The Quiet Man

by ivyblossom

Summary

"Do you just carry on talking when I'm away?"
Forty-Three Minutes

“So.” She rests her hands over her notes, her fingers flat against the page. They’re slim and warm brown. She has pretty, oval fingernails, always clean. Not bitten or ragged, with no bits of torn skin around the edges. No visible cuticles. She’s fastidious, I’d say. She doesn’t work with her hands. She doesn’t do any heavy lifting, nothing dusty or dirty. If you were here, you would say: you hardly need to deduce the profession of your therapist, John.

I know, Sherlock. I know.

It’s just easier to be here if I only look at her hands. If I try and think like you do. Like you did. She splays her fingers out as if she expects me to stare at them. By now, I expect, she does.

I reckon she doesn’t even wash dishes. She probably has a boyfriend who does that. Loads up a dishwasher. Puts them back into a cupboard. Maybe a girlfriend: I don’t know. I can’t tell. I never can. How could he always tell? Clothing? Product? I don’t know. It never made any sense to me.

What can I tell about her?

Her fingernails are manicured, polished, but only ever with clear varnish. Professional, not flashy. It’s kind of a neutral statement, wouldn’t you say? Clear nail varnish? What’s the point of it? It’s perfect varnish, too. Not like Harry’s. No fingerprints, no chips. Not ever. Not since I’ve been sitting here across from her, at least. Not that I’ve noticed. So that’s patience, isn’t it. Painting nail by nail, waiting for each one to dry before doing the next. She must be very patient. With nail varnish, if not with me.

Or: I suppose she has her nails done. Someone else paints them for her. It’s someone else’s patience I’m looking at. That’s more likely, isn’t it, Sherlock? Don’t laugh.

Of course it’s more likely. I don’t know need to hear him say it. I don’t need to see that amused and slightly horrified look on his face. Watching the monkey trying to wear a pair of shoes or something: so funny, isn’t it, Sherlock. That condescending smile of his, no. I don’t need to see that again.

Oh God, of course I do. I need to see it. I want to. This hurts.


Perfectly flat white ceiling. No: there was a bit of damp on the corner, by the window. It’s been painted over. But it’s still there. Spot on the rug behind her chair: a cup of coffee spilled there, maybe. Cup of tea. Hard to say. Hard for me to say, anyway.

Come on. Pay attention. She’s trying to get started, she’s going to say something, she’s going to ask. How I am. What I’ve been doing. She’s going to ask about you, but there’s nothing left to say. Be normal. Be average. Smile for a second, make it look like you’re trying. Look up at her face for good measure. Just for a second. No blood. No broken skull. No dead eyes.

Stop.

Don’t.

Sometimes all I can hear is my own breathing.
Her eyes are always watching me. Judging me. She notices every fidget, so I don’t fidget. I don’t want to be too readable. I’m transparent enough as it is without making myself more obvious. I don’t want to make it so easy for her.

God. It’s not a game. I forget that it’s not. It’s not a game anymore, anyway. It’s a joke. But there’s no punchline, is there. No. There’s nothing.

It’s just this: talking. About nothing. Talking shit. Her skin obscures the last word on the page, but I know what it is. It’s progress. Written in blue ink. In cursive.

So she’s noticed that it’s harder for me to read upside down if she writes it in tiny, tight cursive. Did she notice? Or is it a coincidence? I don’t know. Progress. As in: I’m not making any.

There never were coincidences with him. Everything had meaning. Everything.

It smells like lavender in here, like an old woman. Is it meant to calm me, the smell of old women? I flatter myself. I’m not her only client. I mean: I’m not her only patient. Does lavender remind her other patients of grandmothers and comfort? Pillowy breasts and floured hands? My grandmothers smelled like gin and cat’s piss.

Ella’s not very old. It must be deliberate, the smell. Everything’s deliberate; if it’s not deliberate, it’s a mistake. Meaningless. Is it retro fashion? Is that some sort of hipster thing? I don’t know anything about perfumes. Or scented candles, or whatever it is. Nothing at all. There must be thousands of different scents. Millions, maybe.

He’d have a catalogue of them. In his head. Or hidden away somewhere in a notebook, a file on his computer. An index of gradients, like paint chips.

There’s a mark on her face, by her right eye; a smear of something. Eyeliner. Black. Maybe it’s brown, I don’t know. Sherlock would know the brand by now. He’d know why it’s smudged on her face. The whole story. He’d know.

I can only make up stories.

She’s pretty. She knows she’s pretty. Should I ask? Dinner, a movie? Back to my flat? There must be a bed upstairs here, somewhere. Her thighs around my hips? No. I can’t shag my therapist. Way too awkward. She’d probably keep notes. I can’t even look her in the face.

Anyway: there’s a boyfriend, right? A girlfriend? Maybe I should ask.

“How are things, John?”

How. I don’t know how. There’s a generic answer, the one everyone gives. The default. “Fine.” It’s like punctuation. It doesn’t mean anything. No: it means don’t bother me, don’t ask. It means none of your fucking business. “I mean, you know. As fine as...I can be.” That’s ridiculous. “Under the circumstances.”

She swallows. I watch the motion in her throat and it seems far too intimate. I can feel my face getting hot. It embarrasses me, I’m embarrassed. By what? Nothing. Sitting here, staring at her hands. Saying nothing at all. Or talking shit. Our chairs seem too close together all of a sudden. If she reaches out to touch me, I might spring back, or wrap my hands around her throat. No. I wouldn’t. I swallow too. My tongue feels too thick. I have to give her something. Say something. Fingernails. Varnish. Women’s fingers. I remember.

“Women in the media tend to prefer what some might consider to be an alarming shade of pink,
Pink coat, pink shoes, pink nail varnish. A pink case. Her jagged fingernails left a password. *It would have hurt.* It was something to go on. She knew she was going to die, that there was no hope for her. It must have made her angry, the injustice of it. So she gave us something. Before there was an us. She’d never heard of us. I’d never heard of him. He talked so fast, I could barely make sense of him. But sense was all that came out. It was like love at first sight.

*Love at first sight?* Well. *Love.* What? I can’t say that out loud. God knows Ella’s just waiting for me to say something like that. Everyone is. They don’t understand. It’s not like that, but that doesn’t mean it isn’t. I mean.

I don’t know what I mean.

I can almost feel his withering look. Almost. And I can almost hear him say: *don’t be boring, John.* Ella must think I’ve gone off right the deep end; I’m grinning like a lunatic. It feels so good to almost hear him. But then I lose him again, and he’s gone. He’s not sitting next to me, he’s not at home talking to me even though I’ve gone out. He’s dead. My feet are so heavy on the carpet I think I may never move again.

I find him and lose him a hundred times a day. And each time is just as painful as the last. This might be what hell is like.

“What?” Ella doesn’t understand. She doesn’t remember about the pink lady. She read my blog, I know she did. At the time. She doesn’t remember now. I need to clear my throat first.

“Women on the telly. You know. The newsreaders. So often in pink. Bright pink. Have you not noticed that?”

“No,” she says. She’s stone-faced. She thinks I’m talking in code, or taking the piss. I suppose I am. In the days before, I didn’t notice them either, those pink newsreaders. Never noticed them at all. I never saw anything. I lived in a fog. Now I can’t stop noticing. Turn on the telly: women in pink. You taught me to notice them, Sherlock. Now I notice, but it I can’t make it mean anything.

Maybe I am talking in code.

Jennifer Wilson gave us a password. She used the last seconds of her life to communicate that one thing. And what did Sherlock give me?

That pool of blood next to his head that’s burned into my brain. No pulse. His wrist was warm, but of course it was. Warm skin, and blood everywhere. He made me a witness to something I can’t ever pretend I didn’t see. And a note, he says. That wasn’t a note, Sherlock. It was a lie.

No. Don’t think about it.

Smile. Look her in the face, for once, even though it’s uncomfortable. “It’s just...it’s nothing.” Forty three minutes to go.
It’s too easy to go to 221b these days, even though I won’t go anywhere near the place. Even here, miles away, I avoid crossing Baker Street. I don’t drop by, I don’t visit, though Mrs Hudson invites me back whenever we speak. I don’t think she really expects me to accept.

The tea, once they bring it, is hot. The cup nearly burns my fingers. I let it sit, steaming, and wait. Mrs Hudson may have rented the flat out by now, I don’t know. I can’t quite picture anyone else living there. She must have patched up the bullet holes, at least. New wallpaper, maybe. I don’t want to see that.

I’m early, I know. Harry’s always late. I glance at my watch, rock back and forth on the chair. One leg is too short. It slaps against the tile and makes me feel as if I might tip over. That’s something, at least. Something to keep me paying attention.

Sitting alone with nothing to do is dangerous. My resistance to the pull of 221b is weakest at times like this.

The waitress is blonde and pretty. A little young for me, admittedly. Still: a good distraction. She leans over to pick up some cups and plates, and I can see the pink edging of her bra. A perfect view of her cleavage down the front of her uniform shirt. An excellent distraction. I smile at her, but she pretends she doesn’t see me. I can take a hint.

The scratched surface of the table reminds me; the marks on the teak from some experiment of Sherlock’s, his casual destruction of property. And I feel the pull of the memory. That cluttered sitting room with the harpoon in the corner, our two chairs facing each other, and the recently-dusted mantelpiece. It’s always too close.

Everything still makes sense in that room, and he’s still sitting there.

I’m back to one particular day. It wasn’t a remarkable day. Just him and me, waiting for the next case. Nothing special. I don’t know why I remember it at all, really.

It’s 221b as it was, more or less. It smells familiar, just as it should, as if he never left: toast, plastic bags, agar, and dry cleaning. It’s home. I’m anxious, and you’re ignoring me. I run my finger along
the mark on the table. I wasn’t here when it happened; you never told me what you did. It looks like a knife mark. Could have been anything; we have a lot of sharp objects in the flat.

A lot of things happen here when I’m not around to witness them. I left you alone with Irene Adler because I thought she was going to kiss you. Maybe she did. You never said.

Harry arrives late. Very late; nearly half an hour. She’s carrying a paper shopping bag that she stows under her chair. She’s talking: something about the weather, her shoes, the tube. Explaining herself. It takes a lot of concentration to leave 221b. I focus on the lines on her face, and notice that she’s getting older. Of course she is: so am I. It’s what people do. Her hands are shaking. I wonder if she’s had a drink. She probably has. She probably wants another. She talks. I try and listen.

I can’t stop thinking about Irene Adler. There’s a constant argument we’re having in my head, and it’s annoying me. The things she said: that Sherlock and I are a couple. It’s ridiculous, and untrue, but I can’t stop thinking about it. She shut me up with a simple, yes, you are, and I had nothing to say back. I can always count on my brain to come up with a useless rebuttal days afterwards, but not this time. Dammit. It’s bothering me. I want it settled. It’s silly.

This should be obvious: we don’t sleep together. The ultimate argument: surely that one wins. We don’t sleep together, we never have. Define sleep, define together. We don’t have sex with each other, we don’t kiss. I can’t even imagine how that would go. Oh, wait: yes, I can.

God, you would beat me across the face with your bony elbows, wouldn’t you. One of your sharp knees would slam into my groin and that would be the end of it.

The kettle boils: I’m smiling at the thought. You’re all legs and cheekbones, dear god. It would be like getting into bed with construction equipment. I pour the water over two tea bags; put milk into each cup. No: we don’t sleep together. I put you to bed sometimes, I make your breakfast, I pick bits of organ meat out of your hair when required, but we don’t have sex. That’s not how it works between us. But I have never felt closer to anyone. So the accusation sits there at the front of my head, waiting for me to dispel it.

Arguing with myself is getting me nowhere. So I’ll argue with you instead.

“She called us a couple.” I put your cup of tea down by your right elbow.

You don’t look up. “Hmm.” Complete disinterest. You’re reading the paper. I can’t imagine you find it any more interesting than whatever I have to say, but you are mildly tolerating us both.

“You were there, you heard her say it, I know you did.”

“Mmm.” Still: no interest. Not even to talk about her.

You care about her, don’t you. You should want her to know that you’re not with me. Not like that. You should want a woman you’re in love with to know that you’re available. That you’re not sleeping with your flatmate. That you’re not gay. That you’re interested. Why aren’t you doing any of these things? You let her think you’re with me? Why are you doing that? It would be so easy not to. Just once, just once, could you affirm that we’re not together like that? To anyone? Even if it’s just to me?

“A couple, Sherlock!”

“Yes,” you say, finally, still not looking up. “Well, there are two of us. Apparently she can count.”

I sit down and sigh. You won’t do it, you won’t ever confirm or deny. It’s strange. But I like it,
somehow. It’s what I expected you to say, and what I wanted you to say. I drink my tea. It’s too hot and it burns my tongue. You, sensibly, are letting your cup sit on the table a little longer.

I never raised the question with you again.

But I could have. Maybe I should have.

“You know what she meant,” I could have said.

You’d ignore that.

“We’re not a couple like that, obviously.”

Nothing there for you to say except for polite acknowledgement that anything has been said at all. Politeness isn’t your forte. So you won’t respond, as a way of getting the last word. I think you like to play with me like this.

“You’re flattered by my...whatever, you’re married to your work, right?”

You hate repetition.

“Are you in love with her?” That’s the real question. I already know the answer.

Would you look up from the paper, if I asked you that? Your steely eyes, you’d stare at me for a few seconds, at least, to make your point. Your point being that it’s a stupid question. Not worth answering? I don’t know. I’m missing something here. I think you’re in love with her. In fact, I’m sure you are. I’ve never seen you behave the way you did when you thought she was dead.

“Yes, you have,” you say, correcting me from behind the newspaper. When you’re only in my mind, you can comment on things I don’t say out loud. “I behave that way when I’m thinking. You know that. She made me think.”

“Did she?”

“Yes.” That’s love, isn’t it? For you? Thinking?

I don’t know how I feel about that, as if that matters; it’s like I’m running fast and suddenly the ground has disappeared. If you’re in love with her, which I’m certain you are, I’m not sure where my feet belong anymore. Why do I feel so odd about it? I don’t know.

“Are you in love with her?”

I should be able to force you to answer. You’re in my head now. That’s all there is of you.

“Yes,” you tell me, finally. “But it doesn’t matter.”

“Of course it matters,” I say. My heart starts beating too fast. My hands feel hot and thick. I know the answer to my own question, and now I no longer want to have this conversation with you. “If you want her, you should tell her. You should...she clearly wants you. Maybe you should...”

I don’t want to give you advice on your love life.

She would know how to deal with his bony knees, no doubt. She would know how to deal with him. She asked if I was jealous; I think I am. It’s strange. I don’t know why. He’s mine, that’s why. He’s mine and no one else’s. I can’t ever say that out loud, god. The look he would give me. Maybe he would be angry. Or just laugh. Or ignore me. I don’t know. Why does this bother me so
much? I want him to be happy, I want him to be loved, to love someone. Everyone should have that. Seeing him happy, with anyone, would please me, I’m sure it would. Because I care about him. I don’t want him getting hurt, that’s all, he doesn’t know how to avoid getting hurt. Well: no one does, do they. Everyone gets hurt eventually. The first time is the worst, though. Always.

“Oh course I’m not in love with her, John.” You put the paper down on your lap. You’re bored, and kind of annoyed with me. You see, but you don’t observe. “The truth is far more obvious. I’m in love with you.”

That hits me hard. Is that what he would have said, or is that only what I want to hear? No. Why would I want him to say that? I don’t know. We’re not a couple. We don’t sleep together. Define sleep.

—are you listening to me at all?”

Harry.

The real world snaps back into focus. Harry is sitting across from me, a cup of coffee in her hand, looking truly annoyed. She was telling me about her work, I think. Shoes? The weather? I must have zoned out a bit. Memories. They’re so addictive.

“Yes,” I tell her. “Of course. Go on.” My tea has got cold.
I press my key into the door, push it open, and switch on the light. Take a deep breath. Home.

Really, John? Here? Is this the sort of place you call home now?

The disdain in your voice is a bit offensive, frankly. I’m not going to have you judge me for this. Not now. You’re not qualified to have an opinion anymore. That’s what walking off a building gets you. Cope.

Yes, this is where I live, Sherlock. This is where I live. I knew you’d hate it. That was part of its appeal. You’d stick your nose up at it, I knew that. You’d blink at me like a lost owl and make that face at me. This is unthinkable to you. You’re not one for blending in.

I was lucky to find this flat in the first place, you know. And you were certainly no help. It was a miracle the landlord agreed to rent it to me. After all the news, your picture in the papers with me following on your heels, I’m fairly sure he recognised me. He never says anything about you. He’s one of the few who doesn’t. He doesn’t bother me, and that’s what I want. Anonymity. Even just the guise of it. The comfortable lie.

I thought it would be temporary. Just. Well, you know. A break from it. A change of scenery. It seemed like a good idea. Now I’m not so sure.

I’m an anonymous bloke in an anonymous flat now, Sherlock. Just like anyone else would be. Someone who doesn’t expect anything special, no dispensations, no invitation under the yellow tape. It also means no prying eyes and sympathy, no one asking me how I am. No one looking in on me all the time and being sad at me, waiting for me to cry or rend my clothes, some kind of demonstration I don’t want to give. No texts at three in the morning, either, and no black cars picking me up off the street and taking me to questionable locations. No clients, no experiments in the kitchen. It’s only silence. Peace. Solitude. I need that just now.

So yes. This is home, Sherlock. For now, at least. This is what it’s like when you’re gone. You wouldn’t understand.

What I don’t understand is this appalling flatpack dining set.

You posh twat.
It is a bit ugly, isn’t it.

I mean, I wouldn’t have chosen it, necessarily, but the flat came furnished, and I’m not about to complain about it. It’s fine. Perfectly serviceable. It seats four, and I only ever sit here alone. It’s more than adequate. Who are you to judge, anyway? I’m sure you’ve lived in a few tips in your time, back in the day. You must have. I’m sure Lestrade could tell me all about them. You’d love that, wouldn’t you.

I’d love to see the places you lived before we met, Sherlock. What, don’t tell me: palaces all, were they? Your brother always made sure of that, right? All stuffed with character? You got high staring up at charming dentil mouldings and passed out on classic mosaic tile, is that it? Back before me. Did you always live in some sort of Victorian fantasy with a landlady acting as a housekeeper? Never any terrible dives, lonely rooms, featureless bedsits? How lovely for you. How fucking lovely.

I don’t doubt it. I don’t doubt it for a second. There’s an aura around you that forces everything within a fifteen foot radius to grow more character than its ever thought possible. Including me. Especially me. I never would have imagined. The world never seemed so full of colour until you. But you’re gone now, Sherlock. You left me. You fell.

I’m not living in your fantasy world anymore, the magic has worn off. You walked off a fucking building, and that fantasy evaporated. It could only have taken shape around you. I could only have been that interesting with you. This is how the real world is furnished. Bland, isn’t it. Well, that’s what you left me with, Sherlock. This is it.

_This is a place for transients, John. Boring people._

It’s fine. It’s perfectly fine. It’s not some kind of dripping sewer, if you don’t mind. It’s spartan. Utilitarian. That’s what I am, Sherlock. Utilitarian. You know that. Don’t you? There’s nothing wrong with this place, it fits. It’s how things have to be. For someone like me.

It might be a bit stark, I suppose. Nothing but builder’s beige on the walls. Neutral furniture. The sofa is a bit stiff. It’s fine. One of these days I’ll unpack some things and it won’t look quite so bare. Not everything, though. There are some things it’s best I don’t see again. It’s fine for now. It’s reassuring this way. It’s functional. It doesn’t remind me of anything.

What did you think would happen? Jumping off a fucking building. Christ. Where did you expect me to end up? It’s small, yes. That’s true. Characterless. Boring. But it’s clean. It’s not that bad. I can accept it. I don’t have much choice in the matter, do I.

_You do._

I don’t. I really, really don’t.

_It’s horrible._

It isn’t! It’s what I need just now, all right? A blank slate. It has no ghosts or telltale bullet holes in the walls. No thumbs in the fridge. There’s nothing here to remind me of you. It’s quiet. It’s peaceful.

_It’s hateful._

“Hateful?”

_You should be in Baker Street. Where you belong._
“I can’t.”

You know I can’t. I can’t go back there, not now. Maybe not ever. It’s too much. There are two chairs there, Sherlock. Or there were when I left. Two chairs, facing each other. There aren’t two of us anymore. Don’t you understand? I can’t look back fondly, I can’t. Not yet. It’s too much. This is cruel. You always did have that streak of cruelty in you. I thought you tried to hide it for me. I thought you did.

You left me, Sherlock, and this is what I’ve got now. You. Left. Me. You created this. So stop complaining. It’s not you who has to live here, it’s not up to you. You fucked off, I’m the one left to keep on. I’m keeping on.

So shut up.

All right?

Jesus. I don’t know how you do it. You annoy the hell out of me even after you’ve gone and died. How do you do that?

I’d better put the kettle on.
The Man Who Didn't Know

Chapter Summary

Her voice reminds me of you. Though: to be fair, most things do.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone for the beta, and to tumblr, twitter, and #innercircle for the encouragement and support. <3

Her shopping is heavier than it looks. I can’t believe she carried it this far on her own, and in this weather. It’s a good thing I ran into her, really. It’s about to rain again. She’d slip and fall on the way to the high street and break her leg. You’d never forgive me if anything happened to her, would you. I don’t think you would. Who would take care of her?

She takes my free arm and tucks it in against her. She pats my hand. We smile at each other as if nothing’s wrong, as if nothing’s missing. We’re both such liars, aren’t we.

We walk together, as people do with their arms linked. I shorten my pace to account for hers, grip her shopping bag, and she leans against me slightly. That hip, of course. The damp: it must be causing her pain. She’s leaning against me and leading me forward at the same time. Herding me.

Is this a random meeting, or did I just fall into some kind of trap?

“Thank you so much, dear,” she says again. Her voice reminds me of you. Though: to be fair, most things do.

I hear her voice and I remember odd little things, like her calling your name from the door, or her complaining about your experiments in the kitchen, or her offering you a cuppa. You leaning down to hug her, you wiping your feet on her mat. Impossibly perfect memories. It’s a cliche: people never truly appreciate what they’ve got until it’s taken from them. But I usually did. Most of the time.

It’s a funny thing, being reminded like that: it hurts me and comforts me at the same time. A little tug of war that never really stops. Comfort and pain, comfort and pain, layered together until I can’t feel the difference anymore.

One day, maybe, I’ll be numb to it. But I’m not yet.

It's not that funny, I suppose.

She squeezes my arm a little. I smile at her, but I think she sees through it. She wants to take care of me, like she used to take care of both of us. “Why don’t you come back home with me? I’ll make you a cup of tea, how about that?”

Oh. This is definitely not an accidental meeting. This is a trap, isn’t it. She must have known I’d be
here, it’s the closest I’ll come to 221b. My patterns and habits betray me again; I circle around in
the mornings, after I’ve written for a little while. When the silence gets to me. My habits are
observed even now. By whom?

So she found the heaviest pans should could find and bought two, and stood here waiting for me,
did she? She knew I’d stop, she knew I’d help. And what’s meant to happen next? I’d carry her
shopping home, of course; it’s only a few streets away. A cup of tea in her kitchen, a heart to heart.
She’d lead me back up the stairs, drop me in the sitting room like a terrified cat and wait for me to
come back out from under the sofa. She’d wait for me to cry, and then pour me a drink. As if that
will make this easier, or better. As if that would bring you back.

She’s persistent, I’ll give her that. The steely determination of a motherly woman in her seventies:
not to be trifled with. It’s a bit hard to tell her no. She thinks she knows what’s best for me. There’s
a lot of things she thinks she knows.

“Oh, not today, I’m afraid. I’ve got an appointment,” I lie. “I’ll get you a cab.”

“Let’s walk a little further,” she says, like I’m a child she needs to goad. “Just a little further, all
right? It will be so much cheaper for me if we just walk down the road a little.” I should have seen
this coming.

Not yet. I’m not ready to go back.

I don’t really know why she wants me to come back at all. Shouldn’t she just rent the place out to
someone willing and able to pay? That isn’t me, not any more. What is it, pity? Nostalgia? Some
misplaced sense of duty? Did Sherlock leave her a pile of money to house me in perpetuity? No.
You wouldn’t do something like that, would you.

Anyway, I have access to your accounts. You’re not paying the rent anymore either.

I suppose she was never much of a business woman to start with, renting the place out to someone
like you. She knew what you were like. It’d be hard not to know. She knew you. Before I did, back
before. You might have been even worse then. With a drug habit and no one to keep an eye on you.
Was there someone keeping an eye on you? Like I did?

“All saw your story in The Strand,” she says. Oh. Right. Of course she did. All her friends probably
brought her copies immediately when they saw that there was a Sherlock Holmes story in it.
Awkward: if it were someone else, writing stories about you, blithely publishing them for the
world to see, leaving them for me to run into by accident in a shop, I’d hunt that bloke down and
punch him in the face. No question. That was thoughtless of me. I should have warned her. “It’s a
wonderful story, John! Congratulations!”

She doesn’t seem upset. She seems pleased. I didn’t think she’d read The Strand. It’s my first real
publication: one of your stories, Sherlock. I liked that story, “The Gloria Scott.” I’m telling all your
stories, even then ones from before I knew you. The stories you told me on rainy days; bribery and
codes. Secret lovers and murder. Everyone loves those.

It doesn’t matter if they don’t believe in you. They still love your stories. They want to publish one
a month. I just signed the contract. Maybe they want the controversy, I don’t know. They’ll strike
while the iron is hot, I suppose. Bit of crime fiction from The Man Who Was Lied To, Companion
To The Psychopath, The Man Who Didn’t Know. The public appetite for me and my stories hasn’t
gone off. Not yet, anyway. Bit of a surprise to me.

“It was an old story,” I tell her. “They approached me. You know, because of the news, I guess.”
“It’s nice to read your writing again,” she says. “I’m glad you’ve gone back to it. I’ve missed it.” She’s a bit wistful, I think. She misses him too. Of course she does. “He jumped right off the page, John. It was like he was back for a minute.”

I swallow hard. I don’t really want to talk about you.

She pats my hand again. “He’d have liked that.”

I put the bag in the cab along with her, and she looks at me with eyes I can only describe as pleading.

“You’re welcome back any time,” she says. “You know that.”

I try and smile at her. There’s just nothing more I can say. The driver starts the engine, and the hairs on the back of my neck stand up.

You can tell when someone’s looking at you. You can feel it. As if their eyes actually caress you. You never believed that, you thought it was funny I thought so. A man’s gaze isn’t a physical thing, you’d say to me. It’s not something you can feel. But I can. I turn my head to see who’s staring at me.

Up the road a bit, a man in a long coat. The cab drives off, and there’s a rumble of thunder. And a man in a long coat, watching me. Hands in his pockets, collar up, curly hair. Dark hair. A slim silhouette at the end of the street. He turns on his heel, and his coat flares out behind him.

**Sherlock.**

Is that you?

It hits me everywhere at once; like a clapper hitting the inside of a bell, one glance up the road and my entire body is ringing. Sherlock. Oh my god. It’s you.

How can that be?

It doesn’t matter.

I run. I run as fast as I can; I saw you. Sherlock, wait. Wait for me.

Utter delight and terror must run along the same nerve endings: they feel so close to the same thing.

A dark coat, curly hair: I wrote about you and you came back. Did you see it, I dedicated it to you. “For S.” And I felt, at the time, like maybe it was the only way to say anything to you. A dedication, one little line under the title. Did you see it? Did that make you come back?

First I’m going to hug you, and then I’m going to pummel you.

Run. How can this road suddenly be so long? I can hear my breath in my ears, I can’t hear the traffic, I can’t hear anything else. My breath, and my voice. Sherlock, Sherlock. An incantation. You came back.

Your bloodied face, that pool of blood. My eyes are watering. How can this be? I don’t care, I don’t care. Sherlock, wait for me.

“Sherlock!”

You don’t turn. You don’t look back at me. You keep walking, as if I don’t exist. As if I’m the one who fell, I’m the one who hit the pavement and died. The imaginary one, locked into a terrible alternate reality where you don’t exist anymore.

“Sherlock, you bastard!”

You turn, and I’m ready to tackle you to the ground, but no. A beard, glasses, short face.

No.

It’s not you.

Someone who only looks like you from a distance, from behind, and is glaring at me like I’m mad and possibly dangerous.

I stop short. I feel like my lungs have been pulled out.

“Sorry,” I manage. “Thought you were someone else.”

He glares at me, nods, and then walks away.
Linger

Chapter Summary

It’s still dark, it’s early. It’s a few seconds before you come in and climb into bed with me. I could lie here forever, knowing what’s about to happen, waiting for it. Waiting for you, and knowing you’ll come.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to whimberry and longtimegone for the betas, and my apologies to tiredteaspoons for declaring it done before she had a chance to peek in. This one is so sweet your teeth might fall out. Don't worry, Rosalia: the smut is coming, I promise.

It’s late; I don’t have time for this. I’m already going to wake up groggy in the morning. What is it, two? Three? Don’t think. Just sleep.

I close my eyes and I’m in my bedroom at 221b. As always. In spite of deliberately rearranging the furniture so the window would be on the opposite side of the room, and in spite of the new sheets, pillows, and pajamas, it still turns into 221b when my eyes are shut. I can almost hear the footsteps of the neighbours next door, Mrs Turner’s dog barking, and you shuffling around downstairs. The transformation is complete.

You come in wearing only a sheet. It’s the day we end up in Buckingham palace, but that hasn’t started yet. It’s all still in stasis, the dark before the trigger, back before the events begin that force time to move forward, toward its inevitable end: you, on the pavement, blood on your face, your eyes frozen open. It all stops there. But it’s not there yet. It’s long before that.

It’s still dark, it’s early. It’s a few seconds before you come in and climb into bed with me. I could lie here forever, knowing what’s about to happen, waiting for it. Waiting for you, and knowing you’ll come.

Most nights, this is where I stay. It’s easy, it’s comfortable. You’re still there, but just out of reach. Not dead, not gone forever. Just on the other side of the door, ridiculously, wearing only a sheet. I can fool myself into believing it, most nights. It helps me sleep.

I’m only partially awake, but I can hear your feet on the stairs even before you push my door open, pull back my bed clothes and lie down beside me with your cold, bony knees. I can hear your bare feet against the wood. You cough: not for my benefit. It’s not a warning, it’s just that you’ve got a bit of a cold, a fever. The cough is just a cough, not a message. But I don’t know that yet. I’m partially awake, comfortable, warm. I hear you coming, and it makes me smile.

I don’t know why. It just does.

You push open the door; the hinge squeaks a little. You sniff and wrap the sheet around yourself. You’re cold. I can tell. Your shoulders are hunched up, you’re uncomfortable. Your hair is
flattened on one side and twisted out sideways on the other. Your eyes are half-shut.

I’d shift over a bit if I needed to, but I don’t. There’s plenty of room. I know what you’re going to do.

You don’t say anything. You take the bedclothes and pull them back; for a moment, I’m cold too. My nest is disturbed. You fold yourself into my bed, and I feel it tilt under your weight. Your leg rests against my knee. You really are cold.

You pull the sheet up to your chest haphazardly, as if you don’t know how to tuck yourself into someone else’s bed. You turn your head and look at me. You sigh, and I can feel it against my face.

“John.” You’re making that face at me. It’s the one that makes it clear you want something.

“Yes, Sherlock.”

You don’t do this very often, do you. Just now and again, once you notice I’d been gone for a while, and have come back. Or for some other reasons I fail to comprehend as it’s happening. I spent the weekend in Dublin visiting an old mate; I don’t know what you got up to while I was gone, really. There were some texts I didn’t entirely understand. It rained, it was cold. You were out somewhere, ducking under gutters and trampling through tips, who knows. Out catching a cold, among other things.

So I can’t say I’m surprised when you climb into bed with me. What does surprise me is that you appear to be wearing nothing but a sheet. I presume you have pants on. I don’t know why I presume that: decency isn’t on your list of things to be concerned about. I will discover later, sitting on a sofa in Buckingham palace, that I am wrong in my assumption about pants, but I’m not troubled by it either way at this point. It’s early, I’m pleasantly half-awake, and you’re draped over the other half of my bed. It’s comfortable.

“I’m ill.”

“Are you?”

“You know I am. I already told you. Now I’ve got a fever.”

You complained about it last night. You seemed fine then, if a little glassy-eyed. You were tired, you hadn’t eaten. Of course you felt unwell. I untangle my arm and press the back of my hand to your forehead. You’re warm. Your hair is a bit damp. There’s a virus going around.

“I took my temperature already,” you say, sounding whiny and tired. “As I said: I have a fever. Do keep up, John.”

“Hmm.” I start to make a list in my head: I’ve got some paracetamol, I can make tea. I could pick up some orange juice, some soup. Mrs Hudson probably has something on hand.

“Make it go away.”

“You should rest.” I tell you. It’s not the answer you want. “You don’t have anything on today, do you?”

“I could have,” you say. “If something interesting cropped up. I’d leave the house for an eight.”

“An eight?”
“Of course. Nothing less than a seven.”

I have no idea what you’re on about. I brush my hand against your cheek: it’s usually warm, with a hint of stubble. Unusual. You’re fastidious about your shaving. I shift my hand down under your jaw and you lift your chin up for me. I check your lymph nodes; they’re a little swollen. “Are you congested? Sore throat?”

“Of course,” you say. Your voice sounds rougher than normal. You shiver suddenly, so I pull the bedclothes up over you. Tuck you in properly. It’s what I do: I take care of you. You settle in, turn onto your side, tucking your arm up under the pillow.

“Heal me, John.” You shut your eyes.

Your shin is pressed against my leg. I can feel you breathing, both on my skin and in the tremor it sends through the mattress. Definitely a fever. I stroke your hair. “I’ll make you some tea.”

“This isn’t fair,” you say, rubbing at your eyes. “Your bedroom is so much warmer than mine.”

That’s true: it’s always a bit warmer in my bedroom than anywhere else in the flat. In the summer time I prefer to camp down in the sitting room when it gets too stuffy. The window is small and sheltered, it doesn’t get much of a breeze. But it’s cool outside this morning, and you always prefer to sleep with the window open. It’s probably freezing in your room.

“Well, stay here, then.”

And this is when the day really begins. I’m the first trigger. I make the decision to break out of this quiet space. I could stay here, with my hand in your damp hair and your breath on my throat. But sometimes the sweat on your forehead turns into blood in my imagination, and I find myself on the pavement with you in my arms, and I feel the last bit of your life ebb out of you. I can’t linger here. It happens too soon that way.

So I get up. I put some clothes on while you tell me about the chemical properties of polyester, and something about thumb prints. You burrow into my bed like it’s yours. You’re strangely charming, even now. Maybe especially now. You’re like a cat, gloriously luxuriating on every surface. Everywhere you plonk yourself is your home in an instant. I don’t begrudge it.

I walk down into the kitchen. Something smells off, but I’m not keen to investigate. Probably something to do with thumbs.

The first thing I do is put the kettle on; then I go into your bedroom and shut the window. You’ve torn your bed apart; all the blankets are on the floor, and one of your pillows. Difficult night, I take it. You should have woken me.

I bring you tea on a tray, along with toast and an egg for each of us. I serve you breakfast in my own bed, and it doesn’t ever feel strange to me.

I sit with you, eating breakfast, drinking tea, talking about nothing in particular. It’s another stasis point, one I can walk back into if I want to. You and me, in my bed, eating breakfast. The stasis ends abruptly, however, when Mrs Hudson calls from downstairs. She calls up to us: “Boys! You’ve got another one!”

I can rewind it, though. Go back before, linger there instead. Sit in stasis for as long as I want. You, and breakfast. For as long as I want.
I shouldn’t have had that second cup of coffee. I’m tapping my fingers on my knuckles like I’m nervous, or lying. I wouldn’t want her to imagine either, so. Take a breath, calm down. Jesus.

I stare up at the bit of damp on the ceiling. That’s even worse: probably looks like I’m avoiding her. Or guilty of something. I push myself back into the chair, uncross my legs. Look out the window. Another grey day. It will probably rain later. Rub my temples. God. This is terrible. Look back down to her hands: fingers covering a blank page. She’s not writing anything at all. She’s just looking at me. Observing me. Evaluating me, probably. Waiting for me to explode.

You would know right away. If not from the fidgeting, then from the way my collar is buttoned, or from some stain on my trousers I didn’t notice, or the way I tied my shoes. You’d know. You’d take one look at me and say, So, you’re finally cracking up, are you? It’s been coming for a while. I’m surprised it took you this long to notice.

Well, I’ll just tell her. That’s what she’s here for, right? To help. I’ll tell her. She’ll probably prescribe me something.

“I stopped a man on the street,” I say. “No: I ran a man down on the street. I chased him like a criminal. Because I was convinced—”

I interrupt myself, swallow. Breathe. God.

This is hard to do. Take a breath, exhale. I hate therapy, why am I in therapy? Why can’t I just repress all this like any other man in my family? Like anyone else? Does everyone crack up when their best friend—

Wait. Breathe. Okay, focus. Focus. How do I say this?

“I saw him in the street, looking at me. I could feel him looking at me, you know how you can—”

That part isn’t relevant. Don’t be boring, John. Get to the point. Let’s try this again.

“I saw the long coat, you know. And curly hair. He was tall. Skinny. The collar pulled up. It was from a distance. You know what I mean.”

“Tell me,” she says. She’s not going to help me here at all. She wants me to say it. Dig my own grave.

I pinch the bridge of my nose and shut my eyes. “I thought it was him.”

Swallow again. It’s embarrassing how close to tears I am. I don’t want to be like this. I don’t want
to see ghosts. I want to be all right. But I’m not, I’m really, really not. It’s like it happened yesterday, or earlier this morning: blood. Too much blood. I didn’t see the impact, but I feel like I did. I can see it perfectly well anyway. Your head must have struck the pavement first, and broken. You would have known, you would have felt it, for a few seconds. Did you see me, before you were gone? I don’t think you did. As far as you knew I was still across the street where you told me to stay. Eyes fixed on you.

If you had to die, Sherlock, which you didn’t, I would have rather been with you. Not an impossible span of feet away. That was so incredibly unfair.

Why did you want me to see that? You could have called me from anywhere. Why did you do that to me, Sherlock? Why did you make me watch?

That’s a good question.

Yeah, sure it is. You want me to ask Ella that? Hey, Ella, why do you think Sherlock forced me to watch him throw himself off a building and land on his head? Do you think he might have been, I don’t know, a psychopath with no understanding of human emotion? Or do you think he just didn’t give a shit about how it would tear me to pieces? Was I supposed to be impressed? I know you’re not much good with social cues, Sherlock, but christ. That was a cruel thing to do. Such a fucking cruel thing. You die and you make me watch. You fucking tit. What were you thinking?

It’s a good question, John. You know my methods. Why would I do that?

Don’t. Don’t send me down that road again.

“You thought it was?” Ella, prying for more details. I have to be clear with her. Maybe it will affect the dose she gives me.

“I knew it was.” That’s so scary about this. That feeling. I knew it was you. I didn’t doubt it, I didn’t. Not at all. Like I’ve been waiting for you to come back, Sherlock. Like somewhere, somehow, I don’t believe you’re dead. I saw you. I heard you hit the ground. The blood, your skull. I saw. I felt no pulse. Your eyes, christ. Sherlock. Your eyes.

We buried you. I know you’re dead. But there’s some resistant part of me that doesn’t want to believe it. You’re smart, Sherlock. Very smart. Irene did it; a body in the morgue. DNA tests proving it’s her. But it wasn’t. Could you have done that?

But I saw you. I saw your blood. I saw.

Did you make me watch so I would have proof? Were you trying to help me avoid this magical thinking, imagining, somehow, that you’d come back to me?

“I was sure it was him,” I tell her. “I was sure. But I know he’s dead. I—I—”

Yes. I saw you die. I don’t want to say it. I don’t want to cry in here. I feel myself twisting my lips to hold it back. So obvious: even Ella can see that. Even I would recognize the grief on my face.

“John,” Ella says. “This is perfectly normal.”

Normal?

“You’ve endured a trauma. It’s normal for it to take time to become reality.”

It doesn’t feel very normal.
“You’re looking for him, why? There’s something you need to say to him. Something you didn’t get a chance to say. You’re looking for him to get some closure, John. It’s to be expected.”

Why is she so certain about that? What do I have left to tell you?

“Try to talk to him, John.”

“He’s—” I want to say, he’s dead, but I can’t. I can’t do it, not again. I squeeze the bridge of my nose hard. “I can’t.”

*A blatant lie. You talk to me all the time.*

I’m not going to tell her that. She’ll have me committed.

“Try, John.” She leans back. “Just try.”

What, now? Here? Out loud?

“What do you need to say to him?”

What do I need to say to you? I don’t know. “Why did you do this?” I look at her face to see if she approves. This is like a test at school: the teacher knows the answer, but I don’t. “Why did you do this to me?”

She raises an eyebrow. Not the right answer. Okay, then.

I shut my eyes, I try to picture you. It’s not hard. You’re always there, just behind the curtain or a door. You’re always so close.

We’re in a cab. Lestrade is just outside, the police are hovering around. They’re laughing, they’ve got their phones out. Snapping pictures, I think someone’s getting video. They’ve hauled you by your armpits into the backseat, and the driver looks terrified.

“It’s fine,” I tell him. “It’s fine, he’s fine. It’s just...it’s nothing, he’s fine. Recreational. He won’t throw up.” I hope that’s true.

They push you into the cab without much finesse, but I support your head. You’re pretty much out cold, but your fingers are twitching, like you’re trying hard to hold on to some thread of consciousness. I wonder what on earth that woman pushed into your veins; hopefully nothing addictive. Lestrade folds your legs into the cab and I rest your head in my lap. I can hear the snap of phone cameras and I look up and give them all a wry look. People will talk indeed. Now you’re curled up in my lap, my hand on your shoulder, I’m telling Lestrade to be careful with your feet. Make sure they don’t slip out and get slammed in the door. My hand is in your hair, cupping your head. I can feel your pulse racing. What on earth did she give you?

“It’s all right, Sherlock,” I tell you, though I’m fairly sure you can’t hear me. “We’re going home. It’s okay. I’ll take care of you.”

Lestrade shuts the door, and I can hear the police laughing. It doesn’t matter. You won’t care. I adjust your jacket a little, and pat you on the hip.

“We didn’t see that coming,” I tell you. “A naked woman with a syringe. She’s stolen your coat. She’s smart, like you are. You like her? I think she likes you.”

I don’t know why I’m talking to you. “Yeah, I think you do like her. I think you do. I’m sure she’ll
be back.” As I say it, I feel my stomach drop in a strange way, like I don’t quite belong anymore. Like Irene is about to change everything. I don’t know why: I’m just your friend. That’s all. Irene, well. I pat your hair, and listen to your breathing. “You’ll be fine,” I say. But I mean me.

What do I want to tell you? I look down at your face in my lap. Your eyelids are fluttering slightly. You’re struggling against it still. What do I need to tell you?

I look up at Ella. “I don’t know.”

“You need to find out, John.”

I nod. I guess I do.
The good thing about Mike Stamford, well, one of the good things, is that he doesn’t mind if we sit and eat lunch without talking. That’s about all I can handle right now; sitting in the park, my sandwich in my lap, a coffee on my knee. He’ll sit there, as he is now, and say nothing at all for an hour.

He knows what I’ve lost. He’s a good friend. I appreciate that. He doesn’t ask me questions and he knows Sherlock isn’t a fraud.

I can smell bread baking somewhere down the street, and I remember. It’s as if we’re still there, Sherlock and I, coffee cups in hand. Dartmoor. And because I know Mike won’t mind, I don’t try to stop myself from remembering.

Bread fresh out of the oven in the back kitchen, pulled out to cool. The whole inn smells of bread, faintly, even our room does. The moment we walk in, there it is, the smell of it. It’s a bittersweet memory. Heartache, anger. Hurt. Affection. Comfort. Love, even. In an instant: that’s what I remember.

Love? Yes. Love. Oh, stop. It’s not like that.

Well.

A room with two beds. Two leaded windows. A braided rug on the floor. Purple tulips in a vase on the dresser. Gingham curtains. Me with a bag, you with a black case. There’s a moment there, when I watch you put your case on the quilt, and I can’t quite believe my luck. You don’t let anyone near you, but you’ll share a room with me. A bed, even. Sometimes.

You put your case on the bed, you made a wry comment about the view, we leave. I pick up the key. The owner thinks we’re a couple, and I don’t correct him.

He’s not entirely wrong, that’s why. He’s just not entirely right.
The hours I spent lying on this bed, in this room, alone. Angry. Well, hurt, really. My memory of this bed, and this room, is a bit skewed because of it. The smell of bread and heartache forever intertwined. I’m lying awake, staring up at the crack in the ceiling, waiting for you to open the door, to give me a sheepish look. To open your mouth first and then wait for the right words to come out. I’ve seen that face before. It’s easy to forgive you when you’re looking for the right words. So easy. It’s not about the words with me, and you know it.

I lie in that bed waiting for you come back, to open your mouth to try and find a way to tell me you were wrong. Because you were wrong.

We were friends, weren’t we? Of course we were. Don’t tell me we weren’t. I made that mistake once, and I won’t do it again. You didn’t lie to me, Sherlock, and I didn’t lie to you.

But you don’t come back that night. Why didn’t you? We could have ended this quickly. You could have said, sorry, and I’d have said, all right, and that would have been it. The longer I lie here the more hurt I get, because I feel like you’re avoiding me. That makes what you said feel true.

You’d think that it would be impossible to be hurt by anything he says or does, after all this time sharing a flat with him and being called an idiot on a regular basis. You’d think I’d have a thick skin by now, and you’d be right. I do. But he knows exactly how to hurt me if he wants to.

He just rarely wants to. Almost never, really. But in Dartmoor, with a scotch in his hand, he wants to. And he does.

Mike coughs into his hand. He smiles at me, and looks back at his newspaper. So accepting of my silences.

It’s easier to start at the beginning again.

I put my bag down on the quilt. Our first time in this room, led there by the owner. The owner’s boyfriend, as it turns out. I put my bag down on the first bed, claiming it like a school boy, the one by the door. You put your case down at the foot of yours, the one by the window, your eyes full of something else. You’re thinking, you’re processing. You’re eager to get out of here, and I’m eager to follow you. There’s a hound to find, so they say. A hound? Why not? You’re excited about it. Antiquated language as a clue: I wouldn’t have noticed. It wouldn’t have occurred to me. I’m excited too.

It’s good to get out of London once in a while. This is a nice place, really. Pretty village. Fresh air. Nice. I booked us a room. Just the one. What of it?

“We’re not a couple,” I told her.

“Yes, you are.”

Christ, give it a rest, Irene. Honestly.

We share a room on occasion, it’s not that unusual. We’ve shared a bed a few times, too, outside of Baker Street. When it’s warranted. I almost always offer to sleep on the floor, but he just gives me that look. Complete confusion. Why would I do that? What purpose would it serve? He doesn’t care one way or another. I can sleep in the bed next to him, I can sleep on the floor, I can sleep in the inevitably lumpy and uncomfortable chair rooms like this always come furnished with, he doesn’t care. I’m like an extra pillow, or a landlord’s over-friendly cat, or a coat draped across the bed for all it affects him. I’m just some extra baggage. That’s all. A body in a bed, and not even an
interesting one.

So when people say, and they do say it, *let me get you a candle, it will be more romantic*, or *sorry we couldn’t do a double for you boys, or does your one snore*, or something like it, I feel the urge to point out that it’s not like that. Because it isn’t. And while it’s true that I am a straight man (if there’s anyone left who’ll believe that), that’s not the reason I say it. I’m saying it because I might as well be stuffed doll or set of cricket bats sharing a bed with him. There isn’t a flicker of interest there. Not a spark. He’d be more interested in me if I were a corpse, you know.

People give me far too much credit on that score.

It’s reassuring. I know where I stand with him. So I don’t have think about it. That’s why we share a room, you see. Or a bed. Because it doesn’t matter. Prim as a pin.

I’m his friend. He relies on me. I take care of him. We have an agreement. Sometimes we share a room. Sometimes we share a bed. It’s just to sleep. It means I’m less grumpy the following morning, that’s all. Is that so strange? It’s not, really. Our hyper-sexualized culture insists that everyone with a bond of any kind must surely be going at it, right? Shut the door and everyone’s clothes come off, that’s what people imagine. But that’s not how it is.

Well, his clothes do come off, admittedly. They came off in Dartmoor, the second night, at least. Not the first. He hangs them up carefully, he folds his trousers, he polishes his shoes. He’s quite fastidious. Obviously. He always looks smart, doesn’t he. Even in that stupid hat. He gets into the most posh pair of pajamas you can fathom. He’s an innocent, it doesn’t even occur to him that there’s anything odd in sharing a room with me, or a bed with me. Public school boy, bed sharer, I don’t know. He doesn’t snore, to answer that question. Sometimes I’m not sure he even sleeps. He breathes, he barely moves. That’s all.

We didn’t share a bed in Dartmoor. We didn’t need to. They gave us two single beds. Just as well.

It would cost a lot more for me to get a room of my own for no particular reason other than to protect my heterosexual reputation, don’t you think? That would be ridiculous. We don’t need two rooms. So I reckon: who cares if we only get one? I don’t care what people think about that, I don’t. Not really. Fine. Someone wants to imagine we’re a couple? Please. Imagine it all you like. Get off on it. I don’t care.

But we’re not. You lie there beside me like you would if you were alone. Innocent, for once. No conflict, no dueling thoughts, no temptation. I’m not that interesting to you. If I were, I think I’d know by now.

*Would you?*

Yes, obviously. Of course I would. I’m not an idiot.

*Where did you get that idea?*

I wonder if your recycled words are going to go through my head forever. Will you answer all the questions that occur to me for the rest of my life? Some snarky reply to every passing thought? Is this how it’s going to be?

I know why you lost your temper, why you ordered the scotch. I know why. I felt it too, the terror. Seeing things that aren’t there. I know how that feels. What I don’t understand is why, when you were terrified, the first thing you did, after ordering the scotch, was to tell me that we aren’t actually friends. Was it a bit of honesty? Was it a bit of your armour slipping, one tiny hint that I
don’t really know what’s going through your head, or who you really are? That I can’t ever know?

That turned out to be true, in the end. I had no idea you would do this. No idea at all.

“I know the real you,” I say to you. That’s back at Baker Street. Me looking out the window, you sat at your desk. Rumours flying.

“One hundred percent?” you ask me, like a challenge. As if it can’t be true. I can’t possibly know you so well. As if you want me to consider the idea that I might be wrong, that you’re a fraud, a fake. Is that what you meant? Is that why you said we aren’t friends? Because you don’t think I can ever really know you, with all your fucking complicated exceptionally brilliant grey matter? Did you want me to think that you’re a fraud, just to avoid the complications of this? Jesus. You think too much.

“I’ll make sure nothing happens to you,” you say. But that’s another memory. That’s a form of apology, the seventh or eighth. Not just for what you said to me by the fire, but for what you did to me later. For locking me in a fucking lab and watching me go mad. I don’t know about the experiment when you say that to me. I didn’t put two and two together then. But I’d already forgiven you. You must have known that. I was through being mad at you. “I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you.” You say that to me, too.

Point and counterpoint, this room, these memories. All bundled up together. A bit a fresh-baked bread, and here I am. Fresh excitement in the morning, a night in agony spent waiting for you, a little wound growing larger in my chest, and then later, a night spent with you, you sitting on my bed, my wounds healed over by these things. These things you say to me.

Words do matter to me, as it turns out. They do.

I get into bed, exhausted. The drug, the terror, it wore me out. We’re going home tomorrow. It’s over, you solved the case. That’s it. We’ll spend the night, we’ll have breakfast, and then we’ll go home. I’d like to start writing, because this is an interesting case and I can already imagine the comments it will get on my blog, but my head is pounding and I just want to sleep. You’ve been shooting me curious looks all evening. I don’t have the energy to parse them. You’re sorry, truly sorry. Not just for shooting off your mouth, I know that now. I didn’t know it then.

You’re in your pajamas. You didn’t sleep last night. You wandered around Dartmoor instead, you observed and deduced until the terror in your veins settled. You must be exhausted.

But you’re so careful, your movements are so deliberate. You hang up your shirt, your trousers. You run your fingers over your shoes, as you do. Then you come over and sit on my bed. Close to me, you sit so close for a split second I think you mean to kiss me. I feel a burst of adrenaline, and my pulse speeds up in the my throat. What? What are you doing, Sherlock? I don’t ask. You sit on my bed. I watch you. I wait. My palms feel damp.

What do I do if you kiss me?

It’s like my life passes in front of my eyes. What do I do? I watch you, your eyes. You’re looking at me like I’m precious to you, like you want to reveal your whole heart to me right now. I know you didn’t mean it, Sherlock. I know you didn’t. Of course we’re friends. You were petrified, I know. I felt it too. You want to tell me that you love me, in your own way? I know you do. I love you too. We’re friends, we’re best friends. You’re the most important person in my life, Sherlock, do we need to have this conversation just now? I can hear Irene’s voice in my head. I know, I know, shut it, already.
“There’s no hound,” you say. You look at me so seriously, like you need to convince me, like it’s desperately important. Like I might not believe you.

“I know,” I say. I shot it. There is no longer a hound, monstrous or otherwise.

“The drug is still in your system. If you get a fright, you’ll go into a terror again. You need to believe it, John. There is no hound.”

“I believe it.”

“There are no other monsters on the moor, either.” You look down, fixating for a moment on the buttons on my pajamas. You’re uncomfortable. You feel guilty: guilty for the experiments, for telling me I’m not your friend. For hurting me. For what else? Maybe you knew, even then, that you would leave me like this. Maybe you know how this was all going to end.

I know there are no monsters on the moor. There’s just you and me in this room, you and me. And that’s dangerous enough.

“I’m sure there are some murderers in vicinity. Statistically speaking, it’s likely,” you concede, and you look back up at my face again. So serious. And sad? Maybe. Why are you sad, Sherlock? Or am I only reading that on your face in retrospect?

“But I won’t let anything happen to you.” You say it with such determination. As if you could stop it; as if you could prevent the worst from happening to me. Well, what do I know: maybe you can. And that night, that night on the moor, I understood. It was your way of protecting me. “You need to know, John. You need to believe me. I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you. I can stay awake. I’ll be right here.” He’s sitting on my bed. So close I think he might kiss me.

That’s when the smell of bread and heartache starts to morph; now it’s bread and new kind of heartache.

You’ll stay awake so that I won’t feel afraid in the night. You’ll stay awake so that, when the wind pushes the branches up against the window, or a wayward guest drags his slippers in the corridor, I’ll know in my heart that you’ll be there, and you’ll protect me from whatever fantastical beast I can conjure up. You’ll put your hand on my shoulder and reassure me so I can go back to sleep. And if I hallucinate, if I see something terrifying through the window, you’ll say, *I’ll protect you, John. I’m here.* Because we’re friends, and because you feel guilty. You’re my guardian angel now, is that it? I don’t need an angel, Sherlock. I was fine without one. I had you.

I’m touched by your offer. I’m a bit touched in the head as well, clearly. As are you.

This is what friends are willing to do for one another: die rather than see each other hurt. Exchange of lives: I’d do the same for you. In an instant. You know I would. But I failed, and something happened. You happened. You did everything you could to make sure I couldn’t stop you. I’d rather die, but here I am.

But I can go back; back to Dartmoor, back before any of my tragedies unfolded. I can remember what it was like to be blissfully unaware of them. To hear you breathing, while you may or may not be asleep beside me. This is Dartmoor, and the worst thing in the world is you suggesting my friendship with you is all in my head. And you, sitting on my bed, trying to reassure me, to make me feel safe.

You staying awake through the night is hardly reassuring, you realize. You’ll get bored and light your quilt on fire. I know you, Sherlock. I know you.
“You don’t need to do that. You didn’t sleep last night.” You can read my tone of voice. You know I’ve forgiven you. You know I believe you. You’d die before you let anything happen to me, I believe it. You’d die first.

You did die first.

“I’ll be fine.” Staying awake two nights in a row? That’s nothing to you. The most I’ve seen you do is five, and even then you were only a bit woozy.

“We’ll both be fine.” What I want to say is: you still have the drug in your system too. Do you think you won’t get afraid, start hallucinating again? That you won’t need defending in the middle of the night? I’d die before I let anything happen to you either, so we’re even. But I don’t say that. I don’t know why. “Go to sleep, Sherlock.”

“Goodnight, John.” You reach out and touch my shoulder. Comfort. Affection. Then you stand up and bury yourself in your own bed. I fall asleep to the sound of your breathing. I can feel the heat of your hand on my skin long after it’s gone.

“I’d better get back to the lab,” Mike says finally.

“Right,” I tell him. “Thanks for lunch. Sorry I’m...well, you know.”

Mike smiles at me. “It’s fine.”

He’s a good friend. A very good friend.
Wish Fulfillment

Chapter Summary

You know, Sherlock, people actually like a bit of artistry in a story. A bit of metaphor, some colour. Some vague indication that a writer knows how to use his words, that always goes over well. Writing is meant to be entertaining to read, not just a factual statements of events. I’m not producing a spreadsheet. It’s a story.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone and lavellington for beta duties. <33

Really, John? Did my face actually “fall” when I realized we were too late? I think it stayed roughly where it was.

You know, Sherlock, people actually like a bit of artistry in a story. A bit of metaphor, some colour. Some vague indication that a writer knows how to use his words, that always goes over well. Writing is meant to be entertaining to read, not just a factual statement of events. I’m not producing a spreadsheet. It’s a story.

It’s romantic sensationalism.

People like it. Mrs Hudson likes it. Her friends like it. The people on the website seem to like it quite a bit. The editors are all thrilled with it. You think you know better than all of them?

Who cares what people like? The facts, John! The facts are what’s important!

Well, the facts are there too, aren’t they.

Buried underneath needless emotional dreck, yes.

Oh, cheers.

I have a deadline, Sherlock. I want to submit something this week.

I happen to like that emotional dreck. I think I’ll keep it. And there isn’t anything you can do to stop me.

And, as it turns out, emotional dreck is also true, you know. As true as your facts. But emotions just clutter up a well-functioning machine like you, don’t they. Distraction, needless, pointless distraction from the so-called facts.

But you aren’t a machine.

I said it once, just that once, but I didn’t mean it. You know that, right? I was frustrated. You were being cold, cruel, I hate it when you do that. Acting like you don’t care about people. But it was a
performance of cruelty, you did it on purpose. You were lying to me. You were sending me away.

It still hurts to think about that.

Being alone protects you, you said. Did you believe that, in the end? You couldn’t have. You didn’t have to wait for me to come back. You could have jumped at any time, but you waited. You waited to talk to me again, face to face. You waited to say goodbye. Was that for me, or for you? I like to think it was a bit of both.

You’re a human being. You went out of your way to ignore any emotions you might have, didn’t you. You would have cut the emotional part out of you if you could have. Pointless bit of flesh, right? Just gets in the way. No friends except for me. No lovers, no girlfriends, no boyfriends. Only me. I don’t know how you managed to push all your feelings away so much of the time, I really don’t. But I know you have them. Had them. I know you did. You must have been so lonely for so long. You didn’t fool me.

Maybe that’s what I’m meant to tell you. You don’t fool me, Sherlock Holmes. I know you’re human. I know you care about me. Is that what will give me closure? Making sense of you? Am I meant to forgive you? I’m not sure I can. I don’t know how to, not yet. I don’t want to reduce you to something I can explain away. I’ll only be able to do that if I forget most of what I know.

Moriarty ruined your reputation, but we could have fought back. I’m fighting back now, and it’s working. There are questions, Sherlock. Moriarty’s faked records aren’t all panning out. He’s good, but he’s not that good. We could have rebuilt. I would have helped. Why did you give up? You don’t care what people think. So you say. We could have left, started over. Your brother would have made that happen for us, wouldn’t he? This is his fault. He’s the one who fed Moriarty enough details to pull this off. He owes you. He owes me. He could have vouched for you. They can’t prove something that isn’t true, not forever. So why did you do this, Sherlock? Why did you leave me alone?

Alone isn’t good for either of us.

I don’t understand. I’ll never understand, will I. And Ella will keep telling me I need to get closure, but closure is impossible. I’m just not clever enough, am I, Sherlock. I’ll never be clever enough to understand you.

I thought you’d leap on that.

Of course I’ll never be clever enough. I’m an idiot, aren’t I?

Almost everyone is. Compared to you.

I think I’m going mad when you talk to me in my head, but I miss you when you don’t.

Well. I’ll put the kettle on, then.

I think this story is done. I’ll have another look over it tonight, then send it in. The best one so far, I’d say. Lots of dead ends, things coming clear to us in pieces. You would have hated it, I know you would have. It’s one without a proper conclusion. No one gets caught, we’re too late. The evidence goes up in smoke. You were so miserable about that. You didn’t say anything for three days. Remember that?

Sherlock?

Ah, back to blessed silence again, are we. Great. You talk to me when I don’t need you to, you
interrupt me and enrage me, but you’re silent when I ask you things. Not much has changed there, I suppose.

I remember: you standing in the middle of the sitting room, your eyes focused on nothing. You were flipping through imaginary file folders, reaching up toward imaginary shelves. You stood on tip toe to see over some sort of imaginary obstacle. Your mind palace. I know what you’re doing, and I know not to interrupt you. So I just sit with a cup of tea, read the paper a little, check my email, but mostly I watch you.

I didn’t realize having someone watch you could be a problem until we went to Dartmoor. You don’t let other people watch you do this, but you’ve never asked me to leave the room. You just go, you wave your hands in the air and stare at things that aren’t there, with warning or without. You don’t mind me seeing. It’s a sign that you trust me, isn’t it? That’s how I’m going to parse it. That’s how I like to think about it.

You can root around in there for hours, your eyes shifting all over invisible things, your hands batting at nothing. Once, you started singing: it was a snippet of pop song from the 60s. That was a surprise. I feel it in my fingers, I feel it in my toes. I almost didn’t recognize it. I think I laughed out loud, but you didn’t notice. Your perfect concentration filters me out. Or you didn’t mind. I don’t know.

You have a nice singing voice. You could have been a musician, if you’d wanted to. You’re very musical.

I moved a chair out of your way, once. You were pacing wildly and I was worried you would trip over it. You didn’t notice. You don’t notice mundane things like that when you’re in your mind palace. They don’t exist.

You’re mesmerizing to watch, really. It reminds me how complete you are in yourself; the rest of the world just melts away for you when you want it to. Right now, the world only exists to store the information in your brain, that’s all. A structure to hold what’s actually important, what really has value. I wonder if I’m in there, holding on to some marginally useful evidence. A bag of potting soil and a bloodied hammer, probably. Things of moderate use.

Or maybe I’m a sort of shelving unit for social interaction. How to deal with a kindly-meant gift in one hand; how to apologise when you hurt someone’s feelings in the other. How to smile when they lift a camera into your face, you could keep that on my shoulder; how to react when people start to applaud for you in the crook of my elbow. I could be the hat tree of appropriate social responses in your mind palace, standing somewhere near the front door. Or in a dusty corner somewhere. In a corridor. I bet that’s what I am.

If I’m there at all. Maybe that’s presumptuous.

“I don’t use you as shelving, John.” You stop, your hands frozen in mid-flight. You’re standing on one leg, as though you’re about to climb a stair. “Though I suppose I could. That’s not a bad idea. I could keep the most important details of a case in your ear, or in your navel. A whole body full of information. Could be useful.”

“I’m sure it would be.” Would that mean he would stare at me to solve a case? People would talk. If he needed to undress me in order to solve a case, people would definitely talk.

“But I don’t, John. I have a room for information about you, though.”

You never said that, not in real life. Memories are funny things, twisting and turning around. Your
voice feels so close, though. Sometimes I worry I’ll forget what you sounded like, but I don’t think I ever can. When you speak to me, you’re right here.

“Do you?”

“Of course.” You move again, half martial arts, half mime. You’re carrying something imaginary in your hands, you put it down and turn on your heel. “I used to have a box in the sitting room, but it got too full.”

“Really.”

“After that I moved you to a shelf in the library, but that filled up too quickly. Volume has a tendency to obscure detail. It’s a key principle of keeping a mind palace, John: each element needs its own space. I wouldn’t want to overlook anything. So I put you in a room of your own. I keep you in my bedroom.”

“Do you.”

“Yes. Intimate, domestic. Lots of room in there, nothing else to distract me from you.”

“There isn’t that much to know about me.” Suddenly we’re not in the sitting room anymore. We’re in your bedroom. This is starting to feel a bit awkward. What am I projecting, here? Sherlock wouldn’t associate me with his bedroom. It was never like that, it wasn’t. You didn’t see me that way. You don’t see anyone that way. Except maybe Irene, but I’m still not sure about that. You and I, we’re only friends. We’re only very good friends, that’s all.

“There’s a lot to know about you,” you say. You’re lying on your back now, looking up at me. It’s a bad position: you could choke on your vomit. If you vomit, which you won’t. But he’s conscious this time.

I remember this day. It’s the day Irene Adler injected you with something. You were out cold, or nearly; she said you would be fine. You were out, and Lestrade helped me haul you into your bedroom. Up seventeen steps isn’t a small feat for a body like yours. You’re heavier than you look. I protected your head around the corners, I had you by the shoulders. We laid you down here, on your bed. Your perfectly made bed. He dropped your legs on the mattress like bricks, pleased as anything to see you like this. She beat you, and he really enjoyed seeing you beaten. He didn’t mean anything by it. There were others there with us, laughing about it. It was a bit of a performance, really. Affectionate, and vindicated.

You always beat them, after all. Every time. That someone, anyone could beat you was a victory for them. That’s a red letter day, a day they won’t forget, because none of them were sure until now that it’s even possible to outsmart you. But you don’t care what they think. You don’t care what anyone thinks.

“I don’t.” You should be passed out, but you’re not. Not this time. You’re awake and looking up at me. Evaluating me.

“You say that, but you must care, somehow.” I do now what I did the first time; I hold your ankle and take off first one shoe, than the other. I place each of your feet back down on the blanket. “Why else did you jump off that building? You wanted me to think you were a fake. You wanted everyone to think so. So suddenly you started to care what people think. Why, Sherlock? Why did you do that?” I take your shoes and put them by the door.

When I turn back toward you you’re asleep, just like you were. Asleep, not answering my
questions. I sit down beside you and put my hand on your shoulder. Then, as now, I do it because I want to feel your heart beating. To be sure. Because I don’t know what she shot you with, and I don’t trust her. Others like to see you beaten, but I don’t. It makes me nervous. I press my hand against your shoulder, and onto your chest. You’re so thin, but you’re all muscles and bone. I suppose you can’t answer my questions. This version of you doesn’t know the answer to them, not yet. It’s too soon. You’re not thinking about dying yet.

“You’ll be fine,” I say, even though you’re passed out. I want to believe Irene wouldn’t hurt you, but I can’t. I call Jeanette and cancel for tonight. I need to be here. I want to keep an eye on you. You might vomit, and you’ll need me here to make sure you’re okay. She doesn’t like it; actually, she hates it. She’s furious with me. Which is, I think, a bit unfair: you’re in a bad way. What am I supposed to do, leave you here alone? I think that’s only the beginning of the end of Jeanette. I won’t leave you like this. You look pale. You looked pale at the end too, next to the blood. But that’s ages away. I still have so much more to learn about you between now and then.

This morning you crawled into my bed wearing only a sheet. We spend more time together on beds than I like to consider, generally. Still. It’s not like that.

I have to hug you to get you up. I sit you up in my arms, my hand against the back of your head. I lean you against my shoulder, brace myself, and balance your dead weight against me. But you’re warm, and I can feel your breathing against my neck. It isn’t dead weight: not really. Not yet.

“You’ll be fine in a few hours,” I whisper to you. My lip grazes against your jaw. I remember that: my lip against your jaw. I was embarrassed for a moment: it was like I just kissed you. But I didn’t mean to. And you’re out cold anyway, so what does it matter. “I’m just taking off your jacket. You’d prefer that, wouldn’t you? I’ll hang it up for you, you won’t wrinkle it beyond recognition. That’s better, isn’t it?”

You might be a tiny bit awake, because it seems like you try to say something to me. I wonder if it’s about my lip on your jaw. I’m mortified. You say something that seems to start with, “I...” but that’s it. That drug, whatever it was, is knocking you out cold. You’re struggling against it, like you struggle against everything. Well, almost everything. You opted not to struggle in the end. You just stepped off the roof, no struggle at all. But that’s not yet.

I manage to get your jacket off and throw it on the floor. You won’t like that, but I’ll pick it up in a minute. I only have so many hands, and both of them are currently cradling you.

I gently lean you back down again, your head nestled in the pillow. I need to shift you into the recovery position, but first I lie you down on your back. It will be easier that way. “You’ll be fine,” I tell you as I slide my hand out from under your head.

“Of course I’ll be fine,” you say. Memories merging and morphing again. You’re awake. I’ve got one hand on your neck and another on your waist. Our faces are close. “This is where I keep you,” you say, and I can feel your breath on my lips. “I keep you in my bedroom.”

Your lips are warm and soft. You smell like cotton, coffee and blood. You taste like cream. The skin on the inside of your lips is slick and wet. I feel blind, and nearly deaf, except for the sound of my lips against yours, and my heart beating.


“You’ll be fine,” I tell you, and I pull my hand out from under your head. Your hair falls in a halo on the pillow. I move my hand off your neck and take your wrist between my fingers, looking for a pulse. I find one. It’s fast, but it’s there.
“It’s romantic sensationalism,” you say. “What did I tell you.”

“Sorry about that.” How embarrassing. I embarrass myself in front of memories of you. Christ. What’s wrong with my head? “I guess I’m a bit suggestible.” It doesn’t mean anything. It’s just memories. People always think we do things like that; it’s hard not to picture it once in a while. It doesn’t mean anything.

“Is that the truth that’s buried under all the needless emotional dreck?” You’re laughing at me.

“Very funny.”

“I’ll sleep now,” you say. Almost sadly. I think my memories of you always want to talk. Of course they do: I want you to talk, and my memories of you are only just me. Wish fulfillment: that’s all I’ve got left. I shift you into the recovery position. You watch me, your eyes open but your limbs limp.

“I’ll be outside.”

“I’ll be fine in a few hours.” I pull your knee over to keep you steady. Your hair shifts against the pillow.

“You will be. You’ll wake up groggy, wanting to know where she is.”

“Yes. The woman.”

“She climbs in through the window.” I pull the sheet up over your shoulder. You look so fragile like this, out cold. Vulnerable. “I don’t know how she did it, frankly. I left it open a crack, the window. After I tucked you in. But how does she climb up that high without being seen? But she does, she brings your coat back. And your phone. With that stupid ringtone.”

“Jealous?”

“It’s not like that with us,” I tell you, as if you don’t already know. But I am jealous. Because you’re mine. I can’t explain it. It doesn’t make any sense.

“It does,” you say. “It makes sense. You want me to be yours.”

“Not like that.”

“Just now, I kissed you, but I meant to be kissing her,” you say. And that hurts. Why does is hurt? It just does. Am I jealous? Maybe you did kiss her, when she sneaked in. She must have kissed you; there was a mark on your cheek. One from me, from my fist, and one from her lips. It meant affection both times, really. But my affection comes in the form of my fist at your service, my gun ready to fire, always. Not my lips. I’m getting myself mixed up with other people. Everyone has their role. Mine is to defend you, to help you, to chronicle you, not to kiss you.

And that’s okay. That’s how we both want it.

“Of course you did,” I tell you. “You kissed Irene. That makes sense. You’re in love with her. Already, probably. She beat you. That must have impressed you.”

“No,” he says. “I knew it was you. I wanted to kiss you. I’m only yours. I only trust you.”

He’d never say that. Not in a million years. I suppose all this writing does put me into a romantic frame of mind. Maybe I should give that story another go-over. Wouldn’t want to give anyone the
wrong idea.

“You’ll be fine in a few hours,” I tell him, returning to the script. I said that to him the first time, even though he couldn’t hear me. “I’ll be out there if you need me.” Because I will be. I’ll always be here if you need me, Sherlock. That’s what I do.

He doesn’t answer. He’s so still. But I can hear him breathing. I felt his pulse; I’m reassured by that. A fast, steady pulse. It’s not later, it’s not in front of St. Bart’s. Not yet. I open the window a tiny bit; he prefers to sleep with it open. I’m letting her in. I know that. But I’ll always open the window for him. It’s what I do.

I know you, Sherlock. I just can’t understand why you’re gone.

“Why did you do it, Sherlock? Why did you leave me?”

I hear his breathing. He’s waiting for Irene to arrive and kiss him. Not me: never me, not here. It’s not like that, it never was. I leave the door half-closed, and leave. That’s how all these memories have to end, because that’s what happens. The things I can add to them are fantasy, perverse or otherwise. Exploring every corner, that’s all. Playing out every possibility. That’s closure, isn’t it? Playing out every angle until only the one that happened remains.

He doesn’t answer me. He can’t; I can’t conceive of any answer that makes sense. So he’ll stay silent, unconscious. Dead to the world.

The kettle’s boiling.

I’ll make tea, then edit my story again. I wouldn’t want to give anyone the wrong impression, after all. This isn’t a romance. It’s just an adventure story.
"Think about it: what if she’s right? What if I’m a fraud? I could fool you. You know I could, if I wanted to.”

You’d glance at everyone in this carriage and know at least a dozen stories you could tell me about them. Even the tube is a wonderland of information to you, a jumble of habits and mistakes just sitting there on stiff seats, all too casually written on bodies and clothes, waiting to be observed by you.

But it’s only me, now.

To me it’s all just awkward waiting, the scraping sound of the carriage eking along the track, and too many bodies in one place. There are umbrellas dripping on the floor. And people, in their various shapes and sizes, their perfumes, shampoos, body odor and deodorants, we’re trying to avoid looking at each other. Cattle shoved into a pen. Shuffling feet. That’s all I can see.

*You see, but you don’t observe.* Your constant criticism. Well, all right. I can try.

The man in front of me is wearing glasses. Nothing unusual in that. Lots of people need glasses. He has poor eyesight, maybe he has astigmatism. Brown frames, bit of gold on the edges. No deductions there; it’s all just stating the obvious. He needs glasses.

*Yes. A sound analysis, John. But I was hoping you’d go deeper.*

His shoes are wet, like mine are. Nothing interesting there, either: it’s raining, there are puddles to walk through. That doesn’t tell me anything other than he walked to the tube station, like I did. There’s no story to tell in that.

*It’s not about stories, John. The facts are what’s important.*

He’s reading some sort of almanac. Who reads almanacs? Farmers? He doesn’t look like a farmer.

Well, what does a farmer look like when he’s in central London? He’s not going to get on the tube wearing grass-stained tweed and heaving a pitchfork, is he. Well, maybe he would: you got on the tube with a harpoon once. Absolutely covered in pig’s blood. God, the looks you must have got. I can only imagine.
You took the tube that morning, and you texted me, six times. I remember. I still have them.

*The station is filthy, why is that?*
*Dispatching a mad pig is tedious business, who knew. Are you still asleep? Wake up!*
*It smells like piss in here.*
*Standing across from a counterfeiter with a torn anterior cruciate ligament, should I call Lestrade? Too boring.*
*Check the papers, I need another case. I need one, John. Find me an interesting case.*
*People are so rude. Why must they be so rude?*

I found those texts after I got dressed and put the water on. I laughed at them over my breakfast. You ran off without me in the middle of the night after I told you to piss off and let me sleep. But by morning you were on your way home again. Inexplicably on the tube. I smiled as if you could see me. I picked up the paper.

It’s unbearably sad, somehow, the memory of that breakfast: me alone in the sitting room with a cup of coffee and the paper, my phone in my pocket with fresh texts from you on it. And you on your way home. It feels sad, and I don’t know why.

There’s a warmth I remember. It was sitting in the pit of my stomach, reaching up into my chest; a kind of feeling of warmth I didn’t think was special until you left me and it was gone. I was happy.

There was a flicker of a thought I had, a half-thought, really, reading through those texts that morning: I laughed, and thought that you must miss me.

*Did I?*

I don’t know.

*Maybe I was just bored. You know I was bored: I was bored and empty, I needed a case. The pig was useless.*

Yes. Maybe that was it.

But that morning I thought you might miss me. For a moment. I half-thought it.

*I did. I missed you. You weren’t with me.*

You prefer it if I go with you, I know that. Why else did you wake me up at two in the morning asking me to go skewer a pig with you? I’m someone for you to talk to. Talk at, more often, but also to talk to. I’m your audience, but I’m also your friend.

*I missed you.*

I remember it as a warm burn, that thought of you missing me. It made me feel important, I guess. Necessary. Useful. I didn’t think anything of it; I barely recognized the thought. I drank my coffee, I looked for a new case for you in the paper. It’s just how we were, that’s how it was. Coffee, texts, and that quiet, unassuming warmth in me.

Sad.

Maybe it isn’t that. Maybe it’s just that you were on your way home then, and I sat at the table with my breakfast knowing that you’d come. I knew it, I didn’t doubt it. And you came home.

I miss that.
It’s a well-worn almanac he’s reading, if that’s what it is; even the cover is dog-eared. It’s been shoved into bags and pockets. He has glasses and clean fingernails. I don’t know. I can’t figure out his story. I’m not you. No one can ever be you. There was only ever one.

It’s a full train; all the seats are taken. There’s a group of men standing together in the aisle on my right. Knit caps on, dirty jeans. Boots. Farmers? No. Not in central London on a Wednesday afternoon. Well, who knows. I can’t tell. One of them keeps his keys on a thick chain; it’s dangling across his hip. Is that some kind of story, right there, the way his keys are attached to a belt loop with a chain? I don’t know. It’s meaningless to me.

The woman behind them, though, half obscured: she has neat, curly hair. Beige high heeled shoes. She’s reading a book, a paperback. It’s got a blue cover, but I can’t make out the title. She’s a professional woman, I suppose. Her clothes, what I can see of them, look smart. No bright colours. Navy and beige. On her way to work? Strange time to be commuting. Maybe she had an appointment. Dentist, gynecologist. Maybe she has a lover in the east end. You’d know, Sherlock. You’d know her whole story by now. She’s has pale brown skin, it’s a lovely colour. Her eyes are—

Jesus Christ.

Sally Donovan.

That look on her face: I told you so. Her words: “It’s better this way.” It’s seared into my brain. No it’s not, Sally. No it fucking isn’t.

She started this. This is her fault.

I could push my way through to her. I could press my fist into her chin and slam her head back into the wall of the carriage. I could pin her down by her throat until she passes out, I could grind my knee into her ribs until they break. I could follow her off the train, trail her on the way up to the street, then push her into traffic. For what she did to you. For forcing you to jump.

No. Christ. No.

No one forced me, John.

It’s too hot in here. I can’t breathe.

I do what I want. Just because your idiot brain can’t fathom my reasons doesn’t mean I don’t have any.

One clean shot to the head would do it. She hits the floor, the blood pools. That’s fair: her blood for yours. That’s justice. This is her fault. She killed you.

You think Sally Donovan could kill me? You’re giving her too much credit.

I can’t forget: Sally’s face turned toward me, her smug expression. The look she gave me as they took you downstairs to the police car: like she knew the truth all along. I told you so. Like she was right about you.

She was wrong.

She wasn’t wrong. I told you. I’m a fake. I hired Moriarty, I made it all up. To impress you. It was a trick.

Shut up. Shut up! I’m not going to believe those lies about you, Sherlock. I won’t. I can’t. I know
you. You are not a fake. I don’t know why you want me to think you are. I don’t know why you stepped off the roof. I don’t know why.

Simple, John. Because I’m a charlatan pretending to be brilliant. I’m actually just as dull as the rest of you. I just have better magic tricks. Or: had. I had better magic tricks.

No! No, that’s not true. It’s not. Don’t lie to me, Sherlock. Don’t.

You’re sat there, like nothing’s wrong. Sitting in that chair, reading the paper, waiting for your tea to cool. Like we never left Baker Street at all. Like you didn’t die, and I didn’t see you falling. And I’m pacing, I can’t stop pacing. Across the room, then back again. Only the lap nearest you making a sound; the carpet muffles the rest. I fix my eyes on your neck as I walk, then on your knuckles, your crossed legs, your dangling foot. The shine on the toe of your shoe.

“Why, Sherlock? Why would you do that? Why are you lying to me? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“Mmm.” You’re not paying any attention to me. You’re reading the paper. You’re humouring me by responding at all.

You hardly ever give me your full attention; you don’t need to. You can read the paper, solve a crime, write a treatise on the way blood stains twelve hundred types of carpet and still never miss a beat in a conversation with me. I don’t require your complete attention, do I. That great big brain of yours, you know what I’m thinking anyway, don’t you. And you don’t want to explain, I don’t deserve an explanation. I’m just a tag-along anyway, aren’t I. Your little pet. The maker of tea, the one who pays the bills. Not someone you need to confide in. Not someone you need to explain yourself to. Not a friend. Not really.

“That’s it, isn’t it. Clearly. You don’t have friends, isn’t that it? You meant that when you said it. Because you didn’t bother to tell me anything. You didn’t tell me what you were planning. You lied to me. You lied to me and forced me to watch.

“Now you’re just getting maudlin again. Why don’t you ask Sally. She’s right there. She’ll explain it. She knows why I did it.”

No. My hands are balled into fists. The man turns a page in his almanac, pushes his glasses up along the bridge of his nose. I can’t look over at her; she makes me so angry. She was never going to see you as you are. She thinks you’re a heartless psychopath, she doesn’t understand. She can’t be right. She can’t be.

“You have doubts, don’t you, John.”

“No.”

“Of course you do. I gave you enough of them. Think about it: what if she’s right? What if I’m a fraud? I could fool you. You know I could, if I wanted to.”

“You’re not a fraud. I can’t believe that. I know better.”

“Do you.” Your tea is still steaming. It’s a cup of tea that will never cool.

“How am I supposed to get closure if I can’t understand why you’d do this?”

“I told you why.” You don’t look up from the paper. “I’m a fraud.” Lies. Nothing but lies from
If I were brilliant like you, like Irene, you’d tell me the truth. You’d know I’d see through this, you’d have to be honest with me. If you believed I was bright enough to understand, you wouldn’t say these things to me, would you? You’d have told me something closer to the truth, not a tale of guilt and remorse only Sally would believe. She always thought the worst of you. How could you think I would? It’s not true. It can’t be.

You’d tell Irene everything, wouldn’t you, you’d spill your heart out, because she’d understand you. She’s like you. Two peas in a pod, the two of you. You’d have been perfect together. Did you love her? You did, didn’t you. An equal, finally. Not like me. And she thought we were a couple; you heard her say it. You must have laughed at that. If she’s so bloody brilliant, why would she think we’re a couple, Sherlock?

Was it me? Because I’ll do practically anything for you? She could read that on my face immediately, I bet. Just like you did. She knew I’d drop anything and anyone to take care of you. To keep you safe and whole. That I’d kill a man through a window without a shred of regret if it meant your safety. But that’s not being a couple. That’s me being a caretaker.

“And now your subconscious wants to kiss me.”

“No it doesn’t.” I don’t think that’s even true; it was just a fluke. It was nothing. Just a stray thought. It happens. Thoughts are just thoughts. “Can we not talk about that?”

“Hmm, it seems your subconscious wants to kiss even more of me.” You laugh behind the newspaper. This is funny to you, isn’t it. Embarrassing me. I need to change the subject.

“You lied to me.”

“Of course I did. That’s what frauds do.”

“No.”

I try to pull the paper out of your hands, force you to look at me, but I can’t; I can’t get close enough, my arms won’t move in the right direction, I can’t grasp it. It doesn’t exist; it’s not really there. This memory has some fixed points; I can’t change this. This is how it happened. You don’t look up. You’ll never look up.

I turn around and stare at the cow’s skull on the wall. I reach up for it; I pull it off down and throw it at you. Half the wall comes with it; I can hear the traffic outside, suddenly too loud. But you’re still sitting there. You’re reading the paper. Your tea is sitting on the table next to you, right where I left it, a wisp of steam hovering over the surface. The wall rebuilds itself. You don’t look up. I’m powerless.

“I don’t have to tell you anything, John.” You turn the page, your eyes tracking down a column.

No. I suppose you don’t. You can’t be bothered to. “You only have one friend.”

“Yes,” you say, still not looking up. “Well, apparently you can count. Good for you.”

I need to get off the tube. Sally Donovan is reading her book, she hasn’t seen me. She presses the tip of her finger against her lips. The carriage shudders; it’s about to stop. I stand up, I move toward the door. I don’t know where I am. I must be several stops too early, but I don’t care. My breath is ragged. I may have a panic attack. My heart is beating too fast. I need to calm down, get this under control. I’ll walk home, that will help. Breaths like steps, one at a time. In and out, in and out. It’s
raining outside. It’s meant to rain all day. It doesn’t matter.

She’s still sitting there, beige shoes against the floor. Reading her book. I can’t see the title. She hasn’t seen me. She’s reading, her knees pressed tight together. She hasn’t looked up.

I saw her afterwards, at Scotland yard. That day: that horrible day. I was still in shock. She passed me a cup of tea while I waited for Dimmock to finish with the press. I could still feel the small heat of your wrist on my fingers, I was fixated on it. It was the last I would have of you, that bit of heat. The last. I was staring at my fingers. There was no pulse. Your heart had already stopped. You must have known I would come to you, broken and bloodied as you were. You must have known I would hold on to you until they pried me away. I hope there was some comfort in that. Then suddenly: a styrofoam cup of tea in my hand. It made the heat of you disappear. Now it’s just tea: lukewarm. She mimicked sympathy at me, that small, fake smile people give those in obvious agony. I didn’t say anything; I couldn’t see anything but your face.

“He was dangerous,” she said to me. As if I didn’t already know that. “He could have hurt you. You’re lucky, you know. He must have regretted it all in the end. That’s something, isn’t it? Remorse. It’s better this way.”

Better? Remorse? She didn’t know you at all. Not in the slightest.

_Do you think you knew me?_

Yes. Of course I did. I do.

_Another romantic notion, John. You need to stop generating them. It’s counter-productive._

The doors slide open. I step out. I’ve left my umbrella under the seat, but I won’t go back. I can’t.
Compulsion

Chapter Summary

They want to see that you struggle, they want evidence that what you do isn’t so easy for you. I mean, it wasn’t. You worked hard at it. You gave up so much. You make it look so easy, even when I know it’s not.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone and lavellington for the beta. And thanks to everyone of #innercircle for the fun natter last night and all the inspiration.

If I nurse this cup of tea, I can probably stay here an hour or more without anyone giving me any dirty looks. Free wifi, over-earnest jazz playing at an ignorable background volume, people walking in and out: it’s a nice place. It feels alive. Busy, but not too crowded, not on a Friday morning, at least. There are a handful of other people sitting alone, like me. Among the friends and lovers, the parents with their children in tow, there are the solitary coffee drinkers with laptops or newspapers, ragged old books in their hands. It’s not just me. There’s nothing strange about me sitting here, not from the outside, at least. Just another bloke in a coffee shop, staring down at his screen. Nothing strange at all.

Well, I’m lucky today. Or it’s just a matter of matching weekday morning habits: this is the third time I’ve been here that I’ve seen him. He’s always in the same place, in the corner by the door. Hat on his head, wearing those glasses with the thick black frames that are all the rage. Earbuds stuck into his ears, the white cords hanging down and swinging slightly against the window. Plaid shirt hanging out of his jumper, artfully torn jeans. But when he leans over his book, something in the way he sets his back, he reminds me of you. The shape of him, somehow. He’s all folded in on himself, limbs tucked in and curled around, like he’s holding himself in. Lack of confidence, probably. He’s young. Late teens, early twenties, maybe. Awkward and uncomfortable, suspicious. Like you must have been at that age. Full of rage and uncertainty. A loner, lonely. Seeking solace in public places while resenting the world and everyone in it.

Like me, really.

If I don’t look directly at him I can imagine that I’m sitting here with a version of you. Like any other day when you don’t feel like talking, with a companionable silence between us. I shouldn’t take comfort in it, but I do.

I’d bring him a coffee, but that would make me feel like a creeper. He’s just a kid. I think he’s reading a comic book. Maybe it’s a graphic novel. He’s not covered in nicotine patches and pondering the chemical composition of some stranger’s urine: he’s not you. Just some kid. Some kid whose back twists just like yours does.

Wow: over a thousand comments on my new story in The Strand online. That’s unbelievable. You don’t like me writing about unsolved cases, but I guess readers are satisfied by different kinds of
endings.

Romance and trifles. Pointless details. Poetic turns of phrase.

I think I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.

I’m doing more than chronicling my memories of your cases now; I need to do more than that. It’s you I’m resurrecting here, one story at a time. All the sides of you, all the things that made you so amazing. Readers seem to like seeing you frustrated, thwarted. They want to see that you struggle, they want evidence that what you do isn’t so easy for you. I mean, it wasn’t. You worked hard at it. You gave up so much. You make it look so easy, even when I know it’s not.

You lose in this story, you fail. You make a mistake, in the end. I have to hold you back so you don’t run back into the burning house, throw yourself on the flames to collect evidence. You’d rather die than not solve a puzzle, I know that. It’s a little heartbreaking, I think, this story. I almost cut the epilogue out, but I’m glad I didn’t. People are raving about it. It’s so simple, so quiet: I brought you a cup of tea, and you smiled at me. But you looked so shattered. Readers like a little of that now and then, I suppose. Heartbreak, sadness from you. They want to see you suffer. That sounds cruel, but I think it’s the opposite: they want to see you suffer the way they suffer. They want to know that you’re not just a genius, you have a compulsion to solve these puzzles, and it goes beyond right and wrong, or being a show-off. A compulsion like their compulsions. It makes you so human. Bit of pathos.

As I said. Romance and trifles.

Human truths, Sherlock. As opposed to just facts and figures. This isn’t any less true, you can’t deny that. You were shattered. The look on your face: you were so disappointed in yourself. You were hungry for that conclusion, for the wheel to snap into the right spot. These are your truths. Evidence that you’re a real man, that you inevitably fail sometimes. You get frustrated and tired and confused, just like anyone else. Without these details you seem like some kind of calculating machine, measuring the length of shadows in your head and determining the exact time a murderer entered a room. It seems robotic somehow, like you’re a bit of science fiction. Fake. Showing a bit of failure makes you seem even more amazing, you know. They say it’s their favourite story yet.

Bizarre.

Such kind comments, too. Flattering. Very flattering. I liked that paragraph too. I read about “murder your darlings” and thought I had to cut it, but it stayed in. So glad you liked it, Sophie from Shropshire. I liked it too.

Oh, hello, Madge from London. You love Sherlock, do you? Yes. I understand that. He’s lovable in this light, isn’t he?

Don’t let all this praise go to your head, John.

A weird ping noise from the corner: my friend in the hat. His phone. He digs it out of his pocket and stares at it. I can see his chin, his lips mouthing words at it. A chin a little like yours. He could be a relative. Maybe he’s a Holmes cousin, did you have any cousins? Everyone has cousins, don’t they? You never said.

You weren’t ever one for family, were you. It’s among my regrets, not counting you as family soon enough. I should have invited you along with me to Harry’s for Christmas. I spent Christmas with you anyway. I should have just planned to. I’m sorry for that. That’s what you wanted, wasn’t it. Christmas with me rather than alone. Of course you did. And it didn’t even occur to me.
Our relationship is so complicated I still don’t entirely understand it. And yet it’s the simplest thing in the world in any given moment. Why is that?

He holds his phone in both hands and crouches over it, like someone might try and read his text over his shoulder, or steal his phone. Like a Dickens character with a bowl of gruel. Thumbs flying over the keys. He can text faster than I can type. Kids, honestly. I don’t think they know what phones were originally for. It’s a distant memory now. Ancient history.

Oh: new email. Mrs Hudson. She’s just read my story; did the paper version come out already? Or is she reading online these days? That’s nice of her: compliments. She laughed at my description of you flouncing out of the room with your coat swinging. She recognizes you in that epilogue, all sad and frustrated. The little smile you gave me anyway; she recognized that. She thinks my writing is improving, well that’s nice. Though I suppose that means she thought it was piss poor before, doesn’t it. Doesn’t matter: I’ll take it. I’m learning. I’m getting better. The more you do it the better it gets, isn’t that how it is? It seems to be.

I could picture you so clearly when I wrote that scene. The expression on your face; for all the things you know so well without asking, the smallest things surprise you. I was willing to shoot a man for you. The look on your face. Honestly. How could I have known something you didn’t know?

It would be embarrassing to tabulate how much time I’ve spent staring at your face. And I end up doing it at the oddest times. I remember sitting at the table, typing. Writing up a case, then, nothing fancy. Then suddenly: there you are. Your face.

“Why are you describing my coat?”

You’re reading over my shoulder again. At first that bothered me a lot. It seemed like such an invasion of privacy; I could always show you the post before I publish it, if you like, I offered, but you didn’t want to. Too much work. Words aren’t interesting to you. You said you didn’t care. But then you sneak around and peer over my shoulder while I’m writing and read the whole thing before I’m even finished. You can’t resist it, can you. Words about you are always interesting, aren’t they? They are to me.

“It was wet. It’s relevant.”

“It really isn’t.”

I turn around; our faces are a bit too close. Awkward. You don’t back away; you’ve got your eyes stuck on my post. Reading every word.

“Do you want editorial control now?”

“No, no.” You lean forward, rest your hand on my shoulder, and start tapping at my keyboard with one finger. I could lean into you just a fraction and be kissing you. That’s how close you are. And you don’t even notice. “You missed a word here.”

Your hand on my shoulder. It makes me freeze, half turned toward you, and I don’t know why. You’re not being rough with me, quite the opposite. You’re just gently resting your hand on my shoulder, more gently than I might have thought you capable, once. But it’s nothing. It’s a matter of balance, grace, that’s all. It’s like you’re saying something small to me: wait a minute, hold on, let me just... that’s how it feels. A minor communication between bodies. Friends. Flatmates. I can smell your triple-milled soap on your skin.
“You’re being romantic again.”

“Am I?” I can feel myself blushing, which surely only makes me blush more. Christ. What?

“I think it’s a constant state of being with you. Romantic. Must be why you’re always compelled to go on dates.” You say that last word like it’s a synonym for genocide.

You’re talking about the text, I think. Not me, half-turned towards you, so close I could kiss you on the lips without craning my neck. You’re not talking about the way I’m staring at your mouth, I don’t think. But I’m not sure. You haven’t looked at me, you’re reading my post. You’re fixated on it. Let’s pretend you’re talking about the text in any case. That’s simpler. This is just physiological reactions. Perfectly normal. I turn back to my screen.

“Let me finish it first,” I protest, and try to shoo you away from my keyboard. “It’s just a draft.”


“I’ll show you when it’s finished,” I say.

“No no, it’s fine.” It’s not fine. You’ll peer over my shoulder again in about twenty minutes, and that time your hand will cradle the back of my neck.

Wait. This comment here, with a dozen responses: that’s not a compliment. Huh. This person hates my story. Not because of the writing. It’s because they think I’m profiting off of a criminal. You. They’re calling you a criminal. A fraud. You paid an actor to play the bad guy, you killed innocent people for fun and called it public service. You’re a psychopath.

*Sherlock was not a psychopath*, I type out in the comment box. *You didn’t know him. There’s no evidence he was a fraud, because he wasn’t one. That’s just media sensationalism, and you’re eating it up. There’s been no case opened, there’s no trial, there’s no real evidence at all. Do you believe everything you read in the papers? Are you that stupid? You think the government didn’t know all about Sherlock, about Moriarty? They’d been tracking him for years. Before Sherlock had even heard of him. He was a good man. The best man I ever knew. If you don’t like my stories then don’t bloody read them.*

Submit.

Fucking bastard.

Joe from Bristol needs a fist to the face, that’s what.

You’re not a psychopath. And you’re not a fraud. Nor are you a criminal. You’re my friend. You’re my best friend, and I’m the one who killed people. Not you. Your aim isn’t as good as mine.

Christ.

My friend has left. I didn’t notice him leaving. Urgent text? Argument with his girlfriend? His mother telling him to come home and do the laundry? Who knows. He’s gone.

My phone rattles on the table; a text of my own. I don’t get many texts these days, really: you’re not around to send them. Who is it?

Unknown number.

*Leave it alone, John. You’re not helping.*
What? What’s this about, my comment? Is this from my editor? The publisher? I refresh the screen. My comment is gone.

Mycroft?

Jesus. Leave me alone, would you? The lot of you. Just. Let me get on with it. I’m no use to you anymore. I’m not important. Who cares what I say? Just...leave me alone.

*Fuck you, Mycroft.*

Send. There.

Bastard.
Perchance

Chapter Summary

Wings would help you fly: you’d never fall.

Chapter Notes

Well, I really love writing dream sequences. I didn't think I was going to publish this one, but longtimegone says DOOO EEETTT so here it is. I'm sorry if you think I've lost my mind. I just really love the logic of dreams. And...you know. John's head. Awake, and asleep.

“John.”

The light is on. I’m in bed, the rough wool blanket is heavy against my legs. It keeps me pinned down, which is good. I feel safe, pinned into this little bed. The branches of the tree outside are tapping in Morse code against the glass: he doesn’t understand. Of course I don’t. I never do.

There’s danger out there, somewhere. The water is coming in. But not here. You’re standing by the wardrobe, your shirt is unbuttoned and loose around you. Am I watching you undress? I am. I have been. I always do. Like a predator. A lover.

That’s not what we are. I don’t do this. This isn’t how it is.

“Sorry,” I say. And try to look away. But I can’t. I turn my head but you’re still there. Your chest, your stomach, your exposed hip bones: so close I could touch them. I am touching them: I’m holding you. Otherwise you would float away, you would vanish. I press my face against your thigh. You smell like the moor: terrifying. You put your hand on my head and I shiver.

“John.”

“I’m sorry.” I lean back against the mattress and stare at you sideways.

You pull your shirt off altogether. This is a strip tease; I didn’t know you had it in you. I stare up at the curve of your spine sideways; I can imagine wings sprouting from your back. Wings would help you fly: you’d never fall.

You’re more muscular than people give you credit for. Tough and strong, agile. Alive. Beautiful, that’s what you are. Beautiful.

“You’re beautiful.”

“John.” Reproach in your voice. How embarrassing. Why do I say these things? I don’t know. I don’t know.

“I’m sorry.”
There are three dogs lined up by the door; none of them are the dreaded hound. These dogs are quiet, they just watch you, like I do. A poodle, a beagle, and an Irish wolfhound. In a row. Waiting. Guarding the door.

“John.”

“Yes?”

“I trained those dogs for years. They would die before they let anything happen to you.” You sit down on the bed next to me. You put one hand on my hip, then you lean down and kiss me. You taste like scotch and woodsmoke. That’s nice. Your tongue is rough in my mouth. I can feel you in my veins. You’re so beautiful. Why are you kissing me?

You kiss my jaw. Your breath is hot on my neck. “It’s how they’ll know to protect you,” you say.

“Kiss me again. So they’re sure.” You crawl into bed with me, you’re naked. You curl up against me, and kiss me again. There is a world between us, between these sheets. Pinned down by the heavy blanket. I could live here. But I don’t. I never have. The sadness of it makes me sob. There are tears on my face. I can’t help it.

“They’re sure,” you whisper into my ear. You pull me against you, and I cry like a child. We fit together like we were built to. But we weren’t. We weren’t.

*  

“I was somewhere else a moment ago. Wasn’t I? Where was I? I can’t remember. Now I’m here. Of course I am.

I’m in the sitting room, in my dressing gown. I remember now; I just stepped out of the shower. The wall is broken; did I do that? I think I did. I took the cow’s skull off the wall. It was structurally important. The wall’s collapsed now. There’s a big hole there instead, like some monster took a bite out of it. There’s layers of wallpaper visible; pink and red and green; black and purple. Paisley and check. It turns out the walls are made of layers upon layers of wallpaper. Mrs Hudson couldn’t make up her mind; every new tenant, new wallpaper. Over a century. The flat must have been getting progressively smaller with each new layer; rooms hidden in layers of pattern and colour.

We found a lost room in there: a room with a pair of skeletons on the floor, nothing else. One of them is mine. We don’t talk about that.

There’s some plastic sheeting across the gap. The edges of it catch in the wind and make a flapping sound. Like wings. The flat is growing wings, and one day soon it will fly away.

My feet are cold. The carpet is damp.

“Draw the curtains, will you? There’s a draught.” You’re in the kitchen. You’re peering through your microscope; now you’re holding out your hand. “Then bring me your pancreas, would you?”

“My pancreas?” Of course. I agreed to this: you want to examine each of my organs in turn. Experiment. Terribly important. I’ve removed them already, all of them. They’re in jars on the coffee table, set in a neat line on top of your books and papers. These are the things I do for you. My kidneys, my liver, my heart, still beating. A little teacup on the end with my appendix in it. My brain is sitting in a bowl, pulsing.
You’re peering through the microscope at a bit of tissue from my lungs. I don’t know why you find it so fascinating, but I’m flattered. Am I so interesting? I’ve never had so much of your attention. That’s nice, I like that. Look at me some more. It feels good.

“John?”

“Oh.” I say. “Right.” I pick up the jar with my pancreas in it and bring it to you.

This feels wrong, somehow. I’m terribly exposed. All my insides: they’re still inside me, but they’re in your hands at the same time. You’ll discover everything this way, absolutely everything. I should feel afraid, but I don’t. I want you to see. It feels good.

“You had a crush on Freddie Mercury when you were eleven,” you say. “Fascinating.”

“I wouldn’t call it a crush.”

“Oh, I would.”

“Tell me again how this helps solve a case?”

“Isn’t it obvious?”

It really isn’t. Am I being an idiot again? My brain twists in the bowl. He can see even from the kitchen that I haven’t worked it out; you can read the pattern of pulses like Morse code. The tree tapping against the glass said the same thing. *He doesn’t understand.* How embarrassing, being an idiot. You’ve got that look on your face again. We know what’s really going on. But I don’t. I don’t.

*

“John.”

My room. I’m home. You’re lying in bed next to me. You’re wearing a sheet. Your long limbs in my bed, your cold thigh pressed against my knee, your feet resting against the foot board. The faint hair on your chest is more obvious in a beam of weak sunlight, and your chest: it rises, it falls.

I remember this: you’ll lie in bed with me, I’ll check your temperature, I’ll pull the blanket up over you. *Heal me,* you’ll say. I’ll get breakfast. I remember.

The edges of the walls are bleeding into water. There’s a puddle on the floor, it shifts with the tides, it moves toward the door in a full moon. Next full moon it will rise up to the top of the stairs and cascade down; it will flood the sitting room, the kitchen, and it will all be washed away. All our possessions into the sea. The walls are broken. The rain is coming in, pushing the wallpaper out in blisters. It drips over the skirting boards and joins the small sea emerging from the floor.

That’s a shame, ruining that floor. Perfect planks of old wood veined with ancient rings. I always liked the feel of them against my bare feet in the mornings; the remains of an old English tree. A purposeful death. Turning into something else. A bit of the long nineteenth century underfoot: a reminder that some things last, even after they die. Memories and Victorian wood: a house built of memories, collapsing slowly.

I’m not ready to go yet. Not yet.

“There’s water coming in,” I tell you. It comes out as a whisper.
“That was to be expected,” you say.

That’s true. It was. I tore the walls down in spite of the forecast. I let the sea inside, it was me. It was bound to happen. My fault; Mrs Hudson will not be impressed. Three bullets in the wall and I pushed it right through. They’re digging up the whole street, taking it off the map. No more Baker Street; no more use for it. No more Sherlock.

“You’re dead,” I point out. “Why did you die? It doesn’t make any sense.”

“I’m not dead,” you say. “I’m right here.”

“Right. I suppose that’s true.” You don’t look dead. You look very much alive. How lovely: yes, that’s nice. That’s as it should be. Why did I think you were dead? Am I blind? I’m so easy to fool. Strange. I was so sad for so long, thinking you were dead. I guess I was wrong.

You want me to heal you. How do I do that? I lean over and press my lips against your collarbone. You’re warm.

Wait: what am I doing? I’m kissing you, aren’t I. Why am I doing that?

“Sorry.” I’m still whispering, I’m whispering against your skin. You’re like a black hole: you drag me into you. I can’t pull myself back. You’re so warm.

I rest my hand against your stomach; there’s a sheet there, barely. I can feel the edge of your navel through it, a small gap in your heat. Your skin through the sheet, the dip of your navel: I can’t help it. There’s a warm tingle behind my eyes; I need to touch you. I kiss you on the throat.

“I’m so sorry.” I can’t stop myself. I don’t want to stop, and I can’t: you’re a magnet to something built in my hands, my lips, my veins. I need to touch you. You understand. You’ll forgive me. Won’t you? Tell me you understand.

“I understand,” you say. “I have a fever.” Yes. That’s right: you do. You run your fingers through my hair, and I think I may explode. You are heat and everything else is cold. There’s water lapping at the edges of the bed. Your skin is soft; your chest is ribs and heat and a beating heart.

“Don’t leave me,” I say into the hollow of your neck. Your arms wrap around me, your leg slips between mine. Skin on skin; I’m falling into the sun.

“You’re a romantic,” you say. Then you kiss me on the mouth. You smell like triple-milled soap and nicotine patches. Coffee and crime scenes. I press my hand into the small of your back, and the small groan I can feel against my lips is the most erotic thing I have ever experienced. I can barely breathe.

“I like it,” you say. “Don’t stop.” You run your hand down my stomach and I see stars.

“It’s not like this. We don’t do this.”

“Of course we don’t.”


You died. I forgot for a moment there. You died. The water’s coming in. It’s cold.

*

“John.”
I can hear you, but I can’t see you. I won’t open my eyes. I know what will happen. You’ll die if I open my eyes.

“John.”

Your hands are on my chest. On my thighs. Your hands. Dear god.

“John.”

Don’t stop. Just. Don’t.

Christ.

All I can hear is my own breathing. That’s all there is.
"John?"

There’s a brief moment of panic when I hear someone call out my name in public. Every time. It feels like they’ve caught me and I’ll have to confess. All my secrets revealed in a moment. Like they’ve caught me laughing out loud at something you said only in my head. Or they see something in my face that I’m not ready to talk about. But only you could do that.

They say my name like that and I wonder if maybe I’ve started speaking aloud out in public instead of keeping our conversations where they belong. Maybe I’ve finally cracked and I’m talking to the fruit at Tesco. Maybe I said something to you, and I’ve said it to everyone in the produce section now as well. My secrets revealed in one absent mumble.

I talk out loud to you sometimes, if no one else is around. It’s only a matter of time before I start doing it in public.

I’d better not tell Ella about that, either. My list of things not to mention is growing far too long. One day I’ll have to reverse the lists and tell her everything I mean not to. That will surely result in an impressive list of prescriptions.

It’s a woman’s voice. It’s not an accusation. I haven’t done anything strange, I’m sure I haven’t. I’m just doing some shopping, staring at rows of shiny apples. Just like anyone else at Tesco. That’s all. A woman’s voice, high-pitched, nervous. It’s someone who thinks she knows me, someone who wants my attention.

That voice is familiar: I know it. It’s quiet, and a little bit squeaky. Who is it? Not a woman I dated, no. A client? I don’t think so. I remember: her lab coat, nitrile gloves, the smell of formaldehyde. Her hair pulled back, her timid hands wrapped around a cup of coffee. A careful smile. It’s Molly Hooper. Of course it is.

So I’ll be polite, I’ll turn around. Prepare myself to be friendly. I need to be pleasant. Christ, this is going to be awkward. I haven’t seen her in ages. She’ll want to talk about you. I’m not sure I can bear it. Ella just spent an hour on that trick, and it didn’t go so well. There’s only so much of that I can take. It’s like physical pain: I have a breaking point. There’s not much more to say. You’re gone. We buried you. That’s all there is.

Her coat is hanging open, her cardigan is buttoned up crookedly. She looks more nervous than she sounds. I don’t know what to say to her. She’ll want to know about you. About how I’m coping without you, surely. She’ll want to commiserate. She knew you longer than I did. But she didn’t
know you better.

She loved you. There’s no question about that: she loved you. And you were so cruel to her. There’s nothing I can say to make that better, is there. He didn’t mean those things he said, I could say. He just lacked social skills. Is that true? I don’t know. You’re smart enough to fake your way through social skills. I think you only have contempt for people who love you. For people who make it too obvious. I could say he didn’t mean those things, but it would be a lie.

You did mean them, didn’t you. You always say what you mean. You are not an ambiguity. Except for in death. Then I just don’t even know where to start.

It’s all right. I’ll just tell her I’m in a hurry. I’ve got an appointment. Hopefully she didn’t see me leave Ella’s office just now. I’m exhausted. I don’t want to talk. Sherlock is dead, he’s dead. He killed himself. I can’t accept it, I can’t understand it, I can’t move on. Yes: it’s pathetic. I know. There’s no more ground to tread here. I’m on the edge of the cliff, and the only way is down.

“Hi,” she says. She smiles. It’s a fake smile, I know those.

“Hello, Molly.” I smile too. It’s also fake. Why are we doing this?

“All right?”

“All right. Yourself?” Maybe I can just deflect.

She nods. “Fine.” She stares at her hands for a second. I should jump in, tell her I’m in a hurry. I haven’t picked up a single item yet. My trolley is completely empty. “Are you...” She stops. Am I what? She looks up again, and stares at me, hard. Like she’s trying to find something in my face. What? What is it?

“You know he isn’t a fraud,” she says. No beating around the bush here.

I shrug. Of course I know that. I don’t really know how to respond. “The media think otherwise.”

“But you know the truth,” she says. These sound like questions, even though they can’t possibly be. Her words turn up a bit at the end, like she’s asking me. You know the truth? No, no I don’t. I don’t know the truth of anything. I ask and I ask, but I’m going around in circles. I’ll never get an answer, and I’m no closer to closing the door on this. No. I don’t know the truth. I’m in the dark on this one.

“I don’t know anything anymore,” I tell her. It’s a bit too much information. I didn’t mean to be so honest. “It doesn’t matter.”

“It does,” she says. “You know that he’s—” she stops. “That he’s trying to—” She sighs. “He’ll do anything for you.”

This is just weird. Is this some kind of—

Is she jealous? Is this her heartbreak spattering out at me?

He shares a bed with me, sometimes. Did she know that? Did she guess? He crawls into my bed in the mornings to talk to me when he’s cold, or when he’s bored and wants me to entertain him. He rests his hand on the nape of my neck while he scans my blog posts over my shoulder and I pretend to hate it. Is she jealous of all that? It doesn’t mean anything. It’s only us, flatmates. Friends. My dreams are only dreams. She can’t know about those.
“We weren’t a couple, you know,” I tell her. God. Like I haven’t spent the last hour defending myself against this exact same argument. Sherlock and his feelings for me, me and my feelings for Sherlock, what does it matter now? He’s gone, Molly. Are you jealous? There was nothing to be jealous of.

Well, that’s not true, I suppose. From her perspective. He mocks me too, but I know he cares for me. He thinks I’m fantastic, he said so. That once, at least. He loves my attention, he loves that I adore him. You know that, don’t you, Sherlock? It’s obvious, of course you do. I admire everything you do, in every possible way. You love it. You preen over it. I think you’re a little dependent on it, frankly. I think it’s why you want me around all the time. When you say something especially clever you turn to look at me, you wait for it. You count on my admiration to come pouring out. Brilliant, I’ll say. Genius. Amazing. That’s outstanding, Sherlock, really well done. Wonderful. Fantastic.

I love him and he loves that I do; she loves him and he had no time for her. He’s scornful. No wonder she’s jealous. I’d be jealous too.

“He’d do anything to protect you, John.”

What? What does that mean? How does she know about that?

She’s trying to compose her face. There’s something else there. What is this? “He would die,” she says, with the emphasis on die. “Rather than see anything happen to you.” She looks at me like this means something. Like I’m supposed to parse it and continue her sentence, add the next link in the chain. Like it’s a puzzle piece or some secret code. A password. I don’t know it. This makes no sense.

Maybe she’s a bit cracked as well. It wouldn’t surprise me.

He’d die. Well, he did, Molly. He did. It’s not a future eventuality, it’s the past. What are you getting at? What do you want from me?

I haven’t seen her. We haven’t talked. She must be reading The Strand, though. She must be. She would.

There is a large set of comments that continue on from story to story about whether or not Sherlock is in love with me. They come up with lists of proofs: things he says, things he does. The way he turns back and looks at me. The way he waits. I read it, I look at all the new comments every day, but I don’t respond to those. I wait to see which side is going to win.

It changes day to day. Some people think it’s not Sherlock who was in love with me, it’s me who was in love with Sherlock. The last time I checked, that argument was winning. They have an impressive set of evidence culled from my blog and my stories. Turns of phrase, focus, the way I write about his eyes. The way I dedicate each of my stories to the not-so-mysterious S. Obvious, they say. It’s obvious. I’m only writing him to look as if he loves me back. I think they are probably right.

I bet Molly’s read them all; she must see herself in me. Unrequited love on display, constantly. The pain of it. She must feel sorry for me.

Or she doesn’t: maybe she thinks he’s in love with me, too. Me, instead of her. Unfair. Unfair entirely. I’m not gay. Sherlock doesn’t want a relationship. Love made pointless, drifting off into space, as if it never mattered at all. Well, now it doesn’t, in any case. Just a bit of history now, either way. Does he or doesn’t he, do I or don’t I, it doesn’t matter.
“You understand, John? He’d die,” she says again, like I’m meant to be capable of making sense of it. Which I am not.

Molly. He’s dead already.

He did die. He did die, Molly. What are you trying to tell me?

Am I supposed to understand this? He’d die rather than let something happen to me. What’s the suggestion? That he died so that I wouldn’t be harmed?

That makes no sense. I’m not in any danger. I wasn’t; it wasn’t about me. It was about him. I wasn’t even supposed to be there, he sent me away. He sent me away, then he fell. And I saw him. I saw him there, I saw him dead, and there was nothing else. There was no danger, there were no guns, no bombs, no threats, nothing. Moriarty had done his worst. He had ruined Sherlock without ever touching him. He had made a fool out of him, he had destroyed his reputation and his career. There was no more need for threats. He had what he wanted. He forced Sherlock to take the poison pill, because there was no one there for me to shoot. And I wasn’t there to pull the trigger. He played the long game, Moriarty did. He beat you in the end.

Maybe that’s why you did it. You can’t bear to be beaten. You’d rather die. And maybe that’s the only answer I’m ever going to get.

You said goodbye, you said, goodbye, John, and you spread your arms as you fell. As if you might fly. One last experiment with gravity. You’d prefer that to living with defeat. You’d rather die.

This isn’t fair, it’s not–


I’m not going to have conversations like this. Not at Tesco, not anywhere. This is an ambush.

I hold up my hand. The universal sign. It’s too much. Why is Molly doing this to me? Emotional agony in place of casual chit-chat in the shops: she’s breaking all the rules. We’re in public. It’s not my fault he didn’t love her. It’s not my fault. “I can’t.”

“John–” she’s about to say more, but stops herself. She bites her lip. “I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

“I need to go now.” That’s really all I can say.

“Take care,” she says. As if I ever could.
Boundary Issues

Chapter Summary

Well, I’ll never know the truth now, will I. In my head you only talk in riddles. My memories are too flexible to be bearers of truth.

Chapter Notes

I've never written two chapters in one day before. Though, to be fair, I wrote most of the other one last night, not today. Still. Well, they’re very short chapters, aren't they. Thanks to longtimegone and Lavellington for the read through and beta, and the ladies on Twitter for their ongoing support for my random writey-angst. <3

I don’t even know what program this is. It’s on E4. I haven’t been watching much telly lately; I don’t even know what’s popular anymore. There are people talking, fighting, driving around some city or other. Probably Cardiff, it always seems to be Cardiff in the end. Cardiff tarted up to look like parts of London. Maybe it’s Bristol. I don’t know. The actors don’t look familiar to me. I missed the beginning. It could be anything. Whatever it is, you’d have hated it.

You weren’t much of a fan of the telly, really. If Mrs Hudson hadn’t already furnished the place herself, I suspect you’d not have had one at all. And that would have been too bad, really. We had some fun watching crap telly. Didn’t we? The worse it was, the more fun we had. It seems that way, anyway. In retrospect. Maybe you’d disagree.

I can smell someone’s cooking: boiled cabbage and mash, probably. A roast. Families making meals for each other. I miss you especially when I smell other people’s cooking. I don’t know why that is. I guess it reminds me that I don’t have anyone to make meals for anymore.

How maudlin. Really, John.

I know, I know.

Oh. Someone just got killed. You would not have liked this crime scene. It’s not even a four. Fingerprints, footprints, and a wallet left by the body: far too easy for you. You would have begged me to switch the channel by now.

You should. This is terrible.

I inflicted so many terrible movies on you. You complained, but you never said no when I suggested another. You never walked out. You stayed, you sat on the sofa with me. You ate popcorn, you laughed. Usually at the wrong times, but you laughed. And I laughed at you as much as at the movies. I think you enjoyed those evenings with me. I like to think you did.

I remember Goldfinger; we were sitting on the couch together, you leaning forward, looking bewildered and appalled, your elbows on your knees. And your leg was pressed against mine. I
remember that.

It was such a small thing. Almost unnoticeable. Unremarkable, if you didn’t know it wouldn’t happen again. One of the many things that’s so easy to take for granted.

It was a warm point that connected us. It made me feel secure, somehow. Secured. Like you held me in place, me as some sort of helium balloon in a storm. But that’s not how it was: I was the one holding on. You were always the one on the verge of flying away. You were the one made of coffee and unpredictability. You were the one with the magic. I’m the one with feet of clay. Still here. Still stuck on the ground. I must have let go, somehow.

“Popcorn?” Apparently popcorn warrants a raised eyebrow from you. You act as if I’d brought over a bowl of eels. As if you’ve never seen a bowl of popcorn before. Honestly. You look at it skeptically, but by the end of the film you’ll have eaten most of it yourself. Sweet things and salty things; you like them both, when you bother to eat. Sweet coffee and pastries, and salted butter and popcorn. You are a creature of extremes. You deny yourself physical pleasures with people because people are too distracting, but then you inject yourself with cocaine. You were always about to fly away, weren’t you? Every moment I had you.

“It’s traditional,” I say. I put the bowl on the coffee table and grab a handful. It’s hot. Popcorn is something you’ve deleted, apparently. Strange. I never know with you. Either you’ll know too much about something, or nothing at all. It’s completely in or out with you, always. Nothing halfway.

“I see.” You reach over and take a single bit. You inspect it, then put it in your mouth. I watch your jaw flex as you chew. You act like it’s some kind of popped abomination, but you like it, I can tell. I’ll laugh about it afterwards when I dump the remaining unpopped kernels into the bin while you’re fast asleep on the sofa. You are open to experimentation, that’s certain. Everything is worth trying, at least once. If you like it, you don’t hold back. Off or on. No in between.

“All right then.”

The program I don’t recognize has a lot of sex in it. A lot. More than I thought they were allowed to show at this hour. Half-naked bodies, tongues, lips against nipples. It’s quite explicit. Not that I mind. I don’t mind. I just don’t know who any of these people are.

Your leg is pressed lightly against mine, your body heat mingles with mine. Why are we sitting so close together? I don’t know. It’s easier to see the telly this way. It’s not very big. It’s comfortable. I don’t know.

“You like the closeness.” You lean back against the couch and watch me. “It’s an excuse, isn’t it.”

An excuse? “I don’t think so. Excuse for what?”

“To touch me.”

I laugh. “I hardly need an excuse. You’re the one who takes a case and wants me to sleep with you in a dead woman’s bedroom for the experience of it. You’re the one who asks me to take your phone out of your pocket for you. You have boundary issues. Do I need an excuse to sit next to you?”

“Maybe not. Maybe it’s me looking for excuses to touch you, then.”

“Oh.” Could that be true? No. It was never like that between us. It never was. That wasn’t the way your mind worked, not when it came to me. Irene, maybe. She came the closest. I think she kissed
you. She must have, when I left you alone with her. You drifted off, you were thinking. You didn’t notice me leaving. You were thinking about her, I know you were. She kissed you; did you kiss her back? Did she touch you?

“Are you jealous?” she asked me. She must have had a reason for asking.

Yes. I suppose I am. A little. It’s strange. I don’t entirely know how to make sense of that.

But it doesn’t matter: it was never going to go down that path. You weren’t interested, you would have been disappointed in me for suggesting it. If you had been interested, you would have been more obvious about it. Surely. Wouldn’t you?

“Certainly.” You shift slightly closer to me. More of your thigh pressed against mine. I remember that: yes, you did shift closer to me. I didn’t think anything of it. You were reaching for popcorn. I barely noticed. “Probably not. Why do you think I wasn’t being obvious? Sometimes I wonder if you notice anything at all.”

Well, I’ll never know the truth now, will I. In my head you only talk in riddles. My memories are too flexible to be bearers of truth. My readers on *The Strand* are right: my memories make you look like you’re in love with me. Why?

“Wishful thinking.”

“Very funny.”

I hear the heavy breathing and moans from the telly. Is this a plot point, all this sex? It must be. Bloody E4. All these young girls with their tits out. Not that I mind, of course. Not at all. You just never used to see that.

You grab a handful of popcorn, and I watch the light of the telly wash all the colour out of you. Your pale face, your eyes; you become ambient blue. You were sitting here first, but when I sat down you moved a little closer to me. I’m sure of it. How did I miss that? How did I not notice?

“Is there ever a time you do notice things, John?”

Maybe you were deliberately close. Of course you were: you only do things deliberately. There are no coincidences with you. But it wasn’t like it is on E4. You weren’t after that. I’m fairly sure you weren’t. You’ve said as much.

You’re a very lonely man, I think. People need connection, physical touch. It’s not anything untoward. You are still a human being, whatever you may want other people to think of you. I know the truth. You’re not a machine. You’re more like a cat needing to be stroked; you like it when I touch your hair.

“You like it too.”

Do I? I suppose I do. It’s nice. Being able to. The way your eyes flicker shut. Pleasure on your face. I don’t know. It’s nice. What? Is that strange?

“You should have kissed me.” *Goldfinger* theme music is playing in the background.

“What? Why?”

“Because you wanted to.” Did I? I don’t remember that. You pick up the remote control and turn the volume down a little. That’s a real memory, not an altered one; you didn’t like the music. *Too*
discordant, you said. Bad audio quality. It’s like a screeching harpy in a thunderstorm. I laughed; I laughed a lot with you. I haven’t laughed in months.

“You could kiss me now.”

I could. You’re looking at me instead of the telly. My face must be blue as well. The weird glow is changing everything, making it different than it actually was. A different perspective, a different outcome.

Did you watch me instead of the telly? While we were watching Goldfinger? I think you did. I switched off most of the lights, it was dark. Your face was in shadow. Just the blue glow. You watched me watch Goldfinger, your leg pressed against mine. Why?

Did I want to kiss you then? I don’t know. My memory of that night feels perfect: the movie, the popcorn, you making ridiculous deductions about fictional characters, me laughing at you. You laughing too. It was nice. Your leg was pressed against mine the whole night. Did you want me to kiss you?

“You saw,” you whisper in my ear. “But you did not observe, John.”

“No,” I say. It’s true. “I suppose I didn’t.”

It’s easy to imagine: maybe it’s easy because you’re dead. You don’t have a say in this. It doesn’t take much. Just turn a little, put my hand on your jaw. You lean forward, and that’s it. A kiss. God.

Your lips would have had a bit of butter and salt on them. You would have tasted like popcorn. Have you ever kissed anyone before? You must have. You must know how it’s done. I’m not sure; I don’t know. It might have been awkward. You might have resisted, or pushed me away, or mocked me. Or you might have sat stock still and let me kiss you. You might have learned as you went. You might have grabbed my face with both hands and kissed me back, all teeth and a salty tongue. You might have overwhelmed me. It’s hard to say. I didn’t kiss you then. I never kissed you.

It didn’t occur to me.

“That’s a lie.” You breathe into my ear, your hands gripping at the back of my jumper. “It occurred to you so many times.”

Well, all right. Once in a while, sure. When you crawl into my bed in the mornings. When you tell me you’d die before you let anything happen to me, your wrist pressed against my hip. When you have your hand on my neck, your breath against my face, reading over my shoulder. Once in a while. That’s just human nature. That’s just reactions. They don’t mean anything.

The program ends, and another begins. Some American comedy. I let it run, I just stare at it. None of it is sinking in. I’m still half in the dark with you, on a different sofa, your hand resting on my back, under the waistband of my jeans. What does this mean? It’s a warm place in the middle of the winter; I’m drawn to it. It’s not right. It didn’t happen this way. I miss you so much.

Did I want you then? Do I want you now?

No. Of course not. Wait: maybe. I don’t know. I can’t deny my own reaction to this. I can’t deny that. How long has this been going on? It doesn’t matter anymore: you’re gone. There’s no place for this.

Were you waiting for me to figure it out? Did you want this?
“No, not at all,” you say against my lips. “Of course not. Yes, of course I did. Obviously.”

Always riddles with you now.

You’re tucked into my bed with me, I’ve got my fingers in your hair. Your eyes flicker shut. Bringing you pleasure sends a ripple of pleasure through me. I should have noticed that. I should have seen what that meant. You’re warm; you’ve got a fever.

“Heal me,” you say. Not petulant this time; just a simple request. As if I could do that. I could keep this body here, keep it warm and safe, keep it away from Bart’s, from rooftops, from falls from a great height. I could kiss you and shelter you from what I know will happen. The sheet comes loose so easily, and you are never-ending skin. I can kiss you here, because it’s not real. It’s only a fantasy. It doesn’t mean anything.

You in a sheet and nothing else. Not even pants, I discovered later. Nothing at all. You got into bed with me, without any clothes, with no pants on, and I took your temperature. I stroked your hair. And I have to admit that I thought about it then, one little thought in the back of my mind. I thought about what it might be like: construction equipment. All bony elbows and knees, teeth and impossibility. Salty lips and urgency, your whole body demanding my attention. It would be strange, it would be ridiculous. It would be awkward and probably uncomfortable. You would be a bit of a disaster at it, wouldn’t you? I thought about it, I admit that. But it was verboten. You were off-limits, I would have been a trespasser there.

“I’m not a piece of property, John.”

“No, I suppose you’re not.”

“I’m not construction equipment.” I can feel the warmth of you.

“No, you’re not.”

There’s an invitation in this. There’s a fantasy here unlike any I’ve ever had. Is it appealing because it’s forbidden? Is it appealing because you’re gone and my life is upside down? Is it a way to snatch you back? Or is it appealing because I wanted this all along? I don’t know. I run my fingers along your spine. You move closer to me. You did that: in my bed, that morning, you moved closer. For warmth. Like a reptile moving into a bit of sunshine. I didn’t think anything of it. Was it an invitation then?

Was I sunshine to you? Did I read everything wrong? What am I supposed to do with this? I can’t have you. I don’t know what I’d do with you if I could. This isn’t what my life is like. It doesn’t make sense.

When did you change from being my best friend to being my biggest temptation? Is this a natural part of the grieving process? Is this an identity crisis, or were you my one exception? Your brain, your soul: it is so powerfully attractive to me, you are so powerfully attractive to me, I would find you attractive in any form you happened to take. I can’t deny that. Not now. The evidence is quite evident.

I switch off the telly. I’m not paying attention to it anyway.

I didn’t unwrap you from that sheet in my memory; that’s just fantasy. I need to keep these things separate.

“I’ll make you some tea.” That’s what I said. That’s what I’ll always say. I got out of bed. I left you there. So that’s what I do. I put my feet on the floor. It’s cold. You’re so warm. This is the hardest
thing I’ll ever do.

“This isn’t fair.” That’s what you said then. And that’s what you say now.

No. It isn’t. It isn’t fair at all.
“I’ll get the tickets,” she says. That’s sweet. But I was just paid, and I’m feeling generous. Also: I’m the one who asked her to come out with me. She doesn’t know me from Adam; I’m just the bloke who helped her pick up her dry cleaning when she dropped it in the road. Some random good Samaritan. Some random bloke who needs a good distraction, that’s what I am. But she said yes. I can be charming too, if I try. I can do this.

I haven’t been out with anyone in ages. Literally ages. Since long before you died. Girlfriends didn’t seem compatible with my life with you. I just ended up getting yelled at and dumped. I abandoned women for you, over and over. So I gave up. Life with you was more fun than having a girlfriend anyway. That should have been a red flag, now that I think of it. I preferred to be with you, in the end. That was, strangely, enough.

“Does your one snore?” You didn’t hear that; you were off already on the hunt for the hound. You don’t snore, but I didn’t tell him that. The fact that I know you don’t is damning enough. I know you well, I spend too much time with you, we’re too close; we’re so close that I think I might have fallen in love with you a little bit without noticing. I didn’t know that could happen. I didn’t guard for that. It just sneaked in.

She’s never read my blog. She’s never heard of The Strand. She doesn’t know about you at all. She’s not that interested in the news and she doesn’t read the paper. It’s a strange existence. An appealing one, really. No preconceived ideas, no awkward questions. She won’t ask me how I’m managing, and she won’t mention the way your suicide played out in the press. She doesn’t own a telly. I told her I’m a writer, because that’s what I am now. I’m not your colleague anymore. Dead men don’t need colleagues. Or friends. Or whatever else we might have been. I’m a writer, and she respects that. She has books; she likes books.

“You get them next time,” I tell her. I smile. “Since I asked, I’ll get them this time round. Let me.” I can be charming. I’m a good date. I’m a good boyfriend, you’ll see. This is who I am, this is what I do. It’s normal. I could end up in her bed tonight, I could make her breakfast in the morning. We might be together forever. It would help me remember what it’s like to be normal. That would be nice.

She smiles at me, then looks down at my feet for a moment. Demure, is that what that is? She’s a little shy. It’s sweet. You would never do that. You’re not shy about anything.
Her name is Amber. You’d never remember that; I don’t know why you remember the most arcane
details about cigarette ash and what certain kinds of pants signify but you can’t ever keep track of
the name of my current girlfriend. Though, to be fair, she’s not my girlfriend yet. It’s just one date.
The first date. It’s a little awkward, but I should do this. Don’t you think? That’s what I do, I find
lovely women to go out with. I sleep with them, I write them bad poetry. I make them laugh. I’m
good at it. It’s progress. Ella would write that down: went on a date. Progress. Moving on. Yes.
That’s what I’m doing.

I’m a man, a straight man. I go out with women, I love women. I love the way they feel, the way
they smell. I love to kiss them. I love to slide inside them, bury my face in their breasts, I love to
kiss their hot skin and feel their fingers digging into my back, gripping my hair. Women are lovely.
But at the moment all I can think about is you.

What if I had tried to kiss you, what would you have said? Now it’s all I can think about: what you
might have felt like under my hands. The hard muscles in your chest, your bony hips and sharp
knees, your long, thin fingers: There’d be no softness to you, nothing forgiving. There’s a brutality
to you. You’d be the construction equipment in my bed; something to contend with. Something to
address head on. You’d use your teeth, I bet. I’d laugh; you’d laugh, too. You’d bring your
intensity of purpose, your curiosity, and that awkwardness you have when you think I’m not
looking. Maybe you’d let your guard down, maybe I’m wrong. There is a gentleness to you too,
there is. I’ve seen it. I don’t know.

It wouldn’t have changed anything, would it? If I had asked. If I’d kissed you while I still could.
I’d still wake up at two in the morning and hear you playing your violin, you’d still struggle with
your addictions. That wouldn’t change. You’d still keep human livers in the fridge, no good reason
not to. You’d still forget me in Brixton and get a cab to yourself so that I wouldn’t talk, because
none of that was personal. I think you might have loved me too. You might have. I’m not sure. I
can’t ever be sure.

You’re gone, so it doesn’t matter anymore. There is no answer left for me to find. You wouldn’t
have told anyone. You probably wouldn’t have ever told me, even if it were true. It’s a story no
one’s meant to know. You kept your secrets well.

Maybe it’s just a crush; a crush on the memory of you. All the best memories I have are all bound
up in you, making it so easy to feel these things. A crush: that’s normal.

I need a girlfriend. I need to blot you out. I’m sorry, but I do. That’s terrible, isn’t it. That’s
progress, that’s moving on. Ella would approve. I know how to have a girlfriend, I do. You
remember. I was good at it.

You were terrible at it. The boring one told you so. Remember?

Did you forget their names on purpose? Things that don’t matter to you: the fact that the earth
rotates around the sun, and the names of the women I date. Why was that? Did you think they had
no impact on your life, or were you trying to make some kind of a statement? Was that you being
catty? Were you jealous? Did you always know my girlfriends would be transient, and that you
would be my only constant, so there was no point remembering them? That’s what happened, in the
end.

This needs to stop, this train of thought. It doesn’t matter anymore. You’re gone, and it doesn’t
matter how I felt. It doesn’t matter how you felt. We were friends. We were colleagues. You were
my best friend. That’s enough. It’ll have to be. The loss of you is clouding my judgement. It’s not
an identity crisis. It’s just grief.
She’s pretty.

She’s not pretty in a flashy way. She’s not a dramatic beauty that turns every head as we walk down through the cinema. It’s in that quiet sort of way, the way you know you’re going to admire for the rest of your life. The curve of her nose, the shape of her lips, her lovely skin: you could stare at her face for years and she will still be objectively pretty. I suspect she will become prettier and prettier to me as I get to know her. And then eventually no one will compare to her. I already know that.

It’s not something you can tell someone on a first date. That’s going a bit too far. We’ve only just met. I don’t know what I want to do, yet. I don’t know. I’m playing a role. Maybe eventually it will feel like real life.

She is pretty, Sherlock, and you are not. Words connote gender, and pretty is never a word I would use for you. You’re too male and too alien-looking for a word like that. Your limbs are too long, your bones are too sharp. You have that beautiful mop of hair, but it’s sitting over the most severe face I’ve ever seen. A face that only rarely smiles, and even then, mostly for its own purposes. Even if you had the features for it, the way your eyes stare right through people would take “pretty” off the list. Pretty is approachable, gentle, it’s sweet. You are none of those things. You demand an answer, and Amber isn’t even a question. She’s the opposite of you.

I suppose that’s probably deliberate. Subconsciously, at least.

She’s talking about work: a funny story, I think, about the wrong cake being delivered to a retirement party. She laughs a lot, but maybe that’s just the way she flirts. Or: she’s nervous. That’s sweet. See? A little vulnerability is appealing, it’s disarming. You were never a fan of being vulnerable. You pretend you have no vulnerabilities, but you do. I know you do. Showing a little vulnerability is like a Victorian showing a bit of ankle: it’s how we signal to each other. It’s nice. She’s nice.

That’s it: you’re not nice. You’re not nice at all.

What does nice even mean? It’s attached to everything: a nice person, a nice dog, a nice dinner. A nice price, a nice place, a nice cup of tea. Nice. It’s the most generic word in the English language. It means acceptable, inoffensive, it means playing by the rules and not upsetting the cart. It means going along with things, because going along will keep you unnoticed and unremarkable. Nice is cover, nice is a healthy respect for the status quo. Nice is forgettable, bland, lukewarm. You’re not nice.

I’m not nice either, am I.

Amber is definitely nice. But she means well. That counts for something.

The lights go down; the film is about to start. You’d mock me for taking her for dinner and the cinema. So pedestrian. Terribly uncreative, you’d say, but she thinks it’s great. She’s thrilled. She likes me.

There’s nothing wrong with taking her out for dinner. Dinner is a typical date. I’ve been out to dinner with you loads of times. People assume we’re a couple. Why do you think that was? Was it the way I looked at you? I was probably hanging on your every word. Well: you’re interesting, that’s not my fault. Your every word is interesting. I listen to you. It’s impossible not to listen to you when you want my attention. You’re attractive that way. Demanding, and attractive. I can admit that.
Amber isn’t uninteresting. She’s a nursery school teacher. She likes children, she has a dog and a cat. She volunteers at a homeless shelter. She reads. She’s sweet. She’s not you. But no one can be you, so that’s not fair. She’s the opposite of you. She’s reality, and you’re a fantasy. You were fantasy alive, and you’re a fantasy now.

Could I have brought you here? Taken you out for a dinner like that, to a film? A traditional date, you and me? That just makes me laugh. You’d offend the other diners over dinner, you’d shout at the screen or take more interest in the arm of your seat than the film. You’d tell the woman next to you that her husband is cheating on her, you’d beg me to take you home after the first ten minutes. No traditional dates for you, no. I don’t think so.

Running through Soho after midnight after a serial killer, yes. Period drama in a cinema, probably not.

She puts her hand on my arm, her fingers resting lightly against my wrist.

You might have done that. Though not with precisely the same intention, I’m sure. With Amber it’s a minor marker of affection, it’s a simple intimacy. A sign that she likes me. We’re going to sit in a dark room for an hour and a half: a date at the cinema avoids the task of having to find scintillating topics for conversation, but it’s a bit alienating. We need to do something to remind each other that we’re here together. I’ll lean over and whisper in her ear a few times, I’ll say something funny about the film. Something self-deprecating. And she’ll rest the tips of her fingers against my wrist to tell me she likes me. Maybe later on she’ll put her palm against my knee, and I’ll think about undressing her, holding my hand against the small of her naked back.

If it were you, you’d be monitoring my pulse to determine the precise nature of my emotional reaction to what’s on the screen. You’d tell me afterwards exactly what kinds of sex and violence affect me the most. You’d probably have questions for me after that, bizarre and weirdly intimate ones. And I’d answer them, all of them, because you want me to. I think that would also be a minor marker of affection: just filtered through your odd brain chemistry. You express your affections with information and experimentation. It’s a special kind of care, I guess.

Amber isn’t thinking about my pulse. She’s just being sweet. She’s being nice.

This is a terrible film. Amber doesn’t seem to mind. You’d hate it, Sherlock. You’d laugh at all the wrong parts.

“I hope that’s a codpiece,” I whisper in her ear. She laughs. She puts her hand in mine. She’s going to kiss me later, I can tell. She likes me. She’ll invite me in, she’ll get me a drink. It would be nice to feel someone else’s body heat again.

Maybe I could have got you to go on a date with me. Maybe. You sit through bad telly with me. You watch films with me and eat popcorn. Maybe you would. I’ve even sat with you in the dark for more than an hour and a half in a row without you squirming out of your seat; when we broke into Kitty Riley’s flat. You insisted that we sit in the dark. Though we were handcuffed together, so that might not count.

You walked through the whole thing in the dark; what we were going to do. How we would avoid getting arrested again. We would hide at Bart’s, we would duck the Met, we could curl up in a broom cupboard. I was going to have to sleep in the lab, on my arms. You wouldn’t sleep at all. You had a plan. You’d break the lock on the handcuffs. Kitty would write a story. Lestrade would make the Met stand down. You have favours you can call in. You’re never at a loss for what to do, are you. There’s always a plan forming in your mind. Always.
Did you know then what you were going to do next? You talked and talked in the dark, it was so unlike you. Piece after piece of the plan, all the way through it, all for my benefit. Ending up back at 221b with a pot of tea and Chinese, some bad telly. With our feet up on the coffee table. A happy ending. You were reassuring me, weren’t you. You were distracting me from what was to come. You were lying. You knew then what you were going to do. You knew.

“Of course I knew, John.” Your fingers are drumming endlessly against your knee. Kitty Riley’s darkness; you’re so close to me, just your coat between us. Your voice is quiet; we don’t want the neighbours noticing that we’re here. It’s that little bit of softness in you. We’re sitting on her sofa; there’s a clock ticking somewhere in the darkness. We’re going to wait here until she arrives. She’s going to help us, you think. She’s the press. She can help. But she wouldn’t, she didn’t. Did you know that too? Did you know that’s what would happen?

“I didn’t know, not for certain. I suspected. I guessed.”

“Why did you have to go up to the roof, Sherlock?”

“It was too late for me, John. You didn’t need to be involved. I didn’t want you in the way.”

Is that what I was? In the way?

“It wasn’t your fault.”

Is that what I’ve been waiting to hear you say? Do I blame myself? Yes. I do. I blame myself, I blame your brother. I blame Moriarty. I blame Sally and Kitty. I blame you too, for this. You too. You’re the one who did it. Everyone else just pushed you to it. Maybe I did too, somehow. I wish you’d told me. I wouldn’t have left you. I would have jumped with you if I’d had to.

“If only you’d stopped me. Then you’d be sitting in the cinema with me, and not with Miss Nice.”

“So it is my fault, then.”

“Yes. No. Of course not.”

More riddles. You can’t tell me anything I don’t already know.

“We’ll hide at Bart’s, Molly will help us. I can convince Lestrade to leave us alone. Kitty will print the story and it will all be over by morning.”

Did you know exactly how many hours you had left? How many times have you lied to me?

“I don’t lie to you, John.”

“Yes you do.”

“I’m a fraud; all I do is lie.”

“Don’t say that.”

The film is almost over, thank god. Amber is riveted; there are tears on her face. The melodrama of it works for her, I suppose. I should offer her a tissue, but I haven’t got any. There’s a dramatic swell of music, and the hero reveals himself to the heroine. It’s a stupid plot twist. You would have hated it. Amber pats at her eyes with her sleeve.

“Would you have gone to the cinema with me?”
“Hm?”

“A date. Would you have gone out on an actual date with me, do you think? Dinner and a film, just to be ironic. Would you?”

“Yes,” you say in the dark. “No, John. Of course I wouldn’t.”

Even your imaginary rejection hurts. How did I fail to notice this? You must have known all along. You must have. You did. I know you did.

The film ends; Amber loved it. She talks about it as I walk her home. It’s grown cool and it’s threatening to rain again. I pull up my collar, just like you always did. Christ, Sherlock. I can’t do this. I miss you too much. What if the space you’ve left can’t be filled by anyone else? I’m doomed. I’m stuck.

She expects me to kiss her at the door, so I do. Nothing wrong with kissing. Kissing is nice. I lean down a little to kiss her, and it’s sweet. She’s wearing lip gloss. You wouldn’t have worn lip gloss.

I can’t do this.

“Sorry,” I tell her. I’ve stepped back abruptly. I didn’t mean to; I didn’t do it on purpose. I can’t kiss her, I just can’t. She’s so nice, she’s so sweet. She’s kind. She’s good. But she’s not you, and I think I’m in love with you.

It’s too soon. Four months isn’t enough time to mourn someone you were so hopelessly in love with. It’s too soon, and no one will ever mean as much to me again. My guard was down; I rebuilt myself with you in the centre. I didn’t realise. I didn’t know, and I can’t even tell you. You were right from the start: I’m an idiot. “I’m so sorry.”

It starts to rain. There’s nothing more I can say.
I know what I need to do. I don’t need her to tell me.

Thanks to longtimegone, as always, for helping me build this story to this point. Thanks also to airynothing for her eagle eye beta, and to DVeleniet not only for her lovely comments and for chatting with me over email, but for having a look at this before I sent it out into the world. And thanks to G for finding that errant "gotten."

I’m so, so sorry about this. I really am.

“John, I don’t recommend this.” Well, of course she doesn’t recommend it. Therapists believe in therapy. They believe in a full course of it, like antibiotics. No cheating, no skipping visits, no cutting the experience short. No taking a break, or stopping all together. No calling and cancelling all future visits for the foreseeable future. Oh no. You go once a week until you’re using the right language and talking about your feelings like you talk about the weather, and then you keep on going to make sure you keep it up. I can’t do it. I’m done. “I know it’s difficult for you, but now is not an ideal time to take a break.”

“I understand that.” I’m not planning on taking a break from therapy. I want to stop going altogether. I never want to see the inside of that room again. “This is what I need to do, Ella, I’m sorry. It’s not personal,” I tell her. This is like breaking up with a girlfriend. It’s not you, it’s me. Well, that’s actually true. It’s not her. I know what I need to do. I don’t need her to tell me.

“That’s your choice, of course,” she says, but I know she’s only saying that grudgingly. She’d rather I have no choice but to do whatever she commands. “But John, we’ve barely started. You’re still struggling with daily life. I’m concerned about you.”

“I’m fine.” I’ve always been fine. I was fine in Afghanistan, I was fine when I came home, in spite of the limp and the bullet wound. I was fine. Fine is surviving. Fine is still able to take a breath and let it out again. Fine is walking away from the blood on the pavement that is not yours. I don’t need to pay somebody to be concerned about me. I’m fine. And if I’m not fine yet, I will be. I know what I have to do next. I know. Ella can’t tell me, not now; she doesn’t know how far down I’ve fallen. I don’t want to tell her. It’s embarrassing. “I’ll be fine.”

“Please reconsider, John.” She sounds so serious on the phone. I can picture her face when she says it: her big brown eyes peering into me, seeing nothing. “We could set an appointment for a month from now and give you a nice long break to recoup.”

No. I won’t need her in a month. It will not help me to tell her what I’ve learned. It won’t help me to hear her say it: I know what I need to do. I know what the right answer is. It wasn’t clear before
because everything was ambiguous and I didn’t know it. I thought it just felt like home. But it’s not home anymore, and I know what I need to do.

“I don’t think so,” I tell her. “Not now. I’m fine, Ella. Thank you.” I aim to use that tone of voice that means I’m going to hang up now. I’m finished. She needs to let me go.

“All right,” she says. She’s reluctant. But she can’t force me into therapy. She can’t force me to talk. I won’t. There’s nothing more to say. “Well, all the best to you, John. I mean that.”

“Yes, thank you, Ella. All the best to you as well.” Like it’s a social call, or something. Like we’re passing acquaintances rather than therapist and patient, like we have some mutual friends, or we’ve attended some of the same parties. All the best. I wonder if she tells stories about patients at parties. Will I be the bereaved ex-army doctor who couldn’t come to terms with his best friend’s suicide? Does she already know why I’m drowning in grief? Has she been sitting across from me all these weeks waiting for me to figure it out? She must have guessed. Everyone guesses, everyone assumes. She must have assumed as well. I don’t want to know. She can talk about me all she wants. I don’t care. I’m finished.

Now. I should do it now. There’s no point in waiting. I need to finish this.

I should make tea first. At least. That will help.

You’re stalling.

I know.

It’s like tearing off a plaster, John. One quick motion.

Yes.

Fine.

I’ll lie down on the sofa.

How Freudian.

Yes. Yes, I suppose it is.

The smell of fresh-baked bread; I just need to think of it, and I’m there again. I put my bag down on the bed; your small case at the foot of yours. The sun is pouring into this little room. It’s a nice room, really. There was a time I thought we could go back, as a holiday. A weekend in Dartmoor. They made a good breakfast. It’s pretty. I don’t know why I thought you’d go back with me. Why would you go to a little village like this without the promise of a grisly corpse and an array of possible suspects (including, of course, the victim). A live-action game of Cluedo can keep you entertained for a while; a holiday on the moor, long drives on country roads with no prospect of mayhem or murder, no. That’s not you. I know that.

“There’s no hound,” you say to me. You’re sitting on my bed. Your wrist is pressed against my hip. You look at me so seriously. It’s time, I suppose. You’re hurrying me along. You’re right. It’s time.

“There’d be nothing to keep you occupied here, I know. You wouldn’t have come back here.” It might have been nice, though. A holiday.

I wonder what I would have said to them, going back and asking for a double room. I never denied
that we were a couple, not to them. They wouldn’t think anything of it. Maybe they’d let us stay for free. I could have kissed you under those worn quilts.

I would have written you poetry, you know. I’d have written it and hidden it on my computer for you to find. You’d have laughed, wouldn’t you. I think you would have liked that.

No: no more might have beens. No more questions. It was what it was; there’s nothing I can do to change any of it. I wouldn’t change it. It was perfect as it was.

“You need to believe it, John.”

I do believe it. If I could go back and change anything at all, it would only be to know more. And to treat you with a little more affection a little more often. If I could change one thing, I would take back what I said to you in the lab at St. Bart’s, about you being a machine. I wouldn’t walk out like that, angry at you. I wouldn’t walk out at all. I would go up to the roof with you. I would stand beside you, I would hold your hand until you decided to jump. Because I already know there’s nothing I could say to stop you. You are unstoppable, and you always have your reasons. I may be an idiot, Sherlock, but I know that I can’t stop you. I would just stay with you until the end, like I should have done. And I can’t say I wouldn’t have decided to jump with you. I can’t say I wouldn’t have.

“I won’t let anything happen to you.”

I know. That’s what you said. That’s what you said here, in Dartmoor. It’s dark now. You’re going to sit here and tell me these things. You’ll tell me these things until you’re done, and then you’ll get up, hang your dressing gown in the cupboard, and fold yourself into your own bed. And we’ll sleep. And this will be over. The clock is ticking now; there’s not long to go. And I can’t stop it.

“I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you.”

It’s your guilt talking: in Dartmoor you took me to the edge of terror to see what it would look like. You thought you were drugging me with sugar. You created perfect laboratory conditions, you watched me like a rat in a cage. I forgive you for that. I can’t forgive you for dying. But that’s all right. That’s all right now.

“Sherlock.” You turn and look at me, your face is so serious. I think this was the closest you ever came to telling me how you feel about me. Maybe it’s the most you could ever say; I can’t imagine you forming the words. Not the way I’m about to. Not like that. I can’t entirely imagine you wanting what I wanted even then; you don’t give in to petty physical desires. Well, you don’t give in to most of them.

Maybe you knew. Maybe you knew that if I tried to kiss you, it would ruin things. There would have been hurt feelings and rejection and pain; we’d have lost everything. You wouldn’t have been able to crawl into my bed again like an innocent. Maybe this was as far as we could have gone, and you ended yourself before I could destroy it.

Bullshit. As if you would die to protect my feelings. No: you died for your own reasons, not for mine. To win a game, to stop being bored, to prove you’re bright. Not for something as trite and petty as love.

And I understand. It doesn’t matter: I know what I meant to you, it’s clear on your face. You’d die before you let anything happen to me.

Maybe something was about to happen to me; you must have had reasons. They must have been
compelling, at least to you. Maybe your reasons involved protecting me, why not? Was it my life on the line? Mine or yours? I don’t know. But that doesn’t make it any better, Sherlock, it doesn’t mean I’ll forgive you. You’d have known that. You knew I wouldn’t. Of course you did.

“I have to say it, so just...just bear with me.” I sit up, and touch your face. You’re cool now, it’s grown cold outside. It’s too late for warmth. You just look at me, that sad, tired fondness on your face. Like you knew then I’d have to say this to you one day. Like this: here in Dartmoor, on beds that aren’t ours, without you here. “I loved you. I think I always did. I didn’t realize.”

That’s harder to say than I expected.

“I think I always will. There’s no one else like you.”

There never could be.

“And I can’t keep coming back here. It’s too tempting, and it’s preventing me from moving on with my life. I can’t live in the past forever.”

You nod at me. “I’ll be right here.”

“I know. That’s what makes this so difficult. I have to resist. I can’t fall into this trap again. I have to put the past in the past. I’m going to miss you. So much.”

“I’ll be fine.”

"We’ll both be fine." That’s a lie, though. It's a lie. You're gone, and I'm as far from fine as I've ever been.

I rest my head against your shoulder for a moment. The last time. Just one more time. I look into your face again; your stern, sad face. I think you might be fading away even now, as if my admission is pushing you away. I’ll remember you. I always will. “Goodbye, Sherlock.”

“Goodnight, John.”

Beige walls. It’s so quiet here; so quiet and so hateful. This sofa is terrible. I can’t live here anymore; this place is a tomb.

Chapter End Notes

This story is not over! It's not even half finished! If I could set up "parts" in a chaptered fic, I would put a break in here, but I can't. So this endnote will have to do. There's more to come. The darkest part of the night is when the morning begins. Thank you for reading this far. Phew! Well done, you.
Chapter Summary

Relax. It’s just a phone call. It’s nothing. Stand down, soldier. Stand down.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to elvichar for the britpick and beta, and longtimegone for going over it twice. And to everyone who wants a look before I publish to fix my dropped words and other annoying things: I'm sorry I'm so impatient. All errors are my fault, and I love you for pointing them out.

What the hell is that? Wait: stay still. Listen.

What is it? Is there someone in the flat? That rash of burglaries, they killed a woman in her bed. They killed that woman. Did I lock the door last night? I did. Didn’t I? I’m sure I did. But I left a window open. Did someone manage to break in? They must have. Something woke me. Wait. Listen.

I can hear Mary breathing beside me. If someone were in the flat she’d wake up. She wakes up if I open the fridge, surely she’d wake up if someone opened the door and crept in. Was it a rustling in the sitting room? A window being propped open? It was something. Something woke me. Maybe a murderer. I heard something.

My gun is still in the drawer, but it’s not loaded. I could load it fast enough, if I have to. Two seconds to get from the bed to the desk, I could have it loaded and ready in less than a minute if I have to. No point threatening anyone with an unloaded gun; no point in that. Mary would have to stop complaining about me keeping a gun in the flat after this. There’s always an upside.

Get the gun; that’s first. Walk out into the sitting room, see what (or who) I can see. I’ll shoot him in the chest and end up having a nice chat with the Met. Just like old times.

Why’d you kill that bastard? It’d be jovial. It’s been ages since we last stood together over a body.

Well, he broke into my girlfriend’s flat, Greg. He was pointing a gun at my face, I thought it behooved me to illustrate his situation to him. Mary won’t appreciate her flat being a crime scene, but that’s not my fault. It’s the bloody murderer’s fault, isn’t it. Bringing it right here, into my own flat. If I don’t go out looking for a crime scene, it will come find me.

Sherlock would have laughed at that. Not too many other people laugh about crime scenes.

We could bring a cleaner in to get the blood out of the carpet. It will be fine.

What the hell is that noise?

Oh. Oh, my phone.
Well, that’s disappointing.

There’s no one in the flat. It’s just my phone. It’s ringing. Well, vibrating. Sounds like a knife rattling between the slats of a metal fence, Jesus Christ, that’s loud. All right. Relax. It’s just a phone call. It’s nothing. Stand down, soldier. Stand down.

Who the hell calls in the middle of the fucking night, anyway? It better be a bloody fucking emergency, Jesus Christ. What time is it?

The floor is freezing. Damn. There it goes, vibrating again. As long as I keep it in my hand, it shouldn’t wake Mary. Let’s hope. Out to the sitting room, I’ll answer it there. How many times has it rung already? Whoever it is will probably hang up just as I answer, and I’ll spend the rest of the night wondering what the hell that was all about. As if I need something to encourage my insomnia.

I guess I could write a bit before I go back to bed. Could make it productive.

Unknown caller. Probably a wrong number. Some drunk idiot trying to call his mate from the tube. Bet he’ll just moan incoherently at me and then hang up. This is ridiculous. I should ignore it.

Shit, it’s three in the morning. Who the hell is calling me at three in the morning? Did someone die? Harry is already dead, there’s no more middle-of-the-night news for me to hear. That’s not a nice thing to be reminded of. It wasn’t the most surprising phone call I’ve ever received, but I still wasn’t entirely ready for it. I suppose you’re never entirely ready to accept the death of someone you love. About the same time in the morning, too. About the same time. We’re sorry, Dr. Watson. She passed so quickly. A blessing in her case. It really was. This call won’t be like that one. A wrong number, that’s all. Nothing personal. Push the button, hard. Yes. Okay. What?

“Yes?” I think a bit of annoyance is fair at three in the morning. Whoever this is doesn’t deserve a friendly hello, they’ve got to know they’ve woken me. I hope my voice doesn’t wake Mary; she gets so irritable if she doesn’t get enough sleep.

“Hello, John.”

Well, shit. Mycroft Holmes. I recognise his voice instantly, as if it hasn’t been literally years since I last heard it. Well, a year and a half, at least. Maybe a bit more, now that I think of it. Two words, that’s all it takes. And from the sounds of it he hasn’t changed a bit: he’s still as slick and arrogant as ever. Sounds like he’s sipping a scotch and sinking into a club chair. And as if he’s called me up at three in the afternoon, not three in the bloody morning. What the hell: Mycroft Holmes.

He doesn’t sound a thing like his brother. Not a thing. From the voices alone you’d presume they’d never even met, let alone imagining them to be related. Mycroft took all the posh manners, and Sherlock rejected them all. Every last one.

“Mycroft?” What the hell is going on, why the fuck is he calling me? What do I have that’s of interest to him this time? Of course he won’t ever call unless you’ve got something he wants. I haven’t got anything: my book isn’t even out yet. Maybe he got his hands on a review copy. What am I thinking: of course he did. He’s probably read every last word, or had someone else read it for him. He’s run his finger under the dedication (With love, for S), he knows what it means. How embarrassing. Maybe he wants to tell me off, for whatever reason. There are no family secrets in there for him to object to. Just a fictionalised version of Baskerville and the imaginary hellhound. I didn’t even use his name in it; I thought he’d appreciate that.

“I’m delighted that our acquaintance made enough of an impression on you that you still remember
the sound of my voice, John. Very flattering.”

Smooth mother fucker.

“What’s going on?”

“Whatever do you mean?”

How does he manage to make me feel like the rude one? Jesus. Your brother, Sherlock. Your fucking brother.

You don’t have to tell me.

Wow. Sherlock. Christ. I haven’t felt that voice in my head for...well, a long time now. I locked him out long ago, outside of some fictional dialogue that always feels more like my own words than his own. But that, just now, sounded like him. Sherlock, stuck in my head again. Damn Mycroft, bringing him back like that. It’s sort of nice, though, I have to admit. Hearing him again. I’ve missed you, Sherlock. Like I knew I would. You haven’t changed a bit.

Well, you wouldn’t, would you.

“Why are you calling me at three in the morning?”

“Oh, is this a bit too early for you? Apologies. I’ve been locked away in...well, best you don’t know the details of all that. I’m in a secret location, that’s enough to go on. I didn’t even notice the time. How are you, John?”

How am I?

“Uh.”

I can’t think of how to answer that. Less than two minutes ago I was fast asleep. I was preparing to blow a hole in someone’s chest for breaking into the flat, now he wants to know how I am at three in the morning. No real apologies, just questions. Pointless, trite, invasive questions. Well, how am I?

“I’m fine.” What other sort of answer am I meant to give him? What’s the right response to that? It’s only a preliminary. He’s just greasing the wheels. He must be up to something. He must need something from me. He wants me to do something, surely. Why else would he call me from his secret lair, scotch in hand?

He’s like a Bond villain. You’re the hero and he’s the villain, Sherlock. You’ll always play the hero next to him.

Well, maybe he just misses his brother, and I’m the closest thing. He can’t pick up a phone and dial Sherlock’s number anymore. I know that feeling. Maybe it’s his birthday, and Sherlock remains unavailable, so he’s calling me. Well, happy birthday, Mycroft. Your brother’s still dead. Unfair, isn’t it?

I have no idea when Mycroft’s birthday is. Sherlock must have deliberately ignored it. Maybe those were the days Sherlock broke the most laws, just to be cheeky. Haha! That’s probably true.

Does he miss you, Sherlock? It’s hard to imagine Mycroft having feelings like that, let alone acting on them. He only looked bored at the funeral. He didn’t stay; he left immediately, his phone glued to his ear. Like he barely took the time out of work to attend in the first place. He only cared about
his brother to a point; he went through all the motions. But I don’t know that it touched him, really. Maybe he was relieved to have that security hole well and truly patched up. People thought Sherlock was the psychopath: I think that’s Mycroft’s role in the family.

“What do you want, Mycroft?”

“He’s reproachful. Etiquette first, or something. Even at three in the morning. I don’t think so. No: he doesn’t get to call me up and interrupt my life. He doesn’t get to ask me for things anymore. Not now. Those days are over. I’ve moved on. He’s the one who set Sherlock’s death in motion: he’s the one who forced Sherlock’s hand. If anyone’s to blame, it’s him. I won’t forget that. “I just wanted to see if you were...settled.”

Settled?

Shit, Mary. She’s getting out of bed. She’s not going to be happy in the morning. She has a meeting at eight, she’s going to be groggy and annoyed. I could drive her to work; I’ll make her breakfast. My insomnia keeps her up often enough; she hardly needs Mycroft helping out.

“I’m fine. Can I go back to bed now?”

“Of course,” he says. “My apologies.”

Right. Apologies I don’t believe are sincere. What is this phone call for? What the hell is going on?

“My sympathies about the loss of your sister. I know how difficult it is,” he pauses, as if he’s gearing up to say it, “to lose a sibling. Even one you don’t particularly get on with.”

I don’t know what to say to that. He didn’t approach me at all when she died. He didn’t come to her funeral. He didn’t know her, why would he? He barely knows me, really. Why mention it now, months later? Why the phone call at all? I don’t understand.

“Give my love to Mary,” he says. “Good evening, John.” And then he hangs up. And that’s it.

What the hell was that about?

“John?”

She stands in the doorway, her hands against the frame. I can see the silhouette of her in the muted light from the window. Her hair is a shock of curls, all in disarray from sleep. She’s beautiful. She’s half-asleep.

“What happened?”

“Phone call,” I tell her. I put the phone down on the sofa. If it rings again, I won’t hear it. I meet her at the doorway and put my arms around her. She’s still warm from the bed, and my feet are freezing. I kiss her on the lips; she’s not awake enough to entirely kiss me back, but she does, a bit. In an endearing, sleepy way. She shivers.

“What?”

“It was nothing. Let’s go back to bed.” I take her hand.

“Who calls you in the middle of the night?”

“No one important,” I tell her. It doesn’t matter: that’s not my life anymore. Mycroft will do as he
will. He’ll start and stop wars, he’ll interfere with traffic, he’ll battle international spy rings. It’s all above my head, and I’d rather remain blissfully unaware. That’s not my life. It never was. He may be important, but he’s not important to me. Not anymore. I lead Mary back to bed.

“Who was it?” she yawns, I pull the sheet back and she climbs into bed.

“Mycroft Holmes,” I tell her, tucking her back in. “The bastard. He calls at three in the morning to ask how I am.”

“Sherlock’s brother?” She rests her head back against the pillow. Her eyes flutter shut.

“Yes.”

“The one with the government.”

“That’s the one.”

“Strange.”

“I thought so.” It’s still warm under the blankets from our body heat. Mary exhales slowly as she falls back to sleep. So many nights I wake up and stare at the ceiling, feeling restless, but not tonight. Tonight, I think, I’ll sleep.
Hostage

Chapter Summary

He notices everything. He’s a Holmes.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to: longtimegone as always, Lavellington for being lovely, and airynothing for the betalasers she calls "eyes". Without you, etc.

I’m not much of a cook, admittedly. I can manage; I understand the principles. But generally what I put on a plate is, shall we say, utilitarian at best. It ticks the boxes, it doesn’t do much else. But I can handle breakfast. I like breakfast: the options are limited, but obvious. Eggs, bacon, toast. Coffee. That’s easy. I can do that. Breakfast is nice.

Mary likes her eggs fried, which is a bit more difficult than boiled, but I’m getting better at it.

The hair dryer is loud and drowns out the radio, but I don’t mind. The sound of a hair dryer is like damp bras hanging in the bathroom or long hairs in the drain; you just get used to it over time. It’s kind of nice, really. A reminder that I don’t live alone, and the person I live with has priorities that are different than mine. As it should be. Damp hair doesn’t bother me, but it’s anathema for her. She says it goes all curly and frizzy if she doesn’t blow dry it.

I think it looks nice curly, but she hates it. What can you do.

I slept like the dead last night. I’d almost forgotten what that was like. I used to sleep like that all the time. In another life.

Maybe I should take up running. Or have Mycroft Holmes call me at random in the wee hours to make me momentarily worry that a nuclear war has broken out.

So odd: trite, pointless questions from Mycroft at three in the morning. He doesn’t do pointless, he doesn’t have the time or the patience for it. There’s always some meaning in what he chooses to do. Where was the meaning in that call? It’s like he just wanted to make sure I was awake. Why?

It’s been ages since he’s called me. He used to do it all the time.

I remember all those random calls: late at night when I was out on a date, or early in the morning, or in the middle of the afternoon, all to ask about his brother. Always the pointed questions I refused to answer; usually warnings or directives. He didn’t like Sherlock going anywhere near his old haunts. He didn’t like Sherlock getting mixed up in government business. Sometimes he asked me truly bizarre questions about Sherlock’s dry cleaner, or when he last got a haircut, or, that once, whether or not there was a powder residue on his shoes. I don’t know why he bothered to ask me at all; I never answered any of his questions. It was a point of pride. My allegiance was to Sherlock, not to Mycroft. He was always worried something was about to go horribly wrong, and these little
details, if missed, would prove to be the final nail in his coffin. As if Sherlock always had his finger on some kind of trigger pointed at his own head.

Admittedly, I believed it too. I believed it the entire time I spent with him. I always assumed that Sherlock would be the death of both of us. I accepted it. His choices were rash and mad, and I wouldn’t have had him do anything any differently, most of the time. But Sherlock wasn’t the death of me. His own death wasn’t even his fault.

It was Mycroft’s fault. He should have paid more attention to what was coming out of his own mouth rather than spending all that time staring at CCTV footage and trying to anticipate Sherlock’s every move. Sherlock never did any of the things Mycroft worried most about: he never went back to the drugs, not that he wasn’t tempted to. And the trouble he caused was always worth it, in the end. He was only arrested the once, and I don’t think that time counts. All that worry and all those phone calls for nothing. Mycroft was the one who pushed Sherlock over the edge, in the end. He was the one with his finger on the trigger. And he pulled it. He pulled it.

He knows. I know he does. That’s guilt he’ll have to live with. There’s nothing I can do about that. Nothing a random phone call at three in the morning will fix.

So why did he call me? Why at three in the morning? I don’t buy that he didn’t notice the time. He notices everything. He’s a Holmes.

Time to put the bread in the toaster. Coffee’s ready. She should be out soon. I’ll drive her to work, maybe do a bit of shopping on the way home, then get back to the manuscr–

Wait, what was that? I heard something. The presenter on the radio, I swear: wait. I heard a name. A name I haven’t heard in ages.

Moriarty.

Who’s this talking? What’s on now, a news programme? Moriarty. Is that what I heard? A woman’s voice. Moriarty. She could have said some other name, I suppose. Damn hair dryer. She could have been talking about some other person with the same name. It can’t be an uncommon name, really. Who knows. Isn’t there a writer called Moriarty? Or a footballer? I don’t know. Turn up the radio; I heard it, I swear. It’s something. What did I hear? What is she talking about?

“–found dead by police early this morning. The criminal mastermind was well-known to police after his arrest and surprising acquittal three years ago. In other news–”

Criminal mastermind? There couldn’t be two. There can’t be.

James Moriarty. Found dead? Where’s the paper? I brought it in this morning, it must be there. Nothing on the front page, but if I–

Christ, this paper is so thin, it’s so easy to tear. No, politics, politics, something about Serbia, royal watchers, thefts in Soho, shooting in Clapton, and–

There. James Moriarty, Criminal Mastermind, Found Dead. Dead. They got him. Finally. Who killed him? They don’t say. No details. He’s dead? Are they sure?

There’s no photo. Not that they’d put a photo of a dead man’s face in the papers, necessarily, but I’d like to have the confirmation. At least that it’s the same person, that it’s the one I remember. Well, it has to be. James Moriarty. What else do they say? Sham trial, definitely him. The jurors were threatened in their hotel rooms, their wives, their children at stake. Well. That explains that. We knew it had to be something along those lines. We knew what he was. We knew what he was
capable of.

And there: Sherlock’s name, a mention of him, too: *Moriarty once accused the late private detective Sherlock Holmes of hiring him to commit his crimes, but there is no credible evidence to support this accusation.*

My god. Finally.

Someone sifted through the wall of fake news stories and DVDs that convinced Kitty Reilly. Someone saw it for what it was: not credible. False, in fact. A forgery. What I’ve been telling them all along. It’s not exactly a ringing endorsement of Sherlock’s innocence, but it’s something. *No credible evidence to support this accusation.* Did they manage to clear his name, then?

*No credible evidence.*

People will never entirely believe it, will they. There won’t be a trial, there won’t be a public airing of the entire sorry affair. Moriarty is dead. Is he? Can it possibly be true? Sherlock was innocent. It’s true.

Well, he wasn’t innocent, exactly. Not on the whole. I wouldn’t want them poking about too much in our affairs to find out. My gun isn’t strictly legally acquired or owned, and there is a trail of questionable but perfectly deserved injuries and deaths to account for. No: he’s not an innocent person, not at all, but he wasn’t guilty of that particular crime. He wasn’t a fraud, he wasn’t a *criminal mastermind*. He wasn’t; I know he wasn’t. He could have been, if he’d been so inclined. But he wasn’t. He wasn’t. I knew him. There were no magic tricks. Only him and his extraordinary brain chemistry.

Is Lestrade behind this? I heard he’d had a fight to maintain his position at the Met. Did he take on the task of clearing Sherlock’s name in his spare time? He should have called me. I would have helped.

*No credible evidence.* They wouldn’t be able to arrest him today, that’s what that means. Sally would only be suspicious, just like she always was. She wouldn’t be able to prove anything. They’d probably still have stopped letting him have the run of crime scenes, though. Which is as good as being guilty, really, for him. But still: it’s something. We could have worked through that. We could have found a way to make them trust you again. We would have been back on the inside of the tape before long. They need you, after all. They always will.

They probably would have been able to publish this story far sooner if you had been on the case, Sherlock. Then it would have been a matter of days, I’m sure of it.

Something’s burning. Toast? Eggs?

Shit.

Well. It’s salvageable. I’ll take the worst of it. It’s not so bad. Sorry, Mary.

The hair dryer stops. I pour her a cup of coffee, put her breakfast on a plate and bring it to the table. It’s a bit embarrassing, but I’m not really known for my cooking, am I.

“Did something burn?” she asks, brushing lint off her jacket.

“A little,” I tell her. “I’m taking that part.”

She sits at the table, she sips at her coffee. She has a meeting in less than an hour, and we’re
running late. She looks tired.

“Look.” I lay the paper down on the table and point to the article. I have to tell her, I want to tell her, but I don’t know what I want her to say back.

I’ve told her almost everything. She’s read all my stories; she knows about my life before. She knows about my blog, the cases, how I stopped dating for a while because of how impossible it was to sustain a long-term relationship while working with him. She knows about Moriarty, his murders, his forgeries, his obsession with Sherlock. I’ve explained to her how I know that Sherlock is innocent, in great detail, but I know she doesn’t understand it. I know, deep down, she doesn’t believe me.

She’s never said she doesn’t. I don’t know why I’m so sure she doesn’t. I can’t put my finger on it. But I know. I lived with Sherlock just long enough to know these things; there’s something in the way she carries herself when we talk about it. I just know.

It’s not her fault. Moriarty was thorough, and Mycroft primed him too well. His story was well-constructed; it was compelling. I’ve seen the DVDs. He must have spent months and months preparing to ruin Sherlock. Months in jail planning it, months building up the evidence to make it stick. If I didn’t know better, I’d believe it too.

He could have made an equally compelling case that I was the one who hired him, that I was the evil mastermind, and Mary would have been just as likely to believe that version of the story. With the right resources and the right information, he could have made anyone look guilty. Mrs Turner. That woman from the bank. Mary herself. I don’t take it personally that she doesn’t believe me. Mary didn’t know him. I knew him. I know the truth, Mycroft knows. Lestrade knows. Mrs Hudson knows. That’s enough. Mary doesn’t argue with me about it, she never tells me she doesn’t believe me. That would be intolerable. It would be a row that would end us. I know that; she knows that. Her disbelief just sits there, it hovers over the breakfast table. It’s a thing we don’t talk about.

It doesn’t matter.

I point to the article, cup of coffee in one hand. I have to tell her. This is important. There can’t be a row about it now. There’s nothing left to argue about. “They killed Moriarty. They call him a criminal mastermind.”

“You see, Mary? I was right about him. And you were wrong. You see? I want you to understand this. I want to see it on your face.

“Did they?” She takes the paper and squints at it. She needs glasses, but she doesn’t want them. Not yet, she says. Not before I turn forty. “Wow,” she says, then puts the paper down. “This is great news, and right before your book launch, too! What perfect timing!”

I’d forgotten about that.

But that’s not the point. My book launch isn’t the point. Well: she works for my publisher, and marketing is her department, so I guess I can’t be surprised that it’s the first thing that occurs to her. It’s only natural. She’s looking out for me. She wants me to be successful. It’s my first book. But it’s not the point. This isn’t about selling books, this isn’t about me. This is about a man’s life, and the way he will be remembered. That means something to me.

“But...look, Mary. Look. They say there’s no credible evidence against Sherlock, see?” I take the paper back from her, I read it to her. It’s early, she needs glasses. Maybe she didn’t see it.
“Moriarty once accused the late private detective Sherlock Holmes of hiring him to commit his crimes, but there is no credible evidence to support this accusation. He was innocent. That’s cleared his name, hasn’t it?”

She shrugs. “Near enough, I suppose. That’s great, John!” She leans across the table and kisses me on the cheek. She’s supportive. She understands, doesn’t she? This is important to me. Is it great? I think it’s great. It’s great and it’s terrible.

People accuse me of being some kind of Stockholm case. Holmes’ hostage. I’m not that: I’m his friend. I loved him. She’s still thinking about the marketing campaign, though. I know she is. She hasn’t got any other way to think about it.

I don’t even know for certain that I want her to understand it. For her to understand, she’d have to know things about my relationship to Sherlock that I’m not comfortable discussing. I didn’t talk to my therapist about it, I’m not going to talk to her about it. That’s mine, and it’s in the past, so it doesn’t matter.

Moriarty constructed Sherlock in one way to make a point; I’m constructing him in another. I’m not sure what point I’m trying to make.

I’m angry. I’m angry at Moriarty, but I’m also angry at Mary. I don’t know why I’m taking this out on her. She’s never been anything but supportive. I don’t know what I want her to say. There’s nothing she can say. That makes me angry, too; I want her to find something to say. That’s unfair.

“We should add some materials about it to the book shipments. I mean, people who buy the book should know the truth, right? The press will love it. Maybe we can get some stickers to add to the covers. And some display materials with the quote on them. I’ll talk to my designer this morning.” She smiles at me. All support, thinking of the future, thinking about me. It shouldn’t make me angry. It shouldn’t. “I hope they write another story. That line is a bit lukewarm, I’d rather see something more positive.”

She didn’t know him. He was my friend, not hers. It’s been nearly three years. She didn’t know me then. He’s fictional to her, he’s someone I write about. She’s never going to be able to understand.

I run my fingers over his name, and the line below it: there is no credible evidence. I can’t look at her. Not yet. Deep breaths.

“But that’s wonderful news, John! I’m so pleased for you, you must feel so vindicated!”

I don’t know what to say to her. I’m angry, I’m hurt, and I’m not entirely sure why. This wasn’t a game I was aiming to win.

“Yeah,” I manage. What did I expect her to do? She’s saying all the right things. It is wonderful. It is good news. But he’s dead, and none of this matters to him.

It wouldn’t have mattered to him alive. He never cared what people thought of him.

Sherlock: Moriarty is dead. I don’t know: I feel like you should undo what you’ve done. Take it back. Come home to me. It was a lie. It was a mistake. It’s over now. Let’s start over. Like it never happened.

But that’s not how these things work, is it.

Mary has given up on her breakfast and is drinking her coffee instead. At least I didn’t burn that. “Is this what that phone call was about, do you think?”
“Hmm?”

“Last night, his brother called, didn’t he?”

Oh. Right. Yes. Is this why Mycroft called? Maybe she’s right.

That must have been it. Is that how he’s been coping with his guilt? Finding a way to clear Sherlock’s name? Maybe he did. Mycroft cares about reputations. He certainly cared about Sherlock’s. And he called me, but didn’t tell me what he’d done: he’d killed Moriarty. Maybe he actually fired the gun, or twisted the knife, or pushed him under the water until he stopped moving. The article didn’t specify how he died. He’d finished what Sherlock started. He got his hands dirty for once. And it’s over now. Maybe that’s what he wanted to tell me. But he couldn’t.

“I think your phone is ringing, sweetie.”


“You get it, I’ve got to get to work. I’ll take the car, all right?”

All right. Yes. That’s fine. I don’t want to drive her to work, anyway. I want to be alone.

Seventeen new calls. Everyone I know has been calling this morning; they all saw the article. Now they all know for certain, just like I always have. You were innocent, Sherlock. You were not a fake. You were not a fraud. You were my friend.

Come back, now. Come back.
Chapter Summary

On the other side of that door, things must be different.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone for all her help with the outline, etc.; thanks to trinaest who wants to correct my colon problem and I think she really should just go ahead and do it; to Lavellington for her constant loveliness and support; to Elivchar for the britpick; and you, for reading along this far.

I can almost make out the brass numbers on the door from here, even at a distance. It’s just a door, like any other on Baker Street: black, shiny, and set into the pale concrete of the facade. That rounded window above the door isn’t just decorative: it lets in some of the ambient glow of the streetlights so that you can avoid switching the lights on when you come in at two in the morning. It’s there to help you find that first of seventeen steps without waking your landlady.

It looks just the same as it always has. It’s like stepping back in time.

But it’s not: it’s not like that at all. On the other side of that door, things must be different. Sherlock’s things will be gone, for one. No more body parts in the microwave, no more tidy rows of socks in his drawer. No skull on the mantel, certainly. No more violin music at odd hours. Other people live here now. Mrs Hudson’s latest tenants. She probably loves them as much as she loved Sherlock and me.

No, probably not. She always had a special place in her heart for Sherlock, and me by proxy. Sherlock was special that way. She wouldn’t love any other tenant like that. The new people must be pale imitations of us. Easier to cope with, certainly. Less destructive. Cleaner. Not like us, not like we were. No one could be.

It’s different now, I know it has to be, even if I can’t tell yet from down the street. Different faces, different lives are lived here. There’s probably new furniture; something must have broken or worn out over the last three years. It wouldn’t smell the same.

She will have patched up the wall. No more spray paint and frayed wallpaper, surely. You can paper over things like that, mistakes. The results of Sherlock’s boredom; you can cover up what goes on in a flat like it never happened. Even if it leaves a mark, you can hide it, remove it, no one will ever ask, or ever know. Flats can only share so much of what went on inside them. They keep secrets.

What will I say to Mary tonight? I didn’t tell her Mrs Hudson asked me over. Even when we spoke this afternoon, I didn’t mention it. I had my jacket on, I was on my way out, and still I didn’t mention it. I’m not sure why; I just didn’t want her to have it. I don’t know: she has so much of my life. I don’t know how to give her this. I don’t want to.
Anyway, I know how it would go: she’d listen to what Mrs Hudson told me, and she’d say, why is she calling you over a dodgy boiler? Have her call a plumber, or, doesn’t she have a son or a neighbour she can have do these things for her? You’re just a former tenant, John. Former tenant. Something like that. No, that’s not fair. She wouldn’t be so mean about it. She’d say: what’s the problem? Oh, a dodgy boiler? Right, I know a guy. I’ll call him for her, how’s that. That’s more likely. Mary always knows the right person for every job, and she’s very practical about these things. She wouldn’t want me coming over here, wasting my time, avoiding working on my book. I’m on a deadline this time, they want it finished by the end of the month. But I don’t know: there was something in Mrs Hudson’s voice this morning. She wanted to see me. She wasn’t quite herself, I think. She sounded...I don’t know. Something was wrong. She didn’t say that, but I could tell.

There was something she wanted to tell me, in person.

Maybe not. Maybe I’m making that up: one strange call in the middle of the night, Sherlock’s name in the paper this morning, it’s rattled me, I guess.

I just wanted to come back. Finally.

If it were any other day before this one, I probably wouldn’t be here. I would have told Mary, and I would have let her find a more practical solution. I could have avoided this. I would have stayed away. And somehow Mrs Hudson must have known that today would be different: she stopped asking me to drop by ages ago. But today, of all days, she asked me again, and here I am. Because today Moriarty is dead, and it seems fitting to me that this is the day I come back.

Maybe that’s why she asked. She knew today would be different. Maybe she knows something, maybe Mycroft got in touch with her too. Maybe he arranged all this.

Probably not. I’m not that important, not anymore. Maybe she just wanted me to come over for tea, to commiserate. To mourn Sherlock a little more. We never really did that, she and I, after the funeral. I just couldn’t. But I could now; I miss him. I know she does, too.

So here I am: Baker Street. Finally.

It doesn’t hurt as much as I thought it might. I probably could have come back sooner. To be fair: I didn’t stay away because it would hurt, though that was always part of it. In the end, I think I was avoiding coming back here because I feared it would overwrite him somehow, that the present tense memories would blot out the past tense ones. I’d rather not have reality paper over the memories I have of his presence in this place. I want those bullet holes to remain. They’re my evidence.

But that’s not really how memories work, is it. Everything fades eventually, no matter how hard you try to hold on to it. Maybe avoiding this place only made them fade faster.

The brass “B” catches the light a little.

I remember standing in front of this door the very first time, knocking because I didn’t notice the bell, and Sherlock getting out of a cab behind me. I called him Mr Holmes at first. It seemed appropriate; he was a bit, well. Odd. A bit old-fashioned. Not quite of this world. Strange. Intimidating. It’s funny to remember that moment, him telling me to call him Sherlock, and feeling a little bit...what was it? A bit like being let in on a secret, being allowed to sit in the wings and see the view of the magician no one else gets to see. I knew, even then, that it would be a little bit magical. And it was. It really was.
I’m supposed to meet her in ten minutes; I’m early. I shouldn’t have done that; I should have arranged to be late. Late wouldn’t give me time to take in every detail, remember things. I’d rather neither see nor observe at the moment, quite frankly. It’s a bit overwhelming.

There’s a man on the end of the street, watching. Well: maybe he’s not watching me, he might just be staring into space, like I am. Waiting for an appointment, waiting for a cab, waiting for his wife or his girlfriend to step out of a shop with a bag in her hand, something like that. He’s just standing there, collar up against the wind. Long coat.

If I ran after everyone who looked like Sherlock, I’d spend most of my days running. It’s not him. It can’t be him, he’s dead. So I just look at him, and know it’s not him, but can see how he sort of is. It’s not Sherlock, no, of course not: but there is a little bit of Sherlock still in the world, held in the bones and spines of other people. He would hate that. But there it is; there’s something in the way people hold themselves sometimes, the colour of their hair, their choice of coats, their shoes, the shape of their faces. Their eyes. At my worst I can turn anyone into Sherlock, given the right body shape. I’ve seen him everywhere: the cinema, the market, bookstores, libraries, at Tesco in the frozen food aisle, on a train, asleep under a newspaper, at the museum. Walking across a bridge in the rain, once: I nearly stopped to pick him up before Mary gave me a funny look. Sherlock is everywhere. Overactive imagination, I know. But I find it strangely comforting.

So I hold out my hand a little, like I could touch him in the distance.

Hello there, Sherlock. Did you hear? Moriarty is dead. He’s dead, finally. If you’re a ghost, maybe this will let you be at peace. He’s gone, and you’re free.

He starts; he pulls something out of his pocket. I think it’s a phone. He puts it to his ear. Yes, definitely a phone. He turns away.

I don’t think he saw me. Just someone standing in the street, just like me.

“John!” Mrs Hudson. I should have rung the bell, I suppose. “Come in!”

I’m not going to pretend it doesn’t feel strange to step over the threshold. I feel like I’ve been an unwelcome ghost for so long, and somehow maybe the building itself would repel me. Like I’m not allowed to come near the place again. But nothing happens. I step inside, it’s cool. Well, she said the heating had gone off. It looks just the same; the lamp is on by the chair. There’s a book resting open on the arm. She was waiting for me here, a purple shawl over her shoulders. She shivers.

“It’s a bit brisk in here, isn’t it?,” she says. “Come see. I’m not sure what to do, to be honest, John. I’m really not sure.”

She leads me, not up to the flat (thank god) but downstairs, on the other side of the damp basement. I’ve never been in here before. It’s got a rough concrete floor. She switches on a light.

“Would you look at that,” she said, opening the door. “I couldn’t believe my eyes.”

Where there should be a boiler, there is nothing. Nothing but loose bits of metal and some hanging pipes. It looks as though someone wrenched the bloody thing right out.

“That’s not quite,” I start. I can do a little bit of plumbing, but I can’t fix a boiler that isn’t there. “That’s not a dodgy boiler, Mrs. Hudson.” Someone must have come in here with a soldering iron and a crowbar; there’s bent bits of pipe and smears of solder all over the place and it smells like burnt metal. A hack job; it’s like someone took her boiler apart piece by piece. It must have taken
hours. “What the hell happened?”

Mrs Hudson sighs. “Well, I’m not entirely sure,” she says. “The current tenants are...artistic.”

“The tenants pulled out the boiler?” That’s incredible. And I thought Sherlock was the worst possible tenant. Mrs Hudson must be some kind of terrible tenant magnet.

“Well, I’m not sure, I think so,” she says. “They’ve gone away on holiday now, but they said they heard something strange in the boiler room so they touched it up a bit.”

“This is hardly,” I look down at the spot in the floor where it used to sit. There’s a scorch mark. “I mean, this is not a touch up. It’s...well, it’s gone.”

A perfectly sound analysis, isn’t it Sherlock? I can’t help it. I start to laugh.

“This isn’t funny, John,” Mrs Hudson says.

“No,” I tell her. “No, it’s really not. You need a new boiler, I’m afraid. And you might consider... evicting your tenants.”

She puts her hands on her hips. Then she smiles at me. I smile back. We haven’t mentioned Moriarty’s death, we haven’t mentioned Sherlock. But it feels like that victory is in the room with us anyway. Strange.

“Yes, I suppose I should.” She shakes her head. “Dreadful. Can I fix you a cup of tea, John?”

That sounds nice. Tea sounds nice. And a couple of biscuits, maybe.

There’s a rattle in my pocket; my phone’s ringing. Oh Christ, please don’t be Mary, don’t be Mary...I’m not going to lie to her in front of Mrs Hudson, I can just imagine the look on her face, but I can’t explain this just yet. Oh: it’s not Mary. It’s my agent. Why is my agent calling?

“Sorry, Mrs Hudson, can I just–”

“Yes, yes, of course,” she says.

“Hello?” I can hear someone talking on the other end, but not to me.

“John!”

“Yes?”

“I’ve got him.” He’s talking to someone else, his face must be turned a bit away from the phone. What on earth is going on? “I’ve got him, one second. Look, John,” he says, now clearly talking to me. “We saw the story on the news.” Right. Well, of course they did. Mary would have told them if they hadn’t. “About Sherlock. And Moriarty. Everyone saw it, it seems. We’ve had about a million calls, and your stories in The Strand are suddenly getting flooded with comments again. There’s a lot of interest in Sherlock Holmes. This is the best publicity I’ve ever seen. People are desperate for the book, they’re going to want you on every chat show in the country. What do you think about a five book deal? The publisher is offering. They know if they don’t, someone else will.”

Five books? Five books about Sherlock? And Mary wanted me to write about something else for a change. I could write five books about Sherlock. I could write fifty, I reckon.

“Sure,” I tell him. “Sure.”
“I thought you might be interested,” he said. “I’ll get you the paperwork. What perfect timing, John! It couldn’t be better! Congratulations!”

A five book deal; I could probably buy Mrs Hudson her new boiler.

“Thanks,” I tell him. “Great, thanks.” It’s good; yes. I know. It’s great. An advance; maybe I could buy a house. If I wanted to. I don’t know. I don’t know what I want. Mary wants new floors. Maybe a holiday in Greece. Five books. I can write five books. What would Sherlock have done? He’d have ignored it. He’d have ignored the whole thing. He’d duck and run; he wouldn’t like the publicity. There’d be another ceremony; he’d have to wear the hat. People would give him gifts he wouldn’t know what to do with. Too much romance, too much nonsense, not enough analysis, I know. I know, Sherlock, I won’t forget.

“All right?” Mrs Hudson looks concerned. I don’t know what I must look like; I’m glad people want my book, I’m glad they like my stories. But Moriarty’s death is about more than that. It’s about Sherlock, what he would have done, what he couldn’t do, in the end. It’s about his reputation, it’s about him, not me. Someone somewhere killed Moriarty, and I get all the kudos for it.

It seems unfair, somehow. I’m only the story-teller, not the magician.

“All right.” I’ll tell her about it later. She’ll be pleased, I’m sure. But I don’t want to talk about book deals and advances just now. Not yet. Not today. “How about that cuppa?”
Chapter Summary

How is it that I’m living with someone who doesn’t know that Moriarty strapped a bomb to my chest? How does that even happen?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Elvichar and longtimegone for being ready to perform beta duties at the odd hour of before 10am EST.

“That’s Greg. That’s Greg Lestrade.” Mary doesn’t know who I mean. I point him out to her; he’s right in the middle. He’s the one who’s going to speak; he’s the one hovering nearest the microphone. It’s obvious. “There.”

“Which one?”

“There, the–” Pointing really doesn’t help; the telly isn’t that big. “The one with the blue jacket, reaching for the– yeah. That’s him. That’s Lestrade, DI Lestrade.”

She nods. “Ah, right. I see.”

But she doesn’t. She doesn’t see at all. She takes a sip of her tea and curls her toes against my thigh. She’d rather we were watching something else, I know. But she won’t say so. She knows this is important. It’s about Sherlock. My friend. It’s important to me. She understands that. She’s listened to me go on about it since dinner and hasn’t complained, she hasn’t tried to stop me or change the subject. She even asked me some questions. She wanted to know about “this Moriarty character.”

She asked if I’d ever met him.

How is it that I’m living with someone who doesn’t know that Moriarty strapped a bomb to my chest? How does that even happen?

Maybe I’ve been sleepwalking through the last three years, and I’m only waking up now that Moriarty is dead.

Greg looks out at the press and stares out at us, and it’s like I’ve caught his eye, sitting here on Mary’s sofa, watching Mary’s telly. But I know I haven’t; it’s just the evening news. But I feel like he’s about to recognise me even through the screen and call me over, John, where’s Sherlock? Give us a hand, would you?

“That’s Greg, yeah. I know him.”

I feel compelled to say it out loud; he’s on the telly, right there, in front of a sea of cameras, and I know him. This isn’t live footage, obviously: there’s some weak sunlight through the window
behind him, but the sun went down hours ago. It’s dark outside, it’s raining. Of course it’s not live: they don’t save press conferences for the evening news hour. It’s probably some video from far too early this morning, just after the papers came out, the crack of dawn. Where was I about then? I was in the kitchen thinking nothing strange had gone on in the night other than a weird phone call.

It must have been an exciting night: swarms of special forces, watching monitors and tracking every move and every bit of heat in the night. Waiting for the critical moment, pulling the trigger. I remember that feeling: holding your breath, waiting. Ready to strike. And last night I was dead to the world, sleeping next to Mary. Probably snoring. Probably dribbling. It didn’t used to be this way.

There was a time I would have known everything Lestrade would say before they had even called a press conference. Footage on the news at night would never have surprised me; we rarely even bothered to watch unless it was to mock them for it. By the evening it was all old news; we’d be on to the next thing by the evening, if we were lucky. The press conference is how stories end, generally; not how they begin. There’s rarely a press conference in the thick of it. I’d get a beer from the fridge, sit down on a different sofa, and watch them stumble through the details on the telly. And Sherlock would scan the website for anything new, scratching at the patch on his arm, pin things to the walls, mumble to himself. That’s another lifetime. It feels like it might have been someone else’s life. I’ve turned it all into fiction.

Well, not all of it. Not quite all of it.

This press conference has probably been on repeat all day with newsreaders talking over it. Greg looks a little dazed, frankly. He’d probably been up all night. When did it happen? How? They won’t go into the details, not the interesting ones. Not in front of the press. They won’t say who pulled the trigger. They won’t show photographs of the body. I already know that. Still: I’m waiting to see it, like an idiot. What’s he going to say? He’s squinting down at some paper, the camera is panning all over the place. Stay still, stop mucking around, for God’s sake. Let me watch. Let me see his face. Christ: the incessant yapping of that woman in the pink suit is layered over the whole thing. Her stiff-looking blonde hair is cluttering up the screen. Can we mute her? Is there a button for that? Shut it, lady: let me hear what’s going on.

Greg’s talking to someone behind him. What’s he doing? Who’s that? It’s some man I don’t recognise, he’s leaning down to whisper something. The Met’s got new PR? Did Sally move on? Get sacked? Give up? Who knows. I’ve never seen this one before. Well, it’s been three years now. Nearly three years. Things change. People move on. New hires, growing departments, that sort of thing. Expansion. He’s wearing a nicer suit than Greg wears. Is that a faux pas? What can we deduce from the state of their suits? I don’t know. Nothing. Maybe he’s gay. Maybe he’s rich. Maybe he’s got a girlfriend with a good eye and an interest in men’s fashion. Or a boyfriend who picks out his ties. Who knows. No rings on his fingers. That doesn’t mean anything. That’s a lot of paper he’s got, he’s handing it to Greg. That’s notes, isn’t it. It’s a script, or something. They’re referring to it. Why have they got a script? Greg doesn’t usually need that much guidance. He’s reading over it now. They’re being careful. Why?


That’s meant to be a cutting remark, but it’s wrapped in the most innocent silk.

She does that. And you can’t accuse her of anything, because there’s nothing there to point at. She didn’t mean anything by it, that’s what she’ll say. She was just noticing something, she was just remarking. She was only saying something objectively true: she’s never seen Greg before. He’s
never dropped by, he’s never invited me out for a pint, he’s never called. We’ve never had dinner with him and his lovely wife. That’s all true, therefore, I’m probably lying about knowing him. Or: I’ve met him once or twice, and I’m making myself seem more important than I actually am. I’m just a writer, I watched an old flatmate do his job for a few months, I got inspired, and now I fancy myself some kind of bodyguard or junior detective. The police don’t consult amateurs, and I am definitely that. Maybe I met the DI once, at a crime scene. But he wouldn’t remember me, would he, Mary. That’s what you mean, isn’t it. That’s what you imagine.

Sherlock was a fraud, and so am I. Even now: even now when they’re holding a press conference to announce the truth, that Sherlock was not a fraud, as I’ve been saying all along, you still don’t really believe it. Believe me. He’ll always be a fraud to you, because you’ve only ever seen him as fictional. Because I present him that way. It’s my fault, really. Not hers. She’s just asking. That’s what she’ll say if I tell her she’s upsetting me. “I was only asking.”

That time, once, near the beginning, after she’s skimmed over my blog and read my manuscript: she had a glass of wine in her hand, she looked so beautiful. I thought, looking at her, I thought I might marry her. She was wearing my t-shirt, and it was tucked over her knees. I could marry her. The polish on her toenails was chipped off, and I thought it was charming. And then she said, you had a crush on him, didn’t you. She smiled. She sipped her wine.

I felt stripped naked, humiliated. I don’t know why. She was joking, she was teasing me. What does it matter? I could have admitted it then, but I didn’t. I just laughed, I said something stupid. I’m not gay. We’re not a couple, no no, he was my flatmate, it wasn’t like that. Things I used to say when people made assumptions. They were rusty, those words, I hadn’t used them in ages. I don’t think they were very convincing, but she seemed convinced. She was only asking. I could marry her, I could. But I would never tell her about that. Because she wouldn’t understand.

There is an incredible loneliness in keeping secrets. I always thought loneliness was being alone too much, but it’s not. It’s really not. It’s knowing there’s no one left in the world who will understand, even as you share a bed with someone you love. Love isn’t understanding, in the end.

There’s no point in saying anything.

I’m probably making too much of this. She doesn’t think these things about me, she doesn’t. She doesn’t mean it the way it sounds. She doesn’t mean anything by it at all.

It’s just that sometimes it feels like she doesn’t believe me. That’s annoying: I write about true crimes, things that actually happened, only fictionalised enough to protect the innocent. To protect him, and me. Does she think I make things up out of nothing? She knows I don’t. I don’t. I know a bit about how Scotland Yard works only from first hand experience. I’ve been there. I’ve worked with them, I’ve been invited to crime scenes no one else can get near. I’ve sat in Greg’s office, I’ve been there when the new evidence comes in. They know me. I know them.

Well. I knew them.

I used to have a pint with Greg once in a while. He’s a good bloke, really. He is. His personal life is a bit of a mess, but what can you do. I guess I can’t talk. Maybe he’s divorced, finally. Maybe he’s remarried by now, christ. It’s been long enough, that could be. Who knows. I haven’t spoken to him in all this time.

That’s terrible, actually. That’s awful. Why didn’t I call him? Well, I know why. I couldn’t. I didn’t want to. I was in a bad way, I couldn’t manage to. Sherlock’s body would have been in the room with us the whole time if we talked, I wouldn’t have been able to bear it. Probably he wouldn’t have, either. Greg saved him, really. More than I ever did. Saved him from himself. I wonder how
that happened, the first time: how did Greg manage to break all the rules and bring Sherlock along to a crime scene? The looks on everyone’s faces: it must have been priceless. I never heard that story. Neither of them ever told me.

I should have asked.

I thought they were going to sack him, frankly. Apparently not. He’s still there: he’s running the press conference, from the looks of it. Well, maybe that PR guy is. But Greg’s going to do all the talking. It’s his case. The death of James Moriarty: Lestrade’s case. That seems fitting.

I should have called him. We could have met at the pub, maybe had lunch once in a while. I could have complained about Mary not understanding me. No: that’s not fair. I need to stop that. She’s doing her best. Crime fiction isn’t her thing, let alone crime scenes. Let alone detectives, consulting or otherwise. I’m not a detective. I’m just a writer.

We could have dinner with him and his wife. Or his new wife, whatever.

“Was he a friend of Sherlock’s?”

That’s how Mary sees the world; as if Sherlock were a normal man with friends. Everything becomes simplified when I explain it to her: simplified in ways it never was. Was Greg a friend of Sherlock’s? Yes, I suppose he was. In a manner of speaking. But that’s not the point, that’s not the important part of this. Greg trusted Sherlock’s instincts, and therefore he trusted me. We both saw Sherlock for what he was, he and I. A human being underneath it all, in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. We were united in supporting him, that’s what it was. We were comrades in arms above all else. Was he a friend of Sherlock’s, therefore merely a proxy acquaintance for me? It still feels like a slight. But it’s true. That’s the danger of true things. Their truth obscures the fact that they don’t tell you even half the story.

But I’m the one who called him by his name, after all. I’m the one who knew his name. I’m the one who went out for pints with him, not Sherlock.

“Yeah, I suppose so.”

Greg looks up, and the woman with the blonde hair is back on the screen again. She’s talking again, instead of letting me hear him.

“I’m going to take a shower,” Mary says. She leans over and kisses me on the cheek. “You all right?”

“I’m fine.” I still want to learn how to mute newsreaders. If they haven’t got a button for it, they should invent one.

She gets up; she walks into the loo. I wonder if I’ve still got Greg’s number in my phone. I’ve had to get a new one in the last three years, I might not still have it. He might have changed it, who knows.

Well, there it is. I didn’t use his first name, just his last name. LESTRADE, in caps.

Mary switches on the shower. Press the button: it’s not that late, is it? It’s barely ten. Not too late. I wonder if he remarried. Someone nice, I hope. He should be with someone nice.

“Hello?” That’s him. That’s definitely him. Wow: a rush of memories. A million phone calls, questions, the sound of his concern as he peers down into the cab at us. At Sherlock. His head in my lap, that one time. My hand resting on his thin shoulder, and Greg looking down at him,
perplexed. I wonder if he guessed, then. If he knew. He never made assumptions, he never suggested it. But I bet he thought it. Everyone did, at one point or another. Everyone did.


“...John! how are you? I was wondering if I might hear from you today. Are you all right?”

“Yeah.” Am I? All right? I keep saying I am. I don’t know. If I say it enough times, I’m sure it will be true. “You?”

“Well,” he exhales. “It’s been quite a day, as you can imagine.”

“Yes. I’m just watching you on the news. So he’s dead.” I want to make that a question, but that seems rude. Yes: he’s dead. I want to see it. I want to see his blood. I want proof.

“That’s what they say.”

That’s an odd thing for him to say. Isn’t it? “You weren’t there?” Greg didn’t kill him then, presumably. You didn’t pull the trigger, Greg? I would have wanted it to be you, not anyone else. If not me, then you.

“To be honest, no. I didn’t see a thing, I didn’t even know it was coming. I’ve been trying to track him down and having no luck at all. Every bit of a lead was a dead end for years, John. Then I got this phone call in the middle of the night, and they brought me all the details. MI5, I think, but you didn’t hear that from me. Reams of paper, I don’t even have clearance to see the body. A bullet to the head, that’s what the paperwork says. It wasn’t me, John, it’s not really my case, but they brought it to me to present as though it is. They don’t want credit for this one, for whatever reason.”

Oh. So it wasn’t him? Is this a lie, all of it? MI5. Must be Mycroft, then. Must be. Is he actually dead? Or is this all a giant ruse, part of some large game of human chess. That’s what Mycroft does, isn’t it? Move the human pieces around, check someone. Maybe Moriarty. Maybe someone else.

“That’s...”

“Yeah,” he says. He sounds exhausted. “Yeah, I know. Seems unbelievable, doesn’t it, three years later. I’m pretty confident that it’s true, though, John, you should know that. He’s dead. He is. Molly got to see the body very early this morning, she confirmed the time of death. I believe her. He was shot in the head, John. He’s gone. It’s over.”

Molly? Molly has clearance to see something DI Lestrade doesn’t?

“She’s pretty shaken up,” Greg says. “She went out with him for a while, you know.”

Yeah. I know that. They went out twice, that’s hardly a while. Sherlock thought he was gay. And now they’re both gone.

“You all right?” People keep asking me that.

“Yeah,” I tell him. “Yeah. How are you, Greg? I’m sorry I haven’t called.”

“I was tempted to call you myself a few times,” he says. See? I really do know him, Mary. “I wasn’t sure if you’d appreciate that, though. The reminder. I read the stories in The Strand, though, they’re great. Everyone at the Yard loves them.”
That’s kind. Do they remember us fondly, then?

“I hear you’ve got a book coming out, is that right?”

“Yeah, next week.”

“Perfect timing.”

“It is, isn’t it?”

He huffs into the phone. We’re both thinking the same thing, I know we are. And we both know enough not to say it. The timing is a bit too perfect. No body, just a stack of paper. What’s going on? Who killed Moriarty? What does this have to do with me?

“You up for a pint some time?” That’s the right answer: we can’t talk about it on the phone. Who knows who’s listening. Good thinking, Greg.

“Sure, yeah.” The shower switches off. The newsreader is talking again. “Yeah, that sounds great.”
“Pin it to the wall, would you? On the map, on Baker Street.”

It could be nothing. It’s just an arrest, not even an important one. It didn’t make the front page. There’s no press conference about this one. The story doesn’t come with a photo, even. Just a few paragraphs on newsprint. It’s an arrest, that’s it. That’s all. People do illegal things and get arrested. It happens every day. They get arrested for these kinds of crimes all the time, too: fraud, forgery, conspiracy. There’s a hint about possible murders in the distant past, nothing specific. No named victims. Just an arrest, reported like any other arrest.

But that name: I recognise that name. It’s eastern European, I only know how to pronounce it because Sherlock said it. Once. I remember. Ivan Milunić. He said it in passing, while draped over the sofa in his dressing gown, reading off a scrap of paper he handed to me a few minutes later.

“Ivan Milunić.”

His shirt was pulled up a bit, exposing his navel. I stared, I think. I stared, and I didn’t even notice that I did. I didn’t think about it. I just drank him in, unaware entirely. I remember too much about his stomach, though: his breath in and out, a bit of hair just under his waistband, a small, unexplained scratch down along his left hip. I remember all that: I must have stared. His eyes were shut. He didn’t notice. Well: I can’t say that. He might have noticed. He probably did. He didn’t care. He let me. He must have known.

I had just met a woman on the train, though I never told him that. He probably knew about that too, either from the way I walked up the stairs, or how I paused in the sitting room, or the way I’d buttoned my shirt. I don’t know how, but he’d know. She was pretty. She was nice. We flirted. She smiled at me; she told me her name. She gave me her number. I was thinking about her, the way
her jacket fit against her waist, the way the nape of her neck smelled like strawberries. I never called her; why didn’t I? I got distracted. That was all. Someone was preparing to kill us; life suddenly got short. I forgot about her. I don’t remember her name anymore. I don’t even remember her face.

But just then, when he said it: I was making lunch, thinking about the nape of her neck, thinking about Sherlock’s thin frame and the fact that I could see his hip bones over the edge of his waist band. I could see his navel. Desire: it was all blended together. For her; him. I don’t think I noticed that, the blending of them. His hip bones, the nape of her neck, his stomach. I could see his breathing. I felt good. And in the middle of all that desire he said a name, lazily, with no concern at all, as if he frequently listed off the names of men who’d been hired to kills us.

“Pin it to the wall.”

Maybe it’s a very common name, I don’t know. But Ivan Milunić was arrested for fraud, forgery, and conspiracy yesterday. Conspiring to do what? Kill someone? Presumably. Who? Who this time?

If I’m right, he was part of Moriarty’s web. Or he was, years ago. Low-level: he was only some hired muscle. He had some obvious tattoos, scars; he was easy to recognise. Sherlock wasn’t concerned about him. He felt we could handle him. Nothing came of it, in the end.

I’m fairly sure that’s him. It must be. They’ve arrested him out of the blue, just days after the press conference, after all that attention: a quiet arrest of a mercenary. One of Moriarty’s shadowy crew.

Moriarty is dead. Who will they arrest now? Is everything out in the open? Cut off the head of the serpent, and its body flails around for a while afterward. The blood spatters everywhere. Is that what’s happening? I’ll clip this. This means something, I’m sure of it. I’m developing a collection of these. What am I doing?

A list of arrests: one after another. Frequently several in one day, all linked to Moriarty’s various connections and crimes. Sometimes they mention him directly; other times, it’s only implied. And some I just have a hunch about. It’s a small pile of newspaper clippings and bits of news sites I’ve printed out. It’s my little obsession.

It could be a story, one day. A long, meandering story about a web of crime syndicates and their connections. How they worked together to create a lie that brought down the cleverest man in the world: the greatest crime of all.

I haven’t written about Sherlock’s suicide, which, given how much time I’ve spent thinking about it, is strange. But I don’t want to write about it; that story is senseless, full of lies, and it has no satisfying conclusion. I thought it would stay that way, unwritten, at least by me. But maybe not. Maybe all these arrests, Moriarty’s death, maybe there’s a story in here. This little pile of paper isn’t just an obsession, it’s a collection of plot details that might make the end of that story make sense. Maybe. If I can trace the whole thing, piece it together, maybe it can.

But no, probably not. There are too many missing details. The newsprint can’t hold it all. I can’t hold it all. It’s just a collection of potentially connected facts, that’s not a story. And I’m not in a position to have the crucial details whispered into my ear anymore.

Sherlock never whispered.

A series of arrests is not a story, not if you don’t know the connective bits that binds them together. The real stories, the complicated one that don’t fit into a soundbite. I only half-know it, I’m only
guessing. I’m fabricating. It’s all fiction now.

And here’s another: a group of illegal immigrants with an underground bunker full of automatic firearms. With links to so-called organised crime. Are they related as well? Maybe. Who knows. How could I know? I remember all those laser sights, their sharp red lights on Sherlock’s forehead, dancing across his throat, hovering over his chest; there was a collection of them on me, too. So many guns pointed at us. They must have come from somewhere, and there were blokes, presumably, aiming them at us. What about all of them? They didn’t vanish into thin air. They exist. Will they all get quietly arrested?

I’ll cut this one out. I can’t make the direct link, but I have a feeling about it. A feeling is enough. Enough for my collection, anyway. A pointless collection can afford to have low standards. But there’s something here. I know it. It’s like your fingerprints are in here, Sherlock. And if I can piece it together, I might see your face in it.

That’s madness. It’s not that: it’s just a kind of closure, that’s all. It’s perfectly normal. For the circumstances, which are, of course, decidedly not normal.

What I should do, really, is pin all these up on the wall, in chronological and thematic order, on a map, and see them all at once. That way I can get a sense of the entire web, track what’s going on. There’s progress in it, somehow. It’s following a path. It would be telling, I think. Definitely. I should pin them up on the wall.

Mary would hate that.

I have a box of thumbtacks; where are they? In the kitchen? In a drawer, yes. Here. Here they are. I can put them on the wall behind my desk, that will be perfect. It’s got that crack through it Mary wanted me to fix. I’ll fix it. I’ll fix it as soon as I’ve got a grip on these arrests. A week or two: then I’ll get out the plaster and smooth the whole thing away. Like it never happened.

“Are you ready?” She’s still got curlers in her hair. We’ve got plenty of time. She’s not even dressed yet.

“I just need to put my tie on,” I tell her, which is a lie. But a tuxedo and shoes are easy. I can run a comb through my hair, I’ll be fine. I don’t need hours to get ready, not like Mary. I don’t entirely understand it: she straightens her hair and then curls it again. Why not just leave it curly in the first place? It’s bizarre.

She keeps calling it my book launch party, but it really isn’t. It’s for my book, that’s true, but the launch is theirs. This wasn’t my idea. I’d happily just have them send the book to the stores and see how it does. See if anyone wants to buy it. I don’t really know the people they’ve invited, and I doubt anyone really wants to talk to me. The people who go to these things, they’re all in marketing or the media, they’re not really that interested in people like me, or stories like mine. They’ll want to talk about Sherlock, though, because of the news. I’m not sure I’m ready for that. I’m not sure.

It’s starting to feel strange again, talking about him. I can’t put my finger on why. It’s reality intruding.

What do they want me to say, anyway? Yes: I’ve been telling everyone that he’s innocent for years now, and finally you’re starting to believe me. Fantastic! Thanks for that, really. Thanks. I have to avoid getting angry with them; it’s not their fault. They just parrot the lines they need to. I have to just smile, nod, laugh, and drink more champagne.

I really hate champagne.
I’ve got a map here somewhere; in the drawer of my desk. Right: it’s under that stack of fresh paper. Perfect: I’ll pin that up. Yes. Then these: the first set of arrests. Those are obvious: the financiers, they’re directly linked. The back accounts, the transfers. Scotland Yard didn’t shy away from naming names then. Lords and ladies, willing to fund a mass murderer and a psychopath. Lovely: just lovely. Two blokes from MI5: treason. Secrets. Coventry. Didn’t mention Moriarty, but they hardly needed to. A little knowledge goes a long way. There was a dominatrix who knew exactly what those two like, I suspect. Then the guns, the Croat. There. Is this a pattern?

I can put a mark on the spot where they found Moriarty, that’s should be the centre. But they’ve never said exactly where he was. Greg will tell me, I bet. When I see him. I’ll ask. He’ll tell me. I’m sure he will. I should get some yarn, I can tie links between the arrests I understand as directly linked together. That’s what Sherlock would do. It made sense. It makes things look clearer.

“What on earth on you doing?” She’s already angry. “John, what the hell have you done to my wall?” One hand on her hip. Her bare feet are flat on the floor.

“It’s for a story,” I tell her. I don’t want to turn around. I don’t want to look her in the face when I say this. I need to do this, Mary. I need this. Please. Please just let me. “I’m trying to make sense of it.” She doesn’t say anything. “You wanted me to fix that crack anyway, didn’t you? I’ll plaster it over. In a week or so. That’s all.” Still: nothing.

I need to turn, I need to look at her. That’s what she’s waiting for. So: turn. Look at her. She’s wearing a lot of eyeliner. It makes her look like someone else, someone with gigantic eyes. Someone younger than she is. She looks beautiful. She looks professional, intelligent, savvy. She looks like she’s in control of things. And she is. Her gigantic eyes are boring holes in me.

“I’ll fix it,” I tell her. “They’re just tacks.”

“Which story is it for?” She doesn’t believe me. Why doesn’t she? She knows I write about Sherlock. I write about crimes. She knows that. She’s read the book. She read the dedication page too. She thought it was sweet. Why is this strange to her, then? This is what I do. I’m a writer. I write stories. This is my material.

“It’s about Moriarty,” I tell her. I have to make this up fast. “In the end. All these are related. This is his reach, these are his connections here. This man,” I lay my finger on the article, the one with no picture, “this man was hired to kill me.” That’s true. Not just me, really, but it’s true.

“Wow,” she says. I’m not sure what that means. I’m really not sure. I don’t know if it’s ironic, or sarcastic, or disbelieving. Or genuine. I don’t know why it’s so hard to know what Mary means; it’s like she deliberately says things that can be read any number of ways. Why does she do that? “That sounds really different than the stories you’ve pitched, John.” Ah. Right. She’s doesn’t like it. She hates it. I’m sure she does. Well, I knew she would. She’s concerned that I’m getting off track, that I’ll miss my deadlines. My editor would hate it too. Not enough human interest, it doesn’t fit into the series. It’s not one of the outlines we agreed to. They like stories about Sherlock manipulating people, Sherlock in a hat, Sherlock getting things wrong. The clean up job isn’t so interesting. Sherlock’s not in it. There’s no one central character. I don’t even know who the hero of this story is; who’s finding all these secret operatives? Who’s taking Moriarty’s web apart, piece by piece? It’s not a narrative, it’s not a story they’d want. Justice on its own isn’t a story, I guess. Making sense of a senseless death isn’t enough of a story. It’s an obituary. A long overdue one.

All of this work isn’t for a story. It’s not: I know it’s not. This is for me. I need this. I don’t know how to tell her. She won’t understand.

“I’ll fix the wall.” I’ve already said that. “I just needed a big space to sort out the details.”
She sighs. “Well, all right. Fine. I hate that beige anyway, I guess. You might as well repaint it afterwards.”

“I can do that.”

“Maybe in red. I’ve always wanted a red wall.” She looks me up and down, pointedly. “You’re not ready.”

That’s true. I’m not. I’m still wearing jeans and a jumper.

“I’ll be ready in a minute,” I tell her.

“We’re leaving in ten.”

“Okay.”

She smiles then, like she won an argument. Did she? I’m not sure. She wraps her arms around me, she kisses me. She tastes like toothpaste.

“Are you excited about tonight?”

Can I say no? Absolutely not. This is her party. She’s spent months on it. She’s doing it because it’s her job, but also because she loves me. I have to remember that. She does these things for me, because she wants me to be successful. I want that too.

“Yeah,” I tell her. “Yeah, I am.”
Organised Crime

Chapter Summary

Moriarty and his dead eyes, his fake smile, he had tentacles everywhere, even at the Beeb.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone and Lavellington for beta duties, as always, and to airynothing for the laser eyes of destiny.

Another one. Look at that. Well. It’s not as if there aren’t always arrests in London, even ones broadcast live on telly. Couldn’t this be unrelated? Part of some other tragedy, someone else’s? I suppose it could. But look at them: three men in suits, good ones. Westwood? Who knows. I can’t tell. But they’re television executives, they probably always wear suits with surnames. They’re the types who would have been impressed by Moriarty. They would have been taken with him. They were: of course they were.

They’re keeping their heads down, covering their faces with their hands. They know how news programmes work, they know the cameras will zoom in on their faces if they show them. Yet more elements of organised crime, arrested for unspecified charges, even the newscaster is commenting on that. The outrage of it. What, is this getting too close to home for her? She probably knows these men, they might be friends of hers. Or she knows their wives, or their kids go to school together. They stand next to each other in lifts, they buy coffee at the same place in the mornings. Something like that. Why them? Why now? Trumped up charges, she says, with a question mark. No: no, I don’t think so.

Moriarty had to have some connections in order to create evidence of a fake telly programme; I found those copies of The Storyteller in a second hand shop in Dulwich, in the discount bin. How did they get there? Someone made them, someone released them. They were branded with the BBC logo. Moriarty and his dead eyes, his fake smile, he had tentacles everywhere, even at the Beeb. Not anymore. Here they are. They’re handcuffed and being filmed as they’re led out of the building.

So. They’ve broken through into that side of his operations now, too. I knew it would happen, I just never imagined it would take this long. Three years of commenters at The Strand telling me about their fond childhood memories of Richard Brook reading them fairy stories with puppets in the background. His soothing voice, they told me. I fell asleep with that programme on, remember the one about the grim reaper? That one gave me shivers. People are so suggestible. They’re idiots, most of them. Unthinking idiots.

I never thought I’d be the one saying that. Well, someone’s got to.

“You know them?” The barman asks me that. He looks familiar, but I can’t place him. I haven’t been here before, have I? Maybe. Mary might have brought me here; a lunch with some important
person or other, someone from marketing, someone from the press, I don’t know. I’ve had enough of those lunches that they all blend together: linen napkins and ornate spoons, I don’t know. I don’t remember. He looks up at the telly over the bar. “Friends of yours?”

It’s a joke, is it? Why would I be friends with television executives? He’s mocking me. Of course he is: I’m at some posh party at this hotel I would never have been able to afford before now, filled with publishing types, all of whom want to talk about books, and me, and my career, and Sherlock and his amusing and amazing genius, and I’m sitting at the bar in a ridiculous-looking tuxedo, with a bow tie on for god’s sake, watching a newsreader complain about the arrest of three men from the BBC. There’s a blown-up photo of me in the lobby, meant to look as if it’s not posed, as if I just happened to be standing on a quaint road somewhere in Devon, caught by surprise by a professional photographer. It’s not a leap, really. I must look like the sort of person who knows men who wear suits like that.

He smiles at me, he points at the screen. Oh: I know what he means. Not the executives, not the criminals: the police. The police are on the telly too, their faces are obvious. I recognize a few of them. They look proud of themselves, illuminated by all the camera flashes. This is live, they know they’re on telly. They push the heads of the men down as they get inside the car. High profile people, criminals, caught. Caught on camera. The newsreader is still complaining.

“Yes,” I tell him. “I know a couple of them.” He smiles at me. He knows who I am. Well, of course he does. This is the launch party for my book. All the staff presumably know that. My picture is in the lobby. Everyone is carrying around a book with my face on the back. I’m a writer of crime fiction, and rather than rubbing elbows with the publishers and the bookshop owners, celebrities and newspaper columnists, rather than chatting with the press like I’m meant to be I’m here at the bar watching an arrest on telly. Writers are often introverts, aren’t they? I should be more interested in crime than in empty socialising. But that’s not it. That’s not it at all.

“I used to read your blog,” he says. Oh: he really does know who I am.

“Oh yeah?”

He nods. “Fascinating stuff. What ever happened to that dominatrix? Did you ever see her again?”

Irene. Of course he doesn’t know: I never posted about her death. Sherlock would have seen it, and at the time I didn’t want him to know. Not from me, anyway, not like that. Did he find out? Did his brother tell him? Did he discover the truth in his own ways, through his various networks? Did he know I lied to him? He must have. He always knew those kinds of things. But he never said. I think he might have loved her. He never spoke about her again. She might have broken his heart; I think she did. If she hadn’t done, well. Maybe he’d still be alive. They might have got married. By now he’d be living with her in some grand country house with children underfoot. Or not: maybe he’d be living in her townhouse with her army of lovers, her sitting room full of clients. And he’d be in a basement with his chemicals and body parts, happy as a clam. That could have been. I’d have Mary and her flat, he’d have Irene and her business, but we’d still tramp across the city together, just like always. I’d still have him, in a manner of speaking.

That might have been all right. I would have gone on not thinking about it, not paying attention. We’d sit next to each other on the sofa, watching movies, and the closeness of him wouldn’t have occurred to me as strange. It could have happened that way.

“No,” I tell him. “No, we didn’t. She died, she was killed a short time afterwards.”

“Oh,” he says. “I’m sorry to hear that.”
“Yeah, it’s too bad.”

“She was just like him, wasn’t she. That must have been strange. Two of them in one room!”

I didn’t think of it that way, really. She wasn’t just like him. She was more aggressive, somehow. More sinister. She made decisions he wouldn’t have made. No matter how amoral he wanted to pretend he was, he was always working toward doing the right thing. She never was.

He picks up a glass sitting upside down on a towel on the bar and flips it upright. “I never believed he was a fraud, you know.” He pours a pint, slowly, then puts it down in front of me. “I never did.” I don’t really know what to say. What’s the right response to that: thank you? It’s not me he’s demonstrating faith in. I’m not going to say anything to that. I’m just going to drink this pint.

“Cheers,” I say. The glass is cool in my hand, and it’s hot in here. Too hot; I should take off this stupid jacket. Mary wouldn’t like that. He looks up at the screen again, and I want to explain. He’d know, if he read my blog. He’d remember. It would be nice if someone else knew, if they could see it. It seems so obvious: all these arrests, all this organised crime activity, doesn’t it seem strange to anyone else? Related to the death of the king pin? Why is no one remarking on it? Everyone just goes on, as if nothing’s changed, as if nothing’s different.

“I think,” I start. Is this unwise? I don’t know him. It doesn’t matter; it’s just an idea. I’m a novelist, that’s all. I have all kinds of ideas. If he looks dubious I can tell him I’m working on another book. “I think those three constructed Moriarty’s back story three years ago. The part about him being an actor Sherlock hired, a presenter. That whole story. I think it was them.” I motion to the screen with my pint.

“Oh yeah?” I think he remembers. It’s the most damning evidence; if he read the blog, it would be hard to forget. Sherlock accused of hiring Moriarty to commit crimes; of course he didn’t do that. Of course he didn’t. He squints up at the screen. “Is that right.”

It is! Isn’t it obvious? Well: I don’t know if it’s right, in truth. I don’t know for sure. But that’s what I think, it’s something I’m sure of: all this talk of organised crime. I don’t know if he believes me.

Mary doesn’t.

Well, that’s fine. It’s my theory then, it’s what I choose to believe, for now.

But in reality there’s no proof. Mary will point that out like it’s a plot hole. Where’s the evidence? Where’s the proof? It’s just an inkling. Why am I making everything about him? Maybe this is the beginning of another phone hacking scandal. Maybe they’re involved in a child porn ring, who knows. But I don’t think so. I’ll claim it: it’s mine. My tragedy is spread out across the papers, it’s on the internet, it’s on the telly just now, too. Paranoid delusions: the newsreaders are all talking directly to me. I know how that sounds. I should shut up about it. I should shut up.

This is my fifth pint of the night. Shutting up is not so easy. I can just explain: he’ll understand. Of all the people here, he will understand. He read the blog; he knows. It’s not delusions, it’s right there. It’s right there on the screen. Organised crime. Unspecified charges. They probably have more of them to hunt down. It’s a long operation. I should call Greg. He’d be able to confirm. I’m not making this up.

“I think so.” I tell him. “They killed Moriarty, and now they’re going on to arrest the entire organisation. It’s large; it’s a web, you know. A big web, and Moriarty himself was the centre of it.” I smile at him. I need to appear as sane as possible. The appearance of sanity is as good as the
real thing. It’s not a dangerous obsession if you’re sane and this is all true. And it is: it is true. “I’ve been tracking the arrests since Moriarty’s death. There’s been twenty-six of them now, including these three.”

“Really!” He seems alarmed. Possibly a bit unsettled by me. I’ve gone too far, haven’t I. I should keep my mouth shut.

It’s after eleven; can’t I go home yet? The crowd doesn’t appear to have thinned out at all. If anything it’s got denser. More and more people, all in dresses and suits. I shouldn’t have accepted another pint, I’m starting to feel too tired, too uncoordinated. I want out of this tuxedo: I feel ridiculous. Who wears bow ties? I am ridiculous.

Wait. Who’s–

Is that–

Oh my god.

Mycroft Holmes. Is it? Yes. Yes it is, of course it is. What on earth is he doing here? Standing there on his own, apparently, tapping into a phone with his thumbs. A vigorous text message to some underling, no doubt. There must be cameras all over this place, capturing the whole thing. Including me spouting conspiracy theories to the barman. Hell: the barman probably works for Mycroft. Why is he here?

He looks older, tired. He looks annoyed. With whom? Me? Is he standing there listening in on my entire conversation? Probably. It’s only paranoia if you don’t have a dozen good reasons to believe that it’s true.

“I’ll be right back,” I say to the barman, who smiles at me and nods. I probably won’t be back. I’ve said too much to him already.

All of these well-dressed people are meant to be here for my book, but I don’t think anyone really cares about it. No one bothers with me, so that’s a blessing. The music is still playing and people are laughing; that’s a mark of a successful book launch, surely. Everyone’s having a good time.

He sees me coming, but he doesn’t stop texting. He rolls his eyes, punches out a few last letters and slips his phone in his pocket. Then his face smooths out, he pulls himself up, pushes his shoulders back. He’s preparing to greet me, as if such a thing needs preparation. He has perfect posture; I could balance my book on top of his head and it wouldn’t move an inch. Good breeding, right? Their difficult, judgmental mother and mostly absent father: their sequence of stern nannies and tutors. I know all about it. Well: I know a bit about it. Sherlock told me a little bit. It only made me want to grab him and hug him. And I did, actually: I did. He thought I was being funny. I’d had a couple of pints then too, and I was feeling grateful for him. He let me. He even hugged me back. He doesn’t get enough of that, clearly. Physical affection. Which must have been especially difficult for him as a child. He’s a naturally demonstrative person. You wouldn’t think so, but he is. He was, I mean. He was.

Mycroft clasps his hands behind his back. His shoes are polished and shiny. What is he doing here?

He smiles at me as I approach him; it’s a small, tight smile, the kind that you know is fake. He’s putting it on like a disguise to cover up something else. He nods at me, as if it hasn’t been three years since I last saw him. He didn’t say a word to me at the funeral. He barely looked at me.
“Good evening, John.” He says it as if we see each other all the time. As if this is normal. As if he was invited. “Congratulations on the book. Your writing abilities show a marked improvement from the days of that ghastly blog of yours. I quite enjoyed it.”

An insult and a compliment together; typical. He hasn’t changed. Betraying his brother doesn’t seem to have made much of an impact on him. He’s still keeping one eye on me, as I expected: he managed to get a review copy, even though my publisher swore no one but a select number of reviewers had got a look at it. I should have known. He probably knew what I was writing before I did. Maybe he’s put a keylogger on my laptop. I wouldn’t put it past him, I really wouldn’t.

He gives me a look: he can see right through me. It’s like he knows what I’m thinking, even now. He’s evaluating me, he’s watching my hands for a tremor. His eyes glance down at my leg, as if it might give out on me. For a second I think it might; a spasm runs through it. Like he’s causing it. I remember this feeling, being weighed by him for value. I knew there was a reason I didn’t like him on sight; he can bore into your brain if he wants to. If he feels it’s necessary. What is he doing here?

“Oh, don’t be like that.” He narrows his eyes at me, but he’s still smiling. His face is a contradiction: his eyes are cold, angry, maybe. Frustrated. He doesn’t want to be here, does he. He’s not interested in me or my book. Why is he here? He’s smiling that tight, annoyed smile at me. All manners and grace, the muscles are all in the right places but it’s a mockery of a smile, hiding his plotting and his annoyance at me. Hiding whatever it is he has to hide. There’s always something, isn’t there. I don’t care anymore. I don’t. It doesn’t matter.

I’m not going to bother with thank you. I’m not even going to bother with hello. No point. No point at all. “I didn’t think it would be the sort of thing that would interest you.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Of course it interests me. You wrote a book about my brother, John.” I wince at that; he says my brother and I wince. I see him notice it; I see him evaluate it. He plops it on a scale, he checks it for size and weight. He’s measuring me. Why? He nods; I don’t know what it means.

Have I embarrassed him?

In all the time, from the blog, the stories in The Strand, right up to this book and the outline for the next ones, it never once occurred to me that I could. But Sherlock was his brother; am I embarrassing him, the family? Do they approve? Do they want me to stop? They’ve never said. He could have said, at any time. He could have stopped me any time he wanted me to. I portray Sherlock mostly as he was; gruff, short, brilliant, warm in the oddest ways, socially awkward, deeply lonely and occasionally dense. I mentioned the drug habit a few times; maybe that’s the problem. Their parents are both dead; there’s no one left to take such offense to what I do, is there? Can Mycroft possibly care about those kinds of things? My words are surely no more embarrassing than Sherlock stealing Mycroft’s I.D. and passwords and breaking into a secure military base, are they?

“Bit late to retract anything now, if there’s something you didn’t like.”

“Stop worrying, John. It’s fine.” I can hear his phone buzzing in his pocket. He ignores it. “I think Mummy would have enjoyed it. It’s clear you cared about him.”

I still do. I don’t like him mentioning it. I’m probably blushing. I can blame the alcohol, if I have to.

“So: all’s well then, is it? Your book is coming out, you’ve signed a contract for several more.
You’ve got an engagement ring hidden somewhere, haven’t you.”

How does he know about that?

That’s–

Well, that’s not fair. That’s not right. It’s none of his business. He wouldn’t tell her, would he? He wouldn’t dare. That would be horrible.

“But you haven’t given it to her. Why is that, John?”

No, I haven’t. I bought it months ago in a fit of sentimentality, but I can’t bring myself to give it to her. I don’t know. I’m waiting. At some point I’ll feel the urge to give it to her, because I love her, and she takes care of me, and she is real and honest and knows herself. And she’s funny, and beautiful, and our lives make sense. People see us together and they think, oh, look at them. So happy together. So well suited. A writer and a publicist. They’re perfect together. When Harry died she held me and ran her fingers through my hair. She squeezed my hand through the service. I can depend on her. She loves me. She does.

“I think you should,” he says. He points one long, thin finger across the room; Mary. She’s balancing a stack of hardback books in her arms; my book. I’ve been off having pints, ignoring the whole thing, resenting the tuxedo and the noise of this place, and she’s been working. Working hard. For me.

He’s right. I should. I should give it to her, I should ask her to marry me.

But not yet. Not just now.

He’s trying to distract me.

“The arrests,” I tell him. I turn and point at the telly instead, which is far too small to see from here. “You’re involved in those, aren’t you. Moriarty’s web. They’re dismantling it, aren’t they. Or you are. This is all about him.”

Mycroft smiles that fake, tight smile at me again. His phone is buzzing like mad in his pocket. “I’m sure I have no idea what you’re talking about, John.”

A little screech; books falling to the floor. Mary: she’s carrying too many of them. She’s dropped them. This is an important night for her, for the company. For me. She’s been planning it for months. This is her job, it’s what she does best, and she’s done her best. Not just for the company and her career, but for me. She knows the stories mean so much to me, they’re my life. She misunderstands me, after all this time: it’s not the stories. It’s not about writing, or plots, or publication at all. It’s the fact that those stories really happened. It’s about him. It’s unfair of me not to tell her. All of this is unfair. She loves me, and she’s working so hard to make tonight perfect, and I’m off being a drunken ass.

“You should go and give her a hand,” he says, turning on his heel. He reaches in to his pocket and the buzzing sound stops. “Shouldn’t you.”

He’s right. That’s exactly what I should do. Why did I need him to tell me that?
Erosion

Chapter Summary

Don’t turn around; I don’t even want to open my eyes. He’ll vanish. He always does.

Chapter Notes

Just a quick little dream sequence, lightly betaed by longtimegone before breakfast. It does push the rating up a bit though. Consider yourself warned.

“Are you sure you want to do this?” She’s wearing a white dress. There’s a veil over her face. We’re walking down the aisle together. Her father is with us.

“Yeah, are you sure?” he asks me. They’re on either side of me, escorting me toward the front of the church. I’m still in my dressing gown.

It would be embarrassing to say no. “Of course I’m sure.” I would really like to take a shower before I get married. How did I manage to miss taking a shower before I arrived at the church? I must have slept in. “Definitely,” I assure them both. “I’m definitely sure.” Is this dressing gown nice enough to get married in? I guess it will have to be.

"I never liked you," her father says. He says it in the most jovial way you could.

"I know that." It's nice to get it out in the open like this. Maybe this could work after all. "I noticed that right away."

He laughs. "Now we're getting married!"

That's true. I'm marrying both Mary and her father. That's legal now. It was my idea. They're both wearing rings I bought them. The church is full and the music is playing.

The dressing gown is all right, but shouldn't I have shoes on? It feels strange to be barefoot in church.

*

“John.” His voice. It can only be him. Don’t turn around; I don’t even want to open my eyes. He’ll vanish. He always does.

“John.” He’s behind me, curled up against me. It’s Baker Street; it’s my bedroom. I can hear the traffic outside, the ticking of the clock on the wall. It smells like Baker Street: old plaster, clean sheets, old toast, plastic sheeting, the varnish on the headboard of my bed. I know where I am.

He moves closer, he drapes an arm over me. He shifts his leg over so that it’s nestled between mine, his knee against the back of mine. The oddness of his form, his skinny legs, his hard bones jutting out, presses so easily against me. Like he belongs there.
Let’s just stay this way, Sherlock. How about that? Let’s just stay here. I can take your hand, pressed as it is against my chest, I can stroke your fingers and you can doze off like this, curled into me. Nothing can hurt you here, and nothing can hurt me.

“Stay here,” I whisper into the pillow. “Stay here with me.”

“All right,” he says. I can feel his breath on my shoulder. I can feel him falling asleep.

* 

There’s a glass of water on the podium, and my book. It’s pinned open to the page they want me to read. The room is full; there are people standing in the back. They’re waiting. I’m late, and they’ve already been waiting for hours. They are impatient now; I’d better be good. I’m terrified. I’ll stumble over my words, I know I will, is there any way out of this? There are no doors in this room. I can’t get out. I signed a contract; if I don’t do the reading, they’ll kill me. Mary is standing beside me, she looks proud. She nods to me.

My feet feel so heavy I might break the stage, fall through it and down into the sewer below. I have to walk very carefully, and I nearly tip over with every step.

My hands are sticky; I can’t touch the pages. I’ll only ruin them, they’ll stick to my fingers. The audience is quiet. I want to start by apologising to them, but my tongue doesn’t work.

“Read,” Mary whispers in my ear. “I’ve already picked out the page for you. Just read it.”

I start at the top of the page, and the words come out of my mouth and into the microphone. They echo down through the long room and come back, so I hear them twice. One after another, word after word. This isn’t my book: this is all the things I don’t want people to know. These are all my secrets, and now I can do is read them out loud. I want to slam my mouth shut, but I can’t; now that I’ve started I can’t stop. My mouth moves without my control.

“I’m worried about my hair getting thin. I wash it very, very carefully in the shower for fear of it falling out.” It echoes back at me in my own voice; I sound like a whiny git.

The audience starts to giggle. I have never felt so humiliated in my life.

“I haven’t had sex with my girlfriend in nearly six months.” The microphone screeches a little; feedback. It stings my ears. “The last time we had sex, neither of us had an orgasm.” The word orgasm echoes through the room twice, for emphasis.

There’s a guffaw in the audience. Mary, standing next to me, covers her mouth. She’s laughing too, she’s laughing at me. Why? This is horrifying. I want to turn the page, but I can’t; my sticky hands are glued to the sides of the podium. I have no choice, no choice at all. If I don’t finish, they’ll kill me. My mouth moves without my control.

“I’ve killed people. I have an illegal gun I won’t part with. The only person who knows how many people I’ve killed is dead.” I can see a reporter from The Daily Mail writing notes; will I get arrested for this?

“I wet myself at school once rather than ask to go to the toilet because I had a crush on the girl next to me.” I squeeze my eyes shut; I don’t want to watch them watching me. But I can see them through my eyelids. They’ve turned transparent.

It can’t be that bad. Just get through it; this is what the people paid for. They’re only words. It doesn’t matter. Just finish.
“I have an engagement ring hidden in a drawer with my gun. I’m terrified Mary will find it and ask me about it, because I have no idea if I’ll ever give it to her.” More laughter. I can hear women’s laughter now, as if this is especially funny to them. They like to see me like this, splayed open for them. They don’t care about my book; they only like to see people humiliated. Why did I agree to this? Why didn’t my agent explain what was going to happen? Why didn’t Mary tell me?

Isn’t this unethical?

“I fantasize about unzipping my flatmate’s fly, getting down on my knees and taking his cock in my mouth. But I’m not gay.” The whole room is laughing now. They’re laughing so hard they’re crying. And I can’t stop reading. My legs are stuck in concrete, I can’t ever move again. I have to read until I get to the end of the page. That’s what I agreed to do. They’ll sue me if I don’t do it. I signed a contract. They’ll kill me.

“I’m afraid it’s my fault he’s dead.” They’re still laughing. They’re laughing so hard they’re holding their sides. Why is that secret so funny? What’s wrong with these people?

“I like to imagine that he wanted me. I want to believe that. But he probably didn’t.” They’re rolling on the floor laughing now. I guess this was worth the hours of waiting. All my secrets.

I really should have read the fine print on the contract. How much are they paying me for this? Never again: I’m never agreeing to do a book talk again.

It’s not a glass of water on the podium after all. It’s poison.

“That was great, John,” Mary says. “Fantastic.”

“Was it?” How can she possibly think that? The applause is thunderous.


They’re all lined up; they want me to sign copies of their books. There are tears in their eyes.

*  

Triple-milled soap. That chemical undertone that always hovers around him. The faint smell of burning hair. His dry cleaning. The smell of his skin that I’d recognize anywhere: Sherlock.

“He’s not actually here,” I tell Mary. She’s barefoot and sitting on the sofa, reading a book. The polish on her toenails is still chipped. He’s standing right in front of me, in the middle of the sitting room. He’s wet as if he’s just come in from a heavy rain. His coat is soaked through; its dripping and forming puddles on the carpet. “He can’t be. He’s dead.”

“Yes,” she says. She’s so bored. She’s bored of my voice, of everything I have to say, of my stories. Of the idea of Sherlock. She’s just bored of me, now. “I know.”

He’s staring at me, but he’s not breathing. He’s so pale, just like he was the last time I saw him. Pale lips and wide open eyes. He saw everything right to the end, just like he always did. Eyes open, taking everything in. He doesn’t blink, he just looks at me. The blood is all washed away now. He looks cold. I take his hands in mine, but they’re warm.

“Sherlock,” I say to him. It doesn’t matter, Mary’s not paying any attention. He’s not actually here. “I miss you. It’s killing me. I love you.” He quirks an eyebrow at me, but doesn’t say anything. I don’t know what it means. I can’t know. He can’t ever tell me. He can’t explain. He’s dead. I’ll
never know. I can guess, but I don’t believe it. I never will.

I’m crying like an idiot. It’s embarrassing, but Mary isn’t watching anyway. It doesn’t matter. Tears are flowing out of me in a constant stream, and I realize that’s why Sherlock is so wet. I’ve been crying for years now. One day my tears will take him apart, cell by cell. It’s basic osmosis: the more I cry, the more of him comes apart and vanishes. I’m diluting him, I’m wearing away at the edges of him. It’s erosion, it’s what happens. It’s inevitable. Water destroys everything, even him.

I didn’t mean to destroy you, Sherlock. I didn’t mean to.

He steps toward me, he presses his hand against the back of my neck. He’s going to kiss me.

He knows I want to kiss him; he knows how much I think about it. He knows everything, because he lives in my head. He knows that I think of him when I wake up in the mornings. I fantasize about crawling into bed with him, stroking him, fucking him. He knows. For a moment I’m terrified; Mary will see. She’ll know. But she doesn’t care. She’s so bored, and he’s not even here. This is all imaginary, this is in my head. It’s the only place he can be anymore.

His hair is soaking wet, his coat is so soggy it’s starting to come apart at the seams. He’s so close to me, our bodies are touching, and I can feel the heat of my own tears, the strange heat of his body seeping through me. He leans forward, his wet lips against mine. His tongue. His teeth press into me. He’s salty and hot, and tastes a bit like tea. He still isn’t breathing; but of course he isn’t. Dead men don’t, and he’s not even here. I dig my fingers into his shoulder, because I don’t know what else to do. He feels so solid, so real. He’s wet and slippery, and naked under his coat, but real and warm. He unbuttons my wet jeans and slides his hand down across my stomach. His fingers wrap around my cock and I groan into his mouth.

Mary turns a page in her book.

“John,” he says. I can feel my name against my face, I can hear it in his voice. I have never been so aroused. I might scream from it, but I can’t. He’s not even here. Mary would jump up, she would see. She would ask, she’d want to know. She needs to keep her eyes on the book, I don’t want her to ask. I don’t want her to see this.

“John.” It’s his voice, it’s perfect. I have started to forget what he sounded like. I have no recordings. Nothing. Except for this, playing on a loop in my head: my name. I can hear it.

“John.” He moves his hand against me like we’ve done this a million times. He knows me. He knows me better than I know myself. He can read the expression on my face, he knows what it feels like when he does this. I can’t lie to him, I can’t hide anything. And now, with his hand in my pants, I can’t speak.

“I’m not here, John.”

And then he vanishes. I nearly fall over. I’m cold. All that’s left is a puddle on the carpet. My heart seems to stop in my chest. I can’t bear it. I can’t.

“Are you going to do the dishes?” Mary asks. She doesn’t look up.

I take a breath and find that I still can. I do up my jeans. She doesn’t notice. She doesn’t know. My relief is so extreme I nearly laugh.

“Yes,” I tell her. I meant to do the dishes ages ago. They’ve multiplied by now. They’re piled on the floor in the kitchen. They’re bursting out through the windows now, falling into a pile of
broken china on the pavement below. It will take me all night. I’d better get started.

*

It’s quiet. She’s asleep beside me. The sun is starting to come up; there’s a watery, weak light coming through the window. And Jim from IT walks in from the sitting room and lies down on the bed on the other side of her.

Jim from IT is James Moriarty, but he doesn’t know it.

He’s about to die. He doesn’t know that either. There are a hundred laser sights pointed at him. It’s just a matter of time.

“Breakfast?” he asks. He has no idea. I feel sorry for him; it’s not his fault his alter ego is a homicidal maniac. In a moment the laser sights will turn into bullets, and he will be riddled with them. It will hurt. “I put the kettle on.”

“That sounds nice,” I say. “Coffee would be nice.”
Could be Dangerous

Chapter Summary

I don’t have tobacco ash or drugged sugar or whether a woman’s ring is dirty only on the outside or not. I don’t have anything. I don’t have your eyes, or your brain. Or you.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone for finding time to pick at this, and to lavellington, and Elvichar for preventing me from sounding like an idiot.

I should have put this in chronological order, not geographical. There is no geographical order, is there. It’s time I just admitted that. It seemed like a good idea at first, but this is just confusing. It doesn’t make any sense. It looks cool from a distance, but looking cool isn’t the point. I need to understand it. I need to see the pattern.

There’s got to be one. There’s got to be. I’ll find it.

But this is just a jumbled mess. It’s all over the place, there’s no order in it. There’s nothing. A wall covered over with clippings: it doesn’t mean anything. Other than acting as an ample demonstration of my obsessions. It’s certainly does that. Beyond that, it’s just the wanton desecration of Mary’s stupid bloody wall.

Chronological order would have been better.

That’s what you would have done, isn’t it, Sherlock? You would have ordered it properly from the start: you wouldn’t have wasted time on geography. What additional information is it providing? None. Why would geography matter?

Well, it might have. I couldn’t tell at first. You would have known.

It’s all London, anyway. That’s the only thing that matters: London. Still: there might have been evidence in there, from place to place. Patterns of movement, of tracking groups. Focus points. Something.

You never needed maps. You’ve got the whole of Britain in your head at all times, I think. All the little side streets, the cul-de-sacs, the dead ends. Alleys and tunnels and fire escapes and rooftops, you remember them all. You don’t get lost. You always know. You wouldn’t have tried to use a map for this, would you. You’d have put them in chronological order, from the start. Wouldn’t you.

Yeah, I thought so.

All right. Chronological order it is, then. Definitely. Chronological.

Oh, I really have buggered up the wall, haven’t I. Mary will kill me when she sees this. Well: I’m
going to fix it anyway. I’ve got the plaster and paint right here. Just waiting. She made sure to put
them somewhere I couldn’t miss it. A brand new paint brush: lovely. I’ll do it. I’ll plaster over it
all, and it will be like none of this ever happened.

And then I’ll go on being quiet and boring. With endless nightmares. Yes. I’ll fix it.

That crack is a good place to centre the whole thing. I can use it as a sort of timeline. That will
work.

I can keep the map up here. I don’t have London in my head like you do. The map might be useful.

Useful for what?

Well, there might be a pattern that relates to geography, eventually. I’m still not entirely certain all
of these arrests belong here. What if there’s an outlier? Then I could surmise, I could hazard a
guess, that perhaps that’s an unrelated arrest.

That’s a poor metric, John.

Well, yes. Yes, I know. But I don’t have many other metrics to go on, here.

You have all the metrics you need.

Oh no I don’t. I don’t have a body, I don’t have an accurate list of charges, I don’t have
photographs half the time, I barely have dates. I don’t have anything. I have some vague articles,
some memories, a few names, and the phrase organised crime, that’s practically it. I don’t have
tobacco ash or drugged sugar or whether a woman’s ring is dirty only on the outside or not. I don’t
have anything. I don’t have your eyes, or your brain. Or you.

Maudlin.

Yeah, well.

It already looks better this way. Right: dates. The publication dates don’t matter, it’s the dates of
the arrests that matter. Dates of the crimes would be spectacular, but they never give those. Not
ever. So arrest dates it is. Sometimes they don’t report it until a week or two later, which means–

Right. It means I have clusters I didn’t notice before. Clusters that–

Ah. Look, there is a geographical pattern, I just needed another axis here. Time. That’s all.

Are they moving south? Oh. No. only for a week or two, then it’s back north and west. I don’t
know what that means. They focus their attention in certain places at certain times, but I don’t
know why.

Some of these arrests are clearly related. I mean: some of them happened together, but others might
as well have. Some happened together and were reported apart.

Amazing.

You’d have worked it all out by now, wouldn’t you. There’s something big here. Something I’m
missing.

Obviously.

Well, I guess I can indicate the relationships between them in other ways. String, that will do it. Or
I could write on them. Maybe I should get some sticky dots, or something. They sell those in office supply shops, don’t they? Red crimes, blue crimes, orange and yellow crimes. A taxonomy of ill-deeds across the wall.

That’s probably going too far.

This is better, though. Yes. Better, definitely.

God, they’ve been busy. And the load of it stemming directly from this day here, day one. The day they reported that Moriarty was dead. It’s only the day they reported it; the papers don’t specify that he died that day.

Is that too paranoid? Reading to much into it? But they don’t specify. They very clearly do not say what happened to him, only that he’s dead. That he was found dead. I thought I heard was killed, and maybe I did. Slip of the tongue somewhere, maybe. Someone knew too much. Or too little. But it’s not here, it’s not in this set of articles, at least. They’re really strangely worded, really convoluted. Like someone’s working hard to avoid saying something.

Well, that’s obvious. Yes, I know, Sherlock. I know it is. But what are they hiding?

It’s entirely unclear whose work this is. It’s definitely not Scotland Yard. Lots of men in suits handing over folders of documents, evidence. Pathology reports. Who could that be? Greg doesn’t want to speculate, but it’s clearly the government: Mycroft, probably. Mycroft and his army, the unofficial one. Vengeance, I guess. I can respect that. So they’re hiding his involvement, and the involvement of the government. They can’t say anything at all about that. None of those men are allowed to be heroes. We all know what happens to heroes.

They don’t want to publish the details of how Moriarty died. Too gruesome? Or secret? Did someone shoot him? Someone who wasn’t meant to? Was it someone like me, peering through a window with a clear shot? Are they protecting someone like me?

That’s a reassuring thought, somehow. The anonymous nature of it, the simplicity. That’s how someone like him should die: felled by an unseen marksman. No dramatic scenes, no time to prepare, no fanfare. Just a man with a gun and a steady hand protecting someone he loves. Quietly. That way the bad ones go down and the good ones stay safe. The good ones stay whole and alive and hungry for Chinese. Just like that. Moriarty should have died without ever knowing he was about to, without ever understanding that hearts aren’t burned out by his little tricks, no matter how hard he tries. Hearts are more persistent even than him. That seems fitting, doesn’t it? Not bang, but a whimper. I hope he did whimper. At least a little. I want vengeance too.

He couldn’t convince me to turn my back on you. You know that. Some headlines, a package of BBC-produced lies, Sally Donovan’s styrofoam cup of tea and false empathy won’t convince me. That’s not how hearts work. Not mine, anyway. He would never have been able to understand that.

Could I have understood it?

I don’t know. I really don’t. I hope so.

I think so. Yeah.

Yeah, I think you could.

You could’ve, given the time and a bit of curiosity. There’s no lack of that in you, that’s for certain. Sentiment, you’d say, as if that covers any number of sins, but yeah. You’d want to know how is it that all the evidence in the world can’t convince me that you lied to me, even when you
told me so yourself. It’s not logical, is it. I’m so different than you are. Did you know I’d never believe it? You’d pretend you understand even if you don’t. At first, anyway. And then you’d admit it, quietly, and I’d try to explain. Just like I always did.

No: you don’t need me to explain this anymore, do you? I think you’d understand on your own. Loving someone isn’t being blind about them; it’s having your eyes open to them. Really open. You know that, don’t you? Haven’t you felt that? I want to believe you did. I need to believe that. That’s my favourite delusion.

Love notes in the classifieds: how quaint. Do people still do that? You would have laughed at that. *Sentiment*, indeed.

Wait. What’s this?

My initials. That’s odd. Well: I suppose they’re not that unusual. There must be lots of Joannas and Josephines and Jasons with a last name that ends with W. All the Waddells and Walkers and Whittakers. That could be for anyone.

But the message is a string of eight numbers. Pairs of numbers. Four pairs of numbers.

Hold on. This is a code. Isn’t it? Who writes in code in the classifieds? Well, everyone does, but this code? Something I recognise, something I could decipher? Could it be? No. That’s impossible.

It looks like it. Pairs of numbers. It can’t be. Coincidence? You don’t believe in coincidences. But I do. I see them everywhere. The world doesn’t make sense to me the way it does to you.

Who would know to write to me in a code I would recognise? No one. Anyone. No one would want to do that. Why would they?

Anyone who read my blog would know about the code. That barman would know. He may not know my second name is Hamish, but he’d know it begins with an H. That was on my blog too, in big letters across the top. Hard to miss. Did I ever say the code we cracked was in pairs of numbers? Did I mention in my blog post how we spent the night flipping through books and counting down words and lines? I don’t remember. I mentioned the A-Z, though. I know I did.

Someone could figure it out, if they needed to. To get me a message.

No. Who would do that? Who would think to?

It could be anything. It could be lottery numbers. It could be a lock combination. It could be some lovers’ code that means something completely unrelated to me or to any burst of arrests in the papers. It’s probably nothing.

Well, let’s see. I have a *London A-Z*. This could be good for a laugh. It will probably be nonsense.

But what if it’s not?

No ancient Chinese numbers to decipher this time, just ordinary ones. All right: the first page number, and the line–

No. No, that’s no code. Denmead. That’s not a word. It’s just a street name. Of course it’s not code for anything, it’s just nothing. This is silly. This set of numbers means something to someone, but it’s not for me. That time in my life is over now.

Denmead. Denmead, that rings a bell, though. Did we go there? Didn’t you run across someone’s
roof there once, and leap down into a garden beside some bins? Probably. You probably did. Nostalgia?

Where is it? Croydon. Right. Little road off the high street? Something like that. Nothing special, except that I remember it.

Well. Who knows. Denmead. I remember running. I remember someone’s dog barking, and your trousers getting ripped on a fence. A bit of your skinny thigh showing through, only half-hidden by your coat. You didn’t even notice. I remember laughing about it afterwards. You felt so close then.


Third set: Friday. Friday? Denmead at dawn, Friday. A location, a time, a day. Which Friday? Tomorrow? Tomorrow at dawn? What happens tomorrow at dawn?

And the last set: it’s a pub. No, that doesn’t make sense. What’s the pub called? Danger of Death. Well, hold on.


That sounds like a fairly clear message, wouldn’t you say?

Someone wants me to be in Croydon at dawn? Why? To kill me? I’m not that easy to kill. Who would send me a message like this, in the paper? In the classifieds? Who knows I even read the papers this closely? Mycroft?

No, he’s not that subtle. He’d just phone me at two in the morning if he wanted me. What is it? Secret messages, why? There are pieces of the puzzle missing, things I can’t figure out. My wall doesn’t make any sense. Maybe this is the key to it. Maybe I’ll find out who’s behind all this. Maybe they want to tell me why you lied to me. Why you had to die. There must be a reason.

Could be dangerous.

It would be good to know.

“For god’s sake, John.” Mary.

When did she come home? It’s not that late, is it? Oh. Christ, it is. “you’ve just spread it all out rather than clean it up. Jesus, look at my wall!” The look on her face: it’s disappointment. Annoyance. She’s tired of me, she really is.

“I’ll fix it,” I tell her. I swear to god I’ve said that every day this week. And I will fix it. I will. As soon as I’ve sorted this out. It’s just a wall. It’s just plaster, it’s not flesh. It’s not bleeding. It’s just a fucking wall.

“You keep saying that.” She got the shopping. I was supposed to get the shopping. I forgot. She’s probably angry about that too. Well: I’ve been busy. It’s been a long afternoon. I can’t tell her about that. She won’t understand.

I could tell her about the code. She won’t like it, though. She’ll think I’ve lost it. Delusions of grandeur, she’d just laugh. She wouldn’t approve, she definitely won’t want me to go. She doesn’t know about codes, she thinks they’re only for stories and films, for fictional people, not for real life. Even if she agreed that this message was meant for me, she wouldn’t want me to go. She’d be
appalled, she’d want me to call the police. She believes in safety. Well: I do too, I believe in people being safe, doing safe things. Just not me. That’s not for me.

You always knew that. She’ll never understand.

I have to go. She can’t stop me. I’m going to go.

I have my gun; I’ve got bullets. I can load it tonight, she won’t notice that. She doesn’t notice much, really. If I put my boots and my jacket by the door, and keep my gun with me, I can sneak out after midnight. When’s the soundest part of a sleep cycle? I’ll leave when she’s on the brink of snoring. I can move so quietly and slowly she won’t wake up. If she does, I’ll tell her I couldn’t sleep. Nothing unusual in that. It’s just my insomnia, that’s all. I’ll tell her I’m going to write for a while, or go for a walk to clear my head. To think about the next stage in my manuscript. She’ll like that. She’ll sleep. And I’ll go to Croydon. I’ll be there before dawn. And I’ll see what there is to see.

It’s been too long.

“I’ll make dinner,” I tell her. I’m still holding the paper. She won’t ask about it. She doesn’t like to read the papers, anyway. Too depressing these days, she says. That’s true; it is. The news is depressing, I can’t argue with that. The Lib Dems are turning out to be a disaster. The Conservatives were a mistake. They’re tearing everything apart. She won’t look. She won’t ask.

She doesn’t need to know.
Around the Sun

Chapter Summary

Mary would kill me if she knew.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone for listening to me prattle on at length about things that will probably never even make it into this fic, also for looking over this chapter; to airynothing for her laser-eyes of doom; to lavellington for being wonderful as always, and to elvichar for the intensive and very necessary britpick.

There’s nobody here. As far as I can tell. Well: I’m early, granted. It’s still dark, the message said dawn, after all. It’s barely four. I have to be patient.

I’ve hardly slept at all, but I don’t feel it. This is like those nights we spent running all over London, hiding in alleys, firing bullets at shadows: those nights we were on the brink of something big, on the edge of an explosion. Not just on the edge: we’d be dangling over the edge and hanging on with one hand, more often than not. Laughing. Alive only by the skin of our teeth. It’s exhilarating. It’s better than caffeine, it’s better than sleep.

I feel fantastic.

Mary would kill me if she knew.

She doesn’t have to find out. I’ll come back early, I’ll tell her I was out for a walk, thinking. Thinking about how this web of crimes fits into my next story, that’s the only thing she’ll accept. That will solve everything; my early morning, the wall, the way I’ve been so distant lately. I’ve worked it out: I said I would tell the story about Moriarty, how we met him the first time, Jim from IT to the showdown at the pool, the first series of hostages, the Van Buren supernova. I wanted to call it Around the Sun, because you deleted basic astronomy, and also because my own life came to revolve around you. But my editors don’t like that. They want me to call it The Great Game.

As if it was a game! It was a game to you, at first. But then you stopped thinking of it that way; it got serious. He threatened me. I think you were genuinely afraid of him, by the end. Moriarty: he started out as someone brilliant like you, someone diverting, someone you could play a game with. He became someone who stole your life away from you; not even you wanted to play with that much fire, in the end. You gave up, you let him win that round. The Great Game. I don’t like it, but I don’t have all that much control over titles. I guess we’ll see.

That story has a sequel now, that’s all. Moriarty’s rise, and then his fall. It makes narrative sense, I think. I can tie it all back to him, even if it’s fictional. I have to fictionalize large parts of it anyway; this time I’ll create most of it out of hope and fantasy. I can construct a kind of sense out of all of this, that’s what my wall has helped me to do. Even the coded message in the paper: I’ll tell Mary it’s from a sympathetic friend. Someone on the force, maybe. Someone who wants to help me out,
help me make a story out of it. It could be from a fan of Sherlock’s, someone nearly as bright as he was, who waded into the mess of details to direct me. I’ll tell her I worked it all out, she’ll be pleased. She’ll go into work and tell my editor that I had a breakthrough, and then everyone can have a good day. Everyone will be happy.

My gun is scraping the small of my back and it may be the best thing I’ve ever felt. It’s loaded; I’m ready. What’s going to happen here? I can’t even imagine.

It’s just a little street. It’s a cul-de-sac; the entrance is also the exit. It curls around off the high street, and turns back again toward it, it’s quiet. It’s a little outpost of suburbia, a row of houses separated by a little over a foot each in places, built in the seventies. Nothing special, nothing dangerous, surely.

Well: you would have seen something here, I’m sure of it. Any set of walls can hide something terrible, can’t it. Or someone terrible. But there are no lights switched on; all the bedroom windows are dark. All the sitting rooms are vacant, the tellies are off. No blue glow. It’s silent and still. All the neighbourhood dogs are curled up on beds, asleep. They can’t hear me on the pavement outside. There’s one cat sitting in a garden, staring at me; its eyes glow from the dim light of the streetlamps, but it doesn’t warn anyone.

Anyone could be watching in the darkness, John. They could all be lined up at their windows, peering out at you.

I don’t think so. Not here. They’ve got satellite dishes. They have Volvos in their drives, and there are car seats in the back. Baby on Board, Greenpeace decals on the windows. Not here. Not these people.

Maybe I’ve got the wrong place, or the wrong day.

Don’t underestimate him, John.

The sun is starting to rise. The dark is taking on that weird haze that only pale dawn light can deliver. It makes the world look strange, out of proportion. Tiny details seem bigger in this light, watered down and a bit menacing. Hedges and cracks in the pavement, bits of old fencing. Dawn. It should be happening now, whatever it is. The danger. It should be now. But it’s not.

You see what you want to see. I wanted to see a coded message; something from beyond the grave. Something from you, Sherlock. I can’t let you go. I just can’t.

I can just imagine the look on Ella’s face.

There’s a small alley in the back, between two rows of gardens and fences. No: not an alley. You couldn’t fit a car through. It’s just a little footpath. It’s covered over with knot weed, for the most part, but you can walk through. A tight little space, flanked by fences. Some are wrought iron, some are old painted wood. One of them is chipped stone and probably far more expensive than its little garden deserves. A little gap in the weeds, a space no one claims. It’s a little path of pounded-down weeds, that’s all. Someone’s carved out a space to walk through it, from one side of the cul-de-sac to the other, toward the high street.

There are children who live in these houses: if I couldn’t tell from the bikes and the swing sets, I could tell from the scattered plastic figures and little cars, empty cans and tissue paper. There are a few sticks lashed together and balanced over some old wooden beams propped up against a fence: probably the beginnings of a fort. Children. Not a difficult deduction, is it. They hide out here, tell their secrets to each other, pretend the world is against them. Little pirates, as children are.
In another life, I might have lived on a street like this one with Mary. We might have had children who would hide their treasures here, and I would still be asleep at half four in the morning. I wouldn’t even own a gun, and if I did it certainly wouldn’t be hidden under the waistband of my jeans. There’s no one here. Only me.

I must have got the wrong day. This was a mistake; there’s nothing here.

Wait: wait. What’s that? A van pulling up: is it–

Yes. That’s a police car, and that van is unmarked. I recognize it: it’s probably filled with men carrying very large firearms. Or filled with screens and computers, people tapping on keyboards and flipping the CCTV cameras. It looks like it could be a delivery van, but that’s the idea. It’s not, though: it’s not.

They’re driving up slowly, and parking. Quiet as anything, as if everything is normal. And around it: police cars. I’ve spotted four of them, but there’s probably more. They’re driving in slowly, quietly, in a row. Their lights are off. The street is so quiet I can hear the sound of their tyres against the tarmac and the hum of their individual engines. I didn’t get the wrong day. That code was for me. They’re here. What’s going to happen?

Another arrest? Another one of Moriarty’s crowd?

It must be.

Who wanted me here? And why? Someone wanted me to see this. It must be someone important. Someone who’d know this was going to happen. Someone involved in the details. Mycroft? No: he wouldn’t. Why would he do that? Greg? Maybe. Who else? Think.

I’ve lost count of how many cars there are; the quiet of the morning might be making it sound like there are more of them than there are. They’re on both sides of the cul-de-sac now; I don’t know which house they’re after. There are a lot of armed forces on this street; who the hell are they looking for?

There’s an ambulance pulling up at the bottom of the street; they’re expecting trouble. Someone violent, then. Someone willing to cause damage.

Car doors are opening and closing as softly as possible. I can hear the faint beeps of radios being switched on. Whispers. Which house are they interested in? More than one? All of them? I can’t tell. They can’t see me. I can see them, though, between the houses. A faint strip of sight on all sides. They’re congregating in front of one house in particular. Just one.

Wait: I can hear a door opening into a back garden. The same house. There. He knows. He’s seen them. He’s been waiting for them, probably. He knew. So he’s escaping. It’s a sliding door, it opens with a particular sound. Then he shuts it again behind him. He’s in the garden, he’s not fifteen feet from me. I can hear him breathing.

What must be the plan? The police have the street covered; they didn’t account for the little path in the middle, though. It’s not visible from above, the maps wouldn’t show it. It’s just a small gap between the gardens. It’s for children. He’s going to hop over the fence and hide here. With me.

A mistake.

The police haven’t come round the back of the house yet. They’re about to, I can hear them. They’re going to try to anticipate him leaving through the garden, but they’re too late; he’s already out. He’s going to hop the fence before they check the door. But here, he’ll find me.
The dawn light gets stronger by degrees; it’s still cold and watery. The world is full of strange shadows, like me. Waiting.

I can hear his feet on the grass, and he exhales through his mouth. He’s nervous. He should be.

I pull out my gun. It’s warm from my body heat, as if it’s alive. It’s been years since I’ve held it like this, but it feels right. Natural. Like it’s a part of me.

He’s three feet from me, if that. On the other side of the fence. He’s going to jump over, he’ll be on me in a minute. He doesn’t know I’m here. Stay quiet: breathe. Wait.

I’m aware of every muscle, every bit of wind, every sound. Every smell. Grass and brick, paint. Someone’s bins sitting out. Dew.

The police shout once, then push open the front door, and suddenly the world is moving altogether too fast as well as in slow motion. I can hear their feet as they rush through the tiny space alongside the house. They’re shouting to each other, go and run, they’re peeling into the garden, and I see his hands appear along the top of the fence.

They’ll just miss him. Their torches are blinding them. If it weren’t for me, he might get away.


He’s big, but he’s agile. He’s done this before. He doesn’t struggle over the fence, he leaps over it like a gymnast. Okay: account for his agility: I’ll have to move faster to overcome him. I’ve got the element of surprise; he’s not expecting me. I know how to knock a large man to the ground. I’ve done it before. Take a deep breath. Don’t think too much.

His feet hit the path with a thud and he crouches down, recovering. He takes one breath, he starts to get to his feet, and I’m on him. He’s panting with adrenaline, he’s off-balance. I have the advantage. I’m not winded, I’m calm. I’m ready for him. His shoulders are huge but my weight knocks him to the ground. Swing my arm hard; my gun against his temple; a sharp crack. Metal on bone. He’s stunned.

He lunges out with his fists and makes contact, but I’m secure. I’ve got him. I hold my gun to his temple with one hand and press down on his trachea with the other. I can feel his heart beating. He struggles. His legs are pinned under me.

Victory.

“Here!” I shout. And suddenly I’m covered in light. It’s blinding, but I don’t need to see. He tries to twist under me, but I’ve got him pinned tight, his throat vibrating with panic under my palm. My gun is digging into his temple and he can’t escape me. I feel a trickle of something on my cheek and realize it’s blood. He hit me hard; I’m bleeding. It doesn’t matter. I can’t feel anything. I can hear my breathing in my ears, the pounding of blood. The rush of it, the speed. “He’s here!”

Suddenly there are hands everywhere; I can hear the loud snap of handcuffs and swearing. Hands haul me off of him and I think for a second they mean to arrest me too.

“John?” There’s torchlight in my face, but I recognize the voice. Gareth: that’s it. Gareth. From Scotland Yard. He always avoided Sherlock like the plague, but he was very kind to me. He has a military background too, we traded a few stories. The sun of Afghanistan, the wind and the sand. Not so much about the battles, really. There are things you don’t want to talk about, not in London. We talked about tents and camp beds, the food. Not the blood or the bombs. No need to mention those. “John? What are you doing here?”
I have to restrain myself from giggling. What am I doing here, I have no idea. *There was a code in the classifieds, Gareth.* Can I tell him that? A coded message to me. Someone who knew about this arrest thought I’d want to be here, and he was right. I do, I do want to be here. Gareth was one of Greg’s crew; is he here too?

“Is Lestrade here?” It must have been him. It must have been: who else could it be? A coded message in the classifieds; Greg knows the code. He’d remember. Why didn’t he just tell me? He could have told me at the pub the other evening. He could have written that code on a napkin and handed it to me if he wanted to play secrets. Why the classifieds?

There’s always a reason. This was planned. It was deliberate. Someone wanted me here.

“It’s John Watson,” Gareth shouts, and I turn and see more bodies in the dull light, legs moving toward me. “John took the fucker down!”

“Smith, watch the language, would you?” Greg’s tired voice. “John?”

He’s perplexed. He’s genuinely confused by my presence. No. I suppose it wasn’t him. Well, who then?

“What the hell,” he says, getting closer. I can see his face now; my eyes are adjusting to the torch light. In all the houses, bedroom lights are switching on. Sitting room lights. Porch lights. The sun is coming up. From darkness into light; they’ve got their accused on his feet now, he’s at least twice my size. If I had got a look at him first I might have hesitated, but I didn’t. He’s swearing in some Eastern European language. You’d recognize it; I don’t. He’s got tattoos down both arms. There’s blood on the right side of his face, where the butt of my gun made contact. The lights on the ambulance are flashing. “What the hell are you doing here?”

It wasn’t him. It couldn’t have been. I don’t know what to say; should I tell him? It’s someone’s secret, but whose? So I just shrug. I could say I was walking my dog, but Greg knows I don’t have one.

“I was in the area,” I tell him, and I know he won’t believe me. He shakes his head.

“Right,” he says. “Well, you’re going to need something on that eye.”
Choose a Side

Chapter Summary

Somehow I thought she would be angry, as if I had cheated on her. I sort of feel like I did.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone (as always), and to airynothing for her laser-eye beta. Thanks to Elvichar for the britpick, and to inthemud, consulting-kensherlock on tumblr for helping me out with some language and phrasing suggestions. All errors remaining are mine (obviously).

The lift is taking forever. Mashing on the button doesn’t help, I know, but it certainly feels like it might. Come on, come on...

Is it out again? Are they repairing it, or something? There’s no sign. They wouldn’t shut it off early in the morning, would they? Not without a sign. People are off to work. There would be an outcry. But it’s stalled, it hasn’t moved in ages. What is it, stuck?

Bloody lift. Come on, hurry up, I’m already late.

Oh, there it goes. Thank god. Someone just holding the door open, no doubt. Bloody do-gooders. The rest of us are waiting.

It’s later in the morning than I’d hoped it would be. She’ll be up by now, she’ll be getting ready for work. She’ll have noticed that I’m gone, she might even have looked for me. I didn’t take my phone. She’ll wonder where I am; maybe she panicked and called the police. No: she wouldn’t, would she? She wouldn’t do that. She’d wait. She’d wait and worry, that’s what she’d do.

I didn’t think to leave a note. I’ve gone out for a walk in the morning before. She shouldn’t imagine the worst, not yet. When I go out in the mornings I generally tell her I’m leaving, though. Usually she knows where I am. I could have left my computer on and open to a blank page, as if I’d just stepped out to get some air and cope with some sort of writer’s block. She would have understood that. She would think it was only frustration, or insomnia, or both. That would have been a good idea, leaving the computer on. You would have thought of that. But I didn’t; I didn’t imagine I’d be this late.

An hour ago I could have slipped back into bed and Mary would just be waking up. She might never have noticed that I’d left, if I did it right. She’d never even know enough to ask me. She wouldn’t have heard the door close at three in the morning; she wouldn’t notice that I took my gun. She wouldn’t have seen the code solved on my desk; she wouldn’t have understood it, or tried to. She’s not like you: she wouldn’t take it all in in a moment and make sense of it. She won’t notice the grass stains on my jeans, either, or the flecks of blood on the cuffs of my jacket. She won’t deduce what it is that I’ve done.
She’ll certainly notice the blood on your face.

Oh. Right. I nearly forgot about that. My face.

Ouch. Best avoid touching it, it’s a bit sore. I can feel my pulse in it. I’m still bleeding. That bloke had a pretty good right hook. But nothing broken. It’s fine. I’m fine. It’s nothing.

I guess I could take the stairs. That’s a lot of stairs though. Twenty-five floors. The lift will be quicker, no matter how long it takes.

She could check the drawer and see if my gun is gone. But she won’t. It won’t occur to her. She doesn’t see me as the sort of person who walks around with a gun in public, she just doesn’t. Even though she knows about the gun, even though she’s read all the stories. That was a different man, to her. A fictional one. Someone I used to aspire to be. I thought so too, really. Now I’m not so sure.

Well, maybe she doesn’t really know about the gun, not really. I never admitted to shooting anyone in stories, or in the novel. I’m not an idiot.

Whatever gave you that idea?

Someone’s come in the front door; he’s got a dog. He was out walking his dog first thing in the morning: a perfectly ordinary activity. Makes sense. He looks familiar; I think I’ve seen him before. He’s new. He moved in recently, didn’t he? Yes. Twenty-fourth or twenty-third floor, we’ve shared the lift a couple of times, I think. He’s all in black. He looks military, or ex-military.

Not like me, though: combat. The kind of quietly-muscled ones that are twice as heavy as they look. I know his type. Sniper, maybe. Unless I’m just being romantic.

Am I staring? I probably am. How rude. I’ll just smile, nod, the regular actions. Oh, thank god: saved by the lift doors. I’m not that good at small talk. Though now we’re stuck in a small room together. With his dog.

I could mention the weather if I have to.

He presses Twenty-four. Right: twenty-four. I remember. He lives on the floor below me. I’ve seen him, I’m sure. But not the dog. Maybe the dog is new.

It’s a very well behaved dog. What is that, a pit bull? I won’t ask to pat him. He looks like he could take my lungs out with those jaws. Who keeps a dog like that? Law enforcement? Criminals? Men with something to prove? Men who like powerful dogs. Could be anyone, I guess. It could be his girlfriend’s dog. Or his boyfriend’s. His mother’s. Who knows.

“You all right?” he asks me. He looks a little concerned. He touches his face. Right: My face, he wants to know what happened to me. It must be swelling up; it’s enough to get perfect strangers to ask me about it. That’s not going to go over well with Mary, is it.

“Fine,” I tell him. God, what do I say? I don’t have a story ready for this. “There was a misunderstanding.” That’s vague enough, isn’t it? He doesn’t need a song and dance; I don’t have anything to prove to him. Let him think I got into a fight over something; I’m stronger than I look, too. I don’t have to give him any details. I’m not expected to explain myself to strangers. Mary is another story. What am I going to tell her? What will she believe?

I fell? No. This isn’t the kind of injury you get from a fall. Mugged. Right, yeah. Someone tried to mug me, and I refused to give him my wallet, so he lunged at me and punched me in the face, and I punched him back, and that was the end of it. I just need a cup of tea, I’ll be fine. I’ll act a little
shaken up.

That will do. I’m certain it will.

She’ll tell me to stop wandering around in the wee hours of the morning. She’ll tell me, again, that I should see a doctor about my insomnia. And I’ll agree, and that will be the end of it. Maybe I’ll even make an appointment. I won’t go, though. I know why I can’t sleep.

There’s a notice taped up on the wall; what’s this? Evacuation. What? Five different flats, twenty-fourth, twenty-sixth floor. Yesterday. Evacuations?

“Why are they evacuating flats?” I ask him, pointing to the flyer. The twenty-fourth is his floor. He’ll know.

He pauses for a second. “Bedbugs.”

Bedbugs? One of those flats is right above Mary’s. One of them is directly below. “They haven’t checked our flat, did they check yours?”

“Yeah,” he says. His dog sits down and leans against his legs. “A few days ago. Nothing in mine, thank god.”

“Huh.” No one’s come by Mary’s, I’m certain. Other than nipping out to get a paper, I’ve been home for days.

“Nothing to worry about, I’m sure,” he says.

“I haven’t noticed anything.” But then, I haven’t been looking. I’ll have to ask Mary. I wonder if she knows about this. She’s a bit paranoid about bedbugs, she had them once years ago. She’ll turn the whole flat upside down with the suggestion. I could bring it up if I need to change the subject. That will work.

He pulls on the lead and the dog sits up, instantly alert.

“That’s a very well-behaved dog you have there,” I tell him. The door is about to open; it’s his floor. Mentioning it won’t start a conversation. I’m just being polite. Neighbourly. Normal.

“Thanks,” he says. The doors open. “Good morning.” He smiles and walks out. The dog is much like the man; quietly muscled, quietly dangerous, sauntering out of the lift with a swing of his hips. They both walk as if they’ve heard gunfire. The doors shut again; I can’t tell which flat is his.

It doesn’t matter. I’m not investigating him. I don’t need to know all his secrets. He’s only a neighbour.

It’s quiet on the twenty-fifth floor. There are no police standing around the door to Mary’s flat, that’s something, at least. I was just out for a walk. I left a couple of hours ago, I was just walking around, thinking, I wasn’t paying attention, and suddenly there I was being mugged. What did he look like? I don’t know. He was wearing a cap, he had some kind of puffy jacket on. Trainers. He wanted my ipod. I wanted my wallet. He didn’t get either of them. That’s what I’ll tell her.

The door is open; did she unlock it, looking into the hallway for me, or did I leave it unlocked?

She’s standing in the kitchen, looking lost. She turns as I open the door, her face covered with concern. Not anger, just concern.
Somehow I thought she would be angry, as if I had cheated on her. I sort of feel like I did. I feel like she should be able to see it written all over me. But she can’t. She can’t.

“John!” She walks toward me. Her shoes clap against the tile. That sound will always remind me of her; that assured walk, with shoes that make a hard, pointed sound against the floor. She is so centred in this place, and I am so transient. I shut the door behind me. “Oh my god, what happened to you? Are you all right?”

“I’m fine,” I tell her. She wraps her arm around me, her hand hovering over my eye. I can almost feel it, her hand: suddenly the left side of my face hurts. It pulses, it oozes, and it hurts. There are tears dripping out of my eye, which is close to sealed shut. I can feel the cut burning on the side of my face. I’m bleeding.

“What happened to you? Come here, sit down.” She leads me to the table, she wants me to sit, so I do.

“I nearly got mugged.” I wonder if that sounds truthful; people who lie tell you far too much too fast. That’s how it works: liars buy your belief with details. “I shouldn’t have been out so early in the morning. I just...” Remember: enough detail to give a picture, but not enough to make it sound like I’m desperate. “I couldn’t sleep.” I could learn to be a good liar, I think. I could learn. You’d always see through me, though, I bet. You would have.

“Oh my god, John,” she says. She believes it. It doesn’t even occur to her that I would lie like this. I feel guilty. Here I am trying to fool her; why? She’s looking at my face and she winces in sympathy; she’s imagining what it must feel like. It feels wonderful, Mary. It feels incredible. I caught him, he was twice my size. He could have shot me, he could have pounded my face into the ground, but I got him. Me. It was unbelievable. It was just what I needed. She wouldn’t understand. She doesn’t know me. “You poor thing!”

I didn’t let the medics in the ambulance do anything other than verify that nothing was broken. I don’t need their bandages or painkillers. I didn’t feel anything at the time. I felt fantastic. I felt alive; I haven’t truly felt alive in all the time you’ve been dead, Sherlock. I think some part of me must have died with you. You stole something from me. And you can’t ever give it back. But this morning I remembered what it used to be like. I can’t explain.

“He didn’t get anything,” I tell her. “I punched him back. Then he ran away.”

“I hope you really clocked him one,” Mary says. She puts her hand over mine. She’s worried about me. She’s not angry. She’s not going to ask me where I was, she didn’t notice how early I left. She doesn’t know I’ve got my gun pressed against my back. She’s only looking at my face, seeing the drying blood there. My eye is probably turning a spectacular variety of colours. There’s no anger on her face. Just concern, and love. Because she loves me.

“I’ll get the bandages,” Mary says. She gets up and goes into the kitchen. There’s a first aid kit in there. We used it once when I cut my finger with one of her monstrous kitchen knives. That was in the beginning, the third or fourth time I spent the night here with her. I covered the cut with gauze and applied pressure, and it hurt sharply for a moment or two. Then she kissed me. That was the first time it occurred to me that I could marry her, that I should; there was a bit of blood on my palm, on the worktop, and a few drops in the sink, my finger was aching and she was kissing me. She’s very beautiful, Mary is. And kind. She loves me.

The telly is on; the news. And then I see it: an aerial view of Denmead Street. The little gully where I found him. Serial Killer Apprehended, it says across the screen. I left before the media arrived, apparently. Lucky thing. They show him in the car, his head down, blood on his temple. They
show the Met, all the cars, the van. Greg talking into a microphone. Some terrified neighbours in
their dressing gowns.

Mycroft Holmes once told me that it was time to choose a side. At the time I thought he meant
between you and him, because he was your archenemy. I thought that was the choice I had to
make, but that’s not what he meant. He meant between you and the rest of the world. A normal life,
with a woman like Mary, a flat like this, a career, or you. You with all the excitement you brought
along with you, the danger, standing on the edge of a knife. I was so sure I would die protecting
you. It seemed inevitable. But I couldn’t. You confused me again, Sherlock. You turn everything
on its head, and after that nothing looked the same.

I made my choice then. I thought I could go back, live a normal life. Be the man Mary thinks I am,
the one I’ve thought I would have been had it not been for you.

But I’m not sure I can anymore.

“I’ll get you some ice,” Mary says.
Chapter Summary

Who would be so cruel to remind me, to make me feel like you're still in the world, taunting me a little, inviting me out to crime scenes with you again? Who would do that to me?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Gillian for reading this in the very wee hours, and to longtimegone for all her patience. Even I'm starting to get impatient at this point. And thanks to Cari for keeping me on my toes. ;)

“Here. See?” That’s last Thursday’s classifieds. The code, my initials, my notes over the digits in pen. It’s obvious: He’ll see it. He’ll remember. “But that’s not even everything.”

I can show him all my research, if he wants to see it; the research that started the terrific row with Mary. Two months’ worth of classified ads, several days’ worth of digging and parsing a dozen more of these codes, many of them simply repeated several times, all with my initials. Some have odd notes attached: “seething pratt,” and “craven butcher”, “cons, wild trio” “retreat west park”, “standard gun.” They all include specific locations in the A to Z code for seven different arrests. I missed the first eleven of the ads; how could I miss them? I wasn’t looking. It didn’t occur to me. I didn’t know I was wanted.

But apparently I have been. By whom? I don’t know. Another mystery. It’s dangerous, I know, taking directions from the classifieds. These could be from anyone. But they’ve got to be from someone on the right side of things. Whoever it is posting them knew precisely when these criminals would be arrested and hauled away. I’ve traced each of them to a documented arrest. It’s someone on the inside of this operation, it has to be.

Someone on the inside is leaving notes for me. Me, of all people.

All seven of them were murderers. I don’t get invited to all the arrests; just the ones of the murderers. Someone is giving me murderers, as if those are my favourites. I suppose they are. They were your favourites, too. Serial killers. The tricky ones. And these are all tricky ones.

I’ve missed so much, not paying enough attention. I don’t pay enough attention in any area of my life, apparently.

The row would be over if I just apologised, if I actually looked sorry about it. I know that. It was my fault, but I didn’t back down. I shouted at her, she shouted back. It was childish of me, and I should have known better. It was like arguing with Harry, when we used to argue, back before I gave up on arguing with her. Ancient rage that isn’t anyone’s fault poured out of me in all directions. I should just apologise. It was my fault. I’m twisted the wrong way, now. I’m sorry, Mary. I could just say it.
What’s the point, though? What’s the point.

She didn’t know I had a temper like that. I think it frightened her, a little. I wonder if it made her think of my gun. I wonder if she feels unsafe now.

That’s terrible.

I would never hurt her. I wouldn’t. Not even in a rage. I was just angry. I was frustrated. I was annoyingly excited, it was too much. This makes no sense, who is calling to me through the newspapers? Who would do that? It’s my worst fear and my greatest desire; it’s unfair. Cruel.

I wasn’t paying any attention to her, and now she’s annoyed with me. Disappointed in me, too. I skipped lunch with the editors, I didn’t answer my phone, I didn’t read my email, I didn’t respond to her texts. I couldn’t: I was busy. I was finding codes. She doesn’t know about that. How do I explain?

Codes in the classifieds that line up with the dates and locations of a series of arrests, codes that translate into invitations. I could have been there all this time; I should have been. Watching. Helping, maybe, like I used to. Maybe I’d have met my benefactor by now. I’d know more, I’d have seen so much. But that would have been worse, in the end. She would have dumped me before now.

There was one arrest I didn’t know was related: I had to dig it up. Military police. I saw it at the time, I just didn’t think that was one of mine. But it is, it must be. Because here it is, in code. To JHW, in the classifieds. I was invited. “Bolt gate, long walk. Fair little sanctuary east.”

Someone’s been trying to get my attention.

Who?

Greg holds his pint in one hand and the paper in the other, he squints a little at it. He’s like me, he’s starting to need glasses in order to read that tiny print. We get older, we fall apart. It’s in the nature of people to disintegrate slowly, if you let us. If you don’t exit early. Some of us don’t die young, we just fall to pieces and mourn ourselves. And that’s the best case scenario.

Mary won’t die young, either. She’ll grow old with someone, drink tea, do crosswords. She’ll grow old with someone, but I don’t think it will be me. No: it certainly won’t be.

God: that chap has a voice on him. His mate must have said something very funny, because the whole lot of them are hooting. Some after work crowd, tech support, accountants, or something. I can’t tell. They’ve loosened their ties, they’re drinking too much. They talk too loudly, but it’s all right. They’re drowning us out. No one will hear us. They’re a good cover.

Not that anyone’s watching us, of course. But someone might be. Have I grown so paranoid? All the CCTV cameras used to turn and follow us as we stomped around London in the wee hours, I remember. It wasn’t paranoia then. It was just workaday reality.

“There’s more?” He seems incredulous.

“Yes.” I pull out the rest of them. “See? Here. There’s a dozen of them that I’ve found, though some of them are just repeats. I’m not done digging for them, though. These are from three different newspapers, I haven’t checked the rest of them yet.” I’m excited: I wonder how many more I’ll find. Excited and filled with regret at all these lost opportunities.

Mary won’t stand for it. She’s getting on me about the wall again. She’s started paying more
attention to it. She wants to know why I want so many murderers on the wall. She says I’m becoming obsessed. She’s demanding more from me, too; she wants to see my manuscript. It’s blank; it’s a blank file. I haven’t started yet. I have nothing to show her; I have nothing to show the editors. This is more important, but I can’t tell her that. She won’t agree.

“This is...” He shakes his head. “I mean, I should be concerned because there’s clearly a leak somewhere, but I’m not sure where to start looking for it.” He hands the paper back to me like it’s precious. I appreciate that: I do. Because it is. “There are so many moving parts, and so much I don’t know about. We don’t get warning for these arrests, we just get the call. None of us would even know anything in enough time to put an ad in the papers like this. Our orders are coming straight from the government.”

When he says the government I know who he means: Mycroft, of course. His orders are coming from Mycroft. I don’t ask. I know he can’t tell me. He shouldn’t tell me any of it, by rights. He should tell me to piss off. He should confiscate the papers and swear me to secrecy. He should shut down the classifieds in all the papers, or track all their incoming calls and find their mole. But he just shakes his head at me.

“I have to be honest with you,” he says. He draws his pint up to his lips, as if it will cover over what he’s about to say. He looks uncomfortable. “There’s only one person I can think of who might do something like this.”

I know. I know what he means. I’ve been avoiding thinking about it, but he’s right.

There’s only one person who would ever do something like this to me. I can’t let myself imagine that, though: that’s a dangerous thought. Even taking comfort from it is dangerous, and I know that. It keeps me on edge, the push and pull between delight and frustration, joy and terrible anger, because who would toy with me like this? Who would be so cruel to remind me, to make me feel like you’re still in the world, taunting me a little, inviting me out to crime scenes with you again? Who would do that to me?

You would. Sherlock, you would, wouldn’t you. If you could. I know you would; I know you. That’s what makes this so wonderful, and so horrible.

But you can’t; you're gone. So who would stand in your place and reel me in like this? Who would extend these most exquisite invitations, who would let me watch from a distance, twisting in the wind and cursing? It’s tantalizing, it’s cruel. It’s stirring up all the parts of me that need to stay quiet. But I don’t want them to; I like being stirred up, that’s the terrible thing about it. It’s wonderful; it’s like going back in time. It’s like you’re alive again. It’s the best thing that’s happened to me in years. It’s agony. So who do I thank for it?

I don’t know.

I wouldn’t thank him outright, though, whoever he is. Never. I’d chin him first, for teasing me like this. For making it feel so familiar to me, as if you're talking to me again. As if you're alive. I’d chin him for that, and then I thank him. In that order, not any other. Then I have to ask: why are you doing this to me?

“I know,” I tell Greg. I know. It’s mimicry on a level I can’t fathom. It’s like poking a miserable animal in a cage. Too easy, and too cruel. “I know. It’s got to be his brother, then, doesn’t it?” Who else? No one else knows you well enough to even try something like this. Except for me.

But Mycroft wouldn’t take a risk like this. He absolutely wouldn’t. He doesn’t play games, he’s
the consummate adult in the Holmes family. He wouldn’t want me involved, not even peripherally; he won’t even admit to me that he is involved, for god’s sake. “Or he’s got a fan at MI5. Or I do. I don’t know.”

He sighs. “Then it’s Mycroft’s problem.”

Only if he finds out about it. “I’m not going to tell him.”

“I think he probably already knows.” Greg leans back with his pint and tilts his head to the left. “You’re being tailed, John.”

Tailed? I look over; it’s my neighbour. The one with the dog, all in black. The one I thought was ex-military; maybe not ex. He’s sitting at a table with a laptop, minding his own business. He’s wearing earphones. He’s got a pint beside him, but he’s not drinking it. We’re miles from home, why would he be here?

Greg leans forward. “I noticed him the last time we met up too, but I wasn’t sure. Now I am.”

I’ve only seen him a few times; in the lift, mostly. Once at the Tesco, but we didn’t speak. But I don’t look behind me that often, not anymore. Has he been following me? Reporting back on my activities? For how long? I don’t even do anything very interesting. Was he with me Friday morning when I was pressed against that fence? I didn’t see him. Was he watching? Did I slip outside of his field of vision that time?


“Is he listening to us now?”

What the hell? Does Mary know? Did Mary approve, knowing I was going off the rails? Did she hire him, or my publisher, knowing Moriarty’s death would probably set me off?

Greg shakes his head. “No, he’s not. He’s not that kind of tail, I don’t think.” He glances behind him for a moment, then turns back. “He’s been on you for a while. Don’t worry, he’s just security.”

“Security?”

“Someone’s concerned about your safety.”

Mycroft. Of course. He’s paying someone to keep an eye on me? What am I, a child? Moriarty is dead, and I’m only a writer. I’m a writer, dammit! My days of being in the line of fire are long gone. Does one little isolated pistol-whipping demand that I have my own security detail now? Christ. Mind your own business, Mycroft. Leave me alone. I’m not yours to take care of.

Why would I need security, anyway? If he wants to keep me away from his precious arrests, he shouldn’t put code in the classifieds for me to find, for god’s sake. If it weren’t for the ad I wouldn’t be anywhere near his secret operations. I’d have been at home, in bed, with my girlfriend. Like I’m meant to be.

No bedbugs at all, then. Well, of course not. Only an idiot would believe they’d evacuate flats over bedbugs. What the hell is going on? Does Mary know? Who would bother spending this much time and effort on me? I’m useless. I’m finished, I’ve got nothing left. Without you, I’m nothing: I just repeat the words you said to me. Over and over, in different order, in different places, in my head and on paper. I’m just a myna bird, I just repeat and repeat and repeat.

“I’m just a fucking writer.”
Greg smiles at me. He smiles, like I’ve said something funny. “You weren’t always just a fucking writer, were you.”

What does that matter? What does that bloody matter?

“What do I do?”

“Nothing.” He smiles. “Nothing at all. Just go on as normal.”

There’s nothing normal about this.


“Fine,” I tell him.

I could just apologise, I know that. I’m sorry that I avoided your calls. I’m sorry that I’d rather stare at the newspapers than talk to you. I’m sorry that I’ve been lying to you since we met. You don’t deserve that, but I was only doing the best I could. I’m sorry. I’d love to tell you that I’ll do better, but I won’t. I’m only going to get worse.

“Yeah, she’s fine.”
Thread by Thread

Chapter Summary

Well, I don’t know who you are, or what you want me to do, but I’m here. Okay? I’m here, I’m following the directions as best I can.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to mazarin221b for the once-over. No britpick, because everyone is busy. I’m sure I’ve done a million things wrong. You can tell me, I’ll fix it.

Well, I don’t know who you are, or what you want me to do, but I’m here. Okay? I’m here, I’m following the directions as best I can. I read the classified ads now like they’re all meant for me. I decipher codes as if they make sense. All I need now is a tinfoil hat and a camper van and I’ll be all set. I’m watching. Happy now? I’m here, I’m watching, but nothing’s happening.

Nothing much happens in office buildings anyway, as far as I can tell. Fantasy money traded from one pair of well-groomed hands to another, papers stapled together, meetings. Women in short skirts and jackets with their hair pulled up, walking around with file folders. No one looks up. No one cares that I’m here. A phone is ringing; I can hear the low buzz of a photocopier. What am I doing here? Maybe I got it wrong.

Maybe I’m on the wrong floor.

Well, at least I have the right address. The potted palm and I can see the police van pull up through the window. I recognise it now; it’s bland and plain and no one would think twice about it, unless you’ve already seen it and know what’s inside. One police car, flanked by four unmarked cars. They’re being subtle with this one. Greg? Should I call him? No: If I see him, we can talk. Otherwise I’ll just wait. He doesn’t need more trouble over me. I can hear women laughing from one of the offices. It’s barely eleven. They’re getting coffee. It’s a normal day for them.

My gun feels overwhelmingly large against my back, like it’s obvious and everyone could see if it they looked. I’ll keep my back to the window. Their blinds are broken; I bet no one’s noticed. They don’t close them, not here. Why would they? They’re dusty. The palm is dusty, too.

A ping: that’s the lift. The doors are about to open. This must be it, it must be.

I love this part; the part right before. I’m ready. The doors will open, the police will spill out, guns blazing. Someone might fire, and bullets will spray everywhere. I’ll duck down, I’ll dodge. I’m ready for anything. Air is never as sweet as it is in the moments just before. All right. I’m ready. Go.

The doors open. There’s a pause; no rush into the corridor, no. It’s calmer than that, quieter. It’s just three uniformed policemen, very calm, very careful, stepping out. They are armed, but it’s only obvious if you’re looking for their weapons. They’re being discreet. They look around. I don’t
think they even register my presence. I’m just a bloke standing by the window reading something on his phone, someone waiting for an appointment; nobody. I don’t recognise any of them. They’re not looking for me. The lift door stays open, waiting for them. They walk toward the open office door.

They go inside, hard heels on the floor.

Is that it? No gunfire, no drama? They can’t be here after a murderer, can they? There’s too few of them. The mundane details of arrests: I guess they’re not so exciting. I don’t always get to throw a man to the ground and incapacitate him. Sometimes I can only watch the handcuffs go on, heads pushed down as they’re escorted inside the backseat of a police car. That’s true, that’s often how it happens. A whimper rather than a bang. Sometimes they’ve been waiting for that knock on the door for years, and they go quietly. Maybe it will be like that: boring. Still. Better than anything else I was going to do today. Definitely better.

If I’d read the paper any later I would have missed this. There was only one message this time, with just a few hours’ notice. This must be a new discovery, then. There was barely time to invite me. But I got invited, and I’m here. Even if it’s boring, I’d rather be here.

I can hear their voices as they explain themselves to the secretary, but I can’t make out the words. They’re speaking softly. I can hear the secretary, though: he’s nervous. He’s too loud. Maybe he’s warning someone, giving someone time to prepare. To leave. To run.

“Yes, she’s in. She’s in her office, just behind the...yes. Yes, just there.” He’s terrified. How often do police come in asking questions, I wonder? Not too often. Maybe he noticed that they’re all armed. Like I did. His eyes going straight for the holsters, like me. Count the number of firearms in a room first, then look for the exits. There’s a stairwell to my right if I need it. I can protect myself.

She’s in, he said. She.

So it’s a woman they’re here to arrest, then. Statistically it’s unlikely that she’s a murderer, isn’t that right? Maybe she’s an accomplice. Or she defies gender stereotypes and keeps the bodies of her victims on ice in her flat. Maybe carved into pieces and kept in freezer bags.

I can hear them walking. All the other sounds have stopped. No talking, no photocopying. There’s a phone ringing, but no one answers it. It keeps ringing, and I hear the uniform black shoes as they cross the floor. I can get closer now, can’t I? I’ll peer in.

It’s a cubicle farm, one frozen in time. Everyone’s still, watching the three policemen walking across the room. Everyone looks frightened, on the verge of outraged. This isn’t something that happens. This isn’t normal. Their lives don’t include things like side arms and police uniforms and crime scenes. Women in suits don’t get arrested at work on a Tuesday morning.

Three uniforms: they look so obviously out of place, heading for an office by the windows on the opposite side; there’s a woman in there. She’s sitting at her desk, she sees them coming. She knows they’re coming for her. There’s nowhere for her to go. She’s still, staring. Did she know? Did she anticipate this in advance, did she plan for it? I don’t think so. She looks caught. Lost.

Two of the policemen go inside her office with her, the other stands outside, looking in, watching her every move. He’s the third line of defense against a completely harmless-looking woman. What did she do? What does it have to do with me?

They speak to her quietly. She looks from one of them to the other. She nods, and picks up her purse. They let her. She mustn’t be so dangerous, then; why are they letting her take her purse?
She stands; they handcuff her. They hold her by the arms, as if she might run. She won’t. I can tell she won’t, even from here. She’s caught, and there’s nothing she can do now.

The third policeman goes into her office and picks up her laptop. He puts it directly into an evidence bag, and tucks it under his arm.

What could she possibly have done? What do they do in this office, anyway? I can’t tell. I should have looked it up, but there wasn’t time. I don’t know what they do; nothing too dire. Nothing that requires handcuffs and a police escort, surely.

It’s all over very quickly. It’s not like the last one, the slow and careful entry into a house in the wee hours, no breaking down of doors and waking up all the neighbours. It’s eleven in the morning and they’re trying not to make a scene. They’re just going to walk out of here, as casual as possible, without telling anyone anything. The woman is flanked by policemen holding on to her; the third man walks behind them with her laptop. They’re acting like they’re protecting her, or protecting the rest of us from her. Why? She’s not resisting. She’s not struggling. She’s doing what she’s told. The rest of the office is silent. Gobsmacked. A phone rings, and then stops. Everyone’s staring.

She’ll pass right by me. I’m just standing here, my phone in my hand, by the door, as if I belong here. Maybe I’m a client, or a new hire. I’m about to go in, but I’m hesitating. Looking perplexed, confused. That makes sense. I’m allowed to stare, I’m a visitor, this is unusual, I don’t know what’s going on. I could be anyone. This is gossip, something that will make it to the papers. Everyone here will speak to the inevitable reporters, they’ll say things like, *we had no idea,* and *she was always so quiet,* or *there was something off about her,* but *I couldn’t put my finger on it.* They’ll sit in front of the telly waiting to see what she did. I’ll probably do the same.

She’s in her mid-thirties. She’s pretty.

Wait: wait I know her. Who is she?

Amber.

Amber, the nursery school teacher. I took her out, we went to see a terrible movie and she cried. She was sweet, and I kissed her, just once. That was shortly after Sherlock died. What is she doing here? She looks different; more severe, somehow. Well: she is in handcuffs now, that probably has something to do with it. I can’t even imagine a shy smile on her face now. She’s like a different person.

Someone invited me here to witness her arrest.

I’ve forgotten how to look like a bystander.

“Amber?” Why do I bother saying it; that’s not her name, of course it’s not. She wasn’t actually interested in me. She was paid to go out with me. To flirt with me. Jesus.

She sees me. She narrows her eyes at me, she recognises me. She’s angry; so angry I think she might break loose from the police. “You,” she says. Such venom. Why? I don’t have anything to do with this. Nothing at all. “You’re cruel,” she says to me, loud enough that everyone hears it. The police look at me, but their faces are impassive. “Both of you.” Both of who?

What?

There a moment when I could ask. She’s so close I could reach out and touch her, like I did once. Her face is contorted into an expression I never thought it could. She seemed so sweet. She volunteers, she loves animals. She’s shy. Well, maybe not. I’m stunned into silence. What does it
mean that Moriarty sent a woman to spy on me?

I don’t have time to ask. They drag her into the lift, the door shuts. And they’re gone.

Amber. I wonder what her real name is.

Jesus. Sherlock died, we buried him, and Moriarty still wanted to know what I was up to? Why would he do that? Why am I interesting to him? I’m not interesting at all. I’m really not. I wasn’t interesting then. I was only mourning, I was confused. I was lost. I suppose I still am. What did he want from me? Confirmation? He must have sent her to me, someone to report back about me. Why? Why would he want to do that? It was never me he was interested in. Only Sherlock. Sherlock was interesting; I was just a means to an end. I know that. Why would he waste time with me?

Did he not believe it? He didn’t see Sherlock die, like I did. because he didn’t see it, he wanted to live vicariously through my grief, is that it? There weren’t enough pictures in the paper? He didn’t get to see his face covered with blood, his broken head? That was an honour reserved just for me. A private performance. Thanks a lot, Sherlock. The funeral wasn’t enough? I’m sure Moriarty had his spies there, too.

Maybe that was it: he sent Amber to me, instructed her to act sweet, kind, to be pretty. Because I would fall for that, of course. And then I could tell her all my deepest secrets, I could cry and tell her about how Sherlock died, what he looked like, and what he said to me. That must be it. He would enjoy hearing about that. About the fact that he had no pulse by the time I got to him, but he was still warm. He was already dead, and I wished I was too.

Is that what he wanted to hear? The bastard. The fucking bastard.

I didn’t tell her anything. I didn’t tell anyone anything, it’s none of their business, is it. I kissed her, then I walked away. I left her there, in front of her flat. So I won, in the end. I won. Fuck you, Moriarty.

Was it even her flat we stood in front of? If I’d gone with her, thinking we’d have a few drinks and get into her bed, would I have ended up with semtex strapped to my chest again? Did I dodge death that time without knowing it?

Who wants me to know about Amber? Why would anyone go so far out of their way to show me how many parts of my life are false? What’s next, Mary? Is someone going to show me the other side of that curtain, too? Who is so cruel? That’s it: I need to find out. I need to.

I need to get out of here.

The lift smells like lemons and chlorine. They’re probably pushing Amber into a police car now, shutting the door. They’d have to put those handcuffs on so tight; she has tiny little wrists. Maybe the press has arrived by now; I don’t want my face on television. Things are awkward enough right now with Mary. She doesn’t want to talk to me anymore. She’d probably kill me for getting involved with something like this.

Who sent me here?

There’s a number at the top of the classifieds section, I’ll call. I’ll ask them who posted those ads. I’ll beg them. I’ll explain: they’re ruining my life. They’re making me hope for impossible things. They’ll think I’m a conspiracy theorist. They’ll think I’m a nutter.

No press outside, not yet. No one knows. Upstairs, they don’t know what to do, I’m sure. What do
you do when one of your co-workers gets arrested? There’s no stated protocol of that, is there? They’re gossiping amongst themselves. They’re calling their friends and their boyfriends; no more work will get done there today.

There’s a small coffee shop down the street, I can hide there. Is my neighbour with me? I don’t see him, but he must be. He’s my security detail, surely he’ll have followed me to another arrest. Surely. Or I slipped past him this time. Too bad; I’d ask him instead of pretending not to know anything. He must know. Who is sending me around London to watch arrests? What did Amber do? Why does she think I’m cruel? And who does she think I’m working with? Who’s paying you, Amber?

Who else would it be?

The classifieds: they’ll help me. I’m sure they will. Someone is placing those ads. I’ll find out who.

“Coffee,” I tell the woman at the counter. She nods. “Milk, no sugar.” You never know what’s in the sugar. Isn’t that right, Sherlock?

Dial the number: I’ll just ask them. Is that sort of information protected, somehow? Will I need some special identification, or an excuse? If they won’t tell me I’ll ask Greg to find out for me. He’ll help. He will.

It’s an automated answer phone. I punch a number for the classifieds, I want to talk to a real person. A phone rings, then rings again. A woman answers.

“I want to know who placed an ad in today’s paper,” I tell her. I try to sound authoritative. My heart is beating too fast. I tell her which ad. She doesn’t seem to mind telling me. I should have done this ages ago, why didn’t I do this? It’s probably Mycroft. Who else would it be? He’s punishing me for letting his brother die. It isn’t my fault, Mycroft: it’s yours. It’s your fault, don’t blame me.

“I don’t have a name,” she says. “But there’s a number.” She reads it out to me.

“Thank you.” A number: now I’ll know. I’ll call, and I’ll know.

It’s not him, I need to remember that. It’s impossible; he’s dead. I won’t call and hear his voice. His voice doesn’t exist anymore. I wish Greg had never suggested it, because the idea won’t quite go away. I hang up and dial the number before I forget it. It’s not him. It can’t be him. I pick up my coffee. I’m holding my breath. There’s a pause, then a message.

Dammit.

Disconnected.

It’s been disconnected, that number isn’t in service. Of course it isn’t. Of course. I should have known.

Well, I guess that would have been too easy.

Christ. I’m not some kind of marionette, you know. I’m not. You can’t just tug on my strings and make me run around, not anymore. It’s not fair. Who’s doing this to me? There’s only one person who could. Who would. Who’s cold enough to rip my heart out like this, over and over. Fine. I’ll call him, then. I’ll just ask.
My coffee is so hot it burns my tongue.

“John,” he says. Smooth as anything. Of course. It’s like he’s expecting my call. Like he’s just been sitting there waiting for it. He probably has been. He’s probably watching my confusion on CCTV right now, and laughing. I look around for a camera. “How can I help you?”

“It’s you, isn’t it. leaving me messages in the classifieds, sending me off to these arrests. It’s you, isn’t it, you bastard.” I’m angry. I didn’t realise how angry until I heard his voice. I need to calm down. I hate feeling manipulated, he’s pulling my life apart thread by thread. This isn’t fair. It isn’t right. I’m just a private citizen now, I’m not Sherlock’s flatmate. I’m not Sherlock’s friend. I’m just no one. “It must be you. Why are you doing this? What did Amber do? Was she spying on me? Why do you want me to see this? Was is Moriarty monitoring me for fun, or was it you? Did you hire her to spy on me?”

“Slow down, John,” he says. “Where are you?”

He must know. He sent me here. “You know where I am, I’m at Tower 42, I just watched a woman get arrested. She told me I was cruel.” She didn’t just say that. She said we were both cruel. Who else? As if I’m in cahoots with someone, as if there’s anyone left for me to be in cahoots with. I don’t have any allies anymore, not really. Just a security detail and a book contract. I’m only a writer, dammit. “She told me we were both cruel. Who does she mean?”

There’s a pause so long I think maybe I’ve been disconnected.

“Mycroft?”

“Tell me,” he says, slowly. So slowly. I shouldn’t have called him. It wasn’t him. It was someone else; I’ve just given the game away. What have I done? “Tell me about these classified ads.”
Bad News

Chapter Summary

It’s not you, is it? Jesus. Of course it isn’t. Why do I keep imagining that lately? No: it’s not you, that’s impossible.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing for her laser eyes in the middle of the day, lavellington for catching my mistakes, and longtimegone for the thumbs up.

Have I become a regular here already? I suppose I have. I’m escaping the flat too often lately, looking for some peace and quiet, some place lacking in judgement where I can safely imagine that every crime reported in the papers is somehow related to Sherlock and me. Is that so much to ask?

I think her name is Ashley. Or something like that. She brings me my coffee without me even asking for it now. Milk, no sugar. She knows. She smiles at me. If it weren’t for Mary I’d do more than smile back.

She’s only being nice; she’s a waitress. That’s what she’s paid to do. Be nice. Flirt with me, make me feel like I’m special so I’ll leave her a better tip. It’s not her being mercenary, it’s just how things are. Still: she’s pretty. Too young for me, though. They all are, it seems. I’ve reached that age.

“Here you are,” she says. “Just how you like it.” She smiles. She has slightly crooked teeth, which is endearing. “Anything good in the papers today?”

I smile at her like a regular would: friendly, unthreatening. She doesn’t think I’m a nutter, not yet. I haven’t told her that I look in the classifieds for invitations to participate in top secret arrests. And I’m not going to tell her, because I like it here and I’d like to be able to come back.

“Nothing good at all,” I tell her. “It’s all bad news these days.” That’s what people say, isn’t it? Tut tut, more bad news in The Daily Mail? The world’s gone off the rails somehow, it’s those kids, it’s all those immigrants, it’s the Americans going to war again and dragging us with them. It’s always something, it’s never our fault, and it’s never good. Tut tut, yes, the news is terrible, isn’t it.

She can’t tell that I’m reading the papers with the kind of excitement reserved for Christmas mornings and the birthday parties of nine year olds. It’s not seemly, is it. She’d never imagine that.

She nods at me with put-upon world-weariness, as if she knows all about the horror of world events. But she doesn’t watch the news and she’s too young to really care: they must teach them that world-weary expression to deal with people like me.

Our morning dance complete, she moves on to the next bloke. Another regular; thick black glasses, a beard pulled straight from the mid-seventies, and a glowing white apple on the back of his laptop.
screen. He only drinks coffee with a fancy name and three types of cream. He’s harmless. He flirts with her, but that’s appropriate. They’re both young.

Nothing in any of these papers about an arrest in Tower 42. Nothing about Amber. Nothing at all.

It’s a wild goose chase, that’s what this is. I can’t even remember her surname, how can I find out what she’s been arrested for if I don’t remember her name? It wasn’t her real name anyway. Even the people in her office didn’t know her real name. She came from nowhere and now she’s just vanished. It’s as if it didn’t happen at all. As if she didn’t exist in the first place.

Fucking hell.

Nothing for me in the classifieds, either. Radio silence. I shouldn’t have said a word to Mycroft, dammit. I shot myself in the foot there, I think. Whoever was feeding me information has been stopped, and I stopped it. What was I thinking? Of course it wasn’t Mycroft. It had to be from someone willing to take outrageous risks. Someone more like you, Sherlock.

There isn’t anyone like you, though.


It’s not you, is it?

Jesus. Of course it isn’t. Why do I keep imagining that lately? No: it’s not you, that’s impossible.

Oh: It’s Mrs Hudson. What does she want?

“Hello?” Must keep my voice down; I’m out in public. There’s nothing more annoying than an asshole shouting into his phone in a coffee shop.

“John? It’s me, dear, it’s Mrs Hudson. Are you busy? Am I interrupting you?”

“Good morning, Mrs Hudson. You're not interrupting me, how are you?”

“Oh, I'm fine. Well, no, to be honest, I'm in a bit of a...” She pauses. "I’m in a bit of a bind. There’s been a–” There’s a muffled sound in the background. What on earth is going on?

“What is it?” Have they got her now? Is there someone there with a gun pressed against her temple? It wouldn't be the first time. It's been years, but it could be. It could happen. It’s my fault, I called Mycroft. I shouldn’t have. She’s in danger. "Are you all right?"

“Oh, I'm fine, John, I'm fine. It's just the boiler.” Oh, right. Her boiler. I don’t know if I’m relieved or disappointed. Relieved: yes, definitely. I’m relieved.

"You had it replaced, didn't you?"

"Well, I did," she says. "Yes, they came by and installed a new one. But it's never been quite...well, it’s not as reliable as the old one, and the fellow said he’d come by this week to have a look. But I’ve no more tenants, not after those last ones. And my sister’s had a fall, you know about my sister? She’s up in Bristol, poor thing, she wants me to come sit with her, you know, help her out a bit until she’s back on her feet. So I’m a bit desperate. I’ve run right out of eyes and hands.” Did I know that Mrs Hudson had a sister in Bristol? I don’t remember her saying so. That’s a bit embarrassing, do I pay as little attention as that?
"You need some help, then?" That's what she wants, isn't it? Some help. She's a kindly old lady, she needs a hand. She has no children of her own. I have no family. I'm all alone in the world. She might as well call me.

What does she need me to do? Take her to Bristol? Mary could probably drive. Maybe that would be good, a few hours in a car together, Mary and I, with a third party. That would keep us civil. Could be a good thing. Or a terrible thing, really. Best not to end a relationship in a car. There's nowhere else to go.

Does she want me to watch over the boiler? I have no idea why she thinks I'm any use with a boiler, it's not as if I've ever fixed one. Or installed one. I don't know anything about boilers, what does she want?

"Do you think," she says, then pauses. "Do you think you'd consider spending a few days in the flat this week? Just this once? I'm not sure when the fellow is set to arrive, he didn't specify, it could be tomorrow, or Friday, I'm not sure. I could bring up some bedding, do a bit of shopping if you wouldn't mind..."

Ah. She wants me to come back. Spend the week at 221b, watching out for a repairman. Of course. She hasn't tried to lure me back in ages. She gave up on that years ago, she let the place out to someone else. She isn't trying to lure me back now. She's only in a bind, she needs help. That's all. I'm just someone helpful, a friend. I understand.

A week in 221b: I could read the paper in peace, I could leave in the middle of the night to watch arrests, gun in hand, and avoid all the constant haranguing about my deadlines and obsession with the news. I could build a massive crime wall from one end of the flat to the other. I could watch some crap telly and sit around in my pants. I could say goodbye to you properly, maybe. Seeing the place again without you in it, that’s something final. I couldn’t bear it before. Maybe I could bear it now.

It’s hard to believe I haven’t stepped foot in the place since before the funeral. It was too hard to stay, then. It was too painful, and you were everywhere. It still smelled like you. Your things were still there. That won't be true anymore. It’s been too long, other people have lived there.

I regret leaving now. I regret not going back. I should have stayed as long as I could.

Yes. I can do this. I'll pack up my things, I'll leave. This is just what I need: some space. Some time. An escape plan.

I could move back in permanently, couldn’t I? She doesn’t have a tenant anymore. Presumably she wants one. I can afford the place myself, now. Is that healthy? Going back to the scene of this particular crime?

Sure it is. Sure. I never really left, for all my trying. I can't leave. This is who I am now, and there's no running from it.

"I know it's a lot to ask," she says. Her voice has taken on that sympathetic tone that's uncomfortably close to pity. "I know you've been--" I don't want to hear any more.

"No, no, it's fine, Mrs Hudson, it's fine. I'll come. I can stay the week, if that's what you need."

"Oh, wonderful! Thank you, John. Thank you so much. Can you drop by today?"

Today? So soon? Can I? Mary and I are still not speaking. I'll tell her I'm leaving for the week. I'll
pack my things and go. I'll tell her I'm leaving.

"Sure, today's fine."

"When?"

It's only just after nine, I suppose I could be there around noon.

"About noon?"

There's a pause. Is someone there with her? "Can you make it a bit before noon, John?"

Odd. Is she leaving for Bristol today, then? "I'll aim for about eleven if I can, how's that?"

"Terrific," she says. "Great. I'll see you soon, John."

Well. Now there's a deadline.

Ashley smiles at me again. I'm the sort of person who gets phone calls in the mornings, not strange coded messages in the newspapers. My coffee is only half-finished, but I have to go. I'll leave her an especially large tip. I suppose I won't be back for a while.

Maybe I won't be back at all.

The sun's come out; it's going to be a nice day. And I'm on the precipice. What am I going to tell her?

I don't know.

It doesn't matter.

Can I pack and be gone by eleven? Probably not. It's not that easy to pack up two years. I can make a few trips if I have to. It's only for a week. Just a week. I'll just pack a few things.

No: it's not just for a week. I should have done this ages ago. I thought I would marry her, once. I was a different person then. I'd been half-asleep. It was easier that way. It's not her fault: it's mine. I was trying to be someone I'm not.

At least I can pack in peace; I'll pack, then call Mary at work, tell her I'm leaving. Is it rude to break up with her over the phone? Probably. Well, we can meet later, next week maybe, and talk it over, if she wants. I don’t know what I’ll say. I have nothing left to say. I’ve run out of words now.

The lift is empty this time. No dog, no man in black. Have I lost my security detail? Maybe Greg was wrong about him; maybe he’s just a neighbour. I can’t possibly be that important. The notice about evacuations is still up: three more flats on the twenty-sixth floor, one on the twenty-fifth. Our neighbour, the one with the cats. Why? Not bedbugs, surely. Are they closing in on me, preparing to drill their way through the bedroom wall and shoot me between the eyes? I don’t know. I shouldn’t have called Mycroft. Now I’ll probably never find out.

I thought Mary would be at work. But she’s not. She’s home. She’s got the radio on. It’s a gardening show. I don’t know why she listens to it, we don’t have a garden. It smells like paint in here.

Paint.

She’s in an old pair of jeans and a t-shirt, and she’s painting the wall. My wall. She’s stripped all
my research off, all my articles. She’s dumped them in the bin, I can see them. The bin’s full, it’s packed down with crumpled paper and yarn. My work. She’s ripped it all up, she’s destroyed it.

How could she do that to me. How could she do that.

She saw me come in. She isn’t saying anything. She’s not even looking at me. She just keeps painting. She’s angry. There’s something about geraniums on the radio now.

All my work. Sherlock: that’s all I had left.

No.

No, I’m not going to get upset about this. I’m not. There’s no point. It’s not Sherlock: it’s only some paper. Some paper I can find again, I can print it out again, it’s all online anyway. It was just me thinking. My old maps. Some pins. That’s all. I wasn’t going to find him that way, anyway. Because he’s gone.

I can’t do this again.

It’s not her fault, and being angry with her is pointless. She doesn’t know, she doesn’t understand. That’s not her fault, it’s mine, because I never told her. I let her believe that you were my quirky flatmate with a penchant for crimes. I didn’t want her to know what you meant to me. I never told her that I have a penchant for crimes as well. I know what that sounds like, I know it’s not normal. Normal women won’t share their lives with men who prefer psychopaths. I never told her, so it’s not her fault that she doesn’t understand.

It doesn’t matter anymore.

My keys clatter against the table. I’ll leave them there: none of them are mine anymore. She keeps painting.

Packing won’t be that difficult, now that I look around.

Nothing in this flat is mine. Everything here is hers: the furniture, the rugs, the art on the walls. The telly. Even the bluray player. I only have one drawer in the bedroom, a quarter of the cupboard for my clothes; I don’t keep much. My computer, the cables, my gun. That’s really it: I didn’t realize how small my footprint actually is. How did this happen? I didn’t let myself infect this place at all. I let her things populate me, my life, my head. I’ve been living someone else’s life. How did that happen? Why did I let it happen?

It’s not her fault. She doesn’t know me. I’m a better actor than I thought I was. I’ve always been transient, just here temporarily. Just a lodger in her life, and in my own.

She is very pretty, even with a bit of red paint on her face, with her old jeans on, her hair all tied back and hidden under a scarf. She’s very pretty, very determined. Very successful. She’s strong and empathetic. I could have told her, I should have. She might have understood, even.

She refuses to look at me. She’s still angry at me. Well: let her. Let her hate me for a while. If that works. It’s fine.

“I’m sorry, Mary.” She looks over at me, but says nothing. “I know I’ve been difficult lately. I’ve been...” I’ve been what? Struggling? Yes, that’s true. I’ve been struggling with the past, because it keeps pushing its way into the present. I’ve been struggling to keep it hidden, and private, but it won’t stay that way. I write these books about him, all my stories are out in public, but the truth of it is a secret from everyone. I can write about him as a bit of fiction, but you won’t understand who
he was as a human being, how he changed me. You saw the dedication, Mary: did you think that
was just a nicety? It wasn’t. You don’t know me very well, and I don’t know how to tell you that.
It doesn’t matter: all we do is fight these days. It doesn’t matter anymore. “You deserve better than
this, I know you do.” She crosses her arms across her chest. She thinks I’m reading from some kind
of script. There’s no original way to say this. “I think we’ve gone about as far as we can, don’t
you?”

She stiffens. She wasn’t expecting me to say that, I don’t think. No: that’s not the sort of person
she thinks I am. She thinks I need her, because I’m a bit shy, I need motivation, I get distracted.
She thinks I need her more than she needs me. That might be true, I don’t know. But I’m finished
here. I carry my gun with me everywhere, now. It’s pressed against my back, and it reminds me
who I am. I shoot people. I don’t panic in a crisis. I always know how to escape, how to protect
myself, how to keep others safe. I’m not just a writer. I know the battlefield; it’s where I live.

“I think so,” she says, finally. She puts the paintbrush down on the floor, on a bit of newspaper. I
hope it’s not one of mine; I don’t want to think about it.

“Mrs Hudson called,” I tell her. “She needs someone to watch the place while she goes to Bristol.
I’ll stay there for a while, all right?” We don’t need to see each other again. We probably won’t.
Mary isn’t the type to agonise over things, not like that. Not where anyone can watch. She’ll
pretend this doesn’t hurt her. I know she will.

“All right,” she says. She blinks; is she going to cry? No. No, she won’t. Maybe later, after I’ve
left. But not in front of me. There’s nothing intimate between us anymore, how did I fail to see
that? It slips away slowly, without us even noticing. We’ve become strangers to each other. That’s
my fault: I changed. I kept too many secrets. She doesn’t know me; she never did. I didn’t want her
to.

She held me for hours after my sister died. She stroked my hair and kissed me, she held my hands
in hers. She was such a warm place for me to rest. How do I tell her that? She’s looking at me, her
hair all pulled up. There’s one curl hanging down the back of her neck. I used to kiss her there.

I loved her. But things have changed. I won’t tell her about the ring; I’ll take it with me. I’ll give it
away. I don’t want to hurt her.

She turns, picks up the paintbrush. She stares at the wall.

“I’ll pack,” I say. I should just shut up. I should just go. It’s time.
I’m late. I’m very late. I don’t know why she wanted me here at eleven. I should have asked. I left later than I intended to, and traffic was terrible; I think there was an accident, or something. That’s all I can say: I’m sorry I’m so late, Mrs Hudson. Traffic was terrible. There must have been an accident nearby, all the roads leading here were jammed full. It would have been faster to walk.

How’s your sister? Surely an hour won’t make much difference. If I couldn’t get here on time, surely the repairman can’t either.

221b. Here I am again: waiting for the door to open, nervous. Alone in the world. This is familiar. I’ve done this before.

This place doesn’t change, does it. Years go by and it looks just the same, the way we found it, the way we left it. Anxious, then happy; devastated, then resigned: we’re the ones who change.

A white van is pulling up behind me. The repairman? Must be. Maybe she won’t need me after all. But I’ll stay; I’ll stay if she wants me to. If she says she doesn’t need me anymore, I’ll tell her I want to move back in. I’ll stay either way. This is home now, for me. I suppose it always was. The van makes a signalling noise, backing into a tight parking spot behind me. The windows are tinted, I can’t see the driver. There’s no logo. It’s just white. It looks brand new. Who did she hire to replace her boiler? No wonder they didn’t do it right. I bet the whole operation is one kid. He’s probably eighteen and thinks he knows everything.

The door opens. Mrs Hudson, looking anxious, nervous, maybe. Why? She steps outside and pulls me into her arms.

“John,” she says. “Oh, John. It’s good to see you.”

That’s odd. It hasn’t been that long, has it? She must be lonely, living here with no tenants, all these problems with the boiler, and now worrying about her sister. I should tell her I’m thinking of staying. She might like that, a tenant she can trust. I wasn’t the one who shot her wall. Though it was my gun, admittedly.

“Come inside,” she says. She pats me on the arm.
“Is that your repairman?” I point to the van.

She shakes her head. “No,” she says. “No, that’s—” She stops herself. “Come inside, John.”

I pick up my bags. “Sorry I’m so late, traffic was terrible.”

“Yes,” she says. “Yes, I thought it might be.”

“You did?” I pull my bags inside, and she closes the door.

“I’d give you a hand with those,” she says. “But my hip.”

“Oh, that’s all right.” I’ll bring the big one up first and come back for the rest. Seventeen steps: I can manage. It’s not that much stuff, anyway. I’ll be fine.

Where am I going to put them, anyway? I won’t be needing the second bedroom. I don’t need a flatmate. I don’t want one, either. I’m not sure if I’m ready to sleep in Sherlock’s room, though. I don’t know. It will be different. But that’s as it should be. Because it is different, now.

She smiles at me. It’s a sad smile, a bit more of her sympathy-on-the-verge-of-pity. Like she knows, she understands: it’s not easy for me to come back here. Or is it even simpler than that: does she know that I’ve just left Mary? Well, of course she does: here I am, all my worldly belongings in tow. I’m carrying my winter coat in the middle of the spring. She must guess. Anyone would. Even the taxi driver guessed. Though he said, so she threw you out, did she? and I didn’t correct him. I just shrugged, and he gave me that same sympathetic, pitying sort of look through the rearview mirror. And he doesn’t even know me. Can’t live with them, he said. Waiting for me to finish his sentence. And I did. Can’t kill them. He laughed. I didn’t.

Mrs Hudson hugs me again. I must look terrible; she must see it on me. But I feel all right, really. I’m okay. I’m fine. I’m good, actually. Or I will be. It’s better, for now, for me to be on my own. There are things I need to work through. I should go to the graveyard tomorrow. I haven’t done that yet, either. I should do that, and tell you about my first night back here. My new life. All the mistakes I’ve made. Maybe there’ll be another ad in the classifieds for me. Something to look forward to. Maybe I should call Ella.

“You go on upstairs,” she says. “I’ll bring you some lunch in a few minutes.” She looks nervous. She’s wringing her hands, why?

“Do you have to go?” I’m late; I’m probably keeping her. The traffic will make her late, too.

“Hmm?”

“To Bristol. Did you mean to leave this morning? I can get my own lunch, I’ll be fine.” She probably stocked the kitchen; I can manage to put lunch together. If she didn’t, I’ll drop in to Tesco and pick up a few things. It’s fine.

“Oh,” she says. “Um, no, not yet. I’ll be along later.” She smiles again. Her eyes are a bit glassy. She must have been very lonely these last few weeks. She reaches over and squeezes my hand. “You go ahead.”

The stairs feel so familiar, it’s like I never left at all. I didn’t even live here very long; eighteen months, give or take. Not that long. But those eighteen months shaped me more than anything else ever has. I’m shaped to take these stairs. I’m shaped to push open this door.

It’s shocking how little it’s changed. She didn’t patch over the wall, oddly enough. I can still see
the bullet holes, though she’s trimmed back the paper around them. She’s tried to scrub the yellow paint off, and partially succeeded. None of the furniture has moved; there’s still a cow’s skull on the wall, and it’s still wearing earphones. But it’s neater; there are no piles of papers and books, no harpoon in the corner. There’s no skull on the mantelpiece. No knife, either. No Cluedo board stuck to the wall. It looks startlingly bare without the domestic little details. Empty. Lifeless. I can tell you’re not here anymore, Sherlock. That mess was part of your presence, somehow. I’ll drop my things here, for now. I’ll figure out what to do with them later, once I readjust. Take a breath.

The kitchen table is actually a kitchen table, for once. It’s clear, like a family could sit there and eat. How bizarre.

Wait. What’s that?

I’m still carrying my gun. There’s someone here.

Mrs Hudson was nervous, she knew. She knew someone was here, waiting for me. Was this a trap? Am I some kind of hostage now, with all my things? Without Mary in the way? No one will notice I’m missing now, not for days. Eventually my agent will try to find me, but not for weeks. I could be dead and buried by then. I won’t go down without a fight.

Who is it? Moriarty’s assassins, here to take their revenge the only way they can? I’ll have them in my line of sight. I can aim and fire before they’re on me. There’s no security watching me here. It’s up to me. Don’t move. Don’t move: just wait. Listen. There’s someone here, moving. Sherlock’s bedroom. The corridor. Shoes on the floor, fast. Someone’s here; at least one person. Maybe more. Coming toward me. And there: a body, I can see his shadow, I can see–

Sherlock.

No.

Wait. What?

Sherlock. I can’t–

Breathe.

His face. It’s his face.

My gun, reach for my–

No.

This is impossible.

Exits: I can run. I can run down the stairs, Mrs Hudson. She knows. She must know.

This isn’t–

It’s not happening. Is it?

Sherlock.

I might faint. My knees feel like water. What’s going on? What am I–

You jumped. Oh my God.

He’s smiling at me. A small smile. I remember those: I remember hundreds of them. Before. When he was alive.

“There you are, John.” That voice. It’s been in my head for years now, only in my head. Telling me things, telling me I’m an idiot, repeating things to me. Whispering things I want to hear, things I don’t want to hear. It’s him. It’s him, it’s Sherlock. Sherlock. Jesus Christ. “I was beginning to wonder if you’d changed your mind. I was expecting you an hour ago.”

He’s standing in the kitchen like nothing happened. He’s wearing a crisp shirt. It’s deep blue. I’ve never seen it before. His trousers are pressed, like always. Always? Like before, like it was. When he was alive. He’s wearing leather shoes. He picks up the kettle, takes it to the sink. He fills it with water.

He’s here.

Sherlock.

What the fuck is happening?

Sherlock. He’s–

He can’t be. He can’t.

He switches the kettle on. He smiles at me again. “John?”

I can’t do this. I can’t breathe. There isn’t enough–

No air. There’s no air in here.

He walks toward me. Step back, step back: I can’t. Heat, cold, up and down my limbs, fight or flight. I’ll do both. Breathe, try. My eyes are watering. What? Sherlock. How is this possible?

What’s going on?

Fuck.

Oh my god.

Sherlock.

I can’t move. Panic. I’ve grown slow, I’m stuck. My tongue is dry and thick. He stands in front of me. His eyes. He looks me up and down, he’s evaluating me. I can’t breathe, I can’t–

His hand; he takes my wrist. He’s warm. He’s alive. His eyes are on me again. He looks concerned. Confused. Sherlock. Oh my god. Sherlock.

“You’re surprised,” he says.

Is that what this is? Surprise? I watch his lips moving. I can see his teeth. His tongue. He’s alive.

“Shock,” he says. He holds my wrist in his hand. Lightly. He’s not taking my pulse now; just his fingers around my wrist. Warm. Alive. “Do you need a blanket?” He’s genuinely confused. This is impossible.
“Take deep breaths, John.” His hand leaves my wrist; it moves to my shoulder. He’s trying to steady me. I’m shaking.

Sherlock.

Jesus Christ. Sherlock. You were dead. You were dead.

He pulls me toward him; I’m like jelly, I fall into him, he props me up. Triple milled soap. Faintly: coffee. That vague chemical smell, I never knew what that was. His skin. Sherlock. Oh my god.

His shirt is under my fingers, and the waistband of his trousers. I’m leaning into him. His hands are pressed against my back. He’s hugging me.

Sherlock’s never hugged me. Not once. He’s hugging me now.

You’re not dead, are you.

How did you do that?

Where have you been?

I can’t speak, I can’t. Just–

“All right?” he says. I can hear him, I can feel him say it: his chest is pressed against mine. His chest. He’s breathing. Sherlock. Jesus Christ. He pats my back.

My face is buried in his hair. I can smell him; his shampoo. A faint whiff of cigarette smoke. He’s taken up smoking again, has he? All this time, I thought–

The classified ads. They were from him. From Sherlock. Jesus. Jesus Christ, Sherlock. What have you done to me?

“I’ve missed you,” he says. He’s still propping me up, he’s rubbing my back. He’s hugging me. Move my arms, hug him back. Hug him back. He’s alive. My heart is beating too fast. I’m terrified, I’m confused. I need to breathe. I need to hug him back.

All I can hear is my own breathing. Sherlock.

“Kettle’s boiled,” he says. He doesn’t move.
However Improbable

Chapter Summary

The world is falling, and I’m standing still, just watching it go.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Lavellington, adisusedshed, and Gillian. Apologies to everyone else.

Here you are: just standing here, keeping me from collapsing into the floor, as if it’s nothing. As if it’s not a dream or a miracle. Is it? You’re here, in this place of all places, this place I’ve been avoiding. How long have you been here? Sherlock, how long?

The water is bubbling in the kettle, there’s a hiss of steam. You’re going to step away in a minute and vanish, aren’t you. Don’t vanish. Not yet.

My heart is beating too fast. I need to breathe. I can’t. If I hold him tighter, I just feel more of him. He’s solid. He doesn’t disappear, or disintegrate. His shoulder blades seem sharp even under his suit jacket. He’s all bones and expensive tailoring. I’d forgotten about the smell of his skin, that unique and particular smell I can’t describe, but there it is again. I’d recognise it anywhere. It’s you, Sherlock. It couldn’t be anyone else.

“So you didn’t know,” he says. It’s not a question: of course I didn’t. How could I? “You didn’t guess.”

He shifts, he’s stepping back from me. The fabric of his jacket slips under my fingers: I can’t hold on. I don’t trust my knees. Don’t let me go, Sherlock. He takes me by the shoulders and looks at me. Breathe, I need to breathe. I’m shaking. I might faint. He’s evaluating me. I don’t need to say anything: he’ll read everything he needs to know on my face.

Of course I didn’t know. I didn’t dare guess; I couldn’t. Not without losing my mind.

“No, I suppose you didn’t.” He smiles at me, a sort of awkward, wry smile. I’d call it apologetic, but I don’t think it is. Sad? I don’t know. I’m out of practice reading his facial expressions. “I had hoped...” He sighs, and looks over his shoulder. “Well. Come, sit here, I’ll make you some tea. All right?”

Tea. The kettle’s just boiled. I can see the steam. No time at all has passed since Sherlock reappeared in the world. Three years: three minutes. Time makes no sense anymore. His bloodied, pale face: his wry smile. It’s all blurred together. Which is real? Neither. Both. I don’t know anymore.

He steers me into the kitchen. My legs feel like they’re not mine; I need to orchestrate every muscle, each shift in weight. Each step is an accomplishment. He doesn’t complain.
It’s just the shock. Combat stress reaction: I’m too thick, too slow, too weak. I can’t take my eyes off him. He sits me down; my hands are shaking. I need to breathe, I need just one deep breath, I’m going to hyperventilate. Inhale, exhale. Watch him. It’s impossible, but there he is. Alive.

He moves like music: what does that even mean? Smoothly: he walks, he takes milk from the fridge and puts it on the worktop. I can’t understand him. He doesn’t make any sense. How can he be here? How can he open the cupboard, take down the cups, how are his hands moving at all? They’re not stitched back together, and he’s not a ghost. He’s not a monster made of corpses, he’s not a product of the morgue. How?

He’s so thin; his clothes are hanging off of him. Like the day I met him: rail thin, pinched. Where’s he been all this time? He hasn’t been eating.

His hair is too long: it’s wild and standing on end. Usually you’d relent and get a haircut before it gets this long, before it gets to be a halo of mad curls. I’d have teased you for it by now. There’s a bit of grey in there too, at his temples; he’s aged. Like me. Like a living man. How can you have? You’re alive. Breathe: I need to breathe.

“I’ve given you a fright,” he says. Matter-of-factly. Is he disappointed? He is, isn’t he. I was supposed to work it out. I know his methods: I was meant to apply them. Figure it out. Deduce it. How was I supposed to do that? From code posted in the classifieds? That’s not enough to go on, Sherlock. That’s not enough to make an entirely irrational leap of faith. Dead men don’t come back, not without founding a religion. Not after three years.

But I saw him.

Oh my god.

I saw him so many times. Those weren’t men who looked remarkably like you, were they. Of course not; they were all you. Three years you’ve been standing on the edge of my peripheral vision, haven’t you. Tempting me with the mad delusion that I’d seen you, that it wasn’t possible for someone to look so much like you, to have your posture. Your gait. That it had to be you, in spite of what I’ve seen. But you had no pulse. Your head: it was broken. I saw it. I saw you jump.

**However improbable.** You would expect me to think it through, of course. To make some kind of impossible deduction. _Sherlock is alive._ You were always expecting too much of me.

Why? I don’t understand. Why would you do this?

He puts a cup of tea in front of me on the table and it takes me a second to make sense of it: his over-prominent knuckles are right there in front of me. He takes my hands and puts them around the cup. Hot. He leans back against the worktop and watches me.

“–” Is that my voice? It is. I can speak. My tongue feels huge and thick. “I saw you.” I saw you jump. I saw you fall. I saw you dead. I saw you in the high streets, collar turned up. I saw you in bookshops and walking through the park, standing, quiet, at the end of the street, watching me. I saw you.

He smiles. It’s a wry smile. He looks tired.

“Yes.”

These are the deductions I should have made, is that it? But I couldn’t, Sherlock. How could I? How could I have even begun to imagine this? Mary would have left me ages ago. She would have
had me committed. I’d be in a rubber room by now. It’s too much.

“I don’t understand.”

“I can see that.” His eyes crinkle a little as he smiles. “I’m not dead.”

Starting with the obvious, are we? Should I be annoyed? “I’m starting to gather that, yeah.”

“Are you angry?”

“Still in shock, I think.” Oh god. I am. I’m in shock, and time has stopped, and you’re standing here in the kitchen, watching me unable to wrap my fingers around a cup of tea without help. My hands are shaking. My head is spinning. I’m hot and cold, I’m falling. No: the world is falling, and I’m standing still, just watching it go.

Sherlock. Fucking hell. What have you done?

“Mycroft nearly had my head for the classified ads. He said I was teasing you, it wasn’t fair. I didn’t do it to tease you, you know. I had sort of hoped...well, it doesn’t really matter.” You had sort of hoped what? That I’d guess? Guess that you’re alive, that the ads were from you? That you missed me? What were you doing, showing off again? Were you proud of yourself, is that what this is all about? Or was it meant to be a sign that I would see you again? Christ. How was I supposed to let myself believe any of that? How could I possibly? After what you did, what you said, what you forced me to see?

You said goodbye, it was your note. You said you were a fake, and then you jumped. You jumped. I watched. I saw.

“But I saw...I saw...”

He looks at me: I know that look. He’ll just wait. He’ll watch me, and wait, and let me finish. What did you see, John? What did you actually observe? Think about it, think. Remember. That voice in my head: it doesn’t need to be there now. You’re right here.

He’ll wait for me to put the pieces together. You want to hear me say it, don’t you. Cruel. Amber said that: cruel. Both of you. Did she know about you? Did she mean you, or someone else? Did she think we were working together, somehow? I need to swallow, my throat is so dry. Tea will do it; I can drink a cup of tea. It’s hot, it feels foreign against my tongue. Drink, swallow. Take a breath. Say it. What did I see? What did I really see?

“You jumped. Off the roof.” That much is true. I saw that: you were on the roof; you jumped. That was real, that happened.

“Yes.” He waits. He’s not going to walk me through it, I have to say it. What I saw. The facts. No fantasy, no imagination. What did I see? Ella never asked me that; it’s an insensitive question. It hurts. Jesus, Sherlock.

I start and I stop. I’m afraid I’m going to scream. It wasn’t real, it wasn’t real. How is this possible? “You were...” Just the facts. What did I see? “There was blood.”

He smiles. “Yes. Not mine, though. Six pints of B positive. Not even my blood type.” As if I was meant to work that out by just looking at it. It soaked through his hair. But it wasn’t his blood. All over the pavement, all over him: it wasn’t his.

Oh my god.
Did I see his broken skull? Remember: try to remember. I did, I’m sure I did. I heard it, too: or did I only imagine that? I heard the sound of his head hitting the pavement, the crumpling sound of his body, his limbs. There was blood on his face. His eyes were open, cold. He was pale. I haven’t wanted to think about this: it’s too painful. I don’t want to remember you this way.

I didn’t get to touch you, I didn’t get to feel the break, the bones. Your hair was a little too long then too, a great mass of curls spiralling off in every direction. I’d teased you about it a few days before, I remember that. I threatened to put bows in it, it had got so long. And then it was plastered to your forehead, covered in blood. I saw it: I know I did.

“Come here.”

He does. He’s standing close to me, he leans down. He knows what I want. I put my hands on his head: his thick curls, too long. I sink my fingers into them, feel the hard bone of his skull, run my fingers across it, feel for evidence. I know the exact spot where you would have landed, Sherlock. The right side of your head, above your ear, where the blood was–

Where I thought the blood had come from.

He’s watching me. His lips twitch: he wants to say something, but he doesn’t. He just watches me.

Parietal, temporal bones...no. Nothing broken. This isn’t a skull that met pavement. How is that possible? He jumped. He’s perfectly whole. He’s warm. I don’t want to let him go. Your hair is too long, Sherlock. I’ll pin it up for you, I’ll put bows in it. You’ll look so pretty.

None of this makes any sense.

His neck is warm, too. I can feel his pulse under my fingers. His heart is beating fast, it’s not just mine. Why? He’s nervous. Like me. Well, good. He should be. Three years.

Jesus. Jesus Christ, Sherlock. What have you done to me?

What happened that day? What happened. I fell, someone ran into me. I got up. There was a crowd. I pushed my way through. He was–

I can’t. I can’t, it’s too painful. But it was a lie. I wanted to touch him, I wanted to stay with him, I took his wrist. He had no pulse. They pulled me away. He was gone.

“They wouldn’t let me...”

“They did as they were instructed.” Instructed? Of course. Of course: it was all orchestrated. So was I. He sent me away and I came back. He told me where to stand. He told me to watch him. I did. Why did he do that? I saw him fall; I couldn’t see him land. I fell too. It was a perfect lie, a perfect fraud.

“You wanted me to believe you were dead.” His wrist was still warm, but he had no pulse. I held onto that warmth as long as I could. The last of him. No: it’s not true. He’s right here. He’s still warm now. I can feel his heart still beating.

“It was necessary, yes.” I can feel his breath on my face. I can feel his voice rumbling under the palm of my hand.

“Necessary?” I’m trying to speak, but now I’m whispering. It’s the best I can do.

“If you didn’t believe it, John, if they sensed for an instant that you didn’t believe it, the plan
would have failed. They would have known. They would have killed us both, and that would have been just the beginning.”

“They?”

He raises an eyebrow. They. I suppose I know who “they” are. *I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you.* That’s what he said once. He’d die: or at least pretend to die. What the hell is going on?

“You faked your death.”

“Yes.”

That’s obvious by now, isn’t it. Of course it is. He’s not dead. He’s here. He’s right in front of me. He has a pulse, his heart is racing, just like mine is. Did he let me believe he was dead for three years? He did. He thought I would guess, or start to. I didn’t; I couldn’t. They would have killed us both if I didn’t believe it. Why? What was the plan?

I don’t need to ask him that, do I. I know what the plan was. To kill Moriarty. To root out his network, his web. To rid the world of a massive criminal ring, piece by piece. He needed to be dead to do it, is that it? Sherlock must have killed Moriarty, without me to help him. It worked. I believed, and it worked, didn’t it?

“Did it help?”

He smiles. “It did.”

Well, that’s something. “And now…” It’s over? Is that why we’re back in Baker Street? Moriarty’s dead. It’s over. Sherlock can come back. Oh my god. Are we going to live here again, together? As if it never happened?

There’s nothing wrong with the boiler, is there.

“Now.” He stands up, and my hand falls back into my lap. He looks out across the sitting room, as if he’s expecting to see someone there. It’s empty: the windows are open and the curtains billow out a little with the breeze. I can hear a car driving past. The world is going on as normal, as if Sherlock has not just returned from the dead. They don’t know yet. They don’t know what I know. He looks at me. “Now we wait.”
Safehouse

Chapter Summary

Now is not the time. Jesus.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to DVeleniet for pinch-hitting, airynothing for the lasereye beta, and longtimegone for her usual deftness. Gillian, you have a good point, but I needed him to ask! A moment of weakness, perhaps. <3

“Why a safehouse?” It’s a strange thing to call 221b, a strange thing to try and turn it into. It’s never been a particularly safe place. Interesting, yes. Safe? No.

He curls his lips at me. He’s annoyed. At me? No. He’s annoyed that he has to be in a safehouse. That they had to build him one. That he has to stay in it.

His lips are exactly as I remembered them, but different somehow: they turn up a little as he speaks sometimes, a quiet little half-smile most people wouldn’t notice. I remember that. But my memories were washed out, it seems. I missed all the key details, the things that make him real. I didn’t entirely remember these gradations of colour, or the precision in the shapes that make him. I remember the creases there, the way they deepen while he’s thinking, I thought about them all this time, but not quite like this. I remembered the sharp edges of his upper lip, sharp as if they were carved in stone with a chisel. His angles are more extreme than other people’s, harder and more pronounced, as if his skin takes on the shape of his personality. But I couldn’t picture his lips like this. As they actually are. Not quite.

Amazing.

“Sebastian Moran.”

What? Who? I’m not sure how that’s an answer to my question. But I’m in no fit state to argue.

He sits across from me; he’s watching me. Monitoring me, more likely. Here we are, in the sitting room like we used to be, me in my chair, him in his. I remember sitting here without him, and the agony of that empty chair across from me. The senselessness of it. No. Not now. Oh my god.

“He’s the last,” Sherlock says. “He should know by now, he at least suspects.” That you’re alive? I didn’t. I didn’t suspect.

He steeples his fingers in front of his mouth; I remember that too. His perfect oval fingernails, perfectly clean, manicured. I remembered them remarkably well. I imagined his fingers so many times: holding open the paper, aiming a fork at a bit of tomato. I imagined them knitted in mine, resting against my hip in the night, sliding across my chest and onto my stomach, with his lips pressed against mine. Oh god. Now is not the time. Jesus.
“He’ll be looking for me now.” Sherlock: you haven’t noticed, have you? You’re going to. Christ. I can’t hide this from you. Don’t think about it. He’s deep in thought, his eyes are hovering on some point over my head. I’m just in shock, I need to drink more tea.

Would I have imagined those things if I’d known he was alive? I don’t know. I don’t. Maybe. Maybe not. Christ.

He can’t read minds, no matter how much he’d like to.

“I’d rather go find him myself than sit here waiting for him to work it out.” He jumps out of his chair, and paces toward the window. He’s like a caged animal. Well, I suppose he is: he’s been forbidden to leave the flat. I knew Mycroft had some power over Sherlock, but I never imagined he’d have the power to forbid anything.

“As if I can’t be trusted with my own safety.” He peers through the curtain at the street below.

Well, you never could be trusted to take care of yourself, could you. You take every available risk, every one, to get what you want. And what do you want? Excitement, to solve a case, to make a point. I love that about you. I love that.

He looks over at me, raises an eyebrow. What?

Oh: so this is my fault, is it? This cage? My fault? The classifieds. I told Mycroft something he didn’t already know, something about your current risk-taking behaviour. Getting me involved: you weren’t supposed to do that, were you. So those codes were meant to be our secret, between you and me. Is that it? In the newspapers. The newspapers, Sherlock, that is not a private space. It was against the rules, wasn’t it, sending me into the breach like that. Well, it’s not my fault I got frustrated, it wasn’t enough to go on. You were driving me mad. Just like you do: I should have known. What did you expect me to do, who did you think I would suspect? Who was I supposed to call instead? You were dead. Your precious name was off the table. Christ.

You really can’t be trusted, Sherlock. If this whole operation rests on this Moran fellow not suspecting you’re alive, and my belief in your being dead was the evidence of that, why were you sending me to all those arrests, anyway? Incredible. You can’t resist showing off. Of course you can’t: you’re still you. You haven’t changed. You thought you were leaving me all the clues, you were leading me toward you all this time, weren’t you. Wouldn’t that look suspicious? I can’t believe I’m siding with Mycroft on this one. But he has a point. You need a safehouse. You need a keeper. I guess that’s me. That’s me, now.

“He takes the fun out of everything.”

I can’t help it: that makes me laugh. It makes me laugh so much I spill some tea on my lap. Three years of trying to find something new to come close to occupying me the way you did and here I am, being your caretaker all over again. With shaking hands and a pounding headache. And a crush. Let’s not forget about that: a crush on my flatmate.

Well, fuck.

He’s laughing too, a little. Laughing at me, maybe. Or at all of this: the two of us, back in 221b, waiting for someone to come and kill us both. It’s like poetry. It’s the answer to dreams I didn’t dare have. He’s looking at me again, he’s examining me. I know that look on his face. He sees something he didn’t expect to, and he’s going to deduce something about it. About me. I’m helpless against this: what is it, you can tell by my left index finger that I can’t stop thinking about your mouth? Something like that, I’m sure. He’ll know.
No. No, not yet. Christ. Put the cup down, look away. There’s nothing to see here, Sherlock. Nothing. Just your very shocked former flatmate, still processing the reality of your face. Still processing. Still in shock. That’s all. If I’m staring at you, that’s all it is. You were dead: I mourned you. It’s been three years. I missed you. I missed you so much. I dreamed about you, of course I did. It makes sense.

You must have known, before. Before you did this, before you jumped. We sat here, on the sofa, you and I, watching telly. You sat too close to me. You got into my bed in only a sheet. You must have known. You must have seen it in me even then, before I did.

I’m not ready for this conversation. No. Not now. I just– I can’t.

But I can stand up, I can move around. I have nervous energy suddenly. Don’t look too close, Sherlock, not yet. I can’t feel my knees anymore, but that’s okay. What am I doing here? Why am I here? I left my bags downstairs. I should go get them. I should bring them in here, I should sort through them. I packed in a hurry. We should set things up. There’s a wireless router, we still have a modem. Is that allowed? Are we allowed the internet? I should plug it in and get it working, I can do that. There’s a laptop sitting on the table; that must be yours. How did I miss it? I should tidy up. I could wash the dishes, but there’s only two cups of tea. That’s all, that won’t take long enough. There’s a stack of bedding sitting on the coffee table; that must be from Mrs Hudson. I should make the beds.

“John,” he says. No. Not yet, Sherlock. My left arm tingles and I’m afraid it’s going to develop a tremor again. And I would blame you, you know. I would blame you. “I’m sorry about Mary,” he says.

Oh. That.

Well.

I don’t know what to say about that. I’d nearly forgotten; that feels like weeks ago. You’ve distracted me. It was for the best. I don’t know.

“Did you finally end it, or did she?”

He knows about Mary; he knows it’s over. He knows far too much about everything, but he can’t know which of us pulled the plug, somehow. I suppose it could have gone either way. She could have started that conversation. It just so happens that I did. It feels like it was months ago. Years ago. It’s faded away to grey now, and all there is now is you. There are more colours in your lips than I remembered: more variation. “It was me.”

He nods, as if that confirms something. How does he know about Mary? He’s been watching me. All this time. From my peripheral vision. Damn. There’s a beeping sound, and he pulls a phone out of his pocket. A text. He reads it. He twists his mouth at it, then sets it down on the desk. He sighs. He paces. He’s nervous. Stuck. Caged.

“This waiting,” he says, and flops onto the sofa. “It’s going to kill me.”

I can’t help but laugh. I can’t help it. I want to throw something at him for that, but I can’t, I can’t stop laughing. I need to sit down, I need to sit, I’m going to fall over. The edge of the sofa, by his feet, I can sit there. I’m practically kneeling, and I can’t stop laughing. He’s laughing too, his hands on his stomach like that will keep it all in. I can feel him, the vibration of laughter through the sofa. His and mine. Mrs Hudson must think we’ve gone mad.

He grins at me.

I shake my head. He’s lying there, looking over at me. It would be so easy; I’ve imagined this. I could lean over him, one hand at his waist, the other by his head. I could lean over him, laughing, still in shock, half-hysterical, and kiss him. Because I’ve missed him. Because he’s been gone so long. Because he’s mine to take care of, because he’s mine. And I want to.

Oh my god.

There’s another beeping sound; another phone, a different sound. How many phones has he got? He pulls it out of another pocket and stares at it. He rolls his eyes.

“Mycroft,” he says. He sits up. “Shall I send him your love?”

“I have nothing to say to him,” I tell him. I’m nervous. Christ. I feel like I’m thirteen, what’s wrong with me? Shock: right. I’m not myself. There’s a pile of bedding on the table. I’ll make the beds. That’s what I should do.

Wait: “No. Tell him he’s a bastard, too.” They both kept me in the dark. Both of them. Pick up the bedding: enough for two beds. Two bedrooms, two beds. Of course.

He’s not looking at me anymore, he’s looking at the phone, his elbows on his knees. He’s working. Like he always did. I should set up the router. No: he can manage that. I’ll make the beds. Beds are easy: mattresses into sheets, pull out the bedclothes, make them even on either side. I could do that in my sleep. I could do that even though I can barely feel my extremities. And it will give me a bit of distance: I need that. I need to breathe, I need to think. Bedding: two sets. Mrs Hudson knew this was going to happen: she washed these sheets today. They’re still a bit warm from the dryer. Two sets of bedding. She knew when she called me. Maybe before that, maybe she knew after the tenants took the boiler out.

The tenants didn’t take the boiler out, did they. Was that Sherlock too? Or Mycroft? Or was it this Moran character, the last of the criminals? I’ll ask, at some point. I’ll ask. Mrs Hudson knew all along, didn’t she.

Of course she did. I can’t tell if I’m angry or relieved. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry. Or shout. Or scream. Or all of the above. I just don’t know.

“I’m going to make the beds,” I tell him. He doesn’t look up. I guess that’s obvious, too obvious for commentary: I’m holding the bedding. His back is curved, a brief moment of poor posture. His hair is too long, it’s corkscrewing out from the back where he mussed it against the sofa. I can see him clench his jaw, I can see tension in his shoulders. He starts texting angrily, and I’m staring at him again.

“Right.” Everything is upside down.

I’ll make the beds. I can do that.
Chapter Summary

It’s been too long, Sherlock. I thought about it too much. I can’t forget. I can’t switch it off. People don’t work that way. Sentiment, that’s what you’ll deduce. Sentiment, yes. You could say that.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Elvichar, for excusing my shame spiral and for the discussion about bedding; to airynothing for her laser eyes of destiny; and to Lavellington, who always makes my day that much sweeter.

It’s as if I never left.

It really is: garish wallpaper and the same comfortably over-washed bedclothes, the familiar wood and the rug at my feet, it's all the same. Nothing's changed. How is that possible? It's as if she had no tenants while we were gone, and this place just stopped and held its breath.

But I know that's not true. There were others here, for a little while, at least, in our places. Someone other than you in your bed, someone other than me in mine. Intruders, squatters. But there’s no sign of them now. No trace at all.

In the sitting room, I could tell. Someone else had been there: it was tidy. In the kitchen, our temporary absence was obvious. No lab equipment, no eyeballs on the counter, no limbs in the fridge. But here, there’s no sign. It’s unchanged. There must be something different, some sign of the previous tenants left behind, like a scar. You’d know the moment you looked, if you came in here. You’d probably see the signs of strangers everywhere in here. They won’t be strangers to you by now: you probably know their professions and their habits, you’d know if they broke up or stayed together. You know what they like to eat for dinner and who slept where. Rooms don’t talk to me the way they talk to you. I can’t see anyone else here.

She might have put it all back just for me, knowing what she knew. Is it meant to be comforting, this room preserved in amber? It’s a little bit terrifying. I’ve dreamed myself into this room too often. Am I actually here this time? Or is this a fantasy, some bit of a delusion born of impossible hope? Have I finally cracked and can no longer tell the difference? Ella would know. She wouldn’t approve, I’m sure. Dancing on the edge of sanity like this. Can’t be healthy.

I should get my bags, I should have brought them with me. At least one. My clothes, my things. My toothbrush. I wasn’t thinking. I could spend the afternoon here, putting things away, getting myself in order. Calming down. Reuniting with reality. Then go back downstairs and verify: are you actually here? And if you are, if you’re still alive and breathing, sitting on the sofa or hunched over the desk, what is it I want to say to you? I couldn’t tell Ella. I could barely speak at the funeral. What do I want to say?
Why did you do this to me, Sherlock?

Why didn’t you take me with you?

Welcome back.

I missed you.

Don’t leave me again, all right? Never. Never again. I can’t bear it.

The mirror above the dresser still has a chip in the top left corner. Of course it does: it wasn’t going to magically heal itself, was it, or creep further down the mirror like a patch of damp. It is what it is.

You’re still breathing, still smoking, still causing trouble. You’re downstairs, caught up in details I can’t see and following trails I don’t understand. Just like you always did. You’re alive, like I wished you would be.

Christ.

That’s not how the world works, it’s not. People don’t get their wishes granted like that. Not those kinds of wishes. Second chances, reversals of outrageous fortune, no. It doesn’t happen. But I touched you. It’s true.

You’re pacing again downstairs, I can hear that familiar dull creak of the floorboards holding your weight. The rules of the universe are different with you, I should have known that. Reality is shaped differently in your presence. The impossible is commonplace, obvious. How could I have known? How could I not know? I wished that you’d come back, and now here you are. The embodiment of a fantasy, alive and well.

Alive, anyway.

Dead was the only way you could be a fraud, you bastard. I knew it. The only thing I wanted to be a lie, was. It’s too perfect. Another shoe’s about to drop, isn’t that it? There’s more I don’t know. They’ll snatch you away from me again, maybe. You’ll snatch yourself away. Maybe we’re only set to have this one afternoon, and then you’ll vanish, and no one will believe me when I tell them. It’s my own secret, my own tragedy. I can’t take it. I can’t. Don’t test me on this, Sherlock.

Have I gone mad? Have I finally snapped? It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. One thing at a time.

Bedding. A fitted sheet, a flat sheet, pillow cases. Two sets of bedding: I took both of them. I didn’t think to separate them out. One set for you, and one for me. See? You’re not a figment of my imagination, not this time. Mrs Hudson left us two sets of sheets. She knows. You’re real, you’re really here.

Aren’t you?

I remember exactly how much I need to pull on these sheets to make them fit, to drag the elastic down under the mattress. Muscle memory: my hands are making a bed in the distant past, back before all of this. Moving by rote.

These are the same sheets: navy blue for me, grey for you. She kept our sheets. I didn’t take mine, and I couldn’t bear to go anywhere near your bedroom. So she did it. She washed them, ironed them. The pillows? They feel the same. I don’t know. They look the same, lined up against the headboard like that. Like the last terrible thing didn’t happen. Like you didn’t fall.
You did, though. You did. I saw it. You just didn’t die.

How did you do that?

I’ll have to ask. Maybe at some point I’ll be ready to hear all the details. It doesn’t matter: you didn’t die. It’s a miracle. I asked for one, and you gave me one. You’re not dead.

Any time I shut my eyes, it seems, I was here. And now I’m here with my eyes open.

Lying here feels exactly the same. It’s disconcerting.

You crawled into this bed just here, you lay down beside me. You were warm, you had a fever. Your knee was cold and pressed against my thigh. Your hair was damp; I ran my fingers through your hair. I kissed you.

No: no, I didn’t. I imagined that I did, I thought about it. I fantasised about it, but I didn’t. Not really. Oh god. What if I can’t tell the difference between memories and fantasies? It’s been so long. I’ll make a mistake, I’ll say the wrong thing, and you’ll know. You’ll know everything.

You probably already know.

_Do keep up, John._

I’m trying, Sherlock. I am. But you know I can’t; my brain isn’t as fast as yours. I feel like I’ve stepped onto another planet. Another planet that looks like my dreams, my fantasies, my past. Reality tinged with impossibility. It makes no sense.

_Make it go away._

What? Reality? Sense? My attempts to rationalise this? You don’t understand: if I don’t, if I can’t fit you back into my head, I’ll just leave. I’ll slam the door behind me, I’ll run and never come back here. Because this is so overwhelming it’s ripping me to shreds. This is more than normal people can handle, Sherlock. And if I’m anything, it’s a normal person. An idiot. Isn’t that right?

_Don’t go._

I won’t. I can’t leave you. And you can’t go anywhere either, so we’ll have to sort this out, one way or another. We’re in a safehouse together now. Trapped. You’re trapped here with me. It’s your punishment for lying to me.

_I’d leave the house for an eight._

Your brother would kill you for leaving. And this Moran character would kill you outright. We can’t have that. No, not again. Not today. You don’t come back from the dead just to die, Sherlock. Though: you do love the dramatic, don’t you.

You should rest. That’s what I said to you the first time, when you were lying here, complaining. Early in the morning, you crawled into bed with me, right here. In a sheet. You were damp with fever. Damp with sweat. You complained of feeling cold, but you were warm. I felt your salty tongue, I pressed my lips against your navel, I had my hands on your bony knees, I–

_I’m not a piece of property, John._

No, I suppose you’re not.

_I’m not construction equipment._
Oh my god. I can’t do this. I can’t. This is hardly the place and is certainly not the time to–

“John?”

Is that you calling me? Or is that your voice in my head, inviting me closer to you, whispering in
my ear? I should be able to tell. It’s important.

There are feet against the stairs: I remember that sound, too. You coming upstairs to find me, you
did that so many times. Your familiar gait, sometimes taking two steps at once. You’re always in a
hurry, even in a hurry to see me when I’m dead asleep. Two in the morning, you want to skewer a
pig. You have a question in your head, you can’t find the answer, you come up the stairs two at a
time to wake me up and talk to me, even though I’m groggy and swearing, and thoroughly
confused. I’ll complain. I’ll tell you to piss off, let me sleep, what’s wrong with you? I’m no help
to you, not really, but you don’t seem to mind. You bound up the stairs and breeze into my room
like it’s yours. And I never stop you, for all my complaining. You come in and sit on my bed, you
talk. You do that: you sit on my bed and pat my leg, you talk to me until you understand some
deeper mystery. That’s how it is with you. That’s how it’s always been.

“John?” Your voice is louder now. You’re worried. Why? I’ve been up here too long. I’ve been too
quiet. You can’t hear my feet on the floor, you can’t hear me. I’m making the bed, I’m settling in.
That’s all. I’m lying here, I’m remembering things. Imagining you here with me, in a sheet. Letting
me stroke you and kiss you. As if that’s what happened.

You’re texting me? It’s you, of course it is.

You used to text me all the time. Then you stopped: you were dead. I got a few random texts from
numbers I didn’t recognise, were those from you? I don’t want to know. I’ll pretend they were.
That’s comforting, somehow. That you were there, watching me, talking to me, probably, even
though I didn’t know. It’s comforting, infuriating. I can barely tell the difference anymore.

You’re texting me from the landing, aren’t you. There it is: your name on the screen again. Like
you’re back from the dead. You are back from the dead. My hands are still shaking. At some point
this will sink in, you know. And then I will probably punch you in the face. If you’re lucky. If
you’re lucky I’ll stop at your face. And then I’ll kiss you, just the once, and you won’t be able to
blame me for it.

Your text: Are you all right? This is the present, not the past.

I’m fine. I’m fine, Sherlock.

No. Of course I’m not fine, I’m stunned. I want to touch you and not stop, but that gets
embarrassing after a while. I want to wrap my arms around you and not let go until I’m certain of
you. What would you think of that? What would you say?

I pulled back the sheet then, I kissed you on the throat and listened to your breathing. Didn’t I? No.
I didn’t. It feels almost real; it feels like a memory. A memory of a fantasy, it’s as real as the
bizarre life I had with you, once that was over. It’s been three years. I can’t be here without feeling
your skin against me. It was here, with this wallpaper. The bed was just here, the pillows, these
sheets. Your hands, your mouth.

Oh, Christ.

Your shoes on the stairs. You’re going to come in again, like you always do. You’ll come in, you’ll
see me like this. What will you see? Am I flushed? Pupils dilated, is my heart rate too fast? Not too obviously aroused, am I? Not too obvious. You’ll look at me and know what I’ve been thinking anyway, won’t you. You’ll look at me and know that all I can think about in this room is sex. Sex, and you. With you. Even though it wasn’t like that between us. You’ll be disappointed. I’ve ruined everything. It’s been too long, Sherlock. I thought about it too much. I can’t forget. I can’t switch it off. People don’t work that way. Sentiment, that’s what you’ll deduce. Sentiment, yes. You could say that.

Shit. I should sit up. Stand up: no, not yet. Sit. Just sit. I’m sitting here, on my bed. That’s all right, isn’t it?

“I’m fine!”

Here you are: you don’t knock. You never knock. You just open the door, you come in. Like you always do. It’s a revelation all over again: here you are. Alive. Tall and skinny and framed in the door again, like we never left. Like the last three years didn’t happen. Like I haven’t already buried and mourned you. You beautiful bastard. You impossible, beautiful, horrible bastard.

You look confused. There’s a bit of grey hair at your temples. Your face is gaunt; your cheekbones are more prominent than ever. You’re older. You’re tired. You need to sleep more; there are dark circles under your eyes. Your skin looks too pale and fragile. You’re dehydrated, you’re smoking again, you’re not taking care of yourself. You’re real, and time has passed. You used to come in here, you’d crawl into bed with me. No: stop. Reality: your grey hair, I’ve never kissed you. It’s not like that. We’re friends. That’s what we were. What we are.

Right.


I can almost see the deductions racking up behind your eyes. Yes: take it in, Sherlock. Take me in. Figure me out. Then I won’t have to tell you or wait to make a mistake. You can just set me straight. It will be humiliating, and then we’ll move on. We’ve done it before. I won’t leave you, I won’t. You’ll have to put up with me.

This is ridiculous.

“Are you...tired?” You’re confused. I’m sitting on my bed; surely I must be tired. Beds are for sleeping in, nothing else. Line of reasoning, round one. You get it wrong sometimes, Sherlock. I know you do. Because sometimes you just guess when you’re out of your depth. This is out of your depth. I knew it would be. It’s out of my depth, too.

“No.” I don’t know how to explain. There is no explaining. An observation, then. “Nothing in this room has changed, not a damn thing. It’s a bit disturbing.”

You look around. Deductive reasoning applied to the walls and the floor rather than me. Well, good.

“Crack in the ceiling.” You point up. What? There is no crack. What do you mean? Oh: right. There was. Yes, there was, a curved line from the window that split in two over the bed. How could I forget that? It’s gone now. She’s had someone in and plastered over it. No crack on the ceiling now. That’s true.

“Scrapes on the floor, here, you see? They moved the dresser at one point, then moved it back.”
Yes. Yes, I see. You’re right. That wasn’t there before.

“New hinge on the cupboard door, just the one. Must have broken. Too much use, or violent use? By the wear in the floor here, I’d say too much use.”

You’re just as magical as you were before. Maybe more so: you see the world, you really see it. Not like me: I see what I want to see. I see you the way I want to see you, looking at me with something like concern, like affection. Love, lust, apologies: that’s what I want to see. I can’t just observe you as you are, I can’t be objective.

“Stain on the floor, here, by the bed. You might think coffee, but I’d say more likely tea. Lapsang Souchong, if I’m not mistaken. New doorknob too. Though: same style as the old one, that would be easy to miss. The last one broke and left a mark on the wood, here.” You rub it with your thumb. “And the bed is, I believe, about six centimetres to the left of where it used to be. But otherwise, yes.” You grin at me like you used to. You’re showing off. It makes me grin back at you. I can’t help it. It’s like another code: what does it mean? *I’m still a smart arse.* “Nothing has changed at all.” Especially not you.

Sherlock, I could kiss you. I really, really could.

You tilt your head at me. I know that look. It’s not the one where you know. It’s the one where you know you don’t.

“Better?” Ah. You’re trying to comfort me. That’s you being kind. I almost missed it.

The room isn’t quite the same. It has the marks of the passage of time, just like you do. Like I must, to your eyes. This isn’t a fantasy; it’s not a dream or a delusion. It’s real. This place, you. That’s a surge of pleasure, of joy, that’s what that is. Not nausea. Not panic. It’s okay to be happy about it: it’s okay.

“Yes, actually.” It sort of *is* better.

I should go downstairs. I’ll make your bed too. Then maybe I can lie there with you, and stroke your head until I’m certain it isn’t broken. And you can talk to me about a case, this Moran fellow, the one who wants to kill you. Why does it require so many phones? I’ve seen six of them so far. Why do you need six phones? I’ll stroke your head and you can tell me all about it, even the parts I won’t understand. Just like always.

Time to pick up the sheets. They’re grey: they’re yours. They’re probably made of some ridiculously expensive fabric I didn’t know was even used for bedding. “I’ll make yours.”

You smile at me.
Inventory

Chapter Summary

Here you are out of sight, unfindable, untraceable, locked and barred and trapped until further notice, and it’s your own fault. I did take that in, yes.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone, airynothing, and Gillian. Love always.

Mustard. Pickles. Three bags of frozen peas. Well, dinner will be a challenge.

“I need to go to Tesco.” I do. There’s nothing here. He probably doesn’t want to eat anyway, but I’ll need to. Eventually. Ideally tonight, somewhere around dinner time. Life, such as it is, does go on, after all. Regardless of how many miracles occurred before lunch.

“No.”

What? He’s sitting at the desk, sitting in front of three open laptops. Three. Why three? Who knows. There are so many phones on the table I think they might be multiplying. How many phones does he need? He doesn’t touch most of them. They’re just sitting there, silent, piled on top of one another. Every time I turn to look there seem to be more of them. Only two seem to be in active use. No, wait: three. He’s texting on one with a green case, I haven’t seen that one before. He doesn’t look up at me. He’s busy.

Yeah, I’ve seen him busy before, I know how that works. He could stay like this for days. I might find him asleep sitting at the desk in about twelve hours, the imprint of a keyboard on his face. Not as if that hasn’t happened before, I’m quite familiar with the sight. Everything and nothing changes, all at once. Isn’t that funny.

“We have no food, Sherlock. I know that doesn’t particularly matter to you, but—”

He switches on the telly. It’s loud: far too loud. He turns the volume down to background noise and stares at it. That weird blue glow on his face: I remember that too. Sitting on the sofa, him and me, watching telly. His leg against mine. He was sitting far too close to me. I could feel the heat from him. I didn’t kiss him then, either. I didn’t. Did I? No. Obviously not.

Not now. Now is not the time.

“If I go now I’ll be back in time to make dinner at a reasonable hour.” A walk would be nice. Bit of air. Time to think. I still don’t feel entirely– Well, what? I don’t feel entirely present. I’m not quite right. I feel like I’m sleepwalking, still waiting for that other shoe. It will drop on my head, I’m sure. I’m quite sure. Oh, there’s some pasta in the cupboard, that’s something. God knows how old it is. But pasta doesn’t go off, does it? It’s dried. Should be fine. Pasta with mustard and peas, fantastic.
A quick trip to Tesco, it won’t take long. It will make me feel better. I’ll feel more human. More normal. Good. I can pick up something for you, too. Popcorn. You’ll eat that. I’ll put a bowl in front of you, maybe you’ll eat something without noticing.

Probably not.

You’ve got so thin. What would Irene say about your cheekbones now? You’ve made yourself a cup of coffee. Too much caffeine, not enough actual food. I know you don’t eat when you’re on a case, but we’re only waiting now, aren’t we? We’re just waiting. You’re a fish in a barrel, aren’t you? You should eat. You don’t need to think just now.

A quick trip to Tesco. Perfect, yes. It’s just what we need.

“No.” He doesn’t look up. No?

What, I can’t go to Tesco? I’m not yours to order around, Sherlock. Not now, not after all this. For Christ’s sake. Are you going to tell me I can’t eat anymore either? Because you don’t? You’re too busy, so I can’t eat? No. That’s not how this works. You’ve forgotten, apparently, but I haven’t.

“Sherlock, I need to get food.” I’ll just get my jacket. Where is my jacket? I took it off at some point. Where did I leave it? Upstairs? No, no there it is, it’s on the–

“Do you recall what I told you about Sebastian Moran?”

Sebastian Moran. Right. Yes. The man who’s trying to kill you. Something to do with– I don’t know, actually. He suspects you’re alive, right? Sebastian Moran. He was an associate of Moriarty’s. Something like that. He wants to kill you. Revenge? For instigating all these arrests, destroying the criminal web. And for killing Moriarty, presumably. You did that, didn’t you. How did you do it? Did you shoot him? Did you strangle him with your bare hands? Did he struggle, did he fight back? Did he hurt you? I should have been there. We could have killed him together. You could have let me do it; I wouldn’t have minded. I wouldn’t have lost any sleep over it.

Sebastian Moran, right. He’s looking for you. He wants to kill you. I know that.

What does he have to do with Tesco?

“Yes, I recall.”

“And you recall that 221b is currently acting as a safehouse?”

Safehouse. Right. He can’t find you. Not here. You’re protected here. I know that. That’s Mycroft’s doing. A team of experts, special security, cameras, motion sensors, so on and so forth, yes. 221b is now a carefully monitored location where you’ll be safely bored out of your skull somewhere this Moran fellow can’t get at you. Here you are out of sight, unfindable, untraceable, locked and barred and trapped until further notice, and it’s your own fault. I did take that in, yes.

It’s a safehouse for you, the one who’s supposed to be dead. Is it also a safehouse for me? I did have a security detail. Is he after me as well? How hard would it have been to off me if he’d wanted to? For god’s sake. I was out in public all the time. I did readings from my book. I signed copies of it at Waterstones. It was in the papers, there were adverts. Come on. I’m not his target. I was on the street an hour ago, has the world outside become more dangerous in the last hour? For you, maybe. For you. Not for me.

“You’re not allowed outside, yes, I recall that.” Mycroft forbids it. Ha! Well, no one forbade me from doing anything. I don’t have a brother who is most of the British government. “I don’t recall
anything about not being allowed out myself.”

He looks over at me. He doesn’t roll his eyes, but I feel like he probably wants to. God: fixed by that stare again. Not really fixed, though. Not fixed at all. “He’ll be watching, John. Now’s not a good time. I know how much you enjoy a dangerous situation, but I’m not sure a trip to the shops is worth risking your life, is it?”

Risking my life? That’s a bit hyperbolic, isn’t it?

“You think this Moran is going to shoot me down on the way to Tesco?” The world doesn’t work that way. It just doesn’t. Well: it didn’t. Not in the last three years. But stranger things have happened, I must admit. There’s a zone of extraordinary that surrounds you, always. That much hasn’t changed.

“I think he’ll try. If he’s been paying attention. Yes, if he’s paying attention he would most definitely shoot at you on the way to Tesco.” He picks up a phone and glares at it, then drops it back on the desk. “And that would be inconvenient.”

Inconvenient? For me to get shot at? Yes, I’d say so.

“Anyway, Mrs Hudson will take care of it.”

“Wait: Mrs Hudson is allowed to do the shopping, but I’m not?” That seems rather sexist. Mrs Hudson is in her seventies, for god’s sake, and she isn’t our housekeeper. That’s taking advantage, isn’t it?

“We each have our niche, John.” He puts his feet up on the chair and leans back. His hair falls in front of his eyes and he pushes it away.

“And what’s mine, then?”

He smiles at me. “Right now? Bait.”


Jesus, what’s that?

The door. It’s the door, someone’s come in. The door downstairs, it’s opening. I can hear the noise from the street, suddenly. Who’s here? He’s jumped up, he’s reaching for something in his pocket. A gun? No one should let Sherlock carry a gun, it’s not responsible. He’d shoot his own ear off by accident, he’s careless with firearms. Guns are my job.

It’s not a gun he’s got: it’s a phone. Another one. He’s checking his phone. His thumbs move so fast across the keypad they’re a blur. I’m holding my breath.

Moran: I wouldn’t know him if I saw him. But Sherlock will. He’s texting madly. He’ll have to tell me. Where’s my gun? Christ, where is it? It’s upstairs. What was I thinking? I’m not prepared. I’m not ready. I’d forgotten what it’s like to live here. What it’s like with you.


“I told you,” he says. “Mrs Hudson would take care of it.”
“Sherlock!” It’s Mrs Hudson, shouting from downstairs. Sherlock grins at me. I can hear the door shutting again. Her hard heels tap against the floor. It’s only Mrs Hudson. She’s come back with the shopping. Christ. “Sherlock? John! Come give me a hand, would you?”
Existing

Chapter Summary

I didn’t realise how quiet I’d been. I’ve barely said a word. Sherlock hasn’t said all that much either, which, now that I think of it, is a bit odd. Neither of us are talking. We’re just existing.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to longtimegone and airynothing for the read-through and lasereyes. <3 More soon.

“John.”

I know what she means. It’s all in the tone of her voice; she’s concerned, she feels sorry for me, she’s apologetic. She lied to me, at least once. Probably more than once, but I can’t remember now. There were other conversations between us, weren’t there? That was another time. Another universe, the one where Sherlock died. We don’t live there now.

Her hand seems frail against my arm, but she’s anything but frail. Mrs Hudson is part of the plan, she’s a co-conspirator. I should remember not to underestimate her.

“Are you all right?” Her big eyes are fixed on me. That’s genuine concern. She knew what she was sending me into. She knew what would happen, what I would see. Has she been sitting downstairs wringing her hands and imagining how this was going? Did she want to come in, watch, make sure we were getting on? Odd voyeurism: did she want to see me collapse? To see us embrace, to see us finally kiss? Not that we would do that, of course. Not that he would want to. She always thought we were together, contrary to all evidence. She always thought so. What did she think I would do? Kiss him, or kill him? “You’ve had such a shock, haven’t you.”

I’m tempted not to answer. I’m tempted to be honest. But no: what good would that do? There’s nothing she can do to make this any easier. Not now.

“I’m fine.”

She could have told me, that might have helped. Whenever she found out: she could have told me secretly, quietly. As if that would have worked; Mycroft would have known she’d done it, somehow. He’d have read it on my face on CCTV, or felt it somehow through the walls of Mary’s flat. He’d have known. But she could have tried to warn me, she could have helped me to guess, she could have done that much. She could have let me cope with this revelation in some privacy, with some degree of dignity. She could have given me a chance to get my head in order before I came face to face with him. I could have pretended to be surprised. So when he said to me, You didn’t guess? I could have said, Yes. Yes, of course I did, codes in the classifieds, a rush of arrests, of course it was you. I knew it was you. I’ve been waiting for you to turn up.
“Fine,” I tell her. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“You certainly aren’t,” she looks behind her; don’t doubt that he can hear you, Mrs Hudson. He looks preoccupied, he’s setting up screens and some kind of radio on the desk, but don’t doubt him for a second. He hears everything. Yes, of course he’s listening to us. He can’t not listen, it’s his way. It’s not even deliberate, it’s just the way he is. There won’t be any secrets told in the kitchen that he doesn’t catalogue in the sitting room, you know that. Look at him: he’s beautiful. He hasn’t changed, except that he has: so thin, his hair is too long. He’s hunched over his phone in a posture that can only be his. I’ve seen that posture since: I’ve seen it in other people. Students in coffee shops, a man on the corner, looking at me from a distance. It was you, wasn’t it. All that time. Jesus, Sherlock. It was you. “You’ve had such a shock. You must be reeling, you poor dear.”

I don’t know how to answer that. My hands are still a bit shaky, but I can manage. I can manage the milk and the bread, the beans and eggs and tomato sauce, a bag of crisps, some beer (thanks, Mrs Hudson). I can manage. Food: I know what to do with food. I know where it belongs, I know how to avoid the worst of the experiments sitting in the fridge. There are none there now, though. None at all, it’s empty. This is the real fridge, not the one in my memory. I can still see the thumbs sitting in there in a bag, like a phantom. I can see the head too, faintly. That was so long ago. There was a portion of someone’s thigh in the crisper once, like a section of a tree, lying flat on a plate. I remember all the places where your bizarre collections of flesh sat, and the smell of the bleach I used on the inside of the fridge. I remember.

“I didn’t see him until this morning, though, you should know.” She whispers it to me, as if the volume of her voice matters. “Before that, everything came through his brother.”

**Before that.** Before this morning? When did she find out?

“I didn’t believe him at first, you know. I thought he was delusional, or felt guilty. Something like that. It couldn’t be true, could it. You saw it all! You saw poor Sherlock, you saw him when he fell off the–”

Oh no. No no no I can’t have that. No. Not even now, not even knowing he survived it, I can’t.

“No. No, Mrs Hudson. Please.”

She stops. She lays her hand on my back. That’s meant to be comfort; it works. She’s real, he’s real, and I’m really here. Right. The past is gone, and most of it is a lie. It’s such a big lie I have a hard time wrapping my head around the truth.

Still. I don’t like to think about him falling. Some part of him died then, surely, the part of him that I mourned. As if my mourning made him die, forced it to be real. That’s not how it works though, is it: it was a trick. It was a game, a ploy, it was all on purpose. But I’m still not ready to relive it, not yet. Not in the kitchen. Not now, like this. Not with ground beef in my hands. Sticks of butter. Open the fridge door; it’s only half empty now. Milk, beer, lettuce. Cheese. Just...breathe. Breathe in, breathe out. There’s a faint buzzing noise in the background, like static, is it the telly? Where’s Sherlock? What’s he doing? Nothing: he’s not doing anything. He’s looking at his phone, half-perched on the chair, half leaping up. The noise must be my jangled nerves. Can he hear them?

Of course not.

Jesus.

She sighs. “I wanted to tell you,” she whispers. “But he told me it would get you both killed.”

Sherlock is texting frantically. Who is he texting? It’s work: he’s working. There are still phones
littered all over the place. So many phones, why?

“I didn’t want that, of course. I thought a reunion would be so nice! He’s home, you’re both home now! It’s just like it was, isn’t that nice? He’s been talking about you all morning you know, John this and John that, he’s missed you so terribly. Did he tell you that? I’m sure he did. He would have done, I’m sure. He did, didn’t he? Oh, he was so excited to see you. He’s been frantic, he wanted you here at eight, if you can believe that, eight in the morning, to babysit a boiler! It’s not a good enough story to get you here at eight, I told him, and he gave me that look. So impatient, so keen to see you. He’s mad, isn’t he. Absolutely barking mad. Oh: I picked up a new shower curtain, I had to pitch the last one, it was getting moldy. Terrible. And the tub was in a state when the tenants moved out, I can tell you. I spent the better part of a morning scrubbing it out, you know. There’s some soap here, too, it was on sale, I hope that’s all right. Do you need anything else? Razor blades, or—”

“I’m fine.” It’s an assault of words. I didn’t realise how quiet I’d been. I’ve barely said a word. Sherlock hasn’t said all that much either, which, now that I think of it, is a bit odd. Neither of us are talking. We’re just existing.

Existing is okay; existing is better than what you were yesterday. This morning. One step at a time. You’re sitting in front of your computer, typing so fast your fingers are a blur. There you are, half-silhouetted in the light from the windows: there’s no mistaking it: it’s you. “We’re fine, I think. Fine. Sherlock?”

You look up. Yes: it’s really you. “Razor blades?”

“In the bathroom.” You nod your head in the direction of the bathroom, as if I’ve forgotten where it is. I haven’t forgotten, Sherlock. I haven’t forgotten anything. You smile. I don’t know what that smile means: is it for Mrs Hudson, to reassure her? Or is it for me? I don’t know.

“We’re fine.” I packed everything, didn’t I? I think so. Not food. Everything else. I didn’t want to leave a trace of myself behind for Mary. I wanted to vanish. I wanted her to question whether I was ever there at all. Is that cruel? I don’t mean it to be. It’s a form of apology, really.

God. I’ll have to tell her at some point: Sherlock’s alive, you know. He’s back. I wonder what she’d say. She’d see the marketing potential; she’d want him to come to a reading, or go on telly with me to sell a book. The next one, maybe. Or she’d laugh. Or she’d say, Oh, that’s nice, how nice for you. Yes. Yes, it’s very nice. She wouldn’t get angry, she wouldn’t yell or tell me I’m living a delusion, though I can imagine her doing all of those things. That’s too intimate a conversation for us. She wouldn’t do that, not now. She’d think it, but not say it. How nice for you. Yes, that would be it.

Ah: Mrs Hudson’s soap, I’ve found it. I don’t think I have any, so that’s good. I should take it to the bathroom, unwrap it, put it in the dish. Sherlock probably has his own in there already; his expensive stuff. I won’t touch that. He never said I shouldn’t, but I don’t. I mean: I didn’t. I never did. That was his.

His cupboard has his clothes hanging in it, still in bags from the dry cleaner’s, I checked. I didn’t recognise any of them. He left all his clothes here when he died; Mrs Hudson must have got rid of them. There was no point keeping them, and they were no use to me. I was afraid to go near them at the time. They’d smell of him, and that would be too much. I regretted that. It was all that was left, and I let it go. Because he’s dead. No: he didn’t die. Right. There are new clothes in the closet now. Similar, but different. Still more expensive than I care to imagine. The same, but different. That’s how you must be. Changed. Returned from the dead.
No. You were only in hiding. Partial hiding, I suppose. Because I saw you. From time to time, at least. Where have you been living all this time? Were you always so close? I don’t know how I feel about that. Comforted, angry, confused: I don’t know. You were there; you were so close.

What else did she bring us? Toothpaste. Washing up liquid. I wouldn’t have thought about needing all of this stuff until some point later when I was staring into a sink of dirty dishes or standing in the bathroom with my toothbrush in my hand, feeling idiotic. So that’s good, yes. That’s good.

“Thanks for all this.”

She smiles at me, then opens her arms. She’s going to hug me. Is that a good idea? Comfort: she touches me and it comforts me; am I going to cry? I don’t want to cry. That’s ridiculous, everything is fine. For god’s sake, pull yourself together. It’s just the shopping, that’s all. The shopping, some toothpaste, some soap. She smells like lavender and roses, like powder. She squeezes me.

“You know, I’ve got some of my herbal soothers if you’ll be needing something,” she pauses and rubs my back. “To calm you a little.”

Herbal soothers. Yes, of course. That’s not a bad idea. Herbal soothers and a few bottles of beer, that might be in order tonight. Do we have anything stronger? Sherlock used to keep a bottle of scotch hidden somewhere. I guess that wouldn’t have survived the terrible tenants.

There were terrible tenants, weren’t there?

She pats me on the shoulder and looks into my face. I’m not sure what she’s looking for or whether she’s found it. She touches my cheek.

“Poor John. You let me know.”
Olly Olly Oxen Free

Chapter Summary

Until then, we wait.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Elvichar, Lavellington (the lovely), and Story13 for the read throughs of the first draft of this scene. I added a bunch to the end afterwards, that's all my fault. Well, the whole thing is my fault, actually. In case anyone's about to tell me so: *Olly olly oxen free* is not an Americanism. At least, it's not according to the *Opies*. Whether it's appropriate here or not is another question, but you can see where I landed on that one. You only live once.

I'm surprised you're willing to eat at all. Isn't this a case? All these arrests, this Moran fellow? You never used to eat while you were working on a case. You’d starve yourself until you were nearing collapse, though you’d never show it. All those late night dinners after a case: remember those? Eating slows your brain, you said then. You can’t afford to slow down while on a case. Not while on a good one, anyway. Nothing lower than an eight.

This must be at least an eight. If anything is a ten, surely this is it.

Maybe it doesn’t matter if your brain has slowed down. It looks like you’ve got it all figured out anyway; you know who’s after you. This case is solved. Ready for me to write it up in my over-romanticised way, as you’d say. I’d start now if I knew the first thing about it.

Well, I know the first thing. The very first. I was there. But I don’t want to write about that. Too much blood. Not yours, though. Not yours. How was I supposed to know that? I wasn’t. It was a deception designed just for me.

Is there nothing left for you to figure out, then? Is that it, it’s all over? Waiting like this doesn’t require you to avoid digesting anything, I suppose. Because that’s all we’re doing. Waiting. Waiting for one the phones on the table to chirp, for all those computers to ping, for the telly to make some kind of announcement, for the radio buzzing in the background to do something. We’re only waiting here for the other shoe to drop. For Moran. What’s he going to do, wander in like Mrs Hudson? *Hello there, Sherlock. Risen from the dead, have you? Let me reverse that bit of good fortune, shall I?* Then we’ll leap into action.

Until then, we wait.

I should get my gun. I should have it with me. I brought the bullets. I’m ready.

You eat. You lift the fork to your mouth, put it on your tongue. It’s mesmerizing. You chew, you glance over at your collection of phones. Then at me. Eyebrow raised. Oh: I’m staring, aren’t I.
Well. What did you expect? What did you expect from me, Sherlock? Christ.

Okay: eat. I can eat. My stomach is in knots, but it’s dinner time. I’ll have dinner. With you. Here. 221b, in the kitchen, of all places. Like normal people.

At some point, if you stay here, if you don’t die again or find some other important task that captures your attention and requires you to lie to me and abandon me in agony like some sort of achingly loyal pet, if you stay put and live with me here you’ll probably turn the kitchen into a lab again. I never really minded that. Your microscope, your test tubes and pipettes, bottles of acids and bases, and that constant chemical smell, I didn’t mind any of it.

Did you have another kitchen lab somewhere, all this time? Because you weren’t dead, were you. This isn’t some kind of miracle resurrection, you were just hiding. From me. Not just from me: from Moriarty. From everyone. Hiding where?

Both eyebrows raised this time. You’re waiting. You’re waiting for my questions, is that it? Well. All right. Fine.

“So.” Always a good place to start. Spin the pasta on my fork: for once you’ve eaten more than I have. Take a deep breath. It’s just a conversation. It’s only questions. I have so many of them.

“Where’ve you been all this time?” And why did you lie to me?

You smile. This must have been what you were waiting for. My stomach is pulsing like a warning signal. No danger: there’s no danger in this. This is easy stuff, conversation. Talking. Right. I can do this.

Why am I terrified of your answer? Have I been so stupid all this time, you’ve been right under my nose and I missed it? You always said I was an idiot.

You shrug. “I’ve been here.” Here? Baker Street? Really? You point outside the window, as if that helps. “I rarely left London at all.”

But you weren’t here, not precisely here. Mrs Hudson said she hadn’t seen you until this morning. No: not here. It was never as easy as just coming home, was it. If I had just had the courage to open the door and walk in, you wouldn’t have been sitting there waiting for me. God. Imagine that. It took me three years to come back; that would have made your absence my fault, somehow.

“I didn’t stay in one place for very long. Hotels, bedsits, abandoned factory buildings, the back of a van for a few days. Thames House, god, I hate that place. Too much security, too many prying eyes. A series of terrible little hovels related to MI5, mostly. From darkest Hackney to the sunny little attics in Hampstead and everything in between. I was a transient, you could say. Homeless.”

No other kitchen labs, then. No other flatmates. You didn’t pick someone new and start over, then. You didn’t, did you? You look at me, and wait. Question number one: answered. You want question number two.

“What were you...” What’s the right word to end this sentence? Doing? Working on? I feel like I should know the answer to this. Moriarty, Moran, you were tracking down a web of criminals. I know that. I’ve seen the papers. I’ve watched the news. Dozens of them, arrested. You were tracking them all down. I know that. I don’t need to ask that question.

“How did you manage to...” To what? To...do whatever it was you were doing? How did you manage it without anyone finding out you weren’t dead?
You wait. You watch me. You don’t finish my sentences. I sort of wish you would.

“There were never any rumours, nothing. No one saw you, how did you manage all those cases, all that work, without...” Without me seeing you, that’s the question. With no one seeing you. How did you manage to keep yourself a secret for so long? Did Greg know? I don’t think so. He would have told me. He would have.

You nod at me. You understand. “It was the most controlled existence, John. Much like this.” You roll your eyes at the walls: not 221b, not Mrs Hudson and me, no. Mycroft and his security. The safehouse. “MI5, branches of the military I hadn’t even heard of. But mostly I was hiding in plain sight. No one ever expects that.”


Hiding in plain sight: you were hiding in my plain sight too, weren’t you.

“Did I...” God, if the answer is no, I’m going to be embarrassed. If the answer is yes I’ll be embarrassed too. No-win situation. “Did I see you? I thought I saw you. So many times.”

You smile. That’s a yes. I did see you. And you saw me. Your eyes don’t leave mine.

“Mycroft never liked that. He thought it was dangerous. And that you wouldn’t appreciate it. He worried you might think you were hallucinating or losing your mind.”

I did. I did think that.

“But if a person truly believes that someone is dead, he won’t entirely recognise that person at first, will he. Not at a glance. It’s just his eyes playing tricks on him. People don’t truly observe, John. They see, but they don’t observe.”

That’s an echo: the version of you in my head said that to me all the time. You knew I wouldn’t observe, is that it? Were you testing to see if I would? I failed that test, then. I failed; is that why you stayed hidden from me? If I had recognised you, would you have taken me with you?

“Were you testing me?”

“No.” You look down at your plate. “No, nothing like that.” You pick up your fork again. You haven’t answered the question. Wait: yes you have. You answered it, you didn’t elaborate. I remember that: you’ll answer a stated question if you feel like it, but not the question that’s underneath it. You only answer the question on the surface, the easiest part to say out loud. No reassurances, not from you.

“Then why did you do that? Let me see you like that?” Not to test me, not to tease me. Not to make me tip over into insanity, surely. What use would I be to you then? So why? Why, Sherlock?

You chew, and look at me, fork returned to your plate. Your eyes are too pale for your face. They should look odd, off-putting, but they don’t. Not to me. The lightness of them just lets your brilliance through. You brilliant, cruel bastard.

“I wanted to make sure you were all right.”

I wasn’t all right. I wasn’t all right at all, couldn’t you tell? Couldn’t you read it on my face?
“Was I?” Oh god, I don’t want him to answer that. I’d like to take it back, but I can’t. I said it, it’s sitting there on the table between us. I can clear my throat, I can cough, take a drink of water, but I can’t claw those words back.

“Yes.”

I can hear him swallow. What does that mean? Is he nervous? Uncomfortable? He’s still looking at me. I’m not going to meet his eyes just now, not just now. Fork: pasta. Tomato sauce. Cheese. My food is getting cold, I should finish.

“I thought so,” he says. “Yes.”

There was a version of you in my head that knew everything. For once, for bloody once, the real you has no fucking clue. How can you know so much and be so brilliantly ignorant at the same time? The earth goes around the sun, Sherlock. How can you not know that? How can you not fucking know?

What did you think would happen to me after that? After you said those terrible things, after you stood on the roof, after you–

No. I can’t. Not yet. It was a lie, it was all a lie. That fucking roof. Jesus.

“You lied to me.” You did. “Why did you lie to me?”

Alone protects me, you said. I’m a fake, you said. Holy hell. All these lies, the set up, the fall, your fucking bloody body on the pavement, Sherlock. You lied. You lied to me, why did you do that to me? I would have gone with you. I would have hidden, I would have made dinner over a bunsen burner if I had to. I would have stayed locked away with you, little attic in Hampstead, some tip in Hackney, I would have. But you left me, you lied to me. Why did you do that?

“You mean at Barts?”

Ouch. Hearing you say it, god. Of course I mean at Barts. Your eyes are darting around; fine motions. It’s me you’re looking at. You’re trying to read me. You’re terrible at this, Sherlock. You’re terrible at it. Go on and observe, why don’t you. Observe me. Don’t just see. Observe. I’m livid, Sherlock. I’m fucking livid. You hurt me.

“That wasn’t my idea.” Your fingers are drumming against the table. You’re nervous now, aren’t you. Well good. You should be. “I never thought you’d believe it, but Mycroft—”

Mycroft. I saw him before you died, he didn’t tell me anything. Of course he didn’t. He apologised. I thought he was apologising for what he did to you, for how he ruined you, but maybe he was apologising for this. For having you tell me lies I could never make any sense of.

Jesus.

“Think it through, John. If you’d believed it, that I was a fraud, if you had denounced me to everyone, that would have assured our safety, both of us. You see?” I don’t. I really don’t. He’s talking so fast, it’s hard to keep up with him. “That would have split you from me entirely.”

Split me from him? Split me into pieces. I couldn’t have believed that, I wouldn’t have. I was there; I know he’s not a fraud. He leans closer to me, his voice is soft and fast. I can’t look at him. I’m furious. I’m terrified. Secrets: these are secrets he’s telling me. I don’t want to know. I have to know. It’s been so long.
“No one would question my suicide, or your participation in any of my apparent crimes. Not if you denounced me, you see? Everyone who knew the truth would have believed that Moriarty’s plan for me worked, that everyone had turned against me. Including you. That I was dead and buried. It would have made it seem like an unquestionable success. No one would be looking for me. You understand?”

I do. I do understand. He needed me to turn my back on him to keep him safe. Not to fire a gun, not to pull him out of the way of an oncoming bus, no. Nothing so easy and straightforward. He needed me to lose faith in him, to not trust him anymore. I couldn’t do that. I couldn’t.

“I knew it wouldn’t work,” he says, leaning back in his chair. “I knew it wouldn’t. You refused to question me, even when you should have.”

I’m not sure if he’s praising me or not. Are you pleased by that, Sherlock? Or do you hate it? I couldn’t believe you were a fraud. Because you weren’t. You aren’t. You bastard. I know you.

He shrugs. “It worked out all right. Your condemnation would have been useful, but your eulogising did just as well.”

Eulogising?

_The Strand._ Oh my god. _The Strand._ My stories, the comments. My rebuttals. You saw all that, didn’t you. Maybe not the comments. Let’s hope not.

My book. Oh.

I always defended you, I always dedicated everything to the memory of my dead best friend, my absent flatmate, the man I loved and never confessed it to. Shit. You’ve seen it, haven’t you. My dedications. _With love._ Always. You’ve seen it. You know. You’ve got to know.

Shit.

“Ah!” He leaps up from the table. What? What is it now? The telly. The news is on, what is it? Breathe. Breathe now, it’s fine. It’s fine. Get up, leave the fork behind. My food is cold now, I’m not hungry. Out to the sitting room, it’s getting dark out. The glow of the telly makes everything blue, it obscures how things really are. I see the light of it on your face. I remember that; you in front of the telly. With me.

It was impossible for me to doubt you, Sherlock. It was impossible.

“Finally,” he says. “I’ve been waiting for this all day. Look!” He points at the screen.

It’s another arrest. A dark house, a reporter, a newsreader in a box in the corner, wearing pink. Always wearing pink. The well-lit studio framed below, the dark house in focus above. There’s a ticker: arrest, Scotland Yard. Organised crime. Another one?

“Is this one of yours?”

His face has lit up like it’s Christmas morning. Is this live footage? I think it is. Yes, yes it is. The door opens and light pours out. I can’t make anything out at first. Then I see it: two figures. It’s a man being led from a house. There are lights flashing everywhere, a sea of reporters, and the camera is shaking. It zooms in closer and shaking gets worse. There’s a man in a suit, looking away, leading the suspect. That must be who he is: he’s in handcuffs. Subdued. He’s wearing a hat.

He’s wearing a deerstalker.
The criminal on the telly, being escorted out of some house in full view of every media outlet, is wearing a deerstalker. It might have been yours, it looks identical. A Sherlock Holmes hat.

What? What is this?

“Sherlock–”

“Wait,” he says. He puts his hand on my arm. His hand. He tugs me closer to the screen. Closer to him. “Listen. He’s about to say it. He’d better say it. Wait.”

The man looks around, then spots the camera. He narrows his eyes.


“OLLY OLLY OXEN FREE!” The man is shouting into the camera, his eyes wide, the deerstalker perched awkwardly on his head. Is it yours? I think it might be. “OLLY OLLY OXEN FREE! There! There, all right?” He turns and looks at the man in the suit. “I done it.” The camera pans away, and a confused reporter appears, microphone in hand. The newsreaders begin to pepper her with questions, and Sherlock turns the volume down.

What on earth was that?

Sherlock grins at the telly. “Excellent. Perfect.”

“What the hell was that?”

He turns the rest of that grin toward me. “That’s my message.” Message? For whom? “Fairly clear, isn’t it?”

A Sherlock Holmes hat. Olly olly oxen free. *Come out, come out, wherever you are.* Oh, right. I understand: it’s a message for Sebastian Moran. You’re taunting him, aren’t you. You’re daring him to find you. And here you are, in the most obvious place of all. With me. The bait.

“I’ve been waiting for hours for them to arrest him,” he says. He picks up one of his phones and glances at it. He puts it down. “I can’t possibly be any clearer, can I. He’ll surely understand now.”

Understand what?

He steps over to the window and parts the curtain with his hand, as if to show anyone who happens to be looking: *Sherlock Holmes is alive. And he’s waiting.*

I’ll go get my gun.
Idiot

Chapter Summary

I liked you more when you were dead.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing. Sorry for the delay, this was a tough one, and it's been a tough week.

The water is too hot: that burning ache in my hands each time I reach in to grab a fork is a distraction. Pain: a reminder that I’m not asleep. I’m not dreaming. I’m not making this up. Am I? No. I’m not. This is how things work with you: lies and pain and you with no concept of what you’ve done. What you’ve done to me. Dishes need washing: I wash them, because that’s what I do. It’s normal, like I am. A normal man, a normal human being, reacting the way any human being would.

But you don’t see that. Because you have no idea what normal actually is. You just see pathology and weakness, you see frivolity and stupidity in me. I know, I know. One slippery clean plate: I leave it in the rack to dry. Plunge my hands in again to get another: it’s a hot, tingling sensation. Water and soap, unrelenting stainless steel. It’s too hot. Get out of there. Pain is a warning sign: the water’s too hot, it will burn my skin, I need to get out. Danger.

You can’t do things like that, Sherlock. You can’t do things like that and expect me to not be angry. What, you waltz back into my life and I’m supposed to accept it? Like this is okay?

What the fuck is wrong with you?

Both of you. Jesus. What kind of a bastard does something like that? Only a Holmes. No wonder neither of you had any friends. If this is how you treat people who love you. Lies and deceptions and fucking blood all over the pavement. For Christ’s sake, what is wrong with you both?

What did your parents do to you to make you so cold-blooded? I’m an idiot. It’s biological, I’m sure. Relentless. You’re wired all wrong. I fell for it. I never thought you’d do something like this to me.

You’re standing by the window again, peering out. Like you’re waiting for something. You’ve forgotten that I’m even here. Or you’re just avoiding looking at me. Could you possibly be showing a bit of shame? No. Of course not, no. Not you. Shame is for the weak, the sentimental, the romantic, isn’t that right, Sherlock. Sure. That’s me, that’s how you think of me. That’s how you always thought of me.

Well, I don’t care. I’m a human being, it’s normal to have feelings about the suicide of your best friend. You understand that, don’t you? It’s normal. What you did to me is not normal. You don’t fake a suicide in front of someone who loves you. Jesus Christ. Right in front of me, too. Right in
front of my eyes. All that blood. You have no sense of it, do you. Of what that would feel like. Was that really necessary? Such a fucking production. All for me, all to hurt me. Cruel. Cruel and cold-blooded. Jesus.

And you thought I was all right?

“Idiot.”

What? Who?


You’re staring at one of your phones again, one of your dozens of phones. Not everyone is as clever as you, you know.

Well, yes: of course you know that, you never stop thinking about it, do you. Measuring everyone else against your massive intellect; everyone comes up short. Especially me. No one is as clever as you. That’s my problem, that’s my fault. If only I’d just observe, as if it’s as easy as that, as if it’s just a choice not to see. I can’t. Sherlock. I can’t see the things you see. The world isn’t as simple for me as it is for you. You have nothing but contempt for the rest of us, don’t you. Normal people with normal emotions. It’s normal to love people, you know. It’s normal to love people who give your life meaning. It’s not vacuous sentiment, it’s not ridiculous. It’s not losing or failing or whatever it is you think about it. It’s a normal human capacity, I won’t be ashamed of it. Making room for a person in your life, in your heart. Compromise. Affection. Love. Don’t mock me. Stand at a distance and watch me fall apart, will you? Did you enjoy it? Did you find it amusing, watching me suffer? Did I stroke your ego, standing in front of what must have been an empty grave crying like a child and praying to god you’d not be dead? Is that what you wanted?

Well, you never were a kind man, were you. I can’t say I ever thought you were. But I never imagined you’d be so cold. Not to me. I was an idiot. Me. I’m the idiot for imagining otherwise. You’re a psychopath, and I mourned you. With affection. With love. I mourned you with more love than I have ever had for anyone else. That’s all I am now. An idiot.

Do you know how many times I regretted the things I said to you? Calling you a machine. Mocking you. I regretted the things I didn’t say, and the things I didn’t do: I walked out on you when you needed me most, or so I thought; I wasn’t there to stand with you on that fucking roof. Do you know how many times I stood there with you since then, trying to hold you back and failing? I should have stopped you, I should have grabbed you and held you, I should have kissed you and told you that I loved you, told you not to die, not yet. Not without me. It doesn’t matter what anyone else thinks of you. It doesn’t matter. I know you’re not a fraud. Because I know you, and I love you. Jesus Christ, it cut into me, the regret of all that. God. I was wrong about everything; I was wrong about you.

I’m so earnest and you’re such a fucking liar.

“What am I going to have to do?” You slam the phone down on the table.

I hear it before I realise what I’ve done: china cracking, shattering. The plate, I’ve dropped it. It was hot, it was slippery, it was wet. But I threw it onto the floor. It’s in pieces now. It’s like me: it’s not fixable. It’s in pieces forever now. This is your fault. All your fault. My life is a mess. I wish I’d never met you.

That’s not true.
I wish I’d been right. Just once. I wish you were the man I thought you might have been. I liked you more when you were dead.

You look at me. Affronted. What: I’ve interrupted you, have I? Interrupted your precious train of thought? God, I’ve missed those trains of thought, hours and hours of you talking, reasoning through things, I’ve missed it. I’ve missed you so much and you just stood back and watched me, playing with me like some kind of marionette from a distance. I’m just a mechanism, I’m the machine to you. The emotion machine that entertains you, like a pet. A loyal, loving pet, displaying whatever emotion you want to trigger. That’s me, a retriever, happy enough with a pat on the head. Oh for fuck’s sake. I’ll interrupt you.

The bits of the plate crunch under my feet. I don’t care: I’ll grind them into the floor. Ball my hands into fists: I’ll pummel you. I want you to hurt as much as I’ve hurt. You need to feel it. You knew everything, you knew: you saw my stories, you saw what people said. They thought you loved me, I wrote you that way. I made things up. The Sherlock I wrote about would never have done this to me. I fell in love with a fantasy. I don’t know who you are. Goddammit. You machine. You fucking, bloody-minded machine.

I’m so angry, I’m so livid, I can’t even feel it. My hands are numb, my arms are shaking. One good punch and you trip backward, hand to your face. Right: yeah, that’s only the first. A twinge of guilt: no. No, you deserve this, you deserve it. I’ll hit you, I’ll get you down on the floor and hold you down, I’ll hit you until you’re unconscious. Bleeding. No. Wait. No, I can’t. What am I doing?

A moment of hesitation and you’ve pinned me against the wall. I’m shaking, I’m weak. Your hands are pressed hard against my wrists, your knee digs into my thigh. Your breath is hot on my face. We’re breathing. We’re both breathing. I loved you, Sherlock. Goddammit. I wanted you back so much. My lungs are burning, I’m in pieces.

“John?” Your voice is soft, and remarkably calm.

I want mine to be. I want it to be. There’s something welling up from my chest. It’s pain, it’s a swollen panic, it’s rising up to engulf me. There are tears on my face. Oh god.

You need to understand. You were wrong. You were so wrong, and everything about this is wrong. We’re back home here like nothing happened, like I’m not torn to shreds, like my heart isn’t beating so hard and fast that it might burst. Making beds and putting away the shopping, having dinner like two old friends who never parted. Like you didn’t die, like I didn’t mourn you. I’m not all right, Sherlock. I’m not all right. I may never be all right again.

“I.” That’s all. My voice is broken. Like me. I’m going to sob now, the words are going to come out all squeaky and garbled. You’ll laugh. You’ll mock me, you’ll look at me with contempt. Emotion: I wish I could switch it off. I wish I didn’t have any at all. If I were a psychopath, I wouldn’t have to feel like this. It’s humiliating. “I wasn’t all right.” It comes out in a sob, and there’s nothing left of me. I can’t say any more.

I wasn’t all right, Sherlock. I wasn’t. You destroyed me. I missed you so much. My knees give out. You’re holding me against the wall but I’m falling now. Falling down, collapsing. I have no strength left, my chest is bursting with grief. I need my hands back. I need them to cover my face. Oh my god. Please, please make this stop. I’m sorry I hit you. I’m sorry. But you died. I watched you. I couldn’t save you. I can’t live without you.

You let me slide down against the wall but you don’t let go of my wrists. Precaution, that’s fair enough. I just hit you. There are tears in my eyes, you’ve gone all blurry. There’s a mark on your cheek, but no blood. Nothing broken then, I hope. Nothing broken. Just me.
I’m sitting on my heels. You’re holding onto me, your hands around my wrists. Your leg is pressed against mine. You did that once, you sat too close to me. Watching telly. What was that for? Why did you do that? I don’t understand you, Sherlock. I don’t. I don’t know why you do the things you do. Why do you lie to me? Everything hurts. I can’t get a good breath. I’m choking, I’m sobbing. My face is wet. This is humiliating.

“I see.” That’s what you say. Your voice is still soft, but it hurts me. I never thought I’d hear it again. “I may have...” Your sentence trails off. You clear your throat. You’re so close I can feel the words against my face. “I may have underestimated the impact.”

The impact? Jesus Christ, the impact of what? Your body against the pavement? Christ. The impact of you dying? On me? The impact of your suicide on me, your blood all over the pavement, your funeral? The impact of your absence from my life? Did you not know? Did you not guess how much it would tear me to pieces, how shattered I would be? That I would never get over it, I would never be able to entirely move on?

You were my life, Sherlock. You were the centre of my existence. You were everything good in my whole world. You’re the most important thing. What did you imagine I was going to do, shrug and move on? Be sad for a few days and find a new person to laugh with at crime scenes, to read the papers with, to linger over breakfast with and laugh at stupid telly? I loved you, Sherlock. I love you. It was never going to be that simple. There’s no one like you. You’re irreplaceable.

You let go of my hands, you let me go. I’m panting. So are you. You’re very close to me, you’re bracing yourself against the wall. I never thought I’d see you again. I’m here with you, I’m collapsed upon myself, I’m leaning against your shoulder. I can feel you breathing. Adrenaline. Your heart is beating just as fast as mine. I hit you. I’m sorry about that. I was so angry, I’m so hurt. Underestimated the impact? My scars run so deep, Sherlock. I don’t know if I can ever explain all of this to you. I don’t know if you’ll ever understand what you mean to me. I can’t ever tell you. I can’t, there aren’t enough words.

You press your forehead against my shoulder.


It’s always more complicated than it seems, isn’t it. Always. You did what you had to do, you had to die. You had to die or he would have killed you, isn’t that it? And me. Both of us dead, and how many others? Who knows. It was an impossible situation. You had to die to beat him. I had to suffer to keep you safe. In order to see you again. Pay the price in suffering, pay the price to solve the case. To destroy him and his web of criminals. Murderers and kidnappers, snipers, assassins, spies and traitors and all kinds of evil. The worst of the worst. You won, in the end. You killed him, you painted targets on all of them, didn’t you. Dozens of arrests, you won. You calculated the risks, you made the choice, you solved the case. And I didn’t know, I never knew. All this time. I was part of your plan, you were watching me. And you thought I was all right.

Idiot.

If you had asked me to do this, to live without you for three years, to pretend you were dead, to mourn you and move on in order to put an end to Moriarty, would I have done it? I would have wanted to, for you. If it was what you needed from me. I would have tried.

But I would have failed. I would have sought you out, I would have found you. I can’t live without you. I know. I’ve tried. You were right. If you had told me the truth, we would both be dead by now. Because only you being dead could have kept me from going after you. You were right, and I hate it. I hate it.
“I have a bottle of Scotch somewhere.” Your voice seems small, muffled. You’re not angry with me. So you do understand. Maybe. A little. It’s so complicated. I want to say something, anything, but I can’t: my chest is full of panic and my mouth is full of tears. I’m sorry. My head is pounding. I’m sorry.
Come Away

Chapter Summary

Where’s my gun?

Right. On the table, it’s here. Don’t touch it, it’s loaded. That could go wrong. I’m a bit drunk. Just a bit. Yeah, all right. I am. So what?

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing.

Phones. Bloody phones, everywhere. Why? Who needs more than one phone? Who needs twelve of them?

You. You apparently. Why?

“Sherlock.”

You look over at me. Good; that’s good. I like to see your face. You look at me, sitting here, watching you. I’m the one here with you. Not anyone else, just me. You’re still mine, aren’t you. You were always mine. I hope so. I hope you were. I think you were.

What’re you doing? You’ve been quiet for a while. You’re working, that’s all, you’re always working. If you weren’t working I’d be wrestling needles and cigarettes out of your hands. That, or my gun.

Where’s my gun?

Right. On the table, it’s here. Don’t touch it, it’s loaded. That could go wrong. I’m a bit drunk. Just a bit. Yeah, all right. I am. So what?

“Sherlock.”

I already said that. You looked up the first time. You’re still looking at me. Your fingers are hovering over your keyboard, poised, waiting.

You’ve been typing away at one of your computers for ages now, complaining about Moran, complaining about being locked in, complaining about your brother. I like to hear you talk; it’s soothing. I never told you that. Why would I? That’s not how things work between us. I couldn’t have said that: *Sherlock, I love it when you talk to me for hours.* No. But I did. I loved it. You loved it too, didn’t you? I think so. Yes.

You can talk for hours and I’ll let you. How long has it been? How long have I been sitting here? How much have I had to drink?
Shit.


I don’t know.


My head is spinning. Just a little. This stuff must be stronger than I thought it was.

I can’t imagine wanting to hit him just now. It seems like another lifetime. I’d rather kiss him. Yes. Much rather.

What does that look mean? He’s looking at me, some expression on his face, what? I don’t know. I can’t tell. I can’t invent a feeling and pin it on him, not anymore. He’s a living, breathing person now. He’s got his own motives again. He’s not just here for my amusement, my torture. My lustful imagination, no. Too many clothes, and he’s too far away from me. In the fantasy he would be sitting with me, or leaning over me. I’d feel his breath on my face. I’d have my hand on his thigh, or in his hair, or on his neck, pulling him down to me. That’s how it would go. That’s not what’s happening here. What’s he thinking now? It’s something. On his face, in the tone of his voice. A bit...something.

Why did I say his name? Oh. Right. Phones; a dozen of them, maybe more. I lost count. I don’t know. So many phones: why?

“Why so many phones?” I got that out, right? I’m not slurring? God. It’s been years since I’ve been this drunk. I’m motioning with my glass, which is not a good idea. I’m going to spill it. Oh, I did spill it. On my knee. Jesus. I should probably stop drinking about now. Damp knee; a dark patch on denim. I’ll need to wash these. I should do some laundry; his things, my things, all mixed in together. Like it used to be.

Tomorrow, I guess. Not like I have anything else to do. Nothing else I can do, really.

He smiles. Why? Why is he smiling? I don’t know. He thinks I’m funny, am I being funny? He’s not annoyed, then. No. He’s being patient with me. Because I cried. God. I hit him, I cried, he held me, he pinned me against the wall. And I sobbed like a child. You broke me, Sherlock. That’s what happened.

I need another drink.

Hi, Sherlock. Hi there. My god.

You’re alive. Look at you. You pinned me to the wall. I felt your breath on my neck, then. I did. I
was shaking, I was crying. You can’t blame me for that, you know. You can’t. It’s not my fault. It was too much. Too much for anyone. Anyone else would have just left, you know that. Anyone else would have punched you in the face and left. So don’t talk to me about that, all right? Let’s not mention it. It’s over now. I’m exhausted. I feel like I’ve run for miles and carried your dead weight up the stairs. I know what that feels like; it feels like this. My eyes are sore and I have a headache. I could fall asleep here, staring at you. I could.

“I’ve assumed a few identities.”

What? You’ve assumed identities? You’re meant to be dead, aren’t you? So you’re pretending to be someone else? A few someone elses? What does that have to do with–

“The reported arrests weren’t the only ones.” You say it like it should be obvious. Maybe it should be: I didn’t think of that. Why didn’t I think of that? You can’t pin secret arrests on the wall though, can you.

“There were others, ones the press never found out about. Secretive, there isn’t even any paperwork on them. Bordering on illegal, of course, but that’s Mycroft’s business.” You bat at the air with your long fingers, as if you’re shooing him away. “So there are elements of the network that Moran doesn’t realise are no longer active.” You tap one of the phones with your fingernail. “It’s useful.”

Wait: wait. Let me–

So you’re pretending to be a dozen or so people, men, maybe women? There are women in the network, there was Amber. Right. Men and women then, maybe. You’re pretending you’re them. You have their phones.

You took their phones. And Moran, this Sebastian Moran, he texts them when he wants something, or when he wants them to do something? Is that it? So you know what he’s up to, even when he thought you were dead. You know where he is. What he wants, what he’s going to do next. And you respond to him as if you’re them. Is that how it is?

Huh.

That’s quite clever.


He smiles. I know that smile: I know it, Sherlock. You’re pleased. I haven’t seen that smile in years. I mean: I hadn’t seen it too often even before you died. You’d got a bit immune to my praise, hadn’t you. A bit. I think you had. But not now: that’s clever, and I’ve just told you so. That must have been your idea. You’re pleased. It’s like it used to be; I pat you on the head with praise, and you lean into it like a cat. I’ve missed that.

“He thinks he has a wider reach than he does.” You pick up one of the phones, brush your fingers over the screen. You put it back. “He’s flying nearly blind at this point. Perhaps a little too blind.” You stand, then look back at me.

Hello, Sherlock. Hello.

All right?

Don’t look away. I want to see your eyes.
But you do look away. Of course you do. I can’t control you like that. I can’t morph this scenario into one I’d like better.

He goes back to the window; he parts the curtains. He stands there, looking out into the night. My gun is sitting on the table; what if someone is aiming at you there, Sherlock? If he’s trying to kill you, do you really think a pane of glass is going to protect you? I can’t lose you again. Come away from the window, would you? Come away from there. Come here to me, I’ll protect you. That’s what I do. That’s what I need to do, you know that.

My legs feel too heavy to move.

“Sherlock.” I keep saying it like I’ve never said it before. I want to hear myself say it; it’s always on the tip of my tongue and now it rolls out. “Sherlock.”

You’re all but a silhouette by the window, looking over at me again. Eyes hooded with shadows and light. Half figure in the darkness, half fantasy. No: no. You’re real. Flesh and blood. Vulnerable, with a heart that can be stopped.

“Dangerous.” Isn’t it? “Standing by the window there, come away from there. What if he...” What if he shoots you? He could, you know: he could just take aim and fire at you from the pavement, from an empty house across the street, from a distance with a laser sight and a telescopic lens. He could be poised in some crevice somewhere, waiting for the perfect shot. One shattering sound and that would be the end of you; a crumpled body on the floor of the sitting room draining blood. I don’t want to see that again, Sherlock. Stay away from the window.

You shrug and drop the curtain. “He can’t come anywhere near here, I told you. This is a safehouse. You barely made it, and you were expected.”

I barely made it. I barely made it? Traffic. Right. Yes, that’s true. It took ages to get here. Is that security? A perimeter of some kind? They’ve cordoned us off, we’re locked away in 221b, but also on Baker Street, is that it? A secured island in the middle of London with cameras trained everywhere? Well. Yes, that makes sense. That’s how Mycroft would let you come back. Safe. Watched. He always did worry.

You move away from the window anyway. Is that for me? Thank you.

“He’s not here. He’s definitely not here.” You say it with some remorse. You’d rather he were. Hand to hand combat, guns drawn at high noon, something like that. Well, you always preferred to be direct. You must be suffocating under all this secrecy.

“Do you know where he is?” Why don’t you just go and get him, Sherlock? You never did what Mycroft wanted before. Why now? Waiting like this: that’s not like you.

The look on your face: I’ve seen this one before too. God: yes, I’ve seen that. You don’t want to admit it, but you don’t know.

You don’t know where he is, do you. And it bothers you. You don’t like it, and you don’t like admitting it. Things are knowable; facts are facts, they can be deduced. The knowledge of a person’s whereabouts shouldn’t be so complicated to acquire, but it always is. Always. Mine, yours, anyone’s. Irene’s: she hid from you. It’s possible. You hated that, too.

“Well.” How are you going to answer, Sherlock? Will you be honest with me? Do you know where he is? “Yes. Roughly.”

In other words, no. I know you. I know how you work, Sherlock. I know what roughly means. It
means no. Anything less than certainty from you means no.

I shouldn’t find that so exciting, should I. I should be scared. I should be terrified: there’s a man out there who wants to kill you, and no one knows where he is. You always know, and when you don’t; well. That’s the space where everything happens. I thought I would never be here again. But here we are. Trapped. Together; in danger, waiting.

I love this.

You walk over to the telly and switch it on. It’s loud; didn’t you already turn it down to almost nothing? It’s been so quiet here, just you and I. Me drinking, you working. A stream of thoughts from you. Soothing. Familiar. Mine. Me staring at you and you staring at a screen. It’s been quiet enough that when you weren’t talking to me I could hear you breathing; I didn’t notice anything else.

The newsreader’s voice is jarring, it doesn’t belong here. You turn it down again. A whisper; a woman on the telly, whispering about the weather and a tube delay. Then: they play the tape from earlier this evening. It’s a bit of news to them, something to wonder about. The man in the deerstalker. *Olly olly oxen free.*

Oh, right. I understand, I think. You were calling him out. Out in the open: where you can see him. He’s hiding from you. It’s an elaborate game of chess, the endgame. Three years of strategy reduced to this: you and me in the flat together again. Watching out the window. Scotch in a glass. I look at your face; you don’t react to the telly. You’re just watching it. It cuts to an interview. It’s Greg.

Greg: he must know. He must know about you. Was he involved in all this? He’s the one who planted the idea in my head weeks ago. He could only think of one person who would put ads in the classifieds for me. Only one. He was right. You’re the only one who would.

Greg’s talking into a microphone; it’s raining. It must be from earlier this evening. I can’t hear him, I just see his lips moving. I know what he’s saying. It’s no comment. No: no comment at this time, thank you.

“Does he know?”

Your eyes don’t leave the screen. You shake your head. No. He doesn’t know. What does he make of this, then? I wonder. He must suspect something: a deerstalker. He knows what that means.

I should ring him. Greg: you should know this. Sherlock’s alive. He’s been alive this whole time, hovering around us. Watching. Pretending to be other people, lining up all these terrible people and having you arrest them. You must have guessed. Who else could it be? It defies all logic, I know. But here he is. It’s wonderful, isn’t it.

It is.

My eyelids are so heavy. This chair: it’s mine. My chair. Some things don’t change. It’s so comfortable, and I’m so warm.

There’s a scratching sound from the other side of the wall; it’s a bird. A bird that’s caught there, has always been caught there. It taps on the wall as if you might let it go, but you won’t. It’s an experiment. Freedom is a paradox; birds can’t actually fly.

“It’s an optical illusion,” you tell me. “They’re born with their feet rooted into the ground.” You’re curled up at my feet, you’re stroking my leg. If I touch you you’ll die, I know that. I’m still
tempted to. “We can’t let him out.”

It’s not a bird at all, is it. Mrs Hudson always knew. It’s Moran. He’s always been there, in the walls. Watching us through rips in the wallpaper, through keyholes. Waiting. He knows how I wake up in the morning and think of you. He wants you for himself. He wants to make you breakfast. He wants you to climb the stairs and curl up in bed with him, demanding to be healed. Demanding to be entertained. He’ll listen to you: he has no voice to interrupt you. He’ll stand inside the walls and listen, silent as a skull.

I can feel his eyes on me as I stroke your hair. It’s so long now it’s falling over your shoulders, it’s draped halfway down your back. It’s grown so long you’re a woman now with bright red lips and milky skin. Your alternate identity: I’ve revealed it. You’re angry. It’s my fault, none of your clothes fit anymore. You’ll have to stay naked like this, kneeling on the floor. Mycroft is laughing at you. You’re about to die again.

I didn’t know that would happen, Sherlock. I didn’t know. If I’d known I’d have told you to cut your hair. I thought you were dead already. It’s my fault. I’m sorry.

You were so pale when your face was covered with blood. We’re standing there, on the spot where you landed. In a moment they’ll drag me away, they’re reaching for me, but there’s a frozen moment in the middle where we can stand and watch. The Thames has risen up, the road is all black water. Every body you ever touched is in that water now, limbs and hearts in tins. A small parade of your accomplishments, there’s a trumpet playing. They’re coming for me too.

“It looked real.” It did: I touched you then. You had no pulse. You were cold. You were pale and your eyes were open, seeing nothing. You were dead.

“It was real.” It’s your voice, but your hair has reached your ankles now. There’s a small mole on your stomach, beside your navel. I want to touch you there, cover it, keep your soul from seeping out, but I can’t. You’ll break into pieces. There’s no turning back. The water will pull you away in a moment. It will pull you apart. That’s my fault too. “I don’t need a beating heart, John.”

Yes. Well, that’s true. You don’t. You can live without one.

Well, that’s a relief.

“John.”


What’s going on? You want me to stand. You’re trying to help me up, why? I’m comfortable here. Why do you want me to–

“Bed, John.”

Bed? No. There’s no bed, here. It’s the sitting room. It’s 221b. Am I dreaming? No. No, I came here this morning, I came here to watch for the repairman. Oh, that was a lie. No. I’m here, you’re alive, Moran is out to kill you. Right. I remember. I’m standing, why am I standing? What? Leave me alone, I’m just–

“You’re snoring. Why don’t you go to bed.”

Oh. I fell asleep. My head is heavy. I’m drunk. I can barely feel my feet. God, that’s funny. I got drunk and I fell asleep, and I dreamed. The strangest things. Something about a bird. And–
“I dreamed you were a woman.” That’s funny. That’s so funny. Oh my god. I want to tell you all about it. Because you’re here now and I can. That’s wonderful. I can tell you everything. Your hair, it’s got so long. Look at that. “You should cut your hair.”

“Come on.” You’re leading me. You’re holding on to me, an arm around my shoulders, a hand on my chest. Like that will keep me upright. It won’t, Sherlock. It won’t. But keep it there. Keep it there as long as you want. I don’t mind.

Where are you taking me? I can walk on my own, you know. Of course I can. I’m just tired. I’m comfortable. I’m a bit drunk. So what? I can walk. I’m not going to sleep in the kitchen, Sherlock. Well, I suppose I could. If I had to. Is it safer here?

In the bathtub? Where are you taking me?

Oh. Your bedroom. I’m going to sleep in your bedroom? I’ve never done that. Not once. You slept in my bed a few times, but I never slept in yours. That seemed a bit too...something. What? Presumptuous. It would mean something different if I did it. I’m not the whimsical one. I’m not the one who can climb into bed with you and act like it’s nothing. It wouldn’t be nothing; it would be an admission: I want to be close to you. I want to curl against you, I want to press my hands against you, I want to feel your bony hips, your cock in my hand. That’s what it would mean, wouldn’t it. To me it would. I don’t know what you would think. Nothing, probably. Nothing.


It hasn’t changed either, I don’t think. Not as far as I can tell. I’ve sat here before, with you. Not often, but I have. When you weren’t well. When you were drugged and passed out. I took care of you. Do you remember? I could have crawled into bed with you then, pulled you into my arms, cradled you. She said you would be fine in a few hours. She gives it to her friends, she said. You looked so fragile, like you would break. But you don’t break: never. You fall out of bed, you jump down the stairs, you roll over your shoulder on cobblestone and nothing breaks you. Well, except that once. Just that once, dead on the pavement. Death by falling. But that didn’t break you either, as it turns out.

My shoes. They’re falling off. No: that’s you. You’re taking my shoes off. Why are you doing that? You pull my socks off too, one at a time. Oh. That feels fantastic; a strange rush of sensation against my skin. God. How much did I drink?

“What was in that Scotch?”

“Exactly what you’d expect to be in a bottle of Scotch.” You haul my jumper over my head.

“Scotch.”

You lie me down, you pull the bedclothes up over me. I’m in your bed. It feels strange. It feels good. The sheets are cool against my feet. I’m so tired. My eyes are sore. My head hurts. Lying down feels so good I could dissolve into it. Don’t leave me here, Sherlock. Don’t go. I’m too tired to say anything. You sit on the bed beside me.

Like Dartmoor. I’ve been here before. No: no, this isn’t Dartmoor. This isn’t a memory. It might be a fantasy, I’m not sure. I can hear you breathing.

You sit there, and my hand is on your thigh. I can feel the seam of your trousers under my thumb; rub it back and forth, it feels good. Smooth texture, the bumpy line of fabric. That’s real. You’re sitting here, the world is very small now. It’s this room, and you in it.
I think, when you sit with me like this, that it’s always an apology. It was the first time. Maybe it is this time too.

I’m sorry I hit you, Sherlock.

“Goodnight, John.”

My eyelids are so heavy.
Yellow tape; the road is slick with rain. There’s a light spinning red and blue on top of a police car. It’s a crime scene. And I’m not wearing any socks. Or any shoes. How did I leave home with bare feet? There’s probably glass everywhere. Sherlock? Where are you? It’s a crime scene. I don’t want to be here without you. Sherlock?

You’re not here. The entire Metropolitan police force is standing in the road, looking up at the roof. I don’t know what they’re looking at. There’s no one there, not now. That was years ago. There’s a body on the pavement; it’s wrapped in a clear plastic sheet. There’s blood pooling at its feet. Where are you, Sherlock? I can’t do this. Not without you.

“We need your help, John.” That’s Greg: Greg, you know I can’t do anything without Sherlock. I’m just an army doctor. I’m just a blogger. I write books, that’s all. I can’t do this.

He leads me over to the body.

“He’s alive,” Greg says. “I couldn’t believe it. It’s been years, but he’s still alive.”

Suddenly I realise where we are: Bart’s. We’re standing on the pavement outside Bart’s. I know who this is.

“He didn’t die.”

“No, he didn’t, he’s still alive, John. But he’s weak.”

“No. No, he didn’t jump.” You did, though. You did, I saw it. That’s a lie.

“We can’t keep doing this, John. We’ve been staring up at the roof for three years now. We need your help. It’s your turn.”

I understand; I’ve been shirking my duty to you. I didn’t want to come back here. I was afraid. The entire Metropolitan Police force are keeping you alive. As long as they stand still, looking up at the roof, you’ll live. Until I step in and take over. Then they can go home.

I can do it. I can: I’ll stand here, and the blood will retreat into your veins. My eyes are aching. It’s going to start to rain again, and then it will be just you and me, Sherlock. You in the plastic sheet, and me staring up at the roof, the last place I saw you alive. Until now.
“Don’t move, John.” That’s you: that’s your voice. I almost laugh. “Don’t move. I can almost sit up.”

I won’t move. I won’t move an inch. But everything in me wants to look down at you, just to see your face again.

What?

What’s that?

The mattress is dipping beside me. There’s a bit of light coming in through the window from the street. I can hear the wind; the window must be open. There’s a car driving past; a splash of water, a puddle. There’s a dog barking in the distance. I was asleep: I’m awake now. I’m in bed. I’m in Sherlock’s bed.

Sherlock’s bed. In Sherlock’s room. With Sherlock.

He yawns, he gets into bed next to me. I can see his outline in the dark, getting into his bed. The bedclothes rustle and slide down my chest, then back up again, brushing against my nose. He rubs his eyes, he stretches his legs. He’s lying on his back, looking up at the ceiling. He was working; he’s finished. He’s tired.

He put me into his bed because I was drunk. Very, very drunk. I might still be a little drunk. Now he’s joining me here. In the dark. Did something happen? Or nothing?

“All right?”

He takes a deep breath. He must know I’m awake. He’d have felt it. He always knows that kind of thing.

“All right.”

“Something happen?”

“No.” He exhales. “Well. Something, somewhere, yes, I think so. Something must have happened. I’m just not entirely sure what.”

“What time is it?” I have no end of pointless questions.

“Nearly three.”

“Oh.”

“Sleep.” He turns his back to me, digs his arm under his pillow. He takes a deep breath, and breathes out again slowly.

I was dreaming about you, Sherlock. I think I dream about you all the time, though I don’t always remember. But you’re here now, and everything is okay. It’s quiet. My gun is in the sitting room.

Sleep. Yes.

I’m still a writer. I can’t stop writing.

She’s painting again. She’s painting the whole flat, because somehow, without meaning to, I’ve written my next story across the walls in felt pen. The walls are nearly black with it; I wrote words on every inch, from the mouldings all the way down to the skirting boards. I’m afraid I might even
have stripped off the carpet and written more of it there; but the carpet’s back down now. She won’t see it. The worst of it is under there. She’s painting, which is good. It’s good, because everything I’ve written is about you. And every sentence of it is pornographic.

What the hell was I thinking? How could I have been so careless?

“Looks like it might rain,” she says, painting over a particularly intense description of oral sex. Is she reading it? I hope not.

“It might.” I pick up a paintbrush as well. I’ll start at the beginning, over the bedroom door. Best to get this done quickly. It starts with a description of your stomach, how I can see your ribs, how your hips press out against your thin skin, the smooth lines of the muscles in your groin. I don’t know what’s worse; that I wrote sex all over the walls, or that the writing is so terrible. It’s a sea of adjectives and adverbs, like I couldn’t decide which to use. I used them all. The most horrendous metaphors: his skin tastes like melted ice cream and cigarette smoke. When did I write this? What was I thinking? It’s horrible. If she reads it, she’ll be appalled. I’m a writer, I should know better than this. I should distract her. “How was work today?”

“Oh, fine,” she says. “You know, the usual. Honestly, John: his huge hot hard magnificent cock pulsed out a hot lusty stream of thick hot come into my eager happy hungry waiting mouth? You’re overdoing it with the adjectives a little, here.” She pauses, and picks up a red pen. “You used the word ‘hot’ three times, is that deliberate?” She takes out a red pen: she adds commas.

Oh god. She’s editing. Did I write that? Christ, really? I don’t remember. I know that fantasy, though. I know it better than I’d like to admit. I’ve thought about it so many times it feels like a memory of you. Your eyes shut, your hands in my hair, my fingers stroking your thighs. Your mouth open; you’re moaning, you’re lost to the world, you’re only aware of what it is I’m doing to you. Nothing else matters, nothing else exists. You want me as much as I want you. I know that fantasy well. Why did I write it on the wall? There it is. Her paintbrush is obscuring “lusty stream”. Paint over it, Mary. Paint over it all. It was never meant for this place. This is mine.


“Oh.” Sherlock? What are you doing here? This is Mary’s flat, how did you get in here? Mary didn’t hear you. You’re in the bedroom. Why?

You’re lying on Mary’s bed, you’re naked. You’re wet: like you just got out of the bath, but you didn’t. How did I not notice you here until now? You weren’t here a minute ago. Your penis is soft and angled into the crease of your thigh. You’re watching me like I’m the one who’s naked.

“I’m not sure this part here is even physically possible, John.” Oh god. Stop reading it, Mary. Just paint over it. Paint over it.

“What are you doing here?” I sit down next to you. You’ve been so close to me for so long; now you’re actually here.

Oh: I know what happened: I’ve brought you back from the dead. Just now. That’s possible; someone wrote an article about it in the Times. If you want someone enough, and you don’t let them go, you can revive them. They’ll be brand new; reborn out of lust. But they’ll come back a little different; softer. They’ll always love you back. I put my hand on your stomach. Your skin is damp and warm. You’re sensitive; it’s new skin.

“I love you.” I have to tell you that. I do. You must know that: it’s the only way you’d come back.
You just smile at me. There are tears on my face. I’m so happy to see you.

So I lean down and kiss you. Mary’s going to come in in a moment; she’ll see us, she’ll see me kissing you, your hand nestled against my lower back. She’ll figure out what happened. I’m not sure what she’ll do. She’ll laugh at me, or she’ll pick up a knife and she’ll kill me. Then it will be up to you, Sherlock. You’ll have to run.

I can hear her opening another can of paint.

What?

I don’t know what woke me. It’s quiet; the curtain is shifting a little; just a breeze. What time is it? It’s dark. It’s not dawn yet. It’s hot. It’s intensely hot.

Two bodies. The bedclothes: right. Too much. Sherlock’s bed isn’t designed for two bodies. It’s designed for just one. Just his. It hasn’t woken him; he’s breathing evenly. Still asleep. I don’t want to move. But this heat is unbearable. You’re a furnace, you know that?

Gently; gently. Shift the blanket. I could pull it right off. Yes. I’ll do that. It slides off of you first, brings the duvet along with it, a little. That will be fine. This is hard to do in the dark, with thick fingers. I’m so tired; I don’t want to move. I don’t want to get up. I can do this. Just slide it off. There. Drop it on the floor.

God: yes that’s better. Much better. Christ. I can sleep now. I’m so tired, I can barely think. My mouth is dry and sticky. My head is sore. Sleep. I need to sleep. You shift, you’re shifting toward me. You like the heat, don’t you. You’re like a cat in a beam of sunlight, or a reptile. No, you’re pretty hot-blooded. You’re inching toward me, until our skin touches. Your long, skinny legs against me. Like it’s nothing.

God. You’re so human, and so real.

I can lean my forehead against the back of your neck; you’re so hot. There’s a bit of sweat on you, and it’s nice. It’s good. It’s a relief. Your breathing is even. You don’t move. Drag my arm down across your waist; I rest my hand there. A vulnerable point; vital organs here all exposed. Nothing but skin and muscle to protect them. Too easy to get stabbed here, to bleed to death, to rupture something and die. The thin bones of my fingers couldn’t protect you from that. But I’d try. You know I would.

Your t-shirt is damp. I run my fingers along your torso to your chest; yes. My palm against your chest. That’s comfortable. I can’t feel your heart, not like this. But I can feel your lungs expand and contract. That’s good enough. It’s like a lullaby; I could fall into it, sink and sleep forever. My cheek is pressed against your vertebrae. You’re all bones and hard muscle; I can feel you in the rhythm of your even breathing. There’s a softness to you, in your skin; you have a soft silkiness I don’t want to let go of. You smell like home.

I’ve missed you so much.

Don’t leave me again.

You move your arm. Are you awake? No. I don’t think so. Your arm rests against mine, your hand cradles mine, held loosely against your chest. It’s all right, then. It’s all right to touch you. I’ve been so lonely without you. Welcome back, Sherlock. Welcome back.
As It Is

Chapter Summary

Surely I’d remember if I’d groped him. That’s sort of a significant landmark in a relationship, the first drunken grope. No, I didn’t do that.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to airynothing, and to mazarin221b for offering to beta. I was too embarrassed to take her up on it. Yes: I’d rather post it here than send it to individuals. That’s sad, isn’t it.


I’m in Sherlock’s bedroom. I’m in Sherlock’s bed.

Sherlock is alive.

Yeah. That’s right, yeah. I remember. God. What kind of a–

Oh Jesus, my head. Ow. Well, great. That’s just great.

What was I thinking? I surely did not need to drink that much, did I? I don’t know. Maybe I did. It was a tough day, really. The toughest, after the day he–

Right. Yeah. Okay. That didn’t happen. Don’t think about that.

My mouth is sticky and dry. Horrible. I haven’t felt this hungover in years. Where is he? Jesus. I slept here with him, he got into bed with me. Well, it’s his bed, he might as well get into it. With me there, drunk and breathing on the back of his neck.

Oh, shit.

He spent the night in that bed with me pressed into the back of him, yeah. As if that’s normal. Sure, people spoon their dead flatmates all the time, that’s completely expected, right? Oh god, how embarrassing. I didn’t grope him or anything, did I? I don’t know. Think think think...no. I don’t remember doing that. Surely I’d remember if I’d groped him. That’s sort of a significant landmark in a relationship, the first drunken grope. No, I didn’t do that. I wasn’t thinking about it, was I? I don’t know. I just...I had an arm around him. Definitely that. He was all right about it, though. Wasn’t he?

I think so.

Right, yeah, he didn’t shrug me off. Unless he got up in the night to get away from me, slept the rest of the night on the sofa.
Christ.

Ouch. I’ve pulled all the muscles in my back, what the hell did I do? Tension, stress, the deep-seated anxiety that comes with getting the impossible thing you’ve been wishing for over the past three years. The pain of longing ends with physical pain. Doesn’t seem fair, does it.

Oh, this is great. Sure. I slept in my clothes, apparently. Of course I did, yeah. Sherlock put me to bed, that’s...yeah. For some reason he put me in his bed. Why didn’t he just push me onto the floor? Or send me up to my own room? Or just leave me in my chair, drooling on myself and twisting my neck in a way I would feel for days? I would have woken myself up eventually. I would have stumbled up to my own bed. He didn’t have to do that.

He took off my shoes, and pulled off my socks. I don’t know why he did that, either.

He’s not here now.

Where did he go?

The floor is cold under my bare feet.

“Sherlock?” Oh god my head. That was so, so dumb. Christ. I need a shower. Where is he? He didn’t leave again, did he? Breathe in, breathe out, oh Jesus, my head.

His room looks practically untouched. The window is open, just a crack. His dressing gown isn’t hanging off the hook on the back of the door anymore. He got up.

There were two bodies in this bed in the night. I’m not a consulting detective, but even I can see that. Two pillows for two heads, a pattern of creases in the sheets, different on each side. He was here. We were close enough to touch.

I don’t need the bed to tell me that. I remember.

The light in the kitchen is even more painful. A sunny morning when I would prefer an overcast one. “Sherlock?”

“Morning, John.” He’s sitting at the table, tapping away at a laptop, with a pile of phones beside him. He doesn’t look up. He’s in his dressing gown. He’s still wearing his pyjama bottoms and a grey t-shirt I’m fairly sure I spent most of the night stroking. It should have marks on it; some kind of guilty stain. The sound of his voice makes me feel giddy. That’s him: there’s no one else it could be. There’s no one else like him. I want to touch him, make sure he’s real, but I guess I’ve done enough of that in the last few hours.

“There’s paracetamol on the worktop. Kettle boiled a moment ago. I made tea.” He still doesn’t look up. He’s typing as he talks. What’s gone on, then?

He made me a cup of tea; he must have poured the water when he heard me get out of bed. It’s steaming, and he’s already got his own cup. That’s nice. That’s very nice, it’s lovely. It’s perfect, and washes out the sticky feeling in my mouth. Wonderful. Sherlock, this is a spectacular cup of tea. Really top drawer. Aces. I can’t start complimenting him on his tea-making skills, that’s going too far.

“Any luck?” I can’t even remember what kind of luck he’s after; finding Moran, that’s what. Finding Moran so that we can get him, kill him, trap him, arrest him. Something like that. Right?

“Nothing,” he says. He sighs. He looks up at me, finally. His fingers hover over the keys. “He’s an
idiot."

“Most people are,” I tell him. He shakes his head and goes back to typing. “Have you eaten?”

Open up the fridge: I can’t remember what I put in here yesterday. It feels like years ago Mrs Hudson brought the shopping in. Eggs, right. That will do. We’ve got some bread. Eggs, toast. Bananas. Too suggestive, maybe. I’d accidentally make a stupid joke, or he would, and that would go wrong. I would embarrass myself. I’m not ready to have that conversation. Maybe I never will be. Ah, there’s apples, too. Apples seem safer. Food will help. The paracetamol will help. I could make us breakfast, since he made us tea. That’s parity, isn’t it? Sort of. We could sit here and eat breakfast, after having spent the night together. Well, not like that. Oh, god.

“No,” he says. No? Christ. No: no, he hasn’t eaten. Jesus: for a moment there I thought he’d read something on my face, but he’s not looking at me. That’s not a rejection of the imaginary night I was picturing the two of us having. Not yet, anyway. He may or may not know enough about my inner demons to reject that. I’m sure it will come, eventually. Unless...well.

I’m waiting for him to scold me, or tell me off, or explain, again, that he’s married to his work and not interested in me. As if I made some kind of proposal in the night, which I did not. Did I? No. No, I didn’t. I was only drunk, I was looking to see that he was still there, that he was real. Because I missed him all this time, he lied to me and pretended to be dead. He owes me some spooning, maybe. That might be how he sees it. He’s not mentioning it. It seems we’re going to pretend it didn’t happen.

Well, all right. That’s fine. That’s a kindness, isn’t it?

He didn’t leave and sleep on the sofa. It’s still got the newspapers on it I left there last night. No: he slept with me.

Don’t think about it. Not now. Make breakfast.

Boil the eggs, that’s easiest. Can’t go wrong there. Toast in the toaster. Take the paracetamol. He’s working: he’s quiet. I can hear his feet tapping against the floor in a regular pattern. He’s thinking; waiting. Anxious.

All right: so he’s moved on. Back to the case, back to Moran. He’s not asking about why I curled up against him in his bed. So, it didn’t bother him at all. Sleeping with me, me stroking his stomach. Yes, I definitely did that. He didn’t mind me resting my forehead against his neck and falling asleep like that. He’s not even thinking about it; he’s working. He checks his phones; texts from some of them. Stares at the screen. What does that mean?

I always felt like you were mine. Not like that, not really. But mine nonetheless. Irene saw it, but she wanted you anyway. That was rude, wasn’t it? She must have known what that would do to me. She didn’t care. She just took what she wanted, and what she wanted was you.

Don’t think about it. Butter the toast. Eggs into the egg cups. Knife and spoon.

If you hadn’t been attracted to her and stared at her naked body like you did, I’d have been dead with a bullet in my head ten minutes after meeting her. It is as it is.

“Here.” Put the plate down next to your computer. “Here you go.” Your eyes linger on the screen, then flick up at me. A flash of a smile: that’s familiar. A casual thank you. I remember that.

There were times when that small smile was part of our everyday lexicon. I would never have misunderstood it. You noticed everything that happened around you, but you didn’t acknowledge it
all; only the important things. That smile was a means of keeping the peace. That was something I
didn’t teach you. You already knew that; grease the wheels of social interaction, acknowledge
small kindnesses done out of affection. You knew that, but you only rarely practiced it. But there it

Warm toast, melted butter, runny eggs. Mary wouldn’t like it. She doesn’t like boiled eggs, for a
start. And she’s not a big fan of toast. She wants more vegetables with breakfast; tomatoes and
green peppers. Mushrooms. More ingredients than I can hold in my hands when I’m groggy and
trying to make her happy first thing. Coffee and omelettes and fry ups. But you don’t mind a
breakfast like this: it’s the only way you’re easier to please than most. You and I like the same kind
of breakfast. You’re eating, and wiping crumbs off your keyboard. Like nothing bad ever happened
to us.

There’s a bluish-red mark on your face. That’s from me; that’s where I hit you. I want to touch it,
blend it away somehow. Is it swollen? I reckon it is, a little. Should we ice it? You won’t have that.
It’s not that bad. Sorry about that, Sherlock, but you did lie to me. And you left me. I did my best.

You didn’t smell like smoke in the night. Were my senses dulled? You started smoking again,
didn’t you.

“Have you taken up smoking again?” Said between bites. I’m very hungry; I should have put on
another egg.

You look up at me. You raise your eyebrows a fraction. You’re surprised I know, aren’t you. I do
notice things sometimes, you know. I notice.

“No.” You smile again. That’s nice; that’s nice to see. I like it when you smile at me. But I smelled
it; I smelled cigarette smoke, was it someone else’s? It wasn’t that faint. “I just had the one when
you were late.” You go back to your typing.

You had a cigarette because I was late?

Ah. So you were nervous, were you? Very nervous. That’s flattering somehow. Should it be? I
don’t know. You didn’t seem nervous when I saw you. Not that I was in any state to evaluate that.
But that’s what you do best; you swallow emotions and pretend they aren’t happening, you keep
them off your face and out of your body language. But you felt it; you were nervous to see me, to
have me see you. We hadn’t spoken in three years. You were nervous. Did you think I would
leave? Or be angry? Refuse to be locked into your safehouse with you, refuse to go back to normal?

Maybe it was a relief when I rested my hand against your chest in the night. Maybe you were
hoping for that. Maybe that’s exactly what you hoped for, early in the morning yesterday here in
221b. You reached for a cig again, because of me.

Yeah, that’s flattering. Oddly flattering.

“You’ll pay for that, you know.” I remember the times you broke down and smoked again; it
always made you miserable afterwards. You shake your head at me, but don’t look up. Come on,
you know it’s true. “You’ll be after another in a few hours, and I haven’t got any hidden.” Maybe
you’ve hidden a pack somewhere. I’ll have to look.

You sip at your tea. “I’ll be fine.” Yes: I suppose you will be. You’re busy; you’ve got a case to
keep you occupied. A case of a sort, at least.

The man in the deerstalker is in the paper. Not on the front page, of course. In the back of the
crime section. More picture than text; there isn’t much to say. Low-level forger, he specialised in coins. No mention of organised crime. I would have pinned him to my wall because of the hat. Definitely. The crime doesn’t fit the profile; they’re not using any of my keywords. But the hat: the hat is a message. That’s a sign. Would I have imagined it came from you? After the ads in the classifieds, I would have thought it was a message for me. Olly olly oxen free, the game is over. Back to normal life, now. That would have been a good message. There’s no way I would have understood it.

There’s a trilling sound from one of the phones. A text message. You grab it, and stand up.

“Finally!” Your thumbs press against the buttons in a blur. “Honestly John, for a man as paranoid and cynical as Sebastian Moran, I would have expected him to try something like this sooner.”

“Like what?” What happened? What has he done?

“Unless it’s meant to be a response.” You talk to the phone like it has the answers, walking into the sitting room. “Could it be? That would be clever. Dangerous. But clever. Is he that clever?”

There’s a radio on the desk that I don’t remember from yesterday. That must have come out when I was already too drunk to notice. “I don’t think so. But even the dullest can have a shining moment of cleverness, can’t they, John?”

Is that an insult? Ha. A gentle one; a mocking one. Like it used to be.

What did he do? I’ll take my toast with me, my cup of tea. I walk into the sitting room and stand beside you. Your dressing gown is loose around you; you’re fidgeting. You’ve got bare feet, like me. You took my socks off, why? I hate sleeping in socks, did you know that? You must have. You know me better than I know myself.

What else do you know?

You switch on the radio. The sound of strangers talking pushes out the boundaries of our little space; it felt intimate a moment ago. The intimate remains of the night. Now it feels more public, normal, tamed. The walls seem to have retreated to their regular places. They’re talking about gardening. Did Moran plant a garden in your honour, Sherlock? You twist the dial: men talking about digging. More gardening? No. Grave robbers. Digging up a grave in the night, stealing a casket. Stealing a body.

Grave robbers in London. “They dug up the grave of one Sherlock Holmes.”

I need to sit down.

Moran? He dug up your grave, why? A message? That makes sense. He wants to tell you something, that he knows. That’s a lot of effort to go through for a message. Easier to just send a text, surely. Or maybe he didn’t know. You said he’s an idiot; maybe he dug up your grave to determine whether you’re dead or not. I would have done it if I’d dared to suspect. With my bare hands.

You fired the first shot; you showed him a man wearing a deerstalker. You taunted him.

He dug up your grave; he stole the casket. So he knows. He knows you weren’t down there. You weren’t, because you’re here with me. I pressed my hand against your heart all night; I know.

Did I weep over an empty grave? I suppose I did.

“John.” You clap the phone down on the desk. Your eyes are sparkling. You’re excited; the game
is on, isn’t it. Something’s beginning. “You’ve got to go to Tesco.”
Chapter Summary

*I can do this, Sherlock. I can do this. It’s just Tesco, it’s only down the road. I’ll be back in a moment. I’ll be fine.*

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Elvichar for her always excellent britpick, Lavellington for liking the word "prat", and airynothing for the lasereyes of doom.

No, you can’t leave the flat, that’s what he said. No, you can’t go to Tesco, even though it’s just around the corner and you’re an actual adult who can take care of himself. It’s too dangerous, he said. The flat is a safehouse now, he said. What happened to all that? Was that just to make me too paranoid to wander out without permission? Well, I’ve got permission now. Here I am, flat-footed on the pavement, just like anyone else would be, except for the gun digging into my lower back. Here I am, my hair is still wet. I’m staring up at the windows and looking for you there.

There you are. Your hair is mussed and sticking up on end in places, you’re pacing in front of the window. You’re nervous. I can do this, Sherlock. I can do this. It’s just Tesco, it’s only down the road. I’ll be back in a moment. I’ll be fine.

I might have looked up at you like this yesterday morning, if I’d known the truth. There was so much I didn’t know yesterday, standing in this exact spot. It’s as if I can see the ghost of myself, my past self, twenty-four hours past, standing here by the door, taking a deep breath. I had no idea. None. I walked in completely blind.

*Let me tell you what you’re going to find in there. Let me tell you. You’re not going to believe it.*

The white van from yesterday is still parked in front of the flat. What is it? A moving van? It must be hard to find a space to park it around here. A local? Must be. I assumed it was the man here about the boiler, but I suppose not. That was another lie.

“Keep moving, John.”

This is going to take some getting used to. There’s a bit of static, it’s not like a mobile. More secure, you said. It’s certainly louder. I’m sure anyone within a few feet of me is going to be able to hear your voice.

I know these things look like regular earphones, but they feel different to me. It seems really obvious: *look at me, I’m taking direction from a man who’s meant to be dead.* But I know: no one would think that. They’ll think I’m listening to an iPod, something like that. I’ll look like any other prat on the street with his ears tuned in to something else, pretending his life is different than it actually is. I’ve seen those people. I never think twice about them. I know it looks perfectly normal to have cords hanging across your chest like this, but it certainly doesn’t feel normal to me. It’s not
music I’m listening to. It’s you.

“Come on, quickly. Now. Go north.” It’s like you’re shouting into my head.

“Can you turn the volume down a bit?” I can see you peering at me, talking into that odd black device. You’re still in your pyjamas. Your dressing gown is starting to slip off one of your shoulders. You don’t even notice.

“John, it’s best if you don’t talk directly to me unless you absolutely have to.” Right. Well, that’s familiar, at least. You talk, I listen. Fine. “Now go! Go north.”

North? But the Tesco is directly south. It’s just down the road.

“North, John. I need you to go to the Tesco off of Euston Road, all right? Take Allsop Place south, not Baker Street.”

“Euston!” That’s three times the distance. It will take me almost twenty minutes just to get there.

“Shhh, just go. Quickly. Honestly, John, for your own safety, you’ll need to do as I tell you without questioning me.”

I’m sure you can feel the weight of my stare from a floor above and through the window. I’m quite sure you can. I need to do as I’m told without question? Really? Is that how this is going to be? I can hear you sigh.

“John. Please. You can be stubborn at me about anything else, all right? North to Allsop Place, okay? Go.”

Fine. Fine! I’m going. North to Allsop Place, fine. But I don’t need to go down Allsop Place to get to Euston Road. I thought you were the one who had a map of London in his head. It’s certainly telling of how well you know your way to the nearest Tesco, these directions. Allsop Place to Euston Road just to go to a Tesco? Well, fine.

“Volume better?” Actually, it is. It’s less like shouting now, more like talking.

“Much.” I mumble this time, into my hand. The microphone is sensitive, I know. He can hear me.

“Good.”

He’s silent for a moment. I can hear him breathing. He’s watching me. I know he is: one of his computers has access to the CCTV cameras. One of the advantages of working with his brother as opposed to against him, I suppose. Where’s the nearest camera? Oh: there, right. Above the shop window, just there.

“Don’t look directly at the cameras, John. That’s a dead giveaway. All right, can you cross here? That’s it. Yes, going south now. Good. South on Allsop. Excellent.”

What are we doing here, Sherlock? What, precisely, are we doing here?

“Alright, stop here a moment, would you? Stop and...I don’t know, look at your phone. I’ll send you a text if that will help.”

So I stop. On the pavement, in front of a shop. Why? Is there a camera nearby? Don’t look for one; I fish my phone out of my pocket, and he’s sent me a text. His fast thumbs make short work of texting. That’s not even a new number: that’s his old number. His name appears on my phone as if
I were expecting a text from him. As if he hadn’t been gone all this time.

*Act like this is a normal text. From Stamford, or something. Saying something in that incomprehensible poor spelling.*

That’s funny. I can’t help but smile at that. The only person I know who sends incomprehensible texts is you, Sherlock. Text him back: *can I move now?*

“Yes, all right. Go ahead.” I pocket my phone and keep walking. The road bends east, which is at least in the direction of the Euston Road Tesco.

It’s chilly. Bright, but chilly.

“Good, yes. Follow it around to Marylebone Road.”

Yes, Sherlock. I know. I did live in this neighbourhood for nearly two years, you know.

“You mentioned this spot once, in one of your stories. But you got it wrong.”

What stories? I never mentioned it on the blog, I’m sure I–

Oh. Not my blog, no. I set a crime scene on Allsop Place in one of my stories for *The Strand*. The one about the wealthy client who invited us in and made us wait too long in her sitting room. You spent the time making jokes about the appalling and tasteless paintings, and it turned out that the client fancied herself an artist and put only her own work on her walls. I had to spend twenty minutes pretending to admire them.

So you were reading my stories, were you? Well, of course you were. They were all about you.

“That wasn’t Allsop Place, it was the Outer Circle, right on Regent’s Park. I was surprised you got that wrong. I remember you remarking on the views at the time.”

I didn’t forget, Sherlock. I knew it wasn’t Allsop Place where that woman lived. I was trying to protect the innocent. Well, not so innocent in that case.

You commented on that story, didn’t you. I bet you did. There was an odd comment, now that I think of it. Someone telling me that a house like the one I described couldn’t be found on Allsop Place. Were you trying to remind me? I don’t remember if I replied to that one. It was pedantic, it missed the point. That should have been my first clue that it was you: pedantic, missing the point, obsessed with the details. *They’re only stories*, I think I said. Bitterly, because they weren’t only stories. They were real. You were right. I should have said Outer Circle. The client ended up in jail anyway. *They’re only stories, does it matter?* The details always matter to you. Was that you? Trying to correct me still, leaning over my shoulder to read what’s on my screen.

If only I’d known. I should have guessed, I suppose. But I couldn’t. I couldn’t even begin to imagine this.

“All right, east here. Don’t cross the street, not yet. Stay on the north side. And east down Marylebone Road.” Yes, Sherlock. I know where the Tesco on Euston Road is.

I spent months with your voice in my head. Not once did you provide advice on which route to take to get to Tesco.

I can’t help it, that’s funny. That’s funny, I have to laugh about that.
“What?” You sound so confused. “What’s funny?”

It’s nothing. I just shake my head. It doesn’t matter: who knows what I’m listening to. No one notices. No one even looks at me. I’m just a tired man, hungover from the previous night, trudging down the road toward Tesco laughing at something he’s listening to on his iPod. He doesn’t want me to speak: fine. I’ll text him.

*So you read my stories? Did you leave comments on them too?*

I can hear the trill of a phone; his phone. He didn’t even change the number. All this time I could have sent him texts and he would have received them all. It’s a good thing I didn’t; imagine the humiliation of that. All I would have said is *Come back to me. I can’t live without you. I love you.* Dodged a bullet there.

“I read them. Your memory for details is quite dreadful, John. Each one had dozens of errors in it! But of course there was nothing I could do about that. Your editors were clearly more interested in the romance, not the details of my deductions. It’s disappointing. But everyone thought I was a fraud by then, didn’t they.”

Yes. Yes, they did. And I fought them all. You must have seen that. Me defending you. That wasn’t part of the plan, was it. You hoped I would believe your lies and not the evidence of my own experience. I couldn’t do that. I eulogised you instead. Romance. Yes, I suppose it was.

“I left comments where they were warranted.”

Did you? God. And I never guessed. Not once. You’d think I’d recognise words you’d put together, but I didn’t. Just picky readers, a bit of criticism among all the praise. There were always readers curious about the details, they couldn’t have all been you. People are genuinely curious about your deductions, always.

“Mycroft hated that.”

Of course he did.

You must have seen all the people who thought you were in love with me, or I was in love with you. What did you think of that? I’m not going to ask. You’d just ignore that, I’m sure. As you always do: people make assumptions, you ignore them. It doesn’t matter what they think. People are idiots, aren’t they.

“John, cross the street here, would you? And walk around the crescent rather than staying on Marylebone Road.”

Well that’s a circular route. Am I avoiding something? Is there someone waiting for me with a gun somewhere between here and Tesco on Marylebone Road?

“I know that’s a bit of a detour, but he’s more likely to see you this way.”

More likely? *More* likely? Am I on a safe trip to Tesco for something vital, or are you dangling me in front of your sworn enemy?

“Sherlock, do you actually need anything from Tesco?” There’s no one around; no one will hear me.

“As I said, it’s best if you don’t speak to me directly. And not particularly, no, pick up whatever you want.”
Right. So this isn’t about Tesco. This is about me being seen. Why? You want to stay hidden, but you want Moran to see *me*? Is he monitoring the CCTV cameras the same way you are? How did he get access to them? Is this a means of teasing him out into the open? Well, you did say I was bait. I thought you were joking. I should have known better. I suppose I’m playing bait right now, then.

I should hate that. But I don’t. I sort of love it. I can feel the rush of adrenaline. I have a gun pressed into my skin under the waistband of my jeans. I can handle myself. London is a battlefield. It never really stopped, did it. It was only me who stopped.

“Around the crescent, there. That’s good. When you get to the halfway point, perhaps you could stop and admire the trees, or something. Maybe snap a photo. I’ll let you know when you’re in the right spot.”

I thought the most dangerous thing was the fantasy of your voice in my head. It seems that the real thing is even worse.
Chapter Summary

It’s all lies, lately. Nothing but lies.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Elvichar for the britpick, airynothing for the lasereyes of destiny, for Lacuna for wading into the waters with me. She’s been spoiled she knows the whole story and still wants me to keep going. That's love, that's what that is. Or madness. Either/or.

“Go north at the corner. There’s a pathway that leads west.”

You’re taking me back home on an even more convoluted path. But I understand now; Moran needs to see me, for some reason. I’m the bait, and he’s meant to bite. I’m not sure why he would want to. Why would he be looking for me? I’m supposed to believe that you’re dead, right? That’s my role in all this, chief mourner. Steadfastly loyal in the face of all evidence against you. He can’t expect me to still be shattered by it, can he? He can’t know that much about me; you don’t. So I should just be what I am; I’m tired, my head hurts, my back is sore, and I broke up with my girlfriend yesterday. We weren’t getting on. I wasn’t honest with her. There are things about me she wouldn’t understand. I can be these things. It’s what I am.

What more can I do? What does it signify, me being seen going into and out of one particular Tesco? That I broke up with Mary, I moved out. That’s not international news. I’m going to the shops outside of her neighbourhood, in my old neighbourhood. It means that things have changed. Little things; my love life, that’s all. I’ve moved. I’ve come home. There’s nothing to see here. I don’t understand.

I wonder which of these cameras Moran controls; you must know. Not the ones on Baker Street, apparently. Is that why you wanted me to avoid it? Less chance of being seen?

What do you want him to know? That I moved back into our flat? Or only that I’m here? Is that evidence on its own? Evidence of what, that you’re alive? That doesn’t make sense. No one can see Baker Street; there’s a perimeter, right? There’s security. It’s safe for you to stand in the window. He can’t see you from there. He doesn’t know where you are. Baker Street doesn’t matter, then. I need to be seen near, but not too near, Baker Street.

Why?

I’m not even wearing a silly hat.

“John.” I very nearly look up. It’s hard not to; this voice in my head isn’t the same as the imaginary one. It does things I don’t expect. The tone of your voice changes so fast; all work and seriousness to a sort of playfulness in a second. “That coffee shop you frequented, before you met Mary. On
Pentonville Road. You remember it?"

You mean the place around the corner from my old flat? The place I retreated to after you died, after I found I couldn’t stand to stay in 221b because of your pointed and unrelenting absence? Yes. Of course I remember. I used to go there a lot. I flirted with the waitresses. There were always people there, strangers. Regulars. It was better to sit there among strangers than to stay in my flat all alone. Those were painful days. What about it, Sherlock?

“I liked it. It was much better than the next one.”

All right, hold on. You said you stayed in London all this time, I know that, but did you actually get coffee from the same places I did? That’s impossible. I would have seen you. Someone would have seen you, even if I didn’t. You were supposed to be dead, Sherlock. What were you doing in coffee shops? What were you doing in my coffee shops?

“Better coffee there. The staff at the second one were stealing from the till, did you notice that?”

Jesus. No, I didn’t notice that. Were you always so close to me, Sherlock? Following me? All that time, were you always just a step or two behind me?

“I don’t know how you coped with that dodgy lift.”

You know about the dodgy lift? So you came into the block of flats I lived in, when I was mourning you the most. Right away, at the start. When I was completely alone. You were there, were you? Taking the dodgy lift, standing by my door. Were you standing there on the evenings when I was staring at the walls and talking to you in my head? Did you ever go inside? Did you see the place and see what you’d reduced me to? Did you hover over me while I slept? So close. That’s unfair.

You thought I was fine. How could you have followed me everywhere, ordered coffee from the same women I ordered coffee from, ridden in the same lift even, and thought I was fine? If only I’d just turned around at the right moment, I might have seen you. And you wouldn’t be able to hide from me or run. I’d have seen you and known the truth.

Would that have killed us both?

I suppose if anything it shows that you missed me too, all that time. Maybe you missed me as much as I missed you. I can’t tell. I’m not sure. I just don’t know.

“North, John.”

I know, Sherlock. I know this place. I used to live here, with you. Remember? I do.

“Oh, look at that, we’re on the telly.” Your unique mix of sarcasm and genuine glee. I can hear the newscaster through the device you’re using to direct me. Something about the cemetery, I hear your name. The grave of Sherlock Holmes. “They’re using that bloody ear hat photo again.” Grave robbers, and something about spraypaint across the headstone. I’m turning the corner onto Baker Street now. Out of danger, I suppose, since you’ve stopped paying attention to my precise whereabouts and warning me about where my feet should go.

“What’s the spraypaint about?” I can ask now, can’t I? No cameras here. No Moran. It’s safe.

“Oh, he left me a message.”

“What does it say?” I can see the front door now. Home. Nearly there. I’m glad I didn’t buy
anything heavy.

“It says liar.”

Liar. That means he knows, doesn’t it? He knows for sure; Sebastian Moran, he knows that you’re alive. You told him. He knows that it was you who killed Moriarty. It’s you who’s destroyed his network piece by piece. And he found out by digging up your grave and opening up an empty coffin.

How foolish that seems; we had a whole funeral, flowers, there was music. I didn’t choose the song, I don’t even know what it was, but I think it’s something you used to play. It was sad. Rachmaninoff? Something like that. Your brother was there. Mrs Hudson, a handful of your former clients. Not many people; Moriarty had convinced too many that you were a fraud. I didn’t say anything at the service; I couldn’t. Not then. Greg did, though. Did you hear him? He said lovely things about you. He did better than I could have done, under the circumstances. I had too much to say, and too little I would say in front of anyone but you. All that for an empty coffin and an empty grave.

“Did we bury an empty coffin that day, then?”

We certainly didn’t bury you. I don’t feel as bad about not being able to go back there.

“No no.” You’re distracted. You’re still watching them talk about you on the telly. “You buried Moriarty.”

What?

I’ve stopped. I’ve stopped dead on the pavement, less than ten feet from the front door. Moriarty? That’s impossible. You only killed him two months ago. How could we have–

“Keep moving, John. Don’t stop there. Hurry. Run, if you can.”

Run?


I can see you at the window. You’re holding that odd device up against your mouth. You’re still in your pyjamas. You’ve tied your dressing gown around your waist now. Your coffin wasn’t empty. We buried James Moriarty. That was three years ago. This doesn’t make any sense. Are you lying to me? It wouldn’t be the first time.

He couldn’t have been dead three years ago, it’s impossible. You were fighting him all this time. Why did you pretend to be dead if he actually was?

“John. I need you to come inside. Now, John. Right now.” There’s a note of panic in your voice. Why? You’ve got your hand pressed against the glass, as if you could touch me. This feels uncomfortably familiar.

Fine. Okay. Fine. I suppose I can pull these ridiculous headphones off now. You’ll have to explain it in person, Sherlock. You have so many things to explain to me. No more lies, all right? No more.

We couldn’t have buried him instead of you. That doesn’t make any sense at all. He wasn’t dead. Neither were you. Moriarty?

“John!” It’s Mrs Hudson. She ushers me inside and shuts the door. “Were you out to the Tesco?
Did I forget something? You could have asked, you know, I might have whatever you–"

“It’s fine.” I shift the bag from one hand to the other. There’s not much there. I couldn’t think of what to pick up. Olives, kitchen sponges, a bottle of ibuprofen, and a bag of swiss chocolates. I’m not prepared to argue the rationale behind purchasing any of them. “I just–” How much does Mrs Hudson know? Should I say *Sherlock sent me out in the hopes that one of Moriarty’s henchmen would spot me and try to kill me*? Or is that too much information? “I needed a bit of air.”

The sympathetic look on her face makes me feel guilty about the lie. It’s all lies, lately. Nothing but lies. “You two had a bit of a domestic last night, didn’t you.” She pats my arm. “You poor soul. I know it’s been such a trying time. He should go easy on you.” She sighs. “Have you seen the news?”

Did she know too? Did she know that coffin wasn't empty?

“Someone’s dug up Sherlock’s grave.” Her eyes go wide and round. “How dare they! No respect, I tell you. These hooligans, first it’s the football, and the riots in the streets, and now they’re digging up the graves of men who died so tragically, it’s just awful.” She wrings her hands. “Dreadful,” she says, shaking her head. “I don’t know about these young people, John. I just don’t know. No respect for the dead.”

I’m tempted to point out that you weren’t actually in the grave at the time, nor are you actually dead, but I suppose that’s beside the point.

I’ll take my pathetic shopping and bring it upstairs. I’m starting to feel numb; there’s no end of what I don’t know. You need to tell me, Sherlock. I can’t read your mind. I can’t deduce it all from the expression on your face and the number of phones on the table. I can hear the telly from outside the door. It’s open a little. You’re waiting for me.

Sherlock. God: it’s going to take me a while to get used to this. There you are. Your long fingers are steepled in front of your face. You’re looking at me, not the telly. You’re waiting for me. You’re giving me that look. You know what I’m thinking. You know.

“What do you mean, we buried Moriarty? That doesn’t make any sense.”

I could stand here staring back at you, but it’s a bit too intense for me. I feel like you’re peering into my soul. Into the kitchen, then: that’s where olives and chocolate should go. I need the ibuprofen for my back. The paracetamol didn’t do a thing for it. “He died two months ago, didn’t he?” That’s what I learned from the papers. Mycroft knew. He called me. Why did he call me?

“No.” Your eyes move from me to the telly, and then back again. “No, he died that afternoon on the roof of Bart’s. Shot himself in the mouth. Messy business. I don’t recommend it.”

He–

What?

Why would–

No, why would he do that? Why would Moriarty–

Bart’s? The roof at Bart’s, that’s where you were. You were there, and he–

No. Why? You sent me off, you sent me back to Mrs Hudson, you cleared me out of the way. On purpose. You didn’t want me there. You kept me from staying with you, from following you. I
would have. You know I would have.

“That’s why I had to jump.”

Can we not talk about that? I don’t want to talk about it.

Three years ago, what, it was Moriarty who died, not you. He killed himself, and you had to do the same. Why? It doesn’t make any sense. It should have been over then. He was gone. You’d already won.

But for the network. Right. He wasn’t just one madman, was he. Of course not. There were so many others. Moran, a web of criminals ready to replace him, avenge him? You kept his death a secret. The lie about his death, and the lie about your survival: these things were critical, were they? They must have been. I don’t know. I was taken in. I was part of the lie, and convinced by it. I thought you’d been beaten. It seemed impossible. I didn’t know.

Suddenly all the phones are pinging and trilling. Text messages. You leap up, pick up one of the phones, then drop it in favour of another. Then another. What’s going on?

"He's here, you idiot!" You’re shouting at one of them that keeps on rattling with new texts as you hold it. Moran: you’re shouting at him as if he can hear you. “He’s right here! Open your bloody eyes!"

My bloody eyes are open. And it still doesn’t make any sense.
You look nervous, standing there. What are you looking for? There’s nothing to see out there. Barely any cars, no people. We’re safe in here. Too safe, I reckon; it’s putting you on edge. You’re holding your chin, your index finger is tracing your upper lip. Over and over. You’re waiting for something to happen. I’m not sure what. I’m not sure you know.

You used to tell me things. You’d tell me things all the time, long trains of details that result in a brilliant deduction, or didn’t. You’d talk when you were sifting through the details in your head, the useful and useless ones, before you could tell the difference. You’d tell me things even when I didn’t ask, even when you didn’t have any answers and I wasn’t all that interested. You’d just talk. For hours. You’d talk to me whether I was there or not.

You don’t do that anymore. Not by default, anyway. Well: three years is a long time. I haven’t been around to talk to. You’re used to being on your own now, aren’t you. You’ve been alone, surrounded by phones, in places that weren’t home.

You’ve been lonely, haven’t you. I’m sure of it. Maybe you didn’t even realise it. It’s only sentiment. Sure: meaningless sentiment, isn’t that right? No one to talk to. A skull, maybe. Or talk to the walls. Not quite as satisfying, though. Not quite. You’ve grown quiet.

You can unlearn that. You did once.

Maybe I can prod you back into it. Talk to me, Sherlock. What is it? “What’s out there?”

I think I’ve startled you. You look at me, then back at the street again. “Van.”

Yes. There’s not much else. Just someone’s van. That’s not very interesting, is it? Why stare at it?

“He threatened you, you know.” You say it without looking at me. You’re speaking into the window, as if I’m out there, on the pavement still. “To get to me.”

Did he? Well, he’d have done anything to get to you. He’d done it before, with semtex and snipers. We were close, he could see that. We were so close, it was probably only a matter of time before we ended up in bed together. Well, we did end up in bed together, from time to time. We did last night, even. But not like that. In time, maybe, we would have.

He threatened me three years ago, did he? To get to you? He wanted to play with you, toy with you, he wanted you to help him not feel so bored. Did it work?
I guess it did. You played his game. You did what he wanted. You died.

Is that why you did it? Because he threatened me? No: you wouldn’t do this all for me. You did it to destroy him. Well: him, and his network. To put an end to it. That’s why you did it. He wouldn’t have left you alone otherwise, isn’t that right? It would have gone on forever. He was fascinated with you. Obsessed.

“He was obsessed with you.” I’d say he was in love with you, infatuated at least, but that would be supposing a capacity for emotion that probably wasn’t there. I think nearly everyone who meets you falls in love with you, on some level. Molly Hooper certainly did. Irene Adler did, by all accounts. Most of your clients come to admire you more often than not. Lestrade was beyond flattering at the funeral. And then there’s me. There’s always me.

He was obsessed with you, so you pretended to die. But you didn’t kill him after all. He did it himself. Thinking you’d have to die as well, isn’t that right? He wanted to die with you. Some kind of unwilling suicide pact. That must have been the pinnacle of his life, then: to beat you, and then to die with you. To take you with him, his most prized possession. He was quite mad, wasn’t he. Quite mad. He died thinking he’d beaten you, that he’d got to keep you.

But he didn’t, in the end, did he. You’d beaten him, right from the start. I hadn’t quite realised it; you beat him. Moriarty devised a trap for you, he didn’t think you could escape from it. But you did. That’s amazing, Sherlock. It’s fantastic. You beat him and buried him under your own name. He would have hated that. Or appreciated it.

“He might have appreciated the irony.” Geniuses like the idea that they can be beaten from time to time, don’t they? You certainly do.

“Moran will threaten you now, in his place.”

Right. To get to you. Well, that’s why I’m bait. Isn’t it? If he can’t find you, he can at least find me. What purpose will that serve?

“So he didn’t know? That Moriarty was dead all this time?” That you were alive, hiding? He must not have known. You fooled him.

You glance over at me, your fingers still covering your mouth. You look frustrated. Impatient. What are you waiting for? You shake your head no. “He’s an idiot.”

Most people are, Sherlock. Most people are.

“Oh, lovely.” Your trademark sarcasm is on display again, I see. What is it now? There’s a car pulling up outside. Who’s there? Not whoever you’ve been waiting for, clearly. Not anyone welcome, either. “Oh, take your time out there, please.”

What?

“We’re to be treated to a visit from Her Majesty.” Are we? You walk over to me and adjust the table at my elbow. You’re creating a tripping hazard, aren’t you. On purpose. Then you sit opposite me. You throw back your shoulders and assume the most languid, bored pose possible. Must be your brother, then. I see relations there haven’t improved any in the last three years.

“Mrs Hudson!” You shout for her. She can hear you; the door’s still open a bit. “No need to answer the door, we’re not interested in having any visitors this afternoon!”

Outside a car door opens, and closes again. There’s a pause; then the audible sound of a key
pressing into the keyhole downstairs.

“I should have had her change the locks.”

He has the most deliberate pace in the world, your brother. It sounds as though every motion is planned and executed with purpose. He knows we can hear him. He steps into the flat, he closes the door behind him. There’s a pause, the rustle of a coat. The engine outside shifts gears and the car drives away. Are they leaving him here? Terrific. Neither of us want to see him.

All this time, he knew you were alive and didn’t tell me. He called me in the middle of the night two months ago, why?

I can hear his careful, even pace on the stairs. It couldn’t be anyone else. He must have ordered the security perimeter; only he could pass through it at will, I’m sure. I’m not going to play the mediator between you two. I’m not. I’ll leave you to it. Sherlock, this is yours to deal with. Don’t get me involved. Good luck with him. The door creaks a little as he opens it wide and steps through.

“Sherlock.” Smooth as silk, just as he always was. Some things never change. Not a single hair out of place. The creases in his trousers are perfectly pressed. He closes the door behind him. “Good afternoon, John.”

I suppose I have to answer that. “Mycroft.” Just nod. That should be enough. Enough from me, anyway. I’ll put the kettle on.

“How are you getting on, after the rude shock from yesterday?” He smiles. It could be a nefarious smile; it could be genuine concern. I can’t tell. He only has the one smile, and he pulls it out for every occasion. It is perfectly symmetrical and practiced. He’s probably adjusted it in the mirror over time to convey the perfect combination of guile, threat, and blamelessness.

I have not missed you, Mycroft Holmes. I don’t know what to make of you.

“I’m fine.” I suppose it would be rude not to offer him tea. “Tea?”

“Please,” he says. He glides across the room, neatly avoiding the leg of the table. He sits opposite you. In my chair, which I have just vacated. He’s yours to deal with, Sherlock. Yours. This was your bright idea, faking your death and working with your brother.

The staring contest begins. I know you don’t want to engage with him any more than I do, but you’ve got to. You’re trapped here, and he’s the architect of your prison, isn’t he. He must enjoy that: ultimate control over you, exactly what he’s always wanted. He’s locked you in a prison of your own making. Hasn’t he. I let the water run until it’s so cold my fist feels numb underneath it.

“Your taunting isn’t doing anything but winding him up. You must know that.” All I can see is the back of his head. And you, looking past him. You’re looking at me, as if I’m not here. I’ve over-filled the kettle. It will take ages to boil.

You make a frustrated noise. Is that what you’ve been doing, taunting Moran? Is that a good idea? If you taunt him, he threatens me. Do you want him to threaten me? You must. You must want that. You’re anticipating it. I don’t understand.

I suppose I might as well bring down the teapot, if there’s three of us.

“There are lives at stake, Sherlock.” That sounds familiar. He must know that that’s no way to get you on side. When has that ever worked? Whose lives at stake? Mine? His? Yours? We’re in a
safehouse. How long is Mycroft planning to stay?

“You’ve taken all the necessary precautions.” You say precautions like it’s the most distasteful thing you can imagine.

“Obviously. Someone has to.” That’s clearly an accusation. “But there’s always a risk.”

“Because your people are incompetent.”

“The time was short.”

“Your Captain is short.”

“Don’t be petty, Sherlock.”

You’re not looking at me anymore. You’ve got your feet on the leather now, your hands on your knees, you’ve buried your face in the crook of your arm. You look like a child holding back a tantrum. “I’ve done everything I can. He went to Tesco. He stopped in front of the camera on Marylebone Road, he walked along Euston Road, for god’s sake. He was in the Tesco for twenty minutes. He has all the evidence he needs.”

“He didn’t see it.”

“He must have. Even an idiot should be able to see where John is now.” Even an idiot. Moran. Right? Milk; sugar on the tray. There it is, very civilised. Unlike whatever it is that’s going on between the two of you.

“He doesn’t know that. You were impatient, Sherlock, you moved too soon. And you know what he’ll do next.”

“Well, good. That should be the end of it, then. You’ll track him down and have him arrested. And all this will be over.”

“If we’re lucky. They aren’t like the ones you found here. They’re newer, harder to trace.”

“Not impossible.”

“No.”

“Well then, I’m sure your brilliant experts can manage it.” I can guess what you think about the relative brilliance of Mycroft’s experts. You’ve had an unhappy three years, haven’t you, Sherlock. Surrounded by idiots, MI5 and secrecy and rules you hate. Is that why you hovered around me? You were lonely and miserable and no one told you how amazing you are. You were just as homesick as I was.

I wonder if I should put out some biscuits. Mrs Hudson brought some; they’re the ones you always like best. It looks like Mycroft’s put on a bit of weight since we were last here together. I’ll put out some biscuits, then. I can play host well enough. A few biscuits wouldn’t hurt you any, and they’ll annoy your brother.

The kettle whistles. I pour the water into the pot and watch it change colour. I’ll break the silence. I have my questions. I might as well ask them. Bring the tray into the sitting room and place it at Mycroft’s elbow. He’s still staring at you. Your head is thrown back now, you’re staring at the ceiling.
“Why did you call me, Mycroft?”

“I’m sorry?” It’s like he’s forgotten I’m even here.

“You called me. Two months ago. You called me in the middle of the night and woke up my girlfriend. It was the night before they announced that Moriarty was dead. Why did you call me?”

There’s that smile again. Absolutely blank and meaningless, but filled with smug superiority. “I needed to ensure that your phone wasn’t compromised, John. Nothing nefarious, I can assure you.”

Compromised? By whom? Moran? I’ve never met Moran, I have nothing to do with Moran. He’s certainly never compromised my phone. I don’t use it that much anymore, anyway.

“I’m sure Sherlock has informed you that his ridiculous activities almost always result in a clear and present threat to the safety of you and everyone you love, hasn’t he?” He glances at you. You look absolutely miserable, but you don’t look back at him. You’re still staring at the ceiling. “Did he not tell you that? Oh, pity.”

This little dance you two engage in every time I see you has only got worse. I’m not going to engage in this. I’m not.

I’ll pour the tea. I left my own cup on the worktop. “And you came to my book launch party. Why did you do that?”

“You wrote a book about my brother, John.” That’s what you said then. “Did you think he wouldn’t try to make an appearance?”

Did you? You’re still not looking at either of us. Did you read my book, Sherlock? Of course you did. Were you there that evening? Did you see me? Did I see you?

There’s a beeping sound coming from Mycroft’s pocket; he pulls out his phone. “Well,” he says. “There’s been an incident, Sherlock. This is going to complicate matters.” He ignores the tea and stands, walks over to the telly and switches it on. The news. “Any moment now.”

He sighs, dials a number, and stalks across the floor, his phone against his ear.

“Yes,” he says. “I know. We need footage.”

The volume is still low. I can’t make out what they’re saying. They cut to a live camera with a reporter. It’s Bart’s. They’re in front of Bart’s, Sherlock. Just where I was standing when you—

Right. Yes. Just there. There are flashing lights and a crowd. There’s an ambulance. The reporter is talking animatedly. There’s tape, around the spot where you fell, the police are holding the crowd back. There’s a body there. Again.

What’s going on? This is live. Did someone else jump off the roof?

They show some photographs; a body. There’s no blood, and I can’t see his face. His left leg is tangled up underneath him, his body is too still. His arms rest against the pavement in impossible angles. You can tell he’s dead, you can tell. Like I could tell with you? I watched you fall; this time I can only see the aftermath. But there’s a note pinned to the long, black coat on the body. I can read it from here, it’s in block letters. SHERLOCK HOLMES LIVES.

“Sherlock?” You’re not looking. You haven’t seen this. You’ve got your eyes closed. I want to touch you; I need to feel your pulse again. There’s no blood on the pavement, but I can almost see
the ghost of it there. It wasn’t your blood. It’s only a message. It’s a threat. To whom? To you, to me. Is that what you’ve been waiting for?

“I’ll have that cup.” You extend one hand, ignoring the telly. “I’m dry as a bone.”
This Fantasy of Ours

Chapter Summary

I’ve got my hand on the doorknob. I got up, I picked up my coat, I didn’t even notice. I can’t stay and watch this.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Lacuna, who knows the whole story, airynothing for eyes sharper than the sharpest knives, and Elise for consulting on the use of British English.

I’d forgotten just how good you are. Maybe you’ve got better in the last three years, I don’t know. You’re very good, exceptionally good. Mary took me out to hear a violinist play with an orchestra once a couple of years ago. It was all right, I guess. I had to dress up and the music only reminded me of you. He was nothing like you though; he was portly and balding and he had sweat dripping down his forehead the entire time. And he wasn’t nearly as good as you are. You could have played professionally. If that’s something you’d have been interested in doing. You’d be a soloist on a stage all alone, making the whole audience cry.

But then you’d turn to them and say something like, “I don’t understand, what’s the matter with all of you?” So I suppose it’s for the best you mostly play for an audience of one.

I’m not sure you’re even paying attention to what you’re playing just now; you seem distracted. You’re keeping an eye on the desk, which is covered with your phones. You’re standing by the window, peering down at the pavement as if something might sprout from it. You glance over at the telly from time to time, and turn away in annoyance. Music just happens with you, doesn’t it. It drifts off of you like steam while you’re thinking about something else. You’re so gifted it takes you no thought or effort at all. It’s second nature, it’s like breathing for anyone else. Have you played this song a million times, is it just rote for you, pure muscle memory? Your mind is bent on Moran, wherever he is, and the flat is full of your desperately sad music. I’d forgotten how beautiful it is. You warned me about it when we first met, that you like to play the violin when you’re thinking. As if that’s something that needs a warning. It’s so beautiful, Sherlock. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard.

They’re still talking about you on the telly, of course. I don’t really want to hear what they have to say; it’s a sad story and I’ve heard it too many times. The body that fell from the roof was, apparently, the corpse of a man who died the day before. He was stolen from a morgue, and not from Bart’s. He was dressed in clothes that weren’t his. His family is distressed, they want to find someone to sue. He was already dead though, a suicide. Drug overdose. Does that mean something? He killed himself, and Moran dropped his body off the roof in a coat that looks uncomfortably like yours. With a note. About you.

They have handwriting experts on the telly, as if that will reveal something critical. They say it was a man who wrote it, and he was angry and afraid. Threatened, they say. Threatened and lashing out.
Moran? Mycroft said you’d been taunting him, so that makes sense. They don’t know what to make of the content of the note, though. *Sherlock Holmes Lives*. You died three years ago in disgrace. They show the headlines, the interviews. Snippets of Moriarty as Richard Brook. They’d all been taken in by a madman, of course. They shake their heads, yes, it’s sad. They accused an innocent man who saved hundreds of lives of being a fraud and he committed suicide, only to be redeemed years later. They show your empty grave. They show footage of your funeral, where did they find that? There’s me. There’s me, while Greg talks about you. I’m not crying yet. I didn’t do that until later.

I should turn this off.

Why do you play such sad songs, Sherlock? What is it you’re playing, anyway? You say you don’t understand sentiment, but then you play things like this that make me want to wrap my arms around you and comfort you. Did you write it? I know you write music sometimes. Who is it about?

Is this something you wrote for Irene when she died?

Would you ever write something like this for me?

One of your many phones twitches on the table and you stop playing. Right in the middle of something, you just stop. Is that what you were waiting for? The telly seems much louder suddenly.

They’re talking about my book. There it is, that’s the cover. There’s the dedication page. *With love*. Of course. Yes, it was dedicated to him, you know it was. They show my picture in the corner, and highlight passages. Yes, I never believed he was a fraud, of course I didn’t. I was right. I knew him, of course I was right. I’m afraid they’re going to start the requisite conversation about whether or not we were lovers. Play again, Sherlock. Please.

You put your violin away instead, and flip open one of your computers.

“Did something happen?”

My phone is vibrating. Is someone calling me? Yes. Shit. It’s my agent. I don’t want to talk right now, Oliver. Thank you, I know the book is on the telly just now, yes. I know. Of course it is, there was a mention of Sherlock Holmes in the news! Another body! Sherlock’s empty grave! I’m surprised it’s taken you this long to call. You can speak to my answer phone. Yes, I’m sure it’s good for sales. I’m sure it’s very good. I still have deadlines, I don’t want to think about it.

“Yes.” Your fingers are flying across the keyboard. “John, before you get upset, you should know that Mary is fine.”

“What?”

“She’s fine, she wasn’t there. Precautions were taken. Mycroft’s people weren’t incompetent about that part, at least.”

“Sherlock.” My phone is vibrating again. A text message this time. What the hell happened? It’s from Stamford. *Are you all right?* “Sherlock, what’s going on?”

It’s on the news. Explosion. Is that–

That’s Mary’s block of flats. Christ. Mary’s flat. That’s Mary’s floor, there was an explosion, there’s a hole in the building now. Like something burst out, it’s like–
Oh my god.

There’s bits of dust and plaster in the air, raining down on the street. Bits of rug, furniture. Bits of Mary’s flat. People pointing up at it, police tape. Half of her sofa lying on the pavement, the cushion torn to shreds. Jesus Christ, Sherlock. What have you done?

I should go. I should get down there, find Mary, I should—

“Have you got him?” Sherlock, he’s on the phone. “Have you got him? Come on.” Talking to whom? Mycroft. Yes, probably Mycroft, he’s responsible for this, isn’t he. I don’t care. What have they done? What have you done to me, Sherlock? Mary, where are you? Tell me you’re okay. Please, tell me you’re okay.

“John.” I’ve got my hand on the doorknob. I got up, I picked up my coat, I didn’t even notice. I can’t stay and watch this. Was she in there? Is she lying there on the floor, bleeding, wondering why I’m not there? “Don’t. She’s fine. She wasn’t there. They kept her away.”

I don’t believe you. I don’t. You never told me she was in any danger. Me: sure. I’ll come when you say it’s dangerous. I’ll go hover around watching arrests, I’ll attack a man three times my size. That’s fine. Send me off to let the snipers aim at me, that’s all fine. But you don’t put Mary in the line of fire. You just don’t. She lives in the real world, not this fantasy of ours. You leave her alone.

You’re still holding the phone to your ear. “Moran planted the explosives, and MI5 tried to remove them all, but they missed two of them because they’re incompetent, John. He detonated them tonight. He’s been warning me that he would, I told you that. That’s how he tries to get to me, he threatens you. There were many more explosives in the walls, it would have taken down the entire building. They evacuated the flats above and below days ago. They kept her away tonight. No one was hurt.”

I’ll call her. God, my hands, they’re shaking. Why are my hands shaking? I can’t do anything. I’m helpless here, I can only watch from here. I’ll leave if she needs me, Sherlock. You can’t stop me. I don’t care about your perimeter or your safehouse. I just don’t. If she’s in trouble, you aren’t going to stop me. Not after all this.

“If he detonated them himself, we can track him. It’s not all bad news, John.”

Fuck off, Sherlock.

She picks up. I can hear sirens. She’s there, she’s on the street. I can hear her breathing. Thank God. Mary. Talk to me, please. Are you okay?

“Mary?”

“John.” She sounds surprised. “John, you weren’t in there, were you? God! I hoped you weren’t in there, I wasn’t sure. Thank God. Oh, thank God.”

She thought I was in her flat? Why would I be there?

“No. No, I’m fine, are you all right? I’ve just seen it on the telly.”

“I’m okay,” she says, then she laughs. It’s nervous laughter, not something I’ve ever heard from her. She’s afraid. I should go. “I was— Yeah, I’m fine, I was at my hairdresser’s. They were late getting me in. So late, they’re usually good at keeping appointments. And I was annoyed, John, I was so annoyed at them for making me wait so long, but it was fate, or something.” Right. Fate.
Sure. “They were so behind, and got me in so late, I was on my way home when it happened. I should have been in there, but I wasn’t. I wasn’t close by, even. I’m okay.”

There’s more video of it on the telly: from a helicopter, apparently. It’s Mary’s flat, but without the exterior wall. I can see her kitchen, the smooth granite worktop. I can see the wall she painted over. It’s ripped in half now. Her bed is tilted, the floor has fallen away. I can see her wallpaper. That was my home. For two years, that was my home. Destroyed. Her life; mine. Why?

“Jesus.”

“They’re saying it was a gas line that exploded.” Are they. Is that what they’re saying. I look up at you. You’re staring at me. You’re waiting. Why? You want to know if I’m going to leave, do you? “Some kind of...I don’t know. They wrote me a cheque already, can you believe that? Insurance has got a bit better since the last time I needed them.”

A cheque. Is that how you handle this sort of thing, Mycroft? Hand out cheques?

What have you done? Why would anyone want to hurt Mary? None of this is her fault.

“Have you–” How am I going to ask this? I want to know if she needs somewhere to stay. Because she’ll come here if she needs to, Sherlock. You can’t say no to that. If you say no, I’ll leave. I’ll find her a place myself, if I have to. “Have you got somewhere to go?”

“Yeah, the building manager, he found me this furnished place in Soho, if you can believe that.” I can hear people talking around her. She’s getting into a car; the door shuts, I can hear that. She gives the driver an address. Soho. Nicely played, Mycroft. She’s always wanted to live there. “Soho! Apparently it’s got a little garden. They say I can stay as long as I need to. And I’ve got this cheque, it’s to buy new clothes, dishes, that sort of thing. Whatever I want. I don’t even need to document it, isn’t that amazing?”

At least you’re taking care of her. Are these the precautions you were talking about? Make sure Mary’s out of the way, find her a place to go. Her dream flat. Does she get to keep it? I bet she does. I bet the rent will be remarkably low for the location. She’s paid her dues; she put up with me for two years, she let go at just the right time. She lost everything she ever had, to gain everything she ever wanted. I’m sorry, Mary. I hope this works out for you. I really do.

“That’s good.” It wasn’t her they were after. Oh. You told me: you already told me. It’s me. It’s me he’s after, it’s me he’s always been after. I’m the bait. He knew where I was; he planted the bombs. You lured me out. He threatens me to get to you. This is how you play this game, the two of you: you taunt him with texts, and he threatens me. You sent me out to Tesco, why? To show him that I wasn’t in Mary’s flat anymore.

Were you trying to protect her? You were trying to flag him down, show him where I am now. I understand.

“Alice is going to meet me there.” Mary’s best friend: I dislike her very much. She complains a lot and gossips about everyone. But Mary loves her, so what can I say. That’s good: she needs Alice now. They can stay up all night and make plans. Mary will love replacing her entire wardrobe. They can talk about how much better off she is without me. It will all be true. “She’s going to stay over with me for a while.”

“Good.” She doesn’t need me. Of course she doesn’t; she never did. “So you’re okay.”

“I’m fine. A bit shaken, but I’m fine. I’ve never heard of anything like this happening. I don’t want
to have a gas cooker again, I don’t think. But I’m fine. I’m fine.”

“Right. Well, call me if you need anything, all right?”

“I was worried,” she says. “I thought you might have been in there. I know we didn’t end things on the best note, John, but I was worried.”

“Me too,” I tell her. She was a target as long as she was with me. She’s safer without me, now. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “I’ll be okay. I’ll call you.”

I know she won’t. It’s for the best. She hangs up.

You’re staring at me. I’ve still got my hand on the doorknob. They’ve got bored of this story on the news; they’ve moved on to something else. Some celebrity couple who’ve broken up. Nonsense. Nothing. As if there isn’t a war raging in the middle of London. They have no idea.

“He was trying to kill me.” I understand it. He knows you and I were close. He threatens me to get to you. He doesn’t know where you are; he thought he knew where I was. At Mary’s. He’s been threatening me; you’ve been taunting him. This is the result. Wild and reckless, but no one was hurt. It was all deliberate, wasn’t it.

“Yes.”

“What’s next, then?”

You sigh and sit. You seem small, suddenly. Tired. Too thin. You didn’t get a lot of sleep last night, and god knows when you last got much of any. Your eyes are bloodshot. Has it been this way for the last three years? Waiting, luring this madman around, hiding? Laying out elaborate plans and hoping they work out? Watching over me from a distance, while I knew nothing? What’s next, Sherlock? Who’s going to escape by the skin of their teeth next time?

“I’m not sure.” It pains you to say it, doesn’t it.

Pick up your violin again, Sherlock. I’ll sit and listen. I’ll sit and listen, and you’ll watch outside. I know what you’re waiting for now. You’re waiting for him to find me. I’m the bait. He’ll come for me. Won’t he.

I’ll be here. I’ll be ready.
It's All Right

Chapter Summary

You were right about the crack on the ceiling.

Chapter Notes

Thanks to hiddenlacuna; to airynothing for the laser eyes; and DVeleniet for the encouragement. And...well. Yes. Thanks to #innercircle for listening to me wail about this one. <3

I’m fine. I’m all right, I wasn’t there. Mary’s fine. We’re both fine.

It’s the wrong time, isn’t it, to tell people that we broke up. I just keep sending variations on the same text to everyone I know. No one asks why Mary’s flat, and only Mary’s flat, exploded; everyone believes the story about the gas line, it seems. No questions about it at all. Not one.

I thought humans had a built-in sense that’s triggered when things aren’t quite right, some sort of brain stem prey-animal holdover that gives us gooseflesh if a story doesn’t quite make sense. But we don’t. We like to think we do, but we’re wrong. Our collective intuition is faulty. We’re too afraid of appearing paranoid or delusional, we don’t want anyone to get the wrong idea and think ill of us. It’s all about what the neighbours think, isn’t it. Take out the tinfoil hats, boys, we’ve got a live one. If everyone else thinks something makes sense, we don’t even stop to question it.

We like to think in probabilities. How probable is it that a ring of criminals set explosives into the walls from the flats next door to ours, above and below; how probable is it that those explosives had been sitting there, ticking away, waiting, for longer than I care to consider? Chances are, it’s just the gas line. Of course it is. More probable. And everyone believes it.

So that’s it, then.

I’m fine. I’m all right. No, I wasn’t there, thank god. I know, terrible, isn’t it.

I’m not telling anyone about you. You didn’t say I shouldn’t. Moran knows; what does it matter if it’s a secret or not, at this point? You didn’t say anything about it at all. But I don’t tell anyone all the same. It doesn’t feel like public information yet. I wouldn’t even know how to explain.

I’m at 221b, you know. Yes, back home! Sitting here with Sherlock, watching him stare blankly at his computer just now. I know, a real treat, it’s just like the old days. Well, the boring parts of the old days. Yeah, he’s not so dead after all, as it turns out. Only Sherlock! I know! He’s quite an actor, isn’t he? He sure had me fooled! No, I’m not sure how he did it. Don’t really want to ask, it seems rude, somehow. See you later, mate, have a good night!

No. No, I can’t say that. I don’t know how to approach that one. Maybe I’m just not ready to share you. Not quite yet.
God, I’m exhausted. You’ve been staring at that computer screen a little too long without blinking. You need some sleep. We should go to bed.

We. As if that’s a thing we do together now. Well: we did. Sleep. Together. That’s probably the furthest thing from your mind right now. Sleeping, or sleeping with me. Winning, losing, death, life, all of it, that’s all hanging in the balance now, not whether or not I can rest my forehead against the back of your neck again. Or rest my hand against your stomach and feel you breathing. Sleeping is what you do in between other, more important things. It doesn’t bear thinking about, does it.

“Well?” I think you might have forgotten that I’m here. You look up at me, startled. I know you’re working. You’re planning and plotting, you’re watching dots on maps, it’s all very complicated.

“Well what?”

“Have they found him?” That was the upside, wasn’t it? Trace the detonator, right? I can already guess the answer is no. You would have said something, surely. You’d be in a more celebratory mood. Maybe we’d go out for chinese, or something. Late night dessert at Angelo’s, champagne, a fitting return to the land of the living. But I don’t know anymore. You’re quieter than I remember. You were always talking in my head. I’d forgotten about your stony silences.

“No.” You look back at the screen. “No, they found another of his playthings instead. Eighteen years old, already known to police for drugs and theft. Barely finished Year Seven. His father is in prison for murdering his mother, so he’s effectively an orphan. That’s the sort of person Moran attracts. The most desperate. That’s the level we’ve reached, John. Arresting lost children.” A lost child who nearly blew up my ex-girlfriend, let’s remember. But yeah. Yeah, I see what you mean. The dregs. He’s reached the dregs, now. So it’s almost over.

What do we need him to do now? We need him to strike. Strike here? Even though you’ve made it impossible? Strike at me, and get caught at it, isn’t that right? Come out, come out wherever you are. But only in the right place, and at the right time. Is that it?


“No.” You’ve picked up another phone, I swear there’s more of them now. “Too dangerous. He’ll be looking for you now.”

Too dangerous? I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say anything like that before. “He wasn’t looking for me this morning?”

That earns me a look I only partially understand. “He knows now you aren’t where he thought you were. He knows I’m better prepared for him than he thought I was. We need to move with,” you hesitate a moment. You’re going to say something you hate, something your brother has told you many times, I’m certain of it. “Caution.” Yes. Caution, just like Mycroft. Targeted and careful. Strategic. That’s not your way, is it, Sherlock. You’re all brains for puzzles and none for self-preservation. “His network may be reduced to nothing, but he’s still a better shot than you are.”

Better than I am?

“Well, maybe not better. About even, let’s say. And I still don’t know where he is.”

“So what are we going to do?”

You look at me, then back at the screen. “I have seven different plans.” Of course you do. “All of
them are likely to end rather badly.”

“So you need one more, one that’s likely to end well.”

You sigh. “One would do.”

Sleep now, Sherlock. We’ll sort it out in the morning. You’re exhausted; so am I. It’s late.

“I’m going to bed.” Stand up, and pause. Wait. Will he come with me?

He doesn’t look up at me. He’s staring intently at something on one of the phones. He picks up another. Then another. He types something into one of them. Puts it down. He’s not going to come with me. Of course he’s not. Why would he do that? His bedroom is down here, mine is upstairs. We’re only flatmates, for god’s sake. Just friends. He let me cuddle him a bit last night because for the last three years I thought he was dead. He’s over it now; we’re back to normal. Sort of. We won’t talk about that, because there’s nothing to talk about.

“Goodnight, Sherlock.”

“Goodnight.”

That’s all right. That’s fine. You stay down here, Sherlock. You work until your eyes fall shut, and maybe you’ll fall asleep at the desk, in your chair. Then in the morning I’ll bring you a cup of coffee. Or you’ll realise you’re too groggy to go on, and you’ll curl up on your bed, where we slept together last night. And maybe you’ll miss me being there. Or you won’t. You won’t think about it at all, because, well. Life and death. Moran. Bullets with my name on them, your name on them, too. You’re orchestrating things. You’re worried. That’s enough. I understand. It’s not an absence of affection, I know that. It’s just a different kind.

That’s okay. I can live with that.

It’s dark up here. I haven’t been upstairs since this morning. The window’s still open a crack. It’s a bit chilly.

It’s all right, him staying downstairs. It’s all right. It’s what he does, it’s how this works. I remember this. I used to give up and head up to bed all the time. He can push through with no sleep, it seems to only make him hungrier for a solution. It might help us both if he stays awake. It’s not the same with me.

I slept in my clothes last night. Proper pyjamas tonight though, it’s grown chilly. I suppose the heat won’t come on. It’s warm enough downstairs. I’ll warm up soon enough.

God. I’d forgotten about this bed. I’d forgotten how much I hated Mary’s, Christ, the comparison makes it so obvious. That bed was awful, how did I endure it for so long? You sink right into hers like into a puff of cream. This is better. Yes, this is perfect. The sheets will heat up in a moment. I should have kept the window shut.

You were right about the crack on the ceiling. I don’t think I would have noticed it was gone until now. But I remember many nights lying here looking up at it in the faint light from the window, the way it curved out from the wall and stopped abruptly in the middle of the ceiling. It was a reminder that this isn’t a new house; it has a history. The walls have settled over time, it’s not perfectly level. It’s like a living thing, it’s adjusted to its place. It’s shifted with the earth below it, with rain and time. A carpenter’s perfect angles break against London’s shifting floor. We’re only hovering here, dependent on it staying still. But it never does, not really.
It’s gone now. Nothing but smooth plaster.

Yeah, it’s all right. He’ll stay downstairs, I’ll stay up here. That’s how it was, most of the time. That’s how it should be. It’s okay. I mean, I’m not expecting anything. It’s enough just to have you back at all. It is, it’s enough.

There’s a sort of innocence to you, how do you do that? I can’t think of anyone else who would have let me do those things and not thought it strange. There should have been something afterward, you should have reiterated our status. *I’m flattered by your interest, John,* something along those lines. I would have been flustered, I would have denied everything, and then we’d have laughed it off. You should have said something. But you acted like it was okay, and it was okay. It was fine. You don’t really understand the boundaries around friendship, do you? You don’t have very many friends. Maybe that’s all it is. Some things are okay: a hug now and then, a clap on the back, that sort of thing, but curling up around you in bed, resting my hand on your stomach. I might have kissed the back of your neck, I don’t know. I might have. That’s crossing a line.

But not to you. No, you don’t think anything of it. I missed you, that’s all. I was drunk and I missed you and you understood that. So it’s fine. We just go on as normal. There’s no edge to it; you won’t have it. You’ve missed me too.

Yeah, it’s all right.

A door shuts somewhere; is that you? Bathroom, to bed? Are you? That’s good, you should sleep. I can hear you, you’re walking. Stairs. You’re coming up the stairs. You’re coming up here. To me. Are you? You want to tell me something: you found him, is that it? You know how we’re going to tease him out into the open tomorrow, it’s solved. That’s what you’re going to say. You’re going to relax now, you’re going to tell me how you figured it out. That child-like glee in your voice, I remember that. And I’ll fall asleep with you talking to me. Yes, that’s good. I like that. Don’t: just. God. Don’t imagine anything else.

It’s dark, but I can see the door swing open. I can see the outline of you. I can hear you exhale as you step in. Yes, I know. It’s cold in here, isn’t it.

You step in, push the door back to slightly ajar. You walk in, you’re barefoot. Are you naked? Jesus. No: no, you’re wearing pyjama bottoms, no t-shirt. Bare-chested. Well, all right. You didn’t know how cold it was up here, did you. I’ve closed the window. It will warm up. What is it?

You drop something on the bedside table: phones. At least three of them. Maybe four. Then you pull back the bedclothes. And you get into bed with me.

Why?

You’re cold, aren’t you. You shift down against the sheets, you shift closer to me. Body heat. Do you think I’m asleep? You know I’m not.

God. I’ve imagined this so many times. I’ve remembered it; you used to do this from time to time, do you remember? Of course you do. I don’t know what you were thinking. I don’t even know what I was thinking, really; it seemed natural at the time. It was something you did. I liked it. It was important somehow. It was. Wasn’t it.

“You used to do this.” I’m whispering; well, it’s night. It’s dark. It seems like a time to whisper.

“Hmm?”

“This, you used to—” What am I saying to him? “You’d get into bed with me, sometimes. When
you wanted something. Or you wanted to talk. You remember that.” Of course you do. You were there. You don’t forget things.

“Mhmhm.” Have you become nonverbal now? You’re tired. Yeah. I know. You’re here to sleep this time, are you? Not to talk. No victories to crow about tonight. You probably want me to shut up. You want to sleep here, why do you want to do that? For comfort. You’ve been lonely. You’ve missed me. I missed you too. So, so much, Sherlock. You don’t understand.

“I thought about that a lot.” I’ll stop in a moment. I just want to say this. You don’t have boundaries with me, for some reason. So I’ll tell you this. I don’t have to explain everything. I just want to say this: this is continuity. There’s nothing odd about it. You used to do it and it was okay. You can keep on doing it. I won’t try anything. I won’t. “It was comforting, thinking of you here. I don’t know.”

“Mmm.” You take a deep breath and exhale slowly. I can feel the heat of you now. You shift again, very slightly. Your leg touches my knee. You leave it there. You’ve got to notice. You’ve got to. God: no boundaries. We’re so close. Other people wouldn’t do this. Not flatmates. Not friends. You’re not like other people.

Do you know what you’re doing? You’re not an idiot, you’re certainly not. But there’s that innocence you have. Are you doing this on purpose? You must know. You always know people’s deeper motivations. Can you see mine? I won’t try anything. I can love you as you are. The way we are. It’s all right. It will become normal, with time. I won’t think twice about it.

You turn toward me, and now there’s more of you touching me. God. Sherlock, what are you doing? The hard bone of your shin is pressed against the muscle of my calf. It fits there, through two layers of flannel. I can’t help it; my breath is speeding up a little. You’ll notice that. You know. You must. I know you do.

Really? Sherlock, really?

I thought, maybe. I thought that might have been the case. Enough time together, maybe we might have ended up like this. Did you think about it too? Was it a revelation to you, or was it something you already knew? I wonder.

“Irene Adler.” That’s the question. I’m not framing it as one, but it is. It means something to me.

“Mmm?” Still no words from you. I can feel your breath on my face. I’ll turn; on my side, so we’re face to face. Conversational. You shift a little to account for it; you lay your leg over mine. That’s no mistake.

I’ve asked you this question so many times in my head; did you love her? Yes, no, of course not, of course I did: I’ve heard every answer. I want to know. I don’t know why. It changes everything. I was jealous; she could tell. Surely you could too. I want to know.

“Did you love her?” I never managed to ask you outright. I was afraid of the answer. The obvious answer: yes. Did you sleep with her? Did she touch you? I want to know. Maybe it doesn’t matter. It feels like it does.

You laugh a little. I can feel that. The mattress shakes a bit. That’s funny, is it? Is that funny? Is that a yes, or a no?

“She’s not dead, you know.”

What? She is, though. I told you she went to America. But she didn’t. She died, I didn’t want to tell
you. How else do you think they got her phone? What do you mean she’s not dead?

“I know Mycroft thought she was. He told you that, didn’t he. He didn’t tell you to lie to me, though. You did that on your own.”

Your fingers brush against my wrist, and then stay there. So lightly; just resting there, two fingers. Not moving.

“I thought it would hurt you.” You’re not whispering, so I won’t either. Our voices are soft enough. We don’t need to shout. We’re so close. “I thought you loved her.”

“She’s not dead.” I don’t know why you keep saying that, as if it’s an answer. All right. So she’s not dead. She faked her death twice. Once more than you have. Let’s hope it’s not a competition. “Last I heard she was somewhere in Prague.”

I don’t know what to say to that. Why won’t you answer me? Even in my fantasies you answered: yes, no, of course not, of course I did. No, John. I was in love with you. How is it you manage to come up with a completely different answer in real life? And one that’s even more difficult to understand?

“So.” I have no idea what to say next. You’re waiting for me to respond. I don’t understand this conversation. You’re talking as if you’ve told me something deeply significant. I don’t know what it means. “You’re in touch with her, then?” I honestly have no idea what else to say. I can’t keep asking. You clearly don’t want to answer.

“No.” Through the faint light through the window I can see the shape of your face, the hard angle of your cheekbone jutting out. I remember that: I remember thinking about your face like this, turned toward me. Just here. Like this. This is what you looked like moments before I’d lean in to kiss you. Your eyelashes; your eyes are open. I watch you blinking. You’re studying me.

So Irene is alive. She didn’t die after all; she beat you, and she didn’t die. You admire that, I know you do. You hate it and love it; you like to know someone can beat you. If you loved her, you’d have been in touch with her, is that it? If you loved her, you could have her. You’d be in Prague. You faked your own death; the two of you could be undead together. Oh. It is an answer. I understand. She’s not dead. You haven’t mourned her. You just let her go. Because she wasn’t yours.

You never let me go. Not once.

I understand.

I never let go either, Sherlock. And I tried. Dear Christ, I tried. I just can’t.

You can push me away if you want. We can turn it into a joke. I’ll do it slowly so you’ll guess what it is I’m going to try to do. It’s all right either way, Sherlock. I promise. I won’t sulk about it. You must know now; people don’t get this close unless it’s for this. Our noses are nearly touching; I can feel your breath on my lips. You aren’t shifting back, though. You aren’t turning away. You’re staying still. Your fingers don’t move against my wrist. You’re waiting. You know.

Oh god.

Your lower lip between mine is thick and warm.

That’s you. Of course it is; it tastes like you. Your breath is shaky. I’m barely touching you. It’s all right, Sherlock. I let it slip between my lips, slick and damp. That was it: all right? You don’t have
to do this. You’re not pushing me back. You’re just breathing. I can feel your fingers twitch. Have you been waiting for me to do this?

All right. It’s all right, Sherlock.

Let me try this again.

Your lips are softer than I’d imagined. I don’t know why I thought they’d be anything other than this: rich and warm and wet, and open. I can feel the edge of your tongue against my lower lip. Your breath is speeding up just like mine. You latch onto me, your lips, you pull me in. Yes. All right. Kiss me then, Sherlock. Your tongue is scraping against mine. You knew last night, didn’t you. Maybe you always knew. Kiss me.
**Technicolour**

Chapter Summary

*I don't think it's possible to kiss you and not fall hopelessly in love with you.*

Chapter Notes

*gulp* Alright then. Well, thanks to Gillian for everything, because, well. And thanks to airynothing for the lasereyes on it. These things are the hardest to write, for me at least. Be gentle! Eeek! O_O

I think I could spend the rest of my life just like this.

I can hear the tiniest bit of your voice when you exhale against my lips; it's something between a moan and an honest attempt at breathing in spite of what's happening between us. It’s a herculean effort, I know. Because this is incredible. It really is. Do you have any idea what it does to me? Feeling that slick skin on the inside of your lips, then hearing you on the brink of moaning? Jesus. You must know. It's so obvious. You can hear it in my breath too, can’t you. Of course you can.

Kiss me. Yes. Don’t stop.

God, Sherlock. My god. Your mouth.

If I weren’t already so far gone, kissing you would push me over the edge. I don't think it's possible to kiss you and not fall hopelessly in love with you. That's ridiculous, but it's true.

God. Your breath on my cheek; that's all I want.

Well: not all. There's more I want. I can feel it; I can feel the tension in your shoulders, your chest expanding and contracting against mine. I can feel you hard against my hip, too. That's good. That's good, Sherlock. I can feel it. I know you can feel me too, in the exact same state, pressed against you as I am. The tiniest bit of friction across your bare skin when I breathe out, Jesus. It’s incredible. I won’t rut against you like an animal, not yet. Slowly; we’ll get there. I hope. The anticipation is like honey, it’s like heat enveloping me. Christ.

We don’t need any words; it doesn’t take any to work this out. I want you; you want me. It’s so simple, and yet it’s been so complicated for so long. Your tongue is stroking my lower lip. Your hand is resting on my waist. My fingers are tangled in your hair. This is perfect. Christ. My heart is racing. I could stay this way forever.

Kissing you is not like kissing anyone else. It's just not. This is you. There's no one like you.

I'm not entirely sure whether you've kissed anyone before. It's hard to tell. I mean, everyone's different, and the first few minutes are always a bit awkward, but this might be your first. God. It might be. And I sort of want it to be, even though that's ridiculous. It doesn’t matter, really; you
don’t bring anyone else with you in a moment like this. Irene, or Mary, or anyone else. It’s just you and me, like we’re new. But this might be your first kiss, and I think I like that. You're mine, Sherlock, you always have been. I want to keep it that way. If it’s not the first, it feels like it anyway, even for me; I feel as if I've finally woken up. I've been asleep all my life until now. I’ve never felt this much for someone before I’d even managed to kiss them. I’ve never felt this much for anyone, full stop.

We should have done this years ago. It would have been all right, you know. We would have laughed more, I’m sure. It would have been bizarre, and funny, and awkward. Maybe we wouldn’t have been as certain. We would have worked it out. We waited too long. We made it mean so much I can barely breathe. Three years without you, Sherlock. I don’t think I ever stopped thinking about leaning over and kissing you. But it was never like this in the fantasy, somehow. You weren’t there, and even the most intense fantasy had an emptiness to it, I can see that now. It was only a sketch, it was an outline. It’s all coloured in between the lines now, full of texture and sound. And smell: your triple-milled soap, toothpaste, coffee, and that underlying rich smell that could only be your skin. Your technicolour skin. I can feel it. Jesus.

Your fingers are shifting against my hip; you’re pressing your fingertips into me. Unconscious movement, maybe. Do you have those? Do you do anything unconsciously? I don’t know. You’re trying to pull me closer, as if that’s possible. It breaks me a little bit, that motion. It answers a million questions I’d never be able to ask. You press your teeth lightly into my lip and I know I’m making incoherent sounds into your mouth. Kiss me, Sherlock. Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop. Please.

It was a bit awkward at first, but we’ve got it now, yeah. God. This works. I can't argue with this. I can’t help but marvel at it; you’re letting me do this, it’s like a gift. I can feel the muscles shifting in the back of your neck. You wanted this too. How long? How long has it been like this between us? Did you fantasise about it too? Maybe you did.

Breathe, Sherlock. Your heart is beating faster than mine. It's all right. It's okay. You breathe as if you're starving for air. I press my lips against your jaw, down along your throat. To your collarbones. So sharp: you're too thin. You've been missing, you've been missed, you know that. I've been absent from you and I can feel it in you; your bony ribs, your waist dips in like a woman’s does, you’re so thin.

God, make that sound again, would you? Christ. The sounds you make are driving me mad.

Your hands on me are tentative. I think you’re not quite sure what to do with your hands. But that’s okay, Sherlock. It's all right. This is new, for you, isn’t it. It’s new for me too. You’re a man; I’m not used to that. It’s always new at the beginning. It’s all right.

It's not that different, really, when it comes down to it: a body is a body, regardless of sex. I can feel you shiver when I run my tongue over your nipple, that's nice, isn't it? You like that? I hope you do. Yeah: you do. Your eyes are shut, you’re very nearly holding your breath. Breathe, Sherlock. Breathe. I need you to breathe. I kiss you over your heart, because it's still beating, against all the odds. Don't leave me again, all right? Don't. You rest your hand against the back of my head, you stroke my hair. That’s good, yes. You’re shaking a little, aren't you. It's okay, Sherlock. That's normal. Do you know that? That’s just desire. It rattles you sometimes. It’s okay if it rattles you now. I like it.

Fuck.

Yeah, I really like it. I like that I can feel it radiating off of you: that’s desire, it’s shaking you at your core. It’s uncontrollable, have you felt it like this before? The only way to stop it is to turn away, get out of this bed and go back downstairs, but you’re not turning away from me. There’s no
denying it, there’s no confusion in it. It’s desire making you needy. I love seeing you like this. That’s for me, and I love it. It’s for me.

Your erection is impossible to ignore, not that I want to. It’s obvious when so little is obvious about you, even at the best of times. It’s a hot siren against me, constantly forcing me to remember that it’s there. It’s foreign and a bit strange, I have to admit. But so clear and plain; there’s no hiding it. No hiding what it means. It’s demanding just in its presence; touch me, don’t stop. It’s evidence. You’d like thinking of it that way, wouldn’t you. That’s how you’d think of it, if you were still thinking in deductions just now; clues, observations, the things that tell the truth when nothing else will. I want this. That’s what it means.

I want you too, Sherlock. So much. Jesus. I can’t even say it, it’s too much. There’s no point in trying. You can tell, can’t you? You can feel it too. It’s so obvious.

Oh god, your mouth: move away for a minute and coming back to it is heaven. Kiss me, Sherlock: yes. God. I’m shaking a bit too. Fuck. We’re like kids, here. Virgins. It’s the adrenaline, it’s our libidos gearing up. Our bodies can anticipate what’s coming even if we can’t. I’ve been dreaming of this. Let me just–

Come here, Sherlock. I want to feel your weight on me a little bit. Come here. Kiss me; let me stroke your back. That’s it, that’s good. Shhhhh, it’s all right. I’ll never leave you. No matter what. Even if this is the only time, Sherlock. Even if I can only have you just this one time. Even if you stop now, sit up and laugh about it. Or call it experimental. Or think it’s all horribly funny, these things people do with each other. Messy and unhygienic. Sentimental. You can laugh; it’s funny. It’s okay. Kiss me; I’ll never stop kissing you back, as long as you want me to. God. Your mouth.

Jesus, Sherlock.

I can slip my hands down under your pyjama bottoms. Just a little, the tips of my fingers, a few inches at a time, then slide them back up into the small of your back. I can and I do; I keep my fingers light against your spine. It’s just touch, Sherlock. Just my hands on your skin. Do you like it?

Yeah, you do. You do.

Back down again, past the boundary of that waistband. It’s that singular a border. The difference between friends and lovers, that border. Do you know that? Borders and boundaries mean nothing to you, do they. You want what you want, regardless of customs and conventions. Conventions are for other people, as are the rules of social engagement. And sentiment. So what is this, then? Your heart is beating so fast, and I can feel your lips on my earlobe. You want what you want. Right now you want me. It’s all right. It’s good. Yes. It’s perfect.

I press my hands hard against you. Not a teasing touch there, no. Press down hard and rub my palms into you, and I can feel your cock grind against me. That feels good, doesn’t it? You like that? You’re breathing so hard against my neck, your hands are grasping at my shoulders, your nails are probably leaving red marks across my skin. I don’t mind. I don’t mind at all; it feels good. You’re clinging on to me for dear life, aren’t you. Yeah, I think you like it. One more moan like that from you and I might not need any more friction either, you know. Jesus. Yes: like that, Sherlock. Let go. Don’t think too much. I love it. I want to feel all of you. Make that noise again. Christ. I want to feel you shiver and twist when you come. You’re close, I can feel it. And I haven’t even touched you, not really.

Jesus.
You roll back over onto your back, flat on your back. You pull me with you, you don’t want me to let go. Teeth and lips and saliva; it’s desire making us a bit mad for each other. I certainly am: I’m mad for you, I can’t stop. Your hands are under my t-shirt now, christ. Just flesh against flesh, it’s wonderful. I’m moaning now too, aren’t I, moaning against your skin. I can’t help it. You’re pulling it out of me.

This is nothing like how I imagined it; I didn’t think you would do this, not really. I didn’t think you’d want me like this. Your tongue in my mouth like this: no, I didn’t picture you quite this way. I thought it would be a controlled descent, more experimental, more cerebral. Not like this: this is wild, unsystematic, primal, with that low moan that seems to live in the back of your throat now. It’s beautiful. I want this over and over, you know that. God. I’ve just got started. Sherlock, there’s so much more. I haven’t even–


The things I want from you, Sherlock. The things I want. Christ. You can handle it, I think. I think you’ll like it. All right? Breathe, Sherlock. Don’t stop now, all right?

You know what I did on your back; press my fingers down under the fabric of your pyjamas. I’ll do the same on your stomach, Sherlock. You understand. So I run my thumb in a circle around your navel, let my hand amble down. Below that waistband. Next time, if there is one (christ there’d better be a next time), I’ll take those off first. That way there will be nothing between us, no false barriers at all. Just skin, just you. I rub my hand along your hip, and rest it above the scar I find on your lower stomach. Appendix; you had your appendix removed at some point. That’s before I knew you; someone took a scalpel to you just here. I can feel your pubic hair against the tips of my fingers.

You know what I’m about to do, Sherlock. Don’t you? Of course you do. Let me, Sherlock. I don’t want to rush you, but please. Let me touch you, all right? I’ve never done this. I never really thought I would want to. I thought you were dead. It doesn’t matter now. I want to touch you. God. Let me.

Your fingers make that motion again on my back; closer. I’ll take that as consent. Can I? I hope so. I don’t want to do this wrong. Not the first time. You’re breathing hard against my neck. Oh god.

I take your cock in my hand and you moan; oh fuck. The sound of you. Jesus. You can stop me, if you want, you know. If you have to. If I’m going too far. Push me away if you want. All right? Please don’t push me away. God, please don’t.

It’s hot in my hands, thick and heavy, and your hips twitch when I touch you. Christ, that’s fantastic. Fuck. I could get addicted to this; look at the way you move. God. I’ve never done this, I’ve never wanted to, not with anyone else, but you’re different. Of course you are: you’re you. You’ll always be different. I’ve gripped onto myself this same way, so many times, imagining it’s you. This is completely different; this is wonderful. The sounds you’re making; Jesus. Oh my god. Your skin in my hands; I can feel the pulsing of your heartbeat.

You catch your breath and it’s shaky when it comes back out against my neck. I can feel your whole body tensing. Your hips thrust up, your stomach trembles a little. It’s all right, Sherlock. It’s all right. Your hands grasp at me as if you’ve forgotten how to use them.

I love how your cock feels in my hand. I love it. Christ, the sounds you make. Jesus, Sherlock. The things you do to me. Honestly. I’m a new person with you, you know. You bring out something different in me. You make me into someone better than I am. How do you do that?
Has anyone else touched you like this? Did you let Irene touch you, even once? It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t. But I hope not. That’s terrible, isn’t it. But I want to be the first. I want to be the only one. I don’t know why. It’s selfish and stupid, but I just do.

This is simple: not too fast, not too tight. You’re close; it won’t take very long. I could try and drag it out, but I won’t. Not tonight. It’s okay this way, it’s fine. It’s perfect. Jesus, Sherlock, you’re perfect. Stay with me. I’ll do this for the rest of my life. God, the sound in your throat, Jesus–

Oh god, I can feel that. You shudder, you exhale, and there’s a desperate groan in my ear. I know what that means. My god, Sherlock. You would dissect me right now and tell me which sets of chemicals it is that makes me feel this way, wouldn’t you. Their exact proportions. There is nothing else in the world but you right now. Nothing. It’s you, and my hands on you, and my lips against yours, our shared breath. That’s all. There’s a splatter of fluid against my hand, and on my t-shirt. Your body spasms a little, I can feel your hips thrust against me. And again; fluid, a groan, a spasm. There. Good. Yes, that’s very good. I’ve turned you inside out, I’ve still got hold of you. Your shaky inhale, exhale against me; breathe, Sherlock. It’s all right.

I can feel you relax against me, you’re going limp now. You’ve been so tense; you’ve been nervous, I think. Maybe just cautious, I don’t know. Uncertain. But you’re still shaking a little, even now. I kiss you again, because I can; your lips are still. I’ve stilled you. Your bliss is heavy and warm. I love you, Sherlock. You know that.

I press my lips against your sharp cheek bones, the corners of your lips, your cheeks, your nose, your forehead. I love you. You have to know that. You were my whole world. When you left, everything fell apart. Especially me. Don’t leave me again. Stay here with me.

You won’t mind if I...will you? You’re soft and sleepy now, you’re a tangle of limbs beside me. I’m as close as you were. It won’t take long. Oh, christ. That almost hurts. We waited too long, you know. Far too long. I bury my face in your neck and breathe you in. You smell like sex now, you’re hot and sweaty and beautiful. You’re breathing through your mouth. You run your hands along my back, you stroke my wrist. Yes. God. Do that. You rub the palm of your hand against the head of my–

Oh. Oh my god.

I can feel that everywhere.

Fuck. Yes. Am I shouting? Are there words? I don’t care. I don’t care. The world is pleasure, the world is only you.

You’re holding onto me, your fingers are entwined with mine. I’m shaking. You’re kissing me, I’m coming and I’m sobbing into you. Jesus christ, we waited far too long. Don’t let go. All right? Don’t let go of me.

In the end, there’s only breathing. That’s all I can hear. Mine; yours. That’s all there is.
Crime Scene

Chapter Notes

Thanks to hiddenlacuna and airynothing. Sorry for the silliness, I can't help it!
Honestly I can't. <3

There’s yellow tape all around us; it’s a very small crime scene. It’s barely big enough for both of us to stand inside the tape. We have to stand very close together. I need to put my arms around you to keep from falling out. My lips are inches from your throat. I could just lean forward, and–

“Well?” That’s Greg.

Oh. Crime scene. Right. There’s a body. Isn’t there a body?

Greg doesn’t seem surprised to see you. None of them do; they’re just standing there, waiting for your deductions. They must have guessed that you’re still alive. They saw it on the telly, just like everyone else, they knew. Well, of course Greg knew; he invited us to this crime scene, didn’t he? He needed help, he called. We came. Here we are.

He’s got his arms crossed over his chest. We’ve been standing here too long, it seems. Anderson is getting restless. Sally is staring at her phone. They all look bored. The evidence in front of us is starting to vanish. It will turn to dust and blow away if we don’t do something.

You stroke my hair. It helps you think. It makes the evidence more obvious. It feels fantastic. My knees are getting weak. I put my arms around your waist, under your coat, and discover that you’re not wearing anything underneath it. How often do you do that, leave the house with no clothes on? I like it. You should keep doing it. Shhh, I won’t tell.

Crime scene. We have work to do. Keep it together, Watson, come on. I’m barefoot against the pavement, that seems like a colossally bad idea. How did I manage to forget my shoes?

The body is two dimensional. I’ve never seen a murder victim look like that; it’s as though someone drew him with a pencil on a sheet of paper and taped him to the pavement. He does seem to be made of paper, in fact; it’s so thin I can see right through him. There’s a couple of bits of chewing gum beneath him that show through under his chest, and it looks a bit like a pair of nipples. Bit of dark pink on his chest, just in the right spots. Does anyone else notice that? The idea of nipples makes my mouth water; it reminds me of running my tongue over yours in the night, the feel of you under the tip of my tongue, the way you arched into me. Yes.

That was fantastic.

We need to do that again.

Can I do that here? No. God: no! That’s completely inappropriate, we’re in public. My erection is jutting out so far it’s forming a barrier between you and the body. It must be so obvious. You must feel it. You’re too absorbed in the case to mention it. If I could just–

I need to concentrate: this man died here, this two-dimensional paper man. He couldn’t have always been made of paper while he was alive, no. That doesn’t make any sense. He must have
been flattened somehow, mutilated, yes, that must be it. You’ll know. You’ll explain it. It will be obvious to you. You hold onto my cock; it’s keeping you inside the tape. Purely functional. Deep breaths now, don’t cause trouble. No one’s noticed. There’s nothing strange about it. Perfectly normal.

“Kiss me, John.” What? Here? It’s a crime scene, Sherlock. Is this appropriate?

I don’t really have a choice. It’s for the case. And I don’t mind, of course. I haven’t been able to think about anything else. I desperately want to kiss you. The body doesn’t put me off, it’s only paper. So I grab your shoulders and kiss you. Nothing obscene; we just press our lips together, like children do. God, I want you so badly. You stroke my cock. I think I might pass out. This might be the most arousing thing I’ve ever experienced; they’re watching us, but they can’t tell what it means. They have no idea. We’re just solving crimes, like we always do.

We kiss very gently; you touch your lips to my throat. Christ. That should be enough. It’s the fuel you need, it’s what makes it possible for you to think. It’s what makes the evidence appear. Of course it is: that’s what I’m here for.

“It’s a literary crime,” you tell Greg. He nods. “He was a bookseller, obviously. You can tell by the stains on his elbows.”

Yes, that is quite obvious, isn’t it. The details are filling in a bit; I can see the colour of his suit. It’s a pale green. Who wears a green suit? That’s probably important. There might even be a flower in his lapel. I can’t tell, not yet. I didn’t kiss you deeply enough for that kind of detail. For colours you need to use more tongue.

“Kiss me again, John.” Yes, quite right. I should. I can do that. Your lips are warm and wet. I can feel your skin against me. I should stroke your skin, shouldn’t I, underneath your coat. That will make the evidence more obvious. It’s for a case; it’s expected. I rest my hand on your neck and run my tongue against yours. You have one hand on my hip, the other is still stroking my cock. They’re waiting. The evidence is piling up around us. We’re good at this, you know. We’re very good. That’s why they call us. That’s why we’re here.

“Keep at it,” Lestrade says. “It’s getting clearer, keep at it. John, get that jumper off, will you?”

Good idea. It’s irresponsible of me to leave it on. We could solve this crime if we were properly naked. The body isn’t so two dimensional now; he looks more like a ghost. A ghost in a green suit.

“You’d better give him a wank, John.” That’s Sally Donovan. “We don’t have all day, you know.”

Everyone wants me to. It’s the only way we’ll solve this one. Greg will approve of that. Afterwards someone will give me a tie pin or a pair of cufflinks. We’ll be heroes. Yeah, all right. Twist my arm, then.

It’s dark. It’s night. My eyes are closed. I’m heavy; I’m floating. I’m so tired. Where am I? Home. I’m always home. I never left. I can feel you next to me. Yes. That’s real. You’re breathing.

It’s a quiet street, it’s midnight. There’s no one here but me. I can’t move; I don’t exist. Not properly. This is me. I’m the crime scene. I’m here on the street, I’m waiting for you. There are footprints in the garden, the murder weapon is in a bucket behind the shed. There are fingerprints on the window ledge, and the front door is still hanging open. The body is in the bathtub. The blood is dripping along the tile. It drips in a pretty pattern, you’ll like it. Hurry, Sherlock. You’ll love me. I’ve hidden things in all the drawers for you. There are secrets everywhere.
You’re coming. I can feel you. You’re coming to investigate me. It’s exciting; your eyes will be all over me. You’ll stroke me with your gloved hands, you’ll admire me. I excite you, I know I do. That’s why I’m here.

Come on, Sherlock. Hurry. Before the police arrive. I’m waiting here for you, only you. Solve me.

And you will. You do. You always do.

You rub your palms against my hips. That’s nice. Yes. Do that again. I can’t move; I don’t properly exist. You run your fingers over my stomach, you kiss my hip bone. You stroke my thighs, you rest your cheek against my lower stomach. Your hair is soft against me. Your breath: I can feel your breath against my cock. Oh, god. You’ll find the murderer. I’m no match for you. He’s sitting on a bench down the street, he’s waiting for a bus. It will be over too soon.

Your hand is under my knee. You’re shifting my limbs; I’m paralysed. Your breath is hot on my skin. Your tongue. Oh.

That’s good. Yes, yes. That’s perfect. That’s wonderful.

I want to stroke your hair, I want to tell you I love you, but I can’t. I can’t move. I can feel your lips on me. I can feel your soft palate, the inside of your mouth. Oh. God, Sherlock, I–

God, that feels good. Wet. Your tongue. Oh god.

I wake up; I’m awake, I’m gasping like a fish. I’m gasping for air.

That feels so good. Oh god, don’t move, don’t make it stop.

It’s dark; it’s the middle of the night. I was asleep. I was dreaming, there was something about–


Jesus.

Oh my god.

You’re sucking me off.

Holy shit.

Are you even awake? God, I hope so.

Your hands are gripping my hips. Yes. Yes, I felt that. Even in my sleep. You’re between my legs, I can feel your shoulder against my thigh. You crawled down my body, I was asleep. Oh my god. I rub my fingers against your fingers; your hands are cold. It’s cold in here. The blankets have all fallen over the side of the bed. It doesn’t matter. Oh god, Sherlock. Your tongue. God. Yes, that’s amazing.


I don’t want to stop you from–

Oh, Christ, yes, do that again. Do it again. Oh, sorry, sorry, I didn’t mean to thrust like that, it’s just–
Can I–

Oh, if you moan like that again–

“Sherlock.” My voice is breathy, I’m panting. God. I just woke up and I’m about to come in your mouth. Jesus Christ. “I’m going to–”

Oh god, the vibration in your jaw. It’s–

Christ. CHRIST. Your tongue, oh my god. Do you have any idea how–

“Sherlock, I–”

Oh, fuck–

You’re bursting through me, you’re inside of me and around me, you’re like sunshine in the pitch dark and it’s all fantastic. I can feel it in my toes, Jesus Christ.

I’m saying things, I don’t know if they’re words. Forgive me.

Oh god. Your lips, your tongue. Your mouth. You kiss my stomach. Your mouth is wet. Fuck.

I swear I’m falling into you. I’m falling backwards, forwards. I can’t find gravity. Kiss me.

“Come here.” I can barely breathe.

You cover me with your body, you bury your face in my neck. I still feel half paralysed from sleep, from pleasure. Jesus. My head is spinning. I hold you as tight as I can. I can feel you kissing my neck, my jaw. Come here, Sherlock: I want to kiss your mouth.

Your lips are damp and you taste like me. You taste like sex. Jesus Christ. You’re shaking; why? I can feel your hand, you’re stroking your cock, very fast. You’re barely breathing. You come before I can even touch you. I can feel it on my stomach. You exhale hard against my mouth. That’s good; yes. That’s good. Let me touch you next time, Sherlock. Let me have you, all right?

“Jesus.” That was amazing. I wish I’d been awake for more of it. But you can do that any time you want, Sherlock. Teeth and all. Any time. “How much of that were you awake for?”

You sink down into me. Your limbs are heavy; I’m your pillow now. That’s all right. Yes. I like that.

“Most of it.”

But not all of it. That’s funny; I have to laugh about that. We do things to each other in our sleep, that’s funny. I dreamed I was at your crime scene. Or I was your crime scene? Something like that. I wonder what you were dreaming about. I hope it was me.

It’s cold; right, the bedclothes all fell away. Don’t move, Sherlock, stay where you are. I’ll reach for them. Stretch myself out, reach over the edge. I’ve got the old quilt, at least. That will do. The heat of both of us will make it enough. There. There you are. We’re covered now, we’re in our own private cocoon. I kiss your forehead, stroke your back, the long line of your spine. It’s getting warmer in here already; we’re our own source of heat. We don’t need anything else. It’s the middle of the night. Your breath is evening out. You’re a dead weight against me. It should always be this way.

God, Sherlock. God.
Sleep now, my love. Sleep.
A Minor Matter of Geography

Chapter Notes

Thanks to HiddenLacuna for all her support, to airynothing for her lasereyes, Lavellington for her skim, Gillian for everything, and runwitheyeswideopen for the read through for clarity. <3

God, I need a piss. It’s bright: it’s morning. It’s late. My leg’s numb, I’m suffocating, what’s this on my chest, did I–

Is that–

Am I buried? Did the roof cave in in the night? Moran, did he– Am I–

Oh.

Oh, right. Yeah.

Sherlock.

That’s you. You’re here. With me; you’re here. Half-naked and still asleep. That’s your knee digging into my leg. That’s not concrete and plaster from the roof, no. That’s just you.

You’re sleeping. On me: you’re asleep draped over me, like a lover. Are we lovers now? I guess we are. Yeah. I kissed you. We kissed. That was great, we kissed, I had my hand on your–

Right. And then you–

Yeah. That–

Wow. That was–

Yeah. God. I’m not going to be able to stop thinking about that all day, you know. Damn. The insides of your lips, your tongue: yeah, that’s knowledge that’s going to be difficult to ignore.

I think we might be lovers now.

Unless you change your mind, of course. I’m not going to. And you seem awfully comfortable. I think you tried to wrap your entire body around me in the night, that’s what it seems like. You’re halfway there. And you’re asleep. It’s late. We slept late, we were up in the night. We were kissing in the night, we were having sex. We were–

Yeah. We were. Jesus. Well, I didn’t see that coming. Not at all, I just–

No, I didn’t think it would happen. Not now, at least. Not like this. It was so easy, I didn’t think it would happen this way. I left you downstairs, you were working. You were frustrated, you weren’t even looking at me. Not the way I was looking at you. I was prepared to have my heart broken; I would have kept it a secret, you know. You were in your own world, as you always are. I’m part of your plan, I know that, but I’m only tangential. This is between you and Moran, it’s about the
greater good, and I’m just something the shrapnel could find its way into. Easy prey, an easy target. I’m your friend, your former flatmate. But I must have been wrong. Because this was your choice. You came up here, you got into my bed half-naked. That was you.

So I leaned over, I kissed you. There was no argument, or confusion, or questions, just...well, this. Your steady breath on my skin, that’s where we’ve ended up. A bright morning under a quilt together, shared breaths, your fingers resting against my ribs. I didn’t expect to wake up this way. I don’t know what I expected. Nothing, I don’t know. Not this. You’re a little unpredictable, aren’t you.

I’m not complaining, of course, I’m not going to complain. Not at all. It’s great. It’s better than great. I’m just a bit surprised.

I thought it would be strange, sleeping with you. If it was going to happen at all. You being a man, for one. And you being...well. All angles. Skin and bone, teeth and a general distaste for anything sexual or smacking of sentiment. Experiments and facts, that’s more your thing. Observations, deductions, a lack of any understanding about emotion and how it operates. You’re...well. You’re you, aren’t you. But it wasn’t strange. Not at all. It was...

Yeah. It was great.

You’re like your music, as it turns out; full to brimming in ways no one imagines you are. But you must be. Yeah. Because that’s what it was like; like your music. I was your violin in the night, I was your composition. Or I suppose we both were. Pull us taut and we run our bodies against each other, we produce something that can’t be captured in everyday words. It wasn’t strange. It was fantastic.

You can’t say you don’t understand sentiment, Sherlock. Not after that. You can’t. Because you do. Or you can, if you want to. You just turn away from it more often than not. It’s distasteful to you, are you afraid of it? Does it compromise you, or cloud your vision? I suppose it does. You want to stay objective and rational, as if that’s possible.

You didn’t turn away last night. You didn’t. And it wasn’t strange. It was...well, it was honest, wasn’t it. It was you. I recognised you. I know that part of you, I don’t think I even realised I did. I know you. I always have, Sherlock. I’ve heard you play in agony, in joy, in sorrow, I know it’s in you. I’ve seen you happy and hurt, disappointed and delirious, because I know you. You see more than other people and you feel more than they do, too. I think I always knew that, somehow. All along. I knew. So it wasn’t strange at all to kiss you. Finally. It was so simple.

Not even this morning seems strange, actually.

You’ve slept with me before, though; I’m used to seeing you here in the morning, under my quilt. It’s been years, but it’s not unheard of. It’s happened. I’m not used to you being this close, but that’s just a minor matter of geography, really. It’s only the most minute adjustment from there to here; it would barely warrant noting, from a cartographer’s perspective. It’s just a matter of inches from the other side of the bed to this, to your bare skin against me. From friends to lovers. It’s just a minor adjustment of degree.

There’s sunshine pouring in through the window. We’re lovers now, aren’t we.

That’s lovely. Absolutely lovely. You’re here in my bed with me, and you seem to have claimed me as your pillow in the night. That’s lovely, Sherlock, it really is, and I would stay like this with you all morning quite happily if you weren’t resting your elbow on my bladder.
Can you just–

Can I move out from under you without waking you? I don’t want to wake you. Not yet. Sleep, Sherlock. I know you haven’t done much of that lately. Sleep: I’ll come back. I just need to–

There, just–

Okay. It’s still chilly in here, I thought I closed the window. The temperature is dropping, and the boiler might actually be broken for all I know. You reach out in your sleep, you’re searching. You’re reaching for me, aren’t you. You can feel the absence of body heat in your sleep. Your pillow of bones and flesh suddenly and reluctantly collapsed into nothing. Are you dreaming of me? You’ll have to tell me when you wake up. Will you?

You’re so beautiful. Can I say that? I’m not trying to say you look like a woman, or anything. But I can’t think of another word for how you look curled up under my quilt like that. Sleeping as you are in my bed. As my lover: yes. You’re beautiful. Sleep.

I don’t know where I left my slippers. They must be around here somewhere. Yours are here; mine are nowhere to be found. Cold floorboards are no way to start a morning. It’s nearly half nine. I wonder how long it’s been since you’ve slept this late. Sex makes you sleep better, is that it? Sounder sleep would surely lead to clearer thinking, quicker deductions: that’s a good rationale for crawling into bed with me. If you needed one. Which you don’t.

Cold tile is far worse than cold wood. Thank god Mrs Hudson left me a bath mat in here. God: you must have been pressing on my bladder for hours, I swear. There. Better. I hope I’m not waking you. It echoes.

Well, look at that. I went to bed in a clean shirt and woke up in a filthy one. Surely that’s the sign of a good night. It’s almost a bit embarrassing that I didn’t end up naked until just now. All that and I was in my pyjamas the entire time, and you’re still only half naked. Ah, well. Next time I’ll undress you before you get into bed with me. I’ll pull you against me starkers and kiss you. There will be nothing between us at all. All skin, no barriers or false boundaries. That will be perfect. I’ll lay you down and kiss every inch of you. I’ll memorise you.

I could start now. I could pull your pyjamas off of you and kiss you awake. Turnabout is fair play, isn’t it? I’ve dreamed about that. I could wake you the way you woke me. It doesn’t scare me. It would be nice. I would do it in the light of the morning: you could watch me. I could watch you. Yes: yes, I’d like that.

We’re lovers now, aren’t we? I think we are. I hope so.

Bloody cold floor. What’s wrong with the boiler? Mrs Hudson had it removed. It had wheezed its last, I suppose. They pulled it out in pieces, why? Could they not carry it up the stairs whole? It’s cold in here. Maybe it’s only the comparison: you’re very warm. You’re like a small summer wrapped in my quilt. I need to get back there with you. You can sleep a little longer; we have nothing else to do today. We’re only waiting, as far as I know.

There’s a rattling on the bedside table. One of your phones. What now?

Don’t, Sherlock: don’t wake up. You’re stirring though, limbs shifting under the quilt. Don’t: not yet.

There are four of them on the bedside table, but I can see which one it is making the commotion. It’s vibrating and shaking against the others. I’ll get it. I can feel it pulsing in my hand. It’s slim
and slightly warm, like it’s been working through the night. Texts: a lot of them.

If you don’t, you know I’ll find him.

You can’t keep him hidden forever.

I will find him and kill him. Eventually. I’ll make him suffer for a long while first, of course.

Come out to play, Sherlock.

I’m waiting for you. Where are you?

Meet me, Sherlock Holmes. I want to see your face.

He’s been trying to draw you out, of course he has. He gives you locations: Trafalgar Square, Barts, the Old Bailey, the Barbican. All in the last twelve hours. You don’t go, obviously. What do you do instead, just watch through CCTV cameras? Text directions to Mycroft and his underlings, wait for news? How maddening for you. MI5 must be hanging on your every word, waiting for Moran to appear. So he must not go to any of these places, either. It’s all smoke and mirrors. You just taunt each other endlessly from your safehouses. Daring each other to make a mistake. Come out, come out wherever you are. It’s a stalemate.

You never responded to these texts. Not to any of them. There are dozens of them. Why don’t you respond?

There’s a label on the back. It’s not your phone, of course. It’s someone else’s. All of these phones belonged to someone else at some point, I know that. You said you’d taken on identities, after the arrests. The demise of Moriarty’s network means you have more eyes and ears than ever. You’re playing a dozen different people, you’re most of Moran’s remaining network now. He doesn’t know; you’re careful. But he knows this one’s you, obviously. He calls you by name. He’s speaking directly to you. This is a compromised identity, then. Which one?

The label is in your handwriting: it’s in small block print, and it’s almost rubbed off. You’ve had this one for a while, then. The corners of the label are dog-eared and scrubbed white. You rub at it with your fingers as you read the texts. I can imagine it; you sitting in terrible attics and basements, staring at this screen, typing out texts with your fingers tracing the edges of the label. Tracing the edges of the name you wrote on it: Moriarty.

Moriarty.

Moriarty has been dead for three years. Not two months, three years. You have his phone. The label is old. You have his phone, and Moran knows it. You’ve always had it, haven’t you. All this time. Since he shot himself on the roof at Barts. You’ve had it; you’ve had his phone. You’ve been him.

Sherlock, what have you done?

Did you die in order to become him? He died and left a vacancy; you jumped off the roof to hide your tracks, to disappear and resume your life as his. Is that it? You buried him under your name. I mourned you and no one suspected anything was amiss. We were inseparable, and you left me. You were dead and he was alive. The consulting criminal beat the consulting detective. All the evidence was watertight. You cut out your own heart and let it beat as Moriarty’s. We buried you and the crimes continued.

You did something Moriarty didn’t think you could do, he mustn’t have imagined you would be
willing to even consider doing; you left me to suffer alone. He knew I was special to you. He always knew it, before I did. Maybe before you did, I don’t know. He knew it when he strapped Semtex to me and dangled me in front of you; he knew threatening me was the only way to get you to stay out of his way. He didn’t anticipate you would hurt me in his place.

It’s manipulative and it’s cold. There’s no denying that. But it’s rational. It’s everything you try your best to be. If I was your weakness, you turned me into the irrefutable proof of your own suicide. And it worked, more or less. It worked. I never stopped believing in you, but I didn’t doubt that you were dead. I was convinced. So was Moran. So was everyone. It was a performance.

I can see it; I understand. We were still working together, all this time, without me knowing it. I’m used to risking my life to protect you. I’m used to pulling out my gun and killing for you. I’ve never hesitated to do that. This time you asked for a little bit more of me.

I should be angry. I suppose in a way I am. You left me, you meant to leave me like that; you watched me suffer over the loss of you. But it must have hurt you too. You did it precisely because it hurt you. It only worked because of how much it hurt you. That’s how you beat him; you did something unthinkable. You left me.

It’s genius. Cold, manipulative, calculating, and genius. Was it your idea, or your brother’s? It doesn’t matter, I suppose. It doesn’t matter.

We always knew Moriarty had a web of criminals. You traced it with your fingers for years, and now you’ve torn it to pieces. Of course: as Moriarty you would be able to see the whole of the web, even if it can’t see itself. You could map it out and destroy it slowly from within. That’s what you’ve done; that’s what you’ve been doing all this time. Hunting. You had to do this, pretend to be dead, leave me to suffer, didn’t you, in order to find them all, to unbury them and push them into the light, to stop them from strapping Semtex to me again and using me against you. And you did it: you stopped them all. All but one. And now he knows exactly how and why you did it.

He’s the one last threat. And the only thing he knows to aim for is me.

You can’t hide him from me forever.

I’m the bait.

“You’ve been pretending to be Moriarty.” You’re awake, I know you are. You turn and look at me. You’re wrapped in my quilt; you still smell like sex. You look afraid; you think I might not forgive you for it, is that it? You hurt me, that’s true. You hurt me terribly. But I understand. If you’d asked me to do this for you then, to lose you in order to protect you, to keep your secrets safe, to help you destroy the single largest criminal organisation in the world and to keep this man from threatening both of us, I would have said yes without even asking after the details. I always expected to die for you, Sherlock. I’ve been at peace with that idea since the very beginning. I would have held you while you fell off that roof, if only just to give you a few more seconds of comfort. You know that. You’ve always known you could expect a lot from me. I’ve always been willing.

“I didn’t think it would take so long.” That’s an apology, isn’t it. You didn’t mean to leave me for three years. You didn’t mean me to suffer that much, for it to drag on and on. We weren’t meant to become that lonely for each other. If you had told me the truth and asked me to do this, I would have behaved differently. It might not have been convincing; I wouldn’t have moved on. I’d have waited here for you, knowing you’d be back. I’d have waited here in the sitting room, barefoot, staring at my phone and waiting for you to come home.
It’s all right. It’s all right, Sherlock. I can’t even believe I’m thinking it, but it is. I understand. You did what you had to do. And you’ve nearly won.

“He’s threatening you,” I tell you, because I want you to know I’ve read the text messages and I understand them. He wants to find me and capture me, torture me, destroy me. Cut off parts of me and drop them through the mail slot for you. Not because he wants to punish me, only because he wants to make you suffer even more. Hurting me is the only way to get to you. Because he knows you care for me. I understand. “He’s looking for me.”

You nod. You want him to find me, don’t you. If he finds me, you’ll find him. So you keep me behind the walls of a safehouse and hope he guesses to look for you here. Because if he comes close, you’ll find him. And this will all be over.

I couldn’t be more vulnerable just now; it’s cold and I’m naked, standing in front of you. I was about to crawl into bed with you, curl up around your heat. I was going to kiss you, run my hands over you. Whisper in your ear, tell you how much I love you. I’m your weakest point, I’m your vulnerability, aren’t I. You turned me into your greatest strength. My gun is in the drawer. I’m not afraid of Moran. I’m going to finish this.

“Let him find me, then.”
Failsafe

Chapter Notes

Thanks to hiddenlacuna for the conversation, the candy, and for the beta.

That’s the second time you’ve tried to drink out of that cup. It’s empty, Sherlock. It’s still empty. You finished your coffee ten minutes ago. You want more? I’ll get it. I don’t mind.

You’re somewhere else entirely, aren’t you. You’re thinking, staring at the wall as if you can make it crumble with the sheer force of your will. I wouldn’t be that surprised if you could.

There’s CCTV footage playing on your computer, you’ve got two phones in your hand. And where did this come from? It’s a map of London spread across the kitchen table, it’s covered over with your handwriting and red pen marks. It’s got sticky notes all over it. There’s a rip on the very centre, where the folds meet. You’ve folded and unfolded this map many times; did you pull it out every day, every evening, spread it out on coffee tables and worktops, across beds in dingy basement flats? It’s got stains on it; coffee? Blood? Not blood, I hope. Not yours, at least. I hope not.

You went straight back to work this morning before I’d even got dressed; there are new boxes opened on the floor for me to dodge with the coffee pot in my hand. Books, papers, file folders; three years of work, investigations, confidential records and whatever else you’ve collected. Three years is a long time. It makes for a lot of boxes.

You finished half of your breakfast, that’s something. You’re working out the plan, aren’t you. Feeling out every possibility, every way this could end. There’s no point in it, Sherlock. There’s only one way, you know that: I need to walk in front of him. If I’m the bait, you need to dangle me in front of his nose and get him to bite. Not in your secured places, not in a tightly controlled way. I need to leave the safehouse, the compound you and your brother have built. You need to make him come out and try to shoot me, I’ll take my chances. But you’re thinking twenty-four steps ahead, aren’t you. It’s never anything so simple. You’re planning the endgame. And here’s me only thinking about coffee. Well, not only that: also the way your skin feels against my hands. I can’t stop thinking about that. And those sounds you make in the dark, in my ear. And your lips. God. Did that really happen? It seems inconceivable, really. But it did. It did.

You close your eyes and lean back in your chair. Your hair is still damp. I want to lean over and kiss your neck, just under your ear. I want to take your hand, knit my fingers with yours; I want to kiss the inside of your wrist. I want to pull you back into bed in the daylight, kiss you and taste the sweetness of the coffee on your lips, I want to tell you how much I’ve missed you. But I won’t; not now. It would distract you, and you wouldn’t appreciate it. The first time I kissed you I think you expected me to; will you expect me to again? Will I recognise it? There’s a time for everything, I know. Now is the time for breakfast, coffee, the paper, CCTV footage, and thinking. You want a plan. You want to stay twenty-four steps ahead. It’s all strategy and plotting: an elaborate game of chess, I know. Your fingers are twitching slightly; you’re playing out a scenario in your head. How does it end, Sherlock? Do I live? I hope so. You’ll find a way. I know you will.

It’s all right. I’ll refill your cup. Black, two sugars. I know. I’ll pour.
“Thank you.” Your eyes are open now. You’re studying me. I pour your coffee; I put the pot down. Add the sugar. Two sugars for you: I know. Of course I do. My hands move with the reassuring memory of long-practiced motion. I never dreamed I would have this back again, this odd life, this strange intimacy with you. But you’ve returned. And so have I, along with all of my muscle memories and devotion. Everything’s changed, and nothing has. Coffee: two sugars.

You’re still watching me. What are you thinking about, Sherlock? Last night? I’m still thinking about it too. I won’t be able to stop, not today. I dip the spoon in your cup and stir it; the light tapping of the metal against china reminds me of so many other mornings here with you. I only remember the ones with you; every other morning has faded as though it barely registered with me. Three years of mornings vanish overnight into watery grey because of you. There’s only you, now. You smile at me. That seems like an invitation. Kiss me.

I will. I always will, until you want me to stop, Sherlock. You have no idea. I love you. At some point I’ll have to tell you that. But not today. Not yet. There’s work to do.

I smile back at you, I sit down. Pour my own cup of coffee, why not? Add a bit of milk and watch it go from black to warm brown. I pick up the paper. This is what I do: I make love to you, I make you breakfast, I pour you a second cup of coffee. I stand in the street and wait to be shot for you. That’s how I want it to be. That’s perfect.

Hold on. Is this– What’s this doing in here? In this box of yours, full of papers and jars of god knows what, there’s a book. Well, more than one, but I recognise that dust jacket. This is my book. You’ve got my book?

You bought my book. Or someone did, someone gave it to you, maybe. It’s about you, after all. Maybe Mycroft brought you a copy. Did you read it? God: I fantasised about you reading it. The fantasy version of you, the pliant, easy, naked version who lived in my bed, curled up with my book. That version of you always loved it. Did you read it? I wonder. Maybe you just happen to have a copy of it. It hasn’t been out that long. Maybe you haven’t got around to reading it yet. I fold up the paper and put it on the table, and reach into the box. The dust jacket it is a bit battered, but that could be from travel. From being kept in a box with file folders and jars of hair and sand. It doesn’t mean you actually read it.

You’ve got your eyes closed again. Your fingers are steepled under your nose. Your coffee is steaming. This is my book you’ve got, Sherlock. Did you read it? I’m nervous about this. You were dead; it didn’t occur to me that you’d ever be able to read it. I romanticised you a little. Of course I did; you’re the hero of this story. Shit.

Wait: this is one of the copies I signed. I signed this. How do you have a signed copy? Did you put on a disguise and bring this book to me? God: were you standing across a table from me and I didn’t recognise you? It’s just my signature. If you’d been in front of me I would have asked you your name. I would have said, how do you spell your name? and I would have looked up at you, all friendly and harmless. I would have seen your eyes and known that it was you. No: you couldn’t have done that, it’s impossible.

It’s only my signature, nothing else. No To Joe or To George or To Amelia like every other copy I sign. It must be one of the copies from the launch party. There it is, my tired and sloppy signature, right there under With love, for S. You would have known I meant for Sherlock the moment you saw that, wouldn’t you? Of course you’d know. With love. I’ve already told you, then. It’s right there. Did you see it? Did you look?

Oh. Yes, you looked. You definitely did. Good god.
The margins are full, there’s bits underlined and notes stuck between the pages. God, the whole thing. Paragraphs circled, arrows all over the place. It’s your handwriting. You certainly read it. From cover to cover, it seems. And annotated it. Were you finding mistakes? Correcting me as you went along? Ha! Of course you did. Of course.

_The car was blue, not red. Is this a deliberate misrepresentation?_  
I don’t know why you spend any time at all writing about the unsolved cases, John. There’s little to be learned there! Why would anyone want to know about them? But I suppose you know better, people love your stories.  
Admittedly this is quite entertaining. Even Mycroft likes it. Most of MI5 has read it, you know. Maybe you can teach them something.  
His name was Frank. Are you trying to protect his identity? He’s dead, John, it hardly matters now. Besides, he was innocent.  
I hadn’t realised you spent so much time looking at my hands. Are they really interesting enough for an entire paragraph?  
Wrong. But very flattering.

Every page. Every blessed page. It must have taken you hours. You got my book, a signed copy, no less, and you talked back to me on every single page of it. Is this what you were doing while you watched me in coffee shops? Reading my book and writing all over it?

_I’m glad you noticed this. It was a critical bit of evidence._  
I think you missed a word here.  
Are my eyelashes this worthy of notice? You’ve mentioned them six times so far. Do I have remarkable eyelashes? I hadn’t noticed.  
Thank you, John, but it wasn’t that much of a leap, really. It was obvious from the scuff marks on his shoes.  
Really? Is that impressive? I thought it was common knowledge.

It’s as if you were still looking over my shoulder, commenting on everything. Like you always did. You missed that too, didn’t you. I certainly did.

Writing that story was the closest I could come to you without losing my mind. I wrote it for you, Sherlock. I wrote it because everyone had settled into the idea that you were a fraud, and I knew that you weren’t. So I wrote about you as you were, as I knew you, so people would understand you the way I did. It wasn’t meant to be flattery; you weren’t around for me to flatter, anyway. It was only everything that was true. It’s a love story, Sherlock. It’s a love letter to you. I would have kept writing them for the rest of my life, you know. I suppose I’ll keep on writing them, if you don’t mind.

“There were some surprising errors in that account.” You sip your coffee, you eye the book in my hands. You look a bit perturbed. Was I not meant to find this?

“I fictionalised it.” I changed the names, I changed the circumstances. I didn’t want to get sued. But the core of it is there. You’re there. “I can’t believe you read it.”

“Of course I read it.” You always did read everything I wrote. Neither of us have really changed at all, have we. We’re perpetually inclined toward each other now. We’ve each built ourselves with a space carved out for the other to slide into. When we’re alone the wind whistles through us, but the space doesn’t close in. That’s just how we are. Both of us, not just me.

That’s true, isn’t it. God. Sherlock. I’ve missed you too.

“Did you like it?” A loaded question. You don’t particularly like fiction at the best of times. But
this is different, isn’t it? It’s not strictly fiction. It’s about you.

You raise your eyebrows at me. Liking something is never the point, is it. It’s either right or it’s wrong. It’s true or it’s not; you write up experiments, facts. I write about your eyelashes, apparently. And the reality of being in the room with you, what it feels like when you push the disparate facts together and make music out of them. I wrote what I saw, Sherlock. What I felt. What I knew. It’s as true as anything else. It’s more true, even if the car was blue rather than red. Did you like it, Sherlock? I wrote it for you, really. It’s for you.

“I did.” You did? You smile at me. You know. You understand. It’s a love letter. Kiss me. I will. I will, Sherlock. “Will you write more of them?”

“Yes. If you don’t mind.”

“Good.”

Is it? You keep surprising me. There will be more love letters then, strangely fictionalised and dedicated to you. All right. That’s what I’ll do, then. I have a contract. I should show you my outlines. You’ll laugh. You will. I won’t mind.

You sigh, and put your cup down on the table. It spills a little, but you don’t notice. Or care. Probably the latter. “Idiot!” What, me? Am I? I suppose I am. I’ve come to terms with that, by now. What did I do now? “He keeps looking for you in the wrong places.”

Oh. Moran. Well. He’s not you, Sherlock. He’s not even Moriarty. He isn’t a genius, he’s a cornered cat. He has no idea where to look, he’s ordinary. Like me. You need to think like me, for a change. Not easy for you, I realise.

“We’ll have to show him where to look, then.” You’d wouldn’t think it would be a difficult task, what with all the phones scattered across the sitting room in constant communication with him. He texts you. Just text him back. “Can’t you just have one of these identities tell him where I am?”

“Too dangerous.”

Dangerous? It seems like the least dangerous option. “Why dangerous?”

You sigh again, and pick up your cup. There’s a half-ring on the table because of it. You’re still tired, aren’t you. Your sleep debt is too great for our little lie-in to blot out. We’ll need to have more of them, then. I don’t object to that. I like the feeling of your even breathing against me. “If he guesses that I want him to know you’re here, we’ll lose our advantage.”

We have an advantage? You make a face and stretch out your legs. Your steeple your fingers in front of you. What’s our advantage? You want him to think that you’re hiding me, protecting me, even though that’s exactly what you’re doing. You’re protecting me but you want him to find me at the same time. Of course your plan would be complicated. What’s our advantage?

“Sherlock?” It’s Mrs Hudson: she’s calling to you from downstairs. I can hear the door of her flat closing behind her. What is it? We’re only having breakfast. It’s late, I suppose. “John?” Her voice echoes a little in the stairwell. She’s coming up.

“Good morning, Mrs Hudson!” You call out to her. Then you settle back into your chair and press the cup to your lip. She’ll be here in a moment.

She wouldn’t have heard anything in the night, would she? Not two storeys up. Surely not. We weren’t that loud, were we? You weren’t. No shouting, no screaming, just your voice in my ear.
Intimate. Wasn’t it? What do I say? What if she asks? God. Well: she’s always assumed we were a couple. Maybe she won’t be surprised. It was late; surely she was asleep. I hope she doesn’t ask. No sly winks or comments, please. Let’s hope not.

Best to be polite. She opens the door, there’s a small box in her hands. Your eyes are closed again, you don’t turn toward her. You’re back to wandering through the endgame.

“John, would you mind?” You wave your hand toward the door.

Mind what?

You open your eyes and look at me. “The package.” You know about the package in her hands without looking. Of course you do.

I’ll be the polite one, as usual. That’s what I do: I handle other people. You do all the thinking. I stand and move toward the door, brushing my hand over your shoulder as I do. I didn’t mean to do that; it’s a new instinct. It meant: yes of course, I’ll handle it. But I think I just wanted to touch you. Hardly appropriate in front of company. Too soon, I’m sure. Too soon. You don’t seem to mind.

“Good morning, Mrs Hudson,” I say and move toward her. I smile. She smiles back. She looks nervous.

“I only just found it,” she gestures at the box. “It was sitting by the back door.” She’s holding it like it might break, burst into flames, or explode. It’s a small box, barely six inches long. Someone wrote your name across it with a biro. Moran? Maybe he knows, Sherlock. He might know you’re here, he might not be the idiot you think he is. I take it from her, carefully. It’s light, and something inside it slides along the bottom of the box. What is it?

“Thank you,” I tell her. She smiles at me. She’s nervous. So am I.

Shall I open it, Sherlock? Is it dangerous? Your back is to me. You don’t seem concerned. You know about it, don’t you? You know what it is. You’ve been expecting it. So I open it. The top slides off. It’s a phone. Another bloody phone.

“It’s a phone,” I tell you. Pointlessly, I’m sure.

“Yes.” You hold your hand out flat at your shoulder. You want me to give it to you. All right. Another arrest? The man who tried to kill Mary? Perhaps. I take it out and put it in your hand. Your fingers rub against mine for a second. That was deliberate, I know it was.

“Another phone!” Mrs Hudson crosses her arms in front of her. “How many does he need?”

I smile at her, and shake my head. There’s no good answer for that, is there. It’s a rhetorical question anyway. We both know we’ll never completely understand the ways of the Holmes brothers. I need to change the subject. “Is the new boiler all right, Mrs Hudson?”

“Hmm?” She looks confused.

“It was a bit chilly upstairs this morning, that’s all.” It was. Wasn’t it? Maybe I forgot to turn the radiator on.

“Oh. I’ll have a look. It’s fine, I think. Better than the old one at least, once all those explosives came out.”
“Yes, the old one was absolutely stuffed with them. Didn’t Sherlock tell you? I’d been wondering why it had been behaving so sluggishly. They’d been there for years, you know. Three years I spent with an extra shawl around my shoulders in the kitchen, all because of some silly explosives. Sherlock came back, and they took the boiler out. It took ages.”

“You let me know if you need anything at all.”
Smile; be polite. Thank you, Mrs Hudson, for your patience. There was a bomb in your house, and you’re still offering to buy us tea and biscuits. There’s a reason Sherlock loves you, you know. It’s your infinite patience, your utter inability to be shocked by anything. Explosives in the boiler. Well: that would explain the unorthodox removal. She closes the door behind her.

It’s just you and me again.

I think I understand. You don’t want him to shoot at me. You’re trying to protect me. You want him to detonate his failsafe. You sent me out to the wrong Tesco, you made me pause in front of the cameras. He needs to guess that I’m here, that I came back here. I came home, finally. Moran doesn’t need to shoot me from a dark window, you don’t need me to bleed on the street. He can obliterate me with a phone call. Maybe just a text, who knows.

Or at least he thinks he can. And that’s what you want him to do. But the boiler won’t explode; it won’t kill me. It will make the van rattle, we’ll hear it. And it will pinpoint his location. That’s it, isn’t it. That’s why you’re taunting him. If he knows I moved back into 221b, he’ll detonate the failsafe and reveal himself by accident. He’s the last, and you’ll find him, without leaving the flat at all. It’s brilliant, Sherlock. It’s brilliant.

He needs to follow me home. I need to go somewhere, and he needs to find me, and follow me back to Baker Street. He needs to know I’m here. You want him to feel powerful. He has a secret. He needs to try to use it against you. I understand. All the things he thinks are your weaknesses are your strengths.

“The Criterion.” It’s in the open, it’s surely outside of your safety perimeter. It has to be. You sent me to Tesco and he didn’t see me. The Criterion is better. I used to go there. With you. Maybe he’d watch for me there. It’s near Barts, there’s a big picture window. There are CCTV cameras everywhere. “I can call Stamford. I’ll meet him for a drink.” It wouldn’t look suspicious. As far as he knows, I still think you’re dead. I can meet an old friend for a drink. I’ve done it before. I should, in fact. It will work.

You look up at me. There’s a mixture of surprise, fear, and admiration on your face. Is that for me? I think so. I think it is. It’s dangerous, I know: that’s what I’m here for. I can do this. Let him find me, Sherlock.

“It will need a retrofit.” That isn’t a no. It’s not a quick dismissal of an idiot’s idea. You’re considering it. You stand up, you pick up another phone. “Mycroft and all the arms of the government he controls can handle that, surely.”

For once, it’s me coming up with the plan. That’s unexpected, isn’t it. Moran is like me; you have to think like me to end it. We’re a good team, Sherlock. No matter what happens. It will be worth it. No matter what.

I’ll call Stamford. We’ll finish this.
The machinery is very intricate and probably more expensive than I can fathom: it’s tiny. The ear piece is so small you have to glue it in with tweezers. What powers it? It’s a speaker, isn’t it? A tiny speaker glued to the inside of my ear? It’s too small, it won’t work. I won’t be able to hear anything, and then you’ll have to try and dig it back out again, I’m sure. It itches a little when you adjust it.

Fancy technology like this must be the advantage of working with MI5. It’s like James Bond. Have you got a shiny little gun that looks like a pen? Some poisoned darts in a pair of sunglasses? A car that turns into a boat with the touch of a button? Ouch, what are you doing in there?

“Careful!” Having you insert a pointed metal object into my ear doesn’t strike me as anyone’s best idea.

“Yes, I am.”

You say it in the affirmative, as if I’ve just complimented you. I want to laugh, but any movement might plunge those tweezers through my ear drum. So I just smile instead. Very funny, Sherlock. Very funny.

You haven’t actually changed at all, have you. You haven’t. Neither have I, really. Did you think it would be this easy, waltzing back into my life again? You’ve got your hand resting against my neck, just lightly. Not holding me still, just reminding me not to move. I suppose you are careful, really. When you want to be. I missed you, Sherlock.

It’s baffling to me, really. You pretended to be dead; we had a funeral for you. I mourned you for so long. And you watched me all that time, you knew everything, didn’t you. You watched me leave Baker Street, you read my stories in The Strand, you saw my terrible grey flat. You saw me move in with Mary, didn’t you. Maybe you saw us the day we met. We were happy, at first. In spite of all of this, in spite of the lies and all the things I didn’t tell her. Mycroft knew I bought the ring. You must have known as well; you must have. He would have told you. Maybe he tried to warn you. You knew where I bought coffee, where I got the paper too, I’d imagine. You knew I didn’t love her anymore, didn’t you. You knew we’d broken up when I arrived here; how did you know that? You knew almost everything, didn’t you. It’s as if you watched me leave you, but you never left me. Did it hurt you, watching me? It must have. It must have done. You didn’t want that, I know you didn’t. I know that now.

“You put ads for me in the classifieds.” We haven’t really talked about that. But you did it, you put ads in the classifieds for me to find, obviously. At least thirteen of them. That I found, anyway. There might have been more.

“I did.”
“It was the smugglers’ code. I recognised it.” You knew I would. Or you hoped I would. That’s why you left them for me. You wanted me to know. You wanted me at those arrests, working with you, standing at your side and admiring your work, like I always used to. But you weren’t there yourself. Why? That would have been too dangerous, I suppose. Were you watching? Did you see me? What was I meant to do there? Just watch? Was it a warning of some kind? What was I meant to deduce from it? What did I see but fail to observe, Sherlock?

“Mmm.” I can see you squinting at me out of the corner of my eye. You shift something inside my ear and it burns momentarily.

“Ouch!” The glue must be drying. “Why did you do it?”

“A bit of metal was visible from that angle, I had to shift it.”

“I mean the ads. Why the classified ads?”

You sigh, and I can feel it against my cheek. That’s familiar now in a very good way. Will it be the same tonight? Will you climb the stairs again and curl yourself around me? It wasn’t just a one time thing, was it? I’ll cope if it was. I’ll cope. But I hope it wasn’t. Come to me again tonight, Sherlock, if I make it through this. If I come home. I’ll peel you out of your clothes if I come home, Sherlock. I’ll memorise your skin with my hands and my lips.

“I couldn’t very well get a front page headline, could I.”

“No, I mean, why did you do it at all? Wasn’t it dangerous to get me involved? If I was your–”

What’s the word for it? Cover? “If my belief that you were dead was so critical, why the classified ads?” Not that it convinced me otherwise. The illusion was complete, I must admit: even once I saw the ads I didn’t let myself imagine they were from you. That would have been a sign of madness. It was too much to hope for. You were dead. Were you trying to drive me mad?

“You sound like Mycroft.” Do I?

Whose plan was this, anyway? Yours, or his? It was Mycroft who told Moriarty enough details to destroy you, was that deliberate? Was it a mistake you capitalised on? What about the roof at Barts; was that Mycroft’s idea? Or yours? Are you conceding to him, or is he conceding to you?

Was it Mycroft who insisted I not know the truth until I arrived here and saw you, standing in the kitchen like you weren’t dead at all? Or did you want it that way? You thought I’d have guessed by now. Were you trying to help me guess? Mycroft knew I hadn’t. Did you argue about it? He wanted me to give Mary the ring. He wanted me to get on with it, move on. You couldn’t have wanted that, could you? Not anymore, no. Did you want to tell me the truth, and did he hold you back? That’s a nice thought. Too nice, I reckon. Too nice by far. You’re not nice, Sherlock, I know that much.

You shake your head at me. “Those arrests weren’t dangerous, not really. Moran never knew about most of them, he still doesn’t know. Why would it be dangerous for you to see?”

This is the argument you had with Mycroft, isn’t it. I suppose I should thank you. It was a gift, wasn’t it, a gift to me, outside of Mycroft’s knowledge and control. What were you trying to do? Wake me up? I had fallen asleep, in a way. I had become a sleepwalker. I was beginning to believe my own lies. Did you know that? Maybe you could tell. I was slipping away. You were becoming a character, fictional, an anecdote. You were becoming diluted in my words. My flatmate, the one who died. Let me tell you about him, you’ll laugh. I couldn’t hold on much longer. You must have known.
But it was dangerous, of course it was. Mycroft knew that. Getting me involved; it would ruin your cover. It put me and Mary in terrible danger. It made us all targets. “He put explosives in my flat, Sherlock.” He was preparing to kill me. You know that. That was rash. Was it worth it? Maybe it was. Maybe it was worth it to save my soul.

“Well, yes, but that was only a precaution on his part.” A precaution? Stuffing a flat full of explosives is something you do as a precaution? “He was only beginning to suspect that I was alive, he didn’t believe it could possibly be true. That was Jennifer’s doing, she was always more suspicious than he was. She finally managed to convince him to reactivate your surveillance and establish a new failsafe. It had nothing to do with what you knew or didn’t know. We should have arrested her ages ago.”

Jennifer? “Who’s Jennifer?”

“Jennifer, you know, Jennifer Barclay, the one you– oh. She called herself Amber when you met her the first time.”

Amber. Sweet Amber, the nursery school teacher. So open, so kind; she laughed at my jokes. I never suspected a thing. But she was an accountant. Her arrest wasn’t in the news. She’s the reason Mary’s flat was lined with explosives?

“She said you were cruel.” She meant you, didn’t she. She knew about you. She thought I did too. She thought I was involved. Involved in what?

“From her perspective, I suppose I was. She fancied herself in love with Moriarty. He seduced her at one point. He found her useful. He had her in the palm of his hand. I wouldn’t meet her in person, obviously, and that made her suspicious. Well, eventually it did.”

Wait, was Amber–

I mean Jennifer, was Jennifer–

She was your girlfriend?

No: Moriarty wouldn’t have a girlfriend, surely. Not really. He used people. He took Molly out a few times in order to get to you, did he do the same to Amber? He could make himself look so small, so vulnerable: he spun stories to make people pity him and hate you. Molly liked him. He was an excellent liar. You would have had to keep up his deceptions, once you were pretending to be him. All of them, including his falsified love life. Three years of it: three years. You must have flirted with her, sent her sweet email messages, texted her in the mornings and told her you missed her. You told her other things, too, I’m sure. You told her you wanted her. You must have. Never in person, of course. Is that what you did? Did you learn to flirt and seduce as part of this operation? She thought she loved you. You made her think you loved her, too.

You must have been convincing. At least for a while.

It’s ridiculous to feel jealous, isn’t it. Ridiculous. It was a ploy, that’s all. Still. Three years of saying things to her you weren’t saying to me. I don’t usually feel jealous, you know. I only feel jealous when it’s you.

You run your thumb across my ear. You can be so gentle when you want to be.

“He sent her to watch you.” Watch me? “He thought you would tell her your secrets, if you had any. She’s good at being sweet, isn’t she.” She is. I didn’t suspect a thing. We met; she was nice. Too nice, maybe. That was evidence of something. I wasn’t thinking in deductions: you were gone.
We went to the cinema. She laughed at my jokes. “If I were still alive, he was sure you would know it, and you would tell her. She reported back. She thought you and I must have been lovers, because you were sad, and you wouldn’t kiss her.”

Oh god. I was going to kiss her; I was going to. But I couldn’t do it. That was personal, how did she know that? She wasn’t entirely right, of course. We weren’t lovers. Not yet, anyway. But she wasn’t entirely wrong, either. Was it all on my face, even then?

I’m a terrible liar, aren’t I.

She spent an evening with me, and she emailed you, or texted you, or left you a message on Moriarty’s answer phone. She told you I was in love with you. What did you think, Sherlock? Did you think it was funny? Was it a surprise? People always thought we were a couple. They always said so, and you always ignored it. Did you ignore it that time too? Did you understand what it meant? Would you have left me so long, without any hint that you survived, knowing something like that might be true about me? Maybe you would. If you had to, you would have.

Is that what the ads were for? Were you trying to comfort me, once you could? Were you trying to make me hope?

“Just as well you didn’t kiss her, really. She had a gun and some cable ties in her purse.”

Right. Of course she did. Even the most mundane elements of my life were on the verge of becoming comic book violence, and I had no idea whatsoever. Spies and explosives and ads in the classifieds. If it weren’t for you, I wouldn’t believe it. I would remain blissfully unaware. I would be engaged to Mary, and you would be my best anecdote.

You’re done with the ear piece, are you? It’s invisible. If Moran abducts me he won’t find it. You’ll be able to tell me from which direction you’ll be breaking through the windows to come and find me. As long as I don’t dig it out with my fingernail or break it in some other way. As long as he doesn’t kill me first.

The microphone is as thin as a strand of hair. I don’t entirely believe that it will work either. I’ll go into this thing deaf and mute, and you’ll just have to do your best. Your best is always better than anyone can expect, Sherlock. I trust you. You hook the microphone around my ear. It protrudes a little bit, not very far. I’ll probably brush it off by accident. I’ll break it or drop it onto the pavement without noticing. It doesn’t matter: I know what I have to do. I’ll do my part. And you’ll do yours. What happens next will be far too calculated to be considered fate. It’s just what happens next.

“All right.” You look me up and down, like you’re looking for spots where the bullets could sink in. Anywhere, Sherlock. Anywhere. But that’s all right. “Go upstairs.”

“Hmm?”

“We should test the volume. Go upstairs.”

Fine. I’ve got to leave in an hour, and Mycroft still hasn’t got back to you about the Criterion. Stamford will be there. I have no idea what I’m going to say to him. What can I say? And you’ll be listening to every word. I can’t tell him you’re alive, can I. Not yet. That’s our secret still.

I can hear a crackle in my left ear. You’ve switched something on. I can’t believe it works. I shut my bedroom door, I don’t want to mistake your voice from downstairs for the voice in my ear.

“John?” It’s so soft, like you’re whispering in my ear. I sit down on my bed. “Can you hear me?”
“Barely.” Maybe that’s the point. “Can you turn it up a little, or is that a bad idea?”

“How’s that?” That’s better, yes. That’s louder. Now it feels like you’re speaking very softly, lying beside me in the dark. If I close my eyes I can almost feel you against me. “Better?”

“Yeah, it’s better. Though I don’t know if I’d be able to hear you in a noisy pub, frankly.”

There’s a ticking noise. “Now?” Oh god. “I can make it louder if that’s required, this is about forty percent.” Now my head is filled with you. It’s not too loud, it’s not overwhelming, but you’re there, all right. You’re there beside me, like you always are. Fully present, and weirdly absent.

“Yeah. Yeah, that’s probably good.”

“All right, switch on your radio, would you? And talk for a while. I want to adjust the recording volume so that we get enough ambient sound.”

I switch on the radio. It’s some kind of call-in programme. “What do you want me to talk about?”

“Anything, I just need your voice. Sing a song, if you like, it doesn’t matter.”

Well I’m not going to sing to you, Sherlock. That would be embarrassing and you wouldn’t like it, trust me.

“I...um. All right. I–” I have no idea what to say. All the things that spring to mind are too sensitive or too difficult to talk about. Last night, for one. I could talk about last night. I could talk about how ironic it is that you’re speaking directly into my head after I spent too long with your imaginary voice in my head. I could tell you about that. “Did Mycroft get back to you yet? About the– Well, you know, about the Criterion.”

“Yes, actually, a few minutes ago. The windows are sealed. He’s reserved you a table.”

Great. As if you can seal windows against bullets. “All right. And I’ll– Well, I’ll leave in about an hour, right?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ve worked out the path I’ll take to get there?”

“Of course.”

This is much harder than you’d think, you know. Talk about anything. Absolutely anything? There are too many things to talk about. None of them are appropriate right now.

“Sherlock?”

“Yes?”

“Did you go to your funeral?” That’s an odd question, I know. So I laugh a little. Not because it’s funny. Just because it’s odd. “Everyone always talks about wanting to do that, you know, to hear what people say about them. It’s a unique opportunity.” This was a dumb idea. I shouldn’t have brought it up. “Did you listen to the eulogy, or did you ignore it?” I don’t really want to know the answer to this question. I don’t. But I’ve asked now.

I can hear you breathing. “I was there.” Of course you were. Of course. You saw me, didn’t you. You saw me say nothing, you saw me cry in front of your grave. “I needed to ensure that no one opened the coffin. But it wasn’t something I’d ever had a particular yearning to do.” A drug addict
with no friends and a brother who’d sooner have him sectioned, right. Of course you didn’t dream about attending your own funeral. You don’t care what people think of you, do you. You never did. Not really. “I heard parts of what Lestrade said, but to be honest I wasn’t paying much attention. Moran was there as well, I was keeping an eye on him.” Was he there to point a gun at my head? Was every event in my life accompanied by me in crosshairs? “I was at Harry’s funeral, though.” You— You what? It was such a small room, how could you possibly have— “It was a very nice service, I thought. You spoke very well. I was sorry to hear about her death, John. I know that can’t have been easy for you.”

Unbelievable. You were always nearby, weren’t you. All the times I thought I was alone I never was. I don’t know whether to laugh or cry.

She died alone, you know. You probably do know. She died in hospital with a failing liver and no more will to live. I meant to be there. You never know when something like that is going to happen, it’s very hard to predict. I knew it was coming; so did she. We didn’t really talk about it, I didn’t want to be morbid. I wanted her to have some hope. She had been improving, but that’s common enough; a burst of improvement before a rapid demise. They didn’t call me in time. It was the middle of the night, and there was nothing I could have done. She didn’t regain consciousness. She didn’t know I wasn’t there. She wouldn’t have known if I was. She died alone. I thought I would too, one day.

“Mary was very good to you.”

Yes, she was. She held my hand through the service. I thought I might collapse if she let go; I couldn’t take it. Harry and I never got on, it’s true, but she was family. She was all I had left. And her funeral reminded me of yours. If Mary hadn’t held on to me, I wouldn’t have been able to speak at all.

“I thought you were going to marry her.”

Yes. She didn’t know I was thinking about it, but you did. You watched me buy the ring, didn’t you. You watched me walk home with it in my pocket. You knew it was for her. You knew what it meant. I bought it three days before you had them announce that Moriarty was dead and you were redeemed. Is that a coincidence, or not? You’re not motivated by sentiment, it’s ridiculous of me to presume you might have been. If I had married her, Sherlock, I would have buried you for good. You must know that. And the day you eventually came back, I would have turned and walked away from you. I’d have had to. You understand. There would be no way around that. Decisions like that can’t be unmade.

But I chose you in the end, even though you were dead. I chose you.

“Yeah, I thought so too, at one point. Things change.”

I’ll leave in a hour. That will make me a bit early, but that’s all right. I don’t want Mike to sit at the wrong table. Let’s get this over with.
The world should be colour-coded; the parts that are under the strict watch of Mycroft Holmes and his MI5, the safe zone where no one can be hurt, and the world outside it, where anything can and will go wrong. I’m approaching the boundary, I know I am. You keep telling me so.

“Straight on here, John.” Your voice is gentle in my ear. It’s like you’re just next to me, curled around me, whispering to me. I can almost feel your fingers moving against my ribs. If I close my eyes it’s still night. “You’re not far now. Left at the corner, and then you’re out.”

There are three men just down the street, looking this way. Looking at me. Why? Is one of them Moran? No. No, they’re not looking at me, they’re just looking. Just bored, waiting for something. Not me. It’s nothing to do with me. My gun has grown warm against my back. Who brings a gun out to meet an old mate? That’s me, I’m the one. You never know when you’re going to need it. All right. Breathe. I’m still in the safe zone. Still safe.

You say I won’t need a gun. I’ll be protected. I’m being watched. There will be men from MI5 there in their civvies. They’ll have guns hidden under their waistbands as well, probably better ones than mine. But still. You never know. I’d rather be prepared.

There’s a sharp clapping sound behind me: a woman’s shoes against the pavement. It’s a normal sound, an everyday sound, but something’s different. She’s determined, she’s walking quickly toward me. The pounding sound of hard-soled shoes on the pavement, too fast, too certain. Don’t put it past him to use a woman, Sherlock, you know he would. He used Amber.

Would she have killed me that night, if I’d kissed her, if I’d gone up to her flat? Cable ties on my wrists and a gun pressed against my temple, maybe that’s how it would have ended. That could have been the end of me. And I would never have understood why, or what I had been embroiled in. There was no doubt in my mind then that you were dead. The pain was still at its sharpest then. It would have been a shame to die before I knew the truth.

She wouldn’t have killed me; I didn’t know anything. I couldn’t have confirmed any of her suspicions, if she had any. Your deception was too perfect, it was unshakable. I was safe. I didn’t kiss her. I was thinking of you.

Those shoes: she’s right behind me. Sherlock, can you see her? Talk to me. Is she one of Moran’s? Is she part of the network? I can reach my gun with my right hand, I can have it at her head before she can incapacitate me; my muscles know how. It’s easy. Easier than anything else. It’s natural: I’m ready. I can hear her coming. Her shoulder is against my–

Oh. She’s no one.

She brushes past me, she doesn’t even look at me. She’s in a rush, she’s going somewhere. A meeting, she’s got a date, she needs to pick up her children, I don’t know. She’s got nothing to do
with me. Or Moran. I’m just an obstacle on the pavement, someone to move past. Of course I am. I’m inside the perimeter. You didn’t warn me. She doesn’t know we’re walking through a battlefield. I’m still safe.

Breathe in, breathe out. It’s a normal day, just like any other day.

It’s a healthy paranoia, I think. It will keep me alive. My paranoia and you, peering through every CCTV camera at me.

It’s going to be a long walk to the Criterion, isn’t it.

I can hear you, even though you’re not speaking. You’re only breathing into the microphone, flicking switches, moving objects around on the table. Phones, probably. I can hear the rapid tapping of your fingers on a keyboard. You’re watching me, I know you are. CCTV cameras. You’re watching my every move. I know that: you’re looking three streets ahead to see what I’ll find there, aren’t you. As if you’re my guardian angel, watching over me from above.

“What’s funny?” I can’t help it: it’s the tension. The relief. The idea of you as an angel: that’s what’s funny. “You’re grinning like a lunatic, John.”

You’re not speaking at full volume, the way you would have if I were in the room with you. We’re having the kind of conversation you can only ever have in your head. We’re both very practiced at that, aren’t we. The farther away we are the softer we speak to one another, the gentler we become. That’s counterintuitive, surely.

I shouted when I saw you on the street, after you died. Didn’t I? I had to shout: you were in the distance. I recognized you immediately, just from your posture. That was you, wasn’t it. Of course it was. No one else can look like you; I should have known that. I shouted then, I’m sure I did. I feel as though I did. Come back to me, Sherlock. Come back. Come back! Maybe I didn’t. Maybe my voice was just loud inside my head. Angels, though: angels don’t need to shout. They flutter past and whisper in your ear. Turn left, turn right, wait here. Stop. Go. Straight ahead, come on now, John. A classical angel, nude with maybe a bit of strategically-placed drapery, wings and bathed in light, whispering sweet nothings in my ear and strumming on a harp. Ha!

“What is it, John? What’s so funny?”

“It’s nothing.” I can whisper into the microphone without moving my mouth very much. It hardly matters though, does it. I’m still in the safe zone. Moran is blind for now: you’re the only one who can see me on the CCTV cameras. Well, you and whoever else you’ve roped into protecting me. It’s in the national interest, I’m sure, my well-monitored walk.

“All right, left here. Not too quickly.”

A detour, of course. No need to question it. You’ll take me by the safest route possible. My guardian angel, leading me through an invisible maze, your imaginary hand in mine. I’ll follow. No one would ever have awarded you a halo, though, I’m sure. Except for me, maybe. On some days. Some days you deserve one in spite of yourself, Sherlock.

“The edge of the perimeter is a couple of streets away, are you ready?” I am. I’m ready. “You can’t be grinning to yourself like you’re touched in the head, John, it will look suspicious.” People do smile to themselves, Sherlock. It happens. Sometimes people are just happy.

My phone. My phone is ringing. “Hold on.”

“What?”
“Phone.” The number is withheld. It could be anyone.

“Dammit.”

I’ll hold it against the opposite ear; I don’t want to dislodge the microphone so soon. “Hello?”

“Doctor Watson.” Oh, christ. What do you want?

“Good afternoon.” I should say his name, just so you know who it is. You should know who it is. You probably already know, now that I think of it. Well, just in case. “What can I do for you today, Mycroft?”

“Bloody Mycroft. Ignore him, John.” Two voices now: yours and your brother’s. In stereo. This might be too much Holmes.

“It’s dangerous, what you’re about to do.” No preliminaries. Well, that’s a blessing, I suppose.

“I’m aware of that, yes.”

“I know you’ve got a hero complex, Doctor Watson. And I know you’ve been willing to give your life to save my brother’s before.” Does he know that? Well, yes, of course he does. I shouldn’t even bother to question what he knows anymore, he knows everything. And he keeps it all in an extensive catalogue in his office, I’m sure, complete with photos and video. A complete file of my life, up to and including Mary’s ring size. “But you don’t need to do so now.”

No?

“What’s he saying? Is he trying to convince you to stop? He thinks I’m being unfair to you. Unfair! As if he knows anything about–”

“You can change your mind, you know.” Mycroft is all calm and you are a storm of discontent.

“–bloody fairness. Honestly. This was your idea, not mine, and it’s a good one, so he should–”

“I have a car waiting for you, it can be there in two minutes if you like.”

“–just sit his bloated arse down and help me pinpoint Moran before he kills more citizens of his blessed bloody empire, for god’s sake!” I think you two have clearly grown sick of each other. Three years on the same side is entirely too long.

“The driver will take you beyond the perimeter and away from this–” He pauses. This what, Mycroft? What is this? “This unfortunate situation. I can arrange a new flat for you, somewhere terribly nice. Nicer than Baker Street, certainly. You won’t have to see him again, if you’d rather not.”

Mycroft Holmes, that’s not an offer. That’s a threat. He must know I’m not happy to live without you. Is he threatening me?

“No. That’s quite all right, thank you. I’ll finish this.” I’d rather stay with you, that’s the truth. I know what it’s like in the world without you. I don’t like it.

Maybe he’s testing me again. He does that; he tests my resolve from time to time with safe but distasteful alternatives. A man can be judged on his decisions at a point of crisis, isn’t that right? He’s colder than you are. He’s colder than all of us.

He thought you were being unfair to me? I suppose you were; years of plotting dependent on me
and you never let me in on the plan. It’s awfully upright of you, Mycroft, to care about my consent in all this. It’s not that, though, is it. A willing sacrifice is more reliable than an unwilling one. I understand. I’m willing, you should understand that. I volunteered. I can end this, and I will. “The Criterion is safe?”

“Of course.” A simple task for him, I’m sure. What does that mean, exactly? An army behind windows, rifles trained on the front door? The entire waitstaff replaced with agents from MI5, each with a gun hidden under their uniforms? Microphones dangling from every light fixture? You said something about sealing the windows. Sealing them with what? “The location is entirely secure.” Secure. Of course it is, yes. Entirely secure.

“Then I’ll be fine.” I don’t actually believe that. Not really. Something’s bound to happen. I know it. You’re worried, and you’re almost never worried. Not about me. My chances are probably less than fifty fifty, that’s how this goes. I wonder what the exact probability of my survival is, in your estimation. Forty percent? Thirty? Twenty five? Enough to try, whatever it is. It’s best not to know.

“If you make it to the Criterion, yes. You’ll be fine. If you can also make it back from the Criterion, then we’ll count ourselves extremely lucky, Doctor Watson. Extremely lucky indeed.”

“I understand.”

“Oh, hang up on him. He just wants to stick his oar in, the bastard.”

“Do you understand, John? Once you leave the perimeter, I cannot vouch for your safety. Think carefully about this.” He wanted me to give Mary the ring. He wanted me to move on. Why? I can’t tell if he’s looking out for me or just trying to hurt you. It might be both. Or he’s after something else altogether. “Think about the risks. There’s still time to change your mind, you know. Is it worth it?”

I don’t need to think about it. I’ve spent three years thinking about it.

There’s a pause, and neither of you speak. I can hear both of you breathing, waiting for my answer. You’re watching me, aren’t you. Both of you. He’s probably watching me on some gigantic screen in a secured underground location, or inside his plush office with a cup of tea in his hand, looking bored. You, Sherlock: I know where you are. You’re home where I left you, sitting at the table, tapping away at a keyboard, the way I always pictured you. There’s a cup of tea next to you too, growing cold because you’ve forgotten about it. You and your brilliant mind, Sherlock. You and your secret heart, your lips against mine, the feeling of your even breathing on my skin, your wayward, bony elbows: yes. Yes, it’s worth the risk, Mycroft. Of course it is. Everything worth having is worth risking, in the end. Sherlock always knew that. The world is a better place when he isn’t dead. Isn’t it? I’d like to keep it that way. I’ll end this. I know what I have to do.

“Yes. Yes, it is.” Simply that. That’s all I can say about it. Of course he’s worth the risk. The life I had is worth the risk. I’d like it back. “Now, if you don’t mind, I need to get going. I told Stamford I’d meet him at half four.”

I can hear you breathing, Sherlock. I can hear you. Do you know what he asked me? You can’t possibly know, you can’t hear him, can you. But you can probably imagine. You know your brother. You know what he’d ask me.

“Thank you, John.” Did I just pass some kind of test? “Your courage is exemplary. If all should not go as planned, you will certainly be remembered for your limitless loyalty.” Oh that’s cheering. Yes, thank you, Mycroft, I’m relieved to know that you’re already making notes for my eulogy.
You’re just bleeding with confidence, aren’t you. “Frankly I can’t imagine what he’s done to deserve it.”

Three years of both of you on the same side is most definitely too long. When this is over we should take some cases as far outside the reach of the British government as possible. Maybe some nice little domestic mysteries in the south of France.

“I’ll leave you to it, then. Best of luck, Doctor Watson.”

“Thank you.” I’m not even sure he heard my response. He’s hung up.

“Is he gone?”

“Yes.” I slip my phone back into my pocket.

“Did he try to convince you not to do this?”

“He did.” I won’t mention the offer of a ticket out. There’s no point. “I declined.” I can picture you just now, sitting in the flat in front of your computer with a dozen phones in your lap, and I imagine you’re smiling at that. Smiling at me on the screen.

“All right.” I hear a clatter of keys. “When you cross the street at the corner, going north, you will be outside the perimeter. I don’t expect he’ll notice you immediately. He only has a handful of snipers left, and they’re all across the city at the moment. They can’t watch all the footage at once. It will take some time. Just walk, don’t be too jumpy. Not every person or passing car is out to get you. Walk as if you suspect nothing. It’s just an ordinary day. All right? I’ll watch out for any activity and alert you. Now: go on. Cross here. North.”

North it is, then.

Walk; cross the street, like any ordinary pedestrian. I can do that. My legs feel slightly numb. Left, right, left. With every step it feels as though the earth shudders beneath me, as if I can sense the impact of my steps on the entire planet. I am making only the slightest disturbance; it’s so slight it’s entirely unnoticeable. But I won’t be unnoticeable forever. It’s only a matter of minutes until he sees me. Left. Right. Left. And just like that, I’m on the other side. Open. And now it begins. Come on, Moran. Here I am. Find me.

I can feel my heart beating in my fingertips. My breathing is slow and steady, just like yours in my ear. I’m alert, I’m calm. I’m ready. London is a battlefield again. Watch me, Sherlock. Watch over me. Let’s go.
Thanks to hiddenlacuna and airynothing. I just don't even know anymore.

You must be able to hear me breathing. Inhale, exhale, scan the street, scan the windows: no guns. I don’t hear the sound of a gun firing, not yet. Nearly there: a few more steps and I’ll be inside. I’ll be safe.

I’ve made it, unscathed. Well, not quite yet. Not quite.

Is this the weakest point, the moment just before you reach safety? It always is. That’s always how it plays out; the most ironic way possible, like a horror film. That moment relief arrives a second too soon; that’s when you get caught. Every inch of the battlefield is primed for the war; every inch of it, even the last one.

Just one more step. Over the threshold now, one more step and I’m in. That’s it. God. I’m inside: I made it.

And he didn’t even notice, did he. It’s not that easy to catch this bloke’s attention, as it turns out. All that tension and drama for nothing. Maybe you don’t need the protection of a safehouse after all. He’s just not that observant. You'll have to just ring him and tell him where I am. *He's having coffee with a friend. Go find him. He's certainly not waiting for you with a gun tucked against his back. No, certainly not.*

I can hear the dull rumble of conversation, light jazz playing in the background, a coffee grinder. Cups against table tops, the clacking of glass against glass, a woman laughing. In my left ear, I can hear the rattle of a vibrating phone, a ping from your computer, your fingers flying across the keyboard, your breathing. My limbs feel rubbery and faintly weak with strain; I’ve been too tense, too alert. I shut the door behind me; I’ll seal myself in. Safe. From the edge of one perimeter to another, only this one has better coffee. Unless something’s changed. Something always changes, with time. We made it, Sherlock. We’re here.

Breathe; I can hear you relax a little, too. I can hear it in your breath, Sherlock. You’re nervous. We moved too fast, didn’t we. If I hadn’t kissed you last night would you be as nervous? It doesn’t change anything, not really. Not yet. I don’t know.

“I’m here.” I’ve got used to the odd undertone I need to use to talk to you. Barely moving my lips. No one pays attention to an average-looking man walking into a restaurant. I just mock scratching my cheek to hide my lips.

“Yes, good.” You’re in the middle of something, I can tell. Has he seen me? You're distracted, aren't you. When all you have is a voice to go on, you learn pretty quickly to distinguish tone and mood. Pay attention, Sherlock. It’s my life on the line, here. Watch out for me. What’s wrong? If this doesn’t work, I’ll hunt him down next. I’ll go door to door.

The place is only about half full. God, I haven’t been here in ages. Not since before; before you fell, before everything changed. We used to come here when you’d been hovering around Barts
waiting on test results. It’s close, nicely anonymous, not too poncy. It smells like ground coffee and floor polish. It feels the same. But your former self is missing; you’d be anxious, walking in here, talking a mile a minute, frustrated and emphasising every other word with your hands. You wouldn’t care who overheard us. It didn’t matter then. You’d complain about a client, or about someone at Barts not giving you access to specialised equipment or a particular lab, or not letting you borrow a set of livers in a jar: something like that, always. It was comforting, comfortable, familiar. You were in your element, your mind was racing, you were always thrashing against the ordinary world the way you wanted to. Fighting back against normality. It was always life or death for us. But not like this. Not the way it became. Those seem like our innocent days, now.

"By the window, John."

There’s only the one table in front of a window; it’s got a little reserved sign sitting on it. That must be mine. Reserved for me. When playing at being bait, one must be appropriately dangled, obviously. And in this case, being dangled means sitting directly in front of a plate glass window on a road with more CCTV cameras than anywhere outside of Downing Street or Buckingham Palace. All right, then. Here I am. Do you see me yet, you bastard? Come and get me. We’re done with waiting.

There are two seats: one facing the wall, and one facing the door. Facing the door for me, then. I want to see Stamford when he walks in. I want to see anyone who walks in, in fact. I want to see him before he sees me. I want to look into his eyes as he opens the door and steps inside. I want to know: are you Sebastian Moran? Are you here to kill me? Bit outrageous to imagine that I’ll be able to tell just from a set of pupils and irises in an unfamiliar face, isn’t it. But I reckon I can. I reckon I will. I want the extra few seconds of warning to pull out my gun and aim. I only need a few seconds. That will be more than enough.

Yes, this is my chair, this one here. I’ll drape my jacket over the back of it and make myself comfortable. I might be here for quite a while. Ah, a waiter. Manager? Owner? Who knows. He’s coming over to me, he wants to know why I’m sitting at a reserved table, presumably. Some strange man staking out a table marked reserved. He’ll want to tell me off. Does he know why I’m here? Has he already heard of me? Does he know that I’m to be a sitting duck? They must have had to tell him something.

“There’s a reservation in your name.” Yeah, I figured that, Sherlock.

“You’re...” He looks down at a pad of paper in his hand. It must be written there: the only person permitted to sit here is Doctor John H. Watson. God, did I bring any identification? In my wallet, yeah. I’ve got something. Don’t I?

“Yes, I’m John Watson.” It’s my table, mate. The most dangerous spot in London; it’s for me. What did they tell you? I’m a producer for some well-funded telly programme, a restaurant reviewer, a talent scout? Who knows. Surely they didn’t tell you the truth. Someone will point a gun in here and fire at me. Surely all the staff would have called in sick. Or not: maybe some of them would like to watch. Are you that sort of bloke, then? Violence, blood, danger, that sort of thing? I understand. I really do. It’s a strange lot in life. I empathise.

“Right,” he says. “Yes, that’s...fine, good. Is there--” He pauses. He looks nervous. Maybe he does know. His eyes flick over to the window for a second, then back at me. “Is there something I can get you?”

“Just water, for now.” My mouth is dry and I’m getting a bit of a headache. I think I had my teeth clenched the whole way here. “I’m waiting for a friend.” He probably knows that. Reservation for two, in the bull’s eye.
He nods at me and leaves, more quickly than is strictly necessary. He knows. Yes: I’m the target. It’s all right, he’ll be aiming for me, not you. Stay out of the way, mate. I’ll handle him.

Yes: seated here, I am precisely in the middle of the window. I can see the street, the traffic, it’s at an intersection. There are so many directions from which I can be seen. I’m sitting beneath a lamp, my face must be illuminated. I think they had to adjust the table a bit, you could have fit two tables in here, if you’d needed to. They rearranged the furniture for this, didn’t they. They pulled back the curtains as far as they could go. Isn’t that suspicious? Haven’t you made it a bit too easy? He’s not as clever as you and your brother, though. Not as clever as Moriarty. You have to give him some advantage, don’t you. Me: that’s his advantage, I’m sitting right in the centre of the window, lit like a greek statue, on display for all passersby. I’m impossible to miss. But you’ll have to miss, Moran. You’ll have to. I’m not going to die today.

My glass of water is sweating a little on the bar mat. Hold on. That bloke there, across from–

That’s–

I know him. Don’t I? I could swear–

In the lobby, in the lift–

I remember. The military haircut, the outrageously muscled arms. That’s the bloke with the dog. From Mary’s block of flats. He lives one floor down from her. The evacuations: he was there. Bedbugs, he said. It wasn’t bedbugs. That was a lie. Was it him? Is he–

“Sherlock...”

Moran? Is that him? Sebastian Moran. I’ve met him. I’ve talked to him. I’ve said ridiculous things to him: something about the weather, the lift, the football scores, the sorts of nothing you talk about with strangers. I’ve seen him dozens of times, in and around Mary’s block of flats. He has a dog. A big, muscled dog, a fighting dog. I think they’re illegal now, aren’t they? He was there when they were putting explosives in the walls. Maybe it was him, trying to kill us. To kill me. Sherlock–

“Relax. He’s MI5.”

“He–” No. Is he? MI5?

But that was months ago. Before any of this began. Before Mycroft called me in the night, before your name was in the news again. He couldn’t be. I think I saw him buying a newspaper at the same shop I did not long after I moved in with Mary. Before Harry died. He was a neighbour. I saw him–

“He’s your security detail.”

He looks up, and nods at me, very slightly. Then he goes back to reading the paper. Like any other stranger. How long, Sherlock? How long have I needed my own private bodyguard? I don’t remember if I saw him before, in the other place, the greyer, sadder place. I wasn’t paying attention then. I didn’t look up. I didn’t notice people’s faces after you died. Was he there even then? Has he always been my neighbour one floor down? Does he have a receiver glued into his ear as well? Who’s whispering to him, Sherlock? Is it you? Your brother?

I honestly don’t know if I’m annoyed, embarrassed, or flattered. Or frustrated. If I’d guessed, even for a second–
If I’d second-guessed the evidence of the newspapers, my own eyes, the closed casket—

If I’d kissed Amber, gone up to her flat, found her gun and her cable ties in her purse, read her texts to Moriarty, overheard some whispered phone call in the night—

I’ve been on the verge of seeing you all this time, haven’t I. If I’d turned around when you didn’t expect me to, just once, just once—

You were just on the other side of my perception, weren’t you, waiting and watching me. Hoping I wouldn’t guess, but wanting me to. Willing me to. You know my methods. Apply them. I didn’t dare. I couldn’t have unravelled all this, not without you. I could have started to, though, if I’d let myself guess.

“Stop staring at him, John.”

Was I? I suppose I was.

Fine. I’ll stare out the window instead, look out at the battlefield and look for the enemy. There’s no enemy out there, not now. Only people. Innocents. Men in ties, women in coats and high heels. Children being led to piano lessons, playing games in their heads and dragging their feet. Innocents, all of them. Blithely imagining themselves safe. There are men with guns everywhere. No one would believe it if I told them the truth. I certainly didn’t. Paranoid delusions: real life isn’t like that. I should have known better. Once you fall out of the dream, it’s hard to climb back in.

The first time I saw him, I think, shortly after I’d moved in, it was raining, and he was getting out of a taxi. No dog then, just a heavily-muscled man and a garment bag. It was bright pink. I was a bit drunk. I made a joke about the colour, a frankly appalling shade of pink, or something like that. I was thinking of you. It was a fond memory, and he was a stranger. He smiled. He must have thought I was a right idiot. Absolutely without a clue.

Who else, then? How many of the rest of them are MI5? There are two other men sitting alone; I can see their strategy. They’re covering every angle. They’re all facing me. Or facing the window, maybe that’s it. One of them is staring into a laptop screen; the other is pretending to read a book. I’m surrounded, aren’t I. Are there more of them? The couple by the door, paying no attention to me whatsoever: are they MI5 too? Anyone could be. Absolutely anyone. Nothing is as it appears. Nothing ever has been.


"It's Stamford."

Oh. Only him: my oldest friend. He’s standing in the doorway, not a care in the world, looking in the wrong direction, at every other table instead of this one, looking for me. Over here, Mike. I’m right here.

What have I got you into, Mike? I hope you’ll be able to forgive me if we both survive this. You may never accept an invitation from me again.

He was wrist deep in intestines and his glasses were slipping down his nose the first time I met him. He was skinny then, and thoughtless, as most blokes under twenty-five are. He had a crush on my flatmate's sister, I remember that. Whatever happened to her? What was her name, Hannah? Heather? Something like that. "Just a moment," he said, that first time I saw him, not taking his hands out of the cadaver. "He's not someone you know, is he?" He thought that was funny. It sort
of was, I suppose; back then I didn’t know anyone who’d died. Not yet. Death was only a theoretical concept then. Mike was a good study partner; took his coffee black, and he’d drink it no matter how cold it got. I wonder if that’s still true.

He sees me. I can see it on his face the moment he does; relief.

Gillian! That was her name. Gillian. Yes, I remember her. Blonde and pretty and a little bit vacant. Friendly, happy all the time. She frequently neglected to wear knickers under her skirts, not that I minded. She was reading sociology or literature or something like that. Maybe it was drama. Something so far from cadavers I couldn't quite fathom it. The world was much simpler then. Everyone wanted to marry a doctor.

“Oh finally!” Jesus, Sherlock! Volume, for god’s sake! "Finally he twigs! Wonderful!!”

Moran?

“He sees me?” I whisper it through my friendliest smile.

“Yes. Yes! He’s watching, John. He knows!”

All right. Breathe. Be normal; don’t be alarmed. Could I have done this for three years, pretend I didn’t know you were alive, out there somewhere, watching me? Maybe. I don’t know. Probably not. It’s painful. I want to find the camera he’s got hold of and glare at him. I want to dare him to come after me.

This is the beginning of it, then, isn't it. It will all be different from here. All right. I'm ready. It's the beginning of the end, and I really need the last three years to come to a definite end.

Will we go back to the way we were, before you fell? Maybe. Except that you’ll crawl into bed with me in the night, and I’ll stroke you and bury my hands in your hair, I’ll kiss you and wake up with your body draped over mine. Won’t I? Let’s hope for that. Wave to Stamford, smile, stand. My neighbour (I wonder what his name is?) is looking up at me, for a moment, vaguely alarmed. I’m not supposed to move, not now. I’ve been spotted. The game is on.

"Sorry I'm late!" Are you late, Mike? I didn't notice. I'm not paying any attention to the time.

"It's fine, it's fine." He sits in his spot, across from me. He doesn't debate my choice of chair. He doesn't think about whether or not his back is turned to the door. He's never been in that kind of danger, he doesn't think about his vulnerabilities. Cadavers rarely attack from behind. He smiles at me, he sits down and so do I, he glances outside as if there's nothing of note out there. Nothing lying in wait. He takes it all at face value.

I chose him for this, I need to remember that. I chose him, this wasn’t your idea. He may never forgive me for it, once he finds out. What if Moran opts to fire at him and not at me? A warning shot: kill the innocent man on the left, not the accomplice on the right. No: don't think about it. One thing at a time.

"Good to see you, John." He smiles. Mike always forgives me my long silences and distractions. He's never offended by them, never asks why I haven't called or what on earth I’ve been up to. He just calmly sits across from me and smiles. "How's Mary coping?"

Coping with–

God. Well, right. Her flat just blew up. Our flat. That’s a fair question. That feels like ages ago now. "She's all right. The insurance settlement has been more generous than we expected. She's
found a new flat already. Much better location."

"Ahh, is it somewhere nearby, then?"

He thinks I’m talking about my own flat, doesn’t he. He thinks I’m still living with Mary. Well, of course he does, I was up until two days ago. I was going to marry her. He knew that: I told him that. Ages ago: he was probably waiting to hear the news of our engagement.

"Um, no. No, I thought this would be-- " Public. Outside the perimeter. Easy to home in on and track. No: I can’t say any of that. Well, it's close to Barts, isn't it? ”–easier for you to get to. And I like this place." That much is true. Fond memories. Mike knows we used to come here. He must remember. I need to tell him some of the truth, at least. I’m not a very good liar. I can tell him about Mary. About me and Mary. "I'm back at Baker Street, actually." Can Moran hear me? Let's hope so. That should give him the key bit of information we want him to have. "Mrs Hudson needed a hand, and-- " Don't mention the boiler. That’s a secret.

"Oh!" Mike is genuinely surprised. Confused, more like it. I can understand that. I haven’t wanted to go anywhere near Baker Street for years now. He knows what your suicide did to me. He knows Baker Street will only ever remind me of you. I should tell him about Mary. I’m not sure he ever really liked her, though he never said a word against her. He wouldn’t. He’s kind that way.

I wonder what you thought of her, Sherlock. Maybe I don’t want to know.

"Mary and I, we–" How am I supposed to feel about this, anyway? Contrite? Crushed? Depressed? I don’t know. How do I feel about it? Relieved. Free. Guilty. It feels like it happened ages ago. We’d been marking time, waiting for something to change. Well, something did change: everything true has been reversed, the impossible is now reality. My paranoid delusions came true. You’re home again. I kissed you; we slept together. You've taken over my brain, Sherlock. You've colonised me. Again.

I can't tell Mike about that. God: I can’t imagine having that conversation just now. He’d be surprised, wouldn’t he? I’m not gay. He knows that. But he knows I loved you. He’s a friend, he knew. He doesn't even know you’re alive.

What am I meant to call you now, anyway? Are you my boyfriend? That sounds odd. We’ve only slept together once. You don’t seem like anybody’s boyfriend. I don’t know. You wouldn’t bother with descriptors and titles, would you. You’re Sherlock Holmes. My Sherlock. That’s enough.

Mary and I broke up. It’s on the record. I can talk about that. I broke up with her. It’s over. "I—" Wait: I don’t want to reveal too much. He’ll ask why, maybe. I don’t know how to answer that. What’s a good euphemism for mutually ending a relationship? “We ended it, I moved out a couple of days ago. Before the explosion." I should have said accident.

"Oh." He looks surprised, and then concerned. About me: he’s concerned. Well, yes, he’s a friend. He’s a good friend, and he has a kind heart. "I'm sorry, John." He probably thinks she ended it. Of course he does. I was supposed to propose, but I didn’t. He doesn’t know that. Maybe he thinks this is the result of a proposal: a solid no, and a request that I move out. God: imagine that.

What do I do? Smile at him. Not a broad smile, not a happy smile. I just got dumped, I should be in pain, I should be suffering and glum. I can't tell him the truth, not yet. It doesn’t matter what he thinks, not just now. He thinks Mary dumped me. That’s fine. It’s a good reason to want a cup of coffee with an old friend. "Thanks."

“You’ve had a rough few days.”
“Yeah.” You have no idea, Mike. “So, how have you been?” I can hear a chorus of pings. It’s you: your phones. What’s going on? Tell me, Sherlock. What’s he saying?

Mike shrugs. “Same old, same old. Each new crop of students finds new and innovative ways to cheat on their exams, that’s not news.”

“Go after him yourself, Moran, come on. Don’t send a child.” That’s you, under your breath. It suddenly feels incredibly intimate. Why didn’t I kiss you before I left? I should have. I’ll regret that if I die here today. It seemed inappropriate somehow, in the daylight. I felt shy about it at the last second. I shouldn’t have hesitated. You wouldn’t have minded, would you. If I’d kissed you.

Mike tries to wave down the waiter, but he’s ignoring us. Wise: they know. They know to avoid the table. We’re the bait.

“Molly was asking after you this morning.” Why was Molly asking about me? “I told her you called, I hope you don’t mind. She wanted to know if you were all right. She’s been worried about you.”

Hm. I wonder why. I never knew Molly that well. I always felt a bit sorry for her, really.

Molly. Barts. She was there, after you–

Hold on. Wait just one–

Molly. You were in her morgue, weren’t you. Dead.

There was blood. How many pints of it, did you say? How many? B positive. It’s not even your blood type.

Where did you get that blood?

You poured it on the pavement. Or someone did. Someone helped you. More than one person, maybe. There might have been a team. You didn’t actually hit the ground, did you. Not really. You mustn’t have. How did you do that, anyway? You jumped off the roof and you survived. The blood on the pavement wasn’t yours. It was in your hair, you had it planned out, it had to be realistic, you had to convince me. It was critical that I mourn you. You had no pulse; you were dead. You had it planned out while you were on the roof, didn’t you. Even before that, I suspect. There was a team, you had it all coordinated. I got a call, you sent me away, knowing I would come back. He was dead up there already, but you weren’t. A man on a bike ran into me. I didn’t see you hit the ground; I fell instead. Because you didn’t. It was a ruse. You had help, though. You must have had help.

Who would get you that much blood?

Who else? She always lets you take whatever you like from the morgue. Because she loves you, and she hopes it will make you love her back. No: that’s not fair. It’s not fair. She knew, and she didn’t tell me.

You were in her morgue. You weren’t dead. She got you the blood, she helped you. She helped you fake your own death. Didn’t she.

Jesus. She knew. Jesus Christ.

“How’s she’s doing?” I shouldn’t be angry, but I am. I can’t help it. She knew, and I didn’t. She lied to me. Just like you did. Breathe, Watson. Now is not the time. She was at the funeral. She
looked sad. She hugged me and I didn’t cry in front of her. I saved that for you, for when you and I were alone. You were in your grave, and I cried. But no: that wasn’t you. No. “I haven’t seen Molly in ages.”

Sherlock, I’m right, aren’t I. She’s a part of this. She’s a part of it, and I wasn’t. Well, that’s not true: I was a part of it. I just didn’t know.

“Oh, she’s all right. She was never quite the same after—” He stops short. Yeah, I know. After you died. She’s the keeper of the secret. The burden of it must have buried her, changed her. I’d feel sorry for her, except that I don’t. She could have hinted. She could have saved me years of agony, but she didn’t. Who else knew? “Well. She’s doing all right, she’s teaching for us now.”

“Oh really!” I can play this down. Can’t I? “I’m sure she has a lot of valuable insights to share.” That’s for you, Sherlock. I’m right, aren’t I. I know I am.

I can hear you. You exhale loudly into your microphone.

“It’s not her fault, John, don’t blame her.” You say it in an undertone, as if you’re whispering in my ear. Do you know how intimate that feels? Do you know how much it disarms me? The distance between us has never felt so great. It’s a vast gulf, and I’m not sure I’ll ever be able to cross it again. “She knew both of our lives would be over if she said anything. She wanted to, believe me.”

Oh, sure. Yeah, the burden of incredible knowledge. She knew. She talked to you. I’ll pity her, shall I?

“Careful, John. Careful.” What?

I can see policemen across the street. My neighbour is studiously reading the paper. Something’s happening.

“He’s close. I know he’s close.”

“How’s the writing?” Stamford, changing the subject. He looks a bit uncomfortable. I’m no good at acting, obviously. He knows I’m angry. Angry at Molly, for some reason he can’t fathom, I suppose. Or he thinks I’m angry with him for bringing you up at all.

“Keep talking, John. They’re watching you.”

Great. I’m a terrible actor and now I need to give an award-winning performance. “Stalled, frankly.”

He nods. “You’ve been through a lot.”

“Yeah.” I haven’t even tried to write anything in weeks. I need to renegotiate my deadlines, now that I think of it. Well, if I get out of this. I’m about to be shot at; surely they’ll give me a few extra months. “It’s been hard to concentrate. I’ll get back to it.” Eventually. Hopefully.

“I really liked the book.”

“Did you?”

I can see him. Sherlock: I can see him. Do you? He’s young; seventeen, maybe. There’s a gun tucked into his sleeve. It’s hidden, but I see it, out of the corner of my eye. Can you? He’s not three feet from me.
Sherlock. Look. Do you see him?

He’s pretending to light a cigarette. He’s right in front of me, on the other side of the glass. Moran sent a seventeen-year-old boy to kill me. Do you see him? Point blank range. Point blank. No one misses at point blank range, Sherlock.

You’re texting. I can hear it. That vibrating sound. Your breathing isn’t steady. You’re talking to him, aren’t you. He’s threatening me. He’s threatening me. Stamford is talking. I can see his mouth moving but I can’t hear him. I nod. I smile. He must be talking about the book. He liked it; he’s laughing about something. I don’t look over; but I can see the gun. I can see the boy; he’s just a boy. He’s nervous. He’s got earphones on. Moran is talking to him the way you talk to me. Orders. He probably doesn’t even know who I am.

Sherlock: Sherlock, pay attention. He’s in front of me. What do I do?

“Wait, John. Wait.”

All right. I am. I will.

The tip of the barrel taps against the glass. Where are the police? They’re here: they’re watching. Sherlock: please. What now? I’m waiting.

My heart is beating so evenly and cleanly; the dual beat like a stutter. There’s a gun pointing at my head now. I can see it. The world has shifted into slow motion. I won’t move until you tell me to. That’s the plan. I’m the bait. I’m the target. I see his finger shift on the trigger. Don’t look at him. Smile at Stamford. He doesn’t know. He’s not looking. He’s trying to wave down the waiter. He had no idea.


“John! Get–”

The sound of the gunshot is deafening.
The glass is shattered in a pattern like a spider’s web; there’s a dark, dense centre where the bullet must have hit, wreathed in concentric circles of cracks that radiate outward. It blots out the street, the light, the sun. The world is darker now. Did he hit me? He must have. He wasn’t three feet from me.

Am I hurt? I don’t feel anything. It’s so quiet. Am I dead?

Sherlock?

Are you still there? Am I dying while you watch me on CCTV cameras? That’s what it was like for me, you know. Watching you die from a distance. I wouldn’t wish that on anyone.

It was a stupid plan. I came out here to get Moran’s attention, it was too easy for me to get killed. Far too easy. Mycroft tried to warn me: he can control a lot of things, your brother, but no one can keep a seventeen year old boy’s finger from touching a trigger when he wants to. When he’s told to.

It’s my own fault; it was my idea. I wanted to get this over with. I wanted you back, alive, whole, like you were. It seemed worth the risk. It was: it was worth it. If it worked; did it? Is it over yet?

I could have waited a few more days, at least. I could have spent a few more days locked up in the flat with you, watching you taunt Moran through texts, feeding you reasonable meals, staring out the window with you. I would have had a few more nights with you curled up against me, your lips against my neck and your hand resting on my stomach. Waiting a few more days wouldn’t have made much difference, would it?

I should have kissed you before I left.

You wanted me to get down. Right at the last second, before he fired. You were about to say it: you wanted me to duck down, get out of his line of fire, isn’t that right? It was too late by then: he’d already made the decision to squeeze the trigger, there was no stopping him. Moran must have told him to. He must have been negotiating with you. You pissed him off, didn’t you. Of course you did. You wanted him to reveal himself, give himself away. You didn’t say what he wanted you to say, what he was expecting. You didn’t give up. Of course you didn’t. You don’t. You never do.

Did you find him? Did it work?

I don’t feel anything. I can feel the blood in my ears, my own pulse. A faint ringing: it must be from the gunshot. But my heart is still beating. I’m still alive.

I remember what it’s like to be shot. You hear it first. They say that’s not possible; the bullet
travels faster than the sound of it does. But it’s true: you hear it, and you don’t feel anything. Even if you see your own blood on your jacket, or on your hands, you don’t think it’s you who’s been shot. Not at first. It’s some kind of denial; your body isn’t ready to admit it’s been breached. It tells you otherwise. You thought that somehow you were going to live forever. You hear the shot and it’s too close: you think you were passed over once again, like you always are. You’re one of the lucky ones, as usual, still whole. It’s a few long seconds later that you notice it: the creeping pain, the feeling of being ripped open, torn apart. It grows and grows until it’s overwhelming and you’d give anything for it to stop. But for the first few seconds you don’t know. Your life still proceeds as normal. You still have all your plans intact: get back to the base, take a shower, have dinner. Call home, maybe. Write a letter. And then you know: it’s you this time. You may never do any of those mundane things again. Did you enjoy them enough while you had the chance? No. Never. You never do.

Mike is on the floor, he’s hiding under the table. He’s put his hand on my leg, he’s trying to pull me down. He thinks there’ll be more bullets. There’s a siren going off outside. Voices: shouting. “John.”

People are screaming. They sound as if they’re a great distance away. They’re getting very rapidly closer. Screaming: it’s right beside me, all around me. Outside; inside. Tables are overturned, people are afraid. Mike: he’s on the floor. There are tears on his face. His eyes are huge. My neighbour is trying to say something to me, I can see his mouth moving. I can’t hear him. What’s going on?

“John!” Where are you, Sherlock? I can barely hear you. You’re in my ear still, aren’t you?

There are police everywhere; the boy is down on the pavement, flat on his stomach. The gun has fallen out of his hand. It’s lying there, the safety’s still off, no one’s picked it up yet. It was seconds ago. There are four policemen on him, their knees digging into his back. I can’t see his face; he’s got spots on his neck. He’s only a child, really. He probably has a drug problem. He’s like you might have been at that age, Sherlock. Young and dumb, high or wanting to be, easily manipulated. When did you start using? Around that age? Older? You went to uni, you did well, it must have been after that. I should have asked you. There are so many things I don’t know about you.

Was I hit?

“John, are you all right? Tell me you can hear me.”

There’s a dark spot in the window, right at the centre of the spider’s web of cracks. A dark spot: it’s metal. What is it? Christ: it’s the bullet. The bullet is still in the window. It’s sandwiched there in the glass, held tight in some kind of film. It never made it through.

A film: you mentioned a film. Didn’t you? Yes: you did. I didn’t understand. You said something about a film while you were on the phone, you asked your brother about it. You said something about it to me, too: they sealed the windows this morning. Mycroft dispatched a team.

It’s a bulletproof film, is that it? They were sealing the windows: a top quality, experimental film. I remember. I was staring at your lips at the time. I was thinking about kissing you: I was thinking about last night. Your lips against my hip, your hands. I was distracted. A film: yes, that’s what you said. I thought it would improve the quality of the video, or seal something inside. They double sealed the ones on the front here, where I was meant to sit. I didn’t know what that meant: I looked out the window and didn’t notice any film. And now the bullet Moran ordered some boy to fire into my head is stuck behind it, harmless. If it had managed to pass all the way through the glass it
would be lodged in my temporal lobe now. I’d be on the floor, lifeless. There aren’t even any shards on the floor. The bullet is pinned in space, caught in time, stuck in the centre of the spider’s web of broken glass.

The cracks catch the light a bit, they leave little rainbows on the table and the floor. It’s quite beautiful, actually.

My neighbour is moving some terrified patrons to the back of the restaurant. They’re whimpering, they’re still screaming. They’re terrified. A bullet through the window is terrifying for people; you hear about things like this on the telly. Drive by shootings, gangs, innocent people getting caught in the crossfire.

Mike is on the floor. Do they think he’s been shot?

“John!” You’re shouting at me: you’ve turned the volume up, haven’t you. Are you worried? You sound a little worried. You can see me, can’t you? Where’s the camera? It’s here somewhere, pointed at me. It must be. There: above the painting of a rowboat. I can hear you, Sherlock. The bullet didn’t make it through the film. I’m fine. “Can you hear me?”

“Yes.” I can barely hear myself. My ears are still ringing from the gunshot. I’m whispering: Moran is watching, isn’t he? I’m not sure I trust my voice. I’m fine. I wasn’t hit. Did you find him, Sherlock? Is it over? Did it work?

“All right?” That’s what you want to know. If I’m all right.

You want to make sure. Before the next stage of this operation you want to be sure, because we have to move on, there’s no choice. We’re not finished yet, he’s still a danger to us. He’s out there. He’s waiting. I understand: we don’t have time to be sentimental. Yes: I could have died, if the film hadn’t held. You knew it would survive a point blank shot, didn’t you. The film might have been your idea. I think it was. I wasn’t in any real danger, statistically speaking, was I. Still: right at the end, you wanted me to get down. You tried to tell me; why? On the off chance the film was applied incorrectly, or just in case of a fluke? Product failure, it hit on an unexpected angle, something. I understand: we’re not ready to be apart again, not yet. Maybe we’ll never be ready for that. We don’t need to talk about it.

“All right.” I’m fine. I’m fine, Sherlock. I wish I could see you.

Mike clutches at his chest. Christ: come on, Stamford, don’t you dare go into arrest. Not now. All right: come on then, let me see. I need to get down on my knees. Poor Mike. What have I done to him? His breathing is ragged, he’s sweating and crying, he’s shaking. His pulse is fast but strong. Panic attack. He’s panicking. That’s fair enough.

“It’s all right, Mike,” I tell him. “It’s okay. There’s a film on the windows, the bullet didn’t make it through.” Am I shouting? I’m not sure. My eardrums aren’t any better for being in such close proximity to a gunshot. “You’re all right. Take a deep breath, Mike, it’s okay.”

My neighbour has moved to the back toward the bar; he’s watching something, he’s pressing a phone to his ear. He’s trying to do his job; he’s trying to ensure my safety. It doesn’t matter: there’s no more safety for me now. I’ve been seen. Moran knows where I am. Is he out there? Waiting for me? He must be. Is he texting you? Are you texting him back? I can’t tell. I can’t hear anything. Sherlock?

More sirens: an ambulance, for one. Is someone hurt? No: not in here. There was only one shot, and the police knocked the shooter down. Maybe it’s just for appearances. An ambulance, more police. Suddenly it’s too bright in here: why? There are lights pointed at the window. Illuminating the crime scene. I can hear chatter from outside: police, talking, something else. The press, I think.
Already? Did you have them waiting too, just off to the side, ready to pounce and put this on the telly? It’s probably live. They can see us both on the floor if they’ve got their cameras up against the glass. The spider web of cracks seem made of light. The moment I step out of here, I’ll be on the telly, won’t I. Will they ask me questions? Moran will see me. That’s the idea, isn’t it. To have Moran see me, unhurt, unharmed. I’ll be shaken, confused, but not hurt. I’m fine. I’ll walk home. He’ll follow. He’ll follow me, won’t he. And then we’ll have him.

The door bangs open: paramedics. They’re carrying medical supplies and a stretcher. We’re fine. We’re just fine. We don’t need any of that. The bullet is still in the window. The press is close behind.

Poor old Stamford. His face is red, he’s trying to keep himself together. It’s not every day he has to watch someone try to shoot a friend in the head. Dead bodies come into Barts every day, but he doesn’t often get to see one in the making. So I smile at him: I need to show him I’m okay. He takes my hand and squeezes it.

“The neighbourhood,” he splutters. He’s struggling to keep his breath. I should get him home. If I had a shot of lorazepam I’d give it to him. I’ll call him a cab, he’s been through enough. I didn’t even get to buy him a coffee. Christ. “It’s going to shit, isn’t it.”
Human Geometry

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Gillian (even though she is busy with real life and has almost no internet connection), airynothing (even though she really needed to go to bed early and not beta read this), and hiddenlacuna (whom I will never abandon).

“Stop here.”

Here? What, just here, in the middle of the pavement? All right. Why? Is he up ahead, lying in wait for me? Is he too far behind me, getting lost, getting stopped by MI5 vans and random barricades? I don’t know why you want me to, but I do it, of course. I stop. Without knowing what to do with myself, without even really thinking about it. If you tell me to stop, I stop. I trust you. In spite of everything. It’s not even conscious, you know. I just feel it, it’s just true: I trust you.

“I sent you a text.”

Did you? I dig my phone out of my pocket: yeah, so you did. Three missed calls today, too. My editor tried to call twice, and before that, Bill. Checking up on me, probably.

Fourteen texts, Jesus: everyone I know must have just seen me on the telly. Someone tried to shoot me in the head, yes. It’s true. I’m fine, thanks for asking. I’m fine, didn’t I look fine? I would have seemed a little dazed, I suppose. I was concerned about Mike, he was having trouble catching his breath. I tried to act as confused as possible for the press; stunned, surprised, all of that. It probably came off a little stiff, but what do you want? I’m not an actor. You’re going to be a little stiff and awkward when you’ve narrowly avoided being shot in the head and there are three cameras shoved into your face, aren’t you? I’m only an innocent bystander, that’s what I was going for. This has nothing to do with me.

Which is sort of true, in a way: it doesn’t have anything to do with me, not really. It’s to do with you, but no one asked me about that, so I didn’t have to lie. I can tell them the bullet wasn’t meant for me with a mostly-straight face: why would some kid with a gun shoot at me? I’m only a writer. Former army doctor, former blogger turned novelist. True crime with a dash of fiction. I’ve got my own genre at this point: it’s called Sherlock Holmes. You’re your own genre, because you take everything unmoving and unshakeable and flip it on its head; everything you touch transforms into something different and unexpected. Including people. Including me. He wasn’t really aiming at me. He was aiming at you.

Oh: Sarah texted me. I haven’t heard from her in ages. I wonder how she’s doing.

But you’ve texted me just now, so I’ll look at that one first.

I used to read your texts first, always. Well: you were my priority, above everyone and everything else. I was accused of that often enough, I won’t deny it anymore. It was true. I couldn’t help it; I was driven to it. I fought the instinct for a while, I really did; I tried to carve out space for other people in my personal hierarchy. But there was no point in fighting it, really; it’s practically biological. You’re extraordinary, and I want to protect you and help you. I want to comfort you. I want to be with you and take care of you. I always read your texts first. If we’re lovers now, well:
that’s different again, isn’t it. No one would accuse me of anything anymore. If that were the case. If people knew.

I can’t quite imagine having that conversation just yet, I really can’t.

I love seeing your name on my phone. That makes me a little bit giddy, I have to admit. Back from the dead, against all odds. Amazing.

Your text consists of one word: Dinner?

Ha! In the middle of all this, you want to ask about dinner? That makes me laugh. I’m being stalked by a serial killer bent on avenging the death of his master, there are probably at least three guns pointed at me right now, and you’re asking me about dinner.

*Maybe we can get Moran to bring us chinese when he drops by.*

I press send and wait: wait. There: I can hear your phone. You just got my text, didn’t you. Are you reading it? I wish I could see you. It’s funny, right? It is! It’s funny.

Hold on: were you asking me what we should have for dinner, or were you *asking me out for dinner?* There is a difference. A significant difference. Were you flirting with me? Is that what that was? If so, it was really subtle. Too subtle, Sherlock, come on. That’s not fair. I’d better respond again, just in case.

*When this is all over, I’ll take you out for dinner anywhere you like.*

Anywhere: definitely. I’ll put on a tie and a jacket and take you somewhere fantastic. And you’ll probably pick at your food if you bother to order any, and you’ll complain about the music, because it will be fine but not up to your standards, and you’ll try to deduce at least one scandalous thing about everyone there. We’ll probably get thrown out because you’ll insult the owner or disparage someone’s wife. That’s all right. I wouldn’t expect anything else. I’ll just laugh; I’ll laugh with you. If someone tries to hit you, they’ll have to make it past me first. I’ll take you home in a cab and rest my hand on your knee. And when I get you home I’ll kiss you and undress you, press you down against cool sheets and make love to you, because you’re mine. I wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Keep walking. You’re going to cross at the next intersection and turn left.”

It’s a different route than I took to get here; more main roads rather than side streets. You’re trying to help him track me. I’ll get home faster, though. It’s the more obvious route. Unsuspicious. Is he here? Do you know where he is? Is he only watching camera footage, or does he see me with his bare eyes? He could be anywhere: peering down at me from any of these dark windows. Don’t look: it’s too obvious. What do I normally do? Look straight ahead, look down at my shoes. Shove my hands into my pockets and think about anything else.

You’re typing; shifting things on the desk. I can hear a phone vibrating against the wooden surface. A text, not from me. Then another. And another. What’s going on, Sherlock? Tell me. Is it him? Is it Moran?

“Does he see me?” I can say it without moving my lips much. I run my finger across my upper lip. Normal motions; scratch my cheek. Rub my earlobe. Is that the glue coming loose? It’s a bit itchy. Don’t touch it, for god’s sake. The last thing I need is to lose my last connection to you. I’d be blind and deaf, walking right into my own grave. I’ve had enough of that.

“Yes. Yes, he does.”
All right. I knew it would be this way: it’s a performance, all of it. I have to keep my head ducked down: I don’t trust my own expressions. I’m too easily readable. I’m on guard, he’d see that. I’m waiting, I’m ready. My gun is a comforting presence against my back. Watch the pavement: watch other people’s feet approaching and disappearing behind me.

I need to walk like I don’t know anything at all, which is difficult. I need to walk like a man alone in the world, wandering home after a difficult day. I have plenty of experience with that, as it happens. But I’m not alone anymore.

“He’s beginning to guess where you’re going. Only beginning to, though. I’m not sure he even remembers about the failsafe. He’s not very clever, John.” You say that like a disappointed child.

You’re trying to play a game with someone who’s still struggling to find the playground, aren’t you. How frustrating. You miss Moriarty a little, don’t you. You miss the strategy and the challenge, working against an equal, though you don’t miss the risk he posed. To me, to you. I get it now. I understand. Your brain is just wired that way. It’s taken me ages to accept, but I think I do. You’re attracted to dangerous things, to things with sharp edges. Things that demonstrate just how clever you are, moments before they kill you.

I have no idea what you’re doing with me.

“Can you remind him about the failsafe?” You’re playing the rest of his network, aren’t you? Remind him it’s there. His secret weapon. A bomb in the boiler; take out Baker Street, destroy our home, Moran. Destroy me. Text him something that will jog his memory, Sherlock. If anyone can, it’s you.

I hope to god you really did remove all the explosives this time. Your track record there isn’t fantastic, you know that. Mary’s flat stands as a witness on that front.

Maybe we should move Mrs Hudson to a safer location, now that I think of it. Just for a little while; she can go stay with her sister.

She’d never do it, would she. Tough old bird, Mrs Hudson. She’d have to be, as our landlady. If she were younger she’d probably be out on the streets with us at night, dressed all in black and chasing after criminals in heels. She likes all the excitement as much as we do, I think.

“I can try.” Try, Sherlock. Remind him. Prompt him to flip the switch on us. It’s a challenge of a sort, isn’t it? Prod at Moran in just the right way; it’s geometry, it’s all angles, mass, functions and equations. Poke him the right way and he’ll move along a predictable plane, he’ll do what you want. He’ll fumble for a predictable phone, he’ll make a predictable call. Human geometry with a million variables: that’s got to be a challenge. “I can’t have him suspect that I know, it would ruin everything.”

I can’t believe I’m even thinking this, but Sherlock: “He won’t suspect anything. Sometimes, you know, you’re a little too subtle.”

“Am I?” You’re smiling, aren’t you. I can hear it. You know what I mean. You know what I’m thinking about: your leg pressed against mine. So many times: was it always an invitation? Maybe it was. I didn’t notice. I’m not that clever either, Sherlock. Sometimes you have to be more obvious about things you want us mortals to know.

I’m smiling too. “Sometimes you are.”

Remind him, Sherlock. He won’t suspect you. It’s almost finished now, we’re so close. He must be
hungry for it. He’s tried to kill me twice in the last two days. He’s getting desperate, you know he is. He wants to get you, and he feels like he’s close. He’s not thinking; he’s only firing guns. Give him something he can detonate and let’s get this over with.

“I tried to tell you, you know. Once.”

You tried to tell me what?

“At Dartmoor.”

You tried to tell me what at Dartmoor?

_I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you._

No: no, not that. You can’t mean that. That was about imaginary hounds and drug-induced terror. The power of suggestion was a weapon against us. You wanted to kill any suggestion lingering in my brain, I know that. You were trying to be kind, I thought: you were trying to make up for shouting at me. You were sorry. That’s all. You couldn’t have known what would happen on the roof of Barts, not then. So what did you try to tell me at Dartmoor? When was it? In the car? On the moor? In the lab? What?

“I told you I was going to die. I thought you might remember.”


“I thought you did remember, at first. I told you I’d die before he could destroy us, do you remember?”

Us? You didn’t say us. You said _me_. You said you’d die before you’d let anything happen to _me_. Have you forgotten, or did I transform that moment in my memory into something more romantic? You always accused me of doing that. Maybe it was you this time: you meant to say _us_, but you didn’t. You vowed to protect _me_.

“I remember.” I thought you were trying to comfort me. I thought, later, maybe you wanted me to kiss you. Another missed opportunity. Another rare moment of you being too subtle.

But what did you really mean? That you were going to fake your own death, and it would be for our protection? Was it planned that far in advance? Maybe it was. You became a little more silent after Dartmoor, a little more secretive. Getting into cabs without me, staring at walls for a long time, saying nothing.

So. You were planning, you were plotting. You were trying to find a way to survive. Maybe you didn’t think you would.

You said you had no friends; you said it again the last time I saw you, before the roof. You said being alone protected you. Were you trying to push me away, both times? Was it a test? Were you preparing me for what you were about to do?

I walked away from you the first time you said it. I stormed off the second time, too. You knew it would work: saying something like that to me would make me stamp off in a huff. It’s all human geometry for you, isn’t it. Angles and equations: you have us all figured out, don’t you. _I don’t have friends, alone protects me. I’d die before I’d let anything happen to you._ Was I meant to put those two ideas together? Were you trying to remind me of Dartmoor?

Even then you were preparing to die to rid the world of Moriarty. To protect me. As if I’d ever
forgive you for that.

“I wasn’t certain that I’d survive. I wanted you to know, if I did die, that it was for a reason.”

Seeding my memory with things to hold onto: that’s pure sentiment, Sherlock. Where did that come from?

It worked.

I’m inside the perimeter now, I think. Aren’t I? I think I am. But somehow I don’t feel like I’m in the clear. Are we leading him inside? Are we opening up the perimeter to let him in, trap him there? Are we reducing our safe zone to just the house, to just the flat? We’ll huddle together in my bedroom with the windows shut. I’ll hold on to you, I’ll stroke your hair and we’ll wait. Maybe we’ll talk a bit. You can tell me all your secrets. I’ll listen.


“Yes, what is it?” Must be your brother, then. “Of course. Yes, I know.”

You don’t even bother to try to conceal your contempt. How much of all this was his idea? Keeping you locked up like this certainly was. Working remotely rather than hunting Moran down on foot: that definitely sounds like Mycroft’s idea. At least meeting Stamford at the Criterion involved actually doing something, even if only by proxy. You’re used to that: you think of my body as yours. You’re not wrong. No wonder Mycroft hated this plan.

“Obviously. Of course he knows, he can hear me. Yes.” You’re getting more exasperated by the second, aren’t you. I’ll be home soon, I’ll put the kettle on. It’s all right, Sherlock. We’ll get through this. It’s almost over. I’m leading him into the endgame. Hold on. “Well, you watch for him then, I’m bringing John home at the moment. And you’re distracting me.” I can hear you drop the phone back down on the table. You’ve hung up on him, haven’t you.

We’ve breached his perimeter, of course he’s not happy. I’m sure that’s what it is: Mycroft doesn’t like it. He’s watching us play a shell game with our lives. He warned me: he can’t keep me safe. The walk home is more dangerous than the walk to the Criterion, he said. More dangerous than my seat by the sealed window, certainly. There’s no glass around me now to catch a bullet and hold it away from my temple. There’s a bomb in front of our flat that could go off at any time. I’m walking on the margins of my own life. I’ve never felt so alive.

“Stop at the corner for a moment, John.” All right. The corner, okay. I can feel my phone vibrating again in my pocket. “I’ve sent you another text.”

Do you send them so that I’ll have something to do with my hands while I’m supposed to be standing in front of a camera, oblivious? I suppose that works. It could be a text from anyone. He hasn’t got access to my phone. He had no idea who’s texting me. Bill, Mike, Mary. My editor. My other ex-girlfriends. Is there a sniper hidden in the walls somewhere? Crouched down on a rooftop, waiting for me? I won’t look. I’ll look at my phone, I’ll text you back. I trust you, Sherlock. You watch for me. Tell me when to run.

You used to walk a lot in the evenings.

What? Oh. That’s true. I did. Ages ago. After you died, I’d go out for long walks. Very long: sometimes they took most of the night, is that what you mean? I ran sometimes, as if I could run away from all of this. Run back to you, somehow, back in time and space, make it all reverse itself.
I would have broken my legs trying, so I just went back to walking. Mostly aimlessly, just walking until I was exhausted and found myself somewhere I’d never been. No one takes much notice of a man walking alone in London, no matter what hour. It was oddly comforting. It gave me something to do.


Yeah. I did. Press send. I don’t know what else to say to that, but I have to respond with something, don’t I. Have to keep my hands busy.

Is there another goal to texting me just now, at critical moments? Are you trying to demonstrate to Moran that someone is watching, waiting for me? That it will be noticed if I’m shot, if I don’t get to reply? Is this public demonstration meant to protect me, or make me a more meaningful target?

“I’d go with you sometimes, you know.” What? Oh: you mean when I went out walking? Did you? Really? “I’d stay behind you and on the other side of the street. You took the strangest routes. Why did you do that?”

That’s a genuine question: I confused you, didn’t I. There was no logic to it, which must have perplexed you: I just followed people with dogs, or with children, or no one at all. I turned ways you didn’t turn, or wouldn’t; I followed the sun or the moon or took a random street to see where it went. Sometimes I wasn’t paying any attention at all. “No reason.” How do I explain this to you? There’s no explanation. I was a recent amputee: I’d lost my best friend. “I didn’t have a route, I wasn’t going anywhere. I just...I just walked.”

“Why?” The tone of your voice is so different now. With your brother you were angry and impatient, but now with me you’re more gentle. I think, if anyone else heard you just now, they might not sense that gentleness in you. But it’s there. I know it is. I’ve felt it. I recognise it.

“I was sad.” I missed you. I wasn’t sure how to live my life without you. I suppose I never was without you. If only I’d turned around. My eyes were blinded to everything, then. All I saw was the pavement and the rising dark.

“Did walking make you less sad?”

Well. I’m not even sure. “Not really. A little, I guess. It felt like...well, it was comforting, somehow.” If I kept walking, I could imagine I was walking toward you. Little did I know you were walking toward me the whole time, keeping pace. If only I’d known. I’d have never looked away from you again.

All right. Baker Street. He must know now. He must; where else could I be going? Where is he? Hiding in some upstairs flat, staring out the window at me? Opening up the window to push the muzzle of a rifle through? That’s the best scenario for a sniper, I know: something perfectly still to lean against, your cheek pressed against the metal. We’ve created the perfect scenario for him, if he’s here.

No: he didn’t know to look here. It didn’t occur to him. You’re right: he’s not very clever, is he. I’m only minutes away now. The ends of these journeys are always the most dangerous. All right: left, right, left. I’m just a bloke walking home. I was shot at in a restaurant; I’m not expecting to get shot at again. Don’t look around, don’t look up. Watch the pavement sliding past underneath me. Left, right, left. My skin is a weak armour against whatever’s coming.

“The door is unlocked, John. It’s slightly open, just push your way in and shut it behind you.
Quickly, all right? Don’t linger outside. But don’t run. He’s still watching you.”

The most dangerous point of all: walking past a white van. Such an ordinary thing.

It’s a familiar scene: the street where we lived, the van you’ve been staring at for two days. It’s quiet now; more quiet than it should be. That should be your first clue, Moran, but you’re not very clever. That’s all right, I’m not clever enough either.

The van hasn’t moved; they parked it here and left, took cover somewhere safer. It’s just a normal van, sitting there, looking innocuous. I know it’s not, but I’ve started to imagine the explosives as a few sticks of dynamite with a clock strapped to it, ticking. It’s ticking down to an explosion that should only rattle it on its wheels, that’s what you said. It might break a few windows, maybe. But I’m not so sure. He blew a hole in a block of flats, Sherlock, and that was after you had most of the explosives removed. Are you sure moving the bomb into the van was enough? Maybe you should have disarmed it entirely. We could have found him some other way.

There’s no clock in the van, certainly not one that’s ticking, but walking past it, standing so close to it, I can almost hear it. It’s counting down the last seconds of my life.

Breathe: it’s only a few feet now. I can feel my heart pounding all the way down to my toes. My arms twitch a little with every beat. Inhale, exhale. The door is open, just like you said. It’s open just a little, enough that the streetlamp is faintly reflected in the paint. The light, at such an odd angle, is revealing. The door is covered over with fingerprints: yours, mine, Mrs Hudson’s, Moriarty’s, Moran’s. The wayward tenants who took our place for a while. Weeks, years of fingerprints we didn’t know we were leaving. Our whole history, etched there by the ridges on our fingertips.

I can smell hot yeast and butter from inside: Mrs Hudson is baking. It smells like warmth and nerves.

Every inch of the pavement seems to take ages to cross; this is like the way time works in a dream. I’m stuck in the thickest air, and the door is so close but it takes too long to get to it. Whole lives could begin and end in the time it takes me to reach that door. My feet are slow, my hands are thick and pulsing with my own slow heartbeat. I’m listening to everything: a bird singing, someone’s music pouring out of a car zipping past down the road, a hammer somewhere pounding against wood. A door slamming shut. I can’t hear a safety switching off. It’s impossible to hear someone lining up a shot in any case; it makes no sound. Breathe: left, right, left.

My fingers reach the door, and I can almost feel the impression they’re leaving. It should be an entire handprint, steaming and dense, pressing through the paint and down to the hard wood. Thick, black paint, slick and rain-washed: as if that could save anyone. I push the door open, step inside.

There: for one last moment, I’m still vulnerable. The door is open behind me, my back is to the street. He might still see me, depending on where he is. He could fire now and hit me. Right between the shoulder blades; only if he’s not a confident shot. He’d aim for the back of my head if he’s any good. That’s what I’d aim for in his place: the back of my head. There’s no question there: chance of survival is minimal. It would be poetic, to shoot me down in the back of the head on the threshold of 221b. That would get his point across to you, Sherlock: Moriarty wanted to burn your heart out. Moran will make sure he does.

This would be the moment to fire, Moran. It’s now or never. I’m closing the door.

The latch clicks in place. It might be the most beautiful sound I’ve ever heard. It clicks, and the door is shut. It’s firm in its frame, solid.

“Don’t go outside, Mrs Hudson!” You’re shouting from the top of the stairs. You look ecstatic. You’re beaming at me. It worked, didn’t it. He remembered the failsafe.

He’s going to try to blow up 221b.

You couldn’t be more delighted, could you.
The Right Moment

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Gillian for all her support (and for explaining why this chapter isn't what she expected, and why that's okay anyway), hiddenlacuna for being awesome in spite of all my stupid whining, and airynothing for the laser eyes of destiny.

There isn’t enough space in here for you, is there.
You look as if you want to smash through the windows, or move the furniture around, or upturn everything. You keep reaching out for something that’s not there; I can’t imagine what it is. Every flat surface is covered over with the tools of this particular trade: the phones, stacks of letters, notebooks full of your scrawled handwriting, computers and screens, keyboards, radios, boxes of devices I don’t even know the names of. There really isn’t enough space for all this, is there. Not for all that and you, pacing, patting at your pockets like you’re looking for your cigarettes, practically clawing at the walls. It’s a cage. You’re no good in a cage.

We can’t leave, not yet. We have to wait, that’s all that’s left to do. Wait, watch, and listen for a bomb to go off outside.

If–

If only it had been more than just one night, you know. I just–

If I knew how, if I could–

If I had any experience at all kissing you with the lights on, or touching you outside of my bedroom, I might stand up and take your hands, or put my arms around you, or put the palm of my hand on your neck; I would comfort you, I would tell you what you already know, that it will be all right. There’s nothing more we can do. He knows. He knows, Sherlock. He’s made his third threat, and you’ve responded. He thinks he has the upper hand now, you’ve done everything just right. Subtle, but not too subtle. He remembers about the failsafe. He’ll try to wound you a third time by killing me, and when he does, all this will be over.

Come with me. That’s what I’d say to you, if I knew I could. Come with me, come upstairs to my bed. Let me unbutton your shirt, let me push it off your shoulders and kiss your skin there. I’ll distract you from this. Come with me.

You lean back in your chair, exposing your long, pale throat. There should be a mark there, somehow. I should be able to see the path of my hands against your skin, maybe the lightest imprint in pink where I touched you, but of course I can’t. It would be easier if I could. It almost feels like a dream now, a fantasy. A memory of a fantasy.

All your phones are eerily quiet now. It’s a bit off-putting; Moran is waiting too. Everyone’s waiting, stuck, poised and ready to pounce. You pick up a couple of phones and cradle them in your hands; you stare at them. I stare at your hands; such long fingers. I want to kiss the tips of them, I want you to dig your nails into my back. You’ve done all you can, Sherlock. Put the phones down. Look at me. Come here: sit down next to me. Put your head in my lap, I’ll stroke your hair.
Don’t think about him anymore. When he detonates it, we’ll know.

All right: enough. Watching you isn’t helping, is it. I need to write something; that’s a good way to pass the time. My outline is pretty clear, I just need to get it all down. I have my notes, I have my editor’s comments. The beginning, she said. Start at the beginning. Everyone loves the beginnings of things. She’s kindly avoided asking me to write the ending; I wonder if she understood what you meant to me in a way Mary never did. Maybe.

I outlined a version of A Study in Pink. It starts with a nightmare. I don’t want to write about that; maybe I won’t write that part just now. I could start with my walk in the park, when I ran into Stamford. Coffee and pigeons, who’d want me for a flatmate, all that. Fate meeting me at my lowest, my weakest.


There’s not enough space for your impatience, I know. The flat is too small for that. The world is too small.

I remember the day we first walked in here together. I was leaning on a cane, embarrassed by my inexplicable limp and trying hard not to show it. That will come soon; that’s in chapter two.

The smell of the flat, I remember that: every place has a smell to it, doesn’t it, and it tells you something. I’m not observant the way you are, but I notice the smells of places: cared for or not, long-empty or not, new build or not; lived in by parents of a colicky baby or by the lonely elderly; or by people who love to bake, or who hate to clean toilets, that sort of thing. It’s a little hint of what it would be like to live here, and who’s lived here before you. It tells you what sort of person you’ll become if you sign the lease and move in.

Sometimes I think the same kinds of people end up in the same flat, decade after decade, attracted by location, some quirk of the layout, or scent. A mad genius, a serial monogamist with a limp and a gun in a drawer; a maker of outrageous messes and a long-suffering tidier who puts the cupboards right again at the end of the day; the one who makes the tea, as a general rule, and the one who often fails to drink it. You walk into a place, and it asks you: *do you fit in here? Are you one of these two?* As if there are roles to play in every flat, predetermined, written somewhere inside the walls. *Do you belong here? Which one of these two will you become?*

I grew into the smell of 221b Baker Street. Or it grew into me.

Maybe that’s how I should start the story; with the flat. It’s the flat that made us into what we are. We arrived here and took our places. We two opposites, curled in on each other.

I remember thinking, walking up those stairs, that maybe this wouldn’t work out. Stairs, after all. And me with a cane. I didn’t want to be deterred by that, though: no, I can handle myself. I can handle it. I wanted to follow you, that much I know. You fascinated me, with your outrageous website and your intelligent eyes. The way you knew so much about me so fast. I was intrigued. I don’t know: maybe I already knew I could love you.

I don’t want to think that I imagined you could save me. I wasn’t ever that optimistic.

I wonder if this one is actually going to be a love story. It could hop the ranks of true crime and right into the romance section; we met, we fell in love, you faked your suicide, you came back. No: this is a fictionalised you, and a fictionalised me. And it wasn’t like that, not at the beginning. Unless it was. I don’t know.
We walked in here together, you were proud of this flat. You were trying to show off a bit. After the bedsit I’d been living in at the time, it seemed palatial. It’s almost embarrassingly large, really: who needs all this space? It’s a remnant of nineteenth century generosity, and of years of refurbishments and walls knocked down to accommodate someone or something. It’s a space shaped by a number of misguided attempts to modernise it, as far as I can tell.

But it’s not modern, in spite of all that effort, and it never will be: it’s Victorian to the core. It’s a Victorian terrace, that’s what it will always be. It’s been carved up into pieces and then rebuilt again, dictated by fashion and need, designed to suit someone’s ostentatious personality. Someone like you.

The sitting room is massive by any measure; it would feel awkward and under-furnished if it weren’t for all your boxes and stacks of papers, your piles of books, your harpoons and other ridiculous things no one else has. It’s a very generous space. The kitchen is so big I could always work around your various experiments; the bread and a butter dish always fit around all your flasks and beakers. Whoever built the flat this way must have known that the residents for 221b would always need this much space to accommodate each other.

Even so: 221b is still too small for you just now. You’re pacing again. You hate being trapped, and you hate waiting. You walk over to the window and pull the curtain aside. Don’t, Sherlock. Come away from there. But you don’t move; you stay there, hovering like a ghost looking out into the night. As if you can force the van to explode by staring down at it. You’re too close; we don’t know how damaging that explosion will be when it happens. Maybe he’s waiting to see you there, maybe he’s through the perimeter now. Maybe he means to kill us both.

I’m not going to say anything, though I want to. *Come away from there, Sherlock.* We’re stuck here under his thumb, he’s got you pinned and he doesn’t even know it, does he. It’s quiet, it’s peaceful, it’s hateful. I know. You can’t stand it. Move away from the window, Sherlock. Come here to me. Lie down here beside me, I’ll read you what I’ve got.

I’ll start with the nightmare, and work my way forward. Did you know about the nightmares? I never told you. But you probably knew.

It’s past midnight. I’m exhausted. Mrs Hudson left some pastries on the coffee table for us; we’ve only finished half of them. I suppose the anxiety is getting to her too: baking is a very productive way to cope. I very much doubt she’s sleeping now, but she said she was heading to bed. She’s probably just staring up at the ceiling, waiting to hear it. *Boom.* The sound of an explosion. We’re all waiting together, with walls that can barely hold us in.

Fine: you stare out the window, Sherlock. I’ll try to write something. Where do I start? My terrible bedsit, of course; walking in the park. That sets the scene, doesn’t it? I have to explain who I was before I met you.

*I had come home from Afghanistan with a gunshot wound in my shoulder and a mysterious limp. I was back in London, but I was lost. My nights were filled with nightmares about gunfire, heat, and sand, but I awoke to the walls of a tiny bedsit and rain on the windowsill. It felt temporary; my whole life had been reduced to the tiny space between four walls, one suitcase, a cane, and my therapist. I didn’t know what to do with myself. The war was far away, and I was all alone in the world, aside from my sister, but we never got on. I was alone, living in a terrible bedsit and wondering what on earth I was going to do with the rest of my life. Walking through the park one afternoon, I heard someone call my name.*

*That’s when my life changed.*
Should I describe Stamford? I'll just–

Oh.

How long have you been standing there, your eyes on me like that? You’re staring at me. And the look on your face. A sort of– well, yeah, a sort of wonder. Like you’re surprised that I’m here, surprised that I exist at all.

I know how that feels: I look at you the same way, I know I do. Three years apart is a long time; it will take a while before we stop feeling so alone by default. It’s not a dream anymore, it’s not a fantasy. You’re right there, and I’m right here. Flesh and blood, back home again. You look at me as if you’re trying to figure me out; haven’t you deduced everything there is to know about me already? No: I understand, I think. We have things to sort out, you and I. I’m not sure how to go about that. I’m not entirely sure what you want.

It’s a conversation, I suppose. I’m not sure how to start it. I’m not sure how it would end. It never seems to be the right time. There’s a madman trying to kill me just now. That seems more pressing, doesn’t it. But still: yeah, I know, Sherlock. I know.

It was–

I used to imagine that having sex with you would be awkward or uncomfortable. But then it happened, and it wasn’t. Not at all. In spite of all your planes and angles, you’re as human as anyone else. I think that’s a secret. That’s all right. I don’t mind if you only want to share your secrets with me. I won’t tell anyone.

You got into bed with me last night, and I kissed you. And things happened between us. Things that I’ve thought about a million times, that have populated my fantasies for years, but have never happened between us before. You’ve thought about it too, haven’t you.

It was–

It was fantastic. It was amazing.

Yeah. Yeah, it was. You think so too, don’t you. I’d like that to happen again, Sherlock.

I’d like it to become a habit, actually.

I know you don’t keep to the strictest of sleeping schedules. I know sometimes you stay up all night focused on some case or other, or some bit of data catches your interest and before you know it it’s dawn. But when you sleep, I want it to be next to me. I want it to become so common that it’s completely unremarkable for you to crawl into bed with me. It could be just the way things are, like breathing. Maybe at some point you’ll get bored; that’s all right. There are many ways to be creative in that regard. I’ll be ready.

And I want to ask you: when did you know? We’ll have that conversation one day. Not today. Not yet. I don’t want to ask yet. I’m not sure you’ll know what I mean, or you’ll even know the answer. One night, maybe, when the lights are off and you’re fidgeting. I’ll turn toward you and run my hand across your stomach, and I’ll ask you, Sherlock, when did you know?

Know what? That’s what you’ll say, of course, even though you’ll know exactly what I mean. Because you’re still you, no matter how much changes between us.

That you loved me. I won’t be awkward about it by then; we’ll have had the critical conversation. We’ll have made our uncomfortable confessions and disclaimers. We’ll have said all the words
you’re meant to say to someone you love, someone you want to make love to for the rest of your life. We’ll have said it, mutually; we won’t even think it feels extraordinary anymore. It’s just the way things are: we have each other, much like we always did.

I don’t know what your answer will be. When did you know? After dinner one night, maybe, watching telly with me while you laughed about comments on my blog. Or the morning I came back to Baker Street after three years, the moment before you reached for one last cigarette. Or in some horrible tip in Hackney, while you watched me drink coffee alone on CCTV cameras, or watched me laugh over dinner with Mary.

Was it in Dartmoor, after you locked me in that lab and watched me throw myself into a cage? Or sitting on the bed beside me, maybe, telling me you’d die? Maybe it was then. Or, worse: was it when you were looking down at me from the roof at Barts, about to leap off, not sure if your tricks would work and you’d survive, or if you’d leave me like that, heartbroken and without you forever?

Maybe not. Maybe it was at the very beginning, when you first realised that I’d shot a cabbie for you. It could have been then.

I think I always knew; I fought it, but I think I always knew the potential was there. From the moment I saw you, really saw you, I mean, for what you are and who you are, I think it was there, this little stem of something that could branch out in any direction. But it took your death to force me to recognise which way it ended up growing.

One day, if we get to that point, if it’s clear we could, I’ll ask you. It will be dark, and my hand will be on your stomach, and my lips will be against your neck. And there will be nothing surprising about any of that. It will be easier then.

There are other things to talk about now. The madman with his finger on the trigger, for one.

“What’s he waiting for?”

You sigh, and come over to me. You sit down next to me, too close to mean anything else. “The right moment.”

“When do you think that is?” I close my laptop and put it on the coffee table. I’m not going to write any more tonight.

“I have no idea.”

I should ask you; there are a million things I should ask. Or I could tell you the truth: how long it’s been that I’ve been wanting this. You. I should tell you that. It’s all right if you change your mind, but I really hope you don’t.

The look on your face: it’s still surprise. Confusion, a little. Uncertainty. Why? I should ask. I should reassure you, explain. You don’t need to be uncertain about me. I’ll never be confused about this again. But words aren’t in my mouth just now. It’s easy, really, to lean over and press my lips against yours. You’re so close, and so tempting.

And so willing.

God.

Sherlock.
I missed you.
Practically Romantic

Chapter Notes

I fought this one all week, trying to do something that just didn't end up happening. Annoying! Anyway, thanks to PrettyArbitrary for chatting it out with me in the #innercircle; HiddenLacuna for all the chatting, the ongoing support, the beta read, and for reassuring me that it was okay that I didn't do what I set out to do; Gillian for her constant support and british eyes; and airynothing for her laser eyes. Thank you so much.

Your breath is warm, and your mouth is hot. You are all I can taste, all I can smell, all I can feel. That’s what I want right now: just you. Your fingers are pressing hard into the back of my neck. At any other time, that would probably hurt. I would push anyone else’s hands away, but not yours, and not now. Right now I don’t mind at all.

Have you been waiting for this all day, like I have? It seems so. I should have said something.

I spent so long thinking about the impossibility of running my fingers through your hair, and here I am: my fingers are tangled up in it. I can pull you closer to me, I can feel the solidity of your bones, the heat of your skin. It’s reassuring, it’s overwhelming. I don’t think I can let you go now. Not anymore.

Your teeth dig into my lip momentarily, then retreat and are replaced by your tongue. Jesus Christ. Let’s just stay this way, all right? Let’s stay as we are. Ignore Moran. Ignore the pings and beeps and rattles coming from every direction. We’re safe here. Let your brother handle it. Just keep kissing me. Don’t stop. Don’t let me go. This is a conversation we’ve barely started, and I’m not prepared to stop, Sherlock. Don’t stop.

Though, admittedly, my neck is getting a bit sore. I’m holding my head at an odd angle, I probably can’t stay this way too long. My foot is falling asleep. My shoulder is getting stiff.

Logistics always get in the way in real life, don’t they. Silly discomforts and awkwardness; they build in end points we don’t want, but have to expect. Gravity and space; muscle tension, a grumbling stomach, a full bladder, and the limited life of aching desire. It’s all necessarily transient, but I don’t want to think about that right now. I want to pin you down, I want to peel off your clothes, I want to press my lips against your bare skin. But there’s two sets of arms and legs to account for, muscles and old injuries, and clothes don’t come off that easily from a reclined position, as it turns out.

The sofa isn’t wide enough for any of this, really. In my fantasies I kissed you on this sofa for hours, I undressed you easily and stroked your endless pale skin, and both of us fitting into this tight space was never an issue. Reality is a bit different than fantasy, of course. Of course it is. Reality is better, in spite of the pulled muscles and your over-enthusiastic suction on my tongue.

Ouch. All right, all right. There. Yes. Better. Wonderful. See?

You’re experimenting with me, aren’t you. You’re pressing all the limits, seeing what works. I like
I like being your test subject. I like the edges you stand on, the risks you take. It’s exciting. Keep going, Sherlock. Don’t stop. I like risks too.

I think you’re really getting the hang of this kissing thing. As if you’ve made some kind of postgraduate-level study of it since this morning and now you’re an expert. Your lips, your tongue: Jesus, what are you doing to me?

Kissing you is like a conversation with you; sometimes I can barely keep up, or quite understand where you’re going. It’s interesting: it’s a challenge. You force me to pay attention. I like it. It feels new, like there are no rules and never have been. And you’re right, you’re right. There never were.

It’s only been me then, hasn’t it. Only me. You haven’t so much as kissed anyone else, have you. All your experiments will be with me. I’m honoured, Sherlock. Delighted. Enthusiastic, even. Yeah: let’s do that. Let’s experiment. It will be great.

Your hands are tugging at the collar of my shirt, like you want to pull it off of me. That’s a good idea: yeah. Good idea. I want more of your skin, too. I will kiss every inch of you. I will suck on your skin and mark you; what do you think of that? You’ll have little marks on you from me to remind you, later, so you won’t be able to forget. We won’t go back to not touching each other, not again. Seal the deal; it’s not a fantasy, this is reality. This is a choice we’ve made.

Buttons: I can undo those while we’re kissing. I’ve done that before, with others. With women. That seems a long way away now, a thousand years ago. I can slip each button free with one hand while gripping onto your hair with the other. I like the sounds you make when I do that: yes. Like that, just like that. Christ, Sherlock. That’s incredibly--

What? What is it? Where are you go--

We were in the middle of something, Sherlock, what’s--

Oh.

Is that the important phone, then? You have to leap up and run across the room if it makes that particular pinging sound? Right. Of course. Serial killers, snipers, your faked death, all that. You distract me very effectively, Mr Holmes. I’d nearly forgotten we were on the brink of extinction.

Right. Moran. The failsafe. I suppose it’s good that you don’t get distracted.

“What is it?” God, I’ve got such a crick in my neck. And I think you might have bitten my lip a bit too hard at some point. Not that I mind, really. But it’s a bit sore now. It stings a little when I prod at it with my tongue; I think you bit down just hard enough to break the skin. Experimental, I presume: you wanted to see how far you could go, didn’t you. You and your boundary-pushing.

Wait, Sherlock, what are you--

You’re settling in.

You’ve sat down at the desk, you’re tapping at your laptop and staring at the phone at the same time. You’re not going to answer me, are you. You’re engrossed; I’m not sure you even heard me. You’ve moved on, switched gears, you’re on the hunt again. I know that look; I’ve seen it a million times. There’s a case, something to solve, something to work out. You’re a million miles away already. I’ve lost you, haven’t I. I barely had you.

I shouldn’t be so disappointed. It doesn’t mean anything. It’s not forever, it’s just for now. You’re busy. Of course: of course you are. It’s my life hanging in the balance. Your life.
“What’s he saying?” It must be Moran. I’ll flatter myself enough to think that you wouldn’t stop snogging me for just anyone. I mean, we weren’t kissing just because you were bored, were we? Obviously not. Right?

Christ. I need to learn to keep you and romance separate in my mind. I know you have no time for that kind of nonsense. Sentiment, you’d say. You’d scoff, more like. There’s affection, and connection with another human being, and you and I being a unit, a pair, joined at the hip quite often, yes, all that. There’s even desire, I’ve seen that. I’ve felt it against my thigh tonight, too. There is desire. But romance is another category, and it’s not one of yours. That’s all right. It is. It’s okay. There won’t be any flowers or declarations from you any time soon, I know that. I know. It doesn’t mean you don’t have feelings. It doesn’t mean you didn’t miss me and long for me. I know that.

Well, that’s it then. I should go to bed, I suppose. I’ll think of you, your lips, your skin, your hard cock on your thigh, and I’ll have a wank. It will be entirely unsatisfying, but it is what it is. Then I’ll try to sleep. Maybe you’ll come upstairs later. Maybe.

That’s all right. This is important work. I know it is; it’s my life you’re negotiating for. And the future of your own. Our life, here, together. I understand. I can’t help but feel some envy for that phone in your hands, though.

Jealousy of inanimate objects is probably not a sign of a healthy relationship. Well, who ever said it was possible to have a healthy relationship with you? You certainly wouldn’t say that.

I’ll make a cup of tea first. Two: one for you, one for me. I’ll drink it and keep you company, and watch you not touch it. Then I’ll go up to bed. When it’s cold, maybe you’ll notice that I’ve gone.

I don’t mean to be passive aggressive about this, but getting your attention is a kind of fine art.

You’ve set up a second laptop in the kitchen. What’s this for? I’d ask, but you probably won’t answer me. There’s some program running on it: it’s black with coloured numbers all over it. They’re ticking away, like tiny clocks. Shifting numbers. Latitude, longitude. It’s tracking something. Moran? You don’t know where he is. Is this thing looking for him?

If we’d kept on, I’d have to stop to pee at some point anyway. Bodies are weak, they have all sorts of unsexy and distracting needs. No one ever needs to pee in the fantasy world. Bathroom, then. You’re dialling a number. You’re actually going to call someone. Your brother, probably. At this hour. He’s most likely glued to a computer as well. Or he’s hired someone who is.

I don’t remember it being so bright in the bathroom; I think someone’s switched out the light bulbs for brighter ones since we lived here last. It’s nice, though. The light makes it seem a little bit bigger, and the tile looks whiter. The wallpaper looks even more garish. You have to admire Mrs Hudson’s sense of style, really. Victorian, but playful. You love it or you hate it. And I love it, I think. It makes a statement. It’s like you: it is what it is, unashamed, and awfully loud.

You’ve put out a second toothbrush. Why?

A second toothbrush; you know I have one upstairs. Two toothbrushes. The wrapping for the second one is still in the bin. Is that one for me? Is that the world’s most subtle invitation to sleep in your bed tonight?

Is it? Or is that the romantic in me seeing what I want to see? I’d love that: you thinking about it, thinking it through: what will John need if he sleeps downstairs tonight? A toothbrush, that’s all. Just a toothbrush. So I’ll brush my teeth while you stand beside me, your hand on my hip,
watching me; or I’ll brush my teeth while you get undressed and slip into bed, waiting for me. Why else put out a second toothbrush?

Should I sleep here tonight? Maybe I should. You’re engrossed in your work, there’s nothing I can do. I could make tea and bring you a cup, sit and watch you for a while, glance over my pathetic chapter, then walk over, kiss you on the temple, and tell you I’m going to bed. I’m going to bed, Sherlock, and that means your bed. And maybe you’d look up at me, smile, kiss me on the lips and give me a fraction of a second of an apologetic look. And then you’d go back to your work, and I’d go to brush my teeth with my brand new toothbrush, take off my clothes, and get into your bed. And I would dream about you until you joined me. Maybe you’d kiss me and we’d pick up where we left off tonight. No more crick in my neck; just a warm bed and your naked body. Maybe.

I can hear you talking on the phone, but I can’t make out the words. The soft rumble of your voice through walls is reassuring. It’s your brother, who else would it be?

Look at me: just look. I’m too old for this kind of nonsense. Most men my age are married with children, or divorced with children and getting married for a second or a third time. The effect of the new light bulbs means I can see exactly how rapidly my hair is turning grey. I can see the last three years on my face all of a sudden. It’s aged me, you being gone. I’m too old to be so ridiculously in love and so ridiculously uncertain about it. Men my age are more direct, more worn down, more settled.

I’ve never settled down. I’ve never wanted to. I never will; certainly not with you, you’re hardly the type to settle into anything. And not with Mary. I tried, I really did. But I couldn’t bring myself to do it. I can’t stop and put down metaphorical roots, I can’t live a normal life. Things will never be settled for me, will they. We’ll live on the brink again, in every way. In new ways. This brink I’m standing on now, to stay, to go, to hold on or give up; will it always be like this? Maybe it will. Maybe that’s okay.

“Two hours.”

There you are: standing by the door. You followed me in here. You look– I don’t know. Uncertain, somehow. Why? Will this happen every time we stop touching one another? Is it always going to be a question, whether we’ll ever do it again? What will it take for us to trust each other in this? Time, I suppose. Time and experience. Or just time. “What?”

“He says we’ll meet in two hours at Trafalgar Square.”

Who, Mycroft? No. No, not your brother, no. You mean Moran. Don’t you. Right. That’s what he wants, of course. He wants your head on a platter. He wants you to surrender yourself rather than risk a potentially successful third attempt on my life. Your life for mine. It’s really only your life he’s interested in, in the end. Mine is inconsequential. “Or he’ll detonate the failsafe?”

“He’s not saying that, but I think we can presume so, yes.”

Two hours then, before he detonates it. At least. Two hours before he finds out you’re not there, you’re not complying with his commands. You won’t be there, right? You won’t leave the flat. Will you? “You’re not thinking of going, are you?”

You sigh. You are, aren’t you? You’d like to. You could watch him, follow him, find his safehouse and destroy it. “No.”

Your brother said you couldn’t, didn’t he. Why are you listening to him? “Why not?”
You lean back against the doorframe and look at me. Your hair is even wilder than usual; your shirt is half undone. You were on the verge of something with me, and you look it. You press your lips together, lips that were all over mine a few minutes ago. You look debauched. My mouth is watering just looking at you. Christ. “He won’t be there anyway.”

No, I suppose he wouldn’t be, would he. He’ll send someone else to take you down, chain you up, beat you and bring you to him, is that it? Is it too dangerous to go where he asks you to? It’s not like you to be deterred by danger. What is it, really? Why are we staying here? Why are we taking the safest possible road? You’ve changed over the years. You have. Well: that’s all right. I’ve changed too.

“We can watch him better from here.” We? It’s good to hear that again. Yes. We. All right. Not that I’ve done much watching to date, but all right. “If I went after him, you would come with me, wouldn’t you.”

It’s not a question, but I’ll answer it anyway. “Of course I would.”

“Another reason to stay here, then.”

Why, Sherlock Holmes. That’s practically romantic of you.

Are you trying to protect me, staying here, in this deadly boring safehouse, rather than meet Moran’s men head on with me in tow, an irresistible glowing target on my back? We could find him either way. You know we could. There’s a safe way, and a dangerous way. Normally we take the dangerous option, but not this time. Sentiment, that’s what that is. Pure sentiment. I appreciate it. I do. The risks to me are too high. And to you.

You’re not prepared to lose again. Lose me, lose everything. The flat, Mrs Hudson, your life. You want your life back. And this is how we’re going to do it.

Oh, Sherlock. God. I’ve missed you so much.

Well: let’s get it over with, then. Let’s get through it. We’ll wait. Your absence will anger him, and he’ll trigger the failsafe at some point in the night. Or very early in the morning. And for once, just this once, you’ll leave it to your brother to catch him and finish him. And it will be over. Then we can roam the streets at all hours again like we used to. We can visit crime scenes and do things that are on the edge of illegal if not entirely so. We’ll go back to Scotland Yard, back to staying up all night combing through evidence, back to eyes in the microwave and liver experiments in the sink. Kiss me again, Sherlock. We’ve got the time.

“Two hours, is it?”

“Mm.” You take a step closer.

Yes. Yes, all right. It’s bright in here, so I can see the grey hairs all tangled up in yours, too. It’s starting from your temples, as grey hair often does. Just a little. We’re not untouchable, you and I. We age, we change. Everything is transient. Two hours, two lifetimes. Come here. Take your clothes off, in the light. We’ll leave them here on the tile. And we’ll get into your bed, and continue the grand experiment.

Two hours is plenty of time.
Thanks to Lacuna, and to airynothing for the lasereyes retrobeta. She sees mistakes no one else does.

I have to remember this is new to you.

It is, isn’t it? You haven’t been naked in your bed with anyone before me, have you? I don’t think you have. I know I should ask. And I will, at some point. Once all this is over. When the dust has settled. Not now. It really doesn’t matter. It’s new enough in any case. It’s new between us, that’s all that matters.

It’s new for you, and I’ve never done this before. I mean, not like this. With—Well.

I’m nervous.

But that’s all right. We’ll figure it out, Sherlock. Fast and slow, over many nights in this bed, and the one upstairs as well, maybe. I hope so. You and me. Neither of us are averse to learning new things, are we. You’re certainly not. You take great pleasure in it. Obviously.

In with both feet, aren’t you. Jesus. Look at you. No hesitation at all. God.

I’m in with both feet too, you know. I am. There’s no going back. Not anymore. Not after this, at least.

God: I hope you don’t want to go back. I can’t reverse myself now, I can’t be with you and pretend I don’t want you. I know too much: Your skin tastes very slightly sour, and a bit salty. I know that now, and can’t just forget. I don’t want to stop this, it would kill me.

Keep breathing, Sherlock. You’re holding still but you’re anticipating, aren’t you. It’s as if you’re counting down to something; your breath slows down and speeds up again. Fast and slow: that’s how it is with us. How it will always be, maybe.

Your skin with no boundaries is fantastic. Hip to stomach to chest and back down again; hip to thigh. Nothing in my way but me; you don’t stop me or direct me. You just let me go, let me touch you. I love it. You don’t care about normal, it won’t matter to you if I reach down and stroke your knee, so I will. I want to: I want to touch the familiar parts of you along with the unfamiliar. You bury your fingers in my hair; you encourage everything.

I remember your knees next to me in cabs and on sofas, digging into me sometimes at crime scenes, in alleys: I remember. I stared at them in the half-light of dawn and in twilight, moving from gory crime scenes to back home again. I could have cupped my hand around your knee then and felt your bones, felt the heat of you through the fabric of your trousers, under the cover of your coat.

It’s a classic act of affection; resting your hand on someone’s knee. If you’d been a woman I’d have done it sooner, because I felt something for you. I did. But I kept my hands to myself. It was habit; it was what was expected. What would you have said if I had touched you like this? A hand
on your knee in a cab on the way home, a small gesture; would you have pushed me away? You’re not the sort of person anyone’s allowed to just reach out and touch, or so it seems. You’re beyond human, you’re machine-like, you’re untouchable. But, as it turns out, that’s a lie. You’re infinitely touchable. Your skin is thirsty for touch. You’re human, just like the rest of us. Who knew? Me: I knew. I knew, but I waited. I shouldn’t have.

You’re very pliant; you understand body language better than I thought you did. You do what my hands ask you to. You shift your leg, move your arm, you make room for me. Your hand is stroking my back in a pattern I can’t quite discern. You’re taking cues from me, you’re listening with your skin. You’re trying to understand the conversation I’m starting, aren’t you, you’re looking for the logic of every motion of my hands and my mouth. You’re looking for the meaning, as if there is any. Stop trying to make sense of it, Sherlock: there’s nothing rational here. There is only the irrational, only desire and affection, it’s wordlessness. It’s love, Sherlock. Have you figured that out yet? I can’t tell. I don’t know. You’re very pliant. You’re still and open and I think you’re waiting for something.

You always did what I asked you to when you were uncertain, I know that. That’s how it was, before you died. Before you left. In the world of sentiment you always deferred to me. It’s the same now: you’re deferring to me here, in your own bed. You’re uncertain, aren’t you. You’re waiting and listening and learning. You don’t know what I’m going to do next, not yet. You’ll wait for instruction until you know better and can do without.

You got kissing down in a matter of hours. This will be next, I’m sure. You’ll become a sexual master in a matter of days.

God: imagine what that’s going to be like. When you’re sure and demanding, when you know what you want and exactly how far you can push me. When you know what I want before I do. Presuming you want to go that far with me: I have no idea. I hope so.

You’ll be dangerous with a bit more experience, I’m sure. Definitely dangerous. You never settle for just a little knowledge, do you. It’s got to be all or nothing.

That’s an intoxicating thought.

You’re not in my head anymore. I have no idea what you’re going to do, what you’re going to want. I can guess, that’s all. This is taking a step off a cliff and hoping there’s something forgiving on the other side to land on. Yes: that’s what it’s like. Taking unthinkable risks. Unhealthy ones, unsafe ones. That’s what we do, Sherlock. That’s the way we like it.

Will this be your crime scene for a little while? Human sexuality; yours, mine. Will you solve us both and leave it alone? Or solve us and linger? Is it merely a puzzle that will pulse in your mind until it comes clear? Is it simple, just chemicals and reactions, something you’ll learn to understand and then tire of?

I can’t ever really understand what goes on in your head. You’re real, you’re alive, and you’re complicated. I want you to become addicted to me, Sherlock. Like caffeine, like nicotine, and cocaine. Those are chemicals too, but you still want them. Every night should be a danger night with me, that’s what I want.

Pressing my lips against your stomach, I can feel the heat of your cock against my chin. I’ve thought about doing this. A lot. I mean, I have, I’ve fantasised about it. I’ve woken up in the middle of the night wanting this more than anything. It’s been my most earnest and most impossible desire. But this time it’s real, and it matters, and it’s different. We’re both awake and it means something. Doesn’t it. We’re making choices now. This is deliberate.
Cocksucker. Why is that an insult? But it is.

I’ve never really felt this level of performance anxiety. Desire and anxiety all blend together: I want you to get addicted to this because I already am.

I should enjoy you like this while I’ve got you, all open and easy. I can’t imagine you’ll stay this way. I think you don’t know how to be bossy in this context yet. I’m sure you’ll learn. Probably very fast. You’ll figure out what you like, and what I like, and then you’ll just tell me: like this, John. Have you forgotten? Like this. Faster, don’t you remember? April 17th, John! Yes! That! Just like that, don’t stop.

Is that how it will go? Maybe. I have no idea. You’re frequently difficult and demanding; I can’t imagine you would be any different here. That’s all right, though, if you are: I don’t mind. If I can keep you making the sorts of sounds you’re making now, yeah, it will be fine. It will be great. But for now you don’t really know what you want, do you. You don’t have a clue. So I have to know it for you; I have to watch you and listen, I need to see how your body responds to me. I need to see what you like. And I need to be right about it. There’s no room for mistakes. This is important. I want to keep you. I want to be welcome here.

Your eyes are open. You’re watching me.

God.


Wait: no. That’s a dangerous presumption, especially with you. But I don’t know how to read it any other way. That looks like love.

Lust, love: can anyone tell the difference at this angle? Probably not. I surely can’t. You see what you want to see, don’t you, when you look at someone you’re completely besotted with. But still. Your heavy eyelids, your twitching fingers on my skin: your desire for me, for this, that’s obvious. Obvious! I can see the pleasure on your face when I touch you. Like this: yes. You like that. You want more. I can do that. I want to. God.

It’s so easy to turn you into a caricature of yourself. But you’re not that.

There’s a lot you don’t say, isn’t there. There’s a lot more to you than people know. Even me. And apparently this is how you’re going to show me that, this is how you’re going to make your point. Unintentionally, maybe. With looks like that, looking at me like I’m the air you breathe. And when you kiss me, when you put your hands on me, that’s when I know that it’s true. You’re just as human as I am. You’re just doing your best to hide it. Look at me, Sherlock. Don’t stop.

I’m nervous about this, I can’t deny that. I’m nervous, but when you look at me like that, I—

I want you even more. That’s not a look I imagined, not once. Not like that. But there it is. Sherlock, don’t leave me again, all right? Never again. Looking at you now, I know you won’t. I know it. You need me as much as I need you. You love me as much as I love you. It’s written all over your face. It’s all right, Sherlock. No matter what: I won’t leave you, either. We’ll figure it out.

All right. I know how this works: I know what it feels like. I want you to feel it the way I have; I
want you to dissolve in it. Into me. I’ll hold you, I’ll catch you. If I keep looking at you, I’m not nervous at all.

God: look at that. Your whole body shakes when my lips touch you. I might have let this go on too long; you were probably ready for this before I pulled your clothes off. When I stared at you in the light, and stroked your hip. Stay with me, Sherlock. I know what it feels like to be just swallowed up, and I want you to have that, but I have to start here: I need to feel the edges of you. This is exploratory, can you handle that? I’ve kissed every other part of you. I want to kiss you here, too.

Hot, and hard, with an odd softness. Yes, that makes sense. You taste sour and salty; taste merges with texture and it all makes sense. Slick and smooth, soft and rigid, bitter and salt, and an odd sweetness underneath. The multifaceted nature of skin isn’t as obvious anywhere as it is here. It’s complicated, but in the end it’s really very simple. It’s yours. This is you, and I want you.

I can hear your teeth clacking against each other, your fingers press into my arms, you’re gripping me hard. I can feel your body twitch and your breathing stop.

“All right?” It’s more of a whisper than anything, whispered against your skin. I don’t want to move my lips away from you, so I don’t bother. I like it; I like this. Cocksucker. All right, then. Yeah. I’ll take it. Look what it does to you. Look what it does to me. How is that an insult? It should be a fucking compliment.

You let out a shaky breath and take another. That’s it, Sherlock. Breathe. Keep breathing.

“Mm.” You just nod, and loosen your grip on my arms a little. You’re not going to speak; there are no words. Not here. Your eyes are shut now. That’s anticipation, isn’t it. Your eyelashes seem so long against your cheeks. You’re really very beautiful, you know. Does everyone see that? I can’t not see it, not now. Look at you. All right, then. All right.

I want to tell you everything. My dreams, my fantasies, the months I spent with your voice in my head. I missed you so much, Sherlock. A part of me died with you. And a part of me came back. My whole heart is full for you. I don’t know how to tell you these things. Words will never be enough. So this will have to be enough, this here between us. My lips and my tongue, my mouth on you. Make sense of it, Sherlock, if there’s any sense to find. Only you can. You’ll hear me, you’ll understand. I’m sure you will.

It’s friction that does it, and in the end, consistent pressure and speed. And then you gasp and you tremble: you tense up, you say things that aren’t words. You pull on my hair and I feel your come on my lips. That’s for me: I made that happen, and you let me. I’m grateful for it, I’m still kind of shocked, to be honest. Shocked that I’m here, that you’re here, that the world was cruel enough to take you away from me, and kind enough to give you back. You kiss my mouth hard, you hold me tight and you stroke me and it takes no time at all. Because all I can smell is you, and all I can taste is you. There is nothing else, and nothing else matters.

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We’ve come unmoored. The pavement is gone, it’s only water now. Is this the Thames? It’s huge. The shores are so far away they’re a distant grey smudge. I’m not even sure that is a shore, to be quite honest.

You’ve rigged up a sail out of the washing, that’s quite ingenious. Good thinking, Sherlock. It’s amazing. You’re quite good at thinking your way through; I’ve just been looking at the water, perplexed.
Wait: where’s Mrs Hudson?

“She’s in the crow’s nest.” Crow’s nest? 221b has a crow’s nest? Huh. I never noticed that.

“You see, John,” you start. “But you don’t—”

Oh, I know. I don’t observe. I’ve heard it so many times, you might as well write it across my forehead. Does Not Observe.

I’m quite startled by my own inability to observe this time, I must admit. A crow’s nest? Straight out of the roof like that? How odd. How did I not notice it until now? It’s made of slate and wallpaper. It’s quite beautiful, really. “It’s all right, John. We’re safe here.”

Yes. Yes, I suppose we are. Moran can’t find us out here. We would see him coming in his little rowboat, we’d see him long before he was a serious threat. We could sail away from him, leave him to the elements. The ports will all be closed to him, he has no identification. His fingerprints were burned off in the war. He’ll be stranded if he tries to go after us.

This is the perfect plan.

But there’s the failsafe: there’s always a failsafe, Sherlock. You know that. Have you forgotten? Nothing is ever that easy.

Moriarty is buried in the boiler. He’s waiting to strike, he’s waiting for the little door to pop open and then he’ll emerge, half-dead and senseless, to slither up the stairs into the flat. He’ll crawl in along the skirting boards and hide under the bed, ready to push his bony hands against your throat while you’re asleep next to me. He’s ready to unveil a new game for you, the one you won’t be able to resist. It will take you over the walls and into the waves below. He’ll kill you just to die with you, that’s all he wants.

He’s in the boiler, Sherlock. I can’t move, I can’t speak: my mouth is frozen shut. He’s in the boiler, go find him. Destroy him. Throw him overboard. You thought the failsafe was only the explosives, but that was just his cover. It’s only a distraction. You were wrong. What’s in the boiler is far more dangerous than explosives, Sherlock. His bones are in the boiler. He’s not dead, he can’t die, not without you.

I can feel him in there, waiting, his dead eyes burning a hole in the hull, planning the greatest game yet. That’s what you like best: puzzles, games, not people. Not me. You’re his favourite playmate, and he’s yours.

You’re moving around the flat, pushing your harpoon out the window with a sheet attached to it.

“Due east,” you say. “We’ll go to America. They have parades there.”

Yes, I suppose they do. We can hide among the millions, dodge the streamers and the ticker tape. Moriarty’s bones would struggle to find you there. But the door on the boiler is coming open; I can hear it. Can’t you? The rusty hinge, it’s opening. Listen, Sherlock. It’s not all observation now, you need to listen.

The wind is too loud, you can’t hear anything, can you. But I can. I’m shouting, but you can’t hear me either. He’s coming. He’s crawling out of the boiler, I can hear the bones of his fingers across the floor. He’ll take you from me.

Give me your coat, Sherlock. I’ll wear it. Maybe he’ll mistake me for you. I’ll fight him. Go up to the crow’s nest with Mrs Hudson, Sherlock. I’ll wait for him here.
“It’s illegal, John.” He’s writing something in a notebook, he’s getting out the police tape. He’s going to cordon off the bed, even though it’s not really a crime scene. Or is it? I’m not sure. I can’t remember.

What did we do? When did Greg get here? Who let him in? Who are the rest of these people, are they all from Scotland Yard? I recognise a few of them. What are they doing here?

I didn’t know your bedroom could hold this many people.

You’re half asleep beside me. You’re naked, just like me. Is that what’s illegal? Being naked in bed with your flatmate? Your arm is resting across my stomach, and your fingers are curled around my waist. Your breath is drawing patterns on my skin. We’re guilty of that, I suppose. Nudity after hours. I can’t help it: it doesn’t matter that Scotland Yard is crammed into the bedroom with us. I have to kiss you. Your lips are soft and pliant, you’re more than half asleep. You kiss me back anyway. God, you’re so lovely, Sherlock. Who would have thought so. Who would have thought.

I didn’t sodomise you, did I?

I didn’t. I’m sure I didn’t, I would have remembered that.

Could I have done it in my sleep, in your sleep? Is that why they’re all here? Did I attempt to sleep-sodomise you, did an alarm go off at Scotland Yard, or something?

I’m sorry, Sherlock. I didn’t mean to do that. If that’s what I did. I didn’t want to do.

I mean, I’d love to, but not without your explicit consent and participation, obviously. Definitely not while you’re asleep. I don’t want to hurt you. I love you. I’m so sorry, what exactly happened?

Are you all right? You seem fine. You’re half-asleep. Your knee is nestled between mine. I need to kiss you again. It’s like breathing, I need to do it at intervals or I can feel panic begin to rise in my chest. Your lips are damp and soft and I want more of you. You shift closer to me, you rest your head on my shoulder. That’s nice, yes. That’s good. I like the smell of your hair. The smell of you: yes. That’s good.

I’m quite sure I didn’t sodomise you. I don’t seem to remember much of anything. Did someone drug us? Was it Moran? Wait, did you sodomise me? No, I don’t think you did. That would be all right, though.

I mean, I’m curious. Of course I am, everyone’s a bit curious, aren’t they? If you wanted to, you know, yeah, we could do that.

Is that what happened? There must be a report, can I read it? Buggery, half asleep, 221b Baker Street. No one hurt, no complaints.

God: Mrs Hudson must know by now, too. How embarrassing. She found out before I did. That seems strange.

Wait: I thought the buggery laws were repealed ages ago.

“You thought wrong, then.” That’s Anderson. Do they need forensics for this? Are they going to examine the sheets for evidence of ejaculation? Is this going to involve a cavity search? How is this any of their business?
“Nothing yet.” That’s you. You’ve got a phone in your hand. You tucked it under the pillow.

“They’re going to arrest us.” I can see Dimmock holding the handcuffs at the ready. Will they handcuff us together again? That didn’t turn out so well for them the last time. Maybe they’ve forgotten. Will they let us get dressed first? It would be awkward to sit on plastic seating in the nude.

“No they won’t.” You kiss me again. That’s good, kiss me, keep kissing me. They can’t arrest us while we’re kissing, it’s an old Plantagenet law, I think. “Go to sleep, John.”

Right. You can’t arrest a sleeping man, either. It’s a human rights offense. We could take it to The Hague. Good idea, Sherlock, good idea.

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Any minute, the bombs will go off. Any minute now. And we’re stuck here. How did this happen? We can’t leave, and we’ll die if we stay. This is it; the end. We’re left with such a small space, just enough space for me to hold you. There isn’t much air left.

Mary is standing by the bed. She’s holding a ring. This is what happens if you buy an engagement ring but don’t give it to someone: it becomes some kind of weapon, it takes on power of its own. “If you forget everything, you’ll survive, John.”

Forget? What do you mean? Forget?

“Well: nearly everything. Everything about him. And me. Give up five years of memories and you’ll survive, and so will he.”

That’s the price? Survival, if I give away five years of my life?

That’s every memory I have of you, it’s the sound of your voice in my head saying things you never actually said. It’s the whole of my history since I came home, the last five years, it’s my whole life with you. Every case, every bit of confusion, frustration, every time I laughed at you and every time I wanted to punch you in the face. Every fantasy I ever had about you. If I give all of that away, we’ll survive.

Well, that’s a relief. I thought there was no way out. Thank you, Mary. Thank you. I’m sorry I never told you about him.

“It’s all right. I knew.”


“Will you trade, then?”

I don’t think I really have a choice. What are memories over you? Over our lives? There’s no choice. “Okay.” What do I have to do?

She nods. “Just stay still.” She drops the ring on the floor and walks away.

Stay still: I can do that. I’ll keep you pressed against my chest, I’ll keep my lips against the back of your neck until this is all over. It’s all right, it’s okay. Your fingers are resting on mine. Did you hear her? Do you understand? The bombs will go off, Sherlock, but we won’t die, and I’ll be new again. I’ll come back from the dead.
I’ll forget that night in Dartmoor. I’ll forget the morning you got into bed with me with that terrible cold. I’ll forget sitting on the sofa with you, awful programmes on the telly that made you look at me like I’d gone mad for laughing at them, and heads in the fridge. I’ll forget the first time I kissed you.

That’s too bad. It’s too bad to lose that one.

Well: there will be another first kiss, won’t there? There will be. Surely there will. I hope so.

I’ll forget that you died, too. I’ll forget watching you fall. I’ll forget the last three years. That’s something, at least. I can look forward to that: I won’t have to lose you again. That almost makes forgetting worth it. I’ll be a soldier again, an army doctor looking for locum work. Something. Anything. I’ll be lost. I’ll be alone.

I’ll probably still have a limp. You’ll have to cure it again, Sherlock, will you do that? You know how. You know me. I’ll be new, I’ll be confused. I won’t know who you are. But I’ll still be me. Even though I won’t know it yet, I’ll still love you the moment I see you. You’ll have to help me understand it.

The ring is floating in the air over us now. I can feel it pulling something from me: memories, that must be it. It all streams back out and wraps around us like fog. It’s green and pink and orange, it hums and covers the bed and blots out everything else. It’s like the aurora borealis, shimmering around us. That’s love and memories, drawn out of me. How strange. It’s beautiful, actually. It’s quite beautiful. I’m glad to have seen it. I don’t need those memories anymore, not with you here. We can start over. It will be all right.

“Stay still.” I hear Mary’s voice as if she’s right beside me. Thank you for this, Mary. Thank you. Did Mycroft put you up to this? I only want you to be happy. I want you to have what you want. I hope you do. Forgive me.

The bombs: they’ll go off any second now. I’m ready. I am. Five years of me will die, and that’s all right.

“Remind me, Sherlock.” I’ll forget everything. I’ll be someone else. I’ll be sad, I’ll be lonely and a bit hostile. My sister’s just given me her old phone. I’ve come back from Afghanistan, and my shoulder aches when it rains. I can almost feel it again. I won’t remember you. You’ll have to remember for me, Sherlock.

“I will.”

I can hear the bombs now: this is it. Goodbye. I’ll see you soon. The darkness is blinding.

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It’s quiet, it’s still. It’s dark. It’s beyond two hours. I’m awake. You’re lying beside me, your hand is resting on my leg. You rub your palm against my skin.

“Nothing yet.” You’re whispering. The moon is full and high; I can see it through the window. Where is he? What’s he waiting for? “Go back to sleep.”
Shameless

Chapter Notes

Thanks to Lacuna, and to airynothing for the lasereyes.

The watery dawn light filters through the curtains. It’s grey: it’s raining, and it taps at the window in a reassuring way. The sun rises, the rain falls: the things we do, our decisions and desires, the things we trigger and the things we let alone, won’t change that. It’s going to be a damp, cool, grey sort of day. That’s all right.

It’s early. Nothing’s blown up in the night, as far as I can tell. Maybe the failsafe doesn’t work anymore; it was years ago, after all. Maybe it died an ignoble death in the boiler. It could be all over, you might have finished all of this in the night, for all I know. While I was senseless and asleep, still warm and buzzing from your mouth and your fingers. Maybe you’ll tell me casually over breakfast later on this morning, as if it’s nothing. We’ll sit in the kitchen surrounded by phones and laptops: By the way, John, Moran visited in the night, I shot him between the eyes. Bit of a mess in the foyer, I’m afraid. More tea? I wouldn’t put it past you.

It’s quiet, it’s early, and you’re still sleeping. Well, I think you are. You’re not moving, anyway, and your breathing is slow and even. You’ve made my chest into your pillow for the second time. Your fingers are curled around my hip. It’s a delicate and acrobatic balance between physically awkward and dangerously suffocating, but you’ve managed to find the one point where it’s actually quite comfortable. I suppose the night makes it that. A bit of practice. Yeah, this is fine. Just fine. Terrific, actually.

Maybe this is how mornings are going to be from now on. You’ll cling to me in your sleep, you’ll hold on to me like you’re afraid I might drift away. But it’s not me who left, Sherlock. It was you. You had your reasons. But it was you, not me. I’ve always been the one to stay put. Mine are the feet anchored to the ground; yours have always been the ones that can push off at a moment’s notice. You’re the one who can hover over the rest of us if you want to, unseen. And you do. So often, that’s just what you do.

Light on his feet, they say. Well. I didn’t mean it like that.

Though I suppose that’s also true.

You never said.

I never asked.

It didn’t matter, and in the end I don’t think I wanted to know for sure. I liked the ambiguity of you, the open possibility that I might be able to kiss you one day and get away with it. You never confirmed or denied it, and I just assumed.

You didn’t prove me right or wrong until now.

But this doesn’t prove anything, does it. Not really.

It can’t prove anything about you if it doesn’t prove anything about me.
Of the two general categories of human being, yes, as a rule I prefer the female variety when it comes to sex and relationships. That’s true. That’s still true; I haven’t developed a general interest in blokes, or anything. No: if you turned away from me, if you left me, I wouldn’t seek out another man, I don’t think. Barring some sort of extraordinary circumstance, I don’t think so. Well: who knows. But between those two categories, men, women, yes: I’d say I prefer women. As a rule. But I prefer you above everyone else, in every capacity.

Does that make any sense? I suppose it doesn’t.

It’s strange.

I want you. Just like this. Soft and quiet and still; hard and fast and loud, too. Careless and thoughtless and clever, miles ahead of everyone else. Scared and lost, vicious and cunning, confused, scornful, oblivious. Amazing, brilliant, hopelessly rude to strangers. I prefer women, yes. There’s nothing feminine about you. But I prefer you above all of them. It doesn’t make a lot of sense, but there it is.

I don’t care what labels people give me. I’ll take them. It doesn’t matter. I’d be very happy to stay with you like this until I die. That’s what I want; just you. For the rest of my life.

I should tell you that.

It’s a bit soon for that kind of talk, though, isn’t it? Well, yeah. It is and it isn’t. It’s too soon and ages too late. I can still count the number of times I’ve kissed you. But I should have told you the truth years ago. It’s been true all along; I knew it was. I knew.

Your eyes are open. I can feel your eyelashes brush against my chest. You’re awake. You’re awake and resting against me, fingers against my hip, your knee between my legs, the soft sole of your foot against my calf. You’re choosing to stay with me, just breathing. You don’t want to let go, and I don’t want you to.

We can just stay here like this, can’t we. We don’t need to say anything. We’re both making a choice; not just sex in the night, not just a wild, physical passion born out of panic and terror and the knowledge that we might both be dead soon. No. It’s this, too: a soft and quiet morning pressed so close together nothing can come between us. We’re choosing this as well. It’s all deliberate: there’s no mistaking that.

My fingers fit perfectly into the curved line of your spine, from your lower back to the base of your neck. Slow, slow: your smooth skin against my fingers feels warm and just barely familiar. I’ve kissed you just here, under your shoulder blade. Your skin is a patchwork of my memories now, and when I touch you I remember them all. Your fingers flex against my hip. Yes: we’ve made our choice. This is it, Sherlock. You’ve got me if you want me. And you do, don’t you. That’s a happy ending. Well, it would be, all else being equal, which it never is.

Your breathing is so slow and steady. You’re lulling me back to sleep with your fingers and your breath on my skin. The rain is a steady tapping sound against the windows. It’s early, it’s quiet. There’s no need to hurry, and nowhere in particular we need to go. There are a million words in this bed with us, and I can’t say any of them. Not yet. Eventually, maybe. Yes, eventually I’ll tell you everything, piece by piece.

We can stay here and doze until after the sun is higher in the sky and our stomachs start to rumble. Maybe this is what mornings are going to be like from now on. When you’re not in the middle of a case, staying up all night sifting through files or livers. The in-between times, they can be like this. It’s nice, it’s—
What the–
Jesus, what the hell is–
Oh my god.
We’re dead, we’re dead. He’s found us.
It’s a wall of noise: it’s the sound of the mouth of hell prying itself open.
It’s violent: it comes in and throws us out of bed. It’s an explosion: the flat is blowing up. We’re under attack. It rips at my ears like knives. Sherlock: stay with me. It’s an invasion; the walls are crumbling and tearing. I don’t think I can breathe.
There’s light flashing behind my eyes. The bomb, Sherlock. It’s gone off, we’re in a warzone. Here, against the wall, stay down. Your lamp falls off your bedside table and crashes into the floor. Jesus Christ.
It feels like the whole world is tilting. It’s like an earthquake, but louder. I feel as if we’re falling forward into the street. The house is shaking: so am I. My ears are ringing. Glass is shattering somewhere close by: Jesus Christ, this is it. It’s over for us. Hold on, Sherlock. Don’t let go.
The failsafe: Moran must have detonated it, finally. At an ungodly hour of the morning, Jesus Christ. It must have been in the basement, it must have been. It would have blown out the foundations, the building will collapse. You missed some of them, Sherlock, you and whoever you were working with. The explosives Moriarty placed in here, just like in Mary’s flat, fucking MI5, can’t they at least keep a safehouse safe? Is that asking too much? They let Mary’s flat explode, and now 221b is in shreds as well. Bloody incompetent. If we survive this I’m going to have to write a very sternly-worded letter.
Wait. Hold on. Has it stopped?
Is that it? Creaking sounds, some glass falling. God.
Okay. Breathe.
Jesus Christ.
That was a lot more powerful than I expected.
Beeping, now: what’s all that beeping about? Oh: right, yeah, a car alarm. No, several of them. All the cars outside, or what’s left of them, rattling in their parking spots and screaming out their distress. It rattled the whole street, then. How bad was it? I guess we’ll see.
Glass is shattering into the pavement; broken windows for a few metres out at least, I reckon. Jesus. Jesus.
Sherlock? Are you all right? You look stunned. A bit surprised. Are you? You didn’t know it would be like that, did you. You’re still blinking the sleep out of your eyes. We weren’t quite ready for that, for all the waiting. Your heart is beating very fast, just like mine. Breathe, Sherlock. We’re alive.
“All right?” No obvious wounds. Your head is still whole, thank god. All your vertebrae are intact.
No broken bones, no blood. You’re fine. Am I fine? Yes: yes, I’m fine too. We’re alive. We made it. Oh god: well that’s certainly something to celebrate.

“Yes.” Your voice is a little shaky. Mine must be a bit tenuous as well. “Fine. We’re fine.”

Yes. We are. All right, then. We stand up like kittens, clinging to each other, breathing hard. You use my shoulder to steady yourself. You look at me and I can’t even decipher the look on your face: fear, guilt, a question, possibly. Need, I think, for me. Desire. Concern. I don’t know. You stroke my neck. You’re alive, so am I. Still here, for another day, at least. It’s verification. It could have gone either way.

I haven’t got the words to respond to that just yet. Not yet. It would be a tragedy to lose you again too, Sherlock. I understand. But I don’t know what to say.

“Was that the boiler?” The task at hand: the bomb exploded. It felt as though it came from inside. There isn’t another bomb he can detonate in here, is there? I hope not. You would have told me if there were, right? Right? We might not survive another. The flat certainly won’t.

“No.” You raise an eyebrow. “It was the van, John. Just the van.”

You let go and I nearly fall forward. I was balanced against you, my knees feel a bit weak. No: I can do this. I don’t need a cane or anything, I hope. Not again. God. Inhale, exhale. The air smells like damp plaster. No: I’m fine. The bomb went off, and we survived. You’re picking through the debris of your broken lamp, and pull out a phone.

Your legs are long, pale, and thin; I can see the outlines of all your major muscles through your skin, all tight in your thighs and down to your bony knees. You’re thin but you’re strong. You are so carefully and deliberately constructed, I know you are: you need to be fast and powerful, you make a point of it. But you’re largely oblivious about the overall effect. You don’t see yourself as someone to be looked upon, stared at. You’re thin, you’re strong, and you’re dangerous. But you’re shaped like a dancer; carefully muscled, graceful, beautiful. You perch acrobatically on one knee, your scrotum tucked in against your thigh. You’re completely naked in front of me and absolutely unselfconscious about it.

As you should be, of course. As you should be. I am becoming very familiar with your naked body. I suppose I’ll only become more familiar with it, given time.

“It was the van out front, exactly as planned.” You’re checking texts. Exactly as planned, is it? Somehow I doubt that. Your thumbs fly across the tiny keys. You’re texting someone. Mycroft, probably. MI5. I don’t know. They’re watching, aren’t they? They’ll find Moran now, right? What do we need to do?

“Bit more violent than planned, wasn’t it?”

You shrug. “Perhaps.”

Yeah, perhaps indeed. You didn’t mean to rip Baker Street apart, did you. You’re distracted now; texting. Who are you talking to? What’s going on?

What bloody time is it? Jesus. Half five. Earlier than I thought it was, even. Bloody early.

Moran was looking for the perfect time. Half five is the perfect time for explosions, is it? Christ. There’s a smell of something acrid: smoke, some kind of chemical, the contents of the bomb, perhaps. Burning wallpaper. Is Mrs Hudson all right? My ears are ringing. It was the van, and her flat is on the other side of the building. She should be safe, shouldn’t she? I should get dressed and
“Should check on Mrs Hudson.” I need to put something on. Your dressing gown is hanging by the
door, but mine is upstairs. Shit. “You think she’s all right?” You’re grinning at your phone instead
of listening to me. Good news? “What is it?”

“Come on.” You look excited, like it’s Christmas morning and the present you’ve been waiting for
all year is in the sitting room, all wrapped up in a bow. Honestly, Sherlock: have you remembered
nothing about timing? You walk past the broken lamp and open the bedroom door. My heart is still
racing. I’m shaking a little, I was half-asleep and a bomb went off, I was terrified, you shouldn’t be
grinning at me like that. As if this is fun. I can’t help it; it makes me laugh. You make me laugh,
with your absolutely ghoulous enthusiasm. I love you for it, I do. It’s wonderful.

All right, let’s go, then. Off to survey the damage.

The kitchen looks all right; a few plates fell from the worktop and smashed into the floor, but
otherwise, everything looks relatively okay. The kitchen window is intact; one chair fell over, but it
seems fine. Oh: one cupboard door opened up, some more smashed dishes, one bowl. Well, that’s
all right. We can replace those.

You lean over the kitchen table and immediately start tapping at your laptop, one foot flat on the
kitchen floor and one heel up, toes pressed into the tile. It puts your hip at a slight angle, and–

Oh, god.

Speaking of timing: I really shouldn’t consider that view with too much anticipation just yet. Given
the circumstances. God, you’re shameless, aren’t you. I should get your dressing gown and just
drape it over you for the sake of...well, of something. Preserving my imagination for a more
appropriate moment, perhaps.

Now the sitting room–

Oh. Jesus.

No, that definitely wasn’t the boiler. Christ. The sitting room windows have shattered inwards, the
window frames are torn. The furniture is overturned. There’s glass everywhere. There’s a taillight
in the middle of the sitting room, and a twisted piece of the van’s bonnet between the two broken
pieces of the coffee table. It blew to pieces, quite literally, and flew into the sitting room. I think
there’s a bit of the motor sitting by the door, and a gouged bit of floor in front of it. The windows
are just open gaps in the walls, now.

You spent hours standing in front of that window. If he’d detonated it earlier, you’d be dead.
Absolutely. Jesus. That would have been the end of you.

And it would have been my job to pick your bloodied body up off the glass- and metal-strewn
floor. What were you thinking?

And the number of times I walked past that van as if it was harmless. Everything’s a little more
dangerous with you, isn’t it. That’s the price of admission, as well as part of the attraction.

The car alarms are ringing out a kind of manic symphony, and in the distance, someone is
shouting. No: no, screaming. Fear, shock. Of course. It’s early in the morning, after all, and a bomb
just went off in the middle of Baker Street. That’s bound to cause a bit of panic. What is it, another
war? Terrorism? They don’t know. They weren’t prepared.
To be perfectly honest, I wasn’t either. My hands are still shaking a little. So are my knees. Jesus. That was close. Sirens: I can hear them, way off in the distance. They’re coming.

“Wait,” you say. “John, don’t even–” Don’t even what? “Just wait.” There’s a spinning set of lines on the laptop in the kitchen, dancing over a road map of London. It will pinpoint Moran’s location in a moment, won’t it. Then suddenly it stops. It focuses. “There.”

“You found him?” You did, didn’t you? You did.

You leap up, drop the phone into your hand, and charge into the sitting room. Jesus Christ, Sherlock, don’t do that, there’s glass everywhere!

“Sherlock!” You’re not listening to me. You’re focused now; there’s nothing else in the world as far as you’re concerned, I know. There’s only Moran, his finger still on a trigger somewhere, open and easy to pick off. And you want to be the one, you want to get him. You can see him now, practically, can’t you, you want to reach out and pin him down. Beat him, win. You have, haven’t you: you just won. Still: you shouldn’t be walking across the sitting room barefoot, it’s covered in glass. For god’s sake.

“Sherlock, the glass!” I should go find you your slippers, at least. What do you need in there, anyway? It’s a disaster area. Your bookshelves are knocked down, all your books are poured out all over the floor. There’s one intact teacup underneath my overturned chair.

It will be all right, though. We can put it back together. They’ll come in and fix the walls and the windows, we’ll move the furniture back, replace the coffee table. We’ll sweep up the glass and take the twisted metal away. Maybe we’ll keep that bit of the engine, as a souvenir; we can put it on the mantel next to the skull. I’ll put the chairs back where they were: facing each other in front of the fire, so I can watch your face while you read, while you think. Walls can come down, Moran can try to destroy us. The dead fingers of Moriarty can reach up from the boiler to strangle us both, but everything can all go back into its place again. As if it never happened. These walls are stronger than I thought they were.

You kneel down and shift some papers out of the way. The wind pushes what’s left of the curtains in. It’s cool. It’s still raining. We’re practically outside now. I think you just walked across half of the window pane. I’ll have to pick the glass out of your feet and your knees later, you know that. I’ll do it. Of course I will. And you’ll complain and I’ll tell you you should have known better.

You hold up your hand to me, wait. Wait. You’re staring at a phone, you’re holding your breath. What is it? MI5? Scotland Yard? Your brother? Moran himself, perhaps? What is it?

You smile. You look up at me. “They’ve got him.”

They? The police, I suppose. The army, maybe. They’ve got him. It’s over then. Isn’t it. That’s it: we don’t need a safehouse anymore. Do we. You can come back. We can both come back again.

“They’re bringing him in now, kicking and screaming, of course. He’s claiming they’ve got the wrong man.”

“You did it.” Because you did: you masterminded the entire thing. It was you from the very start: you played Moriarty’s game, you tricked him into offing himself. You tricked his network into thinking you were him. You tricked me so that I could be your silent and unimpeachable protector, your foolproof alibi. You rooted them out one by one without them suspecting you until the very end. You dangled me in front of Moran like the best possible bait and whetted his appetite. And you convinced him to trigger a failsafe that brought the force of a nation to his front door. You’re


“That’s amazing.” I want to write about this; it would make a great book. I wonder if I should revive my blog.

You’re grinning like a loon. It’s been too long since I’ve complimented your work. I’ve missed it; I’ve missed marvelling at it, at you. You’ve missed it too, obviously. Look at you. I want to kiss you. Come here.

“It’s going to make great telly. They found him in a room full of assault rifles.”

Great telly, sure: it will be all over the news before noon, won’t it. Guns and Moran's face: that will be the first time I see it, after he's been safety arrested and locked away. It would make a good novel, too. I could write the whole story this time; the story of your death. Finally, I could write about that, now that it's entirely fictional. The things you said on the roof, the life you led in secret, the life I led too, I could explain about that. And then I could write about your triumphant resurrection.

"It would make a good scene in a book too, I think.” A good long book, with some romance in it, maybe. Only a little, though. Some things are private. Some things are only for the two of us.

"It would." It will be wonderful to write about you while you're alive again and peering over my shoulder, correcting everything and questioning my judgment. It will be good. You should be written about, Sherlock. Everyone should know the truth about you. Not just the facts and the observations you make: but you, actually you, as you really are. The wonderful things you do, the things you’ve sacrificed, the ways you’ve made their world a better place. They should know the whole story. You don’t do it for them, I know: but they benefit from it. They should know you.

The sirens are getting closer now; the car alarms are beginning to grate on me, can we shut them off? I’ll get my gun and shoot the bloody things if I have to.

The door: the door of the flat is opening, oh god. Someone’s here. Sherlock, I should have got your dressing gown for you, you're completely–

"Sherlock!” It's Mrs Hudson. Oh no. And we're both- "John? Are you—" She pushes the door open and it hits the bit of motor ground into the floor. "Oh, my beautiful wood floors! Goodness, it wasn't supposed to cause all this damage, was it?” She's wearing her dressing gown, her hair is in curlers. She’s got slippers on her feet. She’s been knocked out of bed just like we were. She's fine. Not hurt at all. That's a relief. But still, we're–

"Well, I suppose a new floor would be nice, wouldn't– Oh.”

She gets an eyeful of you, standing there completely starkers, holding on to your phone with a look of pure delight on your face. “Oh, Sherlock, put some clothes on, would y—” She looks away from you, only to get an eyeful of me. Sorry, Mrs Hudson. “For goodness’ sake, boys!”

She looks back at you, and then at me, restricting herself to our faces only, and I can see she's worked the whole thing out. Well, I guess it's no secret anymore. Yes: I was in Sherlock’s bed with him when the bomb went off. We were both naked at the time. It’s true. Didn't you presume that’s the sort of thing we were getting up to? This is just confirmation of a long-held suspicion, isn’t it?
"Well." She puts her hand on her hip and shakes her head at me. "I'm glad you're both all right, but perhaps you should get some clothes on before the police arrive."
Your hair is wet and combed. Each of your usually wayward curls is in place, for once. You look like some kind of heartthrob from the fifties with a tube of Brylcreem. You look good. Tidy. Deliberate. You look a bit like a teenager trying to make an impression on someone you like, which is sort of sweet, but isn’t exactly accurate. You’re not trying to look good for them, you just needed a shower.

My hair is wet as well, that should be a clue. Our flat just blew open, there’s plaster dust everywhere. People take showers in the morning before they face the day, that’s just what happens. It doesn’t mean you’re nervous, though I suspect you might be, a little. It’s early, the flat is a disaster, but we at least had time to clean ourselves off and get into decent clothes. There are cameras out there, there will be footage. *Sherlock Holmes, turted up for his return.* Well, why not?

The door looks a little worse for wear from the inside. The doorframe has clearly taken some abuse, but the door is still fitted there, the hinges are working, by all accounts. The numbers were torn off, as was the knocker. Poor Mrs Hudson regrets the loss of them, but they can be replaced. It will all look as it did soon enough. Mycroft will have established a very nice budget for it, I’m sure. Polished brass 221b, and a knocker with a small camera fitted into it, I’m sure.

*Best to be safe,* he’d say. We’ll poke out the camera with a pen and laugh at him.

All the glass from the window above blew out too, of course. There’s glass everywhere. At least we’re both wearing shoes this time; it crunches and cracks under my heels. I’m surprised Mrs Hudson hasn’t come out to sweep it up yet. Soon, I suppose. Once the police have finished their inspections, after a bit of breakfast. All in good time.

You look thoughtful, pulling on your coat. It’s the same old coat, long and sweeping, with the collar that makes you look cool. Of all the things that change, some things just don’t.

Greg is out there with his team, I saw them from the window. He’s brought Sally along, surprisingly. I don’t know why she’d want to be here in the first place: I don’t know that she even believes that you were ever innocent, in spite of all the evidence. She never trusted you, she couldn’t, and wouldn’t. She thought you were a psychopath. She thought you were better off dead, she told me as much. What’s she going to say when she sees you, I wonder? You’re an honest-to-god hero now, Sherlock, a bona fide one, there’s no denying it. You’ve rid the world of a major criminal ring. That’s just the truth of it: you gave up three years of your life to make London that much safer.

It was a puzzle, I know. A good puzzle you could sink your teeth into, but that wasn’t why you did it. You did it for yourself, and for me, and for this place. For 221b, for this life we carved out here. You don’t have to say it; I know. It’s not for London, not really. But London benefits. And so do I. That’s good enough for hero status in my book.
“Sally Donovan is out there.” There’s bits of glass on my coat; better shake it off before I put it on.

“Is she.” You’re trying to be polite, aren’t you. I wonder how long it will be before you stop doing that. You’ll get used to me again, Sherlock. Just like I’ll get used to having you back. Eventually, all this will feel normal again. That will be nice. Yeah. That will be good.

“She said some terrible things after you died.” Truly terrible. I don’t know if I’ll ever be able to forgive her. “She said some terrible things before you died too, now that I think of it.”

You just smile at that. It really doesn’t matter to you, does it, what she thinks or what she says. Well, it matters to me. I’m going to end up in fistfights over you, aren’t I. Over your name and your honour. Well, it won’t be the first time.

They’ve diverted traffic and put police tape in a square all around us. A mysterious explosion, an unknown motive, a mysterious assailant: they’re not sure yet what they’re up against. Sebastian Moran isn’t the name of a known criminal in their database, obviously: he has no connection to drugs or gangs, no petty theft, he’s never been arrested. There isn’t even a noise complaint from a neighbour against him. It turns out he was a Colonel prior to his life of crime, did you know that? You probably did. Your brother says he managed to keep his nose so clean it’s as if he didn’t entirely exist. Well: how the mighty have fallen. Over and over again, this public and dramatic fall from grace. His, and yours. Though, if you’re truly good the way you are, and you don’t care what other people think of you, and have the patience to wait long enough, grace can rise again.

“They’re going to be very surprised to see you, you know that.” If they have a reaction anything like mine, it’s probably a good thing there are already three ambulances parked in the street.

“Yes, I suppose they will be.”

You’re quite subdued. I thought you’d be a bit more excited; this is it. The moment. We can leave, we can walk out of here, return to our lives. Go back to cases and Barts, and to Scotland Yard. You can walk through the streets of London again without a disguise, without hiding. Are you nervous? I suppose you must be. That makes sense. It’s been a long time. There are cameras out there. You’ll be in every paper, on every telly. The world will be listening. You’ve come back from the dead.

“All right?” I want to take your hand, but I’m hesitating. It’s still so new. Is that something I can do, here, almost outside our flat? I don’t know. I shouldn’t hesitate; I should be a bit more confident. We’ll have to sort out the rules as we go.

You look at me, expectant. Curious, I think. Careful. I take your hand, and your fingers are slightly cool between mine. The autumn is coming, and the wind is growing cooler. There will be cold nights together with the window open a little, and your warm body pressed against me under a duvet. I’m looking forward to that. To winter. Christmas and New Year’s Eve. The cases that will inevitably send us running out on icy streets in the dead of night, in cold winter rain. And I’ll bring you home again, make you tea, rub your hands to warm them. Yes, I’m looking forward to all of it.

You smile at me. “I’m fine.”

Yes, well. Come here, let me kiss you. Just once: once, standing here in front of the door, with glass under our feet and Mrs Hudson making breakfast behind us. This is the last time I’ll have you all to myself, the last time before the world knows they can call on you again. And they will: the clients will line up for you, I’m sure of it. One kiss, Sherlock, and then we’ll go.

Your lips are warm, and you taste like toothpaste. You lean toward me, you pull me into you with your free hand. Your hair is cold and wet, and I think I’ve disturbed it a bit too much in the back.
Well, who’s going to see the back, really? You squeeze my fingers a little and kiss me.

When I step back, your eyes are still shut, and your lips parted. You’re still there, somewhere inside that kiss. If only we didn’t have to go out today; one more day at home before all of this began would have been nice. I could sit with you for a while, kiss you, and tell you everything.

In time. We’ll get to that, eventually. You open your eyes again and smile at me.

I smile back. “Ready?”

You nod and squeeze my hand before I let you go.

All right, then. More of that later. Now: the press. Scotland Yard. They’ll want to know everything. The flashes will go moments after you step through the door, I know it. It will be a sensation. You’ve got something prepared, I know. A sort of speech. And I’ll stand next to you as the cameras click away and you explain. It’s time.

I twist the doorknob and take a deep breath. Here we go.

Prepare yourself, London. Sherlock Holmes is back.

Chapter End Notes

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All my love,

Ivy

Works inspired by this one

Cover for The Quiet Man by moonblossom graphics (moonblossom), Cover for The Quiet Man by hechicera, [Podfic] The Quiet Man: A Reading by finnagain, The Quiet Man: a fanmix by sk_lou, [Podfic] The Quiet Man - Part 1 by AlessNox, Cover for The Quiet Man by Fabulae, [Podfic] The Quiet Man - Part 2 by AlessNox, [Cover Art] for ivyblossom's "The Quiet Man" by livloveel, The Quiet Man Redux by nutmeag83

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