergeant next to him, “All right, Hopkins, tell me what we know.”

“A couple of girls called it in, sir, said they were taking a shortcut through the park and saw feet. They were too scared to stay. When the constables got on the scene they found this guy leaning over the body sniffing around.”

“I mean he was literally sniffing,” the dark-haired young woman standing by the bank of crime-scene lights said, glaring at a young man who was handcuffed next to her. “Bloody creepy.”

The young man rolled his eyes. “How else could I tell what the crumbs were? And I didn’t touch anything, anyway. You can’t possibly think I killed her; she’s been dead at least an hour judging by the temperature of the body.”

“How do you know the temperature if you didn’t touch her?” the officer said triumphantly.

“Well I touched her to be sure she was dead! If you don’t believe me feel free to take my DNA. It’s not going to match what’s on her trouser leg.”

Something about the young man’s crisp arrogance was ringing a bell in Lestrade’s mind, but that comment distracted him and he leaned over to look. Sure enough, a splash of what was evidently semen was visible just over the victim’s knee, though she was still fully clothed.

“Have we got an ID yet?” he said, ignoring their annoying witness for the moment as he turned to Hopkins.

The posh young man’s head whipped around so fast he almost fell over, handcuffed as he was. He tilted his head to squint against the lights. “Detective Sergeant Lestrade?”

“Yeah,” Lestrade said automatically and then quickly, “No, it’s—“

“—Detective Inspector now, of course. Forgive me.”


“You might have anticipated that, Detective Inspector, it’s been ten years,” the man said. Sherlock was an adult now, taller and more confident than when Lestrade had seen him last, but he was still
whippet-thin and his ice-blue eyes were as sharp as ever. “Can we take these off? I’ve been trying to convince PC Donovan that I’m not actually into strangling waitresses and masturbating over their bodies, but she doesn’t believe me.”

“What, you don’t fancy working-class women?” the constable—Donovan?—flashed.

“I don’t fancy women. If you wouldn’t mind?”

“It’s all right, Donovan, I know him,” Lestrade said. He couldn’t have explained what made him so sure that Sherlock Holmes—whom he hadn’t seen in ten years, after all—wasn’t the killer; he just knew. Probably because if Sherlock ever did kill anyone he’d make such an excellent job of it that no one would ever catch him. Lestrade devoutly hoped he never did.

Donovan took the handcuffs off with ill grace and Lestrade said, “Okay, what were you doing in the park?”

“Buying drugs,” Sherlock said and at their startled expressions, “Oh, don’t look shocked. I don’t live anywhere near here; if I tried to lie about it you’d just suspect I was up to something worse.”

“Do you have any drugs on your person at this moment?” Lestrade asked wearily.

“No, I saw the body first. Don’t bother looking for the dealer, he’ll have cleared off ages ago. Don’t you want to know about the crumbs?”

Lestrade crouched by the body. There actually were crumbs, just a few caught in the front of her black shirt. “What about them?”

“She didn’t get them at work. She left too long ago for that and at any rate they’re flaky crumbs, croissant. Almond croissant judging by the smell. There’s a patisserie at the tube station near here that stays open late, very authentic; she stopped off on her way home, bought herself a little treat, probably a long shift-- you can see her feet are a bit swollen--stepped into the park, and was grabbed just past the entrance. You can see the marks where she was forced back here—well, I could before you lot mucked them up. She wouldn’t have had time to eat more than half of it, probably the rest of the croissant is still near the entrance.”

“So the clerk at the shop was the last person to see her alive,” Lestrade said slowly.

“Except the killer,” Sherlock said.

Sherlock clearly wanted to question the clerk at the pastry shop himself but Lestrade parked him firmly outside whilst he went in with Hopkins. Unfortunately the clerk—a shy North African girl—apparently spoke no English at all beyond the minimum needed to sell pastries. Lestrade sighed, considered how long it would take to get an interpreter in the middle of the night, and stuck his head back out. “Let me guess,” he said to Sherlock. “You speak French.”

“Of course I do,” Sherlock said. He swept into the pastry shop and soon had the girl nodding and chattering away.

“Karen Crowley came in here most nights on her way home. Usually got an almond croissant, sometimes plain if they were out of almond, sometimes a hot chocolate in the winter. She seemed the same as usual tonight—not nervous or worried, not looking as though she were meeting anyone, no one following her. But.”
“But?” Lestrade prompted. Sherlock was really being unnecessarily theatrical here.

“There’s a busker who’s been hanging around opposite the past few weeks. Plays the guitar and sings…” he turned back to the girl, who sang in a surprisingly clear voice, “Ooh, baby, baby, it’s a wide world.” Her voice was lovely, although she evidently hadn’t the faintest idea what the words meant.

“Cat Stevens?”

The girl nodded. “Toutes ses chansons.”

“All his songs,” Sherlock explained. “But he isn’t very good. And tonight he stopped playing and packed up as soon as Karen Crowley came in.” He turned back to the girl and snapped out a question, and the girl answered slowly, looking up as though she were thinking or remembering. “She says he doesn’t look homeless. He wears old clothes and a cap, but he’s clean and always well-shaven, and he sits on the pavement like it’s uncomfortable, not as though he’s just glad to be sitting anywhere.” He reached into his pocket and pulled out a few notes which he handed to the girl.

“We can’t bribe witnesses!” Hopkins cried.

“I’m not the police and I’m not bribing anyone,” Sherlock said patiently. “I’m buying pastries. I fancy a pain au chocolat and a coffee since I didn’t get my cocaine. I’m getting some for you lot too. Do we go back to the station now?”

“You’re not going anywhere except off home,” Lestrade said firmly. “I appreciate the help and all, but you can’t be involved in the investigation. And don’t buy any drugs on your way.”

Sherlock frowned. “But what are you going to do next?”

“Notify the family, and start interviewing everyone who knew her. We’ll have someone back here tomorrow looking for the busker.”

Sherlock frowned at him for a long minute. The girl leaned over the counter and said “Monsieur,” and handed him a large box and a styrofoam cup, along with a brilliant smile. Sherlock Holmes might not fancy women, but it appeared they certainly fancied him.

“Well then,” Sherlock said. He pulled a pastry out of the box for himself and handed the rest to Hopkins, who looked as though he were struggling not to look pleased. “I’ll just be on my way then, Detective Inspector. Best of luck with your investigation.”

Was it his imagination, Lestrade wondered as he pulled out something sticky and tasty-looking with apples for himself, or did he sound ever so slightly sarcastic?

The Karen Crowley investigation went nowhere. Everyone liked her, no stalkers or jealous ex-boyfriends or mad roommates or anything at all that Lestrade could find. The busker never returned to the Tube station, so that was a dead end. It made Lestrade a bit depressed that he hadn’t solved his first case, though he made a nice job of his second (although that was an open-and-shut domestic gone bad, to be fair; not much of a mystery about it).

Lestrade was sitting at his desk plowing through the paperwork—one thing about not closing a case, there was less paperwork that way—when his mobile rang. “The busker’s resurfaced.”

Lestrade frowned at the phone. “Sherlock Holmes? How did you get this number?”
“Never mind that. He’s been playing at a Tube station near where a lot of nursing students from King’s College live. Don’t you think you’d better bring him in before he kills one?”

“How on earth did you find him?”

“I paid off real buskers all over London to look out for him. The Cat Stevens thing was a big help. It’s definitely him—he’s got a necklace I’m almost sure is Karen Crowley’s in his flat.”

“I am going to forget I ever heard that and you are going to forget you ever said it.”

“Yes, all right, I know. I got a bit excited. I’ve also got pictures—don’t fuss, it’s completely legal to take pictures of people playing an instrument in a public place. You can show them to the Algerian shopgirl and get a warrant for his DNA that way.”

The Algerian shopgirl identified Michael Barnhoffer right away, and Lestrade cleared his first case after all.

Two months later a French kid disappeared from his hostel in Holland Park. His mates were angry because the police failed to get interested until the kid turned up dead in the Thames, and some of them also seemed shifty about something, and they were rude and uncooperative with the Yard’s interpreter. Lestrade went back and forth in his mind, thinking about Sherlock’s easy charm with the Algerian girl, and finally he called him in. Sherlock solved the case in less than an hour and just like that, he was a consultant.

Sherlock never did go to Stanford. He finished out his fellowship, but only because it didn’t occur to him to try to attract paying clients until after Lestrade sent him a rich old man who was convinced his kids were trying to kill him. Lestrade sent him because there was no evidence of any crime to investigate—yet—but the rich old man was driving him barmy, and he rather thought the old snob would approve of Sherlock, who wore his poshness like a thousand-pound suit. Sherlock soon worked out that the man’s children were actually just trying to plan a surprise African safari for their father’s seventieth birthday. The rich old man was delighted by this turn of events. “How much do I owe you?” he asked Sherlock.

Sherlock had no idea. “Whatever you think appropriate, I suppose.”

The rich old man wrote a check that was practically more than Sherlock’s stipend came to in a year, and Sherlock was in business.

Sherlock loved being a detective. He mostly stopped the cocaine, and after a few years he even stopped shagging strangers regularly—it just wasn’t as much fun as work, although he still enjoyed pulling an occasional one-night stand if things were slow. His family was horrified by this change in career path, which was icing on the cake.

On a rather cold and unpleasant day in February he met a charming elderly woman in a café called Speedy’s.

“It’s my husband,” the lady, Mrs. Hudson, confided. “He’s been charged with murder in Florida. He’s on death row, but I’m worried about his chances on appeal.”

Sherlock tilted his head. “You’re worried he’ll lose the appeal?” He had no idea how this could be a case, but the idea of going to Florida—it had been drizzling for days and his flat leaked—was
attractive enough that he was willing to listen.

“Oh no, I’m afraid he’ll win. I know he did it. He killed loads of people. I would have stuck by him, but then I found out about all the other women! I kept the records for the drug cartel, you see. I’ve all sorts of evidence, but if I go back to Florida I’m worried I’ll be arrested too.”

“Leave it to me,” Sherlock said.

As a case it had all the intellectual challenge of flossing his teeth, but it got him out of his wet flat for a few weeks, and he liked Mrs. Hudson. When he came back Mrs. Hudson came round to hear his report and said, “Oh, dear, this flat’s not very nice, is it?”

“No, it’s dreadful,” Sherlock admitted. “I really need to find a better place with a sitting room where I can meet clients, but I haven’t had much luck finding one I can afford.”

“I’ve a lovely flat upstairs I’m looking to rent,” Mrs. Hudson said. “I’ll give you a special rate. It could be handy to have a detective living in the house.”

“Does it have a second bedroom? I’d like a space for my chemistry equipment.”

Sherlock’s new flat was a big improvement. There was a sitting room for clients, and a bedroom upstairs he used as a lab—no water up there, but he could work around that—and an actual bedroom he rarely slept in. He adored it. He still went out occasionally, but he never brought a partner back to the flat; it was his sanctuary.

So his actions on the day Mike Stamford brought his old friend into the lab were as astonishing to him as to everyone else. “Like I said, I’m pretty sure I can get you on the faculty here at least part-time,” Mike was saying as they came in. “What with that and your pension, you should be able to find a place, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know,” the man said, looking around the lab. Sherlock glanced up: hmmm, a soldier. Interesting. He watched the man move about the lab. On the surface he seemed ordinary enough, but there was something…

“Do you need a place to stay?” Sherlock said. “Because I’ve got an extra bedroom.”

And that was how John Watson came into his life.

Chapter End Notes

A.E. Housman (1859-1936) was a poet whose life had some astonishing parallels with Sherlock Holmes’. Housman saw himself foremost as a classical scholar rather than a poet, and was considered not only the leading classicist of his day but one of the greatest Latin scholars to have ever lived (an opinion he clearly shared). Housman was famously dismissive of lesser minds in his field and is legendary for saying of his colleagues: "Knowledge is good, method is good, but one thing beyond all others is necessary; and that is to have a head, not a pumpkin, on your shoulders, and brains, not pudding, in your head." He was equally tactful with his students, whose names he refused to remember (a colleague recalled him saying that "had he burdened his memory by the distinction between Miss Jones and Miss Robinson, he might have forgotten that between the second and fourth declension.")
When he was quite young, Housman fell so passionately in love with his (straight) roommate that he failed his exams. He remained devoted to this friend, Moses Jackson, for the rest of his life, rushing publication of his second volume of poetry so that Jackson could read it before his death. He even wrote a poem for Jackson’s wedding (to which he was not invited) that echoes Sherlock’s toast in TSOT, describing himself as the friend who yields “you o’er/To her that hardly loves you more”.

Happily for Housman, he did not spend his whole life pining and bashing his colleagues. I’m forever indebted to RosiePaw for filling me in on Housman’s summer holiday adventures: apparently he went off to Europe every summer and had flings with “young French traveling companions” and my personal favorite, a Venetian gondolier named Andrea. I like to think Andrea was a lover of prodigious skill and had an enormous…gondola pole.
Okay, so things get a LITTLE angsty in this chapter (no happy ending yet), but by my usual standard it's still practically rainbows and puppies.

Sherlock Holmes crashed into John’s monochrome existence and sucked him out into his own technicolor world like a receding tsunami. At first John felt as though he could barely keep his head above water, dogpaddling frantically just to keep land in sight, but after a bit he gave it up and just rode the wave. Sherlock was larger than life: intense, brilliant, lightning-fast. Charisma poured off of him as though he were some kind of incandescent light source, blinding everyone in the room. John had always thought of himself as mostly straight with a dash of bi—leaning a little more towards women at baseline, a little more toward men in the army, just on the basis of availability—but now he stuck exclusively to women. At least that way he could work in the fact that Sherlock was gay before they got hit with the full effect. Even Sarah was not entirely immune, although she handled it better than most.

John was not immune either, but he knew when someone was out of his league. He’d known it the moment they met, even before Sherlock had preemptively let him down gently that first night (“Relationships…not really my area”, he’d said musingly, staring out at the street as though abashed at his own desirability). Sherlock probably had a string of supermodels and international football stars just waiting by the phone. And yet…Sherlock went out, sometimes; he bought condoms and lube (they shared a loo, after all, John couldn’t help seeing). But he didn’t go out often. And there were many nights, even after a case, where he seemed content just to have dinner with John, or to loll about the sofa whilst John had dinner. It was possible, John thought, that Sherlock had been intimidatingly spectacular for so long that he thought of John as his only real friend. And John was his friend. There was a tiny thread of vulnerability running through that brilliance that only John saw, and it made him feel tender and protective.

For Sherlock’s part, it took him a ridiculously long time to realize that he was smitten. He was used to people being dazzled and intimidated by him, but John was the first person who saw him, who wasn’t intimidated by his body or his mind and thus had no problem calling Sherlock on his shit. (John’s word. Not Sherlock’s. He rather liked it though.) Dear God, was that all it took? But even he knew it was more than that—that his burgeoning feelings for John were deeper and better than the way he’d felt about Philippe or Tiernan the Tenor or the muscular teaching assistant, certainly better than what he’d felt for the men at Oxford and in London who’d fallen into his hand like ripe plums. He’d slept with bigger, handsomer, stronger, cleverer men, but John’s strength and beauty were different, richer. He knew he could seduce John if he really put his mind to it—John was clearly not immune to male charm even if he seemed to keep that part of himself firmly in the closet—but he wouldn’t. He didn’t want John in his bed for one night, he wanted John in his life.

They might have gone on like that indefinitely if the man who called himself Moriarty had not come crashing into their lives.
“Bloody hell,” Agra said, staring around the cellar, which at the moment resembled, literally, a bloody hell. She thought the two bodies might once have been Chinese. She also thought it looked as though Moriarty had torn them to pieces with his teeth.

“I want him dead,” Moriarty said in a flat voice. He was sprawled on a sofa, looking sated but still darkly furious.

“Who?”

“Sherlock Holmes.” It came out in a snarl.

“What, your detective mate? I thought you wanted to keep him around as a plaything.”

Moriarty just stared at her with his dark empty eyes and Agra crossed over to turn the laptop where she could see it. She was expecting the detective’s website, but this was something different—a blog, apparently. On the entry showing were two pictures, helpfully labelled: “This is me. This is Sherlock. Okay? Criminals of London, please note which is which!”

Agra realized she had never seen a picture of Sherlock Holmes. He didn’t look particularly exciting in the photo. “So, what, because he got in your way on this smuggling thing? No.” She saw it now, in the depths of his rage, the picture. “You know him, don’t you? You recognized the picture.”

“I want him dead,” Moriarty repeated.

Jesus. “Well, get one of the others. You know the deal,” she said. “I don’t kill civilians.”

“What about John Watson?”

“Who?” When he bared his teeth at her she glanced back at the website. “What, the blogger? You’re joking.”

“He’s a soldier.”

“Really?” She clicked around on the blog. “Army doctor. Bit of a grey area, that. I’ll have to think on it.”

“Think fast,” Moriarty said, his lip still curled back.

God, had he always been this nuts? “I’ll get back to you,” Agra said, turning for the stairs. “You want me to call some of the lads to clean this up?”

“Not just yet,” her boss said, that low feral gleam still in his eye. “I’ll do it when I’m finished.”

For the first time, Agra began to give serious thought to getting out of her current job sooner rather than later.

“I’ve seen this place before,” Sherlock murmured, staring down at the pink phone.

John and Greg exchanged a look of silent communication: Have you seen it before? Nope, don’t think so. You? They were practically an old married couple by now. John was finding this whole situation—some nutter had blown up half a city street, apparently for the sole purpose of leaving Sherlock a creepy little message—vastly disturbing, but Sherlock was staring at the picture on the phone as though it were a chocolate croissant with double chocolate.
Apparently it was Lestrade’s turn to be straight man today. “All right, where is it?”

Sherlock looked up. “221C.”

“221…Baker Street? That’s your house! We’ve got to get the bomb squad straight away—“

“Of course you don’t,” Sherlock cut in impatiently. “If he wanted to blow me up, he’d have done it already. Clearly it wouldn’t have been difficult. There’s something else there, a message, or…”

“…or Mrs. Hudson’s head in a box,” John said. He already had his phone to his ear. “Come on, come on…oh thank God. Mrs. Hudson, do you think you could pop round to Speedy’s for a bit? Bring the extra house keys with you if you wouldn’t mind.“

After all that, it was something of an anticlimax when Sherlock pushed the door to the basement flat open and John saw…nothing.

“Ah,” Sherlock breathed. John followed his gaze and saw he’d been mistaken: there was something, a pale rectangle of plastic laid out neatly in the centre of the floor, almost lost in the gloom.

“Well, I doubt he’s concealed a bomb in that,” Lestrade remarked pragmatically.

Sherlock stepped forward carefully, almost reverently, and knelt to pick it up in his gloved fingers. “What is it, is it a driver’s license?” John asked.

Sherlock did not answer. He had gone completely still, his face white and shocked. John frowned, the dark tingle of foreboding at the back of his neck growing worse. “Sherlock?”

Sherlock stood. He crossed to the door but instead of turning to John he handed the plastic card to Lestrade. John strained to look over his shoulder and saw a membership card to a London health club in the name of Ian Braithwaite, but the picture in the lower right-hand corner was that of Sherlock. It was the one that John had put in his own blog.

Lestrade jerked as though he’d been punched. “Holy shit,” he said, clearly stunned. “Holy, fucking shit.”

Sherlock was looking at Lestrade and his eyes suddenly seemed shockingly young and vulnerable. “You promised. You swore he wouldn’t find me.”

“This didn’t happen through us,” Lestrade said. He was recovering faster than Sherlock, but he still looked gobsmacked. “I think…I’ve seen this picture before, haven’t I?”

John nodded. “It’s on my blog.”

Lestrade put a hand on Sherlock’s elbow and Sherlock let him, and it was that more than anything that made John realize how badly shaken Sherlock was. He looked at the two of them, both pale and horrorstruck, and said, “Is anybody going to tell me what’s going on?”

The pink phone rang.

“H-hello, sexy.”

The voice was quavery and full of tears. Sherlock exhaled; he realized subconsciously he’d been expecting to hear James Allen’s cold, light lilt. “Ian?”
“Oh no no no no no,” the man’s—Ian’s?—said shakily. He sounded as though he were reading a bad script. “This one’s just the puppet. He was never really real to you anyway, was he? Just a costume you put on.”

Sherlock took a breath. “James?”

“Not anymore. You aren’t the only one who can change your name, are you, Sherlock Holmes?” The man sounded bewildered and desperate, reading the words out flatly, and yet somehow Sherlock could still sense the malevolence behind them.

“What shall I call you then?” he asked, amazed at how calm his voice sounded.

“Oh, I think you already know.”

The realization came in a flash, a strange mixture of pleasure/pain that was almost sexual. “Moriarty. You’re Moriarty, you have been all along.”

“My friends call me Jim.”

“Jim,” Sherlock said, trying it out. “Are we friends, then?”

“We’re playing a game,” the man’s voice said, catching in a half sob. “Didn’t you know? But this time I make the rules. Six hours to find him and make your move, Sherlock. Or I’m going to be—to be—” the man was openly crying now. “—so very naughty.”

Sherlock filled John in on the way back to New Scotland Yard, telling him the story as briefly and in as little detail as possible.

“Oh, Christ,” John said, clearly horrified. “Jesus, Sherlock, if I’d known I never would have put that picture—”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Sherlock cut in wearily. “Everyone’s picture is everywhere now. He would have found me online sooner or later.” In a strange way it was almost a relief; he could see now that he had never really been safe. James was always going to catch up to him eventually.

“I can’t believe you caught a murderer when you were twelve and you never told me.”

Sherlock smiled a little at John’s blatant attempt to cheer him, but it was short-lived. He looked out the cab window at the building looming ahead and said, “Come on, we’re here.”

“I’ve had people working on this since the moment I left Baker Street, every possible angle,” Lestrade said. “Which do you want first, Ian Braithwaite or Moriarty?”

Sherlock hesitated, but then he looked at John and said, “Ian Braithwaite.”

“Is missing,” Lestrade said. “He’s an accountant here in London, lives in the suburbs. Left for work this morning as usual and never arrived. They just assumed that he was sick or had scheduled a day off; wife thought he was at work until we rang.”

Sherlock was already back on his feet. “We have to go. I know where he is.”

“Where?” John said, surprised.
The pool. The aquatic centre in Brighton."

Lestrade and Sherlock argued the matter vociferously all the way to Lestrade’s car, in which Sherlock was consenting to ride only because it would get them to Brighton faster.

“If this guy’s sitting at the pool with a bomb on him, we can’t just let all those people—“

“We have to,” Sherlock snapped. “My move, it has to be me going in there, no one else. He’ll have people there watching that will set off the bomb if the Brighton police show up.”

“We’ll need a bomb squad! Not to mention backup! Can I at least give them a heads up so—“

“Ring them when we get there. Not before.”

Lestrade finally gave it up, though Sherlock suspected that was partly because now that he was driving he didn’t want to risk Sherlock snatching his phone out of his hand and throwing it out the window, which he really would have enjoyed doing at the moment.

“So, you said you had some information about Moriarty?” John finally said from the backseat, breaking the tense silence.

“Oh yeah,” Lestrade said, clearly relieved. “Okay, first off. James Allen disappeared a year or so after he got out. I was keeping tabs on him, and at first everything seemed fine: he was in a halfway house doing job training, good reports, etcetera. And then he just vanished. I went down there, talked to some people, finally went to see that grandmother of his…you never met her, did you? Scary piece of work, that one. She’d given him ten thousand pounds and told him good riddance, and that’s when he cleared off.” Lestrade sighed.

“You never told me,” Sherlock said a little petulantly, still feeling irrationally betrayed that James had found him after all.

“I thought if you wanted to know, you would have asked, or found out yourself. I guess I hoped he’d gone someplace far far away to start over. And it sounds like he did—he just didn’t get very far, apparently.”

“Back to Belfast,” Sherlock said. He didn’t know this for sure, but it seemed likely.

“I think so. Which brings us to...James Moriarty.” Lestrade fumbled in his jacket and brought out a sheet of paper which appeared to have been printed out on an office printer in need of toner. He handed it to Sherlock, who looked at it: a mug shot. Taken in the seventies by the clothing and hair; the man’s pale skin and architecture of the face essentially James’, but his eyes more narrow and hazel.

“James Moriarty was an IRA gunman. Went to prison in the seventies and left a pregnant girlfriend named Mabel Allen. Three guesses as to the baby’s name. We know this because the Royal Ulster Constabulary kept tabs on Mabel for a while, figuring her for an IRA sympathizer, but she took up with another bloke and they dropped her after that.”

“James never mentioned his father,” Sherlock said.

“He never met him, as far as we knew. James Moriarty didn’t get out of prison until 1992. He didn’t exactly cut ties with the IRA, but he got into more of the organizational side of things, and after that business over there settled down he was really just a straightforward crime boss. I suppose he was pretty good at it because he was never arrested again, although from what I heard Belfast knew he was into all kinds of stuff; they just couldn’t pin it on him. Here’s where it gets interesting. Jim senior
died in 2005—pancreatic cancer, sounds like it was pretty fast—but someone named Jim Moriarty is apparently still running the show there.”

“He took his father’s name,” Sherlock said, seeing it all now. “He would have thought it his by right; he hated his mother. And from a practical standpoint it was pure genius—he could keep his father’s network going and expand into London, and we never found any traces of him because legally James Moriarty no longer exists.”

“So why would he jeopardize all that now? It doesn’t make sense,” John said.

Lestrade tossed a quick look at Sherlock and then said, “Because James Allen was the scariest human being I have ever met in twenty-five years of police work…and that was when he was thirteen. He’s had twenty years to grow his obsession with Sherlock into something big enough to scorch the earth.”

“Well…shit,” John said.

They reached the aquatic centre—oddly unchanged after all these years, although it looked considerably shabbier than Sherlock remembered—and Lestrade pulled around to the farthest edge of the parking lot where they had something of a visual on the paddling pool. The outdoor pool was closed for the season, but there were plenty of people indoors.

“Brighton’s on their way, but they’re going to hold back until we call for them,” Lestrade said, pocketing his phone. “John, reach over on the floor behind that seat and bring up that duffel bag, would you? I assume you’re planning to walk in there alone.” This was to Sherlock.

John popped up from behind the seat like a jack-in-the-box. “The hell he is.”

“Yes.” Sherlock turned part way to meet John’s eyes. “John, you know I have to go in alone. He said it was my move, you heard him yourself. If I don’t he’ll likely set off the bomb and blow the whole place to bits.”

“Which is why I have this,” Lestrade said cheerfully, pulling a tiny transmitter out of the bag and handing it to Sherlock. “Tuck it inside your jacket and we’ll be able to hear everything you say. You won’t be able to hear us, of course, since there’s no earpiece I’ve got that won’t show on you, but at least we’ll know to come after you if we need to.”

Sherlock hesitated briefly, but the thought of being connected to John and Lestrade, even if in such a tenuous manner, was strangely reassuring. He nodded and slipped the transmitter into his pocket.

“Yes,” Sherlock turned part way to meet John’s eyes. “John, you know I have to go in alone. He said it was my move, you heard him yourself. If I don’t he’ll likely set off the bomb and blow the whole place to bits.”

“Okay,” Lestrade said. “Good luck.”

Sherlock glanced back once at John’s pinched face, swallowed, and got out of the car.

He showed Lestrade’s warrant card at the desk and gave the woman a story about someone taking cell phone pictures in the lockers. The woman wanted to call security, to which Sherlock nodded politely, and then slipped away as soon as she turned to her phone. Hopefully that would keep all the security guards tied up in the lockers for a bit. He walked down the corridor to the exit to the paddling pool, feeling strangely nostalgic: the tiles and the damp, chlorine-mildew smells were exactly as he remembered. He reached the door and pushed it open, his heart thumping in his chest, and stepped out.

There was no one there.

Sherlock frowned, turning in a circle. He could just make out Lestrade’s car through the chain-link
fence and he said quietly, for the benefit of the wire, “No one’s here.” It was strangely comforting to
be talking to John even if he couldn’t see or hear him. He looked at the shady spot—the tree was
gone now, grown too big perhaps, or the leaves were a nuisance; the other trees were bare and
leafless in the chilly spring air. “I’m looking at the place where James and I always—oh. Oh. I know
where he is.”

He turned back and went inside, picturing John in the car, hearing his voice in his head: “Sherlock,
don’t, get back here—we don’t know where you’re going, we can’t see you!”

“I’m going around to the back,” he said softly. No one was in the corridor to see him apparently
talking to himself. “I never told you, Lestrade, because I thought I would get in trouble, but we used
to go back there and smoke cigarettes.” The sign on the door said FIRE EXIT ONLY, ALARM
WILL SOUND, but twenty years ago it had been an empty warning and apparently that, too,
remained unchanged. The door stayed silent when he pushed it open.

Ian Braithewaite sat twenty feet away, leaning against the wall and shivering in a large parka. His
pale doughy face was blotchy and tearstained and he looked exhausted—not physically, but as
though he had spent the last six hours terrified out of his wits. He looked up at Sherlock as he
approached and Sherlock saw he was holding a pager.

“Hello love,” Ian said. “Care for a smoke?”

He held up his other hand, the one not clutching the pager, and Sherlock saw a cigarette clenched in
his trembling fingers. It occurred to him in the same almost subconscious way that he had registered
that Ian Braithewaite had not actually stayed obese, that he (ironically) now liked swimming quite a
lot, that he had two children and a cat and loved his wife very much and liked his job well enough
and took a salad for lunch every day but often sneak ed off to the vending machines around four in
the afternoon, that Ian had never smoked before.

“All right,” he said. He knelt on the cold ground and took the cigarette. Ian broke into an enormous,
relieved smile—James must have told him this was the moment he would be freed—and then a small
red hole bloomed on his forehead and he slid sideways, the smile still on his face.

Sherlock cried out in horror and jerked back, falling onto his backside on the cold ground. He
clutched one hand in his hair and the other around the cigarette as he looked around frantically—it
wasn’t fair, he’d played by the rules, he’d come out here alone,
where was the sniper
—and heard
distantly the sounds of slamming doors and sirens and looked back at Ian. Ian was slumped at an odd
angle halfway propped up on the wall, very dead, wires now visible at the bottom of the parka.

The door slammed open behind him and suddenly John was there, grabbing him under the arms and

Sherlock tried to speak but couldn’t; his ears were buzzing and he suddenly realized that his hands
must be dirty where he’d caught himself on the ground. He tried to brush them off but John still
seemed to be in the way, somehow, and more distantly now he heard John’s voice again, saying,

Lestrade told John later that Ian Braithewaite had been loaded up with enough Semtex to take out
half of Brighton, but in the immediate aftermath John was focused on nothing but Sherlock.

He got Sherlock back inside the aquatic centre—now a chaos of small wet children and elderly
pensioners who had been doing water aerobics milling about in panic—and inside some sort of a
staff lounge, where he pushed him down on a hideous vinyl sofa and stood with a firm hand on his shoulder until Sherlock’s respiratory rate came down out of the stratosphere. He could still feel Sherlock’s pulse fluttering frantically under his thumb. Sherlock leaned forward, scrubbed his hands through his hair, and sat up to look at John. “I—"

“No,” John said crisply. “Don’t even start that. Moriarty set this whole thing up, right from the beginning, with the sole purpose of getting you here alone and blowing that poor sod’s brains out right in your face. Moriarty did this, not you. He set it up, he pulled the trigger—or he paid somebody to, no difference. Not you. You didn’t do this.”

Sherlock looked for a minute as if he wanted to argue, but then he simply nodded.

“Sick fuck,” John added.

Sherlock half smiled at that, but then it faded. “He’s not done yet. This was just the opening act. I have no idea what he’s going to do next.” He looked bewildered and uncertain, a scared twelve-year-old again, all his usual sparkle and confidence completely stripped away. John had never seen him like this and it seared him.

“Hey,” he said, moving to stand directly in front of Sherlock. “It doesn’t matter. Last time you were a kid on your own, and you still beat him. What can he possibly do to you now that you’ve got me?”

He meant it lightly, but Sherlock seemed to take the question seriously. “You’re right,” he said softly. “He can’t do anything to me.” He looked straight up into John’s eyes.

John looked back and in that instant he knew. The knowledge sparked between them like electricity, like magnets, a connection neither of them needed to put into words.

John was just about to put out his hand when the door banged open.

“Oh, there you two are,” Lestrade said, sounding harried. “You okay, Sherlock? Saddle up, guys, we need to get back to London.”

The second picture came the next morning at exactly nine AM, just as the first had. John and Sherlock were in Lestrade’s office hearing what the police had managed to uncover regarding Ian Braithwaite, which wasn’t much.

“A car,” Sherlock muttered, staring down at the image, just as Sally Donovan came in holding another phone.

“Freak, for you.”

Sherlock took the phone and stood up, his eyes narrowing. “You changed the rules,” he hissed into the phone.

“My game, my rules.” The voice was a woman’s, unsteady with fear. “You m-made the rules twenty years ago, Sherlock. N-now it’s my turn.”

“Why should I—I—“ Sherlock suddenly stopped short, his eyes widening. The color drained out of his face so fast that John stood up too, reaching automatically to steady his arm. “Molly?”

“Oh, God,” Lestrade said under his breath, his own face blanching.
“You h-have...eight hours.”

Sherlock shook John’s hand off and drew himself to his full height. He was fairly crackling with fury. “And why should I play your game? Why solve your little puzzle if you’re just going to shoot her anyway?”

“Maybe I will. Maybe I won’t. But if you don’t solve it in time...boom...boom...boom.” Her voice broke on the last word.

Sherlock spoke in a low, furious voice. “Molly, I will solve this and I will get you out of there. Be brave. James, if you harm one hair on her head, I will flay you alive.” He disconnected with a decisive snap.

“Well, glad you got the last word anyway,” Lestrade said, still looking ashen.

“Shut up,” Sherlock snapped. He was already punching numbers into his own phone. “Mrs. Hudson. Go and get her, right away. Get her someplace safe.”

Lestrade looked at Sally, who said, “I’m on it,” and swung out the door.

Sherlock turned away slightly, pacing in the small office. “Mycroft, listen up, this is important. No, this has nothing to do with your stupid memory stick. I need you to get Mummy and Father...”

“I better get on this car,” Lestrade muttered, picking up his phone. “Pass me that, would you? Eight hours...” He read off the details to someone on the other end.

Sherlock was already turning back. “My parents are on some sort of cruise—“ there was a world of disdain in the word---” and Mycroft found the idea of anyone trying to kidnap him so amusing he was still laughing when I disconnected.”

“What about John?” Lestrade asked, hanging up.

“What about him?” Sherlock looked perplexed.

“You don’t think he’s a likely target?”

“I’m a lot tougher to take than on Ian Braithwaite,” John said. “And anyway, you can’t think I’d leave Sherlock now.”

“John’s always with me,” Sherlock said as if it were self-evident. “There’s no opportunity.”

Lestrade shrugged. “Just thought I’d mention it.” His phone rang and he picked it up, said, “Yeah,” made a few notes, and set it down again. “Found the car.”

Sherlock blazed through the case like a comet. John had thought he’d seen Sherlock bring the full force of his laser-sharp mind to bear on a case before, but now he was electric, so intense he seemed to throw off sparks. It was a little frightening. When Sherlock typed CONGRATULATIONS TO IAN MONKFORD ON HIS RELOCATION TO COLOMBIA into his computer, John almost expected it to spontaneously implode from the sheer power of his glare.

Molly called thirty seconds later, hysterical, and Sherlock wrapped his arms tightly around himself and chewed his bottom lip to shreds while John talked to her soothingly for ten minutes until she began sobbing helplessly and an unfamiliar voice shouted into the phone, “We’ve got her, we’ve got
her, this is Patel from the bomb squad, she’s safe.”

And that was when Lestrade reluctantly told Sherlock that they hadn’t been able to get to Mrs. Hudson before Moriarty did. She was gone.

Sherlock was not the only one sleepless that night. As it turned out, they needn’t have worried; Mrs. Hudson had not been second in command of a drug cartel for nothing. When the police got to her—bound hand and foot and covered with Semtex in an empty flat—she’d managed to knock her guard out cold with a well-timed head butt and kick him in the groin a few times for good measure. Fortunately, she’d thought better of trying to free herself while wearing explosives. It seemed to John that Mrs. Hudson was more upset about Connie Prince being murdered than her own abduction. “What are we going to watch now?” she asked John sadly as she was being loaded into the ambulance.

Next morning’s picture arrived with no phone call, and Lestrade said what they were all thinking: “Suppose he’s just got the bomb under a park bench this time. Good job you’ve got so few friends; he must have run out of people to pick up.”

He hadn’t. When the phone rang in the gallery and the child’s voice said tremulously, “Ten…” it was Lestrade who gasped this time, going white as a sheet.

“Luke! Oh my God, that’s my son!”

Sherlock solved it, of course; he was Sherlock Holmes and he always solved it, but he was nearly as shaken as Lestrade, after.

By the time John and Sherlock went back to Baker Street that night the police had practically everyone connected to anyone who’d ever had anything to do with Sherlock Holmes or James Allen under wraps, including Athelney Jones’ widow, who according to Lestrade was the size of a Smart Car and wouldn’t even have to fight off abductors; she could just stay put and refuse to move. Lestrade had screamed at his ex-wife and his son’s school for a good quarter hour on the phone, and was now feeling a lot better. Sherlock had burned off his excess adrenaline solving Mycroft’s missing missile plan problem, and that seemed to have cheered him up too.

“Well,” John said as they both flopped into their respective chairs. “That was a solid day’s work. Glad we’ve nothing on tomorrow.”

Sherlock quirked a lopsided smile, but he seemed a bit distracted. John couldn’t really blame him. “Five pips, remember? He’s probably got something really spectacular planned.”

“Let him. You’ve solved them all so far, haven’t you?”

“I suppose,” Sherlock said. He pulled his knees up, staring out into space. “You’re going out.”

“What?”

“You always change when you’re staying in. Are you meeting Sarah?”

John pulled his head back a little, regarding Sherlock closely, but Sherlock wouldn’t meet his eye. “I am, actually. But I won’t be out late. I think…I don’t think we’re going to work out, and I wanted to tell her in person.”

Now Sherlock looked at him.
John smiled a little, letting his real meaning show just a bit. “You’ll be up when I get back?” As if he wouldn’t.

Sherlock looked away again. “I’m going to meet up with Mycroft. Give him his memory stick back.”

“Oh right. Can you pick up some milk on your way? We’re out.”

“All right.”

John blinked in disbelief. “Really?”

“Really.”

“Okay then. First one back puts the kettle on.” This was ridiculous; Sherlock would never remember to put the kettle on. Of course he probably wouldn’t get the milk either. “See you later?”

“Yes.”

They should have foreseen it. He should have foreseen it; hell, even bloody Lestrade had raised the possibility. But that was why he made his move first—the memory stick, the invitation—in order to distract Moriarty from going after John.

So when Sherlock walked into the pool, hands clasped behind his back to conceal their shaking, and saw John wearing the parka, he was quite honestly shocked.

“John?” he said in bewilderment.

“Well, this is a turn-up, isn’t it, Sherlock?” John said softly. His voice was flat, almost robotic. “What would you like me to make him say next? Something sweet?” His face twisted on the last words.

“Stop it,” Sherlock said. He felt cold.

A door opened at the far end of the pool and a man stepped through. He was smiling, that familiar smile Sherlock remembered so well, the one that never touched his dead eyes. “Hello, sweetheart,” he sang.

The voice chilled him, but really…this was what he had been afraid of? This slight man preening in his expensive suit? Sherlock cocked his head and watched as James strolled forward. He suddenly understood that the very fact of his not thinking of James all these years would have galled James more than anything else. He was an empty shell, a hollow man, filled up only by his hatred of the world in general and Sherlock in particular.

James came to a stop. “You tried to change the rules,” he said, still smiling, “Tsk, tsk.”

Sherlock shrugged. “Maybe I was bored of you hiding behind your puppets. Maybe I missed you.”

James showed teeth. “Did you? Isn’t that sweet. Did you think of me often? When you were with all those other men, when you let them hold you down, when you let them take you, fuck you, were you thinking of me? You were, weren’t you.” He came closer, eyes gleaming brightly. Sherlock’s stomach twisted queasily. “You’re thinking of me right now, aren’t you?”

“Hardly,” Sherlock said in a bored tone. He pulled out John’s gun, cocked it, and pointed it at Moriarty.
“Oh,” Moriarty sighed, theatrically disappointed. “And here I thought you were happy to see me.”

“Well, I did invite you here, after all.”

“Yes,” James mused. “I was going to ignore it, but then I thought if you wanted to move things up a bit, I might as well accommodate you. I was getting a little bored. Have you come to apologize?”

“What for?”

“You ruined my life,” James said. “Don’t you feel the slightest bit bad about that?”

“No,” Sherlock said coldly. “You made your own choices.”

“Hmmm. I’m not going to feel bad about ruining yours. I’m going to enjoy it.”

“What, are you going to kill me yourself, for once?”

“Oh, I’m not going to kill you.” James’ eyes lit with malicious glee. “I’m going to burn you. I’m going to burn the heart out of you.”

Sherlock’s glance flicked to John before he could stop it.

Moriarty noticed, of course, and something flared in his cold eyes. “Oh, I’m not going to hurt Johnny,” he said, smiling. “I’m going to do much worse. I’m going to turn him against you. I’m going to turn everyone against you. The great detective, the hero, the one everyone desires, everyone admires…you’re going to fall sooooooo far and so hard. People will spit on you in the street.”

Sherlock blinked.

“Yes, good luck with that,” John said crisply, startling them both.

Focus, Sherlock scolded himself. “That’s certainly an idea. Should you like to hear my counteroffer?” He held up the memory stick. “I’ll trade you this. The missile plans for John, unhurt. It will move you up quite a bit—international player, quite a step up for a small timer from Belfast. And of course, you’ll have me in the game. Trying to stop you, of course, but I can’t imagine you’d want anything else.”

Moriarty grinned ferally and took a step forward, plucking the stick from Sherlock’s hand. “Oooh, quite an idea,” he said. He shrugged and tossed it into the pool. “I like mine better.”

And John abruptly seized him from behind. “Sherlock, run!”

Sherlock froze, stunned.

Moriarty seemed delighted. “Oh, good! Very good.” He patted John’s arm where it gripped him around the neck. “I’m so going to enjoy making you hate him.”

Sherlock saw John’s face change and realized in the same instant that the sniper’s laser sights were now fixed on him. For a moment he thought of calling James’ bluff, but if it wasn’t a bluff…he wouldn’t keep John alive for a minute once Sherlock was gone. He dropped his eyes and shook his head, very slightly.

John let Moriarty go and stepped back.

Moriarty brushed himself disdainfully, adjusting his ridiculous suit. “Well, it’s been lovely seeing you again, but I’d best be off. Lots of planning to do.” He puckered up and blew Sherlock a kiss, then
tossed John a wink over his shoulder. “I’ll see you soon, Sherlock.” He strolled casually to the locker room doors and out.

Sherlock wanted to throw something after him, something witty, but he forgot all about it in his rush to free John from the horrid parka. “Are you all right? Are you all right?” He was frantic, dropping the gun to the floor and fumbling with the fastenings.

“Fine,” John said. “Sherlock, I’m fine. Sherlock!” Sherlock had got the parka free and now threw it to the floor heedless of the fact that it was covered in explosives.

They both stared at it a second, and when it didn’t explode, John said “God,” and exhaled, slumping against the wall, and Sherlock suddenly remembered Moriarty and grabbed the gun to chase after him.

Moriarty was gone. When he came back John was still sitting against the wall, apparently trying to recover enough to get up.

“That thing,” Sherlock said, feeling as though he were going to climb out of his own skin from it all, “that thing, that you did, that you offered to do, that was…good.”

John smiled up at him. “You know what?” he said. “That guy’s a fucking creep. Let’s just forget about him.”

Sherlock stopped in his pacing to let out a huff of surprised laughter. John grinned, open and relieved and happy, and Sherlock held out a hand to pull him up. Sherlock still felt as though he were vibrating, too much adrenaline coursing through the too-narrow space of his body, but John seemed completely calm. “Hey,” John said. “Come here.” He pulled Sherlock toward him and Sherlock came, still clutching the gun in his free hand.

John reached up with both hands, clasped Sherlock’s head and pulled him down into a kiss. Sherlock almost dropped the gun. The kiss was awkward—the height difference, the angle not quite right—but none of that mattered. Sherlock had been kissed dozens or maybe hundreds of times in his life, and none of them had been remotely like this. John Watson’s kiss was in a class by itself. No, John Watson’s kiss was in a whole universe by itself. He clutched at John’s back with his free hand, and gave himself up to it.

Agra shifted slightly in position, checking to make sure she still had Watson in her sights, although the laser was off now. How long were they supposed to stay here? The boss had walked out, but he’d told them to hold. Where the hell was he?”

“Agra.” The cold voice came through her earpiece. “What are they doing?”

“Snogging.”

She heard a sharp hiss of breath and then Moriarty said “Put the lasers on.”

She hit hers and saw the other little red dots light up on both the men below. Watson seemed to notice first, pulling back slightly and saying, “Oh, for—“

The door slammed open and Moriarty was back, all expansive good cheer like a game-show host from hell. “Sorry boys! Seems I’ve changed my mind. I would have let you go, but…” he shrugged disarmingly, staring at Holmes. “I don’t like to share.”
Fucking lunatic, Agra thought.

Holmes and Watson exchanged a look, and then Holmes brought his gun up and pointed it at the parka lying on the ground between them and Moriarty, red lights still blinking. He had guts for a civilian, Agra thought admiringly, but she really hoped he wouldn’t do it. They’d all go up then.

Sherlock brought his gun to bear on the parka and said calmly, “I’m done negotiating.” He could feel John steady at his side and surprised himself by reaching to take John’s hand. He didn’t feel afraid any longer. He felt strong, and light, and invincible, John Watson’s warm grip better that any high he had ever had. He raised his chin and looked Moriarty full in the eye, holding John’s hand.

Moriarty smiled slightly in return. He twitched his finger.

No fucking way, Agra thought, but apparently the rest of the snipers were as crazy as the boss, because she heard them fire.

Sherlock never felt the bullet enter his brain. He’d already pulled the trigger.
When Sherlock came back to himself this time, he was smiling.

“What is that, has he fixed it?” Mycroft.

“No.”

“How do you know?”

“If he’d restored the original time stream, we’d be in the original time stream. The system is set up to retrieve him only if he fails.”

“What’s he smiling about then?”

Sherlock opened his eyes. “I blew myself up,” he said happily.

Mycroft and Trevor looked at each other. “Help him over to the sofa and I’ll ring for tea,” Trevor said.

When they had that sorted, Sherlock quickly sketched out the chain of events that had led to him being blown up at the pool. It didn’t take long. “I always told you that Eton ruined my life, and I was right,” he told Mycroft when he had finished.

Mycroft frowned. “It sounds like things turned out more or less the same for you in any case.”

“No.” Sherlock shook his head emphatically. “I wasn’t the same. I was...” he searched for a way to describe the person he had been in that time stream, beautiful and dazzling and confident, but Mycroft wouldn’t understand. “…not a junkie, for one thing.”

“Were we still friends?” Trevor asked. It was the first time she had spoken since Sherlock began his story.

“You thought I was a terrific slag,” Sherlock said, grinning at the memory. “It was brilliant.”

Trevor’s eyebrows went up. “You? I never saw you so much as speak to another person the entire time we were at Oxford.”

Mycroft intervened a bit hurriedly. “Well, entertaining as your little detour into universal popularity must have been, it doesn’t seem to have advanced our cause. It seems as though we’re back at square one. What now?”

Sherlock stood up. “I’m going to get some air,” he said. “I need a few minutes to clear my head. Then I’ll think about what to do next.”
The truth was that the memory of the other time stream was already fading, and he wanted to hold onto it just a little longer. Maybe it could only have happened in that particular time stream; maybe it would never have worked out; but for at least one moment in all time, Sherlock had known that John could love him. He wanted to cling to the feeling for as long as he could make it last. He sat in the tiny frozen garden with his arms wrapped around his knees—the January air was cold, and he'd left his coat inside—cherishing the memory even as it drifted away.

Had he wanted that? He was realizing now that he perhaps he had all along. His experiences in the last two time streams had shown him the moments in this one where he might have let himself see, but he hadn’t—too uncertain, too afraid. Even if he had, he would have assumed that John could never be interested. He should feel sad, he thought, looking up at the cloudy sky; he should be filled with regret, yet somehow he wasn’t. In a life where he could never have John, where John did not seem to want even his friendship any more, it was strangely comforting to know that in another time and place, things might have been different.

When Sherlock came back inside Trevor and Mycroft were back in the dining room study, drinking more tea and arguing.

“I don’t know if it will be enough,” Trevor said, frowning. She pushed irritably at her hair as it slipped into her face again. “It won’t restore the original time stream, so at best it will merely slow the acceleration—“

“But that might buy us some time. If you work out the stabilization—“

“What are you talking about?” Sherlock asked. He poured himself some tea and sat clutching the cup in his chilled hands.

“Mycroft thinks we should try a partial solution,” Trevor said sourly.

“I suggested that instead of trying to restore the entire time stream that we instead avert the circumstances that caused you to end up in this situation.”

“What, at Christmas? You’re saying I should just allow Magnussen to ruin Mary’s life?”

“No,” Mycroft said patiently. “I’m saying you shouldn’t get involved in the first place. Which I said at the time as well, as I recall.”

Sherlock was still a moment, working it out. “I don’t take the case,” he said, understanding dawning. “Mary shoots Magnussen, solving the problem without me ever getting involved. I never get arrested…”

“You never get shot,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock considered. Deep down, he felt a tiny pang at giving John up again, but then he’d never truly had him in the first place. And this was what he’d wanted all along, wasn’t it? John and Mary, happy and safe.

“All right,” he said. He didn’t have a better idea, after all. “Let’s try it.”

“I’m sorry, Lady Smallwood,” Sherlock said. His vision suddenly wavered a little and he blinked. “But I really don’t see that there’s a case here. You’d be better off with an intimidating solicitor.”
Lady Smallwood sighed. “I suppose you’re right. I knew you were able to manage that Irene Adler mess, so I suppose I was hoping you could pull off something similar here.”

Sherlock shook his head. “I’ve rather gotten out of the business of tangling with blackmailers. But I do wish you all the best; I find Magnussen utterly loathsome.”

When she had gone, Sherlock fished out his phone and called Mrs. Hudson. It seemed to take her a long time to answer.

“Good heavens, Sherlock, what is it? It’s past midnight.”

“Do you have any scones?” Sherlock asked. “I can’t remember if I ate today.”

“Hi Sherlock.” Mary’s voice came warmly over the phone.

Sherlock smiled. “How was the honeymoon?”

“Don’t you mean sex holiday?”

“Oh, did you like that?”

“I laughed myself sick. John was beside himself though, he sounded like an old vicar going on about it. I finally told him to shut it or I’d think he was embarrassed for people to know we were having sex.”

“Glad I could spice things up for you a bit.”

“Yes, me too…actually it’s John I’m calling about.”

“Mmmm?” Sherlock wriggled himself around to a more comfortable position in his chair.

“Yes. We’ve been back a few weeks and now that things have settled back down, I think he’s getting a little restless. He won’t call you though, I think he feels I’d think he was bored, which is silly. I know he’s bored.”

“You want me to text him?”

“I’ve got my book club on Wednesday and I really don’t want to have to cope with him waiting up like a good husband and then trying to pretend he’s interested in how it went. Have you got anything on?”

Sherlock considered. He currently didn’t, but there were always little projects simmering away on the back burner he could look into. “I’ll come up with something. Wednesday, you said?”

“Yes. Oh, thank you, Sherlock, you’re a lifesaver.”

“Okay,” John said. He was looking around over the rim of his pint, trying to suss out what he could of the pub. He wasn’t even totally sure whose flag was hanging over the bar. The colors looked like Sweden’s, but didn’t Sweden have that big cross on it? “So you think these guys are running some kind of illegal business? What kind of business?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock admitted. Sherlock was wrapped in his coat with the collar turned up,
looking like a character in a black-and-white Bogart film. People kept giving him sidelong glances.
“My first idea was drugs, but have you noticed how much bigger this place is on the outside than the inside? It must be something that takes up a lot of room. Guns, most likely.”

“You think they’re bringing them in from…where are these people from anyway?”

“Ukraine, obviously. Don’t you see the flag?”

“Ukraine, right. So smuggling illegal firearms.”

“At a guess, yes.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“Buy some,” Sherlock said. “Obviously.” And with that he got to his feet and swept up to the bar, in full-on dark and mysterious mode, leaving John slouching down behind the table wondering why Sherlock couldn’t occasionally try for something a little less conspicuous.

Sherlock returned with a look on his face John couldn’t quite read. “Maybe my Ukrainian isn’t as good as I thought it was,” he said.

“Can you buy me a rocket launcher?” John asked. “The neighbors have this fucking Pomeranian that barks the whole fucking night, I’d love to just blast that thing—“

“I’m not sure what I bought. I asked if they had anything new in, and he said no, but the inventory right now was top-notch, any preferences? I said I wanted the best he had and he said ‘One or two?’ I said two, and that’s when I’m not sure what happened. I think he asked ‘Together or separate.’”

“Maybe he just wanted to know if you were buying both or if I’m buying my own rocket launcher.”

“That’s what I thought. I said together, but then he only asked for four hundred pounds.”

“Two hundred each?” John considered. “I don’t think that would buy a rocket launcher. I think you bought me a grenade.”

“We’re about to find out,” Sherlock said. “He’s waving us over now.”

John followed Sherlock around the corner of the bar and into what John thought for a minute was a broom closet. A sturdy, intimidating woman was waiting at the foot of a narrow staircase, which she led them up single file, and gestured into an open door.

Sherlock took a few steps inside and then stopped so abruptly that John almost smacked into him. Maybe he shouldn’t have had that second pint. He stared. The room did not contain any rocket launchers; for that matter, John could not see any weapons at all, only two very young women in negligees stretched out on a king-sized bed, apparently watching Scooby-Doo.

The woman on the right—no, the girl; in spite of her heavy eyeliner and sharp cheekbones she couldn’t have been out of her teens—clicked a button quickly on the remote she was holding and the television switched to a sustained shot of a flickering fireplace. Smooth jazz filled the room. “Hi sexy,” she said in heavily accented English.

Sherlock appeared frozen in place. “Uh, Sherlock,” John managed, biting his cheek to keep from bursting into giggles, “I think you actually bought us two underage whores.”

John’s voice seemed to shock Sherlock into action. He moved forward, speaking quickly but quietly
in what John assumed was Ukrainian. The second girl—much shorter and plumper, with huge blue eyes like a baby doll’s and large soft breasts straining at the front of her negligee, began shaking her head, pressing a hand to her mouth in terror, but the tall skinny girl tossed her head and answered him.

“You’re right,” Sherlock said, turning back to John. “They are under age. The one talking is only sixteen and the other one is fifteen. They were brought here illegally under false pretenses.”

The tall girl said something furiously to Sherlock. “She thought she was going to be a model. Well, she could have done, actually, she’s certainly tall enough.” He said something back to the girl which seemed to mollify her. John looked at her long neck and arrogant cheekbones, her shining fall of flat-ironed hair, and thought she seemed a little like a young, female version of Sherlock.

The younger girl whimpered behind her hand and John turned to her. “What’s your name?” he asked kindly.

“Nadia,” the girl said timidly, still with her knuckles pressed to her mouth.


“Yulia,” John said politely. He touched his own chest. “John.”

“Hah,” she said, rolling her eyes.

“Sherlock, are you saying these girls were trafficked here?” John asked, his brain finally catching up to this surreal situation. “Are they being held against their will? Jesus, we have to do something.”

Yulia said something urgently to Sherlock, who looked quickly at his watch and then asked her a question. Yulia nodded even more urgently, grabbing at Sherlock’s arm and saying, “Da, da, da!”

Sherlock turned to John, now looking worried. “Yulia says once an hour that woman on the stairs comes around and looks though the peepholes to make sure everything is going smoothly. She’s due any minute and if she sees us all in here dressed and talking, she’ll assume we’re the police.”

“Oh shit,” John said, looking instinctively round at the door. Ruslana had begun whimpering again, babbling at Yulia who shushed her impatiently. “Well, what are you waiting for? Get your coat off!”

“What?”

“Coat!” John himself had already shed his jacket and was working on his buttons. He had no idea how far he was willing to take this—not very bloody far—but they had only been in the room a few minutes, so surely no one would expect them to be going at it already. He pulled off his shirt and looked up to see that Sherlock had his coat and jacket off and was slowly beginning to unbutton his shirt, his face completely blank. Yulia hissed at him to hurry and John realized that both girls had disrobed with admirable swiftness—God, Ruslana’s breasts really were enormous.

Sherlock had his shirt unbuttoned now and Yulia grabbed his wrist, yanking him toward the bed so that he stumbled. John had a fleeting moment’s curiosity as to what the two of them would look like together—a pair of praying mantises mating, probably—but then he caught the look of panic on Sherlock’s face. Oh, for God’s sake. Sherlock wasn’t even going to be able to so much as snog his would-be Ukrainian model without giving the whole thing away. For that matter though, John thought as he looked at plump little Ruslana with her huge creamy breasts and her terrified face (fifteen!), he wasn’t so sure he could pull this off either. Fuck it. He grabbed Sherlock’s other wrist and hauled him back, trapping him for a minute in a bizarre tug-of-war which John, of course, won.
He lost his balance and sat down hard on the edge of the bed as Sherlock all but fell on him, and then he grabbed him by the back of the head and kissed him.

He wasn’t really thinking about it when he did it. It was purely a desperation move, hoping the whole bizarre roomful of them would be taken as some kind of batty ménage a quatre that was just getting underway, so he was unprepared for what Sherlock’s mouth would feel like under his. Unprepared for how that long slender body would feel in his arms, for the heat of Sherlock’s chest against his, for the way Sherlock’s shockingly soft mouth first stilled and then opened, the sweetness of his lips and tongue as John kissed him and kissed him and kissed him. He couldn’t seem to stop. It was as though John had been thirsty so long he no longer even knew it, and now that he had started drinking he couldn’t pull his mouth away.

Dimly, he was aware of the pillowy softness of Ruslana’s breasts pressed against his back and her terrified panting against his ear, but it seemed very far away and unimportant. The only thing that mattered was this, Sherlock’s hands coming up to rest on John’s triceps as John wound one arm around his taut waist and cupped the back of his head with the other, bumping some angular limb—Yulia’s, presumably—out of the way so he could devour Sherlock’s mouth even more deeply. Sherlock. Oh God, he was kissing Sherlock, he was kissing Sherlock and it was fantastic, amazing, it was—

“She go,” Yulia hissed, tugging at John’s arm. He broke the kiss, feeling utterly stunned, looking at Sherlock’s closed eyes and parted lips still inches from his own. He felt a shocked sense of loss. “Hey! You John! She go!”

John let Sherlock go and he swayed a little, opening his eyes. He looked at dazed as John felt. “Da,” he said, blinking, and then seemed to collect himself, sitting up straight and disentangling himself from John. John got up quickly and went for his shirt, head reeling.

Sherlock was pulling his shirt back on, buttoning it up swiftly as he interrogated Yulia, who shook her head as she collected her filmy negligee and answered whatever he was asking her. “Yulia says there’s no way to get out from up here, except another passageway that connects to the house next door,” he said to John, now picking his jacket up from the floor. “I’m going to have a look.”

“Sherlock—“ but Sherlock was already gone, closing the door behind him as he slipped out. John sighed and picked up his own coat, and suddenly Sherlock was already back, grinning.

“I found a way out,” he said, grabbing his coat and tossing it to Yulia. “Come on.”

John handed his own jacket to Ruslana—he couldn’t wait to explain this to Mary; he could smell the perfume from here—and went out last, closing the door behind him as he slipped out. John sighed and picked up his own coat, and suddenly Sherlock was already back, grinning.

“I found a way out,” he said, grabbing his coat and tossing it to Yulia. “Come on.”

John went to the window and looked out. The fire escape was perhaps six feet from the window; easy for Sherlock and manageable for John, but he had serious doubts about the girls. He turned back to Sherlock.

“Take this,” Sherlock hissed and shoved one end of a mattress into John’s chest. He had pulled all the bedclothes off one of the beds and was now trying to force the mattress out the window. Yulia, catching on, was dragging sheets off the other. John got one end of the mattress over the windowsill—it was too wide, but the mattress was flimsy enough that it bent into a U fairly easily—and shoved until he felt the end come to rest on the fire escape. Sherlock took the next mattress and pushed it through as well, making a trough-shaped bridge. John stared at it dubiously.
“I’ll go first,” Sherlock said. He dragged one of the stripped bedframes over and stepped up until he could get his head and shoulders through the (now considerably smaller) window opening, wriggled his way through, and slid out. John heard a muffled clang a moment later and peered over to see Sherlock standing on the fire escape, holding down his end of the mattress. The fire escape was a foot or so lower than the window, which was a considerable help.

“Yulia,” he whispered and bent his leg so she could step on his thigh to climb up. She flailed around a bit in the window, nearly kicking him in the face, and then apparently froze in panic. Ruslana stepped up to the window and spoke to her in a surprisingly gentle voice, apparently telling her not to look down, for Yulia lifted her sharp chin, squared her shoulders, and cautiously worked her way across. John expected Ruslana to balk, but she climbed up and shimmed across with no hesitation at all.

Which left John. The problem was that without him to hold the mattress end in place, there was nothing to stop it sliding out as soon as his weight was off the windowsill. Well, he’d just have to move fast. John climbed up on the bedframe and into the window, keeping his knees on the sill as long as possible, and looked over to see Sherlock leaning out with his hands outstretched.

“Come on,” he said, “I’ll catch you,” and John flung himself forward. For a dizzying moment he felt the mattress slip out beneath him, but Sherlock’s hands had closed on his forearms and both the girls were grabbing on too, pulling him over the edge of the fire escape as the mattresses fell down to the narrow passage below with a soft whump. They all landed in a heap on the ridiculously tiny metal platform with Sherlock on the bottom, and suddenly John was giggling helplessly. It was a beautiful clear night, they had just rescued two young girls from a horrible existence, his face was mashed into Ruslana’s squishy breasts, Yulia’s bony knee had caught him in the solar plexus, and he was sitting on Sherlock. God, he’d missed this.

They stuck around for the raid—partly because it was fun, partly because the police couldn’t get even a Russian interpreter there on such short notice—but in the end Sherlock wasn’t needed. When the girls were herded out, tearful and frightened, it was Yulia and Ruslana who calmed them. The girls were followed by the men and the Ukrainians, at which point Yulia launched into a screaming, spittle-flying tirade that soon had all the girls shrieking and spitting. Sherlock grinned.

“What’s she saying?” Lestrade asked. Lestrade had nothing at all to do with the raid; he was just there in his unofficial capacity as Sherlock’s liaison and babysitter.

“That the men are embarrassingly lacking in both physical endowments and performance skills, and that they are going to make many new acquaintances in prison who will remove their teeth in order to make them more suitable recipients for oral sex.”

Lestrade winced.

The people from the shelter and the human trafficking agency arrived, along with an older woman who began calling to the girls in Russian. Lestrade pushed himself off the car he had been leaning against and stretched. “Guess we’re about done here,” he remarked. He cocked his head at Sherlock and gave him an odd look. “Did you know your shirt’s buttoned up wrong?”

Sherlock glanced down and even in the streetlights John could see him flush, the red rising right up to his forehead. He busied himself with unbuttoning his shirt. John had a sudden flashback of that hot strip of skin pressed to his own naked chest, and he swallowed. Lestrade looked at John with his eyebrows raised.
John shrugged. “They were doing room checks,” he said. “Don’t worry, we didn’t touch them. Sherlock never even got his shirt all the way off.”

“Oh,” Lestrade said, giving John a look he couldn’t read. Probably You could have finally got Sherlock laid!, but he wasn’t sure.

Yulia came marching up in a t-shirt and jogging bottoms that were several inches too short and handed Sherlock back his coat. She had John’s too. “Thank you,” she said in English to both of them. She glanced up at Sherlock and for a minute she looked like exactly what she was: a sixteen year old in a strange country, all alone.

Sherlock said something to her in Ukrainian and held out his hand gravely, as he would to an adult. Yulia looked at him for a minute and then shook it. Her sharp chin went up, her shoulders squared, and she turned and went back to the knot of girls who were now crowding into the cars, head held high. A knife of a girl, all sharp edges. She would be all right, John hoped; Ruslana too.

“Think we’re done here,” Lestrade announced cheerfully. He left them to go over to a woman who appeared to be in charge of the police contingent, leaving John alone with Sherlock for the first time.

Sherlock had shrugged into his coat and buttoned it up, though the night was pleasant, and now he flipped up his collar. “Hungry?” he asked, looking over at John. His face would have given nothing away to anyone else, but John caught the flicker of uncertainty in his eyes.

John looked at his carefully shielded vulnerability and knew in that instant that he could have him. He could take Sherlock home, back to Baker Street, and he could kiss him again and Sherlock would let him. He could take his clothes off—all of them, this time—oh Jesus and Sherlock would let him, he could spread him out and touch him and Sherlock would let him, he could push into his body and Sherlock would let him, because Sherlock had absolutely no fucking idea what he was doing and so he was trusting John, as always, to light the way.

And John wanted him. Wanted him with a hunger he wasn’t sure he had ever felt for anyone. He could still feel the softness of Sherlock’s lips, the heat of his skin. He could still see Sherlock’s pale yearning face in the instant John had broken the kiss; he thought the image might be permanently seared on his retinas. If he went to dinner with Sherlock now, he wouldn’t be able to stop himself from taking him. And he couldn’t. He was married, to a wife he loved deeply, with a baby on the way, and there was absolutely no way he was throwing all that away. Not for anything. Not even—especially not even—for Sherlock, who had already ruined John’s life once and could have made things a hell of a lot simpler if he’d twinged that he wanted this three fucking years ago.

“Sorry,” John said as lightly as he could. “It’s late, and I’ve got work tomorrow. Besides, Mary should be back from her book club by now and she’s probably waiting up to tell me about it.”

Something flickered in Sherlock’s eyes and John steeled himself for the inevitable cutting remark, but it never came. “All right then,” he said, turning away and pulling on his gloves—gloves, really? “Thanks for your help. Sorry I couldn’t manage the rocket launcher.”

“Yeah, well, better luck next time,” John said before he could think.

Sherlock looked at him over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised. “Perhaps,” he said. “Good night, John.” And he strode off.

Mister last word, John thought. But somehow it didn’t carry the wry humor thoughts like that usually did, and he felt strangely heavy as he made his way home.
Sherlock, no longer remotely interested in eating, went home and sat in his chair with his arms wrapped tightly around his knees. He felt bewildered and unhappy. What had happened? Sherlock had no experience with kissing—none, zero, null set—and so had been taken by surprise at how pleasurable it was. The rush of warmth and longing and joy had left him dizzy. But John had loads of experience with kissing, and clearly regarded the entire episode as nothing out of the ordinary. That was fine. Sherlock was perfectly happy for things to go on as usual. He was. But then they hadn’t! John hadn’t gone to dinner with him, had turned distant and artificial when Sherlock had asked. Possibly Sherlock was rubbish at kissing—probably, he admitted to himself—but that shouldn’t matter since John was surely not planning to kiss him again. Was it something else? His coat smelled of cheap perfume, but John’s smelled worse. Sherlock put a hand up to his mouth and sniffed his breath. He hadn’t smoked in months and had brushed his teeth before he went out, so all he smelled was beer. What had he done wrong?

Sherlock had never been so happy to hear his phone ring.

“Run into problems with the Ukrainians already?” he asked Lestrade.

“Nope. The Ukrainians aren’t my case,” Lestrade said. “This particular murder isn’t my case either, but the victim’s high profile and there’s nothing they can find at the scene, so I’ve been asked to invite you round for a look before they take out the body.”

“High profile? Who is it?”

“Charles Augustus Magnussen.”

“So, what have you got?” Lestrade asked, when Sherlock had finished sniffing and poking and prowling around the penthouse.

“Nothing.”

“No, seriously.”

“I am serious. I’ve found nothing because there’s nothing to find. This was a professional job, no evidence left. Talk to the building security and see if anybody’s needed a card replaced recently; that’s the only tip I can give you. He must have got one somehow.”

“So you’re saying it’s a killer for hire,” Lestrade said slowly.

“Yep. Probably out of the country already; you’re not going to find him. Normally of course you’d look at who would have motive to kill him, but this being Magnussen…”

“…probably half London wanted to kill him,” Lestrade finished. He ran a hand over his chin. “Well, shit.”

Sherlock shrugged. “He’s no loss to society, if you ask me.”

“No, likely not.” Lestrade looked unhappy. “A contract killer…didn’t they all work for Moriarty, back in the day? Thought you put them out of business.”

“Which left a hole in the market.” Sherlock was putting on his coat, which really did reek—he’d have to get that cleaned before the weather turned. “You might check into the old Masonic temple,
the Scowrers. I heard some of Moriarty’s ended up in with them. “

“What, that lot you think were involved with kidnapping John last year?”

“We never found any evidence, but yes,” Sherlock said. He pulled on his gloves. “So they must have been fairly clever, don’t you think?”

“Well, you’ve made me even more happy I don’t have this case,” Lestrade said. “Can you turn off your phone now? Cause I’d really like to get some sleep. I might actually get a case of my own tomorrow.”

John was having a slow afternoon. The November day had turned wet and dreary, and apparently half his patients had decided they would prefer to nurse their ailments at home by the fire than seek succor from the NHS. He was just pulling up the hourly weather forecast to see whether he might prefer to leave his bike in the mailroom and catch a ride home with Mary when his text alert went off.

*Tracked a ring of counterfeiters to Thamesmead, where I believe them to be running the press. Planning to investigate tomorrow night. Care to come along? SH*

Once John would have been overjoyed to receive such a text on a gloomy afternoon, but now he felt only irritation. This had to be the tenth text in the past two months; couldn’t the man take a hint? Well, no. That was a stupid question; Sherlock was impervious to anyone’s wishes but his own. At least this time John had a legitimate excuse, he thought grumpily, texting back.

*Sorry. Have plans. Be careful*

He did have plans. Okay, the men of the neighborhood could probably get the bonfire set up just fine without him—John wasn’t even sure he liked Bonfire Night anymore; being used as kindling tended to put one right off—but they were going to have a barbecue after, and Mary had said something about making a cake for it, or maybe she was going to buy something? It didn’t matter. What mattered was that he had a life, a nice ordinary life, and he was going to carry on with living it, no matter how hard Sherlock tried to drag him back into his own crazy orbit. It just…wasn’t a good idea anymore, taking those mad risks. Any of them.

The strange thing was that it wasn’t the kiss itself that haunted John. It was Sherlock’s face in the moment after: his delicate eyelids, so close John could see they were slightly trembling, his lashes dark against his pale skin, his parted lips. John’s hand still in his hair. Caught in the instant the kiss ended, forever longing, in John’s mind, for the next kiss that never came. Shit. This wasn’t John’s fault. Well, okay, technically it was, but he had no idea Sherlock would react like that, and now he was just trying to be a good husband and almost-father and put the whole thing so far behind him it would vanish, and yet Sherlock just kept texting him.

“John?” Mary poked her head around the half-open door. “Mrs. Hosseini just showed up. She’s forty-five minutes late, but no one else is here, so…”

“That’s okay, go ahead and bring her back,” John said, pocketing his phone.

Mary paused. “Is everything all right?”

“Fine,” John said, trying for a cheer he did not really feel. “Just tired. I haven’t been sleeping well lately.” That was true enough.
“Maybe it’s sympathy insomnia,” Mary said seriously. “As long as it doesn’t come with sympathy leg cramps I think you’ll do well enough. Or sympathy sciatica. Oh, and don’t forget the sympathy urinating, you’ll be up and down all night—“

“All right, all right, I get it,” John said, smiling genuinely now. “And I do get woken up for the urinating, you clamber all over me to get to the loo.”

“Keep that up and I’ll clamber all over you when my water breaks,” Mary said. “We’ll have an early night tonight, shall we?”

“Sounds good,” John said. It really did.

Sherlock honestly thought he was exhibiting the height of prudence and good sense. He’d texted Lestrade the minute he’d seen the printing press spitting out piles of notes, and he’d even included a few pictures. The pictures maybe weren’t the best quality, but that was no reason for Lestrade to ring him immediately with that exasperated tone in his voice.

“All right, where are you?”

“Thamesmead,” Sherlock said with what he considered extraordinary patience. “As I told you. At the counterfeiting ring’s printing press.”

“Yes, and how exactly did you see the printing press? These pictures look like they were taken through a window.”

“They were taken through a window. A public, easily accessible window.”

“On the ground floor?”

Sherlock paused. “Define ‘ground’,” he said.

“Sherlock.”

“Oh, fine,” Sherlock said crossly. “The window overlooks the Thames. But it’s not so high up; anybody on, say, a barge-house could see in just fine.”

Lestrade sighed deeply. “And where are you at this moment?”

“In the window, obviously.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lestrade said. “How the hell did you get there?”

“Climbed down from the roof,” Sherlock said truthfully.

“Oh, for—look, don’t move, just stay right there til I can—“

At this precise moment one of the counterfeeters, whose attention had been caught by Sherlock gesticulating wildly as he argued with Lestrade, shot him. The bullet shattered the window, plowed a six inch furrow in Sherlock’s quadriceps, and sent him plummeting twenty feet into the river. If he had been wearing his coat he almost certainly would have drowned—the impact knocked the wind out of him, and he could not seem to make his left leg move at all—but fortunately he had dressed for cat burgling in lightweight dark layers. As it was only Lestrade’s quickness in immediately deducing what had happened and scrambling a police cutter saved Sherlock’s life at all, and he was blue with hypothermia when they pulled him aboard.
It took Lestrade several hours to sort the mess in Thamesmead. Counterfeiting, honestly—couldn’t Sherlock stumble into a crime in his division for once? He finally arrived at the hospital to find Sherlock looking worse than he had ever seen him, including John’s stag night and the time he’d been drugged by Irene Adler. Sherlock’s hair had dried into weird foul-smelling clumps, he was bandaged from hip to knee, and he was still shivering.

“Oh thank God,” Sherlock said when Lestrade appeared at his curtained cubicle in A & E. “They’ve pumped two liters of heated saline into me for some reason—”

“Because your body temperature was that of an amphibian?” suggested Lestrade.

“—and now I’m desperate for a piss, I think all two liters are in my bladder but I can’t walk on my own.”

Lestrade folded his arms. “Will you promise next time to call me before you do something like this?”

“I’ll promise you anything you like, just help me up before I flood the whole building.”

Lestrade got him up and hauled him to the toilet. Sherlock was skinny but surprisingly heavy, as Lestrade knew from experience, and he hoped Sherlock would manage to stay upright on his own once Lestrade parked him in the loo. He heard Sherlock piss for what seemed like an hour and a half, and then he basically fell out of the stall and Lestrade got an arm under him and half dragged him to the basin and then back to his trolley.

“Where’s John?” Lestrade asked finally, when Sherlock was bundled under a heap of blankets.

Sherlock shrugged. “Not sure.”

“But he’s here someplace, right?”

“No. Why would he be?”

“Because you’re hurt? Because you’re in A&E? Wait. Are you telling me you went out to Thamesmead by yourself?”

“Of course I did. Why shouldn’t I?”

Lestrade felt this was the sort of question that answered itself. “Because look where you are, idiot! Why the hell didn’t you take John?”

“I asked John,” Sherlock snapped, curling himself up with his back to Lestrade. “He was busy.”

Lestrade had every intention of shouting some more, but something about Sherlock’s stiff, defensive back gave him pause. Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen John since that night they’d shut down the White Hart. Had they had some kind of falling out? Or was John just…getting on with his life?

Well, that was unfortunate. Because if there was one thing Lestrade knew about Sherlock Holmes, it was that he was absolute pants at taking care of himself. He looked down at Sherlock’s bare bony shoulder blades poking out of the hospital gown as he tried to burrow down into his pile of blankets, and went to pull another blanket off the linen cart.

“Try and get a little rest,” he told Sherlock, tucking the new blanket up around his shoulders. “I’ll go see what we need to do to get you out of here.”
It was only much later, after he had finally managed to get Sherlock up to his own bed at Baker Street and was wearily driving home, that Lestrade realized Sherlock never had promised him to call before he went looking for trouble again.

Sherlock spent the next few days hobbling stiffly around the flat feeling sorry for himself. Molly dropped by a few times with pastries and a Banoffee pie, which he appreciated, and Mrs. Hudson drove him half mad with fussing, but really he just wanted to heal up already and get back to work.

One evening he was lying on the sofa with his leg propped, feeling heavy and sluggish—the forced inactivity was making his sleep even worse than usual, which was saying something—when he heard his doorbell ring. Sherlock’s heart quickened even as he knew, rationally, that it wasn’t John—John wouldn’t just turn up at this hour, he would come straight from work, and he would have texted. He picked up his phone and called Mrs. Hudson. “Can you get my door?” he asked as soon as she picked up.

“I’ve already got it, dear. It’s Sergeant Donovan.”

Sherlock made a face at the phone. Probably forms or something he was meant to sign. He pushed himself up and scuffed at his hair, hoping his temporary disability excused him from offering refreshments.

Donovan appeared in his doorway holding a box. “Happy early Christmas,” she said cheerfully. “Heard you were getting a little bored, so I brought you a present.”

Donovan’s friend’s case proved interesting enough that Sherlock didn’t even mind when Mrs. Hudson appeared with a laden tray and began plying her with cakes. They had the crime scene photos spread out over the table and Sherlock was frowning down at them.

“I don’t understand why the police wouldn’t take this seriously. Look at the way these are staged! It’s clearly the same killer.”

“Oh goodness,” Mrs. Hudson said, leaning in for a closer look. “Those poor girls. What happened to them?”

“Strangled by a serial killer and the fetuses cut out,” Sherlock said absently, picking up a picture and twisting his other hand into his hair. He yanked as though it were keeping him from seeing something.

Mrs. Hudson tilted her head. “Where’s the cot?”

Sherlock looked at her. “What?”

“The cot. Look, everything else is all ready, there’s even a mobile hung over where the cot should be, and there’s a pile of bedding on the rocking chair—that’s sweet, isn’t it, that little duck pattern—“

“The cot,” Sherlock said. He dropped his picture and shuffled through the others, pulling out two more and lining them up. “There’s no cot in any of them. But this one has—are these sheets too?” He held the picture up to Mrs. Hudson.

“I think so, dear. I stayed with my sister every time she had a baby—six, she had, although one set of twins, and that time—“

“Is it usual to get the cot last?”
“Oh, no, I wouldn’t think so. Some like to have a Moses basket in the mum’s room for the baby the first few months, but these nurseries are all arranged. I should think they’d want the cot ready too.”

Sherlock grinned at Donovan, bright and fierce, and to his surprise she smiled back. “There you go,” he said. “The Cot Killer. All the big ones have a nickname. If she threatens to go to the press with ‘Cot Killer’ the police will have to take her seriously. It would help if she could find one more—look at the timing, there’s bound to be another between victims two and three.”

Donovan shuffled papers, looking for dates, and after a minute she nodded. “I see what you mean. Thanks loads, the both of you—I’ll get on Skype with her tonight and tell her what you came up with.”

Sherlock levered himself up awkwardly and planted a smacking kiss on Mrs. Hudson’s cheek. “You’re my Girl Friday,” he told her.

“Oh get on with you,” Mrs. Hudson demurred, blushing. “I’m just glad all that time I spent changing nappies went to good use.”

About a week later Lestrade rang. “Are you on back on your feet yet? Only I’ve got a body here that’s missing a head.”

Sherlock yawned. “Is it a nun?”

“No, it isn’t a nun. How many headless nuns does one career need? It’s a British Museum guard.”

Sherlock sat up. “Was something else put in place of the head?”

“How the hell do you know that? Yeah, it’s the helmet from a suit of armor. Have you seen another case like this?”

“No, it’s just what I would have done if I’d murdered someone in the British Museum. I would have used a mummy mask though.”

“You are giving me an ulcer,” Lestrade said. “Want to have a look?”

“Sure. Send a car round in about half an hour.”

“Okay, I’ll—are you serious?”

“Of course I’m serious. My leg hurts, I’m not going to stand outside waiting for a cab and then walk from the street.”

“Okay, half an hour.”

Sherlock disconnected and stood up. “Mrs. Hudson!” he bellowed.

“I’m right here, Sherlock.” Mrs. Hudson stuck her head out from the kitchen. “Do you fancy some breakfast before you go? I would have used one of those little mummified heads, from the South Sea islands, you know. Used to give me such a fright as a girl.”

The headless guard was diverting enough to keep Sherlock entertained for a solid week, and by the end of it he no longer even remembered to limp. He had forgotten all about the Cot Killer until Sally Donovan turned up bubbling with excitement, bearing a laptop and two bags of fish and chips.
“Hope you don’t mind, but I’m starving and I reckoned knowing you I might as well get two,” she said, dumping everything on the desk. “You set up for Skype?”

Sherlock wolfed down his food whilst Roz Corwin filled him in on her latest findings and Sally pulled up the crime scene photos on her laptop. “So here’s the deal,” Roz said, once Sherlock had confirmed that the latest case looked to be the work of the same killer. “This victim was killed in another state, in Louisiana. That means the FBI would be the ones looking into this, which is good, because they don’t have to admit they screwed up the way the local police would. But I still don’t know if the FBI will think it’s worth pursuing. I’ve talked to Araceli Hernandez’s parents—that’s the case I first got involved with—and they want to hire you to investigate. They think—and I think so too—that the FBI will be a lot more likely to listen to you than to a victim’s family and a writer.”

“That would be a first in my experience,” Sherlock said dryly.

“Well, they haven’t had the chance to get to know you yet,” Donovan said around a mouthful of chips. “Give them a few days and they’ll start running like the rest of us.”

“Ah, shut up, Sal, I’m trying to talk him into this,” Roz said from the screen. “So will you do it?”

“I’ll do it,” Sherlock said.

As soon as Donovan left Sherlock picked up his phone and rang John before he could lose his nerve. If anything could tempt John back it was surely this—a serial killer! In Texas! Sherlock had never been to Texas. Would everyone wear boots?

“Sherlock?” John’s voice sounded a little anxious. To be fair, Sherlock almost always texted. In fact the last time he actually phoned John may have been when he was about to jump off the roof at Bart’s, so probably it was a little alarming.

“John, I need you to come with me to Texas,” Sherlock said quickly. “There’s a serial killer there and one of the families has hired me and you know I’m sure to offend everyone in Texas if I don’t have you along and then someone will probably shoot me so I need you to come.”

There was a moment’s silence. “Are you taking the piss?” John finally said.

Sherlock had anticipated four separate reactions, but incredulity had not been among them. “Er… no?”

“It’s the week before Christmas,” John said, now getting annoyed. “You really think I’m going to leave my pregnant wife to go haring off to Texas with you? What are you thinking?”

Not about Christmas, obviously, when did he ever? “I forgot,” Sherlock said. “We could go after Christmas if you—”

“No. No, Sherlock. I am not going to Texas. My wife is having a baby in a month and I’m staying. With. Her.” John’s voice was so sharp that Sherlock felt himself physically flinch.

Sherlock took a deep breath. God, he was terrible at these conversations, how had he gotten into this? “I don’t—“ no, wait, telling someone you weren’t planning to kiss them again could not possibly be good, surely it implied their kissing was unpleasant or undesirable or, or something? “John, I very much enjoyed kissing you, but—“

“No.” If John’s voice had been sharp before, now it cracked like a whip. “We are not discussing that. It never happened, it meant nothing, it will never happen again. Do you understand?”
Sherlock stared at the phone in his hand. He didn’t understand. He felt bewildered and panicked. “No,” he said finally in a very small voice.

“Too bad,” John snapped, and hung up.

Sherlock set the phone down quietly and pulled his knees up to his chest, wrapping himself into the tightest ball he could manage. What had he done? This had to be his fault, he was the one who got everything wrong. “I don’t understand,” he said out loud to the empty room. “I don’t understand.” His voice cracked on the last word. He felt numb and confused and he rocked himself a little, realizing he had somehow got his hand up to his mouth and was biting at his fingers like a small child. He rested his curled knuckles against his mouth and closed his eyes, leaning his forehead against his knees, feeling very cold and small and alone.

Chapter End Notes

I know, I know, I hate him too...but in John's defense, please bear in mind that in this timeline Mary never shot Sherlock, and John doesn't know anything about her past.
Roz Corwin turned out to be tall and rangy, with crinkling eyes and an easy smile; the sort of person impossible to dislike, even for Sherlock. Distance runner, loved living alone, supported a lot of charities, hated dressing up. She’d have gone far if she’d stayed with the police, Sherlock thought.

“Are you tired?” Roz asked. “It’s a long flight. Do you want to go on to the hotel and start tomorrow, or meet with the FBI now?”

“I’m fine, I slept on the plane,” Sherlock said. It was true enough. He hadn’t slept at all the preceding two nights—too upset about John—so he’d dropped off almost before the plane was off the ground, although he’d only slept an hour or so. “You’ve talked with them already?”

“Just on the phone. I got in a few hours ago myself—drove in from Atlanta, that’s where I live. They’re waiting to hear from us.” Sherlock liked Roz’s accent, which was pure Midlands overlaid with a trace of a southern American drawl.

Roz drove, a relief to Sherlock since Houston traffic appeared completely deranged and there was apparently no public transportation or cabs to speak of. A compact, dark-haired man was waiting in the lobby of the building. “Special Agent Miguel Rodriguez,” he said cheerfully, beaming at Roz and Sherlock as though the arrival of a British private detective and a crime writer was the highlight of his week. “Call me Mike. We’re just delighted to have you all! Come on up!” All this good cheer was making Sherlock’s teeth hurt, but he smiled gamely and shook hands.

Rodriguez led them into a small upstairs conference room and said, “This is my partner, Special Agent Lisa Ryan.” Ryan was a small, light-boned woman, hugely pregnant, with carefully professional hair. Sherlock could see immediately that she was definitely not delighted to have them. The unfriendly scowl she shot them made him feel better immediately, so he sat down next to her to bask in her sour glare.

“So here’s the situation,” Rodriguez said as they all settled. “We’re in complete agreement with you that these killings are all the work of a single individual. Unfortunately, that puts us in a delicate situation in regards to the three supposedly-solved cases. While we may see the fact that three innocent people are behind bars as a grave miscarriage of justice—“

Or of police work, Sherlock thought.

“—the police and prosecutors involved are not going to take kindly to having those convictions
“I carried a badge for ten years,” Roz told him. “I know exactly what you’re saying.”

“Good,” Rodriguez said. They smiled appreciatively at each other and Sherlock fought the urge to roll his eyes. “So officially? There’s no investigation. You, Miz Corwin, are writing a book, and Mr. Holmes is your researcher. We’re just along to help smooth the way with the locals, the implication being that someone’s been throwing their weight around at a fairly high level.”

“The Hernandezes,” Roz said.

“Well, of course not even the Hernandezes have the ability to sway a federal investigation, but if people want to think that…we’re not going to correct them.”

“The Hernadezes are as close as Houston gets to aristocracy,” Roz explained to Sherlock. “They’ve been here five generations, which is longer than anything in Houston except the bloody cockroaches.”

“And they have more money than God,” Rodriguez added. “They endowed the cancer center at Texas Children’s.” At Roz’s surprised look he added, “My wife’s a hematologist there. Anyway, with the two unsolved cases—”

“Two?” Sherlock said sharply.

“Yeah, we found another one, we’ll get to that in a minute. Anyway, with those two we don’t have to be so careful. Lisa?”

Ryan stood and crossed to the corkboard that took up one entire wall. “First victim, Stephanie Poletti.” She pinned a large head-and-shoulders picture of a smiling blond woman to the board. “Lived in Conroe. Teacher, but she was on bed rest for high blood pressure. Husband worked in sales and was sometimes gone overnight. They were paying a woman in the apartment complex to come by a few times a week and help out—do the laundry, run the dishwasher, that kind of thing. The woman was mentally disabled and lived with her own mother. She turned up covered in blood at her mother’s apartment babbling about how she was going to love the baby, her prints were found on a knife in the kitchen, and apparently that was enough to convict her.” Ryan looked disgusted by this, which raised her in Sherlock’s estimation. “The fetus was never found, just as in all the other cases. The defense said she was trying to prove her innocence by saying she loved the baby, not admitting to taking it, and she grabbed the knife out of fear when she found the body and then set it down again. You asked her husband about the crib, right?” She looked at Roz.

“Right. It took him a while to remember. He thought that the crib was supposed to be delivered, but it never showed up and what with everything else he just forgot.”

“We checked with Planet Baby,” Rodriguez said. “They were able to track down the original order. According to their records, the crib was ordered as a store pickup.”

Roz sat back and raised her eyebrows. “Really. That’s interesting.”

“Yes,” Ryan said. She pinned up a second photo. “Jennifer Levy, buyer for Neiman-Marcus in Dallas, reportedly took the day off work to wait for her crib to be delivered and set up.”

“You can have them do that?” Rodriguez asked. “Do it, Lisa. Those things are a pain.”

“I’ll bear that in mind,” Ryan said. “Dallas police did look into that, and once again found that the crib was listed as store pickup. They just assumed Jennifer Levy made a mistake. Neighbors reported
seeing a white panel van without identification in the driveway, but nothing from Planet Baby. Husband was the original suspect, but he had a gold-plated alibi.”

“Went to a Rangers day game and snogged his mistress on the kiss-cam,” Roz told Sherlock. “Didn’t do his reputation any favors, but there was no way he could have killed his wife.”

“Kiss-cam?” Sherlock said, frowning.

Roz laughed. “I’ll explain later.”

“Misty McCubbin, Keithville, Louisiana,” Ryan went on. “Unemployed. Two older kids, didn’t have custody of either, pregnant by her boyfriend and his wife didn’t know about it. He was giving her cash to keep quiet and the jury believed the prosecution when they alleged he decided to shut her up for good. They didn’t really bother to explain why the fetus had been cut out. Everyone involved in this situation was some degree of meth head—“

“—including everyone in the courtroom, apparently,” Sherlock couldn’t help adding.

Ryan frowned at him for interrupting, although Sherlock thought she probably agreed with him. “Paid cash for the crib at Planet Baby in Shreveport, store pickup.”

“But that doesn’t even make sense,” Sherlock said. “If she paid cash, she was already there in person! Why not take it?”

“Well, those things are pretty big,” Rodriguez said fairly. “Maybe she was going to come back with somebody who had a pickup truck, or they didn’t have the one she wanted in stock.”

“Still, this is definitely a trend,” Roz said.

“No argument there,” Ryan said. “Araceli Hernandez.” Sherlock heard Roz sigh. The woman in the picture was beautiful, with porcelain skin and enormous dark eyes, her smile almost childlike in its sweetness. “Graphic designer, Houston, worked from home. I think we’re all familiar with the case. Story on the crib was…”

“Ordered from Planet Baby, Daniel didn’t know the details, but he’s positive Araceli would have arranged for it to be delivered and set up,” Roz said. “But I bet Planet Baby says otherwise.”

“Ten points to the Brits: store pickup. Finally, Lexi Davis.” Ryan tacked up a fifth picture. “Worked second shift at a restaurant in Killeen, lived on the base at Ft. Hood. Her husband was deployed at the time of her murder and the case is unsolved.”

“MPs have jurisdiction being as it happened on base,” Rodriguez said to Roz. “That’s probably why you didn’t find it. The murder took place about a year ago.”

Ryan said, “Nobody in the family remembered anything about a crib, but we were able to confirm that one was ordered from Planet Baby for…”

“Store pickup,” everyone but Sherlock said in unison.

Ryan finished by tacking up a large map, with colored pushpins corresponding to those holding the pictures. Nice, Sherlock thought, mentally making a note to get some colored pushpins himself.

“So, the killer must work for Planet Baby,” Roz said.

“Likely but not certain,” Sherlock corrected. “Anyone could have called and changed the cots from
delivery to pickup, but that would require a fairly intimate knowledge of each victim’s day-to-day life and as far as we know, Planet Baby is the only point of connection among them. So Occam’s Razor would suggest that is where the killer found his victims.”

“Right,” Roz said cheerfully. “As I just said.”

“The more important point is how he chooses his victims,” Sherlock said, getting to his feet and crossing the board. “Serial killers have a type, unless they’re the impulsive sort who act on opportunity. These women were deliberately stalked—the killer knew where they lived, their habits, when they would be at home, when they would be alone. Therefore there is something about them, out of all the women who must buy cots from Planet Baby every day, that drew the killer.”

“Yeah, we actually managed to think of that all by ourselves, believe it or not,” Ryan said. She stood up too. “And there’s nothing. Jennifer Levy was tall; Araceli Hernandez didn’t top five feet. Lexi Davis and Stephanie Poletti were heavy; Misty McCubbin was practically a skeleton. Two blonds, three brunettes. Four Anglo, one Latina.”

“Jennifer Levy’s husband was having an affair,” Roz said. “Daniel Obringer had an affair in the past. Maybe there was somebody, I don’t know, jealous? in all the husbands’ pasts?”

Ryan folded her arms and sighed. “We looked at that too. This is our job, you know.”

“Yes, and you wouldn’t even have a case if it weren’t for us,” Sherlock said, losing his temper a bit because Stephanie Poletti’s big eyes and crinkle-nosed smile were reminding him of Mary. “You don’t even have a case now, not really, you care too much about the feelings of some sheriff in Keithville, Louisiana—“

“All right,” Rodriguez intervened as Ryan flushed a furious brick red. “Let’s all take a step back, okay? Mr. Holmes, you have any ideas?”

“Several,” Sherlock said. “But I need to do some more research to narrow them down. I’ll need access to the case files.”

“Sure. Whatever we’ve got,” Rodriguez said affably.

“It’s after six,” Roz said, looking at her watch. “Which makes it past midnight Sherlock’s time. Why don’t we go for some dinner and look at this again tomorrow?”

“I’m going home,” Ryan said curtly.

“I want to look at the case files,” Sherlock said. “Will I have to stay here or can I take copies to the hotel?”

Rodriguez had already made copies of the case files. Roz drove him to their hotel—a place designed for business travelers staying days at a time, with a tiny living area and kitchenette, good, he could make tea—and helped him carry the boxes upstairs. “Sure you don’t want to go with us? Mike says he knows a great taqueria.”

“No, I need to get to work.”

“I’d like to chalk it up to pregnancy hormones,” Roz remarked, “but honestly? That Ryan woman is a bit of a cow.”

“That’s how law enforcement usually reacts to me. Give Rodriguez a few days and he’ll be doing it too.”
Rox laughed. “Oh, you’re not that bad,” she said and left Sherlock to get on with it.

Sherlock read through all five case files. It took most of the night. When he’d finished, he lay back on the sofa, propped his fingers under his chin, and stared at the ceiling. He hadn’t found anything beyond the Planet Baby cots to connect the women, but he wasn’t discouraged: the connection was there somewhere, and there was no one better at finding connections than he was. He wished John were there so he could talk the case over with him—although he doubted John would have been happy to be woken at five in the morning to be Sherlock’s sounding board—or even the skull, but he was on his own. Time to think. He closed his eyes to blot out the depressing blandness of the hotel room, and promptly fell asleep.

In his dream he was in the hotel, the exact same hotel, only everything was different because John was there. John was holding him, his strong arms around Sherlock and his gentle hand stroking Sherlock’s hair, his love pouring into all of the cold scared empty places inside of Sherlock and filling them with warmth. “You’re not alone,” John’s voice came soothingly. “You’re not alone, I’m here, I love you. You’re not alone.”

But he was.

He was alone, in the dark, and then he wasn’t. The men were there with their hard fists and hands and the pipethepipethepipe and there was hard flesh shoving into Sherlock’s mouth and throat and he was choking—

Sherlock jerked upright, gagging. He barely made it to the en suite before he was retching over the toilet, bringing up only a thin stream of bile because he hadn’t eaten since the previous morning. He heaved again, spitting, and felt the nausea subside. He slumped back on the floor and leaned against the wall, trembling and sweating.

Why?

This was the third time he’d had a dream like this since the kiss. Sherlock had never been indifferent to the idea of sex; he’d just decided early on that it couldn’t possibly be worth all the fuss (and, deep down, the thought of that much intimacy and vulnerability made him profoundly anxious). He’d always felt a little smug about this decision. The first time he’d had the dream, after kissing John, he’d had enough self-awareness to admit that he probably did want John—maybe even wanted him a lot—but he was sensible about it: John was married, John was straight, John wasn’t interested. Sherlock didn’t actually want anything as plebian as a relationship anyway. His subconscious just needed a little time to get the message. But this! For the first time Sherlock wondered if there was a darker reason behind his disinterest. Had he deleted something, some horrific childhood abuse that John’s kiss had dredged up? He prodded gingerly at the thought, like testing a sore tooth, but there was no resonance there. No. Nothing had happened to him, nothing like in the dream, anyway.

Sherlock sighed, feeling the sweat now clammy on his skin, and decided to take a shower. This uncomfortable business was irrelevant now. He had a serial killer to find.

Sherlock was at the Starbucks trolley in the lobby sugaring his coffee when Roz strolled in from the outside, wearing running clothes and carrying her keys.

“Morning,” Roz said brightly. “Get anywhere?”

“No really. Why do you have your car keys?”

Roz made a face. “No place safe to run around here. It’s all made for cars; I had to drive to a park.” She inhaled his coffee steam appreciatively. “Want to get breakfast?”
“No,” Sherlock said.

“Well, too bad, because I’m driving and I’m hungry. Meet you here in twenty.”

Roz took him to a chain restaurant in a strip mall called Le Chick, a bright garish place with laminated menus and mediocre coffee. Roz ordered a pile of food and Sherlock got a side order of toast, feeling the coffee sloshing sourly in his empty stomach. John would have ordered something sweet for Sherlock to pick at, but Roz was not John. He pushed the thought resolutely away.

“So what do you want to do today?” Roz asked around a mouthful of eggs.

Sherlock took a sip of coffee and immediately a waitress swooped in and poured more from a plastic carafe. “I want to look at the crime scenes. Well, as close as I can get, anyway. Are Dallas and Keithville too far?” Now his coffee was no longer sweet enough. He set it down to add more sugar, and someone refilled it again.

“Too far to get there and back in a day, yes. So is Ft. Hood even if we could get on the base, which we probably can’t on our own. We can get to Conroe, and Araceli’s house is here in Houston—it’s been sold though.”

Sherlock clutched his cup protectively to his chest and ate a bite of toast. “Would the owners let us in?”

“We can ask. Have you ever had blueberry pancakes? They’re really good.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, taking a bite of toast for emphasis, and another waitress immediately refilled his coffee again.

The day was overcast and soppily humid, the ubiquitous Christmas decorations incongruous in the warm weather. Roz turned on the radio and Sherlock promptly turned it off.

“So,” Roz said, apparently unfazed. “Tell me what you think so far about Stephanie Poletti.”

“Why?”

Roz smiled at him without taking her eyes from the road. “Because I never trained as an investigator, but I was a good sergeant and I have a pretty good eye for when the coppers have been cutting corners. And because I’m going to write a brilliant book when you find this guy, so I want to know how you process.”

“I don’t want to be in a book,” Sherlock said in alarm.

Roz did glance at him now. “Why not? Private detective, seems like you could use the publicity.”

“I’ve had more than enough publicity,” Sherlock said flatly.

Stephanie Poletti’s apartment complex was sprawling and dull, all the units identical and arranged in clusters around equally identical swimming pools. Sherlock told a manager he was thinking of renting and spent a few minutes prowling around an empty unit, which didn’t tell him much.

“Our guy has some nerve,” Roz said when they were back on the freeway. “Even if he backed right up to her apartment, even allowing it was the middle of the day—he must have had blood all over
him. And what did he even put the fetus in?"

“Bin liner, probably,” Sherlock said. “And he wouldn’t have been covered in blood. Remember, the cause of death was always strangulation. By the time he cut into them the women were dead, so there wouldn’t have been any significant bleeding. If he learned as he went along, he probably waited a few minutes after strangling his later victims before beginning to cut—that’s why there was less blood at the scene of the later murders.”


“The Hernandezes,” Roz said reluctantly. “Araceli was the farthest along of any of the victims—eight and a half months. Her mother told me that they know it’s almost certainly impossible, but they haven’t given up hoping that her baby is still alive someplace.”

“Unlikely,” Sherlock said. “Even if it survived the initial removal, the killer would have had to want to keep it alive. There’s no evidence of that. He probably would have just tossed it into the bin liner and let it suffocate.”

John would have said something (“Sherlock!”), but Roz had been with the police too long. “Yeah,” she said sadly. “I suppose you’re right.”

They went to a Planet Baby, which gave Sherlock an instantaneous headache, and looked at the cots on the floor and the ones in boxes in the storeroom. They stopped for petrol and the loo and a veggie wrap for Roz and another coffee for Sherlock. Then they drove back to Houston and parked outside Araceli Hernandez’s former house.

“Nobody home,” Roz reported, coming back to the car. “I think they’re away for the holidays. I wouldn’t break in if I were you—this is Texas, somebody might shoot you.”

“This house is enormous,” Sherlock said, amazed. “All this for two people?”

“They get into that here,” Roz said, shrugging. “I saw some statistics once that said couples living in really large houses had a higher divorce rate than those in smaller ones. I suppose you can go days without even seeing your spouse in a place that size, so one day you wake up and you don’t know each other.”

Something about that niggled at Sherlock. Unhappy couples…”Is that what happened to you?” he asked with his usual directness.

Roz laughed. “Hardly. We had a townhouse. I knew him all right, I just decided I didn’t really want to be married to him anymore.”

Sherlock stared out the window at the vast houses rolling by. “What about Araceli Hernandez and Daniel Obringer? Were they happy?”

“Well…they’d had some trouble in the past, obviously. And Daniel didn’t want to start a family yet because he’d wanted to open his own consulting firm. Araceli had all the money, so of course the prosecution used that for all it was worth—if he hadn’t been convicted he would have inherited a pile. And then the old mistress turning up didn’t help things, as I’m sure you can imagine. But Daniel loved Araceli. I’ve met with him dozens of times over the past few years—you know his was the case that got me into this in the first place—and her death broke his heart. He didn’t do it.”

They drove in silence for a bit, Sherlock still thinking about unhappy couples…there was something
there, something he needed to follow up on, he just wasn’t sure what it was yet-- and then Roz said, “We’d better go round to the FBI. I promised Mike we’d check in.”

“You get along with them better than I do, drop me off first,” Sherlock said. “There’s something I want to look into.”

“What about dinner?”

“I don’t need dinner, I’m fine.”

“Oh no,” Roz said decisively. “You haven’t had anything but half a piece of toast and a gallon of coffee all day. You can’t work like that.”

“Fine, take me to a shop so I can get tea and biscuits.”

“I’ll take you to get tea, but tea and biscuits is not dinner. We’ll go through a drive-through someplace. What do you eat at home, when you’re out and about?”

“Fish and chips.”

“Well, they don’t have fish and chips here, but that gives me something to work with.”

Two hours later Sherlock let himself into his hotel suite, immediately depressed by the dull sameness of the room, its flat stale air and lack of any warmth or comfort. He put his milk in the tiny refrigerator, set a pot of water on the stove, and pulled out his box of fried chicken. Roz had assured him he would like it, although she warned him the biscuit was not a biscuit as such—“They’re quite tasty though, really.”

The chicken was good. He could have eaten all of it, but knew that would make him sleepy, and he needed to work, so he stopped after one piece and put the rest in his fridge. He ate all the biscuit too. Maybe he could have Roz get him more later.

Sherlock wiped the grease off his fingers, made a cup of tea, and set to work. Generally speaking his hacking skills were no better than average, but he was quite knacky at getting around the various privacy settings in Facebook—it was a useful skill for a detective. Stephanie Poletti’s page posed no challenge; her family had never tried to take it down, although a number of other pages had been set up, including a fundraiser and a memorial page for her students to write on. It took Sherlock only about half an hour to find what he was looking for.

Girls night out! with Julie Savage Perkins, Luz Garcia Valdez, Kim Sorensen Gerber. I was the designated driver, of course.

Kim Sorensen Gerber Everything okay? You seemed a little down.

Stephanie Rand Poletti Fine! Just found out Chris is going to be gone twice next week. He better not be getting his lovin on the road now I’m a big old whale LOL

Kim Sorensen Gerber You know he’s not! You’ve got hormone brain!

Julia Savage Perkins We’ll just have to go out again since you’ll be single for the night hot mama!
Sherlock grinned savagely. Chris Poletti, he thought, let’s see what secrets you were hiding six years ago, shall we?

He was about to go to Chris’s page when something farther down on the page caught his eye.

**Stephanie Rand Poletti** has checked in at **Planet Baby**

Sherlock tipped his head and narrowed his eyes. A marketing tool. If Planet Baby was using Facebook…he reached automatically for another laptop and then remembered that he was in the hateful beige hotel with only one laptop at his disposal. He growled in frustration. He needed several, so he could look at the victims’ Facebook pages *and* look into Chris Poletti’s email—it was astonishing what people put into email, especially six years ago before texting was so widespread.

Sherlock was on the verge of calling Roz and demanding her laptop when he remembered seeing a door marked “Business Center” downstairs. Oh, perfect: there would be at least two computers, hopefully, and with luck even a printer. He packed up his laptop and phone, made a fresh cup of tea, and left his room.

Sherlock was so deep into his research that he didn’t register anyone trying to get his attention until his earbud was tugged out, leaving him with one ear full of Vivaldi and the other full of Roz.

“Sorry, I didn’t think you could hear me,” Roz said. She was in her running clothes and smelled of sweat: morning already, then. “Doing okay?”

“How did you find me?”

Roz grinned. “Guy at the front desk complaining about ‘some English asshole hogging all the computers.’ Have you found anything?”

“I need a few more hours. Go have breakfast at that dreadful place we went yesterday and come back for me.”

“Would you like anything?”

“A chocolate croissant,” Sherlock said, not because he really wanted one but because he thought she probably couldn’t find one in this strip-mall hell.

Roz had barely left when a nervous young woman pushed the door open and said, “Sir…”

Sherlock glanced over his shoulder, raked her with his eyes, and said, “Go away and I won’t tell your manager what you’ve been up to.” He didn’t bother to deduce anything; everyone got up to something at work they didn’t want their manager to hear about. He plugged his earbud back in and returned to work.

Roz come back earlier than he expected, bearing a pink cardboard box and a venti Americano from the Starbucks trolley. “I didn’t know how much sugar you took, so I brought a lot of those little packets,” she said. “Who put the sign up?”

“What sign?”
She pushed the door in so he could see the sign taped to the front: *Business center currently closed due to scheduled upgrades. Sorry for the inconvenience.*

“The management here is very accommodating,” Sherlock said. He opened the box and peered in suspiciously, but the croissants looked good, and when he bit into one, it *tasted* good. “Where did you get these?” he asked, dumping sugar into his coffee.

“There’s a chain…they have quiches and so on too, so I just had breakfast there.”

“Do they refill your coffee?”

“No, you have to refill it yourself. Why?”

“Brilliant, let’s go there tomorrow,” Sherlock said. He crammed the rest of his croissant in his mouth and said thickly, “Let’s go.”

“Like that? Don’t you want to change?”

Sherlock looked down at himself and realized he was still in yesterday’s clothes and that his hair had taken on a distinctly lank feel. “Right. I’ll be down directly.”

Sherlock stowed the box with his remaining croissant and showered quickly. He had the scent now, he could feel it, and he knew where to go next. Unfortunately, this was likely to require the involvement of the FBI. He felt a moment’s nostalgia for Lestrade, but that inevitably led to thoughts of John, so he shut his brain down hard and concentrated on getting ready.

“Roz says you have something?” Rodriguez asked, when all the tedious pleasantries had been dispensed with (by Roz) and ignored (by Sherlock).

“Yes,” Sherlock said, pulling out the stack of paper he had printed out during his researches. He had thought about printing them in different colors of ink to match Ryan’s color-coding, but the printer only did black-and-white. Just as well, yellow might have been hard to read anyway. He fished a red pushpin from the box and pinned a printout below Stephanie Poletti’s picture. “Stephanie Poletti believed her husband was having an affair. He wasn’t, but he did sleep with a woman once whilst he was travelling for his work, a month or so before her death. As far as I can tell he never admitted this to her, but she certainly suspected.”

“You got all that from Facebook?” Roz asked in surprise.

“Well, not entirely, but from my past experience with law enforcement it might be best if you all assume that I did. Jennifer Levy.” He tacked up a second piece of paper. “We know her husband was having an affair. He wasn’t, but he did sleep with a woman once whilst he was travelling for his work, a month or so before her death. As far as I can tell he never admitted this to her, but she certainly suspected.”

“You got all that from Facebook?” Roz asked in surprise.

“Well, not entirely, but from my past experience with law enforcement it might be best if you all assume that I did. Jennifer Levy.” He tacked up a second piece of paper. “We know her husband was having an affair. He wasn’t, but he did sleep with a woman once whilst he was travelling for his work, a month or so before her death. As far as I can tell he never admitted this to her, but she certainly suspected.”

Rodriguez’s eyebrows went up. “That didn’t come up in the investigation.”

“She paid cash. Misty McCubbin—her lover was married, obviously, but had apparently sworn to her that he was going to leave his wife, and she suspected him of lying. Which he almost certainly was. Araceli Hernandez: her husband had had a previous affair, the woman was back in his life and clearly looking to rekindle things, and Araceli, rather naturally, was suspicious. As far as I can tell, however, Daniel Obinger was telling the truth when he swore he hadn’t been unfaithful since the previous occasion. And last, Lexi Davis. Her husband Tyler is a medic and Lexi rather frequently accused him of relationships with other women in the medical corps; in fact I believe he volunteered for his last tour in an effort to get away from her and her suspicions. I found no evidence that he was
seeing other women, but about two months ago he changed his relationship status to reflect the fact that he is in fact currently involved with another medic. A male medic.”

Everyone looked startled and then tried to pretend they hadn’t.

“So…all the husbands were cheating?” Rodriguez asked.

Sherlock shrugged. “Impossible to be sure, but the more important fact is that these women all believed they were cheating. They were suspicious and angry. This man, the killer—it’s an issue for him, maybe his wife left him because she thought he was cheating and he felt wrongly accused; maybe something happened with his parents. He blames the women.”

“We had a profiler take a look at the crime scenes,” Rodriguez said slowly. “She said something similar—that he stages the killings in the nurseries and cuts out the fetus to show that they don’t deserve to be mothers.” For the first time since Sherlock had met him, Rodriguez had lost his expression of benign affability; he was looking at Sherlock with an almost wary expression on his broad cheerful face. “She thought the selection was probably random.”

“It’s not random,” Sherlock said. He tacked another row of pages up. “All these women ‘liked’ Planet Baby’s Facebook page or ‘checked in’ with Planet Baby whilst shopping and they all joined Planet Baby’s ‘Planet Stork’ Facebook group for expectant mothers. Apparently this got them coupons and other discounts. And it also gave Planet Baby access to their Facebook accounts, and of course their email addresses, home addresses, due date…”

“So we’re back to Planet Baby,” Ryan said, folding her arms. She looked skeptical. “How does this get us any farther than we were two days ago?”

“Where is Planet Baby headquartered?”

“Right here in Houston,” Rodriguez said.

Sherlock nodded. “This isn’t just anyone at Planet Baby with access to pending orders. This is someone who is specifically tasked with following customers on social media. Someone whose job it is to snoop into all of the private data that people willingly give up in order for a ten percent off coupon and discount nappies.”

“It’s pretty thin,” Ryan said, looking at Rodriguez.

“It’s better than anything else we’ve got,” Rodriguez answered. “It might not be enough for a warrant, but I bet we won’t need one. I think Planet Baby is going to cooperate because think of the PR nightmare this is going to be for them otherwise—they’re going to want to be able to say they cooperated from the beginning.”

They spent another hour working out exactly what they wanted, and then they all trooped over to the Planet Baby corporate headquarters in Rodriguez’s enormous SUV, Sherlock and Roz under strict orders to keep their mouths shut unless absolutely necessary. Sherlock found both of the FBI agents deeply annoying for different reasons, but he had to admit that their good cop-bad cop routine was highly effective. When Rodriguez’s charm failed to move the HR director from his “maybe I can get ahold of our attorneys after the holidays and see what they think” uselessness, Ryan fixed him with a deadly stare and said, “Do you really want to take the chance that another of your customers will be murdered by one of your employees while you all drag your feet?”

The man looked at her stern unsmiling face and swollen belly, gulped, and capitulated. He meekly promised to speak with the company’s attorneys immediately and have the relevant employee records
available the following morning.

“Speaking of tomorrow,” Rodriguez said, after he and Ryan had high-fived and they all climbed back into his massive car.

“I was going to come in for half a day,” Ryan said.

“I’m flying out to Atlanta at one, but I can be here in the morning,” Roz said.

“Why?” Sherlock asked in surprise.

Everyone turned to look at him. “Christmas, Sherlock?” Roz said. “You remember, the reason for all those lights displays you hate so much?"

“I don’t hate them, I merely find them tasteless and garish,” Sherlock said defensively. He hadn’t forgotten about Christmas, exactly, he was just ignoring it. He had rather hoped that Roz would be doing the same as she had no family in the country, but it turned out that Roz had dozens of friends back in Atlanta who could not enjoy the holiday without her Christmas cake, and she already had firm plans for both Christmas Eve and Christmas Day. Sherlock sulked about this all the way back to the hotel.

“Chin up, love,” Roz told him as she dropped him off. “I’ll be back early on Boxing Day, and I’ll bring you back some digestives—I know where to get them in Atlanta.”

“The shops will be closed,” Sherlock said, still sulking.

“I’ve loads at home. I’ll bring you some and restock later.”

Sherlock cheered up a little the next morning when Roz took him to the French place for breakfast, where no one bothered his coffee and he could eat all the pastries he liked, and then they drove over to meet Rodriguez at Planet Baby. Rodriguez had persuaded Ryan she need not come in just to go along and pick up employee records, so the three of them endured a protracted session with the corporate attorneys and HR director before they were finally allowed to depart with the records.

“You’d better go on and get to the airport,” Rodriguez told Roz, checking his watch. “We’ll go back to the office and get these copied so Sherlock can take them with him over Christmas, and I’ll drop him off at the hotel.”

“I’ll see you in two days,” Roz told Sherlock, sounding for all the world like Mummy dragging him back to school. “Eat something besides biscuits, all right?”

“Have a lovely Christmas,” Sherlock muttered, trying not to sound as baleful as he felt.

Roz gave him a one-armed friendly squeeze and climbed into her car, honking merrily as she pulled out. Sherlock watched her go, feeling oddly bereft.

“All right, let’s get this wrapped up, I have a present to pick up for my wife,” Rodriguez said. “You want to come over tomorrow? I could pick you up. My wife would love it. We both have big families and there’s always some girlfriend or exchange student or lonely resident my wife picks up at the hospital…mostly the guys all go to the basement and drink beer and watch football.” He looked at Sherlock a little doubtfully, as though unable to picture him in this setting.

Sherlock certainly couldn’t. “You’re very kind, but I couldn’t impose. I’m quite looking forward to getting to work on these records, honestly.”
The hotel lobby was quiet. Sherlock scowled at the Christmas tree as he waited for the lift, hefting his latest stack of files; the young woman at the desk caught his eye and blanched, looking frightened. What on earth had he done to her? Oh, right, the business center. Well, at least he was unlikely to have much company there the next few days if he needed to come back. He rode up to his floor and trudged down the hall, balancing the files on his hip as he dug out his key card. The suite was as cheerless as ever. Sherlock had always disliked Christmas—he would have thought, up until more or less this exact moment, that nothing would have made him happier than to be holed up on his own away from all the fuss and festivities with a serial killer case—but now he found himself battling a wave of unmistakable nostalgia for Baker Street. Mrs. Hudson’s mince pies, lessons and carols in the background, the Queen’s bloody speech that John insisted on hearing that Sherlock always ignored. Last year John and Mary had come over and Mary had made some kind of punch that made them all tipsy, and they’d watched something deletable on the telly: John and Mrs. Hudson in the chairs and he and Mary on the sofa, giggling wildly whilst John shushed them. Had they already been planning the wedding? He didn’t remember. They’d been friends though, even then. Sherlock had assumed they would stay friends, had even assumed he would help to plan for the baby too—Mary had said as much. He’d bought books, whilst they were on their honeymoon. He knew about the testing Mary would need, being older; how the fetus would develop, the best hospital to deliver, the safest car seat, the importance of pertussis immunization for adults. But after that night at the White Hart Mary, too, had become unavailable and distant.

Sherlock sighed, feeling depressed. He abruptly decided to take a nap. He hadn’t slept in two nights. At least it would be a change of scene, he thought, shucking his shoes and jacket: he hadn’t touched the bed since he checked in.

Sherlock woke in the featureless twilight, slightly bewildered by a vivid dream in which he had shot Charles Augustus Magnussen. Well, that was weird. Perhaps because he’d been thinking about Mary before he fell asleep—hard not to, pregnant victims and all—but it wasn’t Magnussen’s death that had taken the Watsons away from him, it was the White Hart. But wait, that wasn’t right. In the dream it was something about Mary, something was off there….

Something tickled at the back of Sherlock’s mind, like something he’d deleted but shouldn’t have.

Sherlock shook himself briskly. Enough. He was feeling a lot better since his nap, and it was time to get to work. He had forty-five personnel files sitting on his coffee table and—he checked his watch—thirty-eight hours to work out which belonged to the killer. Time to show the FBI what Sherlock Holmes could do.

Sherlock first took out all the women and then all the married men (easy enough to work out from their tax forms). It would be foolish to eliminate them completely, but the odds were against them being serial killers. On the other hand, maybe a jealous woman, infertile perhaps?...still unlikely, most women lacked the strength to choke another adult to death with their bare hands. He’d come back to the women later if nothing panned out with the single men. He now had eleven files, statistically a higher than average percentage, although maybe not if you took into account that many were likely divorced. One or two were probably gay. Sherlock considered working out which ones these were and putting them at the bottom of the pile, but that would take time. Might as well start at the top and work his way through.

It didn’t take thirty-eight hours. It only took twenty-five; twenty-four if you took out time for making tea, pissing out tea, and making trips down to the business center’s printer. “Got you,” Sherlock said softly to the laptop, which was displaying the website of Houston U-Store-It (Se Habla Espanol, Amigos!). He stood up and paced to the picture of Queen Elizabeth he’d taped to the television so
that he’d have someone to talk to (why the Queen? He didn’t know, unless he was feeling guilty about missing her Christmas address which he never listened to anyway). “It’s Wayne Ellis, I knew it. God, I have to get over there. I’ve got lockpicks, I could be in there in second and then I could see…” the Queen frowned at him. “I suppose not,” Sherlock said, disappointed. Even if he could somehow find a way to get to Houston U-Store-It and back, he’d probably get himself shot. “I’ll have to wait until morning and go with the FBI, unless Ryan doesn’t believe me. Do you mind if I call you Liz? I can’t imagine that you would, given that you aren’t actually here.” The Queen looked disapproving.

Sherlock pulled his arms over his head and stretched. He was longing to talk his findings through with someone more responsive than a black-and-white picture, longing to get to Houston U-Store-it and see what was in Wayne Ellis’ unit, longing to talk to Wayne Ellis himself. Also, he needed to piss again, and he probably needed a shower. It struck him suddenly that it was Christmas night and he’d managed to get through most of Christmas already.

Feeling celebratory, Sherlock took himself off to the en suite and cleaned up, putting on his pajamas and dressing gown, and then went to the kitchenette to see about his Christmas dinner. The croissant was hopelessly stale, but he still had two pieces of chicken, and there was whisky and even chocolate in the mini-bar. Good enough. He carried his feast back to the sofa, toasted the Queen, and then collected his phone to check his messages while he ate. Voice mail: one from Mycroft—good God, really?—one from his parents, one from Molly, one from Mrs. Hudson, another from Mycroft. A text from Lestrade wishing him a Merry Christmas and one from Sally Donovan, of all people: Just talked to Roz. She says you’re brilliant. Have you drugged her or what? Merry Xmas. That made him smile. Nothing from John or Mary.

He played through the voice mails, tuning out most of them except Mycroft’s second; Mycroft surely wouldn’t have left two messages unless he thought it important. But Mycroft just said, “Call me immediately,” and disconnected. Merry Christmas to you too, Sherlock thought crossly, imagining Mycroft tucking into a great Christmas pudding whilst he made do with M&Ms. Sherlock looked at his watch, calculated that it was the middle of the night in England, and rang Mycroft.

“Out making merry, brother mine?” Mycroft asked, infuriatingly wide awake.

“It’s early evening here,” Sherlock said, sidestepping the question. “What do you want?”

“Perhaps I only wished to offer you the compliments of the season.”

“Then you would have left a message saying so, not ordering me to call back.”

Mycroft dropped the banter and got to the point. “Do you remember the media magnate who was murdered last fall?”

“Magnussen? Of course.”

“Since Magnussen sometimes had dealings with foreign nationals as part of his…information-gathering hobby, my office was peripherally involved in the investigation. Mostly my people confiscated anything that could be of a sensitive nature and looked into it ourselves. In the course of this we acquired a certain email correspondence. I have reason to believe from this exchange that Magnussen had become aware that a former member of Moriarty’s criminal network who had survived our purge was currently living in London under a false identity.”

“Which one?”

“The assassin known as Agra.”
“I thought you traced Agra.”

“We traced her to her original existence as a member of the Australian military. I’m having everything the Australians have sent to me immediately. We assumed she survived Moriarty’s takedown because we never captured a woman who seemed to be serving in any kind of wet work capacity, but Agra seemed to have utterly vanished. Apparently she’s merely gone dormant.”

“Why call me?”

“Because she could be a significant threat to you, Sherlock. Appearances to the contrary, it would a great inconvenience to me if you were to be killed.”

“I appreciate your overwhelming devotion and concern, but I’m in Texas. I can’t imagine she’d go to the trouble of following me here when she could have killed me in London at any time. Why are you bothering me?”

“I’ll probably have the materials from Australia tomorrow. I need you back here to help me track her down.”

“I have a case!”

“This is more important.”

Sherlock opened his mouth in outrage, caught the Queen’s eye, and shut it for a minute to consider. When he spoke, his voice was calm and almost gentle. “Actually Mycroft, do you know, it’s really not. I’ve got a serial killer who murders women and unborn children and destroys the lives of their families. You’ve got an assassin who might want to take out one consulting detective who matters, if at all, to only a handful of people.” He was a little surprised at the lack of bitterness in his voice. “I think I’ll stay where I am.”

“You matter a great deal to that handful of people,” Mycroft said quietly.

“Oh, Merry Christmas to you too,” Sherlock said, refusing to get sentimental. “Go have another cake.”

Roz texted from the airport, so Sherlock was waiting out in front of the hotel when she pulled up wearing her usual bright smile and a pair of sunglasses.

“Why are you wearing sunglasses?” Sherlock asked as he buckled his seatbelt. “I haven’t seen the sun since we arrived. It’s like London, only hideous and over-airconditioned.”

“Bit of a hangover,” Roz admitted cheerfully. “Ever been drunk on eggnog? Don’t.”

“Do you ever stop smiling?” Sherlock asked, genuinely curious.

“Nope.”

“Why?”

“My parents were alcoholics.”

“That’s a reason to smile?”

“Oh yeah. Everything’s fine at home, ta, no worries, we’re grand! Anyway, you can always find a
reason to smile if you look hard enough.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes reflexively, but then he considered.

“Did you bring me any Hobnobs?”

“Yes.” Roz’s eyes crinkled behind the sunglasses. “Two packages. Chocolate. They’re in my bag in the back.”

“Well, then, I suppose you have a point.”

Roz took her eyes off the road to glance over at him. “Bloody hell. You can smile! I didn’t think you knew how.”

“I’m just a bit rusty. Can you take the next exit? There’s an office supply shop there and I need to pick something up.”

Rodriguez met them in the lobby, wearing an unfortunate tie Sherlock deduced immediately had been a Christmas present. He and Roz chatted amiably about their holidays as they rode up in the lift.

“Lisa and I have been looking over the employee records,” he said as they got out on the fifth floor. “We’ve got them narrowed down to about a dozen we thought we should look at first—we’ll be interested in your thoughts on those, Sherlock.”

“Of course,” Sherlock said. “May I get a drink of water before we start?” He had no intention of gathering chummily around a conference table to share his thoughts when he’d already worked out the killer.

Rodriguez pointed him down the corridor to a water fountain and held the door for Roz. Sherlock took a drink and felt his phone buzz. Mycroft, predictably, evidently bent on hounding Sherlock until he came home out of sheer exhaustion. Sherlock ignored the call, but he carried the phone in his hand and peered at it as he wandered back down the corridor, stalling for the perfect moment to make his entrance.

“…the married men and the women,” Ryan was saying. “We can’t eliminate them entirely, but odds are that the killer—if he is at Planet Baby—is one of the single men.”

“He is,” Sherlock said, sweeping into the room and straight to the corkboard. He took a sheet of paper from the folder he was carrying and pinned it to the board with one of his new black pushpins. “Wayne Ellis, thirty-five, unmarried, Special Marketing. This is his house.” He pinned another page to the board with a dramatic flourish. “This photograph is from Google Earth, by the way. There’s no cellar, which initially discouraged me—it’s the traditional location for the serial killer trophy room—but then I realized that none of the houses around here have basements.”

“Too swampy,” Rodriguez said, looking confused.

“What it does have is a garage, as you can see, and parked in front of it we have a car. Now.” Sherlock steepled his fingers and looked at them expectantly. “Why does a single man with no hobbies except online gaming park his car in front of his garage instead of inside it?”

Roz was already there. “The van. The white van.”

“Correct.” Sherlock whipped out a third page. “A white van like this one, which is registered to
Wayne Ellis and which he bought, used, six and a half years ago. It’s a model favored by plumbers and electricians. Ellis must be moderately clever to have pulled this off for so long so I assume he has an escape plan in place, and what he needs for that escape is likely stored in the safety deposit box which he has at this bank. I wasn’t able to ascertain if he has a gun.”

Rodriguez was already typing into his laptop. “Pass me that file with his social security number? Yes, he’s got two registered in his name, and a concealed carry permit.”

“But I’ve saved the best for last. Since Ellis doesn’t have a cellar, I assumed he must be keeping his trophies—“

“What trophies?” Ryan interrupted, frowning.

“The fetuses, obviously. Why else would he cut them out? As I was saying he clearly keeps them someplace, so I started searching and sure enough, Wane Ellis rented a unit here.” Sherlock tacked up the last page, a printout of the homepage of Houston U-Store-It (Se Habla Espanol, Amigos!).

“Six and a half years ago.”

You could have heard a pin drop.

“Bloody hell,” Roz said. She stood up. She was not smiling now; her eyes were blazing and intense, and Sherlock thought again what a loss she had been to the police. “This is the killer, this guy? This is the bastard who murdered Araceli Hernandez and all the other women?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said simply.

“Well, let’s go pick him up,” Roz said.

“Now, wait a minute,” Ryan said, folding her arms over her chest. “We haven’t even looked at—“

“Yes, I have,” Sherlock said cuttingly. He flicked each file on the table in turn. “Gay, lives with a partner. Divorced, lives with girlfriend. Morbidly obese. Sixty-one years old and widowed. Divorced, spends a ridiculous amount of time on Match.com. Multiple sclerosis. Gay, has a boyfriend. Divorced, likely due to gambling addiction, heavily in debt. Lives with girlfriend; spends serious time with girlfriend; lives with two kids by previous marriage. No white vans or storage units among them. I also went through the women and the married men for the sake of completion, if you’d like to hear about them too.”

“If we bring this guy in and he’s not the killer, then we’ve shown our hand,” Ryan argued.

Sherlock tipped his head and narrowed his eyes at her. “That’s what happened before, isn’t it? You got the wrong man. That’s why you’re too pusillanimous to commit to—“

“What if we get a look in the storage unit?” Roz asked, talking over him.

“We’re not going to get a warrant with that,” Ryan said, tight-lipped.

“What if we get his absentee records?” Sherlock said.

“His what?”

Sherlock turned to Rodriguez. “Call that HR man, Nelson. Ask him if he can get the dates that Ellis called in sick or took a day off for the past six years.”

Understanding dawned on Rodriguez’s face. “Now that would get us a warrant,” he said, pulling out
his phone. He peered at the screen, evidently pulling up a contact, and called from the landline.

“Good morning, this is Special Agent Rodriguez with the FBI calling for Bob Nelson…oh?” He listened a moment, frowning a little, and then said, “That should be fine. I need the dates that one of your employees took PTO. Let’s say the last seven years. Yes. Wayne Ellis…okay. Let me give you our fax number.” He hung up and immediately picked up the phone again. “Shonda? I’ve got a fax coming, can you bring it right over when it comes along with a warrant request?” He set the phone down and said, “Nelson is out the rest of the week, but the HR secretary said she would have been the one pulling the information anyway, so she’s going to fax it over.”

“You should have warned her to keep quiet,” Sherlock said.

“She works in HR, she’ll be discreet,” Rodriguez said confidently, but Roz shook her head.

“No, he’s right. Secretaries talk. It’s how they keep things running.”

“I’m going to call Judge Harris’ clerk and give them a heads up,” Ryan said, standing and pulling out her phone. She paced out to the hallway. Sherlock sympathized; he felt rather like pacing himself.

A woman came in carrying a few sheets of paper and noticed Sherlock and Roz in their visitors’ badges. “Well, hi there. Did you all need coffee or anything?”

“No, thank you, I’m good,” Roz said politely. Sherlock didn’t bother to answer; his eyes were drawn to the fax cover sheet on top, bearing Planet Baby’s logo. “Is that it?”

Rodriguez took the fax and went over to the corkboard where he went down the row of pictures, clearly ticking the dates off against the list in his hand. Sherlock realized he was holding his breath. When he finished he turned to Sherlock with his eyes alight, and Sherlock let it all out in a whoosh.

“They match,” he said.

“Five for five,” Rodriguez said, grinning, but his eyes were as fierce as Roz’s had been. He held up his hand. “You were right.”

Sherlock had never high-fived before, but he lifted his palm a little gingerly and smacked it against Rodriguez’s, feeling ridiculous. Ryan strode back in and said, “Oh my God. The dates are right?”

“Every one,” Rodriguez said. “Get started on that warrant request. We want the judge to be able to read the request, so better you do it. They’ll be ready for us?”

“Yeah. Give me two minutes,” Ryan said, pulling the paper toward her and writing in a swift neat hand. “Go pull the car around and I’ll be down as soon as I get this back. I’ll bring the file.”

“Sherlock and I will follow you, give me the address just in case,” Roz said.

“I know it,” Sherlock said.

Ryan looked up as they were going out and said, “Hey—I liked your black tacks.”

Sherlock hadn’t thought anyone noticed. He smiled. “You gave me the idea,” he told her. “I left you the rest of the box.”

Roz and Sherlock were mostly silent on the ride over, tense with anticipation. Roz fiddled with the radio, but this time Sherlock left her alone. After a while she snapped it off and said, “What do you think he has in there?”
“The fetuses,” he said bluntly. “Maybe staged some way, maybe just lined up on a shelf. I accessed his internet shopping records, illegally of course, that’s why I didn’t say anything. He’s bought formaldehyde and glass jars, of the type used to preserve large specimens.”

“Ugh,” Roz said.

Sherlock’s phone buzzed again and he looked at it: Mycroft, now texting him: Call immediately. Urgent. He rolled his eyes and stuffed it back in his pocket, catching Roz’s sudden grin out of the corner of his eye. “What?” he asked.

“Did you actually call Ryan ‘pusillanimous’?”

Rodriguez and Ryan arrived before them (“Mall traffic,” Roz groaned) and the U-Store-It manager had already looked up Wayne Ellis’ unit and was waiting to lead them to it. They all followed him down a long corridor, Rodriguez chatting away cheerfully and Ryan tightening and retightening her low ponytail as she walked. Sherlock and Roz brought up the rear, keeping their mouths shut and trying to appear unobtrusive.

“Okay, this is it,” the manager said. He stopped in front of a wide bay door, like a garage, and turned a key in its lock. Rodriguez stepped forward to help and the manager waved him off: “It’s okay, they aren’t heavy.” He took hold of the metal handle and hauled up the door, then leaned inside and flipped a switch. They all looked into a small, square, windowless room, empty except for a few pieces of furniture. There was a moment’s silence.

“This isn’t right,” Sherlock said suddenly. His voice echoed oddly in the small space. “You have the wrong unit.”

“No, this is it,” the manager said, consulting his clipboard.

“Check again. Wayne Ellis rented a storage unit that measured ten by twenty feet. This is only ten by ten.”

The manager frowned and looked down at the clipboard again. “Hey, you’re right. And this hallway…all these units are supposed to be ten by twenty.” He lifted his head and frowned into the space, clearly nonplussed.

“It’s a false wall,” Sherlock said to Rodriguez. “He built a wall in the middle of the room.” There was an empty bookshelf at the back of the unit and Sherlock went over to it. “This is from Ikea, never used. He bought a cheap light bookshelf that he could assemble here and put against the wall, for no other reason than to block this part of it from view.”

“A door,” Rodriguez said. He joined Sherlock, pulling on a pair of latex gloves, and tugged the bookshelf away from the wall. It slid easily on the concrete floor, revealing a padlocked door.

“I can pick that,” Sherlock offered.

“So can I, but it would be a lot faster if our friend here has a pair of bolt cutters.”

“Coming right up,” the manager said.

The manager had the padlock cut in a moment, and Rodriguez handed him his clipboard back and said, “Okay. You go on back to the office, and don’t breathe a word of this to anybody. We’ll come by after we finish in here.”
The manager left, and Ryan joined Rodriguez at the door. He pushed it open and stepped in. Sherlock heard music, a faint electronic tinkling meant to sound like a music box, playing Brahms’ *Lullaby* in a low soothing murmur. “Oh my God,” Rodriguez said, and Ryan put a hand to her mouth, backed out of the hidden room, and walked swiftly to the corridor. Sherlock heard the sound of her being sick in a bin. Sherlock and Roz exchanged a glance, and then she gestured with her hand and Sherlock stepped in.

The room was dimly lit by a wash of colored, flickering light that appeared to be coming from the same place as the music: a plastic aquarium-like toy set on a small white table. A stuffed bear sat next to it. A white rocking chair was next to the table, and around them, arrayed like spokes of a wheel, were five white cots. Sherlock stepped to the first cot and looked at the jar that was placed in the exact center of the mattress. Then he went to the next cot, and the next, until he had circled the whole room and come back to Roz, who had her hand at her mouth. Tears were silently sliding down her cheeks. “Something’s not right,” he said.

Rodriguez was pulling out his phone. “What isn’t?” he said and then his phone rang. He looked at it, frowned, and answered. “Shonda?”

Ryan came back in looking resolute. “You okay?” Roz asked and she nodded.

“Okay, put her through,” Rodriguez said and said to the others, “It’s the secretary at Planet Baby, I’m putting her on speaker.”

“Agent Rodriguez?” A woman’s voice, nervous, came from the phone. “I thought I should let you know…there might be a problem.”

“What kind of a problem?”

“Um, Mr. Ellis appears to have left.”

“What?”

“I talked to the secretary in marketing at lunch,” the woman said, her words tumbling out in a rush. “And she just called to tell me that Mr. Ellis had walked out. Went right past her and to the elevators like he was going someplace. She wasn’t sure if maybe we were supposed to try and keep him here so she called me and I came over to look and see if it looked like, you know, he was gone for the day or had just stepped away for a minute, and I saw an icon on his computer, you know, something minimized, and I clicked it and it’s, like a webcam, and I can see you on it. Well, I can see your arm and the phone and some of the people you were with a few days ago, the tall lady and the pregnant one—“

Rodriguez was turning in place in the tiny room, staring around, and then they all fixed on the bear at the same time and Ryan said, “Oh God. It’s a nannycam.”

Sherlock stepped over and flipped the bear face down with a leather-gloved finger.

“Oh, wait, it’s gone dark,” the secretary said, sounding puzzled.

Rodriguez hit the phone, disconnecting her, and quickly pressed another number. “This is Special Agent Rodriguez with the FBI, I need Lieutenant Marcus, yes, that’s fine.” He looked up from the phone. “I’m getting the Houston police. He can’t have been gone more than a minute. Yeah. Deion? Mike. Listen, I need some guys in a hurry, I’ve got a serial killer running…yeah. Wayne Ellis, probably leaving his workplace right now, driving…” he felt in his pocket, making a frustrated face.

“2012 Silver Toyota Camry, license plate BK4 8819,” Sherlock said.
Rodriguez started to relay the information but then just handed the phone to Sherlock, who rattled off Ellis’ height, weight, hair and eye color, home address, work address, and the address of the bank where he kept his safe deposit box. Rodriguez took the phone back and said, “And a unit to the Houston U-Store-It on Willard, I need a crime scene secured until I can get our forensics team out here.”

Ryan was on her own phone, apparently talking to her superior at the FBI office. Sherlock longed to shout at her—he’d known the secretary would blab, half of Ellis’ department was probably staring at him and whispering, of course he would panic, he should have thought of some kind of surveillance or silent alarm in any case but he hadn’t seen anything, stupid, stupid, what was the point of smiling if you were going to be stupid—when Roz touched his elbow. “What did you mean before? What’s not right?”

Ryan and Rodriguez hung up at the same time and looked at each other. Ryan was pale under her makeup. “He’s pissed,” she said.

“Yeah, me too. Is forensics coming?”

“About an hour. Nobody touched anything, right? Except the bear.”

“You’re okay on that,” Rodriguez said to Sherlock. “We absolutely did not need half of Planet Baby taking pictures of the monitor with their phones.”

“But don’t touch anything else. Actually, let’s get out in the hall,” Ryan said, turning.

Sherlock glared at her back. “I’m not finished.”

She turned back, exasperated. “What—“


“What?” Ryan said, tense.

“Wayne Ellis just blew his brains out in the parking lot of his bank. He must have had the gun in the safe deposit box. The squad car was literally two minutes away when the call came in.”

“Are they sure it’s him?” Roz demanded.

“He did it in the car. Silver Toyota Camry, BK4 8819.”

The phone in Sherlock’s pocket vibrated again and his last tentative hold on his temper snapped. “This is your fault,” he hissed at Ryan. “If you hadn’t insisted on going through all this rigmarole we would have had Ellis in custody already and now—“

“Hey, Sherlock, it’s okay,” Roz interrupted. “The guy is stopped, that’s what matters, and now the others—“

“No,” Sherlock said, nearly shouting. He ran his hands through his hair in frustration. “No, it’s not okay. Don’t you see, that’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, this isn’t right. Araceli Hernandez was thirty-eight weeks pregnant. None of these fetuses are close to that size and degree of maturity. Araceli’s baby isn’t here, someone else’s is, and that means we missed one, but it also means there’s no evidence to link Ellis to that particular murder and there’s nothing to prove Daniel Obringer wasn’t a copycat killer. This doesn’t exonerate him.”
Roz made a sound like she’d been punched and Sherlock rounded on Ryan and said furiously, “If we’d managed to take Ellis alive you could have used that to bargain with him. But because of you —“

Ryan might have lacked the courage to take a stand on a suspect, but she was not backing down from Sherlock. She drew herself up to her full height and said coldly, “Get out of my crime scene.”

“Lisa—“

“Now.”

Sherlock turned on his heel and strode out, his whole body vibrating with fury, breathing hard through his nose. Outside the building he stopped to wait for Roz and began pacing in place. Roz came through the doors a few minutes later and leaned against the wall, eyes red. Sherlock paced off a few more lengths and then came back to lean against the wall next to her, letting his head thud back against the metal siding with a satisfying clang.

Roz kept quiet, mercifully, and after a few minutes Sherlock said, “If I buy some cigarettes will you let me smoke in your car?”

“Absolutely not.”

Sherlock sighed. “I haven’t smoked in over a year. I would now though.”

“We could go to a bar and get drunk,” Roz said. “I mean, I’m still hung over, but I can’t even begin to think of what I’m going to say to the Hernandezes. I talked to them on Christmas and they were so hopeful when they heard we were making progress…”

Sherlock was silent a long moment. “It doesn’t mean the baby is alive,” he said quietly. “More likely it was too big for the jar, or something else went wrong.”

“Maybe there’s, I don’t know, some kind of a clue?” Roz said, looking up. “Some piece of evidence, something you can find…”

Sherlock gave a little humorless huff of laughter. “You really think Ryan is going to let me look through Ellis’ house?”

“I was rather thinking we could come back when she’s on maternity leave.”

Sherlock looked up at the dull, pollution-grey sky and suddenly wanted desperately to be away from this place. He just wanted to go back to London. The thought reminded him of the text earlier, and he pulled out his phone without much interest. Mycroft again, of course.

You aren’t the one in danger. John Watson is in danger.

Sherlock went still, feeling as though all his anger and frustration had been doused in a bucket of ice-cold panic.

“Roz,” he said in a surprisingly steady voice, “I need to go to the airport. Now.”
The Lad That Loved You: Part Three

Chapter Notes

The good news: This marks the last appearance of S3 John, and after that it's rainbows and puppies and warm woolen mittens. And by after that I mean right after that, because I am posting Chapter 13 at the same time as this one. (Chapter 14 will post on Tuesday, back on schedule.) Many thanks to the eternally wise ancientreader for facilitating this decision!
The bad news: The S3 John/Angst Alert Level currently stands at red. Please proceed with caution.

There were no available fights out of Houston that night, but Sherlock was able to get a connection in Atlanta (“Of course you can. Everyone connects in Atlanta—they say when you die that’s where you get sent to heaven or hell,” Roz said) and made it onto the plane in Houston with minutes to spare. He had a three hour layover in Atlanta, of course. Sherlock was literally pulling his hair out by the time he landed in Atlanta—he had fisted his hands in it so often and so tightly that every time he let go several dark curly strands clung to his fingers—and Mycroft was still refusing to tell him anything illuminating. On balance, he decided that Roz had had the right idea earlier. He strode off the plane and headed straight to the nearest bar.

Sherlock downed two drinks in rapid succession and the bartender said sympathetically, “Holiday that bad, huh?”

Sherlock looked up. “Sorry?”

The bartender nodded at Sherlock’s empty glass. “Your family must be even worse than mine if you have to hit the airport bar the minute you’re out of sight.”

“Is your brother a megalomaniacal despotic control freak with far too much power for his own good?”

The bartender considered this. “I don’t know about that, but he stole my girlfriend and she had too much bourbon yesterday and told everyone his dick was bigger than mine.”

Sherlock winced. “Have one on me,” he said, pushing a handful of bills over. “Your penis looks more than adequate from what I can see.”

“Thanks,” the bartender said gloomily.

Sherlock peered at him, but aside from the size of his genitalia found he could not deduce much. The cultural cues were too different from those he knew. “I’m not actually leaving my family,” he offered. “I’m going there now.”

“Oh, man,” the bartender said, shaking his head. “In that case you better have another.”

Sherlock accepted the refill and sipped it while the man went to attend to two women—sisters, Sherlock deduced blearily—sitting farther along the bar drinking something frozen. He came back and leaned his elbows on the bar. “Do you have some good presents?” he asked. “Maybe you could
go on over to the duty-free, get a bunch of good hooch, outdo the megatron brother.”

Sherlock felt a moment’s envy for the simplicity of the bartender’s family dynamic before his inebriated brain snagged on the word presents. Damn. John had always bought a gift for Mrs. Hudson, with Sherlock’s money of course, and said it was from both of them, but now Sherlock had gone away for Christmas and had no gift. “Excellent idea,” he said, pushing another pile of money over the bar. “Thank you. Find a younger and more attractive date for New Year’s, that should take care of your brother.”

The bartender brightened. “Hey, that’s a really good idea.”

Sherlock found a shop advertising Georgia specialties, all of which appeared to feature peaches or pecans or occasionally both, and bought as much as he thought would fit in his carryon. He threw in a jar of jam for Donovan too, and a cookbook for Mrs. Hudson that listed “Southern fried chicken” in the index. He checked his watch and calculated he had barely enough time to go to the loo—he’d spent longer in the bar than he realized, and now his flight was boarding. He was just washing his hands when he remembered Molly. Double damn, he thought, and dashed into the bookstore on the corner. No, no, no, Fox News pundits really no, where were the girly books? He stumbled into a small selection of poetry, frowned in bewilderment at a sticker proclaiming one to be “Oprah’s Favorite!”, and snatched up one he vaguely recognized. A.E. Housman. Wait, wasn’t he gay?

Sherlock yanked at his hair again, spinning, and suddenly caught sight of a calendar covered in fluffy kittens. Good enough. He paid and sprinted for his gate.

Sherlock collapsed into his rather cramped middle seat—the flight attendant had to remind him to fasten his seat belt—and realized he was still clutching the bookstore bag. He hadn’t had time to put it in his carryon, now stowed in the overhead compartment. Moreover, he’d apparently ended up buying the poetry book as well as the cat calendar. Well, he had a long flight ahead of him and nothing else to do except worry about John and brood about Houston, so he might as well look at the book. He turned the pages absently, looking for the poem he remembered. It might have surprised John to learn that Sherlock hadn’t deleted poetry, he thought, but a detective needed to understand passion, and second hand knowledge was better than none.

He found the poem he was looking for toward the end of the book. It had been published posthumously, written for Housman’s best friend of fifty years, the unrequited love of his life.

Because I liked you better

Than suits a man to say,

It irked you, and I promised

To throw the thought away.

To put the world between us

We parted, stiff and dry;

'Good-bye,' said you, 'forget me.'

'I will, no fear', said I.
If here, where clover whitens
    The dead man's knoll, you pass,
And no tall flower to meet you
    Starts in the trefoiled grass,

Halt by the headstone naming
    The heart no longer stirred,
And say the lad that loved you
    Was one that kept his word.

The words blurred on the page. Sherlock touched his fingertips to the poem and thought that, for the first time, he understood the point of poetry. I will keep my word too, he thought. I made a vow at your wedding to keep you safe, and I will. I don’t know where I went wrong since then, but I will keep my word.

Sherlock stared down at the papers in front of him. He felt sick, and not from the fading effects of the whisky. The photograph showed a young woman in military uniform, twenty years younger and a good deal slimmer, but the big blue eyes were unmistakable. Agra. Mary.

“This doesn’t make sense,” he said. “If she was planted to get to John, why didn’t she kill him as soon as I turned up?”

“I don’t think she was planted,” Mycroft said.

Sherlock frowned at him. “Then what is she doing? Come on, Mycroft, you’ve had a twenty-four hour head start. Tell me what you know.”

“Anna Grace Ransome disappeared some fifteen years ago,” Mycroft said. “We presumed her to be the Agra assassin, who seemed to become active about the same time, but there are no known photographs of Agra. Mary Elizabeth Morstan was born in London in 1972 and died two months later. She rose from the dead more than five years ago, when she applied for reciprocity for her Australian nursing certification. The certification is a fake, of course, but Miss Ransome did have a year’s training as a nurse in the military before her exceptional shooting scores aided in her requested transfer to a specialized unit. Miss Morstan was hired as a PRN nurse at a long-term care facility in Worcester, where her mother had supposedly moved. According to the supervisor who hired her, she had recently returned from Australia to care for her dying mother, which was why she only wanted PRN work. In point of fact there was no mother—Erma Morstan died in 1976, a suicide. For the next two years Mary worked the occasional shift, developed a circle of friends, got a master’s degree online in health care administration, and had at least one serious boyfriend.”

“David,” Sherlock said through numb lips.

“Yes. Of course in that same period of time she killed at least three people of whom I am aware; I
suppose contract killing isn’t a terribly time-consuming occupation. After Moriarty’s death she told her supervisor that her mother had passed away and that she would be moving to London for a fresh start.”

“And then she managed to get herself hired on at John’s surgery?”

“Not at all. She was employed there less than a month later. John spent the first few months after your death drinking in a tiny bedsit and avoiding all human contact.”

Sherlock looked away.

“When he finally decided to get back on his feet, he had considerable difficulty in finding a job. I was on the verge of attempting to intervene when he was taken on by the surgery where Mary Morstan was the nurse manager.”

“But why? If she spent all that time crafting a new identity for herself, why jeopardize it by hiring John Watson?”

Mycroft shrugged a little. “Maybe she didn’t see it as a risk. Maybe she’d always liked the look of him. I cannot begin to hypothesize about the nature of Agra’s relationship to her former employer, but perhaps she missed her previous life more than she expected, and recognized a kindred spirit.”

Sherlock looked away again. “But if that’s the case then she’s not a threat to John. Why did you demand that I return?”

“If that’s the case,” Mycroft said. “We don’t know for certain. At any rate, someone knows who she is and sold that information to Magnussen. Magnussen then apparently sold it to someone else, or planned to do so. There are people in this city who would be very interested—or very threatened—by the knowledge that one of James Moriarty’s former high-ranking staff members is alive and well.”

“The Scowrers,” Sherlock said. “Can’t you do anything about them?”

“Not at present, no. I’ve nothing solid enough to get them convicted. If Agra were to come forward and tell us what she knew, then possibly, and if the information were valuable enough I could probably keep her out of jail.” At Sherlock’s expression he sighed. “Sherlock, you must understand that I can’t sit on this information forever. Anna Grace Ransome murdered people on British soil. I’m not the law, and I’m not above the law. All I can do is make her the best offer I can.”

“Let me talk to her,” Sherlock said. “I have a better chance of convincing her than you do. And at least give her until after the baby is born. You can’t let John’s baby be born in prison, Mycroft.”

“How long?”

“January 29. Give or take. And promise me you’ll beef up the CCTV coverage around their house and the surgery.”

“Already done,” Mycroft said. “Sherlock…please be careful.”

“She’s my friend,” Sherlock said with more conviction than he felt. “She’s not going to hurt me. But I’ll meet her in public if it makes you feel better.”

“Sherlock!” Mary sounded genuinely pleased. “I haven’t talked to you in ages. How are you? We had Mrs. Hudson round at Christmas and she said you’d been shot!”
“Nothing serious, just kept me off my feet a bit,” Sherlock said. “It was ages ago.”

“Oh good. And how was your trip to Texas? Did you solve your case?”

Sherlock did not want to talk about Texas. “Yes. But that’s not why I called. Now that I’m back in town and able to get around on my own again, I had a bit of time and thought maybe we could meet up to talk about the christening. You haven’t planned it all without me, have you?”

“Oh, God, I’ve planned nothing,” Mary said, sounding harassed. “What with the holidays and all…I supposed I hoped it would just sort itself once the baby arrived.”

“Well, it’s silly to plan anything before that happens, I suppose,” Sherlock said, “but I’m sure you’ll be run off your feet once she’s here, so if you’d like to brainstorm a bit I can do the legwork once I know what you’d like. And anyway it would be lovely to see you again.”

The tiniest hesitation. So he hadn’t been imagining it: Mary and John had been trying to slowly ease him out of their lives, but how could she refuse to see him now, after he’d planned her entire wedding? She’d have to give him a reason, and Sherlock was certain she didn’t want to go near the topic any more than he did.

“I’ve got to go in and get my blood pressure checked Tuesday next,” Mary said finally. “Want to meet me for lunch after? I’m thinking of taking the rest of the afternoon off to buy a few things for the nursery.” She did not invite him to accompany her.

“Perfect,” Sherlock said lightly. “Where shall we meet?”

Sherlock arrived first, settling into his seat and ordering a double espresso whilst he perused the menu. He’d slept badly, as usual.

“Sherlock!” Mary swooped down and gave him a swift kiss on his cheek before maneuvering her increased bulk into the chair opposite. “So sorry I’m late, that place never runs on time. Did you already order?”

“No. I was going to get the fish for you, as you’re meant to be eating more omega-three fatty acids, but I know pregnant women sometimes have strong aversions to seafood so thought I’d better wait. You look wonderful.”

“Nice, but you know I can tell when you’re fibbing,” Mary said absently, perusing the menu. “It’s only young women that glow. I look like something the cat wouldn’t bother to drag in.”

Mary did look tired, the bags under her eyes more pronounced than when Sherlock had last seen her. “Not at all. And anyway it’s right after the holidays, no one looks their best.”

The waiter came by and took their orders and Sherlock settled back, looking at Mary over the tips of his fingers. “So, have you settled on a name yet?”

Mary smiled, her face lightening. “Well, John fancied Isabelle, but I think I’ve got him talked round to Lily. So possibly Lily Isabelle, or maybe Lily Catherine after John’s mum…Lily Catherine Watson sounds a bit better, don’t you think?”

“What about your mother?”

Mary made a face. “My mum’s name was Erma. She’d rise from the dead to smite me if I gave that
name to someone else.”

Sherlock regarded her steadily. “What about Anna Grace?”

He saw the name register, all the bright happiness sliding off her face in an instant, leaving a cold, flat, blankness.

“So,” she said. She set down her water glass and squared her shoulders. “When did you start digging into my past? Was it before the White Hart, or after?”

Sherlock flinched, but as a master deflector himself he recognized the shot for what it was and ignored it. “I’ve never dug into your past,” he answered. “It came up as part of the Magnussen investigation. Your work, I assume? Nice touch, that book club bit.”

“It was quite a good book that month, actually, I was sorry to miss the discussion. Life After Life, have you read it?”

“No. I’m not interested in fiction.” He looked at her hard face and let a little of his genuine concern show. “Why didn’t you come to me when Magnussen threatened you? I could have helped.”

For a moment he thought he saw a flash of something in her eyes—acknowledgement, remorse—but it was gone too quickly to be sure. “You would have told John. John can’t know about this, can’t ever know that I lied to him. It would break him, and I would lose him forever. I can’t have that.”

“We can still help you.”

“We? With what, a lighter sentence? Witness protection?” She smiled without warmth, crossing her arms. “No thanks.”

“Mary,” Sherlock said, low and intense, “this isn’t going to go away. What Magnussen found out others can find out too. You’re putting John and the baby in danger as well as yourself.”

“I can protect myself and I can protect my family. I will do whatever I have to do to make sure of that.” She uncrossed her arms to lean forward. “And believe me, Sherlock, if you breathe a word of this to John, you will never hear from him again. You know I can make that happen.”

Sherlock stared at her. He saw the regret clearly now, along with something that might have been pity if he’d cared to look closer. For some reason he found it oddly consoling that Mary too had valued their friendship, but he knew she would give it up in a second to keep John, just as he would in her place.

“The offer stands,” he said quietly. “Please, Mary, think about it. You know you can trust me.”

“I trust myself,” she said, standing. “That’s how I survived this long.” She gathered her coat and handbag, then reached out and tipped her glass over so that the water spilled onto the seat of her chair and to the floor. “Say my water broke. They’ll put the food in a box for you.” She turned and walked away, never looking back.

“I don’t like this,” Mycroft said. “All you’ve accomplished is making Agra think that you’re the biggest threat to her security.”

“Would you please humour me and continue to call her by Mary Watson? She’ll come around eventually. She has to realize she’s out of options.”
Mycroft sighed loudly. “Explain to me again why you don’t feel that you can just tell John.”

“He wouldn’t believe me,” Sherlock said shortly, not wanting to explain further.

Mycroft looked at him a long moment. “Oh, Sherlock, really. If you had to get yourself all emotionally entangled, couldn’t you have done it before the man married an assassin?”

“I didn’t know!” Sherlock threw up his hands in exasperation, too exhausted to be anything but honest. “I still don’t really know. You should know that, you never tire of pointing out how inexperienced and foolish I am, so can you just shut up about it?”

Mycroft sighed again, but more quietly this time. “What if we involved Detective Inspector Lestrade? This is, after all, a criminal matter. Then he could be the one to talk to John.”

That was a tempting scenario, but Sherlock shook his head. “We can’t afford to involve the police, even Lestrade. Too much risk of word getting out and it might put him in danger as well.” Mycroft raised his eyebrows and Sherlock realized what he had said. “Would you like me to give you a list of all the people I care about so you can gloat over your superior detachment?”

Mycroft gave him a tight smile. “You were easier to work with before you died.”

Now Sherlock sighed. “That’s an idea. Maybe I should get out of town for the next month or so. That way when Mary is arrested I’ll be well out of it.” He thought briefly of going back to Houston to search for Araceli Hernandez’s missing baby, but dismissed the idea immediately: the FBI would never work with him, and anyway if he never saw Houston again in his life that would be fine with him.

“I have had a job offer for you, as it happens, but I should prefer you to decline. MI-6 wants to put you back undercover abroad.”

“Why?”

“An arms merchant is causing a good deal of trouble. It is a difficult situation and requires careful handling…but it would prove fatal to you in, I estimate, about six months.”

“Oh. Why don’t you want me to take it then?”

Mycroft sniffed. “I’m not facing John Watson on my own.”

John was on the phone with a chatty radiologist about a chest X-ray he’d ordered that morning (“can’t be sure but the way it looks on the lateral and with that smoking history…”) when Mary poked her head round the door and gave him a little wave.

“Hold on a sec,” he said and then into the phone, “Okay, thanks, I’ll do that,” and hung up. “Need to order a CT.”

“Order fast, they’re piling up out there,” she said. “I’m off.”

“Oh right. Just blood pressure or do you have to do the monitor?”

“The whole shooting match today—blood pressure, pee in a cup, monitor. She might even check my cervix if I’m really lucky.”

“I could manage that part,” John said. “Save you some time.”
“Ugh.”

“Are you coming back after?”

“No, it’s not worth it. I thought I’d stop off at that place near there and get that salmon with the sesame seeds on for dinner, you know, where you just have to put it in the pan.”

“Oh yeah, that was good. I thought you didn’t like salmon though?”

Mary made a little face. “I like tuna better, but only rare, and that’s right out; but I’m meant to be eating more fish. The omega-threes are good for the baby’s brain development.”

“Right,” John said vaguely. “Well, salmon’s nice, but I can pick up takeaway if you’d rather.”

“No, I don’t mind. You can get takeaway tomorrow when I’ve got the timesheets due.”

“Okay,” John said, half his mind still on the CT. He needed to remember to order contrast. “See you tonight.”

Mary had been right about the patients piling up; not that this was unexpected in January, but it was full dark when John finally left. He usually rode with Mary in the winter as the streets weren’t safe for a cyclist in the dark, but since she had left early he took the Tube. The Tube was crowded. He saw a dark curly head in a seat several rows up and his heart gave a funny little squeeze, but then the head turned and he saw it was just a kid, a uni student maybe, dark-eyed and laughing. He looked deliberately away from the pretty boy and thought about home, warm lighted windows, Mary making dinner in the kitchen.

Only she wasn’t.

John let himself into the cold dark kitchen and frowned, looking around. “Mary?” He realized belatedly that Mary could be napping, but discarded the idea immediately: the house had the dead, stale feel of a place that has stood empty for hours. He realized he hadn’t seen the car either. Maybe she’d thought of something else she needed from the shops? But no, she would have texted him to pick it up. John checked his phone again: only the text from a few hours ago. BP still up but baby looking good. Back here Tuesday! He frowned and tapped out a text.

Home. Where are you?

John moved to the kitchen and turned on the light, checking in the refrigerator just to be sure: no salmon. Where could Mary have gone? He pulled up his calendar on his phone, which Mary synced with hers: just the prenatal visit. No reply to his text. He called her, but the call went straight to voice mail.

John set the phone down on the kitchen table, stared at it a moment and decided that no, he was not overreacting. He himself had been abducted with no warning and (as far as he still knew) for absolutely no good reason a little more than a year ago. Either this was Sherlock’s fault—and it probably was—or it wasn’t, but either way he was John’s best hope of getting Mary back.

Sherlock was in a bar talking to a bouncer when his phone rang.

“They say that lot used to work for the Irishman,” the bouncer said, rubbing his huge neck. “They claim to provide the same types of services, but they’re a bit small-scale so far. Nothing big that I know of.”
“I wouldn’t mind something small if it put them out of business,” Sherlock said grimly.

The man shrugged. “They serve their purpose,” he said, and that was when Sherlock heard his phone. “Excuse me,” he said, checking the screen, and then slid off his stool so quickly it almost toppled over. “John?”

“Mary is missing,” John said. He sounded calm enough, but Sherlock knew John well enough to know that he was half a breath away from shouting and throwing the furniture. “She left her prenatal appointment three hours ago and hasn’t arrived home.”

“Stay where you are,” Sherlock said, already moving for the door. “I’m on my way. Give me the address of the prenatal clinic and the exact time she left.”

John gave it to him and Sherlock disconnected, immediately dialing Mycroft.

“Mary’s gone. Get a car over to John’s immediately, I’m headed over in a cab.” He gave Mycroft the information and hailed a cab, hitting John’s number as he did so. “Have you checked the house? Is anything missing?”

“She never got here. Her car’s gone, and she was going to—“

“I’m sure you’re right, but just double check,” Sherlock said calmly. If Mary had decided to disappear, better that John be the one to find the evidence himself.

“Hold on,” John said. Sherlock heard footsteps, stairs, doors creaking. A drawer opened. John’s gun, Sherlock thought. Then John was back on the line: “Everything’s where it should be. What’s going on?”

“I don’t know yet. Stay in the house,” Sherlock said. “This is Mycroft—I have to take it.”

“We have Mary on the CCTV at the end of the street, apparently arriving for her appointment,” Mycroft said crisply. “There’s no CCTV at the car park, unfortunately, but there are two on the street, and we have an image of her leaving an hour and a half later. There is a man in the passenger seat next to her.”

“Any possibility of identification?”

“None. He’s wearing a hat and has his head down.”

“What about after that?”

“We’re checking the other cameras in the vicinity to try and establish where they went next. I’ll ring you as soon as I know.”

Sherlock hung up and chewed his lip, twisting a hand into his hair as he tried to will the cab to go faster through the sheer force of his impatience. Fortunately he’d not been far from John’s neighborhood—if he’d been at home in Baker Street, it would have taken him far longer to get there.

His phone rang: John. “What’s happening? Should I phone the police?”

“Mycroft’s already on that. I’m almost there—meet me outside in five minutes, there should be one of Mycroft’s people with a car.” He hesitated, glancing at the cabbie. “You might want to come prepared.”

“Way ahead of you,” John said.
Sherlock disconnected and called Mycroft back. He was starting to think he should carry two phones; then he could talk to both of them at the same time. “Well?”

“They got on a main road. Harder to track,” Mycroft said. “I’m sending you what we have.”

The cab turned onto John’s road and Sherlock dug into his pocket for his wallet, fishing out a handful of bills and flinging it at the man as he dashed out. John was already outside, eyeing the black car without enthusiasm.

“Come on,” Sherlock said and threw himself in, peering at his phone’s screen to see the map coordinates showing where Mycroft’s people had traced Mary’s car. “Go south and pick up the main road.”

“Sherlock,” John said in that same deadly calm voice. “What the hell has happened to my wife.”

Sherlock sent a text to Mycroft, Update coordinates as you get them, and took a deep breath. “Mary is not who you think she is,” he said.

“Sherlock, right now, I have more than enough drama in my life without you adding to it,” John said tightly.

“I’m not. No, listen, I’m not. This situation actually has nothing to do with me.”

“Really,” John said, tone dripping disbelief.

Sherlock had been trying desperately to think of how to break the news to John gently, of how John himself would have done it, but now he gave up. It wasn’t going to go well in any case. “Mary’s real name is Anna Grace Ransome. She trained as a marksman in the Australian Defence Force and went freelance as an assassin known as Agra. You might remember the name as one of Moriarty’s more skilled subordinates. She began building her Mary Morstan identity five years ago and assumed it full time after Moriarty’s death, at which point she apparently retired from active work as a contract killer. I believe that her relationship with you is genuine, by the way. Her cover was blown some months ago by someone who sold the information to Charles Augustus Magnusson, whom Mary killed. Unfortunately it appears the information had already been passed on.”

“No,” John said. He was shaking his head. “You’ve got the wrong woman. That’s not Mary.”

“There is no Mary, John,” Sherlock said tiredly. “Mary Morstan is a fiction. I’m sorry.”

John looked out the window. There was a long, terrible silence.

“How long have you known?” John asked without turning around.

“Three weeks,” Sherlock said and then, remembering Mary’s words, added hastily, “I wasn’t looking. Anything sensitive or international that came up in the Magnusson investigation was turned over to Mycroft’s people and he recognized her from photographs.”

Now John looked at him. “And you didn’t tell me?” His voice was filled with a horrible icy calm that scared Sherlock more than the shouting he’d expected.

“Mary didn’t want—“

“Since when have you given a fuck about what anyone else wants? I’m your best friend!”

Oh, are you? thought Sherlock, stung into bitterness. But John was still glaring at him and he could
hardly tell him the real reason, so he muttered lamely, “I thought it would be better if she told you herself.”

John laughed, a sharp mirthless bark. “You’re lying. At least that’s one thing I’ve finally learned, isn’t it? How to tell when you’re lying? Lying that you’re dead, lying about my wife—“

Sherlock realized he was pressing his back against the car door. He made himself sit up straighter. “I’m not lying to you,” he said quietly.

John was breathing hard. “I think you didn’t tell me on purpose. I think you were hoping for something like this to happen, something to get her out of the way.”

Sherlock was shocked into open-mouthed speechlessness. He had no idea what he might have said had his phone not buzzed with incoming data. New details on Mary’s car, thank God. He pulled up the map and frowned at it, a picture forming tantalizingly out of reach.

“You’d better find her,” John said harshly. “You’d better find out where they took her or so help me God, Sherlock—“

“The Masonic temple,” Sherlock said under his breath. He leaned forward and spoke swiftly to the driver, giving him vague directions toward the river; Mycroft hadn’t worked it out yet and when he did he would undoubtedly tell the driver to stop and keep John and Sherlock out of harm’s way until the police arrived. He felt the force of John’s glare on the back of his neck as he simultaneously tapped out a text: I know where they took her. Mycroft doesn’t. When he works it out he’ll tell the driver to stop and wait for the police. Be ready. He heard John’s phone give a soft chime as he received the text and sat back against his seat. John read it, gave a curt nod and looked out the window again.

They rode in a tense silence for several long minutes before John said harshly, “Why didn’t you work it out before?”

“Sorry, what?” Sherlock said, stalling.

“You heard me. You deduced every last thing about my other girlfriends right away. How could you have missed something like this? Why didn’t you see it the first night you came back, when it might have—“ John cut himself off, lips pressed into a thin line.

Sherlock had had plenty of time to ponder this question himself over the past few weeks. He wasn’t the most insightful of people, but even he could work that one out. The first night he came back. He remembered her clearly, the shards of information not quite fitting together, the pretences not quite made real, LIAR, but then Mary had smiled at him with genuine warmth as he stood bleeding and abandoned and bewildered on the pavement and said, “I’ll talk him round.” Clever girl, to bring him closer instead of push him away. Had she seen him so clearly, his lonely neediness? How pathetically grateful he’d been.

But once again he couldn’t say that even to John, so again he settled for a half truth. “You didn’t love the others.”

“Oh, you did it all for me, did you,” John snarled, real anger in it.

“Yes!” Sherlock was frustrated enough to get angry himself now. “Of course I did! Were you not even listening at the wedding when I—“

His phone rang. Sherlock, who had never been so happy to see his brother’s number, snatched up the phone and said quickly, “Yes?”
“I think we’ve worked out where they’ve gone,” Mycroft said carefully. “I’ve got police on the way now and I want you to promise that you won’t go in—”

“Of course not,” Sherlock said, touching John’s elbow and jerking his chin toward the door. “Where do you think it is?”

“Close to the river, but…”

The car slowed behind a knot of traffic and Sherlock said “Go,” to John and scrambled out his own door, stuffing the phone into his pocket and leaving his door open to slow the driver down further. He heard the man’s startled shout and a car behind him honked crossly as he dashed across the street, John on his heels. He was busy visualizing the route to the temple, the alleys and back streets they would need to take, picturing the windowless building with its back service entrance. It should take them no more than ten minutes, he thought, and maybe the police would be there when they arrived.

A month ago Sherlock would have been thrilled to be darting through the streets of London with John by his side again, but now his mind was so choked with anxiety he barely noticed. They were silent except for Sherlock’s breathless directions. Precisely nine minutes after they had left Mycroft’s car he rounded the corner to the alley that ran behind the temple and saw a lorry backed up to the service door.

The lorry was painted—it had a logo of some kind on the side—but in the orangey glow of the London night it appeared washed out to a pale grey and Sherlock’s mind stuttered, *the white van,* and he ran full out. He passed the front of the lorry without even looking at the driver’s seat and skidded around the back only to come face to face with two men coming out the temple door, carrying something long and heavy between them wrapped in plastic. Sherlock did not pause. He crashed directly into the man in front, knocking him sprawling, and leaped over the plastic-wrapped burden to grab the second man by the shoulders and smash his forehead as hard as he could into the man’s nose. The man dropped heavily and Sherlock, seeing stars, rounded on the first man and stomped his heel directly into his face.

“Lorry’s clear,” John said, coming up behind him and dropping to his knees. He stuck his gun into his waistband and tore at the plastic tarp. Sherlock grabbed for the jacket of the man groaning at his feet and found a knife, which he fumbled open and passed to John. John slashed the plastic straight down the middle, dropped the knife, and folded forward. He made a sound Sherlock had never heard from him, a horrible, gut-deep howl of anguish.

Mary had been shot in the middle of the forehead, the entrance wound surprisingly small and neat. Sherlock knew the back of her head would be a different story, but all that concerned him in that instant was how long ago it had occurred. He reached for her neck, fingers brushing the top of John’s head; the skin was still warm.

“John, “Sherlock said urgently, “You have to start chest compressions, we can still save the baby—I had a case, the mother was killed but the baby may have survived, I couldn’t save that one but we can save this one, John. Please.” He found the knife and fumbled for the front of Mary’s shirt.

“What the hell are you doing?” John bellowed. He pushed Sherlock, hard, so that Sherlock fell backward and landed on his backside and elbow on the wet alley. The knife clattered away. At some point it had begun raining, a chill drizzle that was running down the back of his neck. “Get the fuck away from her, just leave us alone!”

The sudden bright wash of red-and-blue lights filled the alley; *ambulance,* Sherlock thought frantically. He tried to scramble to his feet, the back of his coat and trousers soaked through, but slipped on an oily-slick patch and fell again. “We need an ambulance!”
“Stay where you are and put your hands on your head!” an unfamiliar voice shouted and Sherlock’s heart sank but then he heard the blessedly welcome sound of Lestrade saying, “It’s okay, that’s Sherlock Holmes—do we have an ambulance? Oh, Jesus.” He had reached the debacle at the doorway. “Jesus Christ. Sherlock. Are there more of them inside?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock said. He realized distantly that he was shaking so badly his teeth were chattering. The rain was picking up, making a grey curtain between him and everyone else. Lestrade was shouting and gesturing, police and paramedics and Mycroft’s people pouring into the alley and into the temple and surrounding the bodies on the ground, legs between him and Mary, between him and John. He was cut off from all of them, the cold rain soaking into him as he sat on the filthy pavement and knew that he had failed, failed John and Mary and their baby as utterly as he had failed in Houston. He had not protected John. He had not kept his vow. He had failed.

The paramedics started resuscitation efforts immediately and the hospital performed an emergency Caesarian, but it was too late. The tiny girl had been without oxygen too long and could not be revived.

Sherlock heard none of this from John, who would not speak to him, but from Mycroft. He went round to John’s the day after—not because he would be any use, or would know what to say, but it was what one did, wasn’t it?—and then stood in front of the house biting his lip until finally Harry opened the door.

Sherlock had always got on fairly well with Harry. Online she could be bold, even brash, but in person she was restrained and unsentimental and less annoying than most people. Today she looked tired, her short frosted hair nicely arranged but her eyes heavy and shadowed.

“Sherlock,” she said. “John’s having a bit of a lie-down, I’m afraid.”

“I could wait,” Sherlock offered. It would be horrible, sitting around in John and Mary’s kitchen making small talk over tea, but he didn’t know if he’d be able to work up the courage to come back again.

“I don’t think…” Harry paused, rubbing the back of her hand against her mouth. Wanted a drink badly, Sherlock thought. “I don’t think he wants to see you just now. I’m sorry. It’s been a rough time for him…”

“No, I understand,” Sherlock said. He felt suddenly horribly cold and exposed, standing out on the pavement without his coat. Why hadn’t he dropped it by the cleaner’s on his way? That must be why he felt so frozen and numb. “I’ll phone later.”

“All right. I’ll tell him you came,” Harry said and closed the door quietly, leaving Sherlock alone in the bitter January chill.

Sherlock did not sleep that night, or the night after, so he should not really have been surprised when the night before the funeral he dozed off on the sofa. In the dream he was back in Houston chasing the white van, knowing if he caught it he would find Araceli’s baby inside. But when he finally caught up the dead baby in the jar was not Araceli’s but Mary’s, her hair fine blonde, her eyes wide and blue. He could hear laughter as he clutched at the jar in horror, and he realized it was Moriarty. “Sherlock is a looooooser,” Moriarty sang, high and delighted, and the jar slipped through Sherlock’s fingers and smashed on the ground.
Sherlock jerked awake, panting and clammy with sweat, and put his face in his hands. Well, that was a new nightmare. Of the two he almost thought he preferred the version where he was beaten and raped. He went to the kitchen and drank a glass of water, eyes gritty and painful from lack of sleep, and checked his watch: four in the morning. He wondered if John were awake. Might as well shower, he decided; he certainly wasn’t lying down again.

Sherlock shaved with care and dressed himself immaculately in his best dark suit, even putting on a tie and shining his shoes. When he had finished it was still dark, so he sat down in his chair and waited. Mrs. Hudson came up a few hours later with tea, wearing her own dark dress and with her eyes red-rimmed and sad. She fussed around a bit, but Sherlock tuned her out. About half an hour before they were due to leave Sherlock heard the sound of his doorbell. He would have ignored it—he certainly wasn’t meeting with a client right now—but Mrs. Hudson’s low heels went tapping down the front hall, and a moment later Lestrade appeared in the doorway. Sherlock just looked at him.

“Hey,” Lestrade said, looking awkward. He crossed the room and perched on the edge of the sofa, clasping his hands. “Hell of a mess.”

Sherlock saw no reason to affirm something so ridiculously self-evident, so he said nothing.

“Look, Sherlock…” Lestrade rubbed awkwardly at the back of his head. “You need to stay home today.”

Sherlock frowned. “That would be unconscionable. Just because I ignore most social mores does not mean I am unaware of them. And how could I possibly be needed here?”

Lestrade sighed. “John’s really angry with you,” he said bluntly and held up his hand when Sherlock opened his mouth to protest. “I know, I know the whole story, Mycroft filled me in. It’s not your fault. On some level John knows that, but Mary’s not here anymore for him to be angry at, and that whole thing, her being an assassin and all, it isn’t real to him yet. I mean, I can barely get my head around it, and I wasn’t married to her. I know you aren’t to blame for this, but John’s furious that you didn’t tell him sooner. I think it’s kind of got mixed up in his head with you not telling him you were alive all that time, and now he’d just really, really angry. If he sees you at the funeral I think there’s a good chance he’s going to lose it.”

“But,” Sherlock started and then stopped, unable to articulate that if he did not go to the funeral then he would have failed once again, utterly, at this last thing, what he now realized was the only thing that had ever really mattered: being John’s friend.

“I know,” Lestrade said unhappily. “I’ll make sure he knows you wanted to come, okay? I mean, eventually. Right now I think he just needs some space.”

Sherlock could think of nothing to say to this. He was the last person on earth to know anything about what John needed; John thought Sherlock was the cause of all his misery in the first place. All he could do was make things worse, apparently. He closed his eyes. “All right,” he said mechanically.

Sherlock shut himself down until Lestrade was gone, taking Mrs Hudson with him in his car. He pictured them driving through London and out of the city to the little church where John and Mary had been married. He pictured the mourners, many of them the same people who had gathered less than a year ago, dressed now not in bright summer finery but in dark winter sorrow. He pictured the flowers, the organ, the service; he sat in a back pew and watched, spectral and silent, as the speakers came forward. Janine, wiping away tears; it occurred to him for the first time that Magnussen must have been blackmailing Mary a long while for her to have had enough time to befriend Janine so
thoroughly. John sat with Harry, stiff in his dark suit, spine ramrod straight. The coffin. Would there be one coffin or two? Would they put the baby with Mary, or was she in her own tiny coffin? It bothered him that he did not know. For some reason the thought of the tiny little coffin filled him with a strange horror—a holdover from the case in Houston—so in his mind he placed Lily in her mother’s arms, wrapped in a white blanket as soft as a cloud, never to be alone.

Days passed.

Sherlock did not take cases, did not answer his phone or the door, and spoke to no one except Mycroft and Lestrade. The Scowrers had been caught inside the temple on the night of Mary’s death, but Lestrade brought Sherlock copies of everything found in the building as well as of their statements. “If there’s any more of those bastards out there, I want to make sure we get them,” he told Sherlock.

Sherlock could not bring himself to care overmuch if the last remnants of Moriarty’s network were destroyed or not, but it was something to do, so he did it. Mostly he just waited. He felt suspended in a kind of limbo between his old life and whatever came next, drifting while he waited to see what John would do.

More days passed. Sherlock looked at his violin, but did not play. His inbox piled up. Mrs. Hudson brought food and every few days he ate a little of it. He slept, when he could no longer avoid it, with the lights on. He waited.

Finally, late one raw night, Sherlock heard the sound of the door opening downstairs. Too late for Mrs. Hudson to be going out. It could be Mycroft, but it wasn’t—Sherlock knew that quick, decisive step. He stood up, mouth going dry and his heart hammering against his ribs, and wished abruptly that he were not in his pajamas.

John strode into the room, paused for a split second whilst his eyes located Sherlock, and then kept going. Sherlock did not raise his hands or even turn his head; he let the force of John’s punch knock him to the floor. John grabbed him roughly by the arms and hauled him up, shoving him hard against the wall.

“Look at me,” John growled. “Open your eyes, God damn you. Look me in the eye and tell me the truth for once in your fucking life.”

Sherlock opened his eyes and stared into John’s hard, furious face. John’s hands were painful on his shoulders, but it was his gaze that kept Sherlock pinned to the wall.

“Five years,” John started and then he stopped, apparently calculating, and gave a short, mirthless laugh. “More than five years now. Two years of you pretending you didn’t give a fuck, two years of you being dead. So many times—” his voice broke and he took a long breath through his nose, lips clamped together, and then went on. “So many times I thought you might say something. Shit, the night at the pool…” He shook his head. “If you’d said anything, just once, I never would have let you go. Do you understand that? If you’d said something when you came back, I never would have asked her to marry me.” His voice had risen to a shout and Sherlock prayed that Mrs. Hudson would have the sense to stay put for once and pretend not to hear. John shook Sherlock, hard, slamming his head back against the wall with a force that made his teeth snap. He tasted blood.

“But no, you had to keep telling me, telling everybody, how love was a chemical defect, how you didn’t care, had to prove it by making me watch you fake your death, never said a fucking word until the day I married someone else.” Sherlock closed his eyes and dropped his head and John grabbed
his chin and forced it up, pushing harder into Sherlock so that they were practically nose to nose. “It had to be your way,” he snarled. “Always your way.”

Sherlock realized abruptly that John was hard, his erection pressing into Sherlock’s thigh. The shock was literally visceral, a jolt in his stomach, and to his shame and bewilderment Sherlock felt his own arousal stir in response.

John felt it too. He laughed again, harsh and bitter. “I could take you right now, couldn’t I.” His eyes were like fire, burning. “Did you know all along? I could turn you around and fuck you into this wall and you’d let me. You’d suck my cock if I told you to. You’d spread your legs. I’d grind your face into a bloody pulp against the wall and fuck you dry and come inside you and leave you here raw and bleeding and you. Would. Let me. Wouldn’t you.”

Sherlock felt the sting in his eyes and the back of his nose. He had never allowed himself to think about it, not even after the White Hart, had never pictured it, but he knew John was right. He would not have denied anything he could give John in this moment anyway, but he knew the truth of John’s words. He would let John use him and hurt him and he would welcome it, because it was better than not having John at all, but it would tear his heart to shreds.

“Well, too bad,” John breathed. He shoved himself off of Sherlock, taking a step back. “It’s too late. You lied to me and you lied to yourself, and I never want to see you again.”

Sherlock stared at him, unable to process his words. John turned away, blowing out a breath and straightening his jacket.

“But—” Sherlock’s legs were trembling and his vision swimming; he was glad he had the wall for support. “What are you going to do?”

“Don’t know yet.” John shrugged, almost lightly. “I might join an aid organization, or I might go home and drink myself to death. I haven’t made up my mind.” He looked back at Sherlock one last time and for an instant Sherlock saw the pain in his eyes. He opened his mouth, then shook his head, shut it, and walked out without another word.

Sherlock slid down against the wall until he was sitting with his back against it and his forehead resting on his knees. He felt one tear and then another fall into his lap.

Mrs. Hudson’s footsteps sounded very loud in the silence of the building, though Sherlock thought she was probably practically tiptoeing up the stairs. He lifted one hand palm out—please go away, I’m not going to shoot up or hang myself from the light fixture, just please leave me alone—without raising his head, and after a moment the tiptoeing footsteps receded down the stairs.

He sat there a long time, until the tears dried and the cold trembling receded into a vast, dead, emptiness. I might as well go to bed, he thought; nothing I dream will ever be worse than that.

Before he did, though, there was one last thing he had to do. Sherlock carefully unfolded himself from the floor and found his phone, which he used to send a short message to Mycroft.

*I’ll take the MI-6 job. SH*

He was lucky, that time. He didn’t make it back.
The Man At The Falls: Part One

Chapter Notes

As a couple of sharp-eyed readers have noticed, one of the inspirations for this comes from Star Trek. So rest in peace, Leonard Nimoy, and may the love of those who adored your most enduring character follow you as you boldly go to that undiscovered country from whose bourn no traveller returns.

The talented Khorazir made beautiful art! "Tipsy"

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This time Sherlock returned to himself slowly, not with a jolt as he had before but as though he were rising through heavy water. He became aware of the metal under his hands, the chill air of the basement, his own uninjured living body. He was almost unbearably exhausted. He did not open his eyes.

“Something’s wrong.” Mycroft’s voice sounded very far away. “Is he back? What’s wrong with him?”

Sherlock let the noise fade, keeping his eyes closed. He had died alone and in pain and afraid, but what haunted him were the regrets that filled his last moments.

*If you were dying, in your very last seconds, what would you say?*

So many years ago. He had asked the question of John, that night. Now he knew his own answer.

*You were right.*

*I wish I had told you. I wish I had worked it out sooner. I wish I had let myself see.*

*I’m sorry.*

*It should have been your way.*

*I love you.*

He was so tired. Tired of reliving his own mistakes, of hurting, of dying. But he had to go back. If he died this time, at least he would have no regrets.

Sherlock opened his eyes. “…over to the sofa,” Trevor was saying, one hand on Mycroft’s elbow. Mycroft was trying to get an arm under Sherlock’s shoulders to lift him. Sherlock looked at Trevor’s hand and knew suddenly that in her time stream, she and Mycroft were more than colleagues; more, even, than friends. He smiled a little. It had taken him longer than Sherlock, but apparently Mycroft had learned—would learn?—to see the advantages of caring after all.

Mycroft’s worried expression sharpened. “Now he’s smiling. Something’s definitely wrong.”

“I’m fine, don’t move me,” Sherlock said. His voice creaked with dryness and he swallowed thickly before he went on. “I have to go back. Now.”
“No. Holmes—Sherlock—you need to rest. You don’t look—“

“I have to go back,” Sherlock repeated. He was simultaneously afraid of losing his nerve and desperate not to put it off any longer. “I know what I have to do.”

Sherlock jerked awake just in time to avoid hitting his head on his laptop screen. He frowned, rubbing at his sore eyes as he looked around the flat. Dark and quiet; still night, but getting on toward dawn if the chill ache in his muscles was any indication. He must have dozed off. Not surprising, he’d been awake for days, but still inexcusable; he’d so much to do, he had to work out where to start looking for the man who called himself Jim Moriarty, had to talk to Molly—he’d need John for that, Sherlock would be hopeless—John.

Sherlock swallowed. Seeing John at the pool, realizing he was wearing the explosives, the sniper’s sights on him—Sherlock shouldn’t have let it upset him, shouldn’t be thinking about it now when he needed to concentrate on Moriarty. He didn’t do caring. John was just a piece in the game. Moriarty was the important thing here, he should be…

But strangely, he couldn’t seem to make himself focus on Moriarty. Moreover, he had a strong feeling that he shouldn’t. Sherlock had never put much stock in instinct—just a name the ignorant gave to conclusions drawn from data they had seen but were too lazy to consciously process—but he could think of no other explanation for this conviction, the realization that had come when he stood a hair’s breadth from death tonight: John Watson mattered more than anything in the world.

Sherlock sighed deeply. He had no experience with such emotions. Maybe he really was too exhausted to focus. He looked at his watch: getting on toward five. He could go to bed, grab a few hours’ sleep and tackle the problem head-on after a bit of breakfast. Yes. That was all he needed, a little rest.

John went to New Zealand with Sarah and came back without her. Sherlock, telling himself he was just trying to keep John reasonably happy so he would stay around and keep helping Sherlock, bought beer. The memory of John’s smile stayed with him for days.

Sherlock was deeply intrigued by Irene Adler. She was clever, but more, she was the most completely opaque person Sherlock had ever met—he couldn’t read her at all. His fascination with her lasted for a good ten minutes, which was about as long as it took for a bunch of American idiots to turn up and point a gun at John. That cleared his head. Sherlock opened the safe, dispatched the Americans, pocketed the phone and—when he saw Irene surreptitiously slipping a syringe out of her drawer—slapped his handcuffs onto her wrist.

“Sorry,” he said when she struggled and hissed. “I’ve been clean five years, don’t much fancy ruining things now.” He dragged his coat off her and cuffed her wrists together.

John chivalrously located a filmy peignoir to drape over Irene’s naked shoulders and they went out the back window when they heard sirens. They took a cab to Mycroft’s office, handed over the phone, and then went out to dinner and laughed their arses off.

“You could have knocked me over with a feather when I came in and saw her on your lap starkers,” John said, still giggling.
Sherlock looked down at his trousers. “Oh God, I should get these cleaned.”

“Or maybe burn them,” John said. “Who knows where that fanny’s been.”

“Mycroft does,” Sherlock said seriously and that set them both off again.

“You know, seriously, I really think she fancied you,” John said when he had calmed down.

Sherlock swallowed the bite of curry he’d just taken. “No, she just likes a challenge,” he said absently, poking around to see if he could find more raisins. “Her primary attraction is to women, although she wouldn’t continue in her current profession if she didn’t derive some sexual pleasure from men aside from that of dominating them.” He looked up to catch John staring at him with question marks all over his face. “What?”

“Er…” John appeared to be considering whether or not to ask whatever question was clearly burning a hole in his brain, but then he shrugged and picked up a samosa. “What do you think Mycroft’s going to do about the Americans?”

John had been living with Sherlock for a little over a year when the poltergeist case came along, and was as close to perfectly happy as he’d ever been. True, he couldn’t manage to keep a girlfriend around more than a month or so, but that was okay; he was having too much fun to settle down anyway. Sherlock’s private business was humming along, thanks in no small part to John’s blog, and Sherlock had insisted from the beginning on splitting his fees with John, so financially he was quite comfortable. John still picked up the occasional moonlighting shift, but mostly to keep his hand in. Life was good.

And then the poltergeist case came along, and everything shifted ever so slightly.

As they finally made it through the door to the flat John was thinking that this was the kind of case that was going to be fantastically funny in a month or so, but at the moment they were both heartily sick of the whole thing. He looked over as Sherlock dragged himself in like a drowned cat, struggling with his sweatshirt and limping in his too-small shoes.

“Tell you what. Why don’t you go have a good long bath and I’ll get us some dinner in? We could have pho. I could do with some hot soup myself.”

Sherlock squelched off miserably and John hung up his own wet jacket and phoned in their order. He hoped Sherlock would bin the shoes—they were going to be really awful if they mildewed. He knew Sherlock would be in the bath for a good hour, so that gave him plenty of time to do a bit of washing up and eat his own food. By the time Sherlock finally appeared in his dressing gown and pajamas John was warm and full and feeling much better. “Pho?” Sherlock said hopefully, sniffing toward the kitchen where John had his soup keeping warm in a pot.

“Yeah, here, put your feet up whilst I find a bowl,” John said, collecting his own empty dishes. “Did you bin those shoes?”

“I binned everything down to my pants. It was all sopping.”

John grinned. Trust Sherlock to decide it was easier to toss underpants into the bin than to hang them up on the rack. He tipped Sherlock’s hot pho into a bowl and collected an after-dinner drink for himself, carrying out glass and bowl to find Sherlock half asleep on the sofa. “Sit up, I’ve got your food.”
Sherlock pushed himself upright, looking foggy, and then swung his stockinged feet around to prop on the coffee table when John sat next to him. “Thank you,” he said, cradling the warm bowl.

John was frowning at his feet. “Are those my socks?”

“I only have dress socks!” Sherlock said defensively. “They aren’t warm enough.”

Sherlock slurped down his noodles whilst John sipped his drink, half watching the programme and half just relaxing into the warm coziness of the flat. After a bit Sherlock set down the mostly empty bowl and leaned back against the sofa, staring unseeingly at the telly through half-lidded eyes. John thought he was going to drop off again when Sherlock said suddenly, “I don’t understand it.”

“What, this?”

“Of course not. This is dreck. I don’t understand Wanda Earles.”

John muted the telly, curious. “What don’t you understand?”

“Why go to so much trouble?” Sherlock was still frowning at the now-silent screen. “Why try so hard to hang onto him? I meant what I said—he is a lying cheat. She already has a child, she’s financially stable and objectively good-looking so she could probably find an adequate replacement fairly quickly. Why would she want to hang onto him? Why do people get so attached?”


Sherlock was quiet, still staring off somewhere into the middle distance. Finally he said quietly, “Yes.”

John blinked. Really? He had half expected Sherlock to scoff in derision. He had a dozen questions he wanted to ask at once, but was sure if he said anything too probing Sherlock would shut down completely. “So you know how that feels,” he said carefully. “Have you ever, ah, been with anyone?”

“You’ll have to be a bit more specific, John,” Sherlock said. It was said in his usual dry tone, but Sherlock still wasn’t looking at him. “I’m with you right now, after all.”

“Romantically,” John clarified and when Sherlock raised his eyebrows, “All right, have you ever been with anyone sexually? Er, let’s say snogging with intent at a minimum. No kissing the girl down the road on a dare when you were eight or any of that rot.”

“What about being buggered by the older boys at Eton?”

“Jesus Christ. Were you?” John asked, horrified.

Sherlock grinned. “No. But everyone always assumes that.”

John had wondered if Sherlock’s reticence had some darker antecedent, but his amusement seemed genuine enough. “Okay, snogging with intent where you were a willing participant. Or, ah, any kind of mutually consenting touching with or without snogging.” He’d had a few encounters of the purely utilitarian variety himself. “Kissing, groping, hand jobs, blow jobs, shagging.” They had certainly got off the topic of Wanda Earles, he thought, wryly amused.

“No.”
“No? Wait, nothing? Not any of it?”

“No.”

“Not even—“

“No.”

If he hadn’t asked the first question, John would have assumed Sherlock was telling him that he wasn’t interested, that he was asexual, but Sherlock had admitted to attraction, at least, so…John took a deep breath. “Why not?”

Sherlock shrugged, still looking away. “I saw the deleterious effect it had on others and decided such things were better avoided.”

John imagined Sherlock as an adolescent, bony and awkward and cutting, and thought that was probably as close as Sherlock would come to admitting what John was sure was the truth: that he had been scared to death. Still…nothing?

“The news is on,” Sherlock said, gesturing with his chin to the screen.

“Oh yeah,” John said, picking up the remote and turning the sound back on. Then on impulse he scooped up Sherlock’s woolly-socked feet and deposited them in his own lap.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asked, looking startled.

“Rubbing your feet. They looked like they hurt earlier.”

“They do, but—oh.” John had dug his thumbs into Sherlock’s insteps and he went owl-eyed with surprise, his whole body tensing briefly before melting into the sofa.

John knew without asking that no one had ever rubbed Sherlock’s feet before. Poor skinny little transport, your owner doesn’t take very good care of you, he thought fondly as he rubbed Sherlock’s high arches. He doesn’t even buy you woolly socks. John made a mental note to buy Sherlock some woolly socks of his own for Christmas, or better yet some of those sheepskin slippers, the kind with the fleece inside. Sherlock would adore those, he loved soft things. Too bad Christmas was so far off.

John got distracted by the news—a killer Sherlock had helped identify was going to trial—though he kept up his massage of Sherlock’s bony feet until it finished. Then he looked over at Sherlock’s slack face and realized that he was fast asleep.

John smiled. He turned down the sound on the television, carefully placed Sherlock’s limp legs back on the sofa, and gathered up the empty glass and bowl. He got a blanket and tucked it around Sherlock—a chenille throw, he thought, I should put that on the list too—and looked down at him affectionately. In profile, with his snubby little nose and his messy curls, mouth open in sleep, Sherlock looked like a child. John had a ridiculous urge to kiss him on the forehead.

Okay, no. Sherlock might act like an oversized child half the time, but he was an adult. He wouldn’t take kindly to John suddenly coddling him, even if he was a total innocent, a virgin! John had dismissed Mycroft’s words in the past as typical Holmes-brother sniping—of a piece with Sherlock’s needling Mycroft about his weight—but it appeared he’d been telling the truth. Git, John thought with some annoyance; Mycroft’d no need to go telling Sherlock’s secrets like that. Now if John could manage to get him laid…he tried to envision a scenario in which this actually happened and had to smile. Still, he thought optimistically as he trudged off to bed, what are friends for? Sherlock
might even find he liked sex better than woolly socks. He’d give it some thought.

Their streak of good cases eventually ran out, as they always did, and John woke up late on morning after far too much post-case dim sum to find Sherlock sprawled out on the sofa, laptop perched on his chest.

“Nothing good in the inbox,” he informed John when John plopped himself into his chair opposite. “Thought I’d update my files. Are you making tea?”

John made tea and took stock. The refrigerator was empty, his laundry hamper was full, and the toilet and shower were approaching a really horrific state—Mrs. Hudson drew the line at cleaning their bathroom, for which John could hardly blame her. Time to get the place fit for human habitation again. He could hardly try to sell Sherlock on bringing a date home in this state—any woman with a drop of sense would take one look at the place and flee. Or man, John amended open-mindedly. Well, actually, maybe not. They were both still here, after all.

Scrubbing the loo was nowhere near as much fun as chasing criminals around, but there was a certain satisfaction in it all the same. By nightfall the kitchen was stocked, the bathroom was gleaming, and John’s bed was made with clean sheets. A good day’s work, John thought with satisfaction. He’d bought plenty of worthy dinner ingredients, but now he felt he’d earned a night out. He came out into the lounge and peered down at Sherlock, who had done nothing more strenuous than nap all day. He was also wearing John’s socks again.

“I’m going out,” John informed him. “Want to come with?”

“Hmmmm.” Sherlock stretched his arms over his head, like a lazy cat. “Where are you going?”

“Probably just round the pub.” Sherlock scrunched his nose. “You like the pub. You said yourself, it’s good practice for studying the same group of people over time.”

“Is there a match on?”

“No, she’s drinking too much and laughing too loudly, trying to convince herself she’s having a good time. If they split up, who gets the pub? Does it go by proximity or precedence?”

“Dunno. I’ll ask Greg.” John considered this for a moment. “Probably proximity, unless there are mitigating circumstances.”
"Those women who always sit in the corner—one of them just had her hair completely redone and it’s quite flattering. Her friends are genuinely pleased for her."

"Which one, in the blue? Wasn’t it long before?"

"And frizzy on the ends. She’s had it highlighted too. Those two men at the bar are new, but don’t get used to them; they worked nearby and were made redundant today. That older couple to our left doesn’t live nearby either, but they did thirty years ago, and they’re back for old times’ sake whilst they’re in town. They don’t like it as well as they remember. The couple next to them is on a date, but he’s nervous and talking about himself too much. She’s already bored.”

John snuck a look. Sure enough, the woman was looking at her phone under the table.

“That couple we saw on their first date a while back is back again, this is their….fourth, they’re getting on quite well.”

“Wait, don’t tell me…he’s in red, she’s in the dotty shirt with the ginger hair?”

“Yes.”

The couple did look quite besotted. “Have they shagged yet, or do you think this is the night?”

“No idea…you’re probably a better judge of that than I.”

This was exactly the opening John had been waiting for. “You know, I’ve been thinking about that,” he said casually, taking another swig of beer. “You really ought to give sex a go.”

Sherlock blinked. “What?”

John grinned. “You heard me. Sex. I think you should try it.”

Sherlock blinked so rapidly John thought his eyelids had spasmed. “Why in the world would I want to do that?”

“Could be very helpful in your work,” John said. “You’ve said it yourself, love is the motivation behind half the crimes you see.”

“I seem to be solving most of them just fine without any practical experience,” Sherlock said haughtily.

“But maybe you could solve even more,” John parried. “It could give you an edge. I’m sure Moriarty’s had loads of sex.” John would have also bet money that Moriarty got most of his dating inspirations straight off “Game of Thrones,” but no sense giving Sherlock ideas.

Sherlock looked repulsed. “Even more crimes are motivated by avarice and ambition, but I don’t see you encouraging me in that direction.”

John waved this off. “Everyone covets, Sherlock. Even you. A bigger lab, my socks, a locked-room mystery straight out of Agatha Christie on an island someplace…”

“Well, there you are then,” Sherlock said. He had assumed the blank, bored expression he usually wore around Mycroft, the one he probably thought gave nothing away. “I covet a lab, you covet large breasts. I don’t see the difference.”

John pounced. “You don’t see the difference because you’re operating from an incomplete data set. What kind of scientist are you? You can’t compare two things without analyzing both of them.”
Sherlock looked trapped, which would have made John feel a good bit smugger if he hadn’t known all along he would win this—at least on a theoretical basis. Sherlock was never going to admit he was scared shitless, so he was going to run out of arguments sooner or later.

“Well, but,” Sherlock said, rallying, “even if I did decide to—to expand my data set, how am I supposed to go about it? Prostitutes? Match.com?”

“Oh, God, no,” John said. “I can help you out. I’m an excellent wingman.” Sherlock’s haughty expression sagged into utter incredulity and John went on blithely, “Of course, I need some parameters. I don’t know the first thing about what you like, and I mean literally the first thing. Blokes or birds?” When Sherlock stared at him blankly: “Sherlock. Do you like women or men?”

“Oh,” Sherlock said and looked away. A furious blush rose in his cheeks.

John was torn between wanting to pat his shoulder and laughing, but he knew if he did either that Sherlock would never allow the subject to be raised again. He tried to make his voice sound gentle. “If you’re worried about freaking me out, you needn’t,” he said kindly. “If you’d put my feet to the fire and made me guess, I’d have said gay since the beginning, and you can see I’m still here.”

Sherlock turned, impossibly, redder. He nodded once.

“Okay then,” John said cheerfully. “Now we need to work out what you like. What turns you on?”

“John, physical attraction is a psychological—“

“Yeah, I know all that, thanks. I need to know what physical qualities attract you.” When Sherlock just blinked at him again—well, at least he was making eye contact—John said, “Okay, let’s switch tactics. We’re going to play Hot or Not. I’ll say a name, and you say if you find that person hot. Attractive. Sexually.”

“I know what hot means,” Sherlock snapped, turning red again.

“Good on you. Daniel Day-Lewis.”

“No,” Sherlock said promptly.

“Really?” John was astonished. Daniel Day-Lewis was the first serious guy crush he’d had. He had probably spent a solid year masturbating over Last of the Mohicans—he was getting half a woody now just thinking about Daniel Day-Lewis in that loincloth scene.

“Really.”

“Um…okay. Brad Pitt?”

“Who?”

By the time they were done for the night, they had definitively established that Sherlock did not like facial hair and might like Daniel Craig—although even that was a little shaky, since John was not convinced Sherlock actually knew one Bond from another. Sherlock had loosened up after the second beer, and now he was relaxed and a little giggly. He was such a lightweight, John thought fondly, steadying Sherlock as he wobbled tipsily getting out of his chair, and on the heels of that realized that this was the most fun he’d had in ages.

“This was good,” he said expansively, slinging Sherlock’s arm around his own shoulders. “Really excellent bonding time. And now I know exactly what to look for!”
“Really?” Sherlock said curiously, leaning into John. “Because I still don’t.”

“Trial and error, mate,” John said, which made Sherlock stumble, but John caught him. “S’okay. I’ll vet them very carefully.”

Unfortunately, after this promising start, Operation Shag Sherlock rather stalled out. John had no idea how to go about finding a suitable date for Sherlock, let alone how he would convince Sherlock to go along (for that matter the date might take some convincing too). He figured his best bet was to wait for Sherlock to solve a really good case and then take him out. He needed to start looking into places where a thirtysomething gay man picked up guys. Dance clubs? His own same-sex hookups had taken place at uni or in the army. He would have asked Lestrade for help, but he didn’t want to betray Sherlock’s confidence.

On top of this, no good cases were coming along. Business was in one of its periodic dry spells, possibly due to the fine weather—people seemed less inclined to kill each other when it wasn’t raining, which was of course all to the good, but it meant that Sherlock had gone from bored to really bored to Critically Bored, and that meant he was a lot more likely to shoot up than hook up. Thank goodness Henry Knight and his giant hound came along.

“There were a lot of things about this case I could have done without,” John remarked, swallowing the last of his toast, “most of which involved you being a git, but it was certainly interesting. Can’t say you were bored.”

Sherlock sniffed, looking disconsolately at John’s empty plate.

“You want some more coffee?” John asked. “It’s my turn to get refills.”

Sherlock held out his empty cup, and John took them both back inside the Cross Keys. He refilled their coffees and, after some consideration, picked out an enormous oozing sticky bun. Sherlock would like that. He balanced the plate in one hand and gathered both mugs in the other and headed back to the picnic tables, only to be confronted by the startling sight of a woman sitting across from Sherlock. Not a fan or a journalist, too serious for that; someone from the local police?

“Oh, there you are,” Sherlock said. “Trevor, this is my colleague, John Watson. John, Victoria Trevor. We knew each other at Oxford.”

“A pleasure,” John said, setting everything down so he could shake her hand. Victoria Trevor had not immediately taken the opportunity to say something snarky about Sherlock, so that put her ahead of Sebastian Wilkes already in John’s estimation. “Can I get you some coffee?”

“I’m fine, thank you.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear with one finger. Victoria Trevor had ash blonde hair and extremely pale skin, and her sharp eyes were even lighter than Sherlock’s. The overall effect was rather wintry.

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“I didn’t realize it was you until last night,” Trevor said and then to John, “The last time I saw Holmes he was still reading chemistry. I didn’t realize he’d made such a career switch.”

“Oh, you’ll have to read the blog,” John said grinning.
“You really don’t,” Sherlock said dryly. “You’d prefer my website, I can assure you.”

She might at that, John thought. Trevor reminded him of certain professors from his own uni days: the ones with no sense of humor. “What do you do at Baskerville? Or can’t you say?”

“Officially no, but Holmes knows already, and it looks like my project is likely to be shut down soon in any case. I’m researching temporal displacement.”

“What? Why are they shutting you down?” Sherlock said. “Is it the entropy effect?”

Trevor’s eyebrows rose a millimeter—it was the first change in her expression John had seen. “How did you know about the entropy? We’ve only just recognized it.”

Sherlock frowned, not as though he were displeased but as though he were trying to remember something. “I don’t know,” he said slowly. “Show me the equations.”

“Wait a minute,” John said, finally catching up. “Temporal displacement? Are you talking about time travel?”

“Yes,” Trevor said simply.

“Have you actually done it? Traveled through time?”

“Of course not. We’re still in animal trials.”

“You’re sending animals back in time?”

“Yes,” Trevor said again.

John gaped. “But you could change history! Haven’t you ever seen Star Trek?”

“Did you make me watch it?” Sherlock asked.

“Er…don’t think so.” Why on earth hadn’t he? Sherlock would love Mr. Spock.

“I’ve seen Star Trek,” Trevor said dismissively. “It’s not nearly that simple. And anyway I’m not putting our research into the hands of some quasi-military organization like Starfleet; we’re involved in pure science.”

“You work at Baskerville,” John pointed out. “It’s hardly Greenpeace.”

“He’s got a point,” Sherlock said. “My brother would feel he had a duty to go back and meddle in every possible historical moment in order to restore the glory of the British Empire. Probably a good thing they’re shutting you down…why are they shutting you down?”

“Adverse effects in the animal subjects. It may or may not be due to the entropy, we don’t know. But I’ve had an offer from a private facility, so I might be able to carry on if Baskerville doesn’t explicitly forbid it.”

Sherlock pulled out his notebook and said, “Show me the equations.”

Trevor took the notebook and sketched out a series of equations that John could not begin to follow. He pulled a chunk off the cinnamon roll and chewed on it instead. Trevor filled a page, tore it off and tucked it under the top edge of the notebook, and kept going. She pushed her hair back again.

“You should cut a fringe,” Sherlock said suddenly.
Trevor looked up, her smile so faint John was not sure he wasn’t imagining it. “I did,” she said. “When I turned thirty. But I couldn’t be bothered to get it trimmed and it grew right into my eyes. I had to put a hairpin in it all the time; it drove me mad.”

Sherlock leaned forward so their foreheads were nearly touching. “Right there,” he said, tapping a scribble of Greek with one finger. “What if you stabilized it?”

“I could, but only if the stabilization were the primary endpoint. I couldn’t stabilize and displace at the same time.”

“Not with existing technology, but no one else has even come close to that kind of potential. Imagine if you could actually stabilize entropy formation—you could create completely clean nuclear energy, for one thing. No more need for oil or natural gas; the geopolitical balance of power would be completely altered. You’d change the world.”

“Hmmm,” Trevor said, looking mildly interested for the first time. “I’d need something bigger than the magnets I’m using now…”

“So, Victoria Trevor,” John said. “You two were friends at Oxford? How come you never mentioned her?”

Sherlock, who was twisting around on the train seat trying to get into a comfortable position for a nap, snorted. “Haven’t we just established that I don’t have friends? We might have had coffee together a few times, but even then it was likely just because the café was crowded.”

John was a bit disconcerted to realize that this statement cheered him. Was he that invested in being the only one special enough to be Sherlock’s friend? It made him consider for the first time how he would feel if A Study in Shagging Sherlock resulted in Sherlock getting…a boyfriend? Just because he couldn’t picture it didn’t mean it couldn’t happen. “She came to see you this morning,” he pointed out.

“Mmmm.” Sherlock had settled against the train window with his eyes closed, swaddled comfortably in his coat. John thought he was half asleep, but then a few minutes later he said without opening his eyes, “I never drugged her coffee though.”

John could not help smiling. “That does tend to put most people off, yeah.”

“Good thing you’re not most people,” Sherlock murmured and John saw the corners of his mouth quirk up too.

Sadly, Sherlock’s inbox had not filled with interesting cases on their return, and Lestrade wasn’t officially back from holiday until after the weekend. On the second day Sherlock started some sort of massive project that rendered the kitchen useless, and on the morning of the third John called Sarah in desperation. “Doesn’t anybody fancy a minibreak?”

Sarah laughed. “Not until June, but as it happens Lisa’s daughter has some sort of awards ceremony at school this afternoon. She found out too late to take off, but if you can get in by noon…”

John enjoyed his afternoon at the surgery. Lisa’s schedule was mostly filled with kids needing forms filled out for various summer programs and camps; not terribly challenging, but pleasant all the same. He texted Sherlock a few times whilst he was finishing his charts and didn’t hear back, so finally he
called Mrs. Hudson.

“Oh, he’s still upstairs,” Mrs. Hudson said. “He probably just didn’t hear the phone, he’s all involved in whatever it is he’s doing. One of his homeless lot came round a few hours ago with some pigeons. Pigeons!”

“Are they in a cage?” John asked.

“No, they were in a box with air holes. Of course I said he couldn’t keep pets in the flat, but he promised they’ll be gone tomorrow.”

“I’ll be sure that they are,” John said. What could Sherlock want with pigeons? Ugh. He’d been planning to get takeaway, but now he thought he’d be better off getting a bite at the pub.

The pub was still fairly quiet but filling up fast, and John settled into a seat at the bar. “On your own tonight?” the tall blond bartender—Nick?—asked, sliding his pint over.

“Yeah. Sherlock’s working.” Close enough.

“Does he usually do the cooking?”

John laughed around his mouthful of food. “Oh God, no. I mean, he can cook when he can be arsed, but that’s basically never.”

“Just didn’t fancy eating alone, then,” Nick said, nodding. “I know how that goes.”

John was beginning to regret his initial half-truth. “Actually, he’s working at home. I wanted to watch the match and I didn’t want to disturb him.”

“Ah.” Nick went to pull some more pints and John settled back to eat in peace, but he was back a few minutes later. “So how long have you been together?”

John choked on a bit of potato. “It’s not like that,” he said when he’d had a drink of his beer. “We’re not together, just flatmates.”

“Oh yeah?” Nick looked surprised, and rather interested. “Are you both single then?”

Was Nick chatting him up? John looked at him more closely. Tall and lean, with spiky bleached hair and a single black earring, no tattoos John could see, friendly narrow face…it had been a while since John had been with a bloke. He’d definitely be up for whatever Nick was offering; Nick was just about the type he usually went for. “Yep,” he said casually.

“Your mate…Sherlock? You think he’d ever be interested…”

Oh. John’s initial flash of disappointment was quickly drowned in excitement: here was a perfect opportunity to get Sherlock off, just dropped into his lap by fate! “Yeah, I think so,” he said. Leaning forward confidentially he added. “Just between us…he’s only just now realized he’s into guys. He doesn’t have a lot of experience but he’s looking to change that.” He would have to remember to tell this to Sherlock later, but “first time with a man” sounded a lot more likely than “first time period”, and it would explain any obvious nervousness or missteps.

Nick looked sympathetic. “Got it. Not easy for blokes our age, was it? Not like now.”

Nick was at least five years younger than John, but John knew very well what he meant. His own parents had never known about his bisexuality—he wasn’t even sure Harry knew—and his dad had
assumed John’s _Last of the Mohicans_ poster represented just a nice manly interest in the American Wild West. He’d gotten buffalo-themed Christmas presents for years.

Business was picking up now, and Nick left John to his own devices to tend to a steady stream of customers. John ate the rest of his food, watched the match, and had another pint. He was feeling cheerful and optimistic, a mood which lasted until he got home and heard the suspicious sound of Sherlock rummaging in the little room off the kitchen where they kept the laundry things.

“Sherlock? What are you doing?”

Sherlock emerged wearing an expression of combined guilt and self-righteousness that immediately put John on guard. “Looking for cleaning supplies. There’s a bit of a mess.”

“What kind of a mess?” John looked past Sherlock into the kitchen and for the first time registered that the room was liberally splattered what appeared to be feathers, stuck to every wall and cupboard with, apparently, gore. “Sherlock, what the hell? Did you blow up the pigeons?”

“It was an accident!”

“For Christ’s sake.” John took a step into the kitchen and heard something crunch under his foot. He lifted his leg and, against his better judgment, peered at the sole of his shoe. A single eye peered back where it dangled by a bloody string from a crushed bird’s head.

John sighed, pulled off his shoe, and said, “The cleaning supplies are under the kitchen sink. Everyone keeps their cleaning supplies under the sink, unless they have small children in the household, which I am beginning to think we do. You can clean my shoes when you’re done.”

When John came down the next morning, Sherlock really had done an admirable job of scraping bird body parts off the walls and cupboards, and he had even made shirred eggs and toast and tea in a clear gesture of appeasement. And in fairness John was the one who usually left cupboard doors open, so he really shouldn’t have lost his temper as loudly as he did when he went to take a sip of tea and a single bloody feather floated to the surface.

John was still shouting when the sound of his phone ringing cut through his tirade. It was Lestrade.

“Is Sherlock with you? He’s not answering his phone.”

“Yeah, he let the battery die yesterday whilst he was busy blowing up pigeons and hasn’t got round to charging it up again.”

“Good. Just came back to work and the first case I get is a bloody mess. Can he come take a look?”

“Oh sure,” John said, still glaring at Sherlock. “Sherlock knows all about bloody messes. Bloody king of the bloody bloody mess, he is.”

“Yeah, I heard you about the exploding pigeons, I’m just not up to processing it right now,” Lestrade said. “So you’ll come?”

“We’ll come,” John said grimly.

The case _was_ a bloody mess, which of course was Sherlock’s favorite sort, and it tied them up for days, and then right on the heels of that came the Amateur Mendicant Society case and then the Bishopsgate jewel case, and all in all things were steady and busy for a good few weeks.
Inevitably it all settled down again, and one pleasant day in June John found himself home, with Sherlock, at teatime, with absolutely no pressing plans for the evening whatsoever. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d eaten a normal meal, so he was rather looking forward to cooking a proper dinner.

“Think I’ll make risotto,” he said to Sherlock, who made a noncommittal noise from where he was frowning over his laptop. Sherlock loved John’s risotto, and John knew it. John went whistling into the kitchen, pulled out his large saucepan, and discovered a clump of tail feathers stuck to the inside with what appeared to be dried intestines.

“For fuck’s sake,” John said. He took the pan out and banged it down in front of Sherlock, who looked up curiously. “I’m going to the pub. Come if you like, or stay here, it’s all the same to me.”

“What happened to the risotto?”

“The pan has a bird’s arse glued to the bottom.”

“Do pigeons have arses?” Sherlock peered into the pan. “I suppose they do. I can scrape it out and disinfect it.”

“That thing has been in there for three weeks! I’m not using this pan again. We’re buying a new one.”

“Can we at least go to Angelo’s?”

“Pub.”

Sherlock moped about his lost risotto all the way to the pub, but cheered up once they were established at their usual table.

“The architect and the designer have made it up, they’re talking about going on holiday together. The group of women—the one with the dark eyes just announced her pregnancy, they’re all excited for her, but the one with the diamond earrings has something on her mind, she was going to share it but now she feels she can’t. She’ll call the one who had the new haircut later, that’s her closest friend. And oh, the man who was boring his date last time is trying again with a new one but this one’s going rather better.”

John looked surreptitiously over his shoulder. A woman with wildly curly hair was gesturing with her wine glass as she talked animatedly, making the man sitting across from her laugh.

“Looks good so far,” John agreed and then suddenly remembered. “Hey, I forgot to tell you! You know Nick, the blond bartender? He fancies you!”

Sherlock looked taken aback. “What? Wait, the short one who used to be in the Marines?”

“No, that guy’s a got a kid, I’m pretty sure he’s—how did you know about the Marines?”

Sherlock ignored him, frowning as his eyes flickered rapidly; evidently he was searching his mind palace database for Nick. “The tall one with the onyx earring? Uses a lot of hair product?”

“Yeah, that’s him.”

“That’s not blond, that’s bleached,” Sherlock said scornfully.
“Well, it’s blond now.”

“What do you mean, he fancies me?”

“What do you think I mean?”

Sherlock frowned again and turned to look at the bar. At this exact moment, of course, Nick looked over and lifted his chin in greeting to them. John nodded back and Sherlock promptly spun around and ducked his head, going scarlet and making John feel as though he were fourteen years old and back in the school dining hall. “He’s younger than I am!” Sherlock hissed.

“So?” John was puzzled. “One of you has to be younger.”

“Yes, but he’ll expect…”

“No he won’t,” John said, cottoning on. “I kind of implied you were just coming out of the closet. He won’t expect you to have any experience.”

“So what do I do?” Sherlock said scornfully. “Walk up to him and say, ‘Fancy a shag?’”

John buried his face in his hands. “No. See, this is why you need me. You go up for the next round, you ask him what time he gets done, you ask him if you can buy him a drink.”

“How? How do I ask?”

John groaned. “Sherlock, you flirt. I know you know how to flirt, I’ve seen you do it for cases a hundred times.” He lifted his head, struck by a sudden inspiration. “Just pretend it’s a case. Only instead of trying to get information you want to…see how long it takes him to get off, or something. Maybe for an alibi.”

Sherlock’s considering look dissolved abruptly into panic. “But what if—I don’t know, I’m not—“

“You don’t have to shag him tonight,” John said patiently. “You could just snog him, and then the next time…”

“There won’t be a next time, not with me. I have to do it tonight.”

“No, you don’t, especially not if you don’t want to—and really not if he doesn’t want to.” Oh God: Sherlock Holmes, date rapist. “Sherlock, calm down. Drink some beer.”

John pushed Sherlock’s glass toward him and Sherlock, who usually nursed a pint all night without finishing it, downed half the beer in one go. He looked considerably calmer when he had finished.

“Look,” John said. “I’m going to spell it out for you so, I don’t know, take notes in your head or something. You’ll wait around for him to get off and you’ll buy him a drink. You’ll have a drink together, and you’ll be all charming the way you can be when you want something. If he wants to do any more, he’ll say something like, ‘Want to go back to yours?’ or ‘Ready to get out of here?’ You don’t have to go anywhere you don’t want to, but go on outside with him and then say how it’s a lovely night and why don’t you walk a bit. Let him take the lead. At some point he’ll say something nice, like he’s had his eye on you a long time or how beautiful your eyes are. Say something nice back.”

“Like what?” Sherlock was skeptical, but he was clearly memorizing every word John said.

“You have a lovely smile,” John said promptly. “It’s universally flattering and impossible to argue
with, unless his teeth are crap, and they aren’t.”

“Ah.” Sherlock said, almost admiringly.

“That’s when he’ll go to kiss you. After that…” John spread his hands. “You’re going to have to see how you feel. If you’re uncomfortable or don’t want to go further, tell him you have to work early but you’d love to see him again.”

“What if I don’t want to see him again?”

“Then say you don’t want to make things weird because you like going to that pub. If, on the other hand, you’re having a nice time snogging him, you can carry on. I’ll turn in early when I go home so you can take him back to the flat if you like.”

Sherlock frowned. “You don’t bring women to the flat.”

“That’s mostly because you tend to scare them off. And also the loo is down a flight of stairs and connects to your bedroom, which can be kind of awkward for them.”

Sherlock considered. “I don’t think I want to bring him back to the flat. It’s our flat.”

John tried to ignore the little bloom of warmth he felt. “Well, you can always go back to his place, although it’s likely a lot farther or he shares or both. Or you can, you know. If you’re someplace reasonably private, like an alley, or if you stick around here past closing, you can do a fair amount whilst still keeping your clothing on. Grinding, hand jobs—those are all good options.”

Sherlock stopped in what was clearly mid-mental notetaking. “Wait. How do you know what’s acceptable for men?”

“How do you think?” John said, amused.

“But you only have sex with women. You’ve said dozens of times that you aren’t gay.”

“I’m not gay, I’m bi. I already told you! Remember that time we were arguing with Greg whether bisexuality was a real thing and you asked me what I thought and I said, ‘I know it’s real’? How did you think I knew? Yeah, really observant there, genius.”

Sherlock looked flummoxed. “But you’ve never had sex with a man since you’ve lived with me.”

“Yes, I have.” John thought a moment and said, “Wait, I was in Dublin, wasn’t I? I didn’t see you for another day or so. I guess the evidence was gone by then. Mostly I meet girls just because it’s easier. I mean, there are more of them.”

Sherlock went unfocused. He was clearly considering every piece of information he had stored about John, searching for overlooked evidence of bisexuality.

“Come back here.” John snapped his fingers in front of his face. “If we could get back to the point: yeah, I’ve definitely done my share of grinding—that’s exactly what it sounds like, but it’s a lot easier to get off like that when you’re younger, plus you can get some serious chafing—in dark corners, and plenty of hand jobs too. That would be the option I’d recommend if you’re really set on getting off tonight.” Somehow, the thought of some other bloke—even friendly Nick—pushing Sherlock to his knees or taking him on a bed seemed a lot more bothersome—because Sherlock wasn’t ready for that yet, he told himself.

“How do I know what to do?” Sherlock asked intently.
“Er. Well, you’ve masturbated, right? Please don’t tell me you’ve never even tried it.”

“Of course I have,” Sherlock snapped, flushing again.

“Well, start out the same, and you know, deduce. See what makes him breathe faster. You should be able to handle that.”

“Why can’t I just ask him?”

John pictured Sherlock pinning his laser gaze on Nick as he clutched his penis clinically, asking, “Do you prefer more friction on the head? Fast or slow?” Oh dear. “Well, you can, but remember not to break the mood,” he improvised. “You can be like, ‘Is this good?’ or ‘Do you like it harder?’ But kind of breathe it into his ear, don’t act like you’re interrogating a suspect. Throw some kissing in.”

“Kissing,” Sherlock muttered, eyes glazing with concentration.

John looked at Sherlock’s long delicate fingers curled around his beer glass and pictured them wrapped around a stranger’s hard cock. His clothes suddenly felt too hot and too tight.

“Right,” John said abruptly, draining the dregs of his beer. “No time like the present. Finish that pint and go get the next round, lover boy.”

Sherlock let himself into the house quietly, hoping John had already gone to bed. He was not motivated so much by solicitousness—Sherlock did not see the point of solicitousness—as by the desire to slip in unnoticed. His mind was buzzing with so much new data that he felt as if his brain were physically bulging, and he needed peace and quiet to process.

The lounge was deserted and still: good, John was already asleep. Sherlock sagged onto the sofa with relief and got comfortable. So much to think about! John being bisexual—that was buzzing the loudest, presumably because Sherlock had made an error in his deductions along the way. He hated to admit it, but perhaps John was right and he needed more practical experience in order to form more accurate conclusions. Well, he was working on that. And then…Sherlock had kept his feelings about John—his regard, his respect, his all right just say it CARING—in one box, so to speak, and this sex experiment in another. They weren’t even in the same wing of his mind palace. But now it was as though a secret passage had opened between them. He hadn’t wondered, not yet; hadn’t tried to imagine what sex with John might be like, but now he could feel his mind wanting to wonder. He considered. No: John had never raised the possibility, even though from a practical standpoint surely John was in an excellent position to introduce Sherlock to all the supposed joys of lust. Clearly this would violate one of those many unwritten laws of flatmate behavior of which Sherlock was so frustratingly unaware.

So. John’s sexuality, though fascinating, was irrelevant to the current issue of Sherlock’s. Sherlock carefully pushed his curiosity back down into the secret passage, locked the door, and then bricked up both ends. Then he went back to the sex room, so he could exhaustively review the evening. He went over his own performance critically, but he rather thought he’d been all right: there had been a fair amount of conversation to get through with the drinks that he hadn’t counted on, but John was right: Sherlock could be charming when he wanted to (at least in very small doses). It was hard to know without outright asking for feedback, but he thought he’d done all right with the kissing. He’d had a moment of panic when Nick leaned in when he wondered frantically why John hadn’t explained this process in more detail, but it turned out that “Let him take the lead” worked perfectly well. It had been…rather nice, actually. Sherlock had been surprised to realize he quite liked the feeling of Nick’s arms around him. He didn’t come from a particularly touchy family, and he
couldn’t remember the last time he’d been embraced. It felt…good. What it had not felt was arousing.

Sherlock paced around in his sex room. Why not? Did he not find Nick attractive? Objectively, he was pleasant enough. Nick’s own attraction had been evident at the pub: eyes dilated, pulse increased. Sherlock couldn’t see his own pupils and his rapid heart rate was just as likely to be due to nerves. Sherlock tried to picture himself naked in a bed with Nick doing…things…and failed to find the concept in the least exciting. Maybe Nick just wasn’t his type. Did he have a type? Sherlock hadn’t been trying to obtuse with John; he really wasn’t sure. Abruptly, Sherlock remembered the flash of interest he’d felt when he’d thought John was talking about the other bartender. What was his name? Martin? Something like Martin, anyway. Maybe-Martin was short and sturdy, with a firm jaw and brown eyes. Sherlock imagined those strong arms around him and knew immediately that he’d worked something out, anyway. Thinking of burly, firm Maybe-Martin taking charge of naked Sherlock in a bed was catching his interest in a way that slender Nick had not. Sherlock put both Maybe-Martin and Nick in the bed and considered them, although as sometimes happened in his mind palace when he brought in more than one person, they began to ignore him and carry on with each other—in this case Maybe-Martin had straddled Nick and was snogging him forcefully. Oh, stop it, Sherlock thought crossly, banishing the bed and its inhabitants. Well! Apparently that old saw about opposites attracting was true after all—at least for him. Nick might have fancied another tall slim bloke, but it seemed Sherlock preferred short and muscular. He couldn’t wait to share this insight with John. If they didn’t get a case, maybe John could find him a suitable candidate as early as tonight.

By the time John came downstairs a few hours later, though, Sherlock had forgotten the whole thing.

“John,” Sherlock said excitedly as John came yawning into the lounge. “Look! There are two emails this morning and they’re both fascinating, well one is a lot more interesting than the other but you’ll like the other because it has football, but this one has a locked room and…”

“Hang on, is there coffee? You look like you’ve had a pot or so already and I’ll need some if we’re to go haring off on a locked room adventure. And what happened with--”

Sherlock flapped his hand impatiently at the kitchen. “In there, hurry up.” He picked his laptop up and followed John into the kitchen, talking the whole time. “Look, this painting, it’s a Turner masterpiece, well supposedly a masterpiece, ‘The Falls of the Reichenbach’, it was stolen from the museum and the room was alarmed and the painting was alarmed and the alarms never went off and the CCTV don’t show anyone entering or leaving and but it catches the guard right where he’s supposed to be the whole night and…” Sherlock ran out of air.

“Huh,” John said, pulling the laptop around so he could read the email. “Was the room itself locked or just the outside doors to the museum?”

“Well, the gallery was locked,” Sherlock said impatiently.

“What’s the other one?”

“Oh.” Sherlock reached over John’s shoulder to click on his inbox. “Someone’s lost a football player.”

John peered at the laptop and almost spit coffee all over the screen. “Holy crap!” he said. “This is from Cyril Overton! You have an email from Cyril Overton!”

“Right, he’s the manager, I suppose.”
“You suppose? He manages Kensington! They’re the best club in the league! Oh my God. Is he emailing you about Paolo Fieri? Is it Fieri that’s missing?”

“I don’t know. He doesn’t say. Who’s Paolo Fieri?”

“You are unbelievable.” John gulped coffee, reading the email over again wide-eyed. “Paolo Fieri is a superstar, he’s the best midfielder the game’s ever seen. He’s a trequarista, a three-quarter specialist, and…” John apparently noticed Sherlock’s eyes glazing over. “He’s not been seen at training camp the past two days but the team hasn’t released anything saying he’s injured or sick or anything, so there’s been a lot of speculation. I bet it’s him.”

“Well, he should be easy enough to find. It’s impossible to just disappear these days.” Sherlock sniffed. “If this Overton would get over his paranoia about publicity and call in the police, even they could probably find him before the first preseason match. And if not he won’t be any less missing after we find the painting.”

“But Sherlock, Paolo Fieri is huge. What if someone’s trying to get him out of the way? He could get hurt! It would be a horrible loss to the game!”

Sherlock couldn’t imagine that the value of a football player could trump that of a work of art, even a work of art that romanticized a relatively common if picturesque geographic formation, but he knew saying so would just make John go sanctimonious about actual human lives. “But a locked room mystery,” he pleaded.

“The painting won’t be any less missing after we find Paolo Fieri either, especially since you say it won’t take half a day,” John countered. Just saying Paolo Fieri seemed to make his eyes go misty.

Sherlock stared at John, who looked as though Father Christmas had just handed him a stocking with everything he ever wanted in it, and felt like a cartoon villain. Oh, what the hell. John was right: it wouldn’t take him any time to find the missing three-quarter whatever-he-was, and then he could turn his attention to the delightful mystery of the painting. It would make John so happy. “All right,” he said grudgingly. “Your way.”

Chapter End Notes

This case is based on the ACD story “The Adventure of the Missing Three-Quarter”, which is one of the few canon fics that seem as though it would actually work better set in the present day than it does in canon. I’m fairly sure that the “Three-Quarter” in the original is a rugby player, although the nineteenth century sporting slang is kind of incomprehensible, but I thought he’d be a bigger celebrity as a football player.

Why didn’t Trevor turn up on the show? Here’s why.
MISSING SCENE FROM HOB
JOHN: Glad we’ve no need to rush back. I’m looking forward to a nice breakfast outside, breathing some fresh country air…
Sherlock: (Clearly thinking “This village is so bucolically boring that I would rather claw my own eyeballs out of my skull than look at it another minute”) This village is so bucolically boring that I would rather claw my own eyeballs out of my skull than look at it another minute. You can eat on the train.
JOHN: (Captain Watson voice) We’re having breakfast.
SHERLOCK: (Sulkily) Twenty minutes. I want to catch the next train.
JOHN: Deal.

MISSING SCENE FROM THIS FIC
JOHN: Glad we’ve no need to rush back. I’m looking forward to a nice breakfast outside, breathing some fresh country air…
Sherlock: (Clearly thinking “This village is so bucolically boring that I would rather claw my own eyeballs out of my skull than look at it another minute”) … (Opens mouth. Hesitates.)
SHERLOCK: You’d really like to have breakfast here?
JOHN: Yep.
SHERLOCK: (resigned) All right. The coffee is probably better anyway. Take as long as you like.

Apologies to the bird lovers among you! Sherlock never meant to hurt the pigeons; he just wanted to make them glow in the dark, like the Baskerville bunny. (Fun fact: “glowing” animals really are widely used in research. They carry a gene for fluorescent protein, but you can only see them "glow" under a black light--so Baskerville must be using something top secret and cutting edge.) As Sherlock lacked the patience or expertise to carry out a transgenic pigeon breeding program, he decided to invent a shortcut, and was completely shocked when he realized he had actually invented a death ray instead. Although the temptation to gloat to Mycroft ("I have a death ray and you don’t") was strong, he prudently decided while cleaning the kitchen that the world did not need another weapon of mass destruction, and gloated to himself for a while before he accidentally burned up his lab notes in another experiment and forgot the whole thing. He did feel bad about the pigeons though.
The Man At The Falls: Part Two

You won’t believe who Sherlock’s got as a client.
Who?

You have to keep your mouth shut about it! Cyril Overton. Just left his office
From Kensington?

Is this about Paolo Fieri???

He’s trying to keep it out of the papers. Not a word!

I know, I won’t
SWEAR

I swear! Will you get me his autograph?

“Hope Lestrade can keep this to himself,” Sherlock remarked as John surreptitiously slid his phone back into his pocket.

“I’m not even going to ask how you can tell who I’m texting,” John said. “We nearly there?”

“Another five minutes,” Sherlock said, looking out of the window of the cab. “Tell me about Paolo Fieri.”

“Well, he leads the league in——“

“His personal life, John,” Sherlock said with the eye roll audible in his voice.

“Oh. You know, I don’t really know much. He’s from some small town in Tuscany, usually has a different hot model on his arm every time he goes out…more easygoing than a lot of footballers, supposedly. I think that’s about it.”

They got into the flat easily—Paolo Fiero hadn’t even set his alarm—and found nothing immediately amiss; the flat had a certain expensive bachelor tidiness that made John think he didn’t spend a lot of time there. Sherlock sent John off to check the kitchen and living areas whilst he took the more fertile ground of the bedroom and bath. John found nothing more incriminating in the kitchen than a serious stockpile of Nutella—maybe Fiero didn’t realize it was sold in England?—and was just starting in on the DVDs when Sherlock came out looking satisfied and went straight to the computer.

“Hey, I think I found some gay porn,” John said, sitting back on his haunches to goggle at the massively endowed man on the cover of the disc he was holding. “I mean, this is in Italian, so I guess it could say something like ‘Naughty Nurses’, but there’s no girls that I can see.”

“Of course it’s gay porn,” Sherlock said, shutting the laptop with a snap. “We have to go to Italy.”

The case took longer than half a day, but not by much. Twenty-nine hours after choking on his
coffee, John found himself patting Paolo Fieri’s shoulder in the corridor of a hospital in Florence where Paolo’s lover, Stefano, had just been diagnosed with Hodgkin’s disease.

“Look, I’m sure he’s going to be fine,” John said awkwardly, patting his back as Paolo sniffled into his handkerchief. “Hodgkin’s has a really excellent five-year remission rate, and most…Sherlock, can you tell him? I don’t think his English is very good.”

Sherlock rattled off a stream of impatient Italian and Paolo nodded miserably. “Yes, so the doctors have say, but he is my heart, my love, my soul, how can I leave? And how can I tell Mr. Overton that I have the boyfriend, he will be…” Paolo made an expressive gesture with his hands, fresh tears welling in his eyes.

“Look, he’s worried about you, you have to tell him where you are,” John said. “I’m sure you can work things out, just tell him—“

“Here, you tell him,” Sherlock said suddenly, pushing his phone into John’s hand. “I want to talk to Stefano’s doctor. He’s just come in.” He strode off, leaving John with a teary Paolo in one hand and an earful of hold music on the other.

“Wait, Sherlock!” John hissed, but then Overton’s anxious voice came on, saying, “Mr. Holmes?”

“Er, it’s Dr. Watson, actually,” John said, letting go of Paolo and turning slightly away. “We’ve found Paolo and he’s fine, but there’s been a bit of an, ah, emergency back home; someone close to him has cancer…”

“Oh, God, poor kid. Is it Stefano?”

“Yeah, he—wait. You know about Stefano?”

“Of course I know about Stefano. Do you have any idea how much we pay these guys? Give me some credit. But Paolo’s obviously so deep in the closet you’d need a flashlight to find him, and the owners rather prefer it that way, so I’ve never said anything. That’s why I didn’t mention it to you lot.” Sherlock was going to love that, John thought. “What’s wrong with Stefano?”

“Hodgkin’s lymphoma. It’s highly curable in the early stages, but he was just diagnosed, and Paolo feels like he can’t leave him right now, so he’s a little upset.”

“Of course he can’t. It’s no problem, we’ll have Stefano treated here. Best cancer hospital in London, private nurses—whatever he needs. The club will take care of it.”

“That’s fantastic,” John said fervently. “Here, can you talk to Paolo? I’ve got him right here.” He passed the phone to Paolo, who took it with trepidation, listened, and then burst into a fresh round of tears.

Sherlock emerged from the ward and joined them, looking annoyed. “Is he sniveling on my phone?”

“He’ll be done in a minute.” John passed Paolo his own handkerchief. Paolo was shorter than John had expected, and with his face all blotchy and swollen from crying he showed no trace of the arrogant superstar he seemed on the field, but John thought he rather liked him better this way. “Overton already knew Paolo had a boyfriend. He’s going to make arrangements to have Stefano treated in London.”

“Yes, so I assumed. I’ve been discussing the matter with his doctor and there shouldn’t be any difficulty.”
Paolo ended the call and handed the phone back to John, who wiped it surreptitiously on his sleeve before giving it to Sherlock. Paolo clutched tearfully at his hand. “You are so good, so kind, I thank you so much….”

“Yes, yes,” Sherlock interrupted impatiently. He took out his notebook and handed it to Paolo. “Doctor Watson wants your autograph.”

“No really, that’s okay—“ but Paolo was clearly delighted to be able to do anything for John, and scribbled a heartfelt “Thank you forever to my dear friend Gian Watson! *Mille grazie!*” on the page.

“Ta,” John said, grinning. “Do you think you could do one for Greg Lestrade too?”

“I don’t understand it,” Sherlock said. They were sitting on a rooftop terrace with the sparkle of Florence spread out beneath them, halfway through the second course and well into their second bottle of a really excellent Montepulciano. Kensington FC’s owner had personally arranged for them to have dinner at his favorite restaurant, a short walk from their hotel.

John couldn’t help smiling, the phrase catching his ear and making him remember their conversation from a few months ago. This in turn made him realize he had never found out what had happened with Nick the other night.

“Why not just come out?” Sherlock continued, looking pensively out at the city. “It’s practically a trend these days. Even American athletes are doing it.”

John shrugged, taking another bite of his veal even though he’d just decided to stop so he would be able to manage dessert. “It’s still a big deal in sport, I suppose. Fieri—and Kensington—make a lot of money off advertising, and a lot of sponsors may not want to have a gay man as their public face.”

Sherlock sniffed derisively. “He’s still the same at playing football.”

“Agreed. I’m not saying it’s right. Anyway, who knows? Maybe he just wants to keep his private life private.”

Sherlock hummed absently. The night was warm and he was wearing only his white dress shirt, with the sleeves rolled up. In the soft candlelight of the terrace he looked very young, pale skin and shirt almost luminous.

John leaned over and poured the rest of the bottle of wine into their glasses. “A toast. Here’s to you, for wrapping the whole thing up in a day and a half and getting us a free dinner in Italy to boot!”

Sherlock smiled and raised his class to meet John’s, holding the stem with an exaggerated care that told John he was more than a little drunk. “And to you for making me take it.”

“I’m sure that painting will still be missing when we get back.” John drank his wine, set down the glass, and rested his elbows on the table. “Okay. Now you have to tell me about you and Nick.”

“Who?”

“Nick! The bartender! The guy you pulled the other night? Remember?”

“Oh right.” Sherlock glanced away, biting down on his lower lip to suppress a smile.

“You can’t delete people you shag,” John said severely. “I should have mentioned that before. Bad
“I didn’t shag him!” Sherlock protested.

“You did something though,” John said, pinning him in place with his stare. “Come on, spill. I’m your wingman, remember?”

“What does that even mean?”

“Stop changing the subject.”

“All right. It all went as you said…except that he told me that I had a lovely smile, so then I couldn’t say it myself, but it didn’t matter because he didn’t wait for me to say anything anyway.”

John couldn’t resist a whoop. “You snogged him!”

Even in the candlelight, the color rising in Sherlock’s cheeks was clearly visible. He looked down, biting his lip again, but then he broke into a brilliant smile. “Yes,” he admitted.

“Well, how was it?”

“Good,” Sherlock said, glancing over at John. “I mean, I think it was good. It went on quite a while, so I assume he enjoyed it.”

“Okay, okay, and then…?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Nothing.”

“What do you mean?”

“He asked if I’d like to go someplace more private, but I said no. I’d realized I didn’t actually find myself that attracted to him.” Sherlock was trying to sound careless, but he was blushing harder now, fiddling with the stem of his wineglass.

“Really? I thought he was rather fit myself. Was there something that put you off?”

“No…” Sherlock sipped at his wine thoughtfully and waved his other hand about. “I rather fancy someone a bit less…” he flapped his wrist. “Opposites attract, don’t they? I think I’d prefer someone shorter and stronger. I was thinking you could find me one when we get back.”

John, who had just taken a sip of his own wine, snorted and then coughed into his serviette as the wine burned his throat. “I can’t just pick up blokes at Tesco, you know! That’s what Grindr’s for.”

Sherlock waved this away negligently. “Wherever you like.”

John took a long drink of his water and then sat back with his wineglass regarding Sherlock. Sherlock was loose and relaxed in a way that John almost never saw, even after a case; the wine and the food and the warm summer night had all combined to leave him lounging back in his chair, hair mussed, flushed and bright-eyed and smiling. Anyone would want to shag him looking like that, John thought, and then on the heels of it, hell, I’d shag him. For a moment the idea surprised him, and then it didn’t. If Sherlock wanted a short strong man, why give him away when John could have him himself? And it wasn’t like Sherlock would be the loser by it—John was a good lover, a careful lover, and this way Sherlock needn’t worry about his inexperience being an issue, because John already knew about it.

He cleared his throat. “I’ll do it.”
Sherlock cocked an eyebrow, “What, find me a man on Grindr?”

“No.” He met Sherlock’s gaze, calm and purposeful. “If you really want to have sex…I’ll do it. Tonight, if you like.”

Sherlock blinked once. Even that seemed slower than usual, as though someone had dialed him back a few notches. The colour in his face deepened, but he didn’t look away. There was a long, suspended moment. “All right,” he said.

The waiter arrived at that moment, whisking away their plates and the empty wine bottle and proffering dessert menus. Now that things had been decided, John suddenly wanted to draw it out, to make this magical evening last forever. “Whatever you think is the best one, that’s what I’ll have,” he told the waiter. “And bring an extra fork, and Amari for both of us.” Sherlock had only ordered espresso.

The waiter withdrew, and John looked up to find Sherlock’s eyes still on him—not penetrating in the way they were when he was trying to find something out, just watching, maybe a little assessing. “Why?” he finally asked.

Because I don’t trust anyone else to take care of you the way I know I can, John thought, but he couldn’t say that. Before he quite realized he was going to do it he heard himself say, “You’re beautiful.”

Sherlock blinked, but he didn’t look away. John steeled himself for the eye roll, the snarky remark (I’ve already agreed, you can skip the seduction), but Sherlock just looked at him, that level questioning gaze, and then he said simply, “As are you.”

John stared, but at that moment there was a murmuring and a chorus of ooooh from the other diners on the terrace. He turned to see what they were looking at and saw an enormous moon rising, round and heavy as a blood orange.

“Wow,” John said. He turned back to Sherlock, who was still watching John instead of the moon. “Nice touch. You arrange that?”

Now he got the eye roll. “John. You overestimate both my interest in romantic tropes and my ability to control the earth’s natural satellites.”

“Oh right.” John nodded seriously. “I forgot.” After a beat: “So you had Mycroft set it up then?”

They were both laughing when the waiter returned.

Leaving the restaurant, John was feeling as happy as he could ever remember—simultaneously filled with contentment and anticipation—and then, to top it all off, he heard music.

“Let’s walk through the square,” he said to Sherlock, who was turning in a circle trying to get his bearings.

Sherlock stopped in place and almost fell over. “It’s such a lovely night,” he said solemnly.

John laughed and steadied him. “Yes, it is.” More to the point, he’d seen a little covered shopping arcade in the piazza. If Sherlock wanted the full deflowering experience, they were going to need supplies—John didn’t usually plan on pulling when he was traveling with Sherlock, so he hadn’t packed anything.
They ambled along to the square, John occasionally grabbing Sherlock’s elbow when he stumbled—probably a good thing they were having a bit of a walk, John thought wryly. John himself felt only mildly inebriated, enough to find everything delightful. They came out near the brightly lit shopping arcade and John paused.

“So, I don’t want you to feel as if we have to do anything in particular, but if you—”

Sherlock’s eyes flicked to the shop and back to John so fast John almost missed it. “Yes,” he said.

“Are you sure? Because we—”

“Yes.”

Okay then. John made short work of his errand. When he emerged back onto the square he had a moment’s panic when he didn’t see Sherlock, but he was right there; John was so used to seeing his dramatic silhouette in his coat that he almost missed the slender man with his sleeves rolled up, watching the musicians. Sherlock’s back was to John and his head tilted a little to the side and the sight of him from behind—long white neck, the inviting curve of his arse—stirred a simmering ember of arousal deep in John’s gut. He stepped up behind him and realized they were of a height; John was still standing on the raised pavement outside the shops. He hesitated, then slid his arms around Sherlock’s waist, pulling him back against John’s chest.

Sherlock startled in John’s arms but then relaxed, letting his body melt back into John’s. They stood like that a long minute, watching the musicians, John’s arms wrapped around Sherlock and their heads leaning against each other, and then somehow at the same time John loosened his grip and Sherlock turned around into his arms. Neither of them spoke. Sherlock’s arms were loose around John, one of John’s tight around his waist and the other threading into his hair. John looked into Sherlock’s eyes, steady and grey in the moonlight, and then Sherlock’s lashes fluttered closed and John leaned forward and kissed him.

It was like the first time he put on his army uniform and looked in the mirror and saw that it fit him, inside and out; like the first time he had gone into the trauma bay to save a patient and knew that he could do it; like the moment he had stepped into Baker Street. It was like coming home.

When the kiss finally ended, he looked into Sherlock’s face as his eyes slowly opened and saw immediately that it had been the same for him. That for Sherlock it had been cocaine and chemistry and the Ninth Symphony and everything he never knew he wanted. They looked straight into each other’s eyes as John cupped Sherlock’s cheek with his hand, and John thought that his entire life had led up to this one moment.

“Was that…is it always…” Sherlock breathed on a long exhale.

“No,” John said. “That was something special. That was you and me, together. Us. That was the best kiss of all time, maybe.”

Sherlock’s smile could have lit the square. “I don’t think I need any more data sources.”

“No,” John said and he kissed him again, deeper now, pure and perfect and true.

Afterwards, the specific details of that night blurred a bit in John’s mind, but he would always remember it as having a magical, almost dreamlike quality: the softness of the warm air through the open window, the music drifting up from the street, the taste of coffee and wine and chocolate on Sherlock’s lips. The moonlit perfection of Sherlock’s body, white against the whiteness of the sheets.
John had expected to have to coax him into undressing, but the wine and his essential trust in John made him relaxed and pliant, and he was soon stretched out on the bed: acres and acres of smooth soft skin under John’s hands. John straddled him and stroked his chest, rubbing his thumbs over Sherlock’s nipples until Sherlock arched and shivered. He was more than a little drunk, John thought, looking at Sherlock’s half-lidded eyes, but then so was John, and probably it was just as well. He could feel Sherlock’s erection pressing up behind him and he himself was so hard he felt as though he could go off at the slightest touch.

Sherlock clearly had no idea what he was supposed to do with his hands—he was fluttering them helplessly around John’s thighs—so John took them, threaded their fingers together, and pinned them up over his head. Sherlock’s breath caught and he tipped his head up and back, baring his throat for John’s mouth, and he moaned for the first time when John licked him there. The vibration against his lips made John want to suck and bite and take, but he held back, nuzzling gently. He stroked his hands down Sherlock’s arms and sides and slid off, preparing to move down between his legs. Christ. The moon was shining full in the window and lit that long, pure body like marble. He was white and untouched, a fucking unicorn, John thought a little hazily, waiting for John to deflower him. Oh, Christ. His cock throbbed hungrily.

John parted Sherlock’s thighs gently, just enough to settle between them, and stroked gently along the insides of his legs and along the creases of his groin. He was desperate to touch, but wanted to go slowly in case Sherlock got cold feet or felt overwhelmed. Sherlock seemed to have no such compunctions. He spread his legs as far apart as they would go, biting his lip when John’s thumbs brushed along his perineum. John moved his hand to loosely grip the base of his cock and slid upwards, letting Sherlock get used to his touch, smoothing his foreskin down all the way and running his thumb over the slit. Sherlock sucked in air and dropped one hand down to fist in his disarrayed curls.

So far so good, John thought. He reached for the bag (and the hand towel) he’d prudently deposited on the night stand, pulling out the bottle of lube and slicking his fingers. He’d been tempted to go after Sherlock with his mouth, to take in that long slender cock and then lick all the way down and tongue him until he was loose and open and sopping, but decided to hold off. That last activity was better undertaken after a good long shower, and Sherlock was already so hard and panting just from John’s hand that he didn’t think he’d last if John sucked him. He pushed one finger, very carefully, into the tight clench of muscle. Sherlock gasped and his arms fell, outstretched on either side and grabbing for handfuls of sheet.

“Okay?” John asked. “You still want this?”

“I want it,” Sherlock gasped.

John worked his finger in slowly, coaxing the tight muscle to relax whilst he rubbed soothingly at Sherlock’s inner thighs and arse. Sherlock’s erection seemed to have flagged a little, so he took a chance and leaned over to lick a long strip from base to tip, which made Sherlock arch and moan again. He licked a few more times, breathing moist warm air over the head, and felt Sherlock beginning to relax around him. John took his time, massaging gently, until Sherlock had stopped tensing and was beginning to push back a little. John slid in a second finger, waited for Sherlock’s body to accept it, and then slid his fingers deliberately upward until he brushed Sherlock’s prostate. Sherlock’s whole body curved, his head thrashing on the pillow as he moaned. John stroked again and registered that Sherlock’s breathing had picked up, too fast and frantic and too long on the exhale. He slid his fingers almost out so he could lean up and kiss him, taking all that carbon dioxide into his own mouth and making Sherlock breathe it back, until he calmed.

“It’s so much,” Sherlock whispered against his lips. “It’s so much.”
John did not think he was talking about John’s fingers, still stretching Sherlock’s previously untouched entrance wide open. He could see Sherlock’s closed eyelids trembling. “We don’t have to go further. I can touch you whilst I do this, I’ll make you feel so good—“

Sherlock shook his head even as he opened his mouth under John’s and John reflexively kissed him, tasting wine and coffee. He cupped the back of Sherlock’s head and delved deeply with his tongue, stroking with his fingers. “Ah,” Sherlock gasped. John pulled back a little to give him air. “More. Please, more.”

“You want my cock here?” John said softly into his ear, twisting his fingers and pressing. He sat up a little to get a better angle and pushed up into Sherlock’s prostate again. Sherlock whimpered. He seemed to be trying to push his hips up into John’s fingers, but his legs were sprawled out so widely he had no leverage.

“Yes, oh God, yes,” Sherlock managed. He was biting his lip again, knuckles clenched white against the sheets. John pulled out far enough to add a third finger and pushed back in. Sherlock grunted a little and arched away from the added stretch, so John stilled his hand, stroked along the crease of his groin and caressed his cock, and he relaxed back again. John pulled his fingers out carefully, just a centimeter or so, then slid them forward, going so, so slowly. He had never been so cautious before, so thorough, but he had the sensation of holding something precious and fragile in his hands—thank God Sherlock couldn't read that thought—and was desperate not to hurt him.

John looked at his fingers breaching Sherlock, imagined the feel of that tightness around his cock, and felt as though he would explode from wanting. "Okay?"

"Okay. Yes."

John managed to get the box and the package open using his right hand and his teeth, which seemed quite an accomplishment considering how much wine he’d drunk, and rolled the condom over his throbbing cock. He pulled out his fingers and generously slicked both himself and Sherlock and then wiped his hand on the towel. Sherlock was writhing around, eyes still closed, apparently desperate for some kind of contact with John but uncertain how to get it.

“Roll over now,” John said, putting one hand on Sherlock’s knee to help him turn.

Sherlock’s eyes flew open, shockingly dark in his pale face. “No, he said. “I want you to see me. I’m giving—I want you to see me when you take me.”

The words hit John like a jolt in his gut. How much courage must it have taken for Sherlock, already as spread open and physically vulnerable as a person could be, to so bare his heart? To put himself so utterly into John’s hands? John’s own heart throbbed with an almost unbearable tenderness. “I always see you,” he said, his voice hoarse with emotion. “And once I take you, I’m never going to give you up. You’ll always be mine.”

Sherlock made a choked sound and arched his back again, tilting his arse up in clear invitation. John grabbed another pillow and pushed it under Sherlock’s hips—maybe it would be better if he could see Sherlock’s face, after all—and lined himself up. He pushed in as slowly and carefully as he could, holding onto Sherlock’s waist and watching his face like a hawk for any sign of discomfort. Sherlock bit his lip and exhaled hard a few times, which made John freeze and hover, stroking and crooning, but he seemed all right. Once John was fully inside he held still, staring at Sherlock beneath him: dark curls tumbled on the white pillow, dark lashes on his cheeks, head back, lips parted, an expression on his face John had never seen, John inside him—it seemed almost overwhelming, the intensity of the connection lightyears beyond any experience of sex he could remember. Sherlock’s eyes opened again, wide and astonished.
"You," John whispered. "You--oh God, you're so beautiful, I..."

Sherlock's eyes fluttered closed again and he exhaled, long legs coming up to wrap around John's waist and pull them even more tightly together. John groaned and shifted, and when Sherlock only gripped tighter he began, very carefully, to move, rocking minutely back and forth until he felt Sherlock beginning to push back into him, setting up a tentative rhythm.

John gripped Sherlock's sharp hipbones for leverage and began to thrust, gentle and shallow at first, search for the best angle. He knew he'd found it when Sherlock's right hand clutched at his hair again, his other hand scrabbling for John's wrist. He was moaning now, a long deep sound that seemed to rumble in John's chest like a subsonic vibration. He was close, John thought, looking at the sheen of sweat on his face and his tight heavy testicles. "Touch yourself," John said. He took Sherlock's hand and wrapped it around his cock, guiding his hand so that Sherlock thrust into the circle of his fist every time John pushed into him. "God, that's it, you're so gorgeous. Now faster, that's it, I want to see you come whilst I'm inside you, come on now, do it for me, do it—" his hips snapped forward almost involuntarily and Sherlock cried out when he came, his whole body stiffening, arse clenching convulsively around John's cock. I did it, John thought exultantly: I made him come, a virgin, and he sped up, pulling back a little to move in fast shallow thrusts, trying desperately to keep from pounding into Sherlock’s still-shuddering body and then coming with a shout as he folded over him.

He stayed there for a moment until both their tremors subsided and then he gently pulled out, reaching for the towel and wiping Sherlock carefully before cleaning himself. He tossed the towel to the ground and crawled up to pull Sherlock tenderly into his arms. He cradled Sherlock's bony shoulders—still bright white in the moonlight—and stroked his hair from his face.

Sherlock opened his eyes and stared up at John with such utter adoration that John felt his heart physically swell. "Oh, my God. I’ve fallen in love with you,” he said, not knowing he was going to say it until the words were out of his mouth. “I’m so fucking in love with you I can’t stand it and I didn’t even know it until tonight. How is that even possible?”

Sherlock’s radiant expression faltered. John immediately moved to kiss him, needing to erase that crease between Sherlock’s eyebrows immediately and bring back that pure sweet smile. “It’s good,” he said quickly. “It’s a good thing. If you meant that, what you said before—then I meant it too. You’re mine now, and I’ll never let you go.”

“I meant it,” Sherlock said softly. The corners of his eyes crinkled in a hint of his former smile. John cupped his face, one thumb resting at the edge of that sharp cheekbone, just staring into his darkened eyes. He had never felt this way before, as though he were but half of a whole, everything before this moment only a shadow of the life he was meant to live.

They lay that way a long, long time, nose to nose with John’s hand resting along Sherlock’s face, crisp black-and-white in the moonlight, until John’s vision blurred into a grey cloud, and he slept.

John woke up to bright daylight streaming through his window where the moonlight had spilled the night before. For a moment he couldn’t remember why he was so happy, and then then memory came back in a flood: the kissing, the sex, Sherlock. He stretched and rolled to his side, smiling.

Sherlock was not there. The other side of John’s bed was empty and cold—Sherlock had been gone for a while. John sat up, looking into the en suite, but the door was open and the room was completely quiet except for the noises drifting up from the street. Sherlock had…bolted? Fled? Gone back to his own room to take a shower? John sighed. It would have been nice to wake up with
Sherlock, to share a little slow cuddling in the warm morning sun; even nicer to have had the chance to lick over every inch of that lovely body in the full daylight where he could see everything he might have missed last night. John considered his morning erection and decided, optimistically, to save it for later. He got up and slurped some water out of the tap, feeling a little guilty that he hadn’t made them both drink last night—Sherlock was undoubtedly feeling all that wine this morning.

John showered, dressed, packed up and went down the corridor to Sherlock’s room, but got no answer to his repeated knocking. Huh. John considered the closed door, thinking. Sherlock rarely ran off, unless he was distracted by a case; if he and John were in a row it was usually John who left. If he wanted to think about something, Sherlock just tuned John out. It didn’t surprise John much that Sherlock might have wanted to go off and have a little bit of a panic attack—he’d rather expected as much—but usually he didn’t leave, especially not before…

John smiled. He knew where Sherlock was.

“Scusi, per favore,” he said to the man behind the desk in the hotel lobby. “Can you tell me where to find the best coffee in Florence?”

The directions the man gave him took John back through the piazza where they’d stopped the previous night. As he stepped into the sunny square he couldn’t help glancing over at the corner where they’d kissed, and there sat Sherlock at a sidewalk café.

John couldn’t help smiling. Sentiment? Sherlock was wearing sunglasses and appeared to be staring into space, an empty coffee cup in front of him. John circled around so he could come up from behind and plopped himself down in the chair opposite Sherlock. “Did you order for me?”

Sherlock’s eyes were hidden behind his sunglasses, but John had the satisfaction of seeing his mouth open in surprise. “Well, you had to know I’d find you, didn’t you?” John went on conversationally. “You might know crime, Sherlock, but I know you. I even know why you’re here.”

Sherlock’s eyebrows went up, but at that moment a waiter appeared with a fresh coffee for Sherlock and a menu for John. Sherlock waved the menu away and spoke to the waiter in a flood of liquid Italian. John looked at his slender white hand gesturing and had a sudden desire to suck those long fingers into his mouth.

The waiter vanished and Sherlock turned back to John. “John…” he began uncertainly, fiddling with his saucer.

“Nope.” John put his hand down over Sherlock’s, relishing the tiny tremor he felt run through it. “This is my area, remember? I know exactly what you’re going to say. You don’t do relationships, you think you’ll make a right mess of this, the work comes first. Did I miss anything?”

Sherlock’s mouth had opened again. He seemed to be having some trouble remembering how to close it.

“Yeah, I know all that already, and I don’t care,” John said. He lifted Sherlock’s hand up and kissed the palm, then held it tightly in both of his. “I don’t care. I know you, Sherlock. I’ve lived with you eighteen months now; I know you better than you know yourself. I know you think you’re selfish and rude and sometimes you are, but you also make me tea and surprisingly good food when I’m tired and hungry and buy me beer and make my life worth living. The other stuff is just…stuff. It doesn’t matter.”

“But it does,” Sherlock said. His hand was cold in John’s, but he didn’t draw it away. “You say that now, but it does. I want to be with you more than anything, but I’ll be me, and eventually you’ll get
tired of it all and you’ll leave.”

“Nope,” John said. “My area, remember? The bloody pigeons didn’t make me leave, and that was before I got to kiss you and found out that there is absolutely no point in living my life if I don’t get to kiss you every single day. I need you, Sherlock, I need you like oxygen, so I’m going to make it easy on both of us and tell you exactly what you have to do to keep me. Okay? It’s easy. Three things, and two of them are universal. Don’t lie, don’t cheat, and don’t run off, even if you think it’s for my own good—especially if you think it’s for my own good.”

Sherlock frowned behind his sunglasses. “Cheat?”

“On me,” John said, and when Sherlock continued to frown, he enunciated clearly: “Don’t have sex with other people.”

Sherlock looked repulsed. “I wouldn’t—“

“No, listen. I’m only the second person you’ve ever even kissed. The day might very well come when you really wish you’d played the field a bit when you had the chance, and if that happens, tell me—we’ll work something out, but I can’t—“

“Stop it, please stop,” Sherlock said. He had pulled his hand out of John’s and covered both ears. “You’re making me physically sick.”

Right on cue, the waiter arrived with a huge platter of food for John and Sherlock turned visibly green.

“I think that’s the hangover,” John said. He gestured to Sherlock and said to the waiter, “San Pellegrino, per favore? Er…grande. Jesus, Sherlock, you don’t even have any water.”

Sherlock clutched at his coffee as though John might try to take it away, although he didn’t drink. His fingers were trembling. “I don’t want to be with anyone but you. I don’t understand why we’re talking about this.”

“Okay. Sherlock, okay. Calm down. I’m certainly not going to make you. I don’t want to be with anyone else either. The same rules apply to me, obviously.”

The waiter materialized with Sherlock’s Pellegrino and he drained an entire glass in one go. A little color returned to his face. “That does help. Is it the bubbles?”

“Yeah, here…” John refilled his glass. “Keep drinking. So we’re exclusively a couple now, that’s very good. Do you need to freak out any more? Because otherwise I’d like to eat this delicious breakfast you ordered for me and then take you back to the hotel and spend the next several hours showing you all the other things I can do to you that you are going to really, really like.”

Sherlock was beginning to smile a little. “What about our flight?”

“Oh, we’re changing the flight.”

They were quiet a few minutes, John eating steadily and Sherlock drinking his mineral water, and then Sherlock said tentatively, “Actually…that wasn’t the entire reason I left this morning.”

“What, you weren’t freaking out?”

“Of course not. Well, yes, a little. But there was another reason.” Sherlock set down his glass and sat up straighter. “Do you see that house behind you?”
John glanced over his shoulder. “Right on the corner of the piazza? Yeah. Nice place.”

“I recognized the address last night. It was notorious as the home of Peter Ricoletti, who was head of the Malavita. Peter Ricoletti disappeared ten years ago and is presumed dead—the Malavita is apparently being run by his former lieutenant now—but the house appears to still be occupied. When I came back this morning I had a look round and there’s definitely been a fair amount of recent activity at the back entrance, which is certainly interesting.”

“So maybe Ricoletti left the house to his crime syndicate in his will?”

“Possible. Do you know what the Malavita is particularly known for?”

“Loan sharking? Killing people?”

“Art theft and fraud.” Sherlock smiled. “Change seats with me and look in the first floor window, the one with the draperies open.”

John did. “I can’t really see anything. The sun is on the window.”

Sherlock took off his sunglasses, revealing slightly reddened eyes—maybe they should stop by the chemist’s again and get him some aspirin, John thought—and passed them over. “Try it now.”

John looked through the window. His mouth dropped open. “No fucking way.”

“Yep,” Sherlock said.

“That’s—the painting, that waterfall painting that disappeared from the gallery! The locked-room painting!”

“‘The Falls of the Reichenbach’ to be precise,” Sherlock said. “A Turner masterpiece, supposedly, though I don’t care much for landscapes.”

John stared at him. “You solved a case whilst you were having coffee. Lestrade is never going to believe this.”

“Well, it was at least ninety percent coincidence, and Lestrade is only going to hear about it if you tell him,” Sherlock said, pulling out his phone. “The Italian authorities have absolutely no reason to listen to me. We’ll have to get the information to them another way. Too bad…I’d love to learn how they got it out of the gallery.” He tilted his head. “Good morning, brother dear. Who do you know in the Carabinieri?”

“You aren’t going to get any credit for this now,” John pointed out when Sherlock finally pocketed his phone, looking satisfied.

“Oh, who cares? I don’t need credit. You can write it up in your blog if you want to, but you’re right—probably no one will believe it.” Sherlock smiled at him and drank off the rest of his Pellegrino. “I’m feeling a lot better now. I’m much more interested in seeing all these other things you are going to do to me that I am going to really, really like.”

Until Florence, Sherlock thought that life could not possibly improve on the night he had gained a sidekick and a nemesis all at once. He was wrong. Being in love was better than having an archenemy, better than any crime he had ever solved, any drug he had ever taken, anything. Like John, he had found the events of that night more of a recognition than a revelation: of course he
loved John, he had loved him since the pool, he just hadn’t seen what was right in front of him
(although as usual John was an even more unobservant idiot than Sherlock, since John at least had
some experience with love and therefore should have caught on a good deal more quickly). Being in
love was literally intoxicating. He was drunk on it: dazed by John’s kisses, undone by his hands,
unable to focus on anything but the next time John would touch him.

They cancelled their flight and stayed in Florence until the end of the week, checking out of their
separate rooms and moving into a suite with a balcony. In the mornings they had long, leisurely
breakfasts at the café in the piazza, watching the Carabinieri dismantling Peter Ricoletti’s former
house; in the afternoons they went to see the sights. In between they had sex. Lots and lots and lots
of sex, and Sherlock liked all of it just as much as John had predicted. The first time John took him
into his mouth Sherlock essentially came on the spot, to his intense mortification.

“No, no, no,” John soothed, stroking his hair as Sherlock burrowed his scarlet face into John’s
shoulder. His voice was all gentle concern, but Sherlock could feel him shaking with suppressed
laughter. “Honestly, Sherlock, I haven’t done that in ages—I’m just chuffed to see I haven’t lost my
touch.”

Sherlock pushed him onto his back, determined and competitive. “All right. Tell me how to do it and
let’s see how long you manage.”

John managed longer than Sherlock, but it was glorious all the same—John’s coaching quickly
devolved into a babbled litany of “Oh fuck, your mouth,” and “God you feel amazing” and then just
“oh God oh fuck” over and over again. Sherlock opened his eyes and looked up, curious, and John
happened to look down at the same moment, straight into Sherlock’s burning eyes and his mouth
stretched wide around John’s cock, and John shouted and grabbed Sherlock’s hair and came with a
bitter rush that startled Sherlock wildly, though he managed to hang on until the end.

“Christ, I can’t even—you are the most gorgeous thing I’ve ever seen, you’re incredible, God I love
you so much,” John managed finally, pulling Sherlock up against him to be cradled, smugly, against
his chest.

John refused to penetrate him again whilst they were in Florence (“Let’s save it for when we get
back, you need to heal.”) Sherlock was a bit sore but he wanted it in a way that was different from
the way he otherwise wanted sex with John (any way he could get it, all the time). Intercourse was…
different: taking, having—even the slang was different, it was John possessing him and filling him
and owning him, and Sherlock wanted to be filled and possessed and owned.

“Let’s try it the other way,” John said on their last night.

Sherlock was startled. “What, you want me to…”

“Sure. Why not?”

“I thought…I assumed…”

“That I’d always want to top because I also have sex with women? I’ve tried it both ways, and it’s
only fair you should too.”

Out of deference to Sherlock’s inexperience (and his performance anxiety, Sherlock suspected), John
took charge of the proceedings. He even demonstrated how to do the preparation, although he then
lay back and let Sherlock take over, which Sherlock enjoyed a lot. He was peering intently at John’s
anus and wondering how John might feel about a fourth finger when John cleared his throat and
said, “Sherlock, I know you’re having a great time, but if I don’t get some action in the next few
minutes I’m either going to blow my top or fall asleep.”

“Sorry,” Sherlock said, sliding his fingers out and scrambling up quickly. “Er…”

“Lie back, I’m taking over now,” John said.

And that was how Sherlock found himself sprawled against the pillows, staring in rapt fascination as John rode his cock, strong thighs flexing as he moved up and down. Sherlock found that if he focused entirely on John he could stave off his own impending orgasm, which seemed desperately important as John was clearly enjoying himself immensely. He carefully memorized every twitch of John’s face, every hitch in his breathing that seemed to indicate discomfort or greater arousal—especially when John lurched forward gasping, “Oh God, right there,” and clutched a hand in Sherlock’s hair as he frantically worked his cock. Sherlock gripped his hips to keep him in position and John shuddered and said, “Sherlock, I’m going to…”

He was asking permission, Sherlock understood. “Go ahead. Come on me,” he said encouragingly, realizing that he really wanted John to do it.

John groaned. “God, yeah. Take it, take it…” his words dissolved into a wordless groan as his semen spurted hotly onto Sherlock’s face and chest. That did it for Sherlock, who cried out sharply and thrust up into John’s hot, clenching arse, coming so hard he almost knocked John off.

John stayed bowed over Sherlock for a minute, catching his breath, then slid off with an “oof” and collapsed heavily next to Sherlock. Sherlock lifted his head blearily, frowned at the condom hanging limply from his softening prick, and tugged it off. He lacked the motor skills to do anything more definitive, so he dropped it on the floor.

“Sorry about that,” John said contritely, swiping at Sherlock’s spattered face.

“No, don’t be,” Sherlock said quickly. He wanted to tell John that he’d liked it, that he’d enjoyed the feeling of being pinned down and used for John’s pleasure, of John marking him, but he wasn’t sure if John would consider that an acceptable sort of enjoyment. “It was good. Really good.”

“So you like topping?”

“I wasn’t topping, was I? You were on top.”

John considered. “Yeah, I guess technically I was, but we can do it differently next time.” He kissed Sherlock lazily, wiping the sticky mess away with his hand.

“I liked when you came on my face,” Sherlock said softly, endorphins and John’s caresses making him brave.

John cracked an eye open to smile at him. “Yeah?”

“Yes.”

“I keep thinking you can’t look more fantastic,” John said sleepily, settling his head onto Sherlock’s shoulder, “and then I see you with your mouth around my cock, or you coming underneath me, or my come on your face, and I just think…God.” He was silent a moment. “How did I almost miss this?”

“Well, you’re an idiot.” Sherlock tightened his arms around John, nuzzling into his sweaty hair. “Good thing I convinced you to shag me.”
“Oh, it was your idea, was it?”
“Of course.”
“Of course.”
“I love you.”
“I love you too, you egotistical git.”

Sherlock managed to keep the worrying at bay until they left for London. He wanted to believe that John was right: that if Sherlock just followed the rules (no running off, no lying—the sleeping with other people thing was too ridiculous to bother with) that everything would be wonderful and John would love him forever. The trouble was, he couldn’t. Even Sherlock knew that relationships were more complicated than that—look at John’s string of girlfriends. As far as Sherlock knew none of them had lied or cheated, although there had definitely been a fair amount of running off, on John’s part at least. No: John’s relationships had all dissolved either because the girlfriends dumped John for being unavailable or John dumped them for being, in his words, “clingy”. Sherlock did not really care about the girlfriends who had dumped John, who were obviously idiots, but he did wish he hadn’t deleted the others so thoroughly. He spent a fair amount of time digging through the recycling bins in his mind palace, considering what he could recall about the dumped girlfriends and how they had behaved. And then there was the issue of how everyone else would react and how John would feel about that, and their living arrangements…maybe John would laugh at Sherlock’s sock index? Maybe he didn’t actually like sharing a bed with him? That one kept Sherlock awake the whole way home.

“So, how are we doing the sleeping, then?” John asked when they got back, unabashedly straightforward.

Oh God. How was he supposed to know the correct response? “I am, of course, open to any arrangement you might prefer,” Sherlock said, trying not to sound stiff, “but I very much enjoyed sleeping with you in Italy.” It was true. Well, he hadn’t actually slept most of the time—mostly he just lay there and watched John sleep—but when he did it had been lovely.

“Right, me too,” John said, smiling. “I thought I might keep my things upstairs for the time being—not sure all our clothes would fit—but I’d like to sleep with you. And anyway, we need to break in your bed. I believed I promised you a proper christening for it?”

That distracted Sherlock immediately. He let himself be towed into the bedroom, where John undressed him as though unwrapping a spectacular, longed-for gift. Sherlock was already hard, desperate to feel John inside him again.

“God, you’re lovely,” John murmured, nuzzling into Sherlock’s neck and running his hands over his back. “Lie back for me?”

Sherlock lay back against the pillows, fumbling to turn the light off as he did.

“Hey, I like to see you,” John protested.

“People could see in,” Sherlock pointed out, although really he just felt self-conscious. He couldn’t have said why, but the thought of being seen losing control at home unnerved him in a way it hadn’t in Florence.
Sherlock held his breath when John finally pushed into him, so carefully, just the head of his cock at first. Oh, it was marvelous: John inside him, claiming him, the discomfort nothing compared to the incomparable feeling of John shuddering over him in an effort to hold back. Sherlock’s fingers were tingling. “Sherlock,” he heard John say distantly, John’s voice shaking a little, “breathe.”

Oh. “More,” Sherlock said on an explosive exhale. John pushed in deeper, and then deeper still until he was all the way inside, and Sherlock gasped, “Ohhhhhhh.” He felt like a sacrifice, spread open to John, John’s hard prick plunged deep inside him, laid out on the altar of his white sheets. “Ohhhh.” He was floating, unmoored. John’s fingers found his and laced them together, his other hand coming up to tangle in Sherlock’s hair, grounding him.

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“Okay?” John panted.

“Slow,” Sherlock managed breathlessly, “go slow. I want it to last forever.”

John huffed a little laugh and his hands ran along Sherlock’s sides, stroking his flanks, his chest, the creases of his groin. Sherlock arched his back and moaned as John rolled inside him and John slid an arm under his back and bowed over his chest, pulling Sherlock up closer and groaning, “God, you feel so good.”

They drew it out a fairly long time, Sherlock stretching his arms over his head and losing himself in the sensation of John filling him, the discomfort entirely faded, little sparks of pleasure flying around his consciousness when John’s rolling hips brushed him a particular way. He really would have been happy to stay like that forever, but eventually John pushed his legs up and stroked the backs of his thighs and it felt so wonderful that he couldn’t help reaching for his cock. John took that for the permission it was and began to move against him, each thrust pushing the pleasure up higher, higher, higher until he heard John shout, “Oh, fuck, yeah,” as he plunged in hard and deep, cock pulsing. Sherlock grabbed his bicep hard with his left hand to hold him in place and stroked himself quickly to orgasm, crying out into John’s mouth as John kissed him.

John cleaned them up when they could both move again and then settled back into bed, Sherlock tucking himself up behind him so his knees fitted into John’s and his face was nestled into John’s hair. He wriggled around a bit, getting comfortable, and felt a damp bit of residual lubricant slippery between his thighs. The sensation was odd, but not unpleasant.

“John?”

“Mmm?”

“Could we do it without the condom?”

Sherlock felt John come back to full wakefulness. “Er….I’ve never done that, but if you don’t mind the mess…we should probably get tested.”

Sherlock shrugged. “You know I don’t have chlamydia or gonorrhea. And I always used new needles, but I was tested for HIV and hepatitis when I was in hospital once.”

John was quiet. “Did you overdose?”


John stirred and turned over to look at Sherlock. “Jesus. Seriously? What happened?”

“I had a very high fever and Lestrade came…apparently I was delirious; I don’t really remember. He took me to hospital and I suppose they saw the needle marks on my arms.”
“Automatic admission for four weeks of intravenous antibiotics,” John said softly. “Did you have a positive blood culture?”

“Strep viridans,” Sherlock said. “Classic pathogen. I was meticulous with new needles, but not meticulous enough with cleaning my skin, it would seem.” He felt his mouth twist ruefully. “I learned later that most drug abusers leave hospital in the first week so they can shoot up through the central line. Thank God I wasn’t that far gone; the thought never even occurred to me. I stopped after that. Mostly.”

“And you’re okay? I mean obviously you don’t have congestive heart failure, but…”

“I’m fine. No valvular dysfunction at all.”

John reached a hand up to stroke Sherlock’s hair. Sherlock, eyes downcast, said, “If I had known I would…if I had known there would be you, to give my heart, I would not have been so cavalier with it.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” John said. He pulled Sherlock into his arms, awkwardly as they were both lying down, but Sherlock got his arms around too and clung fiercely. “Sherlock, love, that’s the most beautiful thing anyone’s ever said to me. So it’s mine now, your heart?”

“Well, that was a metaphor and of course the physical—“

“Sherlock.”

“Of course it is.”

“I’ll guard it as my most precious possession,” John vowed. “And I’ll take excellent care of it. Speaking of which, I don’t want you to think I’d automatically leave you over it, but…”

“A rule. I know. Don’t worry; it’s almost as unlikely as me cheating.”

“Sherlock, you know that addiction—“

“Yes, of course I do, but why would I ever want to take drugs when I have you?”

John made a choked sound and hugged Sherlock tighter. Sherlock, pleased and little mystified—he was just being honest, after all—let himself be squeezed and then released so John could take his face in his hands and look steadily into his eyes.

“You have me too,” he told Sherlock. “My body and soul and of course, my heart. And I just hope to God I’m worthy of yours.”

Sherlock did sleep that night, curled in John’s arms with the sound of John’s own heart—Sherlock’s, now—thumping steady and reassuring in his ear.
The Man At The Falls: Part Three

Chapter Notes

No warnings! Really!
Khorazir has made the funniest art of all time for this chapter HERE.
The passage that opens this chapter is copied directly from wikihow. I did not change it one bit.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

www.wikihow.com/Be-Less-Clingy

Method 2 of 3: Live a More Fulfilling Life

Learn to like being alone. Many clingy people prefer to spend 99% of their time with other people. Wanting to always hang out with other people will make it particularly hard for you to be alone. Enjoying your "me time" is an important way to build confidence, find what makes you happy, and just to decompress and spend time away from other people. Here are some ways to like being alone:

- Go for long walks. This is not only healthy but will help you get in touch with your thoughts.
- Find a love for reading. Reading is not only entertaining and educational, but a book can be a perfect companion.
- Redecorate. Redecorating your own space can make you more in touch with what appeals to you and can make you more excited to spend time in your space.

“Anything good?”

Sherlock quickly clicked over to the window that was displaying his inbox as John came up behind him, smelling pleasantly of shaving cream and soap. “Nothing worth my time.”

“Mmmm,” John said. He wrapped his arms around Sherlock’ shoulders and rubbed his cheek against his hair, and Sherlock immediately turned his head so he could nuzzle into John’s shirt. This was a side benefit of boyfriendhood he had not anticipated: all this glorious touching. The sex was brilliant in itself, obviously, but now he also got John’s arms around him, John’s fingers scratching his scalp, John’s hands massaging his shoulders, his back, his feet. It just all felt so good. “Well, in that case, I think I’m going to get some coffee and read the newspapers on the sofa. Care to join me?”

Sherlock had already read the papers, but if he sat on the sofa he could probably insinuate either his feet or his head into John’s lap and be petted. “Maybe in a bit. I’m just going to finish looking over a few things,” he said as indifferently as he could manage.

“Okay,” John said agreeably. He dropped a kiss on to Sherlock’s head and ambled off to the kitchen, entirely missing Sherlock’s happy little wriggle.
Lestrade finally rang a few days later, though they missed his first call, having spent most of the morning in a blow job tutorial. Sherlock felt he was really making progress on this, both in his technique (when performing) and stamina (receiving). Unlike most sex acts, which he thought of as duets or *pas de deux*, oral sex was more of a solo performance, and thus lent itself well to extensive postgame analysis. Today, therefore, he had spent a good hour after John had finally got up lying in bed exhaustively reviewing a minute-by-minute assessment of everything he had done to John that John had seemed to like, as well as everything John had done to him that *he* had liked so that he could try it on John next time. Then he spent the whole of his shower contemplating other sources of information and wondering how he could practice relaxing his gag reflex.

“Your phone’s been going,” John said when finally wandered into the lounge. “I assume it’s Lestrade.”

Sherlock nodded at the papers. “What do you think he’s calling about?”

John grinned. “I wondered that too. I’m betting on the kidnapped banker. High profile, getting a lot of press.” He tossed Sherlock the front page.

Sherlock skimmed through it and tossed it back. “Boring,” he said and carried his phone into the kitchen so he could turn on the kettle. “Tea?” Truthfully the missing banker did not look completely devoid of interest, but it had Moriarty’s fingerprints all over it, and Sherlock had the strong feeling that it would be best to avoid drawing his attention to Sherlock’s recently changed circumstances.

“Yes,” John said, following him in and leaning on the bench.

Lestrade had, in fact, been calling about the banker, but Sherlock gave him detailed instructions so he could solve it himself. He’d prefer the police take credit for this one, and besides, for once in his life he wasn’t sure he wanted a case—he didn’t know if was ready to venture out of their little cocoon just yet. “It’s that or the wife, but you’ll have looked into her.”

“You think?” Lestrade said, sounding dubious.

“Obviously,” Sherlock said, annoyed at being doubted, and hung up.

“So no case?” John said, taking the cup Sherlock poured for him. “I thought for sure you’d take it.”

“Lestrade wouldn’t have needed to call me at all if he had an ounce of imagination,” Sherlock said, adding sugar to his own tea.

“I just thought you’d be happy for anything right now. We’ve been back over a week, I reckoned you were getting bored.”

Sherlock looked up in surprise. “Hardly. Sex is a far more complicated subject that I ever realized and my studies have been very…didn’t you want me to learn about sex?” Oh God. Were they spending too much time having sex?

But John grinned at him. “I love you learning about sex. You just let me know whenever you need a research assistant.” Sherlock scowled, feeling teased, but John went on, “Although you’ve got to know you’re pretty fantastic already.”

Sherlock forgot his pique. “Really?”

“God, yes. And the way you draw it out! Like a porn film! It’s torture in the best possible way. I just wish I were twenty years younger so I could take proper advantage, because I’m having the best sex of my life.”
Sherlock inwardly preened a little—just wait until he learned to overcome his gag reflex—but schooled his face into what he hoped was indifference as he sipped his tea. “You should know by now that if I’m going to make a study of something I’m going to do it properly.”

“Just one of the many things I love about you,” John said amiably. “Well, if we’re not going to find the banker I’m going to go buy a new saucepan. I could make risotto tonight.”

“Oh, good idea. Get a high-quality Teflon one so the rice doesn’t stick.”

“You mean bird guts? Yeah, I was thinking nonstick too. And I might get a new spatula.”

“If you make risotto I could do a salad and dessert,” Sherlock offered.

John raised his eyebrows. “You’re going to the shops?”

“I was thinking more of persuading Mrs. Hudson to go to the shops.”

John laughed. “Right.” He set his mug in the sink and lingered a moment, hesitating. “You’re not… avoiding Lestrade, are you?”

Sherlock didn’t look at him. “Why would I do that? If the case were a little more interesting or I actually were bored I would have done it myself, but Lestrade should work it out in no time if he does as I told him.”

“So, when we do see him again,” John said carefully, “are we going to tell him? You know. About us?”

The answer to this was emphatically no, as far as Sherlock was concerned. He could just imagine the snide comments (from Anderson and Donovan) and the faux-friendly ones from everybody else: *Got your work cut out for you there, Watson!* And there would surely be a few semi-homophobic remarks thrown in as well: *Not that there’s anything wrong with it of course, just didn’t figure you for a poof.* John would be embarrassed, or angry, or embarrassed and angry, and it would be because of Sherlock. And if the worst possible thing happened and John did give up on him (*clingy needing demanding*) it would make everything infinitely more unbearable to have everyone know about it.

“Hey,” John said, now peering into Sherlock’s face in concern. “Sherlock? We don’t have to say anything. It’s nobody’s business but ours, though Greg’s our friend, and I know he’ll be happy for us. But I don’t want to do anything you’re not comfortable with.” John was using his gentle voice, the one that made Sherlock simultaneously insanely irritable and filled with the desire to crawl into his jumper like a burrowing hamster.

“I’m more comfortable keeping our private life to ourselves,” he snapped, resisting the instinctive urge to stand up from the kitchen table so he could tower over John.

“Okay,” John said, unruffled. He tugged Sherlock’s head into his chest and hugged him with one arm. Sherlock held himself stiffly a minute, then gave up and wrapped his arms around John’s middle and buried his face into his scratchy, John-smelling jumper. “Probably end up in the papers if we don’t. I can see it now: ‘Seven times a night in Baker Street’….they’ll be saying you wear that deerstalker hat when we shag.”

“How do they count the seven times?” Sherlock asked, voice muffled in John’s front. “Is it total orgasms or separate sex acts?”

John laughed. “That’s not meant as a challenge.” He kissed the top of Sherlock’s head. “I’ll be back in a bit, all right? Try not to blow anything up.”
The wife arrived the next day.

Fortunately John and Sherlock were both clothed and out of bed when she arrived, but as that was by no means a sure thing at this point Mrs. Hudson had her wait on the stairs whilst she stuck her head in the door and called, “Boys, are you decent? There’s a lady here.”

“Claudia Sym-Smith,” The lady in question—and she clearly was a lady—said, holding out her hand.

“Sherlock Holmes,” Sherlock responded, taking it and assessing her in a swift glance. “Sorry for your trouble.”

“Here, have a seat,” John said kindly, pulling out their client chair. “Can I get you something? Tea, something stronger?”

“A glass of water, please,” Mrs. Sym-Smith said, settling regally into her seat. “Mr. Holmes, I know that you have already declined to help the police locate my husband. I would offer you money if I thought it likely to change your mind, but other than that I have only the conviction that you have not heard the whole story.”

Sherlock sighed inwardly. Apparently the police were bollixing things up as usual. “All right. Tell me why I should find your husband.”

Mrs. Sym-Smith sat forward, unconsciously clasping her hands to her chest in a gesture that would have seemed melodramatic in anyone less composed. “My husband is not the man who has been depicted in the press. His is the voice of conscience at the bank, not greed. He’s involved in international development because he can use his influence to require companies to proceed responsibly—to invest in the infrastructure of local communities, to build schools and clinics, to train the workers in valuable job skills. If they knew what he really does, I’m sure that this 99% Army would never have targeted him. But that’s too complex a story for the tabloids, I suppose, so instead we have this narrative of the oppressed rising up against the forces of imperialist capitalism.” Her composure wobbled. “Our son is so very young—if they kill him, I’m afraid he will hardly remember his father the way he really is, only as this greedy monster the papers have made him out to be.” Her voice broke at the end, although she kept her chin high, blinking quickly to keep the tears back. “I believe I’ll have that drink now, if you wouldn’t mind.”

John stared, almost missing his cue, then said, “Right, of course,” and hurried off to the kitchen. It took a few minutes before he finally returned with a glass and said apologetically, “Sorry, had to wipe the bottle off a bit.” He threw Sherlock a dirty look.

“Mrs. Sym-Smith, the Army of the 99% is a fiction,” Sherlock said crisply. “I explained this to the police yesterday. Your husband has been targeted in an effort to get the companies his bank is financing out of competition.”

Mrs. Sym-Smith blinked and took a long drink of her whisky, closing her eyes for a moment and then opening them again. “But they don’t seem to be looking at that at all,” she said.

Sherlock gave a long, put-upon sigh and then sat up briskly. “You will get me full access to your husband’s workplace and associates. I am working for you, not the police, and I trust you can ensure me their cooperation. When I have identified your husband’s location I will turn the matter over to the police, and they will take full credit for the entire process. My name will stay out of the matter and your husband will use his joyful reunion press conference to draw attention to the shameful
practices of his business competitors.” Lestrade—or whoever had overruled him—would be embarrassed enough by Sherlock solving a case using the lead he had freely given them without it being public knowledge, and Sherlock really wasn’t about to draw Moriarty’s attention if he could avoid it. “Are we agreed?”

John was happy to see Sherlock throw himself into a case again, especially since he suspected him of doing it for noble and unselfish reasons Sherlock would probably deny to his grave. He’d loved having Sherlock all to himself, but couldn’t imagine Sherlock would stay happy with nothing more challenging to occupy his mind than seeing how long he could keep John at the brink of orgasm before John’s testicles exploded. Besides, Sherlock’s evident insecurity and anxiety—though adorable—were breaking his heart; he really wanted Sherlock to get a spectacular solve under his belt to boost his confidence.

So he tagged along uncomplainingly to the bank and spent the next several hours as a sort of glorified assistant and coffee-fetcher whilst Sherlock and Sym-Smith’s underlings looked at computers and argued incomprehensibly. It was the kind of fiddly, tedious work at which the Holmes brothers excelled: sifting a mountain of data and finding a pattern no one else could see. The difference, of course, was that Mycroft enjoyed it, whilst Sherlock got cranky and mussed up his hair. After that they hit the streets to talk with any number of Sherlock’s less-savory contacts, until finally, in the cool damp of the early summer dawn, they stood staring at a tiny row house in a down-at-heels neighborhood on the outskirts of London.

“You really think he’s here?” John said dubiously, yawning.

“Ye-e-e-s,” Sherlock said slowly, “but I’m not certain. We need to get a look at the inhabitants.”

“Bit early to knock on the door,” John said.

Sherlock straightened decisively. “You’re right. Let’s go back home and shower and you can have some breakfast. We’re going to need to change our clothing in any case. Do you have any black trousers?”

“I can’t believe we’re doing this,” John said, straightening the name tag on the pocket of his white shirt. “Aren’t we a little old?”

“We only need to be convincing for a few seconds, long enough for me to get a good look at whomever answers the door,” Sherlock said. He had left his coat and jacket at home and was fidgeting irritably with his own tie. “Can you do an American accent?”

“Hey buddy, how’s it going?” John said, channeling the soldiers he remembered from Afghanistan.

Sherlock winced. “Just smile,” he said.

“Your American accent is shite too, you know.”

“We only need a few seconds,” Sherlock said again.

The cab let them off a few streets away and John and Sherlock trudged over to the house on foot, drawing a few curious glances on the way.

“This is the stupidest thing we’ve ever done,” John muttered as they drew up to the front door.
“Smile,” Sherlock said through his teeth. “No, not like that, you look like you’re going to break someone’s arm. Smile like you’ve glimpsed salvation and want to share it with everyone.”

“I’ve glimpsed salvation in your arse,” John said and they were both giggling when the door was flung open.

“Good morning,” Sherlock said brightly in his atrocious American accent. “I’m Elder Smith and this is Elder Young and we’d like to talk to you about the Church of Latter-Day—“

“Fook off,” the wiry man with the bad teeth said unceremoniously and slammed the door.

“Should we leave him a tract?” John asked. “Oh, right, we don’t have any.”

“He’s here,” Sherlock said, vibrating with suppressed excitement. “Let’s go round the back. If the basement window’s covered that’s where they’ll be keeping him.”

They went down to the corner and slunk along the tiny back gardens, still arguing in whispers over who made the less convincing missionary. “You don’t look like you want to share the light,” John hissed, “you look like a child-molesting pervert when you smile like that.”

“Shut up, it’s this one.”

Sure enough, the window was boarded over from the outside. Sherlock grinned, a smile that would have convinced anybody of divine truth, John thought, and wondered if he was allowed to kiss him when the nasal voice of the wiry man said behind him, “Thought I already told you lot to fuck off.”

They whipped around and there stood the man, arms crossed and eyes narrowed.

“Told a wrong turn,” Sherlock said quickly, “We’re not from around—from, er, these parts, and—“

“Aye, you took a wrong turn all right,” the man said and whipped out a switchblade.

Shit, John thought, adrenaline kicking in, and he shoved Sherlock back the way they had come and shouted “Run!” as he brought his Book of Mormon up to use as an impromptu shield. The man feinted left and John leaped sideways, ready to charge him from the side, but then Sherlock shouted, “John!” and John whipped his head around and saw a second man leaping out the back door with some kind of metal bar in his hand. He spun back around and smacked his book down on the wiry man’s head, and the man stumbled, caught himself, and slashed at John with the knife.

“Damn it,” John said furiously and kicked out at the man’s wrist, sending the knife flying. He whipped back around and saw Sherlock grappling with the man with the bar, so he flung himself at the man’s back and pulled him off so Sherlock could punch him in the face. The man dropped and John spun back to go after the man with the knife, and then the world abruptly tilted and went sideways.

“John!” Sherlock screamed and John blinked in confusion. Why was he on the ground? Where was the knife? He heard a crunching sound and vaguely registered that it was probably Sherlock smashing his forehead into someone’s nose, but was distracted by the quantity of red staining his white shirt. Wait, that was blood! And that meant…oh fuck, that hurt.

John fumbled out his phone with his phone with his uninjured arm—his left, thankfully—and punched in 999. “Yeah, ah, this is John Watson and I’ve been cut pretty badly, I need an ambulance,” he said to the operator. “And we’re also going to need the police right away.” He heard a howl of primal rage from Sherlock and what sounded like bodies hitting the ground as he gave the address and added, “Make that several ambulances.” It suddenly occurred to him that he needed to
do something about the bleeding in his arm, so he lay the phone gently down on the ground, the operator’s tinny voice still calling from it.


“Take that stupid tie off and make a tourniquet,” John groaned.

Sherlock fumbled his tie off, fingers shaking, and tied it so tightly around John’s upper arm that his fingers immediately began going numb. “Like that?”

“Yeah, that’s good. Are the guys…”

Sherlock looked around, and then his face darkened and he growled murderously, “Oh, no, you don’t.” He launched himself to his feet and vanished from John’s sight. There was a squeal of pain. John closed his eyes and hoped to God the ambulance and police showed up before John bled out or Sherlock actually killed somebody.

Sherlock rematerialized in John’s increasingly hazy field of vision at the same time that the sirens turned onto the road, crouching over John as though to shield him while he held pressure on John’s wound at his direction, making terrified little whimpering noises. When the paramedics finally appeared he actually bared his teeth.

“Sherlock, get out of the way so they can look at my arm,” John said.

“Sir?” Oh good, the police were there too. “We need to ask you a few questions.”

“No you don’t,” Sherlock snapped and then, apparently thinking better of this, “Actually, you need to search the house and get the kidnapped banker out and arrest those idiots who attacked us.”


“This isn’t slowing at all,” the paramedic with the long shiny black plait said to the one getting a line into John’s left hand. “We’d better move. Call ahead and tell them to get ready for a bleeder.”

“The two unconscious idiots in the shed,” Sherlock said.

“Okay, mate, we’re going to get you on the trolley now,” the male paramedic told John.

John gritted his teeth and clenched his muscles against the pain as they maneuvered him into position. “Holy fuck!” one of the police officers shouted. “Where’s that other ambulance? What happened to them?”

“I threw them into the shed so the paramedics wouldn’t try to look at them before John,” Sherlock said dismissively.

“Guys—“

“The other ambulances are on the way, I can hear the sirens,” the female paramedic said, flipping her plait back over her shoulder as she took the head of the trolley. “We need to get this one to hospital.”

“Wait, where are you taking him?” Sherlock cried, a note of hysteria in his voice. “John!”

“Now look, mate—“

“We need to move now,” the paramedic with the plait said sharply. “Get him out of the way.”
“Sherlock, it’s going to be fine,” John called, feeling a wave of nausea as the trolley lurched into motion. “Just let them…”

“John!”

“Terrific,” John muttered, a fresh bolt of pain shooting up his arm as the trolley was lifted into the ambulance. He could still hear Sherlock wailing as the doors slammed shut.

“Run that wide open,” the female paramedic said as the man hooked a bag of saline to John’s drip. “Is there someone we can call for you?”

“Uh—yeah, Detective Inspector Greg Lestrade, with the police,” John said. Sherlock would presumably be tied up explaining the banker and the pulverized kidnappers in the shed for some time, and at least this way Lestrade could deal with him when he made it to the hospital. “His number’s in my mobile.”

John was beginning to feel seriously terrible by the end of the ride—not please-God-let-me-live terrible, but definitely fuck-this-hurts-and-I-think-I’m-going-to-be-sick terrible. “Can I please have some morphine,” he pleaded, as soon as he had been transferred to a hospital trolley and asked about his allergies.

“Sure,” the young doctor frowning at his monitor said absently. “Ruth, let’s get that going and I want a type and cross, and is vascular on their way? Hang another liter of saline too.”

The morphine improved the situation immensely. John was feeling pleasantly hazy and comfortable, if increasingly cold, when a smiling Asian man swam into view.

“Hey, I’m Ron Liao,” the man said cheerfully. “I’m the vascular surgeon on call. You’ve got a bit of a nick in the brachial artery here, so we’re just going to pop up to the operating theatre and fix that up, shall we?”

“Am I going to lose my arm?” John asked muzzily.

“Nah, it’s just a flesh wound!” This last was delivered in a high Monty Python voice that made John close his eyes. “Of course, all my cases are flesh wounds,” the surgeon continued thoughtfully.

John decided to ignore him. He would delete the annoying surgeon, just as Sherlock did. It was surprisingly easy…of course, that might have been the morphine. He was hazily aware of being rolled along and then jostled onto a table, and then a soothing voice told him to count backward from ten, and that was that.

When John opened his eyes he was dry-mouthed and queasy, but at least he was warm and his arm no longer hurt.

“Oh good, you’re awake,” Lestrade said from his chair by the bed.

John blinked, momentarily disoriented, and then tried to sit up. “Sherlock,” he said.

“Yeah, we’ll talk about that,” Lestrade said, pushing him back down easily.

“Where is he?”

“Downstairs.”

“Are you going to stay awake this time? ‘Cause I’ve already gone through this the last two times you woke up.”

John blinked at the ceiling a minute, considering. That would explain the weird déjà vu feeling, he supposed. “Can I have some water?”

“Ice chips,” Lestrade said, handing him a cup.

John crunched ice, felt better, and crunched some more. He looked over at his right arm, which was still attached to his body and seemed to be fine. “I thought I was going to lose my arm,” he said.

“Ah, it’s just a flesh wound,” Lestrade said.

“Yeah, but—never mind. What happened to Sherlock?”

“So, Sherlock.” Lestrade settled back in his chair with an air of launching into a well-rehearsed story. “Apparently the uniforms who arrived at the scene had never had the pleasure of meeting Sherlock before and didn’t know who he was. They encountered what they thought to be a raving maniac who freely admitted he had beaten two men unconscious with a metal rod and thrown them into a shed. Not unreasonably, they attempted to question him, but the maniac became combative and uncooperative and attempted to flee the scene when his accomplice was carted off in an ambulance, so in an effort to subdue him they sprayed him with CS.”

“What?” John tried to sit up again. “He’s allergic!”

“Yeah, I know, I was there the first time,” Lestrade said cheerfully. “Apparently Sherlock shared this information loudly after he was sprayed, although of course the guys thought he was lying until he started swelling up.”

“Is that why he’s downstairs? Is he okay?”

“Oh, that’s just the beginning. He got epinephrine and the reaction started settling down, but he was already under arrest at that point so he was handcuffed to a bed…”

“Oh no,” John muttered.

“…but apparently he was hyped up as hell from the epinephrine and managed to get out of the cuffs and started running amok in the A&E. Did I mention he couldn’t see? His eyes were swollen shut.”

“Why the hell didn’t he have them call you?”

“They did call me. About fifteen times. But I was already on my way and then I was up here in surgical waiting, and I just thought the hospital didn’t realize I was already here so I ignored it. Finally Donovan called from the Yard and said I needed to get down there and get him under control. So I went down and by that time they had given him a sedative and got him back in the cuffs but then I guess he started having a rebound reaction. Yeah? That’s a thing? And so they gave him more epinephrine and put some oxygen on him and then some more sedatives and by the time I got down there he was in kind of a slow-motion wheezing freakout, kept working the oxygen off and screaming about how he had to get to his boyfriend and make sure he was okay.” Lestrade stopped and raised his eyebrows at John.

“How is it,” John said wearily, “that I get stabbed and he’s still the one getting all the attention?”
“Don’t ask me, mate, he’s your boyfriend,” Lestrade said pointedly.

“I’m sorry! I wanted to tell you right away, but Sherlock wanted to wait. It’s early days yet—just happened whilst we were in Italy.”

“Well…okay,” Lestrade said, looking slightly mollified, and then after a moment, “So what’s he like in bed?”

John choked on a mouthful of ice. “Shit! I’m not telling you about that.”

“I guess it’s a bit inappropriate,” Lestrade said, nodding.

“Yeah, a bit.”

“Besides, you already told me the last time you woke up.”

“Oh no,” John said, sinking down into the bed. “Oh, no. What the hell did I say?”

“Well, there was a lot about how beautiful he is, especially his arse—you kind of went on and on about that, so I tuned you out for a bit—and then it was all about how sensitive he is, and how if you suck his nipples he practically comes just from that, so, you know, I wish I tuned out for that part because I don’t think I’m ever going to get that picture out of my head.”

John covered his eyes. “Please don’t,” he moaned.

“Though in some places he’s a bit too sensitive cause you can’t lick his ears or toes, he gets overstimulated. But he’s the best shag you ever had, and apparently he can suck you off for hours without getting tired, which I have to admit made me a little jealous, and when you fuck him you’re so fantastic that he goes right off his head and sees God.”

“Oh Christ.” John was trying to sink all the way under his blanket now. “I did not say that.”

Lestrade fiddled with his phone a minute and held it up, and John heard his own slurred voice saying, “…and when I’m inside him it’s like he goes into a trance, like it’s so amazing he can’t even process, and he looks at me like I’m, I don’t know, like I’m the face of God, and can you imagine what a rush that is?”

John sat up. “All right, enough’s enough. Delete it.”

“Oh hell no,” Lestrade said, holding his phone up out of reach.

John sat back and narrowed his eyes, preparing to play hardball. “Did you find Philip Sym-Smith in the cellar? Is he okay?”

“You know, I was standing right there when Sherlock told you how to look for him,” John said conversationally. “And I was also right there when Claudia Sym-Smith said the police ignored his advice. Now, Sherlock told her he didn’t want to take any credit for this—mostly he didn’t want to cause trouble for you lot—but I reckon if I talk to her, Mrs. Sym-Smith is going to start thinking maybe she should be a little bit angry that she had to hire a private detective to follow up on a lead that he already gave you for free.”

“I tried! But I couldn’t get anywhere with it. We didn’t even know where to start.”

“Shame,” John said. His arm was beginning to throb again. “I don’t know if that’s what you want to
say to the press though.”

“Fine, you win,” Lestrade said sulkily. He tapped on the phone, held it up so John could see the Delete? on the screen and pressed Yes. “Happy?”

“Yeah, I’m just great,” John said. “Can you go get my boyfriend out of those handcuffs now?”

A nurse came in after Lestrade left, checked John’s pulses and his capillary refill, and gave him some more pain meds. John dozed off, and woke some time later when the curtain was pushed aside and Lestrade pushed a pitifully unrecognizable Sherlock over in a wheelchair.

“Jesus,” John said, pushing himself up. Sherlock’s eyes were swollen closed, one side of his bottom lip was grotesquely puffy, and he was blotchy with hives.

“John?” Sherlock said thickly. His tongue sounded twice its usual size.

“Oh, sweetheart, come here,” John said, reaching for him. “I’m fine, everything’s fine, I’m so sorry I wasn’t there to keep you from making a berk of yourself.”

Sherlock clutched at John’s forearms and levered himself halfway out of the wheelchair to collapse over John’s bed, face buried in his abdomen. John could hear him wheezing. “They dibn’t have my nabe on your chart,” Sherlock said miserably. “Dey woubn’t tell be anything.”

“I know, it was all a misunderstanding,” John said, stroking his curls. He realized belatedly that Sherlock appeared to have sick in his hair. He looked around for Lestrade and saw he was standing behind Sherlock, inspecting his bare arse where the hospital gown had fallen forward. He caught John’s eye and gave him a thumbs-up and an appreciative that IS a nice arse sort of face. “Oh, grow up and see if you can find us a flannel and another gown,” John said, curling his good arm protectively around Sherlock’s shoulders.

Philip Sym-Smith gave a press conference praising the police to the skies, and a few days later a silver-wrapped box arrived with a note reading, A small token of my very deep gratitude, Claudia. Inside was a cut-glass whisky decanter.

“Can we give this to Mycroft for Christmas?” John asked when he had stopped laughing.

“I never give Mycroft presents,” Sherlock said. “What about Mrs. Hudson?”

“No, she’ll think it’s too nice to use,” John said. “I’m putting it on the mantle.” He stood it on top of the Book of Mormon, which someone from the police had retrieved from the crime scene and sent back to John. He stood back to admire the effect.

“Perfect,” Sherlock said. “We just have to remember to use that instead of the bottle with the bird guts on next time we have such a well-bred client.”

“Yes,” John said. “Oh, Lestrade texted me earlier. He’s going to bring dinner round for us in about an hour. He seems to think we can’t fend for ourselves.”

“Why does everyone always assume you do all the cooking?” Sherlock asked. “I cook as often as you do, and I’m better at it. Not to mention that we’re both still perfectly capable of picking up a phone and ordering takeaway if Mrs. Hudson suddenly decides to clear out for a few weeks.”

“Dunno, but I’m not saying no to a free meal,” John said. In truth they were almost completely
recovered—Sherlock was entirely back to normal and John would have his stitches out in a few days—but John had a feeling Lestrade had ulterior motives for his visit. Sherlock evidently thought so too. As the hour wore on he became increasingly snappish and fidgety, twitching around the flat in a way that would have driven John mad if he hadn’t known the reason behind it. He thought about trying to reassure Sherlock, but that was likely to make him even worse.

But when Lestrade strode in, takeaway in one hand and a six-pack in the other, Sherlock greeted him as politely as he usually did (which was to say he grunted, “Oh, it’s you,” irritably and then carried the beer to the refrigerator at John’s glare).

Lestrade plopped himself on the sofa and grinned at John. “How’s the arm?”

“How’s the arm?” Sherlock greeted him as politely as he usually did (which was to say he grunted, “Oh, it’s you,” irritably and then carried the beer to the refrigerator at John’s glare).

“Coming along,” John said. “He got my bicep pretty good so I have to be careful lifting, is all. Should heal up fine.”

Sherlock came out of the kitchen carrying two beers, one of which he handed to Lestrade before bringing the other to John.

“And how’s the love life?” Lestrade inquired in the same brightly conversational tone.

John caught the barely-noticeable hesitation in Sherlock’s stride, the way his eyes flicked nervously to John, and decided it was time to settle this nonsense for good. “Fantastic,” he said. He took the outstretched beer, caught Sherlock’s wrist, and tugged, causing Sherlock to overbalance and topple with a startled yelp over the arm of the chair and into John’s lap. He set the beer down—it hadn’t even spilled—wrapped his arm around a squirming Sherlock, and pulled him into a big, showy, romance-novel kiss. With tongue. He heard Lestrade happily snapping pictures.

When they broke apart, Sherlock was staring up at John with that expression of dazed, adoring astonishment that never failed to make John’s heart melt. He heard Lestrade muttering “face of God,” from the sofa and said loudly “I love you,” to drown him out.

“Oh,” breathed Sherlock and John kissed him again.

When they finally surfaced for air, Sherlock looked flushed and happy and Lestrade was slouched back against the sofa, grinning. “Congratulations,” he said, raising his bottle to them. “About bloody time if you ask me. Maybe the two of you can keep each other out of trouble a little better now.”

“What fun would that be?” Sherlock asked, wrapping his arms possessively around John’s neck and wriggling to settle himself more comfortably on his lap.

The encounter John was really dreading came about a week later, when Mycroft finally turned up.

Sherlock scowled at his brother and tried to ignore him, but John kicked him in the foot and sent him to make tea. “Nice weather we’re having,” he said politely, settling into his chair and setting his face into an expression as bland as Mycroft’s own.

“Is it?” Mycroft said, inspecting his umbrella handle.

Sherlock returned with the cups and banged Mycroft’s down sulkily.

“Well.” Mycroft switched to inspecting his teacup, an expression of faint disdain on his features. “Charming as it always it to visit you, Sherlock, I’m actually here for a reason. The investigation precipitated by the discovery of stolen artworks at Peter Ricoletti’s former house in Florence has
proven most fruitful. Several members of the Malavita are under arrest and Interpol believes there is potential to widen the investigation even further."

“What do you care?” Sherlock said rudely. “Italian organized crime isn’t your concern.”

“True. However…” Mycroft was now examining his fingernails, having decided to ignore his tea, “…my contacts in the Italian government seem to feel that they are owed a favor for their help in recovering the Turner painting. The Malavita are suspected of being behind the theft of some notable artifacts from some of the smaller churches in Italy and selling them abroad. In particular, the Italian authorities believe a Michelangelo triptych is presently in England in the hands of a private collector, and they want it back. I have assured the Prime Min—I have assured my contact that you are capable of finding this object.”

John was suddenly reminded anew that he was sitting across from the most powerful man in the country, and possibly the planet. He was also intensely aware that the night before he had taken that man’s baby brother to bed, spread him out, entered his body, and taken his pleasure in the lewdest of ways. He felt his face go hot.

“I hope I have not overestimated your abilities?” Mycroft inquired smoothly.

“I fail to see why we owe the Italians a favor for notifying them that their criminals stole our painting in the first place,” Sherlock said crossly.

“Ah, little brother, the subtleties of diplomacy have always eluded you,” Mycroft said suavely.

Sherlock looked ready to kick Mycroft in the teeth, and John though he might just let him. “Do you have a picture of this thing, or any information on the collector?” he asked instead.

Mycroft pulled out a file, handed it to John, and then settled back with his hands folded as though he had nothing better to do all day. John handed the file to Sherlock, wondering a little crazily if maybe Mycroft really didn’t know about them. He hadn’t so much as raised a knowing eyebrow since he came in. If not, would Sherlock ever tell him?

Sherlock flipped through the pages of the file, pausing here and there when something caught his attention. John could tell he was getting interested, and felt a little twinge of gratitude to Mycroft—Sherlock still hadn’t taken any of Lestrade’s cases, and it didn’t do for him to be sitting about unoccupied too long.

“You’ll owe me a favor, of course,” Sherlock said without looking up.

Mycroft sighed dramatically. “I suppose.”

“All right, fine.” Sherlock shut the file with a snap and set it on the desk. “I’ll get around to it. Anything else?”

“No, I believe not,” Mycroft said, rising smoothly to his feet and collecting his umbrella.

Sherlock and John exchanged a glance and Sherlock abruptly shot to his feet. “Oh, just say it! I know you know, you know I know you know, just say whatever you came here to say and stop dragging it out!”

Mycroft turned, one eyebrow raised in mild surprise. “Why would I have anything to say?”

Sherlock opened his mouth helplessly, turning bright red.
“I believe I have expressed everything that needs to be said already,” Mycroft said calmly, looking deliberately at John before turning back to Sherlock. “But I suppose the niceties should be observed, by one of us at least, so…congratulations.”

And he strolled out.

John and Sherlock looked at each other again and John said, “How can he be so creepy without even saying anything?”

Sherlock was across the room in a single bound and kneeling at John’s feet before John could even react. “Mycroft has excellent hearing,” he muttered, scrabbling at John’s zipper. “And I’m going to make sure he hears me sucking your cock before he makes it out the front door.”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa,” John said, getting Sherlock by the arms and hauling him up to his lap—a position he had never realized he liked until the night Lestrade had come round. He settled Sherlock so that his bony arse rested between John’s thighs. “We are not having sex just to annoy your brother. And anyway, what are you worked up about? He didn’t give you a hard time and he brought you a great case, I could tell by the way you were looking at it.” It suddenly occurred to John that perhaps this was Mycroft’s idea of a congratulatory gift. Maybe they should give him the decanter after all.

“Ohhhhh, you don’t understand,” Sherlock groaned, thumping his head onto John’s shoulder. “I hate him.”

But there was no real heat behind it, and Sherlock snuggled into John’s arms with his long legs dangling off the side of the chair and nuzzled at his neck and let John stroke his hair, until he clearly remembered the file and started wriggling around again and John pushed him off.

They tracked down the Michelangelo triptych—and a great many other valuable things too—in Kent, and the whole case came off with no one getting hurt or annoying the local police to the point of getting arrested. They both enjoyed themselves immensely and the next time Lestrade called with a man apparently drowned in a toilet Sherlock sighed dramatically and said, “Well, as we’ve nothing else on.”

The loo was rather cramped, and there wasn’t a lot of room for anyone else once Sherlock, the corpse, and Lestrade were all packed in there with Anderson haranguing them from the door, so John backed off and went to prowl around the bedroom.


“Not that it’s any of your business, but yeah, it’s real,” John said, preparing to get his back up on Sherlock’s behalf.

“It better be,” Donovan said, narrowing her eyes at him. “Cause if you’re only messing with him, I’m going to fuck you up. We clear?”

“Yeah, we’re clear,” John said, taken aback.

Donovan gave him another squinty look and then turned away when Lestrade shouted for her. John shook his head, a smile slowly spreading across his face. All the people he’d thought would say it that hadn’t and here it was Donovan…

“What was that all about?” Sherlock said, looking suspicious.
“She says if I break your heart, she’ll beat the shit out of me,” John informed him.

“Oh,” Sherlock said, looking as surprised as John felt. He shrugged. “She just wants a reason to beat one of us up. Can she do it, do you think?”

“I don’t want to find out,” John said.

To Sherlock’s utter astonishment, no one ever did say anything rude or snarky or cruel. Everyone seemed to be happy for them (even, according to John, Nick—Sherlock was just happy John had handled that particular conversation), and almost nobody was even surprised; a lot of people, like Mrs. Hudson, apparently assumed they’d been together all along. This bewildered Sherlock. How could anybody not find it astonishing that someone as wonderful as John wanted to be with Sherlock? And yet clearly he did. A month became two became four, and Sherlock gradually began to believe that maybe John really meant all his declarations of true love and forever. John seemed more than happy with their sex life, even though they were no longer doing it multiple times a day—from several remarks Lestrade made Sherlock had the impression that John had made his happiness known to the world at large on at least one occasion. He didn’t stop worrying entirely, but he did let go of his obsessive research. He still kept a low profile though. Attention from the press might not bother John overmuch, but Sherlock could not shake the feeling that it was better to keep both of them—especially John—out of Moriarty’s line of sight as much as possible. Just because Sherlock had lost all interest in playing Moriarty’s stupid games did not mean Moriarty had lost interest in him.

In early October a client named Ron Adair came to see Sherlock. He ran a backroom poker ring and was convinced someone was cheating, which was not really a matter he could take to the police. It came as something as a shock to John to learn that Sherlock had never learned to play poker.

“Where did you think I would learn?” Sherlock asked, not unreasonably.

John had by this time met Sherlock’s parents—Mycroft had forced everyone into having brunch at his club—and though he had found Father Holmes lovely, Mummy scared the shit out of him. He tried to picture them all playing a hand of cards at a vacation cottage somewhere and his mind balked. “I see your point. Never mind, you’re a quick study, I’ll teach you.”

“Why are you putting your shoes on?”

“Because we’re going to play strip poker.”

The lesson soon devolved into one of their epic tantric sex sessions, this one so long that John came twice—early on in Sherlock’s mouth and, much later, deep in his spent and shuddering body. Not surprisingly, they both fell asleep after that, but Sherlock was up again and hitting the internet two hours later. By the time John awoke he was completely proficient and at that evening’s impromptu practice game (Dimmock, Lestrade, a lot of beer) he cleaned them all out.

“I think he’s ready,” John said, dumping empty bottles into a bag.

“If he gets any more ready you’ll be able to retire,” Dimmock said. “I’m getting out of here while I still have lunch money for tomorrow.”

The poker setup turned out to be a bigger operation than John had expected, and for the first few
hours he and Sherlock were at separate tables. They were able to talk briefly during a short break to get drinks and food.

“How are you doing?” John asked.

“Splendidly,” Sherlock said happily. “I’m up several hundred and a house in Leinster Gardens. And there’s something really off about one of the other players--not the cheater, but he definitely bears looking into.”

“Jesus Christ, lose some of that back,” John said, alarmed. “You’ll get us thrown out.”

They switched around for the next few games but were still at different tables. At the next break Sherlock had won even more money but had managed to lose the house. “This is fun,” he told John.

“Those guys are glaring at you,” John muttered. “If you get back in a game with them, lose.”

Of course he didn’t. John ended up at his game, finally, and after a few hands was ready to bang his head on the table. Sherlock just couldn’t resist the opportunity to show off his cleverness in so tangible a manner--they were only lucky he wasn’t gleefully explaining everyone’s tells to the room at large. The men who had been glaring at him before were now looking downright threatening.

“How long until you identify the cheater?” John muttered after Sherlock had managed to force himself to lose with a particularly pathetic hand.

“Oh, I worked that out ages ago,” Sherlock whispered back. “It’s the two you said were glaring at me--they’re in it together.”

“You already knew? Why the hell are we still here? Let’s go before someone decides to follow us out!”

Too late. John thought they had managed to slide out the door unobserved, but they had gotten only a short distance away before four of their fellow players stepped out in front of them.

One of them, a big guy with a shaved head, loomed over Sherlock and said, “Don’t you know it’s bad manners to leave before you give us a chance to win our money back?”

“You weren’t going to win your money back,” Sherlock said, tipping his head back to look down his nose. “You were just going to lose more.”

“Well then, I guess we’ll have to take it back,” another man with a colossal overbite said in what was clearly meant to be a threatening way.

Sherlock cocked his head curiously. “Why? I won quite fairly. You’re the one who was cheating.”

“You posh fuck, how dare you--” the man grabbed at Sherlock’s jacket and pulled back a fist. John saw red, but before he could move the big man shouted, “You fucking arse, I knew it!” and barreled into the one with the overbite, sending Sherlock skidding out of the way.

John, temper still boiling, would have been more than happy to join in, but Sherlock grabbed at his sleeve and hissed “Run!” and John had just enough presence to mind to do just that. They flew through the dark streets, skittering through alleys and around corners until they careened out onto a main road, where Sherlock managed to stop a cab by practically barreling in front of it. They fell into the back seat, so breathless from laughing and running John could barely gasp out their address, and then before the door even closed they were on each other, mouths coming together in a clash of teeth and tongues and frantic lips. John got Sherlock pressed up against the door of the cab, Sherlock’s
breath coming in hard panting gasps in his ear as John mouthed along his neck, and then he muffled a groan as John pulled Sherlock's leg up to rub along his arse and between his legs. “Faster,” Sherlock muttered, bucking his hips and banging his head against the window--John was not sure whether this was meant for him or the cabbie.

John would have taken him on the stairs, Mrs. Hudson be damned, but Sherlock kept pulling him backwards and up even as John’s hands tangled in his hair and pulled his head down for more bruising kisses. As soon as they were inside the door he had Sherlock up against the wall, scrubbling at flies and kicking off shoes until they got their trousers and pants off and he could hoist Sherlock up with his legs around his waist.

Sherlock made a desperate sound as John pressed his back into the wall and rubbed against him, arms going around John’s neck and holding on for dear life. His head was too high this way for John to kiss him, but his head had fallen back and John fastened his mouth on that white throat and nipped, filled with a sudden, puerile desire to mark him. He bent his knees and hauled Sherlock up a few inches more, letting his own cock slip underneath his spread legs. “Oh,” Sherlock gasped. “Oh yes, do it, take me right here…”

John was not going to take Sherlock dry and unprepared and certainly not whilst holding most of his weight, but he couldn’t resist pushing up a little and rubbing his cock along the cleft of Sherlock's arse. “God you feel good,” he managed. “Give me your fingers.”

Sherlock worked one arm out and John sucked his fingers into his mouth, eliciting more groaning and thrusting from Sherlock. He was getting unbearably heavy, so John let go his legs and slid him to the ground. “Get started, I’ll be right back,” he said, sprinting off toward the bedroom.

When he got back Sherlock had his shirt off and one leg up on the sofa arm and two wet fingers already inside himself, head back, stroking his cock with the other hand. “Oh fuck,” John said, stripping off his own shirt so fast he heard buttons pop and grabbing for the lube. He wrapped one arm around Sherlock's waist and pressed up against him, Sherlock leaning against the wall and dropping his hips a little to align them. John drizzled lube over everything he could reach—their hands, their pricks—and threw it aside, then covered Sherlock’s penetrating hand with his free one so that he was basically fucking Sherlock with his own fingers, and then sliding in one of his own blunt fingers along Sherlock’s long slender ones. “Ah,” Sherlock gasped, shuddering, and John pulled his hand out and spun him around. He shoved Sherlock down over the arm of the sofa, spread his buttocks apart, and shoved deep inside with one hard thrust.

They never had sex like this. Their lovemaking sessions were slow and romantic and tender, conducted in their bed with the lights out because Sherlock still seemed self-conscious with them on. Some part of John felt distantly that he should stop, should at least ask Sherlock if he were comfortable, but his body seemed to have taken over and the feel of Sherlock’s tight underprepared arse yielding under him was just too unbearably sweet to slow down. He drove in again, squeezing Sherlock's skinny hipbones in a hard possessive grip, mesmerized by the long white line of Sherlock’s back, arms outstretched in front of him, clutching at the sofa. All mine, all mine, all mine, the primitive part of his brain seemed to be clamoring in time with his thrusts, the pleasure rising in a high counterpoint: so good, so good, so GOOD. He gripped harder and yanked Sherlock back against him, driving impossibly deeper. At this angle Sherlock couldn’t have gotten a hand underneath to touch himself even if John had let up but John was too far gone to stop—he’d take care of Sherlock afterward, he’d slide his fingers into Sherlock’s entrance all stretched and slippery with John’s semen and stroke him, Sherlock was ridiculously sensitive to prostate stimulation—and the thought of touching Sherlock there when he’d already been used and filled with John’s come somehow made John even more aroused. He slowed his rhythm just enough to pull out almost all the way and slam back in. And again. Sherlock gave a long high pitched cry into the cushion and John
had just an instant to wonder if he had hurt him when he felt Sherlock’s body clench and ripple, hips jerking under John’s as he came all over the sofa completely untouched. “Oh fuck,” John gasped. “Oh fuck, look at you, you love it, you--” he was slamming into Sherlock so hard now that his arse would be black-and-blue in the morning but he couldn’t stop himself, he had just made Sherlock come like this so it must be all right, and the pleasure rose and rose with every thrust until it exploded, leaving him wrung out and shaking.

John had just enough presence of mind when he’d finished not to collapse over Sherlock’s back, which probably would have cut off the circulation in his legs entirely. He braced his arms on the sofa for a minute, getting his breath, then pulled back as gently as he could and fetched a tea towel from the kitchen. Sherlock tried to stand up and his legs folded under him, leaving him crumpled on the rug giggling weakly as John cleaned them both off and then swiped ineffectually at the sofa.

“So…should I be sorry about that?” John asked, when they were finally collapsed in their bed.

“Not on my account,” Sherlock said sleepily. “I think the evidence of my enjoyment was fairly obvious.”

“Just, I didn’t want you to think...I mean, if you had said anything, of course I would have stopped. You know that, right?”

“I didn’t want you to stop.”

“Well, yeah, but...you know. You looked like you were rather sore after.”

“I liked it,” Sherlock said, cracking one eye. His eyes were utterly colorless in the dim light, giving John the strange feeling he was looking right through him. “I’d like to do it again. Not every time, of course, but…” he stretched sensually, eyes fluttering closed. “It was good. Stop fussing.”

“Well, all right. As long as you’re okay.”

“I’m more than okay,” Sherlock said, stretching again, his whole body shivering as though in some long-delayed aftershock. John pulled him close, relishing the feel of that long, panther-like body against his own. Sherlock yawned and relaxed, curling himself into John like a sleepy cat. “Let’s do it again. When the circumstances warrant.”

Chapter End Notes

I didn't realize until after I wrote this that there was a line in HLV where Sherlock mentioned the the Clarence House Cannibal was actually a cannibalette. I tried to change it but couldn't--I just can't get my head around a female card-playing cannibal. So I decided Sherlock was still feeling the morphine in that scene.
The events of the poker night stayed with John for the next few days, stirring up complicated feelings of arousal and confused guilt. He’d never thought of himself as particularly aggressive—he’d always been a respectful and considerate partner, even with other men. Sure, there had been some encounters in his younger days he might have characterized as, well, a little rough (usually with strangers and usually after a considerable amount to drink), but it was on both sides and had as much to do with testosterone as lust; just young guys confusing the fight-or-fuck instinct. He had never dreamed of handling Sherlock in such a way: Sherlock whom he adored, who looked at John with those dazzled eyes, Sherlock who was only a few months removed from being an untouched virgin. And yet…Sherlock clearly had enjoyed it and so, it seemed, had John. Little flashes of that night would flicker across his mind at the most inopportune times: Sherlock’s slender back and outflung arms, his defenseless hips pinned by John’s grip, his body convulsing in helpless pleasure. He wanted it to happen again. But only when Sherlock did! Certainly only then.

For a month or so nothing came of it. Sherlock worked a few private cases of the sort he could practically sort without leaving the flat. John made risotto. Sherlock made brioche. There was a long experiment involving air pressure and balloons, which caused loud and startling BANGs and resulted in a few broken dishes and Mrs. Hudson banning any future balloon projects. John worked a few days at the surgery, and Sherlock got called in to consult on a huge and confusing fraud case which was notable mainly for the fact that Sherlock and the forensic accountant took an instant loathing to each other and had to be managed by John and Lestrade for days on end, like two dog owners trapped with a pair of antagonistic Rottweilers. They had a great deal of sex, as usual: slow, loving, romantic sex, in their bedroom, with the lights out.

Sherlock had also been poking around looking into the man at the poker game he thought had been up to something, the one from whom he’d won (and then thankfully lost) the house in Leinster Gardens. John hadn’t really been paying much attention to this—Sherlock was always making the weirdest contacts—until he came home on the evening of November 5th to find Sherlock dressed in jeans and a hooded sweatshirt, hopping around impatiently.

“Hurry up, John, put on something warm and shabby,” he ordered. “We’re going snooping.”

“What, tonight?”

“When better? Everyone will be out. No one will take any notice of us.”

“Snooping” for Sherlock covered a multitude of sins, so John wasn’t really surprised when he was ordered to stand watch whilst Sherlock scrambled up a fire escape to peer into some windows and then redirected John to the front of the building to keep an eye out whilst Sherlock broke in.

“What are you looking for?” John hissed into the phone.

“Body parts in the freezer.”

“You keep body parts in the freezer…hey, what is this? Should I be jealous?”

“I’m not planning to eat my body parts, John. Just text if anyone comes in the front door.”

Most unfortunately, the windows on the fire escape turned out to have a silent alarm, and a few minutes later a police car pulled up. The police spotted John and immediately came over to ask him if he had seen anything suspicious.
“Just a lot of kids running around with their faces blackened,” John said, smiling in a matey way. “Would be weird any other time, but it’s all good fun tonight, yeah?” A man came up and glanced at them curiously as he pulled the front door open and John’s heart leaped into his throat: it was the man from the poker game.

The police said good night and followed the man into the building and John ran around to the back, texting frantically. He reached the fire escape and Sherlock practically fell off it onto his head, having seen the police lights and decided to beat a strategic retreat. “Run!” Sherlock hissed, picking himself up and bolting off down the back street.

John had learned long ago to just follow as fast as he could in any given chase scenario, so he put his head down and concentrated on keeping up. They zigzagged through a few busy corners and then straight through the crowded park, circling around the bonfire and weaving to avoid the crowds of people and food vendors, and then out the other side, down a narrow side street, and into an alley where Sherlock came to an abrupt stop behind two huge skips. John bent double, trying to catch his breath.

“How do you know this one?” he finally wheezed, once it became apparent that no one was going to catch up to them.

“I used to buy drugs in that park,” Sherlock said. John looked up in surprise and caught Sherlock’s eyes, dark and huge and hungry, and he was already reaching for him and saying in a low growl, “but you didn’t—“ and Sherlock answering, breathless, “no, never, --oh” and then John was on him, fingers digging into the worn fabric of his jeans and pressing him back against the cold brick wall.

Sherlock’s hands were skittering over his back; he was gasping into John’s mouth as John rutted against him. God, John was so hard already, he’d be coming in his pants like a teenager in a minute. “Is this grinding?” Sherlock managed curiously, sliding down the wall a little so they were better aligned and sending sparks up from John’s groin to his brain. As if on cue, fireworks exploded over the park.

Sherlock suddenly got his hands up and pushed at John’s chest so John stumbled back a pace, feeling a sudden pulse of worry—was it too much, had he scared Sherlock, hurt him? But Sherlock was dropping to his knees, right there on the filthy wet pavement, still so close to the wall that he had to spread his legs to kneel at John’s feet, and he was, oh fuck, he was yanking John’s jeans open and then he was sucking him down.

John bit back a curse and almost lost his balance, throwing one arm out to brace against the wall. This was nothing like Sherlock’s usual blow job technique, which was delicate, thorough, and exquisitely slow. This was Sherlock taking him down to the root and sucking for all he was worth, fast and filthy and furious. John grabbed for his head with his free hand, meaning to caress but somehow fisting his hand in his hair instead, and Sherlock moaned his approval and bobbed faster. John looked down at him and saw his eyes were closed. In the dim glow of the distant bonfire his face looked soft and terribly young, like a skinny kid in his jeans and hoody, and suddenly John realized this must have been what he looked like when he used to buy drugs here. He knew he hadn’t—Sherlock had never—Sherlock had told him he’d never traded his body like this, and somehow that seemed to make it okay, that the fact it had never really happened made it all right for John to fantasize just for a second that they were strangers, that Sherlock was—John had of course never actually done such a thing nor ever would, but the instant the thought occurred to him he reflexively tightened his grip in Sherlock’s hair and Sherlock tipped his head to take John in all the way, yanking at John’s hips so that John was straight-up fucking his throat, and John pulled at his hair and thrust hard, trying to stifle his shout as he came. Sherlock swallowed once around him and then pulled back fast, clutching at John’s spurting prick and pumping it as John thrust at his face,
chasing his mouth and pulling at his hair to drag him back until his orgasm wound down.

John remained leaning against the wall for a minute, eyes closed and body shuddering, one hand still knotted tightly in Sherlock’s hair. He felt Sherlock fumbling as he tucked John away and then his head shifted, back and down, and John opened his eyes to see Sherlock sitting back on his heels and opening his own zipper. There was a sudden crackle of fireworks and the semen splattered on Sherlock’s face sparkled red and blue.

“Here,” John said, letting go Sherlock’s head and trying to straighten. “Let me—“

“No,” Sherlock said sharply, “Put it back.”

“What? Like this?”

“Harder.”

John wound his fingers in the silky curls, mesmerized by the fierceness in Sherlock’s eyes. Sherlock kept his gaze fixed on John as he reached up deliberately with one hand and smeared it through the come on his face, then reached down to wrap his wet hand around himself and began stroking. He lifted his other hand and dragged two fingers down his own cheek, making a trail of semen from his cheekbone to his mouth, and then licked his fingers. His burning eyes never left John’s. He sucked John’s come from his fingers, pumped his cock slick from it, smeared it onto his face and into his mouth again. John couldn’t look away. He was still bent over, one hand tangled in Sherlock’s hair, staring down as Sherlock—on his knees at John’s feet, staring up—fucked his own fist. It was the hottest thing he had ever seen.

“Harder,” Sherlock growled again.

John twisted his fingers and yanked, distantly shocked at the little thrill that shot through him when Sherlock’s body shuddered. Sherlock’s eyes closed involuntarily in a little grunt of pleasure and John jerked his head backward. “None of that. Eyes on me.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open, wide and dark with arousal, and John felt that thrill again. “Yeah, just like that. You keep your eyes on me. Now touch your face again. Yeah, right there, right where I came on your pretty face. You loved that, didn’t you? Now suck it. Suck my come off your fingers just like you sucked my cock.” He had loosened his grip a little and now he tightened it again, relishing the way Sherlock’s eyes flared, the sound of his hand moving faster. He let go of the wall and cupped Sherlock’s face with his other hand, smearing his thumb along Sherlock’s wet bottom lip. “Look at that mouth, the way it looks around your fingers. You wish it was my cock again, don’t you? Do you know how hot your mouth looks when it’s stretched around my cock?” He pushed his thumb into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock’s back was arching now, his hips moving to push into his fist. John pulled his head back by the hair, keeping Sherlock’s burning eyes on his. Sherlock gasped, unable to keep up the suction around John’s thumb, eyes watering from the sting of John’s grip on his scalp. “Do it,” John said in a low groan. “You’re mine, come on, give it to me, I want to see you come—” Sherlock’s whole body jerked, head held in place by John’s fierce hold, crying out, “Oh, oh, oh,” as his eyes finally fell closed, helpless against the onslaught of pleasure.

John stared, watching him pulse in spasms onto the ground between John’s feet as his shudders gradually slowed. Sherlock was panting, wobbling a little on his knees, and he had to put his other hand down on the dirty pavement to keep his balance. John reached down for him, finally untangling his cramped hand from Sherlock’s dampened curls to get him under the armpits and haul him to his feet. Sherlock swayed a little, leaning against John’s shoulder, and John awkwardly managed to get him zipped up. Sherlock put his head down and clung. John closed his own eyes, feeling confused and astonished and ashamed and more than halfway aroused again. What the bloody fuck had he just
They were quiet on the way home. John had no idea what Sherlock was thinking. When they got back to Baker Street John took Sherlock into the shower, stripping off his jeans—he wanted to bin them, the knees were disgraceful, but the jeans were old and soft and clearly well-loved—and climbing behind him to wash the smoke from their hair. They’d never showered together before, but Sherlock didn’t even blink as John lathered up the soap and washed him, gently urging Sherlock to put his hand on John’s shoulder and lift his feet one at a time. Then he wrapped one arm around Sherlock’s middle and got him to lean forward by stroking his back and washed between his legs, rubbing his soapy fingers up his cleft and just into his opening as Sherlock shivered, warm water running in rivulets off his hair.

They didn’t speak. It was as though they both understood without words that they would now come together again, that it would be a balance to what came before. It was John who knelt this time, on the bed between Sherlock’s legs, lifting his hips and pushing his thighs back to lick and lick at his entrance until Sherlock was wet and whimpering and open. It was Sherlock who clutched at John as John carefully entered him, moving in a slow and exquisite rhythm as Sherlock moaned in a long deep rumble. And when John cupped his face to kiss him, Sherlock looked up at him with wide, pure eyes of such radiant adoration that for an instant, John almost felt like crying.

John woke up first in the morning, which almost never happened. Sherlock was dead to the world, flat on his back in the exact same position John had fucked him—John could just barely remember wiping him off, but he honestly had no idea if Sherlock had even been awake at that point or not. John padded to the loo, came back and crawled under the covers to lie facing Sherlock.

So. In a nutshell: Sherlock had gone to his knees, sucked John in an alley, maneuvered John to come all over his face, and then got off on John pulling his hair and…what was that John had done exactly? Bossed him around? Slut-shaming? Clearly John’s sweet lights-off-under-the-covers recovering virgin had some edges to him. John was fine with that—he was perfectly happy with their mostly-vanilla sex life too, but he certainly didn’t mind a little spice. It was his own behavior that worried him. He hadn’t just indulged Sherlock, he’d liked it, a lot more than he would have expected. He’d liked Sherlock vulnerable at his feet: had pictured him even more vulnerable, a defenseless kid. He’d loved pulling his hair and telling him what to do. And he’d really loved the way Sherlock had responded to all of it: that sweet thrill when Sherlock opened his eyes at John’s command and sucked at his fingers and, Jesus, come at his feet—that had turned him on enough that he could almost have fucked Sherlock right then and there.

John shifted a little uncomfortably, staring at Sherlock’s peacefully sleeping profile. It was okay, wasn’t it? They’d both liked it. John would never hurt him. Even if Sherlock pushed him to, he wouldn’t. They really ought to talk it over, John thought, but he knew they probably never would. He would just have to be careful to not let things go too far, just as he always did with Sherlock. That was his job.

John thought about getting up and seeing about some breakfast, but he almost never got to lie in bed with Sherlock like this and the opportunity was too good to miss. He worked one arm under Sherlock’s shoulders and hauled him up onto his chest. Sherlock lifted his head, eyes closed, and said very distinctly, “Kibble,” before going still and boneless again. John smiled and kissed the top of his head where he’d pulled so hard the night before, arranged Sherlock’s head more comfortably in the hollow of his shoulder, and let his own eyes drift closed. Maybe that was what love really was, he thought dreamily, the moment when you truly understand that there are things about the person you love that you don’t know; when you understand that you will never know him, not every part of
him; when in spite of that, you still love.

John had really wanted their first Christmas together to be just the two of them. Of course, “the two of them” was really “the two of them plus Mrs. Hudson”, and then Lestrade asked what he could bring this year and added that Christmas Eve in Baker Street was the only part of the whole holiday he wasn’t dreading (“well, and the Doctor Who special”), and after that he really couldn’t say no when Molly offered to make Christmas cake.

“Are you planning to get drunk?” he asked Sherlock bluntly. John was doing all of the preparations with Mrs. Hudson’s help, whilst Sherlock lay on the sofa proclaiming the whole thing pointless.

Sherlock considered. “Is getting high an option instead?”

“NO,” John and Mrs. Hudson said at the same time.

“What about kicking everyone out and shagging you under the mistletoe?”

“No,” John said again, forestalling Mrs. Hudson, who looked interested.

“I guess I’m getting drunk then. It does have the weight of tradition, after all.”

John pulled out a phone and handed it to him. “Pick Lestrade’s pocket and swap this for his phone. Sometime between the first and second drink would be best.”

“Mine or his?” Sherlock peered at the phone. “This is the one you had when I first met you, the one your sister gave you. Why do you still have it? I thought you tossed it when you upgraded.”

John ruffled his hair. “Why do you think?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, but John could see him smiling. “And why am I switching out Lestrade’s phone for this?”

“Oh, you’ll work it out. You’re a brilliant detective, after all.”

Molly’s Christmas cake was a great success, as was Lestrade’s contribution (drinks). By the time these had gone around a few times Sherlock was sprawled over the sofa with his head in John’s lap, apparently fast asleep. This at least spared them his acid commentary when Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson began singing a Christmas carol they insisted was “God Rest Ye Drunk Detectives,” although they never seemed able to get past the first line without falling over laughing.

“Oh, I must go,” Molly said suddenly, looking at her watch. “I’m meant to be meeting my mum at church for services.”

“I’ll get your coat,” John said, sliding off the sofa and letting Sherlock’s limp head fall with a thump onto the cushion. “It’s just in the bedroom.” When he handed over Molly’s coat he realized that Lestrade was standing directly under the mistletoe that Mrs. Hudson had hung in the kitchen doorway and so, having had rather a lot to drink himself, grabbed him about the waist and gave him a resounding smack on the lips. He groped his arse for good measure.

“Hey!” Lestrade said. “Wrong league, mate--not that you aren’t a nice kisser, understand.” He grabbed a handful of John’s arse in revenge. “Nice arse, too,” he added.

“It’s nothing compared to his penis,” Sherlock suddenly announced from the sofa, without opening
his eyes. “John has an enormous penis.”

There was a moment’s startled silence in which John covered his eyes with his hand, praying that Sherlock had remembered to swipe Lestrade’s phone before he decided to overshare.

“Oh, yeah?” Lestrade finally managed, voice shaking with suppressed laughter. John was sure he was covertly pulling out his phone. “Please, Sherlock, tell me about John’s penis--hey! What the hell is this?”

John looked up just as Sherlock leaped to his feet, grinning like a maniac and clutching Lestrade’s phone.

“What the fuck?” Lestrade said in bewilderment, staring at the old phone in his hand.

“I’ve already got the email set up to send to the entire Scotland Yard mailing list,” Sherlock said happily, holding up the phone. Lestrade’s face appeared on the screen, saying in a quivering voice that made him sound like an eager thirteen-year-old girl: “Please, Sherlock, tell me about John’s penis.”

“You wouldn’t dare,” shouted Lestrade, making a dive for him. Sherlock jumped onto the sofa, pinwheeling wildly, and then leaped to the desk. His feet skidded on a pile of loose papers John had haphazardly shoved together earlier in the day and he wobbled precariously for a moment, trying to find his balance, until Lestrade bounded up onto the desk after him and they both crashed off the desk and knocked over the Christmas tree.

John had to sit down, he was laughing so hard. Mrs. Hudson and Molly were clutching each other and shrieking, tears in their eyes, as Lestrade tackled Sherlock and sat on him until he got the phone safely away. Sherlock lay pinned on the floor, squirming and hissing like a trapped cat. “Really, if you wanted to grope me, you should have just caught me under the mistletoe like everyone else,” Sherlock managed finally when Lestrade had rolled off his stomach and sat on the floor next to him in the wreckage of evergreen and tinsel.

Lestrade shrugged. “I’ve snogged everyone else tonight,” he said cheerfully, grabbed Sherlock by the head, and kissed him soundly. Sherlock yelped and struggled, and Lestrade slapped his arse and began singing, “God rest ye drunk detectives, let nothing you dismay; remember John’s huge penis is yours on Christmas Day…”

“Oh God, stop,” Sherlock moaned, covering his ears.

“Hey, hands off!” John said.

“Oh, I can’t breathe,” Molly gasped, wiping at her eyes. “This is terrible, I’m not going to be able to get through the service without thinking of that song now.”

“Take Greg with you, he needs to settle down,” John said, pulling Lestrade to his feet.

John finally got them all cleared out, with no help from Sherlock, of course. He came back in and switched off the lights, leaving the room lit only by the soft glow of the dying fire and the fairy lights on the mantel, and went to stand over Sherlock who was still lying on the floor.

“I can’t believe you knocked over our Christmas tree,” John said. “Where is Father Christmas going to put your gift?”

“In your pants, apparently,” Sherlock answered. He looked immensely pleased with himself.
John bent over and hauled him upright. “You really are drunk, aren’t you? Is that why you let Lestrade snog you?”

Sherlock grinned deliriously. “Nope,” he said in a loud stage whisper.

“Oh, really,” John said very sternly. “So why’d you do it then?”

Sherlock lowered his head to John’s and said in a deep, velvety rumble, “To make you jealous.”

“Did you,” John said in a tone that had made brave men tremble. He slid one hand down the front of Sherlock’s trousers and cupped his hand over the rapidly hardening bulge there, then threaded his other hand into Sherlock’s hair and gave it the barest hint of a tug. “I think in that case you may need to be taught a bit of a lesson.”

Sherlock learned his lesson right there in front of the fireplace on his hands and knees, and a very merry Christmas was had by all.

“Peter Ricoletti,” Lestrade said. “Ring a bell?”

“Number one on Interpol’s most wanted list, a position he has held at least two decades,” Sherlock said. “Got his start as an art forger, particularly known for Impressionists; there’s a widely held rumour that the Water Lilies in the d’Orsay is actually his but that’s untrue. Rose up the ranks to become head of the Malavita in the early 80’s and was one of the most widely feared figures in the Italian underworld until his unexplained disappearance eight years ago. He’s presumed to be dead.”

Lestrade propped his feet on his desk. “Most people would just say ‘yes’,” he observed.

Sherlock shrugged. “You don’t want most people. You want me.”

“True. Last summer the Italian police started cracking down on the Malavita. I guess they got lucky and found a lot of good information in a raid on one of Ricoletti’s former houses, some stolen artwork thing…”

“The Falls of the Reichenbach’, a Turner masterpiece gone missing from an English auction house.”

Lestrade blinked. “Okay, that was just creepy. So now Interpol is involved and, long story short, they think Ricoletti is actually alive. More than that, they’ve got the idea that he’s living in England. You probably don’t know this, but Ricoletti was born in England.”

“Sheffield, to be precise, in 1946. Mother English, nurse in the Army during the war, came back with her Italian husband for a few years before the family returned to Italy.”

“I guess you do know. Can we just skip to the part where you tell me where he is now?”

“Of course I don’t know where he is now, I’m not clairvoyant. I assumed he was dead too. Why would he retire to England?”

Lestrade pointed at him over his shoes. “That’s what I’m hoping you can work out. Interested?”

Of course Sherlock was interested. Peter Ricoletti! It was like a bird watcher hearing that a dodo had been sighted in the forest. “I’ll see if I can find the time.”

“Brilliant.” Lestrade swung his feet down and handed over a thin file. “Here’s what we’ve managed so far. We looked into all the obvious connections—Sheffield, any family connections—but that
looks like it went cold decades ago. There’s a cousin in Manchester who swears he never even knew Ricoletti, which is quite likely as he’s ten years younger, and other than that no family left we could find. Basically we’ve hit a wall, which is where you come in. The stuff we got from the Italians and Interpol is in about six boxes, mostly in Italian, which none of us can read, so we’re hoping you’ll be able to come up with something. I’ll send those round in the morning.”

“Fine. I’ll take a look.” Sherlock tucked the folder under his arm.

“Got plans for the evening?” Lestrade inquired archly.

Sherlock frowned. “As it happens, yes, but your tone implies that I should have plans but that you think it likely that I will have somehow been deficient in that regard.” He knew it wasn’t John’s birthday. Was it Lestrade’s birthday? Was he expected to do something about it if so?

Lestrade turned around his little desk calendar (Three Hundred and Sixty Five Beers in a Year!) (Christmas present. Donovan. Almost certainly) and tapped the date, which was February 14th.

“Oh, Valentine’s Day,” Sherlock said, relieved at the prospect of not having to take Lestrade out for a pint.

“Yeah, Valentine’s Day. You know how important this is, right? Have you got roses? And chocolates? And you have to get some racy, er, pants and—”

“No, I don’t. John said so last week. He said it was one of the bonuses of being in a relationship with me that he could ignore the whole thing.”

Lestrade folded his arms. “You were more fun when you were new at this.”

“Thank you for your support,” Sherlock said, standing and winding his scarf around his neck. “If we’re out when your louts bring those files to Baker Street, be sure you have them taken all the way upstairs so Mrs. Hudson doesn’t try to do it.”

The evening was raw and biting cold, but when Sherlock turned the corner and saw John sitting at their usual candlelit table in the window at Angelo’s with a glass of wine, he felt suddenly warm right through.

“Did Lestrade have a nice valentine for you?” John asked, smiling, when Sherlock had slid in next to him. “Here, I’ve got us a bottle of wine.”

Sherlock told John all about Peter Ricoletti. “Why would a criminal retire from Italy to England? I thought people usually retired to warmer climates.”

“Yeah, I don’t know.” Their food arrived, and John dug into his veal with gusto. “A lot of people want to be close to their families, especially if there’s grandchildren, you know, but that doesn’t sound like the case here…maybe he had really good memories from his childhood.”

Sherlock arched one eyebrow in disbelief. “Of postwar Sheffield?”

“Maybe he took up a second career as a…sheepherder, or something. I knew a major who left the Army to make guitars.”

“Really? Are you going to take up a second career when you retire?”

“Well, I haven’t really spent a lot of time thinking about retirement, to tell you the truth. I mean, it’s not like I work all that much as it is.” John pulled a rueful face. “Speaking of which…”
“I’m going to live by the sea and keep bees.”

“I was talking to…what?”


“Really? Since when?”

“I don’t know. Since I was a child.” Sherlock considered, twirling his spaghettini around his fork. “Although that may have had something to do with the fact that Mycroft was allergic to bee stings.”

John snorted in amusement. “You don’t even like honey that much.”

“But you do,” Sherlock pointed out.

“Yeah, I do.” John’s face was fond and lovely in the candlelight. “Bees by the sea, hmmm? I could live with that, I think. Bit of a garden for me to putter around in, maybe a dog…”

“Or a cat.”

“Sure, cats are good too.”

Sherlock basked in John’s smile, feeling extraordinarily warm and content. He remembered to be polite. “How was the surgery?”

“Oh, fine. Lots of coughs and colds. Silly gits who won’t give up smoking.” Sherlock immediately felt guilty, although he really had cut down quite a bit. “But listen, there’s something I have to talk to you about. No, don’t tense up, it’s not about you. My license comes up this year and I’m behind on my continuing medical education hours—“

“An utterly ridiculous measure of clinical competence.”

“Not disagreeing with you, but there it is. Anyway Raj at the surgery was telling me he’s going to a conference up in Edinburgh in May. It’s a four-day conference, so it would cover my CME hours, and if I went with Raj we could share a room and keep the costs down.”

Sherlock’s heart sank at the thought of John being gone for four days, but he did not want to be clingy, so he tried to think of something supportive to say and failed.

“So…that’s one option,” John said slowly, toying with his fork.

“Oh?” Sherlock perked up. “What’s the other option?”

“Well, I was thinking seriously about giving it up. I mean, as I said, I don’t work all that much anyway, and now that we’re together in pretty much every sense…and you’ve made it clear that you’d prefer to have me at your beck and call, so…what do you think?”

“Give me a minute,” Sherlock set down his fork and steepled his fingers. As a valentine this was even better than Peter Ricoletti, but he needed to think about all the implications. He thought so hard that when he resurfaced his plate had disappeared and John was tucking into a large semifreddo.

“Hey, welcome back,” John said amiably. “Want some?”

“No.”

“Okay, do you want an espresso or—“
“No, I mean no, you shouldn’t give it up.”

“Really?” John looked surprised. “I thought you’d jump at the offer.”

“I would,” Sherlock said slowly. “But it would be selfish. With Moriarty out there—if something happens to me, you will need to be able to work. You will need to be a doctor, to have people to help.”

“I’ll need to pay the rent,” John said.

“Of course you won’t. I took care of that right after the pool. No matter what happens, you will never have to work again if you don’t wish it; you’ll never have to leave Baker Street either. I made arrangements—well, all right, I had Mycroft make arrangements, but I signed everything.”

John had stopped with his spoon suspended in midair. “Wait. That far back? After the pool?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, feeling self-conscious.

John lay his spoon down and reached out for Sherlock’s hand. His face was so filled with tenderness that Sherlock felt an absurd stinging behind his eyes. “I can’t believe it took me so damn long to realize how bloody lucky I was.”

Sherlock shrugged, but he wrapped his fingers around John’s. “You came around after you realized that I provide the best oral sex in London.”

“You provide the best oral sex in the known universe,” John said, squeezing his hand. “And this is a nice dessert and all, but I think I’d rather go home now and have one of your patented hour-long blow jobs. And then I’m going to see how hard I can make you come just by fingering you.”

Sherlock grinned. “Valentine’s Day is a vastly unappreciated holiday,” he said.

The young woman sitting in the client chair hadn’t really lost her online-dating boyfriend, of course. Sherlock had worked out her real purpose almost immediately, but John clearly hadn’t; he was still taking notes—he was even doodling possible blog titles now, “Match.Gone”, dear God.  Time to move things along. Sherlock took out his phone.

“So then I went round to his flat, and the landlord said…” The young woman trailed off. “Am I boring you, Mr. Holmes?”

John looked up and frowned at him. “I didn’t even know you had games on your phone.”

Sherlock hadn’t until about two minutes ago. This was what people actually did all day? No wonder they were such idiots. He pocketed the phone and said “Miss Reilly, why don’t you tell us why you’re really here.”

Kitty Reilly sat back and folded her arms. “Why don’t you tell me?”

Sherlock was bored of this already. “You’re a journalist, hoping to dig up some dirt. Now you’ve failed to find any so get out.”

“I was hoping to get your side of the story, give you a chance to go on the record. Sure you don’t want to take it?” She pulled a small recorder out of her pocket. “Jim Moriarty’s been happy enough to talk to me.”
Sherlock froze for a heartbeat, blind terror rising up and choking him, but then he dredged up the fury buried beneath it and leaned forward, enunciating very carefully. “Here’s a quote for you: You. Disgust. Me.”

“Wait wait wait, let’s all just hold on a minute,” John intervened. “Miss Reilly, are you saying you’ve been talking to Jim Moriarty? What’s he been telling you?”

“Oh, quite a bit. He and Mr. Holmes go way back, did you know that? They went to school together.”

“No, I didn’t, and I’ll wager that’s news to Sherlock too,” John said crisply. “Listen, you need to know that he’s done this before. He makes a habit of insinuating himself with pretty young—” naïve, stupid, vulnerable, Sherlock thought, “—women and lying to them to get to Sherlock. I could have one give you a call if you like.” Oh, brilliant John, the woman actually seemed to be listening to him.

“If you wouldn’t mind telling me—what’s your interest in Sherlock? I mean, is there a reason you’re looking into our lives here besides to pander cheap gossip?”

For the first time Sherlock realized that John was angry too. He was just much, much better at hiding it.

“Yes, there is.” Kitty Reilly was defensive but determined, her chin up high. “I think the public have a right to know if ordinary people are taking it upon themselves to investigate private citizens without any legal oversight. What’s next, are you going to get a gun like the Americans and start dispensing your own justice too?”

“We work within the law,” John said, resting a calming hand on Sherlock’s arm as he opened his mouth in outrage. “You’re welcome to talk to the police about this if you like. But I respect your motives as a journalist. If you’re as good as I think you are, then I think you might want to look at your source a little more closely.”

Something flickered in Reilly’s face; ah, Jim was pretending a romantic interest again then. Sherlock suppressed a snort and, taking his cue from John, said stiffly, “I never went to school with Moriarty. I went to Harrow—verify that however you like; I’ll wager he won’t be able to say the same.”

“Oh, I will,” Reilly said. Her expression settled back into its usual cat-watching-a-mousehole smoothness. “Sure you wouldn’t want to fill me on anything else whilst I’m here?”

“No, I think that’s all we’ve got to say,” John said with equal smoothness, standing. “How about I show you out.”

Kitty Reilly took her time, looking around openly as she moved slowly toward the door. “Lovely flat. Is there just the one bedroom?”

Sherlock was on his feet now—their relationship could not be known to Moriarty, he would go after John—but John was still smiling. “We actually live upstairs with our butler,” he said. “That’s where Sherlock keeps the Batsuit.”

That got a genuine laugh out of Reilly, and then, thank God, they were on the stairs.

Sherlock turned in a circle where he stood, hands tangling in his hair. He had been so careful—and now—what was Moriarty doing, was he bored?—what would Reilly—John—Sherlock squeezed his eyes closed and clenched his teeth against a howl of primal terror. He wanted to run, he wanted to scream, he wanted to smoke, he wanted cocaine, he wanted John to shove him face down and fuck him into oblivion. He pulled at his hair with both hands, hard.
“Hey.” John was in front of him, face creased up with concern, reaching up to clasp his hands over Sherlock’s wrists. “Hey, settle down, okay? She’s gone. She didn’t get anything good here, and now with any luck—“

Sherlock roared in sudden fury, startling John so that he took a step back. “You don’t understand! How can you—” he flung out his hands in frustration, then clenched them in his hair again. “I have to think. Leave me alone,” he said tightly, and strode off to the bedroom and slammed the door.

“It’s really great to catch up with you again,” Mike said warmly over his pint, after they’d covered the gossip about all their old friends and the changes at the hospital. “Haven’t seen much of you since you settled down.”

“Ah, you know how it is,” John said. “I think I’m the last one really, so you can’t complain.”

“Suppose not. How are things going with you two? It’s been, what, six months?”

“No, longer than that…almost nine, I think. It’s good.” John had said this last automatically, but now he stopped and considered. He hadn’t had a real conversation in days, and deep down, he knew he’d called Mike instead of Lestrade because he thought Mike would be a more sympathetic listener. “Well, we’re good, really good, but Sherlock’s going through a bit of a rough patch right now.”

“No the drugs?” Mike said, worried.

“Oh no, not that, more the opposite. He gets down, really blue periods…” John wouldn’t have been able to use the word to anybody else, but this was another doctor, so he just said it: “Depression.”

“Oh, that’s rough,” Mike said.

“It is. Remember when you first introduced us, how he said…”

“‘I don’t talk for days on end’,“ Mike said, nodding.

“Yes. He doesn’t talk, doesn’t eat, stays up all night playing the violin and sleeps all day. It used to happen a few times a year but this is the first time since we became a proper couple so…”

“It’s hard, seeing somebody you care about hurting like that,” Mike said. He hesitated, then said, “Linda had a bit of postpartum after Jake was born. She cried continually for weeks. The baby would cry and she’d cry harder, and then I’d try to take him to give her a bit of a rest and she’d cry even more. And then she got angry, like it was all my fault.”

“Yeah. I know I can’t fix this for him, but it still bothers me when he just shuts me out and won’t talk at all. It’s like everything I do to try to help just makes it worse.”

“You know it’s not anything you can help. Do you think he’d ever try medication?”

John shook his head. “Of course not. He’s the classic self-medicating who’d never trust anti-depressants because of the side effects. Anyway, he really probably needs mood stabilizers and he’d never go for that. He loves being manic.” Selfishly John did too, though he didn’t say this to Mike.

“He doesn’t get full-blown mania though, does he?”

“You mean grandiosity, decreased need for sleep, focused goal-directed activity, pressured speech, psychomotor agitation?” John said dryly and Mike laughed. “Yeah, I’d say that’s pretty much his
“Well, look on the bright side,” Mike said bracingly. “At least Sherlock can’t blame you for getting him pregnant.”

“Oh my God, can you even imagine,” John said, horrified at the mental picture of a ragingly hormonal pregnant Sherlock, and they both burst into terrified laughter.
“Nothing could exceed his energy when the working fit was upon him, but now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would lie on the sofa, hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night.”—*A Study in Scarlet*

However far down Sherlock sank—and this was about as far as John had ever seen him—he would always stir himself for a case. John had a moment of heart-clenching fear in the darkened bedroom when Sherlock didn’t initially respond to him, but then Sherlock stirred wearily and sat up, T-shirt hanging loosely on his thin shoulders. “Give me a few minutes to dress,” he said.

Mr. Margolis was more than willing to wait. He was a pasty, middle-aged man with sad hound-dog eyes made even droopier by worry, and he told his story in a few minutes: only daughter in her first year at Cambridge, not answering calls or texts. No boyfriend; some friends whose names he had heard—Jessica, Hunter—but her father did not know their last names or their mobile numbers. He had called the university and been assured his daughter was surely fine and would call in a day or so. Someone had checked her room and asked around, but apparently there was nothing out of order.

“The thing is, Mr. Holmes,” Margolis said heavily, “Emily’s a very quiet girl. She’s not the sort where people would notice, if she wasn’t at a tutorial or a meal. If she’s really missing…”

“We’ll look into it,” Sherlock said, surprising John a bit. “Is there anyone else she might contact, someone else in the family perhaps?”

Margolis shook his head. “My wife died eight years ago. There’s my sister Anna, but I’ve talked to her already and she hasn’t heard from Emily either.”

“If you could give me her number, just in case,” Sherlock said.

Once he had gathered all the facts Sherlock decamped to his laptop without another word, leaving John to handle the “We’ll be in touch directly we know anything” formalities and usher Mr. Margolis out the door. Sherlock spent the rest of the morning clicking around in silence. John tried to take advantage of his distraction to deposit some tea and biscuits on the desk, but they went untouched. He let his hand hover, tentatively, over Sherlock's shoulder, but in the end he let it fall away. When Sherlock had first turned withdrawn John had tried to stroke and cuddle him out of it but Sherlock, usually so tactile, had responded with a poorly-disguised weary indifference that had wounded John more than he liked to admit.

Around noon Sherlock suddenly stood up and snapped the laptop shut decisively. “Let’s go,” he said.

John had assumed they would be headed to Cambridge, but instead Sherlock bought tickets to
Rodmell. “So,” he said when they had settled into their seats. “Mind telling me what’s in Rodmell?”

“The River Ouse,” Sherlock said, not looking at him.

“Okay,” John said slowly, not getting it. “Should that mean something to me?”

“On 28 March, 1941, Virginia Woolf filled her pockets with stones and drowned herself in the River Ouse.” Sherlock was still looking out the window. “Emily Margolis was reading English literature; she was required to submit her papers online. She sent them as e-mail attachments so I was able to access them through her sent mail. Should you like to guess the topic of her last paper?”

“Oh shit,” John said, his heart sinking.

Sherlock kept looking out the window, silent and alone.

John felt vaguely that Emily Margolis’ death should have somehow lent her an Ophelia-like beauty; she should have had flowers twined in her streaming hair, incapable of her own distress. Instead it had robbed her of what little beauty youth and vitality had lent her and left only a plain, pale body, bloated by the water. She had been found on 29 March, two days ago.

“There was a note in a plastic bag in her pocket,” the morgue attendant explained in hushed tones, “but it wasn’t sealed all the way and the water got in, so it couldn’t be read. The police have it. She didn’t have any other identification on her.”

Sherlock stood with his hands in his pockets, staring down at the body with no expression on his face.

“Thanks,” John said on a sigh, rubbing a hand over his eyes. “We’ll be in touch with her father, I suppose, and he’ll…”

“No,” Sherlock said abruptly. He put his phone into John’s hand, a number already showing on the screen. “Anna. The sister. Call her.” He turned on his heel and walked out.

He knew all along, John realized. That was why he had asked for Margolis’ sister’s number: so they could ask her to deliver the news.

He found Sherlock standing outside, smoking a cigarette. From the smell around him it wasn’t his first.

John handed his phone back and Sherlock took it silently. “Anna said she’d been depressed for years,” he said quietly. “She’d hoped university would be a fresh start, but she was very shy, and she didn’t have a lot of friends.”

“Her mother killed herself.”

“Yeah.” John didn’t ask how he knew. “Overdosed on sleeping pills.” He sighed, thinking of Emily’s father, probably getting the news now. Poor sod.

Sherlock abruptly dropped his cigarette and ground it out with his shoe. “Let’s go,” he said.

Sherlock said nothing else on the way back to the station, and nothing else on the train either. He wrapped himself in his coat, leaned against the window, and closed his eyes. John knew perfectly well he wasn’t sleeping; it was just his way of closing out the world for a while.
John half-watched him, lulled himself into a sad tiredness by the events of the day and the motion of
the train. He wondered why the girl’s death had distressed Sherlock so much. He wondered why
he’d taken the case at all. He wondered when the Sherlock he knew was going to come back. It
made him think of the morning last fall when he’d lain awake and watched Sherlock after the night
in the alley, thinking about how you could never really know another person, no matter how much
you loved him. There had been one other occasion like that—well, not counting Christmas—when
they’d nearly been caught by a group of smugglers in a warehouse who had finally left without
noticing them. John and Sherlock had stumbled out of their hiding place laughing like hyenas and
John had said “better call Lestrade before they come back” and Sherlock had answered, “not yet”
and they’d ended up with John pinning Sherlock against the wall and fucking his brains out. They
hadn’t even had any lube, just Sherlock’s lip gloss—they’d used almost all of it and it was still
rough—and Sherlock had barely been able to walk after. God, John missed him—missed his old
Sherlock, the one who crackled with energy and life.

Night had fallen when they arrived back in London, a wet, gloomy evening that made John feel even
more depressed. He tried to think of something pleasant, and pictured the two of them in a warmly lit
restaurant sharing dessert.

“Want to stop for dinner someplace?” he asked as the cab pulled away from the station.

“Not hungry,” Sherlock said shortly, angling his body away from John to stare out the window
again.

John felt a wave of irritation. Honestly, would it kill Sherlock to just try? John knew perfectly well
that Sherlock could no more will himself out of depression than he could the bubonic plague, nor
could John cure him, but he couldn’t help feeling that Sherlock’s shutting him out was not helping.
Sherlock seemed unwilling to even admit there was a problem, which John could only assume was
down to his ridiculous delusion that John would somehow lose interest if Sherlock admitted that he
needed him. John considered having the cab drop him at the pub anyway—at least the bartenders
would talk to him—but he still had a good sized pot of pork and cider stew that he’d made earlier in
the week, and a nice bowl of stew and a beer in front of the telly with the fire going sounded just as
good.

At the flat John took off his coat and went straight to the kitchen, having already decided that the
day’s events merited a drink whilst the stew heated. He got out the soup and the bread and was on
his second drink by the time he turned off the stove. He went to the cupboard the get a bowl and
glimpsed Sherlock, standing motionless by the window.

John hesitated. He didn’t really feel like putting himself out to be rebuffed again, but he had no idea
when Sherlock had last eaten, and the visible tension in his shoulders and tightly clasped hands made
John’s neck ache. He took a step out into the lounge. “I’ve got stew hot if you want any, he said
casually.

Sherlock turned around. “I don’t want stew.”

Oh, for fuck’s sake. “Well, come take a look and see if there’s anything in the fridge you fancy, then.
I’m not a short-order cook.”

Sherlock had unbuttoned his jacket and draped it over his desk chair whilst John was speaking and
now he strode across the floor to meet him, unbuttoning the top button of his shirt as he came. “I
don’t want food at all. I want you. I want for you to fuck me right here on the floor the way you did
at Christmas.”

John’s jaw dropped. He didn’t think he’d ever actually heard Sherlock use the word before. “Are
you mental? You’ve not wanted it for weeks and now you think I’m just going to drop everything and have you on the floor?”

“On the floor, on my knees, over the sofa, however you like,” Sherlock said. He had reached John and was now crowding into his space, unbuttoning his way down his shirt. His eyes were hot and tight.

“I don’t like,” John said irritably, turning away toward the kitchen. “As it happens I’m not in the mood at the moment, I just want to relax with some food and a beer.”

Sherlock was faster, already around and blocking his way again. “Yes, you are,” he said. He dropped to his knees and grasped at John’s trousers on both sides, opening his mouth to breathe a long hot breath over John’s crotch. Shit. John felt a hot surge of arousal, heightened by the sight of Sherlock’s dark curls bent over his groin.

“Cut it out,” John growled. He fisted one hand in Sherlock’s hair and caught a glimpse of his triumphant smile, which just fueled John’s anger. He gripped Sherlock’s bicep hard with his other hand and hauled him bodily to his feet. “I said no. Now get out of my way and let me get my dinner.”

“Oh, so you’re the only one who can make the rules?” Sherlock said furiously. There were two bright spots of color high on his pale cheekbones. “You get to decide when, where, how? Don’t I get a say in this at all?”

“Not when you’re acting like a fucking toddler,” John snapped. “Now if you want to sit down and eat with me—“

Sherlock snarled, his face twisting with fury. “So is that the new rule? I don’t get pudding if I don’t eat my veg? Stop treating me like I’m a child who doesn’t have any right to make my own decisions!”

“You’re acting like a child!” John shouted. “And living on coffee and cigarettes all day—“

Sherlock laughed, a low harsh sound like broken glass. “And how many drinks have you had since we got home? I can’t smoke, but it’s all right for you to drink as much as you like?”

John took a long breath through his teeth, trying to keep hold of his fraying temper. He was not going to descend into this kind of petty squabble, he was going to eat his damn dinner and then go sleep upstairs. “Do what you like,” he said in a tight, controlled voice. “It’s not like you care what I think anyway.” He turned deliberately away.

Sherlock actually had the nerve to get in front of him again and shove him back, hard enough to make John stumble. “Oh really? What if I make a rule? If you won’t give me what I need I’ll just go out and get it elsewhere. I’ll go to a club and buy cocaine and get so high I don’t—so high I’ll let the first man who wants it take me out in the alley and—“

John actually saw red. He’d always thought it was a metaphor, but it turned out to be true: he was so angry his entire field of vision flared scarlet. He grabbed Sherlock and dragged him across to the kitchen table, shoving him face down across the surface and grabbing his wrists up behind his back. Sherlock put up a good fight, struggling and snarling, but he was weakened from lack of food and sleep and John always got the upper hand anyway. John held him down with one hand whilst he fumbled at Sherlock’s flies with the other, and Sherlock stopped struggling and began to laugh again in angry triumph. “I told you—“ he started, and then John hauled off and smacked him across the arse. Sherlock gave a yelp that was half-startled and half-outraged and John spanked him again, and then
again and again. They were not playful swats; John was striking him with his open hand hard enough to make his own palm sting and Sherlock’s white bum was rapidly turning a fiery crimson.

“If you want to act like a child then this is what you get,” John said, breathless from the effort of holding Sherlock in place while he walloped him.

Sherlock began struggling again, kicking at John with his legs and snarling against the table—“you patronizing, stupid, sanctimonious—why should I keep you around if you can’t even—” and his bony wrists slipped in John’s grasp. He got in a good kick to John’s shin that made his eyes water. John shoved his legs back and leaned over him to keep him in place whilst he unfastened his own belt and pulled it out. At the sound of the leather sliding through belt loops Sherlock’s body gave an involuntary jolt and he made a stifled, bitten-off noise. John had heard every sound of arousal of which Sherlock was capable and this was not one; there was fear in the sharp sound, and somehow that made John even angrier.

“You really think that?” he hissed furiously. He wrapped the belt around Sherlock’s wrists and pulled the end through tightly, yanking the free end hard enough to raise Sherlock’s upper body off the table. “You really think I’d hit you with a belt? Fuck you, Sherlock.”

“That was the idea,” Sherlock gasped, somehow still managing to sound haughty even with his face smashed into the table.

John wrapped the end of the belt around his right hand and used his newfound freedom to haul his left arm back as hard as he could for the next blow. His loosened jeans slipped against his pants and he realized that he was, in fact, rock hard. Well, fine. If Sherlock wanted it so much, he could bloody well have it. John gave him one more vicious smack and then got his jeans open one handed, scanning the table for something useful: there, mineral oil by the microscope. John dumped some onto a plate that had once held toast and smeared his fingers through it. He shoved two fingers straight into Sherlock’s squirming body. “Tell me you want it.”

“I want it,” Sherlock snarled, still struggling frantically.

John rolled his fingers around with no finesse to stretch the muscle as efficiently as possible, slicked his cock, and then pressed in both thumbs and pried Sherlock’s buttocks apart, belt still wrapped around his right hand. He thought Sherlock would cry out when he pushed in—some sick part of him wanted him to, wanted to force some kind of honest reaction—but although Sherlock’s whole body went rigid he did not make a sound. It just made John angrier, of course, and he pulled out far enough to jolt the table when he slammed back in. Oh Christ, it felt good. John had been getting by with the occasional furtive wank in the shower since Sherlock had gone downhill and it had been some time since the last one; he wasn’t going to last more than a minute. He dug his fingers into Sherlock’s bony hips and gave himself up to it, letting the pure animal pleasure fill his mind as completely as the scarlet rage had a few minutes ago. When he came it was with a strange sense of angry triumph, thrusting so deeply that he hurt his own hips as he crushed Sherlock against him.

John’s head finally cleared and he found himself panting, bent over Sherlock and holding himself up with his elbows on the table. He pushed upright and unwound the belt from his hand, pulling it through the buckle so that Sherlock’s arms thudded limply to his sides. They must have been completely numb, John thought distantly. He tucked himself away, started to turn, then reconsidered and reached around Sherlock to tug his pants and trousers up over his hips. Sherlock’s feet slid, trying to get balanced enough to stand up, but then his knees crumpled and he went down hard, striking his chin on the table edge with enough force that John heard his teeth snap together.

John looked down at Sherlock collapsed on the floor and felt the beginnings of a deep, awful guilt. There were red marks on Sherlock’s face and wrists, he was shivering, and there was a spreading
wet stain on the back of his trousers where John had not even wiped him off. John’s head throbbed. He felt utterly exhausted, no longer interested in food or anything but taking a shower and going to bed and hoping this would somehow all sort itself out by morning, but…he knelt down, wrapping his arms around Sherlock’s chest to pull him to his feet. He tried to make his voice gentle. “Come on.”

John washed himself first, brisk and efficient, and then handed Sherlock his shampoo as he rinsed. Sherlock tried to open the cap but then shook his head. He was leaning against the shower wall as though he lacked the strength to stand. John sighed, but he took the bottle and poured shampoo into his hand, pushing Sherlock under the spray.

He felt rather than heard the hitches in Sherlock’s breathing as he washed his hair, and his hands gentled a little. He took Sherlock’s head in both hands and held it under the water, careful not to get soap in his eyes, and felt his shoulders shaking. He smoothed Sherlock’s hair back and let his head droop slowly onto John’s shoulder, his tears hot against John’s skin.

“All right,” John said tiredly. “All right.”

John woke in the chill light of early morning, feeling grim and guilty and still a bit angry. He’d slept badly, although from the look of things better than Sherlock; his side of the bed had clearly been deserted for hours.

John pulled on his clothes, went to the loo, and stared at himself in the mirror a moment. Then he straightened his shoulders and raised his jaw. Time to deal with this. John was going to have to be the grownup and force the issue, because God knew Sherlock wouldn’t.

Sherlock was sitting in his chair, fingers steepled in front of him, staring into space. He’d clearly shaved and showered again and was impeccably dressed in one of his crisp dark suits, a transparently self-protective move that did not abate John’s anger one iota. John set a well-sugared mug of tea beside him, sat down in his own chair, and said, “We have to talk.”

Sherlock sighed in what was clearly meant to be a long-suffering way. “I apologize for the things I said last night. I didn’t mean them. I apologize for goading you into getting angry and for pushing you to have sex when you said you didn’t want to. I know it was wrong. It won’t happen again.”

His delivery was wooden and should have been annoying, but John knew Sherlock well enough to know that his regret was sincere. He felt a good deal of his anger drain away. “I appreciate that. I apologize for hurting you. We still need to talk about it.”

Sherlock’s shoulders slumped in defeat and John leaned over and put the tea directly into his hands. “Drink up, you’re not going anywhere for a while.”

Sherlock drank obediently, eyes downcast. There were blue smudges under his eyes and the faint shadow of a bruise on one cheekbone where John had pushed his face into the table. John said more gently, “You needed something from me last night, and instead I ended up hurting you. I don’t want that to ever happen again.”

“IT won’t,” Sherlock said quickly.

John nodded. “No. We’re going to talk about what you wanted, and how you can get it in the future. But first we have to talk about why. I know there’s something going on, something that’s bothering you, that you aren’t telling me. I know…” John hesitated, then plunged on. “I know you’re moody,
love. I know you have dark patches. You told me yourself the first day we met. I don’t have any illusions that I can change that or prevent it, but I feel like there’s something else going on right now making things worse, and maybe I can help. We’re in this together, remember? That means you don’t have to carry this alone, whatever it is.”

John had expected Sherlock to go defensive and stonewall him, but instead Sherlock abruptly bent forward and clenched his hands in his hair. “It’s Moriarty!” he burst out. “I thought--ever since Italy I’ve been trying to do what he said. I backed off. If I saw his hand in something I let others take the credit. I was afraid--I was trying not to play his game, not to engage with him, just watching and waiting to see if he’d make a mistake, because I didn’t want him to know--but that reporter, she knows, and now he’ll know that you--that we’re together, and he’ll--” his long delicate fingers were knotted so tightly the tendons stood out. “I have dreams,’ he said miserably. “Dreams where he’s taken you from me and I’m all alone.”

“Oh sweetheart,” John said, all his anger gone now. He leaned over and laid his hand gently on the back of Sherlock’s bent neck. Sherlock breathed deeply a few times, then tipped his head a little into John’s palm so John could cover one tense hand with his own and then stroke his hair.

“And it’s not just you,” Sherlock said into his lap. His voice was agonized. “Since I started being afraid, it’s like open wounds, like my fingernails have been torn off and everything keeps brushing up against them and it hurts whenever I try to touch. That father yesterday, all these people, cases--I know what it’s like to care now and I feel how it hurts them and I can’t bear it, I can’t.” He was trembling violently.

“Oh, love, I’m so sorry,” John said. He stroked Sherlock’s hair and neck, feeling a hot stab of shame at the memory of how he had accused Sherlock of feeling nothing for other people, had let him pretend that he didn’t care. “I know how it hurts you, I can see it. I know. But I’m right here, Sherlock. No one is going to take me away from you, and I’m going to help you deal with this.” He wanted to pull Sherlock into his lap, let Sherlock wind his arms around John’s neck and nuzzle into the hollow of his throat and be cuddled until he could relax, but Sherlock had been right: it was time for John to start treating him as an adult.

“Do other people understand this?” Sherlock asked. “They can’t possibly. How could they just go about living their lives if they knew at any moment that something could happen? That the people they love could die? They can’t possibly feel it like this.”

John couldn’t help smiling. Trust Sherlock to decide he must be extraordinary even in love--that his heart must be as exceptional as his brain. “I think they do,” he said kindly. “Death is the mother of beauty, haven’t you heard that? Didn’t you tell me once you didn’t delete poetry? Maybe you should have read more of it.”

Sherlock sniffed. “I did delete Wordsworth,” he said.

“Yeah, I think I did too,” John said. “Drink your tea. Okay?”

Sherlock drank the rest of the cup. His hands were no longer shaking as violently, and he looked calmer when he set the cup down. “Okay.”

“I know how badly you were hurting,” John said carefully, “and I think part of you was just spoiling for a fight, but that wasn’t all of it. I agree that you should have an equal say in our relationship, but for that to happen you are going to have to tell me what you want.”

“I’m very happy,” Sherlock said quickly. “But...sometimes...” he made a frustrated face. “It all felt like too much last night, as though nothing I did mattered, it was all just pain and sadness and my
clothes hurt my skin. And then...I thought about those times when we...the night after the poker game. Bonfire Night. Christmas. The warehouse. Those times it was like I couldn’t think about anything except you. I couldn’t hear anything except your heartbeat. Nothing else.”

John stretched out his hand and Sherlock took it, turning his palm up to touch two fingers to John’s wrist. “So slow and steady,” he said, marveling, and John could almost feel Sherlock’s own skittering pulse slowing to match his. “In music, the low instruments are the heartbeat of the piece, did you know that? When everything is atonal and I’m the screaming violin, you’re the cello who comes in and makes everything right.”

John thought that metaphorically they were getting a long way off the point, but he was fairly certain that he was being complimented. “How, exactly? What was it about those times were you wanting last night?”

Sherlock looked uncertain, but he didn’t let go of John’s hand. “All of it,” he said.

John brushed his bruised cheek with his fingertips. “Not this,” he said.

“No.” Sherlock looked ashamed. “I’m sorry, I know I shouldn’t have--”

“No,” John said sharply, cutting him off. “No matter what you did, that should never have happened. I should never, ever have laid a hand on you in anger and I never will again--we have to agree on that, Sherlock; if one of us is angry we have to cool off first. You know I have a temper; I’m not proud of it, and I try to control it, but I couldn’t live with myself if I really hurt you. Okay? Everything else is on the table, but not that.”

Sherlock immediately looked curious. “Everything?”

“Sherlock.”

“All right, yes, I understand. I promise not to try to provoke you and to, to...take a time-out if warranted.”

“Okay. We’ll talk about everything else. I mean really talk, Sherlock. I’ll need you to tell me what you want and--”

“Boundaries, limits, tedious,” Sherlock said, rolling his eyes and looking a bit more like himself.

“Yeah, all that,” John said, smiling.

Sherlock cocked his head and said, and edge of defiance in it, “You like it too. I think you tell yourself you’re just doing it for me, but you do.”

“I do like it,” John said honestly. “But I like how we usually have sex too. I love how we usually have sex, actually.”

“Pulling my hair,” Sherlock said with an air of ticking off a list. “Holding my wrists. Me kneeling at your feet--you don’t get off on coming on my face so much, that’s more my kink than yours, but what you really like is to tell me what to do.”

John blinked. “I suppose that’s true,” he said. “But like I said, it’s all on the table. We’ll work it out.”

Sherlock yawned hugely and curled into his chair. He looked spent, as though he had a harrowing few days and a long sleepless night, and John suddenly felt exhausted as well. “How about I make some breakfast,” he said, “and then let’s have a bit of a lie-down. We can talk more, or sleep more,
or just...be together. Okay?”

“Okay,” Sherlock said. He got up, crossed over to John, and draped himself over John’s lap with his head tucked into his shoulder and his legs dangling off the side as they always did. John wrapped him up in his arms.

“It’s not gone,” Sherlock murmured into his neck. “The dark patch, is that what you called it?”

“I know,” John said. “I can’t make it go away. But I can be here with you.”

Sherlock’s arms tightened around him. John could feel the sweat cooling on his forehead; the tension was draining away now, leaving him exhausted and limp.

“What I said last night,” Sherlock said softly. “About going out to find someone else, I didn’t mean it. The drugs, maybe, but not that. There will never be anyone for me but you, John.”

“Sweetheart…”

“I’m not being melodramatic,” Sherlock said. His eyes were closed, John could feel his lashes against his skin. “And this isn’t the depression talking. If I lose you, I lose everything.”

John had no idea what to say. His fingers clutched Sherlock’s jacket.

“It isn’t the same for you,” Sherlock went on. “And it shouldn’t be. If something happens to me it will hurt you terribly, but you’ll survive and one day you’ll even be happy. I want you to be happy.”

“No.” John shook his head emphatically. “You know a lot about me, Sherlock, but you’re wrong on that. Maybe I could have been happy with someone else once, but not now. I can’t live without you either. So, I already promised you, I’m not going anywhere. Now you promise too. You won’t leave me, not for anything, ever. Swear it.”

“I swear it,” Sherlock whispered.

Eventually the grey despair lifted, as it always did. The somatic symptoms followed a predictable pattern: the insomnia improved first, and Sherlock spent as much time as he thought justifiable sleeping in John’s arms. He knew he was getting better when he found himself wondering when in the progression his libido would return.

As it turned out, it came back with his appetite. One morning Sherlock opened his eyes to see John’s face just inches away from his own, fingers stroking gently through Sherlock’s curls, and suddenly the whole world seemed bright with promise.

“Oh God, there you are,” John breathed. “There you are.” His smile warmed Sherlock like the sun, and his hand curled around the back of Sherlock’s head as he drew him closer and into a kiss. Initially the kiss was gentle—an I-love-you, I-missed-you kiss—but it soon grew heated and Sherlock found himself wriggling closer to press his body up against John’s.

“Are you sure—” John began, his own enthusiasm hard and palpable against Sherlock’s thigh, and Sherlock shucked his T-shirt off by way of answer.

The rest of their clothes were discarded quickly after that and Sherlock rolled onto his back and stretched his arms over his head, reveling in the sensation of John’s skin against his. He opened his eyes to look and then pulled his arms down to his chest, embarrassed by the sharpness of his ribs and
hipbones.

“No, don’t,” John said, reading his mind with unnerving accuracy and pulling his arms away. “I love every inch of you thin or fat; you’re the most beautiful thing in the world to me no matter what.” He went right to work proving it, kissing down every prominent bone and into the hollow cave of Sherlock’s abdomen. It all felt wonderful, like a feast after a long case, and Sherlock soon forgot his self-consciousness and wriggled under John in delirious abandon. It did not take long for them to be panting and rutting against each other.

“Can I do this?” John asked, sliding one hand between Sherlock’s legs and stroking tenderly. “I want to make you feel good…”

“Please,” Sherlock gasped, legs already falling open shamelessly. It was his favorite thing after intercourse and he knew John loved it, loved being able to give his full attention to Sherlock’s reactions as he twisted and stroked with his talented fingers. Besides then he could reciprocate by giving John a fabulous blow job, which was John’s favorite thing, full stop. The minute John’s first finger slid inside him Sherlock was twisting and moaning, knowing he wasn’t going to last—he hadn’t had an orgasm in weeks, and his testicles were already full to aching. But John was brilliantly good at this and he managed to draw it out until Sherlock was thrashing around two slow relentless fingers, begging, “Please John, more, more fingers, your cock, your mouth, anything, please…”

“Shhh,” John soothed and Sherlock moaned, thrusting up helplessly, and then John pulled his fingers back, so slowly, but then he pushed in a third and at the same time slid his mouth onto Sherlock’s throbbing erection. Sherlock shouted and scrabbled to pull a pillow over his face so he could cry out—it was so full, so much, just on the edge of too much, those fingers pressing relentlessly against him and John’s mouth sucking, sucking until he came so explosively and so long that John had to pull off to avoid choking and stroked him through the end of it with his free hand.

“Sorry,” Sherlock gasped as John rolled him into his arms, kissing and nuzzling at his neck. “Been a while.”


“I did too,” Sherlock whispered and John smiled, understanding.

Sherlock’s long fingers settled onto John’s hips and he said, “I know something else you’ve missed,” and pushed him onto his back.

“Oh God, yes,” John groaned, pulling Sherlock’s abandoned pillow over his own face.

Sherlock pulled out all the stops, a greatest-hits compilation of all John’s favorite moves, including one he had just perfected: a gentle circling of John’s perineum and anus with his thumb, pressing over but not in, which made John cry out and grip Sherlock’s hair and thrust frantically into his mouth. Just to show off, Sherlock swallowed every drop.

“I should have worked back up to that,” John panted when he got his breath back. “You should come with a bloody warning label, I swear to God.”

Sherlock usually lapped up such praise like a cat, but an unfamiliar sensation had distracted him. “John,” he said urgently. “I’m starving. I think I’m going to pass out. Stop laughing. I’m not being a drama queen! If I don’t eat imminently you’re going to have to hook me up to a drip feed.”

Back on his metaphorical feet, Sherlock spent the next few weeks working through his backlog of
private cases, solving a ridiculously simple double murder for Lestrade, and putting on half a stone. Mrs. Hudson was bringing goodies up daily.

“You’ve got to stop,” John said, gazing at a plate of scones Mrs. Hudson had just deposited on the table. “I’ve gained almost as much as weight as he has, and I certainly didn’t need it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Sherlock said, drawn to the kitchen by the smell of fresh pastry. He stuffed an entire scone in his mouth and wrapped his arms around John’s middle. “I like when you have this soft bit here, when I’m behind you in bed it makes a nice cuddle for my hands.”

“Oh my,” Mrs. Hudson said and beat a hasty retreat.

“What?” Sherlock said in bewilderment, his mouth still full of scone. “I meant when we’re sleeping!”

“Stop squeezing my chub,” John said through his giggles, and soon enough Sherlock’s appreciation of John’s middle deteriorated to the point that they were both glad Mrs. Hudson had left.

Sherlock knew John was trying to make sure he got to the papers first every day, but as the weeks went by and no Kitty Reilly story appeared they both began gradually to breathe easier. Presumably Moriarty would come up with a different line of attack eventually, but for the time being it was enough not to have his private life with John splashed all over the tabloids.

Mary was out with some friends when her Agra phone rang.

“Oh, better get that, it’s mum,” she said, standing up and moving quickly toward the door to get out of earshot. She took a breath, making the shift back to Agra, and answered.

“Hello darling, I’ve a job for you,” Moriarty crooned in his creepy singsong. “Can you come round?”

“Not tonight, I’m not in London,” Agra said crisply. “I can be there tomorrow.”

An audible pout. “Well, be here as early as you can,” he said peevishly, and hung up.

Agra rolled her eyes as she replaced the phone. Weirdo. Last year he’d been completely obsessed with that private detective, but then the Italian police had hit the Malavita and Moriarty had been distracted by the golden opportunity that had presented. Essentially, he’d sat back and gloated whilst his former allies went down like dominoes and then smoothly moved into the void. He’d been a busy little beaver the past six months, consolidating his domination of the art underworld, and that meant Agra had been busy too. She really was sick of this life, but the number of jobs she’d done recently had increased her nest egg nicely—she was beginning to think she would be able to afford to go to America or Canada when she retired, and that would be a hell of a lot safer than England.

She assumed this job would be another minor Malavita goon, so what Moriarty told her took her by surprise. “Why?” she demanded. “He’s not doing anything to hurt you at present.”

“He knows too much.” Moriarty was out of playful mode and doing scary, which she actually preferred. “If he feels like it he could bring me down, so I want him eliminated.”

Agra shrugged. She was going to have to be careful on this one; it would take some time. “You’re the boss.”
Eventually Sherlock ran out of cases demanding immediate attention, so he decided to take another stab at the Ricoletti files.

“Oh great, this again,” John said, when he came home from the shopping to find the contents of all six boxes spread over every surface in the lounge.

Sherlock was sitting cross-legged in the middle of the mess, frowning into space. “Do you remember the night we went to dinner at Angelo’s on Valentine’s Day? Tell me what you told me then.”

“I’m going to a conference in Edinburgh? Which is in three weeks, by the way.”

“No, not that, about the major who makes guitars.”

“I knew a major who left the Army to make guitars,” John repeated obediently.

“Yes, but why? Had he always wanted to make guitars?”

“I don’t think so.” John frowned. “I think he started off playing the guitar, but maybe he wasn’t a very good musician?”

“Yes,” Sherlock breathed. He stood up abruptly, grasped John by the upper arms, and kissed him soundly. “Yes! That’s it! Oh, John, you’re brilliant. Peter Ricoletti got his start as an art forger; he’d gone to art school in Italy. But who sets out to be a forger, copying other people’s masterpieces? Surely what he really wanted…”

“Was to be an artist himself,” John finished. “Yeah, that makes sense.”

“Brilliant, brilliant, brilliant,” Sherlock said, spinning round so his dressing gown flew out and making a dive for his laptop.

“Oi!” John said. “Does that mean we can clean all this up now?”

They went to Florence so Sherlock could go to Ricoletti’s art college and get a look at his early works. This probably wasn’t strictly necessary, but it was helpful, and they had some extra money from all the cases Sherlock had recently solved and he rather thought John deserved a bit of a holiday. It was a lovely trip with loads of food and wine and lazy sex, and Sherlock came back with a huge roll of full-scale copies of Ricoletti’s early paintings. He got these scanned to make digital copies, and then disappeared into a multiple-computer frenzy of searching.

He finally found what he was looking for and surfaced in triumph on an evening in late spring. “Cornwall!” he said triumphantly.

Dead silence greeted this pronouncement. Disconcerted, Sherlock looked around: the flat was in twilight and no John was in sight. He picked up his phone and rang Mrs. Hudson downstairs. “Where’s John?”

“He’s in Edinburgh, dear, at that conference. Don’t you remember? He did say he wasn’t sure you were paying attention this morning.”

Sherlock hung up morosely. He hadn’t forgotten the conference, he had just been ignoring it in the hope that something would come up to prevent John going—which he knew full well was patently ridiculous, since he had been the one to encourage John’s going in the first place. Then he saw three missed calls from John and felt better. He rang back.

“Hey, there you are,” John said. He was speaking more loudly that usual to compensate for the
amount of chatter in the background. “Did you just now notice I was gone?”

“Of course not…how is the conference?”

“It doesn’t start until tomorrow. We’re at a reception right now. It’s pretty good—I’ve run into some people I know, and we’re all going to go to dinner in a bit.”

Sherlock immediately felt sulky, even though he knew he would have hated the reception and refused to go to dinner. “I think I’ve worked out where Ricoletti is,” he said.

“Really? That’s brilliant! You’ll have to show me everything when I get back.”

In four days! Sherlock scowled at the phone. He needed John here to appreciate his brilliance right now. But that was clingy, he reminded himself. (“Have your own interests!”) “And then you can tell me all about the conference,” he managed with as much politeness as he could muster. God, the words actually tasted bad.

“Of course I won’t, you’ll be bored stiff. Listen, I’ve got to go, but I can ring you later if you like?”

“No, that’s all right, you go have a nice time,” Sherlock said with (he thought) an impressive lack of self-pity.

“I left you a nice big pot of risotto in the fridge. Take care of yourself,” John said, and rang off.

As if risotto had any appeal without John there to go with it. Sherlock sighed, contemplating the prospect of four days without John, and glanced disconsolately back at the laptop. Then he had a brilliant idea. Why shouldn’t he go ahead and go to Cornwall whilst John was away? He’d have his interesting case to pursue and be able to distract himself from John’s absence. Pleased with this excellent solution, Sherlock returned to the laptop to make his plans.

He was on his way out of town on the train the next morning when it occurred to Sherlock to wonder if this could be construed as running off. He didn’t think so—John had run off first, after all—but better safe than sorry, so he sent a quick text: Going to Cornwall, reconnaissance only. No danger. SH

John did not respond for thirty-seven minutes, which meant he had turned off his phone in the conference for fear of Sherlock texting incessantly, which was ridiculous as Sherlock would not do such a clingy thing. BE CAREFUL came first, then Best keep Lestrade informed so he can nab R if you find him.

Sherlock knew perfectly well that John was more concerned about Sherlock’s safety than about Ricoletti slipping the net, but it was a good point all the same. He rang Lestrade and filled him in.

“That sounds a little thin,” Lestrade said dubiously. “You think this Peter Reynolds is Ricoletti because some of his paintings look like Ricoletti’s from forty years ago?”

“Essentially, although I’ve a small sample size as Reynolds has mostly been concentrating on pottery for the past few years.”

“Look, I know your crazy hunches are usually gold—“ Sherlock huffed indignantly at “hunches”, but Lestrade plowed on—“ but I don’t think I can get clearance to go with you on this one, especially since we’re up to our necks in this disappearing socialite thing.”

“The boyfriend killed her. Obviously,” Sherlock said.
“Yeah, even I can see that, but he’s being a dick about cooperating and we can’t find the body.”

“His brother’s country house. He knows nothing of disposing of bodies so he’ll have pushed her car into the pond.”

There was a moment’s silence. “You think?”

Sherlock sighed. “I’ll phone you when I find Ricoletti.”

Sherlock hired a car, booked a room at the first tolerable inn he saw, and went shopping. There were at least three galleries carrying Reynolds’ work, and he made a quick pass through all three with an eye to the proprietors. Young woman with piercings, clearly not the owner, no; stern elderly battle-axe type, no; middle-aged and chatty, definitely his best bet. He returned to Chatty’s gallery and picked out the largest and most expensive thing available—was it meant to be a sculpture?—as well as two rather more sensible vases. There, now he had his Christmas shopping done too and it wasn’t even June.

“These are just lovely, aren’t they?” the woman enthused as she wrapped them carefully in heavy paper. “Do you know his work?”

Sherlock slid easily into Fabulous Gay Boy Who Loves His Mum. “Well, to tell the truth they’re not really my thing. It’s my mother who loves them. She was evacuated to St. Agnes as a small child during the war and always adored Cornwall, and she thinks this Reynolds artist really captures the spirit of the area. I suppose they do, don’t they?”

“Oh, definitely. Isn’t your mum a lucky woman to have such devoted son!”

Sherlock let his face fall. “Well, she’s ill, you see. I don’t think she’s going to come home from hospital this time, so I decided I’d get these to brighten her room.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Actually, you wouldn’t happen to know where I could find the artist, do you? I was thinking of a commission, if he could do it fairly quickly.”

“Oh goodness, isn’t that so sweet!” She considered, biting her lip. “He usually brings the pieces round himself, so I’m not sure I have the—wait, yes I do, we had to send round something for him to sign a month or so back.”

Sherlock, who had already gone to extensive and unproductive lengths to try and track down Reynold’s address himself, twinkled at her. “Aren’t you lovely! I so appreciate it.”

“Oh, definitely. Isn’t your mum a lucky woman to have such devoted son!”

Sherlock let his face fall. “Well, she’s ill, you see. I don’t think she’s going to come home from hospital this time, so I decided I’d get these to brighten her room.” He leaned forward conspiratorially. “Actually, you wouldn’t happen to know where I could find the artist, do you? I was thinking of a commission, if he could do it fairly quickly.”

Well, with your poor mum and all.” She gave beamed sympathetically and patted his hand. “I do hope you find him.”

Sherlock piled the vases in the back of his car, put the address into his phone, and considered. It was getting late; most of the shops were beginning to close up for the night, and it would probably seem suspicious if he turned up right at tea time burbling about a commission for his dear mum. Better to go back to his inn and wait for John to call—no, he was not waiting for John to call, he was pursuing his own interests. Maybe he would have dinner at the inn. Oh, who was he kidding? He would be listening for his phone the whole time. Sherlock was so wrapped up in his own thoughts that he never noticed the small woman driving slowly down the street behind him in her little blue car, wipers going against a slight misty rain.

The next day dawned clear and bright with spring, and Sherlock felt unexpectedly cheerful as he bumped along the narrow country roads. He had a case, his bed at the inn had proved comfortable
enough that he actually slept in it, and he had survived two days without John (who had texted I really miss you right now last night). Life was good!

Reynolds’ house proved to be set well off a back road, at the end of a private drive. It was a long, low structure with a view of the cliffs and sea stretching behind it. Sherlock parked, collected his ugly sculpture, and arranged his face into his brightest smile, but annoyingly no one answered the bell.

After the third ring, Sherlock set down the heavy statue and considered his options. It was quite aggravating of Reynolds to be away, after Sherlock had come this way just to catch a glimpse of him. Perhaps his studio was a separate building, or he was out on the cliffs on such a fine day, sketching? At any rate surely it would not be unreasonable to just trot around the back of the house to see if he could spot anything. He stowed the heavy sculpture back in the boot—he could always retrieve it if need be—and went around the house.

He spotted the studio easily enough, a glass-walled room attached to the back of the house, but no one appeared to be inside it. Sherlock peered through the glass and saw a door opening onto a sort of small room apparently housing the kiln, which had a number of red lights lit—presumably it was on, or fired, or whatever kilns did. This would seem to argue for someone being home, but Sherlock was not that conversant with kilns. He moved farther around and spotted a back door leading into what was evidently a kitchen and which was, moreover, slightly ajar. Aha! Reynolds was home, he was simply ignoring his annoying caller. Sherlock could sympathize, but he would be on his way directly he got a good look at his quarry, so he banged away on the door without a qualm.

He had to bang a good few minutes before the door was yanked open, but it was worth it: the old man scowling in the doorway was undoubtedly Peter Ricoletti.

Sherlock beamed in unfeigned delight. “Oh, Mr. Reynolds! It is you, isn’t it? I’m such a fan! I’m so sorry to intrude on your privacy like this but—"

“Get in,” Ricoletti said abruptly, opening the door.

Sherlock had no desire to get in. “Oh no really, I couldn’t possibly—"

“Get in,” Ricoletti said again, grabbing Sherlock’s arm and yanking. Sherlock stumbled in his surprise and practically fell into the kitchen, whereupon Ricoletti shoved him out of the way and nipped out the door with surprising agility.

“Now look what you did,” a voice said behind him. Sherlock whipped around just in time to see a woman take aim with a silenced pistol and fire it, sending Ricoletti flying forward and then thudding face down into the grass, shot cleanly through the back of the head.

Sherlock stared at her, shocked, and the woman turned huge, calculating blue eyes on him. “Mr. Sherlock Holmes,” she said. “Now what am I going to do with you?”
“You’re lucky I recognized you,” Agra said. They were sitting in the dead man’s sunny kitchen drinking tea, which Holmes had made. It was quite good. “I try to avoid collateral damage usually, but if there’s a witness to something like this…”

“If you hadn’t recognized me you wouldn’t have allowed Ricoletti to let me in, and then there wouldn’t have been a witness,” Holmes pointed out.

“You’d have broken in.”

“Probably,” he admitted. He frowned. “Why didn’t you kill me anyway? I’m a much greater threat to you than a civilian.” He sounded genuinely curious.

“The boss wouldn’t like it.”

“Ah, of course.” Holmes’ gaze sharpened. “What’s his interest in Ricoletti anyway? Or did someone else hire him?”

“You know I can’t tell you that,” Agra said primly.

“Then I’ll tell you. Moriarty’s been taking advantage of the Malavita collapse, hasn’t he? He’s taken over all their art theft and forgery and smuggling business and is running it out of London. But Ricoletti’s a loose end; your boss is worried one of the Italians will talk and give away his location. He probably has a lot of information that would be very valuable to Moriarty too, I suppose.”

“Not bad,” Agra said. “Except supposedly, none of the Italians had any idea where Ricoletti was—“

“Oh of course, Moriarty arranged his retirement in the first place, didn’t he? That was his entrée into the Malavita.”

“Maybe. The point is, how did you find Ricoletti?”

Holmes told her in some detail and she couldn’t help being impressed. “That’s amazing,” she said honestly. “You’re really good.”

Holmes preened a little. “You’re rather good yourself. I know most people have moral barriers that prevent them from appreciating a well-executed assassination, but really some of yours are practically works of art.”

Agra pulled a face. “Thanks. To tell you the truth I’ve been thinking of retiring lately though. I’m pushing forty, and…”

Holmes was frowning again. “Wait. Why didn’t you kill Ricoletti right away? You could have been away before I—oh, obvious, the information; he wouldn’t tell you where it was.”

“Yeah, and thanks to you, now he never will.”

“I could find it,” Holmes said with perfect confidence.

Agra refilled her cup, regarding him with amusement. “I’ll make you a deal,” she said. “You find me
the files and I’ll let you go.”

Holmes set down his tea and leaned forward, eyes sparkling. “I’ve a better idea.”

A few hours later, they were standing in the studio arguing. Ricoletti’s body had been hauled in and dumped at their feet, next to a manila envelope with his files—Holmes had been right, finding them had taken him less than ten minutes—and a gun which had been hidden with the envelope.

“It doesn’t matter where they’re placed, the whole place will be burnt to crisp,” Holmes was saying in exasperation.

“It matters to me. If everything doesn’t match up exactly right, Moriarty’s going to find out, and then he’ll never believe I’m really dead. Come on, let’s go through it again before your brother’s people get here.”

“Too late,” Holmes said, tilting his head. She heard it a moment later: the steady whump-whump of a helicopter.

The helicopter set down behind the house, rotors turning steadily, and two men emerged carrying a body bag. “She’s still a mite frozen,” yelled one of the men over the noise, “but mostly thawed—where do you want her?”

They took the men into the studio, where they unzipped the body bag and dumped out a partially frozen corpse of a light-haired woman.

“She’s fatter than I am,” Agra said, eyeing the body with distaste. “And her hair’s fairer.” She tilted her head, studying the woman’s coloring. “D’you think I’d look good as a blonde?”

“She’s a good six centimeters taller too but that doesn’t matter because the autopsy is going to say whatever my brother wants it to say,” Holmes said impatiently. “Stop quibbling and let’s get this set up.”

“Make sure the helicopter’s well away before you fire the house,” one of the men told Sherlock. “We don’t want to get blown into the bloody sea. All right, Miss, we’ll wait for you out there.”

“Now tell me whilst we do it, just as you’re going to tell the police,” Agra said.

Sherlock took the manila envelope and placed it by the pottery wheel—he had found them there, in a secret compartment—and went to the door. “Everything was as it happened until I came around the house. Then I spotted you and Ricoletti arguing in the studio. I didn’t know who you were but it looked suspicious and the kitchen door was ajar, so I slipped inside and came along the hallway, here, trying not to be seen but you spotted me—“

Agra checked the angle and moved the body a bit to her left as Holmes continued. “Ricoletti took advantage of your distraction and shot you.”

“Come on over and hold her up, I’ll do the shooting,” Agra said. “Wait—” she pulled off her anorak, which had all her identification and keys and so on in the pockets, and wrestled it onto her double as Holmes held the corpse up. It was a rather macabre moment.

In the end Holmes had to prop the body in a sort of sitting position—it was too heavy to hold upright—so Agra knelt on the floor and took aim with Ricoletti’s pistol. “Where are you going to shoot…you?” Holmes asked.
“Outer right chest. I’ll go down hard, it’ll look bad—but there’s no major blood vessels there and I could live some time with a pneumothorax. Move a bit away if you can just in case.”

Holmes held the body as much at arm’s length as he was able, and Agra shot it in the chest. “Perfect,” she said, as Holmes dropped the dead woman unceremoniously to the floor. “Okay, back to the door.” She scrambled over to the corpse. “Then Ricoletti turned his gun on you and I shot him in the back of the head. The angle’s totally wrong, but hopefully he’ll be too burned to make that out. Then I dropped my gun because I was having rather a lot of trouble breathing.” She lay on her side, clutching at her chest.

“I was a bit rattled by this unexpected turn of events, and inclined to view you as an ally since you had just shot Ricoletti when it looked as though he were going to shoot me,” Holmes said. He crossed the floor, crouched next to Ricoletti’s body, and pretended to check for a pulse. “I took his gun, being concerned that there might be other persons present, and told you I would ring for an ambulance. Then it occurred to me that there would likely be files of some value and I would wish to retrieve those for myself before the police arrived. I deduced their location—“ he went to the wheel and picked up the envelope—“ and was preparing to depart to await the police when you realized I had obtained the files you wanted, shot at me, missed, and smashed the glass wall of the studio.”

“Turn your face away,” Agra advised, and blew out the wall. The resultant waterfall of glass was very satisfying.

“Since you were between me and the door, I ran for the now-open wall, and you shot at me again as I fled, so I turned and shot at you but missed and blew up the kiln. Now fire another shot and then you can go to the helicopter.”

“No, go on out like you’re really running, it will make it more believable when you tell it.”

Holmes rolled his eyes but turned and jogged obligingly toward the shattered wall, leaping over the jagged edges of broken glass at the base. As he reached the grass, Agra shot him.

Holmes yelped and went down, landing hard on the turf and not—she hoped—on too many glass fragments. Agra stuck her gun in the corpse’s hand and ran to his side. Holmes was clutching at his leg and writhing around in pain, and she had to pry his hands away to get a look at the wound. “You shot me!” Holmes howled, outraged.

“Yeah, I know, shut up and let me see it.” The bullet had plowed right through the fleshy outer part of his thigh, as she’d planned; no permanent damage. It had also clipped his right buttock, which she hadn’t planned—he must have been jumping over something. “You’ll be fine. I had to shoot you. Agra missing once with a bullet in her chest is believable, but I don’t miss twice. Moriarty wouldn’t buy it.”

“You could have said,” Holmes said sulkily. His forehead was beaded with sweat and he was gritting his teeth against the pain. Agra sympathized: just because the wound wasn’t lethal didn’t mean it didn’t hurt like hell.

“If you’d been expecting it you might have moved or flinched,” she said. “Then I really might have hurt you. This way was safer. Are you going to be able to shoot out the kiln still?”

Holmes lifted his head and looked around; he had dropped both gun and files when he fell. Agra gave them to him and helped him roll onto his left side with a line of sight to the kiln. “Remember to wait until the helicopter is out of range,” she said. “Listen, Mr. Holmes…I’ll probably never see you again after today, will I?”
“Sherlock,” he said, not very graciously. “No, as soon as you’ve told my brother everything you know about Moriarty’s operations, he’ll have you moved into your new identity wherever you like. I’d advise someplace as far away as possible.”

“In that case, Sherlock, I just wanted to say that it’s been a pleasure working with you.”

“I trust you won’t be offended that I can’t say the same,” he said grumpily, but he squeezed her outstretched hand warmly enough. “Aren’t you going to tell me your name?”

She smiled down at him in genuine happiness. “But I don’t know it yet,” she said. “Ask your brother.” And then she was up and running, leaving Agra behind just as she had left Anna Grace so many years ago, running over the grass in the dazzling sunshine to the helicopter that would take her to her bright new life.

Sherlock lay on his side, clutching the gun and listening to the steady thump of the helicopter receding into the distance. God, his leg was killing him. He was probably bleeding out all over the lawn right now, and John would never… no, best not to think about John. He shoved the thought down hurriedly and took aim at the kiln, steadied the gun, blew out the way John had taught him, and fired. He missed. He lifted his head and frowned into the studio, which was all dimness due to the bright sunlight outside. Oh, hell, he had hit the gas line. He really needed to do this on the next shot, or the studio would fill up with gas and he would likely go up with it. Sherlock aimed again, squinting against the sunshine, and pulled the trigger.

There was a moment’s chaos of motion and noise, and then he was tumbling bleeding-ass over teakettle across the lawn and finally rolling to a stop. He lay still for a moment, dazed, his ears ringing horribly and every bone hurting, and then he felt an abrupt wave of nausea. He rolled to his side—the wrong side—screamed in pain, and vomited. Then he rolled quickly to his other side. Ow!

Sherlock lay for a moment with his eyes closed, trying to get his bearings, but his head was now throbbing in agony too. Help, he needed help. He managed to get his phone free and hit Lestrade’s number, only to realize that with his hearing gone from the blast he could not tell if he was listening to the phone ringing, or Lestrade answering, or even his voice mail. He hung up in frustration and fumbled his way through a text. *Need help now. Shot. Ricoletti blown up. SH.* Then as an afterthought: *Please don’t ring John; he’s in Edinburgh. SH.*

Lestrade’s reply came blessedly quickly: *WTF?? WHERE ARE YOU?*

Where was he? Sherlock frowned, but his battered brain produced nothing useful. He looked at his phone again and pulled up the map he had been following to get to Ricoletti’s house. Memorizing the address took far longer than it should have done, but finally he was able to laboriously type the information into the phone. Lestrade responded immediately: *Help is on the way. STAY WHERE YOU ARE!*

No argument there, Sherlock thought. He rested his head on his curled arm and closed his eyes.

At the hospital Sherlock was assured that his leg would heal with no loss of function, which was reassuring, but he was being admitted overnight to monitor his concussion. This all took a ridiculously long time, and it was evening by the time Sherlock was finally wheeled upstairs and deposited into a bed, where he lay feeling sorry for himself. His head and leg ached fiercely, and he wasn’t allowed any pain meds because it might interfere with his neuro checks—not that he would...
have taken them anyway, but somehow not having the option made him hurt worse. He missed John desperately. Sherlock curled his aching body into a tight, unhappy ball and closed his eyes against the annoying hospital lights.

It was almost a relief when Lestrade turned up, accompanied by a disgruntled looking woman who seemed familiar; she must belong to the local police.

Lestrade said something cheery and Sherlock waved irritably at his ears. “I can’t hear you. The explosion.”

Lestrade leaned directly into his face and bellowed, “I HEARD YOU GOT SHOT IN THE ARSE.”

Sherlock winced. “Stop shouting, I have a concussion. And I was shot in the leg.”

“GOOD THING,” Lestrade shouted. “I DON’T FANCY TELLING JOHN. HE’S VERY PROUD OF YOUR ARSE.”

What was he on about? Perhaps Sherlock’s concussion was worse than he realized. “You didn’t talk to John, did you?” he asked anxiously.

Lestrade shook his head and launched into a rambling explanation which Sherlock could not hear clearly enough to understand, probably a discussion of the fact that John would kill him but that he, Lestrade, knew John was attending a professional conference and deserved a few days in peace to maintain his credentials before hearing what Sherlock had done. Sherlock didn’t bother to pay attention; the negation was all he needed.

“NOW TELL US WHAT THE HELL HAPPENED,” Lestrade bellowed. “And why is your brother shutting us down anyway? Since when does he care about organized crime?”

Sherlock needed this repeated a few times before he got the gist. He shrugged. “I don’t know. He never tells me anything.” More or less true. “You knew I had tracked Ricoletti to Cornwall…” he gave the story he and Agra had worked out, grateful now for the playacting—it really did help in conveying the story believably. He had just reached the part where he texted Lestrade when he saw both officers’ heads turn in unison toward the door and Lestrade’s lips clearly shape the words, “Oh shit.”

A small knot of people burst in: a nurse, gesticulating angrily—probably some nonsense about visiting hours, Sherlock thought—Anthea, who was speaking dismissively to the nurse and texting simultaneously, and John, who was growling loudly enough for even Sherlock to hear: “Get the hell out of my way.” He spotted Sherlock and his face did something terrible, and Sherlock immediately felt a million times worse.

“Sherlock,” John said. He was by Sherlock’s bedside, Sherlock bracing to be shouted at, but John took his face in his hands as carefully as if it were made of porcelain and said, “Oh, sweetheart,” with his face still crumpled in concern. Sherlock had a horrible moment of fearing he might actually cry, and then John kissed him on his aching forehead and Sherlock’s joy and relief that John was actually here overwhelmed him. He saw Lestrade over John’s shoulder muttering something that looked like “face of God”, but that didn’t make sense. Clearly he needed to work on his lipreading skills.

John looked around and said something sharp Sherlock didn’t catch, and there was a lot more arguing and fuss after that, but Sherlock just closed his eyes and held onto John’s hand and decided to let everyone else sort it out.
“Thank God,” Sherlock said fervently, when they finally made it through the door to the flat the next night. He hobbled to the sofa and collapsed onto his side, vowing not to leave the flat again until his leg had healed.

“Tea first, then I’ll call for a takeaway,” John said, heading into the kitchen. “And I think you’re due for a pain pill. You want it now, or would you rather take it closer to bed so you can sleep through the night?”

“Since when do I sleep through the night? Now, please.”

Sherlock lay listening to the infinitely comforting sounds of Baker Street and John rattling around in the kitchen until John reappeared with two mugs and a single capsule. “There you go. Chinese?”

“Whatever you like.” Sherlock scooted himself up a little to drink his tea. He felt enormously relieved to be back in his own flat with John, which in turn made him feel enormously guilty. “I’m really terribly sorry about the conference, John. I was trying to keep anyone from telling you until you returned. Can you do another?”

“Nah.” John waved this aside. “I was already thinking of leaving, and if I’d come back and found out…wait. How did Mycroft know to fly Anthea up there anyway? Is he really omniscient after all?”

Sherlock blinked. He had repeated his cover story so many times he had almost forgotten John did not know what had really happened. “Actually…there’s a bit I haven’t told you yet.”

“Oh no,” John said, letting his head thump back against his chair.

Sherlock rather thought he came off better in the actual version, so he told his tale with a minimum of trepidation. John looked completely stunned. “You let her shoot you?”

“Of course not!” Sherlock said crossly. “She wasn’t supposed to shoot me. She cheated.” He explained Agra’s “you would have moved” rationale.

“For fuck’s sake.” John had his head in his hands. “See, this is exactly why I never should have gone in the first place.”

Sherlock felt guiltier than ever, as well as slightly resentful; persuading Moriarty’s top henchman—henchperson?—to sell out in exchange for Mycroft’s version of witness protection seemed well worth a few minor injuries. Then a thought occurred to him. “What did you mean, you were thinking about leaving?”

John shrugged. “I felt like going was the wrong choice all along. But it seemed important to you, and your arguments seemed sensible, so…but I missed you so much the night before, and then yesterday it was rainy in Edinburgh and I kept thinking, ‘Why am I sitting here listening to advances in diabetes management when I could be running around Cornwall with you?’ And then I came out during the break and there was Anthea saying you were hurt and she had a private plane and…”

John shook his head. “If anything had happened to you, I couldn’t have borne it. Not just because I wasn’t there, but because I’d wasted two whole days that I could have been with you. So that’s when I thought, oh, fuck it. You deserve a say but in the end it’s my life. I’m not going to waste a minute of it planning for some future in which you aren’t there, because that is not going to happen.”

“But,” Sherlock said, and then decided to just shut up.

John smiled over at him. “I don’t know why you keep worrying about what’s going to happen to me
without you. Given my abysmal track record with relationships, it’s rather impressive you aren’t fretting about yourself.”

“Just because you have failed to observe something, John, certainly doesn’t mean it isn’t true.”

“Really?” John looked amused.

Sherlock felt an immediate desire to backtrack, but after all John had just announced his intention to give up his entire career to devote himself to Sherlock full-time. Surely this left him a little margin for clinginess? “I worry all the time,” he said quietly. “That I’m too much. That I’m not enough. That I’m doing it all wrong. Everything.”

John looked back at him steadily. He did not seem put off by this pronouncement; on the contrary, his eyes were full of affection. “You’ve nothing to worry about, sweetheart. You’re the love of my life. And since I can’t live without you, and you’re absolute shite at taking care of yourself, I’m going to be taking over that job now.”

“I can take care of myself,” Sherlock said automatically.

“Sure you can. Shit, I really want to tell you to come over here, but you can’t.”

“Sod it, I’ve had a pain pill,” Sherlock said, getting painfully to his feet. He limped over to John and awkwardly maneuvered himself into his lap, ending up perched with his left hip balanced awkwardly between John’s thighs. It hurt quite a bit, but was worth it to be able to bury his face into John’s neck and think happily love of my life over and over.

Two days later Sherlock hobbled grumpily down the stairs and into one of Mycroft’s black cars. He spent most of the next few weeks apparently huddled with Mycroft going over everything they had gotten from this Agra woman (whom John still thought of with a certain annoyed suspicion for shooting Sherlock) as well as the files Sherlock had gotten from Ricoletti’s house. John took the opportunity to take Sarah to lunch and explain why he would no longer be available to fill in.

Sarah seemed somewhat amused by his explanation. “What’s so funny?” John asked.

“Nothing. Well…” She waved her hand a bit. “It’s only that on our first date it was you got kidnapped and Sherlock had to come and rescue us, so I suppose it seems a little funny to me that you’re stopping work to keep him out of trouble.”

John couldn’t help laughing. “I see your point. But honestly, you have no idea what a disaster he is on his own.”

“Oh, I can imagine.” Sarah smiled at him. “Well, we’re all certainly going to miss you.”

“You haven’t seen the last of me. I already told Raj he’s going to be my GP now. I haven’t had a proper physical since my discharge, which is rather shameful for a doctor, isn’t it?”

“We do make the worst patients. Does that mean Raj is stuck with Sherlock too? Did you mention that?”

“Ah. Actually…when I was talking to Sherlock and telling him he really ought to have a physical as well, he asked if Raj was the best in the practice and I said no, that was you, but I couldn’t go to you because that would be awkward, and he said that didn’t apply to him so…”
“Oh God. You didn’t.”

“Yeah. Can you get him to stop smoking?”

“You are buying me dessert too,” Sarah said grimly, reaching for the menu.

John couldn’t see anything different about Mycroft’s supercilious expression when he strolled into the flat unannounced, but Sherlock took one look and was on his feet, snapping, “What went wrong? What did you miss?”

“We didn’t miss anything,” Mycroft said calmly, his refusal to get ruffled only enraging Sherlock further. “We knew this was a strong possibility. Miss Agra warned us that she knew very little about Moriarty’s—”

Sherlock snarled at him, already pacing around and pulling at his hair in a towering strop. John said, “Would one of you mind filling me in?”

“As you are no doubt aware, Sherlock and I have been working on organizing the intelligence we recently acquired with an eye toward wiping out the remains of the Malavita and Moriarty’s criminal network in this country. Previously we had been unaware of the involvement of the police in his activities, but Miss Agra apprised us that the Chief Superintendent was on Moriarty’s payroll, a fact that gave us a reasonable pretext for having one of my own agencies conduct the investigation. Today in a coordinated operation we hit everyone at once—including the Chief Superintendent and several of his cronies, which should make for exciting reading in the papers tomorrow. Unfortunately, Moriarty himself eluded us.”

“Well, shit,” John said.

Sherlock glowered. “I knew we should have—”

“Settle down, brother dear,” Mycroft said with equanimity. “Moriarty may be physically at large, but he is nonetheless ruined. We’ve seized his accounts and arrested his confederates and as we coordinated our plans with Interpol, most of his European contacts have been eliminated also.”

“And all of this was handled officially? Moriarty won’t see Sherlock’s hand in any of it?”

“Entirely officially. Neither he nor our source are mentioned anywhere at all.”

“Whatever happened to her anyway?” John asked, curious.

“I’m afraid I am not acquainted with the person to whom you refer,” Mycroft said, which John hoped meant that she had vanished into a new identity and not been terminated when her usefulness was over. Or maybe he would prefer that she be terminated, actually. Mycroft turned to Sherlock, who had not stopped his agitated pacing. “If you would like to make yourself useful, there remain several fragments of Moriarty’s more far-flung operations still active in more distant parts of the world that need seeing to.”

“So see to them,” Sherlock snapped. “That’s what you have a secret service for, isn’t it? I’m certainly not doing it.”

Mycroft raised his eyebrows and John said, “You can’t be serious.”

“You’re going to have to come up with a less obvious way of getting rid of me than that,” Sherlock
said. “I’m no kind of secret agent. It took me two tries to shoot a kiln, for God’s sake.”

“Well, undoubtedly you were distracted by the injury to your…derriere,” Mycroft said.

“I was shot in the leg!” Sherlock shouted.

John, who had spent the last several weeks lovingly tending to the tender little divot now marring Sherlock’s previously pristine arse, decided it was time to make tea.

The minute Mycroft finally left Sherlock was on his knees in front of John’s chair. “John,” he said urgently. “I need—I need you to—”

“Shh, I know,” John said. He cupped Sherlock’s head in his hands and held it firmly, fingers gripping hard to hold him still. If it were up to him they would have spent the evening getting drunk, but they had a deal: Sherlock would tell John in words when he needed this, and John would take care of him. Anyway, the sight of Sherlock on his knees breathing fast was having a predictably Pavlovian effect, and John could already feel himself getting hard. This was only the second time Sherlock had asked since they made the arrangement, and John had decided after the first that this time he would try tying Sherlock to the bed—he had already bought silk scarves. “Go into the bedroom and take your clothes off. I’ll be there in a just a minute.”

Sherlock’s eyes fluttered closed in relief, some of the tension already draining out of his body. John kissed the top of his head and released him. “Go on now,” he said and Sherlock went.

In the kitchen, John poured himself two fingers of whisky whilst he ran over ideas in his head. He’d had several after the first time, but there was no need to use them all at once. And now he found himself a little fixated on the image of Sherlock on his knees…he collected what he wanted and made his way to the bedroom.

Sherlock was sitting on the bed naked, one arm wrapped around his knees and the other twisting in his hair. His eyes were distracted and stormy and John immediately said, “Stop. Stop thinking. Sit on your knees and turn around so you have your back to me.”

Sherlock blinked rapidly and for a second looked mutinous, but then he obediently unfolded himself and turned around. “Hands behind your back,” John ordered. He pulled the bag out from under the bed and unfolded one of the scarves, which he then looped around Sherlock’s wrists. At the brush of silk on his skin Sherlock shivered, and his soft penis gave an interested twitch. “Is this okay?”

“Tighter.”

John tugged the knot a little tighter, and Sherlock sighed out. “Good.”

John picked up a second scarf and said, “And this?” He wrapped the scarf around Sherlock’s eyes. “Yes.” The frantic edge was draining from Sherlock’s voice. “Yes.”

“Okay. You tell me to stop at any time, understand? Now turn around to face me.”

Sherlock wriggled his way around, frowning as he attempted to keep his balance with his hands tied, and John took a piece of ice from the bowl he had set on the bedside table and popped it into his mouth. When Sherlock had finally got himself maneuvered around to a fair approximation of where he was supposed to be, John spit out the ice, took him by the back of the head, and plunged his chilled tongue into Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock gasped at the sensation—God, he felt so hot—and dropped his head back, letting John take possession of his warm mouth. John reached for the ice, still kissing, and slowly ran the edge of the ice cube over Sherlock’s collarbone.
John had learned biofeedback techniques for controlling pain in his medical training. The students had practiced with ice, and he well remembered how painful even a few seconds of direct exposure to naked skin could be. He kept the ice moving, but very, very slowly, and broke the kiss to lick and warm the cold skin with his mouth. Sherlock was writhing a little now and panting, his chest heaving under John’s hands and mouth. When he reached Sherlock’s nipples John traded the half-melted piece of ice for a fresh chunk, which he pressed directly to Sherlock’s left nipple whilst he breathed hotly over the right. Sherlock jerked and whimpered and John looked up quickly. “Too much?”

“No, it’s—not quite, it’s just right,” Sherlock said breathlessly.

John switched sides, sucking Sherlock’s cold peaked nipple into his mouth and making him moan. He did his neck next, and then his earlobes, and then he held a piece of melting ice in his hand and let the frigid water drip down onto Sherlock’s hard prick for a few minutes before leaning over and sucking the whole thing into his warm mouth. Sherlock gave a groan that seemed to come directly from his toes, his whole body arching into the contact.

John licked and sucked for a few minutes and then took Sherlock’s head for another kiss, using both hands this time and bracketing Sherlock’s knees with his own so that he was practically in his lap. Sherlock was utterly yielding under him. Not thinking about Moriarty now, are you, John thought with satisfaction, feeling exceptionally pleased with his handiwork.

“I’m going to take the blindfold off now,” he said, “and you’re going to kneel by the side of the bed. And then I’m going to fuck your face and come down your throat. All right?”

“You can leave it on,” Sherlock said, practically slurring his words.

“No, I want to see you.”

John set a pillow on the floor for Sherlock to kneel on and Sherlock managed with some difficulty to get himself off the bed and kneeling at John’s feet, hand still tied behind his back. John undid his trousers and then, feeling a little curious, he stuck his hand into the bowl of melting ice—shit, that was cold—and ran it over his hard cock before sliding into Sherlock’s waiting mouth. “Oh fuck, that’s—you’re so warm,” he gasped.

Sherlock hummed a little, eyes drifting closed, and John fisted his hands in his hair and began thrusting into his warm and willing mouth, pulling Sherlock’s head down into his lap as he pushed up. Sherlock wobbled a few times, but with John’s thighs bracketing him he couldn’t really fall, and anyway John was soon gripping his hair fiercely to hold him still as he fucked his mouth. He forced his eyes open to look at Sherlock in the dim light—all white skin and black hair and the black silk scarf binding his wrists, on his knees, giving himself up to be used for John’s pleasure—and then had to close his eyes because he was, as promised, coming down Sherlock’s throat so hard he saw stars.

Sherlock laid his head against John’s leg when he had done and John stroked his hair, getting his breath back and murmuring nonsense like “Beautiful, sweetheart, you’re brilliant,” before he took Sherlock by the biceps and hauled him to his feet. “On the bed like you were before,” he ordered, and then he replaced the blindfold, slicked his hand, and knelt behind Sherlock, tugging his back against John’s chest. It was a little awkward with Sherlock’s bound arms in the way, but John was able to reach around to take hold and stroke him, and Sherlock’s head immediately fell back against John’s shoulder and he groaned as he pushed up into John’s hand. John had slicked the fingers of his other hand too, but kept them out of the way until he could tell Sherlock was getting close, when he slid them down the cleft of Sherlock’s arse and right into his tight hole whilst he hissed into his ear, “Next time I’m going to tie you down and fuck you so hard…” The angle made it impossible to hit Sherlock’s prostate, but apparently that was unnecessary because Sherlock jerked in John’s arms and came like a freight train, spattering his own chest as he arched his back and shouted.
John was feeling inordinately proud of himself as he untied the scarves and rubbed tenderly at Sherlock’s hands. Sherlock seemed limp and utterly sated, opening cloudy eyes only when John collected his ice bowl and went to the door. “Where are you going?”

“Just to get a warm flannel, love. I don’t think you want me cleaning you with this.”

Sherlock made a face but his eyes still followed John, who hurried to deposit the bowl in the kitchen and fetch a flannel and, as an afterthought, a bottle of mouthwash. When he returned Sherlock had curled himself up into a ball, head tucked down between his knees.

“Hey, hey, hey,” John said. He climbed onto the bed and gently untangled the tight knot of his beloved, wiping at his sweaty face with the flannel before carefully cleaning the rest of him. “It’s okay, I’ve got you.” There had been a bit of this last time too, and John made a mental note to have cleanup supplies already prepared in the future. Sherlock allowed himself to be cleaned and soothed and dressed in clean pajamas, and swigged from the mouthwash as John got his own pajamas on. Once under the covers he nestled into John’s arms, apparently no longer distressed.

“Was all that okay?” John asked softly. “Did it work for you? Anything too much, anything you want different next time?”

Sherlock shook his head against John’s chest. “It was good. Thank you.”

“Is there anything I can do to make it better afterwards?”

Sherlock shook his head again, hesitated, then said, “I like you to stay.”

“Then I’ll stay,” John said simply.

Sherlock’s arm tightened briefly around his middle, and John squeezed him back. “I love you.” His voice was soft and slow, as though he were already half asleep.

“I love you too,” John said, and kissed his hair.

John was braced for Sherlock to slide into one of his black moods, but for whatever reason—John’s attentions, the vagaries of serotonin—he didn’t, and a warm summer evening found them at Angelo’s once again.

“I got you something,” Sherlock said stiffly, pushing the small bag across the table. Neither of them was much good at wrapping.

“Hey, I thought we didn’t do romantic occasion gifts,” John said and then when Sherlock tensed, “It’s okay! You’re not being clingy, I just don’t have anything for you.”

The lines around Sherlock’s eyes smoothed out. “You’re everything I could ever want.”


“He was quite well regarded in his lifetime,” Sherlock said, scooting around to sit closer to John and taking the book to open it. “I was actually thinking of this one when I looked for the book.”

John took the book back and read, “I did not lose my heart in summer’s even…I lost it to a soldier”--aw.” He leaned over to press a quick kiss to Sherlock’s mouth. “And people think you aren’t
Sherlock blushed and fidgeted, looking every bit as awkward as a teenager presenting a gift to his first crush. He leaned over John’s shoulder to turn a few pages. “As I say, I originally was thinking of that poem, but then when I was looking through the book I found this one.” He pushed the book into John’s hands.

_Some can gaze and not be sick,_
_But I could never learn the trick._
_There’s this to say for blood and breath,_
_They give a man a taste for death._

“‘A taste for death,’” John repeated softly. “That’s us, all right.”

“I understand it is traditional for couples to have a ‘song,’” Sherlock said, his disgusted tone clearly indicating air quotes. “Maybe we could have a poem instead.”

John burst into laughter. “In sixth form, maybe. We don’t have to have anything, but I agree this fits us rather well.”

“It…” Sherlock said. He ran his finger along the first line. “This used to be me. But not anymore. Since I came to care for you, I’ve lost the trick, do you understand? The loss and pain of others—it does sicken me, now. But because you are there, it’s all right.” He smiled a little, meeting John’s eyes in that way he had of looking steadily at him even as he bared his soul. “We still have a taste for death.”

John folded his hand over Sherlock’s where it lay on the page. “You are the best and wisest man I’ve ever known,” he said.

Sherlock smiled fully now. “And you say I’m the romantic one.”

It was early July, the anniversary of their first night together. In another life, a life glimpsed only rarely in the fading edges of nightmare, Sherlock had been gone a year.

A year passed, and then two. Moriarty did not reappear. Eastern European gangs became more problematic as they moved to fill the vacuum left by the demise of Moriarty’s organization, and Lestrade was kept quite busy. John and Sherlock had several excellent adventures helping him out, including the shuttering of a human trafficking network at a pub called the White Hart. Sherlock worked the occasional case for Mycroft, notably one involving a member of the House of Lords who was selling secrets to North Korea, although none of them ever knew that the man’s arrest and the subsequent arrests of his confederates would prevent them planting a bomb in the Underground.

“What is this?” Sherlock said, reading over John’s shoulder. “‘The Second Stain’?”

“Well, yeah,” John said. “You know, the stain on the carpet that didn’t match the floor?”

Sherlock frowned at the screen. “I don’t get it. Where’s the dreadful pun?”

“There isn’t one. Not _all_ my blog titles have dreadful puns.”

“Don’t they?”

There were also a fair number of private cases, which became more frequent as Sherlock’s renown
increased. John’s favorite involved an opera singer with a jealous rival because of the sheer drama involved, although he got a little sick of their client, who kept hanging around even after the case had been wrapped up.

“I’m pretty sure he fancies you,” John told Sherlock, after the famous tenor had once again come round (“Just in the neighborhood!”) with free tickets.

“Who?”

“Tiernan! Who else?”

Sherlock went into what John thought of as status blinkus. “He doesn’t.”

“He does.”

Sherlock looked comically horrified. “Oh God. He’d crush me alive.”

“Sherlock Holmes, that was very rude!” Although, John had to admit, probably accurate. “I bet he was quite a looker when he was young.”

Fortunately Tiernan the Tenor eventually fell for a lovely Italian baritone, and they did not see him much after that.

An embarrassingly long time after John had stopped work he finally went for his physical. He felt rather good about the whole thing until the next day, when Raj called with his lipid results.

“So I don’t think we need to think about statins yet,” Raj said, “but you’re definitely going to want to work on diet and exercise—there’s a link to the dietary guidelines on our web page, you know.”

“Yeah, I know, thanks,” John said, turning away and trying to ignore the fact that Sherlock was hovering over him like an overanxious bat. He felt unreasonably betrayed by his previously well-behaved body, which was ridiculous—his father had died of heart disease; he’d always known he’d be at risk. “You said a recheck in six months? Right, see you then.”

“What, what was that? Your cholesterol?” Sherlock was already at his laptop, eyes flying over the screen. “What are your numbers? I need to get into your chart.” In a few moments he had multiple screens going, displaying John’s lab results, several scholarly papers, and the NHS “Your Health, Your Choices” page. John sulked off to the kitchen to make tea.

By evening Sherlock knew more about dyslipidemias than John did and had had a serious talk with Mrs. Hudson. All the meat had been cleared out of their refrigerator and replaced with tofu, and Sherlock had banned cheese, eggs, biscuits, and butter on toast.

“We won’t be having toast anyway,” Sherlock informed him when John objected to this. “I’ll be making steel-cut oatmeal.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson said sadly, looking at a recipe Sherlock handed her for whole-wheat fat-free scones. “What about the holidays? I’ll still be able to make mince pies, won’t I?”

Sherlock looked torn, but he held firm. “No mince.”

“And no Christmas cake,” Mrs. Hudson said sadly, shaking her head.

John went to pour himself a glass of whisky which Sherlock promptly confiscated. “Alcohol raises triglycerides,” he said.
All of this had a predictable outcome: Sherlock lost five pounds and John, due mainly to the fact that he cheated on Sherlock’s diet every chance he got, gained three. “How about a curry?” John said happily, when they had wrapped up a fabulous case involving a demented dwarf with a peashooter.

“I thought maybe we’d try that new Japanese place,” Sherlock said in an overly casual tone. “I hear they have a delicious ahi tuna.”

“I want curry,” John said grimly, so they went for Indian and he had to cope with Sherlock’s anguished expression every time he took a bite of butter chicken.

Then Sherlock came down with an awful hacking cough that resisted all John’s efforts: honey, pastilles, extra pillows. He agreed to see Sarah only after John, worn down by Sherlock coughing all night, threatened to move upstairs to get some sleep.

Sherlock returned from his appointment with a chemist’s bag and a rather hangdog expression. He set his prescriptions on the kitchen table, pulled out a bin liner, and then silently went through the flat collecting cigarettes from a truly impressive array of hiding places, most of which John had no idea even existed. When he had finished he carried the bag to John, who had watched this performance in astonishment, and placed it wordlessly into his hands.

John set the bag down and tugged Sherlock into his lap. He felt deeply ashamed of himself. “Hey,” he said softly when he could trust his voice to stay steady. “Want to go round to that new Japanese place for dinner? I hear they do a mean ahi tuna.”

Sherlock turned his head to cough into John’s jumper and then looked up at John with that blissfully radiant smile that John would always think of as his face-of-God expression, fuck you very much, Greg Lestrade. “That would be lovely.”

Giving up smoking for good precipitated one of Sherlock’s worst depressive episodes, but he got through it eventually, and when he was better John announced that they were going to take up running. “Several studies show vigorous exercise is as effective as SSRIs, and it will increase your lung capacity so you can chase criminals better, and help my triglycerides too.”

Getting Sherlock out the door for a run was something like taking the cat to the vet, but then for Christmas John gave him a fancy GPS watch that automatically uploaded his mileage and speed to a ridiculously complex spreadsheet, and he was hooked. He lost another five pounds. Fortunately by this time John had lost some weight of his own, and had gotten his cholesterol levels down to the high-normal range, so he was able to persuade Sherlock to allow chicken twice a week. The steel-cut oatmeal had turned out to be not half bad and Sherlock had gotten very good at cooking fish, but the tofu was just too much.

“And boiled eggs for you,” John added. “I know you miss them.”

“But I like them with toast,” Sherlock said weakly.

“Whole-grain toast, just a little bit of butter? I miss toast too.” Sherlock narrowed his eyes and John said, “Okay, no butter, if I can have my whisky back at night. I don’t really care about the eggs.”

“Your triglycerides are much better,” Sherlock said magnanimously, “you may have the whisky.”

“And you eat those eggs,” John said, squeezing his arse. “You’re getting a bit skinny here. I want this plumped back up.”

Three years together, and John was just as in love with Sherlock as he had been the first night. They were ridiculously happy. Even Moriarty didn’t cast as much of a shadow anymore, as the years went
by without a sign of him; maybe some rival Mafioso killed him off, John thought hopefully.

And then one late summer evening they were settled by the fire, John with his evening whisky and Sherlock with some weird file he’d been sent by the Surete, when they heard the bell downstairs and Mrs. Hudson led up a stern-looking woman who said, “Mr. Holmes? I’m Lady Elizabeth Smallwood.”

Chapter End Notes

"The Adventure of the Second Stain" is an actual ACD story involving stolen government secrets. ACD loved stolen government secrets and used it at least three times, and apparently Moffat and Gatiss do too--they've already used "Naval Treaty" and "Bruce-Partington Plans", so this was the only one left!
“So, Charles Augustus Magnussen,” John said, returning from showing Lady Smallwood out. “Terror of the British press, striking fear into the hearts of the great and powerful. How are you going to bring him down?”

“Well, a trap, obviously,” Sherlock said. He was already busy at his computer. “I think I can position myself as fairly tasty bait. A little indiscreet heroin…”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” John said. He addressed the empty air. “And for all of you who wondered why I stopped work, exhibit A, ladies and gentlemen.”

“Well, what’s your idea, then?” Sherlock said, looking nettled.

“Fight fire with fire. Dig up some dirt and smear the hell out of him. There has to be some somewhere.”

Sherlock tilted his head, considering. “That’s going to be hard to find…and we have to find a way of getting it made public. Not your blog, that will put a target on our backs that will make my using look like an excellent idea in comparison. We need an insider.” They looked at each other and then John said, “that woman” in the same instant that Sherlock said, “Kitty Reilly.”

“Do you think she’ll talk to us?”

“Only one way to find out,” Sherlock said, turning back to the keyboard and bringing up Google.

Later that night, snuggled up in bed, John said sleepily, “I’m so glad we finally got to use that whisky decanter.”

He felt Sherlock’s silent laugh as a gust of warm air against his shirt. Sherlock was lying on his side with his head pillowed on John’s shoulder and their fingers laced together on John’s stomach, a position John knew meant he would be thinking instead of sleeping. When Sherlock slept, he tucked himself behind John with his face buried in John’s hair and his arms and legs wound around him like an affectionate clematis; in his dark periods, or after he had requested rough sex, he curled into John’s arms like a child.

“It must have been terribly dusty.”

“It was, I had to rinse it under the tap, I think there might have been a few fossilized pigeon feathers…” Sherlock huffed another soft laugh and John rested his cheek against his silky curls.

“Are you going to be thinking for long?”

“I don’t know…I might need to get up for more data. I’ll try to come back before you wake though.”

“Is that what you usually do?” John asked, curious. He had never really thought about it.

“No, sometimes I fall asleep,” Sherlock admitted, and John laughed.

Even John could tell that Kitty Reilly had moved up in the world. Her suit was of a better quality that
the one she had worn previously, and her hair was now a becoming chestnut shade. “We weren’t sure you’d be willing to meet with us,” John told her as he led the way up the stairs.

“I was quite glad to hear from you, as it happens,” Kitty said. She nodded to Sherlock in greeting and said, “I always rather felt I owed you an apology as well as thanks. You were right—as soon as I started asking questions, Jim Moriarty vanished. I never heard from him again. I tried to interest the editor I had back then in an investigation, but he was only interested if I could tell him Moriarty’d shagged someone famous.”

“I take it you’ve moved on?”

“Yeah, I have. Thank God. I’m after real news, not rumours and scandals.”

“Actually,” Sherlock said, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees, “rumours and scandals are exactly what we’re looking for at the moment.”

Kitty was silent a long moment when he had finished. “Magnussen,” she said, shaking her head slowly, but as though she were thinking it over rather than in negation. “I’d love to see that bastard take a fall; he’s the reason everyone hates the press. But as far as I know…” She started at the fireplace, eyes distant, then looked up at them. “Back when I was freelance I heard he was a nightmare to work for—that he used to humiliate people just because he could, that he got off on it, I mean really sick stuff. I never heard about anything outright illegal or sexual, but there were always interns about. If we could get someone underage to make some allegations…”

“How? How can we find them?” Sherlock asked intently.

Kitty’s face spread into a slow smile. “Oh, I know exactly how. Magnussen’s current assistant and I were at the same newspaper back when I was looking into you. She’s got a bit of a thing for you.”

Sherlock looked baffled. “A vendetta?”

Kitty and John burst out laughing. “She means she fancies you, you prat,” John said. Sherlock went blinky, so John turned to Kitty and said, “Do you have her number?”

Sherlock, sitting in a cab outside the restaurant, sourly thought that he would have preferred to shoot up heroin in a filthy drug den, but he plastered his most charming smile across his face and sauntered out. “Janine?”

Janine was quite pretty and surprisingly clever, and whilst Sherlock’s previous experience with flirtation (all case-related except that one bartender whose name he had finally been allowed to delete when he’d left the pub) had never lasted an entire meal, he thought he was getting on fairly well. The basic rule of wooing was the same as detecting: get the other person to talk about herself.

“Would you care for dessert?” Sherlock asked, refilling her wine glass as their plates were cleared away (he’d taken advantage of John’s absence to eat every high cholesterol item on the menu, including pate and lobster, guiltily enjoying every bite).

“Or we could go back to mine,” Janine purred, looking up at him through her lashes. “I’m much tastier than anything on the menu.”

Sherlock’s tongue stuck to the roof of his mouth. “Ah,” he said thickly. “The, ah, crème brulee…”

“Okay, drop the act,” Janine said briskly, sitting upright and abandoning her coquettishness entirely.
“You aren’t interested in me—actually, I’m fairly sure you’re gay, no straight man on earth would have said ‘cream brulee’ instead of ‘cab’ after that line.”

Sherlock was indignant. “Maybe I—"

“And you identified my perfume,” she interrupted. “A straight man might have said something about how I smelled nice, not pointed out the subtle differences between this and Poivre.”

“Really?” Sherlock asked, distracted. “Why not?”

Janine gave him a pointed stare. “What do you want?”

Sherlock considered lying, but he knew his only shot at getting what he had come for was to tell the truth, and anyway he was surprised to find he rather liked Janine. It was a relief to come clean. “To destroy your boss,” he said bluntly.

Janine raised her eyebrows. “Really?”

“Yes.”

“Hmmm.” She considered him. “Are you better at destroying people than you are at dating?”

“God, yes. I’ve ruined dozens of people… though to be fair only when they deserved it.”

Janine’s dark eyes lit with interest. “Order me that crème brulee and tell me everything, and we’ll see.”

Sherlock told Janine about what he had learned from Kitty, downing two espressos as she polished off the crème brulee. When he had finished she licked the spoon, thinking, then dropped it onto the dish with a clatter and said decisively, “All right, I’m in. Magnussen’s a right arsehole and I’d love to see him go down. You’re barking up the wrong tree though—he only picks on people he knows have no leverage; he’s a bully through and through. You won’t get anything from the underage interns.”

“So you can’t help us,” Sherlock said, disappointed.

“Oh, I didn’t say that, darling,” she said, smiling. “But why try to publish fake allegations of impropriety when I can get you the real dirt on tax evasion?”

“I don’t see why I have to be lookout again,” John said, stubbornly refusing to see reason. “I’m always lookout. Why can’t Janine do it?”

“Because no one notices you standing on a street corner, obviously,” Sherlock said. “Everyone would notice Janine standing on a street corner.”

“It’s only because I’m a girl,” Janine said quickly. “If I’m standing out by myself late at night, people will stop to ask if I’m okay or say something stupid like, ‘Why don’t you come with me instead love, I’ll show you a better time’. No one’s going to bother with a man like you, because obviously you can take care of yourself; you’re bloody scary.”

John looked considerably mollified and Janine added with a grin, “Besides, I stole the card. So it’s only fair I get to use it to break in.”

It had been Janine’s idea to raid Magnussen’s accountant’s office instead of his own, since that way
they could identify other tax cheats, and thereby divert suspicion from themselves. She had waited until a young associate had brought over papers to be signed and then stolen his key card whilst hanging up his coat.

“How long do you think all this will take?” John asked.

“Not long to find the papers, but we’ll need to make copies. That way with any luck no one will ever notice the theft,” Sherlock said. “I take it you can manage the copying?” This was to Janine.

She rolled her eyes at him and said sweetly to John, “Another reason you’re better as lookout. Imagine if himself had to work a copier.”

John, whom Sherlock knew had been frequently tormented by the fax machine back when he actually had a job, laughed, and Sherlock had to admire Janine’s skill. Even though he certainly could manage a copier if the occasion required, he was content to let a professional deal with it.

“I’m just glad we’re about finished with this,” John said under his breath, as the cab made a turn.

Sherlock knew that John wanted it over. The business with Magnussen had gotten under Sherlock’s skin more than he had expected; he couldn’t really articulate even to himself what it was about the man that bothered him so deeply. He’d had to go to John for distraction twice so far, a record for a single case, and the second time had at his insistence been truly rough: John’s hard hands pinning his wrists as he fucked him senseless over the desk in a brutal pounding that left Sherlock bruised and limping for days. He knew John had worried about it afterwards, that he had gone too far or been too rough, and only the clear evidence that Sherlock had orgasmed furiously—untouched—had really reassured him.

“Let’s get out here,” Janine said, peering out the window.

Breaking into the accounting firm’s office was almost disappointingly easy. Sherlock and Janine strolled right past the security desk, laughing and chatting, playing the part of a couple out on a Friday night stopping by the office to pick up a file. The key card got them into the firm’s suite, and Janine quickly located the office belonging to Magnussen’s accountant. The file drawers were locked, but of course that was no problem for Sherlock.

“Here we go, I’ll start on this lot,” Janine said, pulling out a stack of folders. “Who else should we do? How about this one, doesn’t he own the Kensington football club?”

“Not him,” Sherlock said, looking over her shoulder. “He bought me the best dinner of my life once.”

“So that makes it okay he’s a tax cheat?”

“In this case, yes. I’ll choose. You make the copies.”

Janine was swift and efficient at the copying, and Sherlock had the originals back and the drawers locked in less time than he had expected. Janine then mussed her hair and pushed her coat collar cockeyed to make it look as though they had enjoyed a romantic interlude, and they got back in the lift.

Just as the lift reached their floor Sherlock’s phone pinged and he glanced down to see a message from John: STAY PUT, POLICE IN LOBBY.

“Police,” he said quickly to Janine just as the doors opened.
Janine, not batting an eyelash, swirled out saying, “I’ve just got to stop by the ladies, hold this for me, won’t you?” and sashayed away from the lobby and toward the corridor with the toilets. Sherlock, determinedly not looking back, followed as he texted *What are they doing? Already on 1st floor. SH*

*Leaving now. You’re clear.*

Janine was giggling wildly as they stepped outside, flushed with the excitement of their adventure. “Come on, let’s get around the corner so we can get a cab,” Sherlock said, although he couldn’t help smiling too. “That was fun,” he told John as he joined them, looking worried.

“Maybe for you. it was a little unnerving for me when the panda car pulled up and the coppers went in!”

“What did they want, could you tell?”

“Probably nothing. They just talked to the guard a bit and left. Still…just as well you weren’t seen.”

They went to Kitty Reilly’s flat and pored over the files all the night, though Janine left after a few hours since she had to go to work in the morning. John, having limited knowledge of accounting, tax law, or financial shenanigans, mostly made coffee and eventually dozed off on the sofa. By the time they had finished, Kitty had full documentation of the tax frauds committed by a telecommunications mogul, an actress (“good choice, she’s a right bitch,” Kitty said approvingly,) Magnussen, and one Michael Christopher Philip Bruce III, whom Sherlock clearly remembered as a bully from his days at Eton.

“Brilliant,” Kitty said, smoothing the papers with a satisfied air. “I’ll get in touch with my editor this morning. Front page of the Sunday edition, this is.”

“Will it run tomorrow then?”

“God, I hope so. Have to get Legal to look it over first…I’d best get started.”

Sherlock roused John and they left just as a dazzlingly perfect autumn day was dawning. They went for an enormous, celebratory breakfast, and emerged into full sunshine.

John stretched and yawned, looking vastly content. “I’m feeling just about ready for another nap. That’s the best thing about moving into your bedroom…mine always got the morning sun.”

Sherlock was eyeing the strip of exposed skin at John’s middle. “Does it? We’re going there then.”

John dropped his arms and squinted. “Why? It’ll be too bright to sleep.”

“Which means it will be the perfect place for me to admire how astonishingly fit you’ve become lately whilst I ride your cock for hours. We’re bringing down Charles Augustus Magnussen and my childhood nemesis, John; this calls for some epic sex.”

John really was fit. When Sherlock started going for longer runs, John had joined a gym, and now generally ran as far as the gym with Sherlock and then peeled off for his own workout. His shoulder was as good as it been since his injury, and the muscles of his arms and chest were hard and bulging. Sherlock ran his fingertips over them appreciatively, and then John swept him up like a bride and tossed him on the bed.

“Oof,” Sherlock said indignantly, simultaneously enraged, amused, and massively aroused.
“You're not the only one who wants to admire his fit partner in the sun,” John said. He crawled over Sherlock and Sherlock obligingly stretched like a cat, basking in the warm sunshine and John’s attention. He felt suddenly lazy, happy to spread himself out languidly for John’s stroking hands. “Mmmmm,” John said approvingly, his palms warm against Sherlock’s flat belly. “Very good. Look at these quads!” He stroked the taut muscles of Sherlock’s long runner’s legs, carefully avoiding the silver furrow at the back of his thigh, which would always be sensitive. “And these feet…have I told you how much I love your feet?” His thumbs dug into Sherlock’s high arches and Sherlock groaned.

“Oh don’t, you can’t. It feels so good. I'll fall asleep, and I don’t want to fall asleep.”

“Maybe when we’re done,” John said, smiling. He lifted one of Sherlock’s feet from his lap and sucked at his toes and Sherlock gave an undignified yelp, pulling his foot away. “Remember how you always used to steal my woolly socks?”

“I liked yours better,” Sherlock said sulkily. “But then you bought me all of those pairs that were exactly like yours and they all got mixed up in the wash.”

“Shame,” John said cheerfully. He worked his way back up and ran his hands over Sherlock’s chest and shoulders. Sherlock had nothing like John’s bulk, but he was lean and taut and his weight was where John wanted it, so he preened under John’s appreciation. “So you’re going to ride my cock, is that the plan? I’ll be able to enjoy a nice eyeful of this perfect chest then, won’t I?”

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, distracted by John’s thumbs rubbing tantalizingly around his nipples. He was fully hard now, cock pinned where John was straddling him and feeling every nerve ending straining for more touch, more sensation, more John. “I want to look at yours too. We might need to go through a few positions.”

John smiled down at him as he slid off and his voice was soft, no longer teasing. “You are so beautiful,” he said, stroking his hands over Sherlock’s aching prick, and Sherlock shivered in the warm sunlight and spread his legs wide for John’s touch. “So, so beautiful.” He cupped Sherlock’s buttocks in his hands and spread him wider, rubbing his thumbs over Sherlock’s yearning hole and the tender skin of his perineum. “Your skin is practically glowing.”

Sherlock opened his eyes, squinting against the brightness. His own skin just looked moon-pale to him, but John’s was a deep golden, his chest dusted with tawny hair like a lion. He reached out and ran his hands over John’s strong pectoral muscles and deltoids, reveling in the strength and power under his fingers. “Up,” he demanded and John obligingly lifted him off the bed, shifting so that they sat facing each other with Sherlock’s legs wrapped around John’s waist, cocks brushing as they kissed.

John managed to get hold of the lube and worked his hand in between then to cup Sherlock’s testicles and oh, that felt so good, John’s hand stroking him and the warmth on his back and shoulders and his nose buried in the top of John’s head. Sherlock reached to gather their cocks together and now it was John who groaned, his head dropping to thump against Sherlock’s chest. “God, you—“ John choked out and Sherlock’s head fell back, lost in it all: John’s palm against him where he was spread wide, John’s fingers sliding inside him, John’s hard, thicker cock rubbing against his. John’s arm wrapped around his waist and squeezed, and Sherlock clutched at his strong shoulder with his other hand. “Kneel up,” John said breathlessly.

Sherlock folded his legs back one at a time—not without some difficulty—and lifted his hips, and John withdrew his fingers and used both hands to spread Sherlock wide, lifting him up and shifting him so that Sherlock slid back down, slowly and gently, around his prick. “Ahhh,” Sherlock gasped, clutching at John with both arms, shuddering at the glorious sensation of being wrapped in John’s lap whilst John’s thick length filled him. “Oh, God, John, it’s so good, don’t touch me or I’m going to
“Fuck, you—you’re not the only one.” John ground up a little and Sherlock arched his back and moaned, and then John pulled his head down into a hot, sloppy kiss.

They kissed and John wrapped his arms tight around Sherlock, rubbing at the sensitive skin where he was stretched tight around John and squeezing at his arse. It all felt good, everything felt good, every inch of him so aroused and stimulated that when John’s lips brushed his nipple he felt as though he would come from that alone. “Lie back now, I want to see you,” Sherlock ordered, and John lay back. Better. Sherlock breathed, felt the knife edge of orgasm receding, and leaned forward to run his hands over the firm muscle overlying John’s chest. John’s hands settled on his hips and Sherlock lifted and lowered lightly, purely for the pleasure of seeing John’s mouth fall open, and then again. He was teasing John, not lowering fully but keeping just the head of John’s cock seated within him, rocking back and forth lightly against the tight ring of muscle.

“Fuck,” John said explosively and suddenly gripped Sherlock tightly as he thrust up, making Sherlock’s vision sparkle. “God, sorry, you just feel so fucking good—“ he thrust again and Sherlock lifted up to stay just out of reach. “Oh, God, you’re killing me.”

Sherlock grinned and slid back down, moving slowly and adjusting the angle until he was leaning over John’s chest, supporting his weight on his elbows. He knew John loved it when he came from his cock alone, though that was never going to work in this position, but it felt fantastic all the same. He bent lower to let his throbbing cock brush against John’s abdomen and let his hips rise and fall with tantalizing slowness, letting the pleasure build bit by bit, making it last as long as he could.

John reached up and took Sherlock’s head in his hands, pulling him down for a kiss and running his fingers messily through Sherlock’s hair. His eyes had fallen closed and his breathing was erratic; he was getting close in spite of Sherlock’s careful control. Sherlock pulled back and sat up, stretching his back and scratching his fingernails over John’s chest, then running his hands over his own cock and his chest as John opened his eyes. “Take the reins,” he said, and letting his head fall back he took himself in hand and began to stroke as John groaned and clutched his hips, lifting him up and slamming him down as Sherlock arched his back and worked his fist faster, pushing up a little on his knees so John could thrust into him. His cock felt like a live thing now that it was finally enclosed in friction, pulsing and jerking and he had wanted to wait until John came but suddenly he couldn’t, the rush of pleasure hitting so hard and forceful it was almost painful. He came all over John’s chest and then he was teetering, his legs wobbling under him, and John pulled him down and rolled them so that Sherlock lay splayed out dazed on his back as John fucked him. It didn’t take long—half a dozen good thrusts and John came shouting, folding over Sherlock’s chest as he pulsed within him.

Later, when they’d made a desultory stab at wiping themselves off and were drifting off in the mess of slightly musty-smelling sheets, Sherlock murmured into John’s hair, “Look, the sun’s gone now. I timed it perfectly.”

“Clever you,” John said. Sherlock could hear the smile in his voice. “Whatever happened to my shy virgin who would only do it in the dark?”

“That was before you started going to the gym,” Sherlock said and John reached behind them to smack Sherlock’s bottom. Then he pulled Sherlock’s thigh and Sherlock obligingly slid his leg over John’s, winding himself as tightly around him as possible, and went to sleep with his face buried in John’s sweaty hair. His last thought was that he had never thought he could have such perfect happiness.
On the day Magnussen was arrested, the board of directors at MagCorp held an emergency meeting and decided to immediately replace him with an interim director, in order to avoid any appearance of partiality in their various media outlets’ coverage of the events. Of course, this also had the effect of neutralizing Magnussen’s ability to publish secrets, and he lost his hold over his opponents. John and Sherlock took Kitty and Janine to dinner to celebrate.

“Just think how many people are sleeping easily tonight for the first time in ages,” Kitty said, toasting them all with her glass.

“Not me,” Janine said glumly. “I’m out of a job.”

Sherlock, who had got bored immediately and was distracting himself watching the little drama unfolding at a nearby table (young woman only recently learned that the older man opposite was her biological father, arranged the dinner on some pretext, man believed her interest was romantic or sexual in nature), looked around at this. “You’re clever, ruthless, morally flexible, and can think on your feet,” he said. “You’re wasted as a PA anyway.”

“Thanks, I think,” Janine said, “but unless you’re hiring…”

Sherlock smiled. “I’m not, but I know someone always looking for that particular skill set,” he said. “Now watch. The woman behind John is about to make a scene.”

They all automatically looked—even John—just as the young woman shoved her chair back with an angry screech of chair legs, flung her wine into the man’s face, and stormed out. They looked back at Sherlock. “He must be an even worse date than you,” Janine said.

Sherlock waved dismissively. “He deserved it. Let’s get coffee.”

Magnussen was released on bail and that same night was shot to death by the actress Kitty had called a bitch, who mistakenly believed that he had told the police about her tax cheating as well as her drug habit. Bruce (who, Sherlock was secretly pleased to note, had become bald and been divorced twice) was sent away for ten years.

Sally Donovan turned up on their doorstep one miserably wet autumn evening with rain dripping from her red woolen hat. “Heard there’d been a dry spell so I brought you a present,” she said, hefting a large box. “Not interrupting anything, am I?”

“I have no idea to what you could be referring,” Sherlock informed her, carefully not looking at John, who had his own methods for entertaining Sherlock during a “dry spell” and had promised something special for later involving bubble bath and massage oil.

“Every day is Valentine’s Day for Sherlock, you know what a romantic he is,” John said cheerfully. “What about you and that big guy?” Sally had been dating an enormous, soft-spoken investigator who worked in computer crimes.

“Got sent to Glasgow for the week, something financial they need more people on. I’ll see him at the weekend. Now get me a cuppa—” this was to Sherlock, “—and I’ll show you what I’ve got here.”

It was John who spotted the oddity in the crime scene photos. “Where are the cots?” he asked. “Look, all the nurseries have everything else—that one even has a mobile up—but none of them have cots.”
“Maybe they aren’t set up yet?” Sherlock said, frowning at the pictures.

“These people already have a bag of nappies,” John said, tapping one of the photos. “The cots come in those big flat boxes—I don’t even see one of those.”

“How do you know so much about baby furniture?” Sally said, raising her eyebrows. “Something you haven’t told us?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Yes, and we were hoping you’d be godmother if it’s a girl. We’ve always wanted our daughter to grow up to sleep with married men.”

Sally flushed dark red. “Darren’s not married! He was already separated when we started seeing each other!”

Sherlock opened his mouth but John cut him off. “Sherlock, play nice, or Sally will take her toys and go home. And to answer your question, Sally, one of my best mates from the Army and his wife had their first baby a few months ago. I went with some of the lads for the weekend so we could take him out for one last epic pub crawl, and we helped him put the cot together next day. I learned more than I ever wanted to know about baby furniture, believe me.” He looked over at Sherlock.

Sherlock opened his mouth, shut it, opened it again and muttered, “Darren’s less of an idiot than most of his division.”

Sally wrinkled her nose and asked John, “What was that? Is it a compliment?”

“And an apology. You have to read between the lines,” John said. “Can we get back to the case?”

Sally left in great good spirits, telling John she would let them know if she heard anything back from her friend, and Sherlock plonked himself in John’s lap and said, “Finally.”

“Why did you let her wind you up?” John asked, wrapping a comfortable arm around Sherlock’s shoulder. “She was only taking the piss.”

Sherlock let his head be drawn into John’s warm neck. “You had special plans, and she was delaying them.”

“She brought you a serial killer case! We can do that stuff anytime.”

“John,” Sherlock said seriously, pulling his head back to look at him, “one of us is clearly a very bad influence on the other, but I’m not sure which is which.”

John laughed, his whole face crinkling into the beautiful smile lines that Sherlock loved so much. “Anyway, it doesn’t matter. We’ve nowhere special to be in the morning. We’ve got all night and I,” he slipped one of Sherlock’s shirt buttons open and slid his hand inside, “plan to carry out every single one of my special plans.” He leaned down and kissed Sherlock, a kiss that started slow and tender and grew heated rather quickly, and Sherlock forgot all about the serial killer case.

But a few weeks later Sally was back with fish and chips and her laptop, bubbling with excitement, and a month after that John and Sherlock were on a plane to Houston.

John was prepared for Houston to be warm—was looking forward to it, in fact—but was not prepared for the wall of steaming humidity that hit him when he walked out of the airport. Sherlock wilted immediately.
“Sorry, it’s not usually like this in January, though you should see Houston in the summer; it makes Atlanta look like London--and trust me, Atlanta is hot,” Roz said cheerfully. John had taken to Roz immediately; her upbeat briskness reminded him of his Army mates. “The FBI would love to meet with us, but if you’d rather go to the hotel…”

“No, the FBI,” Sherlock said, perking up again. Sherlock had a small child’s tendency to doze off within twenty minutes of being in a moving vehicle, and had drooled on John’s shoulder for the first half of the flight. Of course, just as John had finally got comfortable and was falling asleep himself, Sherlock had woken up and spread case files over both their tray tables. It was fortunate for John that his military and medical training—not to mention several years of living with Sherlock—had made him expert at sleeping under any circumstance, including Sherlock propping autopsy photos in his lap.

John, who had pleasant memories of watching “The X-Files” in the junior doctor’s lounge, was delighted to see that FBI agents really did come in pairs. The man, Rodriguez, was about John’s height and build, dark and friendly; the woman, Ryan, was slender and reserved. John was careful to sit between her and Sherlock.

“So officially,” Rodriguez explained, “You’re here as consultants, since you’ve supposedly been involved in a similar case.”

“Consulting only,” Ryan added. John had the distinct impression she was less than happy with their presence, for which he really couldn’t blame her. Sherlock opened his mouth and John kicked him under the table, leaning forward to cut off Ryan’s view of him.

“We’re incredibly grateful that you’re letting us be involved at all,” he said with his most winning smile, and Ryan’s tight posture relaxed fractionally.

“Now I know you’ve seen the case files on the four original victims,” Rodriguez went on, “and we got you the information on Lexi Davis?” He looked at Roz.

“You did, and I passed it on to Mr. Holmes.”

“Please, John and Sherlock,” John said, Rodriguez nodded. “We have a sixth victim now so if it’s all right with you all, we’d like to tell you about that one first and then we can go through all the cases.”

“Bloody hell, how did I miss another one?” Roz said.

“Just happened, right before Christmas,” Rodriguez said and John felt a stab of guilt. It was due to him they hadn’t come a month earlier—it certainly wasn’t as though Sherlock cared where he spent Christmas, but John couldn’t bear the thought of spending the holidays in a hotel, and then Mrs. Hudson had got flu.... Sherlock, however, clearly saw this as good news; he was leaning over the table practically vibrating with excitement. “Who’s got charge of the case?” he asked.

“We do. It’s because of Lisa that we have it at all—she worked out our guy was about due for another one and put out a bulletin to all the local law enforcement in four states. Flagged the computers too. We took over an hour after the call came in.”

“Excellent.” Sherlock was crackling with intensity. “Is the scene intact?’

Rodriguez flicked a glance at Ryan and John guessed this was a sore point. “It is, yeah, although I think the family would really appreciate if we could release it as soon as—”
“Let’s go now,” Sherlock said, already half out of his chair.

John groaned inwardly but Rodriguez was already waving Sherlock down. “It’s an hour’s drive at least. Not tonight. We’ll go first thing in the morning though.”

“Nice work,” John said to Ryan, and this time he got a real smile.

Sherlock settled back into his seat, looking disappointed. “All right, tell us about her. You’ll have copies of the case files?”

“Two sets right there. Lisa?”

Ryan got up and pinned a photograph to the wall with a colored pushpin; a sandy-haired woman clinging to the last vestiges of prettiness. “Andrea Chisolm, thirty-one. She was a nurse who worked nights, and her husband is a petroleum engineer with a rock-solid alibi: he was out on an oil rig all week. Found by her mother-in-law who had a key and got worried when Andrea didn’t return calls.” She passed around a set of crime-scene photos and went on, “As you can see the scene fits our guy’s MO, and when we checked on the crib Planet Baby’s records indicated that the purchase had been made but it was listed as store pickup, meaning she probably bought it online and then was planning to go by the store and pick it up. However, the family swears she had arranged for delivery, because her father-in-law had offered to set it up for her and she said no because he had a bad back.”

“Was that the situation with all of the cribs? It wasn’t clear from the case files.” Sherlock was practically climbing over the table in his impatience, eyes boring into Ryan’s as though hoping to suck the information directly from her brain.

“Yes. Why don’t we go through that now…”

They went through the cases, Ryan adding to the row of photos until six dead women smiled out at them from the wall over a large map. They were lucky the last case was nearby, John realized; some of them looked to be a good day’s drive from Houston.

Roz stretched and looked at her watch. “I don’t know about the rest of you, but I’m starving and it’s the middle of the night for John and Sherlock. Can we take a break or maybe order in?”

“We’ll go out,” Rodriguez said. “The best tamales in town are just five minutes from here. Best margaritas, too, but we’ll save those for when we wrap this up.” He looked over at Ryan. “Come on, Lisa. You were planning to stay late anyway.”

“Well.” Ryan looked torn. “Let me call my husband. If he’s good I’ll meet you there—I have to take about fifteen minutes to pump. Maya’s, right?”

“I don’t need--” Sherlock started and John said, “Yes, you do. Come on.”

Maya’s turned out to be noisy and low-ceilinged with fairy lights strung everywhere, but John found it oddly cozy. A pretty dark-haired waitress arrived as soon as they sat down for drink orders, and Roz said, “Sweet tea with lemon.”

Sherlock looked up with interest. “Sweet tea?”

“Try it, it’s not bad,” Roz told him, and Sherlock ordered sweet tea too.

Ryan arrived and Rodriguez said, “Bill okay?”

“Yeah, he said she’s sleeping, he just want to be able to watch the game later…I guess they’re on the
west coast. So I should really only stay about an hour.”

“This is the first time you’ve been out since the baby was born,” Sherlock announced.

Ryan didn’t even blink; she must have assumed Rodriguez had mentioned a baby. “Yeah, it is. I came back for this case, actually; I was supposed to be on maternity leave another month.”

“Oh, do you have pictures?” Roz asked, and soon they were all passing around Ryan’s phone and admiring a bald, sleep-eyed infant. John, as he always did in these situations, took a brief check of his own feelings: any regrets? Nope. He was perfectly happy with his life with Sherlock, and looking at Ryan’s tired face certainly didn’t make him feel any keener to change things.

Their drinks arrived in litre-sized plastic containers and Sherlock stared at his in open dismay. “It’s cold!”

“You’re not going to get a decent cup of hot tea around here. The coffee’s not bad, though, and our hotel has kitchenettes so you can make your own cuppa,” Roz told him. “Now try it.”

Sherlock took a drink, considered, and drank again. “It’s an abomination, but not terrible,” he said grudgingly, and drank some more.

“Help me with the menu? I’m watching my cholesterol,” John said to Rodriguez.

“I know how that goes. It’s the sugar for me,” Rodriguez said, grinning. “Let’s see, the veggie fajitas for you I think, amigo.”

Dinner was fun. Even Sherlock stopped tapping his foot and sighing impatiently once he had got into a long discussion with Ryan about forensic protocol. He drank two buckets of sweet tea, which made John hope his side of the bed would be closest to the loo. Sherlock was physically incapable of sleeping on the left side of the bed. If they’d actually been drinking, they probably would have closed the place down even with John’s jet lag, but they wrapped up fairly soon after Ryan left.

The hotel’s air conditioning was dialed down to freezing and John, who was overfull of tortilla chips and fajitas and feeling slightly hallucinatory from jet lag, had the vague sensation of being in outer space. Condensation ran down the windows. Sherlock had abandoned his luggage by the door in his impatience to get at Andrea Chisolm’s case file, so John carried everything through to the bedroom, cleaned his teeth, and found ESPN on the enormous wall-mounted television. He stuck his head through the doorway. “I’m going to sleep,” he told Sherlock. “You going to be up all night?”

Sherlock had commandeered the entire sitting room and spread files, pictures, and his laptop over every available surface. The sight of his narrow face furrowed in concentration made John feel more at home than he’d been since they arrived. “Probably not,” he said distractedly. “There’s not enough here…I wish we could have gone to the crime scene instead of wasting time with dinner.”

“Well, get some sleep so you’re sharp for it in the morning,” John said. He hesitated, then went over and dropped a kiss on Sherlock’s rumpled curls. Sherlock reached up to his shoulder without taking his eyes off the page, found John’s hand, and kissed it. “Roz said we’ll grab breakfast before they come over so I’ll set the alarm for seven, all right?”

“Mmm,” Sherlock said, clearly not paying the slightest attention. John smiled, squeezed his hand again, and left him to it.

In the middle of the night John jerked awake, momentarily disoriented. The chilly, strange-smelling
room confused him further for an instant, until he remembered that he was in a hotel room, in Houston. What had woken him? Sherlock was pressed against him in the bed, but John was never awakened by Sherlock coming and going anymore; he was as stealthy as a panther in any case. Then John realized that Sherlock was awake, breathing shakily against John’s chest. One hand was curled so that the knuckles were pressed against his mouth, which was something he only did when he was distressed. John thought he probably wasn’t even aware that he did it.

“Hey.” John tightened his arms around Sherlock. His voice sounded rusty, and he cleared his throat before he went on. “What is it? Is something wrong?”

Sherlock shook his head, his words muffled against John’s t-shirt. “It’s nothing. I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you.”

“It’s not nothing.” John pulled Sherlock up a little so they were face to face, though Sherlock kept his head averted. “Did you have a bad dream? I get those too, you know.”

“You do?” Sherlock seemed to find this genuinely surprising.

“Of course. I used to have terrible nightmares when I first came back…they got better when I moved in with you. Tell me about it.”

Sherlock remained tense for a minute, but then he sighed, slumping into John’s arms. John rubbed soothingly over his back, stroking the lithe muscles of his shoulders, the bumpy ridge of his spine.

“I was here,” Sherlock said softly. “In the hotel. But I was all alone, you weren’t here, and I was so alone. You were back in London and you had a whole life without me, and you hated me, and I didn’t know why.” The bewildered hurt in Sherlock’s voice squeezed John’s heart like a vise.

“I’m right here,” he said gently, stroking Sherlock’s hair. “You’re not alone. I’m with you, and I’m not going anywhere. There’s no other life I want but with you.”

Sherlock sighed again, but this time he sounded tired rather than miserable. He burrowed his face down into John’s shoulder and curled up so John could envelope him in his arms.

Sherlock was quiet for so long that John was beginning to grow sleepy again, but then he asked very softly, “What do you dream about now?”

John was suddenly wide awake. He didn’t want to tell Sherlock about his nightmares. He knew it was foolish, but he couldn’t help feeling that to voice the thought might be to put it into Sherlock’s head.

Sherlock sensed his hesitation, of course. He lifted his head, frowning up at John with an expression of combined curiosity and concern. “What? What is it? I’ve just told you my worst fear, and you know I won’t laugh at you.”

“No, I know.” John closed his eyes. “I dream you—sometimes, especially when things are bad for you, I’ve had nightmares where you take your own life. Sometimes you overdose. I had a dream where you jumped off the roof of Bart’s.” That had been years ago, and the memory still carried a faint tinge of horror.

“I wouldn’t.” Sherlock’s voice was taut. “John, I swear to you, I would never do that to you. I’ve never even thought it since I’ve been with you, not once, no matter how bad things got for me. I made you a promise, remember? I promised I would never leave you. I won’t. Even if Moriarty comes back—if he shoots me through the heart, then I will come back from the dead for you. I promise.”
John opened his eyes to look at Sherlock, his thin pale face blazing with utter conviction. He reached out to cup Sherlock’s cheek. “If we live forever,” he said, “I’ll never deserve you. I have never known anyone who could love as you do.”

Sherlock let himself be drawn forward and kissed, then he rested his chin on John’s chest and smiled up at him. “Keep it to yourself. I don’t want my reputation as a cold-hearted sociopath to be in danger.”

Andrea Chisolm’s house was a small, one-story bungalow, depressing with its forlorn Christmas lights still drooping from the roof. Rodriguez opened the door and they all wrinkled their noses at the smell. “We have got to get this place released,” Ryan muttered.

“It’s things gone off in the fridge,” Roz said. “Sherlock, would you mind starting in the kitchen? Once you give the okay I’ll clear it out.”

The kitchen was at the back of the house, with a sliding glass patio door giving onto a back patio with an empty bird feeder. Sherlock peered intently at the table whilst they all watched. John noted the long-cold coffee cup, the open box of Christmas cards, and felt a pang of sadness, but Sherlock was frowning at something on the table that seemed to have caught his eye. He checked the bin, sniffed over the cabinets, opened the refrigerator—which made them all back away quickly—and then gave Roz a nod and swept out.

“I’ll give you a hand,” John said to Roz. He was a seasoned professional at cleaning out refrigerators, and knew it went more quickly with a second person to hold the bin liner. Roz swept out all the perishables with quick efficiency and John tied off the top of the bag and carried it out to the garage. When he came back, Sherlock had already gone through the master bedroom and was looking under the sink in the en suite; Rodriguez was watching him with open curiosity, Ryan as though reserving judgment.

“All right,” Sherlock said, straightening, “let’s see the nursery.”

The nursery was a small, blue-painted room at the front of the house, with a border of pastel trains running around the walls. Andrea Chisolm had been expecting a boy, John though with another stab of sorrow. A stack of receiving blankets and cheerful train-patterned sheets sat on the changing pad, but, as expected, no cot. Sherlock was bending over the bloodstains on the carpet, muttering under his breath and peering around the floor and into the bin. He stood up and looked at John, but in that way he had of barely seeing him, as though he were deep in his own head. “Why was she crying?”

“Who? Andrea?”

Sherlock blinked, eyes coming into focus, then turned without a word and left the room. They all followed him as he paced through the house: nursery, kitchen, front door. At the door he whipped out his pocket magnifying glass and peered along the jamb. “No sign of forced entry,” he murmured.

“Yeah, we know. Our guys checked,” Ryan said, a little impatiently.

Sherlock straightened, ignoring her. “She was in the kitchen,” he said. “Early afternoon, but she was drinking coffee, because it was morning for her. She’d worked until seven AM and then come home and slept for a few hours. The doorbell rings. She looks out the window, sees the white van, sees a man, probably a uniform, a clipboard, she opens the door.” He opened it. “And the man says, ‘We have your cot.’”
“We?” Rodriguez asked.

“Almost certainly. The implication that he’s there with a team is reassuring to a woman alone. There was no other man, of course. And then…” Sherlock paused, frowning.

“And then,” Ryan said with certainty, “he says, “Want to show me where we’re putting this?’” Sherlock rounded on her. “Yes,” he breathed.

“Sure, right through here,” Ryan said pleasantly. She held the door, then pushed it closed and turned to lead the way to the nursery, Sherlock following behind her and still holding his imaginary clipboard. “You want a drink or anything?” she asked over her shoulder.

“No thank you, I’m fine,” Sherlock said. They reached the nursery and Ryan turned, opening her mouth, and quick as lightning Sherlock stepped into her, one arm going around her back and the other rising to her throat, where it stopped an inch from her skin. Ryan’s eyes widened, but she didn’t flinch.

“He strangled her,” Sherlock said, stepping back. “Then he went back out to the van and brought something in. Maybe a box, or a bag…something that wouldn’t arouse suspicion, anyway. He had his knife in there and something to put the fetus in, a bin liner or something similar. Kitchen roll. An extra uniform. You can see where he knelt, where something was moved—not the body—and where he stepped away and removed his clothes. He would have put everything bloody into the bin liners and back into the carrying container, along with the fetus, dressed himself in the clean uniform, and left. There’s very little blood here; Andrea Chisolm had been dead for several minutes before he made the first incision.”

Roz opened her mouth and then shut it again. “What?” asked Sherlock, noticing.

“The earlier scenes had a lot more blood,” Roz said. “Do you think he learned to wait as he went along?”

“Probably, why?”

“Araceli Hernandez,” Roz said almost reluctantly. “She was one of the earlier victims and the coroner thought that the baby had been removed almost immediately. She was eight and a half months along, and…her family has always held out hope that the baby survived.”

Sherlock shook his head. “Unlikely. Even if the fetus survived an unskilled and traumatic Caesarian section, it would have taken considerable effort to keep it alive and there is no indication that our killer had any desire to do so. In the unlikely event that the infant did survive, it almost certainly died of exposure or suffocation.” The words were harsh, but his tone was gentle. “I’m sorry.”

“So we know how he does it,” Ryan said, looking back into the bloodstained room. “But Planet Baby is a huge corporation, and we still don’t know who.”

“He chooses his victims deliberately,” Sherlock said. His eyes had taken on that faraway quality again. “There’s a similarity, something they have in common…” his gaze sharpened on Ryan. “I want to talk to her sister.”

“Who, Andrea Chisolm’s?” Rodriguez said. “We talked to her. What’s her name, Laura…”


“Yeah.” Rodriguez looked at his watch. “North side of Houston. If traffic’s okay…should take about
an hour and a half. We’ll get some lunch first. Do you know her number too?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said.

Rodriguez took out his phone. “Just out of curiosity, why do you want to talk to Laura?”

“Because I think she knows,” Sherlock said, looking back to the kitchen. “I think she knows why Andrea was crying.”

Laura Benning was a slimmer version of her sister, with a few more lines around her eyes and her face furrowed by grief. “Come on in,” she said, holding the door open. She looked past John at Ryan, who was carrying a boxy black case. “Hey, Agent Ryan. You want to use my bedroom again?”

“You’re a lifesaver,” Ryan said. “You need to pick up or anything?”

“I don’t mind if you don’t. The bed’s not made, but I figure you’ve seen worse.”

“My bed’s not made either,” Ryan said. She disappeared off down the hall.

“You want us to wait?” Rodriguez called after her.

“No, go ahead.”

Laura smiled faintly at them, glancing at Roz. “You have kids?”

Roz shook her head. “Never worked out, I’m afraid.”

This was clearly more than enough small talk for Sherlock. “Mrs. Benning,” he said. “It’s evident that you and your sister were quite close, but in your interview you made no mention of the fact that she had been severely depressed. Why is that?”

A slow blush spread over Laura Benning’s face. She blinked rapidly several times. “How…” It came out high and breathy and she cleared her throat. “How did you know?”

“Tissues. Used. On her table, in her bed, in every bin in every room of the house. She was doing all right at work, but she’d let the birdseed run out and hadn’t mustered the energy to buy more, and she had always kept the bird feeder well stocked. “

Laura nodded, still looking a little shell-shocked. “Okay,” she said. “Okay. Here, let’s…can we sit down?”

They settled in the living room, clearing toys off the couch—a neighbor was watching her kids, Laura explained—and then Laura made them coffee and by the time she was finally ready to talk Ryan had rejoined them, looking considerably more relaxed.

“Andrea got pregnant her freshman year at Baylor,” Laura said tiredly. “Her boyfriend said they’d get married, but then it turned out he was seeing another girl, and it got really ugly. I was a senior at UT at the time and I came up and drove her to Oklahoma for an abortion. Our parents don’t know any of this, by the way, and it would just kill them on top of everything else. It practically killed Andrea. She spent the whole next year depressed—wouldn’t go out of her room except for class, didn’t really see any of her friends, nothing. She couldn’t go for counseling at school because Baylor is very religious, and she thought they’d kick her out for getting pregnant, never mind the abortion.”
She sighed. “She finally transferred the next year to UT. She went for counseling at the student center there and was on antidepressants for a while, and pretty soon she was pretty much back to her old self. She was fine ever since. But then when she got pregnant…” She grimaced. “I think it brought a lot of stuff back to her. For the first few months she was convinced God was going to punish her for the abortion by making her miscarry, or make the baby be born dead or deformed or something like that. Everybody else just thought it was hormones, even Brian—he doesn’t know about the abortion, of course. But then when all the tests and the ultrasounds were good, she started convincing herself that she was going to lose Brian like she’d lost her boyfriend back in college. I mean, she was totally irrational. Every time he was gone for work she was positive he was cheating on her, even though he’s on an oil rig, in the middle of the Gulf of Mexico, with a bunch of roughnecks! She would search through all his stuff when he came back and if she found, like, a gum wrapper that didn’t look like his usual gum she would call me up freaking out.” Laura shook her head. “I kept telling her she was crazy. I mean, Brian is the nicest guy, and a Christian, and a good husband—he would never cheat on her, especially while she was pregnant.”

“Did Brian know that she suspected him?” Sherlock asked.

“No. I don’t think so. She would never ask him about it, she was scared to death of driving him away. I think she really tried to hold it together when he was around.”

“Hmmm,” Sherlock said, sitting back and pressing his fingertips together in front of his mouth.

“So Andrea Chisolm thought her husband was cheating,” Roz said in the car as they threaded their way through rush hour traffic to the freeway. “Araceli’s husband cheated in the past. Jennifer Levy’s husband was definitely cheating, and Misty McCubbin’s boyfriend was married. So maybe that’s the real link and the Planet Baby thing is just coincidence?”

Ryan shook her head. “We looked at that, and we didn’t find anything. Neither Daniel Obringer’s old girlfriend nor Levy’s had any connection to each other, and the wife in Keithville took up with another guy when her husband went to prison and they were both killed in a drunk driving accident a couple years ago.”

“What do you think, Sherlock?” Roz asked.

Sherlock was pressed up against his door, staring out the window. John knew being in a car—even an enormous SUV—with four other people who all wanted to chat about the case was making him slightly crazy, and hoped the traffic wouldn’t slow them down too much getting back to the city. “I need more data,” he said shortly.

Rodriguez accelerated onto the freeway which seemed—to John’s relief—to be relatively clear. “Lisa and I need to get home tonight,” he said. “Need any recommendations on where to eat near your hotel?”

“I don’t need to eat, I need to work,” Sherlock said even more irritably. After a pause he added, “I could use some of that sweet tea though.”

“There’s a Chick-Fil-A up ahead, I just saw a sign,” Roz said, perking up. “I could use a sweet tea too.”

“You go to Chick-Fil-A?” Ryan said, sounding surprised.

Roz was immediately defensive. “Well, not if I can help it. But I drive a lot for research, and
sometimes you really need caffeine to keep going. I just go to the drive-through.”

“I don’t go to Chick-Fil-A at all,” Rodriguez said virtuously.

John was completely lost. “What’s wrong with this chick place?”

There was an awkward silence. John sensed Ryan and Rodriguez glancing at each other. Finally Roz said bluntly, “The corporation’s owner’s opposed to gay marriage. And I think our friends here weren’t sure if the two of you were a couple or not and if so you might find the idea of going to Chick-Fil-A offensive. Which it is, obviously. But their sweet tea is really quite good.”

Sherlock turned around. “So if John and I went in there holding hands, would they throw us out? Would they shoot us?”

“Of course they wouldn’t shoot you!” Ryan said. “Not everyone in Texas is carrying a gun all the time.”

“Aren’t they?” Sherlock said, disappointed.

Oh, enough. “Sherlock and I are together, yes,” John said to the front seat. “But we aren’t married and would be perfectly fine with everyone setting their principles aside for long enough to buy Roz and Sherlock their sweet tea. And I for one plan to eat dinner, so if you have any suggestions, Mike, I would be delighted to hear them.”

John had a minor panic attack the next morning when he awoke to find Sherlock nowhere in sight, but it turned out he was just down in the business center, monopolizing the computers and terrorizing the hotel staff. It seemed that Andrea Chisolm was not the only victim who had been suspicious, nor the only one without cause. This put Sherlock onto a trail of breadcrumbs that led, as he had always predicted, straight back to Planet Baby. Two days after visiting the house where Andrea had died they were all gathered in the conference room at the FBI building, staring at the picture of Wayne Ellis that Sherlock had just dramatically tacked to the wall with a black pushpin.

“Let’s bring him in,” Roz said.

“We can’t.” Ryan was chewing her lip, frowning at the picture. “This is all circumstantial. I agree—she held up her hand as Sherlock opened his mouth in outrage, “—it all points to him, but there’s no proof. He’s going to know we’ve got nothing definite and if we bring him in and he doesn’t talk, then he knows we’re on to him.”

“If we could get into that storage unit…” Rodriguez said.

“Not enough for a warrant.”

“We could get the absentee records from Planet Baby,” Sherlock said. “They would prove he was not at work on the days the murder took place. That would be enough, surely?”

“You start asking for more stuff on Ellis and they’re going to know he’s the suspect,” Roz pointed out. “They’ll start talking, and he’ll get word of it, and—“

“We could get the records on all the employees.”

“And how long will that take?” Sherlock snapped.
They were all frustrated, itching to get their fingers on Ellis but seeing no way forward. John said suddenly, “We do both.”


“What?” Rodriguez asked.

John pointed at him. “You go to Planet Baby. Ask for his records and then take Ellis off into a conference room or something. Say there’s a possible data breach, say you’re worried about their online security for personal information, say Homeland Security thinks a terrorist has signed up on the baby registry—anything you like. Keep him tied up. You could even pull in some other people from his department if you want a bigger smokescreen. Then as soon as you get the records—“

“Yes. Yes.” Ryan had caught on. “We don’t even have to wait for you; I’ll call Judge Harris’ clerk and make sure she’s in chambers today and fill out the paperwork—“

“And if the records match, you’ve got the warrant and can search the storage unit, and I’ve got Ellis sitting in my lap waiting for the handcuffs if you get the goods,” Rodriguez said. “I like it. Let’s go.”

Chapter End Notes

This thing is getting a little long and complicated, so:

The owner of Kensington FC paid for Sherlock and John's dinner in Florence
Michael Christopher Phillip Bruce III was the bully at Eton who tormented Sherlock in "The Blue-Eyed Stranger"
The scene in John's bedroom = Sherlock's dream at the end of Chapter 6.
Rodriguez left almost immediately, but Ryan had to talk to the judge’s clerk and fill out the paperwork for the warrant and fax it over, and they ended up taking Roz’s Jeep—Ryan had an Accord with a car seat in the middle of the back—and Ryan had to get gloves and evidence bags out of her trunk, so they were still on the freeway when the text came.

“Oh my God,” Ryan said, peering down at her phone. “They match. We’ve got him, he’s the guy. You were right.”

“Of course I’m right,” Sherlock said from the front seat, sounding bored, though John heard the undercurrent of excitement in his voice.

Ryan grinned at John and they smacked palms. She was already hitting buttons, calling the judge’s clerk. “Sam? Yeah, it’s me, the dates match. Can you get her to sign off? Mike’s faxing the records to you…yeah. Email it to me as an attachment and if that doesn’t work I’ll get you the fax number when we get there.”

They were all so keyed up, burning with impatience and excitement, that the shock of finding the small room empty almost made John dizzy.

“No,” Sherlock said, moving forward. “No, this isn’t right, this room is too small, you’ve got the wrong room…”

“Sherlock,” John said softly.

“No!” Sherlock cried. “It’s not the wrong room at all, look!” He knocked on the wall at the back of the space. “He built a wall!”

“Oh, man, that is so against the rules,” the manager said, looking affronted.

Sherlock was already sliding the cheap bookcase out of the way to reveal a padlocked door. “Wait,” Ryan ordered, moving forward and snapping pictures with her phone. “Okay, move it the rest of the way. You have any bolt cutters?”

When the padlock was off and the manager sent packing, Ryan dropped it into an evidence bag Roz held for her and reached for the door. Then she stopped and gestured to Sherlock. “You want to go first?”

Sherlock looked startled. “Me?”

“We wouldn’t have found any of this if it hadn’t been for you.”

Sherlock lit up like a Christmas tree. First on the scene of a serial killer’s trophy room—John couldn’t imagine anything that would make him happier, but suddenly he paused. The light left his face. “Wait,” he said to Ryan, “One moment? Please?” He took John’s wrist and tugged him to the corridor.

“What?” John asked, confused.
“Don’t go in,” Sherlock said urgently.

“Don’t go in? Why?”

“I have to look,” Sherlock said, the words tumbling over each other the way they sometimes did when he was very worked up. “I have to look, and Ryan has to look, and Roz—she can look and not be sick, do you understand? Do you remember, the poem? But I’ve lost the trick. If I look—I need you to stay here, to be whole. To make me well.”

John remembered the poem. He thought about what was probably in that room. He thought about what it said about him that he had to make sure he had no regrets about children, every time. He thought about the Chisolms, of what this would mean for them: a tiny little coffin to bury, a life that had been snuffed out before it ever began. The thought gave him a strangely sick, swooping feeling, as though he had missed a step going downstairs.

“All right,” he said. “I’ll stay.”

Sherlock squeezed his hand, looked back at him once, and then went to the door.

Ryan had her flashlight out, but when Sherlock pushed the door open John saw a wash of multicolored light flickering over his face and shirt. He stepped inside and Roz and Ryan followed. John could hear a faint electronic tinkling, like a music box, playing a song too faint to make out. There was no other sound at all. John was on the verge of calling out to be sure they were all right when Roz emerged from the doorway, striding purposefully on her long legs over to the corridor where she leaned against the wall opposite John with her head down, fumbling in her bag for tissues.

John looked from her to the open doorway, where he could now hear Ryan talking to someone—Rodriguez, from the sound of it. Then the weird, unsettling quiet was abruptly broken by the sound of Sherlock shouting. “Five! Five! John!” Roz looked up, startled, as Sherlock came barreling out of the hidden room, his eyes blazing.

“Five,” he said urgently, grabbing her by the upper arms. “You were right, the Hernandezes were right, you were right all along—there are only five fetuses in there, and none of them are eight months. Araceli’s child isn’t here.”

John knew it was a cliché, but he couldn’t help being disappointed in how incredibly ordinary Wayne Ellis appeared. He was the sort of bloke you wouldn’t think twice about if you stood next to him in a queue or a lift—or if he rang your doorbell with a furniture delivery.

Roz, standing at the one-way window next to him, seemed to be thinking the same thing. “I know they’re supposed to look just like everyone else,” she murmured, “but it seems as though he should be a bit mad about the eyes, at least.”

John thought of Moriarty’s gleeful, soulless eyes. “Yeah,” he said.

Rodriguez burst through the door into the observation room. “We did it, guys, we did it!” He grabbed every hand he could reach, slapping John heartily on the back as Sherlock quickly backed away.

“Where’s his lawyer?” Ryan said, frowning.

“He’s declined representation. I was waiting until you got here to question him. He knows what we’re charging him with though—I made sure to list every single name.”
“Well, get him one anyway; we need to make a deal. There are only five babies in the storage unit and we think the missing one is Araceli Hernandez’s. We need him to tell us where she is.”

Rodriguez, John thought, was not an easy man to shock, but now his mouth dropped open in astonishment. “What? But if there’s one missing, isn’t it more likely to be Andrea Chisolm’s?”

“No,” Ryan, usually so cautious, was adamant now. “He’s got them in jars, in formaldehyde or something—it’s like a sick biology lab in a high school. You can tell one’s fresh and it’s a boy. None of the babies in there could be Araceli Hernandez’s; Sherlock worked it out and we went back to the office so he could show me in the records.”

“Araceli Hernandez’s initial due date, the one she used when she registered with Planet Stork, was based on her first ultrasound,” Sherlock said. “Her prenatal records are part of the case file. The assessment was inaccurate because it was based on the size of the infant, which was small—“

“—but Araceli was small,” Roz said. “Not even five feet.”

“The gestational age was adjusted several times, most recently after she had a 3-D ultrasound that showed the fetus to be significantly farther along than originally thought.”

“Planet Baby thought Araceli was thirty-four weeks pregnant,” John said, “but she was actually thirty-eight. That’s a big difference. Thirty-eight weeks is considered full-term.”

“None of those babies in that storage unit are that far along,” Ryan said with certainty.

“You sure?” Rodriguez asked.

Ryan gave him a look and said, “What To Expect When You’re Expecting, Chapter 13, ‘Your baby this month’. ‘From thirty-two to thirty-five weeks…”’

“Okay, okay,” Rodriguez said, holding up his hands. “Let’s get him a lawyer.”

But Wayne Ellis would not talk.

He was happy to tell them about the murders, in as much detail as they liked, in spite of the protestations of his lawyer. “They didn’t deserve to be mothers,” Ellis said calmly. “Those children are in a better place.”

“And what about Araceli Hernandez’s child?”

“What about her?”

“You admit to killing Araceli.”

“Yes,” Ellis said, as though Ryan had asked if he drove a car.

“Then where is her baby? We know she’s not with the others.”

“I told you,” Ellis said pleasantly. “In a better place.”

Rodriguez leaned forward. “And what about the baby’s father? Daniel Obringer has been in prison all this time for a murder he didn’t commit. He wasn’t even cheating on Araceli. Doesn’t he deserve to know where his daughter is, even if just to bury her?”
Something flickered in Ellis’s eyes at that, but his face smoothed out quickly. “She’s in a better place,” he said again.

“You’re going to death row,” Rodríguez said. “If you tell us where Araceli Hernandez’s baby is, we could make a deal. You could get life instead.”

Ellis shrugged. “I’m going to die in prison either way. What difference does it make?”

They kept at him for a while, but Ellis didn’t budge, and after an hour or so Ryan excused herself and joined them in the observation room. She looked frustrated and tired. “Any ideas?” she asked Sherlock.

“Yes,” Sherlock said. “Take his house apart.”

The forensics team was busy with that already, but as the hours went by nothing turned up. They found the white van, of course, and the jars and preservatives, but nothing that indicated Wayne Ellis had ever deviated from his usual routine. Sherlock, who was of course not allowed to actually touch anything the techs had not finished with, prowled the house getting increasingly agitated until he finally flung himself out into the back garden in a complete strop.

John sighed and followed him, the damp warm air hitting him like a wave as it always did. It was well after midnight and the street was quiet except for the noise in Ellis’ house. Sherlock was moving restlessly about the tiny patio liked a caged tiger, both hands buried in his hair.

“I can’t think,” he snapped in frustration as John approached. “There has to be something, something that points to where he put her but I can’t see it, there has to be something I’m not seeing.”

“Listen,” John said, bracing himself. “You haven’t slept in two nights and now we’re going on a third. If these guys do happen to turn up anything, they’ll call us. Let’s go back to the hotel and get some rest and you can look at it fresh in the morning.”

Sherlock growled and spun in place, pulling at his hair as though trying to stretch out his brain. “I can’t sleep! How do you expect me to sleep?”

“I’ll help you,” John said quietly.

Sherlock paused in his agonized twirling, looking at John as though he had only just now noticed him. “It,” he said, grimacing, and clenched his hands tighter in his hair. “That room—it’s all—“

“I know,” John said gently. He stepped closer to where Sherlock stood in the dark, rigid and trembling, and laid his own hands gently over Sherlock’s. “I know, love. I know. Let me help you.”

Sherlock was silent a moment, eyes flicking frantically and his whole body a clenched knot, but then he blew out a long breath. “All right.”

Back in the frigid hotel room Sherlock crowded into John immediately, eyes wide and dark, but John gripped his wrists and said firmly, “Bed.”

“John,” Sherlock cried, his voice gone high with desperation.

John looked at him. He was thin and trembling—the weight just fell off him when he got caught up in a case—with his skin sallow from fatigue and his eyes reddened; he looked, in that moment of frantic pleading, like a junkie in need of a fix. Always an addict, John thought, and it put an edge to
his voice when he answered, “Go to the bed and take off your clothes. I’ll be right there. I’m not fucking you up against this door; it’s so thin it’s practically cardboard.”

Sherlock sagged with relief, some his tension already beginning to drain away, and turned immediately toward the bedroom. John got a drink of water from the kitchenette. God, he was tired, but he couldn’t deny that on some level he enjoyed this—Sherlock certainly didn’t listen to him much the rest of the time. He cleaned his teeth and went to the bed, where Sherlock had stripped off all of his clothing and was now hunched up and shivering in the over-air conditioned chill. John punched at the thermostat for at least the hundredth time and then crossed to his suitcase.

They had acquired a few accoutrements at home for nights like these, but there were limits to what John wanted to explain in a baggage search, so he packed only silk scarves. He took a handful out and set them on the bed, watching with wry amusement as Sherlock relaxed further at the sight, like an overly tired toddler spotting a lovey. “Make them tight,” he said to John. “Really tight.”

“How rough do you need?” John asked, winding one of the scarves around Sherlock’s eyes to make a blindfold.

“Mmm.” Sherlock considered. His body was still tense, but he was no longer shaking. “Not very…I know I’m tired, I can sense it’s there, I just don’t feel it yet. If I can only get to where I can sleep…”

“Okay,” John said, a little relieved. He liked being rough with Sherlock up to a point, but they had passed that point at least once back during the Magnussen case, and he’d felt terrible for days. “On your back. Spread your legs.”

John was quite good at bondage by now. He soon had Sherlock spread-eagled on the bed, scarves around his thighs pulled tight to hold him wide open. His knots were all slipknots and easy to loose, if you weren’t the one tied in them. The heavy drapes were closed, but John had left the lamp on in the sitting room, and he could see every taut muscle as Sherlock strained against his bonds. He was getting hard now. Deep down, John knew, some part of Sherlock was still that shy virgin who had wanted the lights off; being tied down and exposed like this aroused him on an almost primal level. John pulled off his own clothes slowly, making Sherlock strain his ears to work out what he was doing, and then put a T-shirt on so he wouldn’t freeze his bollocks off. He settled between Sherlock’s legs and poured massage oil into his palms. He wondered briefly if Sherlock couldn’t relax just as well with just a massage—or maybe a hot bath—but then, John wouldn’t have nearly as much fun. John rubbed up the hard lean muscles of Sherlock’s legs and over his chest and shoulders, pulled taut by the bonds, and smiled as Sherlock pulled against the scarves and pushed his hard cock helplessly into the air. He switched to lube and slid an expert finger deep into Sherlock in one smooth slow push, making Sherlock moan and thrash his head.

“Shhh,” John said, grinning. He worked more fingers in, slowly, not touching Sherlock’s cock and pinning his hip down with his other hand when he tried to thrust up, although Sherlock was tied too tightly to get much purchase in any case. He rubbed around Sherlock’s entrance until he was relaxed and open, and then slid two fingers in and began methodically stroking his prostate. Sherlock arched as much as he could, his muscles tensing now for a totally different reason as John massaged him inexorably, using his thumb to push against his perineum at the same time. “Oh God,” Sherlock gasped. “Oh God, John, it feels…oh God, I’m coming, I’m, I’m…” John eased off the pressure as Sherlock’s cock jerked and dribbled and Sherlock wailed, a long low sound of pure agonized frustration.

“Not yet,” John said, cheerfully cruel, and pushed in all four fingers. Sherlock gasped at the burn and did his best to push against him, trying to get some part of John where he wanted him. John looked up at him. The dim light from the sitting room lamp was a far cry from the moonlight in
Florence so long ago, but something about the long lines of Sherlock’s marble-white body reminded him of that night: the pure beauty of him laid out like this, a display meant only for John. John teased him for a bit, stretching the muscles and brushing his perineum lightly, then pulled out and resumed his torturous stroking. Sherlock’s fingers clenched, his testicles drew up tightly, and he begged, “Oh please don’t stop, please please please—”

John slowed down, slower, slower, until he was barely moving his hand. “Don’t come yet.” He heard a tremor of arousal in his own voice—God, he was getting off on this, making Sherlock beg—and he pressed gently with his thumb, making Sherlock cry out as his rigid cock dripped again. “Not yet.” Sherlock tried to pull his legs together but he was tied too tightly, thighs spread wide for John’s fingers. Sherlock was completely in his power: John could make him come, make him beg, fuck him, torture him, anything he liked, and the heady rush of power almost made him salivate.

“Oh please John, please,” Sherlock moaned again. He was gleaming with sweat, back arching desperately and every muscle taut, and John saw a single tear streak running from under the blindfold to his ear.

“All right.” John increased his speed a little and when he felt Sherlock beginning to clench he reached for his cock and wrapped his slick hand around him, sliding down Sherlock’s hard length as he rubbed, and Sherlock came explosively into his hand, head jerking forward and limbs convulsing in his bonds. John waited until his head fell back and then he quickly slipped the knots holding Sherlock’s legs, pushed his knees up into his chest, and sank into him. Oh Christ, he felt good, all slick and open and pliable from his orgasm. John clenched his hands on Sherlock’s outstretched arms and thrust into him hot and sweet and frantic as Sherlock gasped and panted, and then when he felt the first surge of pleasure roll through him he pulled out, knelt up, and came all over Sherlock’s face. “Oh,” Sherlock murmured blissfully, opening his mouth to catch the last drops.

John panted for a few minutes as well, supporting himself over Sherlock on his hands and knees, then leaned over and pulled the loose ends to free Sherlock’s wrists. He got up, staggered to the en suite, washed his hands, and returned with a wet flannel to find Sherlock already fast asleep. John shook his head, smiling, though he himself was so knackered he could barely keep his feet. He pulled off the blindfold and wiped Sherlock’s face and belly, then manhandled him under the covers and onto his side of the bed. His last act before he himself fell deeply asleep was to pull Sherlock into his arms to sleep curled against his chest, just as Sherlock would have done if he’d been awake.

“John. John. Wake up!”

John cracked one eye open just as Sherlock flung open the drapes, giving him a full view of Houston’s morose, pewter-gray sky. “Ugh. What time is it?”

“Nearly eight. Come on, you can shave whilst I shower; we’re going to breakfast.”

John opened the other eye. Sherlock was rooting through his suitcase in search of socks and pants, wearing one of John’s old t-shirts and dripping sweat. “Where have you been?”

“Out running with Roz. Come on,” Sherlock ordered, and disappeared into the bathroom.

John sighed, climbed out of bed, and tripped over Sherlock’s discarded running shoes. Cursing, he shoved them under the bed so that Sherlock would have to search for them later. Still, Sherlock seemed to be in a good mood; he must have come up with a new line of attack on his run. From a three-patch problem to a three-mile problem, John thought, pleased with his good influence.
When John got out of the shower he could hear Sherlock in the sitting room talking away to someone. It took him a moment to realize that the oddity nagging him was the fact that Sherlock sounded neither demanding or impatient, which was his default setting on the phone: he usually endured talking to people only as long as was necessary to get what he wanted. Curious, John stuck his head through the door. “Who was that?”

“Ryan. She’s getting some information for me.”

“You like her,” John said, realizing. “Ryan. You actually like her.”

Sherlock shrugged as though this were not an extraordinary and unprecedented event. “She’s clever.”

Since Sherlock offered unqualified compliments about as often as he volunteered to clean the loo, John filed this away to tell Ryan later. “You just say that because she listens to you.”

“Well, she wouldn’t listen to me if you hadn’t got on her good side in the first place, so you can share in the credit.”

Roz rapped on their door a few minutes later and they drove the short distance to Le Chick. “How was the run?” John asked her, after they had ordered blueberry pancakes (Roz), egg white omelette with tomatoes and a Wild Maine Blueberry MegaMuffin on the side (John), and coffee and sweet tea (Sherlock).

“Good,” she said. “Sherlock said not to talk, so I didn’t.”

“If you can talk you aren’t working hard enough anyway,” Sherlock said. He downed half his coffee in one gulp and then glared at a perky young woman approaching with a carafe, who paled and scurried nervously away. Sherlock looked an entirely different person from the strung-out wreck he had been the night before, bright-eyed and alert; energy crackled around him like static.

“This is why I stopped running with him,” John said to Roz.

“You stopped because I got faster than you,” Sherlock corrected.

“That too. So what’s the plan for today, then?”

Sherlock took a swig of coffee and narrowed his eyes at another young woman swooping in with a carafe. She backed quickly toward the next booth. “Araceli Hernandez’s daughter must be alive. If not Ellis would be playing with us—offering clues or pretending to make deals, holding out the hope of finding her so he can enjoy the disappointment when she turns up dead. That means that wherever she is, he put her there, and he’s never going to tell us.”

“That’s…is that good or bad?” John asked.

Their food arrived. John blinked at his MegaMuffin, which was the size of a birthday cake, and asked Sherlock, “Do you want some of this?”

Sherlock pulled over the plate and sliced off the top of the muffin. “Ellis didn’t just drop the baby off at the orphanage steps. This is a man who killed women because he believed they were unfit to be mothers. He would have chosen the person to whom he gave the baby very, very carefully, and that means he knew her ahead of time—knew her well enough to believe that he was making a good decision. He didn’t have much time to think about it, as he couldn’t have anticipated the baby’s survival. There can’t be an infinite pool of possibilities.”
“Is that what Ryan is doing, looking people up?”

“Yes. Well, she’s having her assistant do it. And she’s already got a call in to children’s services, since obviously the bit about the orphanage steps has to be verified. Ryan and Rodriguez are going to be talking with the families of the other victims, getting DNA evidence to match the bodies and expediting the release of the wrongfully convicted.” He swallowed a bit of his muffin top and looked at Roz. “They wanted to know if you were planning to meet with the Hernandezes.”

“I rang them last night and I was going to go and see them today,” Roz said. “Do you want to come? They did hire you, after all.”

Sherlock looked cornered. “Must I?”

“I’ll go,” John said. “Unless you need me to help you look through the people Ryan finds?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Not necessary,” he said. He looked at the plate and said in amazement, “I like blueberries. Do you want the bottom of that?”

“Here, try this,” Roz said, slicing off a wedge of her pancake stack and sliding it onto the plate next to the muffin bottom.

Sherlock took a bite and hummed in appreciation. Then he looked at his empty cup. “I’m out of coffee,” he said in irritation.

The FBI researcher Ryan had assigned to identify every person Wayne Ellis ever knew in his adult life was, understandably to everyone but Sherlock, still hard at work. John and Ryan therefore parked Sherlock in the conference room with what had been dug up so far and left.

“So this guy Sal’s moved in with,” Roz said as they drove. “Is he a wanker?”

“Surprisingly, no,” John said.

Roz sighed. “She’ll probably chuck him then.”

“God, I hope not,” John said sincerely. He could only imagine what Sally would be like in that case. “You worked with her, didn’t you? Back when you were with the police?”

Roz brightened. “I was her sergeant when she was first starting out. Green as grass for all she was so clever. One time…”

John was laughing when they arrived at the Hernandez’s, but he sobered up quickly when Roz stopped the car. The house was large and elegant, old for Houston, surrounded by huge old oaks dripping Spanish moss. It was the first truly lovely place John had seen since he got off the plane.

“Bit posh, this part of town,” Roz said, following his gaze. “They’re all right though. You’ll see.”

The Hernandezes were older than John had expected, although some of that might have been due to grief. John could see Roz was trying very hard not to get their hopes up, but they were certainly not at all displeased that the detective they were paying was searching for their missing granddaughter instead of meeting with them.

“We read about him, of course,” Mrs. Hernandez said to John. “On your blog.” Unlike her husband Mrs. Hernandez had the faintest trace of an accent, and Araceli’s big dark eyes. Pictures of Araceli
herself were all over the elegant sitting room: as a child, in a graduation gown, as a vibrant young woman, on her wedding day. “He has already done so much—we believed for so many years that Daniel is innocent, but no one would listen until Rosalind got him involved.”

“If she can be found, Sherlock will find her,” John said with conviction. “He’ll never give up.”

When John and Roz got back to the FBI building they saw several television trucks parked outside.

“I thought you had the press conference this morning,” Roz said to Ryan when she met them at the lift.

“We did,” Ryan said. “They want pictures of Sherlock.”

“Good luck with that. Sherlock doesn’t do press,” John said. “Did you lot talk about him? He’s usually more than happy to let official law enforcement take the credit.”

“And we’re usually happy to take it,” Ryan said. “No, it was Laura Benning. She pretty much told every reporter who called that he solved the whole thing single-handedly and was a hottie to boot—her words—and now they’re slobbering all over themselves hoping for a look.”

“Oh, Jesus. Sorry,” John said, wincing.

“No, it’s all right. Rodriguez thinks it’s good, actually. That sheriff in Keithville is one thing, but two of the supposedly solved cases were right around here, and we have to work with those guys. If the local press wants to give Sherlock the credit for making them look bad, that’s okay by us.”

“Hey, where are we going?” Roz asked.

“My office. Sherlock kicked us out of the conference room for, like, breathing, so we’re meeting back there.”

The office was a little cramped with all of them in it, but they all squeezed into seats and filled each other in. There was a distinct feeling of let-down in the air, the high from yesterday’s capture drained away by the tedium of legal formalities and the loose end of the missing baby. Ellis was not contesting the charges against him, although his lawyer was doing his best to negotiate this compliance into a deal for life without parole, so there was unlikely to be a trial.

“Sounds like we’re good then,” Roz said, trying to stand up without shoving her chair into John’s knee. “Let’s go collect Sherlock.”

“Go away,” Sherlock said without looking up as soon as they opened the door.

“Sherlock, it’s time to go,” John said.

Now he looked up. “No. I have two researchers who can access the law enforcement databases and a lovely woman named Shonda keeps bringing me coffee as soon as I run out. Why would I leave?”

“Well, Shonda and the two assistants are probably leaving, for one thing,” John said.

But one of the researchers, an eager young man who seemed fascinated with Sherlock, said he could stay and knew how to make coffee, so they agreed to return at ten. John and Roz went to dinner and then spent the rest of the evening in the hotel’s lounge, drinking beer and sharing their notes. Roz was trying to organize material for her eventual book, and John wrote a first draft of his blog post for the case.
“You know, I read your blog when Sally first told me about you two,” Roz said, eating a handful of free popcorn. “You’ve got a real flair for this. You should think about writing a book yourself.”

John was flattered at this praise from an actual professional. “I’ve got a long way to go before that, I think,” he said. He thought about writing a book about his life with Sherlock and felt a little chill touch the back of his neck, thinking, *but I don’t know how it ends.* He did his best not to think about Moriarty, but he never forgot that he was out there, somewhere, and had surely not forgotten about Sherlock.

“Oh, well, let me know if you ever do, I’ll put you in touch with my publisher,” Roz said cheerfully.

At ten o’clock they collected Sherlock, who was sulky about leaving. It took two trips to the car with the no-longer-eager researcher before they had loaded all the material Sherlock planned to go through that night. Sherlock took one of the boxes with him into the seat and as soon as Roz started the car he said preemptively, “Shut up,” and began reading by the light of his phone. Roz caught John’s eye in the rear-view mirror and grinned at him, and they rode back to the hotel in tolerant silence.

When John stuck his head through the sitting room door to say goodnight he had a flash of deja vu: a copy of one of the pictures of Araceli he had seen at the Hernandez’s house had been taped to the television screen. “Can I help at all?” he asked.

Sherlock didn’t even answer him, which was unsurprising, so John just said, “Tea and sugar in the kitchenette, milk in the fridge,” and went to bed. He woke around four and heard Sherlock muttering away in the other room; John heard his own name, but everything else was indistinguishable. Once he would have got up, thinking Sherlock needed him, but now he knew better, so he just rolled over and went back to sleep.

Sometime later he woke again, not certain what had awakened him until his eyes adjusted to the dimness and he could make out Sherlock sitting silently on the bed, knees drawn up to his chin. “Hey,” John said thickly. “You okay?”

“I need you,” Sherlock said quietly. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, okay,” John said, trying to clear the cobwebs from his brain. “Are you stuck?”

“No,” Sherlock said in the same oddly flattened voice. “I found her.”

“You what?” John sat up quickly, wide awake now. “Bloody hell. Let me just—“ He pulled a jumper on over his T-shirt and followed Sherlock into the dark sitting room, where Sherlock had cleared a space on the sofa. John’s laptop was sitting open in front of it, the screen—a blog of some sort, John recognized—showing a large picture of a woman and child. The woman was about John’s age, heavyset and unfashionable, but made beautiful by the warmth and love glowing in her smile. The little girl with her arms wrapped around the woman’s neck looked to be about three years old, tiny and delicate, with silky hair and Araceli Hernandez’s enormous dark eyes. The header at the top of the page read “Our Adoption Story”.

“Oh, shit,” John said.

Sherlock was curled around himself next to John. “Read it.”

_Some of you might have read this before, because I post this every Mother’s Day in the hope that my daughter’s biological mother might someday read it. So if you can, please share and repost!_
Three years ago I had just turned forty. I had always hoped for a family of my own, but as I was unmarried I was beginning to accept that maybe this was not the Lord’s plan for me. I had just left all my friends and a job I loved in Houston to come back to San Antonio, because my mother had dementia and my sister couldn’t manage caring for her alone. I was blessed in that my wonderful supervisor at Planet Baby was able to arrange a job for me where I could work from home, so at least I was still working, but I missed talking to the customers.

And then one night my doorbell rang. I looked out the peephole and saw nothing, but I thought I heard a noise like a kitten meowing. I opened the door and there on the mat was a car seat, and in the car seat, crying, was the most beautiful baby in the world. There was an envelope taped to the handle with my name, Linda Stafford, on the front. There was a diaper bag next to the seat. I pulled everything into my apartment and ran outside looking, but of course I didn’t see anyone. Here is what the letter said.

Dear Ms. Stafford:

You don’t know me, when I first found out I was pregnant I called the new parent line to ask about baby things and I talked to you. You were so kind and helpful, and when I asked you what you bought for your own children you told me that you had always wanted children but that God had never blessed you with them. I had thought I wanted to keep the baby even though it would have been really hard, but I knew right then that God meant for you to have my baby.

Don’t try to find me. I had a friend bring her to you and by the time you read this I will be far away, starting a new life. You don’t have to worry I’ll change my mind.

God bless you.

Well, by the time I finished I was crying as hard as the baby. I remembered so many young girls who called, nervous and wanting to buy the best of everything for their babies even though they had no money at all. There was a can of formula in the diaper bag and a bottle, so I fed her while I waited for the police to come. She looked up at me with her big beautiful eyes as she drank it and I felt the most wonderful peace and happiness. I just knew that God would find a way for us to be together. And He did! The amazing people at children’s services expedited my application and helped me get into a training session that was already full, and just eight weeks after that night I was approved to be Madeleine’s foster mother. Two years after that the adoption was finalized. It was the happiest day of my life.

So every year on Mother’s Day I reach out in the hope that somewhere, somehow, Maddy’s birth mother will read this. I want her to know that that little baby is now a beautiful, healthy, happy girl who loves Elmo and Curious George. We remember her every night in our prayers, and hope that she has the new life that she wanted, and that God has blessed her there.

John had to swallow a few times. His eyes were stinging, and not from being woken before dawn.

“Linda Stafford used to be a customer service representative in a division of special marketing called ‘New Families,’” Sherlock said softly. “There was a number to call if parents had questions about what type of pushchair to buy or how to install a car seat. She worked with Wayne Ellis for years. He must have thought of her immediately when he realized the baby was viable.”
“The perfect mother,” John said. He looked at Linda Stafford’s radiant face, at the happy child clinging to her neck.

Sherlock pushed John’s laptop aside and replaced it with his own, this one open to Linda’s Facebook page. It was a photo album posted a week ago titled “Christmas”: dozens of photos of Madeleine twirling in a red dress, sitting on Father Christmas’ lap, making a gingerbread house, gleefully opening presents in her little footed pajamas.

“I don’t know what to do,” Sherlock said, very quietly. “John? What do we do?” His face was miserable and he had his arms wrapped around his knees.

John looked at the happy little family, the loving mother and daughter. He thought of the Hernandezes in their silent, empty house. He put his arms around Sherlock and pulled him close. “I think we tell the truth,” he said. “I think...we have to tell the truth, and trust that everyone involved will do the right thing.”

Julie Donovan closed the door of her office and sank into her desk chair with a sigh. The afternoon session was already underway, but so far things were running smoothly, and if she was lucky she’d be able to grab fifteen minutes to eat her lunch in peace. She pulled out her bag from under the desk and extracted her lunch sack and a copy of *People* magazine. She didn’t usually read *People*, but she’d caught sight of the cover on her way in and bought it on a whim.

Julie unwrapped her sandwich, looking at the magazine. “The Crib Killer: Terror in Texas”, screamed the headline, which seemed a little overwrought to Julie given that the guy had been caught—was anyone still terrified? The Crib Killer didn’t interest her so much as the smaller photo in the corner though: Sherlock bloody Holmes, with a caption reading: “The Mysterious British Detective!” Julie grinned and took a bit of her sandwich. She hoped Holmes had seen this.

She found the sidebar easily enough in the main Crib Killer story; the photo in that one showed John Watson too. He was handsome as ever, she thought, feeling a surge of affectionate nostalgia. The story was short on details and long on speculation. “Holmes was accompanied on the case by his longtime associate Dr. John Watson, a former doctor in the British Army. The two live together in London and have long been assumed by the London press to be a couple, though neither has ever confirmed the fact publicly.”

Hmmm, Julie though, chewing thoughtfully. She’d wondered about that herself. She flipped back to the beginning of the Crib Killer story to see if there was anything else about Holmes in there, but her eye was caught by another sidebar: “‘Our Little Miracle’: A Family Comes Together Around A Small Survivor”.

Julie hadn’t heard that bit. She was astounded that the murdered woman’s child had survived, let alone been found—oh look, Sherlock Holmes again. Aww. What was next, rescuing kittens from trees? Bit of a blow for the adoptive family though...or maybe not. “‘Having lost our own daughter, we would never dream of separating Madeleine from her mother,’ Araceli Hernandez’s parents said in a statement. ‘Linda is a wonderful person who is doing an exceptional job raising our granddaughter. While nothing can ever replace Araceli in our hearts, in Linda we feel that we have found another daughter, and we are very thankful.’

And as for Madeleine’s father, Daniel Obringer, he has only recently been released from prison and is considering a move to California, where his old firm has offered him a job. ‘I want to be part of my daughter’s life,’ Obringer told PEOPLE, ‘but only to the extent that she..."
and Linda are comfortable. I know I’m not in a place to be a full-time parent right now, and I
don’t ever want her to see me as the person who takes her from her mom. It’s just incredible
that she’s been alive all this time. She’s our little miracle.’

Linda herself, who asked that her last name not be revealed to protect her daughter’s privacy,
expressed sorrow for the family’s tragedy and gratitude for their kindness toward her. “I pray
for them every day. But I can’t help but be happy for Maddy—now she has a father and
grandparents in her life.”

Julie couldn’t help smiling. It almost gave you hope for humanity, that these people could all put the
interests of the kid above their own. Just as she was thinking this optimistic thought, a knock came at
her door and Eva stuck her head in. “Julie, sorry, I know you were trying to grab lunch, but there’s
an asshole on the phone who says he’s out front with a bomb and he’s going to come inside in five
minutes and blow us all up.”

“Shit, I just started my sandwich,” Julie said. “Did you lock the doors?”

“Craig’s on it.” Craig was the security guard.

“Well, start getting everybody out of the rooms…wait a minute. Did he say out front? Specifically?”

“Yeah, he said he was coming in the front door.”

“I bet there are some more out back with paint or cameras or something. Okay, listen. Get everybody
out of their rooms and to the back, but do not go out that door. Not yet, anyway. And check the
security cameras when you go back up.”

“Gotcha,” Eva said, leaving, and Julie picked up the phone and dialed 911.

“911, what’s your emergency?”

“Hi, this is Julie Donovan at Planned Parenthood, we have a bomb threat. We are proceeding with
our evacuation protocol and request that you send the police as soon as possible,” Julie rattled off,
pulling out her heavy coat and shrugging into it. She looked sadly at her sandwich. “No thank you,
I’m not going to remain on the line because I don’t want my bloody arse blown to hell. Have you
called them? Brilliant, thank you.” She hung up and went out into the hall.

The staff, no stranger to emergency evacuations, had already herded the patients into the back
corridor leading to the fire door. Several were in gowns, although most had grabbed their coats
against the bitter Chicago weather. Julie spotted one girl who looked as though she was barely in
junior high, trying to scrape her braided hair back up into a bun—she must have taken it out to lie
down on her back. The girl was crying, which made her angrier than ever.

“Fucking bastards,” another woman said. She was stick-skinny, with lank hair and bad teeth. “Are
they going to pay to raise this kid if I have it? Pay my rent when I can’t go to work? Buy food for my
other kids? Hell no. They’re the same shitheads who voted against funding for contraception. I
should go out there and kick their fucking asses.”

“Anybody out there?” Julie asked Eva.

“Yeah, three of them, looks like they have cameras. They’re about halfway up the chain-link fence.”

Julie looked at the crying girl and the stringy woman, who was wearing only a thin hoodie over her
gown, and felt a surge of righteous fury. She turned and strode down the hall to where the fire
extinguishers were kept—she had to maintain the fire safety logs, she damn well knew where they were—and came back with one for her and one for the woman in the hoodie. “You know how to use this?”

“Pull, Aim, Squeeze, Sweep,” the woman said, tapping the pin.

“Okay then?” Julie asked and the woman broke into a huge and rather terrifying grin. “Oh hell yeah.”

“Hood up,” Julie said and wound her own scarf around her lower face. “Ready? One, two—“

On three they burst out, going straight for the fence a few feet away and spraying the three men hanging on the chain link in a magnificent burst of foam. One of them fell right off, and the other two scrambled down quickly, yelling in pain and outrage and dropping their cameras. “Take that, you fuckers,” the skinny woman screamed, aiming her fire extinguisher squarely into the slowest man’s face. A loud cheer rose from the women crowding into the doorway, and Julie heard the sound of sirens.

“Okay, we’re good, let’s go,” she said quickly, grabbing the woman’s sleeve and tugging her back to the safety of the door.

“Looks like you’re all clear,” the guy from the bomb squad said. His name tag read “Robert Zdziechowski”, which Julie had given up on immediately. “No bombs in the building, nothing on any of the protesters we managed to detain outside. We still don’t know who called you, but that guy’s probably long gone. Unlikely he ever had a bomb.”

“Yeah, that’s what I thought too.” Julie finished her neglected sandwich and pulled out an orange. “You want half of this?”

“I’m good, thanks.” Robert Zdziechowski smiled, and Julie noticed that his eyes were a very bright blue. “I think one of the officers wants to talk to you, though. There are a couple of guys who claim they were assaulted behind the building.”

“Really? That’s terrible. It’s not the best neighborhood around here. They should be more careful.”

“They say they were attacked by women from the clinic, on your property.”

“Well, if they were on our property they were trespassing,” Julie said. “And I can tell you for a fact that no one was assaulted, because we were taking advantage of the downtime to do some fire safety drills while we waited for you lot to show up, so I would have noticed anyone being assaulted. Is it okay if I call you Robert? Looking at your name tag is making my eyes hurt.”

Zdziechowski laughed out loud. “It’s Rob. You don’t rattle easy, do you?”

“Would I work here if I did? You’re in the bomb squad; you must have nerves of steel yourself.”

“I did two tours in Iraq. I got out before I couldn’t adjust back, although not early enough to save my marriage…this seems pretty tame after that.”


“Still…you carry a gun?”
“Glock, yeah.”

“You good with it?”

“Pretty good,” Julie said. “I’m better with a rifle. I grew up on a station—what you call a ranch here—and there were always a lot of predators, dingoes and so on.” She had no idea if this was true—Anna Grace had grown up in Sydney—but she bet Rob didn’t either.

“Want to go out to the range sometime, get some practice? I’m free this weekend. My ex has the kids.”

Julie looked up consideringly at Rob’s well-filled uniform and bright blue eyes. Not bad at all. “That sounds good,” she said. “Trade numbers?”

On her way home Julie bought a new burner phone, a cheap thing with no features but with prepaid minutes. When she reached her apartment she shucked her coat and boots, retrieved her old burner phone and plugged in the new one, and poured a glass of wine. It was after midnight in London, but her handler answered on the first ring, as she always did. “Jezebel.”

“Hey, it’s me,” Julie said, smiling. She liked Jezebel, whose warm Irish lilt always made Julie feel as though she were talking to a girlfriend. Her old handler had been much more distant. “Sorry to wake you.”

“Julie! What’s up, everything all right?”

“Oh sure, things are fine. I’ve a date for this weekend and I need a background check.”

“Ooh, spill,” Jezebel said. “It’ll take me a moment to get the computer up and into the system.”

“Bit taller than me, bit older, very nice muscles, really nice eyes—looks a bit like Mel Gibson, you know, back when Mel was hot and before he was crazy.”

“Sounds yummy,” Jezebel said. There was a pause, then she said, “And what would Mel’s name be then?”


“Okay, got him. He was in the military, did you know that?”

“Yeah, he told me, said he was in ordnance disposal.”

“He was telling the truth. Two tours, no trouble, a couple decorations…nothing to indicate it was a cover for intelligence or anything we’d worry about. I’ll run it by Himself in the morning to see if he wants to look deeper, but I think you’re in the clear.”

“Brilliant,” Julie said, pleased. She took a sip of her wine. “Speaking of His Spookiness, his brother made the tabloids here.”

“What, Sherlock? He never did! What for?”

“Do you know him?”

“Oh God, yeah. It’s down to him I’ve got this job, cause I helped him put my boss away at my old one.”
“So he and John Watson, are they…?”

Jezebel laughed. “They are. It’s funny, I met Sherlock because he asked me to dinner; he was planning to charm his way into getting me to give up the dirt on my boss. But I knew before they poured the wine he was gayer than flowers in springtime. I didn’t call him on it until dessert though. You should have seen him, he was so relieved—I think he was petrified he’d have to get into my knickers to keep up the act.”

Julie giggled into her wine. “Bastard. You know I shot him in the arse once? I should have aimed more to the center.”

“You didn’t!”

“I had a contract on a retired Mafia boss…” Julie told the story, relishing Jezebel’s throaty laugh. It was a little sad, she thought wistfully, that her best friend was a woman she would never meet face to face, living an entire ocean away.

“Well,” she said when they’d finished having a laugh, “It’s been lovely talking to you, but I know it’s the middle of the night for you. I’d best let you get back to bed.”

“I want to hear all about Mel Gibson after the weekend. Promise me?”

“I’ll ring you Sunday morning…that’ll be afternoon your time. All right?”

“All right. Take care, love.”

“You too.”

Chapter End Notes

Some time after this story wraps up, Sally Donovan is going to marry Darren the giant investigator, and Roz will come to London for the wedding. Roz will reluctantly dress up but refuse to wear a hat (“I hate them and I’m too tall anyway”) and will be seated at the reception with John, Sherlock, and Lestrade. By the end of the evening all four of them will be uproariously drunk—even Sherlock—and will laugh so hard that at one point John will be seriously concerned that Lestrade is actually suffering a heart attack. (He isn’t.)

Ryan will eventually be promoted and become quite a big deal in the FBI, and she and Sherlock will maintain a mutually beneficial acquaintance, although they never communicate except about cases.

If you've been lulled into domestic complacency...the action picks back up in the next chapter
Days became weeks, and weeks became months. For the most part they were good months for Sherlock. There were cases and baffled calls from Lestrade and the occasional odd problem from Mycroft. There was bad telly and good music; they saw Tiernan the Tenor in *Carmen* and someone else in *On Wenlock Edge*, which John had spotted in the papers and bought tickets when he realized Housman had written the poems. John made him watch *The Last of the Mohicans*. Sherlock cooked a sea bass so good it made John close his eyes as though in prayer and swore he would never miss red meat as long as he had Sherlock to do the cooking. They kept up their workouts; John’s cholesterol stayed under the limit and he only rarely cheated, and Sherlock hadn’t touched a cigarette in years (not that he wasn’t tempted. Often).

There was their fifth anniversary, which they spent in Florence, and Christmas, which had shifted to Sherlock’s parents’ house a few years back when Father’s knee surgery had curtailed the Holmes’ usual winter travels. This had become an annual event: John, Sherlock, Mycroft, Lestrade, Molly, her mum, Mrs. Hudson, Harry, and eventually Harry’s girlfriend, all riding out in a caravan and having a merry time. The holiday by now had its own traditions: the card game started by Sherlock, who had never lost his fondness for poker after the Ronald Adair case, and which was always won by Mummy (*Every. Bloody. Year*); the annual screaming row between Mycroft and Sherlock (over the seating arrangements, the wine, the music—Mycroft favored big band and “Chestnuts roasting on an open fire”); the way every year John got drunk enough that Sherlock was able to persuade him to enthusiastically fuck him on Sherlock’s childhood bed. Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s bedrooms shared a wall. Lestrade usually led them in singing carols, although he never tried “God rest ye drunk detectives” again—either out of a sense of propriety or because he was scared of Mummy; Sherlock wasn’t sure.

There was sex, of course, loads of sex: long epic sec in John’s old sunny bedroom, tender sex in their bed with the lights out, teeth-rattling manic sex after a case, and—occasionally—rough, controlling sex, when Sherlock couldn’t manage the input anymore. And always there was John: John with his crinkling eyes and warm smile, John who praised Sherlock’s violin and his cooking and his beauty and his mind, John who rubbed Sherlock’s feet and bought him warm socks.

Things weren’t perfect, of course. John could get short-tempered and snappish and Sherlock still had dark patches, and sometimes they fought, just as all couples did. Mostly the fights blew over quickly enough, but since both John and Sherlock were quite expert at holding a grudge, occasionally things got out of hand. There was one particularly nasty argument that mushroomed into a full-blown battle, both of them dragging out all the usual sore points (*you treat me like a child*/*you ACT like a child/controlling/selfish/pedestrian/spoilt*), John red-faced and furious whilst Sherlock went icy and cutting. It finally ended with John slamming his way upstairs to spend the night in his old bedroom. Sherlock, immediately sorry but still seething with resentment, knew he wouldn’t sleep alone in their bed, so he sat up all night organizing case notes and rehashing arguments in his head.

In the morning John was stiff and distant and they spent the next two days like that. Sherlock, who by now did most of the cooking when they didn’t have a case, did not set foot in the kitchen. John made beans on toast and didn’t offer any to Sherlock, not that he would have eaten any, beans on toast was *disgusting*. John spent his nights upstairs, and Sherlock spent his on the sofa. He didn’t sleep much.
The third day was Sunday, which was Sherlock’ day for a long run, and usually they would run together as far as the turnoff for John’s gym and later go out for brunch. Sherlock was already in his running clothes when John came down, but John was wearing his regular shoes and jacket—apparently he was just going straight to the gym. Sherlock felt a hot, tight knot of anger and hurt in his chest. Well, fine then. If John didn’t want to be with him, he didn’t want to be with John either. He snatched his keys and phone and slammed off down the stairs.

As soon as he set off on the Thames path Sherlock felt better. The cold damp air cleared his head, although he was still filled with self-righteous fury. It felt good to pound along the river, letting the rhythm gradually untangle the resentful snarl of his thoughts, miserable anger seeping away. He reached his usual turnaround point and kept going. Just a little farther, he decided, and then his mind would be completely clear, and when he got home they could talk this all out.

A mile or so later he was forced to halt—idiots taking pictures—and as soon as he stopped, a wave of dizziness came over him. His head swam. Sherlock groped for a bench, legs shaking, and sank onto it, dropping his head between his legs and hoping desperately that he wouldn’t be sick. Damn it! He was just as foolish as John always said. He was miles from home, hypoglycemic, dehydrated, and had no money. Well, at least he had his phone—he might be stupid, but he wasn’t an idiot.

Sherlock managed to get to the road and into a cab, though he had to ring Mrs. Hudson on the way to have her bring down some cash. Fortunately she was in; even more fortunately she had her Sunday baking in the oven and didn’t stay to bother him with questions. Sherlock wobbled out onto the pavement, his legs like water, and then the sparkles in his vision cleared to show John, striding down the street from the direction of the gym. John gave him a stiff nod, then stopped and frowned.

“You okay?”

“Fine,” Sherlock managed, lifting his chin and trying to sweep haughtily to the door but staggering into a lamppost instead.

John caught him, one arm going around Sherlock’s shoulders and the other around his narrow, trembling waist. “No, you’re not. You haven’t eaten a thing for three days and you just tried to run to bloody Oxford, didn’t you.”

Sherlock stiffened, bracing for the patronizing you really are an idiot or how you managed to stay alive before I came along I’ll never know, but instead John went on easily, “I’ve done that a few times. Mostly in the Army. Once I was sick all over myself and had to get a ride back—God, that was embarrassing.”

Sherlock immediately melted. He put his own shaky arms around John and tucked his head into John’s shoulder, letting John stroke his back. Sherlock just stood there with his eyes closed a few minutes drinking in the comfort of John’s touch and smell, knowing he was making a bit of a scene but not really caring, and then when he thought he could keep his voice steady he said, “John?”

“Yeah?”

“I can’t even remember what we were fighting about.”

John laughed. “Me neither. Come on, I’ll make us some breakfast.”

John kept a steady arm around Sherlock until he was deposited in a kitchen chair, where he drank two cups of very sweet tea whilst John made an egg white omelette with tomatoes for himself and scrambled the yolks with cheese for Sherlock. He piled this on buttery toast and Sherlock honestly thought he had never tasted anything so delicious in his entire life. When they had finished he fell asleep on the sofa whilst John rubbed his feet, and after that everything was fine again.
The case that would upend their lives started innocuously enough, with a girl with blue hair.

Sherlock found himself oddly drawn to the blue hair. Ordinarily he was of the opinion that hair, like food, should not as a rule be blue, but Violet Hunter’s hair was peculiarly striking with her dark eyes and red lips. It was the only reason he kept listening after she started in complaining about her boss, an irony he would not recognize until later, as Violet’s hair was in fact central to the case.

“I mean, she’s a bit uptight, but I never thought she’d go mental about me coloring my hair,” Violet said earnestly. “Look who she’s married to!”

Violet was a nanny. The boss in question was a photographer named Jessica Rucastle, who was married to a rock star of fading fame and glory called Davy Dreadful. Sherlock had never heard of him, but John had practically fallen out of his seat when Violet mentioned him—he’d apparently been a fan of either the man’s music or his looks at some point; Sherlock rather thought the latter from the way he blushed when Sherlock stared at him.

“I mean, I told her when she hired me I’d be cutting it eventually,” Violet went on. “I let it get to here and then I cut it off for one of the charities that make wigs, you know, for kids with cancer. But I suppose she forgot.”

“Is that your only issue with the position?” Sherlock asked, wondering why on earth the girl thought this was a case for a detective.

“No, there’s a lot of weird stuff. And then there’s the stalker…”

Violet’s employers lived on an estate in Hampshire called the Copper Beeches. Both of them were frequently away in London, and even when at home were often in their separate studios on the grounds (“although I don’t think Davy does anything in his but shag local girls. He’s an awful perv, tried to get in my knickers the first week”). Jessica was uptight but not difficult, and she sometimes paid Violet extra to pose for her when Jessica was trying different layouts for shots.

“Like, she has this account for an outdoor supply company, so she had me pose wearing an old electric-blue backpack. I wanted to send a copy to my mum, but you couldn’t even see my face in the pictures, just my hair.”

“Was this before you dyed it?”

“Yeah. It was really long…here.” Violet held out her phone and Sherlock studied it. The screen showed Violet in what was evidently a selfie, a long mane of glossy, red-brown hair flowing over one shoulder.

“You did have lovely hair,” John commented, leaning over.

Violet tossed her blue bob. “It grows back, yeah? And those kids need it more than me.”

“What about the stalker?” Sherlock asked.

A few weeks after her arrival Violet had answered the house phone and a man had asked for Alice. He had called several more times, becoming progressively angrier when told he had the wrong number. Violet had also noticed a man on the road watching the house with binoculars, and reported this to Jessica.

“She went mental. Finally she told me that Alice was her daughter from her first marriage, that she’d
gone on a hiking trip in the Himalayas and decided to stay and work with an aid organization there. She said Alice had a crazy ex-boyfriend and wanted to get away from him. I was like, wow, I never knew you had a daughter, cause there’s no pictures or anything, and she said something like Alice spent her holidays with her dad until he died. But then she got these totally scary guard dogs and I’m like, overreacting much? I mean if this was her daughter’s stalker why does she need guard dogs?”

Sherlock’s neck prickled in a way that made him glad he hadn’t tossed the girl out immediately. “Why indeed,” he said, standing and crossing to the desk in a single swift motion. “Is Alice’s last name Rucastle?”

“I don’t think so…I get the post sometimes, for the housekeeper, and after she said that I saw a letter, official looking, addressed to Jessica Rucastle trustee for Alice Thewlis.”

The prickle intensified. “A trust means money.” Sherlock was busy on his laptop, typing swiftly, and after a minute he said, “Does this picture look familiar?”

John and Violet both got up and peered over his shoulder. The picture was on Alice Thewlis’ Facebook page and showed a young woman looking out over a snowy mountain vista. The picture was taken from behind so her face was not visible, only her bright blue backpack and a long fall of shining chestnut hair.

“Wait a minute,” Violet said slowly. “That’s…that’s me, that’s the picture she took in the studio! That’s my black jumper, and I see my earring—but there was just a plain backdrop when she took it —“

“Photoshop,” Sherlock said, turning the laptop back and scrolling down the page.

Violet had gone pale, which made her hair look brighter than ever. “What the fuck. Why is that picture of me on her page? Where’s Alice?”

Sherlock thought Alice was very likely dead, but the last thing he wanted was to alarm Violet so much that she bolted from her job at the Copper Beeches. “I don’t know,” he said, scrolling down the page and making a mental note of the sparseness of the postings. “Are you on Facebook?”

“Me? Yeah, but I just put stuff on there for my mum and my gran, mostly. None of my friends really use it.”

“What do most people your age use then?”

“Instagram, Twitter, Selphie…that’s kind of a new one.”

Alice Thewlis’s Instagram had many of the same pictures as the Facebook page, but her Selphie account had nothing more recent than several months ago. There were, however, several comments from a Felix Fowler, saying things like “I know you’re out there somewhere” and “I’ll never give up on you, no matter what your lying bitch of a mother says.”

Sherlock grinned fiercely, but remembered to rearrange his face into an expression of concern before turning to face the others. “I think we should have a chat with Felix,” he said.

It took Sherlock only a few days to track down Felix Fowler, who was delighted to meet with them. Violet, fortunately, had turned out to have considerably more backbone than Sherlock had expected. She had no intention of leaving the Copper Beeches until they found out what had happened to Alice.
“Using my hair to make me impersonate her own daughter,” she said furiously. “That’s so not fucking on.”

Felix turned out to be a fount of useful information.

“Davy Dreadful’s bankrupt,” he told them, leaning over his coffee in the small café in Winchester and speaking with such intensity Sherlock had to fight the urge to lean away. “His record company dropped him a year ago, but Jessica keeps paying for his studio in London and telling him it’s the company. Her money is keeping the whole sham afloat because she’s obsessed with him even though he’s a complete disgusting tosser.”

Sherlock heard John give a tiny disillusioned sigh.

“Except it’s not her money, is it,” Sherlock said.

“No. It’s Alice’s. But her mum has control over it until Alice is twenty-five—her dad never changed his will after they divorced. Alice had decided that when she came back from the Himalayas she was going to get her own solicitor and try to have Jessica removed as trustee. She didn’t do it before because she was scared they’d cut her off and she’d never see her half-brother again, and anyway she’d just turned twenty-one a few months ago.”

“When was the last time you heard from her?”

“That I believe was really her? Almost a year ago. Her first few emails were all legit, I’d swear it. But then I got this email talking about how she’d realized how unimportant money and stuff was now that she was in Nepal, and she was going to stay there and concentrate on helping people, and since she wasn’t coming back for a while she thought it was better if we were just friends.”

“But you didn’t believe it?”

“No way. It didn’t sound anything like her. I emailed, I called, I went round to her mum’s…and then Jessica got a court order, told the police I was a mad stalker.” The young man flushed. “If you were only hearing her side of it, I guess I did sound rather mental. You probably don’t remember, but I tried to hire you several months ago.”

Sherlock blinked. “I do remember. I responded but several weeks had gone by—we’d been busy with a serial killer case in Texas.”

“Yeah, I…” Felix rubbed at his mouth. “I got sectioned, and when I got out I thought maybe I should try to move on, but…I just can’t let it go.”

Sherlock felt an uncomfortable throb of guilt, but John, as usual, knew exactly what to say. “Alice is an extraordinarily lucky young lady,” he said kindly.

Felix looked up sadly. “I just want to know, one way or the other, and if her mum did something…so what happens now? Do we confront her?”

Sherlock bit his lip, but he felt the fierce grin lurking at the corners of his mouth again anyway. “No,” he said. “Alice does.”

“You should be totally fine in here. Davy’s in London until tomorrow,” Violet said, unlocking the door to Davy Dreadful’s studio on the grounds of the Copper Beeches. The guard dogs, locked in their nearby kennel, were barking furiously. “You can’t see this building from anywhere in the house
and Jessica never goes to her studio after dark, so nobody should see you.”

“Remember to text me as soon as you’re free to keep an eye on her,” Sherlock said.

“The minute I’m sure Jack’s down for the night. I’d best get back, he’s watching a DVD but it’s a short one.”

Violet left and Sherlock, Felix and John looked around the studio for someplace to sit. “I’m going to keep watch just in case,” Sherlock told John, dragging a high stool over to the window. The dogs finally gave up hysterically trying to warn their owners of the intruders in the studio, and fell silent.

Twilight thickened into darkness. John wandered around the studio, looking at framed album covers that showed Davy Dreadful in his glory days and poking at the guitars that hung on the walls. “Do you play?” Felix asked.

John shook his head, smiling. “Just the clarinet at school. I was a big fan back when I was your age though.”

“Let’s put something on.” Felix slid off the sofa and went to the equipment against the far wall; a minute later a thumping cacophony erupted from the speakers and Sherlock glared at Felix as he sheepishly adjusted the volume. “Hey, I know this one. Davy might be an arsehole, but he was pretty good back in the day.”

“I used to hear this song clubbing,” John said reminiscently. He crossed over to Sherlock and held out a hand. “Feel like dancing, gorgeous?”

“How can you dance to this?”

John laughed. “Like this.” Completely unselfconscious, he began shimmying in the darkened studio and a minute later Felix joined him, the two of them laughing and swaying and doing the occasional hip bump.

After a few songs John said, “Okay, that takes more stamina than I remember,” and came over to lean by Sherlock, grinning down at him as he wiped his forehead. “Didn’t you ever go dancing?”

“I love dancing, but not like that. Proper dancing.”

“Oh what, the waltz? Sir Roger de Coverly?”

Actually Sherlock had spent several happy years learning ballet before deciding on his arrival at Eton that his enemies had enough ammunition, but he was not about to admit it. “Do you have a problem with waltzing?”

John laughed. “Not if I knew how. Maybe you can teach me some day.”

“I can waltz,” Felix said unexpectedly. “Here.” He fiddled about with his phone for a minute, found a speaker he could plug it into, and a fast but familiar beat filled the air.

“Prince?” John said in disbelief.

“’1999’ has a waltz beat, I swear.” Felix held out a hand to Sherlock, who hesitated and then slid off the seat. Oh, why not. “Uh, who leads?”

“You can,” Sherlock said, not because he pictured himself as the girl but because he thought of the two of them he was more likely to be able to manage dancing backward without falling over. He
took Felix’s hand feeling a bit uncomfortable, but then Felix whirled him off and he forgot everything but keeping up. John was right—dancing was harder work at their age, and by the end of the song he was panting and sweating too. Felix bowed with surprising grace and Sherlock, still in the spirit of the thing, dropped an elegant curtsy.

John was clapping. “Brilliant! I can see we’re going to be having some tutorials when we get back to London.”

“Hush,” Sherlock said, straightening abruptly. He had just seen what looked like headlights sweep onto the drive and, right on cue, the dogs began barking again. Thank heavens they’d hidden their car a good distance away. “Turn that off, quickly, and find a place to hide,” he said urgently.

“Back here,” John said, darting through the door leading behind the half-glassed wall that separated the recording space proper and sliding down with his back to the wall.

“Phones,” Sherlock hissed, silencing his own just as the door scraped open behind them.

“Ooh, very nice,” a woman’s voice said, giggling.

“Bloody dogs,” a man said, voice hoarse and slightly slurred. “Right nuisance, they are…let me get the door shut and I’ll let them out, it’s an electronic gate.”

“Is that safe?” The woman sounded nervous.

“Yeah, they’ll go back to their kennel when they don’t catch anyone.”

There was a distant metallic scraping noise and the dogs stopped barking, evidently pelting off on the scent of all the strangers who had trod through their territory that evening.

“Now, where were we?” the man, evidently Davy Dreadful, was saying. “Oh yeah, I was saying how good your dress looks…and how much better it would look on my floor.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and caught John’s cringe of embarrassment. His phone buzzed in his hand, and he looked down to see a text from Violet: In position.

Sherlock hesitated, but he was like the dogs now: he couldn’t stop until he had run his quarry to ground. He switched to his drafts folder and hit SEND on the email he had ready, which would route through a server in Asia. The email purported to be from Alice Thewlis, saying that she had spent the last several months fighting for her life in a remote Nepalese hospital and now was preparing to return home. Then he sat back to wait. Sherlock was not a particularly patient person, and this waiting was made even worse than usual by the sounds coming from the open door to the main studio.

“I can’t believe I’m actually with you,” the woman was saying breathlessly. “I used to have your poster on my wall!”

Sherlock raised his eyebrows at John, who was determinedly not meeting his eye.

“Slow down, love, I’m not as young as I was,” Davy mumbled.

“God, he’s vile,” Felix whispered and John and Sherlock both glared him into silence.

Sherlock’s phone lit up with a text. I think she got it. She’s just jumped up. Looks shocked.

Watch her. SH
A few minutes passed.

*She’s going for her coat. She’s going outside.*

“The dogs!” John whispered, but Sherlock was already typing: *The dogs are out. Will they hurt her?*

*SH*

*IDK*

*How did they get out?*

Sherlock was burning with impatience. *Why, oh why, couldn’t Davy have taken his latest conquest to a cheap hotel? WHERE DID SHE GO?* *SH*

*I’m watching from the window—she’s in her studio, the lights are on*

*Can you see what she’s doing? SH*

*No*

*She’s coming out*

*Is she carrying anything? SH*

There must be something, some proof of Alice’s death that Jessica Rucastle was after. If she’d left it in the studio, they needed only wait until Davy and the dogs were done for the night and search Jessica’s studio.

*I think so but she turned out the lights*

Sherlock bit his lip, John and Felix both crowding into him to read over his shoulders, and had just started to type *Watch* when there was a sudden explosion of barking outside and then a woman’s long, high-pitched scream.

“Oh shit,” John said and he was up and running, not a second’s hesitation. Sherlock scrambled up after him and hissed at Felix, “Close the door!” before he bolted through the outer room, eliciting a startled yelp from the sofa. The night outside was dark and moonless and he was momentarily disoriented, unable to see the direction John had taken, but he blindly followed the cacophony of screams and barking, stumbling and cursing as he went. “John!”

There was the loud crack of a shot, and then two more, and abruptly the night fell quiet. Sherlock’s ears were ringing—he must have been closer than he realized—but then the ringing cleared and he heard the sound of a woman moaning. He ran forward and almost crashed into John, who was bending over to pick something up off the ground. “Are you all right?”

“Fine,” John said calmly. The bodies of three large dogs lay dead on the ground, surrounding the huddled form of Jessica Rucastle, who was clutching her bleeding arm and leg. John held up what he was holding so Sherlock could see it: a clear plastic bag, holding a coiled plait of long, coppery-brown hair.

“Oh my God,” a high, trembling voice said. Violet had evidently run out of the house at the sound of screaming, clutching a cricket bat for a weapon. “That’s—that’s my hair. How can she have my hair?”

“Oh my God,” a high, trembling voice said. Violet had evidently run out of the house at the sound of screaming, clutching a cricket bat for a weapon. “That’s—that’s my hair. How can she have my hair?”

“That’s not yours.” Felix said, coming up behind Sherlock. “That’s Alice’s.” He crossed to Jessica
and grabbed her by the arms roughly, hauling her to her feet. “Where is Alice?” he shouted into her face, eyes bulging with rage.

“I don’t know!” Jessica screamed back. She looked deranged, hair wild and her face spattered with blood, eyes almost as wide as Felix’s. “I thought she was dead! They sent me her hair and her backpack and said they threw her body in a ravine but tonight I got an email from her!”

“That was from us,” Sherlock said. Something was nagging at the back of his mind, like a cat scratching at a door, but all the racket was distracting him.

“Who the hell are you?” Jessica demanded.

“They’re detectives,” Felix said.

Jessica sagged in defeat and the Davy Dreadful, who had come puffing up whilst Felix was shouting, said, “What the bloody fuck?” Davy was completely starkers, a fact which did not seem to bother him one whit. Sherlock privately thought that being clothed would not have helped a great deal: Davy’s face was seamed with hard living and his long, thinning hair was dyed an unconvincing shade of yellow. “You killed Alice?”

“Yeah, she did,” John said. He seemed unable to look at Davy.

“You’re a bloody nutter,” Davy said in tones of wonder. “I’m out of here. I can’t have this kind of publicity, you know that.” He gave Jessica a kindly pat on the shoulder. “Sorry love.”

“You’ve got a kid!” Violet shouted at him. “What about Jacky?”

“Oh.” Davy stopped to consider. “Would you mind looking after him for now, Viv?”

“It’s Violet, you washed-up wanker!”

“We’ll take him to his gran,” Felix intervened. “Her mum.” He jerked his chin at Jessica. “She and Alice always got on.”

“You’re leaving?” Jessica Rucastle only now seemed to be recovering the power of speech. She was white with fury. “After everything I’ve done for you, you’re leaving me?”

Davy shrugged, already turning away. ”Well, yeah, you’re mental.”

Jessica screamed in pure, elemental fury, and it took all three of them to hold her back as she launched herself at Davy with her fingernails hooked into claws.

“You were amazing,” Sherlock said on the way back to town. Felix had stayed at the Copper Beeches to help sort out matters with little Jack and provide backup in case Davy decided to be a nuisance to Violet. Jessica, of course, had been arrested.

John glanced over from the passenger seat, smiling. “Me? I was amazing? Thought that was my line.”

Sherlock’s mouth quirked. “You didn’t think for an instant about your own safety, just ran out there and saved a woman’s life. You didn’t miss a single shot and Jessica Rucastle hadn’t a scratch—well, at least not from you.”

John shrugged. “That’s my job, right? You’re the brains and I’m the muscle.”
“You’re far more than just the muscle, although it’s very fine muscle.” John’s smile broadened and Sherlock went on, “I do hope you aren’t hungry. I want to get back to the inn and shag you senseless.”

John’s eyebrows went up and now it was Sherlock who smiled: he loved to catch John by surprise. “Oh, you do, do you? And just how do you plan to do that?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You know how.” John was teasing, a little. They had at some point or other tried every conceivable sexual position and permutation, because Sherlock would always try anything, but his preferred repertoire as a top was rather limited. Something about the sight of John prostrate—or worse, spread wide—beneath him gave Sherlock a deep sense of wrongness he didn’t like to examine too closely. It probably said something about his relation to authority figures that he just didn’t want to know.

“Hmmm,” John said, pretending to consider. “I could have something to eat, or I could spend the rest of the evening riding your cock—which is exceptionally long, by the way, and quite satisfying—and that’s after you spend about an hour opening me up very, very slowly so that by the time I finally slide down on top of you and take you all the way inside of me I’m desperately hard—“

“Shut up,” Sherlock said, heat rising in his face and prickling over his chest.

“—and God knows we haven’t had sex in over a week because of this case so when I come all over your face with your cock deep inside me there will be gobs of it everywhere—“

“John—”

“—and then I’m going to have you pinned down with all my weight on you and I’ll be clenching around that long hard prick and I’ll reach down and pinch your nipples and—“

“Stop it,” Sherlock said through clenched teeth, “or I’ll have to pull the car over and have you right here. It’s been over a week for me too, you know.”

Sherlock did love to take his time with preparation, but by the time they got back to the inn he was already so hot and bothered from the conversation that he rather rushed things by his standards—not that John seemed to mind. Now Sherlock was stretched out full length on the over-soft bed, fingers gripping the brass headboard and his toes curling as John’s muscular thighs clenched and unclenched, sliding up and down Sherlock’s length in a rapidly increasing tempo.

“Oh, God,” John moaned, pausing in his frantic jerking of his own cock to stroke slowly over the head. “God, you feel so good inside me, I’m not going to last much longer—“

“Not yet,” Sherlock gasped—he was close, but not that close. The sensation of John surrounding him, sheathing him in pure pleasure was always just this side of overwhelming, and he had to consciously shut his attention down for brief periods.

“Sherlock,” John groaned, fisting his cock again, and Sherlock grabbed for him. He clutched John’s left wrist in one hand as he gripped his hips, holding John still so he could thrust up into his endless heat and oh God, that was incredible, that was going to do the job for sure…

“Oh fuck,” John said, head falling back and pushing back against Sherlock’s thrusts. “Do it, come on. I want to feel you come inside me, give it to me,” and Sherlock did, crying out and pushing up with all his strength as John slammed his full weight down against him. John groaned again at the feel of Sherlock’s cock spasming inside him and fell forward over Sherlock, bracing himself with
one hand as he pumped himself hard with the other, and then Sherlock felt him clench tightly around him as he came, wringing a burst of aftershock from Sherlock’s spent prick.

“Jesus,” John gasped, supporting himself on one trembling arm. “We should do that more often.”

“Mmmm,” Sherlock purred, sated and limp and immediately sleepy.

John panted a moment and then pulled off, a rush of warm semen cascading onto Sherlock’s already sweat- and come-slicked abdomen. “God, you’re a mess,” John said, reaching for the towel. “There’s come in your hair.”

“Wipe it off, it’s your come,” Sherlock said lazily.

John wiped him off. “How come even when you’re nominally topping I end up doing all the work?”

“Because you’re a bossy bottom,” Sherlock said promptly and John laughed and flicked him with the towel. Then he tossed Sherlock his pajamas and pulled on his own and lay down beside Sherlock, groaning a little at his sore arse, and Sherlock immediately wound himself completely around John and fell into a deep, contented sleep.

Sherlock woke as abruptly and thoroughly as if he had been doused in cold water. He knew what he had missed earlier.

For a moment he just lay there, cold sweat trickling down his back and heart hammering hard enough he was sure John could feel it through his rib cage, but John stayed still and sleeping in the tangle of Sherlock’s limbs. Sherlock carefully unwound himself and slid silently from the bed, padding over to the window alcove. The moon had come out at last and he could see the whole expanse of lawn spread beneath him, wide and empty, but the terror did not abate.

Some time later John stirred and set up on the bed behind him. “Sherlock?”

“It’s all right. Go back to sleep.”

John’s voice sharpened with concern. “What’s wrong? Did you have a nightmare?” Sherlock heard him hiss as his bare feet touched the cold floor, and then John was behind him, touching his shoulder where Sherlock sat hunched on the window seat, hand curled at his mouth.

“Jessica Rucastle,” Sherlock said dully. “She didn’t do this alone.”

“Well, yeah, she had somebody in the Himalayas do it, didn’t she? So she said.”

“She’s a photographer from Hampshire,” Sherlock said. “How do you think she arranged a murder in the Himalayas? She had to have help. Professional help.”

“Professional…” Sherlock heard the penny drop in John’s sharply indrawn breath. “You think it was him. Moriarty. You think he’s back.”

“Yes,” Sherlock said very quietly, still staring down at the empty lawn.

John was silent a moment, hand resting on Sherlock’s shoulder. Then he blew out a breath and wrapped his arms around Sherlock’s huddled body, pulling him into the warmth of his chest. “So we find him and we bring him down,” John said matter-of-factly. “As many times as it takes.”

Sherlock twisted his head to frown up at John but John smiled back at him. “He doesn’t have
“Superpowers, Sherlock,” he said gently. “He’s just a man. A clever, ruthless man, but so what? So are you. And besides, you’ve got something he doesn’t.”

“What?” Sherlock said suspiciously.

“Me.”

The tight knot in Sherlock’s chest loosened abruptly. “You’re right,” he said. He unclenched himself enough to wind one frozen arm around John’s back. “I have you. He doesn’t stand a chance.”

“Nope,” John said cheerfully. “Now can we go back to bed? Your hands are like ice.”

“I won’t sleep,” Sherlock warned, straightening his stiff legs with some difficulty.

“I probably won’t either, but at least we won’t do the job for him by dying of frostbite.”

Under the covers, the bed was still warm. John pulled Sherlock into his arms and Sherlock curled up gratefully, realizing that John was holding him as he did when Sherlock was deep in depression or obliterated from sex. He didn’t care. He felt warm and safe. He burrowed his cold nose into John’s shirt and thought of nesting things; soft-furred rabbits, cats curled together by a stove. Warmth.

Sherlock had been sure he would not sleep, but somehow without realizing it he slid into a dream where he was lying someplace warm, in the sun. The sea, maybe…no, he could hear children splashing and laughing: a swimming pool. The laughter took on a sharper, darker edge as he listened and Sherlock tensed instinctively, but the laughter was distant: not aimed at him. Sherlock opened his eyes and propped himself on his elbows. He had never seen the group of boys before, but he recognized the leader immediately: Carl Powers, arrogant and resplendent. The dark-haired, pale-skinned boy who was backing away was at once familiar and yet not.

Me, Sherlock thought, not me — the dark hair was straight, and the eyes that met Sherlock’s as the boy turned were dark: fathomless black pools that reflected back only Sherlock’s own face.

Sherlock sat up. The bed beside him was empty and full sun was streaming through the window; the sky was blue and clear. John came from the en suite, toweling his hair. “You fell back asleep,” he said, smiling.

“I know where to start,” Sherlock said. “I know where to start looking.”

Carl Powers’ school had been investigated inside out, upside down, and sideways, but no one had ever thought to look at the rest of the swim team.

“Almost all the boys went to the same school,” Sherlock said to John, tapping the records with a fingertip, “but not all. Look at this one. James Allen—he was on the team only one year, and he didn’t attend Lewes House.”

“A comprehensive? A Catholic school?”

“We need to find someone who knew about the team in 1989,” Sherlock said.

“James Allen.” The coach frowned down at the roster, then went to a groaning bookshelf and found a scrapbook which he brought back to the table. “Don’t remember him at all…he didn’t win anything I can see. Doesn’t look like he was very good from these time trials. Ah, here’s the picture.”
The coach ran his finger along the names. “This must be him. Still doesn’t ring a bell.”

Sherlock looked at the shadowed face of the dark-haired boy in the picture, who was ducking his head as though hoping not to be seen, and felt his neck prickle.

“You know who they want,” the coach’s wife said, leaning over the picture. “Mabel Donaldson.” She touched the photo. “Those are two of her boys there, aren’t they?”


“Ah, she was team mum for a donkey’s age. Had four boys and all good swimmers. You know the type—organize the fete, the snacks, the present for the coach at the end of the year—“

“Always a dreadful tie,” the wife said reminiscently.

“She knew everything about everybody, Mabel did. That’s who you want to talk to.”

“James Allen,” Mabel Donaldson said. She had agreed to talk to them if they came to the parish hall where she was arranging tables for a dinner, still sharp-eyed and bossy well into her seventies. “Oh, I remember him. Irish boy, rather shy. Lived with his grandparents. I think he had a tutor. Never saw the grandmother—at work all the time.” Mrs. Donaldson’s disdainful sniff let them know exactly what she thought of that. “No wonder the daughter turned out how she did.”

“Turned out…how?”

“Well, no better than she ought, obviously,” Mrs. Donaldson said. “Ran off with some Irishman—probably Catholic to boot—and clearly he never married her, or the boy wouldn’t have had her last name.”

Sherlock, who found all religions equally ridiculous, still bristled instinctively on John’s behalf, but John just said mildly, “What happened to his mother?”

Mrs. Donaldson waved dismissively. “I never heard. Took up with another wastrel, no doubt.”

“Can you remember anything about James’ grandmother?” Sherlock asked. “Where she worked, first name?”

“She was a scientist of some kind. Her name…” Mrs. Donaldson frowned. “Her husband called her Rose, but that was a nickname, I remember from the paperwork…Rosemary or Rosamund, something like that.”

“Rosemary Allen,” Sherlock said to John. “Worked for a pharmaceutical company, retired some years ago. Mycroft checked tax records and she lives in a cottage near the sea now—not in Brighton any longer. Guess what she was working on.”

John shook his head inquiringly, eyes fixed on Sherlock’s.

“Botulinum toxin.”

Rosemary Allen opened the door to her windswept cottage and Sherlock felt that prickle again. Mrs. Allen was old, with short-cropped snow white hair and a hunch to her back, but her flat, dark eyes were Jim Moriarty’s.
“Mrs. Allen?” John asked, beaming his friendly smile—a smile that would be entirely wasted in this case, Sherlock thought. “We need to talk to you about your grandson.”

Mrs. Allen regarded John expressionlessly, then swept her cold stare over Sherlock, lingering on his face. She stepped back and pulled the door open. “Took you long enough,” she said.

“So that was how he did it,” Mrs. Allen said. “I always suspected he had a hand in the thing, but I never knew how.” If she felt any guilt or surprise at the role her own research had played, she expressed none of that to them. “There was another boy a few years later, supposedly a suicide—I’m fairly certain that was him too.”

“But you never said anything?” John asked.

“He was my grandson,” Mrs. Allen said coldly. “After my husband died, though, I had to put a stop to things.”

John blinked. “Your husband.”

“I found him dead in his chair when I returned home one day. No exact cause of death was found but I was told it was likely due to a cardiac event. Probably James put a pillow over his face.”

John was doing rather a poor job of keeping the shock from his voice. “Had they quarreled?”

“Certainly not. My husband had gotten…old.” Sherlock had been watching Mrs. Allen as intently as a cat watching its prey, and now he saw the faint curl of disgust in her lip. “He could barely be bothered to tie his shoes. It was probably for the best. But of course I couldn’t keep James in the house after that. I told my daughter as much, but she’d married by then and claimed she couldn’t manage him. In the end he went to boarding school, in Ireland, but paid for by me. His mother and her new family immediately moved away to America, and at the next holiday James simply ran off.”

“Do you know where he went?”

“I didn’t at first. I retired a few years later and moved here, and shortly after that I received a note in the post congratulating me on my retirement.” For the first time Sherlock saw the barest hint of a smile. “I think he just wanted me to know he knew where I was. So I sent him ten thousand pounds as a belated birthday present and wished him the best of luck. We both understood we would not see each other again.”

“Where?” John asked. “Where did you send the money?”

“Belfast. I don’t remember the address.”

Sherlock doubted that very much, but he knew she wouldn’t tell them, and it was unlikely to be much use now in any case. “Why do you think he stayed in Belfast?” he asked, speaking for the first time.

Her cold dark eyes met his. “Because his father was there, I imagine. When he was a boy he was desperate to know him, but my daughter had that much sense, at least. The man was a criminal and a member of the IRA. He was in prison when James was born.”

“What was his name?”

“Oh, I think you know that already.” That tiny hint of icy amusement again. “Jim Moriarty.”
“Knowing Mr. Allen’s real name has enabled us to get much farther tracking his finances than we did several years ago,” Mycroft said, spreading out a number of printouts on the table in his office. “In addition we have been able to establish the extent of his smuggling operations in Northern Ireland, which he kept entirely separate from London.”

“So he went there,” Sherlock said, frowning at the papers. “After we destroyed his network here and in Europe.”

“Possibly in the beginning, but he didn’t stay long,” Mycroft countered. “He’d established another new identity by that point and poured a great deal of his resources into it. I can’t account for all of his movements over the past few years, but for at least part of the time he’s been living as a legitimate and very wealthy resident in Dublin.” He handed Sherlock a tablet open to an Irish newspaper’s society page. There on the screen, wearing impeccable white tie and looking rather jowlier than Sherlock remembered, was Jim Moriarty.

“Well, he’s certainly done well for himself,” John said, looking over his shoulder. “Almost wish that old bat Mabel could see him… wait, what’s this name he’s using? Why Turner?”

“James M. W. Turner,” Sherlock said, feeling his mouth twist wryly. “Joseph M. W. Turner was an artist—you might remember him as the painter of ‘The Falls of the Reichenbach’.”

“But that doesn’t make sense! You finding that painting led to the downfall of the Malavita, and that led you to Cornwall, and that led to the collapse of Moriarty’s whole—”

“But he wouldn’t see it that way,” Sherlock said, up and pacing now. “Stealing that painting was one of his greatest triumphs—I never have worked out how he managed to get it out of the gallery. My finding it was complete luck. He probably never knew that was what set the police onto the Malavita, and I’m certain that he’d already received an enormous payout for it.” Mycroft nodded. “Which he used to establish the Turner identity.”

“And it’s part of a pattern,” Sherlock was speaking faster. “He took Moriarty’s name to thumb his nose at his mother’s family, but he outgrew it. Calling himself Turner was a way to establish himself as more than a petty criminal; he was an artist, a master, a Napoleon of crime. And now he’s living as a wealthy socialite in Dublin? God, he must be so bored. No wonder he’s gotten back in the game as a consulting criminal.”

“Well, unfortunately,” Mycroft said, “he seems to be carrying out his consulting activities elsewhere. The Republic of Ireland considers him an upstanding citizen, a philanthropist, and a pillar of society. We can’t touch him.”

“Shit.” John folded his arms, staring at the picture disconsolately. “So what do we do?” He looked at Sherlock.

Sherlock rubbed at his hair, looking into those dark, empty eyes. He could practically feel Moriarty’s ennui radiating off the screen. Given the right invitation, he would leap at the chance to come and play with Sherlock, but he wasn’t stupid enough to fall for any trap Sherlock could imagine. “I don’t know,” he said slowly, hating the sound of the words, hating not knowing. “I don’t know.”

Sherlock was quiet in the cab on the way back. He felt stymied, as though he had been chasing his quarry through a maze only to come up against a glass wall at the end; and yet at the same time the
frantic agitation he expected did not materialize. What he felt instead was a sort of fatalistic calm. Looking into Moriarty’s dark eyes had filled him with a strange sense of inevitability: they were always going to end up here sooner or later, the two of them.

“Come to bed with me,” he said softly when they reached home.

“Do you need...”

Sherlock shook his head. “I just want to be with you.”

They had not been together since Hampshire, but there was none of the urgency that usually filled them after a case; they came together slowly, tenderly, their bodies pressed together tightly and their mouths breaking apart only for one or the other of them to draw a quick gasping breath. Sherlock wrapped his long arms around John’s firm back, feeling the comfort of strong muscles flexing under his skin, and John’s fingers tangled in his hair. This was everything, his whole life, the only thing that mattered or ever would matter: John kissing him, John holding him, John’s warm body pressed full-length into his.

Eventually John’s breath came faster and he broke the kiss to slide down a little and align them lower, forehead resting against Sherlock’s shoulder, and when the movement of his body became urgent Sherlock reluctantly let go his back to work one long-fingered hand between them and wrap around them both. “God,” John panted, gripping his hair. “Sherlock—sweetheart—I love you, God, I love you, I love you—” he was punctuating this with quick jerking thrusts, igniting Sherlock’s own lagging pleasure. When he came his hot wetness smeared Sherlock’s cock in a flood of sensation, making him climax so abruptly he cried out in pure surprise.

When they were cleaned up Sherlock reached for John again and they lay in nearly the same position, kissing sweetly and, in John’s case, a little sleepily.

Sherlock pulled away and rested his forehead against John’s. “John,” he said in a near whisper, “I want to tell you—”

“Nope,” John said, trying to pull Sherlock back down into his embrace. “None of that. You made me a promise, remember?”

“I know, but—please, John, I’m not good at saying these things. Please let me say it once.”

John sighed, but he didn’t refuse, so Sherlock said tentatively, “If this—do you remember I asked you once, what you would say if you were being murdered? Well, if we were being murdered, if this were my last night on earth and I knew I would spend it in your arms, I would say: good. These five years with you have been worth more than if I had another fifty years of life without you. I have no regrets. It wouldn’t matter that I never caught Moriarty—well, it would because he’s a menace to mankind, obviously, but I’m sure Mycroft would take care of him eventually. Everything I ever really wanted, I already have.”

John reached to smooth Sherlock’s hair back, his eyes suspiciously shiny but his smile warm. “You can’t be serious. You could have had anything—you could have been a brilliant musician, a Nobel-prize winning chemist, you could have worked for Mycroft and been better than James Bond, you could have been a criminal mastermind, a pirate, a—”

Sherlock went still. His spine tingled, head to toe, and instead of dissipating the tingle seemed to spread out along his nerve endings gathering strength as it went. “Say that again.”

“What? You could have been a pirate?”
“Not a pirate,” Sherlock breathed. His fingertips were buzzing with electricity, as though they would crackle lightning, but instead he caught John’s face in his hands. “Oh, John, you are the most—not luminous yourself, but you—if I am the candle you are the mirror that reflects the light a hundredfold.”

“Well, good then,” John said agreeably. “Mind telling me what I said that’s so brilliant?”

Sherlock smiled at him, a huge, joyous smile that felt like sunlight. “Master criminal.”

Chapter End Notes

“The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” is another of those ACD canon stories that are just crying to be updated…although if the show can work out a believable way to stash someone in the attic these days I’ll be beyond impressed.

Felix Fowler’s email to Sherlock was the one John found in his inbox in “The Ghost”.
"The first thing is to exaggerate my injuries. They'll come to you for news. Put it on thick, Watson. Lucky if I live the week out--concussion--delirium--what you like! You can't overdo it." Holmes to Watson, in *The Adventure of the Illustrious Client*

“Norway,” Mycroft said.

John sighed. He probably only understood about 85% of what Mycroft said on his best days, and apparently this was not one of those days. John had no idea why Mycroft would respond to his brother’s lengthy description of how he planned to establish a secret identity as a master criminal by listing Scandinavian countries.

Sherlock had no such difficulty. “You’ve the necessary contacts?”

“Certainly. We can establish a credible backstory fairly quickly there, I think. All that oil money lying around, conveniently contiguous with Russia…Moriarty always worked through Eastern Europe. I’m rather surprised organized crime isn’t more of a problem in Norway, now that I think about it.”

“I’ll need to have killed someone there, so there’s reason for me to have left the country,” Sherlock said with relish.

John had finally caught up. “You’re going to be a *Norwegian* criminal mastermind.”

“Can I have done by causing an avalanche?” Sherlock asked Mycroft. “I’ve always thought that had a certain panache.”

Of course Sherlock turned out to be an exceptional criminal. What surprised John was the backlog of cases Sherlock had ready, cases where he had identified the perpetrator to his own satisfaction but not that of the legal system. A woman had embezzled a large sum of money; Sherlock stole an even larger sum—from Sebastian Wilkes’ firm—and, when Sebastian hired him to solve the theft, framed her for it. He stole art that had been looted during the war and returned it. A certain high-profile celebrity whose emotional abuse had led to her partner’s suicide was caught in a drugs bust.

“Well, I’m glad you being a drugs kingpin serves a larger purpose,” John said dryly. John was not happy with this facet of Sherlock’s growing criminal empire, although the actual operations were overseen by an unprepossessing but undeniably clever lieutenant named Wiggins. Sherlock had also taken over a counterfeit ring in Thamesmead, which he couldn’t help tweaking so that it ran more efficiently.

“I need to kill someone,” Sherlock informed Mycroft. “I’ve spent my whole life planning the perfect locked-room murder, and this is my chance. Someone who deserves it, obviously,” he added quickly, glancing guiltily at John.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” Mycroft said, examining his manicure. “In spite of what you seem to think,
“Can I almost kill someone? It will add a degree of difficulty if I have to make sure they’re saved at the last minute. There must be someone you need inconvenienced.”

“Hmm,” Mycroft said, looking thoughtful. “Actually, there is a member of the Russian trade delegation…”

The almost-murder of the Russian delegate went off like clockwork. They had had to install electronic surveillance in his hotel room so that Sherlock could make sure he was saved in the nick of time, which meant that John and Sherlock spent thirty minutes listening to pay-per-view porn before they abruptly realized that the Russian’s grunts had turned to groans. John had his cock halfway down Sherlock’s throat before the lift doors had closed on the ambulance crew.

They were still sleeping, sated and happy, when Lestrade called early the next morning. “I’ve got a Russian who was almost killed last night, and the consulate is all over my arse,” he told John when Sherlock refused to wake up. “Please tell me you can get him to come over here.”

“Give me—er, an hour,” John said, not mentioning that they were one floor down at the same hotel at that very moment.

Sherlock wasted no time in dramatically pinning the crime on their designated Judas, a room service waiter who had been placed for solely this purpose and now conveniently disappeared. “You’ll never find him,” Sherlock told Lestrade solemnly. “Word on the street is that the Norwegian arranged this.”

“What, that Sigerson bloke?” Lestrade frowned unhappily. “Does this guy fancy himself another Moriarty or something?”

“Hardly. He’s much cleverer than Moriarty…and much more dangerous.”

John managed to hold in his giggles until they were leaving Scotland Yard, when Sherlock said happily, “Oh, I do hope Moriarty’s invested well in his spy network. I’d hate for that not to get back to him.”

It was a strange time, a little unsettling: half case, half not. Sherlock was always buzzing with ideas for his next crime, but at the same time he seemed hungry for John’s touch, desperate for him in a way that reminded John of the early days of their relationship. They were having sex all the time, and yet Sherlock was back up and moving as soon as they had finished, rarely sleeping and eating even less. He was still cooking—John thought privately that he didn’t trust John to not backslide into eating deep-fried everything if left to his own devices with a takeout menu—but hardly ate anything himself.

When he did sleep it was always in what John had previously thought of as his comfort position, curled tightly into John’s chest. Ironically, on these occasions it was John who did not rest. He would lie awake for hours staring into the dark with Sherlock in his arms, feeling the sharp bones of his back, the limbs that grew thinner and lighter with every passing week. He had an unspoken fear that one day he would wake up and Sherlock would have simply melted away into nothingness.

Even if John had felt like discussing his worries, he couldn’t: there was no one who knew but the three of them, and John certainly couldn’t imagine pouring out his heart to Mycroft. Occasionally,
however, he caught a glimpse of Mycroft’s unguarded face when he looked at Sherlock—a quick shadow in those bland eyes—and found the fact that Mycroft too was anxious simultaneously reassuring and unnerving.

“We’ve drawn this out long enough,” Sherlock announced abruptly, looking up. “There’s no way he doesn’t know we’ve moved in on his territory. Time to really go on the offensive.”

Mycroft raised a placid eyebrow. “Planning to crash the Dublin Winter Ball in a sharper tuxedo?”

“Better,” Sherlock said. “We’re going to take out the Belfast smuggling operation.”

Hitting the Belfast smuggling ring turned out to be a lot more complicated than John realized. This was enemy territory, terra incognita; most of the people involved presumably went back to the days of Jim Moriarty senior. So Sherlock set up a rival outfit in Liverpool and began chipping away at their business. None of this moved nearly fast enough for Sherlock, who seemed slowly but surely to be winding himself tighter, like twisting a spring.

When he reached the point where his agitated pacing and hair-pulling made John feel as though he himself were on the verge of snapping, John took charge. He hauled Sherlock off to bed, tied him up, and swatted his behind with a bare palm until Sherlock’s arse was glowing pink. Then he fucked him as slowly as he possibly could. John generally had nothing like Sherlock’s staying power, but he was determined to make this one last, and he did. When John finally let him come Sherlock all but collapsed, pillow soaked with tears of exhaustion and frustration.

“It’s okay,” John crooned to him, when Sherlock was clean and in his pajamas, face wiped with a cool flannel. He almost had to lift Sherlock into his arms. “It’s okay. I’ve got you, sweetheart.”

Sherlock sighed a long, tired sigh and turned to nuzzle into John’s chest. He shifted around until his ear was pressed over John’s heart, smiling a little.

“What do you hear?” John asked, curious.

“Hmmm?”

“You said, a long time ago—something about my heartbeat, how I was the cello and you the violin. What does it sound like?”

“Oh.” Sherlock sat up and leaned over to rummage around in the bedside table, coming back with his phone and a set of earbuds. He handed one to John and settled back where he had been before, fitting the other earbud into his ear. John tucked his in and listened. He was no expert at chamber music, but he could pick out the violin, plaintive and longing, and the answering steady song of the cello. It was the most soothing thing he had ever heard. The piece was brief, and when he realized it had ended he picked up the phone from the bed and played it again.

“That’s what I sound like?” John whispered, brushing his lips across Sherlock’s wild, sweat-soaked curls. “You hear that music in my heartbeat? That’s beautiful. What is it?”

But Sherlock didn’t answer; he was already asleep, his face completely peaceful for the first time in days.

The Belfast lot hijacked a transport en route from Uzbekistan to Liverpool bearing an extremely
valuable payload of pure opium, and Herr Sigerson sent them a very polite message. Surely there had been a mistake? Certainly Mr. Moriarty, in the spirit of friendship and peace, would rectify this misunderstanding? Moriarty (or more likely one of his lieutenants in Belfast) sent a far less polite reply suggesting where Herr Sigerson could stick his friendship and peace, so Sigerson wiped them out. In actuality this consisted of Mycroft sending a handpicked team to take Moriarty’s men into custody before blowing up the warehouse, but of course they made it look as though everyone had died in the explosion.

“Is that legal?” John said, startled. “I mean, you aren’t holding them in…some kind of dark location, or something?”

“Holding whom?” Mycroft said blandly.

“Oh, stop being dramatic,” Sherlock said. “They’re fine, John. The men were legally charged and denied bail, but under assigned names and the proceedings are sealed under court order. As soon as this is business is done they’ll be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.”

“What’s going to stop Moriarty from blowing up your Liverpool boys in retaliation?”

Sherlock smiled, sharp and wolfish. “Business,” he said. “Not that we aren’t taking precautions just in case. But he’s smart enough to know that he’ll get a lot farther by setting up an alliance and then knocking me out of the picture.”

Sure enough, Moriarty sent a far more conciliatory message. Things had gotten a bit out of hand. Clearly it was in both of their interests to work together, was it not? There was a fair bit of back and forth but they both agreed a meeting was in order, preferably at a neutral location. In the end the meeting was set for the Caledonian Hotel in Edinburgh, a week hence.

The morning after the meeting had been arranged felt quiet and oddly relaxed, like a holiday. John lounged at the desk, eating his steel-cut oatmeal and flipping through the papers, Sherlock’s woolly-socked feet propped in his lap. He was honestly startled when Sherlock’s phone rang.

Sherlock set down his mug to peer at it. “Lestrade.”

“You going to answer?” John asked. “Might be a fun change of pace to solve a crime you didn’t commit for once.”

Sherlock kicked at John with his sock foot but he was already shoving himself upright to answer the phone. The conversation was brief and one-sided.

“Dimmock’s got a dead body,” Sherlock reported, disconnecting. “Found by the river with no ID or apparent cause of death. He thought the man might be homeless, so he showed the photos to Lestrade this morning to see if he if he could be one of mine, but Lestrade wasn’t sure.”

John felt a frisson of unease. Sherlock’s homeless network had played a not-insignificant role in his burgeoning criminal empire, and it would be awful if this had led one of them into danger. “Where’s the guy now?”

“Dimmock’s already moved him, unfortunately. We’ll meet Lestrade at the morgue.”

The dead man did not look familiar to John, but Sherlock recognized him immediately. “That’s Phil,” he said, frowning down at the corpse. “I’ve known him for ages, ever since the subway strangler, but he wasn’t an active part of the network…why on earth would anyone kill him?”
“Well, he wasn’t young,” John said, peering at the man’s lined, lifeless face. “Maybe natural causes?”

“He looks like an alcoholic too, though his liver will tell us more,” Molly piped up.

“There was a sort of note,” Lestrade said. “Pinned to his coat. It said ‘IOU’, like the letters.”

Sherlock looked up. “Where is it?”

“Dimmock’s got it.”

Sherlock chewed his lip for a moment indecisively. “John, go back to the Yard and see what you can work out from the note. Paper, ink, handwriting—anything you can find. Take pictures as well and then meet me back here. I want to see the post mortem.”

It would have made a lot more sense for John to be the one to watch the post—he was the one with medical training, and Sherlock would have gleaned a lot more from the note—but the cause of death was the biggest mystery at the moment and Sherlock was clearly dying to get a look. “Okay. See you back here in a bit.”

This is how it happens, John would think later: one minute you are sitting in Lestrade’s office talking about wedding presents for Donovan when the door opens and a young officer says “Sir,” and Lestrade steps out, and you are taking out your phone thinking maybe you should reschedule that haircut for this afternoon when the door opens again, and it’s Anthea, and just like that the world as you know it shatters into a thousand brittle shards.

John took in nothing beyond the word “explosion”. Somehow he found himself in the black car, no idea how he got there, knowing only that it was taking him to Sherlock. “Where’s Mycroft?”

“He went directly to the hospital.”

“Have you heard anything?”

“No.” She didn’t meet his gaze.

John stared out the window feeling entirely numb. He felt a curious reluctance to reach their destination. It was like Schrödinger’s cat: as long as they stayed in the car, didn’t arrive, hear the news, Sherlock was still alive. Beside him Anthea suddenly tucked her phone to her ear. “Yes,” she said, and then, “Understood.”

John couldn’t look at her, but almost against his will he said, “What…”

“He’s in the trauma bay, that was Mr. Holmes telling me where to bring you.”

Still alive. Still alive. John clung to it, refusing to think of whatever else might be implied by Sherlock’s being in the most high-acuity area of the A & E. Still alive. That was all that mattered.

At the hospital Anthea held up her credentials and breezed them right past the security desk, through a maze of busy corridors and waiting areas to where a dark-suited, impassive man stood by a door. The man nodded to Anthea and opened the door for John. He knew it intimately, of course, having sat in similar rooms many times during his training: tiny, windowless, dimly lit by soothing lamps with boxes of tissue on the end tables. Molly was sitting on the sofa twisting a handkerchief in her hands, cheek scraped and her eyes red with crying. John felt a horrible surge of guilt: he had not
thought of Molly once.

“Molly,” he managed and somehow forced himself into the room, hearing the door close behind him.

“John,” Molly gulped out, fresh tears running down her face. “Did they tell you anything? I haven’t heard—I haven’t heard anything, but they haven’t sent a chaplain yet, that’s a good sign—“

John took a deep breath, forcing down the panic. He made himself sit in the chair next to her.

“Molly, tell me what happened.”

Molly sucked in a breath and blew her nose, making a visible effort to pull herself together. “We were doing an external survey and Sherlock—something caught his attention and he stopped me, he said it looked as though the man had—he had something inserted, um, in his rectum. I was joking about it, a bit, but Sherlock was very serious, he said not to pull it out, we should X-ray it first. So I called for a portable X-ray and the tech came down and told us to wait outside, and I was looking up some toxicology reports but Sherlock was watching through the glass, and I think—he must have seen the screen when she brought up the image and known what it was, because all of a sudden he was shouting at me and telling me to run. I froze, a bit, and he said go, call security, he was screaming, so I ran and then…” She gulped, fresh tears welling. “I heard him shouting at the tech, he was saying to get out, I was at the stairs and then I was on the ground, I scraped my face on the step and the wind was knocked out of me, but I didn’t know what happened for a minute, my ears were ringing and ringing, and there was dust…”

John had to resist the urge to shout at her, Sherlock, where was Sherlock, but she must have seen something in his face because she had to stop for a moment and wipe at her face. She took a deep, shuddering breath. “I ran back and the glass was gone, just gone. Sherlock was on the floor, it looked like someone had thrown him into the wall. He was unconscious and his arm was all bent under him. I called the code team and security and made sure of his airway and then everyone came, it seemed like it took forever, but—he was breathing, his pulse was good, but he wouldn’t wake up.”

She exhaled, closing her eyes a minute. “I didn’t even think about the X-ray tech until they came but it wouldn’t have mattered. She was…there wasn’t much left.”

“Jesus,” John said. He scrubbed at his face. He couldn’t take it all in, it was too much, like something out of a bad movie: explosives in a dead body, and Sherlock unconscious, subdural, epidural, herniation—no, Molly said his vitals were stable. He wanted desperately to barrel out there and find Sherlock and see what was happening for himself, but that would just get him in trouble with security, and surely someone would be—where was Mycroft? Come to think of it, how did Mycroft even find out? Even he wasn’t that omniscient. He looked at Molly. “Did you call Mycroft?”

She nodded. “I realized we were all in danger, and I knew he could take care of it the fastest. And I didn’t—“ she grimaced apologetically. “I didn’t want to tell you on the phone.”

John stared at her, the full meaning of what she was saying sinking in slowly. “Christ. It was meant for you. The bomb, or whatever it was. And that means—“ he was on his feet without even realizing it. “Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson—“

“It’s okay. John, it’s okay.” Molly reached out, touching his arm. “Mycroft’s taking care of it.”

Of course, John realized. The man calling Lestrade out of the office—Anthea hadn’t come alone; there must have been another agent there to whisk Lestrade off to safety. The stone-faced suit at the door of the quiet room was there to protect them. He blinked, rubbing at his eyes again. Then he decided he could worry about all that later. There was no room in his mind at that moment for anything but Sherlock. He sank back down and stared at his clenched fists, wishing desperately that he could go back a few hours to his life before, that he could wrap his hands around Sherlock’s long
feet, hear the deep rumble of his voice, see his pale thin face intent on the newspapers.

The door opened.

John saw Molly look up quickly, but he couldn’t bring himself to raise his own head. Not the chaplain, he thought, staring fixedly at his lap. Please no. Please let him be okay.

“Miss Hooper,” came Mycroft’s smooth, unhurried voice, and at that John did jerk his head up. “If you would please…”

“How is he?” quavered Molly, getting to her feet.

“Miss Jones will fill you in on the way,” Mycroft said, stepping aside in a clear signal for Molly to get moving. Molly looked at John a little helplessly and said, “I’ll talk to you soon,” and went meekly out. Mycroft closed the door.

“What I am about to tell you cannot leave this room,” Mycroft said quietly. He was as impassive as ever, but John thought he saw strain in his eyes. “My brother regained consciousness shortly after his arrival here. He was disoriented and his arm is broken, but his head CT is normal and it appears he will make a full recovery.”

“Oh my God,” John said. He had to close his eyes a minute, the relief so overwhelming he almost didn’t brace himself for the unspoken but that was clearly coming. “Oh thank God, thank God.” He breathed out, unclenched his hands, and then straightened up and opened his eyes. “Okay. Tell me the part I won’t like.”

Mycroft almost smiled. “You are far more observant that my brother gives you credit for.”

John waved this aside. “Go on, just tell me now. I want to see Sherlock.”

“You can see him immediately, but he won’t know you are there. He’s been sedated and paralyzed and placed on a ventilator.”

John stared at him. “What? Why? You just said he was conscious!”

“He was,” Mycroft corrected. He sat down, which surprised John, and rubbed briefly at the back of his neck. “I assume that the target of the attack was not Sherlock but Miss Hooper. I heard about the note that was found with the body, “IOU”, and the inescapable conclusion is that Moriarty has worked out Sigerson’s true identity and is taking revenge for the Belfast attacks. I have therefore taken steps to assure the safety of Sherlock’s associates. Miss Hooper, Mrs. Hudson, and Detective Inspector Lestrade have all been moved to secure locations, as, shortly, will you.”

“I’m not leaving Sherlock,” John said automatically.

“Certainly not. As I was saying, Sherlock’s injury was an unintended consequence of the bomb meant for Miss Hooper, but it presented us with an opportunity. Sherlock should be back on his feet within a day or so, but the official story is that he has suffered a devastating neurological injury. He is in the process of being transferred to a private hospital which will not be identified to protect his safety.”

“Oh,” John said. He still wasn’t processing at full speed, but he thought he could see what Mycroft was up to. “That’s…that’s pretty good. Yeah. If you can pull it off, anyway.”

Mycroft just looked at him and John said. “Right. Hence the ventilator. How soon are you moving him?”
“The orthopedist should be finished by now. I am going to take you to him, and then we will go.”

“Right. Okay,” John said. He stood up and steadied his treacherously shaking legs, squared his shoulders. “Where is he?”

John braced himself going in, *it’s not real, he’s just sedated, he’s fine*, but the sight of Sherlock limp and still with the endotracheal tube forcing air into his lungs still made him feel as though he’d been punched in the stomach. He moved to the side of the trolley and smoothed Sherlock’s hair back from his bruised face, kissed his temple. “Hey love,” he whispered into the unhearing curve of his ear. “I’m here. I’m right here. It’s going to be okay. We’re going to take you to Mycroft’s safe house now. I’ll be with you every minute. It’s okay.” He felt the hot sting of unshed tears and closed his eyes briefly, then straightened up and gave the waiting doctor a curt nod. “Okay, let’s go.”

John followed Sherlock down the corridor, feeling eyes on them as he trailed behind the little crowd surrounding the trolley: people pushing the ventilator, the drip bank, the trolley itself. They went through the set of double doors that led to the ambulance bay, banked sharply left, and went into a waiting service lift.

John looked around at Mycroft who answered his unspoken question: “Over the next ten minutes, three ambulances will depart here destined for three different hospitals. We, however, will be on none of them.” With impeccable timing, the doors whooshed open onto a deserted delivery dock, at which a plain van was pulled up with its back doors open and engine running. Inside it was identical to a fully functional ambulance.

As John climbed into the van behind Sherlock, he caught a glimpse of bright blue sky and glanced automatically at his watch. Barely noon; the appointment he had meant to cancel was in just over an hour. Outside the secret ambulance, incredibly, was a beautiful spring day, with people going about their lives. He felt another of those bursts of intense longing for *before*: Baker Street, the ordinary rhythms of their life there, Sherlock’s feet in his lap, Sherlock’s clear blue eyes and brilliant smile, *Sherlock*.

By the time they reached the safe house Sherlock was off the drips and breathing on his own, but between the sedation and the concussion he never completely woke up. He spent most of the day in a disoriented irritable fog, not helped by the pain from his broken arm, for which he refused to take anything more than NSAIDs.

“He needs something stronger,” Mycroft said when he reappeared that evening.

John had spent the whole day staring at the beige walls of this stultifyingly bland room and attempting to keep Sherlock calm and comfortable, and was not in the mood to argue with Mycroft. “No,” he said shortly.

“He’s in pain. I won’t permit—“

On second thought, maybe a fight with Mycroft was *exactly* what he wanted. “I said no,” John said sharply, stepping into Mycroft’s face. “Do you really think we’ve never discussed this? Almost six years together, in hospital twice, and you think somehow it just never came up? *He doesn’t want narcotics.* Full stop. He’s far more afraid of the drugs than the pain.”

Mycroft drew himself up. “I can’t allow—“
“Mycrof!” Only the presence of Sherlock dozing uneasily behind him kept John from shouting. “It’s not. Your. Decision.”

John saw the moment it hit him, really sank in for the first time, and he saw what it had cost Mycroft to carry that burden for so long and what it cost him now to give it up. “You’re right,” Mycroft said, eyes cast down. “Apologies.” He made to turn away.

John caught his arm, all his anger gone. “Wait. I’m sorry. It’s—I hate it too.”

Mycroft glanced up at him, a lifetime of weary worry in his face, and John went on, “That arm—I saw the films they took, post-reduction, and it’s going to be fine. He’ll be good as new in a few months, back to playing the violin and everything.”

Mycroft met John’s eye, the ghost of a smile playing about his mouth. “Will he be able to shoot?”

“I don’t see why, he never could before,” John answered and they laughed together, softly so as not to disturb Sherlock. “Listen, could I ask you a favor? I’d really like to go find something to eat, and I haven’t wanted to leave him, but if you’re here…”

“Of course,” Mycroft said immediately, straightening. “Charles will see to anything you need.” And then as John turned away: “Oh, and John? I took the liberty of cancelling your appointment. Someone will be along in the morning to take care of your hair.”

“So how am I doing?” Sherlock asked when Mycroft arrived next day.

“Well, you shouldn’t put off,” Mycroft said serenely, accepting a cup of tea from the ever-helpful Charles.

John rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. Sherlock was moving gingerly and wincing whenever anyone turned on a light, but the sharp alertness was back in his eyes. John still felt disoriented and homesick in the safe house—which seemed to combine all the charm of a midprice hotel with an oversized waiting room—but it was all bearable as long as he had Sherlock back to his usual caustic self.

“Where are the others? Are they okay?” he asked Mycroft. “I rather thought they’d be here too.”

“Miss Hooper and Mrs. Hudson are at a different safe house. Detective Inspector Lestrade declined protection—rather vehemently—and is presently heading up the effort to find the bomber. I have discreetly placed several agents in position to provide backup if needed, but I believe it likely that he is no longer in any danger.”

John frowned in confusion but Sherlock said, “You think Moriarty won’t bother to kill my friends if I’m not around to suffer for it.”

“Precisely.”

Sherlock went to press his fingertips together at his mouth and scowled in annoyance at his sling. “Moriarty knows I’m Sigerson. The question is, does he know why?”
“What do you mean?” This from John, of course.

“Does he know I set up the whole thing as a trap, or genuinely believe that I’ve gone to the dark side?”

“I take it we have you to thank for the Star Wars references,” Mycroft said to John.

“You got the reference,” John replied, but he was thinking about what Sherlock had said. “I think he fell for it. Moriarty hasn’t seen you in years. The last time was at the pool, wasn’t it? And back then...he thought you were alike, remember? That’s why he let you leave the pool alive. And you were different back then. Lestrade...he said you were a great man, but he hoped one day you’d be a good one. And Sally—practically the first thing she ever said to me was that someday you’d get bored and start killing people. “

Sherlock looked pleased. “She probably still thinks that.”

“No, she doesn’t, but Moriarty does. He doesn’t know how you’ve changed since then.”

“He arranged the meeting,” Sherlock said. John knew he would be pacing if his head could stand it. “But he wanted to even the playing field—my people for his, the four men we took from Belfast that he believes to be dead. His oldest associates. That’s why he targeted Phil. Not because he was useful, but because I had known him the longest. But now...” He rubbed the back of a finger along his mouth, thinking hard. “He won’t know whether or not to believe I’m dead, so he’ll still show up to the meeting. If I’m there, he’s got me. If I’m dead, presumably my second in command would show, and they can still do business.”

“I agree,” Mycroft said. “Especially given that Mr. Turner has apparently disappeared from Dublin. We do not presently know where he is.”

Sherlock was clearly still thinking about the Edinburgh meeting. “Maybe I can disguise myself as a waiter,” he was saying dreamily. “A French waiter...I can have a mustache...”

And that was when Mycroft said, “You aren’t going to Edinburgh.”

Sherlock threw a tantrum, of course, although it was a very muted one by his usual standards. Mycroft just sat there and let him rant himself out, and John got another cup of tea from Charles, since for once he was on Mycroft’s side and therefore thought it prudent to keep his mouth shut.

“Why can’t I go,” Sherlock finally demanded sulkily, slumping back in his chair.

“We don’t need you,” Mycroft said calmly. “The documentation my people retrieved from Belfast before they destroyed the premises ties Moriarty, also known as Turner, very nicely to a long list of illegal activities. We just need him to set foot on British soil, and we can arrest him. You being there will only complicate matters. Particularly if he does suspect a trap, since in that instance I imagine he will have arranged something along the lines of a bomb himself.” He flicked his eyes to John, who recognized his cue.

“Sherlock, if you go, you know I’m going too,” John said. “You want Moriarty to blow us both up?”

Sherlock scowled for a long moment before finally bursting out, “So we’re going to just sit in this beige monstrosity for a week whilst you have all the fun?”

“Certainly not,” Mycroft said. “I plan on getting you as far away from this situation as possible. I’m
transporting you to Switzerland tonight. The accommodations will be more pleasant, and it will be harder for you to…change your mind about cooperating.”

Sherlock looked as gobsmacked as John had ever seen him. “Switzerland?”

“A lovely chalet with a view of the Alps,” Mycroft said. “I’m told there is also hiking if one goes in for that sort of thing.”

“You’re sending us on holiday?”

“Don’t you think John deserves a holiday?”

“Oi, leave me out of this,” John said, holding up his hands.

Sherlock promptly whipped around to John, looking desperate, and John sighed. “Look, we can’t stay here, we’ll go mental. We can’t go back to Baker Street. We can’t go to Edinburgh. If we go…it’s just for four days, Sherlock. Mycroft can keep us posted on any developments, and, I don’t know, it might be kind of fun.”

“Fun,” Sherlock said as though the word offended him. “Fun.” He glared furiously at Mycroft, who looked calmly back, and flung his left hand in the air. “All right, fine. You’d better get us some decent hiking things. Boots or staves or rucksacks or whatever we need.”

John was surprised to feel a smile tugging at the corner of his mouth. He was going to take Sherlock hiking. Maybe this would be fun after all.

Mycroft’s barber arrived that afternoon to trim John and shave Sherlock, who was already driving John round the twist whinging about all the things he couldn’t do with only his left arm. Afterwards John taped his right arm into a bin liner and helped him bathe. This would not have been too bad at Baker Street with its enormous cast-iron tub, but the safe house had only a mean little bath-shower combo, and Sherlock had to fold himself like a pocket-knife to fit. John, squashed on the loo with a pitcher to rinse his hair, was forcibly reminded of bathing the reluctant family dog as a boy.

“Why don’t I have a cast?” Sherlock asked as John pulled the plastic off as gently as possible. He was trying to pretend he wasn’t hurting, but John could see the set to his jaw even if he’d somehow missed the bruises covering most of Sherlock’s right side. “I don’t even remember them putting this thing on me.”

“Be glad about that. It was a right mess before they reduced it, I saw the before-and-after films,” John told him. “The splint stays on for a week to allow for swelling. You’ll get a nice waterproof cast when we get back…want some more paracetemol?”

“In a bit.” Sherlock had gone pensive, staring into space in that way he had, and John felt a tiny stir of disquiet. But then Sherlock sighed dramatically and said, “Well, if we must go, might as well make the best of it. Let’s make a list of things we need brought from the flat.”

John had been expecting something rustic and small, a little hiking cabin with crossed skis and a wood burning stove—somehow his imagination had overlooked the fact that it was nearly May—and above all, secluded. He should have known better. The chalet was enormous, a towering structure of peaked granite and glass perched high on a mountainside, bursting with security: four English and six Swiss. There were also a cook and housekeeper.
“This doesn’t belong to your brother, does it?” John asked in astonishment as the helicopter settled neatly onto the landing pad.

“His Swiss counterpart, I think,” Sherlock said. He was peering out the window. “Is there road access?” he asked the leader of the Swiss contingent, a brisk, efficient man called Werner.

“There, is, yes, but it takes much more time to travel from the airport,” Werner said. “There is the road, there…we have a guard house. On the other side are all cliffs, so you see, very safe.”

“Good,” John said, looking around. He could see that Werner was right. The only way to reach the chalet was along the narrow roadway that hugged the side of the mountain. If the guards were any good—and John assumed that they were—they were safer than if they had been on an island. Still, twelve extra people had not exactly figured into his vision of a pastoral hiking holiday.

Sherlock’s mouth quirked as though he could read John’s mind. “I’m sure they’re all very discreet,” he said out of the corner of his mouth, “and if our bedroom isn’t private, we’ll take over the guardhouse.”

The bedroom was the master suite at the top of the house, all alone on the upper story and with the most astonishing views John had ever seen. He stood at the floor-to-ceiling window and just goggled at the sweep of Alps spread out before him.

“Help me with this?” Sherlock asked. He had been rooting through their luggage and now appeared at John’s side holding a navy jumper with the tags still on. The mountains were a good deal chillier than London had been. John unfastened his sling and helped wrestle the thick wool over Sherlock’s head; he had to cut the sleeve with his pocket knife to get it on over Sherlock’s bulky splint.

“Sorry about the sleeve,” he said, when he had got the sling back on.

Sherlock shrugged. “I’m not likely to wear it back in London in any case.” He leaned next to John, following his gaze out the window. The blue of the jumper brought out his eyes, but John also saw the shadows around his eyes and the hollows beneath his cheekbones. He looked ethereally beautiful and profoundly weary all at once.

“So what do you want to do?” John asked, trying to keep his tone light. “Lots of lovely hiking out there… I think I see a waterfall, look.”

Sherlock followed John’s finger, but his gaze still seemed distant. “Actually,” he said slowly, “Would you lie down with me? I’m not being euphemistic—I just want to be with you, and rest a bit.”

John felt that little niggle of unease again but he pushed it down. Sherlock was stiff and sore and exhausted from the journey and his injuries; of course he wanted a rest. A bit of a kip sounded good to John as well. “Come on,” he said, leading the way to the enormous bed and kicking his shoes off. “I’d love a lie-down, now that you mention it.” He helped Sherlock settle on his side with his head on John’s chest, arm propped with a pillow, and closed his own eyes. They had left London at three in the morning and he’d spent the night before dozing in a chair by Sherlock’s bed, so it really wasn’t surprising that he dropped off immediately.

When he woke, though, to find the sun dipped behind the mountains and shadows thickening in the room, he found Sherlock’s fathomless twilight eyes still open and watching him, having apparently not slept at all.
Somewhat to John’s surprise, they really did hike over the next few days, and Sherlock actually seemed to be enjoying himself. They stuck to short hikes at first, John having persuaded Sherlock of the need to break in their hiking boots (“I’m sure it’s unnecessary John, Mycroft probably had his minions march them around Whitehall”). It was a pleasant routine. They would lie abed late and eat a leisurely breakfast, John reading the news while Sherlock checked in with Mycroft—“checking in” being a euphemism for “harangue on the phone”. The chalet had excellent wifi but terrible mobile service, so Mycroft had provided them both with satellite phones before their departure. Then they would stroll the sun-dappled meadows for a few hours, come back for lunch and a rest, and strike out for the high westerly peaks in the late afternoon. At night they made love with hushed, unhurried tenderness. Those nights had the same quality for John as their first, moonlit time in Florence: Sherlock’s reverent, delicate touch, his adoration evident in every brush of his fingers and lips, the way he seemed to be surrendering himself utterly to John’s hands like a gift. And John matched him at every step. Sherlock was too thin, bruised and a little stiff and with his right arm awkwardly splinted, but to John he was as exquisitely beautiful as the first time John had ever touched him. They kissed with their eyes open, drinking each other in. They kissed as though each time were their last.

John wasn’t an idiot, no matter what people thought. He actually found it somewhat adorable that Sherlock apparently didn’t realize that John knew exactly what was in his head; but then, Sherlock himself could sometimes be a bit of an idiot.

“So now that we’re acclimated, I was thinking we should go for a proper long hike today,” John said brightly Monday morning. “Pack a lunch and everything.”

Sherlock looked up, fondly amused at his transparence. “This wouldn’t have anything to do with distracting me, I suppose.” The meeting in Edinburgh was set for that day.

“Oh, is something on today?” John asked, all innocence.

Sherlock didn’t even deign to answer that. “Of course we’re going on a long hike. I’ve already got it mapped out. Have a look.” He pushed the map over to John, who frowned down at the German words before finding the spot Sherlock had circled.

“Reichenbachfall…wait. The Reichenbach Falls, seriously? Like the painting? They’re here?”

“There’s a trailhead on the road—we can get one of the Swiss to drop us off. It’s a few miles each way but we’ll be going uphill coming back.”

“It’s a steep hike,” John agreed, tracing the path on the map. “But if you get knackered I’m sure we can get the lads to pick you up in the helicopter.”

“Ha. I’ll be towing you up the path with my one arm.”

John laughed outright at that, as Sherlock had expected, and shut his laptop with an air of decision. “Well, let’s get going then. I’ll go talk to Elena about putting a lunch up for us.”

Sherlock went up to the master suite to get ready, which still took him considerable extra time. He was scowling at his hiking boots when John came in. “Do you want me to give you a hand with—oh, you got it on already.”

“Can you cinch up my cuff?” Sherlock’s anorak was a size too large, to accommodate his splint, so the sleeves hung down over his hands. John obligingly pushed his left sleeve up to his wrist and pulled the cord snug, then helped him on with his boots and did up the laces. “I feel like I’m in
nursery,” Sherlock complained.

John ruffled his hair, which did not help. “I bet you were adorable when you were four, frowning all
the time and following Mycroft around like a shadow…come on, let’s go—Werner’s bringing the car
round.”

Even Sherlock, who was not much a devotee of natural attractions, could not be immune to the
beauty of the hike. The first mile or so dropped steeply through glorious Alpine meadows and rocky
craggs, and the combination of snowy peaks, flower-dappled grass and blue sky gave Sherlock the
disorienting feeling of posing for a travel postcard. At least John didn’t seem inclined to take photos,
he thought with reflexive disdain, but then a hawk swooped over the path and he found himself
smiling up at it despite himself.

“Levels out a bit here,” John said, studying the map. “We’ll be coming up to the Reichenbach
stream, there’s the waterfall…oh, there are more than one. Which one was in the painting?”

Sherlock was not entirely certain. “The biggest?”

“Well, we’re joining up with some other trails out of the valley fairly soon, so we can just follow the
signs. Or the other hikers.”

They took a break for some water and a snack, and then then set off again. John had been right: the
trail was relatively level here. After a bit it wound around a steep wall of rock to follow the stream,
which was running through a gorge some distance below, fast and swollen with snowmelt.

John beamed at the sight of the rushing water and was just turning to Sherlock when they both heard
the sound of running footsteps on the path behind them. A young boy came stumbling around the
curve, still wearing a rock-climbing harness, and at the sight of them he came to an abrupt halt,
bending forward and gasping with his hands on his knees. “Bitte,” he panted, struggling for breath.

“What’s wrong, lad?” John said kindly, but Sherlock was looking up, scanning the mountainside
with quick flicks of his eyes.

The boy burst into a flood of German, speaking frantically and gesturing behind him. Sherlock could
see John was following none of it—he had picked up the bare minimum of German necessary to get
coffee and beer from Elena, and that was about it. “He says his mother has fallen rock climbing.”

“Oh, my God, did they call emergency services?”

Sherlock spoke to the boy, already knowing the answer, and sure enough the boy waved his phone
frantically—“No service.” He was pulling the satellite phone out of his anorak pocket as he said it.
“Go with him, John, I’ll ring them.”

“We shouldn’t—“

“He came from up near the cliffs, you’ll have to climb over the rocks. I can’t manage it with one
hand.” He put the phone to his ear, already ringing. “Go on. I’ll wait right here—if I’ve read the
map right they’ll probably come up this way.”

John hesitated, clearly not wanting to leave Sherlock, but the operator answered and Sherlock began
telling her the situation in rapid if imperfect German, so he gave a brisk nod and turned to the boy,
who was looking back up the path with his face knotted with anxiety. “Doctor,” he said, pointing to
himself and raising his eyebrows, and the boy looked enormously relieved and grabbed for John’s
arm, tugging him back the way he had come.
Sherlock waited until they were out of sight before he dropped the satellite phone into his pocket and pulled out his own phone. He opened an email to John and began tapping out the text laboriously with his left hand. *Dear John, by the time you read this everything will be over, but I just wanted you to know how sorry I am. There was never any*

He heard the sound of unhurried footsteps on the rocky path and glanced up. It was Moriarty, of course.

“Would you mind?” Sherlock asked, as though Moriarty were waiting for him to continue the hike. Moriarty was dressed as impeccably as ever, although in this case in a lamb’s-wool sweater over corduroy trousers, but he had definitely put on some weight since Sherlock last saw him. He must have been hiding close by to be so cool and collected. “I’d just like to finish this.”

“You can hardly send it, you know,” Moriarty said with his old arch amusement.

“I’ll just leave it here,” Sherlock said, indicating the rocks lining the edge of the path. “He’ll find it with my body, won’t he? Won’t be a moment.”

Moriarty made a gracious gesture. “Be my guest.” They both understood that this was the price of Sherlock’s cooperation: the promise implicit in John’s being lured away, that he would be left unharmed.

Sherlock stared down at the screen, but for once in his life he could think of absolutely nothing to say. In any case he was suddenly sick of the whole thing. It was just time for it to be over, he thought, and he typed out slowly: *I love you. Always.*

“Finished?” Moriarty said brightly.

Sherlock flicked him a glance and looked around as though picking a suitable spot. He leaned over and set the phone carefully on a low boulder, close to the ground but fully visible in the sun. When he straightened, though, the sun slipped briefly behind a slip of cloud, leaving him for a moment in shadow. He shivered and wrapped his left arm around himself protectively, not caring if he looked defensive.

“Well now,” Moriarty said pleasantly. He had pulled out a handgun, a bit large and bulky for hiking, but he looked well used to handling it. “I was picturing something a bit more exciting, a wrestling match at the edge of the falls, maybe? But it doesn’t look as though you’d be much of a challenge.” He pulled a mock-sad face at Sherlock’s arm. “Maybe this is for the best after all, a quick bullet—no muss, no fuss.”

“I quite agree,” Sherlock said, and dropping his left arm he shot Moriarty with the gun he’d been concealing in the oversized right sleeve of his anorak. He had to angle his body a bit since he couldn’t move his wrist, but then, that was why he chose that particular rock. The shot hit Moriarty in the abdomen, a bit lower than Sherlock had hoped but probably better than expected given the limitations of his broken arm, and for an instant the expression of astonishment on his face was immensely satisfying—it really did look like his mock-surprise expression from so many years ago—until he crumpled down to the ground.

Sherlock switched the gun to his left hand and took a tentative step forward. He knew he should finish the job with a head shot, especially since Moriarty’s gun was surely underneath him someplace, but he couldn’t seem to bring himself to do it—shooting someone who was lying on the ground, even a criminal mastermind who would not hesitate to shoot him, felt much harder than shooting someone who was pointing a gun at his face. He was still standing there indecisively when a glint of light on the mountainside caught the corner of his eye. He just had time to think *idiot, of*
course he has backup, he always had a sniper, idiot, idiot when he saw the muzzle flash and in the same instant felt the bullet punch him in the center of the chest.

It didn’t hurt. He wasn’t aware of any pain or even fear, only a slight astonishment at the blueness of the sky over him, the amazing sensation that he was flying: air was whooshing by his head, and yet no hard ground struck his back. There was only the blue sky, and the rushing sound of the air, growing louder in his ears.

Chapter End Notes

The counterfeit ring in Thamesmead is the one where Sherlock was shot in “The Lad That Loved You.”

Thanks to Ito for very gently breaking the news to me that “Sigerson” is not actually a Norwegian name. Look, Arthur Conan Doyle, I know they didn’t have Google in your day, but would it have killed you to written the Norwegian embassy or something?

The music Sherlock hears in John’s heartbeat: "Arcangelo Corelli: Christmas Concerto, Adagio”

The exaggerating of Sherlock’s injuries comes from the vastly entertaining ACD story “The Adventure of the Illustrious Client”. Holmes was trying to convince the evil Baron Gruner he was out of the picture, so that Watson could distract Gruner by posing as a Chinese porcelain collector while Holmes broke into his house and stole his “lust diary”. That’s a direct quote, by the way.

The “real” timeline in this fic was meant to parallel ACD canon, so John and Sherlock would be together for years before Sherlock gradually closed the net around Moriarty, and they would then meet at the Reichenbach Falls. In the universe of this fic Moriarty realized the trap he was in at the same point as Moriarty in ACD canon, and he went back in time using Trevor’s device to the moment at which he felt Sherlock had really become a problem for him: the three cases at the start of TRF (the painting, the banker, and Peter Ricoletti). But being at least three-fourths crazy anyway, the temporal displacement effect undid him completely, so he killed himself, and the universe promptly went to hell in a handbasket.

I really wanted this part of the story to align with “The Final Problem” as closely as possible, but that didn’t work out, because “The Final Problem” makes ABSOLUTELY NO SENSE. In a nutshell: Watson, who hasn’t seen Holmes in a year, discovers him on the doorstep in fear for his life. Holmes has spent that year building a trap around the terrible Professor Moriarty (who, by the way, has never been mentioned before) and now has everything in place to have the evil mastermind and all his henchmen arrested in three days. ACD never bothers to explain why he can’t just be arrested right then; he also doesn’t explain why Moriarty, instead of being a sensible evil mastermind and leaving the country, instead visits Holmes to threaten him and then spends a whole day trying to kill him off in various inefficient ways, such as dropping roof tiles near his head. Seriously? The Napoleon of crime, and that’s the best he can do? So Holmes, in absolute contraindication of everything we have ever heard about his character up until this point, decides to flee the country himself, and takes Watson with
him so he can have company while in life-threatening jeopardy. And that’s before we get to the part where an elderly mathematics professor with a back-up sniper decides that the way to settle all this once and for all is to have a wrestling contest at the side of a waterfall. Hopeless.
The River

Chapter Notes

"Time is a River Without Banks", Marc Chagall

See the end of the chapter for more notes

John stumbled up the steep path after the scrambling boy, clutching at a stitch in his side and thinking that he really might need the helicopter to pick him up when this was over. God, and he’d thought he was in shape. The path leveled a little and curved around a jagged spur of rock, and then the boy cried out frantically and bolted forward. John saw his quarry a little way ahead, sitting on the ground leaning back against a large rock: a curly-haired, ashen woman, clutching at her leg.

“Hello, I’m a doctor, let me take a look,” John gasped, all but collapsing onto the ground next to the woman. The boy was speaking to her frantically, tears pouring down his face. The woman answered him in German before she slowly pulled a blood-soaked fleece pullover away from her thigh.

“That’s…” John said, frowning, his brain stumbling and freezing in its attempt to catch up. “That’s a gunshot wound, you didn’t get that falling from the rock.”

“There was a man,” she said. Her English was halting but precise, and it was a lot better than John’s German. She gritted her teeth against the pain and went on, “He shot me, and he told my boy to go and find the men on the road, the short man with the red pack and the tall man with the…” she gestured at her arm and went on, “…or he would kill me. Please, he had no choice. Please…”

John did not wait to hear what came next. He was already running, stumbling back down the steep path the way he had come, desperately grabbing the satellite phone whilst trying not to go arse over teakettle down the hill, when he heard the gunshot below and his mind skittered into terrified freefall. Nononono, he thought, darting off the path and onto a rock outcropping where he thought he could see the path below. Holy shit, there was Sherlock, still on his feet thankGodthankGod, where did he get a gun? pointing a gun at a huddled shape on the ground with its back to John but surely that was Moriarty, that sleeked-back hair—

He wouldn’t have heard the soft pop if he’d been farther down the path, but his gut recognized the sound before his brain caught up, clenching furiously; and then the gun had fallen from Sherlock’s hand and he had stumbled backward, one step, two, and then he simply tipped back over the gorge and was gone.

John stared in shock, having completely forgotten the phone in his hand in his horror, until he distantely registered the faint sound of Werner shouting. He pulled the phone back to his ear and cried, “Sherlock, he’s fallen into the Reichenbach, he’s shot, get the helicopter, now—“ and then he was running again, no idea if he’d dropped the phone or put it into his pocket, no idea where the sniper was, not caring, desperate to get to Sherlock.

John pounded past the point on the path where Moriarty lay dead dying who gives a fuck and the glimpse of something out of place—Sherlock’s phone?—caught his eye but did not slow him. The path veered away from the stream then, switchbacking down the mountain, and John ignored the switchbacks in favor of leaping straight down over the rocks and grass like a poorly coordinated mountain goat. He tripped once and fell, spraining his ankle badly, but then he was back up and
running again, palms stinging and vision blurring.

He heard the pounding of the helicopter and then it passed almost directly overhead, following the stream, and he saw it bank and come around. For a minute he thought it was coming back for him but then he saw it circling and settling down for a landing, only a bit farther along. The path curved away again and he could have screamed with frustration, if he’d had breath, but then he was in trees, pine needles fragrant underfoot and then sunlight flickering through the branches, and then back out in the open again and there was the helicopter, rotors still turning, but the stream was to the right and John made for it.

Sherlock had been caught in a fallen tree, tangled in branches splayed like a dam over the swollen stream. The Swiss security men, belayed with rope harnesses, were already pulling him free and passing him along to the ground, where they laid him on a flat stretcher. John dropped to his knees next to him, chest burning, fumbling in his pocket to pull out his pocket knife even as his mind knew, traitorously, horribly, that there was no hope. Sherlock lay completely still. The parts of him that weren’t blue were bleached white, soaked and frozen with river water; and yet as John sawed at the sodden wool he realized a spreading pool of blood was soaking his knees. Sherlock was still bleeding and that meant—incredibly—he was still alive.

The strap had been knocked off the sling, but Sherlock’s arm was still tangled in it; John pushed arm and jumper aside to see the entry wound. It was tiny and neat, just a fingertip-sized hole in the middle of his chest. The bleeding must be coming from the exit wound. “Sherlock,” John said hoarsely. He pressed his hand to the waxy skin, too white, too cold, he must have already lost so much blood. “Sherlock, can you hear me? I need to turn you…”

A tiny flicker of Sherlock’s half-open eyes. Sherlock’s chest was barely moving under John’s hand. He could feel Sherlock’s heart, its beat already slowing and growing fainter. There was nothing he could do. Sherlock was bleeding out under his hands, and there was absolutely nothing he could do.

“Sherlock,” he said again. No point in turning him. He was almost gone in any case, and John could not bear to look away, holding to the tiny thread of Sherlock left in those fading eyes. “No. You promised, Sherlock, you promised you wouldn’t leave me. Damn it!” Sherlock’s breath slowing, stopping, no matter how hard he pressed his own warm hand to his chest. “Sherlock! You promised me! Fuck you, Sherlock Holmes, you promised…” he was sobbing the words out, clutching helplessly at Sherlock’s limp, cold body. “You promised.”

The water that closed over Sherlock’s head was icy cold, colder than anything he had ever felt or imagined; it would have stolen his breath away if he could still breathe. Almost immediately, however, the chill faded. He was still underwater, but it was fine. He floated peacefully.

“You did it,” a voice said and Sherlock looked around to see, of all people, Victoria Trevor. She seemed far older than he remembered. He frowned at her in confusion and then abruptly he remembered all of it: Trevor, her project, the entropy, Baskerville, Oxford, Brighton, Uzbekistan the pipe the White Hart Houston Mary the tiny little coffin John. And beneath all the others, faint but clear, he could remember a lifetime not dissimilar to this one, different in detail but identical in essence, leading him inexorably to this same mountainside. “You did it, or close enough as makes no difference. This will repair the entropy effect.”

Sherlock smiled, letting the sense of triumph buoy him for a moment, but then the smile faded. “But I’m dead. Aren’t I.”

Trevor shook her head and now she was the girl Sherlock knew at Oxford, pushing back her fair hair
and fiddling with her silver pencil. “I don’t think so, not yet. You’re still here.”

Here, Sherlock understood, meant the strange and infinite river, and yet not: he saw the cellar bunker around him now, the fluorescent lighting and concrete walls. “But I have to…” he started but before he finished the thought he knew it was wrong. He didn’t need to be willing to die to defeat Moriarty; he had always been willing to give up everything. What he had finally learned--after six lifetimes and still, it seemed, too late--was that he did not have to do it alone. “Oh,” he said sadly.

“I think you can still go back,” Trevor said. “Not too far, but if you really want to, you can.”

For a minute he was actually tempted to stay. He sensed that if he let the river take him that it would swirl him away someplace beyond pain or fear or failure, someplace where he would always be safe and warm. He hesitated, but then he heard John’s voice as clearly as if he stood next to him, desperate and almost weeping: “Sherlock, you promised me.”

“If I can go back, I must,” he said. “I made a promise.”

Trevor nodded. He could see the bunker beyond her, Mycroft’s shadowy outline leaning over her shoulder. “Go now. Quickly, while you still can.”

He turned into the current and pushed against it with all his strength—it was hard work going backward in time; no wonder the effect on energy conservation was so massive. He wasn’t going to get far, but then he didn’t have to—which was just as well, because when he surfaced he was standing on the path again, staring down at his phone. Dear John, by the time you read this...

And then Moriarty came round the corner.

“If you wouldn’t mind, I’d just like to finish this,” Sherlock said calmly, tipping the phone toward him. “It takes me a bit longer to type right now.”

“You can hardly send it, you know,” Moriarty said with his old arch amusement.


He slipped the phone into his anorak pocket and then paused as though a thought had just struck him. “Who was your spy? You clearly had one, and relatively well-placed.” At the same time he slid his hand to the satellite phone and typed blind: It’s a trick. Moriarty here. There’s a sniper on the hillside.

“Oh.” Moriarty smiled at him slyly. “Charles, of course.”

Sherlock made a face of unfeigned annoyance. Meek little Charles with his sandwiches! He should have guessed. “How long?”

“Oh, not long. I imagine he just got bored, always working in the safe house.”

Sherlock just needed to stall Moriarty long enough for John to find and take out the sniper. He pulled out his own phone again “Can I tell my brother? He’ll be furious he missed this.”

“Best not,” Moriarty said, still smiling. “He might come in handy again.”

Sherlock sighed, dropping the phone back in his pocket. “Speaking of bored…aren’t you getting a bit bored yourself? Being Mr. Turner, swanning about Dublin with your charity balls?” He smiled sweetly in turn. “You’re going to miss me dreadfully.”
“That’s true,” Moriarty said thoughtfully. “But it’s surprisingly fun being an upstanding citizen if you’re filthy rich. Anything I want, anyone…everybody loves me. I don’t really need you anymore.”

They love your money, Sherlock thought but didn’t say. He could still remember everything, and the thought of young James Allen—Sherlock’s dark, twisted mirror-image—stayed his tongue. “You’ll get bored eventually.”

“Oh, but I’d already got bored with you.” Moriarty shifted, bringing his gun up where Sherlock could see it. Playtime was over, apparently; come on, John. “Ever since you went off with your little pet you got so dull. Safe little cases, making people feel better.” Moriarty wrinkled his nose. “I’m doing you a favor, really, taking you out whilst people can still remember your glory days.”

“Wait,” Sherlock said quickly. He fished in his pocket and pulled out his phone again. “I think I’d like to leave this here. Just in case.”

Moriarty shrugged, but Sherlock could tell his patience was thinning. “Hurry up.”

Sherlock moved away from the edge of the gorge and turned to place the phone carefully on a rock. As he bent over he let the gun slide down into his hand, sliding the safety off and tucking his hand back into his sleeve. He stood, hugging his other arm around himself to block Moriarty’s view of the gun.

“It would have been more poetic if we both went over the falls,” Moriarty mused, “but then I decided I’d rather carry on enjoying myself a bit longer. A gunshot is quicker though, don’t you think?”

“Definitely,” Sherlock said and shot him.

As soon as he fired the shot he dove for the cover of the rocks, ducking behind a large boulder so that he was almost behind Moriarty and out of the sniper’s line of sight. He could see Moriarty on the ground, a pool of blood spreading beneath him, though he wasn’t sure where he’d hit him. Now what? He couldn’t call John; he might be sneaking up on the sniper. He transferred the gun to his left hand and crouched where he was, chewing his lip in agitation.

John was stumbling up the steep bath behind the German boy when he heard the satellite phone chirp. He stopped immediately: no one had the number except Sherlock, the chalet staff and Mycroft, and none of them would text unless something urgent was happening. He leaned against a steep wall of rock, panting, and pulled out the phone: It’s a trick. Moriarty here. There’s a sniper on the hillside. Well, hell. He’d been a bit suspicious of the boy and his story, of course: he hadn’t been certain Moriarty would turn up here, but he’d been fairly certain that Sherlock believed he would. But the boy’s terror seemed genuine, and he could hardly—never mind, he needed to get past that and find the sniper.

John slipped the pack from his back and pulled out the map. He located the main trail easily enough and pinpointed where he’d left Sherlock; here was the smaller side trail that he was on...he looked up and around, trying to work out where he’d set up if he were a sniper, cross checking the map. There. On that promontory with the trees. John stuffed the pack behind a rock and pulled out his gun—Mycroft had had it brought to him before they left, of course—and set off the way he’d come. He left the trail a few hundred meters later, making his way among the sparse trees and low vegetation as quietly as he could. There. Up ahead, lying prone on the ground with his eye to a rifle scope, dressed like a hiker: a big guy John had never seen before, cap pulled low to cut the glare. The sun must be right in his eyes, John thought: good. John stepped forward, cocked the pistol and said clearly, “All right, freeze. Keep your hands where I can see them and back out.”
The man went still but he was clearly a pro: he didn’t make the mistake of trying to look over his shoulder. He lifted his hands from the rifle and began wriggling backwards carefully using his elbows. John reckoned he would go a few feet to lull John into relaxing his guard and then make his move, and that was exactly what happened—the man slid his an arm underneath himself as though trying to push himself over some obstruction and John stepped forward, planted a foot on his back, and said pleasantly, “That’s good enough. I really don’t have a problem shooting you here.”

Two things happened at once. The man surged up with all his strength, making John stumble backward and almost lose his balance, and the sharp crack of a gunshot split the serene mountain air. John didn’t even pause: he shot the man in the back of the head.

Sherlock heard the gunshot and jerked back reflexively, but surely that was a handgun; it must have been John taking out the sniper. He smiled hugely in relief and stepped back out, looking up at the hillside again, scanning for some sign of John.

The sniper dropped like a stone and John shoved him out of the way with his foot, darting forward and flinging himself onto his belly to look through the rifle scope. For a second he saw only a collapsed figure on the path oh God but he could see the man clearly through the rifle’s sights: it was Moriarty, not Sherlock. And then Sherlock stepped out from behind a rock and looked up at him. He was smiling, and John felt an answering grin spread across his own face, even as he noticed the small pistol in Sherlock’s left hand and wondered where the hell Sherlock had gotten a gun. Mycroft, he supposed. Sneaky bastard. Then a movement in the bottom of the scope caught his eye and he glanced away from Sherlock, just in time to see Moriarty push himself laboriously up on one arm and aim his gun.

Sherlock had been scanning the hillside for some sign of John, so by the time he realized Moriarty was about to shoot him it was too late. Moriarty’s finger was tightening on the trigger: no time to run, to duck, to bring up his own gun; no time at all. Except. It went through his head faster than thought: another beautiful day long ago, green grass and blue sky, a woman’s voice: outer right chest. No major blood vessels…could live some time, with a pneumothorax. He did the only thing he had time to do in that fragment of a second before the gun went off: he turned.

John grabbed for the rifle grip, lining up the sight, just as Sherlock turned toward Moriarty and Moriarty shot him. John heard the shot but did not see it, because in the next breath his finger tightened on the trigger and he blew Moriarty’s head off. He scanned wildly for Sherlock. Sherlock was—shit, Sherlock was on the ground, he seemed to be moving feebly but he was down, shit, John pushed himself up and flung himself back through the little tangle of trees, stepping on the dead sniper and fumbling for the satellite phone.

At first Sherlock did not feel anything in his chest, only the pain in his arm from hitting the ground. He blinked his eyes open to see blue sky overhead and felt an instant’s terror: had he miscalculated? Was he falling again? But then he tried to draw a breath and the pain exploded across his right side and he exhaled sharply with relief. He was safely on the path—or at least he was safe unless Moriarty shot him again. That thought made him look around in spite of the pain, so he was just in
time to see Moriarty’s head disintegrate in a spray of blood and bone. It was rather disgusting.

Sherlock lay still and let his eyes fall closed again, trying to take the shallowest breaths possible. John was coming, he had to be on his way right now, Sherlock just had to hold on until he reached him. Sherlock thought about trying to retrieve the satellite phone from his pocket, but he was feeling light-headed now and the world was taking on an unnaturally bright sparkliness he thought probably portended nothing good, so he just kept still.

“Sherlock!”

Oh thank God, pounding footsteps and John skidding into sight, dropping down next to him and fumbling for his pocket knife. “I did it,” Sherlock said breathlessly. He beamed up at John, the sun lighting up his beloved frowning face like an angel’s. “I kept my promise. Oh, and I saved the universe.”

“Lie still and don’t try to talk,” John said curtly. He cut swiftly through the straps of the sling and pushed it aside, making Sherlock clench his teeth against a whimper, shoved the anorak apart, and sliced through his shirt and jumper. The furrows in his face relaxed a little.

“See, it’s all right, it’s only a pneumothorax,” Sherlock gasped.

“Only a pneumothorax,” John said, but he smiled. He wiped his bloody hands on his jumper and went to slice a piece off Sherlock’s anorak. He pressed the slick surface to the hole in Sherlock’s chest, which made Sherlock cry out, a little.

“Shh, it’s okay. Werner’s on his way with the helicopter; it’ll have an emergency kit. We’ll have this under control and be on our way to the hospital in no time.” John glanced around at the dead body of Moriarty, collapsed on the ground a few feet away. “You should have finished him off with a head shot. What the hell were you thinking? You arschloch.”

Sherlock felt a wide, delirious grin spreading across his face. He turned his face up to the blue sky and laughed. When would he learn to stop underestimating John Watson? Here he thought John knew only two German words, when all along he knew three! He heard John’s chuckle and then, getting louder, the steady whump-whump of the helicopter, and he closed his eyes against the flying dust and laughed and laughed and laughed.

The helicopter’s emergency kit did not extend to a chest tube setup, but John improvised with a butterfly needle, a length of tubing and a bottle of water. He drew off some of the accumulated air with a syringe and Sherlock could actually feel his lung re-expand; it was marvelous.

The reaction set in when they were airborne, when the high of successfully defeating Moriarty without getting himself killed (yet) began to wear off. Part of it was the pain and the blood loss, of course, but there was more than that. The memories of the other lives were fading away like dreams in the daylight, but the sharp edges still cut; Sherlock felt an unreasoning terror that if he closed his eyes he might somehow slip back into one of those other time streams, where he would be alone without John. He began to shake, bone-deep chills that made his teeth rattle.

“Hey. Sweetheart, hey, it’s all right,” John said soothingly. He pulled another blanket up over Sherlock’s shivering body and stroked his hair. “We’ll be at the hospital in twenty minutes. Listen, Sherlock, I’m going to give you a little morphine, okay? Your heart rate’s through the roof.”

Sherlock wanted to refuse, but he was hurting very badly, and in any case his teeth were chattering
too violently to speak. John understood, of course. “It’s only a little,” he said, looking over the
syringe Werner held up and nodding approval. “Just to get you through the first bit. I’ll have you off
it as soon as we can.” He put his hand to Sherlock’s face again, stroking his thumb lightly along
Sherlock’s cheekbone, and Sherlock turned his face into John’s palm and breathed in his scent: dirt,
sweat, glove residue, Sherlock’s own blood, John. He felt the sting in his arm and then the soft
blurring spread through him, but he clung to the sensation of John’s hand and voice until he drifted
away.

Julie Zdziechowski heard the text alert as she was strapping the baby into her car seat, but she
couldn’t check just then—Rob was crashing around trying to find his car keys, and she needed to get
the fresh bottles into the day care bag. She got it all together just as he barreled in, saying in a rush,
“Gotta go, love you, see you tonight,” grabbed car seat and day care bag, and left.

Julie found her phone, thinking irritably that if this was Whitnee calling in again she was going to be
looking for a new medical assistant, but it wasn’t Whitnee. Lock in your lowest mortgage rate in
years! Text REFI to this number! She felt as though she’d been doused with cold water, numbness
spreading from the top of her head down to the tips of her toes. She wanted to dash after Rob, to
grab him and the kids and throw them all into the car and just drive, all the way to Canada or maybe
the North Pole, as far as they had to in order to be safe…she made herself take a deep breath and
glanced at her watch. They had to be at the bus stop in five minutes. She could call after, of course,
but she knew already she couldn’t wait that long.

Julie stuck her head into the breakfast nook where her stepsons were still gobbling cereal. “Guys, I
have to call my work,” she said. “If you keep it down and clean up your stuff I’ll drive you to
school.”

The boys brightened instantly. “Can we play on the computer?”

“Yeah, after you brush your teeth.”

She took the stairs two at a time, hands shaking as she pulled the burner phone from its hiding place
and punched in the number she knew so well. “Jezebel?”

“Listen, love, you’re safe, don’t panic,” the familiar Irish voice said quickly. “Everything’s fine. I
just wanted to tell you…Moriarty’s dead. Really, definitely dead. There’s no doubt.”

“Oh my God,” Julie said. She sat down on the closed toilet and dropped her head between her legs.
Relief made her shaky and a little giddy. “Seriously? He’s dead? How?”

“Sherlock Holmes, of course, and John Watson. It happened in Switzerland. Sherlock was shot—
we’re told it’s not life-threatening, but Mycroft’s on his way now.”

“Okay,” Julie said. “Okay.” It was only just starting to sink in: Moriarty dead. She was truly safe
now. He could never track her down, tell her secrets, threaten her family. She felt tears prickle and
blinked them back quickly. “God. Jezebel, thank you. Thank you so much for telling me.”

“Ah, we’ll still keep in touch.”

“I’ll call you tonight to find out about Sherlock, yeah?”

“He’s tough, that one. Don’t worry.”

“I know. But you tell him—if he ever needs anything, I owe him one. Listen, I have to run. Talk to
you later.”

Julie disconnected, dropping the phone into her pocket automatically; she’d dispose of it on her way to work and get a new one on the way home. She sat where she was for a moment feeling a bright bubble of happiness expand within her. Everything in her life seemed suddenly precious and beautiful, even that bloody mildewed grout in the shower that she saw every time she sat down to piss…they’d need to get to that one of these weekends. She laughed at the joy of it, at the luxury of all those weekends, and she was still smiling as she got to her feet and shouted down the stairs, “Two minutes! And those bowls better be in the dishwasher!”

Sherlock opened his eyes slowly. He felt heavy and disoriented, the weight of the morphine trying to tug him back down. He had the strange sensation that he had been dreaming, dark unsettled dreams, but that didn’t make sense. He made his eyes focus on the shape sitting next to him and discovered it was Mycroft. Panic sliced up through the fog. “Where’s John?” He tried to sit up, but Mycroft pushed him gently back. Bloody hell, that hurt.

“John is downstairs,” Mycroft said calmly. “He was persuaded to go and get something to eat only a few minutes ago, after I swore to him that I would not remove my attention from you even if the Queen herself rang my mobile.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said. Relief. He still felt groggy and he twisted his head to frown up at the bags hanging above his bed. None of them seemed to be morphine, but he was having a bit of trouble forcing his eyes to focus.

“You received your last dose of morphine about six hours ago when the chest tube was placed,” Mycroft said, reading his mind with annoying ease. “John had the order changed to PRN after that. You can have a dose at any time you wish.”

“I don’t wish,” Sherlock said immediately. That was a lie—his side was hurting in a way that made him think it was just warming up—but that syrupy, tempting heaviness alarmed him far more than the pain. “I take it no one showed up at the meeting?”

“You are correct. It hardly mattered in any case—once the men in custody realized that Moriarty was dead, they became much more interested in providing information in exchange for a deal. My people have been moving swiftly. We now have what I am certain is the entirety of Moriarty’s senior management under arrest. It’s over.” Mycroft spoke with a deliberate precision, holding Sherlock’s gaze. “Moriarty’s network is destroyed for good. You’ve done well.”

Sherlock glanced away from his brother’s eyes, oddly embarrassed at the approval he saw there. “I need some water.”

“Ice chips,” Mycroft said, sounding pleased at being able to deny him something, and filled a cup. Sherlock crunched meditatively for a moment and then asked, “How’s John?”

“Physically he is fine. Worried about you, naturally.” After a beat Mycroft added, “Angry at me.”

“Why?” Sherlock asked, genuinely surprised.

“He seemed to think I expected Moriarty to come after you, that I let you put yourself out as bait.”

Sherlock frowned. “That’s ridiculous. If you were going to use me as bait you would have planned better than that. The gun was just a precaution.”
“I truly believed he could not find out where you had gone,” Mycroft said, almost inaudibly. “When I realized I had miscalculated…losing you would have broken my heart.”

Sherlock choked on his ice chips. “Now what the hell am I supposed to say to that?’ he said, still coughing. “God, this hurts. Give me some water.”

Mycroft gave him a bare half inch and Sherlock drank gratefully. “It wasn’t your fault,” he said when he’d got his breath back. “Moriarty paid off Charles. Fairly recently, from the sound of it.”

Mycroft looked not so much shocked as indignant. “Charles! But his father was…”


“I need to call London,” Mycroft muttered, getting to his feet.

“Oh no you don’t,” Sherlock said brightly. “You promised John, remember? Not even for the Queen herself.”

Mycroft glared at him. “This matter—“

“I’ll make a deal with you,” Sherlock interrupted. “Bring me my phone and I won’t say anything to John. I’ve got something I need to delete off there before he sees it.”

“Deal,” Mycroft said, diving for the bag of Sherlock’s belongings with alacrity.

Sherlock was released from hospital several days earlier than anticipated (“Because they bloody well can’t stand you anymore,” according to John) with a shiny new cast on his arm that he could finally get wear into the shower. They had to stay in town several days more—Sherlock had follow up appointments, and the mess at the Reichenbach was still being straightened out—so Mycroft put them up in a luxury suite at his preferred hotel in Geneva.

“I could get used to this,” John said happily, wandering out of the enormous en suite. He sat down next to Sherlock, who was propped up with pillows on the bed, staring at a guidebook. “Fancy seeing a few sights when you’re feeling a bit stronger? We’ve got to remember to get a load of chocolates for everyone back home.” He looked over Sherlock’s shoulder. “The Large Hadron Collider facility? I was thinking about the Flower Clock.”

“Actually,” Sherlock said slowly. “I was thinking of trying to see Victoria Trevor. She works there now.”

John looked only briefly astounded before he nodded as though Sherlock proposed looking up old friends all the time. “I remember her. From Baskerville, right? Sure, go ahead. If I’m free one evening I might take Werner up on his offer to show me his favorite beer halls.”

Sherlock arrived at the lounge early so Trevor wouldn’t see him hobble in like an invalid, but he got distracted by the spectacular view of the lake and city and didn’t see her until he heard her quiet voice querying, “Holmes?”

Sherlock got to his feet quickly, if a little awkwardly, and took her hand. “Trevor. You look very well.” It was true: he’d been expecting her to look older, for one thing, but even so Trevor had the
sort of fortunate coloring that would age almost imperceptibly. The pearls, silk blouse, all the same, but: “You’ve changed your hair!” Her hair was not noticeably shorter, but it was subtly angled on one side so that it no longer fell across her face.

Trevor smiled, more of a real smile than he remembered, and kissed his cheek. “You were always telling me to. And you look exactly the same—well, except for that.” She gesture at his cast.

“Occupational hazard,” he said, sitting down as the sommelier approached. “I hope you don’t mind; I’ve ordered a bottle for us. My brother’s recommendation, I’m afraid I don’t know much about this region.”

Trevor tipped her head to see the label and nodded in approval and Sherlock felt his eyebrows go up: he’d never seen Trevor drink anything stronger than coffee in their Oxford days. “I’m paying though,” she said firmly. “I owe you a rather large debt of thanks.”

“For what?”

“This project, of course,” she said, smiling. “I never would have thought to go in this direction if it weren’t for you.” She raised her glass to him.

“Tell me about it, then. I don’t exactly remember,” Sherlock said, and Trevor took a sip of her wine and pulled out a notebook and a silver pencil and bent over it. He couldn’t help smiling in genuine affection. There was a quiet happiness in sitting at this table with Trevor, following the equations she sketched out and asking questions, arguing minor points, just enjoying the brilliance of her mind. Sherlock had had some thought of warning her off returning to her previous research, but there seemed little need now. His memories of the other time streams had become blurry and indistinct, which he didn’t mind at all, and he rather thought he would do his best to delete them. Certainly he would never tell anyone, not even John. Who would believe him?

They had finished their glasses and night had fallen outside; the lights of Geneva glittered beneath them. “They’ll give you the Nobel prize when you’ve got it done,” he said, refilling their glasses. “Not the physics prize, though you should get that ten times over, the peace prize. Clean renewable energy? A way to reverse climate change? You’ll deserve that ten times over too.”

“If I manage,” she said softly. “It will take twenty years more, and I might not have twenty years.”

Sherlock frowned. “Why not?”

She sipped her wine, looking down and away. “My mother developed Alzheimer’s disease in her fifties. I might be lucky to get ten years, let alone twenty.”

“No, you won’t,” Sherlock said with utter certainty. “You won’t get it. You’ve decades more ahead of you.”

Trevor looked up curiously. “You can’t know that.”

“I do though,” Sherlock said definitely.

“Well, I hope you’re right,” Trevor said, picking up her glass again. “And anyway, I agree with you about what this could mean. Not for me, but for all of us. That’s why I owe you a greater debt than one bottle of wine can repay.”

Sherlock tilted his head, curious. She couldn’t possibly…“How do you mean?”

“When I saw you at Baskerville—what was that, six years ago? My project was about to get shut
down. I’d had an offer from an investor to set me up in a private lab, and I was thinking of taking it. But then when we talked, and I realized the potential for this…I banged out a grant proposal in record time, took it to CERN, and here I am.” She spread the hand not holding her wineglass. “Now that I’ve gotten farther I’ve realized you were right about the temporal displacement causing a logarithmic entropy increase. Pursuing that line of work would have been not just dangerous, but immoral.” She stopped, a faint blush coloring the sharp lines of her cheeks.

“What? No, tell me. I really want to know.”

“You’ll think…it sounds metaphysical, if not downright mediaeval.”

“When I knew you twenty years ago, I thought science was the only real thing in the world,” Sherlock said. “I know better now. Trust me, I won’t laugh.”

“What I’m doing, stabilizing entropy,” Trevor said slowly. “I’ve started to see it as part of a larger context. There has always been entropy, and there has always been chaos. It’s the nature of the universe for entropy to increase. But as long as there has chaos, there has also been order, do you understand? I started to see them as intertwined. If I can stabilize entropy, then I can oppose chaos.” She had set down her wine glass as she said this and alternately spread both hands. “The time travel was selfish. I wanted it for my own ends. And that investor also wanted it for his own ends. I pretended I didn’t see that, but I did.” She folded her hands, watching Sherlock intently. “You showed me a way to work for something better.” She twisted her mouth in a wry little half-smile, making fun of her next words. “To be on the side of the angels, like you.”

Sherlock was quiet, turning the stem of his wineglass as he looked out at the lights. Trevor was more right than she realized, but he rather thought deep down she had known Moriarty for what he was all along, if not the extent of the danger. Sherlock had just provided a convenient alternative at exactly the right moment. Still, on the side of the angels…was he? John was, certainly. He found that he rather liked the idea. A little tiny part of him—the part that really didn’t mind when John made him watch all those films—was quite taken with the notion of himself and John arrayed against the forces of evil, like the Avengers. He had saved the universe, after all, even if no one would ever know it but him.

A thought suddenly struck him and he looked up. “Trevor?”

“Hmm?”

“Where did you want to go? Or not where I suppose; when.”

Now she did blush, all the way to the tips of her ears. “Oh no. You will laugh.”

“If you’d made it work, I’d have given anything to go back to the eighteenth century and been a pirate,” he said seriously.

“Oh…all right. I didn’t want to go back, I wanted to go forward. Remember when you friend said that about watching Star Trek? Well, I watched Star Trek. That’s what I wanted. That future, with all Earth’s problems solved, finding new life and new civilizations.”

“You thought you would fit in there,” Sherlock said quietly.

She looked away. “When I was a girl I had a ham radio. I used to send out transmissions, because I thought the Enterprise would get my messages in the future and come back for me. When I was at school I sometimes pretended I’d been captured by Klingons and was being tortured.”

Sherlock laughed and then said quickly when she looked up, “I’m not laughing at you. I just wished
I’d thought of it.”

Finally she smiled. “Well, I’d been adopted by Mr. Spock, of course. He taught me his Vulcan mind-control techniques.”

“I really wish I’d known those,” he said a little ruefully. “Misspent youth. I didn’t discover Star Trek until John.”

“Well,” she said, looking away and picking up her wineglass again. “It still helped in the end. Because once I realized the potential of what I had, I realized that I had the chance to create that future, not just dream about it.”

“Trevor,” Sherlock said suddenly, “Do you have any plans tonight?”

“Just writing a paper. Why?”

“Would you join me for dinner? Because my brother should be returning to the hotel about now, and I would very much like for you to meet him.”

Sherlock sat up for hours after he had left Mycroft and Trevor to their own devices, staring unseeing out the window in their suite. He gingerly sifted through his fading memories, organizing them into neat files and then packing them away into a tidy little cabinet in his mind palace, tucked behind a hidden panel, carefully locked. He didn’t really want to see them again. Then he settled in to muse about his conversation with Trevor. Sherlock was so deep in his own head that he didn't even hear John come stumbling in until he clambered right onto Sherlock’s lap in the armchair.

"You," Sherlock said as John kissed him sloppily, "are intoxicated."

"Yep," John said. He had managed to straddle Sherlock's thigh's and was now trying to grind down against him without putting any weight on Sherlock's chest. "Had a lot of beer. Mmmm, you smell good." He finally manged to get his groin more or less in proximity to Sherlock's and groaned. Sherlock realized that being yanked from his deep philosophical musings by his drunk and amorous boyfriend might not actually be as annoying as he had thought.

"I don't think I can, er, put too much pressure..."

"Don't want you to," John said, now fumbling with his shirt buttons in what Sherlock could see was going to be a hopeless attempt. "Werner...after a few, well, a lot, he started asking, you know how they do, how do we decide, doesn't it hurt, and I was telling him..." Sherlock felt his eyebrows go up. "Not about yours exactly, but how good a nice long cock feels, not too thick, and the more I thought about it the more I wanted it..."

"You told a Swiss agent how much you want my cock in your arse."

"Yeah," John said, smiling blissfully. He had given up on the buttons in favor of rubbing his thumbs over Sherlock's nipples through his shirt, with the exquisite caution of the very drunk, and Sherlock was rapidly coming to the conclusion that he was recovered enough for this, after all. "This cock, right here, this perfect beauty, God I've missed it..." He had managed to snake one hand into Sherlock's pajama bottoms, and deep philosophical thoughts were summarily abandoned for the remainder of the night.
Sherlock returned to the surgeon a few days later and got his stitches out and the green light to return home, although he was advised to avoid air travel if possible. It took Mycroft a few days longer to get the Swiss government’s blessing—the police had not been thrilled that John had killed two people and then left the scene in a helicopter, no matter the mitigating circumstances. So they were able to see the Flower Clock after all, along with a number of equally dull tourist attractions that Sherlock deleted immediately. Thank God he had an injury that gave him an excuse to flee back to the hotel.

“Geneva is really lovely, isn’t it?” John said cheerfully as they were packing up on the day they were finally allowed to depart. He was trying to secrete a large parcel that he had brought back from the clockmaker’s district the day before. “Maybe we should come here on our next holiday.”

Sherlock groaned. “Switzerland is the dullest nation on earth. The only thing it has to recommend it is chocolate.”

“Chocolate!” John popped up like a jack-in-the-box. “Shit! We forgot to buy chocolate!”

They had to scramble, of course, getting to the station just in time for John to tear through the shops whilst Sherlock stayed with the luggage, buying up all the overpriced sweets in sight to take back to Mrs. Hudson and Molly and Lestrade. Sherlock was beginning to think he would have to haul the bags on board himself, hole in his chest or no, when John reappeared panting and clutching a large carrier bag.

“I’ll get that, you get the rolling one—no, not that one, the lighter one.”

They managed to get on the train just in time. Fortunately it was not crowded—schools wouldn’t get out for another month—and they were able to get seats in a nearly empty carriage. Sherlock sat by the window and fidgeted.

“You okay?” John asked after a while, filling in a series of numbers on his Sudoku. “You’re usually asleep by now, and you’re twitching like mad. Are you hurting?”

“I think we should get married,” Sherlock said abruptly.

“Oh?” John said. He didn’t even look up from the page.

“Okay,” John said. He didn’t even look up from the page.

Sherlock was nonplussed. “Okay? That’s it? Okay?”

“Well, yeah. Of course I’ll marry you. I would have proposed ages ago if I’d thought you went in for that sort of thing, and I’d have made a much better job of it, believe me.”

“You still can. That was more of…a declaration of intent. You can do the actual proposal if you like.” Sherlock considered this for a moment and then added, “As long as I can pick out the rings.”

John smiled at him, eyes crinkling with affection. “I think I can live with that. Did you have anything in mind for the wedding? Just pop into a registry office, or some sort of ceremony? Your parents’ garden would be lovely.”

“I want to be married in a church. It doesn’t matter which, I truly don’t care, but Mycroft says even he can’t compel the Catholic Church to marry us, so. Church of England, probably.”


“Of course not. Religion is nonsense. So is marriage, obviously—I mean, there’s no intrinsic value to
John frowned at him. “Is this making sense in your head? Because it’s not so much on this end.”

“I already know I’m going to be devoted to you until the day I die. If we go to a registry office, then we just have a legal recognition of something we already know.” Sherlock realized he was getting agitated and pulled his hand back into his lap. Chaos and order. Entropy and the side of the angels. It had all sounded so sensible when Trevor said it, but he found he could not put the feeling into words. “I want a sacrament, even though I don’t believe it. I want to say words that have endured for hundreds of years, I want…”

“You want us to swear ourselves to each other in the eyes of God and men.” John was smiling, but his eyes were serious. “You and me, forever and ever, world without end, amen. I understand, I do.” He took Sherlock’s hand in both of his and kissed the knuckles, still smiling at him tenderly. “I think it’s beautiful. Okay, let’s do it up right then, shall we? Flowers, hymns, adorable kids—we can borrow Mrs. Hudson’s great-nieces—your mum in a whopping hat—“

“—Mycroft in a morning suit—“

“—God, Harry in a dress—cake, Champagne, everyone we know—well, maybe not Wiggins.”

“Definitely Wiggins.”

“And exquisitely tasteful rings.” John rubbed his thumb over Sherlock’s ring finger and kissed his fingers again.

Sherlock squeezed back. “Simple yet elegant.”

“That’s settled then.” John released Sherlock’s hand and settled back, looking immensely pleased. “We’ll set a date when we get home. God, please tell me I don’t have to ask Mycroft for your hand.”

Sherlock snorted. “Mycroft doesn’t own me. It might not be a bad idea to ask Mummy though.”

John blanched. “I’ll need a drink.”

Sherlock wrapped himself in his coat and settled himself comfortably against the window, feeling happy and content. All was right with the world. He and John would get married. They would grow old together, a scenario he had never really dared to hope for until Moriarty was out of the way. There would be woolly socks and steel-cut oats, sex and cases and danger, holidays, Christmases, matching simple-but-elegant rings. The cuckoo clock with the Reichenbach Falls on that John thought he didn’t know about, adorning their mantle next to the whisky decanter and the Book of Mormon and Peter Ricoletti’s ugly statue. John. John’s crinkled smile, his loving hands, his warm strength at Sherlock’s side. John. Forever and ever, world without end, amen.

Warm and safe in his seat next to John, Sherlock slept. And when he dreamed, he dreamed only of John.

Chapter End Notes

I had two major inspirations for this fic, but first, a bit of backstory. You see, kids, back in ye olden times before there was the internet, fanfic as we know it now did not exist.
There were fanzines, but they were hard to come by (particularly if you were a kid who had to convince your parents to drive you to a convention). I was an original Star Trek fan, and what we had instead were the officially published Pocket Book paperbacks that came out every month or so. I was living in a part of Houston at the time where everyone worked for NASA, and even by that community’s high standards I was a colossal nerd. So I spent most of the insanely hot summers of the 80’s alone in my room, sprawled out on my wall-to-wall shag with the droning of the cicadas outside almost drowning out the nonstop hum of the AC, obsessively rereading my collection. (I can probably still recite whole chunks of my favorites, like some kind of geek Homeric bard.) The absolute best of these was The Entropy Effect, by Vonda N. McIntyre, and from this I took the hook on which this story hangs, the character name of Ian Braithwaite, and Trevor’s line to Sherlock in the first chapter (“Longer for me than for you, I think”). One of the most astonishing things about posting this story was hearing from so many people who also read that book and recognized the references or who also had fond memories of Star Trek. It’s a beautiful thing, so many years later, to be in such glorious company. May you all live long and prosper.

The conceit of Sherlock reliving his life with almost no memory of having done so previously was taken from Kate Atkinson’s brilliant Life After Life, which I highly recommend.

Finally, thanks to everyone who read and commented and made this story better as it was being posted. I had very complicated feelings about S3 in general and John in particular, but I didn't realize how much I would strike a nerve in writing about S3 John! I was awed by the passion and intelligence of the comments on the more difficult sections of this story, and many of them made me rethink a lot of my own positions. Thanks also to those of you who pointed out typos, added to my knowledge of A.E. Housman, far-flung cities, and Norwegian names, and to ancientreader for encouraging me to post chapters 12 and 13 back-to-back (and to add more sex). It would be far bigger mess without all of you!

Works inspired by this one

Podfic] A River Without Banks by aranel_parmadil

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