The Least of All Possible Mistakes

by rageprufrock

Summary

If ever a people deserved tasering, it’s Holmeses.
Chapter 1

The first time George meets Mycroft Holmes, she tases him.

She’s just wrapped up teaching a self defense class sponsored by the Westminster council — a proposition which, after seeing so many bruised-looking eyes, always leaves her a bit bloodthirsty — when she’s more or less Shanghaied into a black town car and deposited at Battersea power station without explanation. It’s dark, her feet hurt, she spent the better part of the morning trying to roust Sherlock out of the New Scotland Yard bullpen, and George has never been fond of being kidnapped.

It’s hardly her fault that when she hears, “Ms. Georgiana Lestrade — a pleasure to finally meet you in person,” coming from just over her shoulder, she reaches into her handbag and opts to tase first and ask questions later.

At this point, a cadre of thugs in black, descriptionless suits haul her off to a black, descriptionless holding room, ignoring her protests that she’s a police officer and demands for identification. They take her taser and her mobile and George is trying to figure out if she can break the one-way glass when the door bangs open and Sherlock bursts in, eyes manic with glee.

“Lestrade, you are marvelous,” he declares, and rapturous, begs for details.

George is of a mind to beg for some fucking details of her own, except looking over Sherlock’s shoulder, she comes face to face with the man she’d tased again. He looks flawlessly put together and wholly put out, a red spot on his cheek from where his knees gave out and he’d hit the concrete. He’s stiff as a board, clutching at his umbrella as if he’d like to use it for some compensatory damage.

She points at him. “I’m arresting you — for illegal everything,” she snarls.

“Feisty,” the man says mildly. “I can see why my brother favors working with you among all of Scotland Yard’s detectives.”

Sherlock doesn’t even turn, still gripping George’s shoulders as he says, “Mycroft, do shut up, or I shall have her give me a live demonstration of how she tased you,” and attention back to George, demands, “Was it amazing? Did he lose bowel control?”

“He’s your brother?” George asks, angling her face toward Sherlock but keeping her eyes on Mycroft: bespoke suit, antique cufflinks, handmade umbrella, Italian shoes. Everything about him is whisper quiet like a silver tea set on padded damask cloth, elegant with old money, which George supposes answered several questions she’s always harbored about Sherlock, too.

“Genetics are boring,” Sherlock dismisses. “Now, tell me, and you must be comprehensive: did he twitch? Remember, you owe me full disclosure — if I hadn’t intervened, Mycroft’s people were going to have you disappeared under the Official Secrets Act.”

Apparently reaching the end of his tether, Mycroft intervenes. “Sherlock, that is ridiculous,” he snaps, and says to George, “And yes, I am his brother, Ms. Lestrade, so as you can see now, there was no reason for you to react so violently.”

Scoffing, George says, “You’re having me on, right? If you’re his —” she nods at Sherlock “— brother, even setting aside the kidnapping, then I should have tased you harder.”
“Still a charmer then, dear Sherlock?” Mycroft asks, one brow arching eloquently.

“Frankly, it horrifies me there’s more than one of you,” George tells him.

Mycroft’s face changes incrementally, the corners of his mouth curling up just the tiniest amount. It’s too small to be called a smile really, but it’s a strange expression that makes George think, *it looks unpracticed*, and it only lasts a moment, anyway, before Sherlock creates a series of horrified noises and it vanishes again.

Later, after she’s turned down Mycroft’s generous — if poorly timed — offer for a ride back to her flat, she finds herself sharing a cab with Sherlock, and turning to ask him, “What the hell was that about? Why is your brother kidnapping people? And how is it he seemed thoroughly unconcerned that I was going to arrest him?”

Sherlock, off on one of his irrelevant tangents, clearly ignores her question completely in favor of saying, a tremor of faint horror in his voice, “If you two were to breed, any and all of your more tolerable characteristics would be drummed out, you know.”

The cabbie darts a worried look into the rearview mirror, which George returns.

“Right, well, that’s close enough to mine,” she declares, and gets out at the curb.

She’s got a half-mile walk ahead of her before she reaches her house, but honestly — *Holmeses.*

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The next three times she sees Mycroft are as follows: (1) trespassing in the New Scotland Yard car park, (2) trespassing in the New Scotland Yard second floor break room, and (3) with his hands in his face in a moment of obvious vulnerability, waiting outside the door of Sherlock’s room at the University College Hospital after what is apparently Sherlock’s third overdose. She decides to put off berating him for his boundary issues — “minor government official” her arse — and goes downstairs, crosses an extremely perilous interchange, and triple-stacks some thermal cups so that when she returns with tea, it’s still searing hot.

“Here,” she says to Mycroft. “All hospital tea is shite.”

He looks up, and looks faintly surprised to see her. George can’t imagine why. She’d been the one to leave the urgent message with one of Mycroft’s myriad of assistants. Or maybe he’s already forgotten about everything that led up to this moment. She doesn’t blame him if he has.

George presses the tea on him, and he closes his hands around it. She’s added whole milk and three sugars, because he has that look to him, like all of her old friends from uni who now spend their hours trying ludicrous diets. A man deserves sugar by the third overdose.

“Careful, it’s hot,” she warns, when Mycroft goes to take a sip. He must have an asbestos mouth though, because he just does that thing again, the corners of his mouth tugging up tiredly, and says:

“My thanks, Ms. Lestrade.”

“Detective Inspector Lestrade,” she corrects him, feeling strangely off balance. She hasn’t been Ms. Lestrade since school. “Or Lestrade. Or George.”

Mycroft’s momentary zen transforms into a faint moue of distaste.

“Georgiana?” he proposes.
George scowls at him. “Do I honestly look like the sort of woman who can carry off a name with that many syllables?”

“Georgiana it is,” Mycroft decides, just like that, and before George has a chance to confiscate his tea on violation of Code 14 subsection Not Being A Twat line item Fucking Holmeses, a doctor peers out of Sherlock’s room and says, “Mr. Holmes? If you have a moment?” and Mycroft vanishes on near-silent feet, leaving a vapor trail of clean linen and an elegant, “Thank you again, Georgiana.”

It sits in her stomach, making her feel stupid and too young, and she carries it with her like an unwanted obligation all the way home and through dinner.

“You’re acting strange,” Tom says, over carbonara.

George shrugs. “Odd day. Sherlock ODed — this is number three.”

Tom sighs. “Honestly, some people,” he comments.

The rest of the moralizing about substance abuse and not respecting the gift of life is implied. George always feels a flare of anger when Tom gets this way; he’s never been the one in soaked-through shoes on a bitterly cold January night, talking a teenager off of Waterloo bridge. Anyway, that’s her problem, not his, so she muffles her knee-jerk irritation with another forkful of pasta and clutches at her wine.

“So he’ll be all right then? Sherlock?” Tom presses.

“Probably,” she manages after a few bites. “His brother was at the hospital today.”

“Oh, God, there’re two of them?” Tom asks, looking genuinely horrified, and George peals out a laugh, because Tom is a arsehole, he really really is, but she loves him anyway, the miserable bastard.

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Sherlock falls off the face of the Earth for three months. George likes to think herself unsentimental enough that she doesn’t worry, that she can just enjoy the peace like her coworkers — but then her coworkers hadn’t been the ones who’d found Sherlock at his Montague Street flat, barely breathing and white as bone ash.

*I’m going to regret this, but. Is Sherlock all right? Been ages. GL*, she texts Mycroft — well, she texts a number Mycroft’s assistant had given her.

There’s a beat, long enough for her to regret it, before her phone buzzes across her desk.

*My wayward brother is fine.*

*I’ve sectioned him in an extremely upscale clinic.*

*MH.*

*Oh god, George* texts back, reflexive, and almost immediately, there’s a reply:

*Indeed, Georgiana. MH.*

She thinks about writing back, *IT’S GEORGE*, but frankly it’s not worth the assumed hassle. There’s not really much she can do about posh people.
In the bedroom, late that night, Have I Got News For You playing on the telly, George sits cross-legged at the foot of the mattress and braids her hair into a pair of short, unsatisfying plaits. She’s going dreadfully gray. It’s a family trait, she knows. Her mother had been entirely silver-haired by the time she was thirty-five, which means George is already making progress by only being halfway there at thirty-six.

“Apparently, he’s in rehab,” she calls out to Tom, who’s in the bathroom fussing.

“How?” Tom asks, obviously disinterested, most of his attention still stuck on frowning at his stomach. This new streak of vanity is hilarious, George thinks privately, but she wouldn’t ever say it, he’d pout so.

“Sherlock — who else do I know that might be in rehab?” George asks, and leans back so he can see her smiling in the sink mirror. “Stop preening and come over here.”

Tom does, swatting off the bathroom light like a child. “I wasn’t preening,” he mutters.

“You were, you absolutely were,” she laughs, and she straddles his hips when he gets on the bed, feels his hands settling on her thighs, and leans over to kiss him. She whispers, “You don’t need to worry, you know — I like you just as you are. Just as you’ll be.”

There’s a hush of silence here — too long, the Sherlock voice in her head whispers — before Tom says, “I know,” and “You, too,” and rolls them over, pressing her down into the mattress with familiar, well-loved kisses.

The next morning, clad in the magnificence of a decade-old nightshirt, knickers, and a dressing gown her mother-in-law bought her for Christmas last year, George finds herself furtively examining a coupon for hair dye. Vibrant, natural-looking chestnut, the ad promises, but it seems wrong, somehow. George doesn’t even like eyeliner.

Tom staggers in, muffling a yawn and a kiss into her temple as he passes her, casts a look down at the newspaper, and casual as anything, says, “You know, might not be a bad idea to try it,” before he goes off to fix himself a cup of tea.

It stings like a razor-sharp cut, already closed-over, that reopens to remind her for the rest of the day.

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Because George’s life is absolute bollocks, Sherlock reappears the day after she says to herself, “fuck it,” in Boots and goes home to try and recapture her fading youth.

“Lestrade! Give me problems, I need wor — dear God,” Sherlock says.

She doesn’t even bother to look up at where he’s probably perched dramatically in her doorway. George just drops her face into her hands and moans, “Oh, God. Why today.”

“The ammonia alone,” Sherlock complains, and George hears him slumping into the chairs in front of her desk with an overflow of drama. “You look like you put your head in a paint can.”

Glaring, she finally lifts her head. “Hey. I did this myself.”

Huffing, Sherlock says, his face a map of morbid fascination, “Obviously.”

George withholds every pointless and scathing thing she wants to say in favor of studying him.
Sherlock’s gained back some much-needed weight, and his skin is back to its fragile, Regency heroine porcelain as opposed to quicklime, his hair a tumble of dark and endearing curls again, not matted down to his frustratingly brilliant head with sweat and God knows what else. He’s in a gorgeously tailored black suit, a black shirt, and an achingly dashing coat — if she didn’t know him at all, she might actually fancy him.

“You look much better,” she tells him, retrieving her pen once more and flipping it across her knuckles.

Sherlock breaks his gaze. “Well — yes.”

She lets the silence eat away at the oxygen in the room for a while before she says, “Don’t make me do that again, Sherlock.”

He lets out a noise that could mean anything.

“I mean it, Sherlock,” she barks. “If you do, I swear, I will be the first face you see when you regain consciousness and I’ll be weepy and have feelings all over you.”

The naked horror on his face is marvelous.

“You wouldn’t,” Sherlock retorts, but uncertain.

He may be able to deduce the brand and color number of George’s disastrous hair dye, how many pounds she’d gained this month, what’s wrong with the clutch plate in her Golf, and which cases littering her desk she should give up for lost right now, but Sherlock’s always been a bit suspicious of his deductions when it comes to her female threats. He understands the biology, of course, and enough of the tiresomeness of human interaction in general to pinpoint the motive of a crime, but once, when she’d been feeling particularly effusive, George had kissed him on the cheek thank you for a case and he’d just stared at her like she’d turned green and grown antlers.

“How can you be sure?” George asks reasonably. “There could be desperate, wailing, gnashing-my-teeth, tearing-at-my hair tears. Perhaps I am concealing a secret, desperate love for you.”

Sherlock rockets to his feet, hunted. “I’m leaving. This is harassment.”

George leans forward. “But Sherlock, give me a chance — I know I’m older, but that only means I have more experience.”

Scowling operatically, Sherlock stalks toward the door, and before his coat can flare behind him as he storms away — presumably to pester some other division, which, God have mercy on their souls — he turns in the doorway to stare at her.

“For whatever it’s worth,” he says, “while the dye job you’ve chosen to go with is — frankly — appalling, it is more appalling because your physical appearance was above average beforehand. You have fairly symmetrical features and fair skin, and the silver hair will be quite striking, once you let it all grow in; insecurity is so dull. Separately, I can tell from your rubbish bin that you’re eating prepackaged salads for lunch again, which is in the letter if not the spirit of that ridiculous South Beach diet you’re probably swearing you’re not on. Future reference: salads work better if they’re not comprised of vast quantities of sweetcorn and mayonnaise. So: hair, diet? All in a woman who has worn lipstick exactly ten times in the four years I’ve observed you — marital problems, Detective?”

George throws a staple at him, and Sherlock darts off, grinning like a schoolboy.
“Twat,” she mutters, under her breath, but she’s smiling.

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Six months, twenty-odd cases (five involving Sherlock), and three arguments about the number of hours she’s spending at work later, she and Tom shore up at the NSY holiday party, still tense and a bit chilly.

There’s terrible Christmas music and the slightly sad lobby tree has been relocated to the conference room and heaped with tinsel and inappropriate decorations and loaded down with lights. There’s a small mountain of Secret Santa gifts beneath it, and London’s finest police force is gathered around it, getting soundly shitfaced on cheap liquor and bad wine and wearing awful paper crowns.

George is three glasses of sauvignon blanc in when Sherlock appears in the corner of the room, looking manic, and she barely has time to say, “Oh, Jesus,” before he’s upon her.

“There’s a case and it’s interesting and you’ve been hiding it from me,” he tells her, looming in a way that might be frightening if he didn’t sound exactly like a whining child.

She could prevaricate, of course, or even try to lie, but at this point, she knows Sherlock well enough to know it’s a waste of time. George takes a steadying sip of wine.

“You do remember you don’t work for us, right? That you haven’t a right to the files?”

“Of course not, I could never be so dull,” Sherlock ripostes. “But I thought we had an agreement that if you had a case too complicated for your tiny brains, it would be flagged to me.”

“How your brother didn’t drown you in a bucket when you were an infant, I will never understand,” George says to him fondly. “And no, Sherlock, we do not have any such agreement at all. You get to peek at cases at my discretion — understood?”

Sherlock does, but he doesn’t deign to answer in favor of looking mulish.

“And right now, my discretion is that this is a bloody Christmas party, I am here with my husband, and you should be off doing whatever it is you Holmeses do for the holidays,” she concludes.

George knows the exact case Sherlock is talking about: a triple-murder in a shipping container with a digital lock. Security footage in New York, where it had loaded, shows several pallets of laptops going in. Security footage in London, where it had ultimately decamped, showed three dead bodies. The computer techs swear up and down that the locking mechanism showed no signs of tampering, all the time stamps and date stamps and hours correct: no one opened or altered the container during its voyage, and none of the victims have been identified.

Sherlock tries for a different tack. “We could treat this as my Christmas gift?”

“I’m not giving you a bloody unsolved murder for Christmas,” George snaps at him, but it’s through a laugh. Sherlock is a ludicrous human being, and most days she’d sooner bludgeon him to death than work with him, but honestly, sometimes she can’t help but find him just the tiniest bit adorable.

“All right there?” Tom asks, suddenly standing over her shoulder, a hand curled around her elbow. He’s looking at Sherlock as he says it, a little too loud to be heard over Rockin’ Around the Christmas Tree, blaring out over the intercom. George is going to find who put together this playlist and commit some serious acts of police brutality later.
“I guess it was inevitable,” George sighs, waving her wine glass between them as she says, “Tom, Sherlock Holmes, consulting detective, pain in my backside. Sherlock, Tom Garrow, English lecturer, Kings College, spouse.”

Tom sticks out a hand. “Sherlock — I’ve heard stories.”

Sherlock, true to form, ignores it, and only narrows his eyes at Tom instead. It takes barely a second for George to feel like all her blood’s been swapped for ice water, and when Sherlock gives her several considering looks before giving the same considering look to Tom, George only has time to protest, “Sherlock, no,” before he’s off.

“No, Sherlock,” George tries again, free hand closing around his wrist. “Do not do this.”

Tom says, “No, it’s fine, Georgie — let him do his trick,” cocky, challenging.

“I had intended to begin by pointing out that you’ve recently started a fitness regime — undoubtedly what made Lestrade paranoid enough to consider dieting when I’ve seen her eat four sausage rolls in one breath without so much as a flicker of guilt in the past — and how that’s a boringly common indicator that you’re in the throes of a wicked midlife crisis,” Sherlock says, “but after that, I believe I ought to tell you that Lestrade hates that nickname.”

She throws back the rest of her wine. There’s her night. Tom’s face is already purpling.

“Oh, and you know so much about her?” Tom snarls, not bothering to look at George at all. “All those long nights of intimate confession.”

George gasps. “Jesus Christ, Tom.”

Sherlock narrows his eyes. “Late nights, yes, but hardly intimate considering they’re literally documented by a squad of forensic scientists — but telling that it would be your first and miscalculated swing.”

The intercom fades out to Silent Night overhead, a quieter, choral version, and so the small crowd they’ve accumulated gets to hear every word of the rest of it.

Sherlock steams on. “You’re what, thirty-eight, thirty-nine? You’re reasonably handsome for your age, if a bit worn, nothing to be embarrassed about, and you’re already married to a woman that — this is from a casual survey only, so nothing conclusive — approximately half the men at Scotland Yard refer to as a ‘silver fox.’ So why the sudden health kick? Could be you’ve gotten some news from your doctor: bad cholesterol, poor heart, family history of medical problems, but you’re holding a plastic plate of shrimp toast and spring rolls, even though there’s salad and fruit and sushi joyfully accumulating salmonella on the table buffet table. No, it’s not for health reasons. This is pure vanity.”

“Nobody calls me a silver fox,” George interrupts numbly.

“But why vanity?” Sherlock asks as Tom sputters. “You’re already married, and if your wife’s a reflection of your success, then you’ve far outdone yourself. Lestrade, even though she’s irritantly particular about paperwork and chain of evidence, is hardly the sort of woman to be finicky about looks — obviously, that hair dye was your influence and therefore not relevant data — and humans are so inertial at heart. You’re not doing it for her. You’re also not wearing your wedding ring. Some couples don’t, and Lestrade never has, but that’s because she’s forever losing it inside gloves or worried she’d going to get blood on it, so she wears it on a chain around her
It’s official, they have an audience, and George wishes she could crawl into a hole or rewind time, do something to stop this. There’s been a pit in her stomach gathering signs for months, but it’s one thing to recognize it in victims or families and it’s another to look for it in herself. She’s Georgiana Lestrade, she’s a detective inspector with New Scotland Yard, she’s been married to Tom for seven years. He’d mailed her annotated books of romantic poetry, marked up with positively filthy notes for her, dried flowers folded between the pages. She’s not easily moved, but she’s been moved by him, has been moved by him, made him promises she’s kept.

“Aside from the brief fiasco with the hair, Lestrade has been as constant as a boring metronome, so it’s nothing the two of you shared, some sort of life-altering experience. No, this was all you. Something happened to you. Kings College, English lecturer — reasonable to assume you spend a lot of time locked in with students, younger women who’re overcome by Keats or panting like Coleridge. It’s understandable: Lestrade is never there, and ever since her promotion, her life’s been so much more meaningful than yours, hasn’t it? It was different before, when she was just an ordinary dogsbody for the Met. Now that she’s climbing the ranks, and photogenically forced to lead press conferences, your infrequent academic publications fade in the face of her spectacularly sexy crime solving, don’t they? The power balances shifted — not to your liking.”

It’s only now that George realizes she’s still clutching Sherlock’s wrist, so she digs her nails in at the tendon and hisses, “Sherlock — stop it.”

“Who the fuck do you think you are?” Tom barks, spittle flying, eyes huge with fury. “I don’t know where you’re getting any of this.”

“I’m simply deducing, Mr. Garrow, commenting on what I see,” Sherlock retorts, ignoring George and her nails. “Such as the glitter traces on your cheek. Yours is hardly that kind of school, where there might be construction paper and art supplies. It’s well past 9 p.m., and I can’t imagine your classes run much later than early afternoon, so it’s got remarkable staying power. Cosmetics, designed to stay on, and Lestrade is — thank God — not the type of woman given to such frivolities. You smell like cologne, too much of it, probably to cover the smell of cheap perfume, and Lestrade doesn’t wear any. You’ve been touching her, but it’s been from a remove: possessive but not entirely certain you’re allowed to be — guilty. Conclusion? Affair. Probably a undergraduate, maybe a first year graduate student.”

He turns to Lestrade for the next bit.

“If it’s any comfort, when you locate this girl, she’ll look exactly as you did at eighteen. Mr. Garrow’s a man of fairly simple tastes. It’s not even that he doesn’t love you anymore — for lack of better phrasing, it’s just that you’ve become ‘too much woman’ for him, as you’ve grown into yourself.”

There’s a minute of nearly dead silence in the conference room, the third verse of Silent Night still piping out overhead.

The worst part is that Tom doesn’t say anything, nothing at all. His face is just pale and his jaw is unhinged, mouth gaping, the hand that had been at her elbow drawn away. He doesn’t look angry anymore. He looks caught.

“That, Mr. Garrow,” Sherlock concludes, haughty, “is why your wife and I spend so very, very much emotionally charged time together in the small hours: my little trick, as you called it.”
The quiet is cracking, fracturing away, and Tom’s blank shock is melting into panic, the tight-eyed anger she remembers from their worst fights, right after she moved over to NSY, the kind that had their neighbors calling in mortifying noise complaints that local officers were obliged to check out. Sherlock may be able to deduce it, but George knows that Tom’s about to haul off and punch Sherlock — so she beats him to it.

She’s had semi-erotic dreams about hitting Sherlock before, but in real life, slapping him feels awful. The fine bones of his cheek make her hand hurt from the abrupt force of it, and he just looks stunned, gaze averted where his head turned with the force, a reddening mark appearing across his linen skin.

“Too right,” Tom blusters from behind her, sounding panicky. “Too right, Georgie — if you hadn’t have, then I would — ”

Tom, she punches.

The party’s effectively over after that.

The office women swarm her, cloister her off in the safety of their bird noise comforts, delivering her into the women’s room and waiting, braced, for the inevitable flood of tears, and then provide a running litany of ways Tom and Sherlock can be murdered. Sally brings her a several unfinished bottles of wine, which George drinks while sitting on the closed lid of the toilet in the handicap stall, sobbing furious, humiliated tears, while Edith runs interference with the rest of NSY. Eventually, the cleaners need to get in so they can wrap up their evening, and George is transferred to her office, where new half-finished bottles of wine appear and the cycle begins again.

“You’re coming home with me tonight,” Margaret informs her. Margaret serves as the serious crime unit’s admin and who — until this very moment — George had been convinced loathed her with a passion.

George stutters, “I couldn’t possibly.”

“You will, or you’re coming back with me,” Sally says, decisive. One day, she’s going to be a fucking terrifying boss. “Except Margaret has a guest bed and I have a falling apart couch. Plus, I would continue to pour booze into you until you slipped into a coma.”

George goes home with Margaret. She stays the night before ending up at her mother’s house the next day, red-eyed and quiet, her mom tiptoeing around her and making endless cups of too-sweet tea. Tom calls her almost thirty times before he resorts to texting, and when she ignores those, too, he stops altogether. His efforts last all of seventy-two hours, and on Christmas morning, George thinks about the stupid gift she’d made for him, her plan to cut back hours, get a transfer, whatever, to start that family he’s always wanted, formatted like a thesis proposal, and she starts crying all over again, curled up under three blankets in her parents’ conservatory and missing Tom so much she aches.

She goes to work on Boxing Day, because what the hell else is she going to do? She can’t stand her mother’s pity anymore. Sherlock’s waiting in the deserted bullpen, and as soon as he sees her, he’s on his feet, looking at close to uncertain as she’s ever seen him.

“I cannot fucking believe they let you in,” George croaks at him.

Sherlock makes a face. “Everyone was extremely childish. I was forced to establish an alternative means of entering the building.”
George makes a note to force him to tell her what those means are, so that one day it can’t be similarly exploited by terrorists, and not just bored crime-solving dilettantes.

“What do you want?” she asks. “If you have any other deductions about my life you feel compelled to make, do me a favor and shove them up your arse.”

Sherlock stares at her, eyes round. “No — no further deductions.”


“I — ” Sherlock starts, rushed, and then falters like a stumbling child. Regrouping, he says, “I have been informed by...interested parties that I owe you an apology for the way I handled the situation at the Christmas party.”

“Oh, God,” George says in realization. “Is Mycroft cutting you off until you apologize?”

“Yes,” Sherlock snaps. “It’s base and just like him.”

“Right, well, apology not accepted, you may fuck right off,” she says, and detours into her office. It’s still filled with empty wine bottles and the bin is overflowing with makeshift tissues: red and green napkins with reindeer and snowmen printed on them, ragged and ripped through from tears. The cleaners had clearly seen her office for the shrine to George’s personal failure it was and left it alone, a sacred place of reflection. She sighs and starts gathering bottles off of her desk.

“I didn’t do it to upset you,” Sherlock says, hovering in the doorway now and looking very put out, annoyed. Like George’s marriage is inconvenient. “I did it because it was the truth, and I thought you, of all people, would want to know.”

George doesn’t hurl a bottle at Sherlock’s head, but it’s a near thing.

He’s right, of course. Down the pub with her girlfriends in uni she’d always claimed she’d want to know, that the truth was always preferable. But she’d been young and two terrible boyfriends away from meeting Tom back then, and she’d also thought that disclosure didn’t necessarily mean she’d end the relationship, that there might be crying and betrayal but that they could make it work. It’s been a week since the party now, no word from Tom since that first flurry, and George can’t bring herself to call him, no matter how much her mother pleads. Maybe Tom’s still giving her time to cool off. Maybe he’s secretly relieved about it. George could ask Sherlock, since he probably knows, but at this point, she just doesn’t want to think about it.

Everything on the surface of her desk is blurring, her hands going weak around the bottles she’s clutching. George is glad she has her back to Sherlock now, because even though he knows she’s crying again, doesn’t mean she can bear to have him see her at it, shivering in just-bought clothes because she’s too cowardly to go back to her house.

George clears her throat, swallows it all down, tucks it away.

“Right,” she says, and her voice sounds strange. “So — you still interested in that shipping container murder?”

There’s a brief, suspicious silence from Sherlock. “….Yes.”

George waves blindly behind herself. “Sit down. I’ll get you a copy of the file.”

Someone should be happy at Christmas.
The sealed container case concludes itself by giving Sherlock two black eyes and George a concussion, which she can hardly take home to her mother, who’d burst into tears the day George had declared she was joining the police force. George opts to spend the night in hospital, enduring the cruel affections of the night nurses, and she’s ringing up an alarming bill on the hospital movie rental system when there’s the sound of fabric moving and a throat clearing in the cloaked darkness of the sixth floor hall.

“Hello?” she asks, too loudly. There are two men and a woman sharing floorspace with her in this corner of the ward — if this is a threat, it’d be worth it to have them awake enough to make a run for it.

She hears tapping — wood? on the tiles — and then Mycroft Holmes melts out of the shadows, holding up one long-fingered hand, open, placating. He’s doing that thing again, that little curl on his mouth that she thinks might be his real smile, and he hangs back, umbrella-distance from the foot of her hospital bed.

“I come in peace,” he says mildly.

George is flustered for a beat, and then she remembers how he’d gone down hissing, “Jesus Christ,” the nodes on the taser still attached to his exceedingly fine pinstriped suit, and colors. Today, Mycroft’s wearing a coat and a camel-colored suit and waistcoat, a dark teal tie that should clash, but doesn’t in the half-dark of the hospital.

“I’m unarmed anyway — you’re off the hook,” she says, waving her hand expansively over the floppy hospital chair next to her side table. “Please.”

“Thank you,” Mycroft says, thoroughly comfortable in the social niceties.

George sometimes wonders what the hell their childhoods were like, and how come Mycroft is so steeped in genteel manners and Sherlock so abhors them, though he slips into moments of innate fine breeding when he’s too otherwise distracted to remember he’s decided to act like a tosser.

“You are looking better than I would have expected after a night running around with my brother,” he observes.

“I’m in a hospital bed,” George points out.

“Yes, well, we both know why,” he dismisses, and she supposes he must. If he’s anything like his little brother, then he probably took a passing glance at the plastic cup of melted ice and water and the particular angle of her hospital gown and neatly concluded it all: the fragile mother, how she’d asked the hospital not to contact her husband, how it’s frankly easier to bunk down on the NHS’s dime for the night than go home and face the wailing.

“I suppose it’s pointless to ask how you circumvented visiting hours,” George says philosophically, “so I’ll move right along to: why are you here?”

“Primarily to assuage my guilt,” he confesses, and out of the darkness darts a beautiful girl with deep brown hair, a distracted smile, who hands Mycroft a pale green shopping bag, tissue paper tufting out. He takes possession of it, murmuring, “That will be all for tonight, thank you,” to his assistant, who just types something — rapid-fire — on her BlackBerry and clicks away on spindly heels down the hall.

George stares after her. “I don’t think I’ve ever heard anybody thumb type that fast.”
“She won a national championship,” Mycroft says, setting the bag down on George’s bed, among the folds of her hospital blankets. “It was one of the more attractive things on her resume.”

George has to bite her lip to keep the laugh hidden away and tips her chin at the bag. “What’s this then? Bribe? Because officially, we don’t do that sort of thing anymore.”

“Please, Georgiana,” Mycroft scolds, but every syllable is rich with humor, “I should like to think that if I were ever to try to bribe you, you would know. This is a get well gift, and an apology for my brother.”

“What? Wholesale? You’re going to need a bigger gift,” she laughs quietly, and reaches over to the bag — runs her fingertips over the edges of the tissue. Her hands are ragged, three knuckles ripped up from the brawl she and one of the gunmen had gotten into, and there’s an ache whenever she extends her arm, enough to remind her there’s a dark, ugly, and rapidly greening bruise swallowing her right breast. She’ll tell her colleagues tomorrow it’s no big deal, but she’ll be moving gingerly for a week, wince into the bathroom mirror, press tenderly at her areola for days.

Mycroft tilts his head to the side. “Or I shall keep sending them to you: quantity in addition to quality.”

“Oh, God,” George says, stumbling, blushing, her heart a sudden butterfly in her chest. “That’s — I was joking, Mr. Holmes — ”

“Mycroft,” he interrupts her, serenely unperturbed, and pushes the bag a bit closer to the bump of her knees, under the blanket. “Go on then.”

She does, hesitating now, shy, curled in over her legs and feeling her face go very hot. She’s a grown woman, for fuck’s sake. She’s almost forty. There’s no reason at all to be such a tit, she lectures herself, and reaches into the bag.

Mycroft’s brought her dark-colored jeans and a pair of soft-looking fawn-colored flats, a cashmere sweater in searing lapis lazuli. There’s also a little black box from a positively salaciously named boutique, which she peers into: cream-colored camisole with a lace neck — kindest thing for her breasts now, frankly, since a bra’s going to be a practical impossibility for a few days at least given her ribs — and a plain pair of panties.

George glances up at him, one brow arched, and Mycroft shifts in the seat like a bird settling his feathers, saying, “The intimates, I assure you, were selected by my very female assistant. I took no part in it.”

“And I guess everything will fit perfectly,” George says, grinning.

She’d been worried it would be something impossible, like ceramics, or a glass vase, something awful and incredibly expensive. George has no doubt these clothes are incredibly expensive, too, but they’re useful, nice, and the sweater is already warm wrapped around her hands. If George had had all the things in the world to choose from, she would have chosen these.

“She’s not just good for texting,” Mycroft assures George, and pauses a beat before asking, “Then these meet your requirements? Not going to say you can’t possibly keep them?”

George’s clothes are soaked through with filth from a number of puddles, bloody thanks to Sherlock’s oh-so-delicate nose, and torn besides. They’re beyond saving and probably best fit for burning. She’d been trying to think of who she could secret into either her mum’s for clothing or who she could send to Tom, but this is perfect. This is just what she needed.
“No, they’re lovely, thanks very much,” she tells him sincerely, closing her arms around her knees and tucking herself in close, feeling that shyness come back under the keen study of his gaze. Sherlock’s looked at her like that millions of times, inspecting, calculating, logicking out all of George’s secrets, and it’s always unsettling, feels like ants crawling beneath the skin. Mycroft’s look is different, like he’s already figured you out.

“Thank you again, Georgiana,” he says to her, solemn. “My brother is a trial, and you are extremely gracious to be so patient with him.”

George thinks about all the office supplies she’s thrown at Sherlock over the years, and how the week after McDonald’s started serving coffee she’d thrown the dredges of that at him, too.

“Well, not that patient,” she mutters.

“More patient than he deserves,” Mycroft says, rising to his feet, the tails of his coat — dark brown, single-breasted — swishing near his knees. “And with me as well. I’ve kept you up when you should be resting, my apologies, Georgiana.”

“Were made with this sweater, and all those intimates you didn’t see,” she quips at him, fond suddenly. Talking to Mycroft is like tripping into a comedy of manners.

He nods at her, acknowledging, closing his hands around the hook of his umbrella in a way that makes George blurt out: “Drive safe. Keep warm. It’s supposed to be freezing tomorrow.”

Mycroft pauses and frowns at her. “Is it?”

George shrugs, looking away to mask her horror. What the hell is wrong with her? “Nothing to do but watch telly here today — I’m caught up on the weather.”

Mycroft makes a considering noise, taps the floor twice with his umbrella. “Noted,” he decides, and favoring her with a tiny dip of his head, says, “Sleep well, Georgiana,” and strides off into the hallway.

Georgiana spends the next half an hour trying to asphyxiate herself with a pillow.

When she wakes up the next morning, the city is in chaos. There’s an inch of snow in central London and newsreaders are having apocalyptic visions about a shortage of grit. George lies in her hospital bed after a shitty and constantly interrupted night of bad sleep, seriously considering giving herself another concussion to avoid the ruckus.

“Right then,” the day nurse, Suzie, says. “Once you’ve changed, just take these forms down to the front desk and they’ll have you all processed and ready to go, right as rain.”

George mumbles something that aspires to sound grateful or happy.

“Good thing your gentleman caller came back last night,” Suzie says, burbling, and George’s head shoots back up — ow — in time to see Suzie holding up Mycroft’s coat: the dark brown one, single breasted, with an apparently robin’s egg blue lining. “Said he knew it was late but that you’d be cold today if you wouldn’t have this — very sweet,” Suzie comments, winking, and lays the coat across George’s lap.

George runs numb hands across it. She has no idea what the material is, other than heavy and terrifyingly expensive. There’s no manufacturer’s tag, which makes sense, since she guesses Mycroft is the kind of minor government officials who has his clothing and winterwear made bespoke on Saville Row — and gives them to concussed DI's.
The hospital needs the bed for a poor girl who’s somehow managed to break both her legs walking down the hall at work, so George hustles to change, the camisole whispering down her back, trying not to shiver as she pulls the panties up her thighs. Men have bought her clothing before, lingerie, even, but it’s another experience and new to be entirely kitted out, to have the front desk ladies bully her into Mycroft’s coat before they’ll let her leave.

Mycroft’s just as long-limbed as Sherlock, tall and minus the eating disorder, so the coat is vast on her, swallowing up her hands until only her fingertips show. She turns up the collar to keep out the cold as she flags down a taxi. It’s an expense she’d usually scoff at so close to the Tube, but this way, there’s only the one witness to the way she curls up in the back and presses her face into the fabric, breathing in.

When she gets back home, her mother’s in a state. George’s mail is opened and strewn across the kitchen table: divorce papers, freshly couriered.

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There are a number of boring stroke terrible fights in the next two days, which George carries on at her own house out of respect for her mother’s delicate nerves. Sometimes she thinks her father stuck her with this monstrosity of a name so as to foreshadow her mother’s inclination for emulating Mrs. Bennett in all things.

It comes out in the first skirmish, Tom thought George was shagging Sherlock, which is so utterly fucking unbelievable George has to sit down to get her bearings during this portion of their row. How would that work, even? One time, during one of her more successful drugs busts, Sherlock had described to her — floating several miles above Earth atmosphere — how he’d had a vision of a beautiful naked woman with a crossbow. George had thought he might have a libido after all, and then he’d gone off on the crossbow and what a fascinating weapon it was and why was nobody in London being murdered with a crossbow? Why were all her criminals so dull?

George accuses Tom of being petty, of resenting her for her success when she’d always been nothing but honestly joyful for his career — gone to his fucking mixers and faculty dinners and luncheons and hung ornamentally on his arm as best as she could. She’d endured a half-decade of her father-in-law’s aggressive misogyny and racism over holiday meals before he’d finally done everybody a favor and died. She’s never strayed, and she feels stupid saying it but she’s never been tempted. Why would anyone else appeal? Strangers could be handsome and it could be flattering to be the object of their temporary attention, but they didn’t know her, they didn’t know the geography of her.

“But see the difference is that my career advances never put off anything!” Tom roars at her. “I can go from being nobody at the university to dean and that would never mean we couldn’t have children because I could be shot in the fucking face any minute!”

“I was a police officer when you met me,” George yells back.

And so on and so forth. At least the neighbors don’t call the police this time.

George had been prepared to fight this out, to go to fucking counseling, for him to grovel and apologize. They’ve been through the wars before; she thought they’d be in the foxhole together again, except Tom just says fine, yes, he been sleeping with someone else, but that as far as he’s concerned, he and George have been separated for months already. Even when she’s home, she’s gone, darting glances at her mobile and sending profanity-laced texts to Sherlock when he’s in one of his manic upswings, messaging her at two minute intervals, and he’s done with it — her — them.
By the end of it, Tom’s hoarse and red-eyed, as shattered as George, and it’s horrible to think that after almost a decade together, this is what it’s come down to: Coronation Street shouting at each other midmorning, and still keeping secrets, she can see it in Tom’s expression, and she knows there’s one hidden under her tongue: *I don’t even want kids. That was always you.*

He’s packing to leave the house — staying with a friend, Derrick, that apparently George isn’t going to be getting in the split — and every time he stuffs a shirt in his bag it feels like he’s peeling it out of her chest, from the bruise that’s already on her skin, pulping the muscle underneath.

Two weeks later, sitting in the neutral territory of a Caffe Nero off of Oxford Street to exchange some paperwork, to start untangling the arteries of their lives together, Tom sighs, “Look, Georgie — it’s not like we didn’t both see this coming anyway.”

*I didn’t, I didn’t see anything coming,* George doesn’t say. She just stares down at the bank forms and writes in neat, block letters.

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Tom gives her the house since he has alternate accommodations. George is sort of touched by that until she realizes that “alternate accommodations” means Tom’s moved in with the twenty-four year-old grad student he was fucking.

She sees them once, when she comes home too early on the day Tom said he’d be moving out the last of his things. She’s 5’5, with wavy brown hair and doe-soft eyes, a mediocre smile. George can’t decide what stings worse, that this is how Sherlock assures her she used to look (really? no, she never looked that young, did she?) or that George has no idea what this girl’s name is — this person who’s walked into her crumbling house and tossed it to rubble.

*I did not look like that,* she writes to Sherlock, debating and debating sending it, since it would be an invitation to disaster if she were to engage his attention while he’s otherwise occupied. Still, it might dampen the sting of hiding in her garden while her soon-to-be ex-husband and his new girlfriend clear his DVDs out of the sitting room.

She’s saved from herself when her phone makes a twittering noise at her.

*Information exchange on Sherlock?*

*MH*

George feels herself cocking one brow. *Haven’t seen him in weeks. GL,* she types back.

There’s only a tiny break before the reply comes:

*All the more reason to be worried.*

*Car out front.*

*What you’re wearing is fine.*

*MH*

She’s wearing a gray jersey dress from Hobbs she bought on half off, tan heels, and a black trenchcoat — makeup running and fading and melting from a day of unending fucking meetings with the higher-ups. George wastes maybe a minute being deeply unsettled that Mycroft probably knows her earrings are in her pocket, too, before slipping into abject panic because she’ll have to walk through the house while Tom and Nameless Graduate Student are still in there sorting their belongings and —

*My research indicates the girl is named Laura Hilton, and she was infected with herpes sometime*
in the last four weeks, Mycroft interrupts her by texting, adding: Whether or not you choose to disclose this to Mr. Garrow is at your discretion.

George laughs, sharp and loud and utterly surprised.

It’s not so bad to walk through the house after that. Laura Hilton, herpes, looks like someone’s treading her grave when George pokes her head in to say hello.

“Er, Georgie — Georgiana,” Tom says, and both sound wrong coming from him.

“Just popping in and out,” she assures him. Her smile’s completely unforced, pooling out of her like water overflowing the bath. “Tom, you’ve still got the keys?”

He nods at her dumbly.

“Lock up when you lot are done, then,” George tells them, already turning for the coat closet.

She hasn’t worn the coat since that first day, after Mycroft left it with her, but then the thought of texting Sherlock’s brother to say, “Hi. You were very sweet and left me your horrifically posh coat. Where shall I drop this off?” always seemed an impossible task — especially since his assistant was just as liable as he was to receive it. Her two attempts to give it to Sherlock to pass it on to his brother resulted in two remarkably similar instances of Sherlock looking like someone had disproved the scientific method in front of him, shouting, “Deleted!” at her, and bolting down the hall.

George’s hands are careful on the shoulders of the coat when she pulls it off the hanger, suddenly and painfully aware she probably should have had it dry cleaned while it had been in her possession. Too late now, George thinks, and folds it over her arm, shutting the closet door to Tom’s face: drawn and a bit sweaty and nervy.

“Er, hi,” she says.

“You’re going out?” he asks.

Frowning, George edges out around him in their narrow hall. The wall’s half-filled with photographs of them, still. There’s them at Brighton, stubbornly clutched together on the rock beach while England is England and the rain pisses down on them. Her cheeks are red from the cold and Tom looks half-drowned, and they’re so happy it aches. There’s Tom’s office at Kings College, George perched behind the desk Bogarting his phone to check in with work before she’d gotten a mobile. There’s George asleep, tumbled and half-buried in the white sheets of their hotel, the second morning they were married, dozing on their honeymoon in New York. Tom’s halfway into the photograph, stretching out his arm above them to take the picture, and his eyes are closed, pressing half a kiss to her cheek, the pillow-lines on his face as dear and familiar to her as Jesus fucking Christ George has to get out of this God damn house.

“Yes,” she says, and her voice sounds stricken, hurt. “Yes,” she tries again, better. Improved. “I’m — I’ve a meeting.”

Tom nods, jerky. “Work,” he asks, but not really.

It’s strange for George to say, “No, not work,” and she scrambles for the doorknob, jerks the door open and skitters down the front steps with such concentration she nearly walks into Mycroft, leaning idly on his ever-present umbrella, lounging by the black car tucked neatly along the street.

She says, “Oh,” and holds out the coat, stupidly, in the scant inches between them.
Mycroft says, “If you wouldn’t mind holding onto that for a bit longer,” and moves aside two inches, pulls open the back door of the car, murmuring, “Please.”

George doesn’t get into cars the way beautiful women do: a duck and a shimmy, and settled gorgeously on a leather seat, flawless. So she hesitates a beat, worrying at her lower lip and sliding her gaze up to catch Mycroft’s eyes: as precise and all-seeing as Sherlock’s — and soft as anything as he looks at her.

“Go on,” he says, just to her, so quiet no one else could possibly hear.

He puts a hand between her shoulders, slides three fingers — just the fingertips, just the lightest trace of a touch — down the curve of her spine, barely a touch through her coat and her dress. It’s only a second before George folds herself into the backseat of the car, but it’s enough to make her boil over, to make her heart go seismic in her chest.

Mycroft waits for her to snatch up his coat, pull it across her knees and out the way of the door before he closes it with a quiet, authoritative snap, sweeping around to his own side, sliding in wordlessly as he glances at his watch.

George feels asthmatic. She feels like she the air’s deoxygenated.

“Are we late?” she asks, and she sounds as young as Laura Hilton, herpes, collecting DVDs in the wreckage of George’s heart.

Mycroft smiles at her, shaking his wrist out as he sets it down in his lap, unhurried.

“Nothing of the sort, Georgiana,” he assures her, and nods at the driver.

Tom’s standing at the front door, George sees, when the car pulls away, rolls down their quiet street, away from where their quiet life is being dismantled. George knows Tom better than she’s ever known another person, but she doesn’t know what the look on his face means, why he’s frozen on the step the entire time it takes for him to disappear from her view.

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They don’t end up somewhere painful and buttoned-up in the City, out in Knightsbridge, or anywhere trendy in Hoxton, which always makes George feel about twenty years older than she actually is. The car weaves through London, the late-evening traffic melting away in the sodium-orange light, and when George turns away from the window to ask, “Where are we going?” Mycroft clears his throat — startled? — and says, “I thought somewhere beyond the reach of even Sherlock’s spies.”

George’s expression must make clear that she believes this to be a factual impossibility.

“Well, increases the difficulty of his spies accessing us, at least,” Mycroft allows, that vine of fondness creeping into his voice, the one George knows from every time Mycroft has ever mentioned Sherlock. He’s not heavy, he’s Mycroft’s poorly socialized, brilliant crank of a brother, and George grins.

“Leaving the country then, are we?”

Islington is melting away from the streetsides, into Elephant and Castle.

“No — just London,” Mycroft tells her, and George glances out the window in time to see them drifting onto the A23.
There’s a slight chill in the car, just underneath the heating billowing over her feet, and George keeps Mycroft’s coat over her knees, hands knotted into it: possessive. They’re quiet for a long time, while London’s still loud around them as the car streams through Brixton and through Croydon, pedestrians thronging around them at crosswalks. Mycroft doesn’t seem to notice any of it, alternating his attention between his BlackBerry and looking straight ahead, and George wonders if that says anything, if that gives anything away. Maybe it’s designed specifically not to.

The A23 drops away to the A22 and the chaos of London is folded into the frosted-over green hills of Surrey, light pollution sapping all the stars out of the sky overhead. George murmurs: “You weren’t joking, then.”

“The Devil’s Jumps,” Mycroft tells her, his voice pitched soft. He’s leaned toward her, just close enough that she knows he’s moved, the BlackBerry abandoned in the foot of space between them in the backseat. His gaze skims her cheek before going to the trees crowding around the roadside, as teeming as the city had been — their bows hanging low over the double carriageway, leaves rattling silently as the town car flies past.

It’s dark enough in the car that George doesn’t mind how she’s flushed. She glances over her shoulder, asking, “Devil’s Jumps?”

“The stories say,” Mycroft starts, and it’s too dark for George to see much more than the shadows of a grin on his face, the shine of something in his eyes, “that the devil used to hop from the three hills as entertainment — until it so annoyed Thor that he threw a boulder at him.”


“Then I see no reason to tell you about the Devil’s Punchbowl, either,” Mycroft tells her, too amused to be tetchy, really, and George isn’t in primary school anymore, but she can’t help it, spends the next ten minutes through the forest needling him for the truth.

George grew up in Walthamstow, in a brick and green-shuttered terrace house at the end of a row. She had no brothers and sisters and only ever did all right school. Her father drove a cab and Rachel, her best friend, had a mother and father who ran the local. George is uncomplicated and relentlessly working class, and the stories Mycroft tells — about his and Sherlock’s exquisitely well-bred childhood of riding lessons and lawn bowling during summers — sound otherworldly, like BBC period drama.

“Sherlock played cricket?” George asks, gaping.

“Under extreme protest,” Mycroft replies, smiling and unwound, unraveling. “He’s always been difficult. When he was six, he engaged in a two day hunger strike when Mummy put him in short trousers — said they were beneath his dignity.”

George is still laughing when the car pulls off the main road, onto a far more disreputable one into the dimly lit forest. Every policeman’s instinct is wary and all of her own, privately, are drowned out by her curiosity. They rumble down a wood path, over a bridge, the trees opening up to a clearing, and a mill with white walls and a sloping roof, perched over a small pond, water churning. It’s lit-up orange-warm from the inside out, umbrellas on a deck already closed up for the night, ducks huddled together at one end of the pond, tucked in for sleep.

“Oh,” George says. It’s the second time she’s said it today, and before she can be annoyed at her verbal incontinence, Mycroft cuts in:

“It’s one of my favorite places — Sherlock would never be caught dead here.”
George laughs as the towncar draws to a stop in front of the pub door. “Too provincial?”

“Too low a likelihood for interesting crime,” Mycroft corrects.

George rolls her eyes. “How could I have been so foolish.”

He smiles at her, says, “One moment,” and lets himself out of the car, catches George’s door as she’s opening it and easing it the rest of the way for her.

A third “oh” would be too much humiliation to bear in one twenty-four-hour period, so George opts to say, “Thank you,” leaving the coat folded-up on the car seat. The blast of sound — voices, music from the pub — and the arctic air are a shock, which is going to be George’s excuse for later, when she’s lying in her bed and reexamining this moment. This moment where Mycroft handed her out of his car, saying, “Georgiana,” and she’d let him, how she’d been reluctant to let go, slid a thumb down the line of his index finger in absent longing.

They actually do talk about Sherlock. Mycroft drinks beer, which surprises George, and refuses to order dessert, which appalls her. The food is good and conversation is easy, one story fading out into another. Mycroft tells her about meeting Sherlock for the first time, and his expression as he says, “And then he proceeded to vomit on my school blazer,” is a marvel, both because of the depth of his disgusted affection and the mental image of a seven-year-old Mycroft in a blazer. George tells Mycroft how she met Sherlock when some lunatic started sending her uncomfortably detailed e-mails about her crime scenes, and she’d had tech backtrace his IP.

“I’ve no doubt you knew all this before I started telling the story,” George says, giggling into her pint glass, because back then, Sherlock had been even thinner and gawkier and his whole, wretched flat had been filled top to bottom with dented tins of Heinz beans for an experiment. “But when I went there the first time, I thought I was going to be arresting a serial killer.”

Mycroft leans back, cheek cupped in one hand, trying to hide his smile with his fingers and failing. “And yet you sound so fond.”

“Oh, he’s Sherlock, you know?” George says. They’re sitting by the French doors, overlooking the orange light from the pub flickering across the water. Her earrings are on the table; they’d fallen out of her pocket earlier, and she’d scooped them up and set them there, catching the candle glow. “He’s an arrogant twat and I suspect he’s made everybody at Scotland Yard cry — but he’s very often right.”

“Yes,” Mycroft says quietly. “Very often.”

“Sherlock is…” George gets a bit lost here, not sure how to say what she’s thinking, to articulate all the complicated ways she feels about Sherlock.

Sherlock is so staggeringly brilliant and completely insane, all at once. He’s the endless presence of water with TNT, unstable, explosive. George has loathed him for his cruelty and loved him for his insight, when she gets to return children to their parents and help families put a grievance to rest, and all through it she’s been quietly angry with him — for having the capacity to be amazing, to be a truly great man, and wasting it, numbing it out with heroin and a fucking coke habit George is determined to trace back to that shithead banker she just knows was the root of the whole debacle.

Mycroft knows, of course. He must, and George can see it on his face, something held back and so warm it must be love. Sherlock may be the most terrible brother in the world, but that doesn’t mean Mycroft can love him any less, not after Sherlock threw up on his school blazer and held hunger
strikes and started solving crimes for the Met.

“Yes, he is, isn’t he?” Mycroft says after a very long time, somewhere deep inside his own head.

“Right,” George decides, flagging down a passing waitress. “Get this man another pint.”

They shut down the pub, or George guesses they would, if people ever shut down anything on Mycroft Holmes. They don’t, so they linger over the detritus of George’s dessert and their drinks for long hours, until it’s pitch black outside and even colder when they stagger out past the mill wheel — still turning in the doorway.

She falls asleep in the car on the way home, cheek pressed against the buttery leather of the seats, and when she wakes up, it’s half-one and Mycroft is touching her shoulder, saying, “Georgiana,” and his coat is tucked around her like a blanket.
Chapter 2

The morning after, George is an hour late for work and feels manic the entire time. She polishes off four months worth of backlog paperwork by noon, has extremely civil conversations with Tom’s lawyer, her lawyer, Tom, and admin Margaret, whose sympathy during the low tide of George’s dignity has transformed back into caustic dislike. It might be associated with the amount of property damage Serious Crimes managed to kick up during one of their last arrests, but George refuses to feel guilty for it since she was on leave that week weeping into a bottle of Tesco brand table wine and wondering if her husband was leaving her because she’d never waxed her vagina.

Sherlock sends her a baker’s dozen of emails, all subject lined, “DELETED!” and none containing any body text. She texts Mycroft about it (He’s gone round the bend) and he tells her not to worry (I just popped in to Montague street; he’s alive if not particularly well) and George spends the rest of the afternoon drilling down through the geologic layers of paperwork on her desk.

The next six months George slogs through ordinarily horrible crimes, the ones Sherlock wants nothing to do with: domestics gone wrong, a dead girl in an alley, a hit and run in Whitechapel, a double murder in Hoxton. The actual muscle and bone of police work is unglamorous, repetitive, the collection of small and fairly common-sense facts until you’ve cobbled together a case. George arrests three people who confess on the way to the station. She chases three hoodies down an alley who think she gives a fuck about their possessing marijuana. George books them out of spite, and because they make fun of the dead girl: Julie Cowen, 17, runaway, two priors for prostitution.

George goes to court three times to give evidence, and wears the blue sweater Mycroft gives her a half-dozen times before it’s murdered brutally in an accident at the dry cleaners. She’d be upset if Mrs. Jalalipoor wasn’t already having a fit and offering to compensate her. George has no idea what the sweater costs but it’s probably more than Mrs. Jalalipoor can afford to comp.

The divorce is too easy. They’ve always maintained separate bank accounts and George never bothered to change her last name. They don’t have any children, and Tom’s already written off the house; she doesn’t want any alimony. The whole thing is painfully polite — deadeningly civil.

It’s April when Tom breaks the news, the gray English winter dissolving into a similarly dishwater spring.

“You’re fucking joking,” says Edith, whose been George’s best friend in the ladies ever since the Christmas party. Edith works with traffic and wears easily a kilogram of eye makeup every day, and outside of the four dour walls of New Scotland Yard she and George have exactly nothing in common, but in the fourth-floor women’s toilet, they are cleaved to one another. “You’re absolutely fucking joking — you’re not even properly divorced yet!”

George looks at herself in the sink mirror instead of saying anything, mostly because she doesn’t know what to say yet. Tom hadn’t looked sorry about it, after he’d called her out and said they needed to talk, and mostly George gets that. Babies are happy things, happy occasions. She’s bought enough onies and flowers and forks for enough showers to know that. At least he’d had the decency to break the news to her in person.

“He always wanted a family,” she says finally.

“Yeah, and now he gets to have one with a fucking zygote,” Edith swears, shoving open the window and lighting a cigarette before passing it to George.

George stares at its orange coal tip. She almost says, oh, I quit ages ago, but ages ago she quit
because Tom hates smoking, hated the way it tasted in her mouth and the brown stains it left on her fingers, the way it sunk into her clothes. Right now, George is wearing a shirt her mum bought her at Peacock’s six years ago, black trousers she can’t remember purchasing, and mismatching underwear. She’s turning 38 years old in two months and the man she loved for ten years of that is going to be a father October.

“Yeah, go on then,” she says, and takes the Silk Cut. It’s an instant time machine to being 18 and having strong feelings about The Clash.

She spends the evening with familiar faces from the Yard under the false assumption that spending it alone would have been depressing. Having to shut Anderson down when he hits on her in increasingly disgusting and saddo ways is much, much more depressing than being alone.

“Not even a little tempted by him?” Sally asks, teasing, when they’re shivering on the corner together waiting for an open taxi.

George waves, frantic, at a silver cab that comes their way, still lit up.

“I’ve already been party to one instance of infidelity in the last twelve months,” she mumbles as the car rolls to stop in front of them. “Frankly, I’d rather not make that two — yeah, hi, Islington?”

Sally’s quiet all the way to her flat, and she’s quiet when she says, “Night, George,” and disappears into her doorway, as the cab carries on to George’s house. There, she falls asleep in front of the telly, the channel set to unending Top Gear reruns on Dave.

***

The next time she sees Mycroft Holmes, he’s for once not trespassing.

It’s some awkward and terrible to-do for various big names at the Met: everyone must be represented. Serious crimes had drawn straws and she lost. “Might be fun,” Sally had tried with false cheer. “Get dressed up, made up. Hair, all of it.” George had said, “Yes, so that I can make awkward small talk with hundreds of extremely important people who can fire me.”

Her mum does her hair. As an ex-stylist, it would have been sacrilege to trust it to anyone else, and anyway, George has always liked the feeling of her mother’s hands in her hair untangling her tangles, talking aimlessly about her trio of lunatic cousins. George’s mother had decided to excise all memory and reference to Tom out of their lives, talking around him and filling in the blanks with banal chatter and sighing — “Are you sure you don’t want me to color your hair? It’s all gray now.” — and speculating on which of their family friends has a nice boy her age.

“Boy?” George asks, tipping her head back. “You know I’m forty, right?”

Her mum shoves her head back down, frowning. “You’re thirty-seven — ”

“Turning thirty-eight in a week,” George says, almost gleeful. She’s never been regretful of her age, or the years of her life she’s already spent out. George wouldn’t want to be eighteen again or twenty-two or thirty, it was fun while it lasted but she’s glad it’s over.

Her mother jerks on her hair lightly, rebuking. “You’re thirty-seven years-old, which is far too young to be closing up shop.” There’s an awkward, nervous sort of pause. “You don’t want your mother to be dating more than you, do you?”

“Jesus, Mum, are you seeing someone?” George asks, marveling.

The rest of her hair appointment is understandably taken up by discussing her mother’s new beau.
Growing up, George had never seen her parents kiss, but she’d never seen them walking together without holding hands, either; she knows what that means now. Her mother objects violently and for the sake of dignity against the term “boyfriend,” but George learns over the next twenty minutes that her mother’s gentleman friend is the local NHS dentist: a bit dreamy and mostly bald already, but apparently always ready with a quick laugh and some candy.

“He’s trying to secure future business,” George warns, grinning, because Dr. Ben Undershaw sounds like a nice man. “This one’s crafty. Might have to look into him.”

Her mother, blushing bright red, smacks George on the shoulder and says, “All right, all right, enough with your bloody teasing — go on, get dressed, and we’ll do your face up.”

George drives herself to the dinner and is equal parts grateful and worried when she hands over the keys to the valet. On the one hand, at least she doesn’t have to park it; on the other, she’s become rather fond of all of her internal organs, one of which she’ll surely have to sell for the luxury of curb service at the Ritz.

Early summer in London is confused weather: clearing skies and undecided warmth. Tonight, there’s a breeze curling around her shoulders, plucking away at the loose curls pouring down her back.

Her mother had spared George a more-elaborate hair confection and opted for simplicity, so her fringe is brushed — “Model bangs, they call them,” her mother assured her — gently to the right, elegant and unfussy. She’d vetoed most of the seventeen layers of concealer and shellack and blush her mother had attempted, and settled on red lipstick, a dark line of black fringing her eyes, mascara her mother swore wouldn’t run, no matter how much George drank or swore at her superiors.

Surrendering her coat is strange, and makes George wish she’d blackmailed Sally into coming instead, because her dress makes her think about Tom and how awkward she is outside of her skin or just showing it. It’s blue and sleeveless and there’s a spill of chiffon down the front of the skirt, the neckline in a deep v, and she’d loved the way she’d been able to feel Tom’s fingertips through it, when he’d touched the small of her back so long ago. She can still feel his fingertips through it.

Margaret the admin had drilled George on a list of people she was required to find and make small talk with, and George wanders into the ballroom — sweet Christ, it’s an actual fucking ballroom; there’s silk bunting everywhere — seizes the nearest flute of champagne she can find for courage, and goes for it.

She steels herself through small talk with a half-dozen of her superiors and their wives, who look alternately thrilled at the trappings and as shellshocked as George. They discuss the hours (“Awful”), they talk about NSY’s coffee (“Awful”), they talk about the latest lowlifes they’re not allowed to hit in the face during apprehension (“Awful”), and George is about to repeat the entire process when there’s a touch at her elbow.

George feels her body tilting, the way it’s done in the past, magnetized, weight shifting onto her back leg, and she says, “Mycroft,” chin tipping up so she can catch his eyes as she moves.

He smiles at her, a Home Office Smile that George knows well enough, and which deserves only her Metropolitan Police Force Smile in return.

It seems to startle him — as much as he’s startled her — and it jars a laugh out of him, and he says, “All right, noted,” before his face softens into something much more familiar. “Good evening, Ms. Lestrade.”
George winks at him, fond. “Good evening to you, Mr. Holmes,” she says dutifully, and she can’t quite glance away from him to look round the rest of the ballroom anymore — its flotilla of police wives and black ties — as she asks, “What brings you here?”

“Work, as I believe it’s the case with you as well,” Mycroft answers her. George suspects it’s even true, although not the truth, and he offers her his arm.

“If you ask me to take a turn about the room, I’m telling Sherlock,” George warns him, but she slips her hand into the comforting notch of his elbow anyway.

Mycroft looks like he fell out of an E.M. Forster novel, with a white bow tie and vest, looking extremely dapper and charming as fuck in the soft orange light of the ballroom. They discuss their hours (“Awful”), they talk about NSY’s coffee (“Awful”), and how Sherlock’s been behaving of late (“Categorically awful”). It’s the same small talk but entirely different, and all of George’s polite smiles bloom out into embarrassing giggles, the type that overflow you carelessly.

“You should get him a hobby,” George suggests, when they pause to swap out empty champagne flutes for full ones, Mycroft leaning six inches to the left, keeping her well-hidden from Deputy Commissioner Trackwell, who hates George with the fire of a hundred dying stars. George has no doubt Mycroft does it on purpose, and flashes him a grateful smile over the rim of her glass; Mycroft looks a bit lost for a second before he collects himself enough to say:

“Please don’t be offended when I tell you you were supposed to be his hobby, Georgiana.”

She snorts. “I’m offended. I’m offended and hurt,” she tells him, smiling crazily.

“My apologies,” Mycroft says to her, saucy, and asks, “How can I make it up to you?”

George is about to say something ridiculous like “cake” or “diamonds” or “tell me about the bloody Devil’s Punchbowl, you silly toff,” when Mycroft makes a noise of profound irritation — eyes sliding away from her to the other end of the room. She tracks his gaze to where the commissioner of the Met appears to be trapped in a soul-killing conversation with the mayor of London, who looks (a) extremely red in the face, (b) toxically drunk, and (c) like he hasn’t combed his hair in twenty years.

“Work intervenes?” George asks, after a beat and gently.

Mycroft slants her a look. “Sadly, yes.”

She lets go of his arm — fingers sliding on the fabric of his jacket, stubby nails scraping, it must only be seconds but it takes forever to break contact — and quietly tells him, “Go on then. No time like the present.”

He doesn’t go, not immediately, just turns so he can look at her. It leaves George standing there feeling exposed, her blush spreading down across her breast, until Mycroft heaves a sigh.

“You are an eminently practical creature, Georgiana,” he tells her softly, and from him, it sounds like the compliment it’s meant to be.

George is about to say, “my father always said it was my finest and least attractive quality,” when Mycroft takes her hand, and all the words die on her tongue.

“If you’ll excuse me a moment,” he tells her, and leaning over to brush a kiss over the back of her palm, he adds in hush against the skin of her wrist, “I’ll return as quickly as I’m able.”
There is just absolutely nothing to say in response to that, so George just watches him go in a stunned-stupid silence, hand still half-hanging in the air, blood roaring in her ears. She stands there long enough, staring as Mycroft neatly rescues the commissioner and then collects a rapidly paling Boris Johnson, for Mycroft’s assistant to sneak up on her and offer George another glass of champagne.

“For you, Detective,” the girl says.

George smiles at her gratefully. “Thank you…?”

The girl’s smile is attractively crooked, and just a touch naughty. Probably another highly desirable characteristic on her resume, in addition to the speed typing. “Anthea,” she supplies.

George raises her glass. “Thank you, Anthea.”

“I have been instructed to see to your needs in Mr. Holmes’s absence,” Anthea reports, timed specifically so that George will choke spectacularly on her drink. “Whatever those needs may be.”

Opting to stare at Anthea a bit, George manages, “My — you’re joking.”

Anthea’s expression shifts incrementally, just enough to telegraph that she would never.

“What if I needed a pony,” George says, just to be contrary.

“What color and breed?” Anthea asks immediately.

George rolls her eyes. “Or what if I said I wanted to make out a little?”

“I would need a moment to refresh my lipstick and brace myself for Mr. Holmes’s reaction,” Anthea answers smoothly, utterly unperturbed.

George feels herself go bright red. “Right, well, let’s say I need this conversation never to have happened.”

Anthea smiles at her. “What conversation?”

“Minor government official my arse,” George swears into her glass, and goes back to glowering around the room.

Forty minutes, three more tedious how-do-you-dos, and sixteen blazing fast text messages later, Mycroft reappears with a much-subdued looking Boris. The mayor hangs around long enough to stare unabashedly at Anthea, give George lifetime free use of the Barclays bike share program, offer Mycroft a shaky-cum-frightened handshake, and takes off like a shot.

“Well, that was surreal,” George says mildly, watching Boris go, a bobbing mass of white blond hair in the distance. “What was that all about?”

Mycroft rolls his eyes. “Oh, the Olympics. You know,” he dismisses, and asks Anthea, “Anything of note during my absence?”

Anthea, not looking up, says, “Detective Inspector Lestrade temporarily wanted both a pony and to make out a bit, but decided against both in the end.”

“Traitor,” George mutters, avoiding Mycroft’s gaze, although it’s not enough for her to ignore the amusement radiating off of him.
The rest of the night is reasonably painless, and she spends more of it than she should discussing modern policing challenges or gossiping about the other partygoers with Mycroft, randomly asking Anthea for impossible things ("Amnesty for the Dalai Lama in China") and, most impossible of all, there is a dance.

George doesn’t really know how to dance at all. At her wedding, she and Tom had mostly held onto one another and swayed back and forth, laughing at their friends as they’d gone twirling around the floor. Anyway, George has also never been the type of woman you dance with, in nice gowns while everyone looks at her like the painting in a man’s frame. She’s always been comfortable sitting on the side, and it’s a little bit terrifying when Mycroft offers one gloved hand and says, “Indulge me,” before leading her out to the floor.

“Let me guess,” George babbles, to shut out the high-pitched nervousness ringing in her head. Mycroft is pausing now, midway onto the floor, pressing a hand to her back, just beneath the shoulder blade, and George wonders if he can feel her heart thudding through her lungs and muscle and ribs and skin on the other side. “You had terribly a terribly posh dancing master when you were a boy.”

He smiles at her, the real one. “Ah — Sherlock and I both did.”

And then George is too delighted to be scared anymore. “No.”

Mycroft takes her hand, and George slides the other over his shoulder, palming the line of his tuxedo coat, relaxing into his hold as he says, “It was painful for both of us. I was too shy then to invite any local girls to the lessons, which meant Sherlock had to do.”

“No wonder he hates you,” George laughs, squeezing Mycroft’s hand in her own. “Are there pictures? Tell me there are pictures.”

The strings pick up, a high, sweet sound over the mellow notes of the cello, and Mycroft sweeps her out of stillness across the floor — her dress fluttering around her ankles, and everyone must be staring at them, it’ll be all over the Yard come Monday — grinning as he says, “If there are, they’re very well hidden. Sherlock’s spent every Christmas since he was twelve trying to find and destroy them.”

“Mr. Holmes,” George says, trying for serious and probably failing. She feels silly; she feels young; she can feel how widely she’s smiling. “I’ve thought of something I need.”

Mycroft’s fingers curl where they’re settled on her back, his thumb stroking the chiffon of her dress. “I’ll consider it,” he promises, and the music swells again.

That’s the last good day in a while.

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“...The body of Beth Davenport, Junior Minister for Transport was found late last night on a building site in Greater London. Preliminary investigation suggests that this was suicide,” Sally is saying. She gets to read off of a sheet. “We can confirm this apparent suicide closely resembles those of Sir Jeffrey Patterson and James Phillimore. In the light of this these incidents are being treated as linked. The investigation is ongoing, but Detective Inspector Lestrade will take questions now.”

Detective Inspector Lestrade would rather set her own hair on fire than take questions right now, but the primary problem with having advanced to a level of management where she can make other
people deal with her bullshit is that now, George has to deal with the press. Which is hard enough without Sherlock bloody Holmes somehow mass texting everybody, “Wrong!” in the middle of George treading water among the sharks.

“If these are murders, how do people protect themselves?” asks one annoying ginger in an ugly shirt, and George legitimately has to claim insanity when she says:

“Well, don’t commit suicide.”

Sally mutters, “Daily Mail,” under her breath.

“Obviously this is a frightening time for people, but all anyone has to do is exercise reasonable precautions. We are all as safe as we want to be,” George forces herself to say, already pushing away from the table when her phone bleats at her.

You know where to find me

SH

George manages not to swear in front of a roomful of Fleet Street’s finest, mumbles a noncommittal, “Thank you,” and gets the fuck out of there. She yells, “I know, I know, all right?” at the Yard public information officer gasping in fury just outside the press room, dodging two of her assistants, and George scampers off toward her own office for a defensive position against the inevitable shitstorm that’ll be raining down for that debacle.

Except it would take a finer woman than George to shake Sally, who dogs her heels and says, “You have got to stop him from doing that — he’s making us all look like idiots.”

Which George knows, and is resigned to, if not overjoyed by.

“If you can figure out how he’s doing it, then I’ll stop him,” she promises.

Sally asks, “Can I just kill him? Set it up to look like an overdose?”

George glances at Sally, who knows a little about Sherlock, but not enough to know that’s not exactly funny. “I think his brother might object,” she says, finally, dumping her phone and her files across her desk and making for the seat.

“Oh, and then who would take you dancing,” Sally asks, overly innocent, and runs away before George’s well-aimed staple-remover can hit her in the face for that.

It’s been a week since George has done more than collapse into her bed for a few snatched hours or run home to change clothes. There’s a small heap of mail collecting in her front hall — that she continuously trips over — and her coriander plant is dead and so are three people from completely baffling suicides using the exact same poison. The first case was sad, but not her problem, the second case was weird, but only on the periphery of her radar. After Beth Davenport, the deputy commissioner had raised six kinds of hell, hauled Lestrade into her office, and summarily dropped the entire disaster into her lap, saying, “I don’t care what you do — just fix it.”

Which is great, if you have someone you can hand impossible, probably-a-crime-but-how-is-it-a-fucking-crime? crimes to and say, “fix it.”

The suicides (?) are either a brilliant crime (?) or the most irritating fucking coincidence (?) in history: three victims with nothing linking any of them together — all found in empty buildings, showing no signs of struggle, and dead by apparent self-administered poison. The victims didn’t know each other; the victims’ families didn’t know one another; the victims’ friends nor their
family friends knew one another. One lived in Knightsbridge, the other in Bethnal Green, the third in Clapham. Their routes to and from work and to and from their most commonly haunted haunts don’t cross over, and none of their internet histories have intersected, except in that they all apparently had a secret weakness for reading the Daily Mail. There hadn’t been a common point, a secret pact, no letters, or P.O. boxes. The Met’s forensic accountants have gone over their three victims’ lives with a fine-toothed comb, and beyond the affairs, the teenaged sexuality crisis, and a fairly obvious alcoholism, there weren’t any secrets — or any secrets that would have gotten them killed. Wives and friends and boyfriends and families had all already alibied out, and George has watched so many hours of London CCTV footage she’s genuinely beginning to think she’s losing her fragile grip on reality.

If this case wasn’t so fascinatingly strange, it’d probably go cold. She’d leave it in a pile on her desk of things she would return to occasionally, but the trail would get dimmer and dimmer as time passed. As it is, with all of queen and country breathing down her neck, George knows it’s a matter of time before Sherlock stops taunting her from a distance, and gets to taunt her up close.

She’s debating the irresponsibility of putting off another sortie with Sherlock versus the likelihood of someone else ending up dead when Sally clacks into the doorway on perilous heels, shouting, “There’s been another one!” She catches the frame, breathless, and adds, “Brixton. Lauriston Gardens. This one left a note.”

“A note?” George asks.

“Well,” Sally says, “she scratched RACHE into the floor.”

George says, “Jesus fucking Christ,” and grabs her coat.

“The deputy commissioner is furious with you, by the by,” Sally reports brightly, pacing George down the corridor. “Apparently you’re on the front page of the Sun online.”

“My mum will be calling any minute now, then,” George sighs, and waves Sally off. “Go ahead and secure the scene — I’ll be round shortly.”

“Oh, no,” Sally pleads, already knowing. “Tell me you aren’t.”

George pulls on her trench, sighing. “Then I won’t.”

She kidnaps a uniform out of the motor pool — who looks flatteringly breathless when she spins him round to face her, his tea sloshing out of his paper cup and her hand fisted in his collar — and directs him to Montague Street. The kid’s eyes go wide, because despite appearing to be 14 years-old and so new to the Met he squeaks, of course everybody’s already told him stories about Sherlock.

No one’s at the Montague Street flat, and George is frowning at the door buzzer when the landlord comes out — a man she’s had frequent occasion to run into at all hours of night and who on more than one instance suggested she was a prostitute — and informs her that he’s successfully evicted Sherlock, finally, and did she need a new client in the neighborhood. She gives him an ASBO on principle.

_Sherlock evicted. Any idea where he is? GL_, she sends to Mycroft, getting back in the car and ignoring the furious look on the landlord’s face.

There’s only a half-second wait before the reply.

221B Baker Street. MH
Another half second yields a follow-up:

_That ASBO will never stick you know._

MH

“Good Christ, that family,” George complains to herself, shoving her phone into her pocket and saying, “Baker Street, please. Apparently he’s moved house.”

“So, are the stories true then, sir — ma’am?” he asks, stumbling all over himself, navigating London with shocking lack of skill. Recent transfer, George bets. It’s a ten minute drive, past SOAS, along Upper Woburn and then down the disaster zone of Euston to Sherlock’s new home, tucked away uncomfortably close to Madam Tussaud’s.

She has no idea what kind of stories they tell about Sherlock to the freshly inducted constables, but. “Yes,” she says, because torturing new hires is one of the few perks of her job.

“Cor,” PC Hatcher says, obviously awed.

“You should stay in the car,” George counsels when they reach Baker Street. This is both because she wants a quick escape and because PC Hatcher is so ginger and adorably earnest that Sherlock would probably eviscerate him as an amuse bouche for the rest of her team once they get to the scene.

Hatcher nods. “Right, of course, sir. Ma’am.”

George thinks, _he’s doomed_, but gives him a tight smile and gets out of the car. The door to 221B isn’t locked, which could mean anything but probably nothing, given that it’s Sherlock. The first time she’d gone round to Sherlock’s old place at Montague Street, fully convinced she was going to find the place filled with taxidermied male prostitutes, Sherlock had been half hanging out of his living room window trying to attract lightning during an electrical storm.

There’re voices on the first floor, and George takes the stairs two at a time, only most of the way up when she sees Sherlock framed in the window, asking her, “Where?”

“Brixton, Lauriston Gardens,” she says, huffing. She’s been feeding her pain too aggressively at McDonalds, she thinks.

“What’s new about this one?” Sherlock asks, turning away vainly like a model searching for his light. “You wouldn’t have come to get me if there wasn’t something different.”

“You know how they never leave notes? This one did,” George says. “Will you come?”

Sherlock narrows his eyes. “Who’s on forensics?”

“Anderson,” George sighs.

Insert dramatic head turn. “Anderson won’t work with me,” Sherlock mutters.

“Well, he won’t be your assistant,” George tries, because today is not a day she cares about the many and sundry feelings Sherlock likes to pretend he doesn’t have.

“I need an assistant,” Sherlock says, a verbal pout.

George relives the memory of slapping him. “Will you come?” she repeats.

Ambivalent swishing, now. He must be shrieking with excitement on the inside, George thinks,
exasperated, and watches Sherlock swish a second more before saying, too dismissive, “Not in the police car — I’ll be right behind.”

“Thank you,” she says, and turns to go. An older woman and another man are in the room, too — purple dress, cane, is all she manages to register before she goes — and George nods in what passes for polite discourse for her these days.

She’s not expecting to see the man again at the scene.

“Who’s this?” she asks, wishing she’d worn trousers today so she wouldn’t have to tramp into one of these hideous blue bodysuits in a skirt. If it was just Sherlock, she wouldn’t give a fuck about dignity or if he might see up it, but now there’s a reasonably attractive stranger here who doesn’t need to know she’s wearing pants from La Senza.

“He’s with me,” Sherlock tells her, like that makes it all right.

“But who is he?” she asks.

“I said, he’s with me,” he repeats, at which point George decides she’s wasted about as much energy as she’s willing pretending to know what on Earth goes on in Sherlock’s brain. And that she’ll get a name and background check on whoever this bloke is later.

Jennifer Wilson’s upstairs, face down on the floor, dressed head to toe in an absolutely eye-searing color of pink. Sherlock, on the other hand, is as rotten and twatty as he’s ever been. He’s always a bit insufferable on the so-called boring cases, but this one’s so fucking annoying it ought to be right up his alley, and George is actually a bit baffled by Sherlock’s seemingly randomized escalation of hostilities until she glances over at the man with the cane — looking awkward in the blue suit, awkward in this room, but not awkward around Sherlock, murmuring astonishments under his breath — and thinks, oh my God, Sherlock’s showing off.

After being a bit player in the exposition dump of her own existence, with Dr. Watson adding occasional color, Sherlock asks her about the suitcase.

“What have you done about it?” he asks.

George frowns down at him, at his riot of dark curls. “There wasn’t a case.”

Boom. Flailing arms, put-downs, etcetera and so forth, Sherlock flying down the stairwell of the house — all the crime scene techs watching from the sidelines and collecting gossip to horrify the new recruits, no doubt — and poor Dr. Watson, hanging awkwardly at her side as she leans over the bannister shouting like a madwoman:

“What mistake?”

And Sherlock yells back, “Pink!”

Afterward, Anderson is in a snit, Sally says, “We should put a uniform on that poor doctor — make sure Sherlock isn’t going to skin him and use it as a coat,” and there’s still the subject of the suitcase.

Taking a wider-angle view than Sherlock’s certainty and certainty in his own deductions, the spots on the back of Jennifer Wilson’s leg could come from a hundred thousand different things, but George has also suffered Sherlock’s abusive genius enough to know that there probably is a case, so she calls PC Hatcher and sends him and a few other pieces of fresh meat out to rifle through all the skips in a half-mile radius of the scene. They probably won’t find anything — Sherlock’s likely
gone through half the skips in Brixton and gotten the case, if there is a case, already — but it’s character building all the same. Also, joy of joys, it appears that Sherlock’s made off with her badge again, so she feels completely all right with deciding she’ll give him two hours before she goes to toss his apartment for her evidence. If he’s going to be a cunt, so is she.

It’s a fit of pique that has her sending the message. She and Mycroft are passing acquaintances, drawn together by the common and violently annoying thread of Sherlock, that’s all. So there’s no reason for her to send it other than as an editorial comment and fair warning, but she can’t resist.

*Just a heads up. I’m going to kill your brother. GL,* she texts Mycroft.

The answer is immediate. *This is Anthea. We’re picking up Dr. Watson now.*

“Bloody. Terrifying,” she tells the screen of her phone, and before she can reply and ask Anthea for a monkey’s paw, Sally calls up to her, “Lestrade! Cardiff’s on the phone for you about Jennifer Wilson.”

Her phone chirps again. *He’s rather handsome.*

George laughs. *Is this Anthea or Mycroft?* she asks, and calls back to Sally, “Yeah — coming down.”

*RACHE* turns out to be *RACHEL* after all, stillborn daughter 14 years ago, and George only thinks, like an electric shock and only for a moment, about Tom and Laura Hilton, herpes, before she clears her throat and says, “All right — I’m accepting volunteers for a drugs bust at Sherlock’s. *First come first served.*”

It’s entirely petty, but working with Sherlock is a catalyst for instant emotional regression. The flat’s charming, which George hadn’t had the wherewithal to notice the first time, and she’s very sorry to upset Sherlock’s poor landlady. The case is, no surprise, there — along with a chemical distillery, a number of hair clippings George isn’t thinking about, and in Sherlock’s bedroom, there’re about a dozen condoms filled with fuck knows what. She’s built up almost enough morbid curiosity to want to know when Sherlock and Dr. Watson burst back into the flat.

***

George knows better, really, than to hope that being abusive at Sherlock or lecturing him will result in anything other than him being abusive in return and making her rue the day she ever met him. Sherlock always, without fail, brings out the best of the worst of her, and she imagines this is the person she would have been with a murderously annoying sibling: stealing into his room, disordering his sock index, checking to see if he’s dabbling in creating a more-effective methamphetamine.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asks, low and dangerous and glowering around the room like he doesn’t know where to start. Wisely, he manages to resist, since everybody here is just *gagging* for an opportunity to claim self defense. A brawl would be equal parts hilarious and a disaster since Sherlock bites and Anderson has an excess of fury to work off given the rumored state of his marriage.

George gives him a Look and leans back in the armchair she’s appropriated. “Well, I knew you’d find the case,” she explains patiently. “I’m not stupid.”

Heroically resisting the urge to diverge into an argument on that subject, Sherlock snarls, “You can’t just break into my flat!”
“Well, you can’t withhold evidence. And I didn’t break into your flat,” George says.

“Well what do you call this then?” he demands.

George smiles at him cheerfully. “It’s a drugs bust.”

John, who apparently has decided not to exercise better judgment, just laughs over Sherlock’s shoulder. “ Seriously?” he asks. “This guy? A junkie? Have you met him?”

Righteous anger fleeing for wariness, Sherlock rotates on his heel, pressing two steps more deeply into John’s personal space than George has seen in a long time, saying, “John,” in quiet reproach.

“I’m pretty sure you could search this flat all day and you wouldn’t find anything you could call recreational,” John says, a laugh still clinging to all of his vowels.

Sally’s rundown on John Watson’s pages-long background basically boiled down to a post-it note on top that read, **TOO GOOD FOR FREAK BUT PROBABLY MAD AS A HATTER, GIVEN FREAK ATTACHMENT.** He looks generally unconcerned that there’re a dozen police officers tossing Sherlock’s flat, which is a good sign for his future interactions with Sherlock but extremely worrying as a commentary on his personality.

George spares a look for Sherlock here — shoulders tense, leaning close to John’s ear — and thinks either Sherlock’s experiencing the oh so pedestrian affectations of affection or she should give some serious consideration to Sally’s skin coat theory. Either way as soon as she’s not out of her mind over this case it’s going to be a memory to cherish, and one to misuse: needling Sherlock to explode into a Category Holmes hurricane when there’re no lives at stake is one of the more exquisite pleasures in her life.

“John,” Sherlock says, voice lowered to a hush, “you probably want to shut up now.”

“Yeah, but come on,” John asks, smiling as he turns to meet Sherlock’s upper-case S stare, and George has enough time to think, Christ, it’s like watching primary school kids flirting, before Sherlock looks over his shoulder to say:

“I’m not your sniffer dog.”

Of course he’s not, because dogs are affectionate, can be trained, and come when called. Sherlock isn’t even cat material.

George nods at the kitchen. “No,” she agrees. “Anderson is my sniffer dog.”

Watching Sherlock’s face contort in momentarily wordless rage at the thought of Anderson touching his belongings is pretty fantastic, full stop, as is listening to him say, “What? Anderson, what are you doing here on a drugs bust?”

Anderson looks happier than he has in years. “Oh, I volunteered.”

“They all did,” George elaborates. “They’re not strictly speaking on the drug squad, but they’re
very keen.”

Sally pops out of the kitchen. “Are these human eyes?”

Not missing a beat, Sherlock says, “Put those back!” sounding for all the world like an annoyed nursery school teacher.

“They were in the microwave,” Sally clarifies.

Of course they were, George thinks. Fucking Holmeses.

“It’s an experiment,” Sherlock tells Sally, imperious, and starts to pace.

“Keep looking, guys,” George intervenes, and pushing herself to her feet — which hurt almost as bad at her back, which has been punishing her for the night she spent on the sofa in her office all day — she offers, “Or you could start helping us properly and I’ll stand them down.”

Sherlock’s expression is 100 percent six year-old him, holding a hunger strike over short trousers as he spits, “It’s childish.”

“I’m dealing with a child,” George says, and moments like these, she sounds so much like her mother it’s horrifying. Gathering herself, she says, “Sherlock this is our case. I’m letting you in but you do not go off on your own — clear?”

“Oh — so, so what? You set up a pretend dugs bust to bully me?” Sherlock retorts.

George raises her eyebrows, and quietly, she reminds him, “It stops being pretend if they find anything.” The subject of Sherlock and his less than stellar record with substances is a secret she’s in no hurry to disclose to her team. She trusts Sally with her life and Anderson with her work, but George knows herself well enough to know that Sherlock is her pet project, her spoilt ingenue. Maybe once you’ve put someone’s head in your lap and stroked their forehead, waiting for the ambulance to come, you can never come back from that. If only she didn’t give a shit about him, her life would be easier.

He doesn’t look at her when he yells around the room, “I am clean.”

Sherlock knows exactly how people lie, all the different ways they telegraph it. If he’d met her eyes with confident sincerity, she would have thought, oh, no, but he’s embarrassed and pissed and going to make her pay for this stunt for ages. It means he’s probably even being honest.

“So your flat?” George asks, mostly because she knows instinctively there’s cocaine somewhere here. “All of it?”

“I don’t even smoke,” Sherlock sulks, rolling up his sleeve to show off a nicotine patch, which is adorable enough that George rolls up her own to show that they match, saying, “Neither do I,” because Edith and her Silk Cuts are life-ruining.

Sherlock’s reaction to that is half dejection, half plotting, which George decides to arrest mid-brew by saying:

“We found Rachel.”

It’s not a surprise, exactly, that in the following discussion that Sherlock doesn’t understand why Jennifer Wilson would have thought of a child she’s never really known in her dying moments. What’s surprising is Sherlock’s little pause, the way he shifts his balance, to ask, “Not good?” of
John, because even though George has never managed to resist telling him off for failing at basic comprehension of human emotions, Sherlock’s never given a toss about it one way or the other.

“A bit not good, yeah,” John says in the awkwardness of communal silence.

“Look,” Sherlock asks him, his voice meant for a conversation between two people in the middle of the crowded room, “if you were dying, if you were being murdered, in the very last few seconds, what would you say?”

John’s answer is quiet as Sherlock’s question. He probably means it to come out as a query, but it emerges a confession: “Please, God, let me live.”

“Use your imagination,” Sherlock pleads, and John replies, quick and utterly flat:

“I don’t have to.”

It’s still not an answer, not even the beginning to one, really, except it triggers that thing that George has seen so many times now — that anger that rallies into an explosive moment of realization, Sherlock stalking around the room waving his arms and calling everybody stupid: cruel and sharp and dizzyingly brilliant. Like George, at once the worst and best version of himself.

Jennifer Wilson’s missing case hadn’t contained Jennifer Wilson’s missing mobile, either, nearly unthinkable for her not to have one, one of those painfully obvious things that isn’t obvious at all until Sherlock points it out — until he’s tracking it from his laptop and the signal is coming from inside the flat.

George lets out a breath. “Guys, we’re also looking for a mobile somewhere in the flat,” she calls out, and when she turns back to say to Sherlock, “right, you better help, your flat is a tip and it’s not entirely my fault, either,” John’s calling down at the line of Sherlock’s back as he disappears down the steps:

“You sure you’re all right?”

Sherlock mumbles something in reply, which George doesn’t hear because she’s glaring down the stairwell at his vanishing mop of hair, and then glaring back up at John.

“Where did he go?” she snaps.

John just stares at her innocently.

George flares up in fury that dies away to exhaustion just as quickly. She’d known it would end this way, but she’s never been able to stop hoping, and she’s angry every time she falls for it. Every time Sally calls her out on it. Every time Sherlock is Sherlock is Sherlock, and Jesus Christ, why doesn’t George ever learn?

They don’t find the phone. Out of adolescent wrath, George pulls Sherlock’s drawer of delicates — socks color-coded, pants folded up neatly — from his chest and dumps them all over the floor of his bedroom just to stay her urge to set the flat on fire.

“Why’d he do that?” she sighs to herself later, pulling on her coat and getting ready to leave, her team already sorted out and packed away, driving off in pairs and trios with new stories about Sherlock for Yard currency. “Why’d he have to leave?”

She’s not expecting an answer. Least of all for Dr. Watson to say, “You know him better than I do.”
She stops, jacket half on. Watson’s mid-thirties, her age or a bit younger. He’s got a solid, dependable look that George used to find crushingly attractive during her even more boring days as a younger woman, and he’s wearing a frankly awful oatmeal-colored jumper and has apparently been running around London with Sherlock Holmes all night. And now he’s here, sitting in Sherlock’s flat and comfortable like he’s allowed. George has found Sherlock passed out surrounded by his own piss and vomit, half-starved during the worst of his overdoses; she’s put him in overnight lock-up just to get him out of her hair, and watched him torture the guards over CCTV until she had to go home. George knows Sherlock finds lying tiresome, is vain as a popinjay, that he has an older brother who worries about him constantly, and that sometime in the last few weeks he was evicted from his flat near the British Museum.

She’s lived with the knowledge of his potential and the repeatedly crushing disappointment of him for half a decade now — George doesn’t know a fucking thing about Sherlock. About how he works.

“I’ve known him for five years, and no I don’t,” George says.

Watson smiles at her, one of those awkward, reflexive things you do around strangers who you have no clue what to say to — looks around the flat. It’s a mess, but it was a mess when George had come in, so she’s not fussed.

“So why do you put up with him?” Watson asks, harmless, querying.

“Because I’m desperate, that’s why,” she tosses out, too tired to be anything but honest at this point. She hasn’t got her badge, she hasn’t washed her hair in three days, her ex-husband’s a father, and the last six text messages on her phone are from her recalcitrant, violently uncooperative consulting detective’s brother’s assistant.

She’s most of the way out the door of the flat when she stops, pauses, because there’s another half to this truth, of course, the one that she doesn’t bother telling people anymore, because nobody who’s met him believes her, and Mycroft must know already.

“And because Sherlock Holmes is a great man,” she tells Watson, who looks entirely placid, unmoved, just considering, and George goes on, she says, “And I think one day, if we’re very, very lucky, he may even be a good one.”

As an apology for persisting on having hope for Sherlock, she sends Sally and Anderson and everybody else home for the night. As punishment for herself, she goes back to the Yard, eating ancient Hobnobs she left in her desk drawer for just this kind of soul-killing moment until Dr. Watson rings her, frantic, half an hour later.

When the call goes out — shots fired; one DOA — George is already en route to Roland-Kerr Further Education College, and Dr. Watson’s not answering his phone.

“Fucking of course,” she says to her car windshield. “Of course.”

Watson had looked too harmless, too entirely well-adjusted. What the hell had she been thinking? This was a man who was voluntarily spending time enduring Sherlock’s mistreatment and rough handling and seemed, by all accounts, disinclined to sever their relationship. Of course he’d be just as batshit as Sherlock, of course.

The uniforms and paramedics beat her there, and the scene is a chaos of police lights and neon yellow ambulances by the time her car shrieks to a halt, and her heart’s racing, shuddering in her chest, because obviously Sherlock can’t be hurt (dead), since if anybody is going to break his face,
it better be her.

“Where is he!” she shouts, at everybody, at three different scared-looking young officers, including — finally — PC Hatcher, who yells back at her, “Ambulance, sir — ma’am!”

“Not the DOA?” she asks him, and he shakes his head at her, ashen.

“Christ, thank God,” she says, relief gushing out of her, liquid ice in along her limbs. George feels shaky and surprised by how shaky.

Sometimes, at her worst times, she forgets that even though he’s Sherlock, he’s still a civilian and she’s sworn to protect him despite himself. If one day it’s his dead eyes looking up at her because of a case she let him work on, George doesn’t know what she would do, if she would be able to carry on.

It takes her ages to get her shit together, searching for that deep breath that keeps eluding her, so she expends all of her nervous energy rallying the troops and inspecting their murdered murderer.

Cabbie, dead from blood loss after a single gunshot wound from a small-calibre weapon, pills scattered on the floor. She’s not processing any of it properly though, and gives it up for lost to the forensics crew in favor of making her way back down to the car park, where Sherlock’s sat on the tongue of the ambulance, looking baffled.

“Why have I got this blanket?” he asks her, as soon as she’s close enough to whine at. “They keep putting this blanket on me.”

“It’s for shock,” she explains. He looks fine.

He also looks disbelieving. “I’m not in shock.”

He’s probably not, but. She says, “Yeah, well, some of the guys wanted photographs.”

Sherlock rolls his eyes elaborately, and starts asking about the shooter. Maybe Sherlock is in shock, because he’s halfway toward identifying Dr. Watson — John H. Watson, Captain, 5th Northumberland Fusiliers, trauma surgeon, far, far too good to be associating with the likes of Sherlock Holmes — before he shuts himself up.

The timing is suspicious as fuck, naturally, and if George supposes that if she were to waste even five seconds of investigative energy on this, she’d find a trail so categorically dead it could only have been covered up by Sherlock. But the good thing is that she’s not going to think about it at all; she’ll write up a file and kick it up the chain of command for further inquiry. As far as George is concerned, the cabbie — who was her specific mandate — is dead, and this miserable case is bloody over. Fine time for Sherlock’s Golderberg machine of a brain to go entirely offline.

George figures after that disgusting display, she ought to give them the night to get their stories straight, so she waves him off and says she’ll see him at the Yard tomorrow, and watches them go.

Dr. Watson’s limp and cane are gone, and they’re giggling like children together, one dark and one light head bent in close, and George thinks that John Watson will end up being another man she knows for years without knowing at all.

Her phone buzzes.

This is Anthea. My employer is here.

George blinks twice. The beauty of text-based communication is she her reflexive what? is lost to the ages. Fumbling with her phone — it’s bloody freezing tonight — she manages to peck out, How
This is Anthea. He says it’s to check in on Sherlock, comes the reply.

“That’s what he says, why really?” George says to herself, laughing a little, but she types, Hang on a tick, I’ll come find you. GL

Anthea looks a slightly more distracted version of her ordinary blank expression, and Mycroft is frowning after where Sherlock and Dr. Watson are vanishing in a flare of Belstaff and military bearing. Mycroft looks thinner and tired, a bit washed out from the police lights, perched a dignified distance away from the police tape, and when she draws closer he turns toward her, tipping his head like he’s doffing an imaginary cap.

“Detective Inspector Lestrade,” he says, and when he says it like that, it sounds like Georgiana.


Not bothering to look up from her BlackBerry, she quips, “Successful extinct animal cloning not scheduled until 2014.”

“Hopes dashed again,” George says mildly, and looks back to Mycroft. “Well?”

“Well, what?” Mycroft asks. He has that rare, Holmesian look of unusual surprise: baffled by being baffled.

“Why are you here?” she replies, patient, smile creeping outward.

This time, he frowns, a genuine, unattractive look on his mobile face, and George laughs before she can temper herself for masculine vanity, pressing a hand to her mouth to keep in the worst of the giggling, saying, “Sorry, sorry! I mean — you look so wronged.”

“Long-suffering might be a better word for it,” Mycroft sighs, aggrieved. “It seems my brother’s found a colleague.”

George closes her coat more tightly around herself, hands under her arms, the chill seeping under her skin now where the layers will just hold it in closer to her. She’s good at what she does, sometimes she even likes what she does, and it just means that this feeling — cloaked darkly and lit up with police cars, standing round shady corners of London at all hours feeling the cold slip in — is as familiar as anything, as the weight of her own body sinking into bed.

“I dunno, colleague’s not really the word I’d use,” George muses. “They seemed thick as thieves, leaving here.”

Mycroft makes an annoyed tap with his umbrella, and George tries not to analyze how she can gauge his mood via rain gear at this point.

“Accomplice?” he asks, still irate, but just barely, clinging to it sullenly like a boy.

“Or a friend — could be good for him to have a friend,” George offers. She sounds a bit crazed from lack of sleep and she’s overly giggly, voice trembling with cold, but she supposes it’s not surprising: she’s running on a twenty-four-hour sleep deficit, this is a fall jacket, and Mycroft always seems to throw her entirely off her own axis.

“My brother doesn’t have friends,” Mycroft says, but says it neutrally, like it’s a fact he’s reassessing.
George shrugs. “I’d be his friend if he wasn’t such a fucking twat all the time,” she assures him, and giving into her shivers for a beat, she says, “Brr — right. That’s it, I’ve a few more uniforms to go shout at and then I’m off for the night. You should be, too, unless you want to get involved in the fascinating business of watching us photo document every inch of this building.”

Mycroft is silent for a beat, and George is about to awkwardly repeat her dismissal when Anthea cuts in with, “Sir, you were saying you wanted to discuss Dr. Watson with the detective? Or did you want that rescheduled?”

George arches a brow at the both of them. “Oh, I’m scheduled, am I?” she asks.

Anthea just gazes at her blankly; Mycroft, meanwhile, almost looks chagrined.

“Presumptuous, I know,” he says. “But it would be helpful if you were able to join me.” He glances over her shoulder, at the hive workers of crime scene technicians and officers still gathering around, the EMTs making notes — S. Holmes: flagrantly ignored shock blanket — and clears his throat. “Unless of course you’re truly obliged to stay and manage the scene?”

Under normal circumstances, George’s general low-grade need to be a control freak marries into an outsized guilt complex about her people being trapped doing work while she’s off not, but she’s cold and ravenous and none of these guys at the scene have been working on this bloody case or dealing with Sherlock Holmes the way she has. And the promise of being indoors and fed is so suddenly appealing George says, “No, not really. Let me go deputize someone and I’ll be right back.”

She does — not PC Hatcher, who manages to refer to her as sir-ma’am, again, bless him — and ends up following Mycroft’s almost invisibly black town car with her own, winding and winding until they end up past Liverpool Street Station, at a tiny restaurant off of Columbia Road, cars parked very illegally nearby.

George eats three separate orders of the salted almonds before their entrees come, trading notes with Mycroft on Dr. John Hamish Watson. She has her background check on him, and Mycroft has his own, but neither of them are truly interested in the black and white line items of Dr. Watson’s CV.

“How did they even meet?” George asks, eating Tuscan beets now. Thank God all of her vanity died in the police academy or else she’d never be able to face Mycroft again, the way she’s plowing entire acreages of food into her mouth.

Mycroft picks idly at his green salad. “Barts. Mutual acquaintance thought they might make good flatmates.”

She points at him. “This,” she says, “this level of detail you have about his life? This is why Sherlock hates you.”

“If he didn’t need so much looking after, I could stop straining myself looking,” Mycroft says innocently, as if he’s not an obvious voyeur at heart. George has a giggling, thrilling thought of the vastly expensive auteur pornography he must own, all suggestion of bondage through heavy curtains the next house over in Belgravia.

“I can’t imagine Sherlock living with anyone,” she goes on. George tries to visualize sharing a bathroom with Sherlock, surrendering her kitchen table over to his chemistry set, or what she’d do if she didn’t have the 3 a.m. insulation of turning off her mobile, if he could just come into her room and talk at her until she murdered him in self-defense. “God, I don’t think I’d last a day.”
Mycroft makes a thoughtful noise. “Our good doctor seems no worse for wear so far.”

George decides not to mention the giggling at the crime scene.

“Well, maybe Dr. Watson will be good for him, moderating influence,” George says, feeling ridiculous even as she says it. She can’t even imagine the effects of a moderating influence of Sherlock would be. Would he be Sherlock any longer? Shout less? Halve his tendency toward being a tosser? She’s not built for that kind of hypothetical.

She’s ordered rabbit and polenta, and it’s heavenly when it comes, redolent with spices and a touch gamey, the polenta studded through with crumbled parmesan. George isn’t particularly successful employing fork and knife onto the rabbit, and she’d be embarrassed by her commonplace table manners and sleep-dumb fingers if Mycroft didn’t keep up a running dialog through their meal: warmly affectionate, dryly funny.

George understands she can never really know the unique ecosystem of Sherlock and Mycroft’s relationship, but she knows she likes Mycroft. Being with him is effortless, oftentimes literally, and George feels uncomplicated sitting across from him, talking about how she came to work for the Met and the one time Sherlock got them locked in a car boot for an experiment — “I sprained his wrist for that one,” she remembers fondly — and he laughs at her when she caves and calls back to the scene out of sheer paranoia.

“You are very dedicated, Georgiana,” Mycroft says when she ends the call hurriedly, and before she can tense up about it, he murmurs, “We’re lucky to have you on the job.”

He’s watching her with something very like — very much like, George thinks, feeling herself go red, a blush gone wild over her cheeks, down the hollow of her neck, and her hands shake with realization, wine trembling in the glass until she sets it down.

“Thank you,” she says, shy again, vanishingly shy all of a sudden, and stares down at her plate, her heart heaving in her throat.

There’s a too long silence between them, that stretches and stretches until voices and the clinking of plates and silver from the rest of the restaurant steal in to fill in the spaces, and George tries to think of something to say and discards all of it, feeling suddenly overtired like a child at the end of a day, too tongue-tied to say what she wants or even know it.

Across the table, Mycroft shifts, just the sound of fabric moving. She sees him touch the end of a fork, righting it along a 45 degree angle on his plate as he says flatly, “I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

George looks up, saying, “No,” when she means yes, but I like it, “it’s just...been an extremely long week. Weeks.” She scrubs her hands over her face, sighing, “Eons.”

Being Sherlock’s brother, he sees it for the dissembling it is, but being Mycroft, and not Sherlock after all, he allows it.

“I’ve kept you too long,” he says, all public school manners now, flawlessly cordial.

The check is spirited away along with Mycroft’s ebony black credit card, and George is too tired to argue she ought to pay half. She doesn’t realize how tired she is, actually, until she finds herself standing at her car door, staring stupidly between the keys in her hand and the lock, trying the puzzle out the mystery of their combination and finding herself utterly stumped.

“This will never do,” Mycroft says, appearing suddenly at her side, and George barely manages to
say, “What?” before he looks over her shoulder, instructing, “Anthea — please take her bag.”

George says, “Wait — what?” again.

Anthea takes her bag and Mycroft takes her car keys and herds her into the passenger seat. “Sit down,” he says, and frowns his marvelous frown at her until she complies, warning, “If you do not put on your seat belt by yourself, I shall do it for you.” The door is closed, and George registers — distantly — the sound of a discussion of logistics, but then the driver’s side door is opening and Mycroft is folding himself painfully into her Golf, long legs jammed against his chest until he slides the seat all the way back.

“You are very tall,” she tells him, clinging to wakefulness.

He puts the keys in the ignition, and when Mycroft looks at her again it’s with that humbling attention again, the full, searing weight of it like a finger pressed between the wings of her collar bones: intimate and incapable of being ignored, comprehensive.

“You should be asleep,” he murmurs, and George hears the engine turning over, sees the lights of the dash go on.

She closes her eyes, so she doesn’t see what his face does when she says:

“I was uncomfortable — in the restaurant.”

George feels blurry, tipped off that continental shelf into a bone-deep exhaustion that hurts, her skin and her eyes and her head aching for sleep, her brain slurring almost as badly as her speech. More alert, less deconstructed, she’d never be so stupid or have the courage to say it, but right now, she should, she can, and George doesn’t want to give up her easy conversations, her occasional co-conspirator — her accomplice and friend.

“But only because no one looks at me like that,” she confesses, tongue tripping over the consonants, “the way you did.”

She forces her eyes open, and it takes a second to resolve the image of Mycroft turned to stare at her, the amber of the stoplights ahead of them. It’s too dark, really, to read the expression on his face, and anyway, George would never presume to be able to decode either of the Holmeses, but he says, “I see,” like he really, truly does.

“Good,” she whispers back, eyes shuttering again, “okay.”

George wakes up ten hours later. Her mobile phone alarm’s been turned off, her bedside clock’s been unplugged, and there’s a glass of water and a note by her lamp, balanced on her half-finished copy of Georgiana: The Duchess of Devonshire.

*You are on leave for the next three days, by order of your superiors at New Scotland Yard. I had Anthea leave your bag and car keys in your sitting room.*

*Mycroft Holmes*

He has competent, impatient copperplate: practical, not effusive, and George rolls onto her back and stares at the note too long.

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*Thanks for dinner. And for seeing me home. GL*
The pleasure was mine.
MH

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Chapter 3

After that, George gets the distinct feeling the ball is in her court.

She’s not used to this part. Even leaving aside her staggeringly unsuccessful romantic career in her teens and her mostly-accidental series of drunk, football hooligan boyfriends in her twenties, it’s been a decade since she’s dated anybody but Tom. Several years ago, she would have claimed she was at least quite good at dating Tom, except of course he’d disagreed and preferred Laura Hilton, herpes, instead. Not for the first time, she’s grateful she’s too uncool to have a Facebook account, and can’t spent hours of her fucking life at work staring at their pictures and kissy messages to one another the way poor Dimmock is after his girlfriend had dumped him with extreme prejudice after the last interdepartmental rugby match. Gruesome. It was so emotionally fraught it’s topped George’s own debacle at the Christmas party.

The other problem being back then at least she had friends she could talk to about this sort of thing. Now, she has Sally (who must never know), Anderson (who must never know), Sherlock (who probably already does know, Jesus), and Dr. Watson, who’s so new to this entire mess she’s still referring to him by title and surname. Plus, the greater likelihood is that he’s already run screaming for the hills.

Anyway, it feels private, something to be kept close and secreted away.

She doesn’t even have enough time to worry about it properly since as soon as she’s back at work, she’s back to juggling several flaming balls.

Two weeks and several other cases go by before George realizes she’s committed almost zero time to the question beyond her now habitual evening two hours of DIY SOS and pasta or takeaway, gaping at the television and allowing increasingly inappropriate thoughts about Mycroft bloody Holmes to cross her mind. In a way, her frenetic worry — what must he think of her? — at her lack of action is indication enough as her what her next response should be, but then there’s the issue of her being terrified.

There is the common, everyday scared she feels because this is new, and her mother still likes to tell the story of how George had forced her father to taste-test every new ice cream flavor he brought home before she’d try it. There’s the additional layer of hesitation that comes from the fact that the last person she kissed had left her, walked away from the life they’d made together and told her she must have seen it coming. If she hadn’t seen it coming then, will she see it coming now? Can she ever know? She’s barely knit together; she doesn’t know if she can handle being torn up any more.

And then there is the issue of Mycroft and his aggressive stalking, the obvious falsehood of his minor position in the British government.

Recognizing it goes beyond ordinary levels of pathetic, George resorts to asking the only person she knows who’s actively dating.

“Well, government work is very stable, dear,” her mother says, plating up a dish of biscuits and settling into one of her squeaking kitchen chairs. She’s a bit rosier in the cheeks these days, her hair just a touch curlier, lipstick perfect. “But do you like him?”

Oh God. Yes, George thinks. “Oh, God. Maybe?”
Her mother gives her a disbelieving look. “You must be over the moon for this one.”

“The more important issue here is what I should do next,” George presses, since just because her mum knows her doesn’t mean the woman ought to be allowed to use such an unfair tactical advantage. “I mean — what the hell do I do?”

Her mother retreats into her teacup, coming up a moment later to say, “Well however should I know, George? You’re around young people all the time. What do they do?”

Pained, George says, “I’m around young people arresting them all the time, Mum.”

“Then do the opposite and you’ll be right as rain,” her mother declares. “Honestly, George, I’ve never understood why you’re such a ninny about this sort of thing. Any man should be counting his lucky stars to have your attention.”

George decides to eat all the biscuits herself and pulls the plate close to do so.

“Thank you for being completely and utterly unhelpful,” she says.

She ends up spending the night in her childhood bedroom, staring at her ceiling of glow-in-the-dark stars and her walls plastered over with pictures of teen idols and newspaper clippings, her diplomas and certificates. She remembers being crushed up close with Tom in this twin-sized bed Christmas Eve not long ago, elbows in each other’s ribs and staying up late to whisper since the walls were paper thin at her mum’s house.

She thinks, *God, I miss him,* and then revises it to, *God, I miss that,* because more than Tom, it’s the easy intimacy of it she craves, the way she’d known him — or thought she had. George misses having someone to buy preposterous Christmas presents for, to make breakfast for, to kiss good morning, to watch her luggage at airports, and the truth is that she has no idea if Mycroft does any of these things, or if they’re all far too common for him. If underneath his apparent fascination with her civic responsibility, she’s too common for him.

“Well,” she says to her ceiling, clutching the covers under her chin, “I’ll never know unless I go for it, will I?”

There’s a thump on the wall over her head.

“That’s exactly what I mean, dear,” her mother calls back. “And anyway, he sounds like a nice boy.”

George puts a pillow over her head so her mum doesn’t have to hear her swearing.

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She puts it off until Thursday, at which point her mother’s overly solicitous text messages become too much to bear: *i googled him! very dapper! and ooo it says hes a career civil servant that’s nice isnt it? and shame about his hair youll have to bring him over i can fix that right up for him and denniss son at the licensing buro says hes never married b4 are we sure he likes women???

Mycroft answers the phone saying, “Detective Lestrade, what a surprise.”

“Yes, you sound utterly surprised indeed,” George says, instead of something coquettish and charming, because that gene had skipped her generation, her mother mourns.

Except Mycroft must find it charmingly coquettish, because he laughs. “Caught.”
George tries to bite away her smile and fails. She wasn’t this 13 when she was 13. “Well, as long as there aren’t any cameras in the ladies toilet, I’ll let this slide,” she says, because Georgiana Anne Lestrade is the type of woman who says ‘toilet’ to a posh man when she’s trying to ask him out on a date. Christ.

“I’ll have them removed immediately,” Mycroft promises smoothly. “To what do I owe the pleasure of your call today, Georgiana?”

She coughs awkwardly and turns to stare pointedly at her computer monitor, because mindlessly scrolling through cold cases will numb the awkwardness of this, she’s hoping. “Guilt, primarily,” she admits finally. “I’ve put off asking you to dinner so long my mother’s begun Googling you.”

George can hear Mycroft’s smirk over the phone line. “Oh, dear.”

“Any incriminating holiday photos I ought to know about?” she asks, babbling now, nervous. What if he’s changed his mind? What if she’d interpreted everything wrong? She’d been half crazy with exhaustion — why on Earth would she trust her judgment then? She’d been wearing brown shoes and black trousers that day for God’s sake.

“Nothing except for an exceedingly unflattering photograph on the HM Revenue website, I assure you,” Mycroft answers.

George blurts out, “My mum apparently thinks you look dapper,” and running on adrenaline before mortification can paralyze her voicebox like it had in sixth form, she forces herself to say, “So — dinner?”

There’s pause, the sound of pages turning. “Dinner may be...difficult for the foreseeable future,” Mycroft starts, and George knows instinctively he’s not letting her down easily because she’s been that person, too, flipping through her diary looking for an open space. “Brunch? This weekend?”

George glances at her desk calendar. “Saturday? Noon?” she asks, breathless.

“Done,” Mycroft agrees. “Preferences on location?”

George writes down OH HOLY FUCK under 12 p.m. Saturday, hands shaking like mad.

“Ottelonghi? On Upper Street? If you have no objections, of course,” she says somehow.

She hears a voice in the background, soft, and thinks it must be Anthea, moving around far more important meeting to fit this one in, and over top of it Mycroft says, “No objections,” all warm vowels in her ear.

“Good, great,” George says. “Um, meet you in front.”

“I look forward to it,” he says to her. “Until then?”

Probably, the U.K. is sliding ever close to financial ruin without his constant attention, but she still waits a little longer than she should to say, “Yes — until then,” because there’s something addictively good about having that attention all to herself, even just for a moment.

She spends a good ten minutes after hanging up with her legs kicked up on the desk staring at the water stains on her ceiling trying to get her breathing under control.

Sally interrupts her purgatory of self-doubt with a doughnut and tooth-rotting coffee.
“I’m fine,” George says, eating the doughnut in three bites. “There was no need.”

Sally just pats her on the arm. “You’re a good boss,” she says, patronizing. “I like you.”

George says, “Fuck off,” but it’s around the doughnut and the coffee so Sally rightly ignores it as the feble protest it is by leaving another of each on her desk.

None of the scum in London has the decency to do anything that falls within the purview of Serious Crimes for the rest of the day, which is simultaneously maddening and probably for the best, since George’s effectiveness as a law enforcement officer would register at negative six. Friday, she has court. She spends the day in a dark gray suit and white shirt, wilting in the heat of the courtroom, feet screaming in her tan pumps. George feels like she spends half her life in court, but everybody assures her she’s good at it in the way she’s not good at press conferences. Court is facts and figures, evidence and probable causes; press conferences are almost always in the middle of investigations, when George has nothing to say and nothing to show anybody, just stuttering over her own awkwardness and knee-jerk defensive.

The night before her first date with with Tom, George had agonized over what to wear and meticulously shaved her legs over the course of an hour. She’d debated over the number of condoms to bring with her — was three slutty? or intimidatingly presumptuous? — and had Rachel over to do an inventory of perfumes trying to decide which would be the most mouth-watering and irresistible.

Friday night, circa present day, George does a load of laundry and pops into the Sainsbury’s to do her weekly shop. She ends up on the couch clearing out her DVR at about 8 p.m., eating tomato soup for dinner. For a moment, she actually thinks she’s going to manage this entire night without any sort of adolescent romantic meltdown when she catches a glimpse of herself in the hall mirror, sees the state of her hair, and promptly freaks the fuck out. About everything.

She falls asleep hours later in between a small colony of Tom’s clothes she’s decided to burn, and about a hundred dresses that fall into the “they were too slutty for me ten years ago” category, too filled with despair to go on.

It’s breathlessly blue-skied on Saturday, tiny wisps of cirrus clouds at the horizon, the last clear note of autumn before October begins to bleed sluggishly into winter. Upper Street is lightly peopled with morning shoppers and yummy mummies at pram, and George dodges a half-dozen girls cooing at the bags in the window of Oliver Bonas. There’s already a cross and decaffeinated line jammed into the doorway at Ottelonghi when she gets close enough to see inside its windows — half obscured by an embarrassment of tarts and popovers and chocolate cakes.

George is thinking, oh, Jesus, what the fuck was I thinking, staring at the crowd when there’s a touch on her arm. It’s an echo of the gala at the Ritz, one that turns into a hand, cupped around her elbow, the sudden press of a body close to her — proximity warm — and George finds herself smiling as she turns.

Mycroft is wearing a tweed sportcoat and gray sweater underneath, the collar of a pale blue shirt peering out, and he’s running his thumb along the outside of her elbow. George blames the way he’s looking at her for how breathless she sounds saying:

“Hi — hello.”

“Hello,” he says, and he pulls her in a little bit closer. It’s only the tiniest application of force, but George was balanced barely anyway, and then she’s near enough that she can curl a hand into the lapel of his jacket and rub her thumb against the grain, smile growing wilder and wilder as she
watches his pupils dilate.

And just in that one second, George knows exactly what to do, a lock clicking open at his fingertips, and she says, “Mr. Holmes — does your jacket have elbow patches?”

It’s perfect, it’s absolutely perfect, and George feels like a skeleton key, doors giving way, because Mycroft laughs, eyes crinkling, before he tucks her in a bit more tightly against him — possessing — and admits, “It does.”

They’re blocking the door, and probably drawing a crowd, but George could stay here safely in the center of his focus for the rest of her life. She feels that great surge of vertigo, the scared-luscious thrill of looking down from a great height with nothing in between her and the fall but two steps and a decision, and George thinks that she can’t wait to jump, and that the fall might kill her but what a way to go.

She bites her lip, but the smile doesn’t go away because Mycroft’s eyes dart to her mouth, and she imagines what he must be deducing of her: Vaseline aloe vera lip balm, MAC Lady Bug lipstick applied twenty minutes ago with a nervous hand, chapped from the dry weather, tempted.

“We should go inside,” she says, watching him watch her.

The line in the door isn’t a problem, it turns out, because the geologic era of waiting turns into a series of small revelations: the pads of his fingers drawing across the back of her arm; the way they feel pressing down the curve of her spine, into the well of her back; the way he chuckles in her ear when she says, “You ironed those jeans, didn’t you?” George feels pulled out of focus, and every time reality intrudes — when their harried server apologizes and seats them side by side at the long table in the narrow belly of the restaurant, when the menus flop down between them, when the tea and coffee arrive — she feels startled, like the brunch and the restaurant are the ghosts in the image, and the weight of Mycroft’s fingers on the inside crook of her elbow is the only clear thing in the photograph.

“Do you know,” George laughs, sudden, and she’s blushing, her face is hot, “I don’t know why I chose this place — you probably hate it.”

He cocks his head at her, and George feels it to her fingers at toes. It figures that being the object of Mycroft’s attention would be like this: gloriously hypoxic, euphoria slipping in with the detail of things blurring away.

“Georgiana,” he says in a voice that should be too quiet to hear in the din, over the sound of babies and Saturday morning laughter, “I can honestly say that I haven’t noticed the restaurant at all.”

Her face must be a sight because when their waitress comes back, she takes one look at George’s expression before laughing and winking at Mycroft, promising, “I’ll come back in a moment — or six.”

Later, they’re turned like quotes, opened to one another and closed off from everyone else, their breakfasts going cold on the table between them. George puts her cheek in one hand, elbow on the table, and watches Mycroft’s face as she asks, “What’s it like?”

His face is momentarily undecided. “How do you mean?” he asks.

George glances away, at the waitresses floating between tables and the baby batting at the balloon nearby, the twentysomethings on a date, the couple on the rocks near the back. She doesn’t wave, but she knows Mycroft is following her gaze, looking around them now, too.
What do you see, when you see this?” she tries again. “I mean — what’s it like in that head of yours? What are you seeing?”

“I’m not exactly making a deduction right now, Georgiana,” Mycroft demurs.

She arches a brow. “Just because you’re not doesn’t mean you’re not noticing,” she argues.

He makes a thoughtful noise, and allows, “True,” before he motions to the waitress for another cup of tea. He takes his with skim milk and no sugar, but George suspects the first cup of tea she ever brought him is still to his liking.

“Her name is Lara,” Mycroft says, as soon as the waitress is out of earshot.

George blinks.

Mycroft nods over her shoulder. “Don’t turn,” he murmurs, and goes on, “Ottelongs is far too trendy to force its waitstaff into wearing nametags, but the girls at the end of the table are regulars, or perhaps friends of the proprietor, and they’ve been asking for our waitress by name all meal. She’s not new to London, but she didn’t grow up here, the accent she’s suppressing and the way she greeted us when she gave us our menus says West Midlands. She’s been here long enough to be self-conscious about her accent, but not long enough to be comfortable flattening it, either — six months, give or take. Either an aspiring model or actress, from the way she lied when you asked if she liked the French toast — it’s likely she hasn’t tasted most of this menu — and the way her cheeks are touch too hollow: this is her natural shape minus a about a stone.”

“Oh, about a stone is it?” she teases.

Mycroft sniffs. “To make a more exact determination, I’d have to see her naked,” he says, “which, considering I am having brunch with you in your favorite restaurant, is both undesirable and extremely improbable.”

“Good save,” George says mildly, and stirring another sugar into her cooling coffee, she asks, “Is it all right? I mean — is it overwhelming?”

He considers the question, long enough that George wonders whether he’s ever considered it before, if anyone during his childhood or teens or youth had ever looked at the Holmes brothers and been concerned about them versus their remarkable minds.

“My brother,” Mycroft says after a long beat, “on our first visit to the Louvre, decided to use its floorplan as his memory palace.”

George says, “Fucking of course he has a memory palace,” because she can’t help herself.

Mycroft smiles. “It always seemed so imprecise to me, and so inefficient, but Sherlock is a hedonist, no matter what he thinks, and he liked the marble and columns and the staircases — the rooms wide enough for even all of his observations,” he tells her, thoughtful. “I never had any patience for it. I imagine it must slow down the process of retrieval, having to wander so many rooms to locate a thought.”

“You may not use it, but do you have one? A memory palace?” she asks. Mycroft looks like he ought to have a memory file cabinet, everything neatly labeled.

“As an experiment, mostly, but yes,” he says.

“So not the Louvre for you,” George muses, trying to imagine something that would fit into
Mycroft’s elegant pragmatism: everything in its place. “Is it a thing? A place?”

“Our house,” he says, and correcting course, adds, “the family home.”

“It’s an estate, isn’t it,” George returns, and it’s not even really a question.

Mycroft pulls an almost-convincing look of offense. “I will have you know it is only a minor Georgian mansion.”

“If Sherlock requires the enormous sprawl of the Louvre, how on Earth can you fold everything into a single house?” she asks. Sherlock would say it’s because he’s smarter than Mycroft, but Sherlock also believes he’s infallible perfection, that his brilliance will always make him necessary and perfect and untouchable.

“Well,” Mycroft says, leaning back to allow Lara from the West Midlands to set down another cup of tea, steaming hot, “I have always been tidier than Sherlock.”

George may not be a genius, but she is trained for this, so she takes a sip of her coffee, the sugar gritty sweet, and replies, “You didn’t answer my question though.”

He turns down to his teacup, fingertips tracing the lip of it, a frown tugging down the corners of his mouth. He looks pensive, but not angry, really, so she waits, letting Lara’s voice and the door and the kitchen and people and food sounds fill in the spaces. George wonders if there’s a drawer, a book, a nesting doll, hidden somewhere in Mycroft’s house that he’s looking for now. She wonders if he’s up to date, if she would be in the house, too, and where he might keep her. The conservatory? In the garden? Among the coffee mugs? Or maybe tucked away in somewhere, among the disordered linens of a four-poster bed.

“Right, while you mull that,” George says, glancing at the scowling crowd outside, waiting for a table as they linger. “I can’t bear the guilt any longer.”

She gets the bill and pays the check, ignoring Mycroft’s half-hearted attempt to intervene, and takes his hand to lead him from the restaurant. He’s still quietly thinking about her question, and she feels protective of him like this, as she laces their fingers together and weaves them down the aisle, around other customers and a running child, through the awkward doorway and back onto the street.

“Well?” she asks, when they’re clear of the crush of people and on the sidewalk, standing in front of a Whistle and down the road from the Angel, the movieplex, the Sainsbury’s where she buys yogurt and tampons and vinegar to descale her kettle.

“I think that I wouldn’t know how else to be but like this,” Mycroft says finally, looking amused in spite of himself. “Do you mind terribly?”

George feels something come loose in her chest, a worry that had been binding her and she hadn’t noticed, and the next breath comes easier. It’s a silly question, like asking George this late in the game if she minds that he’s slightly ginger and taller than she is, obviously fussy about his clothes — things that she had to have liked already, to be standing here with him on a Saturday morning, holding hands.

“Not terribly, no,” she says, and slides her other hand into her pocket, tugging him along by their palms, pressed close. “Come on — let’s see if there’re any actual antiques in Camden Passage.”

If she were playing this game with Sherlock, George imagines they’d be drummed out of every single shop they visit, and the yarn store preemptively for all the deliciously cruel deductions.
Sherlock wouldn’t resist making. Mycroft is exceedingly polite and deadly charming to all of the storekeepers, who end up tittering ridiculously and fumbling with their pricing guns and wares around him.

“Shall I buy you a present?” Mycroft asks her, when they’re standing in front of a store full of Japanese prints. “It would seem the traditional thing to do.”

George doesn’t really want anything, so she says.

“Maybe the ceramic bird,” Mycroft replies, utterly unflappable. “They’re supposedly very valuable, you know.”

George had physically recoiled at the bird, it was so horrible. “Oh, I see,” she says. “This is where you make fun of me for hating ugly garbage.”

“You could grow to love it,” he points out. “You grew to love Sherlock.”

“Bite your tongue,” George scolds. “Your brother I tolerate for the good of London.”

“Do you know, I briefly considered he might have feelings for you, in the beginning,” Mycroft tells her, gleefully evil. “I was prepared to bribe you to marry him.”

George kicks his ankle. “I’m so glad I tasered you,” she says, and she means it earnestly. If ever a people deserved tasering, it’s Holmeses.

“Me, too, in retrospect,” Mycroft agrees.

George doesn’t believe in ghosts or fate or that she’s destined for anybody. She’s always thought herself unromantic, common, achingly everyday, but right now George believes that there are ley lines in this narrow little paved road, the crowd outside the Breakfast Club getting ever louder. It feels like the pull of a magnetic pole, orienting her, the ushering gust of a summer sea wind sending her two steps closer, and George smiles and reaches up, frames Mycroft’s face with her hands.

“I just thought of something I need,” she tells him.

“Mummy won’t unhand those dancing photographs,” Mycroft quips, immediate, but he’s watching her mouth like he’d like to deduce the history of her life from her lips, and it makes George forgive him instantly, laugh as she mutters, “I swear you and your miserable brother are the bane of my existence,” and draw him down to her.

Mycroft is bossy and presumptuous, predatory in his invasions of privacy, and George knows she’s a little crazy to be here, to want such a person so badly. Mycroft is too polished for any of Sherlock’s ragged, glass-sharp edges, but that doesn’t mean he isn’t dangerous — genuinely dangerous — but George guesses she must like it, the thrill of it, to throw herself in between the world and Mycroft’s explosion.

He kisses in patient little sips of her: the left corner of her mouth, the swell of her lower lip, a thumb pressed into the divot of her chin so she sighs, opens up for him. She can feel the way he smiles into her at that — smug — and she shouldn’t encourage this kind of behavior except she likes it, except it leaves George impatient for him, one hand trailing down the to the tug on the collar of his jumper, going to the tip of her toes.

Mycroft’s other hand is pressed in between her shoulder blades, pressing her close against his chest, sealing off the space between them, keeping out the October chill. The little kisses are
deepening with a scrape of teeth, the warm wet of tongue, and George bites his lip until he gives in, laughing, and she can take what she wants.

It’s lush more than heated, languorous, kissing Mycroft this way. George feels unhurried and indulged, his arm traveling the length of her back and his fingers sliding up to card into her hair, tilting her head back, so she’s murmuring nonsense words into his lips when he breaks away from her, hovering close so they’re breathing together.

“Is that what you needed?” he asks her, pressing his mouth to her chin.

Mycroft is running his thumb along her neck, making her shiver against the pad of his finger, and she startles away from the touch just long enough to miss it again, leaning back in for another, humming low in the back of her throat and feeling the endorphin rush of teenaged love filling up her veins.

It’s both exactly what she wanted and nothing like she thought it would be: perfect and a touch infuriating, which is an apt description of Mycroft in general if George thinks about it. She keeps catching him answering questions she’s been too cowardly to ask, telegraphing that little impossibilities that aren’t so impossible at all, and George thinks about worrying he wouldn’t do this, that ordinary people things like holding hands in the street and horrifying teenagers with a public kiss wouldn’t be for him. And here he is: standing in the October sunshine, her lipstick smeared all over his mouth, hair a wreck, grinning like he’s a boy and he’s just found something foul in the shed.

She laughs and darts in for two last, little-bird kisses — and he chases after her, leaning closer when she pulls away — and says casually, “Oh, that’s some of what I needed,” before reaching up with the cuff of her jacket to scrub at his face.

He submits to it mostly cooperatively, but not without a few faces that George decides are probably genetic markers for the Holmes boys.

“I hope your sundry spies are enjoying this,” she tells him, running her thumb along the corner of his mouth and unable to hide her smile. “Watching their boss look at if he’s been set upon by a clown.”

“Surely they must know I’ll order them killed if they feel the need to tease me at the water cooler,” Mycroft says to her in a way that is probably supposed to be lighthearted, but makes George narrow her eyes anyway.

George jerks on his lapel in warning. “I’ll report you for misusing government resources.”

“It would hardly be misusing if Anthea, as you know, hungers for blood at all times anyway,” Mycroft is telling her in a very reasonable tone, eyes gleaming, when suddenly Tom and Laura Hilton, herpes, and a stroller are there, very blandly making their way down the sidewalk — presumably to add to the noise levels at Ottelonghi.

“Oh, God, George,” Tom says, every word punctuated by his face going another shade paler. At his side, Laura Hilton, herpes, is the same wide-eyed that she’d been in George’s sitting room so long ago. How can anybody stay so ridiculously young when they’ve a baby and Tom, George thinks briefly before collecting herself.


George makes a face, but decides to be petty by not saying, “Just call me George.” Instead, she turns to Mycroft, who is hovering conscientiously at her side, a bit behind and to her right, setting himself between George and the road like a gentleman when those rules still existed.

“Mycroft Holmes — Tom, and Laura,” she says.

He holds out a hand, and when he says, “How do you do?” it’s with public school vowels on all the words. Laura blushes when she shakes, and Tom bristles, asking:

“Holmes? As in Sherlock?”

“My younger brother,” Mycroft answers easily. “I’m afraid I am in his debt now. Without his constant acting out, I never would have met Georgiana.”

Tom swallows, throat dry enough he makes a clicking noise, and it takes a moment before he manages, “Right, well.”

He looks awkwardly at Laura, who looks awkwardly back, and George finds herself trying to gauge how in love they are — if they are at all — and mostly comes up blank. It’s strange to think there’s something of Tom’s she can’t know, even now, all this time apart. She hasn’t seen him since he came over to leave his house keys, bringing back some random trinkets of her’s he’d accidentally taken. She’d been hurt and he’d been quiet, and they’d gone out with a whimper and the the bang of her breaking a plate later that night, just dropping it on the tile floor of the kitchen to see what would happen.

She looks down at the baby buggy. “And this is?” she asks.

Laura makes pleased noise. “Oh, this is Fletcher,” she says, and reaches down to retrieve a baby: he’s got Laura’s dark hair and no other distinguishing characteristics, and mostly, George feels cold and a bit hollow looking at him — none of her usual rush of affection — and she doesn’t ask to hold him.

“Oh, he’s got Tom’s eyes,” George lies, because she has no idea what to say. Your child is very average and I’m surprisingly blase about him, which is nice. I thought I’d be volcanic or collapse or something.

“He’s very handsome,” Mycroft contributes, and takes the opportunity to slide arm across her back again, settling his hand at her hip, curling his index finger into the beltloop of her jeans: an anchor. It’s the type of touch at which Mycroft appears to specialize: invasive — desired.

Tom’s just staring at her, then back at Mycroft, and probably he’s playing the same game, trying to figure them out. George wonders if he’s having any more luck.

“So,” Tom starts, ignoring his baby and Laura Hilton, herpes, “are you two — ?”

Mycroft looks very pointedly at his watch, which makes Tom — who’s always been a bit of a watch fiend, actually — gape unattractively when he notices it, and says, “We are, indeed, running late.” He looks up, smiling blandly, and says, “If you’ll excuse us?”

George blinks when Mycroft plucks her hand out of the air and she catches up with the conversation, saying, “Right — sorry, gotta dash,” and whirls away, right into a gust of autumn wind that whips her hair into a frenzy, that has Mycroft smiling at her and pushing her fringe out of her eyes as they wait for the light to change at the intersection.

He walks her home, unhurried, telling the long history of his watch (which, excitingly, involves
killing Nazis), and concluding when they arrive at her house, saying with a flourish, “And anyway, after that, my grandfather could hardly justify keeping it, so down to me it came.”

She resists the urge to shove him like a schoolboy. “There is no way that story is true.”

“That story is as much a Holmes family heirloom as this watch,” Mycroft insists, so cool butter wouldn’t met in his mouth.

“You’re a filthy liar, and I know because I’m an officer of the law,” George accuses him, grinning, taking her keys out of her purse. She’s asking, “Would you like to come in?” before she’s really thought it through.

George is at once hoping he does and horrified he might, and she finds herself standing in the opened doorway of her house, tension knotting down her spine.

Mycroft doesn’t answer immediately, just draws her in so he can kiss her again — lingering — and when he pulls away, he says, “Yes, but not today.”

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After the business with the murderous cabbie, George genuinely doesn’t think she’s going see Dr. John Watson again. First off, Sherlock is vicious with his playthings, the sort of child that would love a toy to death in short order and then sulk resentfully at its lack of endurance. Secondly, although Watson had exhibited some characteristics — a well-hidden but apparently very deep streak of being absolutely cracked for one — that Sherlock likely found irresistible, there was being psychos in love and then psychos in love who had to live together. At uni, George had briefly dated a royal marine, and although the sex had felt like fighting a jaguar while falling off a cliff, she’d wisely never let him stay longer than the time it took her to peel herself off the kitchen table or the entryway wall or away from the airing cupboard.

Except then Dimmock had staggered back into NSY looking like he’d gone through the wars at the end of a miserable week, swearing at George about how could she stand them, that lunatic Sherlock bloody Holmes and Dr. Watson.

“What, seriously?” she asks, watching Dimmock drink cup after cup of scalding coffee like it will burn away the memory of his humiliation. George would tell him from personal experience it doesn’t work, but frankly it’s better to let new DIs learn this for themselves. “He’s still running around with Sherlock?”

“Yes,” Dimmock moans, bitter, before consulting his watch and moaning, “Christ,” before he leaves again, dragging his coat over his shoulders.

The rest of work is occupied with arresting very ordinary, boring bad people and enjoying it immensely. It’s a day of open-and-shut murders, with idiots running the minute she and Sally show up at their doorway, and George happily takes the opportunity to slam one of the miserable bastards against the police car as she cuffs him with cheerfulness of purpose.

“That’s police brutality, you bitch!” he shrieks at her.

“Oi, you haven’t seen anything,” Sally assures him. “She kills after mating.”

“I’m reporting you for that, Donovan,” George says brightly, and as punishment, abandons Sally to the paperwork and processing to catch a bus into the warehoused wilds of Shoreditch, where Mycroft meets her at the Aubin Cinema and they watch a crushing documentary about monkeys and language and George drinks to stave off embarrassing tears.
Dinner is old school and at the Hawksmoor. She makes him tell her a story about every country he’s ever visited, and that takes up all the time between their being seated and dessert, which means he’s only barely through a story about Borneo when his phone buzzes a centimeter across the soft white cloth of the table, reproachful.

He sighs at it, and George just tilts her head to the side, saying, “You know I don’t mind, don’t you?”

Mycroft favors her with one of those soft-eyed glances. “But I do.”

“Your job in your minor government post is very important,” George says, and folds the napkin in her lap, setting it on the table.

He has the good grace to feign chagrin at that. “I must also tell you I’ll be out of the country for a bit,” he says after a beat. “I should be no more than a week.”

George leans forward — pausing to flash their waitress an acknowledging smile as the plates and napkins and wine glasses vanish — and glances at Mycroft’s phone where it lies facedown against the table. George knows it’s not an accident that she’s never seen the screen of the phone and she wonders briefly if it should bother her to be so managed; like he’s married to work and she’s the mistress he keeps in a less-fashionable part of town.

“Can you say where you’re going?” she asks.

“No,” Mycroft tells her easily. “But I will bring you a gift.”

“I don’t want a gift,” George says reflexively, because Mycroft does things like spirit her away from hiding in her back garden into Surrey for dinner and dance with her at police galas, and she can’t imagine any gesture of his would be small.

He smiles at her. “What if it’s worthless?”

“I guess if it’s worthless, that’s all right,” she says slowly. “But only if it’s worthless.”

The check comes, and mostly to please her, he lets her split it between them, ignoring the way the waitress smiles indulgently between George’s NatWest Mastercard and Mycroft’s obsidian American Express. It’s the principle of the thing.

The less said about the ride back to her house the better. George is never going to be able to look Mycroft’s driver in the face again.

He texts her at 7 a.m. the next day to say he’s leaving and that he’s having Anthea look up the technical definition of “worthless.”

Something CHEAP GL, she writes, laughing at her desk. Most of Serious Crimes is exchanging worried looks, and Sally and Dimmock appear to be gossiping furiously.

This is Anthea. What if it is cheap in the local currency?

George types back, If you bring me heroin from Afghanistan, I am arresting you no matter how well-intentioned. GL.

The rest of the week deteriorates prodigiously.

On Monday night, about five minutes before she goes off shift, a pair of fragile-sounding new
constables find a baby in the dumpster near Royal London, and that’s her night shot. George has been doing this long enough that she knows to detach for cases like these, but just because she won’t let herself feel grief doesn’t mean she can shut off the anger, so she sits in the security bay at Royal London until half-nine the next morning watching CCTV footage and drinking a league of bad hospital tea. It’s not a good case, and arresting the stupid 17 year-old girl who’d done it doesn’t make her feel any better. Dr. Cleary at Royal London’s paed’s unit calls George later that afternoon to say the baby didn’t make it, and she goes through the motions, says, “All right, thank you for letting me know,” before George goes to tell its mother, waiting down in holding now, the depth of what she’s done beginning to sink in.

George sleeps through most of Wednesday since Margaret had more or less kicked her out of the office and threatened the rest of Serious Crimes on pain of death from letting George back into the building. She takes the opportunity to weed out her knicker drawer and pop in on her mother for the rest of the evening to tease her about her dentist. They’ve progressed to the point where George makes a mental note to abuse her police privileges and run a background check on the man.

“You won’t find anything!” her mother protests over dinner from the chippie down the street. Bill’s fancied George since they were both just babies, and they’ve never properly been charged for fish and chips since he took over his father’s shop.

“I’m sure he’s a paragon of virtue,” George agrees, talking around a mouthful of potato. Primarily, she’s just going to check for dead prostitutes, missing ex-wives, or debt, which George thinks is very restrained of her.

Nicking one of George’s chips, having already made short work of her own order, George’s mum asks, “Well? What about you? That Mycroft fellow?”

“Uh,” George says, turning bright red.

“Oh, is he that good then?” Gillian Lestrade says approvingly.

“Mum,” George groans.

Her mother pats her comfortingly on the knee. “I know you’ve always been a bit of a prig about these things, George, but men have needs.”

“I’m turning on QI now, Mum,” George says very loudly.

Apparently kids are going to be the theme of the week, because George gets to work on Thursday only long enough for Sally to say, “Anderson’s meeting us at the scene, come on,” before turning and heading for the motor pool.

It’s PC Hatcher at the scene, looking pale and queasy, and George squeezes his hand — discreet — as she passes. She’d looked him up after he’d chauffeured her round London for the pink lady case: 24 year-old, originally from Manchester, earnest, with a notable goodness she hopes he can hang onto at this job.

“Tell me what you found, Hatcher,” she says to him kindly.

“Of course, sir — ma’am,” he stutters, and leads her past the crime tape.

George is glad for Heller, their coroner, who talks gently to the body of the little girl in the ditch and clinically to George when she draws near enough to hear. He points out perimortem bruising — blood dark along the backs of her thighs — covering up what he guesses are days and weeks older ones littering her arms and legs. She has one of those sweet, little-girl faces, thick lashes
shuttered over baby-round cheeks; her dress is torn. Heller says there’re no signs of sexual assault, just the evidence of a long history of physical violence and little clues near the body besides: a cheap but very sparkly locket, a pink pony doll with a raggedy purple mane.

“Guilt,” George says, more for Hatcher than for anybody else.

“Guilt?” he asks.

George squats down, covering up her cold knees with the flaps of her coat, glancing back up to where Hatcher is maintaining five feet of distance between himself and the girl’s naked toes — painted a bubblegum pink and flaking.

“How can I tell?” she asks him. Aspires to being a DI, it had said in Hatcher’s file.

He stares at her for far longer than he needs to before turning to the girl, the body again, watching Heller’s quick hands taking a liver temp and declaring, “She’s been dead more than 24 hours — it’s not early rigor, it’s wearing off.”

“The toys,” Hatcher guesses, the words rushing out of him.

“That was a guess, but I’ll give it to you,” George allows fondly. She waves him down, and he goes to his knees awkwardly on the tarped ground as she points around them, at the pony, at the locket. “History of abuse, but the dress is mostly new, and her toenails are painted.”

He frowns. “They’re chipped, though.”

“Regular wear and tear,” George assures him. “Check with your girlfriend if you must.”

Hatcher colors. “Er.”

Sparing him further discussion on the subject, George says, “Heller says she was wrapped up in a blanket. This is a body dump, but it’s one that’s been done with some measure of love. Her hair is neat, she has her favorite things — the doll and the locket — and she was wrapped up warm. That all equals?”

“Guilt,” Hatcher says, more solidly now. “So — this was an accident?”

George shrugs, standing again and slipping her hands into her pockets. “Insofar as beating a child to death can ever be an accident,” she says.

In the background of the scene, Sally’s looking at a map with a couple of uniforms on the hood of a police car. They’re deep into North London, Sally’s old stomping grounds, and George redirects her attention to the girl again — watching Heller murmur her cheerful nothings as he zips her into the body bag, a promise he’ll have her out in two shakes of a lamb’s tail.

“It won’t ever get easier, really,” she tells Hatcher, answering the question he’s thinking is too cliche to ask. She glances over to where he’s staring down into the shallow ditch where they’d found the girl.

“Oh,” Hatcher says in a hush.

She pats him on the shoulder and starts off for Sally. “But if it weren’t for us, nobody would be on her side at all, would they be?” she reminds him quietly as she goes.

Sally has some people back at the office looking through missing persons reports in the last 48
hours, and says she’ll get Heller to send them a photograph to show around the area. It’s legwork even George is happy to leave for someone else, although sadly today it’s PC Hatcher and his partner, named PC Andy, and who doesn’t watch enough television to know why that’s funny.

George and Sally while away the rest of Thursday looking through missing persons files and on the phone with an already-hostile liaison from family services. Outside, it goes from fucking cold to brutally freezing, with clouds gathering in the afternoon to ensure weak winter sun doesn’t prevent frost from starting to spider itself across the windows in George’s office.

She gets a text when she’s standing in line at Pret, buying a crayfish sandwich, three brownie bars, and a cup of tomato soup:

*Will be delayed. Natives hostile, pedantic. MH*

“Fucking natives,” George sighs to herself. The girl at the register barely bats an eye at George’s purchases. The week after Tom had moved in with Laura Hilton, herpes, George had subsisted primarily on Pret brownie bars and an occasional Swedish meatball wrap.

Being a coward at heart, George hides in the shadow of NSY to reply versus texting in the warmth of her office, where Sally will see and make fun of her.

*How long delayed? Everything else okay? GL*

The reply comes less than 45 seconds later, which can only mean Anthea.

*This is Anthea. He’s very cross, so probably a week.*

There’s a follow-up in another 30 seconds.

*This is Anthea. Don’t fall in love with anyone while he’s gone.*

George glares down at the phone and types laboriously, fingers frozen stiff and trying to manage her purchases, too, *Need bribe of unicorn. GL*

There isn’t a reply, which could mean anything from Anthea being needed — presumably to assassinate a high-ranking member of whatever totalitarian government they’re currently visiting — or Mycroft discovering she’s been spreading lies about him via SMS or that she, too, is cold and wants to go eat her substandard lunch. It’s a sign of how gone for Mycroft George is that she’s considering this at all, she thinks glumly, and goes into the building and into the elevator to hate herself in relative warmth.

It’s a long day that goes into a long night, but by 7, Sally and George are reasonably confident they have a name: Aisha Baxter, a very slight eight years old. She lives with her father, Garrett, and a grandmother and four siblings in one of the council estates about a mile away from the dump site — or had lived, anyway.

The father’s a wreck when they get to the house, sobbing and asking to see his baby, and George spends most of the ride over to the morgue trying to figure out if this is delayed guilt or singular grief. His knees give out, looking at Aisha on the morgue slab, and when he raises his hands to stroke her hair, George thinks, *thank God for that, at least*, to see them unblemished: not a bruise, not a mark, no signs he slammed a child into the wall until her neck snapped less than 36 hours ago.
She catch’s Sally’s eye, and she’s off, back to the house for the grandmother.

***

Are you still up?
MH

I’ve decided to think it’s sweet you’re pretending you don’t already know. GL

I have looked into the unicorn issue.
They are still extinct.
MH

....You mean IMAGINARY. GL

I know what I typed.
Sleep well.
MH

***
George has an extremely quiet weekend filled with watching Antiques Roadshow, eating vegetables, and sleeping more than six hours a night, which is why it’s so infuriating when on Tuesday the following week her team sends Anderson in as a sacrificial messenger.

"You have to go to the doctor," he tells her, wearing a face mask and gloves.

"I’m fine," George says, after she coughs for half a minute.

"That is a wet hack," Anderson tells her. "That is a chest infection. Go away."

George tries to say, "You go away," but it dissolves into a series of screamingly painful coughs. The only good thing is the way Anderson recoils from her like she's a plague victim and scampers out of her office. In the next five minutes, Sally emails her four times, subject lined, "you sound awful, go to the doctor!" and "seriously, that’s vile, get out of here," and "at this point you’re just menacing us with disease," and finally, "fine, I’m telling Margaret."

She ends up hunched over in reception at her GP’s, surrounded by cross mothers and their even crosser children. It’s apparently high season for disease, so she waits for ages, until the sweet oblivion of death sounds like a viable, nay, preferred option.

Then someone clears their throat overhead, and it’s only through supreme effort that George manages to look up at — John Watson.

"You," she mumbles. And coughs.

"You," he replies, and goes ahead and checks her pupils, right there in the waiting room. "Right — you sound like you have a chest infection."

George doubles over, seized by another coughing fit, and John’s left talking in a quiet voice over her head. He loops one of his arms into her own and heps her out of the chair, and George has barely reached for her purse when he picks it up for her.

"Yeah, come on, I’ve got you," John says, and George lets herself go weak against him as he hauls her into one of the surgery’s exam rooms and settles her onto the bench, paper crackling underneath her bunched up coat. "I suspect you’ve got a touch of bronchitis."

George gives up dignity and collapses onto her side, face half-mashed into the paper and groaning, "I can’t go on — just shoot me like one of those racehorses."

John laughs, and George hears cloth rustling before strong arms are helping her back up. He’s saying, "Bear with me for a minute," before he’s put a hand between her shoulder blades, leaning her forward until George’s face is pressed into his shoulder, breathing in shallow, desperate pants.

"I’m going to open your shirt a bit so I can listen to your lungs, all right?" John tells her, his voice an easy reassurance close to her ear.

"You’re a good doctor," George croaks, wrung out.

She feels John grin against her temple as he says, "Warning: room temp latex hands," and then he’s pulling at the buttons on her shirt with obvious expertise, for which George would tease him under almost any other circumstance. John’s gloved fingertips make her shiver a little when they stroke
over chest, but the stethoscope is the worst. John says, "All right, deep breath in — and out."

It takes three tries before she manages it, and George growls, "If you make me do that again, I will arrest you," and John just laughs, pulling the stethoscope away and saying to her mildly:

"I’m sure Sherlock would break me out shortly," and asking her a number of questions that George attempts to answer and only mostly succeeds. At the end of it, John declares, "Right, that’s that. I think some antibiotics, and you’ll be right as rain."

It’s a measure of how tragic she must look that she spends half an age trying to button her own shirt before he takes over for her, closing her coat more tightly around her before he snaps off his gloves and goes to the ancient computer in the room to type up her prescription.

"I’d recommend you get a taxi home," John tells her as he hands over prescription. "You’re in no fit state to navigate public transit."

George clutches at the paper and says, "Shit. I drove."

John stares at her for a beat. "I am surrounded by ridiculous people."

In another life, George would have taken a cab and called Tom to get the car, because even if George had always been a bit of a loner, the institution of marriage was that of binding companionship and Tom was always a sympathetic nurse on the rare occasions she was ill. Now, George is trying to figure out if she can blackmail Anderson to drag himself out of Clapham, go to Islington to get her car keys, and then go get her car off of the narrow backstreet near the surgery she’d parked (probably somewhat illegally), or if she wants to chance calling her Mum — who will be equal parts distressed and cross.

"It’s fine," George says, "I’ll — "

John puts a hand on her shoulder. "You will sit right there," he instructs.

George is ready for an argument, but John just consults his wristwatch and clipboard before striding out the door of the exam room, white coat flapping, and George can imagine how that sort of determined competency would have gotten him easily laid — and that’s without the tragically attractive combat history in Afghanistan, even. Recognizing it’s mildly creepy to be speculating on her doctor’s sexual history, especially when her doctor is her nemesis stroke pet consulting detective’s friend stroke flatmate stroke something involving nipple clamps and gags, according to Sally, George abandons her efforts to sit upright and crumples down onto her side again.

John returns some time later, white lab coat traded in for his beaten-in leather jacket and bag, and he says, "Hand over your keys, there’s a girl," despite George mumbling, "I’m older than you." It’s not her best attempt at authority, she knows, and it’s not until he’s steering her out of the surgery that she realizes what’s happening.

"Oh," George starts, "you don’t need to."

"I know people like you," John answers. "People like you ignore their illnesses until they collapse or drive their cars into trees. Anyway, you’re Sherlock’s favorite copper at Scotland Yard — he’d be shattered if anything happened to you."

George smiles at him blearily. "Meaning Sherlock hates me the least," she manages, before going off on another coughing jag, but John smiles back at that, genuine.

"Maybe just point me at where your car is," he suggests.
It’s a bit touch-and-go for a bit, but they find George’s Golf eventually, and John shoves her in with the ease of someone who’s used to managing physically uncooperative people, gets her belted into the passenger seat as she coughs pathetically. The directions she gives to her house are half-hearted and slightly confused, but John seems to understand her well enough to get her home, driving with the same unflappable confidence he seems to do everything.

_Why is John too good and responsible to drop me off at the front door and leave?_ George thinks despairingly as helps her up the stairs, settling her on her unmade bed and asking, "Can you get undressed or shall I help you?"

"Spare me Sherlock’s jealous fit," George scrapes out in between coughs.

Laughing, John reaches for — oh, God — her prescription, tucked safely in his pocket, and says, "All right, sit tight here for a bit, I’ll just pop out and be right back."

George’s protest is mostly mumbles in between coughs, and John only looks at her with a vague amusement-cum-fondness before darting out the bedroom door and presumably out to the chemist’s.

It’s only the instinctive knowledge that if she’s not changed into sleeping clothes by the time he returns, John will forcibly assist her that drives George to discard her coat and scarf and trousers. The button-up and jumper are tossed over an armchair near the foot of her bed. She swaps it all in for her nearest nightgown, shivering into it and scrabbling weakly at the covers until she’s tucked up in the fetal position underneath, hair still trapped in a ponytail in an uncomfortable knot against the back of her head, sinking into the pillows like an anchor.

She must fall asleep, because the next thing she knows, John’s waking her up to force feed her antibiotics and make her drink a glass of water.

"I’m fine," she lies after, in between coughing, "you can go home. It’s okay."

"Convincing, truly, BAFTA-level there," he chides her. "Go back to sleep."

It’s not like there’s much else she can do, the entire wall of accumulated tiredness from this week and the last adding up to hold her under, and George has that strange sensation of all of her limbs detaching as she slips back into unconsciousness.

In the morning, she feels weak and still-miserable but less like she’s about to die where she stands, and it’s sufficiently motivating that she manages to clean her teeth and shower. After that, the distant ache of hunger comes into play, and George throws on a dressing gown and heads for the kitchen, taking each step with too much care on her still-weak legs and leaning heavily on the bannister.

On the landing, she sees John through the squalor of her living room, standing peacefully by her electric kettle and yawning in the mid-morning sun of her kitchen, barefoot on the tile.

"Oh, God," George says reflexively. "I’m so sorry."

John looks up at her, startled and sleep-wrinkled, and they both stare for a beat before he breaks first — giggling, and asks, "Tea?"

"Yes," George says, painfully glad for their shared English vocabulary, "yes."

It’s over said tea and the chocolate croissants she keeps permanently stocked in her cupboard and another dose of antibiotics for her that George says, "Thank you — you really didn’t have to stay."
John cocks an eyebrow. "Sleeping on your couch to make sure you didn’t die unsupervised was hardly trying."

"Still," George says, feeling her face coloring, worrying her dressing gown more tightly around herself. "You didn’t need to. Thanks. Really."

John’s studious attention is nothing near as paranoia-inducing as Sherlock’s, but it’s unsettling all the same. George is nothing if not used to being stared at, being appraised, ignoring leering and catcalls and vile degradations — all part and parcel of the joy of being female while cop, after all — but it’s not armor she wears at home, normally, discarded like her coat and shoes in the front hall.

What’s more, she can’t help the strange and not entirely new feeling that’s crawling up her spine, a sort of rueful awareness that sitting in a nightdress and barefoot like this with John will leave at least one other man upset. Mycroft is an unknown quantity in these things, and the less said about Sherlock’s possessive tantrums the better. Jesus Christ, George feels embarrassed just thinking about it.

"You’re right, I think," John says suddenly, and pausing, he doubles back around to add some context. "About Sherlock being a great man. I think — I think he’s good, too, underneath all of it."

George smiles, can’t help herself, because she’s always believed it, or maybe she’s always just wanted it so much she’s believed it in spite of all the evidence to the contrary.

The first active case she’d ever let Sherlock work was the kidnapping of a young mother, and the only evidence was the ten-year-old daughter the attacker had discarded. She’d allowed him the text files, and when that hadn’t been enough, she’d coughed up some photographs, and the fight Sherlock had instigated later that day, storming into her office like a vengeful god, was apparently still the stuff of New Scotland Yard legend. It had been in her first year as a DI, newly kicked up the ladder and appointed to Serious Crimes. George is only overprotective of little girls because she knows what the world does to them.

George doesn’t carry a gun in the ordinary course of business, and she’s a full foot shorter than Sherlock in flat shoes. She hadn’t excelled at hand-to-hand at the academy and she’s not even that scrappy, but George knows she can be dangerous, and on that first case, she’d slammed him into the wall outside the morgue and let him know so.

"But she’s already dead," Sherlock had argued. "Surely you don’t think — "

"I think I will stab you with a scalpel if you don’t pretend to be normal this once and treat her with the utmost respect and gentleness," George had snarled.

He’d only stared at her, interested, for a moment, and said, "Noted."

The medical examiners had already gone over Mary Power, combed her for evidence and taken samples, but Sherlock had done it all over again, with quick fingers and professional detachment while George had stood at Mary’s feet and fretted. She had been thinking about the brutal, ugly perimortem bruising they’d found, the darkening handprints around her fragile neck, the way she was putting Mary through an exam again so they could find a mother who would probably rather be dead once she learned her daughter's fate.

And then Sherlock had done something extraordinary and wholly unexpected: he’d started humming.
"What the fuck is that?" George had asked flatly.

"Flight of the Bumblebee," Sherlock had told her — distracted, checking Mary’s face now, peering at her eyebrows through his tiny magnifying glass.

"I — what?" she’d asked, ready to throw him out of the room and pepperspray him in the hallway for added effect, and then he’d come back with:

"She has calluses on her fingers from a stringed instrument, but they aren’t set or thick enough for her to be a longtime player. New then, and there’s not a matching mark under her chin for a violin or viola, and it’s unlikely a little girl would play the bass — so, cello," Sherlock had told her. "Every child learning a new instrument has that song, a composer, that one that’s a touch beyond their capability only for speed and not dexterity. Mine was Mendelssohn, of course — "

"Of course yours was Mendelssohn," George had said, feeling stunned.

" — but I suspect something more pedestrian for Miss Power, and — " he had indicated the inside of her wrist, the fading transfer tattoo of a cheerful bee, YEAH!!! written around him in dark blue biro " — I think Flight of the Bumblebee is as good a deduction as any."

So she’d spent the afternoon in the morgue with Sherlock and Mary and he’d hummed classical music as the moments had passed, and the only reason for it George had ever been able to guess at was simple kindness, something good at the core he couldn’t ignore even though he wanted to.

Six years later, she’s seen Sherlock do a number of other things like that: tiny moments of extemporaneous kindness, unpredictable, without pattern. So maybe Mycroft is right, that George has grown to love Sherlock like a particularly ugly possession, but he’d won that, clawed that devotion out of her in little threads and pieces, and George feels a moment of strange and dizzying levity to be sharing her breakfast table with somebody else in the know — another person Sherlock has gotten his talons into.

"I wouldn’t tolerate him if he wasn’t," George says finally, and tipping her head to the side, she adds, "Nor, I suspect, would you."

John grins back at her, cheeky, and looks like he’s about to say something that is equal parts despicable and charming when his phone rings to shatter the moment.

"Scuse me," John says fumbles the mobile out of his pocket only to blink at it twice before saying, "Er — I think it’s for you."

George asks, "What?"

"Look for yourself," John invites, and passes over his mobile.

This is Anthea. Give the phone to DI Lestrade, the phone screen — cracked already from hard living — says. George is still gawping at it when a follow-up comes through. This is Anthea. I thought I told you not to fall in love with anyone while he was gone.

"Oh, Jesus Christ," George says.

"Why is Anthea looking for you?" John asks reasonably, an absolutely shit-eating smile on his previously attractive face. Now it looks very attractive for punching.

George decides to ignore him, since "none of your fucking business," isn’t as compelling when she’s being forced to text Mycroft’s PA via John’s phone to say, Why the hell are you texting Dr
This is Anthea. You’ve missed two calls and seven texts and three separate noise complaints were called in about 221B Baker Street last night. It was suspicious.

George glances up at John. "Mycroft’s PA says there were three noise complaints filed about your flat last night," she tells him sweetly, watching all the color go out of John’s face.

"Oh hell," John swears, and rouses himself from the breakfast table in search of his coat.

She sees him to the door, thanks him again, and then runs upstairs to unearth her phone from the mountain of clothes she’d left lying around the night before to find that she has actually missed twelve calls and forty-five text messages, but that the balance excluding Mycroft were all from Sherlock.

"Stop panicking," she says when Sherlock picks up, as George holds the mobile to her ear, curling up under the covers again and feeling drowsy already from the day’s exertions. "I’ve just sent him home safely to you."

"And why was he gone all night?" Sherlock rants at her. She can just imagine the red spots of fury on his usually ghost-pale cheeks, and it gives her a frisson of childish delight to know she’s located such a delicious weak spot.

Telling Sherlock the truth would be boring, for which she’s constantly being mocked, so George takes the initiative to disclose, "Well obviously John and I were having extremely acrobatic unprotected sex over every surface of my house last night, Sherlock," but she’s not sure how much of it he hears over his own anguished noises and then probably some elaborate drama before he hangs up on her with a malevolent beep.

Sorry I missed you. Not feeling well and crashed out. John drove me home from the surgery and was kind enough to stay the night so I didn’t drown in my own vomit unsupervised. Hope you (two) are well GL, she sends to Mycroft, because she never knows if she’s interrupting something, and texts at least are easy to ignore if needed.

This is Anthea. He’s sulking and worried, is the reply, a heartbeat later, followed by, This is also Anthea. Please take more care with yourself. The rest of today’s negotiations are likely to be extremely bloody.

"Oh, God," George says to her bedroom window, lying on her side, "I genuinely can’t tell if she means that literally."

***

She must fall asleep again, because she wakes up to the orange-pink light at the end of day, twilight creeping into the frames of her windows, her cell phone chirping by her ear for her attention.

"Mm — hello?" she asks, eyes still mostly closed, rolling onto her back in the bed and feeling her body ache in protest even as her throat feels a hundred times better, breath coming easy now.

"May I come in?" Mycroft asks. "Are you well enough to come to the door, or may I pick the lock without your being too offended by it?"

George smiles, eyes coming all the way open. "I thought you’d still be in location undisclosed."
"That’s what airplanes are for," he tells her patiently, and less patiently, "The door?"

"Come in — just don’t scuff the lock," she yawns.

He makes an offended noise at that and ends the call.

George thinks about getting up, about changing, about making herself presentable at least, but all of that seems so exhausting she decides to close her eyes for a bit, phone a warm weight in her palm, listing sideways across the pillow next to her cheek.

She’s not sure how much time passes, but she wakes up when she feels a weight on the edge of her bed, settled close, and someone carding her fringe away from her eyes, fingertips soft against her temples.

"It’s time for another dose, Georgiana," Mycroft says, a hush in the darkness.

Mostly, when she opens her eyes, she the liminal profile of him sitting on her bed, edged in faint orange from the sodium lights outside her window, the curtains drawn to keep in the dark. It takes a minute for her night vision to start kicking in, and she sees Mycroft’s face is fond and a bit tired at the edges, down to his waistcoat, shirtsleeves rolled up, hair falling into his face, and she feels a surge of delayed longing for him, missing him like her body’s only just realized his absence now that he’s here.

"Hello," she whispers, throat still aching.

When he smiles, a little of the tiredness falls away, at least, and his thumb makes a study of her cheek as he replies, "Hello to you, too," before asking, "Do you think you can sit up and eat, or would you rather sleep some more?"

George blinks three times, trying to collect her brain into some order, before deciding, "Food. I think I might actually be starving."

"What do you fancy, then?" Mycroft asks, still petting her like a favored cat.

"Surprise me," George orders, and stretches out underneath Mycroft’s large palm, until it’s stroking down her neck and in the hollow of her throat — warm, heavy and calloused in places: the lingering marks of string instruments and guns and fountain pens.

"As you wish," he says, leaning close to press a kiss to her hairline, and George takes the opportunity to breath him in, the office paper and ink and textile smell of him, and feel herself humming contentedly at the touch his mouth on her skin, shameless.

Her hall is bright outside her bedroom, and there’s the sound of quiet enterprise coming up the stairwell, water running and the stove being lit. George allows herself another few minutes languishing in bed after Mycroft leaves her there before she pushes herself up and then onto her feet, reaching hazily for her dressing gown again and starting out of the room, not bothering to belt it. She brushes her teeth and washes her face, and in the mirror George looks tired and pale, but there's a smile on her face.

There’s a black town car parked like a sleeping cat in front of her house, she can see from the hall window in at the foot of the stairs, and the fireplace is lit and crackling away, the living room suffused with warmth, the television on low: the BBC news report. The worst of the clutter of post and papers has been sorted away, and Mycroft’s jacket and coat are laid neatly on the armchair tucked in the bay window, looking out onto the street between the closed-up blinds.
In the kitchen, Anthea is sitting at the table, thumbs flying away on her BlackBerry while Mycroft is unboxing something that looks vastly more complex than George’s regular order of Chinese takeaway or curry.

"Anthea," George says, her voice still touch hoarse from coughing.

She glances up at George through perfectly mascaraed lashes to say, "Very bloody."

"That is enough out of you," Mycroft says, shirty. "You may go home now."

George presses a hand to her mouth to disguise her smile when Anthea asks, perfectly placid and entirely too innocent, "Shall I leave the car? Will you be needing transport again later this evening?" and Mycroft goes a little red around the edges.

"You can go, Anthea," George says, and surprises herself by adding, "And you can take the car with you."

"Very exciting, sir," Anthea says mildly, at which point Mycroft’s tolerance of being very subtly teased must hit its breaking point because he sighs, aggrieved, and Anthea vanishes with a tap-tap-tap of excruciatingly gorgeous shoes.

Mycroft, in the wake, is making that hilariously put-out face again, and George goes up to him to straighten his waistcoat — any excuse to lay hands on him — and remind him, "If you have her killed, who will murder all those gossips at the water cooler for you?"

"Surely you have access to weapons," Mycroft says reasonably, his hands settling underneath the dressing gown at her hips.

"Haven’t you heard the joke about British police? Stop, or I’ll say stop again?" George asks, leaning in so she can press a close-mouthed kiss to him, to properly say hello. "Hi — thank you for rushing home."

His hands go tighter on her, hot through the thin, slippy fabric of the nightgown, and he catches her in another kiss, one that comes with a sting of teeth on her lower lip, at once tender and the kind of thing that telegraphs jealous possession. George has never thought she’d enjoy that, this emotional knife-play, but apparently she does, because she bites him back, and says, hoarse for a different reason now:

"Were you jealous?"

Mycroft makes a rumbling noise against her mouth, which she files away for later, wants to hear while her ear is pressed against his chest.

"Concerned," he returns. "Not without due cause."

"It’s true," George says solemnly. "Because nothing is more amorous than a chest infection — which by the way, you’re going to catch from me at this rate."

Mycroft does that thing he does, where he cants his head slightly and looks at her with wide, beguilingly gray and blue eyes. There’re a thousand calculations going on in his head right now, and George thinks that if they could open his skull, it would probably look like the inside of a marvelously complex grandfather clock, the movement priceless and terrifyingly delicate, precise to a millisecond.

"Jealousy," Mycroft says, in a low, rolling voice, "is hardly rational, is it, Georgiana?"
She’s smiling too hard for it to be an effective reproach, but she says, "I thought you were always rational, you Holmes boys."

He just knits her in more tightly, closing the inches between them, until she’s pressed tightly enough against him to feel the buttons on his vest, the solid weight of him, and George decides to slide her hands around his sides — to slip underneath the waistcoat along the fine weave of his shirt, warm and near the skin.

"We know how to be," Mycroft allows, still watching her like a kestrel, looking for something, and George isn’t sure what. "And in the back of my rational mind, I had no doubt you were fine in Dr. Watson’s care, that you would take your medicine and rest, but —"

And here he leans in, head dipping lower, mouth brushing over the corner of her eye, near the fragile skin next to her ear, at that soft and vulnerable spot where her jaw joins her neck until George is shivering, over-sensitized, feeling her breath catch and her breasts tighten and knowing they’re pressed up so close he knows it, too.

" — but I’m wholly irrational about you, Georgiana," he whispers to her, murmurs it into the shell of her ear. "I’m petty and quick to anger when it comes to you. I can’t think properly when you’re fringing my thoughts, and I fear, increasingly, that —"

George is gasping, "Christ," because she can feel herself go hot from the inside out, spontaneously combusting in his grasp, heart shaking apart in her chest. She knows she’s clutching at the back of his shirt now, holding herself up just barely.

" — I’m liable to burn London to ashes on account of you," he confesses, and closes his mouth over the skin of her collarbone — teeth grazing.

George wants to say, "fuck dinner," and lay waste to the kitchen table, to laugh into Mycroft’s mouth and strip him out of his waistcoat and posh tailored trousers, to rough him up and have him — mark him. But the flesh is so out of it the spirit’s only half willing, and she just sighs into him, lets him find his way back to her lips and kiss her again, twice more, and lingeringly, a third, before he steers her to the living room sofa like he hasn’t just made all the muscles of her seize in wondering shock.

Dinner is risotto from a place George knows doesn’t do takeaway and a number of cups of hot water with lemon and honey, her feet tucked in Mycroft’s lap as he reads through a stack of files he produces from his briefcase. It’s a beat-up thing with marks and lines, fine workmanship and obviously loved, and George feels unreasonably comforted by Mycroft’s fondness for heirlooms, antiques, old and imperfect things that are important to him nonetheless.

By the time Mycroft is halfway through his pile of papers, George is exhausted again, cheek pressed against the back of the settee and watching his profile framed in the warm light of the kitchen, dressing gown wrapped around herself carefully. She feels like a child, overtired and delirious with happiness, wanting to stay up as long as she can and soak in it, let the skin of her fingers crinkle in it.

"You should be back in bed," comes Mycroft’s voice, suddenly hovering just overhead.

"I’m fine," George lies petulantly, voice faded. "It’s okay."

He laughs, and it’s a sound that curls around her. "Georgiana, if you don’t get up voluntarily, I will be forced to carry you."
The little bit of dignity George is clinging to is just enough to motivate her into an upright and standing position, and even though she pouts crossly about it, she lets herself get herded upstairs and tucked back into bed. Mycroft hangs her dressing gown on the back of her closet door, exactly where it belongs.

The bed feels huge and soft and wonderful, and George just has the presence of mind to say, "If you sleep on the couch, I will set your umbrella on fire," before drifting off.

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Mycroft doesn’t sleep on the couch.

The next morning, George has enough time to clean her teeth and climb back under the sheets to press her ear to his chest, listen to his heartbeat change as he wakes up.

This time, it’s Mycroft that blinks awake slowly to say, "Hello," and George who gets to card her hands through his hair and say, "Hi."

"You look better," Mycroft says, voice breaking with sleep, and George has to lean in and kiss him on the shoulder for that, through his t-shirt. She has no fucking clue where he’d even gotten that and she hopes to God it’s not Tom’s. "You weren’t coughing much last night."

She lies down on his chest, chin on her hands, pressed together across the butterfly cage of his ribs. "Did I wake you?"

"I wouldn’t know what uninterrupted sleep was, anyway," Mycroft dissembles, and settles a hand in her hair.

George steals a glance at her bedside clock: 6:45 a.m. Outside the thin bedroom curtains, it’s the gray light of early dawn, silent except for distant cars — the sort of moment when anything can happen.

"What time do you have to get to work?" she asks.

"Her Majesty’s Revenue & Customs likes for its midlevel cogs to be at their desks by 9 a.m. to do the work of the nation," Mycroft tells her, but with that crooked smile that means that he can get to work whenever he fucking wants, his hands stroking up her thighs.

She grins and throws a leg over him, settling across his hips, saying, "Good," before she reaches for the rucked-up hem of her nightdress.

***

Officially, she’s off ill and near dying for the three days leading into a weekend, which was factually disinteresting except for the part where she’d apparently infected half of traffic as well. Unofficially, she’s off ill and near dying for the first two days, spends the hours of 6:50 a.m. to whenthefuckever on Friday morning having the slowest, most maddening intercourse of her life, that doesn’t actually hit any level of climactic friction until she ends up pinning Mycroft to the bed and taking it from him by force. She’d feel bad about the bruises but he seems to like them, if the steady stream of text messages she gets the rest of the day when she’s camped out in post-coital languor on her sofa and Mycroft is presumably organizing the Arab Spring is any indication.

George is a competent if not particularly gifted cook, but she can roast chicken and mash potatoes, so she makes dinner and keeps it warm in the oven, idly reading over her work email until Mycroft breaks into her house again — like a vampire who’s received an invitation before and doesn’t
understand the social niceties of needing one every time.

"I'm a police officer," she scolds him, but she does it in between kissing him at the kitchen sink so she’s not sure if it’s effective this way, "you can’t keep housebreaking."

"You're ill, I wouldn’t want you to exert yourself getting the door," he says, up to his elbows in suds from the dishes, and George just doesn’t have the heart to do more than pinch him where she knows she left a bruise.

She eats green tea ice cream out of the carton for dessert, and carefully doesn’t ask Mycroft if he’d like some because she’d prefer not to see that momentary longing and then abrupt self-denial on his face. They end up watching Would I Lie To You on the sofa because George is fascinated by Mycroft’s dissections of everybody’s tells in between haranguing her to drink more water or remember to take her antibiotics.

"Wow," George says, after Mycroft tells her how David Mitchell gets a slight twitch in his left eye every time he lies, "you and Sherlock must be intolerable playing poker."

"We were forbidden very young," Mycroft says with genuine wistfulness. "Mummy said we were awful creatures, always ruining her country house parties."

With equal gravitas, George reports, "I understand. My Mum said the same thing about me and her and my dad’s piss-ups at the local — " which is as far as she gets before Mycroft pushes her down along the sofa.

Even though George is still aching a bit from this morning, they’re operating on three times speed later that night, which she asks him breathlessly about and gets for her troubles an answer of, "I was cataloguing you earlier," before he disappears down her belly, pressing wet kisses into the creases of her thigh.

"I elect to find that arousing and not creepy," she says around the high-pitched flutter of a gasp, bursting forth from her throat, and endures another few moments of Mycroft's data gathering before she fists a hand in his hair and drags him back up to her mouth.

Saturday, George suspects Mycroft is actually supposed to be working, but he’s a grown up and knows best what he can and can’t ignore, so she lets herself stay in bed with him all day until she’s sore in every sense of the word. Dinner’s at Isarn, dressed down with their heads leaning in close, cloistered off together in mutual satisfaction at one another’s company.

"I do, actually, have a meeting tomorrow that I cannot reschedule or ignore," Mycroft sighs at her, later that night, studying the lines on her left palm for reasons about which George finds herself strangely incurious.

She moves her fingers around so he has to trap them all over again. "Too bad," she says, "guess I’ll just have to call Dr. Watson to come look in on me again."

"I have no idea why I like you," Mycroft tells her.

George sends him home at half-eleven, because staggering home for an early morning shower and fresh clothes is for people in their twenties, changes her much-abused sheets, and sleeps until noon the next day. She’s doing laundry in the hazy afternoon sun, listening to the Cabin Pressure Christmas special, when her mother drops in with groceries and gossip, and they huddle around the kitchen table and talk for ages about Gloria Patterson and her thirty year-old boyfriend with voyeuristic delight.
"You look well rested," her mother decides, poking at George’s cheek affectionately.

"I am well rested," George answers, smiling too much.

"And happy," Gillian goes on, happily suspicious. "This have anything to do with that nice young man of yours?"

George hides her expression behind her mug and says, "Maybe," but that’s enough for her mother right now, who just puts another three biscuits on George’s plate and goes back to her story about the carbon monoxide alarm, the interfering but well-meaning neighbors, and the terrifying lingerie Gloria had been wearing.

***

Even if George wasn’t grinning like an idiot when she rocks up to work the next day, she’d be fucked because of the Yard grapevine: a terrifyingly effective network of transmissions that works faster than email, as far as George is concerned.

"I heard a man called you in ill on Tuesday night," Edith says, cornering George in the break room and smiling like a lunatic.

"Jesus, really?" George complains, going hot. "Isn’t that a gross violation of HR?"

"And I also heard that a different man called you in sick for Thursday and Friday," Edith continues, gleeful.

George stirs a spoonful of sugar into her tea and flees for her office, where Sally meets her at the door with a number of pending cases and asks, "Is he handsome?"

"You’re fired, Sally," George tells her.

"Did he nurse you while you were ill?" Sally goes on. "Were you feverish and shaking in his strong, reassuring arms?"

She ends up locking her office door for the morning and taping up a sign that says "BUGGER OFF" on her glass walls (fucking glass walls) so she can actually get caught up. George is aware she’s only putting off the inevitable, but still.

Mycroft’s Sunday meeting leaks into all day Monday, which George finds out when Anthea decides her new, secondary job description is to keep George appraised of all of her employer’s non-official secrets movements, such as:

This is Anthea. He just got distracted staring at the water cooler.

This is Anthea. He is asking me to text you to let you know he won’t be free tonight, but would you like dinner on Tuesday.

This is Anthea. He is rearranging everything so he will be free on Tuesday.

This is Anthea. He is now telling me I am no longer allowed to text you without explicit permission.

It’s the happiest George has ever been doing asinine paperwork, and her good mood spills over when she gets a package mid-afternoon: a clutch of little wildflowers, clearly hand-picked and wilting from travel — but still smelling of sunshine and soil, cheerfully orange and pink and
powder blue, and George puts them in her Metropolitan Police mug on her desk and stares at them the rest of the day. She guesses she deserves all the pronounced and schoolboy "oooooo"s coming from the bullpen at large.

Her good mood stays all day, stubborn even through Sherlock’s utterly baffling text of:

FOR FUCK’S SAKE, LESTRADE.
DELETED.
SH

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George would be out of practice dating even if she wasn’t seeing probably the world’s most improbable man, but Mycroft seems genuinely disinterested in proscribed behaviors, and George stops trying to inspect whatever they are to one another through the lens of ordinary relationships. Instead, she makes him take her on a walking tour of London so he can tell her the entire history of their city and send her cups of steaming-hot tea via his functioning dumbwaiter at his stupidly enormous five-story house on Lyall Street, a stone’s throw from Belgravia Square and Buckingham Palace.

"I have no idea why you find that thing so amusing," he sighs, from where he’s sitting incongruously on the floor of his bedroom surrounded by papers, because she’s sitting in the middle of the bed surrounded by her own, and neither are supposed to see what the other is working on: Official Secrets Act and Pending Investigation.

"Mycroft — you have a dumbwaiter," George says, because she doesn’t see how that requires any further explanation.

At some point, when enough of her favorite shirts and scuffed, department store shoes have made their way into Mycroft’s literal "dressing area" that it seems inevitable her mother will realize George’s house looks only half-lived-in, she resigns herself to planning a meeting. Left to her own devices, George would never introduce romantic partners to her mother at all out of sheer awkwardness, but Anthea — who can reliably be found in Mycroft’s kitchen most mornings making tea and eating marmite and cheese sandwiches for breakfast — is vastly unsympathetic about the whole thing.

"It’s not like I’ve met Mycroft’s mother," George justifies to herself while Mycroft is having a shouting match with Sherlock in his office over God knows what. "Probably, if I introduce them, he’ll feel pressured and break it off."

Anthea rolls her eyes. "Mycroft’s mother has a dossier on you an inch thick," she reports. "Separately, he’s put you on his car insurance so you can take the Aston Martin."

And then obviously George can’t introduce her mother because George needs to take Mycroft and the Aston Martin out for the weekend into the South Downs to drive recklessly and bully him into having sex with her in the backseat.

All of George’s good intentions for full disclosure are ultimately worthless, since one weekend when Mycroft is lying on her living room couch reading one of her romance novels with a morbidly fascinated look on his face, her mother bursts in shrieking:

"Ben asked me to marry him!"

He clips the coffee table going down off the sofa, and then George is left in the enviable position
of introducing Mycroft and her mother while icing his head and simultaneously trying to admire Gillian’s giant, hideous engagement ring. But her mother seems too happy to be annoyed with George for keeping secrets, and then too entirely pleased by Mycroft’s best behavior to be anything but overjoyed with him. It turns into one of those silly and impossibly perfect days despite the goose egg on Mycroft’s head and George’s latent guilt and that unavoidable touch of sadness at the memory of her father.

"Tell me what he was like," George whispers, later that night, tucked away in her bedroom listening to the traffic outside and feeling strange and young.

"Your father?" Mycroft asks, running a hand down her back patiently, stroking her like a cat. "Shouldn’t you be telling me?"

She shakes her head. "What can you tell about him — from me?"

He makes a considering noise. "You must have learned your steadiness from him," he says, voice raspy from exhaustion, from a long day of flattering George's mother over afternoon tea and listening to Gillian's wedding plans while George was quiet and overfull with her own feelings. "You’re not given to doubt, and likely you learned that by example from him. He wasn’t a reader, but he liked reading to you — you still like being read to. He was constantly, quietly worried you would be unhappy, which is why you’re so determinedly fine all the time now. You like doing things for people — you bring me tea and paracetamol and interrupt me when you think I’m upset — and that must be a relic of being well-loved and knowing it."

George is quiet for a long time, feeling her eyes going damp. "I am happy for her," she says, because she is. Her mother’s been lonely for such a long time, her father’s been dead a decade. "I really am."

"I know," he says, and gathers her up close enough that she can hide against his shoulder. "You’re fine, just as you are."

It’s a short engagement and a big wedding at Dr. Undershaw’s cottage in the country, George’s entire horrifying extended family pouring into the tiny space — tent lit up in the back yard during the last of the summer warmth — absolutely everyone gasping with curiosity about Mycroft. And since he’s probably been trained by fucking Smiley in the art of never giving anything away, he manages to slither away unmolested every time, cruelly leaving George to field the worst of the inquiries: where does he work? what does he do? how did you meet? have you met his family? is he rich? The answers to which are either top secret, too horrible to share with normal people, or gauche. The idea of having to backtrack and clarify that it was all the affectionate kidnappings that had won her over and not the money is equally awful, so George just smiles her awkward teenager smile and drinks heavily.

She wears dove gray to match her mother and walks Gillian up the aisle, and by the time she folds her mother’s hand into Ben’s, George’s eyes are swimming. She chokes out, "You better take care of her," and Dr. Undershaw kisses her cheek — warm, grateful — and whispers back, "I will always do my best."

The happy couple set off immediately from the reception for their honeymoon in Thailand and George cries all the way back to London in the passenger seat of Mycroft’s car. She can’t really pin down why. She’s so happy her mother is happy and crushingly sad at the same time, and she lets herself get bundled up in a pair of Mycroft’s pajamas and put to bed without protest.

He makes her tea the next morning, with whole milk and three sugars, because apparently a woman deserves whole milk when she’s just married off her mother.
It’s a frigid, miserable Tuesday when Baker Street blows up.

George hears about it from Mycroft, who she’d left sulking in the bathroom trying to convince himself he doesn’t need a root canal. He shouts her name and says, "There’s been an explosion at Baker Street," from up the stairs. She forgets to put on a bra and ends up wearing her least comfortable pair of shoes but they’re out the door and in her car in less than five minutes.

The scene is a train wreck, but the PCs on hand assure her no one’s hurt. Mycroft barely looks at the disaster area of Baker Street before going to check on his brother, and George pops in on Mrs. Hudson both because she’s worried and because she suspects Holmeses can’t actually express affection for one another when observed.

"My poor windows," Mrs. Hudson says, fluttering around her kitchen in a jumper and three housecoats to keep out the cold. "And poor Sherlock — he’ll be freezing tonight."

Probably Mycroft will have the windows fixed for him by midmorning unless Sherlock is bratty about his concern, in which case, Mrs. Hudson’s windows will be fixed by midmorning and Sherlock’s windows in about two weeks. There’s a telling but muffled shout from upstairs, and George feels a moment of sympathy for John, always collateral damage in petty arguments between brothers.

She gives Mycroft and Sherlock another two minutes to repress all of their feelings and be settled safely on opposite couches before pressing a kiss and her business card — mobile number scrawled on the back — onto Mrs. Hudson and running upstairs.

Sherlock’s still in his pajamas and dressing gown, plaster in his hair, but he’s already faffing around his violin, and the minute she comes up the last step, he points his bow at her and says, "You are not wearing a bra."

"Sherlock," Mycroft starts, and George stalks over him to say, "Yes, thank you for that brilliant bloody deduction you twat," and stalks over to him, saying, "Stay still."

He sets away his violin and submits to her inspection, but probably only so he can glare up at her through his eyelashes and ask, "Why aren’t you wearing a bra?"

"To torture you," she mumbles, running her fingers along his scalp looking for bumps, because the EMTs outside had told her the lunatic in 221B had categorically refused medical attention. She doesn’t find any obvious signs of trauma on his scalp — just a few tiny cuts, unavoidable from broken glass, really, he’s lucky that’s all he got — so she tips his face up to her so she can check his eyes.

"Your breasts don’t scare me," Sherlock retorts, and in the background, Mycroft makes a noise George would find hilarious under almost any other circumstance.

She frowns down at Sherlock. "Are you seeing double?" she demands. "Why didn’t you let the medics look you over?"

He ignores her question, musing, "You spent the night at home, and yet you don’t smell like your usual shampoo and — oh my God," he cuts himself off, face going colorless with shock and his eyes round like dinner plates.

"Oh, shit," George says, glancing around for a bin, a box, a bowl, anything.
"I — Mycroft," Sherlock gasps, genuine horror in his voice, staring past George at his brother and getting steadily paler. This has to be some kind of delayed stress reaction.

"If you have to throw up, just throw up," George counsels Sherlock. "I promise I will only make fun of you for two months. Three months. Definitely less than a year."

Sherlock’s nauseated white face keeps turning between George and his brother, and it slowly morphs into an expression of exquisite betrayal on top of his obvious fury.

"How could — you were touching my hair, just now," Sherlock moans. "With your hands that — it’s too horrible to countenance."

"My touching your hair is not making you throw up," George snaps, and behind her, Mycroft says, "Georgiana, I believe Sherlock’s just realized we’re — "

"Don’t," Sherlock interrupts, pleading, "don’t say it, I beg you."

" — in a relationship," Mycroft finishes in a purr, and George doesn’t have time to give him a properly dirty dirty look for that before she sighs:

"You cannot have just realized that."

"Really, Sherlock, do grow up," Mycroft tells him, but smugly.

Sherlock moans, "Deleted — I’m deleting this immediately," and George yells, "Is that what that was about? Bloody hell, Sherlock, how many times have you deleted this already? Stop it!" all over the sound of footsteps thundering up the stairs and John calling, "Sherlock? Sherlock — are you all right? I saw the — oh. Hi."

"John," Mycroft says evenly, unmoved from his spot on the armchair.

"George — Mycroft," John says with a start, and goes straight for Sherlock, who moans and drops his head into John’s steady, seeking hands with a soul-wrenching exhaustion telegraphed in all the lines of his body. George would be impressed if she hadn’t watched him do that at Montague Street with a Real Doll he was keeping for an experiment (he claimed) when she’d stopped by to confiscate a crate of 5 Hour Energy shots from him, once. "Jesus, Sherlock! What happened?"

"Quickly, John, gouge out my eyes," Sherlock begs. "I’ve seen terrible things."

"And that’s the end of my concern for you, then," George tells him, because Sherlock with enough energy for theatrics is Sherlock fine enough. She retrieves her phone — six missed calls, from Sally and Dan from bomb tech; not a gas leak, then — and swoops in to give Mycroft a quick kiss before saying, "Must run."

He hums agreement and says, "Here," before tucking a pair of gloves into her coat pocket, fingers lingering long enough to catch hers for a squeeze. It’s hard to stay annoyed after that, and George leaves the flat grinning at the echoes of Sherlock’s tantrum, Mycroft saying, "I’ll allow you to delete this — on one condition," and heads for the Yard to sort out the detecting end of this fiasco.

British Gas and the bomb squad agrees find a lockbox at the epicenter of the explosion: solid enough to have survived the blast if half-crushed from the force. British Gas seems worryingly gratified it’s not their fuck up, and bombs gets busy breaking out an ocean of industrial tools the open the damn thing somewhere safe — AKA: somewhere no one cares if they blow up — AKA: Croydon. George gets sucked into a discussion with their Home Office liaison about increasing on-street police presence and how to gently elevate the public’s safety on the off chance is the
opening salvo in a terrorist attack without generating any panic. It eats most of the day until Dan from bombs calls her to say:

"Hey, we finished x-raying the box, you won’t fucking believe what’s in here, mate."
Chapter 5

One of the primary reasons George wants more women in leadership in the Met is because she’s stuck braless the rest of the day on account of most of her coworkers being men, and all the people who might have an extra bra being too far beneath or beyond her on the chain of command, and therefore inappropriate to ask. She hopes Anderson’s enjoying all 36 excruciatingly B of her; Dimmock’s already brained himself on a pole, which is more a comment on how badly he needs a new girlfriend than the magnificence of her breasts.

It actually wouldn’t be an issue since it is with equal parts gratitude and irritation that George knows that she doesn’t really register as female with most of her coworkers — ridiculous slander about silver foxes aside — except that when she meets Sherlock at the front desk at NSY to sign them in, he glowers at her tits and sighs, aggrieved.

"And you’re still not wearing a bra."

"Yes, thank you for that," George says, quietly perishing of mortification on the inside and trying to scrape up her dignity enough to ignore the all-knowing and already-gossiping grins of all the PC's and secretaries and random passers-through in the lobby. "Upstairs with me, please, so that I might kill you as you deserve with fewer witnesses."

Sherlock trails her into the lift, John stepping in last and hitting the button for the third floor reflexively.

"Hardly a real threat when I’m so vital to your exceptional solve rate," Sherlock declares, imperious, as the elevator creeps up.

"I did all right before you came along and started declaring my lingerie status to everybody, too," George reminds him, and glances at John. "Has he deleted it, then?"

John grins back at her. "Entirely. With prejudice," he tells her, affectionate, and not for the first time George thinks that of course these two lunatics found one another, the only inmates in the vast asylum of London crazy enough for each other. She’d be sentimental about if the pair of them weren’t so completely frustrating.

"Deleted what?" Sherlock asks, glaring between them suspiciously.

"This can’t be good for him," George says to John. "He’s going to give himself a stroke."

"I’m all right with that — the alternative being that I get to live with him mid-tantrum in perpetuity," John says philosophically, and George can’t help her snicker.

Sherlock, who is clearly capable of working himself up to a froth whether or not he still retains the memory that George and Mycroft have carnal knowledge of one another, snaps, "I’m sure whatever I deleted was excruciatingly useless!"

John leans into Sherlock’s shoulder, teasing, "It’s about her love life," in a loud whisper, as they step out of the lift and into serious crimes.

"Then I’m sure it’s intolerably dull," Sherlock declares, long legs eating up the corridor toward the bullpen. "Obviously a reasonably new relationship, probably with someone wealthier and older — and a touch into slightly shadier sexual practices."
"It’s true," George agrees. She shouldn’t be encouraging this, but it’s hilarious.

John tells Sherlock, "You have no idea how much you’re going to regret having connected all of those dots when you deduce this all again," which just about sums it up.

"Impossible," Sherlock tells them both, dismissive, tracking George as she makes her way past Dimmock’s office and Sally’s desk. "Lestrade’s love life is sure to be as boring as all of those horribly plebian murders she knows not to bother me with."

George rolls her eyes, pushing into her office. "Anyway, you'll love this," she tells him. "That explosion — "

"Gas leak, yes?" Sherlock interrupts.

George grins. "No."

She can hear the spark of interest in his voice. "No?

"Made to look like one," George clarifies, and goes to her desk, shoving aside her scarf and the interoffice folders that have made their way into her inbox in the five minutes she’s been away as John asks, "What?"

"Hardly anything left of the place, except a strongbox. A very strong box," she tells them, and hands Sherlock an envelope, his name scrawled across it in neat blue ink. "And inside it was this."

He snatches it from her, taking it to the lamp in the corner to look more closely. She’s always seized by a moment of unaccountable tenderness when he does this sort of thing, vanishing down into his own head before her eyes. George wasn’t lying when she told John she doesn’t know Sherlock. She still doesn’t, and no matter how many childhood anecdotes Mycroft tells her, his little brother will always be unfathomable, his brain a riot, the stirrings of his heart well-hidden, but George at least knows that in moments like these, he’s wholly present, entirely alive in a way that many people never are.

"You haven’t opened it," Sherlock murmurs.

"It’s addressed to you, isn’t it?" George allows, hanging back and letting Sherlock look and look, while John hangs back so he can look and look at Sherlock. "We’ve x-rayed, it’s not booby-trapped."

"How reassuring," Sherlock says, but all the venom is dampened by obvious curiosity. "Nice stationary. Bohemian."

There’s an incredible amount of shite on George’s desk, about half of which she can’t actually account for, which leaves her waving for Sally to come in and fix it and asking, "What?" in distraction.

"Czech Republic," Sherlock explains, short like a shot. "No fingerprints?"

George shakes her head. "No."

Sherlock’s looking at the envelope in raking light now, the orange glow of the bulb deepening the blue of his name. "She used a fountain pen," he says. "Parker Duofold, meridian nib."

"She?" John asks, stepping closer.
"Obviously," Sherlock says, which John parrots as his flatmate opens the letter carefully with a knife. George can’t see the contents, just the tension coiling up Sherlock’s back, and then John sputters:

"That’s the phone. The pink phone."

"What, from the Study in Pink?" George blurs out, pressing in closer to get a look. It is the same: older model iPhone with a rubbery pink case, no scuff marks. And there’s Sherlock and John huddled around it again, months later, still dashing into and out of life and death situations like boys at play, and George letting them get away with it.

Sherlock starts off distant, murmuring, "Well, obviously it’s not the same phone but it’s supposed to look like — " before he jerks around, barking, "Study in Pink? You read his blog?"

"Of course I do," George tells him, because of course she does.

John’s incredibly unenthused and sparsely populated blog had been one of the first things Sally’s background check on the man had turned up. Being a dedicated and experienced officer of the law and still completely convinced Sherlock was going to ask John to put the lotion in the basket, Sally had set up a Google alert. The rest was history.

"We all do," George goes on. "Do you really not know the Earth goes around the sun?"

It’s either incredibly good or incredibly bad timing, because there’s Sally all of a sudden, standing in the doorway snickering, and John wearing a face George had seen frequently on Tom when he’d known he’d be spending the night on the sofa. Mycroft, perhaps betraying the fragile nature of their current peace, absolutely refuses to go to bed angry and makes himself six times as annoying as Sherlock has ever managed to be by dint of his having assumed access to her bedroom and a tendency to create flow charts about their disagreements.

Turning back away from John with the type of slowness that promises a louder and much more embarrassing domestic later in the privacy of their own home, Sherlock returns his attention to the mobile, saying, "It isn’t the same phone. This one’s brand new. Someone’s gone to a lot of trouble to make it look like the same phone — " he spares another pouting glare for John " — which means your blog has a far wider readership."

The phone, when it turns on, announces, "You have one new message," into the tense silence of George’s office, and after a beat comes five tones at one second intervals: flat, commonplace, utterly and universally recognizable.

"Was that it?" John asks, on behalf of everyone.

Sherlock’s mesmerized now, peering at the phone and saying, "No, that’s not it," as the mobile pings and a photograph loads up.

The picture, when George manages to shove her way in between Sherlock and John to see it, is only incrementally more interesting: a damp-looking room with deteriorating wallpaper. Overall, it reminds George very strongly of some questionable flats she’d called home during uni, but nothing more or less than that.

"What the hell are we supposed to make of that?" she asks. "An estate agent’s photo and the bloody Greenwich pips?"

Sherlock still has that sorcerer’s look in his eyes. "It’s a warning," he breathes.
When John Watson tenses, George can feel it in the room like the vibration of a stereo speaker, thrumming in the floor. John is kind and friendly and unassuming. John also invaded Afghanistan and likely shot a man for Sherlock the first day they met.

"A warning?" John asks.

"Some secret societies used to send dried melon seeds, orange pips, things like that — five pips," Sherlock says, and George thinks — fond in a sad way — that he hadn’t learned that reading mystery novels in the shade of a tree like other boys, but probably buried somewhere in the ancestral Holmes estate from a government manual after Mycroft had fucked off to Eton and left him wandering the grounds like a restless, intractable ghost. "They’re warning us it’s going to happen again," he murmurs, and already darting out of her office, says to no one in particular, "I’ve seen this place before."

"Hang on. What’s going to happen again?" John yelps, trailing after, and Sherlock spins to says, "Boom."

Sherlock must have made a deal with the devil at some point during childhood, because never has George had better luck acquiring taxis than when she’s standing next to the man, and it’s only a few moments before they’re tumbled into the back of one and headed for Baker Street.

"What are you thinking?" George asks, and when Sherlock ignores her in favor of the phone, she sighs and turns to John. "What’s he thinking?"

John’s smile is also too good for Sherlock, but George, being female, is used to the art of letting friends date horrible men. "Might I remind you I’ve still known him five years less than you," he tells her.

"Ah, but you two are all cozy now," George returns, grinning.

"Oh, not so cozy," John answers, that little gleam in his eye, and George finds it entirely plausible that his Yard-anointed nickname of Three Continents Watson is factually accurate when he grins at her in that exact manner.

"Stop flirting," Sherlock interrupts, not looking up. "John is constitutionally incapable of not having a go at any beautiful, pre-menopausal woman but I seriously doubt your partner would appreciate you giving Dr. Watson a leg over, Lestrade."

George beams. "True — he gets so jealous."

"Oh, Christ," John laughs, covering his face.

This, Sherlock finds interesting. "Really — jealous?" he asks, looking up from the phone finally as they draw nearer to the flat. "I wouldn’t have thought you had much patience for men so inclined."

"Oh, under normal circumstances, no," George admits, because it’s true, and Sherlock is the truest judge of character she knows, despite his avowed disinterest in it. "But his isn’t driven so much by insecurity as a profound inability to share."

"Common," Sherlock declares. "Sparking his possessive tendencies must have some sort of incredibly base sexual compensation for you, I imagine."

"George Lestrade," John says, breathless, eyes wet now, "you are the most singularly cruel woman I have ever known."
"Why?" Sherlock asks, frowning, his brain probably whirring and constantly getting a 404, File Not Found page.

George, in lieu of answering either John’s accusation or Sherlock’s query, says cheerfully, "Oh, look, Baker Street."

Sherlock gives both her and John suspicious looks, but subsides at the promise of a more interesting mystery, tossing the driver a few notes and striding into 221B. Mrs. Hudson says hello, ignores the impatient tone of Sherlock’s voice, chatters all through locating the keys to the basement flat, and then editorializes briefly about its lack of popularity, all while Sherlock and John make like teenaged boys and ignore her, and George curses being socialized female and her obligated if poorly feigned interest.

By the time she manages to shut the door to 221C (who knew?) and get downstairs to provide a modicum of adult supervision, it’s in time to see a pair of trainers in the wholly uninspiring room — surrounded by that florid wallpaper, sickly green paint, a filthy fireplace and a single mirror, propped up in a corner. It smells like mold, the watery light flickering, and George feels seasick, tension winding up her spine.

"Shoes," John says quietly, the word trailing into a flat question, and Sherlock steps toward them, impatience radiating, until John stops him, his voice a bark — and this must be what Captain John Watson sounded like to his men in Afghanistan, that steel core and sandpaper edge — as he snaps, "He’s a bomber, remember?"

In 2005, George had been a detective sergeant, and at about 8:50 a.m. on July 7 she’d been at the Costa nearest to New Scotland Yard on the phone with her mum. Five minutes later, she’d spilled her coffee and run. Mostly what she remembers of that day is in searing detail; the pieces that stay with her are the way she’d spilt her coffee, the way everybody had stared as she’d bolted, how she’d gasped, "Mum, whatever you do, stay indoors today," and hung up to call Tom, and the infinite seconds where her heart had broken and revived a dozen times before he’d answered, sleepy and fine, to say he was running late and what was going on? He’d heard on the news something about a power surge on the Underground? She remembers having to lean against the fucking pole that held up NSY’s sign — spinning away overhead — and gasp, "Jesus Christ, thank you, oh, thank God." George remembers bombs and hates them.

Now, in the guts of Baker Street, Sherlock crouches down, balancing on his gloved fingertips and the balls of his feet to lean in, take a deep breath of the shoes as the tension burns and burns and the phone rings — terrifying — into the silence.

"Fucking hell," George whispers, under her breath, and Sherlock presses a button on the phone, saying low and measured, "Hello."

The pause is long enough that George is torn between annoyance and fear, but when the voice comes, it’s crying, echoing over speakerphone.

"Hello, s-sexy."

***

The next week is a horrible blur.

Sherlock and John are fighting so obviously that George wants to tear out her hair, to shout that they can have their fucking feelings later because there are innocent people who’s relying on them for her survival, and how miserable is that? How completely terrible? That Sherlock Holmes has
finally drawn in a criminal playmate as brilliant as himself and all of London is their chessboard. It’s one of those sickening truths about Sherlock she’s always known but likes to ignore: he helps her out for the thrill, not out of any sense of duty. It’s why the boring cases get ignored, why he’ll lose interest, why he’ll forget to tell her he’s sussed out the criminal sometimes, why his eyes are shining so fever-bright right now, dashing around London with John growing increasingly grim-faced at his heels.

They save Susan Dearborne, who’s been sitting in her own sweat and piss for twelve hours, who sobs hysterically the entire time the bomb squad works to deconstruct her semtex cage. They save Gavin Ashwood, who’s lost feeling in his extremities from standing in the cold, his knees locked up and his feet swollen into his shoes, who has to be wrapped up in all the shock blankets Sherlock didn’t need.

George has six fights with her superiors because she doesn’t have time to discuss procedure with them — especially not if this discussion is going to dovetail into an agonizing negotiation over her most infamous unnamed informant. They say they’re letting her go out on a limb, that they’ll give her just enough rope to hang herself. George thinks fuck the lot of them, because they hadn’t heard the phone calls, they’re not running themselves ragged chasing after Sherlock’s deductions, trying to shake out someone mad enough to make Sherlock look half in love. They want to call a counterterrorism task force; they want to alert the Home Office. George doesn’t care what they do or if they do all of it — they just need to let her do her job.

Mycroft’s tied up with one of those somethings he can’t talk about at all, taking defensive positions at his office or at his club. George is glad for it. If he were here, she’d just pick a fight, and Mycroft never shouts back at her when she’s upset like this, sees right through her misplaced fury. He just sits there and takes the abuse until George gets tired or her voice cracks and she trips out of anger and directly into abject guilt, crying angry tears at herself.

The Lyall Street house, when she gets there the end of the second horrible day, is empty and lonely-smelling: no tea or toast or marmite, just the stale afterimage of Mycroft’s aftershave and grapefruit cleaner the housekeeper uses. George sorts the mail and makes herself an omelet, leaves it half-eaten in the breakfast room and curls up on Mycroft’s side of the bed, feeling profoundly sorry for herself.

She sleeps badly and barely. Early in the war story days of her and John figuring out the paces of one another, she learned he can sleep anywhere: standing up, sitting in mud, in dirty medical cots. He’d trained for it in med school, long before they ever shipped him to Afghanistan, where he was the envy of his men there, too. George is a light sleeper, easily drifting and easily drifting awake at the shock of a dream, at a change in elevation, at a rumble on the train, a faraway sound — at the weight of Mycroft’s body moving to sit on the edge of the bed.

She blinks twice, eyes feeling gummy, rolls back enough so she can look up at him.

"Hi," she rasps out, and when he just frowns at her mulishly, she croaks out a laugh.

His hair is a mess, hanging in dark wisps across his forehead and his jaw’s a touch swollen, probably hot and hurting to the touch, and George reaches over to collect one of his hands and fold possessively into her own. She presses a lingering kiss to the knuckles: warm skin and the cold metal of his ring, holds it close to her cheek on the pillow.

"Did you finally go to the dentist, then?" she asks, smiling into his fingers.

In lieu of risking a lisp, he just nods.
"Of course you did it in the dead of night, otherwise, however could it be dramatic enough for a Holmes," George laughs, and yawning, curls in around herself more tightly for a beat, squeezing his hand as a talisman before she forces herself to get up, to say, "Come on, I’ll make you a smoothie."

Mycroft sulks abominably all through breakfast, drinking sullenly and with a straw, and George knows she’s not encouraging any grown-up behavior. She combs through his hair with her fingers, presses understanding kisses to his temple, and curls up with him in the breakfast room, creating sign language just for the two of them. An eye-roll that means *Sherlock*, the wrinkle of his brow that means *long day, nonsense in southeast Asia*, the curled backs of his fingers stroking down the line of her throat, and how it means, *hello, Georgiana and I missed you* all at once. It’s the nice part of the day, the good feeling she holds onto in the shower and as she puts on her coat and scarf and lets Mycroft fit a hat on her, tucking her hair behind her ears.

"You should stay home," she says to him. "Nap. Make Anthea come here for work."

He smiles and George smiles back, and they both know he’ll be back at his office in less than an hour — out the door as soon as she’s vanished down the street.

"Fine, fine," George sighs, good-natured, because she trusts him to know his limits, even if she doesn’t like them. She drags him rudely down by his loosened tie for a quick kiss, light across his mouth, and heads for work, where she’s intercepted in the lobby by John and Sherlock, whose expression as he’s perched near reception betrays an exceptional level of bloody-mindedness today.

"Oh, Christ," George says. "What now?"

"Connie Prince," Sherlock demands. "I need to see her body immediately."

George looks at John. "Oh, he needs to see her body, does he?" she asks.

"Immediately, even," John repeats, smirking, and indicates the pink mobile Sherlock is clutching inside a gloved hand. "Another call."

Scowling, George doesn’t bother to take off her hat. "Leaving aside the fact that I asked you to submit that into evidence yesterday, Jesus — fine, let me ring around."

Sherlock frowns at her. "Whose hat is that? You never wear hats. You’re constantly cold but you never dress properly for it."

"Shut it," George instructs him, and presses her mobile to her ear.

He does, but it’s temporary, and when they all pile into her Golf — Sherlock commandeering the passenger seat and pushing it all the way back to fit his stork legs — and John settled primly in back, he starts again.

"I’m only intrigued because your inability to dress for the weather is one of your selective and extraordinarily confusing vanities," Sherlock informs her. "Clearly, this has something to do with the lover you’ve taken."

In the backseat, John starts giggling, reflexive.

George slants him a look. "This is not you shutting it," she says mildly.

"I would have thought you’d spend more time mourning your marriage," Sherlock says, but
without any judgment, just flatly speculative: he doesn’t care either way. "Anyway — far more importantly: tell me they have not begun any embalming processes."

"Lucky for you, England’s bureaucracy has been on the same tea break for twenty years, so no," George tells him. "They’ve only just finished the autopsy last night."

Connie Prince on the slab looks nothing at all like the big-voiced woman on the telly, all her eye shadow washed away and her lips blue. George’s professional life revolves around dead bodies, but it’s still strange to see the before and after, to know how Connie Price moved and shrieked laughing and now to see her so quiet under Sherlock’s merciless inspection and miniature magnifying glass.

"Connie Prince, fifty-four, had a makeover show, my mum’s addicted," she says, after she’s cashed in four favors and pulled rank two times to get them access to the body, plunges them into the sterile chill of the hospital morgue.

Sherlock glances up at her through his lashes. "Not anymore," he says, and turns back to the body. "So. Dead two days, according to one of her staff, Raoul de Santos, she cut her hand on a rusty nail in the garden. Nasty wound. Tetanus bacteria enters the bloodstream — goodnight, Vienna."

"I suppose," John says, circling around, like he and Sherlock are tethered together.

"Something’s wrong with this picture," Sherlock murmurs, and George can’t help making an inquiring noise. Sherlock’s entire consulting career is like a Greek tragedy: drama and destiny and the need for a chorus on the side. "It can’t be as simple as it seems or else the bomber wouldn’t be directing us towards it — something’s wrong."

And then they’re both looking her over: John with a doctor’s eyes and Sherlock with impatient ones. George used to be upset by this, the strangely invasive way that Sherlock studies the dead. It’s irrational to be angry on their behalf, they’re so long past caring, and Sherlock isn’t doing any harm, just searching for evidence. Maybe she’s more numb to it these days, or maybe whenever she supervises his inspection of a body, she’s just remembering him humming Flight of the Bumblebee, but it unsettles her less now, sits more comfortably in her chest. One day, if she ends up on a metal table with a question mark hanging over her, she thinks she’d like Sherlock to take her case, that she wouldn’t mind being the subject of one final, obnoxious deduction. If it’s boring, all the better: fitting punishment for his behavior the entire time she’s known him.

"John," he calls, "he cut on her hand — it’s deep. It would have bled a lot, right?"

John’s checking the autopsy results, glancing up from the paperwork and back to the body like he’s verifying the medical examiner’s work. He says, "Yeah."

"The wound’s clean," Sherlock says. "Very clean. And fresh — " he snaps his magnifier shut, slips it into his pocket as he unbends " — how long would the bacteria have been incubating inside her?"

John looks thoughtful a beat before saying, "Eight, ten days."

Sherlock was brilliant before he met John, but he was never happy about it, always rushing from one fantastic deduction to the next case, ravenous for the next piece of evidence. Now with John watching — with John thinking Sherlock’s brilliant and that his work is fantastic — there’s a smile, more jumping, an occasional, ludicrously childlike flash of delight.

Tom used to say, when they’d just met, "How can anyone be scared of you as a police officer?
You’re so smiley.” George was shy and awkward and bad at dating as she ever was, and never managed to say, I’m not smiley — I just can’t stop smiling when I’m with you. She remembers what that meant then, and she wonders what that means now, watching Sherlock and John locked into one another’s endless orbits.

John’s traveled all the way back around to Sherlock’s side again, and he says in the silence after Sherlock’s query, "That...cut was made later."

George looks down at Connie’s face. "After she was dead."

"Must have been," Sherlock says. "The question is how did the tetanus enter the dead woman’s system — " he leans toward John, just a half-step closer but suddenly enclosed in a little bubble, just the two of them " — you want to help, right?"

"Of course," John answers, stumbling.

"Connie Prince’s background, family history, everything. Get me data," Sherlock instructs, and John nods and vanishes: practical and endlessly reliable.

Sherlock’s being more conciliatory than usual, the "right?" appended to the end of his demands a little off key, a touch out of character and just shy of condescending. George guesses this is as close as the man can come to making allowances. George once threw Antonia Fraser’s biography of Mary, Queen of Scots across the room at the 490-page mark because she couldn’t bear to read about that woman making any more foolish romantic decisions; running around with John and Sherlock is like watching it all over in homosocial technicolor, sometimes.

"There’s something else that we haven’t thought of," George says, when Sherlock winds around Connie and heads for the door, calling over his shoulder in disinterest:

"Is there?"

"Yes, why is the bomber doing this?" George asks, because she’d bet the crown jewels that Sherlock knows. "If this woman’s death was suspicious, why point it out?"

Sherlock leans back to tell her, "Good samaritan," so sarcastic it almost sounds sincere.

"Who press-gangs people into being suicide bombers?" George goes on.

"Bad samaritan," Sherlock rejoins, that sincerity winding back to sarcasm again.

"I’m serious, Sherlock," George says, barely resisting the urge to grab him by the collar and shake him. "Listen, I’m cutting you slack here, I’m trusting you, but out there somewhere some poor bastard’s out there covered in semtex and he’s just waiting for you to solve the puzzle."

Unsurprisingly, Sherlock looks unmoved.

"So just tell me," George concludes, annoyed that she’s begging, "what are we dealing with here?"

There’s that gleam in his eye again, that makes George’s stomach sink into her shoes.

Sherlock breathes, "Something new," and whirls out the room.

George gives herself a minute in the too cold of the morgue and to shudder out two breaths before she forces herself to chase after him, to dive back into it. Sherlock spends the entire ride back to Baker Street in pensive silence, mulling over something he’s not interested in discussing, if the
way he flagrantly ignores her four separate attempts to initiate conversation is anything to go by. They get another phone call from the bomber — the old woman’s voice is shaking horribly, and George forces herself to go a bit dead inside, so she can focus on what’s being said — to say, "You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” and to remind Sherlock they’ve only three hours left. Both are true, and for so many reasons, George has nothing to say about either.

She sits around the flat waiting for him to come up with something until her breathing becomes, quote, intolerable! Must you respirate so loudly, Lestrade? and she goes downstairs for tea and a moan with Mrs. Hudson.

"If I were you, I’d be grinding laxatives in all of his food," George tells her.

Mrs. Hudson smiles beatifically. "Oh, I’ve been tempted, dear. But with those boys, how can you even tell what’s food in that awful fridge of theirs?"

"Valid," George agrees. "Probably the take out is a defensive maneuver."

Mostly to be a twat, she makes Mrs. Hudson come upstairs with her, so both of them can respirate loudly at Sherlock — who glowers at her murderously while he maintains benign politeness for his telephone call — as he stalks around the room frowning at things and rifling through piles of paper.

"I’m going to miss her," Mrs. Hudson says, admiring placidly all the photographs of Connie Prince’s body that Sherlock’s thoughtfully pinned to his wall. Figures that he and John live here. Maybe everybody at 221 Baker Street deserves one another. "She taught you how to do your colors. For example: I shouldn’t wear cerise. It drains me."

"I don’t buy into that," George says loyally. "I think you’d look lovely in cerise."

"Forcing me to entertain suicidal ideation over the subject of your asinine conversations isn’t going to make me think any more quickly," Sherlock shouts at them.

Ignoring him, George continues, "Anyway, I think that colors business is bollocks. According to her I should wear gray. As if my coloring can handle any more gray."

"Your hair is silver, dear," Mrs. Hudson assures her. "And very pretty."

Sherlock, in the background, makes an agonized sound that gets interrupted by his phone and then a cry of, "John!"

"It’s almost embarrassing how he lights up like that," George observes, watching Sherlock dash around the flat gathering camera equipment — some of which has obviously been stolen from ITV — and pulling on his coat and scarf.

Mrs. Hudson smiles indulgently as Sherlock bangs out of the flat, jumping down the stairs two at a time and calling over his shoulder, "Stay there! Don’t touch the testicles in the fridge!"

If three hours wasn’t forty minutes ago — so now they have two hours and twenty minutes — George would have shouted something back, or deliberately stolen one of John’s gloves and touched Sherlock’s fridge testicles just to irritate him. But all she can do is stare at Connie Prince, dead on Sherlock’s wall, and panic, feel helpless, feel sick rising in the back of her throat.

Mrs. Hudson clutches her hand, comforting.

"Breathe a bit, love," she says.
"Right. Sorry," George manages.

"Sherlock and John are clever boys," Mrs. Hudson says, and gives George’s fingers a squeeze. "It’ll all be fine — you’ll see."

***

It’s not fine. They don’t save Margaret Hesher, and her flat and half her tower block goes with her, taking eleven other people down in the rubble and flames. And even though George swears and swears and resorts of begging, Bombs won’t let her go into the scene to look, to look for something, anything, any trace.

"There’s nothing there for you, George," Dan says, not unkindly. "It’s just pink mist and bone fragments and a fuckload of burned quilts. You’ll have it all — just not now."

The case is on the highest level need to know basis, which means George knows and Trackwell knows and the commissioner knows. Sally know something’s going on, but she also knows enough not to ask. The Home Office has its own sticky fingers in it, and Yard’s bomb squad is in British Gas uniforms when they investigate the building. She has no idea how they’re going to convince the Tottenham Council to take the rap for this, and George thinks, I bet Mycroft has ways.

"Georgiana."

She blinks. She’s holding her mobile to her ear.

"Georgiana?" Mycroft says again, more urgent this time.

"Hi," she says, awkward. "Hi. I — I don’t think I realized I was calling. Sorry."

She can hear the television in the background of his office: BBC1, relentless coverage on the gas main explosion, discussion with various experts on London’s aging infrastructure, public advocates furious people are being put at risk in this manner.

"I doubt you can say anything to me about it, but I can tell from the news cycle it hasn’t been a good day," he says.

George covers her face with her free hand. It’s half ten already, the late shift wandering the building — people George knows in passing but doesn’t really know at all. Her desk lamp’s on but the overhead’s off, and her little office is sepia colored. Her eyes hurt and her throat hurts and her chest hurts. There’s nothing else to be done today. Sherlock and John have been debriefed, and Met and Home Office techs have cloned the phone, although George has no doubt that they won’t pick up the calls Sherlock is getting. It’s dark and cold and this terrible day is both unending and over already.

"No," George croaks. "Not a good day."

Mycrohums, thoughtful, over the phone, and she can hear papers shuffling, a woman’s voice in the background coming closer, and the transfer of a phone.

"Detective Inspector Lestrade," Anthea says, comfortingly flat as ever.

George’s heart leaps a little, aware it sounds wet and pathetic, but Mycroft is actually terrible at cheering people up and it’s sweet that he knows it. "Hi," she says. "Time machine."

"Forbidden due to a NATO treaty," Anthea replies.
"Time turner?" George tries.

"J.K. Rowling withholding schematics," is the answer, and before George can ask Anthea to find Superman and have him fly around the Earth so quickly it spins backwards, she says, "Mr. Holmes is tying up some loose ends — "

George can’t help but ask, "Literally? Is he hanging people in the next room who’re more than ninety days late paying their tax?"

"— and then he’ll meet you in front of New Scotland Yard in half an hour," Anthea finishes smoothly.

"Look at that," George says quietly, "just what I needed."

There’s a shifting noise on the other end of the line, the television turning off, and Mycroft’s voice in the distance, indistinct underneath Anthea’s, "Of course, it’s my job."

Mycroft’s at the wheel of the car that pulls up in front of NSY, and George slides into the passenger seat chilled through, shivering harder in the sudden warmth than she’d been shaking standing in front the building, hat pulled down over her ears and Mycroft’s gloves huge on her hands.

"I’m sure you did everything you could," he says to her, when they’re idling at a red light waiting for it to turn, London quiet and frigid around the car.

George just stares straight ahead: at the shuttered stores and still-open newsagents, the university students running around in tights and high heels, shrieking laughing in the city — everyone happy in their ignorant vulnerability. Of course George had done everything she could, but that’s the shittiest part of it, isn’t it? That she can kill herself trying and there’s nothing to be done, nothing in all of her training or planning. She could be better than herself, faster and more dangerous and think more quickly and it still wouldn’t matter because she just watching this one — it’s Sherlock’s show.

"How are you you, when Sherlock is Sherlock?" George asks, instead of talking about how she feels or how the day went, the way she just wants to go home and give up, lie still in the foyer and let Mycroft pick his way gently around her, cover her up in a blanket and leave her alone.

He’s quiet for a long minute, the car filling in the space with low purring — it’s a Bentley Continental GT this time, in a gunmetal gray; she still likes the persnickety Aston Martin better — before he says, "In terms of absolute intelligence, I’m only slightly cleverer than my brother, just a few points."

George smirks, knee jerk. "Somewhere out there, Sherlock just vomited blood, and I bet he’s already deduced why."

"Not too far off from his actual reaction when we were tested as children," Mycroft allows. "But I’ve always been lucky in that those few extra points meant I understood people. Sherlock doesn’t. We’re all baffling to him."

It’s a quick drive, just under ten minutes, from NSY to the Lyall Street house, and traffic is light by this time of evening on a weekday — past Christchurch Gardens and crossing Buckingham Gate — the city orange night around them. George worries about all of it, every single person: the woman in the fucking Pizza Express and the boy stumbling into the Caffe Nero, the couple walking down the street, Mycroft’s awful neighbors.
"I remember when he found the Carl Powers case," Mycroft says. "It was a logical inconsistency, naturally, but what left its mark was how Sherlock couldn’t use that to leverage anybody else into taking an interest. He wanted to know how people ticked, why they did what they did, why they all failed to see the truth."

"So, what, his endless quest for the most interesting murder, that’s not his morbid curiosity, it’s his secret way of reaching out for humanity?" George asks, frankly disbelieving, because she’s never bought into Sally’s argument that Sherlock’s heartless and on the brink of a killing spree, but she can’t imagine him concealing a secretly throbbing love of humanity, either.

"God, no," Mycroft laughs. "No — but people are Sherlock’s greatest mystery, us and the mad things we do. It’s the only puzzle he hasn’t conquered. Crime is just one of the more interesting of the mad things we do."

At the house, up the stairs, after Mycroft’s stripped her of her clothes and her foul mood, he runs her a bath and sits on the edge of the tub: trailing his fingers into the water and along her collar bone, the line of her arm, curiously tracing a nipple.

She sighs into it, into his touch, eyes sliding closed. "Sherlock always says he’s bored, horribly bored by everything — what about you? If you’re even smarter than he is."

"Meaning I," Mycroft says, a smile in his voice, "am smart enough to find my own entertainments," and his hand trails down the line of her sternum, past the well of her belly button and the curve of her stomach, his finger slipping between her thighs.

George’s sigh melts into a groan. "I always knew that bastard just needed to get laid."

"Well, as long as you don’t volunteer," Mycroft says.

"Disgusting," George says, dragging him into the water with her as punishment, getting his shirt and trousers soaked through and sending a tsunami across the bathroom tiles, "it’d be like committing incest with an uncooperative family pet."

They end up having to sleep in one of Mycroft’s eight zillion other bedrooms because the combination of water and slick and semen that they inflict upon their own makes it uninhabitable until the housekeeper does some sort of exorcism.

"Poor Claire," George says as she’s drifting off to sleep.

"Your pity’s misplaced," Mycroft says, still running a hand up and down her back. "I’ll be mocked about this for years."

George smiles into the pillow, eyes closed.

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She dreams about sitting in the back of her father’s cab, trapped in between Mycroft and Sherlock along the seat while John perches on a fold-down. It’s brightly gray outside the windows, and every building they go past explodes. It’s not exactly a bad dream, too strange for her to feel anything but strangely about it, but she wakes up half-nauseated anyway, to the sound of her mobile manic in her ear, SHERLOCK FUCKING HOLMES blinking ominously at her across the caller ID.

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Both to defy expectations and because with the wind chill along the fucking Thames, it’s -10 celsius, George wears a scarf and the hat Mycroft put on her yesterday and his gloves that she’s still appropriated and a pair of fleece-lined wellies with her trousers tucked in. It’s probably the least attractive she’s ever looked, which given some of the scut work she did as a constable, is really saying something.

She’s drunk three flat whites already since she managed to eject herself from bed, and basically the only non-shite thing that’s happened so far today is the steady stream of text-based cruel editorializing Mycroft has about his morning meeting. Uncomfortably, George suspects it’s the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

_If you keep this up, he’s going to raise govt withholding out of spite. GL_, she warns him, but mostly so he’ll smile a little today.

The answer comes two minutes later, as George’s walkie is crackling to life, saying, _Warning, Holmes alert. Repeat: warning, Holmes alert,_ and her phone screen bleats at her, _He’s only cross because his mistress is ignoring him, if his cufflinks are any indication. Please push Sherlock into the Thames if he’s rude. MH._

She’s still grinning when Sherlock comes stalking toward her on the shore, already pulling on gloves and with eyes only for the body in the shallow water and rocks, John trailing in his wake. The coroner’s pronounced, but held off on the rest at George and the Home Office’s request, which he’d taken with about as much grace as could be expected.

"Why are you smiling?" Sherlock asks her, sneering. Clearly, at some point during the last days he and John had reversed places on the penalty sofa.

George just smiles at him sweetly. _Incredibly depraved sexual intercourse._

"Dull," Sherlock snarls and makes for the body.

"Do you reckon this is connected then? The bomber?" George asks, instead of telling Sherlock about Mycroft’s prodigious oral fixation. She’s saving it for a special occasion, one day when she’s really going to want to make his life hell.

"Must be, odd though," Sherlock says, crouching down near the body, eyes searching. "He hasn’t been in touch."

George winces. _We must assume some poor bugger’s primed to explode, yeah?"

"Yes," Sherlock allows, but it’s not anywhere as impatient as George would have expected. She wonders if that’s what he and John were fighting about last night, this morning, this entire case. Sherlock sounds cold and oddly subdued.

"Any ideas?" she presses, watching him inspect the body.

"Seven. So far," Sherlock tells her.

George gapes. _Seven?"

Sherlock’s response involves peering at the dead man’s eyebrows, poking at his shirt, peeling off one of his black socks, and jerking his head for John to examine the body, too. George waves him to it, since the coroner’s already sworn a pox on her and any progeny over this bullshit, so she might as well. At least Sherlock hasn’t showed up this time with a meat thermometer and asked John to demonstrate how to take a liver temp. That had gone over so well with Heller he’d written
up a foul note for her in the autopsy that included no fewer than six references to being long overdue for retirement.

John’s exam is less silent.

"He’s dead...about twenty-four hours," John says, checking rigor. "Maybe a bit longer — might be drowning, but he’s got all the classic signs of asphyxiation."

George leans over to watch the little swirl of brassy brown hair at the top of John’s head as he inspects the body.

"There’s a little bit of bruising around the nose and mouth," John goes on, and indicating the man’s face, his hairline, he adds, "More bruises here — and here."

In the background, Sherlock pecks away at his BlackBerry and mutters, "Fingertips."

"He’s late thirties, I’d say," John concludes. "Not in the best condition."

"He’s been in the river a long while, the water’s destroyed most of the data," Sherlock declares, looking up finally from his mobile to stare at them crazily. "But I’ll tell you one thing — that lost Vermeer painting’s a fake."

George stares at him. "What?"

Sherlock, true to form, ignores her to say, "We need to identify the corpse — find out about his friends and associates —"

It’s very hard not to pick up one of the many rocks on this beach and throw it at his face, but George forbears.

"Wait, wait wait wait," George interrupts. "What painting? What are you on about?"

"It’s all over the place, haven’t you seen the posters?" Sherlock says, frowning at her like she’s disappointed him (again) with how dull she’s being. "Dutch old master, supposed to have been destroyed centuries ago, and now it’s turned up — worth £30 million."

George isn’t ashamed of her lukewarm verging on cold relationship with the art press, so she asks, "Okay, so what has that got to do with the stiff?"

"Everything," Sherlock breathes. His face is one of pure, mad joy. Fantastic. "Have you ever heard of the golem?"

"Golem?" George says, frowning and shaking her head.

"It’s a horror story, isn’t it?" John cuts in. "What are you saying?"

"Jewish folk story, a gigantic man made of clay," Sherlock tells him, turning round to catch John’s eye with a glint of almost-affectionate approval. George is going to have to print him out one of those So You’re Having Some Feelings, It’s Probably Not Appropriate To Arrange Crime Scenes As Dates pamphlets. "It’s also the name of an assassin. Real name, Oscar Zunza, one of the deadliest assassins in the world, that — " Sherlock points to the body " — is his trademark style."

"So this is a hit," George says, more to herself than anything.

The man lying on the beach is ordinary and small and very sad looking, the way a lot of bodies are after their inhabitants have gone, and George can’t imagine someone as nondescript and plain as
"Their victim looks being the object of such a crime. He’s wearing department store socks and looks too commonplace for this.

"Definitely. The golem squeezes the life out of his victims with his bare hands," Sherlock says.

"But what has this got to do with that painting?" George asks. "I don’t see —"

It’s while heaving an enormously put-upon sigh that Sherlock moans, "You do see, you just don’t observe —"

"All right, all right, children, calm down," John cuts in, which is probably for the best since her hands had been inching toward Sherlock’s miserable face and the temptation to hold his head in the Thames like a childhood bully had been rising fast in her blood. John asks, "Sherlock — do you want to take us through it?"

In a life prior to John Watson, getting explanations out of Sherlock was like pulling teeth from a lion. Now, it’s more an issue of setting it up so that Sherlock has sufficient reason to show off. It’s a good thing George has zero ego about her job.

"What do we know about this corpse?" Sherlock begins, circling the body like a shark. "Killer’s not left us with much, just this shirt and the trousers. They’re pretty formal. Maybe he was going out for the night. The trousers are heavy duty, polyester, nasty."

John and George share a look at that. Posh arsehole, is their shared thought.

"Same as the shirt. Cheap," Sherlock goes on, oblivious with all of his Harrow-educated consonants. "They’re both too big for him, so some kind of standard issue uniform, dressed for work then. What kind of work? There’s a hook on his belt for a walkie talkie."

"Tube driver?" George tries, and feels moronic the minute it’s out of her mouth, a sentiment reflected in Sherlock’s disgusted look.

John offers up, "Security guard?"

"More likely," Sherlock says, sounding relieved that the entire world isn’t so offensively stupid. "That’ll be borne out by his backside."

George is getting a migraine. "Backside?"

"Flabby," Sherlock says with summary finality. "You’d think he led a sedentary life, yet soles of his feet and the nascent varicose veins in his legs show otherwise. So a lot of walking a lot of sitting around, security guard’s looking good. The watch helps, too. The alarm shows regular night shift."

"Why regular?" George asks, mostly to be obnoxious at this point. "Maybe he just set his alarm like that the night before."

"No no no, the buttons are stiff, hardly touched," Sherlock says. "He set his alarm like that a long time ago, his routine never varied. But there’s something else. The killer must have been interrupted, otherwise he would have stripped the corpse completely. There’s some kind of badge or insignia on the shirtfront that he tore off, suggesting the dead man worked somewhere recognizable. Some kind of institution. Found this inside his trouser pockets. It’s sodden by the river but it’s still recognizable..."

He holds it up for John, who obligingly says, "Tickets."
"Ticket stubs," Sherlock tells him, fairly overflowing with low-grade approval. "He works in a museum or a gallery. I did a quick check. The Hickman Gallery has reported one of its attendants is missing. Alex Woodbridge. Tonight they unveil the rediscovered masterpiece. Now why would anyone want to pay the Golem to suffocate a perfectly ordinary gallery attendant."

And why, George wonders, would the gallery be reporting him missing? Woodbridge’s body has been in the water for a day, probably, but that warrants a phone call home and a stern lecture from your manager on your voice mail. Two going by without a thoroughly apologetic call might warrant a ring from HR. It’ll be minimum three or four before a workplace thinks to call the police and file a missing person report.

"Inference: the dead man knew something about it, something that would stop the owner getting paid £30 million pounds — the picture’s a fake," Sherlock concludes.

"Fantastic," John says, smiling. George wonders if he even knows he’s doing it, if he can stop himself, or if Sherlock just triggers happiness like a chemical reaction in John, the way that people do sometimes, if they’re very very lucky.

Sherlock shrugs, too studied in casualness to be anything but entirely pleased. For him, it’s so schoolboy sweet it’s almost diabetic. "Meretricious," he dismisses.

"And a happy new year," George says, because there’s no way in hell she’s telling the Met and the Home Office this cockamamie Golem nonsense. If nothing else, bloody Interpol would get involved and then she’d never be able to do her job again.

John looks back down at the body. "Poor sod."

"I better get my feelers out for this Golem character," she prompts, mostly because at this point she knows it’s better to goad Sherlock into doing something by threatening to do it poorly with her, quote, apparently revoltingly plebeian and thoroughly embarrassing skillset, end quote, than to request it.

"Pointless, you’ll never find him," Sherlock cuts her off. "I know a man who can."

"Who?" George asks, like reciting the lines of a play, barely hiding her grin.

"Me," Sherlock says brightly, already starting for the steps back toward the OXO Tower off at double speed, leaving John barely the time to look despairing before taking off after him.

George cups her gloved hands around her mouth, shouting, "Have fun! Stay warm! Call if there’re shots fired!"

John’s answer is two extremely rude fingers; Sherlock doesn’t bother at all.

"It’s like I haven’t learned my lesson at all," George says philosophically, four hours later, standing in the lobby of the planetarium and feeling extremely zen for how completely furious she is. "It’s like I think that telling you asshats to call in case there are shots fired is a safe, fun, playful thing to say, and not taunting fate at all."

Sherlock wrinkles his nose. "Asshats?"

"I learned it from the traffic pool," George snaps. "How the fuck did you break the planetarium and where did you get this bloody gun? Why shouldn’t I let those officers drag your arses back to headquarters?"
Behind her, she can hear the officers in question sniggering. According to Sally, it’s major Yard gossip currency to see George tearing into the legendary Sherlock Holmes and John Watson. She can’t imagine why. She feels like she has some sort of rage-induced seizure at him on a quarterly basis, but then again Sherlock enduring her screaming at him for any length of time is telling of his affection for her — she’s seen others try it before only to have Sherlock wander off in boredom.

John raises a finger and smiles at her. "Ah — fourth victim?"

"You haven’t even gotten a call yet," George retorts.

"But we will! Don’t you see? The Vermeer is a fake! Why else would someone have sent the most expensive assassin in the business after that woman?" Sherlock reasons, voice escalating. "We’re wasting time! We have to go to the Hickman."

Police Sergeant Davison — originally from Leeds, cried during sexual assault training; George has first dibs on him when he inevitably joins Serious Crimes — cuts in here to say, "Yeah, right, mate. There’s a dead woman in there and you two are beat to hell and have a gun."

Sherlock angles his sneer around George. "If we have a gun, why would we have choked her to death?" he demands.

Absolutely straight-faced, Davison says, "Probably a sex thing."

John actually bursts out laughing at Sherlock’s expression.

"Sherlock," George says, steeling herself, "honestly, a hundred percent, no tricks, no time to waste. Do I need to get you to the gallery now?"

He meets her gaze, solemn as a church. "Yes, a hundred percent, no tricks, no time to waste — yes."

When George’s D had been situated in front of an S and she’d been shackled to this hideous warthog of a DI, Vincent Branton, she’d been ordered to throw Sherlock off of a case. Insubordination would lead to a bollocking, which she was all right with, which would come with an additional side of Branton eyeballing her like discount meat the entire time, which George was not all right with, and she’d cuffed Sherlock’s delicate and wildly flailing wrists mid-protest and hauled him to her police car. She’d been halfway back to Montague Street because she’d never had any fucking intention of arresting him and punishing herself with paperwork for it, when Sherlock had pressed his stupid gaunt face into the barrier between the back and front seats and hissed, "Lestrade — if you do not take me to Dunloe Street, someone else will die, a hundred percent, no tricks, no time to waste." George will always be the woman who had looked at his red-rimmed eyes in the rearview mirror, hissed, "God damn it," to herself, and taken a U-turn down fucking Bishopsgate out of faith — neither blind nor ever misplaced, she hopes.

"Fine, Christ," George sighs, and looking to Davison, she says, "Right — I’m taking these two into my custody. The handcuff keys, please?"

PS Davison gapes at her. "You’re joking — there’s a dead body!"

"I know," George says, placating. "When all of this is over and done with, the commissioner will almost certainly scream that at me, too, and I will note your very pragmatic objection. But, until then, the handcuff keys."

Davison hands them over. "You’re an absolute mentalist," he tells her, awed.
"I’m even worse when you work for me," she says, clapping him on the shoulder and tossing the keys to Sherlock.

They’re piled into her car — Sherlock pushing the passenger seat all the way back again — when he confides, "Davison’s puerile crush on you has worsened threefold now, you ought to know. He’s liable to vomit out a confession anytime in the next month, depending on how frequently you see him."

George glares at him as she puts the car into gear. "Your brother likes to watch."

In the backseat, John puts his face in his hands, and in the front, Sherlock goes utterly white, sputtering, "I — what?" and the rest of the trip to the Hickman is occupied with Sherlock making rapid-fire deductions and then deleting them in panicked agony.

He’s either over it or he’s done serious, lasting damage to his short-term memory by the time they reach the museum. George isn’t bothered either way, since when they get out of the car Sherlock appears to be as brilliantly annoying as ever, scamming his way past security to get them in to see Ms. Wenceslas, the gallery director. The conversation is civil for roughly five minutes before Sherlock says:

"You probably don’t recognize me from our earlier conversation because you’re too busy panicking about the fake Vermeer you have hanging on your wall, I understand."

John says, "You were here earlier?"

Ms. Wenceslas says, "Excuse me?"

George says, "For fuck’s sake."

They end up in the viewing room, stark and painfully white but for the single painting on the wall at eye level. It’s an unremarkable little thing to her: a nightscape with slightly blurred edges, tired paint, and a layer of veneer over everything that’s a sickly yellow, either with age (Ms. Wenceslas) or contrivance (Sherlock).

"It’s a fake," Sherlock mutters, frowning down at his phone. "It has to be."

Ms. Wenceslas, in a jagged-edged couture gown and a perfume of desperation that just reeks of guilt, says, "This painting has been subjected to every test known to science."

"It’s a very good fake, then," Sherlock retorts, turning on his heel to glare at her. "You know about this, don’t you. This is you, isn’t it?"

She ignores him in favor of settling her hands on her hips, tilting herself at George with a well-cultivated curl of her lip, and George narrows her eyes instinctively. She knows that look on a woman and the sort of appraising put-down that always follows.

"Inspector, my time is being wasted," Ms. Wenceslas says, sounding steadier now, comfortable in her refined disdain, ordering George around. "Would you mind showing yourself — " there it is, the up and down look George has been waiting for: to take in her off-the-rack clothes and muddy shoes, her cheap haircut and her wrinkles, all the irrelevant things that do and don’t define her " — and your friends out?"

The pink phone rings, clanging, echoing in the gallery, and Sherlock turns it on speakerphone, barking, "The painting is a fake."
"It's a fake," Sherlock tries again. "That's why Woodbridge and Cairns were killed."

Still nothing — a distant intake of breath, and George can't tear her eyes away from the phone, its toxic pink case in Sherlock's ghostly white hands. They haven't gotten a call and a countdown this time, but she has no doubt there is a victim, that their seconds are ticking down.

"Aw, come on, proving it's just a detail," he insists, sounding the kind of cocky he sounds when he's scared, when he's nervous, when she'd told him he could either stop doing cocaine or be punched repeatedly in the testicles because doing cocaine wasn't an option. Sherlock snaps, impatient, "The painting is a fake. I've solved it. I've figured it out. It's a fake. That's the answer — that's why they were killed."

On the phone it's another breath, quieter this time. It's damning and Sherlock knows it.

"Okay," he says, into the air over the phone, near-pleading. "I'll prove it — give me time. Will you give me time?"

There isn't a silence this time, just a boy's voice, shaking, saying, "Ten," floating out of the speaker of the iPhone, and Sherlock whirs back around to the painting, frantic.

"It's a kid?" George says stupidly. "Oh, God, it's a kid."

"What'd he say?" John asks, looking gut-punched, gutted.

"Ten," Sherlock whispers, back to them. "It's a countdown, he's giving me time."

"Jesus," George murmurs, and over the sound of blood rushing her ears — she can't bear it, to lose another tower block like that, or what if it's a school? dozens of dead kids in their jumpers and polished shoes — George hears Sherlock talking feverishly to himself, to the painting, chanting, "It's a fake — how do I prove it? How? How?"

The boy is down to eight when Sherlock turns to Ms. Wenceslas, shouting, 'This kid will die — tell me how the painting's a fake! Tell me!' And she shifts, momentarily moving her weight between the heels of her guilty stilettos before Sherlock's gaze shifts to the floor and he changes his mind, says, "No, shut up — don't say anything. Only works if I figure it out."

"Seven," the boy says, voice muffled now from the way Sherlock's clutching the mobile, a tearful beat to Sherlock's frantic hissing at himself, pressed close enough to see the craqueleur of the painting, the thousands of tiny brush strokes that knitted it together.

George tries not to watch, stares at her feet, her brain running through the possibilities and knowing the inevitable: mobilizing the bomb squad at this point is meaningless, they've no clue where this child is, if there're any other people, too, who will be hurt when there's an explosion. Their best hope is standing in front of this painting wild-haired and listening to the boy count, "Six," and George begs, "Speeden up," as John croaks, "Sherlock," because they both know it, they all know it.

And as the boy is saying, "Four," Sherlock lets out a gasp like someone's voice breaking over orgasm and says, "Oh — at the planetarium, you heard it, too," whirling around, manic-eyed and beaming, pacing with the methamphetamine thrill of a mystery, shoving the phone at John. "Oh, that is brilliant, that is gorgeous."

"Three," comes the countdown, as John asks, "What's brilliant? What is?"
Sherlock just laughs, checking something on his own phone and moaning, "This is beautiful — I love this," and George explodes with, "Sherlock!" just as he doubles back, seizing the mobile out of John's hand to shout into it:

"The Van Buren Supernova."

The quiet that follows lasts forever, George waiting for her insides to rust for fear of moving, until the kid opens his mouth again and says, "Please, is somebody there? Somebody help me."

George doesn't hear anything Sherlock says, just seizes the phone and goes off somewhere quiet, pulling out her own mobile at the same time, saying, "Hello — hi. My name is Detective Inspector George Lestrade. You're going to be fine."

No more counting, no more voice in his ear, and the boy starts crying in earnest.

"You're a girl," he says. "Girls aren't named George."

"They are if they don't like being called Georgiana," she says to him reasonably, drawing from some hidden well of balance maybe everyone pays into as they grow up for moments like these, when there's a child crying who needs you to be perfectly calm. "Can you tell us where you are? I'd like to send my friends to come get you."

"I'm at Hamleys," he cries, blubbering now, barely audible over his tears and any composure gone now there's a police officer on the phone. "I'm with all the model cars."

You sick fuck, George doesn't say out loud, to whoever set this up. She breathes through her nose to tamp down the nausea and ignore her mental calculations about how many hundreds of families and little kids are wandering around in Hamley's right now, buying Stieff bears and Hello Kitty figurines, and says, "That's good — what's your name?"

"Joe," he weeps at her. "I'm Joe. Please don't hang up."

"I won't," George promises him. She won't. She holds up her other phone to her ear, where Dan is already shrieking down the line at her in escalating worry. "I won't hang up — here, you'll enjoy this. I'm going to swear at some police officers now."

He laughs a little, and then laughs a little harder, still tearful, as George does exactly that, and he's back to inconsolable by the time the phalanx of the bomb squad and the Met police evacuate Hamleys and meet him on the fourth floor. George hears Dan in the background saying, "Hey, I hear you've got our DI Lestrade on the line?" over the shuffling of cloth and equipment.

"Yeah," Joe says, brave like no little boy should have to be. "She's nice."

"Joe," George hears Dan say, "let me tell you: that woman is bloody amazing."

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George doesn't feel amazing. She feels delicate and poised to burst, like one more thing heaped on top of all the others might have her committing arson. She drives like a bat out of hell with her sirens blaring, ducking past the PCs on scene at Hamleys — every fucking tourist in London gathered on Regent's Street to stare and gossip as she goes, scowling at a cluster of Japanese housewives — just as she hears the "All clear!" call singing through the store. Joe, when she meets him face to face for the first time, is a handsome boy no older than seven, his face swollen from tears. He says, "Are you George?" and she says, "Yes, hello, nice to meet you finally, Joe." He clings to her like a limpet until his parents arrive, and then he rockets off from her side, shattered
again as he hurls himself into his mother's arms. George watches as the woman sinks into the
carpet of the store: Joe's mother is holding the back of his head like he's a baby and she's
supporting his neck, the father wrapping his arms around them both, crying silently, his shoulder
shaking. George feels a sense of gratitude and longing and grief so strong it makes her weak in the
knees.
Chapter 6

In her office, after, Sherlock is post-coital with smugness and coiled, waiting for the next episode of this to unfold, and George hears the name the first time: Moriarty.

"You know something, something more than you're saying," George says, watching PC Davison booking the curator, leading her away.

George has ordered her put on suicide watch and held in solitary. She doesn't think Ms. Wenceslas is particularly given to killing herself or aggressive violence in holding, but she is tied to someone who makes Sherlock's eyes glimmer like opals, and George can think of nothing more tellingly dangerous.

Sherlock, where he's still perched in a seat in front of her desk, makes a distracted noise.

She frowns at him. "Sherlock."

"I've heard the name once before," he allows, not meeting her gaze, the corner of his mouth tugging up.

George knows that smile, that secret little grin, because it's on Mycroft's mouth when he's alone with her and for John when Sherlock's particularly pleased with himself and it's here again — in the wreckage of everything, for someone who wants to burn London to its bones. She turns to stare at the pink phone where it sits on the edge of her desk, and hopes that when Sherlock ignites, he doesn't take everybody down with him.

***

When she gets home — after she spends two hours briefing the public information officers on what they can and can't tell the Guardian and what they can and can't let the Sun get away with making up — it's to Anthea on the sofa watching Jonathan Creek reruns with her stocking feet kicked up on the coffee table.

George frowns, dumping her diary and her mobile on the table next to Anthea's toes, and sits down next to her, asking, "Shouldn't you be with Mycroft?"

"Mr. Holmes has been delayed on a personal errand," Anthea recites, eyes never glancing away from the television. "He said I should tell you that he'll be home as soon as he can, and that we should order Thai."

George arches an eyebrow. "Did he actually say order Thai or do you just want Thai?"

"We speak as one voice, Detective Inspector Lestrade," Anthea returns seriously.

They order Thai. It turns out Gold is showing a Jonathan Creek marathon because one episode just bleeds into another, and George remembers watching these years ago and thinking they were charming but ludicrous. She should have taken notes, although it would likely be pointless: Maddie's a bit crueler than George could ever manage and Jonathan's a far more compliant detective than Sherlock could ever be.

"So what is this personal errand of Mycroft's?" George asks

Mycroft's personal errands fall into four categories: (1) Sherlock-related, (2) Mummy Holmes-
related, (3) George-related, or (4) non-personal errands beyond Anthea's security clearance. George hates anything beyond Anthea's security clearance. It leaves her imagining Mycroft alone somewhere doing something terrifying, no Anthea or her BlackBerry to help.

Tonight, it leaves George thinking about the final pip, that singular tone remaining and who and what it might be for. It's been in the back of her mind all day, ever since Sherlock left her office and she'd sat there too distracted to do anything for hours. She wonders when it will come, and why it hasn't already; Sherlock's playmate hardly seems like the patient type. She worries about London. She worries about Sherlock. She worries about the unknowable abstract of Mycroft, because to think at length about his work scares her badly enough on a normal basis without the long shadow of the bomber hanging over them. She wonders where he is now — what he's doing.

Anthea eats another piece of tao hoo tod and says, "Prostitutes."

George's laughter is reflexive, breaking through her worry. "Did he tell you to say that?"

"He said to tell you something vaguely convincing," Anthea replies. "So: prostitutes."

"Plural, even," George ripostes. "Ambitious."

"The British government prides itself on professionalism and exceptionalism," Anthea tells her, and reaches for her pad kee mao.

George eats a spring roll and muses, "I wonder what kind of prostitutes Mycroft would hire," which begins a conversation that rapidly devolves into Anthea implying Mycroft spent his late twenties and early thirties hiring five-diamond pros and fucking them savagely at the Ritz. George barely keeps herself from tipping over into hysterical laughter ("Well, Mr. Holmes did endure two weeks of being a Beaver Scout, I'm sure he learned about knots then.") while Anthea maintains a straight face the entire time.

She wonders if this is how Tom felt: waiting in their dark house and watching anything but the news, staring at the telephone and hoping it rings, hoping it doesn't ring. She wonders if he's been quietly, steadily scared like she does now, unsettled and aware she should be more frightened than she is, trying to cover it by laughing.

George has always operated among the pantheon of known fears: gangbangers and thieves and generally uninspired murderers, and when she'd started riding a desk more than walking a beat, she'd given up the stab-proof vest and baton, too. She'd always thought Tom was a fucking lunatic, terrified for no reason, picking fights when she was late coming home or back with a scrape when he ought to have known she was fine and trained for it.

Mycroft doesn't operate in the pantheon of known or unknown fears. George doesn't know what he does; no one, maybe not even Anthea, really does. He vanishes ahead of the Korean elections and leaves a wake of subtle political shifts in the countries he doesn't visit. He's so need-to-know no one knows him at all.

George lives in his house and shares his bed and has convinced him to let her put an aspirin and manuka-honey mask on him and all she knows is that she's scared for him, that of course he's fine and trained for it and the cleverest man in the world. They've lost half an apartment block and twelve people this week, too many near-misses and no idea where to begin looking. They're chasing a ghost, and George has no doubt it's Sherlock and Mycroft who will get there first — she's just worried what she'll find when she catches up.

On screen, Jonathan is dealing with a dead, rented elephant when George gives up on eating and
asks, "Is he all right? I mean — is what he's doing safe?"

Anthea doesn't pretend not to know what she's asking about. She sets down her Thai iced tea and her second box of tao hoo tod and takes George's hand into her slightly greasy one — an unthinkably human thing against Anthea's flawless perfection — to lace their fingers together and squeeze, eyes fixed to the television and utterly silent.

George passes out sometime after Maddie goes to America and Jonathan gets a new (old girlfriend) blond sidekick, and when she wakes up it's because Mycroft is pulling a blanket across her shoulders, draping it over Anthea, too, where she's slumped over and asleep on George's shoulder — their hands still linked.

"You're home," George says, and she sounds like she's crying. "You're okay."

"I told you I would be back as quickly as possible," he murmurs, and presses a kiss — lingering — to her forehead, where all of her stress gathers between her eyebrows. "Go back to sleep. I'll be here when you wake up."

He is, and so is Anthea. They're having a silent argument in the kitchen, the only kind they ever have. She's passive-aggressively under-sugaring his tea and he's putting the wrong kind of cheese on her cheese-and-marmite toast, and George sits at the breakfast table in the cloaking gold sun and smiles into her coffee — relieved, so relieved.

The last pip never comes. Or at least George doesn't hear about it, but John sticks particularly close to Sherlock. Sherlock is particularly ferocious when women flirt with his blogger, and Mycroft works from home the next three days so she guesses that something's happened, that something's changed.

"How are you not furious that this case just got snatched away?" Dan demands, later that week when they've been locked in together to finish their paperwork or die trying, handlers from the Home Office guarding the door to George's office. Everything they're writing down is going directly into the bowels of some unknown office in Whitehall, to add to some chapter she'll never have the security clearance to know.

She types, unknown bomber, and knows it's a lie. "It's bloody terrorism, arguing jurisdiction would be the dictionary definition of futility," she points out.

"George Lestrade, you are a fucking marvel," Dan grumbles, and goes back to banging on his keyboard, pecking with two index fingers across the letters, because typing is not a highly valued skill in the Met's bomb squad.

She's not. She's a coward. She should want this case, to chase it to the ends of the Earth, to take the name Moriarty and disclose it, uncover it, figure it out. But George has the instinctive hesitation bred into a hundred generations and she knows that here be monsters, that underneath the trappings of this case there's something else, and that whatever detente she has now is temporary at best. Sherlock's heard the name Moriarty once before and George knows she'll hear it again, that this like the geologic crawl of erosion is unavoidable, that it'll come again on silent feet.

George gets up in the mornings and goes home at night, she chases criminals and kisses Mycroft hello and goodbye and she still spends Sunday afternoons with her mum, watching bad telly and eating biscuits. But somewhere in her gut George is waiting — barely balanced, breathless — for something more, for this borrowed peace to explode.

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Things do blow up, but they're fairly pedestrian — for her life and for some value of "pedestrian" in the context of Sherlock Holmes, anyway.

Criminals keep doing annoyingly illegal things in London, and people keep being killed in fits of passion or stupidity or ignorance; if George never has to talk a woman off the ledge in the aftermath of a tragic and inappropriately diverting scaring incident ever again, it will still be too soon. Much to George's prurient delight, she gets to play front-row witness to a series of intensely hilarious domestics between Sherlock and John regarding the relative popularity of their websites, which has to be the most petty and ridiculous dick measuring contest of all time.

George had been worried in the early days that John was going to be too starstruck by Sherlock's intoxicating combination of insanity and danger — some people like that sort of thing; it explains a lot of marriages — to ever get any perspective on him. And then he'd started blogging about Sherlock's cases with equal parts self-deprecating charm, joy at justly humiliating his intolerable flatmate, and a steadying, ocean-deep kind of love.

"I like cigarette ash and fascinating retellings of your failures," George tells Sherlock, when he asks her which website she reads more, to which his response is to hiss at her like a cat and stomp off, John sniggering as he follows.

As predicted, Davison takes the detectives exam. He scrapes through with a shockingly low paper score and a shout of pure joy from Serious Crimes, which promptly snatches up the newly anointed DS Davison and tries to give him alcohol poisoning. George ends up having to give him a ride home, where he cries a little and tells her he wants to kiss her knees. George says, "I'm very flattered, but I'm seeing someone, and anyway, you are very scared of me, which wouldn't bode well for a relationship even if I wasn't going to officially be your boss come Monday."

PC Hatcher is making waves in traffic — how anybody fucking makes waves in traffic, George has no idea — but he's doing it, and she's already dispatched Sally to start seducing him with the promise of terrible hours and more excruciating responsibility.

"There's something wrong with you," Sally says to her. "How are those incentives?"

George signs off on something. She's not sure what it is but Sally gave it to her and stared meaningfully at where she'd drawn a big X so probably it was due a month ago.

"It worked on you," George replies, and Sally has an expression of such personal despair at that undeniable truth George is tempted to give her the afternoon off.

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In the last clear week of autumn before winter seizes the city, Mycroft gets recalled to London from Moscow for something urgent and royal, a combination of descriptors he assures George instantly cancel one another out. For someone who's doggedly close-mouthed about what place in line to the throne he is, Mycroft's interest in monarchical intrigues is a baseline zero, so George suspects it's bigger than just embarrassing photos, illegal addictive stimulants, or poorly thought-out costume parties.

"Are you supposed to be telling me any of this?" George asks Saturday night.

Mycroft smiles at her and sips quietly at his scotch, sprawled in an armchair that had appeared next to the bathtub for stolen moments like these: George soaking off her week at the office and Mycroft watching her do it. Somewhere out there, Sherlock has a migraine and he doesn't know why.
"All I've said is that my current work involves the Queen," he points out. "Technically, I do work for Her Majesty's Revenue & Custom."

George is obligated to flick water at him for that, grinning when bubbles end up in his scotch. She surrenders her foot when he sets his drink aside to confiscate it from her, settling her heel into his palm — the bathwater leaving a dark patch on the knee of his trousers.

"Anyway," Mycroft tells her, studying pale skin of her ankle, "I plan on offloading the issue onto Sherlock, which means that there are sure to be several days of dramatics before anything is sorted — " he strokes a palm up the inside of her calf " — which leaves me free to pursue other avenues of investigation."

"Oh, is that what we're calling it now?" George asks, laughing.

That weekend, the phone's there, but Anthea's not, which is as close to off duty as Mycroft ever gets, really, so George takes another two days off and they make it a proper break. They take the Aston Martin down the winding country roads into the South Downs and George introduces Mycroft the concept of an M&S picnic, sitting together on a folded-out copy of the Telegraph and trying to keep pieces of plastic from escaping in the brisk wind across the rolling hills. It's too cold for it, really, but Mycroft just pulls a blanket out of the boot of the car and wraps it around them and says, "We should go on holiday," which is so completely ridiculous George overturns her personal-drunk sized bottle of M&S pink cava she laughs so hard.

"Where would we go on holiday?" George manages, still giggling. "The only reason we're here is because you don't care about the queen."

"Bite your tongue, I care about Lizzie enormously," Mycroft quips, to which the only appropriate response is to throw a grape at his head.

The day of driving leaves them on a the top of a hill outside of Bath, the car crunching over the white gravel drive in front of a Georgian B&B with all the windows blazing orange. The duke's suite is open — "Of course the duke's suite is open," George murmurs into Mycroft's shoulder at the reception desk — and they're informed about complimentary champagne and that breakfast runs between 7 a.m. and 10:30 in the mornings, and please call down in case they need anything.

"I wonder what the strangest request they've ever gotten is," George says.

She's sitting on the turned down bed — a massive thing with a gilded, scrolling headboard, an embarrassment of pillows — in an India teal camisole and shorts: one of those frilly purchases she'd made on the fly walking down Upper Street one morning past the dangerous nexus of Jigsaw, Whistle, and Hobbs.

Mycroft, where he's undoing his cuffs in the vanity, looks at her thoughtfully. "One time, I had to ask a hotel concierge for a pint of O negative and a car battery."

"Were you electrocuting someone's testicles?" George asks very seriously.

He smiles at her in the mirror, cuffs open, a flush on his face from the winter sun. He says, "Not his testicles," and George thinks, oh my God, I love you.

Once she's whispered it to herself, in the quiet of her own head, it echoes out and George can't stop thinking it, can't stop the way it wells up in her throat and telegraphs itself in a blush down her throat. She thinks, he can tell, he must be able to tell, and she's shy for the first time in forever, in a year, with him, pressed close in the dark. George kisses a little too desperately, is a little too eager
to please, and she feels shocky with realization, her skin prickling, until Mycroft's curled up around her — his hand stretched across the skin over her heart, possessing — and he whispers it out loud, fearful but certain and into the knob of her spine like a prayer.

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They've been back in London about twelve hours, and George back in the house, enjoying her rare day off after doing a round of errands for less than forty minutes when she hears fucking shots fired in Belgravia.

"Oh, of course this is you arseholes," George says, when she shows up five minutes and a few houses away — hair a nest, clutching her walkie talkie and warrant card, her gun tucked into the back of her jeans like a lunatic — to see John and Sherlock in the middle of it.

John frowns at her. "Davison said you were off."

"I am!" George yells at him. "I live round the fucking corner! Where the fuck do you two keep getting firearms?"

She is off, technically, and the last thing she wants to do is opt herself back into work a day early, so instead of banishing all the rubberneckers from the scene and assigning Sally and Davison to handle the interior of the house with the crime scene techs, she makes Sally assign herself and Davison to the house and chase off the rubberneckers. George contents herself with taking a cell phone video of Sherlock — stoned out of his mind and obsessively stroking John's coat while deducing and re-deducing what John ate for breakfast — being checked over by the EMTs and then eventually released into Dr. Watson's care.

"Sherlock," she says later, still filming. "Say hi to the camera."

He blinks at her very slowly from where he's sitting on the steps of the house. "Your breasts actually do frighten me a little," he tells her.

She palms his curls affectionately. "I forgive you for opening fire in my neighborhood."

"Do you live here?" Sherlock asks, operating on quarter-speed and swaying. "I would have deduced that, if I weren't so distracted — why do you smell like my brother?"

George rights his collar a bit. "Because I was having sex with him all weekend," she explains patiently, and adds, "Please stop deleting that."

"This is very mean-spirited, George," John says, from where he's filling out a ream of paperwork. It's all boilerplate, and if Sherlock and John hadn't personally offended everybody on the EMT crew here before, they'd probably just tick the boxes themselves.

She grins over her shoulder at him. "I'll send you a copy," she promises.

"Incredibly mean-spirited," John calls back, but he's smiling.

George doesn't get the full story for days, and when she gets it it's insanity at its finest: Irene Adler, Europe's most elite dominatrix, a mobile phone with photos that could bring down governments, and Sherlock being thrashed with a riding crop by a naked woman wearing his coat. George can't decide if she's sorry she missed it or glad she wasn't involved.

"So did I imagine it, or did you tell Sherlock you live near Irene?" John asks.
They're sitting in the what they've decided is their local, a helplessly twee little pub run by earnest thirtysomethings who'd spent their twenties backpacking through central Europe having intense feelings about brewing. Both John and George are a bit ashamed to like it as much as they do, but they serve (good) Czech beer on tap and have double orders of truffle chips; they're both too old to pretend that the music and smell of desperate loneliness in some of the other places nearby isn't a turnoff.

George rolls her eyes. "Please tell me you aren't surprised Mycroft lives in Belgravia."

"Please tell me I'm allowed to be surprised you live with Mycroft," John rebuts.

"It's been more than a year," George says.

"Which is also strange," John retorts.

George points a chip at him. "Says the man who lives with Sherlock."

John calls it a draw, on which George calls bullshit. She's at least getting laid; Sherlock seems actively invested in preventing John from getting his rocks off, if the last three girlfriends have been any indication. It's not good for anybody, not in the least because it leaves John desperate and making incredibly bad sex-related decisions that have consequences that linger for ages.

It all leads up to a truly sad moment, months later, when George gets talked into answering John's mobile phone and pretending to be his lunatic girlfriend who's licensed to kill and carries a badge. He's spun her a compelling tale of how his actual, current girlfriend is going to leave him kneecapped in a ditch if Helen, the clinging librarian, keeps calling to sob into John's voicemail.

"Why can't you make Sherlock do this?" George says, after she hangs up and hands the phone back. "He's crazier and more possessive than I could ever be."

John makes a face and orders her another pint. "I did, for a while. He told one of them he hated the smell of downmarket floozy all over me and didn't she know she was distracting me from far more important work."

"So basically, he was uncomfortably in character," George asks, grinning.

Pointing at her warningly, John says, "Don't smile at me like that, George."

"Why, is Sherlock going to tell you he hates the smell of downmarket floozy coppers all over you?" George asks.

"Ha bloody ha," John mutters into his glass, and George bets that's exactly the conversation he's going to have when he gets home to Sherlock's sulk. "Look — are you coming to our Christmas do or not, you harpy?"

George covers her face and mumbles through her hands, "No, because I'm spending Christmas at the Holmes's country pile with their mother."

John nearly chokes to death.

Apparently bored by George's inch-thick dossier and possessed of foreknowledge that George's mother and Ben were going away to spend Christmas with Ben's son in California, Mrs. Eugenia Philomena Holmes nee Beauchamp had sent a beautifully calligraphed note on thick, personalized stationary, extending her warmest holiday invitation. George — in an act of shocking cowardice — had left it sitting on the breakfast table for a week, afraid to touch it, before Mycroft had applied
three tumblers of Scotch to the problem and confronted her over dinner.

"I'll understand if you don't wish to go," he had said. All the food on his plate had been systematically cut to smaller pieces and rearranged, except for the pork crackling, which he'd eaten in between tumblers one and two, probably for courage.

George, conversely, had eaten three servings of everything and couldn't tell any longer whether the nausea was terror at the thought of Mycroft's mother having her murdered and buried behind the boat house, or too much apple chutney. "It's not that I don't want to go," she'd explained hurriedly. "I just — surely I'm not what your mother anticipated."

She'd been horrified the minute she'd admitted it, but it was the cloud she'd been living under ever since Mycroft had met her mother. Gillian Lestrade thought her daughter's beau was clever and funny and well-employed, found his Oxbridge intonation endlessly charming, and always said, "I'm so glad you found such a nice man, George. Also, have him ring me if you can. I've a question about my tax." Christ only knew what a woman named Mrs. Eugenia Philomena Holmes nee Beauchamp would think of George — or more specifically, what she'd think of her older son with George.

"Georgiana," Mycroft had said, and there'd been such laughter in his voice she'd looked up, startled by it, only to see him wide-open smiling at her, eyes shining. "My mother anticipated she'd find me dead, cleaved to my desk, at forty-five."

George had let out a shaky noise of realization. "Oh."

"You should be aware there's a very high likelihood she'll try to give you some of the family jewels if we visit," Mycroft had gone on. "She may restrain herself to the late-Victorian pieces in an effort not to drive you away."

That had turned into a long discussion about how the Holmes family vault — "It's my design, actually, the only project Sherlock and I managed to implement that only came partially to blows," Mycroft mused fondly — actually contained pieces ranging from modern-day Harry Winston and Tiffany's to filigree work contemporary to the Sutton-Hoo hoard. By the end, George had been significantly drunker and too happy that Mycroft wouldn't die cleaved to his desk at forty-five to do anything other than say, "Yes, sure, of course we'll go to Sussex for Christmas."

Easier said than done. Her agreement to go is met with much ado by all quarters. Mycroft promptly vanishes on a six-nation week-long business trip punctuated by a series of texts that are all just effervescently cruel comments about the unnamed world leaders he's glowering into submission, lest they interrupt his holiday. Sherlock — who apparently took her request to heart during the Irene Adler fiasco and hasn't deleted anything (yet) — throws a tantrum so intense George feels it second-hand through John's pained emails. Anthea develops a twitch in her left eye, which seems to be compensating for how exquisitely bland the rest of her face is.

"I'm guessing this is a bigger deal than anticipated," George hazards when she goes downstairs for a glass of water at 2 a.m. and finds Anthea sitting in the den, typing feverishly and eating an entire tub of Haribo Starmix.

Anthea just looks at George with deadened features in the glow of her ThinkPad.

"Mr. Holmes has never taken off for the holidays," she explains. "Ever."

George tries to smile at her. "You could come with us?" she offers.
"I'm going to Cambodia," Anthea says, after which point it seems somewhat pointless to carry on with that line of conversation, really.

In the lead-up to the Christmas visit, George surrenders her lunch breaks to searching for a gift for Mrs. Holmes. Expensive, nice things are pointless, since if she's anything like her sons she is able and willing to buy herself expensive, nice things. In the months that George and Mycroft have lived in one another's pockets, all the presents they've exchanged have been — as George first requested — categorically worthless. Knowing that Mycroft could have anything in the world and chooses to want her is an opiate stronger than any drug George has ever found hidden inside Sherlock's boxspring; she doesn't need anything else.

She consults her mother, who goes slightly spare and starts crying.

"Oh, God, what the hell, Mum?" George asks, trying to staunch the flow of eyeliner down her mother's face with kitchen paper.

"It's just — he'll probably ask you to marry him soon, and," Gillian starts and the rest of it dissolves into further tears.

George has no fucking idea why her mother's upset about this since Tom's proposal had ended in her mother throwing a bloody party at the local. The rest of the afternoon is spent watching the Vicar of Dibley, which goes all right until the wedding episode, at which point, George says, "Fuck's sake," and just lets her mother weep all over her before going for the family albums to sob over ugly pictures of George during the eighties, too. Ben comes home in the middle of this debacle, but showing more wisdom than courage, sticks close to the wall and sneaks off to his office, ignoring George's pleading looks for rescue.

"And look, there's you," her mother says, pointing at a photo of George in an hideous, pea-green puff of taffeta standing next to Bill, the future chip shop owner, slanting a longing, ten-year-old look at George. "You were absolutely furious when we made you dance with him."

"Mum," George says, inspired, "you are brilliant."

Mycroft is easy, since whenever she brings him eggs _en cocette_ he smiles. Sherlock flat-out refuses to participate, so she ends up trading him her cameraphone footage of him sky high for his compliance. John says, "Yeah, sure, why not," with studied disinterest, but George makes a note to make two copies as she arranges them to her liking in front of their fireplace of horrors. Typically, Sherlock refuses to exclude the skull, and it ends up perched on his knee — his right hand over its crown possessively — when her shutter clicks, John's face crinkled into a lovely smile and Sherlock's mouth tugged up into a smirk, which is as good as George is ever likely to get.

"It's insipid, right?" George asks Edith with the urgency of knowing Christmas is literally a week away. "It's rubbish, isn't it?"

Edith, sitting on the counter with her cigarette hanging out of the bathroom window, says, "It's precious as fuck and I'm sickened you've come up with it."

So after work on Friday the 23rd, George dumps her overnight bag, her gifts, Mycroft's overnight bag, and Mycroft — who had gone through three different time zones in two days and is worse for it — into her Golf and takes off for the countryside.

It's not a particularly long trip but the traffic getting out of London that night is miserable, and Mycroft drifts off to sleep in the middle, the orange light of the city petering out into the glare of the motorway. George keeps the stereo on low to stay awake and hums along with the refrains she
learns along the way, tapping her fingers on the keyboard as they go, eventually peeling off the M roads and onto the As, that get less and less aggressively paved and more and more charmingly offbeat.

The house, when they reach it at half-eleven, is impossible to miss. Mostly because George has to drive through a forest, a charmingly dilapidated gate, a gate that looks charmingly dilapidated but has Mycroft Holmes written all over it, announce herself to a speaker set in a hollowed-out tree to an extremely enunciated butler, and then drive another half mile before the actual building comes into view.

George glares at Mycroft's sleeping face. "Minor Georgian estate my arse."

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It's the housekeeper, Mrs. Caulfield, who lets them into the house and settles them into Mycroft's childhood suite in the east wing. Only George's pity for Mycroft's obvious exhaustion spares him the thorough mocking he deserves. She sits Mycroft down on the edge of his massive bed and helps undress him, fold him into the linens, and waits until the muscles in his face and shoulders go loose with sleep once more. George looks at his childhood bookshelves — overflowing with history and two separate, well-thumbed copies of the Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy — and draws the heavy curtains over the massive windows out to the rolling hills beyond. She's never felt her commonness more keenly. It eats away at her until George slides into bed, shivering with the chill of the house, and Mycroft sighs and drags her greedily across the acres of mattress. It's a small thing, but it makes her brave, and instead of staring into the cavernous ceiling all night, George dreams about her father's taxi again, driving on an interstellar highway with Mycroft giving him directions to the restaurant at the end of the universe.

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Mrs. Holmes is elegant more than beautiful, with Mycroft's nose, Sherlock's hair, and velvety brown eyes. She looks almost as scared as George must, when they come across each other in the kitchen the next morning and freeze in surprise before Mrs. Holmes — a consummate hostess — musters a smile and says, "You must be Georgiana."

"Or George," George offers, because she's systemically inclined to hopeless causes. Resisting the urge to fidget is torturous. "Sorry we missed you last night."

Mrs. Holmes's face goes longing, and George suffers a moment of sudden, blinding tenderness for her, her very small hands in this very huge house, her boys grown up and gone away out of her reach.

"Mrs. Caulfield says Mycroft was dead on his feet," Mrs. Holmes ventures, still careful.

_Courage, George_, she thinks of her father saying, and George walks over to the counter to settle on one of the kitchen stools, because her plan to sneak downstairs for a poke around and caffeine without anyone knowing is already shot, so she may as well make the best of it. George smiles — that particular smile Mycroft says can undo sailing knots and melt away the worst of his moods — and says, "And he's still dead to the world," and asks, "Would you mind if I interrupt your tea?"

All in all, it takes about an hour for George to conclude that public school is the worst influence a child can have, because Eugenia Holmes is quite possibly the nicest woman George has ever met, and the only way Sherlock and Mycroft can be, well, _Sherlock and Mycroft_ is that Eton did something to them.
"If it did, it did it to Sherlock in extremely short order," Eugenia — she'd forbidden George from referring to her as Mrs. Holmes within two minutes — says cheekily. "He was drummed out in less than a semester."

"I am wholly unsurprised by this turn of events," George laughs. "Harrow?"

"Two months," Eugenia sighs.

Pink morning is melting across the Sussex skies during that magic hour between 8 and 9 a.m. on winter mornings, light coming sluggishly out of bed. George is in jeans and a navy jumper with mother of pearl buttons at the wrists, her hair still wet and dripping. She's sitting at the breakfast counter with the massive aga radiating warmth behind her and Eugenia Holmes doing the same in front, leaning over her cup of Earl Grey and smiling at George with humbling affection.

"But not Mycroft," George says, smiling just at the thought of him, reflexive now — a direct line from behind the cage of her ribs to the corners of her mouth.

Eugenia laughs. "Mycroft was an entirely different type of problem," she confides. "What on Earth do you do with a child who was thirty by the time he was eight?"

"Intervene when he's forty-two, and before he dies cleaved to his desk, obviously," George says, teasing, into the rim of her teacup.

"And thank you very much for that," Eugenia says, with good humor and not a little touch of genuine gratitude that sings in the air for a long moment before she clears her throat. "Well — what do you say to a tour? Don't worry: since it's not Mycroft playing docent, it won't be historically comprehensive."

"Thank God for that," George says.

Epperley House is a sprawling 135 acres of estate, cottages, outbuildings, and gardens, and a further 700 acres of farmland that the Holmes family has rented out to local farmers and small holders for five generations now. Before Sherlock and Mycroft grew up in the country house with its stone face and Doric Venetian front doorway, it had been part of the dowries of two future duchesses, one lesser heiress, and then entailed down the male line to Mr. Sherringford Browning Holmes — a third son in one of those once-great families that had lost its title along the way.

Eugenia takes George through the parlors and drawing rooms and solars — each decked out in Christmas splendor — the library and the two studies, the music room with its grand piano and south-facing windows golden with mid-morning light. The grand foyer is playing host to a 20 foot tree, gleaming with spun glass ornaments and lights, a mountain of gifts underneath it. George peeks into Sherlock's childhood bedroom, papered over with news clippings and charts, a music stand in the corner, books stacked in unwieldy heaps all over every flat or semi-flat surface.

It's a sharp, crisp sort of cold outside, George's breath clouding with every outward breath, melting frost and shards of blue-green grass slicking her boots. Eugenia wears an ugly hat and falling-apart mittens and when she sees George's hands — dwarfed by Mycroft's gloves — smiles with mortifying indulgence.

They look at the garden, frozen in winter sleep, and the skeleton limbs of the trees in the orchard, the glassed-up orangerie, and George regresses to early girlhood in the stables, pulling off her gloves to touch the noses of the enormous, sweet Clydesdales and curious palomino who has a go at her hair.
They come back inside, red-cheeked from the cold, to find Mycroft perched tensely in the kitchen. He's a vision of relaxed control, which means he's so tightly wound he's probably about to crack one of his molars.

"You can breathe," George says, pressing a freezing kiss into the place where his neck and jaw. "Your mother was just giving me the tour of your minor Georgian mansion."

The twitch at her cold lips on his skin turns into a slight loosening at that, and Mycroft divides a wary look between George and Eugenia as his mother says:

"To be fair, it really can't compare with some of the Devonshire properties. But honestly, Mycroft, this house is hardly Georgian."

"Disputable," Mycroft argues, like he can't help himself. "There are clearly Georgian characteristics to the main building."

Eugenia frowns, and when she does, she looks exactly like Mycroft. "Preposterous," she declares, and George interrupts whatever Mycroft is about to say with:

"I take it back, I see the resemblance now."

It's a lazy day, one that Mycroft's obviously needed, if the way even his obvious worry at George and Eugenia interacting can't stop him from sliding off into an afternoon nap. They leave him slumped over in an undignified heap in the solar and go for the scrapbooks, which are wonderful and terrible — a lifetime of accomplishment and very few friends: always just Sherlock and Mycroft, standing awkwardly next to one another, and as they get older in the photographs, they stand further and further apart.

"Sherlock used to idolize Mycroft when they were little," Eugenia says.

George runs her hand over the photo, Sherlock as a fat toddler with an ebony black thatch of hair, fingers knotted in Mycroft's much-lighter locks. They're sitting on the edge of the millpond, under a willow in the lush green of full springtime, sunlight dappling.

"What changed?" she asks, distracted.

"Oh, just Sherlock always thought they'd be just the same, him and Mycroft, thick as thieves. He still does idolize his brother, I think, only it comes across with a healthy dose of fraternal resentment, now," Eugenia sighs, turning the page to a series of pictures of Sherlock with a violin, serious-faced and chubby-cheeked.

The Eugenia of the photographs is younger and lighter, with the same warm smile and rounded edges, clutching her tiny sons to her. Sherlock, particularly, clings, and there's a photograph of her walking Mycroft to the edge of the shore — his toddler fingers reaching into the foamy lip of a wave — that makes George grin.

"Were they horrible?" George asks, slanting a conspiratorial look to Eugenia.

"Awful," she confirmed, long-suffering even now. "Constantly running off nannies and tutors and the like. For a year we couldn't engage a housekeeper on reputation alone."

George had to smother a laugh. "Did they ever get one up on you?"

"Certainly," Eugenia allowed, eyes crinkling in a smile. "But the key, my dear, is to make them feel miserable about it afterward."
George turned back to the photographs, to another picture of Sherlock holding his tiny violin and frowning passionately at a stack of sheet music, the image overexposed and the colors fading. Next to that, a photograph of Mycroft in his teens in cricket whites, looking entirely too solemn against the lush green of an English summer, his teammates dotting the field and not a spot on him.

"That is an enviable skill, Eugenia," George murmurs.

Eugenia reaches over and tucks a lock of George's hair behind an ear, the sort of motherly thing that only her own mother's ever done, and George feels terribly shy all of a sudden to be so — so. It's always like this with Holmeses: their affection creeping up like fog filling the streets, quietly and then all-consuming. She'll never know when Mrs. Holmes went from being curious about her to sorting out her hair, no more than George will ever know how Sherlock decided she had special access to his life, or when Mycroft had looked at her and thought, "yes."

"Georgiana, I have no doubt you could tie my son in knots far better than I ever could," Eugenia says, with a fondness that makes George go red, before mercifully turning back to the album and asking, "Would you believe that Sherlock packed himself into Mycroft's luggage for school three times?"

George exhales, shaking, relieved, and although the smile she musters is awkward, it is real, because she believes it, she absolutely would.

Christmas Eve dinner turns out to be a quiet little thing, Mycroft shooing George and his mother away from the aga with a determined look on his face and a blue and white striped apron tied over his button-down shirt.

"So all those nights when you had to endure my soggy pasta and dry roast chicken," George asks, wry and watching Mycroft do something fascinatingly violent to a duck, a sauce of brandy and star anise and oranges simmering away on the French range. "What the hell was that? Self-denial?"

Mycroft smiles at her innocently. "I'm told enduring great trials are a sign of love."

George glares at him.

"Oh, if you think Mycroft's cooking is impressive, you should see Sherlock bake," Eugenia chimes in, sailing back into the room with afternoon martinis and a manically happy look on her face. Her smile hasn't abated since breakfast, was steady through lunch, and George is worried Eugenia's cheeks are going to be sprained at this rate.

Like the royal family, the Holmeses open presents on Christmas Eve. It's an enormous act of will to bite back all the editorializing George wants to do about that.

Mycroft gets her the gloves that go with the hat he's already given her and a camel-colored coat with a robin's egg blue lining. She knows it's childish but she puts it on immediately, wrapped up in it and beaming and trying to ignore the way Eugenia is having a perfectly composed seizure of joy to their immediate right. George gives Mycroft a taser.

"Really, you shouldn't have," he says to her, but there's a laugh on all his consonants.

She reaches over to lace their fingers together, so she can draw up their hands and press a kiss to the back of Mycroft's wrist and say, "You never know when you might be swept away by shadowy figures and need it."

"Please, don't encourage him," Eugenia pleads, sounding stricken.
"Here, Mummy," Mycroft intervenes, as if the subject of his frequent kidnappings of people is a long-running yet ultimately meaningless discussion. "George brought you a present, too."

George's present fits neatly inside a box she'd braved John Lewis to buy, and isn't even in the neighborhood of the ash-colored pearls Mycroft had presented his mother, but George was never going to win in any competition where throwing around money and exquisite taste were the primary object, anyway.

Eugenia is the type of woman to carefully fold away wrapping paper and curl up the soft green ribbon George had tied around the package. It takes ages before she lifts the pasteboard lid, and looking down inside the nest of tissue paper, she says, "Oh," softly, in surprised realization, her eyes going round with surprise.

George clears her throat. "They're yours, so obviously you can imagine how uncooperative they were, so no group shot, sorry. But I figured you'd might like an up to date photo of them," she babbles, and adds, "Er — sorry about the skull. Sherlock refused to relinquish it."

It's not a particularly beautiful photo, but George has learned a few things after years hauling around crime scene cameras and she'd selected the bifold frame very carefully. Mycroft has been caught as he's making his way through a pile of folders at the desk of his study at home, the thin early sun of December pouring into the room. He's smiling — distracted by her — and there's a jade plant next to his diary, pages flipped open across his blotter, his tie loose and his topmost button opened: Mycroft Holmes, cut loose and casual. Sherlock and John are more posed, leaning toward one another, Sherlock seated and John standing next to the armchair, posed ludicrously with the skull as their third. The chaos of 221B is evident around them, and if you look closely in the corner, you can still see a Cluedo board stuck into the wall with a knife. They look happy, the intimate, unassuming sort of happy that George never thought she'd see on Sherlock.

"I just thought you might like it," George concludes lamely, and feels so massively stupid that if she weren't still hand in hand with Mycroft, she might flee the room in mortification.

Eugenia finally looks up, and her eyes are wet, and her smile trembling but real.

Mycroft leans in, ostensibly to brush a kiss over George's temple, but also to whisper, "You're doomed — no way you're escaping without jewelry, now."

Eugenia must have ears like a bat, because she snatches the very reasonably sized box that had been labeled for George and says, "My son is annoying but correct." George barely has time to say, "Oh, no, Eugenia that's really not necessary," before she's being hauled off, deep into the bowels of the house, beyond the wine cellar, Mycroft at the top of the catacomb stairs, saying, "I'll just wait here by the fire, shall I?" and grinning like a lunatic.

George is trying to explain, delicately, that when it comes down to it, middle-ranking members of the Met very rarely have opportunities to wear any kind of diadem, much less one crusted in yellow diamonds, when Mycroft's voice carries over the room intercom, saying:

"Georgiana, Mummy, apologies. There's been an emergency with Sherlock."

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Eugenia takes their sudden departure with the stiff upper lip of an English war bride, drawing Mycroft in for a quick squeeze and then George close enough to press a kiss to her forehead, to whisper, "I'm so glad we finally met," before sending them off — Mycroft in an unmarked helicopter that erupts from the lawn of Epperley House headed for location undisclosed and
George in the Golf.

The hours she's on the road are endless, just George and black asphalt, endless Christmas songs on the radio, and stomach-churning worry.

She wonders if Sherlock is all right but George tells herself that if he'd been hurt, Mycroft wouldn't have lied point-blank when Eugenia had asked about it. He'd said, "He's fine, Mummy — just something that can't wait, unfortunately," before his mobile had rung and he'd answered it, saying, "Yes — is it confirmed?" She wonders if John is hurt. She wonders if Baker Street had exploded again. She wonders if that final pip has come, if the whole thing was starting up again, and she's half-sick by the time her phone buzzes with a text message across the passenger seat of the car.

Sherlock is fine.
His dominatrix friend is dead.
Going to morgue to ID body.
Please tell Mummy all is well.
MH.

"Jesus buggering Christ," George says to the screen of her phone.

She edits, heavily, when she calls Eugenia to break the news, although knowing Holmeses, George's "An acquaintance of Sherlock's has passed away, he's all right, but Mycroft's going with him to the morgue to identify the body," probably sounds to her like, "The naked woman in Sherlock's coat who beat him with a riding crop and apparently swanned away with his heart has turned up dead. He and Mycroft are probably being obscure at each other about it as we speak."

"Poor Sherlock," Eugenia sighs, tinny through the mobile speaker. "At least he'll have John there to comfort him."

George makes a slightly hysterical noise. "Yes," she forces herself to say.

Mycroft's quietly drinking himself into a state in the library when George finally gets back to the Lyall Street house, dumping her coat and shoes in the doorway, their bags still in her car. She still smells of cold air and the shitty roadside coffee she'd bought halfway home when she bursts in to ask him, "Well? Tell me I didn't lie to your mother."

He doesn't look at her, just stares into the fire as he says, too lightly, "You didn't."

George stares. "What — that's it?"

"I gave him a cigarette," Mycroft elaborates.

"That bad," she translates, and closes the distance between them, goes to her knees next to the leather wingback, closing a hand around Mycroft's ankle. "Hey — look at me."

DCI Partridge had given George a book on dog training before she'd taken semi-retirement out in the bloody Yorkshire countryside like a traitor, leaving George alone in the sausage factory of Serious Crimes with nary another pair of management-level tits. It had been meant in jest, sort of, but George had read it in the bath over the course of months and ended up applying it mostly by accident: be clear, be consistent, use positive reinforcement; your lack of attention is the most painful punishment. She'd done it with Sherlock from day one — feed him interesting unsolved cold cases when he's reasonably polite; ignore his texts when he's a twat — and she's glad for the practice.

Mycroft is the definition of self-possessed, unmoved, endlessly calculating and hypothesizing and
considering. George will never win an argument with him if she gets tricked into discussing the relative merits of their mutual points of view; all she can do is draw the boundaries beforehand so he'll know how close he can tread. She's always been clear about this, about never needlessly demanding his full attention, but when George asks for it, she expects it, and she waits for his eyes to meet hers.

"What happened?" she asks, because Mycroft looks like he's been through the wars, face sagging with exhaustion and ashen. "Is Sherlock really all right?"

He takes a fortifying drink. "We argued."

"You always argue," George points out, because they do, and she thinks that most of the time, they enjoy it on some sick level.

"We do," Mycroft admits, and his smile is bitter as he says it. "He was...off balance. Surprised by his own reaction, I think."

George frowns a little, plucks the tumbler out of Mycroft's hands and sets it aside. "By — what? His reaction to Irene Adler's death?"

"He was upset, more than he wanted to give away," Mycroft says, and without the glass he cards his right hand into her hair, thumb pressed on the soft skin behind her ear, watching her mouth. "I told him caring wasn't an advantage."

George says, "Okay," because there's not much else to say to that.

Mycroft likes to imagine himself more emotionally adept than his brother, so maybe this is just another chapter in his managing nature: convince Sherlock his feelings are irrelevant to protect him from the ache of them. But that doesn't change the way there's a voice in her head that protests, but, and how something in her throat drops all the way to the well of her stomach, her eyes feeling suddenly hot and hurt.

She's still anchored to him, by his hand in her hair and their lives intertwined, how six hours ago they were opening presents with his mother, and George has to swallow around the fight she wants to start. She's on her knees in front of him in a house she thinks of as home, now, and her heart's been fragile in her chest for hours worried for his brother. What does he mean? Why's he told her this?

"He asked," Mycroft goes on, and he's searching George's face now, his own expression deepening into pain, "what would I do, if it were you on that mortuary slab — would I appreciate him feeding me platitudes."

Her hurt transmutes into worry. "Mycroft."

"What would I do," he says, low and with a razor edge. "What could my brother know of it. He deduced her once, and she surprised him. He's infatuated with the idea of her."

George smiles for him, wavering.

"It's Sherlock," she points out gently. The maybe one deduction was enough is implied.

"I deduced you, the first time we met, when I was looking at your furious back as I was walking toward you," Mycroft retorts, the rumble in his voice unsoftened by the lassitude of alcohol on his tongue. "I knew the whole of you in a glance."
"What makes you so different, then?" George asks, and she doesn't even know whose side she's arguing anymore, whether they're talking about Sherlock and Adler or Mycroft and George, if they're having a conversation at cross-purposes. She feels heavy and dense with everything unsaid, sore, fearful suddenly. "What makes us different?"

Mycroft laughs, his fingers in her hair turn into a fist.

"If it was you in the morgue, Georgiana, I wouldn't have been standing in the corridor smoking a cigarette," he tells her in a hush, his voice a rasp of considered horrors. "I would have burned down the hospital."

"Poor hospital," George murmurs, and Mycroft's face goes unsettlingly dark, still. George takes his other hand, his free hand, and puts it over the faint, rabbit-hearted patter underneath her breast, through the thin weave of her sweater. "But I'm here, I'm fine — see?"

Sherlock is all explosive declarations, dashing around with his coat flying, fiery and ferociously present; Mycroft's bursts of kinetic energy are all internal, locked behind deadbolt and key and iron-clad self control in his head, beyond the muscle and bone. George sees it sometimes, the interiors of him, through the pinhole camera of Mycroft's pupils, blown wide open and close, when they're in their bed and telegraphing all sorts of secrets. He's not cold: he's a barely contained wildfire, the kind of dangerous that's too cool to flare up and misstep.

"Her face was a mess," Mycroft says, those same dangerously soft vowels rushing out of him — ripped open and confessing — fingertips hot on her skin. "He identified her by her measurements. What would I have done?"

"Hopefully sent everyone out of the room before you pulled off the rest of the sheet," George tells him, trying for light and falling terribly short, because she can imagine it, too: the belly of Bart's, the church next door, Smithfield restaurants rollicking a street over, and Mycroft Holmes dragging the white sheet down her neck and clavicle, over her breasts and the curve of her belly — a nauseating parody of their living hours.

"Could I have walked away from you the way Sherlock did," Mycroft says, not really a question, and too deep into his own thoughts to hear her now. "Or would I have sat with you and searched for your heartbeat — like I am now."

George swallows, dry throat clicking. "It's not going to happen to me."

"You run with Sherlock Holmes," Mycroft contradicts, back in abrupt focus. "And you sleep with me — your entire life is like the first chapter of a disaster story."

The glare is reflexive, and so is the way it makes her dig in her heels, the way George shoves at Mycroft's knee to press in her point as she says, "I live with you. I intend to keep on doing it."

His eyes are very black as he says, "I should tell you to leave me."

"I wouldn't go," George shoots back, because she recognizes this now, the recursive back and forth, the way he just needs to underline and dot his Is, review all the things he already knows for sure. "My birth control pills are here and I like making you do my mother's tax. You're not getting rid of me so easily."

That surprises a laugh out of him, something startled and genuine, and those hands on her pull her up, drag her nearer, so that when he says it, it's kissed into her mouth:

"Georgiana, you are the most impossibly difficult thing I have ever known."
Sherlock ignores her thirteen separate texts, with George offering him so many dead and putrefying things over the next few days she feels like a fucking housecat. Mycroft gets tied up in knots with something at work, but he doesn't do anything terrifying like take two hours out of the day to have languardous sex with her at the Lanesborough like that one time so George assumes the world isn't about to end.

She and John spend a number of nights at the pub steeped in one another's silences, until one day John bursts out with, "I just didn't know, you know? That he loved her. That he could have loved her. I would have been more careful."

It's a sentiment so completely and stunningly stupid George just says, "You're joking."

"Sherlock doesn't like people! How was I supposed to know?" John protests, as if Sherlock isn't mental about him.

"I'm getting a new GP, because you're a fucking moron," George tells him seriously and without further elaboration. The very last thing George needs in her life is to sort out the hellscape of Sherlock's love life with his lunatic flatmate.

On New Year's Eve, while George is wasting the last two hours of her workday watching Never Mind the Buzzcocks on BBC iPlayer, Sherlock calls.

"What," she answers the phone.

"Lestrade," he says, too evenly. "We've had a break in at Baker Street. Send your least irritating officers and an ambulance."

George throws a stress ball out the opened door of her office, where it bounces madly through Serious Crimes and sends half the bullpen ducking and everyone else looking up. Sally's the first one to catch George's eye as she says loudly, "Bloody hell — is anyone hurt?" just before she yells, "Hey, officers, medics to Baker Street."

"Christ," Sally says and goes for the phones.

"No, no, it's the burglar," Sherlock carries on over the line, silky smooth. "He's got himself rather badly injured."

George narrows her eyes, which makes Davison — whose pulled up short in the door of her office — freeze like a sighted animal. "How badly injured?" she asks Sherlock.

"Oh, a few broken ribs, a fractured skull," Sherlock tells her dismissively, and curling his tongue with satisfaction around the syllables, he adds, "Suspected punctured lung."

George covers her face with a hand. "Oh, God, Sherlock. What have you done?"

"He fell out of a window," Sherlock lies.

"Yeah, fucking right," George swears at him. "Stop falling people out of windows. I'll be there shortly."

Selcuk in dispatch, when she calls to verify they've got units in motion, takes the time both to
berate her for questioning his professionalism and swear at her half in Turkish and half in Essex, saying bloody of *course* it's her pet detective throwing people out of windows on December 31.

There're already PCs and EMTs on scene when she gets there, and George has barely a minute to be confused before she gets inside the house and sees John dabbing at a vicious-looking scrape on Mrs. Hudson's chin, saying soothing doctor things and feeding her cups of tea.

"God, Mrs. Hudson," she says. Mrs. Hudson's got that fragile look of someone's who's been badly handled. "Are you all right?"

The smile George gets is watery, and so is Mrs. Hudson's. "Oh, I'm fine now that the boys are home, dear."

John says quietly, "She's just a bit shook up. Cuts and bruises, that sort of thing."

"Well, I'm sure the opened window got your burglar right back," George says dryly, avoiding John's studiously innocent face and leans in to press a comforting kiss to Mrs. Hudson's unhurt cheek. "I ought to buy you some pepper spray."

Mrs. Hudson's laugh is shaky but real. "You should buy me some new *bins*, that horrible man landed right on top of them."

It shows. The man's unconscious, has no identification, and is one giant wound, by the time George swings round to the ambulances to get an eyeful before they take him to the A&E. George spares herself the inevitable fighting by taking Sherlock's statement herself, leaving Davison and Sally with Mrs. Hudson and John. It's dark when they're done, and George watches the second ambulance — the one where the medics had clucked, looked over Mrs. Hudson, and exchanged the pleasantries of long acquaintance with John — leave, standing next to Sherlock on the sidewalk.

"And exactly how many times *did* he fall out the window?" George asks, hands shoved into her pockets.

"It's all a bit of a blur, Detective Inspector," Sherlock says, and slanting her a meaningful look, adds, "I lost count."

"I hate you," George tells him meaningfully. "And I'm leaving now."

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She's not surprised when she gets a call later that week to let her know that the case has been referred to the U.S. Embassy.

"They'll sort it out on their end," Chief Inspector Kerrigan says in his thick-as-porridge Brummie accent.

"Sure they will," George says, because she knows how this will go.

Kerrigan laughs, and George always echoes with a smile when he does. Kerrigan has four children and the same number of wives; he's always the first one to buy a round and the last one to leave the pub, and he'd sat with her in the ladies toilet at the White Hart one night in the early days after Tom, rubbing a hand up and down her back while she cried against a sink. "Don't worry about it, mate," he'd said to her. "I'm professionally fucking divorced." He likes to tell George that one day he's going to get a stubborn mutt and name it after her.

"Thank fuck, too. One less thing your plate, George," he says, ignoring her with the skill of a much
more seasoned manager. "Sound happy about it, you miserable harpy."

"This is why your wives keep leaving you, you fat arse," she lectures him, but she's smiling too hard for it to be truly scolding.

A week later, when she calls the embassy, they say thanks for her interest but the file's been sent off to the appropriate regulatory bodies and been sealed on their end.

"Doesn't it ever bother you?" Sally asks her, when George tells her she can stick the latest file in the Baker Street saga down in the archives. "That we get these fucking impossible pieces of their frankly ridiculous lives and never know all of it? They could be doing anything up there! That flat could be filled ceiling to floorboards in body parts — and not body parts he conned off that poor girl in the morgue, either."

The particular problem with knowing Sherlock Holmes is that early on, you have to make a choice: you're either all in, or you're all right with never knowing the truth of a thing, for it to dribble out to you by accident or in fits, little surprises or not at all.

George is a detective for a reason, and she's good enough at it to know where to lay the foundations of her Chinese wall. Being all in with Sherlock means something complex and impossible; she couldn't possibly endure it. As far as George can tell, the only one who has — and who's thrived — in the nuclear hothouse of Sherlock's life is John Watson. It means hiding illegal guns all over the flat and violin at 3 a.m., collecting ASBOs like 20p pieces, and living forever on the knife edge of complete chaos. John loves it; George can tell. He glows with it; his stride is more confident, he smiles more, he laughs louder.

The idea had been seductive long ago, but she'd had Tom to consider and midnight calls from mad amateur detectives weren't the sort of seasoning her already volcanic marital fights needed. She'd worked with him on cases, which Tom had endured, but Sherlock had asked her to go with him on a random experiment once to dredge something out of a pond in Yorkshire at 4 fucking a.m. on a Tuesday, standing on her doorstep with a pool net and gleam in his eye. For a minute, George had been so curious her teeth had ached, but she'd said, "Jesus Christ, Sherlock — no."

"Yes and no," George tells Sally, because Sally's at two years and counting in Serious Crimes now and she's been mad at Sherlock the entire time. "If I knew, then I'd have to know — if that makes any sense."

Sally narrows her eyes, disbelieving. "So — what? Avoiding paperwork?"

"It's not paperwork that's the problem with Sherlock," George says, sharp. "And you're a good enough detective to know what actually is."

It's a mulish expression and not a chastised one on Sally's face when she says, "We're police officers. We should be figuring this stuff out."

Sally is the only daughter of an upwardly mobile family. She got into police work because she wasn't to do good, but Sally had imagined walking the beat and saving people, translating that into promotions. She's smart enough for it, savvy enough for it, but the way she hates Sherlock is symptomatic of something George has been hoping would go away on its own.

She's a good detective, taught herself how to pay attention. As a kid she wasn't content like Billy from the chip shop with her lot in life and she wasn't brilliant like Rachel, either. She's average, but she's always been keenly aware of it, known it enough to know to draw the boundaries of herself appropriately. George has no ambition, really. She doesn't want to be the chief inspector and she's
in no rush to be a DCI. She does her job because she likes helping people. The other stuff is incidental.

She's clever, not extraordinary or talented the way Sally is, the way Sally has been since the first time George had stumbled across a gawky PC already dog-earring a study guide for the detectives' exam years ago. Sally doesn't hesitate and she doesn't bother with hunches, just quietly collects the evidence into an avalanche and then dares you to disagree. One day, Sally's going to be the commissioner of the Met. She's relentless and untiring, and because she's thrice-damned by being beautiful, black, and a woman, discarding all-too-human weaknesses has been the only way Sally has ever known. George loves Sally with a big-sister bittersweetness: delighted to see her blow peers out of the water by sheer virtue of wanting it more and crushed because every review's another obstacle course, because men can be lazy but Sally can't even have a bad day.

But underneath all those gold stars and fraught political tensions, there's still the kernel of that woman with hair tied back severely, using the hood of a patrol car as a desk, and she's a good one down to the bones. Sally should keep that, hold it close.

"At some point, you're going to have to figure out which you want more, Sally," George tells her, all her consonants softening again and reaching for her bag, "to save people, or to save people on your terms."

Sally stares at her, but she doesn't say anything.

George smiles, but it's one of those tight, polite things that won't defuse any of the bombs she's leaving in her wake.

"Night, Sally," she says, quiet, and goes.

Anthea is keeping watch in the hallway outside the study when she gets home, stabbing away at level 800 on Angry Birds for BlackBerry, one stocking foot curled around the leg of the chair she's appropriated from the sitting room. She looks annoyed and gaunt, and through the study door, George can just make out Mycroft's low, angry tones, which is enough proof of life for tonight.

"Have you eaten at all?" George asks, hands on her hips and frowning.

"You're out of Maltesers," Anthea demurs, her lipstick gone missing by this time of night. George's menstrual supply of Maltesers is only two little bags stuffed in with Mycroft's organic, hand-milled oatcakes, though, so that hardly a dinner makes.

"Jesus, the two of you," George complains, and goes to the kitchen.

She makes four pesto, mozzarella, and tomato sandwiches in the panini press her mother had given them as a late Christmas present, and steeps a pot of tea with water just short of nuclear and piles it all onto a tray. She says, "Here," and sets it down in the hall near Anthea's shoes, abandoned near a towering ficus.

"He won't eat," Anthea says. "Sherlock forwarded him a study three weeks ago saying fat uptake is more intense when you consume it while furious."

George ignores that to bang on the study door. "Oi, tosser, there're sandwiches out here," she tells him through the wood and reinforced steel before turning back to Anthea to say, "Those sandwiches better be gone when I come back down here — I don't care which of you eats them, but I cooked them and my feelings will be hurt otherwise."

Mycroft doesn't come to bed that night, but Anthea's asleep in one of the guest rooms the next
morning and the tray outside the study is empty, nothing but crumbs and a stained teapot and cups. George tries the door — unlocked — and pushes in, peering left and right to see the smoldering remains of a fire and Mycroft glowering crazily into it.

"Hello," she says, hanging back in the doorway.

His eyes are red, capillaries burst, when he looks up. "Hello."

"Are you done being furious?" George asks, and doesn't ask what he's been furious about. Her legs are cold under her dressing gown, the scalloped hem of her nightgown whispering against her knees.


What George wants right now is to cross the room and curl up with him on the armchair, so she does, tucking herself against him in the chair and feeling the warm leather through the thin robe. She smiles as Mycroft pulls it over her legs, covering her up and holding the fabric in place with a palm, wrapped around the outside of her thigh.

"You know Sherlock probably mocked up that article just to piss you off," George says, her cheek pressed against Mycroft's shoulder, one arm folded up and her fingers tugging at his collar.

He sighs. "The margins weren't even right — sloppy work," Mycroft complains, and curls the arm around George more tightly.

"Should I worry?" she asks, dreamy and still a bit asleep, the last soft fragments of their bed clinging to her. She feels drugged with warmth from where their bodies are pressed together — the familiar feel of his three-piece suit against her skin. It's half-six on a Sunday morning, and this is George's perfect moment, the one she'll carry with her all week. "Should I call and make my peace with Tom?"

"Even if the world were ending you should feel free never to call your ex-husband," Mycroft informs her generously.

She smiles into his chest. "But what if he's sorry?"

"Your mother and I agree I'm better for you," he quips, and George can feel him smiling into her hair. "Stop teasing. I'm fine."

She looks at him seriously. "Did you eat any of my sandwiches? Or did Anthea fall asleep because she had all of them and slid into a coma?"

Mycroft is a Holmes and thus a practiced and fluid liar, so when he says, "Don't be ridiculous, as if Anthea could eat four sandwiches," George takes it as her cue to get out of his lap and say, "Right, that's it — come on. We're having breakfast."

He finds her attempts at hollandaise vile, and George can't seem to teach him how to soft poach an egg properly, so they divvy up breakfast duties. Mycroft is putting an artistic scatter of minced chives over the eggs benedict by the time Anthea staggers downstairs, looking rode hard and put away angry, her hair in a violent poof extending from the right side of her head.

"Here," George says, setting a plate and fork in front of her. "It's smoked salmon."

"He didn't eat any of the sandwiches," Anthea tells George, and neatly cuts her breakfast in fours, the orange gold of the yolk bleeding across the plate as Mycroft glares at her.
George pours Mycroft a cup of coffee. "I already knew that," she assures him. "Don't worry — your punishment will come when it's least expected."

"I look forward to it," Mycroft says, smiling, like he really is looking forward to it, whatever she has in store for him, and George figures, fuck it, and leans over to kiss him slowly good morning. He's unteachable. That whole family is. She may as well enjoy it.

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One of the nice things about Sherlock and John becoming internet famous is that the news photographers and paparazzi stop taking pictures of her. Everyone wants shots of Boffin Holmes and his sidekick Watson, and George sanctions an entire wall in her section of the Serious Crimes bullpen for her people to paper over with clipping and subsequent editorial comments. She tries to keep the gay romances to below an R18 reading level, but she's not trying that hard.

Occasionally, she ends up in the background of one or another of these images, usually far outplayed by the upturned collar of Sherlock's coat, his cheekbones prominent in what John likes to call Sherlock's "Love Me, I'm Ridiculous," pose.

Anyway she's blaming Gareth Hartley and his bloody picture in the London Times for why, on an otherwise uneventful Thursday, the phone on her desk rings and it's Eugenia Holmes. The conversation starts with Eugenia saying, disapproval and worry heavy in her voice, "You look exhausted!" and deteriorates into George arguing feebly, "It's how I always look in these photographs — my own mum doesn't even worry about it anymore." That's a mistake, because Eugenia makes a sound of pure sadness as she asks, "Your own mother doesn't even worry about it anymore?"

Forty minutes later, when Mycroft calls to say, "Apparently we're spending the weekend at Epperley House," George's response is: "Shit."

She can hear Mycroft's raised eyebrow over the line. "Dare I ask how this happened?"

"Can't you tell her no? You're busy, aren't you?" George asks.

Mycroft is always busy. One time she'd been forced to claw him soundly on the thigh when mid-coitus, his bloody mobile had gone off and his hand had crept toward it meaningfully. George has a strict rule where if someone has their cock inside of her, she ought to have his full attention, and no matter how many put-upon faces Mycroft makes, she believes it to be a just and reasonable requirement. "Given what a horrifically low bar that is, if it's not going to work out for you, I could always go find someone else to put their dick inside of me," George had told him, and suggested a number of candidates, including John Watson, Dimmock, or that actor who plays Martin Crieff on Cabin Pressure.

Mycroft had made an ugly, petty expression of annoyed jealousy as he'd sulked, "It's fine, they can leave a voice mail if it's important," to which, "You have no idea how lucky you are I'm in love with you," had been the only possible reply from George.

"She pointed out we abandoned her on Christmas day and that Sherlock is a horrible child and won't come and see her," Mycroft replies, long-suffering. "And then she made up a series of gratuitous lies about the state of her health."

Tensing, George asks, "Is she poorly?"

"My mother will outlive us all," Mycroft says with a telling and grim certainty. "She's also taken
pains to explain how I will be working from the estate over the weekend so she can see to you properly and also force you to try on all the family jewelry."

"My argument about a lack of occasion to wear the diadem failed, didn't it?"

"My mother is the type of woman who believes every occasion is the proper occasion to wear a diadem," Mycroft says fondly. "It could be worse: I managed to convince her that a surprise visit to your mother would upset you."

George smiles. "Well, there's that."

So they end up headed for Sussex again for the weekend, Mycroft at the wheel, equipped with a bluetooth headset and with his suit jacket off, shirtsleeves rolled up. George, curled up in the passenger's seat, tries to ignore the frankly terrifying things she overhears of his conversations and read *Bonk!* at the same time. It's an unseasonably warm day in early spring, and the air is the sweet green smell of fields and earth and rain, and George eventually gives up on the book to stare dreamily out of the opened window — letting the wind whip across her cheek and tangle her hair.

She feels like they've crossed a faerie hill somewhere in between London and the long drive of the house Mycroft grew up in, and George blinks lazily in the Friday evening haze — pink and dark blue melting into one another at the horizon — as she climbs out of the car and stretches her limbs when they reach Epperley House.

There's a bite in the air now, the threat of cold, but then Mycroft's hands are on her, pushing her against the metal of the car and pressing hot against her front.

This close, the height difference between them shows, and George tips her head back and smiles up at him, lazy and chilled, wraps her hands around his waist to link her fingers at his back — where she can feel the line of his trousers underneath his waistcoat. In the half-dark his eyes are luminous, and all she can see are the traces of auburn in his hair and the line of his nose, the tired pink of his mouth.

George has loved like this before — with unthinking constancy and oftentimes humbling depth — and it's hurt her, it still aches like John Watson's war injury. But given the option of being safe or having Mycroft's hands huge on her hips, George will choose danger every time. The DNA of love is clever like that, keeping you on the oxytocin high of it until you've already been knit together with another person and find yourself suddenly aware that you need them, that you've entangled, that to separate for oxygen would feel impossible. George has no defenses against it, will lay down her shield every time.

"Yes?" she asks, because it's been two minutes now that Mycroft has been staring at her. George is always curious to know what he's deduced of her — how many of her secrets are actually telegraphed by her eyes, the flicker of an eyelash.

"Nothing," Mycroft tells her, sounding distracted, "just," and kisses her lazily, with the assurance of time: sultry and open-mouthed and then filthy with intent.

Right now, George is happy, the way people are almost never happy, and she clings at it greedily, lets it seep through her pores and press deep into the marrow and bone so she'll have it when she's no longer on her tiptoes, leaning against the Aston Martin, kissing Mycroft as the sky goes a deep, soft midnight overhead.

Eugenia serves lasagna and embarrassing joy for dinner, and the way she keeps looking at Mycroft with a combination of disapproval and reluctant pride makes it clear that George and Mycroft had
an audience for the way they'd all but reproduced against the car. The only reason George hasn't gone to hide under the table in sympathetic horror is that watching Mycroft squirm is fascinating.

"Maybe you could use your influence on Sherlock," Eugenia says to George. "Make him see how cruel he's being by leaving me abandoned and in shambles."

George arches a brow at that, and fittingly, the downstairs maid chooses that moment to sweep through to clear the entree dishes and refresh their wine, murmur something about how the cook has a marvelous pavlova for afters. Mycroft, made of posher stuff, manages to restrain himself to a meaningful click of his knife against his bread dish.

"I'm abandoned at the very least," Eugenia insists.

"Mummy, Sherlock is only exercising reasonable caution," Mycroft says. "Surely he's deduced the way you've been desperate to entrap poor Georgiana with precious stones — God only knows what you'd do to John."

George kicks him under the table, which turns out to be redundant because over the table, Eugenia raps his knuckles with her coffee spoon at the same time.

Immediately after dinner, Eugenia shoos George off to bed with the strength of maternal insistence. George, who hadn't even known she was tired, falls asleep as soon as her head hits the pillow, a hand stretched over Mycroft's side of the bed, his voice faint from where he's walking around downstairs.

It's hours later — it must be hours later; the room has the cold stillness of ages — George wakes up to Mycroft's hand on her face, his palm cupping her cheek.

She says, "Hello," voice scratchy with sleep, and stares up at him, where his eyes are slivers of light in his shadowed face. "Are you just getting to bed?"

"I received a phone call not long after dinner," he says, running the pad of his thumb over her eyebrow. "I found myself thinking."

George hums. "Always dangerous for you Holmeses."

His smile, when it comes, is heartbreaking and small, and it wakes George up completely. She unearths herself from the covers, feeling the cold air prickling at her skin as she watches Mycroft watch her, both of them limned with orange light from the hall outside the opened bedroom door.

"Everything okay?" she asks. Do I need to call my mum? she thinks.

"Everything's fine, or will be anyway," he says.

It's a lie but not an enormous one, and it makes George wonder how many secrets he carries with him all the places he goes, if he has a cyanide pill in his tooth or a kill order like in the spy books. She's been idly curious about how much of her his superiors — does Mycroft even have superiors? — know, or if George is a carefully guarded secret, kept in a walled garden of Mycroft's life, where she shares a plot of earth with his mother and brother and his childhood. George thinks sometimes about the things he's done and how far he'd go, if he's ever killed anyone, if he's ever done something unforgivable, if he's ever let people die. John told her, early on, that Sherlock called Mycroft the most dangerous man he'd ever met. To George, Mycroft is just a man who avoids dentist visits, has nosey, overprotective instincts, and kisses her against cars. These things are real, even if they are only real to her.
"But I was thinking," Mycroft goes on, and the hand on her cheek strokes down her neck, over her shoulder, down her arm. "I was thinking that if it wasn't going to be all right — if tonight was the end of everything, I would rather be with you than downstairs waiting alone."

George draws him under the covers, clothes and all, tucks him in close and presses his face against her throat so she can wrap her arms around him. It's irrational to think she can protect him from any of the things that keep him awake at night, but she can't turn it off, wouldn't know where to begin. All she can do is press lingering kisses onto his brow and let him squeeze her breathless, too tightly under the covers, as she strokes her fingers through his hair until his exhales even out.

He's gone when she wakes up in the morning — which she was expecting — but back that night, and not alone, either — which she was not.

"You are supposed to be dead," George says, when in the front hall at Epperley, she meets Mycroft, Sherlock, Anthea, and a ghost with dark hair and striking pale eyes, draped in a gown made of something synthetic that juts out and clings in all the most beautifully asymmetrical places.

Irene Adler — who George had looked up, triggering every single web blocker at the office to scour the woman's website — looks triumphant, languorous with satisfaction, and she's hovering close enough to Sherlock to make him twitch, his eyes downcast. George wants to reach over and draw him behind her for safekeeping, but then Irene's smiling at George, predatory, sighing in appreciation.

"Oh, you're interesting," she says, stepping closer, hand outstretched.

George is only a half-step back on her heels before the tip of Mycroft's umbrella snaps against Irene's naked ankle: precise and terribly dangerous. He says, "No further," and to George, he murmurs, "The household?"

George says, "Asleep already," and looks between Sherlock and Irene as she does.

Irene hasn't moved an inch — smart, George thinks — but she's still grinning, her eyes eating everything up, and George is suddenly, aware that she's wearing one of Mycroft's shirts over old jeans and no shoes, her toenails painted a vicious red. She's hasn't got on any makeup and her hair's in a state and George may as well be naked, the way Irene's staring. It's a harrowing sort of inspection, and George thinks, still, don't move an inch, to keep herself from shifting her weight back and forth, from fidgeting, from looking away.

"You must be very special," Irene says. "Secret wife?"

George holds up her left hand — no ring — and stays silent.

"Oh," Irene purrs, "I am so pleased to meet you."

George raises an eyebrow at Sherlock, who continues to glare at his Italian shoes, and then to Mycroft, who's suddenly fascinated by an ugly painting on the wall. Anthea makes a distracted noise about preparing a room and vanishes through a side door, taking the circuitous route through the downstairs music room and the butler's pantry.

"The feeling's not mutual," George says finally, because she remembers John telling her about Sherlock composing, the long hours of heartrending violin at Baker Street, the way he'd gotten even thinner and paler, his disquieting good behavior.

"The fact that you exist at all is a marvel to me," Irene goes on, favoring Mycroft with an indulging
smile that George wishes she could claw off Irene's face. "Do you know that they call your boyfriend when you're not around?"


Mycroft shows a flicker of a smile at that, but Irene shows all her teeth.

"Curiouser and curioser," she breathes, hungry, and the line of her gaze feels like the trail of unwanted fingers between George's breasts, down the line of her sternum and scraping over her belly.

"I'll just — go elsewhere now, shall I?" George asks, trying to ignore the way Irene is watching her.

"For the best," Mycroft agrees, and clears his throat. "We'll be in the mahogany room."

"Oh," the woman coos. "Is it soundproof?"

George says, "Don't," reflexively. She doesn't even know what she's forbidding or why she's not leaving as quickly as her legs will carry her, but she's loathe to leave Sherlock here, not when he looks like that, or when Mycroft won't look at him at all.

"No need to worry, yours is entirely too well-behaved for me already," Irene says innocently. "I like mine still needing a little — " she looks over at Sherlock " — breaking."

"Stop it," George snarls, and barely keeps herself from adding, leave him alone.

Irene turns to Mycroft again. "Is she real then? Not engineered from a list of component parts? She's darling, Mr. Holmes, but no polish, not beautiful enough to be the caliber of professional that would catch your eye — "

George's face burns. She should have left ages ago, as soon as she realized Mycroft wasn't unaccompanied. She's no business being here, and —

"Stop talking," Sherlock hisses at Irene, with a barely banked violence. George feels her eyes widening in shock, looking at the way Sherlock's face is ugly with fury as he says, "You're not to talk about her."

Irene looks shaken, but it only lasts a second before she's gathered up again, flawlessly cruel and grinning. "And here I thought I was the first woman who touched your heart."

"His heart isn't what you touched," Mycroft says, unsettled enough to sound venomous versus flat — unsettled enough that when he directs his miserable little caravan toward the mahogany room, he lingers in the hall so he can whisper, "I'm sorry — " and George can stand on her tiptoes and kiss away the rest of that sentence, murmur, "I know. Don't worry. Go. Take care of Sherlock."

He stares at her a moment, and then another. "I wish you would marry me," he sighs.

"I would," George promises him, and seals another kiss over his mouth. "If you asked."

The mahogany room actually is soundproof, still echoing with the memory of Mycroft and Sherlock's father with its dark paneling and heavy furniture, the constantly-blasting fire. George ends up taking up a defensive position in the kitchen, staring through the hall at a heavy door with everybody behind it. Her back's to the aga, and she's rocking a high stool at a dangerous frequency, feeling the mug of tea in her hands go slowly freezing as the minutes creep past.
Almost an hour later, Sherlock is the first one out of the room, victorious and cold. George barely manages to ask, "Everything all right?" before he's gone without an answer, disappeared into one of the swallowing midnight shadows of the house, only his footsteps up the grand staircase giving him away.

Anthea's next, a much-subdued Irene trailing her. George holds her tongue and watches them go, listens until the ancient door of the house opens and closes and nothing's left but the whisper-ticks of clocks and the hum of the fridge, the wind barely audible through the shuttered windows.

She waits almost a quarter of an hour before she gives into her own curiosity and abandons her tea to tiptoe to the door of the mahogany room. It's warmly lit inside, fire still crackling away, and Mycroft is standing in front of it looking pensive. The chamber is all long shadows and orange-sienna light, Persian rugs and handmade furniture imported from Italy during the early Renaissance.

"Is it over, then?" George asks, hanging in the doorway. "Everything sorted?"

He looks up at her, smiles crookedly. "In a sense. Although I suspect Irene Adler will always have a place in Sherlock's heart — though she failed on account of her own."

"Because she wanted him?" George asks, stepping into the room now, and darting nearer to the fire, feeling the warm prick at her icy fingers and toes. "I doubt a woman like her would be so foolish as to be duped by lust."

"But we are all duped by love," Mycroft comments absently, and closes his hands around her own, rubbing them together to scrub some heat back into her skin.

George frowns, and when Mycroft raises her curled fingers to his mouth to press a kiss there, she asks, "Do you really think that?"

Mycroft looks torn. In all cases, Mycroft's preference — at least toward her — is for omission or nondisclosure versus an outright lie. He'll talk around it; he'll change the subject; he'll say he can't say. But those are matters of state and this is a matter between them, and Mycroft knows she won't play along here.

"I think love is associated with intoxication for a reason," he says finally.

"Oh, so you're drunk on me right now?" George scoffs, and Mycroft just replies, quick as a shot and absolutely certain:

"Yes. I am."

George steels herself against her knee-jerk instinct to smile at him, to kiss him, to sweep this away like so many other tiny everyday irritations. Mycroft knows the way he knows everything how she folds under the weight of his gaze, and he uses it like he would a gun or a cutting word.

"That wasn't love, Mycroft," she says evenly. "Whatever was going on between Irene and Sherlock? That was not love."

Now it's Mycroft's turn to deploy the eyebrow.

"She hurt him," George says, with a certainty that doesn't have any physical evidence behind it. But she knows women like Irene, and the way she'd touched Sherlock had telegraphed entire novels.
"He was cruel to her, in the end," Mycroft says, and after a beat, adds, "I don't think we're like them, if you're worried."

"I'm not worried," George says, tugging her hands away so she can scrub them over her face. She's tired suddenly, her head hurting, and she can't quite shake of the memory of Irene's curiously gleaming eyes, her genuine, delighted surprise.

George knows half the reason she and Mycroft work is because she doesn't think about it too much, just follows her instincts, the tug on her heart, his beckoning hand into their bed — but now she wants to know what Irene saw, what Irene thought. She'd ask Sherlock if he wouldn't throw a wobbler at her. She doesn't want them to end the way everything had ended tonight: in aching silence, Anthea leading her to the car.

"What did she see?" George asks. It bursts out of her. "When Irene Adler was looking at me and smiling like that, what did she see?"

Mycroft's expression is grim. "Confirmation of a suspected weakness."

It's less romantic when it's a legitimate concern, George decides, but mostly she wonders what the clues were, before Irene had gotten to the door at Epperley House and known for sure.

"And you always eliminate weaknesses," George ventures.

"It's not a hypothetical I enjoy entertaining," Mycroft says, flatly disinterested, and retakes possession of her left hand, stroking a thumb across her knuckles and down the backs of her fingers to the joints and back again. George used to think, he likes my ears the best, or no, the collarbones, when he would get distracted like this, leaning a part of her body by touch. By now, George knows he intends to learn all of it, that he's taking his time. "And another reason it was imperative to neutralize her."

Mycroft looks the same as he ever does to George: pressed and tucked and carefully tied in a Windsor knot, as flawlessly put together as she's ever seen him, stepping into an out of a thousand anonymous black cars and perched at his desk in Whitehall. He's wearing a pinstriped suit and a silvery-gray tie and a hundred years of stress in the creases on his forehead and — a dotty red pocket square she recognizes because it belonged to her in a former life, a scarf left over the back of Mycroft's bathtub wingback.

George runs a hand across his chest, the fine stitches and seams of his jacket. "This is mine, you thief."

She feels his smile more than she sees it. "It was an indulgence," he tells her.

"Is it what gave you away?" George asks.

Mycroft covers her hand where she's pressing against the scarf and the fine fabric of his pocket. "Among other things," he allows.

George turns her hand over in Mycroft's grasp and watches him watching her palm as she asks, "What will happen to her now?"

"She'll run, most likely," Mycroft says mildly, disinterested.

"Is she in danger?" George asks.

Mycroft says, "Not from me," and after a beat, "Would that bother you?"
George thinks about Adler's snake eyes in the front hall, the long nights where Mycroft's been gone. The horrible look on his face earlier, after the call and when he'd let himself be consoled with sleep. She thinks about Sherlock's expression, the hurt anger in his voice, and the fact that any person who can so deftly earn Sherlock's infatuation and Mycroft's hatred is dangerous.

"It should bother me more," George admits, and says, "Come on — bed."

"There's actually one more thing to do," Mycroft says.

They end up in the garage and scouring the surrounding grounds for two hours, taking the spark plugs out of all the cars on the estate. George also removes the battery from a golf cart and disables a backhoe the builders working on Eugenia's new conservatory had left behind the stable. The mental image of receiving a phone call from the local police after they arrest Sherlock trying to flee Epperley House at half-four in the morning, going 17 kilometers an hour on construction equipment, is vivid.

The spark plugs and batteries and such end up in Mycroft's room with them because it's the only place they know Sherlock can't bring himself to check for fear of catching George and Mycroft engaged in 'intimacies.' George admits she's been encouraging this phobia.

"It could almost be read as a sign of tenderness," George proposes, half-asleep already, Mycroft's face buried in her hair. They're curled up together on the left-hand edge of the bed, because George likes to let her feet dangle over the side, and Mycroft likes to press himself along her spine as they sleep.

He makes an unconvinced noise.

"If he really wanted to leave, he could brave coming here and steal the spark plugs, or there're always taxi services," George goes on around a yawn, eyelids getting heavier.

Mycroft says, consonants slurring in exhaustion, "None of the local cab services will come here anymore, and I told him I'd have John sent back to Afghanistan if he burst in."

George laughs, blurry. "You wouldn't."

"He doesn't have to know that," Mycroft argues, rotten like every older brother that ever existed, and kisses the soft curve where her neck melts into her shoulder in pleading. "Go to sleep — please."

"Fine," George agrees, "but I'm telling Sherlock about this tomorrow morning."

She means it, too, except that the next morning she wakes up to Sherlock creeping under Mycroft's bed, looking for spark plugs.

"They're not down there, you wanker," George says, because now that the Holmeses are in her life, of course these are the first words she would say out loud on any given day, still prone in bed and all her limbs heavy underneath the covers.

If Sherlock's expression wasn't one of pure mutiny, he would look angelic in the warm morning light: dark curls, pale eyes, his cheeks red from fury.

"I've checked everywhere else — they have to be here," he declares, and adds matter-of-fact, "There were entirely too many to use your vagina as a hiding place."

From behind her, Mycroft growls, "Kabul."
"Beast," Sherlock retorts, and lights it out of their room. "I'll walk!"

Eugenia must intercept him before he can leave on foot, though, because half an hour later, when George wanders down into the kitchen, Eugenia is peacefully sipping her morning tea while Sherlock makes cinnamon buns with a fascinating degree of resentment. George wonders if you can taste hatred in food.

"Good morning, darling," Eugenia says, and favors George with a kiss to the cheek, already preparing a second cuppa. "Sleep well?"

George grins. "Yes," she says, "and Mycroft and I are starving."

From the digital ovens double-stacked near the aga, Sherlock makes a pained noise.

But at least he's not the miserable of yesterday night, where he'd been angry with hurt, feeling embarrassed and used. This morning's irritation and impatience is ordinary, the kind George is used to, that she barely registers anymore. She's glad for his misbehavior, his terrible selfishness and tantrums, because it means at least he's all right. George is always surprised by how she went from tolerating Sherlock to feeling a reluctant tenderness for him, custodial affection, and she's still staring at his sullen profile when Mycroft sweeps in a few minutes later, already dressed, and kisses her.

He says, "Good morning," and George smiles back.

"Yes, it is," she agrees.

"No," Sherlock says in the background, "it is not."

"Kandahar," Mycroft sing-songs, and Sherlock barely has time to open his mouth before Eugenia intervenes with:

"Speaking of Afghanistan, Sherlock, when am I going to meet this doctor of yours?"

The cinnamon swirls are delicious. So is watching Sherlock slowly caving like wet paper under his mother's arguments.

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George isn't surprised when John tells her a few weeks later that Irene's in America in a witness protection scheme, that Sherlock won't ever be able to see her again.

"It's for the best, really," John says, faux cheerful.

They're in their pub again on a quiet Tuesday, their odd hours lining up for a 3 p.m. drink, huddled together near the back of the counter. John looks tired, bags under his eyes, like he knees a good twenty hours of sleep and a long reprieve before he goes back to Baker Street again.

"Do you really think so?" George asks, because by now, John must know Sherlock better than anybody else in the world. Mycroft and Eugenia may love Sherlock, but John's the only person who has to live with him, and who elects to stay in spite of everything. She's wanted to ask before what John had thought of Irene, but she'd always gotten tongue-tied: it wasn't the right moment, or hell, Sherlock was there.

John's quiet for a long moment. "She was bad for him," he decides.
"Sherlock doesn't like things that are good for him," George points out.

"Well, he'd better learn," John retorts tartly, waving for another drink, his face an expression of pure, grim determination. "And fast — I've just agreed to help him quit smoking cold turkey."

When the bartender comes to them, George intercepts to say, "Make my gentleman friend's a double. He's going to need it."

***

George supposes even Sherlock's broken heart can be repaired by time, because she's in Portugal with her mother — "Let's go somewhere, George, just you and me," she'd said, smiling, happy, well done Dr. Undershaw — when she gets a text from Mycroft.

_Sherlock's broken into Baskervilles._
_John has assisted by pulling rank._
_You'd categorically refuse to supervise, correct?_
_MH._

"Oh, is that Mycroft, then?" Gillian asks, leaning over George's mobile screen and smiling. Behind her the pool is a glimmering aquamarine and the sky is white with cotton fluff clouds, and George thinks her mother looks beautiful. "Tell him I'm sorry for stealing you away."

George rolls her eyes. "No need," she says. "He's complaining about his brother breaking into military installations."

Gillian makes a sad noise. "How on Earth Mycroft turned out so well when Sherlock's such a mess, I'll never know," she mourns, secure in her ignorance of how completely terrible Mycroft is in his own unique and terrifying ways.

George replies:

_I will go and babysit them if you are concerned enough for me to pull a Lysistrata on you until Sherlock learns some manners. Obviously, timeline indeterminate. GL._

Mycroft's answer takes forever to come, but when it does, it says:

_I'll send Dimmock._
_Give Gillian my best._
_MH._


A week later, George sails back into London and Scotland Yard with presents, a flush from the sun, and charity in her heart.

"How was it?" George asks Sally, when they convene in the break room to exchange half-hearted gossip. It hasn't been the same since George had quietly called Sally to the carpet, and George doesn't think it will be again.

Sally's smile is genuine though, this morning. "Fine on our end, not so good elsewhere."

She nods over at Dimmock, who's hunched over his desk with a particularly fragile moue of pain seemingly etched onto his face.
"Poor man," George observes, grinning into her cup.

"He wouldn't speak for a week when he came back," Sally says. "Just sat at his desk looking tragic and pale and glaring at your office."

George rolls her eyes. "Men are fucking useless, Jesus."

"Amen to that," Sally says, and startles, looks away, as if she remembers suddenly that she's still angry with George, that there's a lingering wound between them. "So what's on the docket, then?" George asks, hurrying to finish her tea, because hopefully burning her tongue will make her chest hurt less.

"Surprisingly little," Sally says. "Murderers have been quieter than the thieves, lately."

"And what have they been thieving?" George says, looking toward her office, where the thin stack of pending documents has reproduced in her absence into a substantial mountain. Quiet murderers just means more time to sort out the aftermath of their more active peers, awaiting trial or appealing or requiring a fresh set of eyes on a case.

"Ugly German waterfall paintings, apparently," Sally tells her, distracted, and consults her mobile. "I'll flag you if anything comes up?"

George nods. "You know where to find me."
George sees the so-called Reichenbach Falls painting at a reception after it's been recovered, and while it's not ugly, per se, she doesn't see what the fuss is about. Mycroft is fuck knows where (Anthea's latest text, he's resorted to eating pork scratchings, was very ominous) so when John had said, "Want to come to our, hurrah, we found it do at the gallery?" she'd said, "Yeah, go on then," and changed back into her pumps after work. The pinot grigio is free-flowing, it's a lovely evening, and George is linked arm in arm with Confirmed Bachelor Watson, giggling near-constantly, because she's a touch drunk and John is painfully charming.

"Mycroft's going to have you assassinated," Sherlock says, swanning up to them in a black suit and powder blue shirt, looking petulant.

"Who? Me?" George asks.

"You could probably murder the queen and only get an erotic spanking for it," Sherlock mutters, sounding revolted. "John, on the other hand, lives in constant threat of being dispatched back to a warzone."

John, looking not at all intimidated by this, turns to leer at George. "You wouldn't let anything happen to me, would you, George?"

"No, I like you far too much," she agrees, hugging John more closely to her side — in part from genuine affection and in part because when Sherlock's jealous, his entire face collapses into a two-inch crunch of ugly, angry features, and it's a hilariously unflattering look for him. "And then who would manage Sherlock?"

Sherlock snaps, "I don't need to be managed!"

"I have to remind you to thank people," John says. "And then you complain about it."

"Cufflinks," Sherlock spits out, like it's profanity. "We worked on this case for two weeks and had multiple interactions with the gallery owners. It's patently obvious that all of my shirts — "

"I've been meaning to talk to you about that, Sherlock," George interrupts seriously. "I don't know if you've intended this but the tailoring on those things has gone increasingly slutty and I'm getting a bit concerned."

" — have buttons at the cuffs," Sherlock barrels on, ignoring her comment with no more than a violently annoyed glare.

George says fondly, "Never change, Sherlock," which sets John — also a touch drunk — off laughing.

The next morning there's an email from Eugenia reading, "IS THIS DR. WATSON?????????" with a link to the Times article about the painting, topped by a picture of John and George laughing, their heads bent close together. The caption reads, "Dr. Watson and DI Georgina Lestrade share a moment of post-victory levity." Another misspelling of her name to go in the scrapbook.

Your mother's starting to ask me about John you know. GL, George texts Sherlock, because he may be a mad bugger but on the subject of nosey mothers, there is such a thing as solidarity among wayward offspring.
Eugenia may have an inch-thick dossier on George, but that's because Anthea had gathered up the documentation and had it couriered out to Epperley House; Sherlock's worked triple time to keep his mother from knowing anything about John. Mycroft has recused himself, claiming cowardice, and arguing that his life is worth more than getting in between his little brother and his mum.

Sherlock's reply is near-instantaneous. *I blame you*, he texts. *Stop flirting with him. SH.*

George finds each of Sherlock's adolescent frailties hilarious, so she laughs and reads it out loud, garnering an elaborate eye-roll from Anthea. Mycroft, who's woozy from a red-eye flight, clears his throat and holds out one elegant hand for George's mobile. He raises an eyebrow and asks, "May I?"

She grins. "Be brilliant in your cruelty," she advises.

"Nothing but the best for you, Georgiana," he promises, and appears to brighten several degrees of magnitude as he begins to type.

Mycroft is never anything less than exquisitely good at everything he does, so it's unsurprising that the violence of Sherlock's reaction echoes out into a tantrum that earns George a furious text of *MUST YOU TWO REALLY?* from John, bless him.

***

Sherlock takes on a half-dozen cases before he gets wrapped up solving the kidnapping of a top banker who's been taken captive by a radical subset of Occupy St. Paul's *Fuck You, You're the Filth!* that had gone a bit looney. The banker's grateful son gives Sherlock a tie pin after he and John orchestrate a dramatic rescue, which George finds out when she catches him trying to break into her desk safe with it a few hours after the press conference. George is menstrual and generally upset — Mycroft's been out of town for almost two weeks and the bed's too big and she misses Anthea — so she doesn't blame herself too much for throwing Sherlock into a jail cell out of sheer pettiness. He's halfway through dismantling the door using nothing but cussedness and the interior parts of a fountain pen when she lets him out later that night and takes him and John to Thai Square to apologize.

"You realize that you two have a deeply fucked up relationship, right?" John asks.

"Violently hypocritical," George says, not missing a beat, and steals the rest of the prawns out of Sherlock's pad thai.

Sherlock, who's not eating in protest because the banker case was so dull, orders another Thai iced tea, which brings him to six in an hour.

"All right, fine," George says at the end of dinner, by which point Sherlock's resorted to deducing passers by on Shaftesbury Avenue, leading to any number of cruel comments about the patrons of Forbidden Planet. "How about this one: we're reopening the Peter Ricoletti case."

Sherlock's look of Greek tragedy suddenly transfigures itself into a fetishistic gleam.

"Oh?" he asks. "Tell me more — tell me everything."

There isn't much in the way of *new* evidence to tell, but the archives and old case notes are a legion. Ricoletti's an arms dealer whose contacts in the former USSR means that no antiquated semi-automatic weapon or grenade goes without being re-homed. His most recent paramours have been groups of Pakistani extremists and the Syrian government, but the promise of a military withdrawal from Afghanistan has made him look longingly in its direction again — once loved,
always loved. He had a murky childhood divided between his father's (unstable) household in Naples and his grandmother's restaurant on Capri. He was made with the mob at the age of nineteen, with the clinical disposal of one the mistress of an Italian politician, and somewhere in his twenties and thirties went from being the Continent's most deadly fixer to trafficking a quarter of the arms and artillery that's illegally crossing borders.

Most annoyingly, Ricoletti has been in London recently, because George had caught a murder a few weeks ago where blood had been left at the scene matching blood pulled from a weapon used in a confirmed Ricoletti hit.

George, who's well sick of being ordered around by everybody and being courteous about it, figures that it's only fair that if Interpol and Trackwell are allowed to be unbearable, she ought to be able to throw Sherlock Holmes into the pot, too.

Ricoletti's not for nothing a career criminal, and rooting him out is more paperwork and less foot chases across London in the orange-black night. Still, as if in compensation, Sherlock, Interpol, and the Force Firearms Unit get to crash six police panda cars and burn down a building in the process of Ricoletti's capture. It is the happiest George has ever been about an abject shitshow because Force Firearms does their own paperwork, Interpol technically started the warehouse fire, she's got her murderer, and nobody who wasn't licensed for a weapon shot any off.

"There is soot on your face," Mycroft says, when he meets her in the mudroom that night. He's got a pinched, impatient look on his face and he's down to his button shirt and waistcoat, sleeves rolled up.

George smiles. "Hello to you, too."

"There is soot in your hair," Mycroft goes on.

"Well, there was a fire," George replies, feeling manic.

"Which you should have stayed well clear of," he complains, and reaches over, scrubbing a thumb over the slope of her cheek, his mouth folding down at the corners.

George turns to catch the pad of his finger — gray now with ash — in a fleeting kiss, because she's not going to apologize for chasing Sherlock into burning buildings or dragging him out of them.

"You wouldn't love me if I stayed well clear of burning buildings," George teases. "How else can I account for my inexplicable affection for you?"

"I'm running you a bath," Mycroft says, instead of answering her, and slides his hands down her sides to push her toward the stairs.

Mycroft has elegant hands and long fingers, which George has always liked about him. She likes it best when she's sunken to her chin in hot water water and he's carding shampoo through her fringe, stroking conditioner down the long, frazzled strands of her hair until they're glossy from his touch.

Later, when she's towel damp and barely dressed — a robe over her shoulders and untied at the waist — perched in his lap in bed, he tells her, "Congratulations, by the way, on catching Ricoletti."

"That was more Sherlock and Interpol than me," George says, reaching between them to unbutton his trousers. She likes having him this way: fully dressed and at her mercy.

Mycroft's smile is slow coming. "It will never stop surprising me how completely you fail to see
how important you are," he says, and kisses her before she can mount a proper protest, curling one hand around her hip and sliding the other between her thighs, so George is left clinging to his shoulders for balance, all the air in her lungs rushing outward.

"You," she starts, but loses the thread because Mycroft's mouth has traveled down to the divot between her collarbones. Automatic, George arches her back now, so he can press the same wet, lingering kisses between her breasts, score his teeth across her dark aureolas as he slips two fingers into the wet folds of her.

It's easy and heated more than desperate and hot, but George loves it, will always love it, the way she can whisper, "Deleting frantically as we speak," and how he chuckles — the vibrations running through both of them — as she presses his cock inside her, feeling the cold metal bite of the trouser zipper along the inside of her thigh. There's something ferocious and possessive in her when she thinks that in all the world, she might be the only person who knows that Mycroft Holmes laughs during sex; George thinks, that's mine, and that's just for me.

He keeps her balanced there, hips barely moving, thumb traveling down to where they're joined and slicking back up toward her clitoris — close and never touching, just exactly what she likes, what it takes to send her breath escalating in pitch, to make her grind down on him, greedy for another micrometer of stretch.

"You're perfect," he sighs, sounding surprised, sounding reverent, rubbing up against her and dragging her down at once, pressing in and in and trying to crush the atoms that separate them. "You can never leave."

George sighs out a laugh, in a long breath that melts into a moan, rolling her hips and searching for friction, the hard line of a pubic bone, anything to trigger any momentum, to get Mycroft's thumb to stroke her closer to orgasm.

"Where would I even go?" she asks, and bites him in reward when he rocks into her in earnest. "Oh, Jesus," she gasps when he slams up again, bruising, and he says:

"Anywhere — you could go back to your house."

"My — ?" she starts, and gives it up for gasping when Mycroft hits that perfect, exquisite point of sexual impatience, where he throws off their balance and pushes her down onto the bed, when he gets messy and bruising and shoves his way back into her with the leverage he wants, fucking her slowly breathless and aching on the edge.

"Would you sell it?" he asks her, curling his palm around the back of her knee and mouthing her shoulder in between words.

George is skidding on the silk dressing gown beneath them, sliding further and further up the bed as she digs her heels into the mattress, claws at the hem of Mycroft's trousers as he goes from languid to rough in a way that makes her go a little bit mental. She's chanting now, alternating profanity and begging, and because she can't stand not being able to reach him to kiss him, she drags Mycroft down by the knot of his tie — nails scoring the silk, ripping at the embroidery.

"Sell it. Stay here," he whispers, pleads, his forehead pressed against her temple. He's braced on one elbow, his other hand in the hot space between them, fingers soaked through and rubbing languidly against her, pressing hard enough that there's a dizzying spark of pain that keeps her banked on the edge of an orgasm.

"You — absolute — motherfucker," George swears at him, but she's smiling crazily, her entire
body nuclear hot and desperate. She reaches down between them, too, gets him where she wants him, how she wants him, as slow as she wants him, and says, "Yes, fine, I'll sell the fucking house," before she comes hard enough to take Mycroft with her.

He's actually still inside her when his brain reboots enough to say, "Anthea can add an estate agent meeting into my diary anytime between 4 and 8 p.m. on Tuesday," for which George punishes him by leaving the robe — disgraced and heavily stained — on the bed along with an extra pair of handcuffs the next morning.

The housekeeper now believes I'm brainwashing you into a sex slave, Mycroft texts her, just before the Q&A with reporters. I hope you're happy with yourself. MH.

George grins and texts back: I'm falling on that sword to protect Anthea from your filthy perversions. GL.

This is Anthea, comes the reply. 15-love, Scotland Yard.

It is the second best part of her day — right after the look on Sherlock's face at the press conference, wearing that miserable fucking deerstalker.

***

Selling the house is harder than George thought it would be.

Her photos are still on the walls, all the cupboards filled with her dishes and Argos wine glasses from the early days of her marriage. The rugs are from Tom's parents and the furniture is worn in all the places that mean it was well-loved, that she'd had a life here and it was good. She sorts through it alone, boxing up the things she'd like to take with her and setting away the things meant for goodwill. She spends long hours in the garden, sitting on a dust-covered lawn chair, staring into the overgrown grass, and for the first time in a long time, George is crushingly sad about this place, about Islington and this house, the life she thought she was meant for, and the years with Tom that had ended with an ugly, cauterized wound.

The house is the last of George's twenties and most of her thirties, being carried — shrieking, laughing — over the threshold by someone she may always love a little. The house is sex in the upstairs bath, water sloshing over the sides. The house is frying eggs for breakfast. The house is where she got older and grew into herself and out of Tom. The house is where Mycroft kissed her at the door, and then on the sofa, languidly, and in the garden and kitchen and bath, too. It's home, even if she hasn't lived here in months and months.

"Be well," she tells it, tells all the blank walls after the removal company came through and hollowed it, gutted it. George walks through it, from front door to the last cupboard, running her fingers across the wallpaper and paint and tile, following the perimeter of the garden, murmuring, "Thank you, I'll miss you," until it's dark.

The black car that started everything is parked on front of the house to end it, too, when she locks the door for the last time, when she comes tripping down the steps feeling weak-kneed and a little heartbroken.

Inside, Anthea is waiting for her, still glued to her BlackBerry and flawlessly pressed in a black sheath dress and searing red pumps, the stiletto heel in gleaming metal.

"It's a good house," she says, sounding distracted. "It's going to a good family."

"Yeah," George agrees, and because if she keeps thinking about it, she'll probably start crying, she
clears her throat and asks, "Are you eating with us tonight?"

Anthea's BlackBerry makes an angry noise at her. "Yes," she replies.

"Okay then," George says, and leans forward, to open the separator and say to the driver, "Mark, could you take us to the Waitrose, please?"

That actually makes Anthea look up. "I can pick anything I want?"

George tries not to think about why she's chosen to surround herself with painfully competent people that constantly telegraph crushing loneliness.

"Yes," George says as the car peels away from her house — the house — someone else's house. "You can pick anything you want."

***

Traffic is shite and the weather is shite and it's pretty obvious that Sally had finally given in and fucked Anderson, which is utter shite, so George says, "fuck it," around 11 a.m. and walks first to the Krispy Kreme for three donuts and then to the McDonalds for the sweetest, most disgusting mocha they make.

She's most of her way through the second donut and down to the vilest sugar dredges of her coffee when Sally comes thundering down the hall, sticks her head into George's office door, and says, "George, there's been a break in."

"Not our division," she mumbles around the donut.

Sally says, "You'll want this one," which George knows, knows down to the bones is a fucking lie, and is born out when she finds herself tearing around fucking London in Mycroft's BMW screaming, "Hacked into the Tower of bloody London security? How?"

Sally's mobile starts shrieking before she can answer, and George snaps, "Tell them we're already on our way," after Sally picks up.

"There's been another one, another break in," Sally says, and George stares at her instead of the road. They're in the middle of a fucking police convoy of tactical forces and pandas, she figures no safer place to have a collision. Then, Sally says, "Bank of England."

George says, "Fucking Christ," and asks, "Who are they sending?"

"Uh — Dimmock," Sally reports, the voice on the other end of the call tinny in the cabin of the car, but still distinguishable despite the air-raid scream of all the police sirens surrounding them. "He's on his way right now."

George asks, "Has the Home Office been alerted?"

Sally nods, giving her a thumbs up, and George settles back into the car seat, clutching at the steering wheel like it's someone's neck as London flies by the windows of the car in an entire palette of disheartened grays. Yeah, George thinks. Be bloody depressed. I bet the fucking ravens are all gone, too.

Sally's phone rings again, and George groans, "What is it now?"

"Pentonville Prison," Sally says, her face awful, stunned.
George almost swerves out of her lane.

It's only a 15 minute drive in good traffic from NSY to the Tower, but it's rammed like a bloody Primark opening on Victoria Embankment, so George swears fluidly and breaks about a thousand traffic laws to do a full U-turn down and back over the bridge south of the river. York's only slightly better, and she nearly takes out a fleet of teenaged girls huddled outside the BFI IMAX before roaring onto Stamford Street and over Blackfriars Road to Southwark, Sally clawing at the Oh Shit strap the entire time. George goes over Southwark Bridge and executes a frankly terrifying hard right onto Upper Thames that sends the car onto two wheels briefly, Sally moaning, "Oh, fuck me," in the passenger seat and George's car radio crackling to life with one of the tac team members swearing, "You are fucking insane, Lestrade," as she goes steaming past Customs House.

The Tower's instantly recognizable from the stream of people pouring out of its side gates and the phalanx of Met vehicles pouring in, and George pulls up short to the Jewel House at the heart of it already leaning on her brake, trying not to think how badly she's bollocksed Mycroft's transmission as she's tumbling out of the vehicle.

Force Firearms — bless them — has already flooded the zone by the time George runs up the steps into the building, where the vault door's thrown open and there're about eight hundred sub machine guns pointed inside one of the display rooms. Through the entryway, George can just see a chaos of broken glass, a guard unconscious on the ground, atmospheric with museum lighting and the stone and brick vault. All around, George hears Force Firearms telling her things: that the jewels are secure, that they're still securing the building, that they'll hold him the culprit until they can be certain there's no accomplice or bomb threat imminent, that the man doesn't appear armed, that he's so far cooperating with direction if refusing to give his details.

"I want to talk to him," she says.

Heidigger, who runs one of the Force Firearms teams and whose face is a permanent rictus of miserable forbearance, says, "Jesus, Lestrade — seriously?"

"That's Detective Inspector Let Me Talk To Him Lestrade to you," she says sweetly, and calls over to one of his team, hovering in the doorway of the Jewel House. "Hey — you. Give me your vest and go wait in the van."

Heidigger straps it onto her — still miserable, still forbearing — and says, "We'll have at least five MP5s on him the whole time."

"I am entirely confident in your ability to shoot him into flesh streamers, Heidigger. It's one of my favorite things about you," George tells him fondly. "Now let me pass."

He does, but he does it transferring her into the care of four heavily armed members of his team who escort her through the vault door and flank her as she walks, crunching glass under her shoes, the sound of guns being shifted at either side — the low rumble of curious uncertainty now that she's stepped into the room unarmed.

The man sitting on the plush seat is wearing a crown and carrying the scepter, a robe cast around his shoulders. He's patiently waiting, watching George with eyes as dangerous as Sherlock's. They're deep dark and colorless, the total absence of light, and it makes her curious as much as it makes her fearful.

George notes quickly the discarded jean jacket, the ugly Union Jack hat, the fire extinguisher, and it starts to knit together a picture: the afternoon masses of tourists and schoolchildren and underrepresentation of guards. This could have gone differently, more violently, and this man
chose to play it this way instead of any other.

"Hello," he says to her, blinking slowly, lizardlike.

"Hello," George answers, polite. "Is there any reason you're wearing all of that?"

He smiles at her, like she's surprised him, and George has to put all her courage to the sticking place to hide her shudder at that.

"One has so few opportunities like this, it would be shame not to take it," he drawls, his voice atonal, sailing up and down over the syllables and jumping between accents — constantly changing. "And you, I know who you are."

She arches a brow. "Oh yeah? Who am I?"

"You're Sherlock's pet copper," he crows, delighted. "You must be. You're dull, but you're not scared, are you? Not properly. Not like the rest of them."

"I'm reliably informed if you put a toe out of place, this small army of men with very large guns will shoot you a lot," George says patiently. "You're under arrest, by the way."

He beams at her, and George flasces immediately to her very first night walking a beat, when it hadn't been the drunks or the hoodies or the aggro that had scared her so much as the quiet ones who smiled too much, who weren't doing anything wrong, really, but who watched her: silent and unsettling.

"Don't you want to know my name?" he asks her.

"Are you volunteering that information then?" she says. She already knows who he is, there's no one else he could be.

"James Moriarty," he says. It comes out like a rattlesnake hiss. "I'm very excited. It's been sooo long since Sherlock came out to play."

"You do not have to say anything, but it may harm your defense if you do not mention when questioned something which you later rely on in court," George recites. "Anything you do say may be given in evidence. Separately, I'm sure Sherlock misses you, too."

He sighs theatrically. "I do hope," he trills. "It was such a whirlwind affair last time."

George hopes sincerely that's a euphemism, and if not, she's going home and having Mycroft teach her how to delete things before he realizes the state of his car.

Thankfully, Heidigger comes into the room here, saying, "Bomb squad's cleared us. They can't find anything and they don't think that chair's a pressure trigger or anything."

"Oh," the man says, "but that would have been monstrous clever."

"Right," George says briskly, "hands."

She plucks the crown from his head and takes the scepter off of him and the whole time she's handing off national treasures to stunned-looking tactical team members, she's trying desperately to ignore the way the man's looking at her. He's studying her face, his eyes trailing down the line of her neck and into the v of her shirt collar before it's cut off by the vest; she can feel his gaze on her skin as he offers up a pair of delicate wrists for her, the blue veins clear underneath the skin.
George cuffs him, trying to touch him as little as possible, because he's burning up the way cold things burn: boiling to the touch and freezing when you linger. She drags him out of the chair, off the pedestal, until he's stumbling over the glass, the fire extinguisher, his jacket, past the Force Firearms officers, down the hall.

He smiles, hypnotic, before she lets Force Firearms lead him off, saying:

"You might want to hang onto my mobile. Terrrrrribly interesting photos on it."

She lets Heidigger and several enthusiastically armed officers drag Moriarty away, and when she looks back at the chair, sitting flush left is a sleek handset, brand new, just a smattering of fingerprints on the glass.

George slips the phone into the an evidence bag and surrenders it to Sally, fingers itching. She knows better than to search through the photos herself — could be set to self-destruct and destroy evidence; could trigger God knows what — but she wants to. She wonders what he means, what photos he has, what Moriarty knows, and if he knows about Mycroft, too, the way he knows about Sherlock.

It's a mind game, there's no question. George usually wins those, has stared down wife beaters and serial rapists and a man who's poured acid onto the faces of women who'd spurned him after meeting them on internet dating sites and she knows this runaround intimately. She's never been physically stronger or taller; all she's ever had is the ability to anchor herself, to let it slide off without leaving a mark — but those other criminals had been the sort of boring that Sherlock had no time for. This is James Moriarty, who's interrupted Sherlock's orbit: blasted through his disinterest in a suicide rush.

And later, after John and Sherlock arrive, too quiet, George watches Sherlock instead of watching the security footage, frozen at the moment before Moriarty had shattered the glass case — GET SHERLOCK still written across it.

***

The Met's forensic techs takes almost a week to sort out Moriarty's phone, and when they send her the files they are simultaneously an utter fucking let down and a relief. It's pictures that don't make sense, stuff that doesn't compute properly: St. Bart's; a newspaper scan of her and Sherlock at a crime scene leaning companionably against the hood of a panda car, turned toward one another mid-conversation; a painting of King Arthur and his knights, all their eyes ominously blacked out.

"These are not terribly interesting photos," George says, mostly to herself.

"Well, he's a fucking lunatic, isn't he?" Sally points out reasonably, when they've printed the photos out and pinned them up in the conference room. "The 'very important' pics could have just as easily been decapitated dollies or cat photos."

It's late afternoon and the sun's the golden color of Italian egg yolks, casting yellow bars across the ugly carpet of the bullpen. Everything's quiet, easy, a little too comfortable, and the televisions lining the room are running BBC, ITV, Channel 4 and their blanket coverage of Moriarty's capture, an endless slideshow of Sherlock with the collar of his coat turned up and John standing at his side looking harmless and reliable.

"You're right," George admits, because Sally is. George is overthinking this.

She knocks off early and spends the night tucked up with Mycroft asking him purposefully
annoying questions about the cricket he'd TiVoed until he pauses the game to and resigns himself to having sex on the sofa. George enjoys the fucking with him almost as much as the fucking. Afterward, when she's swaddled in a blanket, curled docile against his chest, he says, "One day I am going to figure out a way to ignore you," and George only smiles, saying, "No, you won't," as the Sri Lanka-England ratchets upward in tension in the background.

She should stop being so paranoid all the time, George lectures herself, forcing her muscles to go lax, sinking deeper into the sofa, letting her eyes drift closed. *It'll be fine, you'll see*, she says to herself.

***

Moriarty walks.

The night after the verdict is in, she falls asleep alone with voicemail confirmation from Anthea that Mycroft is tied up with paperwork — shorthand for sulking at his club. George wakes up to the sound of Mycroft settling into an armchair in the corner of the bedroom, cufflinks undone, tie vanished, his fringe in his eyes. He looks younger and uncertain and alien to her, in the moonlight slivers from in between the curtains, blue-white lines across the rugs.

"It's 2:45 a.m.," Mycroft says, answering her before she asks, and George groans, stays horizontal on the bed, huddled under the covers and glowering at him. "I needed to think."

"You couldn't do it at home?" she croaks, scrubbing at her face and pressing her cheek fitfully against the warm hollow in her pillow.

Mycroft huffs. "I don't think that well when I'm around you."

"Flattery will only get you so far as being allowed to sleep in this bed tonight," George grumbles, and pulls the covers over her face, mumbling through the fabric, "Was this about Moriarty?"

He's silent a long time, unmoving, and George pulls down the blanket so she can squint at him for signs of life. He looks far away, and when she murmurs, "Mycroft?" he snaps back into focus, eyes locking onto hers, saying:

"Freeing him was a mistake."

George stares at him for a beat before she extends a hand, hot skin freezing in the still air of the room. "Come to bed."

"I've doubled the house security," he explains unnecessarily, frozen in the armchair.

"Job creation for ninjas, well done," George says, waving him toward her impatiently. "Come over here. My arm is cold."

This time, he comes, but he's tense and unhappy, undressing with clinical speed and lying on his side of the bed with all the charm of a corpse.

One day, George ought to write a book about the care and feeding of domestic Holmeses, she thinks, sliding away from her well-established patch of warmth under the covers to shiver pressed up against him in their bed.

"There's nothing you can do about juries," George whispers to him, in the low, small voices of their late night and early morning secrets. "I'm sure there was tampering — and the crown prosecutors said they were looking into it."
Mycroft lets out a thin breath, and draws his arm up around her, closing tightly over her shoulders. "Yes, of course," he says, far from mollified.

"And until then," George goes on, "you can become the proud employer of everybody who washed out of MI6 for being too violent, have them stand on our roof and snipe suspicious people in the neighborhood for a fiver a headshot."

"Surely that wretched Bollinger will be the first to go," he says.

George smiles into his chest. Kenneth Bollinger from two doors down is an overwhelmingly virile man who'd aged into his forties by being aggressively dreamy, and was knighted for his many years of philanthropic service providing obstetrics care for poor women in the Ivory Coast. He also loves football and has a keen appreciation for Mycroft's accessories. Too keen. Once George had caught Bollinger stroking a finger down Mycroft's tie and had been forced to shut that down with extreme prejudice; Mycroft had been in ecstasies about it. All of which would normally endear someone to Mycroft — as he loves nothing better than a person who appreciates the whimsy in his tie pins and makes George fulminate with jealousy — except he and Bollinger are on opposite sides of the right old ancient rowing rivalry between Oxford and Cambridge, and Mycroft apparently disdains all the hatesex Bollinger hopes they could be having.


"But who knows, perhaps once you let him snog you a little, you'd come around," she laughs, because a sullen Mycroft subject to the vagaries of sport-related rage is a Mycroft that isn't frantically planning to have SAS lay land mines on their front walk, at least.

She's too tired to know when she slips off, exactly, but when George wakes up, Mycroft's still a tense and troubled knot of limbs — just one curled around her. She'd been folded up against his chest, tucked in close, and she blinks a few time, half-aware, before Mycroft says, "It's only just seven, you can sleep a while longer. I'll wake you up."

"It'll be okay, you know," she mumbles, into his pajama shirt, already drifting off again. "Everything will be fine."

He presses a kiss to her head, where her part melts into her fringe, and says, "I know," softly, the way George sounds when she's hoping against hope and still knows it's a lie.

Twenty minutes later, Mycroft wakes her up by pressing his lips over her eyebrow, saying, "Georgiana, it's time, it's now or you won't have time for a bath before work," and she blinks — slowly — as the room and Mycroft's face resolve in front of her. He smiles and strokes a thumb over her bottom lip. "Good morning."

George blinks, and morning pulls into focus. "Hi. Good morning."

"I have decided to defer you first shower," he declares generously.

George rolls her eyes at him, but it's less effective horizontal. "We have six bathrooms."

"It's the thought that counts, Georgiana," he lectures her sweetly.

She sits up enough so she can smash a pillow into his face in response before he makes a grab for her ticklish spots that would escalate tensions into a full scale territorial war on the king sized bed. The last time such a conflict had occurred, a lamp, three framed photographs, and a stack of books
— gruesomely soaked through with water — had been named among the honorable dead.

Wise now from sorties past, George says, "Truce! Truce!" and Mycroft considers it long enough to make her consider breaking the rules of engagement and seizing upon his indecision to take the upper hand. Because she does, actually, have to go to work on time, she says, "I'll make breakfast?"

"Your terms are accepted," he says, and in the traditional manner of their people, he seals the agreement with a kiss to her shoulder as she laughs.

It's very small but it's just theirs, these hidden-away moments of normalcy. They're wonderful, but even when Mycroft's lips slide from George's shoulder up the column of her neck to take possession of her mouth, it's not enough to completely drown out a voice hissing in the back of her mind:

_It's soon. That thing you knew was coming. It's coming soon._

***

It arrives in the shape of a little girl screaming in an interview room at NSY, the terrible discovery at the end of a breadcrumb trail following her and her brother's kidnapping. The heels of the girl's hands and her knees are ragged and raw, dirt still streaked across her pale cheeks, and she's too scared to cry, her face ghost-white as she hurls herself away from where Sherlock's just walked into the interview room speaking in his softest voice. George acts on reflex, body checking Sherlock out the door, but the shriek echoes even after the door is closed.

***

George's eyes are crossing by the time the ambassador and his wife are reunited with their daughter and vanish off to the hospital for their son. There's still a little boy possibly dying from heavy metal poisoning, so there's no jubilation, and George sends the family on their way with a police escort, a card with her personal mobile on it, and instructions to call for any reason — any at all.

The paperwork will have to wait. She can barely think straight at this point, and she's sitting at her desk trying to stuff things into her bag when there's a knock on the frame.

In George's doorway, Sally looks grim and Anderson looks smug. Neither of them look like they're going to let George go home any time soon.

"Ma'am," Sally starts.

"Oh, Jesus," George says.

The last time Sally had ma'amed her was 2006, when PC Alex Penman had bled out after a knife altercation at a council estate in east London at the age of twenty-seven, and George needed to make the call to his six-months pregnant wife.

"We need to talk about Sherlock Holmes," Sally goes on gamely.

George puts her face in her hands. "He wasn't even that badly behaved this time, Sally."

"That's not the point," Anderson jumps in, already pitchy. "The point is that — "

"The point is that CSI Baker Street or not there ought to be no way for him to have taken a look at some bloody footprints and dirt and known where those children were!" Sally says too loudly, like she's fighting against the urge to yell. "It doesn't make sense! It's always like this! It takes us weeks
to find the forensics to back up his deductions and he can figure it out in minutes? It's impossible!"

Anderson, sensing momentum, says, "I put those samples into our database as well, even with four other techs pulled off of cases trying to do matching they're still no where close to identifying all the particulars, and the best they can give me is the geographical description of 'south of the river.'"

George is grinding her teeth, she can feel it. Mycroft is going to buy her a bite guard at this rate and force her to wear it. She can decline gracefully into menopause looking as sexually unappealing as possible.

"This is hardly the first time Sherlock's made a seemingly impossible deduction, you two," she snaps. "What the hell are you on about?"

There's an ugly look of triumph on Anderson's face as Sally says, pausing but certain, "He had to have something to do with it, ma'am — "

Christ, *again.*

" — There's just no way he could have figured it out so quickly, and *just* in time," Sally says. "There is no way unless he already knew where those kids were."

Scattered across George's desk are the case notes for the kidnapping, some gum, her mobile and the charger, the trainers she should have been wearing today as she'd wandered around all of bloody London. Her bag's gaped open on her lap, and George feels the same way: insides pulled outward, a mess.

"No," she says, short, and starts putting her stuff back inside.

"You cannot just ignore this," Anderson yells. "It's too much! It's the only thing that makes any sense!"

George says again, only this time she says at the top of her lungs, "*No.*"

"He's a sociopath," Sally argues. "He's said it himself!"

"Sherlock *wants* to be a sociopath," George returns, voice shaking she's so furious. She's exhausted enough that her self control is porous right now, that she might say something stupid like: "And you two are as genuinely stupid as he likes to accuse people of being if you've fallen for it after you've worked with him for this long."

Sally's quiet now, and George can imagine her train of thought: reviewing their long years of accidental familiarity, the way John and Sherlock giggle helplessly at crime scenes and have no concept of personal space, their fucking NSY wall of poorly written erotica illustrated with Daily Mail photos. Sherlock's not a good person. Sherlock's not a bad person. He's just human person, and absolutely mad, but he's not *evil,* and anyone who wasn't evil wouldn't have the stomach for this.

"Do you honestly think that Sherlock would *poison* children?" George demands, when Sally and Anderson are silent for too long. "For what? To what ends?"

Sally squares her jaw. "I honestly think Sherlock is mental enough for anything," she says, defiant. "I've honestly thought that from the beginning."

"We've worked with him the most, aside from you," Anderson says. "He may have other people
fooled on short acquaintance, but we've been stuck with him for years."

"So have I, and I don't think he's out torturing children in his free time," George says, because in Sherlock's free time, he's torturing John, who is both a willing participant and oftentimes an instigator.

Anderson bursts out, "Well you're not exactly unbiased, are you?"

"Excuse me?" George demands.

Scrubbing her hands through her hair, Sally groans, "Anderson — "

"No, someone needs to fucking say this," he shouts, and turns back to George. "You're not unbiased. You've always coddled him, and that was before you started getting off with his fucking brother."

George actually doesn't know how she doesn't throw the mobile she's clutching hard enough that she can hear the plastic creaking.

"That is out of line, Anderson," she says, voice low and flat and strange in her mouth.

"So is this, all of it," he retorts, and Sally cuts in here:

"You've got to talk to him. If you don't — " she hesitates, pulls her shoulders back, and George has been waiting for this moment for as long as she's worked with Sally; she's only sorry it's come now, like this " — if you don't, we'll go directly to the chief superintendent."

George is numb with anger. "Right," she says, brisk. "Well played. As we all know, he's nothing but praise for me since he's best mates with Trackwell."

Sally looks away. Anderson looks unrepentant.

"Fine," George says to them, pushing away from her desk. "Fine."

***

John gets the door at Baker Street, looking surprised.

"I thought we were done?" he asks, looking past George to Sally. "New break?"

"No, a mutiny," George says lightly, and heads up the stairs. "Sally will be staying down here."

Behind her, John says, "All—right," in that way men do when they sense a disagreement between women that's beyond the scope of their desired involvement. In this case, it is both true and not, and George taps up the dusty stairs to the first floor flat with fury burning cold in her heart because she doesn't believe it, she doesn't at all, but she must be responsible and ask, and she hates that she's found herself in this quandary at all.

Sally and Anderson are wrong about this because there's no way Sherlock has anything to do with this crime, but they're right about the other things.

George has been on tiny adventures with Sherlock. She's been to dinner at his house dozens of times, and she's told him, more or less, that she approves of his young man. She'd turned that blind eye in the case of the murdering cabbie when the signs had been neon lit and obvious. She's fretted about his health and conspired with John to help hide Sherlock's cigarettes and nicotine patches, rode with him in ambulances to hospitals after overdoses. She's living with his brother and email
friends with their mum. George is in possession of a Holmes family diadem, effusive with yellow diamonds.

She is too close to have an objective opinion about Sherlock, and she doesn't know what to do because he saves people, catches killers, and she won't trust him under anybody else's handling. The only reason he works, that they work is because it's her — her and Sherlock. George isn't flattering herself, she's only remembering the way Sherlock's ripped through the other DIs at the Yard, the way she's apparently on his speed dial, how he'd once said her features were very symmetrical.

When she steps off the landing into the flat, Sherlock's literally climbing the furniture and says, "No, Inspector," without turning around.

George blinks at him. "What?"

Dismounting from the armchair and bookshelf all long and spindly limbs in Spencer Hart, he clarifies, "The answer's no."

"But you haven't heard the question," George protests even though she doesn't know what she'd been planning to ask, exactly. Can you please come to Scotland Yard and convince everybody you had nothing to do with those kidnappings? Separately, perhaps we need to reconfigure our working relationship so that when I argue you're not a murderous child abductor, I have some fucking credibility on the subject?

"You want to take me to the station," he says to her, looking up from whatever's in his hand. "Just saving you the trouble of asking."

George inhales. "Sherlock — "

"The scream?" he asks, cutting her off.

Wincing, she says, "Yeah."

"Who was it?" he says in one of those half-questions that moves faster than George can ever answer him, closing the distance between them. "I bet it was Donovan. Am I somehow responsible for the kidnapping. Ah, Moriarty is smart. He planted that doubt in her head, that little nagging sensation. You're going to have to be strong to resist. You can't kill an idea, can you? Not once it's made a home — "

Sherlock reaches over and presses a fingertip between her eyes, where her worry lives, where he lives, in the geography of her.

" — there."

"Will you come?" George asks, because there's nothing else to say.

Sherlock twirls away from her, taking to his desk, fingers flying across the keyboard.

"One photograph, that's his next move," he says, look and back and forth between the screen and a cube of black plastic in his fingers. "Moriarty's game. First the scream, then a photograph of me being taken in for questioning. He wants to destroy me inch by inch — " he looks up at her, those ice blue eyes underneath his curling fringe a hundred years old like this, like he's carrying something heavy " — It is a game, Lestrade, and not one I'm willing to play."

George lets out one of those whispering sighs, a long-suffering exhale. She doesn't have anything
else to say. He's probably right. That doesn't mean that when George goes back down the stairs empty-handed, Sally won't look at her accusingly and run straight to the chief superintendent when they get back to NSY.

"Give my regards to Sergeant Donovan," Sherlock says, peering at his computer again.

George doesn't, mostly because she's too angry to talk and drive at the same time right now: fucked off with Sherlock and Sally and herself and this — and when they get to the Yard, fucked off at Anderson, who intercepts them in the lobby and says:

"The chief superintendent wants to see you."

Actually, the chief superintendent wants to bollocks George and then order her arrest Sherlock for questioning.

"John?" she says, driving too fast and talking on her mobile at the same time.

Over the phone line, he says, "Yeah, George?"

"It's me, look, we're coming to take him in," she says.

"Seriously?" he asks.

The only reason George isn't pressing her face to the steering wheel is because she's moving at thirty-five miles an hour. "Yes, seriously," she groans. "It's out of my hands at this point — and brace yourself, half the fucking force has stuck their noses in this."

John makes huffing noise on the other end. "All Sherlock's greatest fans, I guess."

"Something like that," she sighs, and hits her indicator, Baker Street looming ahead. She's being followed by a half-dozen other patrol cars, overeager in the hugeness of Sherlock's mythos. "Look, I'm just calling to give you the heads up and see if you can't help this go as smoothly as possible. We both know this is absolute nonsense, but it's going to take a while to untangle it."

John says, "George, honestly, how well do you think this could go?" which is a fair question considering less than fifteen minutes later she's watching John Watson being slammed up against a police car, the chief superintendent's nose bleeding freely and Sherlock grinning like a loon.

She's walking over to remind John he's supposed to be the normal one when there's a scream of radio feedback and then Sherlock's got a fucking gun, declaring loudly in his plummy vowels: "Ladies and gentlemen, will you please all get on your knees?"

"Ladies and gentlemen, will you please all get on your knees?"

George says to herself, "Oh for fuck's sake."

True to form, Sherlock's too bloody impatient to let the shocked suspension of belief play out, and he points the gun skyward before letting off two rounds, yelling, "Now would be good!"

I'm sending him a sex tape, George vows to herself, and shouts over the crowd, "Do as he says," waving everyone toward the asphalt, feeling stray grit digging into the soles of her feet through the bottom of her pumps as she crouches down, wrapping her arms around her knees. Just because she can, and not because it'll help, she finds the nearest CCTV camera and glares into it.

John, feeling the need to further muddy the waters as they move away from the police contingent, edging carefully backward down the street, says loudly, "Just—just so you're aware, the gun is his
idea. I'm just a — you know — "

Sherlock turns the pistol on him. "My hostage!"
George has just enough time to say, "Oh, no," before they're gone, running down the length of the street, and she's too tired and too fucking sick of this to do anything other than put her face in her hands and stay crouched there until the chief inspector shouts:

"Get after him, Lestrade!"

***

There's no way George will outthink Sherlock. She doesn't think anybody knows London's streets and alleys and dead ends better, so there's no point in wasting Met resources to hem him in that way, either. Anyone else this savvy she'd find their weak point and take it into police possession, but Sherlock's already handcuffed to his and dragging him hither and yon. PC Hatcher had found the gun, discarded, not two hundred meters away from Baker Street, so at least he's no longer an obviously armed fugitive of the law. The chief superintendent says, "Well, he can't run forever. He's got to come back sometime," and George thinks to herself, Yes, he could — he's got everything he needs with him already.

Sherlock's not a ghost, though, he leaves a trial: a semi-hysterical 74 route bus driver, a dead man in a hoodie — "That wasn't him, we've already got his gun," George says, right off the bat — a break in at Kitty Reilly's flat.

"Oh, it's you," she says when George fetches up at the apartment, a first-floor set of rooms in a mid-terrace house with a postage stamp lawn.

George hurts all over, from the steady throbbing in the back of her head to the small of her back, and every time she shifts her weight from one foot to the other, there's an ice-cold burst of pain that extends from her toes to her knees. She feels like eight miles of bad road and looks it, too, so she doesn't make the connection, immediately, just blinks stupidly and asks, "Beg pardon?"

"You!" Kitty Reilly cries, reaching for a recorder. "Detective Inspector Georgiana Lestrade, right? That copper Sherlock's always cuddled up with in the photos?"

"What?" George asks.

"Kitty Reilly, the Sun," Kitty Reilly says unnecessarily, going on to add, "sorry, just reflex, you know, but — " she waves a dismissing hand at the officers working in her flat, taking fingerprints and photographs " — seeing as your colleagues have this well in hand, would you mind having a bit of chat?"

George stares at her for a beat. "I — Miss Reilly, I'm meant to be interviewing you."

"I've already told your officers everything," Kitty says reasonably. "I came home, Sherlock Holmes and John Watson were handcuffed to each other on my sofa. They threatened my source and gave chase when said source ran for his life."

Flipping through her notebook, George says, "Yeah, about your source — Rich Brooks?"

"The actor, hired to play Moriarty," Kitty supplies quickly, and reaches into her handbag to retrieve a battered A4 printout. "Here, you can read it in advance."

George reaches for the pages with numb fingers and looks at the gray paragraphs without really processing any of it. SHERLOCK'S A FAKE!, the headline screams, with "He invented all the
"How'd you meet him?" Kitty asks, tone lowered in tenderness. "He must have been something to work with — pulling the wool over on someone like you."

George almost says, *He found me; he was just an irritating ghost in my email in the beginning* and *He was a dick, but he was marvelous, too, and he helped people.* She catches herself just in time though, coughing over the beginnings of a confession, and she hands the pages off to Sally to bag in evidence as she says:

"It's not appropriate for me to comment an an open case, Miss Reilly."

Kitty's smile at that is too wide. "I knew it," she crows.

"Knew what?" George hazards, trying to think if she'd given anything away, said too much, but she hasn't really said anything at all, just wandered into this flat and started to note the obvious with a sinking sense of despair. She's called Mycroft six times now and gotten Anthea's voicemail on the last attempt — never a good sign but even worse with Sherlock on the lam.

"You like him, don't you?" Kitty laughs, eyes shining, like this is news. George supposes that to people outside of Serious Crimes, it might be. "Then the question is how much?"

George feels herself grinding her teeth again. "Again, inappropriate."

"But what kind of inappropriate?" Kitty pushes. "Were you ever involved? Or was it a one-way thing? He's quite fit, isn't he? Sherlock? Although he seems pretty well attached to his Dr. Watson."

"Incredibly inappropriate," George bites out, calling over her shoulder, "Sally, I'm off. You can handle this scene, yeah?"

Kitty's fearless, apparently — the type of reporter who likes to doorstop George about child killings when she's trying to get home at the end of a twenty hour shift — and reaches over to close a hand round George's wrist.

"The truth is going to come out one way or the other, Inspector," Kitty says. "Talking to me now gives you the option of telling your side. I'm sure you know the benefit of that."

George has enough experience and media training to know that she shouldn't say anything, just walk away from this and put it in the hands of the professionals. She's too close to the subject to talk rationally about it and all her filters have been been broken since just after midnight, and through the front windows in Kitty Reilly's house, George can see the sky going the pale pink and gray of an overcast English morning.

Except.

"Sherlock Holmes is the real deal," George says, the words tumbling out of her mouth.

Kitty's gaze is steady as she asks, "You sure about that?"

"Sure as I've ever been about anything," George says, and shakes herself, turning quick to call out, "Sally! Did you hear me?"

Sally, when she turns up, doesn't say, "Yes," or "All right, go on, then," or ma'am her again. She doesn't actually say anything at all, just looks huge-eyed and bruised and holds out her mobile in a trembling hand.
"What's going on?" George asks, taking the phone.

"They want to talk to you," Sally croaks. "It's Bart's."

***

Sally makes PC Hatcher drive.

Traffic's done him good, George thinks, because he's weaving through London like an old pro now, siren on, steering with one hand and clutching the car radio transmitter with the other, saying, "Emergency transport coming through — clear a route." It's misappropriation of police resources, sort of, but she's really not in any position to comment on it or be a good influence. Her throat hurts. She's not breathing very well.

They've picked a full Met escort by the time they reach the hospital, and George hears a hurt, awful noise coming out of her own mouth at the sight of police tape on a square of sidewalk in front of St. Bart's.

Nobody's said anything, PC Hatcher standing at her shoulder and all the panda cars fanned out in front of the hospital are silent, a dozen uniforms in a line behind her.

There's a dark smear on the ground, already mostly washed away in the mid-morning drizzle, and George freezes there too long looking at the blood mixing with water and running down the narrow furrow between cement pavement tiles toward the gutter and the sewer. She looks up at the roof where the edge of it cutting into the sky and thinks about the on-scene officer's report that they'd found a second body up there: James Moriarty or Rich Brooks, whoever he was, dead from an apparent self-inflicted gunshot wound. Suicide pact, they'd posited, doesn't look good for Sherlock, they'd said. George looks back down at the ground again because the sun's come out unexpectedly and it hurts it's so bright.

George doesn't know why she does it, but she crouches down and presses her fingers to the wet ground — near the melting edge of the blood stain — and she makes that fucking noise again, like a sucking wound or an injured dog. She forces herself to stand up, to stumble into the hospital, hearing Hatcher behind her saying, "Inspector — inspects."

Molly from the morgue is waiting in the lobby, her face a disaster zone of tears and running eye makeup, all the color gone from her, and she says, "Inspector — he's — I've put him down in the — " she wrings her hands " — downstairs."

George asks, "Can I see him?"

"He's — his brother's in there, now," Molly chokes, and all the blood rushes to George's head, a deafening roar as the other half of it hits her, the full realization of what's happened oh my God Sherlock, Sherlock, Mycroft, and she barely hears Molly crying as she says, "He said he wanted to be alone."

George says, "Okay." and she lets Molly maneuver her to a tatty waiting room downstairs near the morgue. It's quiet-colored, the floors carpeted. Everything's a touch overwarm and George is so tired she's hallucinating. She's been here before, holding the hands of grieving fathers and wives and children. The room looks exactly the same now that she's the one grieving — George supposes she's grieving — and she lets the tea Molly makes her go cold on the side table as she stares at the wall and the ugly print of a seashore mounted on it.

Molly sits with her, fidgeting, body slumping under the weight of the air here. George has the
reflexive desire to put a hand on Molly's wrist and say, "Hey, you all right?" except she can't move her hands or make any sounds come out of her throat. Her eyelids are gummy and in the absence of noise, the HVAC and her heartbeat are like a bass beat inside a tornado.

It takes a few moments before George realizes Molly's been talking, her voice trailing off as she finishes, "...pretty...damaged."

George blinks. Turning her head takes forever, and Molly's face is still the color of bone, although from the way there're black smears on her cheek, she's tried to wipe away the worst of the make-up run. "Sorry?" George asks.

"I — I was trying to say," Molly manages, just barely, "the — it's a tall building. The damage to his face is...pretty comprehensive."

George has seen suicides before, cracked-open skulls and blood pools, but —

"He landed wrong," Molly is quick to say. "I don't...I don't think he'd want you to see."

"Ever vain," George murmurs, too numb to think about how she shouldn't, that she shouldn't speak ill of the dead. Sherlock doesn't feel dead. "Bet he's not best pleased about Mycroft seeing him, either."

Molly's mouth is a furious knot. "Well, Mycroft has to — identify the body."

And that reminds George it's not over yet, that she can't fall over yet. It's a funny thing to realize at the bottom of yourself, when you're entirely spent, that there's something you've hidden away for emergencies. George moves her hand, she puts it on Molly's trembling wrist. She says, "I'm — Molly, I'm so sorry you had to see him."

George has only ever met Molly once or twice, but she knows her the way you know the characters from a soap opera. George knows about Molly's tragic dating history and doormat tendencies, her nervous sweetness and tendency to stare. George knows that Molly has probably spent the entire time she's known Sherlock horribly, gruesomely, painfully in love with him, the way you can only ever love someone who will never love you back — letting the wound go necrotic.

Molly is young and a touch silly, and she doesn't deserve this, shouldn't have had to collect the body of her best beloved from the fucking sidewalk, and George is momentarily furious that Sherlock would do this to her — rip her heart out this way.

The slow fracture of Molly's expression is like watching a building demolition, the silent boom and the little cracks before the collapse comes at light speed. George barely has time to say, "Here, it's fine, it's all right, come here," before she's wrapped both arms around Molly's shaking, narrow shoulders and feeling the wet torrent of Molly's tears pressed into George's neck. Molly's clawing at the back of George's trench, fistng the fabric, and George makes nonsense noises, hushing sounds, says, "It's fine, Molly, it'll be all right," and "Come on, now, Sherlock would be so annoyed right now if you were to waste another tear over him," and "I'm sorry — I'm so sorry."

It's an age before Molly stops trembling, before she stops clutching at George's clothes, and the hurt noises fade away to desperate, wet gasps for breath. George just runs her hands up and down Molly's thin back, cupping the back of her head, taking the weight of her and waiting — wondering if Mycroft is burning down St. Bart's right now, if he's slid to his knees and searching for a pulse. He would. This is Sherlock, who packed himself into Mycroft's school luggage twice and loves him so much they live in constant war.
There's a knock on the doorframe that sends George's heart rate skyrocketing, and when she looks up, away from the slope of Molly's back, it's to Mycroft: perfectly flawless, perfectly composed, his face pale as a ghost.

"Ms. Hooper," he says, grave. He's very still. Every movement limited.

Molly jumps away from George, her face swollen red, and she rubs frantically at her cheeks as she says, voice wet, "Um — um — sorry. Is it — are you done?"

Mycroft looks past her, right over her, looks directly at George. "Yes," he whispers. "I'm finished. Thank you."

Molly goes away in the scurrying footsteps of someone still half-blind with crying, leaving George with empty arms in the waiting room with Mycroft and desperate to say something, anything, knowing there's nothing to say at all.

"Is it really him?" she asks finally. "They told me, but I can't — "

"He — " Mycroft hesitates, he shakes, a little, the last color of his face goes away " — he wouldn't be able to fool me."

George exhales, all the air whooshing out of her. She feels hypoxic, dizzy.

"Oh," she says. "Oh, my God."

She doesn't know how long they go, drowning in their mutual silences, before he says, "John's in for overnight observation. He has a very bad concussion."

George nods. "All right," she says.

When it's other people, she knows the motions. Sit with them while they panic, wait until the worst of it's over and British breeding and stiff-upper-lip kicks in for a temporary burst of order. She'll tell them that the body will be released as soon as the police can reasonably do so, that the morgue will work with them to organize the transport of their loved ones to a funeral home, where they can discuss further options. She promises to work her hardest to find the killer, to bring justice to the dead.

George knew Sherlock for tantrums and sulks, but she didn't know this, that he could be pushed, that he could be driven to this. She never even thought he gave a shit about his reputation, for Christ's sake. His summary opinion on public opinion seemed to involve correcting the grammar on his gay romance wall — why would he do this? Why would he care if anybody thought he was a fucking fraud?

"He was driven to it," Mycroft says, like he's reading her mind or fluent in the nonverbal language of her grief, and either is equally likely. "He was forced."

"Moriarty," George says in a hush.

Even now, all of England is waking up and spending 50p on their morning trash tabloid. Kitty Reilly's story is sure to be the talk of the town, and the Daily Mail website must be imploding under the traffic load. There's a leak in Bart's — there's always been a leak in Bart's — and George doesn't doubt it's everywhere already: Boffin Holmes, Fraud! Dead by his own hand! Pitched himself off of fucking Bart's in front of Bachelor Watson! Suicide pact with actor Rich Brooks! The sad end to the sad work of a twisted man!
"I need to go to my mother," Mycroft says suddenly. His voice is very level. "It's — isn't something you say over the phone."

She reaches for her handbag, abandoned one seat over. "I'll come with you."

"I'll go alone," he tells her, with a cold edge that makes her look up, startling: Mycroft is staring past her now, too, over her shoulder toward the opposite wall, white-knuckling the handle of his umbrella, leaning heavily against it.

"You shouldn't have to," she says, but she's unsure now, she feels shaky like Molly now, not just from the exhaustion but from someone who's shaken her, and there's a creep of sickening suspicion roiling her stomach. She offers, "I can come with you. This is — "

"I don't want you to," he cuts in. "I don't want you anywhere near this."

George prefers the worrying numbness, because the pain that blooms like ink in water through her chest is lacerating. "What?"

He won't look at her. He touches his pocket square, the stitching on the edge of his jacket, slides one hand into his trouser pocket instead, keeps carefully away from the watch chain she'd pinned on him more than twenty-four hours ago, when they'd broken apart in their hallway with goodbye, see you soon kisses, the comfortable kind, the unworried kind.

"I let him do this. I let him work with you," Mycroft says hoarsely. "And look what's happened."

George is going to throw up. "Mycroft."

He squeezes his eyes shut. George has never been in a room with him this long and not caught his gaze; he can't help it, he's told her. He's helping it now.

The summer before George graduated from uni, Rachel had dragged George out of bed at half-three in the morning for one of those lunatic car rides that's only possible when you're very young and slightly mad from lack of sleep. The sky had been the velvet blue of princess dresses and spangled deep with diamonds she and Rachel had only ever seen through museum glass, and they'd stopped when they'd hit Beachy Head. They'd parked alongside the narrow double carriageway and halfway onto the green grass, climbed up the rolling incline to peer off the edge — down along the white chalk hills and to where the slate-blue water rolled up against the gray rock beach, the wind whipping their hair back from their faces and chilling them through. They'd sat there through sunrise, as the night had ceded to dawn, and George still remembers the soft orange-pink of the day leaching out across the sky, the cloudless hugeness of it cut off by the horizon, sitting looped arm in arm with Rachel in the grass, their legs hanging off the sides, heels kicking the cliff face.

"This is perfect, isn't it?" Rachel had said, clutching George close.

"You're mental," George had laughed, but slotted their fingers together to keep from losing their hands to frostbite in the morning chill. "Completely mental."

"A perfect moment," Rachel had said, ignoring her and grinning crazily. "One to keep with you the rest of it, all of it. Hold it close."

And George remembers pressing a kiss to Rachel's head, where her hairline used to meet her temple, the sort of kiss you give to a friend who is part of you, and saying, "Yes. Exactly."

This moment, the morgue, this room, Mycroft staring at the floor between them, it feels like Rachel's bedside in Walthamstow again. When George had read from *The Little Princess* until
she'd tasted blood in her mouth, until she couldn't see the words on the page anymore, and Rachel's hand had gone limp inside of George's. But she'd stayed because Rachel's mum and dad couldn't do it anymore, and George had promised, and right now, this fucking moment, George feels it all over again: that sickening, crippling hurt when it had all been over.

"I need to take care of some things," Mycroft says, filling up the widening space between them with his polished consonants and detachment.

He looks up at her finally, here. He looks like he's aged a decade, gray with misery, the line of his mouth soft with exhaustion, and when George searches his eyes she sees someone grieving, crazy from it, resolute the way you are when you're about to give in and admit you're losing the most important thing in your life.

"I overreached," he murmurs, and she hears in translation: *I didn't protect him.*

"This is not your fault," George promises.

"It is, more than you can know," Mycroft whispers, with the weight of certainty in his words. "And now I have to do what I can to make this right."

It takes two tries to say anything, but when her voice cracks and words spill outward, George says, "So, what now? What happens now?"

"Sherlock's my brother," Mycroft says, to himself now more than to her. "I can't do what I need to do if I'm distracted."

She's not hearing this right. She can't be. "What do you need to do?"

He catches her eyes, and for a minute, she thinks he's going to crack, that he's going to give in, that he's going to tell her everything. George would listen, she'd carry it all with him, she's good at that, she would do it for him.

"I'm so sorry, Georgiana," he says instead. He says it the way Tom had apologized to her, the way her father's doctors had apologized to her, the way her school friends had apologized to her after Rachel's funeral, and George feels her blood freeze in her veins.

"What is this?" she hisses at him. "Penance?"

"Yes," he grinds out, and in a lower voice, he says, "And an offensive strike."

"You don't mean it," George says, sounding sure and steady in a way she doesn't feel. "You're mental right now. Come on — let's — your driver's outside, right? Let's go."

Mycroft says, "Georgiana."

"We need to talk to your mother," George insists, because it's the right thing to do, snatching up her bag and heading for the doorway, weaving around Mycroft where he stands and tapping out into the hall. "If she's up any time soon she'll hear it from the papers and it would be — it would be fucking awful. Come on. We need to go."

"Georgiana," Mycroft says again, and this time, he arrests her with a hand, closed vice-like around her wrist, tightly enough that it hurts — and he uses her shock to push her against one of the unadorned walls of the hallway, to loom over her with his huge, heartbroken face in swallowing silence.
George whispers his name, she must whisper it over and over again before she manages to say, "You can't blame me for this," pleading.

"I don't," he promises her, and his eyes are closed again, forehead pressed against hers, and she can hear him panting like he's run a marathon or lost a fight. "Georgiana, I don't, I swear to you."

Her face is wet. She's crying now. "Then why are you doing this? Don't do this."

"I have to," he moans, wrecked, wretched. "I have to."

She tells him, "No, no," and seizes him by his perfectly stiff collar, drags him down to her height, closes that space between them, desperate. It hurts to kiss him, a crash more than an embrace, and George's lips are bruised and she can't breath she's sobbing so hard, and he's dragging himself away from her — reluctant — and she loses the heat of him from one minute to the next, the inches between them growing into miles, Mycroft pressing himself against the opposite wall of the corridor. His mouth is bleeding.

"I have to go," he tells her. There's a shadow over his face. "I have to go now."

"You don't mean it," she repeats. "Say you don't mean it."

He doesn't, but he does say, "You can have the house," and then he's gone like a ghost, footsteps becoming quieter as he leaves, and George stands there, held up by the wall, until she hears PC Hatcher's voice, shaken and close:

"Sir — ma'am? Inspector Lestrade? Are you all right, ma'am?"

She looks down at her feet, though she guesses he must have already seen her face, can read the way her purse is on the ground, its contents scattered.

"Inspector?" PC Hatcher asks again, scared now.

"It's fine," she scrapes out of her throat. "It's just — my shoes hurt. My feet hurt."

He says, "All right, ma'am," and "Let's get you home then, and you can take your shoes off in the car, yeah?" and goes down on his knees to gather up her bag, her lip balm, her mobile and her diary. When he reaches for her, it's with the soft hands you use on a widow or a nutter, and he pushes her and pushes her until she's in his car.

The fifteen minute drive from St. Bart's to Lyall Street takes a year. George feels every single inhale and exhale on the way, on the knife edge of complete panic until he pulls up in front of the house and George tumbles out of the car.

***

She cries. She cries herself to sleep. She wakes up swollen-faced and aching six hours later and cries in the shower, and then she walks around the empty house like she's as concussed as John — wobbling and a bit dim. She talks her mother out of coming to see her by lying extensively and saying she's taking care of Mycroft; she calls Mrs. Hudson and tells her about John in the hospital; she calls Anthea a dozen times. By the thirteenth call, Mycroft's assistant at HMRC answers with a generic, "HM Revenue and Customs, Mycroft Holmes's office, Kerry speaking." That's pretty final, and George supposes that's sufficient justification to go back for another bath to cry in. She thinks about calling Eugenia before admitting she doesn't have the courage.

The media's first day story is Sherlock Holmes, fraud! and an outpouring of equal parts sympathy
and bile for Dr. John Watson, war hero, who'd fallen for the magic act. It's sad and salacious and there's a lot of b-roll for it — Sherlock and John having been terribly photogenic media darlings for months before. There are a lot of unnamed sources who claim to have always suspected; there are very few people who argue in Sherlock's favor. The contrarian stories will take longer. People worth talking to very rarely volunteer. In the first twenty-four hours of any breaking story, it is the prerogative of media to throw everything at the wall and only worry about what will stick later.

The second day story for the press is easy because the Met has sprung a leak a mile wide, and everybody's babbling about the number of cases he was allowed in on, the special relationship between Sherlock Holmes and the Serious Crimes division. Everyone wants to know what cases he'd assisted on, and every defense lawyer in all of England is in a lather about this, arguing that their client's cases be reexamined on account of possible taint from the Sherlock Holmes fiasco. It's barely 4 p.m. before the Independent Police Complaints Commission announces that Detective Inspector Georgiana Lestrade is to be suspended until further notice, and that an investigation of Sherlock Holmes's involvement with the Met going back almost a decade has been launched.

By the third day, when the press has exhausted the obvious news angles, someone must notice how frequently George is in the pictures alongside Sherlock going through the photo archives: how often she's smiling at him, how often she's yelling, how often they have been sitting side by side, companionably, on the hoods of police cars, while John looks on with an easygoing grin on his face.

George looks and looks at the picture on the Guardian website, and thinks about all the ways in which that moment was singular and irreproducible, how she should have remembered it, kept it close. She remembers it a little: it was almost a year ago, on one of those rare, hot English days when the sky was bleached out, and Sherlock had suffered horrors over how she'd rolled up the sleeves of her shirt so he'd taken over for her. Unsurprisingly, in the photo, the folds look exquisite. She's peering at her mobile, sitting on the OL in POLICE, and Sherlock's leaning over her shoulder to stare the screen. She can't remember why John was smirking at them, or what they the text message had been about anymore. The crime was never solved: one of Sherlock's rare failures, one of George's many cold cases.

She goes over the night a million times, the different ways it could have ended. If she'd ignored Sally and Anderson. If she'd talked the chief superintendent out of trying to have Sherlock taken in. If they'd been successful at arresting him, even, then he would probably still in in a holding area raising hell and complaining about the food. Maybe if she'd managed to reach Mycroft earlier, or just thought to call him in for help earlier, more desperately. Maybe if she'd run after Sherlock immediately and reasoned with him. Maybe.

She gets the call on the fourth day.

"Don't do anything stupid, Lestrade," Kerrigan says to her, his voice gruff with worry. "We're sending you a police escort."

Downstairs, camped in front of the house, there's two dozen photographers jockeying for space, eating bacon sarnies and ham slices on the sidewalk in Belgravia. George doesn't bother wondering how they figured out where she lives. Probably tomorrow morning's papers will be splashed with annoying alliteration about the extreme poshness of her postcode. She has — maximum — another two days before the press realizes she's living with Sherlock's brother. She was.

"Can you have them mow down a few of these paparazzi?" she asks, but her heart's not in it. They'll be there thick as ants no matter where she goes. They've been part of her professional life for a decade now.
"I'll have them drive as recklessly as possible," Kerrigan promises, and lets an awkward silence cultivate before he says, "I believe you, Lestrade. You know that, right?"

George covers her face with her free hand. Her eyes are hot. "I know," she croaks, and hangs up before she can start crying again on the fucking line.

She puts on a black pantsuit and flats and makeup, because looking like hell won't help. She ties her hair back and puts on her watch and a pair of earrings and goes downstairs to eat something, ignoring the constant, bingo parlor dinging of her mobile. Her voicemail is full and she's been deleting all of her texts without looking.

George is halfway through one of Mycroft's disgusting fucking hand milled oatcakes when there's a great swell of shouting just outside, flashbulbs going mental, and she steels herself in the entryway for the knock on the door.

***

It runs on telly pretty much on loop for the next day:

Two uniformed officers in neon checked jackets, the rain sleeting off of them, a sea of people shouting questions, all staged on the doorstep of a massive house in Belgravia. George, when she steps out, it's with her head lowered — silver hair striking — silent for the push through to the Met vehicles. Most of the journos know her, one way or the other, from years of working on one another's nerves, and they call her by name, "George! Georgie!" and "Oi! George!" because she's shared cigarettes and umbrellas with them at wretched crime scenes and outside the Royal Courts of Justice. The new ones, the surprise ones, are the American and continentally accented voices calling her title through the crowd, too. At the last minute, before George disappears into the passenger seat of a police car, there's a flash of her coat lining — robin's egg blue — as she turns to look over her shoulder, her face wide-open and hurt, her fringe sweeping into her eyes.

***

Kerrigan meets George at the lobby of the New Scotland Yard building. He's wearing a rumpled suit with mustard on the tie and his hairline is glistening with sweat.

"You look like absolute shit," he tells her.

"You're seriously one to talk," she says, grateful, and he flashes her a crooked grin, before he tips his head toward the belly of the building and says, "Come on then, the IPCC's got their people in waiting for you."

They're not the only ones.

Lining every hallway, in every cluster of offices and cubes, uniforms and detectives and sergeants — people George sees day in, day out, who she's known more than a decade now — fall silent and stand at attention as George and Kerrigan meander past. They meet her eyes as she walks by and Davison mouths, We believe you. It surprises George so much she almost misses the way Hatcher's loitering around the elevator bank, the way he whispers, "You wouldn't help a liar; he was for real," and how Edith and Margaret are waiting in the third floor hall, looking obstinate. "Fuck the lot of 'em," Margaret orders, and Edith says, "Yeah, fuck 'em all, George," as Kerrigan steers George toward the meeting rooms — buzzy with people in suits and upper level uniforms.

"Don't let them make you a scapegoat, Lestrade," Kerrigan says, when they're stopped in front of the closed door. "I know you. I know you did right by all those people."
George looks at him, at his profile as he knocks. "You really believe me," she marvels.

Kerrigan slants her an impatient look. "Don't make that face, Lestrade," he counsels. "You look like a fucking kicked dog."

"Any dog of yours would look like this," she retorts, and then the conference room door swings open.

The man on the other side's in his mid-forties, a little under six foot, medium brown hair and a worn face. He's wearing a gray shirt and black tie, knot loose, and he might be a little handsome if he wasn't going to be one of George's inquisitors.

"Inspector, we've been waiting for you," he says, a touch of sympathy in his voice.

She clears her throat and puts a stilling hand on Kerrigan's arm. "I'm here now, sorry about the wait," she says.

Looking over his shoulder, toward the wall of windows, the man sighs before he turns back, asking, "Vultures circling?"

"Inside and out, it seems," Kerrigan growls.

"We're just asking some questions," the man says and waves her inside before shutting the door with Kerrigan still glowering on the other side. He adds, "Look, this is a fucking miserable situation we know — we just want to get to the bottom of it, I swear."

George looks over his shoulder, toward unfamiliar, calculating faces.

"You could have fooled me," George quips, light in her anger because without her fury all she's got is incapacitating grief — she won't have time for that until later.

The man looks round them, careful, before he leans in a touch closer and confesses, "Look, for what it's worth, I've had a look at your history and your files, and I think that the investigation, when it gets underway, will bear out that you're telling the truth, and so was Holmes."

George is in a state if that's enough to make her eyes sting.

Behind them, one of the IPCC members says, "Oi, Moran, let's get this started, then?"

Clearing her throat, George asks, "Moran?"

"DCI Sebastian Moran, one of the cogs in Professional Standards — just transferred a few months ago from West Midlands." He grins. "Heard a lot about you even before all of this hubbub."

"I wish we were meeting under other circumstances," George sighs.

"Oh," Moran says, still smiling, "this has its charms."

***
Chapter 9

The meeting is brief and mostly perfunctory, with professional standards explaining to George her rights in this inquest, walking her through the process. George tries to listen but none of it's sinking in. Trackwell and Chief Inspector Potter are both present, which is fantastic, and George is silent as a grave for most of it, eyes fixed at a spot over Moran's shoulder where the plasterwork on the conference room is beginning to crack. Everybody's tea goes cold twice over in the ice of discomfort.

"Do you understand the seriousness of this investigation, Detective Inspector Lestrade?" Trackwell asks, stony-faced and plotting. Someone will need to be martyred for this not to touch the larger body of the Met, and George can already feel the sting of a fucking tourniquet.

"I'm aware of the seriousness of this investigation," she parrots back, because she can't say, *Fuck you.*

Trackwell says, "Your old cases will all need to be reinvestigated for fraud."

"I'll be leading that inquiry," Moran steps in, frowning down the row before he turns back to George with a sympathetic look on his face. George has always hated the overly nice doctors the most. "We'll be seeing a lot of each other in the coming weeks."

Potter, scowling, can't resist. "Frankly, if I may make an aside — "

Moran sighs. "Chief Inspector, please — "

" — it must be said that it's frankly *ludicrous* that this situation went on so long," Potter goes on anyway, because he's the type of man who chases children off of his lawn and says cruel things to his daughters, George bets. "How you were able to conceal his involvement in such a staggering number of sensitive cases really betrays — "

"There was never any concealment," George interrupts him, her voice flat and cracked open like the bed of a dead lake. "I never made any attempt to conceal Sherlock Holmes' involvement — any more than I would do to protect the identity of any other informant. He was on the books. He was in the files. He's testified at two-dozen trials."

Potter colors.

"You shook his hand once," George continues, her voice growing steady as her blurry anger hardens into something certain. "Just outside the Royal Courts of Justice. He made a twatty comment about your tie and you laughed it off because you were so chuffed about the case we'd just closed. With his help."

Potter's furious red has gone a bit green and sickly, and George refuses to look away, keeps her eyes dead level with him and her face stony. Potter doesn't have the right to say anything about Sherlock Holmes. He should remember if that he's going to imply that Sherlock is George's pet fraud, that the first part of that description is *George's*. She could claw Potter's eyes out with her bare hands.

She asks, "Are we done?"

"That's it for today," Moran answers obligingly, breaking the tension in the room. "Detective Inspector Lestrade, thanks for coming in."
George shoves away from the conference table and lets herself out.

***

On the sixth day she confesses to her mother, and the worst part is sitting on the phone listening to her mother cry and letting her own tears well up and over, broken glass in her throat. George doesn't know what to say, and neither does her mother, because their lives and their shared histories have been shaped by terrible things, but this is something new and novel in its awfulness.

She's been sleeping on the drawing room sofa under a blanket from the most remote and unloved of the guest rooms. George can't go into her bedroom, where Mycroft's clothes fill up half the closet and his shaving kit is scattered around the double sinks and it still smells like him in their bed. The conservatory and the sitting room are the only safe spaces with the study overflowing with Mycroft's books and his desk and his jade plant and the kitchen stuffed full of his collection of gluten-free crackers and a recipe for the Splenda version of Victoria Sponge tacked up on the fridge-freezer.

"He loves you, duck," her mother says. "He'll be back once he gets himself a bit sorted. Be patient with him."

George wants to say, Will he? Really? You have to promise, and I miss him and He scraped his nails in me, through an open wound but all of it just lives in the back of her throat like the beginnings of a scream.

Underneath the immediacy of her empty house and the concussive, nauseating hurt of Mycroft is the sharp and chilling reality that's Sherlock's gone and not coming back. This isn't like his season-long vanishing acts in rehab, when he emerged pressed and polished and perfectly furious; he's dead in a pine box of Mycroft's choosing, and George is thinking about that night with the cabbie and John's gun — when she'd felt her heart stop and rushed the flashing lights of the ambulances. George remembers how John had blasted his way into her notice that first night and branded himself across Sherlock's heart, how she'd thought that if Sherlock had ended up dead because of everything she let him get away with, she didn't know how she'd go on.

She's lost people before, attended police funerals, mourned for colleagues and friends. Sherlock is both, and more, and at the same time, neither. George knows it's stupid, but she feels like prior to her tacit permissions and pulling strings, Sherlock was brilliant chaos with no particular end goal — it was only with the Yard that he became a target, that George helped paint it over his chest.

But to think this way is to strip Sherlock of his own decisions: from kicking the drugs to keeping John to solving mysteries to pitching himself off the fucking roof of Bart's. Anderson and Sally may think George babies — babied — Sherlock, but he wasn't actually a child.

It probably doesn't matter the right answer in this case, to wonder endlessly whether or not she was truly complicit, because she's alone in this house and sitting in an armchair drinking cognac alone because she feels she is, and George has gotten confessions from sobbing, hysterical people with far less cause for guilt.

She wonders where Mycroft's staying, if anybody is worrying about him. In the small hours, when her spine hurts from being crunched up on the sofa, she wonders about things that spiral outward into abject absurdity, but that intrude on her like a sudden vision of gore. She can't see Mycroft to verify, so her brain fills in all the empty spaces with the worst possible outcomes: crushing, untended grief, ignoring sleep entirely, stealing and eating all of Anthea's starmix, fucking five diamond pros in at the Ritz to distract himself.
Swallowing around her sharp-edged grief, George finds it woven through with anger. It sits and grows carcinogenic in her stomach as she thinks of the ignominious way Sherlock's left them all behind. She can't bear to think about Eugenia in her massive house or John and the way Mrs. Hudson said he was nonverbal when George had caught her on the phone to get some proof of life.

George keeps checking to see if her camp of photographers has gone away or gotten bored so she can stomp over to Baker Street and smother John with her worry. The crowd stays more or less constant, fluxing up or down one or two photographers, until half-four, when George looks out the window — more from bleak curiosity than any genuine hope — and finds the entire street deserted.

"Shit," she says into the window pane.

Her breath's still steaming across the glass as the doorbell rings, echoing through the entry hall and the downstairs reception rooms in a quiet chime.

The video feed for the door buzzer shows Anthea, and George has to scrub her hands along the hips of her battered jeans for long, shaky-breathed seconds before she gets up the courage to open the monstrously heavy door, dragging it inward with all her weight.

On the other side of it, standing on the front step, Anthea is immaculate: in unwrinkled linen with her hair drawn back from her face in a tight fishtail braid that falls over her left shoulder. Her face is flatly impassive and her eyes are red, capillaries burst from exhaustion or stolen-away crying jags in the ladies, George has no idea: Anthea is a much-loved puzzle for the way she's never come undone. She'd holding a document box and wearing Tory Burch flats.

"Hi," George says, standing frozen near the line where the parquet floor of the entryway changes over to the smooth paving stones of the step.

Anthea offers her the box. "Your things," she explains.

George stares a long time before taking it, before asking, "My — how? From where?"

"Mr. Holmes is a thief," Anthea says, without her usual bland affection, and George wonders crazily if they're fighting again, and where, if they don't have the proscribed battleground of the kitchen and their designated weapons of sugar and toast at hand.

"O—okay," George allows.

Because Anthea always knows exactly what George needs, she reaches over and lifts the cover of the box.

Inside is a magpie's collection of things George doesn't remember going missing: a single earring; an old warrant card of hers, its corner broken off from long abuse; a rolled-up and heavily defaced copy of a program from the night Mycroft had tricked her into going to see part of the Ring Cycle with him; a tube of lipstick, the same one she'd worn on their first date; Post-It notes, dozens of them. There's the appalling paperback romance novel she'd bought at St. Pancras and lost during the same trip, a bracelet she remembers abandoning in the change tray of Mycroft's BMW not so long ago. There's an extra mobile battery, a fold-up reusable grocery bag that used to live in her purse, a series of printed out recipes, marked up in George's looping script.

It feels like a man's fingers pressing against a bruise over thin skin: a deep, rounded ache that flowers open in her chest. She thinks about Mycroft sorting through his things, rooting out every trace of her, erasing them, the places where they have their hooks in each other, where their scars
have grown over and wound together like the limbs of trees in deep forest.

George's lungs empty.

"I'm also to tell you the Holmes family will be holding a private service for Sherlock tomorrow. A car will be sent for you, 1 p.m., if you wish," Anthea goes on, impassive around the little grenades of her words, and the silence as her first sentence dies away lasts for geologic eons before she says, "Mrs. Holmes would like for you to attend. She would like to see you."

George croaks, "I'll go — I can drive myself."

"It'll be at the parish church at Rye Harbour," Anthea tells her. "In the family plot at half-three in the afternoon."

George stares down into her box, at takeaway menus with her writing in the margins — What do you want? OK, a circle around the vindaloo — and a LUSH bath bomb still in its paper wrapping, a METROPOLITAN POLICE fridge magnet.

"Was that it?" George asks. "Is that everything?"

It can't possibly be just this — these little things. George doesn't believe in the sweeping, epic romances Rachel used to read in their teens; she doesn't even believe in the effortless love of her twenties and thirties. But she does believe that love is stubborn, that it seeps into the groundwater, that Mycroft wasn't lying when he whispered it into her spine, when he smiled it against her mouth, when he said he wished she would marry him.

Anthea is quiet, not the effortless, certain kind that George has known in her since the beginning. It's hesitating, considering, an everyday, human silence that begs a question, and it goes on for long enough that George glances upward to see Anthea's eyes gone redder, her mouth bloodless as she says:

"I can't give you what you want. I can't give you what you need."

George must have been waiting for it because the tears that come have only been barely banked, flooding in like a levee's given way.

"And for that," Anthea whispers, raising one hand to George's cheek — burning under Anthea's cool fingertips — touching the corner of George's mouth, "I am truly sorry."

The kiss, when it comes, is chaste and sweet and waxy with gloss. George closes her eyes into it, leans into it, lets Anthea lean into her. It lingers like an apology between them, and George breathes in the smell of Anthea's French perfume, feels the rough palms of Anthea's hands on her face, and when they break apart, Anthea exhales, "I'm sorry. I don't know what to do. I'm sorry."

George thinks that her heart must be a secret only to herself, that everyone around her finds the defenses she's only ever half-heartedly kept up even more porous than George had thought. In nearby rooms and winding corridors, Mycroft and John and Sherlock and Sally and Anderson have all made their homes, and Anthea's carved out a space, too, in the annex near the shrine George has kept empty for Rachel all these decades.

She's hates this, seeing Anthea's surface fractures, and George shoves the box aside onto one priceless Restoration sideboard or another so she can wrap her arms around Anthea's shoulders, drag her in close for a hug.

"It's fine," George promises, runs her hands up and down the shaking curvature of Anthea's spine,
strong under the fabric of the dress. "I'm okay — thank you for coming."

Anthea doesn't hug like someone who knows how. She fists her strong hands in George's jumper instead, near the hem, sucking in graceless breaths for long, horrible moments on the doorstep.

She says, "I have to go," in between shuddering exhalations. "I have to go."

George presses her cheek against Anthea's temple, feeling tenderness like a garrote. She nods, putting a hand against the back of Anthea's neck, murmuring, "It's all right — you'll be all right. It's fine."

Anthea doesn't pull away carefully, she shoves herself free of George, cuts a foot between them. When she turns to go it's with a clatter of her shoes skittering too quickly down the step. There's a black car waiting, and Anthea doesn't let the driver open the door for her, jerks it wide in a panic and vanishes inside.

George watches the sedan pull away, stands there for minutes that melt into a quarter of an hour before her phone buzzes with a text in the back pocket of her jeans:

*Go back inside. The security detail is about to release the photographers.*

She doesn't move. She writes back:

*Is this Anthea?*

There isn't an answer, and George thinks about standing there until she forces a reply, but then Pete Caster from the fucking Sun is the first arsehole back trotting down Lyall Street, so she swears under her breath and slams shut her front door instead.

***

On the seventh day, her camp of photographers has thinned, but not by much.

George puts on a black pencil skirt and black jacket, sensible pumps, the professionalized uniform of law enforcement in mourning. She shrugs on a black trench and whispers, "I can do this," and goes for the garage.

Mycroft's left his cars here, his sensible BMW and the Aston Martin sitting as abandoned as George is, and she stares at them both, thinking about braving the paps to get at her Golf, parked slightly crookedly round the corner on the street next to Sir Kenneth's SmartCar. She wonders about the optics — the Met media team are always talking about optics — of taking one of Mycroft's painfully posh cars. She thinks that all things even, she could give a fuck, and gets in the Aston Martin.

The shouting starts as soon as the garage door opens and she pulls out, thankfully half-muted in the cabin of the Aston. In one of Mycroft's slightly loopy monologues about why he loves it the way men love carefully cloistered exotic mistresses, he'd talked about the design, and how it's one of those beautifully sleek things you can outline in a single penstroke. It means the photographers don't have any ugly bits to cling onto as they chase her down Lyall Street, shoving their massive lenses against the driver's side window and jogging alongside the car.

Pete, who is as relentless as he is ugly, knocks on the lower edge of the windshield as George grits her teeth and tries not to step on the gas to mow down a few of his stupider colleagues, darting around in front of the vehicle on the short street.
"George, you dressed for a funeral?" he shouts at her through the glass.

She grits her teeth against the urge to fire off a witty retort. George will never forget the inhumane torture of having to sit in with some publicist freshly trucked out of Goldsmith's — who'd seemed fairly harmless until the door to the conference room had shut and George had gotten the bollocking of a lifetime for her completely harmless quip that may or may not have threatened bodily injury upon a member of the Metro's reporting staff for crossing police tape for the twelve thousandth time. George has been lectured about talking with the media until her ears have turned inside out, but it all boils down to don't.

"Is it for Sherlock?" Pete carries on, well-versed in having one-sided conversations with people who are mutely furious. "Where's it being held? There's been no public notice."

George is saying, "Pete, if you don't get off my fucking car in it's going to be your funeral," before she can send her brain the DO NOT ENGAGE warning, and Pete grins at her through the window and throws off a fucking flash in her face because he knows he's won — got a foot in the door.

"Be a sport, George," he lectures her at a mild bellow. "No one's going to come round to your side of things if you keep acting like such a cunt."

She claws at the steering wheel. "You're a disgrace to humankind, Pete," she hollers through the window, because she's snapped, lost it, obviously gone completely off the rails, better judgment evacuating itself from her brain.

"And you're fucking gorgeous when you're angry," he rejoins, shameless, and winks. "Come on then, Georgie, give us something."

"I'm giving you to the count of three," George informs him loudly. "One — two — "

Pete, despite being a bottom feeder of the worst kind, succeeds and thrives because he's a clever bottom feeder of the worst kind, and by the time George drops a lead foot onto the gas he's wisely fucked off out of the trajectory of her vehicle. In her dust, he waves and shouts, "I'm filing a complaint about this!" but he's grinning as he does it.

It's eighty miles from central London to Rye Harbour, itself fifteen miles out from Epperley, and George spends the two hours it takes her to get there barely paying attention to the road. She's afraid to listen to the radio and she can't let her mind wander lest it head straight for troubled waters, so she lets the lines of asphalt hypnotize her, her body drift out on autopilot, following red brake lights and narrow country lanes.

St. Mary's Parish Church is bigger than it sounds, medieval and added onto, with stained glass window coloring the floors and a church tower that overlooks the town — all of it settled neatly, purring, in a plot of green and fenced in by a low stone wall.

Sherlock's service is short, graveside, and Church of England. George stands in the damp grass and thinks that he, of all people, would have preferred cremation, to go out in literal flames. There's no real eulogy, just comments delivered by the parish priest, and George wonders about the dozen-odd people gathered here, their coats and jackets flapping in the wind, and wonders who they were to Sherlock, who they are to Mycroft and Eugenia, to be included for this moment. John's nowhere to be seen, but George guesses she can understand that.

Aside from her father's funeral, where George and her mother had leaned against one another to keep from falling into the grave with him, George had mostly felt numb at these things: graveside or at a church service, mixing at wakes afterward. She doesn't feel anything here, either, looking at
the black earth of the churchyard and the elegant marker for Sherlock's grave. She supposes he might object to the sentimental claptrap and religion being introduced into the proceedings, but Sherlock would probably endure any amount of sentimental claptrap and religion on account of his mother.

Eugenia, where she stands at the right of the grave, is wearing a black straw hat and a half-veil, her face colorless and blank, a hand tucked in the notch of Mycroft's elbow. Her nails are digging into the fabric of his black suit, and Mycroft looks sickly gray and wrung out, staring fixedly at the dark wood of the coffin being lowered slowly into the ground. It hurts to see him, but differently than she'd expected: an angry, impatient ache where George had thought she'd feel the twist of a knife.

George wishes — stupidly — that she could go over and slide her fingers in between Mycroft's, interrupt whatever he's thinking by putting her cheek against his shoulder. Or maybe she just wishes that she wasn't standing here alone, awkwardly apart from the clustered groups of aristocrats and MPs that make up the locus of attendees.

And then a slim palm is closing against her own. George startles, slants a look to her left to see Anthea standing suddenly next to her, lacing their fingers together because she's has always known what George and wanted and what George has needed, so of course she'd know now when the two are one and the same.

They watch Eugenia — hand trembling — throw a fistful of dirt into the gaping hole in the Earth before darting away, swallowed back up by her a cluster of women in black. Mycroft is slower, let's his handful of dust seep in a shower from between his fingers, pattering softly against the top of Sherlock's casket.

Anthea asks, "Do you — ?"

"No," George whispers. She can stand here, just barely. She can't imagine feeling the grit of the grave dirt under her fingernails.

Anthea squeezes her hand. "Okay," she says. "All right."

The sky is a crisp, Pantone light blue and the clouds lead white, and George feels outside of herself, miles-removed: her fingers and toes feel strange where they attach to her hands and ankles, her skin odd on the inside of her clothing. Sherlock was a privilege and a punishment, but mostly he was one of hers: long-limbed and preening and spoilt. George had loved him — still loves him. She's left her sadness in her house, in the afghan from last night she'd drawn over her head, in the bathtub in slowly cooling water, into the skin of her palms, when she'd covered her face and gasped for breath into them, curled up against the closed door of the Lyall Street house and ripped up so badly she doesn't know where to start drawing herself closed from exposure.

Death is a black cat that steals into unexpected moments and places, and grief — if she's felt it — has never come at culturally appropriate times. It's curled away, hidden, to surprise her mid-washing-up, as she's driven to work in the morning, as she's climbed into bed at night and remembered the way her father had sung to her as a baby and found herself dismantled, gutted.

Right now, George feels cold and very still, but she knows the grief that's gone for now and that will be back too soon.

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George tries to leave early, before the locus of attendees head off to Epperley for what promises to be a bitterly, joylessly intoxicated wake. She's almost gotten away with it, too, except that Eugenia
is waiting for her in the ivy-shadowed archway of the side church door, red-eyed and weighed down. She takes George's hand, presses a heartfelt, apologetic kiss to it. George murmurs, "Eugenia — what are you — ?" until the woman interrupts to say, "I'm so sorry, Georgiana, I am. Please, forgive them," and before George can burst into sympathetic tears or ask what the hell Eugenia is talking about, Mycroft appears out of nowhere and herds his mother away.

He doesn't look at George at all.

***

She ends up at Baker Street, after.

The camp of photographers is at least twice the size of George's and significantly more diverse. She sees the usual suspects (Stella from the Sun, Daily Mail's Leo, Victor from the Guardian, who still owes her five quid) and a dozen unfamiliar faces, too, packed into Speedy's drinking endless cups of tea and probably soaking up Mr. Chatterjee's bitter, jilted gossip. His abortive love affair with Mrs. Hudson has taken on epic proportions thanks to the bored romantics at the Daily Express digging into the Earth's molten core for a seventh-day story. It's a weird time of evening when nobody's expecting visitors, so only Victor notices her arrival, and by the time he manages to get himself untangled from the cheap metal chair and out the door of Speedy's, Mrs. Hudson's already let George into 221 and shut the door roundly in his face.

"That young man has been the prime offender in leaving cigarettes all over my step," Mrs. Hudson says by way of hello, and with brisk affection kisses George on the cheek and says, "I'm so glad you've finally come."

George forces a grim smile to her face. "Sorry it's taken me this long."

Mrs. Hudson pats her hand forgivingly. "I've seen the papers, dearie. You've a lovely house and a lovely front walk and it's been heaving with these awful reporters, too."

"Yes, well," George says, just to fill in the awkwardness of that moment. She looks up the narrow stairs, to the cracked-open door of 221B. "He's home, then?"

Sighing, Mrs. Hudson says, "Nowhere else to go, not now." She nods up the steps. "It'll be good for him to see some more familiar faces."

Yes, that is true, George thinks crazily, because what would be best for John is if Sherlock were to suddenly reappear.

"Go on, then," Mrs. Hudson says quietly, and George turns to her.

"I — I don't even know what to say," she admits, lost.

Mrs. Hudson smiles and gives George a shove at the stairs. "You'll muddle through. Go."

George goes — up the steps that creek under her shoes, feeling her heels sinking into the carpet, around the tight landing and the last few steps. In the upstairs hall, she hears nothing, no sign of life, and when she peers inside — shoving the door open by tiny increments — she realizes it's because John's frozen on the sofa, staring across the room with his hands clutched together between his knees.

"Heard you downstairs," he says, abrupt. "Come to check on me?"

"Hiding here," George corrects, still hanging in the doorway.
John looks — like normal. He's not gaunt with misery or thinner. His hair is military neat and his clothes are clean and unwrinkled. He looks a picture of high-functioning severity, and George supposes that maybe it's what the military had taught him: the motions for when everything else is fucked up. George knows her hair and her face are a picture of her unhappiness, leaking out at the seams where John's kept his under lock and key, boxed away in the metal cage of himself.

"You weren't at the funeral," George says.


She joins him on the sofa, sits a respectful foot apart, staring beyond the pair of armchairs — always turned toward one another, just like boys with secrets and secret handshakes — and the kitchen and the skull to the dusky interior of Sherlock’s room: austere in his absence.

"We should have grief-stricken sex on his bed," George says suddenly.

John’s laugh sounds punched out of him, a touch hysterical but genuine.

"Oh, he'd hate that: feelings and semen," John says, still giggling. "We could cry and fuck in the missionary position and get it all over his duvet."

George rolls her eyes. "Christ, the duvet," she says, because one time Sherlock had declined to assist her on a case because the bedding in his room needed a rigorous and specialized laundering process that meant there was only a singular dry-cleaner clear across town qualified to do the fucking linens. It was imperative they were done immediately.

"Yeah, fitting punishment," John decides. "Might even be worth risking the government-sanctioned assassination."

"No need to worry about that — I’ve been dumped, with prejudice," George declares. She looks at John, at his shocked face, and says, "You can be my rebound shag."

John blinks at her a few moments. "You’d have to get a new GP."

"Or we could just combine pelvic exams with something more recreational," George says, half-mad and desperate, suddenly, to make John laugh again. George is sorry she can only know a fraction of what John feels right now — that he’ll be so utterly alone in this. It’s always like this when it comes to Sherlock: George desperate to do something and knowing it’s pointless to try.

"Do you know," John says, smirking at her, "this it the first time in our acquaintance I am genuinely uninterested in sleeping with you?"

George sniffs. "Fine, so be it," she says. "And when you're having your crying wank, know that we could have been having awkward, unenthusiastic sex."

John's smirk, which had been bitter and hurt anyway, is mostly sad now.

She goes back to staring at Sherlock's door, into the cavern of Sherlock's room.

The last time she was in there, it was a month ago and she'd come over with Chinese and a DVD because Mycroft was in Beijing and despite Sherlock's best efforts, he and John were George's ambiguously gay friends. John had been getting the dishes and setting up the movie, and George — because she'd lost rock-paper-scissors — had to flip Sherlock out of his bed, where he'd cocooned himself in no fewer than six quilts, suffocating himself in a sulk. Previous incidents where she and John had just left him there had resulted in even more dramatic sulking, so front-loading the pain
had been decided upon as the most logical course of action. Sherlock had eaten all the shrimp toast, confiscated the prawn crackers for an experiment, and then become engrossed in the plot of Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy, which of course he'd never read before. John had distracted Sherlock by explaining Ford Prefect while George had stolen back the confiscated prawn crackers so they could savor them along with Sherlock's cry of rage.

"It doesn't make sense," George hears herself say. "He was happy."

Next to her, she can feel the temperature drop ten degrees, and when John says, "He was discredited," his voice is level like he's giving a sitrep.


Before John, during the barbarian days of Sherlock's uneasy relationship with the Met, he used to solve cases all the time and never tell the detectives in charge — smugly pleased with his own cleverness and new data, and forget to mention it for days until he ran across George and declared his genius. Recognition only matters to Sherlock among certain audiences; winning the awe of commoners is boring, pointless.

John closes his eyes, looks every year of his age and all of Sherlock's, too, weighing him down. George wants to touch him, to run fingers down his arm, take his hand, stroke the curve of his skull in comfort. She can't help but think that it'd be like sticking a hand in a lion's cage: John might let her get away with it, but for how long?

"He wanted me to see it — he made me watch him do it," John says, hoarse, and George feels her nails digging into the soft flesh of her own palms as her fists tighten. "He was such a fucking arsehole."

She reaches between the bars, closes a hand over John's wrist. There's nothing to say.

She sits with him until the sky goes from gray to pitch, until Mrs. Hudson goes quiet downstairs and all they can hear is the noise of the traffic dim through the thick walls of the terrace house. The Baker Street flat has always been terribly comforting, a nest of forensic papers and wild experiments and John's raucous laugh, Sherlock's flirtatious violin, bookended by houses left and right and perched like a cat above the cafe. George feels like Sherlock and John have always lived here, that they will always live here, that maybe this funny little flat with its awful wallpaper and beautiful old floors has been holding its breath all these years — waiting for them.

"You don't have to stay," John croaks finally, after more than an hour.

George thinks about the drive home, about the photographers that are probably trading shifts now downstairs. Mostly, she thinks about how if she leaves, it'll be John versus all the ghosts filling up the flat, just her versus all the ghosts filling up the house.

"Let's watch TV," she says, and kicks off her heels, curling up on the couch with her toes tucked under John's thigh — where the sofa leather is warm from his body — and undoes a button on her blouse as John watches her, almost smiling.

"Does this mean that the awkward sex is still on the table?" he asks, and leans back into the couch, sliding an arm around her shoulders. He's warm and comfortable and leaning her weight against him is an entirely different experience than pressing herself into Mycroft — who is almost always wrapped in the precise origami of his suits, who touches her with a casual possession — but it's still good. It's better than being alone.

He reaches for the remote.

Sometime after 1 a.m., in the middle of their fifth episode of Restoration Roadshow on Yesterday and three-quarters of the way through a fucking awful bottle of Scottish whiskey, John says:

"He made me his suicide note. Did I tell you that? I didn't tell the cops that."

George blinks slowly and doesn't remind him she is the cops. "No," she says instead, over-enunciating around the booze. "What did he tell you?"

John shrugs, like this was some forgettable exchange outside the Tesco, like this isn't something he's memorized and hidden away in the marrow of him. It's that moment you know talking about it is too huge, that to open the door is to be consumed, all you can ever do is discuss the context of it, maybe peer inside for the briefest of moments. Anything else would be — fittingly — suicide.

"He said he was a fraud," John says, as flat as Earth must feel right now to him, frozen and unmoving. "He said I should tell you, and Mrs. Hudson, and Molly that he was a fraud, that he faked all the crimes."

George says, "Oh, Jesus."

John closes his eyes, swallows. "He told me to keep my eyes on him."

Most people George meets, she meets on the worst day of their lives: the day she knocks on their door to say their son or daughter is dead, that their partners have been killed, that something awful has happened, that their lives are about to be ruined.

The way she murmurs, "John," and puts a hand between his shoulder blades is the way she's done it a million times before. George has always thought that if she can't bring back their loved ones, the least she can do is bear witness. So she goes with the family liaison officers, she sits on the settees and sofas and drinks everybody's absentminded tea, and lets them shatter in front of her.

John falls apart like a house struck in an air raid. It's deafening silence and the bottom falling out, a dust cloud kicking upward, pluming from of the bones of the structure as the sturdy lines give way and decimate the perimeter. John puts his hands on his mouth, seals it with his trembling fingers, and when that's not enough he covers his face with his palms — his whole body shaking to rubble.

"How could he?" John asks, muffled. "How could he do that to me?"

John Watson has invaded Afghanistan and enlisted for a tour of duty with Sherlock; he's sassed her and rolled his eyes over semi-severe wounds and hidden illegal guns all over the flat. He's not fragile or small enough to fold up inside George's arms, and she wouldn't try it with him. John doesn't want to be comforted.

"What can I do?" she asks, desperation seeping into her voice, curling a hand in the hair at the back of his neck. "Is there anything I can do?"

His laugh at that is wet and mostly drunk, and he sways into his own hands, neck loose and his body shambling as he scrubs at his face, at his cheeks until his fingers are slicked over, too, with the tears neither of them are talking about.

"Just — help me up the stairs," he says, finally. "I'm fucking exhausted."
"Okay," George says, and sits with him until he stops shuddering.

Putting John to bed isn't that hard. She can carry most of his weight and she does, dragging him up the steps — his leg is faltering today, nerveless — before she strips him with professional detachment and draws the covers up his chest with very personal tenderness. She sits on the left side of the mattress, where John isn't curled into himself with misery, and falls asleep leaning against the headboard, a hand on his shoulder, turned away from the shut-tight curtains.

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A month after Sherlock's death, George's encampment of paparazzi has dwindled to two at any given time, with Pete being a frequent visitor, but mostly she guesses to reassure himself she hasn't killed herself or anything.

One morning, he leaves her an offering of Chelsea buns and flowers and a note saying, "Sorry we're twats," on the front step. George would be touched except he takes a picture of her stepping out of the house to pick them up, baffled, in a dressing gown and bare feet, and the cutline in the paper reads: SUICIDE DETEC'S POSH COP IN SHAMBLES! In retaliation, she leaves him a number of packages of shite ham slices and pork pies, which she knows he can't resist and that give him ferocious heartburn. Theirs is a relationship fraught with contradictions.

The press has cycled through stories of Sherlock's fraudulent detective business, the crimes he appears to have actually solved as grateful clients come forward, George's assignations with Sherlock's wealthy older brother, and less salacious discoveries like George has been boringly dating and then living with Sherlock's brother who works at HM Revenue. Discussion of him ends at that point, although George can't really tell if that's because even in the midst of a bubbling scandal discussion of upper-middle management at HM Revenue is too boring to endure or if Mycroft had made a few calls and shut it down. Considering his full name is — somehow — never mentioned, it's probably 20-80 Mycroft.

George is studiously not thinking about her suspension from work, because to mull the summary destruction of her two-decade career with the Met makes her so furious her vision whites out. Between the gaping absence of case, the grim realization that about 99 percent of everybody she considers a friend these days is at the office, Mycroft's categorical shunning, and self-imposed isolation, George has a lot of free time. Boredom is exponentially worse when it's shackled to misery.

Since she isn't watching the news, and there're only so many episodes of Top Gear and QI XL a person can watch in one go without chancing madness, she's been reduced to cleaning the entire house out of desperation. On the one hand, it's an exercise that leaves her increasingly impressed with Claire, who appears to be the type of woman who wipes down all the house baseboards with dryer sheets to prevent dust from sticking to them. (Of course she is; Mycroft hired her, after all.) On the other hand, it also leaves George annoyed when she finds a hidden doorway in one of the guest room closets that leads up to a tiny balcony she'd always assumed — looking at it from outside — belonged to the neighbors. George wonders how many other passages there are like this, that belong to Mycroft, what places he would have never invited her and doors he'd never have unlocked.

It devolves into her sitting on the secret balcony drinking shiraz at two in the afternoon, reading the Guardian's Sherlock live-update stream on her iPhone.

She stays there until it gets dark, when twilight begins to bleed across the London sky, and Sir Kenneth's SmartCar pulls up to the curb, sending George scuttling back into the house when the beams of his headlights blind her.
The investigation is half out of her hands, and half dumped in her lap.

All in all, George is hauled into NSY a dozen times after the first brief meeting to answer for herself. It's tense but not combative, because the IPCC panel is closed and nobody needs to score political points like this is the fucking phone hacking inquiry. It's boring and uncomfortable and humiliating, like she's in court but there's no prosecution, just an endless series of scummy defense lawyers and no jury or other witnesses to defray the discomfort. They ask a lot of "yes" and "no" questions, and George offers up a lot of "to the best of my recollection"s, and they break for coffee and continued awkwardness in the halls after an hour or two go by each time. At least twice every time she gets called in, George ends up half-yelling that they're working off of the false presumption that Sherlock was a fake, and wasn't that the point? To determine whether that was fact or fabrication? And Moran calls for an end to the day's hostilities, favors George with an apologetic look, and schedules another interview.

She runs into people she knew from past lives in the hallways sometimes. There's Dimmock, whose arrival for the IPCC panel had ushered in a spate of military intervention and a series of heavily redacted reports. There's Gregson, who'd been Sherlock's favorite punching bag — apparently — before he and George had started going crime steady. George blanks Anderson when they pass each other when she goes out and he goes in, and she and Sally stare at each other, once, for a long, wrenching moment in the ugly overhead lighting. She sees Molly's back once or twice, always dashing away as quickly as possible.

There are lawyers and other officers, incidental players and extras who've lived in the fringes of George's awareness for years. There are victims George remembers a little, victims George doesn't remember at all; all of them remember George. Martin Havistock hugs her outside the ladies' toilet for finding his daughter's killer. Then there's Susan Corcoran, who George remembers vividly: wild-haired with her eye makeup running, screaming on the step of her terrace house swearing she'd get them back when Sherlock neatly dismantles her serial extortions. A man named Charles Hammond says, "You and that crazy bugger made all the difference for me and my boy, Inspector," and George just swallows hard, because she and Sherlock had brought Charles the drowned body of a ten year-old boy, and no peace at all.

Most bizarrely, sometimes she runs into John. He's always impeccable for these things, his collar in perfect right angles and his tie up tight, hair neatly shorn, and at these moments, he wears his exhaustion like another star or bar on the uniform.

This goes on for ages, weeks, months slipping out from between her fingers.

George finishes every half-finished book on her nightstand. She reads the New York Times that keeps getting delivered to the house. She watches CNN, because BBC is still spending most of its time alternating between coverage of the phone hacking inquiry — it's been a public relations bonanza year for the police — and Sherlock. She has Sunday afternoons with her mum. She goes for drinks with Edith and Margaret, who tell her Met gossip and say that Serious Crimes is a constantly simmering hothouse of mutiny these days, and that Kerrigan has barricaded himself in his office in a bid to let the inmates take over the asylum as punishment for Trackwell and the chief superintendent.

She and John spend a lot of time in their twee pub of choice, drinking Staropramen in the solemnity of shared silence watching 24-hour cable at two in the afternoon.
"So," John says, watching smoke plume on a shaky video feed of a subway bombing in Moscow, the sound of a BBC correspondent faint in the background, "how's suspension?"

George rolls her eyes. "How's hermithood?"

"I will have you know I went outside twice this week," John retorts.

On the television, part of a cement facade gives up the ghost and collapses. George slants John a sideways look. "Is that two including this? Because one is a legally binding Met inquiry and journeys into the outdoors to acquire alcohol don't count."

"They do," John protests. "They do, in fact, count."

"You need to get a job again," George says, because John's never appreciated the tiptoe or the soft touch, and she doesn't have it in her to try her hand at either right now. They've both been shut-ins the past three months but at least George isn't doing it voluntarily. "You have to get out of the flat."

John stares into his beer.

The rock-solid case against Sherlock is beginning to erode. It's difficult to argue that all the crimes were faked if most of the crimes weren't: there's a litany of people who write letters to the newspapers or agree to interviews saying they've personally been helped by Sherlock, and that nobody fakes that level of genius or arsehole behavior. The coverage starts to turn like an ocean liner: slowly, with extreme care.

But it's taken its toll on John, aged him by years and made him heavy with it. He looks like the John Watson she first met, that night in Brixton when he'd been as baffled by his circumstances as she by him, before she'd known him as a good and reliable friend, the love of Sherlock's life. Or George supposes he is; she never asked and wouldn't, now, it'd be cruel. And anyway, maybe there's not an easily understood designation for what John and Sherlock were to one another: catalysts? co-conspirators? important.

"You're one to talk," John says finally, after a long pause, but his heart's not in it.

"That's why you have to do it for both of us," she lectures. "Look at us: we used to be the responsible ones and now we're both on the dole and drinking during daylight."

John lips at his drink. "Inquiry not going well?"

"My kangaroo court is going swimmingly," George says with blithe levity she doesn't feel. "My sources inside the Met say it's currently hemorrhaging purpose as the news cycle reinvestigates Sherlock's old cases more quickly than the force."

"I drink to the media, then," John says, wry. "How quickly they turn, and turn again."

"Don't get too excited," George sighs. "There'll still be a witch burning."

"The question being: who'll be the witch?" John says, which is so depressing George preemptively orders them another round.

She's drunk by the time the cab drops her off home at half-four, which is why when she finds Sebastian Moran sitting on her front step and asking if he can come in for a bit, she says, "Fuck it, why not."

***
George makes him tea because she's (mostly) English and it's reflexive.

She's already set the electric kettle to boil before she notes him taking note of the house: the kitchen with its massive high ceilings and Georgian windows, the French doors that open out into the garden with its high walls and climbing ivy, the cheerful yellow aga and the subway tiles behind the stove and its French range.

It makes her self-conscious for the first time in a long time about the house. George's mother had oooed and ahhhèd the first time she'd been over, and John — in the brief moments he's darted in while Sherlock sullenly refused to cross the threshold — had waggled his brows meaningfully. But that's family, and they're allowed to tease, and anyway that was ages ago.

Moran's careful inspection of the house feels invasive in a way George has a hard time explaining, and he's running his hand along the countertop when she clears her throat and asks:

"So why are you here?"

He looks up at her, considering. "Sorry. I just — got a bit thrown," he admits, and waves around the kitchen, out the doorway to the sitting room, where the late-afternoon light has dyed the shell-colored walls the color of blushing peonies and saffron. "This is not what I was expecting."

George arches a brow. "What were you expecting?" she asks, mostly to be a twat.

Moran must sense it in her voice. Grinning, he says, "Something less Upstairs Downstairs — maybe a little mess to telegraph your mental state. That sort of thing."

She's not in the mood to explain her fucking mental state, and she's never talked about Mycroft with anybody. She barely talked about Mycroft with Mycroft, so George just smiles tightly and busies herself with the tea ball, with hot water, and lets the muscle memory of this carry her: pouring milk and locating the sugar dish and finding cups.

"Either they're paying you a lot, a lot more than me, or it's the mister," Moran goes on, talks at the tightening line of George's spine. "How's he holding up?"

George forces her jaw to unclench. "He's with their mother."

"You didn't go?" Moran asks, and it's just casual enough that George thinks, too casual.

She turns around and asks, "Sugar? Milk?"

"Both, please," he says. In the kitchen light, his eyes are very pale, the color of ice cubes.

"And you can stop digging," George informs him, keeping her voice light. "I don't want to talk about it. So if you're not here about official Metropolitan Police business then — "

Moran holds up two hands, palms open, chagrined. "I apologize," he says. "It's just — " he looks around the house, and it suddenly feels huger and quieter " — is it really all right for you to be alone right now?"

"Did one of the reporters send you so that he could get a great photo of me throwing someone out of my house or are you just naturally this irritating?" George asks, because she wouldn't put it past Pete, who'd left a note on her front step that read, I swear to be less of a cock if you let me use your bloody toilet. The nearest Starbucks is a fucking league away.

Moran grins. "Sorry. I'm not helping my case am I?"
"No," George says shortly, and the kettle punctuates her point by coming to a boil.

Now it's Moran's turn to clear his throat. "Look, let me cut to the chase: the reason I'm here is to tell you the committee is looking to close the investigation into Sherlock."

George feels her lips part, the place where her elbow is touching the cool metal of the fridge, listens to the hiss of water simmering behind her. It takes her a beat before she manages to ask, "I beg your pardon?"

"Declare that Sherlock is a force for good after all," Moran clarifies, and George doesn't wince at the present tense the way she would past. "Clearing you by extension."

George asks, "Why?" reflexively, because she doesn't need the IPCC to declare her a good officer. She's always been one.

"I don't know if you've noticed, Lestrade, but the public fervor has taken a distinctly different tone of late, even leaving aside the fact that none of Sherlock's so-called faked crimes appear to have been faked," Moran says, leaning back against the counter, hands curled around the lip of it, and George keeps looking at his forefinger and thumb against the granite. He keeps taking the measure of her, studying her the way George knows coppers always size people up: not leering or interested, just taking note.

George doesn't feel happy or relieved. Mostly, she feels pissed, because what the hell was the point, then? Why bother with the commission, the inquiry, with dragging her name through the mud and linking Sherlock with a fraud? Why did three rainforests of news coverage hold more weight than George's years working with the Met? Or Sherlock's half-decade of dubiously consensual cooperation with the force? Even thinking it, George knows it's naive, like sketching out an ideal across the image of reality, but she can't shake it: that immediate twist of hurt, the sting of betrayal.

"You really haven't been watching any news at all? Not the subway bombing? The fire at the European Commission?" he asks, curious, trying to tease something out of her. He cocks his head to the side. "That gang roundup in Warsaw? None of it?"

She ignores him to say, "What's the catch?"

He doesn't answer for a long time, but he doesn't answer in a way that echoes with something unspoken. He's still looking at her like he can read an answer to something she doesn't even know in her, in the slope of her shoulders. It makes George want to throw the kettle in his face.

"Hey," she snaps, and he blinks like he's startled but too good to show it. "I asked: what's the catch?"

"They want a public exoneration," he says finally. "This has been ugly and increasingly embarrassing for the Met, the IPCC, and there's that fucking picture of you everywhere."

George must stare a little while too long, because he elaborates.

"It's the big, bad Met versus poor abused genius Sherlock Holmes now," Moran tells her. "And it doesn't help that he's widowed an army surgeon and your bloody gorgeous face is all over everything, looking bleak and brave and sticking to your story about how he was a fucking hero."

"He's helped hundreds of people," George says, automatic.

Moran points at her — finger and thumb like a gun. "You see? Like that. It's why they want you."
"And, presumably, John told you to go fuck yourself," George guesses.

He shrugs, not really embarrassed the way he should be, but then George supposes you get your loyalties and doubts surgically removed when they hire you for Professional Standards. "John doesn't work for us," he says.

"I'm not going to stick to a script," she warns him.

"I wouldn't expect it," Moran promises.

George frowns. "Do they expect it?"

"They shouldn't," Moran says, and he's smiling as he says it.

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Chief Superintendent Potter looks like he's inches from vomiting blood and Trackwell's face is stony the entire time the IPCC chair is making closing statements at the Sherlock Holmes inquiry. It's the last day, and the venue is absolutely heaving with people, moved out of unromantic interior conference rooms at NSY to a massive chamber at QEII, which means tripling the number of vultures since all the phone hacking reporters are bored shitless at this point and everybody covering Parliament wanders over from Westminster during a smoke break. George isn't being lectured or harangued today, she's here purely as ornament, sitting silently next to John in the front row listening to carefully worded comments closing the investigation into Sherlock, offering insincere condolences and undeserved self-congratulations for mortal turpitude. Like most of these things that starts with a bang, it ends with an uneasy detente.

Afterward, Kimberly from the Met's crisis communications firm — rumor has it they're currently employing four — clotheslines Garett Tucker from the Times and shoves him and George into a meeting room, ignoring the bloodlust among the remaining ladies and gentlemen of Fleet Street.

"Sweet merciful Christ," Garrett says, clutching at his collar and clinging to the wall. "I thought Kitty Reilly was going to rip out my trachea with her bleached teeth."

Outside the door, George can hear Kimberly — who must be seven stone dripping wet and carrying a toddler — swearing, "Off the record, if you try follow her out to her car, Reilly, I swear on my grandmother's grave I will burn down your house."

George has known Garrett since before he made good and escaped the tabloid ghetto, remembers him as a mousy boy with hungry eyes and dumb questions from the Daily Express, who used to stalk her DCI in sex crimes and once tripped into a trashcan on Embankment. She appropriates a cheap computer chair with green and gray-flecked upholstery and leans back, crossing her legs.

"Why you?" George asks, and listens to the sound of Kitty Reilly's vehement protests just outside the door, which contain liberal helpings of words like "preferential treatment" and and "continuing pattern of ethically questionable interaction with the media."

"Hell if I know — probably I've been the most consistently secretly sympathetic," Garrett says, settling primly into a nearby chair. "Which I'm not, because I'm ferocious and unbiased and a fearless crusader for the brutal truth — "

George cuts in with, "Don't you have a crush on John Watson?"

Garrett fumbles with the battered Pukka pad he's tugging out of his backpack, his face going a florid and telling red as he sputters, "You tell me how any red-blooded gay man is supposed to
resist having a crush on John Watson."

"What did you really promise her?" George asks, because the devil's bargains between the media who cover the Met and the Met have always been perversely fascinating. For example, George once unbuttoned an extra two buttons on her blouse, tousled her hair, and let some arsehole from the Sun take a photo of her like that in lieu of filing an official police report for the way Sherlock had stolen his trousers at a crime scene for what he claimed was SCIENCE.

Garrett pulls out a digital recorder and waves it at George, who nods at him as he says, "I said I'd let her check quotes before we publish on your commissioner for the next six months," and retrieves a fistful of batteries and a biro from the front pocket of his bag.

The interview's no better or worse than George had anticipated. Garrett starts her off with a couple of softballs about is she glad that the inquiry is over before he asks if she's angry about the commission. George tells the truth: yes, she's glad the inquiry's over; yes, she's angry about the commission. But she does understand it, or at least she's always known it was going to happen; she doesn't like the politics of the Met but she's cognizant, and while she's not fluent, she's conversational in them. She doesn't say "betrayed," or "disgusted," because she's a fucking grown up and she loves her job and her people too much to burn the bridge that gets her back to them. George declines to answer a half-dozen questions about her personal life that Garrett seems irritated enough by that she's sure his editors are making him ask them.

From outside the door, at the fifteen minute mark, Kimberly knocks and hollers, "You've five minutes left before I'm bundling her out of the building, Tucker!"

"How do you feel about Sherlock, now?" Garrett asks, not missing a beat, bland in a well-practiced way that George wishes she had at her disposal.

She can feel her own mouth flatten, her jaw ache from tension. George knows she's giving Garrett his touching anecdote for the story, a segue into her vulnerability for the second half of his article, but at least her voice is steady when she says, "I feel the same as I always have."

Garrett writes it down, hand flying across the notebook. "That is?" he prompts.

"Surprised," George admits. "Grateful he helped with cases. Baffled by him."

"And his suicide?" Garrett presses.

George sucks in a breath and says, "I said baffled, didn't I?"

Kimberly pushes open the door. "I'm ending this," she declares. "Inspector, let's go."

"That was not five fucking minutes!" Garrett argues.

George just lets them fight it out while she gathers up her coat and staggers to her feet — her toes aching in her heels and oh Jesus Christ, are these the shoes she'd worn that horrible day? that she'd been standing in in the morgue? — and numbly tumbles the last thing she says over and over in her head until she's out of the room and plunged into the flotilla of reporters again.

The Met had sent her a car for the inquiry, and she's still thinking, baffled — baffled, when Kimberly hands her off to a phalanx of PCs. There's a police cordon and sawhorses to stymie the worst of the press, so George just keeps a careful watch to where her strides are eating up sidewalk on the way to the car, letting herself be herded because she can't stop being fucking baffled now that she's reminded herself she is.
"Inspector," someone says, pulling open the door of a black car, and George barely mumbles a thank you before she's sliding inside, hands sliding across —

Fuck.

Hands sliding across butter-soft cream leather.

When she looks up, it's to Mycroft sitting in the next seat over, staring fixedly ahead. He's wearing a slate gray pinstripe and his collar's so stiff she feels a sympathetic flare of discomfort just looking at it. He's sallow and flawlessly put together, hands closed around a folder in his lap, and when George U-turns to climb the fuck out of the car, the door is slammed shut in her face.

He says, "Please don't make this more complicated than it needs to be, Georgiana," while she's still staring out the window, where through the one-way glass she can see Garrett scribbling furiously as they pull away from the curb.
Chapter 10

George isn't actually sure how the tomblike silence in the car turns into a fight, but one minute her jaw is locked shut and Mycroft is looking pointedly in the other direction, and the next it's like someone lit a fire in a napalm factory.

She has no clue what the original plan is, but ten minutes into the drive Mark — poor bastard — is pulling abruptly off the side of the road in some grotty hellhole and George is shoving her way out of the car into what is probably a camera blind alley. She puts the Bentley between Mycroft and her overwhelming urge to beat him to death with her handbag.

"This is my job," George is snarling, "and I just barely got it back."

Mycroft is actually clutching at the door of the car, white-knuckled. "I came to you with this because I thought you'd be reasonable about it, Georgiana."

She gets dizzy she's so furious. "Reasonable? How is this reasonable?"

"It's a leave of absence, not a resignation," he tells her, with familiar gravity in his voice, that particular tone she's always believed when applied to other people. "And it's warranted given the circumstances. I can't give you the details, but believe me that — "

"I am not one of your lackeys or some stranger to be fobbed off with a shite excuse about Queen and county," George yells. She lived with him. She waited up to have meals with him and stroked his hair and loves him, haunts the house they made a home because of him. He owes her more than this: an argument under an Overground bridge. "I deserve to know."

"And then what? Then will you do what I've asked?" Mycroft asks savagely, but his face is in one of those ugly, petty frowns, so he must already know the answer.

If Mycroft had picked this fight in their bedroom, in the kitchen, if they were still together, she'd be bemused and annoyed but she'd hear him out, at least. Maybe she would even do as he says, because George is past the age of being so arrogant she believes she has the best judgment in any given situation, without all the facts. And those Holmes boys have snake charmer eyes and fortune telling voices, and George knows she falls for it too much — that she'll let them into the crime scenes and onto the guest chairs of her hospital room, that she'll let him keep her like a jealously guarded secret and run languid fingers through her hair until all the fight goes out of her.

But this isn't Lyall Street. This is some shitty alley in Bermondsey and that cold numbness that had taken root in the base of her spine has ripped open into something that tastes desperate and more than a little crazy on George's tongue. She's lost Sherlock and she's lost Mycroft and she's losing John and the directionless urgency, the helpless panic that is a constant hound at George's heels is difficult to articulate.

"Just tell me," George croaks. "Just — whatever it is. Tell me."

"I'm trying to keep you safe," is Mycroft's answer, and the elegant line of his words is beginning to fray, a static crackle seeping into his voice.

George asks, "Safe from what? What's happened to change everything?"

Because as much as Mycroft had fretted when she'd come home from cases wrung out or covered in soot, with cuts and bruises and scrapes he'd never hinted that she ought to stop, that it was
anything other than the consequences of doing business. The fights she'd had with Tom a lifetime ago — the ones that had rattled the roof and the neighbors — had stayed safely buried, because Mycroft's worry for her had been as abstract a thing as George's for him: real, but formless, with unspoken acknowledgement that they'd read the fine print going in.

"It's beyond Met jurisdiction, Georgiana," Mycroft says through gritted teeth.

"Is it about Sherlock?" George asks, because it's pointless to follow his lead here. Mycroft will have plotted out this argument to every eventuality, and she learned from long years of dealing with his brother, from dealing with him, that to win she has to keep throwing everything at the wall until something sticks. She offers, "I'm not going to kill myself — " a pause " — although at this rate John might."

Mycroft blinks at her, a lazy sweep of lashes that would be a flinch on anyone else.

"Do you think people at the Met are going to give me shit when I go back to work?" she asks.

"Yes," Mycroft tells her, but he sounds unworried about it. "But you would hardly be the woman you are if that sort of thing affected you."

"Then what?" George says, past fury and hurt and operating on automatic, now. "What do you think is so dangerous about me going back to the mountains of reproducing paperwork on my desk? I'm not suicidal, Moriarty or Rich Brooks or whoever he is is dead, and — "

George freezes at the sudden look on Mycroft's face: blank nothingness, stress smoothing away from the edges and every fracture gone flawless.

" — he's not dead?" she asks.

Mycroft's mouth folds itself into a flat, angry line. "He's dead."

George narrows her eyes, because her face is a series of unavoidable tells anyway. "But he's still a threat somehow. Copycat? Accomplice? Partner?"

"Georgiana, taking drastic action — especially on someone with whom I've had such an involved relationship — is distasteful, but if you continue in this manner, I will," Mycroft warns.

He says it in that crisply threatening way that must work wonders on people who don't know him. His voice is all posh consonants and swallowed syllables, and married to the geometric lines of his suit, the chain of his pocketwatch and the ebony handle of his umbrella it's quite some rank to pull standing in a dark alley in London.

"Involved relationship," George says flatly.

He glowers. "I would prefer not to be crude."

Just say it, George wants to dare him. Call it what you think it was. If you say we were just fucking, that I was convenient, I won't believe you. You spilled too many secrets to me, and I'm greedy: I kept them all. You love me. You're terrified for me.

She doesn't say any of it. She says, "Do it then."

"I beg your pardon?" he asks.

"Drastic action," George invites. "Do whatever it is you'd do to someone else who's
"Inconveniencing one of your operations."

"Georgiana," Mycroft growls.

"What's it to be, Mycroft? Private prisons in Yemen or do I just get disappeared?" she asks, because the petty, moral questions had always seemed so stupid in the face of how he stroked long fingers down her spine. Here, she doesn't have a moment to ruin. "What will you tell my mother, when she wonders where I've gone? Or will you play the coward to the very end and send Anthea with a box of my remaining possessions and no explanatory note?"

"This is life or death for more than you or I," Mycroft barks at her, voice rising in pitch now. "This isn't about your hurt feelings or whether I trust you."

"Good," George spits at him. "Great. Nothing messy and inconvenient then — you should be able to explain this to me bloodlessly."

It's lucky the car's in between them, George thinks, because Mycroft has a look on his face that sends a shiver up her spine. He looks like he wants to shove her up against a wall and loom, grind the back of her wrist into the brick until she listens. She'd like for him to try it. But he won't and she couldn't really hurt him anyway so they're at an impasse, and George can read the calculations on Mycroft's face, the consideration of every eventuality and determination of probabilities.

It's ages, eons after she spoke that he says finally, "It's not over."

That could mean anything, and George says so.

"My men found three sniper hide sites," Mycroft goes on, his tone flat now, mechanical. At Bart's, at Baker Street — " he stares at her, unblinking " — at the Met."

George's stomach turns. "When?"

"The day Sherlock jumped," he says, looking down to inspect his cuffs before he looks back up at her to add: "I assume that the likelihood of your, John, and Mrs. Hudson's murders were the reason he jumped at all."

Mycroft probably means it to be emotionally dismantling, the verbal equivalent of cutting off her supply lines and salting and burning the earth. It's stunning, George admits, it disorients her like absinthe long enough she lets herself get ushered back in the car and delivered to the Lyall Street house, Mycroft's familiar hand closed over her own on the leather seat between them.

He kisses the inside of her wrist before letting her go: a lingering thing, longing, breathing her in, George call tell. She waits until the car is long gone, until night's fallen and the street is quiet and Mycroft's spies have probably reported she's prostrate in their bed before she reaches for her mobile.

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John manages to say, "What is — ?" in the entryway before George grabs him by the collar of his jumper and drags him in for a kiss. It's bruising more than anything else, but it keeps John's mouth occupied as she kicks the front door shut and drags him into the house, slides her hands up the back of his shirt and drags out the tails of his oxford as she pulls him toward the staircase.

"Okay," John says, when she breaks for air, and he has a flatteringly stunned look on his face. "Right, so this isn't as awkward as I thought the awkward sex would be."
"Shut up and follow me," George tells him, and she takes care to stop by a window so she can pull off his jumper before shoving him up the steps, dragging him along the landing.

John actually looks torn between concern for her fraying sanity and arousal by the time she slams the bedroom door.

"I find myself in the strange position of still thinking we shouldn't sleep together," John confesses to her, and he sounds horrified he's saying it, standing warily by the foot of the bed looking hard and hard-done-by.

"Good," George tells him, "because mostly I needed to get you into a bug proof room and tell you that the day Sherlock jumped it was because there were snipers Bart's, your flat, and my office."

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It's not as if they really need records of the day or anything other than their own heads. No one in the world could know Sherlock's death or its circumstances better than John and George — even Mycroft with his wiretaps and zoom lenses can't tell her how it felt to be standing under a gray January sky watching the fall. John is plagued by the eidetic scar and George constantly dizzy with the echo.

"So he was pushed," John says.

It's the fourth time he's said it, and George imagines it must be a relief to direct his anger at someone other than Sherlock, to know that Sherlock hadn't wanted to leave him after all. John is getting that look on his face, the one with hard lines and right angles that speaks of the iron core in his spine that made him so perfectly tuned for the military, to the crack of a gun.

"By circumstances if not by physical hands, yeah," George says, perched at the head of the mattress and curling her fingers around the headboard for an anchor. "I just — if Mycroft's asking me to take a leave of absence — "

John scowls.

" — then it means there's still someone out there," George concludes.

"Why haven't they acted yet?" John asks, slumping down into the chair in the corner and clawing at the armrests.

George frowns. "Why would they act at all?"

"We're loose ends," John guesses.

"To what?" she asks, unfolding herself in the bed and feeling her left knee ache, her bad shoulder throb. "If we can agree that Sherlock was always the target — " John nods " — then what's the point of wasting further effort and resources on you and I?"

Rubbing a hand over his face, John says, "I don't know, but if Mycroft thinks we're in harm's way."

"Yes, that is worrying," George mutters, and flops back across the snowy duvet, staring at the gilded ceiling, the lozenge design in the center. "Do you think Moriarty had a partner?"

John laughs, low. "Must have done. Even Sherlock Holmes had a partner."

His face is tired and awful when she turns to look at him, and George has a momentary flash of
doubt: maybe she shouldn't have told him. But she believes that disclosure, no matter how painful, is for the best, and in all the world the only person who can help her with this now — who won't try to stop her — is John Watson.

George reaches a hand out to him, waving him closer.

He looks curious, but he comes, and lets George lace their fingers together and sits down next to her, following George's gaze up to her stupidly posh ceiling in her stupidly posh house in the stupidly posh disaster area of their intersecting lives.

"I thought the sex thing was just a ruse," John says, straining for a quip where she can hear exhaustion in all the syllables.

"If you manage to stay awake for forty more minutes, you can have a go at me," George promises.

He's quiet for a long time before saying, "Christ."

She squeezes his hand. "You'll help me, right?" she asks, because Sherlock Holmes was the best judge of character she'd ever known, and he'd loved John with a consuming certainty in the rightness of him.

George has no doubt, no doubt, that Mycroft will find an answer and punctuate it with a wake of destruction, and he'll never tell them the truth. That's if he manages to overcome his sense of duty to the state and overwhelming paternalism to tell them anything at all. Maybe George and John can't and shouldn't know, for Queen and country, but they deserve to, have an sluggishly bleeding mark that needs to be staunched. George isn't afraid of what Mycroft might be doing; she's only afraid he'll do it and she'll never feel the hollow satisfaction of whatever it is.

"We'll figure it out," John says, to both of them, for both of them. "Sherlock would kill us if we left this puzzle undone, wouldn't he?"

For months now George has felt underwater, pulled by currents in directions she doesn't control, and when she wakes up the next morning to the sound of John Watson's quiet breathing in her ear, she feels sharp and perfectly in focus in a way that feels foreign from long absence.

She'd forgotten — in the midst of her grieving and her self-pity and her anger — that it doesn't matter what other people read across her skin. No matter where she lives or who she's fucking or what her job description, George is still the same woman who stares down murderers and knows how to take the recoil of an MP5. London is still her city and Sherlock is still her responsibility: a weight she doesn't mind.

"Yeah," George says. "We'll figure it out."

John clears his throat, and when George turns to catch his gaze, he looks uncomfortable. "Maybe you should take that leave, though, until we've sorted it out."

"And what would I do if I did?" she asks reasonably. "Sit here and wait it out?"

"Probably Mycroft's preferred outcome," John says, saying Mycroft's name in the vicious tone of a man with a grudge.

"Forgive me for discounting Mycroft's preferred outcomes from my own of late," George mutters. She's comfortable in her pettiness in front of John Watson, who once salted a dictionary with pop cultural terms for a violently bloodthirsty game of Scrabble with Sherlock, which led to a dozen 2 a.m. texts from the man asking things like, Is "butterbeer" actually a Scrabble-allowed term need reply ASAP and John says I've never heard of "vajazzling" because it's a female thing and thus I've
deleted it is this true reply needed ASAP. "And anyway, we're going to need me to get access to any files."

With philosophical resignation, John says, "Funny. I wonder what Mycroft'll have me shot for first — shagging you or putting you in the line of fire."

Which sets George off laughing wildly, for the first time in a long time, and she curls up on her side still huffing giggles into the pillow as John lies down and drags her close, presses a kiss to her temple and slips an arm under her cheek in the blue darkness of the bedroom.

It's here, in the quiet, after all George hears is their breathing in synchrony, that John whispers, "Sorry. I've been a bad friend. I wasn't the only one who lost someone."

"It's not your fault," George tells him, because she can't say any of the other things welling up in her throat, the way she's so grateful that he understands, that he's here, so she just presses her face into his shoulder, seeking animal comfort.

It's telling of the type of relationship she and John would have had had given drastically different circumstances that she says, "Anyway, you'll have to stay the night or else it'll look like it was bad sex," and his reply is, "You're going to need to limp a little in the morning."

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John insists on putting on a show in the morning under the "fuck it, I'm probably already marked for death so I may as well enjoy this" codicil of his particular brand of madness. Which means that after a breakfast of demoralizing Alpen and Belvita biscuits he kisses her in the doorway of the house — with tongue.

"You are asking for it, John Watson," George laughs, when he breaks away for oxygen, because her happiness with John is an easy, uncomplicated one.

"Yeah," he agrees, and takes her hand for a reassuring squeeze.

She wonders if this is how he felt in his humvee in Afghanistan: perched voluntarily on the edge of disaster. George is too practical to have ever opted for this type of danger before, and she stares and stares into his worn face and his deceptively kind eyes and wonders what kind of person she's turned into that this isn't frightening — or what kind of person she's maybe always been, hidden just underneath a skin of boring prudence.

He hesitates before leaning in again, pressing a lingering kiss to her temple, and George draws him in for a hug because he always looks like he needs one. She whispers, "Meet you at mine tonight?"

"You bring the paperwork, I'll get the takeaway?" he offers, and sees her off to her Golf with a hand on the small of her back, charmingly solicitous. George doesn't at all blame the women who hope against hope John will actually stick around.

Weirdly, that's the least awkward part of her day.

Apparently, the only thing more uncomfortable than being back at work after a Christmas party where the entire Metropolitan police force watched your marriage disintegrate is being back at work after the entire Metropolitan police force watched you tarred, feathered, and subsequently exonerated and deified by the public relations department. There are actually fucking flowers on her desk, which George would almost by amused by except they're from Potter.

"Right," Davison says, pausing in the doorway of her office clutching a monstrous pile of folders.
and photographs and ominous-looking baggies of smeary red evidence. "Well. Good to be back, I guess?"

George finishes stomping the lilies into a white and bruised-brown mess in her rubbish bin and smiles serenely back up at him. "It is, Davison. It really is."

The backlog's pretty horrific, as if the Met and Crown Prosecutors picked over her cases for all the easy ones to bring to court and sandbagged anything that looked like it might have a smudge of Sherlock's involvement, and fuck the families and victims as long as they were keeping their own cowardly noses clean. The Met's been chronically short staffed since it was still the Bow Street Runners, but this is completely ridiculous: there're more than 50 cases that should been in some state of trial or prep, 20 have been pled out and the rest are buried under motions and delays and reschedules. She'd give Davison grief about it but he has tell-tale circles under his eyes and that nervy look every time he checks his mobile. George can put two and two together and reach long, desperate hours and angry wife well enough, no matter how out of practice.

"So should I ask where the fuck Sally and Anderson are, and why they haven't been helping you deal with this shit or push the prosecutors or just draw my own conclusions," George asks casually in a way that it's not really a question.

Looking bleak, Davison says, "Ma'am."

Kerrigan's door is soundly shut when George marches up two levels to yell at him, her heels sinking into the gray-purple carpet. Kerrigan relies on a combination of his legend and the presumed cowardice of his underlings to manage his time, and never actually locks his office, so George just barrels in both guns blazing, feeling steam coming out of her ears.

He takes one look at her before he's holding up placating hands.

"It wasn't me, George," he starts. "Nobody wanted to touch it."

"So that meant it was fine we're now literally three months behind and I've got a voice mail box overwhelmed with grieving families," she snarls at him. "Just because I was suspended didn't mean someone couldn't have picked up the cases."

Kerrigan frowns at her, kindly if that's possible. "A lot of those cases had Sherlock bloody Holmes's fingerprints all over them. You tell me if given your fucking witch burning it's reasonable anybody would have jumped in."

"Fine, fuck it," George retorts, because she's not going to get into the fact that they've left Davison in a hole and the people of London in a fucking lurch over bullshit workplace politics. She has nothing but time now to get this sorted. "I'd like to request some transfers then — or will you deny me further resources to carry out my sworn duties as an officer of the law?"

Rightfully, Kerrigan looks pained.

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She and John eat in the garden that night, fragrant and oil-stained boxes from Sedap spilling out across the tables in the green, fairy-lit corners, hydrangeas still blooming dozy-headed and riotous along the high fence, and vines crawling up the back of the house. They'd started off trying seriously to fit the puzzle pieces together, but the wine is flowing and neither of them had a proper wake for Sherlock before. They end of trading stories back and forth instead. In between the dishes and flatware George has spread out her files — the personal ones she kept in a locked drawer in her
desk, the official ones filed in with the Met — and she's telling John about Sherlock from before John was here, before he was the missing piece that made Sherlock's mad-hatter clockwork smooth to an elegant movement.

"And of course, that's when Gregson staggered onto the scene covered in bird shit and threw himself into the fray," George says, chasing the last few pieces of beef around her dish with the tines of the fork — heavy silver, Mycroft's grandmother's — and hearing the ceramic sing. "It really was accidental."

John is choking on his beer. "Oh, my God."

"So anyway, that's the story of how I got my taser, and Sherlock collected his data on what it's like to have one's testicles zapped," she concludes. "I'm surprised he never told you that one."

Wiping at his eyes, John says, "You know, oddly, for all he has no sense of propriety, Sherlock doesn't really volunteer stories about people electrocuting his privates."

"I only wish I'd done it," George says dreamily. "Gregson's Yard legend for it."

It's funny now, in retrospect with all the edges rounded out with the blessings of long acquaintance. But she supposes that if Gregson tells the story — as he often does in exchange for free pints down the Met local — it wouldn't be as fond. It had been a bitterly cold December night and Southwark had been a nightmare of black ice and narrow passes, and Sherlock could have just as easily gotten himself or another bystander killed as secured the culprit, in the end. And even though it's funny to think of Gregson swearing violently and deploying his taser at random upon the mess of black wool and dark hair that was rolling around furiously near the Golden Hinde, it's less funny now to think of how badly it could have gone — how badly it could have gone every time — how badly it finally went.

Sherlock had always talked of London like George only ever saw the surface, that just beneath the white noise of double decker buses and the cobblestones in SoHo, there was something roiling underneath. George always thought that was wishful thinking for Sherlock, that the perilousness of his everyday life was so crushingly dull he was hoping for something more sinister than the dead rivers of London could offer.

She wishes she'd been right.

John clears his throat. "I'm moving out of Baker Street."

"I — okay, all right," George says, faltering.

Just because she's tending a mausoleum doesn't mean John wants to, but she can't imagine him anywhere else. No other flat would have a jack knife in the mantel just so, or the right series of skull prints over eye-wateringly bad wallpaper. And who would curate all they have left over? Sherlock's strange library, his collection of silk dressing gowns and his sock index? But even George's mother had eventually given away her father's things, so she just swallows all her reflexive protests to ask:

"Where will you go?"

"To Harry's," he says. "Just for a bit. Until I get sorted."

George waves back at the house. "Could stay here," she offers. "I've got the room."

There is positively a twinkle in John's eye as he says, "Can't risk it — we'd never get out of bed,"
and George lets him off the hook by bursting into a full-throated laugh, one that bubbles out of her into night and compels her to open another bottle of shiraz. She feels sorry for whichever surveillance team has to report that piece of witty banter to Mycroft.

The next day she interviews two dozen candidates for her team while slightly hungover. Most of them are fine if not extraordinary, and George is grimly determined the make the best of it until Hatcher staggers in, sweating profusely and offering up his just-marked detectives exam. George hires him on the spot by handing Hatcher a sheaf of documents and telling him he's on point for family liaison work starting five minutes prior. His tearful, "Sir — ma'am," is weirdly heartening, and she takes the time to throw a pad of Post-Its at him to express her overwhelming affection. DC Hatcher indeed.

Mid-afternoon, she gets a series of texts all more or less along the lines of This is not what was meant by 'leave of absence,' until George gets sick of it and grabs a legal pad so she can scrawl IF IT BOTHERS YOU SO MUCH JUST SNIPE ME I AM SITTING RIGHT HERE IN FRONT OF THE FUCKING WINDOW and prop it up on the sill backed by a figurine of Wenlock in all his surveilling glory.

The nosey marketers who work in the building across the street give her a wide berth — understandably — when they cross paths at the Pret during the lunch rush.

She finalizes the transfer paperwork sending Sally off to Dimmock and keeping Hatcher for herself that afternoon, and afterward she locks herself in the second floor ladies room to have a good cry about it. The worst is that for all Sally raged that Sherlock was spoilt, George had loved Sally, too, with a firmer hand and higher expectations and a constant need to remind herself that Sally was a colleague and a subordinate and not a woman to loop arms with and gossip. George doesn't want Sally to work for anyone else — wouldn't trust them not to stifle or waste her — but she can't keep her, either, not anymore. The best she can do is torture Dimmock with threats of abuse behind the scenes and spend the better part of the evening hiding in the Met's main basement archives sorting through case files involving Sherlock so no one can see her puffy eyes.

At half-eight, when the shadows of of the room have gathered close like a cobweb cloak, she feels a touch on her shoulder and jumps about a foot at it.

"Jesus fucking Christ," she gasps, clutching at her chest and pressing herself backward against the shelving.

Moran raises his hands, palms open in apology, all smiles. "Sorry."

George slumps against the document boxes, doubling over her knees and glowering up at him, because Moran has that cheeky grin like a naughty schoolboy — delighted for a new set of pigtails to pull. Worse, he drags a leering smile up and down the length of her, and she watches him watch her bare toes with some fascination, the nails painted the dark blue of scarab beetles and chipping badly.

"Yeah, all right, say it," she invites, just to get it over with.

"No, no, it's a good look on you," he laughs, waving at her feet, the deep v of her blouse, three buttons undone, the mad state of her hair, as if this isn't exactly what George had been expecting with resigned impatience to begin with. "Very sexy."

George doesn't scowl or frown or anything that'd give her away that easily, but the corners of her mouth flatten out and her face smooths to serene indifference. "Arch," Rachel had called it, a lifetime ago. "You look arch when you do that." Folding herself away too quickly would, too, be a
sign of weakness, so she forces herself to move slow, casual, disinterested, toeing her feet back into her sensible black pumps.

"What brings you down to archives?" she asks, squatting down to begin gathering her files, earmarking the ones that need photocopying, the ones that seem like they might be suspect, the ones that could use John's privileged inspection.

Moran sighs. "Not even *humoring* my playful advances, I see."

George wishes Mycroft had asked to marry her, so that she could have told him, "yes." She would have worn his ring, and she would have held it up right now. Instead, she heaves folders back into their boxes and glances back up at Moran, asking, "Well?"

"I heard from the evidence clerks you were down here torturing yourself with old Sherlock cases," he says, offering her a hand up, and George takes it more to mend the lingering awkwardness than out of genuine need.

*Traitors*, George thinks. "I'm just reviewing notes."

"Don't blame them, Lestrade," Moran says. "I bribed them with cinnamon swirls."

George looks pointedly at where he's still clutching at her fingers, but it still takes him a half-beat before he lets her go. She frowns. "Is there something I need to know here?"

"I'm sorry?" he asks.

You're acting oddly, George wants to tell him, only she doesn't know Moran well enough to know what counts for odd. Maybe he's always been a casual sexual harasser and she's never noticed because they've usually been on opposite sides of a T-board from one another. Maybe his defense of her during oftentimes contentious back-and-forths with the professional standards panels was a quiet demonstration of his admiration. Maybe he just triggers every hackle into her, her grandmother's great grandmother shivering in her grave at Moran's waning-moon smile.

She levels him a blank stare. "Is the investigation still underway?"

"No," he says to her honestly. "Just a few lingering loose ends."

"That's why you're hanging around in the basement at half-eight on Wednesday?"

"You're why I'm hanging around in a basement at half-eight on a Wednesday," Moran says to her, brazen, and tipping his head to the side, he asks, "What are you looking for, Lestrade?"

George thinks about saying, *nothing, or what does it matter? or maybe I'm just wallowing in my overwhelming guilt.* She actually says, "What sorts of loose ends are you looking into, Inspector Moran?"

"Why he jumped," Moran says bluntly. "What happened that day." He looks up to catch her eyes: hypnotic, considering. "Why you're still looking, as if you think there's more to this story."

"Maybe I just wanted to spend some more time with him," she says, just so she can watch the calculations start in Moran's eyes. "Relive the good times."

"By my own research, it was mostly bad times," he argues.

George sighs. "What do you want, Moran?"
He looks down at the stack of files in her arms and then back up at her face with a thoughtful expression. Moran has the mathematical gaze of the best detectives but none of their human warmth, and George roots herself to her spot on the floor so she doesn't take any instinctive steps back or away. She tries to remember if there're any of Those Stories about him — the kind that get circulated in the women's changing rooms, about getting too rough with suspects or taking freebies from hustlers, and comes up blank. George knows fuck all about Moran's history in the Midlands and he knows her entire professional history inside and out, drank tea in her kitchen, and George is suddenly furious she let him into her house.

"I want to know what you know, Lestrade," Moran tells her after a long pause.

She arches a brow at him. "What is it you think I know?"

"I think you know lots of things," he returns.

"And here I thought your investigation was over," George says, feeling the chill of the archives and the late hour prickling against her neck now, along her collar bones, down her throat — over her exposed skin. She wonders why Moran is actually here in London then, what his masters in Professional Standards had sent him to look for if it wasn't a convenient body to burn at the stake of their public embarrassment. She wonders why he keeps looking at her, as if George is hiding anything underneath her clothes.

This time, when Moran smiles, it's purposefully bashful, ducking his head so he can tell her a secret. Except George has watched Garrett do that to men and women of all stripes with such convincing sincerity she doesn't believe it anymore, not after he's walked out of so many of those moments snapping gum and unmoved.

"Isn't it suspicious, don't you think?" he asks, voice lowered, inviting. "It's Sherlock Holmes. And if even fraction of what they say about him is true, well — wasn't this all just a bit too neat?"

Neat. As if there's any sense in George's echoing empty house and her mother's quiet pity, tinged ever deeper with resignation, and John Watson leaving Baker Street. Sherlock's death is the Blitz — unrelenting in its reality — and they're all making do in the constantly changing rubble. Neat. Her nails curl into the meat of her palms so she doesn't scratch them down his face.

"It must be wonderful to see it that way, Moran," George tells him, languid with rage, and turns back to the document boxes, their guts spilled out across the concrete floors.

"I didn't mean to offend," he says, but he says like he meant something, that he'd wanted something from her, inspecting her eyes too closely.

She glances up at him and back down again, putting away folders and matching up lids, hefting boxes to their rightful places and noting the way he doesn't intervene or offer to help. Bad breeding or purposeful snub, she can't tell and doesn't care.

"I'm sure you didn't," she says, shoving away the last box, April-June of 2009, and gathers up her coat and handbag. "Anyway, that's me done for the night."

He lets her pass without comment, and George's fingers are closing around the archive room handle when Moran calls out rom behind her, his voice an echo in the chamber, "You'd tell me, though, wouldn't you?"

George looks over her shoulder, face carefully blank.

"If you found something," Moran continues, his face all angles and bleak shadows in the dim track
lighting overhead, and George notices the silvery scar down his left cheek for the first time — the gleam of too-smooth skin.

She smiles her candy floss smile at him, gauzy and sweet and weightless. It's the sort of look that — with practice — can make even the most dangerous women look harmless, and George has been cultivating it all her life.

"Of course," she lies. "Good night."

***

Harry Watson post-marital flat is an emotionally dead modern palace looming over the Old Street, and after John gives her the all clear, George pops into the Sainsbury's Local downstairs for a four-pack of Stella. They sit on Harry's curved balcony looking over the kebab shops the other side of the roundabout and George kicks her shoes off to curl her toes over the edge of the railing, the sky inky with promised rain and cold weather. It's November already, clear autumn skies sweeping over the city after a grimly endless shitshow of a summer, one she and John barely noticed. George just wraps her coat — don't think about Mycroft, don't — more tightly around herself and stares out over East London.

"Where's Harry?" she asks, watching John lip at his beer.

"Hah," he snorts. "Some sort of group counseling with Clara."

George grins. "Not optimistic?"

"As you've actually been divorced, you'd be better versed in whether or not that sort of thing works," John points out. Being the only one of George's friends to have run into Tom in a completely unrelated social occasion and flagrantly overturned a pint in her ex-husband's lap, he's allowed to talk about her divorce as much as he wants.

She laughs, "Ah, Dr. Watson, that's where you're wrong! Sherlock outed him for a cheater and he promptly filed for divorce. We never even made it to therapy."

"What a cock. I should have dumped a kettle on him," John says casually, but John also casually shoots killer cabbies and casually runs around the countryside chasing monster dogs with Sherlock, so. "So what's brought you to my sister's not-at-all humble abode?"

Wincing, George takes a long draw of Stella before saying, "Sebastian Moran cornered me in archives today."

John stills. "What?"

"Cornered me in archives today," George repeats, shuddering because no matter how much hand-to-hand training she gets and how intellectually confident of her ability to get out of a bad situation, there's something in her hind brain that hates being in a dark room with an unwanted man. She'll never shake it, and she probably shouldn't. "He seems convinced I know something."

John rubs at his mouth. "Jesus — like what?"

"No clue," George admits, taking another drink. "Something about Sherlock's case — " she grimaces " — his specific words were, the whole thing was too 'neat.'"

"Neat," John spits out, the way George had wanted to. "Is he mental?"
George thinks, *Probably*. Out loud, she murmurs, "There's something we're missing."

"Maybe he knows about the snipers," John suggests. "Or whatever secondary systems Moriarty set up to force Sherlock to...do it."

"Maybe," George concedes.

But it doesn't feel right. Moran works for professional standards, which spends its time terrorizing their own, not examining outside cases. And if the Met was opening a secondary investigation into Sherlock's death and treating it as anything but a suicide, she and John would have been the first people hauled into interview rooms and asked if they were aware of their rights and do they know they're being videotaped.

She feels like she's just missed it, whatever it is, that he's given himself away somehow and she's just been too distracted to knit everything together.

"I've skimmed over something," she says, rubbing the heel of her hand into her brow, the skin slick cold from the beer can. "I feel like all the pieces are already there and I'm just missing something."

"You see," John quotes, making a toast at the air, "you see but you don't observe."

George finishes off her beer. "You know what? You're right," she says. "I should do some actual police work on this."

John hands her another Stella. "Meaning?"

"Meaning you get to see the unsexy parts of all of Sherlock's mysteries now," George decides, and cracks open the can.

John politely takes the couch so George can crash out on the guest bed, and when she steps out of the bedroom the next morning it's to Harry fussing with a French press, saying, "Who are you and what have you done with my brother? There's a heterosexual woman in my spare room and you're telling me you didn't put your penis in her?"

"Harry, for fuck's sake," John says.

George, filled suddenly with good cheer, chirps, "Good morning."

John puts his face in his hands, slumped at the breakfast counter over an uninspiring plate of beans steaming gently over toast. White bread, George marvels. She'd been living with Mycroft long enough she's forgotten that's a thing people are allowed to eat.

John's sister is a compact, curvaceous woman with his dishwater blond hair and expert eyeliner. She's wearing a gorgeously tailored tweed jacket and skirt in her bare feet in the kitchen, and looks the kind of put together that comes from long experience overcompensating for being a mess where no one else can see it. She and John have the same eyes and share a smile, which she extends to George along with a hand.

"Harriet Watson, Harry," she introduces herself. "I've heard so much about you, George Lestrade."

George grins and takes Harry's outstretched hand. "It's very nice to put a face to the swearing, Harry."

"Well, there's my appetite gone," John interrupts, and says to George, "Don't you have to go protect London from murdering scum? — " turns to Harry " — and don't you have to go defend London's
"Oh, a defense barrister," George says, delighted. "Which Inn of Court?"

"Gray's," Harry laughs, adding, "Which, yes, means I know — "

And George chimes in here so they say together, "Bloody Nick Savage," before they burst into laughter.

John looks pretty traumatized by all of it. George's explanation that Bloody Nick Savage is the most terrible and handsome bastard ever to grace the UK court system as they're sharing a cab into central London doesn't seem to help.

"So you're telling me that this man is a monster, basically," John starts.

"A beast. A proper shit," George agrees.

"And yet somehow women of all stripes and apparently all sexual orientations find him completely irresistible," John continues.

George holds up a quelling hand. "Not irresistible, hardly irresistible. Resisting him is easy. But so is appreciating what a terribly, awfully fine specimen he is."

She would tell John about Bloody Nick Savage's affinity for cunning bespoke suits and silk ties and how his silvering hair is just making him more sexually alluring, but John looks a touch seasick already.

"Harry's right," John decides, slumping back in the cab seat. "I'm talking to my dead flatmate's ex-sister-in-law about the sexiness of evil lawyers. My life's a fucking mess."

Over the intercom, the cabbie says, "Fucking mess is right, mate," and George laughs until John more or less shoves her out of the taxi in front of New Scotland Yard.

George barely has a foot in her office before she's swamped with phone calls from CPS (murderous after she logged an official complaint), conference calls with Hatcher and family liaison (also murderous, but behaving so as not to scare Hatcher away), and Kerrigan (meekly guilty). She shouts at CPS (she can also play murderous), advocates for Hatcher's virtue with family liaison (they appear unconvinced), and capitulates within ten minutes under Kerrigan's unspoken apologies. He's already been divorced four times. If George doesn't love him, he really will die alone, unmourned, at the pub.

George is leaned awkwardly over her desk in a way that makes her back hurt, her ear sore and hot from the handset of her phone, writing a painstaking list of everything she remembers from the 48 hours leading up to Sherlock's death, when her desk phone rings for the millionth time.

"Scotland Yard, this is Lestrade," she says, distracted.

"This is Anthea," she says, voice blandly tired on the line. "What are you doing?"

George grits her teeth through her surprise. "Surely you can see me."

"I can see you're writing," Anthea replies. "And that your back hurts."

George forces herself to write, to distract herself. She writes down that two two days had begun — with a call with Anthea, spitefully eating Mycroft's hidden supply of summer fruits Alpen bars
somewhere in a former Soviet satellite — and the call from the ambassador, half crazed on a red-
eye flight into London.

"Thus proving my point and rendering any response from me moot," George says.

Anthea is briefly quiet. "No," she says, tense, dangerous. "You know we're looking, too?"

George writes down the way she'd taken Mycroft's car to Baker Street to fetch Sherlock, the tense ride under the green boughs lining the A roads of Godalming. She appends her interview notes from speaking with the school staff — doors/windows bolted; no signs of forced entry; between 50-100 adults in and out of building on leaving day — and she roots around her files until she finds a crime scene photograph, the linseed oil fluorescing in the blacklight.

"I imagined you might be," George tells her crisply, scrawling the way they'd all tramped back to the Yard, the frantic search for a site with CHALK and ASPHALT and BRICK DUST and VEGETATION and FUCKING CHOCOLATE?? "Will that be all or are we returning to a policy of radio silence where you forward all my calls to Mycroft's secretary at HMRC?"

George records the way her voice had echoed over the word quietly in the abandoned factory, and how Sally had swaddled the ambassador's daughter in her blazer and pressed helpless, desperate kisses to her sweaty temple, scrubbed dirty tears from her cold cheeks as they'd waited for the ambulance. George writes, Is there field treatment for heavy metals poisoning? George writes, daughter starts screaming.

The subsequent shitshow that was allowing Met politics and the unforgiving, suspicious part of Sally's good heart to take point is heavily documented already, and George doesn't bother to write down any impressions at all.

"Then why are you doing this?" Anthea asks over the phone. She sounds the way she did in the Lyall Street house's front hall, red-eyed and clutching a box of broken pieces, apologizing for something she hadn't done.

George rifles through her desk because she doesn't know how to answer, really. Because I want to? Because it turns out I'm not as incurious as I thought? Because I'm angry and I know you and Mycroft will only lie to me? The answer is: because Sherlock had seeped into her, his hunger to know, and they may have put him in the ground but George can't bury him until she's figured this out — the why, the who, the how.

"This is dangerous. You could get hurt," Anthea says into George's non-response as she realizes that the next thing that hasn't already been dissected to pieces by the professional standards board and the media is that next night at the morgue, as late afternoon dripped miserably into evening and George had sat dumbly in a waiting room chair while Molly wept on her shoulder. The next thing is Mycroft ripping her heart out of her throat in the morgue hallway, and the gut punch of the memory makes her vicious, snarling:

"I'm already hurt."

"He'd rather you hurt than dead," Anthea retorts.

"Tell your employer if he wants me to stop, he knows what drastic action to take on someone with whom he's an involved relationship," George says, slamming the handset into its cradle and clawing at her notes until her hands stop shaking, until her breath comes out in smooth exhales. It takes ages, endless minutes until she trusts herself to put her pen back to paper.
At the bottom of the last page, she scratches out in angry block letters, SOMEWHERE IN HERE, MORIARTY WAS THREATENING TO SHOOT JOHN/MRS HUDSON/ME, and underlines it twice.

***

George starts with the string of London bombings, the first time Sherlock had sat in her office with glittery eyes in the whisper-echo of Moriarty like he'd just found his life's work. She adds in the last cases: the Tower, the prison, the Bank of England. The files — all three document boxes of them — make John's eyes cross. He leafs through a few pages delicately, with a faint moue of distaste, managing to hold out all of three seconds before asking:

"So what are we doing with these?"

"These cases," she says, with the patience she exercises at work for Hatcher, "are the ones we know involved Moriarty."

"And you think there's something in here that may give us a lead on his co-conspirator?" John asks, appropriating a file folder and frowning down at it in his hands. It's an inch thick, with pages fairly exploding from within.

"I think it's our best place to begin," George says, because if she's learned anything in her years of police work, it's how to beat a whole lot of nothing out of vast acres of bushes.

It takes two weeks for her to read through all the files with John's help, and once they've identified the key players, George starts calling in favors she hasn't already burnt on Sherlock. She calls Bill, the chippie, who's best mates with a load of the guards down at Pentonville, and he promises to have them all round for a some pints and to dig for information about what happened the day of the jail break. She calls Susan who is a PR flak down at the Bank of England lock-up room, who is shagging Rick, who owes her for not telling Rick's boyfriend. She calls Molly, who practically has a stroke over the phone when George asks her to let them have a peek at the morgue files.

"How do you know all these people?" John marvels, watching George go through her laundry list of contacts and debtors.

She hands her mobile over to John — Molly still stuttering painfully over the line — as she says, "John, I recognize it's hard to see this when you're faffing about with Sherlock bloody Holmes all the time, but I am actually a moderately competent detective," and adds, "Now go talk to Molly so we can get in there and look at her files.

During the day, George pulls new cases, plays tour guide through police procedure and detective work with Hatcher, who Davison has decided to abuse like a much-beloved younger brother and tell him an impressive number of lies about NSY politics. She's going to let it go — for now — or at least until she sees any indications that Hatcher is starting to fall for any of the more potentially explosive fabrications.

The evenings she tucks in with old cases, and late nights and free weekends, she and John exhume the long-dead corpus of Sherlock's work.

Bill eventually reports rumor at Pentonville was that the security failure and prisoner riot was an inside job, with all the internal CCTV cameras turned off too-precisely for it to have been anything but an elegant crime. "That's all just drunk mates talking though," he tells her, handing her a cone of searing-hot chips and dousing them liberally with vinegar just the way she likes them, his face red from the fryer and beaded with sweat. "Apparently their superiors are too shit-scared of
what might happen if they push it any further up the chain of command."

Susan drags her heels, enduring almost two weeks of George's harassment before she sends a series of comprehensible-only-to-the-media text messages that more or less translate to say that very shortly after the Moriarty fiasco, an IT security guy had vanished from the office. Rick — who is understandably slightly insane and extremely tense given the unfortunate situation involving the FSA and LIBOR of late — thinks they've been disappeared like those Latin American political dissidents, she tells George.

"What do you think?" George asks, when she traps Susan in an All Bar One in the arcade on Bishopsgate, perched at the far eastern edge of the City.

Susan attempts to drown herself in a poorly mixed whiskey sour. "I think that Asher was horribly bullied by everybody in the IT department," she mutters, scrubbing a hand across her face, "and that it wouldn't have been hard for someone to convince him to do something naughty for payout."

John turns up just as much nothing and hearsay as George does, slogging over to their designated pub with an armful of photocopies from Molly and no closer to any version of the truth.

"What about the guys from the tetanus case, then?" John asks, holding up Connie Prince's autopsy file. "They were arrested."

George grimaces. "And were found dead while still awaiting trial two weeks later," she says, and wishes she'd spared more than a passing moment of suspicion for it, or that there hadn't been a double murder at a council estate in Hackney that had embroiled her for 48 hours and completely pushed it out of mind.

"You're joking," John says, snatching the folder away and scanning the pages. "Hanging. Jesus."

She goes for the Vermeer case, where she discovers a note appended to the grainy pages saying that Ms. Wenceslas escaped custody six months into her incarceration and was never found. George supposes she could have made a clean escape, but it's far more likely she's been shot from a great distance, from a fourth hide blind.

Or, hell, maybe Mycroft had people neatly shutting down avenues of potential investigation, ordering his own assassinations on the surviving guilty. His mandate has always been the ends and never the means.

George hands the papers over to John and goes to have a lie down in the corner of her sitting room, where it's quiet and she can be panicked and furious in peace.

"If it makes you feel any better," John tells her later, "I think most likely it was Moriarty who had those people murdered and not Mycroft."

"That doesn't make me feel better," George informs him, and decides to put the Moriarty cases aside and look back even further, into the first splashy deductions that made Sherlock famous — lit him up on everybody's radar.

Apparently she and John are immediately recognizable to every human being in England now — "It's you! You're that inspector and that doctor Sherlock Holmes ran around with!" followed oftentimes with, "Were you shagging or was he having it off with that doctor fellow?" — so Sherlock's old clients are at least understanding of why they're wandering around asking bothersome questions. Anybody who ever crossed paths with Sherlock is always quick with an affirmation of their belief in him to John, which is cold comfort compared to how grueling it is to
reopen the wound time and again.

Actively *listening* to everything someone says is an exhausting skill, one cultivated over years of detective work, and George isn't surprised by the way John falls upon a pint at the end of day wandering around Chinatown. It's dizzying. It's oddly boring, but the key is unrelenting focus, and a willingness to keep looking. But that's just ordinary crimes; as they're inspecting the mystery at the center of John Watson's broken heart, the process is considerably more fraught.

"Jesus, how do you do this all day?" John asks, hunched over his empty glass.

George has been trying to get the bartender's attention for almost five minutes, but the entire bar staff is glued to the telly, set to Sky News's live report about a massive human trafficking bust in Mexico. She waves again before giving up until the commercials.

"I did, actually, receive professional training on how to be frustrated, bored, and simultaneously stressed beyond words," George says.

He grins at her. "So this is what solving crimes is like without Sherlock, then?"

"Pretty much," George says, and the barmaid finally comes over to pull them another round of Staropramen. "Although admittedly there's less drinking on the job."

John rubs at his face. "We're getting nowhere."

"And a packet of crisps, please," George tells the barmaid, because if she's going to be demoralized, she wants salt and fats for it. She turns to John. "Possibly — what if we say fuck it to the old cases?"

"And?" John asks.

George rips open the Walkers bag and sets it between them on the bar counter. "Well, Mycroft did say something about snipers."

Everything George knows — probably inaccurately — about the military comes from reading body cues off of John, her ex-Royal Marine's post-coital mumbling, and crying without dignity when she'd watched *Atonement* and been forced to endure James McAvoy dying on a massive screen because Tom had felt the film would be a faithful adaptation of his favorite novel. Upon reflection, George wonders how she could have missed the signs that their marriage wasn't meant to last.

"Hm," John says. "Let me ask around."

His asking around turns up Keifer Maccelsfield, who meets her and John for pints at their local three weeks later, fresh off of an inbound flight from Location Undisclosed from Assignment Unrepeatable. He's clearly still riding the adrenaline high of it because instead of telling George and John where they can shove their curiosity, he consumes their mystery story in between a half-dozen pints of lager and the occasional playful leer at George. She can tell from the way he wraps an arm around her shoulders — friendly like — that Keifer is harmless to women and children and likes getting his ego massaged, that all of his danger lives in a locked room he tends with faithful care.

"You need to reconsider your actions here, Maccelsfield," John warns, deep into his second pint and laughing. He looks happier today than he has in months, and George can't know if that's because the wound of Sherlock's death is beginning to heal or if solving secondary mysteries with her is the emotional equivalent of methadone. "Because she has a lunatic jealous ex."
George says, "He does not need to reconsider. In fact he ought to continue as he has."

Keifer, who apparently met John at the foot of the Pamir Mountains in Afghanistan when they'd both been trying to relieve themselves on the same shrub, is not so much a soft target as just the right kind of mad. Of course he would be to be friends with John.

"I think I could take your ex-bloke in a fight," he tells George, who tries to imagine Mycroft in a physical altercation and bursts into laughter.

She buys them third and fourth rounds, until she finds herself leaning in, breasts flush with Keifer's forearm, listening to John tell the full story of his and Sherlock's adventures at Baskervilles. John's only so far as telling them about pulling rank to enter a sealed military facility before Keifer's desperate to engage in some classic one-upmanship, and it's only another two drinks and forty minutes of back-and-forth bragging before Keifer knits all the pieces together himself and says:

"Hell, if you show me these locations, I bet I can tell you something about your sniper."

***

You need to stop this, Georgiana.

MH

I can see you ignoring my calls.

MH

This is dangerous. Anthea said she's spoken with you.

MH

Don't force my hand.

MH

George texts back:

If you decide to have me shot, I'll be conveniently at the hospital. GL.

***

They arrange to meet the following weekend to visit one of the sniper sites, with John saying it was pointless to check around 221B, because — he'd said very casually — they'd been neck deep in eastern European assassins so it was all rather pointless.

"How the fuck has your life gotten more dangerous since you left Afghanistan?" Keifer asks reasonably from the backseat of George's Golf as they wind their way through the midday traffic swaddled around Smithfield. John, lounging in the passenger seat, just looks baffled by the question because he is a ludicrous human being.

George, because she didn't have any young siblings to torture in her childhood, calls over her shoulder, "Ask him about the time he and Sherlock had to dress up as ninjas."

"It was not that weird in context," John says, which triggers Keifer's cry of, "In what fucking context is that not weird?"

She takes them to Bart's first, and they spend as little time as possible there. Mostly because George hates the way John's face looks as they wander the building, the weight of the roof overhead suffocating with memory, his easy laugh from the car vanished. He keeps his shoulders squared so severely that George aches from the right angles, and nods with professional distance
when Keifer picks out this hallway, that stairwell, a few potential hide sights — all with a perfect line of sight to where John had been standing in the parking lot, being gutted and left as a suicide note.

"Hospital could help us," George says a day later, when she and John are camped out at an anonymous pub morosely eating chips. "Hospitals are limited access, CCTV monitored, lots of sign-in sheets. We could pull the records from that day."

"Hospitals are also open 24 hours a day and have hundreds of people tromping through all the time. It's just not possible," John argues, thinking of tactical improbabilities the way you do as a soldier, versus grimly accepting the inevitable pain of watching a day's worth of CCTV and reading all the visitor logs like a police officer. He'd looked as pale and green as the waning moon when they'd left Bart's, and George strategically taken Keifer's obvious discomfort and John's barely concealed nausea to cry off for the day.

"Don't worry," she promises, "I'll do the boring bits myself."

"Oh, in that case, have at it," John teases, even though George thinks he'll be right there with her, watching every second of tape and checking every inch of paper.

On the bar telly, Fiona Bruce is wearing a frankly provoking kelly green dress as she talks about a series of seemingly unrelated deaths in China that have taken on a tinge of political murder. George tries to listen, but only a little, because Fiona Bruce has only just said, "...Interpol are crediting the discovery to..." when John asks:

"How do you deal with it? If you never figure it out?"

George thinks about telling him what she tells all the new officers that travel through her office, what she'd told Hatcher as they'd gone through the backlog of files today and he'd grown weary with it. She could tell John that more often than she cares to admit, they never find a culprit or a reason, sometimes most cruelly, they don't even find a body. But that doesn't diminish the value and obligation of their efforts, the duty to use all their available wits and resources to try, every time. But the Met's new officers and Hatcher feel a professionalized kind of grief, and when George tells them, "We do our best, and then we move on," she's telling them a professionalized kind of lie.

To John, she tells the truth:

"You don't deal with it," she says, because it's true and she couldn't bear to say anything otherwise.

John grins at the television, smiles at Fiona's dour expression and the image of dead political dissidents in China and says, "All right then. Okay."

***

Two weeks, three court appearances, another round of dick-measuring (that she wins) with Potter, and a painfully sympathetic dinner with her mum goes by before George is finally able to tear herself away from legitimate police business long enough to call Maccelsfield and John again. It's a bitterly cold autumn Friday with the sky steel blue and threatening rain overhead, and by the time George gets a ring from downstairs saying her guests have arrived, she's gone through three separate Pret brownie bars as a testament to her mood.

"Nice," Keifer laughs, looking around the lobby of the Met and winking at the Maureen in reception. Maureen in reception is all of 22 years-old, and so freshly graduated from uni George
reflexively steers Keifer away from her and her bright future as he's musing, "I've never been in one of these of my own free will before."

"It's an adventure for us all," George agrees, and directs an unabashedly amused John and Keifer on the 10p tour of New Scotland Yard, including a turn about the library and Jack the Ripper archives. They stop by traffic, where Edith and Keifer strike up a worrying flirtation, and only after two more detours — for coffee and for John to check in on Dimmock, who John has decided is "fragile" — do they make it to her office.

"You weren't joking about your office being a bloody fishbowl," Keifer says, disapproving, glowering at the nosey marketers across the street.

George offers up a wan smile. "It's supposed to be modern."

Ignoring her, Keifer declares, "Your sniper could have been almost anywhere in that building across the street, or on the roof — " and barely sparing a look over his shoulder, motions broadly at the bullpen, fairly heaving with people at the end of a shift " — and obviously it could have been anyone in there."

John says, reflexive, "Donovan," and then revising, adds, "Anderson."

"They hated Sherlock, not me," George says, glaring at him before turning back to Keifer. "Those are all my people."

Keifer shrugs. "You're the one getting shot at, love," he says, frowning out at the Serious Crimes team, who appear to be frowning back at him, like schoolchildren suspicious of an unknown adult consorting with their teacher.

"Weren't you not even here, then?" John asks suddenly. "That night? Weren't you at that bloody reporter's flat?"

"Chasing your path of destruction," George ripostes, and says, more soberly, "Yeah, I was — but I was on my way back in when we got the call about Sherlock."

She would have been an easy kill in her light-colored coat, moving slow. The Met keeps its ugly halogen lights on all night, and her bloody glass office would have been a beacon against the still-shuttered offices banking it in. The bullpen had been buzzing through the night, too, everyone desperately trying to find Sherlock, people dashing in and out. And had she left Kitty Reilly's and gone back to the Yard, her last memory would be a shout and glass breaking and nothing else.

"Christ," John says, looking sick.

Keifer's still frowning at the bullpen, and he keeps frowning at them when he loops an arm round George's shoulders in a way that makes her raise her eyebrows at him. He says, "Indulge me," wheels her around to look out her windows toward the street, and starts reeling off potential sites with clinical disinterest, John coming up around her other side to follow the line of Keifer's pointing fingers with a frown on his face.

John is asking questions and Keifer is answering them and George guesses she ought to listen, too, but all she can really hear is blood rushing in her ears and her own voice asking, What am I doing?

Her father had laughed about it and Mycroft had admired it and her mother despairs of it but George is unromantic, really. She makes the practical decisions because flights of passion are only so good as the endorphin rush, and she's too smart to give in and be so easily seduced. So what the hell is she doing here? Chasing down a ghost that Mycroft can't pin? It's pointless, isn't it? Her and
John's best intentions and broken hearts versus the vast network of resources that have probably already been brought to bear.

Except she's been thinking this since she'd called John over and she's going through the motions anyway because —

"Look," Keifer says suddenly to George, frowning down at her with his arm still wrapped around her, his touch gone protective. "I wouldn't normally do this, but we've got to talk about that jealous ex-boyfriend of yours."

"Oh, Jesus," John swears.

George blinks twice, refocusing. "What?" she asks.

"You really ought to be careful with that man," Keifer says, fearless, tossing a look back to the cubical farm casual as you like.

George stares at Keifer's five o'clock shadow and rough features. "I beg your pardon?" she asks, because while it's not inconceivable that Keifer has been ordered to shoot someone in the face at Mycroft's discretion, it's fairly unlikely he'd cop to it now.

"There's no point in being trying to be subtle about it if he's going to stare like that, Lestrade," Keifer says.

"They all stare, they're like horrible children," George answers, knee-jerk, because they do, overlapping John's, "Who's staring?"

Keifer laughs, tension breaking. "Yeah, but, Moran. He's a fucking mess."

George frowns, flicking a glance toward the cubes, where Moran is — where Moran is, bizarrely, leaning against a column and glaring furiously at a file, two floors away from Professional Standards. She says slowly, "...Moran."

"I haven't seen that arsehole since Desert Storm, but last I heard he'd finally washed out," Keifer tells them. "Watson was having a laugh, I guess, about the ex, but I'm serious about this, Georgie: that bloke is a fucking mentalist."

"She wasn't dating Moran," John says, because it needs saying, but more importantly, George asks:

"What do you mean Desert Storm? How do you know him?"

Keifer stares between her and John like they're idiots. "As in the Gulf War?"

"Yes, I'm aware," George snaps, suddenly frantic, impatient. "But why would you know — look, I've pulled Sebastian Moran's records. He's never served in the armed forces."

She had, just to figure him out, to put some history to his name and blandly unsettlying smile. DCI Sebastian Moran, 46, born in Weston-super-Mare and worked as a PC first in Leeds before gravitating toward, marrying in, and divorcing in Bristol. He'd done distinguished work for a decade in Birmingham before being nominated to Professional Standards, at which point the glowing accolades had faded into silent resentment from his peers. Nobody knew him, but Scotland Yard was a bit oblivious to non-Londoners, never mind members of Professional Standards, who were widely viewed as dead to their former coworkers, so it wasn't surprising that he'd been a ghost in the wires, that he would appear out of seemingly thin air. And then the Met had exploded and he'd been waiting for George, grinning, in that conference room.
"Then they've wiped his bloody slate clean," Keifer retorts, "because that lunatic was infamous for taking his M25 out and practicing moving-target shots on any dog or cat with the misfortune of being outside. And he did it as infantry."

George's chest goes cold. "Oh, Jesus Christ," she whispers.

She thinks about him at the Yard. She thinks about him sitting in the office, with keystroke access to every file on Sherlock, every case note she ever submitted into the system. She thinks about him in archives that night, foreign and dangerous in the overhead light, the way he'd watched her with a predatory look. She thinks about him asking about Mycroft. She thinks about him sitting in her fucking house, drinking her fucking tea, touching her fucking hand — running his eyes down the length of her body, and it's everything George can do not to double over and throw up.

Keifer is saying, "Or at least he used to. I don't know how the fuck you lot let him in, because if you're too fucking crazy be a a sniper I don't see how you can work in law enforcement," but George isn't hearing a word of it.

"Oh," John says, "shit."

Her hands are shaking. She gropes for the Sharpie she'd dropped near Wenlock, clasps the legal pad still propped up against her window. She can hear Keifer say, "What the hell's wrong with you two?" and John whispering, "We're going to have to clear the fucking building."

But the ingrained fearfulness in her knows they don't have time, that they're on borrowed seconds already, so George lets her handwriting shake apart into bare legibility, scrawling wildly across the page and slaps it up against her window with a bang:

**IT'S MORAN. IT'S SEBASTIAN MORAN.**

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BBC Breaking News @BBCBreaking
Multiple shots fired at New Scotland Yard HQ #NSYShooting
Chapter 11

Three things happen very fast:

There's a shot from behind her, and it shatters the glass of her office wall before she realizes it's strafed her shoulder. George doesn't have time to properly register the sudden shock of pain before she's screaming, "Everybody down," over the sound of yelling in the bullpen, pulling Keifer lower by his collar.

Her knees have barely thudded against the carpet before the entire wall of windows facing the nosey marketers goes, shattering with a horrible din, glass raining down and slicing tiny cuts into her hands, the back of her head. She wonders, how many fucking snipers did Mycroft have on that building? just for a second before she hears pandemonium in the bullpen, screaming.

George thinks, Sally. She thinks, Hatcher. She thinks, Davison. She thinks she's going to be ill, and then John seizes her by her fucking injured shoulder and bellows:

"George!"

She thinks, Okay. Yes.

Her mobile's lost in the flood of broken glass shards halfway across her office, and George only thinks about calling the switchboard a split second before she realizes the foolishness of it. Someone must be reporting this. John's right, they need to clear the building, but they're cornered in her office and all of her people are outside, sandwiched in the line of fire between Moran and Mycroft's phalanx of long-range rifles, and she barely thinks, this is really fucking stupid, before she's moving on instinct, shoving her way to her feet.

It's ridiculous to think of how badly her hands hurt, but they do — there's blood smearing everywhere now — more than the dull throb in her shoulder, now. George peers over her desk in time to hear the first volley of shots end and see through the spiderwebbed, shattered-through glass of her office that the bullpen looks like a disaster zone. She can hear people yelling, see people starting to move. She doesn't see Moran.

George thinks, fuck it, and hollers:

"Donovan?"

There's a silence that drags on long enough that George thinks she's going to be sick, before Sally yells back, "I'm fine! Moran's gone and Hatcher's hit!"

"Jesus, so are you, are you all right?" John says to George.

She nods, reflexive, clutching at the edge of her desk and leaving blood smears across the paperwork there. She yells, "Hatcher, if you die, I'll kill you myself," and it takes too long — too heart-rendingly long by halves — for Hatcher to say back, shaking, "Yes, sir — ma'am."

And then there's nothing to do but press her forehead to the edge of her desk for a minute, to let the pain and fearfulness shake her like thunder rolling through her chest, down her spine. John's inspecting her arm, and George bears it for long moments — digs her nails into the cheap laminate surfaces she can reach and listens to her shuddery breaths — until he says, "Looks like it's just a nasty graze; stitches and you'll be right as rain."
"Right, thanks," George manages, and gives herself 30 seconds to be shattered, that and no more.

She's going to get up and check over her people any second now, distribute a description of Moran and a redundant APB, as she has no doubt Mycroft has every CCTV camera in the city trained for his face. She's going to go press hands to Hatcher, brush his hair out of his face and be very cross with him for frightening her so —

Except before George even finishes out 25 seconds of self-indulgent horror, *John Watson's shoved away from the desk and run out the fucking door,* shouting, "*Moran!*" as he goes.

"Shit," Keifer says.

If he says anything else, George doesn't hear it because she's tearing off after John, keeping the oatmeal-colored shape of his back in view and darting past her people in the bullpen, coat flaring out behind as she tries to catch up.

She yells his name, and he ignores her to go flying into the stairwell, and it's not until the concussive thud of her feet hit the concrete that she hears the echoing clatter of someone else running, sees the top of a man's head, and George clears the last four steps in one long tumble of adrenaline and panic.

Overhead, the atonal shrill of the building alarms finally goes off, and the pre-recorded health and safety-approved message starts to play as George slams into the hard corner of a handrail on the landing, clutching it to keep from spinning out and gasping at the hurt of it, to press her torn-open palms against anything.

The building goes from warily quiet to completely fucking mental in four seconds flat.

John freezes in the now-empty stairwell, listening carefully as the noises vanish under the panic and noise of NSY in chaos: they can't hear any individual footsteps over the rush, any doorways open and close in the banging. He'd gone into the stairwell and then gone into the din, and John says, "Fuck, *fuck,* he's getting away," as George gasps out:

"*Won't happen,* the building's gone on lockdown: two exits, both will be watched."

Bent over his knees, John snarls, "*He's still got a gun.*"

George closes a hand over her shoulder to remind herself of the sting and her fingers come away the fresh red of a glistening pomegranate: split, burst open. "*One less shot in it at least,*" she says, the last syllable of it swallowed up in a scream below them — punctuated with the sound of a single round, muffled by the fire doors.

John's gone before she can ask him politely, futilely, to head for the exits, to leave this to the professionals. He's just a flash of brassy hair and fierce shoulders, sailing down the last of the steps and bursting onto the third floor.

George follows him, trailing after him and hoping for what — for the best? that she can dampen the inevitability of this disaster? and she keeps him in her line of sight in through the fire door onto the third floor but loses him around a corner.

It's midday, in between shift swings, and traffic's relationship with its warren of cubes has always been theoretical, so the floor's empty but for aging computers and the suffocating, dizzy knowledge that Moran is here — John is here — someone's been shot here — and George has no clue where any of them are. The pain that had been a flare and then an impatient event in the back of her mind is throbbing through her now, a hot fire at her shoulder and bleeding sullenly down her arm, down
her fingers, leaving a confetti of droplets as she tiptoes through the floor listening for footsteps, another gunshot, looking for John.

She finds Edith instead.

She’s prone on the floor near the copier, fingers loose and palms open, her throat white like bone china. George falls down on her knees in the corridor, presses shaking fingers to Edith's neck, hearing her own breath desperately loud in her ears.

Edith's pale, mouth open like a hooked fish and the purple of her jumper is soaked through now, the gory red of clay and raw meat. George presses her other hand to the wound on Edith's chest, blood pooling out of her in rivers, oceans, the delta to the sea. She's staring upward blindly already, eyes unfocused on the ceiling.

George thinks about her training. George thinks about the emergency medical procedure she's known by rote for decades. George thinks about nothing at all, because she thinks that Edith is dying underneath her hands, and that no amount of George feverishly whispering, "Edith, hold on, just hold on, my love," will bridge the distance between the tinny sound of sirens beyond the NSY windows and the ugly carpet of the third floor — George's knees, soaked now with Edith's blood.

George leans over her, presses her forehead to the skin of Edith's cheek, and she wants to lay there and die, too, until she feels the hot barrel of a gun pressed onto the back of her neck.

***

Sebastian Moran says:

"Get up — she'll be dead in 20 seconds anyway."

George doesn't. She keeps her hand pressed in the oozing mess of Edith's chest, watching the light go dimmer in her eyes, her mouth going slack, the tension unraveling from her, shock calcifying into something else.

Moran doesn't shoot her, doesn't pistol whip her into submission. He just strokes the burning mouth of the gun across her skin, thoughtful, and George cups Edith's cheek in her cleaner hand — the one that isn't slicked hot with all her blood — strokes a thumb along her freckles, and watches the fog roll in, her last breaths hitching away.

George thinks about Edith's cat and her dodgy partner, Keith. George thinks about Edith's Silk Cuts and Edith's Somerset consonants snarling out the word "zygote."

"See," Moran sighs. "Now, up."

"Why are you doing this?" George asks.

Her knees hurt and her hands hurt and the robin's egg blue lining of her coat is smeared through with blood; she stands up, looks away from the body on the carpet, where Edith isn't anymore.

"You forced my hand," Moran says, matter-of-fact, unemotional, and when George turns to look over her shoulder, he looks unruffled, with a spray of close-impact blood spatter across the shoulder of his striped shirt. He has the same face and eyes, the same harmlessly attractive features. He has a gun in an unshaken hand, trained at the well between her collar bones, the metal soughing against her skin as she breathes.

George asks, "Keifer?"
"Do you know, I'm rather impressed by MI6's work on the paper trail, actually," Moran tells her, conversational. "The official records say he's still deployed in Afghanistan. There was enough corroborating evidence that even my former employer believed it."

George stares at him. "Why not run?" she says, her voice the rusted creak of a long-abandoned garden gate, aching with effort. "Why not just slip away?"

Moran's eyes go from calm to curious, and he has just enough time to say, "You really have no idea, do you?" before John Watson comes barreling in from the left.

John fights dirty, all unschooled desperation and ripped-open knuckles, with the viciousness of someone who knows that to lose the altercation would be worse than dying in the process. He slams Moran sideways into the hard edge of a government-issued desk in a tumble of limbs, swearing, taking Moran's split second of shock to close his hand around the gun.

There's a shot that goes wide — punching out an overhead light — and George reaches into the fray, clawing for traction, trying to pull the gun out of Moran's hands.

It's nothing like the hand-to-hand demonstrations from George's days at the police academy, the instructional videos from Hendon, the required training on plastic-smelling mats. This isn't even like chasing a junkie or a murderer down an alley or following Sherlock into the dark. This is uglier and more uncoordinated: grasping.

George hurts all over, isn't physically strong enough, is losing her balance as her heels sink into the berber carpet. It's too quiet, no scoring, just John swearing and Moran huffing for breath, and it's all over in a heartbeat — seconds elongating into hours — before she wrests the gun away from him, leaving a freely bleeding gash on Moran's wrist, John trying to land a punch and failing.

And she's triumphant, exhausted for maybe half a beat before Moran shoves past John and seizes her by the — fuck — shoulder, and George doesn't know what he does when his hands scrape down to her wrist but it leaves something inside feeling crushed and her fingers going numb, the gun slipping from her grasp as she shouts.

John's already got her by the other hand, dragging her backward and down a hall, by the time Moran is halfway bent down for his weapon, his eyes still trained on them, and George shoves them round a corner as he whips the barrel up.

George counts two shots, and John hisses, "That was a P250 Compact — he has at least 16 shots left."

Moran's 16 rounds versus George and John's no rounds are shite odds, and even though the sirens are wailing downstairs, she doesn't doubt they could be dead by the time Force Firearms gets up the three flights of stairs.

She says, "Go left — down that hall."

John doesn't move, and George doesn't have time for his doubt or his tactical mind, shoves at the sudden, immovable mountain of him until he's shifting on near silent feet down the dim-lit hall. There're no doors leading off it but the one on the end, and George doesn't exhale until they're through — in the relative safety of the sickening pink ladies toilet, an ancient electric heater coughing at them.

John's saying something about this being a dead end, emphasis dead, but George can't hear him over her own anxiety, as she tries to raise the window sash by the sink as quietly as possible. It
hurts like a motherfucker to move her arm like this, makes her fingers weak with it, and it takes three tries to get any traction. The crackle of the shitty paint work makes her think about Edith's gel manicure clacking against it, the way even the tiles smell of nicotine and tar now, from the eons of women who've stolen away out of dick-measuring contests in NSY to steal a calming fag in here — leaning out this window, gray plumes of smoke dissipating over the skies of London.

"You'll have to jump," she says to him, over her shoulder, jerking the window the last inch upward, until the metal and wood and paint protest too much.

John stares at her. "It's the third floor — we'll break our legs."

"There's a ledge, six feet down, and a pipe with enough traction to hold you until the roof of the next building down," George says, the words tumbling out of her, and now all she can think is of Sherlock's fox-gleaming eyes, grinning at her in early January a lifetime ago, showing her his very favorite alternative means of entry into New Scotland Yard. "Go — you've got to go now."

John smiles at her, that reckless one that shrugs off his harmlessness and lets all his edges shine through. He says, "Ladies first, surely?" perched in the window, extending a hand to her.

George smiles back, because in that second she thinks of John and Sherlock and their broken hearts and their wild rambles through the undercarriage of the city — how they've convinced themselves that's all you need to know her, to claim a duty to her. George has walked London and loathed London and scoured pavements of Sherlock's blood, written in the police reports to each of John's blog highlights, held hands that needed holding. John may think himself as infantry in Sherlock's warzone, but this is peacetime, and London is no noir wonderland of high fantasy villains: it's thugs and thieves and murderers and bankers from the city, men complaining about the Olympics and little girls in rolled-up uniform skirts texting furiously on their mobiles. George knows London not like the back of her hand, but the way people know their homes in the dark — by rote, reflexive, wary of intruders.

She's always protected Sherlock as best as she could, and she owes John no less consideration.

"You may be a soldier, John, but this is my city," she tells him, and shoves him out the window as the door opens behind her.

The next one of Moran's 16 remaining rounds doesn't deflect on the glass of her office: its path is true.

***

There is no good place to be shot.

Every entry point is the promise of a wider exit; there's the potential for hypovolemic shock, death by hydrostatic shock, or suffocating from a pneumothorax while the ambulance fights traffic to get you to the nearest A&E.

The medical article in the packet the Metropolitan Police Service hands out cites a study done at a South London hospital between 1993 and 1994, with 42 victims, all male. They were all injured by low-energy transfer weapons, handguns. Sixteen had penetrating gunshot wounds to the head, neck, or chest, and half died.

George knows all of this from her decades on the force, absorbed it from emergency medics and police procedural manuals. She also knows that being shot in the gut is an agonizing way to go, and if Moran's bullet has punctured her stomach, then she has 15 minutes before the acid makes its
The blood in her mouth is fucking disgusting and George is frankly furious that the blank shock she's been promised is nowhere to be found. She's in too much pain to vomit from it, even; this is 30,000 on a 1-10 scale at the walk-in clinic, and her vision is fraying black at the edges.

"I was warned Watson was a nuisance, but no one said anything about you," Moran complains at her, and steps around her — the soles of his shoes slicking up in the pool of blood George is producing — toward the window, slipping his gun into a back holster.

George swallows and regrets it, whitening out for a beat. "You still haven't told me why," she says, but she's not sure how clearly the words come out.

She's slumped down on the floor; she doesn't remember getting there, but as far as she's concerned, the immediate worst part of all of this is the fact that her hands are smashed against the cold tile and her blood is still hot pooling around her fingertips. It's surreal. It's otherworldly. It's horrible. Had Edith bled this much?

"Believe me, Detective Inspector, this is more trouble than I was paid for," Moran sighs, and contentious, pauses long enough to press an affectionate hand to her cheek. He says, "But I could hardly disappear neatly with your man closing off my promised avenues of escape, could I?"

George realizes that somewhere in between Moran's two sentences, the blood on the floor and the disgusting touch of Moran's hand have become the only warm things in the room. She's freezing, staring straight ahead at the scratched-up door of a bathroom stall in the January air, wind billowing through the opened window, her skin a sheet of ice over her dying muscles.

She closes her eyes because she doesn't want that to be the last thing she sees, and then in the darkness she tries to draw up something she does and all she has is panic, a fear that chills her from the inside outward.

It's out of cowardice more than anything that she forces her eyes open again, turns her head away from the stall, toward the door —

Where she sees Anthea planting her feet and lifting a gun, eyes blazing.

George hears the two shots, but doesn't see them, and then she's hearing fucking Sherlock Holmes's voice in her ear, supernaturally calm as he says, "I will never forgive you if you perish in this dull manner."

George comes out of it a few times — of what to where, she has no idea. But she comes out of it a few times. She gets flashes: the pockmarked ceiling whirring past, blinding lights; her mum, her face bloodless. She hears stuff more frequently, but none of it's worth listening to: the sound of atonal flatlines or crying or the soft shuffle of trainers on tiles, immediately familiar after a lifetime haunting the A&E.

She feels muffled in cotton, and thank God for it, because the occasional flashes she isn't are excruciating, the same immediate, breathtaking, shattering pain she'd felt at the Yard. It flares out from her gut and goes past her fingertips, until it's a halo of searing agony and she hears herself in distress before there's a flurry of movement and she's knocked backward again, put down into opiate darkness.
At some point, shortly after George has convinced herself she's probably not dead, she gets up the energy to open her eyes. It's hard, moving her head is exhausting, breathing in and out is exhausting. She looks at the blur of gray and dark spots in front of her for a long time before she blinks — exhausted already — and she sees —

She sees Sherlock.

His dark curls are shorn away to a razor-sharp cut and his eye is a dark, ugly purple bruise, narrowing as he frowns down at her.

"You are comically susceptible to infection," he tells her.

"I'm in hell," George croaks sadly, and goes back to sleep.

That theory gets shot the next time she wakes up. She's on her back and there's a fucking tube in her throat and her sudden panic sends a heart-rate monitor screaming as loudly as she wants to. Chaos reigns for almost a minute before her mother's there — her eyes happy but her face ashen, and then Gillian is smoothing her hand through George's hair, whispering, "Calm down, my love, calm down."

These things keep happening, over and over again. George falls asleep and wakes up and falls asleep — exhaustion and drugs kicking in. Her mother is there; her stepfather is there. One time, she wakes to see John sitting at her bedside flipping through her chart.

The tube is gone again, but her throat still hurts and she's desperately, desperately parched, and before anything else, she croaks, "Water." She's useless until he's helped her consume half a cup of ice chips, at which point she flicks her gaze toward the records — still in John's grip — and grinds out:

"That's private."

John favors her with a tired, crooked smile. "I was the nearest trauma surgeon on premises," he says to her, reaching over, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear and stroking his fingers over the curve of her cheek, tender. "My hands have been inside you, George."

She frowns anyway. "What happened?"

"You've had four surgeries," John tells her, closing her chart. "The bullet nicked your intestine. We had to remove your spleen. And then because Mycroft wasn't being terrifying enough, you developed sepsis."

"What's sepsis?" George asks.

"Not good," John clarifies, annoyed, and inspects something on the tower of machines parked next to her bed with an impatient look on his face.

Swallowing is still terrible, but she doesn't taste blood in her mouth anymore. George wonders who had to clean her teeth, who washed her hair — soft on the pillow — who scraped the blood out from underneath her fingernails. She wonders where her coat is.

"Hatcher?" she ventures, and she's not sure if she wants to know but she must. She'll need to call his family; she'll need to see him herself; she'll —

"He's fine, George," John says, interrupting her escalating worry. "They're releasing him in a week."
And then she's dizzy with relief, feeling suddenly exhausted with the effort of everything. She mumbles, "Good — good," and asks, "Moran?"

Here, John smiles. "Anthea shot him in both knees. Mycroft collected him."

"Oh, good," George says, "good."

One time, she wakes up to Anthea playing Fruit Ninja, leaning an iPad against George's hip where she's lying on her side, pain a banked discomfort underneath her skin. Anthea's ghostly pale, her hair pulled back in a messy bun, but her gray sweater-set and twill skirt are flawless. There's a pistol on the bed next to Anthea's left hand, safety off, pointed at the door, and she's hovering over George protectively, just inches between her cheek and George's fingers, limp on the hospital blankets.

George says, "Hi," and puts a hand in Anthea's hair.

Anthea stares back, wordless, for what feels like ages, a year. Her eyes are red, vessels blown, and there are lines around her mouth. There's a bucket of Haribo Starmix on the bedside table next to her BlackBerry, turned off at last.

"Are you all right?" George asks, because in the late afternoon light, Anthea looks achingly young, hurt. Without the phone, her hands look very small.

Anthea still doesn't answer, just swallows all the words balanced on her tongue, George thinks. But that's not enough to keep her eyes from going bright, wet, to keep her lashes from going damp and leaving shadow traces on her face, and George rubs a thumb across Anthea's cheek. She says, "Thank you for shooting Moran in the knees."

"Thank you for not dying," Anthea replies, finally.

"As if I'd give him the satisfaction," George says, her mock bravado as fragile as she feels in this hospital bed, all her bones light as a bird's under the heavy covers.

Anthea puts a palm over her own cheek, over George's fingers — warm skin over George's cold hand. "You came very close to giving him the satisfaction," she whispers.

"But I'm here now," George promises. She'll never know why she feels better offering up comfort than taking it, but she watches the tension unravel from Anthea's face in tiny increments and feels something go lighter in her chest. "I'm going to be fine, now, thanks to you."

And Anthea's only answer is to press her forehead against the curve of George's hip, the shape of the rolling English countryside beneath the blankets, and shake for long, long minutes — until there's the squeak of footsteps and George's mother sweeps into the room with two steaming cups of tea.

George stays up almost half an hour that time, listening to her mother's round vowels and Anthea's soft consonants, their voices a comforting hum in the background. As she's tipping over into sleep again, she hears Anthea say, "Has anyone told her, yet?"

***

Awareness looses its ephemeral, gauzy haze soon enough, and then George wakes up in low-grade and increasing pain, all the discomforts that had been theoretical through the morphine starting to slice into her. Without the constant stream of heavy opiates, the long nights at the hospital go from cocooning dark to unbearable, loud, endlessly interrupted. Her mother is at her side every day, and...
Anthea has appropriated a corner, reaching ever more astronomical heights on Angry Birds; John shows up more often than not to inspect her charts and chat up her surgeon. Her moments of consciousness get longer and longer. One Thursday she realizes she's been awake all of an hour and that Edith is dead and George feels a sort of empty, wrenching hurt that sends her straight back again, searching for the oblivion of sleep.

***

George has always just got on with it, whatever it was, so the arresting nature of being grievously injured is a deeply annoying revelation. There's no work to distract her, and her — admittedly lengthening — periods of awareness are plagued by the demands of doctors and nurses, her ever-present visitors trying to verify the state of her health. George wants to yell that there's a crosshatch of surgical scars on her, she's missing her spleen, and they'd had a tube down her fucking throat until a week ago, how do they think she's doing? but even that is too dear a price, most times, and she just gives in.

So it's two weeks (or so John tells her) before George manages to stay awake long enough to call Edith's family, to call her dodgy partner Keith, to stay cold and broken wide open on the telephone, conveying her regrets. She doesn't tell them the way Edith had been alert and awake, terrified and dying in obvious pain. She says that it was fast and that Edith probably hadn't even been aware, that she'd slipped off with the same coy quickness she had for managing traffic's clashing personalities. She tells them it was a privilege to be among Edith's friends, that she's sorry she missed the service, that she'll come by for tea and to trade stories about Edith's Silk Cuts, her husky laughter, the way she'd been — in some small way — George's best friend, at least in little fragments of all their shared spaces, in their shared days.

It doesn't help; she doesn't feel better. If anything, she feels worse, propped up on a bank of pillows in her hospital room listening to the machines percuss in beeps and hisses around her, staring at the ceiling dry-eyed — cried out.

There's a knock at her door then, a neat double-rap, and George puts a hand over her eyes and croaks, "Yes?"

"I told them it might be better if someone broke the news to you gently first, but everyone decided to be difficult about it," says Sherlock.

George takes her hand from her eyes and looks down, down the length of the hospital bed to the dead man standing in the doorway. He's wearing his Belstaff coat and his hair shorn short — just like in her dream, earlier — and in addition to being thinner and tired, he still has a hideous black eye.

"So," he continues. "I'm not dead."

She stares at him. It takes three tries to say, "I — I beg your pardon?"

"I'm alive," Sherlock repeats, impatient. "Not actually dead."

Stupidly, George points at his face. Lifting her arm is a horrible idea, and she regrets it immediately when it pulls on muscles she didn't know she had that are connected to aches in her stomach she also didn't know she had. "What happened to your eye?"

Pulling a face, Sherlock says, "John overreacted."

"To...your not being dead," George reasons for herself.
Wronged, he says, "Yes, the day you were shot." He presses careful fingers to his face. "And then again when I approached him last night to ask if he was finished having his irrational tantrum about the misunderstanding."

*Irrational tantrum, George boggles. Misunderstanding.*

Before Sherlock can add whatever tart and cunningly bratty thing is perched on his tongue, she asks, "*How are you not dead? Why did we think you were dead?*

He looks away here, abashed, a tenseness to his features that was hidden before, and George watches him flip through her medical chart, looks at the torn knuckles of his hands, his birdlike wrists. The ghost in her room looks like the boy from long ago, hanging out of his first floor flat window like a lunatic, hollows in his cheeks and a wildness around the edges of him. This isn't the man she last saw, who'd composed himself into a sort of domestic bliss in the odd trappings of Baker Street, with the odd companionship of John Watson. She doesn't know what to think. She hopes if this is a near-death experience, if she's flat-lining in her bed and her nurses and doctors are calling a code blue wherever she actually is, her mother isn't nearby to watch it happen.

"I was given a choice between my death or John, Mrs. Hudson, and your's," Sherlock tells her latest lab panels, running his fingers down the page. He's quiet, terse; she thinks this is Sherlock struggling under the weight of hurt. "Choosing myself was the only acceptable option."

"Yet here you are," George whispers.

He looks up again, looks up at her from beneath his eyelashes, and George thinks this is what he must have been like as a boy: rabbit-hearted with anxiety. She doesn't know how she feels, is strangely flat, and probably in an hour or a day or a week she'll well up with cold fury, will burst into tears. For now, she waves a hand at him, waves him closer.

Sherlock comes, wary, in halting steps that look foreign on him, and as he gets closer she sees him more clearly: there's a scar on the corner of his mouth, an ugliness to the white of his skin, dark bruises under the unblackened eye, too. There's a nasty burn on his neck. His body, to her, is an open book of suffering, of going without, and George thinks about the way he said, "*only acceptable option,*" and knows that when she is able to feel angry with him, she'll ache for him, too.

"Are you going to hit me, too?" he asks, suspicious, a foot out of her abridged reach.

"It would hurt me more than you right now," she says impatient. "Bend down."

He does, sullen, and George reaches over for him, fingers shaking until she touches the severe fringe of his hair, cut short, feels her nails scraping across the milky skin of his scalp, warm under her hands.

"You cut your hair," she mourns, palming his face now, turning it up to meet her gaze.

Sherlock sighs, but doesn't pull away. "*It was a liability.*"

"As you did what?" George asks.

That shadow comes back, flickers across Sherlock's face. "*Moriarty died, but he left a syndicate — they couldn't be allowed to carry on.*"

In another life, George thinks Sherlock would have meant that the puzzle was too good, the crime
too thrilling, the opportunity to prove himself cleverest too irresistible. Now, she's not sure. She's known Sherlock to love John and chase puzzles that hurt him all the same, but George is holding the face of a man she knows even less than she'd known Sherlock, before.

"But it's done now?" she asks. Surely it must be.

"I came back," Sherlock says, and there's a tenor in his voice that sounds older and wiser and wounded, "as quickly as I could."

"You broke my heart, you bastard," George tells him. "I cried over you."

She doesn't know what his months away have been like, exactly, at what cost Sherlock's found himself here again in her hospital room. She doesn't know what he's seen or done, but she can imagine, she can read between the telegraphed lines as he puts his hands over hers — still pressed to his narrow, sickly face — and meets her gaze.

"You were alive to do it," he says. This is a version of Sherlock who hesitates, who's lost the reckless sense of immortality he'd always worn like a mantel. "You, John, Mrs. Hudson, you're all furious, but you're all alive to do it — that's all that mattered to me."

He curls his index finger around hers, until they are holding hands in some small way, and George can't even begin to explain the way her chest hurts at it, to feel Sherlock clinging.

He says, "That's all that mattered to us."

The word drops like a coin and George feels rather than realizes the implication.

"Oh," she says, and her wrists and elbows go weak, her whole body goes weak with it, hands dropping like sudden weights back to the covers and her arm aching with it — the least of her bullet wounds just a dull throb now.

Sherlock peers at her face with a curious urgency that had been absent before. This must be new; the rest of it, Sherlock had deduced hours, days, weeks, months in advance, perhaps as soon as he'd vanished from London, he'd known what he'd return to.

"I can't tell what you're thinking," he admits.

_I don't know what I'm thinking_, George doesn't say. "Of course he helped you."

"He had to," Sherlock answers. "He owed me."

That could either be an accusation or an excuse, but George doesn't care either way. She doesn't know if it's the thousands of antibiotics or blood thinners or opiates coursing through her system, but she doesn't have the energy to do anything but ache, comprehensively, helplessly, all over.

She was wrong, earlier, when she thought she was cried out, parched, because it comes again, an undertow, her vision blurring.

"Lestrade," Sherlock starts, and George cuts him off.

"Go away," she tells him. She curls up on her side. "Just go away."

He does, but he lays a hand on her first — it's cold on her shoulder blade through the hospital gown — before he leaves, holding the hospital door open for the neat clicks that signal Anthea's return.
She lays a hand on George, too, but it's lingering, this touch, and laced through with sadness.

"Did you know?" George asks, muffled, wetly.

Anthea doesn't say anything, but she doesn't need to. And George isn't angry with her, not really, since Anthea has always been the keeper of secrets not hers to give away, but it is funny — *wretched* — to think of how close to hand absolution had been the entire time George's heart had been breaking open.

"I don't want to stay here anymore," George says. "I want to go home."

Anthea's quiet for long moments, but the way her thumb rubs circles against George's elbow is telling. When she does speak, finally, it's to say, "Whatever you need, Detective Inspector," and it plunges George through years, back to the gala at the Ritz and endless supply of champagne: Anthea asking if George wanted a pony, what kind, saying that Mr. Holmes would be back presently.

***

Moving out of the hospital — which had been a private room in what looked like a private home in Hampstead — is an ordeal. The doctors are far too professional to fret like common NHS surgeons, but they sigh elaborately over her charts, and although they sign off, they sign her off into the care of another phalanx of medical staff. It's a complicated mess, stabilizing and strapping her down and attaching various pieces and accessories to have her moved. Everyone fusses a great deal. Another version of her, an earlier, different, less perforated version of her would have been mortified by the spectacle of it all, made ill by the underlying knowledge that she's relying heavily and shamelessly upon someone else. George, circa 2012, post-operative, could give a fuck. There's a tube up her fucking urethra, she has one less spleen, and John Watson has had his hands *inside of her*. The least the world can give her is her way.

***

The Lyall Street house, for its many stories and rooms, had always felt bizarrely cozy: George lived there with Mycroft, and sometimes Anthea. There were occasional visitors, but they felt, if not unwanted, intrusive all the same. The house was at once very large and very small, and there had only ever been room for its permanent residents.

When George moves back, the house unfolds like a map of the world. Her mother has a bed moved into the massive dressing area and there are an army of nurses who have either taken over the various guest rooms or have taken to squatting in the sitting room, for they aren't ever absent. There is Anthea, who is a constant shadow, perched in the armchair that has migrated from the bathtub to the bedside. There is also John.

"So, Sherlock," George croaks, rousing slowly from sleep to find him sitting on the edge of her bed, nosing through her medical file again.

The frown on John's face darkens into a scowl. "Sherlock," he says.

"Not dead," she continues, and adds, "Apparently," as John turns to do his now-familiar visual inspection of her — to touch her pulse and check her eyes, run his fingers across the palms of her hands. She never knows what he's looking for, exactly, but the tightness around his mouth eases as he does it, so she doesn't mind.

"Apparently," John agrees, gruff, and glances at her from beneath his lashes. "I assume you saw his
She grins at him. "Yes, I did," George answers. John helps her up, pushes pillows behind her back until she's propped at a 45 degree angle and he can inspect the wound on her arm. He asks:

"Anyone tell you the whole story yet?"

George shakes her head, lets him pull up the hem of her soft hospital gown and inspect her surgical scars. They're hideous. There's not much else to say. One day she thinks she'll be able to look at them without wanting to throw up, because vanity in the face of near death is foolish, surely, but she doesn't know when that day will be. For now, she just turns her eyes toward the ceiling and swallows hard around the visual memory — the ugly stitches that are barely holding her closed.

John's fingers run close to her wound, not touching. He makes a humming noise; it's in a catalog of his Doctor Sounds George knows too well now. "Would you like to know?"

"I don't really care," George admits, because this is John, after all, "but tell me anyway, so I know how angry I ought to be when he shows his face again."

"Very," John promises her, laughing. Probably because being furious is exhausting, and they've all slept badly for months — a season. He begins pulling the hospital gown downward again, over her bandages, over fragile new skin, and George moves for him when his fingers tap her this way and that. Death and sex are two unsettlingly similar types of physical intimacy, she has realized. "I gather you've deduced he faked his jump."

She sighs. It hurts. "Fuck," she mutters, and adds, "Yes, even I managed that. Cheers for punching him, by the way."

"It was my pleasure," John says, smiling. "Anyway, in our latest conversation, he revealed that he apparently hung around London long enough to verify we had, in fact, survived his 'death,' and went on the lam." He drags George's covers back up, over her belly and up her chest. "That arse went to his own bloody funeral."

George remembers Eugenia and her cold, stricken expression. Maybe it's only the sepia of realization and the inconstancy of memory, but upon reflection it's a look more of misery than loss. In the shadow of the parish church, George imagines Eugenia had wanted to say something, that she'd seen George's red eyes and bloodless mouth and had wanted to tell her everything. If anyone should have been spared the fiction of Sherlock's death, then reasonably, it was his mother, but it doesn't make George hate Mycroft or Sherlock any less.

"I'm glad I didn't give him the satisfaction of crying, then," she grits out.

"Yes," John says lightly. "He complained about that length."

"Tosser," George says, and flings her good arm over her eyes, pressing her face into the crook of an elbow. "Then what?"

"Then he tortured me for a bit about how I had betrayed some completely illogical and non-traditionally masculine expressions of emotion about his death, and I was forced to hit him in the face again," John reports. "Which derailed the conversation for a long time."

"Of course," George says. "As your crying hardly made him less dead."

John is quiet for a long time before saying, "He went to Krakow, first, after London."
She lifts her elbow and peer at John's drawn and unhappy face. "To — dismantle Moriarty's remaining network?"

"Through any means necessary," he says lightly. "Then Moscow."

George thinks of her sunny kitchen; Moran standing in it with a teacup. "The subway bombing," she murmurs. "That was him."

"Among other things," John says agreeably, but with a briskness to his tone and as he is rising to his feet. "By this point I was threatening to beat him some more and the conversation deteriorated significantly."

She smiles, and it's genuine. "I'm honestly surprised you held out as long as you did."

"He'd broken into Harry's flat, I had no choice but to listen," John says.

"He'll just let himself in again and finish you know," George warns him.

"Shan't," John disagrees. "I'm back at Baker Street; he'll stay away if he knows what's good for him."

It's such a ridiculous sentiment that George starts laughing, hard enough that even the raw burst of pain doesn't stop her. Sherlock's never been interested in anything good for him until he'd gotten interested in John, and watching him stand in front of her with an expression full of indignant menace is mental — completely mental.

Later that day, Anthea is curled up next to her in the giant bed, dressed in a camel-colored pencil skirt and a dove gray blouse. They've joined forces in an attempt to unlock level eight on the Logo game, but level seven is monstrous with unknowns.

"So that was it? He blew up the Moscow subway and came home?" George asks, as Anthea tries every known variation of the name "United Airlines" on the game to no avail. "Also, I think that might be Delta."

Anthea types in "Delta," which goes through with a dismal 25 points. "And set fire to the file rooms at the European Commission and shut down the subway system in Beijing for six hours and offline an aging nuclear plant in Kanto, among other things," Anthea says, distracted. "Not everything could be kept out of the press, especially with Mr. Holmes seeking to make ever-larger, more headline-grabbing disasters, but we made an effort."

George stares at the phone screen, at an oval with stars in it and a gradient blue background and mumbles, "Headline-grabbing?"

"There were several fights about this," Anthea returns. The I was very annoyed by the redundancy of it is implied. "Kia?"

"Well, Sherlock's never done anything quietly," George allows. "And it's not Kia. I'm reasonably sure Kia is just KIA."

Anthea tries Hyundai and their enemy the red X appears. "More like he was desperate for John to suspect he wasn't dead," Anthea sighs, and deletes her guess.

George says, "Try Subaru," and "I beg your pardon?" in almost the same breath.

Anthea slants George a look, too innocent. "It's just a theory," she says, but she says it the same
time the game announces, LEVEL 8 UNLOCKED, so it feels more, it feels revelatory. It feels like another piece of a much larger truth.

***

It takes almost a week for Sherlock to show his face again. She's at once touched and annoyed by his restraint. She's bubbling over with questions, so that when she sees the bobbing fringe of his shorn-short hair lurking just outside the kitchen, she shouts:

"Get in here, you pillock!"

He gets, but it's with suspicious steps.

"You seem improved," he says, and stays in the doorway. He's graduated to a new pair of skintight jeans, but at least he's put on a button-down shirt. If his wardrobe is any indication of his mental state, then he's halfway between functional and functionally batshit, which George supposes is about as well as any of them are doing.

"Over here," she instructs impatiently. "And stop being such a coward, I'm still not well enough to hit you."

Thus assured and with dignity, he approaches, asking, "Why are you up and around? Aren't your intestines in slivers or something?"

The rotation and force needed to land a meaningful hit on him would be too painful to consider, but George is well enough to let him loop her arm into his, to lean heavily against him and walk with torturously small footsteps around her kitchen per the instructions of her fascist doctors and John. She's also well enough to snatch a piece of his skin between two fingers and twist.

Sherlock hisses like a wet cat, but George just keeps slumping against him, glowering out of the corner of her eye. "They were nicked," she corrects, and too sore for small talk, goes on to demand, "What's this I hear about you trying to get John's attention while you were supposed to be quietly playing dead?"

"I did no such thing," Sherlock lies, stiff.

George is aware of how unattractive disgusted realization is on her, and yet.

"Moriarty's network was a deeply entrenched and near-impenetrable vertical," he went on, condescending. "It's hardly my fault that my efforts to dissemble it were necessarily spectacular."

George snatches the still-reddened skin of Sherlock's arm again, threatening. "So spectacular that despite your brother's best efforts, the media became engaged?" she asks. "What did you do — send a press release?"

They've progressed all the way from the sink to the aga now, and George huffs for air a bit, leaning heavily against its warm body, free hand arrayed carefully to avoid a burn. The garden is bleached white from exuberant sun overhead, and any minute now her mother will be back with Anthea in tow, arms overflowing with the makings of several day's worth of stodgy British fare.

She must be looking better, because Sherlock actually ventures to slap her fingers away from him, looking as wronged as a Victorian schoolmarm.

"No, I made a statement — "
George glares at him.

"— statements," Sherlock revises. "It's hardly my fault if people were clever enough to translate them — which, I might remind you, didn't include you or John."

George pinches him anyway, more viciously this time, and listens to him let out an indignant squeak, which she ignores in favor of saying, "That is for getting my intestines shot to slivers, you ridiculous shit."

He pinches her back, at which she shouts, "Fuck!" and he snaps, "And I am hardly the reason your innards are in pieces. I'm afraid that honor rests proudly with my brother."

The fact that Sherlock is the type of rotten human being who would assault an invalid is forced to the side for the time being.

"I beg your pardon?" George asks. "Explain."

Sherlock sniffs. "Honestly I don't know what you've been doing: laid up in bed with almost zero avenues for entertainment and you somehow haven't deduced this already?"

George bites back her reflexive answers to this, about how recovery is boring, yes, but it is also horrible and consuming. She doesn't talk about how they're stepping down her narcotic intake, so she's in constant, unrelenting low-grade pain; or how shitty and invasive and humiliating it is that after more than three decades of doing all sorts of things in private, now an entire medical community — John Watson inclusive — is privy to the color of her urine and the frequency of her bowel movements. There are the lost hours eaten away by her misplaced and ridiculous self-pity (for the scars) and better-justified self-loathing (for Edith). She doesn't shout at him about all the interstitial moments, all the half-thoughts she arrests mid-completion, and how she's been staring at the ceiling of the hospital room, her bedroom, at the walls, at Anthea, and all the time desperately thinking of anything but Mycroft — how his absence has left holes in her.

The effort of not saying any of it is draining, but it's not worse than the look that would flicker across Sherlock's face if she does. It's foolish of course, because Sherlock is a grown and exceptional man, but to her he'll always be that wild-haired boy whose jagged edges cut both ways. George can't bear to hurt him.

"Intestines, shooting, still convinced it's your fault, etcetera — out with it," George manages, snappier in tone than in sentiment.

Sherlock huffs. "It's simple deduction, Lestrade," he lectures. "He sent you away." It's shocking how much that still hurts. Enough so that George snarls, "Simple how?"

"Think, Lestrade," he demands, narrow-eyed now. "Does it even make sense he would send you away if I were dead? Why would he want you — the only person by all accounts who can tolerate him for multiple hours at a time, romantically even, despite how horrifying I find that prospect — away from him if I were genuinely spattered on a sidewalk somewhere? What would be the point?"

George stares at him and doesn't say, I thought he blamed me.

"And if, as your expression betrays, my wretched despot of a brother had actually blamed you for my expiration, I've no doubt you'd fully appraised of that sentiment, rather than harboring self-generated guilt on the subject," Sherlock went on, impatient. "No — this was obvious, this was glaring. Mycroft Holmes abandoning a woman in a morgue corridor in a torrent of emotion? Nothing could be more suspicious: he wanted to protect you, and foolishly imagined that simple
absence would help serve as a firewall when in reality it only underlined his frankly embarrassing attachment to you."

She felt her eyes widen. "Morgue corridor?" she asked. "Were you watching?"

"Irrelevant," Sherlock declared, which meant yes, yes he had been. "What's of substance here is that given those circumstances, it was all too easy for Moran to identify you as leverage and — " he waved at George's midsection " — eventually shoot you in some brutal, common outburst."

As soon as she was well, George was going to stomp Sherlock into a greasy smear.

"Are you telling me that you knew Moran was Moriarty's partner and you let him call John and I in for repeated interviews in confined spaces?" she asked. "Let's not even discuss his tendency to sexually harass me in dimly lit corners of the Yard."

In another life, Sherlock would have scoffed and gone off on part two of an epic poem about his own cleverness, and how he was balancing the risks every step of the way, Lestrade, cease your extremely dull panic.

In this one, in this incarnation, his face is drawn. His voice is quiet. He says, "No — I knew Moriarty had at least one partner, or else who would be taking the kill shots, but we didn't know who." Sherlock falls silent for a second, one that drags out to an everlasting minute. "It was stupid to think he'd go on the run when everything of value was in London, still."

George can't help but think about how Sherlock had nearly brought governments to their knees over the pale smoke of imagined love with Irene. She thinks about Mycroft's face — the weight of his fingers on her cheek — in the fireside light of the study, telling her he would burn London to ashes over her.

She wonders how they couldn't have known, when it was so obvious to her, obvious to John, obvious to Kitty Riley and every person who had ever made an insinuation about Sherlock and John on the Mills & Boone wall at NSY. She wonders how they could have calculated every risk and possibility and completely ignored their most glaring vulnerabilities, the bruises writ large across their hearts.

"It was an oversight," Sherlock murmurs, the silk of his voice hoarse around the hard consonants.

George reaches up so she can press her hand against his gaunt face, to press some warmth into his skin, to catch his gaze. She doesn't know what she's looking for, exactly, in the hurt blue of his eyes. She just wants to know that it's there, that he isn't playing at penance, that he'll deserve it when John inevitably forgives him. She wants to know that he's taken this to heart, wherever it lives: with him, with Baker Street, cupped in John's hands.

"I did cry for you, you bastard," she whispers to him, softly confessing.

Sherlock winces. "I know. Mycroft was very cross with me."

George smiles, involuntary. "How cross?"

"I'm reasonably sure he sold me, briefly, into the sex trafficking industry in Romania," Sherlock mutters, and like that, George can feel the moment sealing itself behind them, the edges shuttered in conclusion.

Walking her from the ground floor to the first floor and her bedroom again is fraught. Even with the installation of a lift on the staircase, there's the business of plodding her way to the staircase,
and then the business of her mother and Anthea returning before she's gotten all the way there — Sherlock's long-suffering boredom heavy with sighs in her ear the entire time — and there's a great to-do about her being reckless with herself. All in all, it's another half-hour and an absurd amount of shouting before she's back under the covers of her bed, still peering up at Sherlock's studied indifference as he inspects her charts.

"Should I forgive him?" George asks, without the question passing through any of her mental or verbal filters. It explodes out of her.

Sherlock's eyes, when he looks up, are sharp.

Only George doesn't care anymore. She just wants to know. "Should I?" she asks again.

"I would say 'no,'" Sherlock starts, "because he's a helplessly interfering fascist, and his association with you genuinely upsets me."

George arches a brow. "You would say no?"

"But," he continues, looking sick with himself, "I suppose I hope you do."

"Why?" George asks, because Sherlock's explanations have framed the mysteries of her life for more than half a decade now — it's been his reasoning that's helped grieving families and solve puzzles. Why not this one?

His smile, this time, is self-deprecating. "Let's say I view it as an indicator of whether or not John will be equally understanding."

"I have permission to shoot to kill, Mr. Holmes," Anthea says from the doorway. Her voice is pleasant, but she's double-fisting a Haribo bucket and her BlackBerry.

"And so, I leave you to her tender mercies," Sherlock declares, and whirls away.

"Your mother is downstairs making a fish pie," Anthea reports, as Sherlock's footsteps clatter down the stairs and into the front hall.

George pulls a face.

"I've already called for takeaway," Anthea goes on, toeing off her heels and reaching for the iPad by George's bedside. "Jonathan Creek?"

"Please," George agrees, but between the length of the day and the warmth of Anthea's shoulder under her cheek, she's asleep before they hit the first shot of the windmill.

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It takes a week of shuffling around the first floor of the house, shuffling around the kitchen, shuffling around the garden, before George shuffles up to the secret balcony she'd discovered during the apogee of her misery. She sits up there for hours, wrapped in her robe, clutching her arms close, looking across the sweep of Mayfair, of the park, toward the palace, at Sir Kenneth's SmartCar.

George supposes there is a battalion of highly trained snipers with long-range rifles located strategically, otherwise there's no way she'd be left alone here so reliably. She brings books, cups of tea, the iPad. She always brings her mobile — clutches it in one hand or the other: the modern-day equivalent of being tongue-tied.
She starts and restarts her messages. She starts and restarts dialing. When the screen's turned off, there's the tell-tale marks of her fingertips across the same five spots on the glass, archeological evidence. She wants to make him tell her the unabridged truth, to grovel for forgiveness, to prove Sherlock right and ease the infectious doubt in her, to convince her he loves her now the way he did before.

In the end, she sends:

_Sherlock said you helped him because you owed him._

_What did you do? GL_

Mycroft answers texts from her either not at all, or under 2 minutes, and after 15 have crawled past, George is tapping out, _You're a right cunt, do you know that?_ when her phone whistles at her, coy, the screen glowing.

_I told Moriarty about him._

_It was a bid for his cooperation._

_Failed, obviously._

MH

And then, a beat later:

_You need a blanket._

MH

George, reflexively awful, writes back: _No blanket. Running mild fever. Why did you want his cooperation? GL_

_Destruction of his network._

_It's sorted now._

_I'm sending Anthea._

MH

George wants to write back, _where are you? and why haven't you come to see me? and don't you miss me?_ except then Anthea's clattering up the staircase in the closet, looking nearly put-out and bearing the afghan off the sitting room sofa.

It goes on like this, the days stretching out. She goes for x-rays and doctors come to see her. The nurses change shifts. John and Sherlock alternate visits, as if she's a child for whom they have joint custody. Sherlock brings her gifts stroke bribes of cream buns from the Asian bakery, clandestine curries from Brick Lane, peony petals from Columbia Street Market. John brings her reassurances she's healing — slowly, but well — and he eats the cream buns, the clandestine curries, runs his rough fingers over the petals.

"Will you forgive him?" George asks, idly curious. She knows John will, but she doesn't know if he knows he will.

He arches a brow at her, nods at her mobile. "Have you forgiven him?"

"At least yours is making an effort," George retorts.

"He's sleeping rough out behind Mrs. Hudson's bins," John answers. "That's not making an effort: that's stalking."

She smiles, and it surprises her a little to find she means it. "In the Holmes lexicon, that's actually
quite sweet, you know."

"You're a sick woman, George," John informs her, and strips her out of her soft, too-big t-shirt for inspection.

She might be sick, but it doesn't make her wrong. And the next time she finds herself sitting on the balcony, drinking Irn Bru to prove a point, she looks down for Sir Kenneth's SmartCar, the familiar neighbors, and sees a black sedan instead, parked quietly in front of the house.

George fumbles the soda can, her mobile, the edge of her blanket. It takes two tries before she manages to disengage the lock screen, and even then, her fingers are shaky as she texts:

_Is that you then? GL._

This reply, like the old ones, like the hundreds stored in her history, is lightning fast.

_Stop drinking that._

_It's toxic. Who gave it to you?_  
_MH._

The laugh that bursts out of her hurts, but in the best way.

_I asked if I could have a glass of wine and was told it was the worst possible thing I could be drinking right now. I begged to differ. GL._

It's ridiculous, of course, but George thinks she can hear his sigh from here on the second floor, looking down at the gleaming roof of the car and through the bulletproof glass and sound-killing insulation. She thinks she can imagine his face, the severity of his suit, what pocket square he might be wearing. She thinks about her anger and her embarrassment, and how compared with her mortifying _yearning_ for him, they seem small and spiteful in comparison.

She curls a hand against the railing and dials him.

"Hello," she breathes, when the line connects.

The silence on the other end is endless. Then: "This is the liquid equivalent of cutting off your nose to spite your face, Georgiana."

She's glad she's already sitting — her knees go weak at her name. She's never liked it, consciously, and it's baffling to be so greedy to hear its vowels and consonants in his mouth. She wonders if Mycroft's missed her, too, and shuts her eyes against it.

"Georgiana?" he repeats, with a barely calm urgency she finds obscurely pleasing.

"Tell me you were sorry to do that to me," she murmurs, barely above a whisper, her eyes still closed. It's not what she'd thought she'd say, but it must be what she's wanted all along, hidden underneath her tongue. "Tell me it hurt you, too."

Mycroft's answer is slow. "Yes — I was. I did," he tells her, and it sounds gouged out of him.

She exhales, shaking. "Did you regret it?"

"I tried not to think about it," he says. "I had Anthea watch you very closely."

"Anthea?" George asks.
"Because I couldn't bear to," Mycroft tells her, and it's so easy and unembarrassed and flatly, abjectly miserable George has to press a hand to her mouth to seal in her reflexive absolution.

She hangs up, frantic, and stumbles back inside, pulling two stitches in the process and spending the night on the sitting room sofa meditating on a single page of *The Weaker Vessel* and staring into the banked fire in the room. There aren't any easy resolutions here, and George finds herself thinking about the statistics on second marriages, the staggering numbers that were against her in the first place, and wonders how the algorithm changes when accounting for Holmeses — when accounting for this, whatever it is, and if there is even math for these probabilities.

"Did Dad ever do anything you found unforgivable?" George asks her mum, the next day, when the afternoon light is pooling across the kitchen floor.

Her mum just looks thoughtful, a touch sad, saying, "What's unforgivable anyway? Isn't anything you do forgive forgivable?"

George stares at her, mouth dry. "Is it that easy, then?"

"George," Gillian sighs, "there is nothing easy about it."

She sleeps badly that night, pain waking her up at odd intervals, but it's half-two in the morning and George doesn't want to bother her nurses, to limp down the hall until she can find Anthea. So she lies on her mostly-uninjured side and stares at the stack of books on Mycroft's side the bed: *Wodehouse, The Pillars of Hercules, Delta of Venus*. He doesn't use bookmarks, nor does he fold down the corners to save his place, tries not to leave a mark. But the spines are all cracked-white and broken, the ragged pages waterlogged from her baths, from overturned glasses of mineral water ("Sparkling, please") thoughtlessly overturned. There is a pair of reading glasses, smudged with fingerprints, and a receipt, unearthed from somewhere and left behind.

Holmeses only seem otherworldly, George thinks to herself, woozy with hurt and philosophical. Their advantages larger but their flaws more dangerous; they are as human as she is, as John is. They live alone, but they're bad at it.

She unearths her mobile from where she's shoved it under a pillow and calls him.

"You're in pain," he says, instead of hello. He sounds stricken, as if he hurts, too.

"Was it the only way? Sherlock faking his death? You couldn't have...dispatched men to have it handled?" George whispers to him, like their secret conversations from not very long ago, held in the cathedral of their bed linens.

"It wasn't the only way," Mycroft says. "But the other options were worse — messier. They were no guarantee of safety, with a larger possibility for loss of life. It was not a good decision, only the best choice we had available."

She hums to herself, believes him. "How did you not know?" she asks now. "About Moran?"

"It was not actually my intention for you to be shot, Georgiana," Mycroft says, but at least he sounds properly wretched about it.

"You are not allowed to be shirty with me about this," George replies. "They had to remove my spleen."

His silence this time is tense and very dangerous. "I am aware," he promises.
"So?" she demands, a little louder.

"Very early on, after I first met you — "

"Had me kidnapped," George interrupts.

" — I brokered a...territorial agreement in London," Mycroft continues, bland with studied disinterest. "And in the process, for various reasons too complicated to detail, Kings College lost a small property that had a car park adjacent."

George remembers this, but through a different lens. She remembers Tom storming home in a frightful mood, raving about how someone at the university had bollocksed everything and had his car taken away. And in the subsequent days she remembered him making vain efforts to retrieve it, and how it was nearly a week later they'd located it — more or less dismembered — in an impound lot a mile outside of Tottenham.

"You arranged for the assassination of my ex-husband's car," George says, wondering.

"This cannot be a surprise to you," Mycroft says, impatient. "I identified Sebastian Moran as suspicious the first moment he arrived at Scotland Yard — but I made that judgment as he touched your hand."

George reaches out to touch the edge of the Anais Nin. It's been well-loved.

"You were jealous," she concludes.

"He was spotless in the records, had a well-papered trail, and there was no reason for my suspicion of him beyond the knowledge you'd made him a cup of tea and been in the archives room with him — barefoot, at night. Jealous — " he spits out the word, disgusted " — is an inadequate term, and I overcorrected."

George thinks about this for long minutes and comes to no conclusions. It's simply something that happened, like Mycroft trying to trade Sherlock's secrets for Moriarty's compliance, like Sherlock being an architect of her and John's continued danger with his desperate hope. Nothing will change these things; the only way out is through.

"This is impressive," she says at last. "You are much crazier than I had thought."

Mycroft makes a long-suffering noise. "I've woken one of the nurses for you," he informs her. "She'll be in shortly to administer a painkiller."

"Oh, God," George says, horrified. "It's 3 a.m.!"

"You called me," Mycroft says.

"You're different," she hisses, hearing a knock at her door and Wendy, the night nurse, calling out, "Ms. Lestrade?"

When Mycroft says, "Oh, thank God," it comes out trembling and genuine, and George hangs up on him again.

***

She and John compare stories the next day over tea and a small mountain of Pret brownie bars that he brings as an offering.
They are still only privy to part of it, they're sure, but enough to gather a semi-cohesive narrative. Mycroft told Moriarty about Sherlock; Moriarty used the information to blaspheme Sherlock in the media, to push him off the roof. Blackmail, apparently, is catching, and it was used to secure Mycroft's participation in Sherlock's deception, after which point certain people were abandoned, certain other people went into a decline, and many things were dismantled and exploded.

That's a trite reduction, factual if not comprehensive. Sherlock had come back brittle, literally scarred, but by the time George is ambulating the stairs freely, John's capitulated and let Sherlock move back into the Baker Street flat, and she can think of no better, nor any more desired, caretaker for Sherlock.

"Congratulations," George commends him. "You gave in even faster than I expected."

"Sod off," John quips, unwrapping another brownie. "What about you, then?"

George looks out the window, at the unrelenting gray mass of London, letting the chocolate melt across her tongue. "I'm...trying to figure out the right thing to do."

John makes an unattractive sound. "George — there is no right thing to do," he tells her, not without sympathy, and whatever else he might say is swallowed up by the shrill noise of his mobile phone, lighting up where it's lying on the table.

She doesn't bother to look at the screen. "Sherlock?"

John frowns. "No," he says, sounding strange, and holds the phone up for her inspection. "Do you recognize that number?"

George's eyes round. "Shit," she says, and reaches for the television remote. "We'd better check the news."

"George?" John asks, still holding the phone, which is still ringing madly.

"That is the newsroom number for The Daily Mail," George tells him, as the tiny countertop television springs to life, the BBC newsreader's mouth moving on the screen, saying:

"...in a shocking turn of events, private detective Sherlock Holmes, who had been presumed dead by his own hand, was spotted at Scotland Yard today."

George and John stare at the telly.

"Oh," John says, breathy, "I'll kill him."

Over the next five days, George receives no fewer than thirty voice mails from various media outlets. In between, she receives a dozen texts from Sherlock, complaining that Mycroft is being unhelpful in reviving Sherlock for the land of the living, and that his credit cards have been stopped, and that if she were any kind of ethical police officer at all, she would put a stop to the gross abuse he's being forced to endure.

She ignores him, but it feels normal, ordinary, not fraught with hurt. The times she sees him on the television — as cameramen and photographers chase him everywhere now — his curls are growing back in, he's reclaimed his tailored, tarty suits.

***

Guy Fawkes day begins with several representatives of the Metropolitan Police Force arriving at
George's doorstep. They bring their best wishes for her wellbeing; their repeated, profuse apologies for the slings and arrows she'd endured in the entire Sherlock debacle; a fulsome desire for her to make a media appearance post-shooting in order to quell the outpouring of public concern, both for her and at perceived incompetence at the Met; and an offer to kick her up the management ladder to DCI.

It ends with some drunken hooligans setting a number of cars in Hoxton Square on fire, and George finds herself sitting in the garden watching the news through the kitchen window — sound too faint to be heard — thinking about the next day, the day after, the month after, and what she wants during all of it.

The reality she's been avoiding is that this entire mess isn't a singular extraordinary instance of metastasizing chaos. This is just an example of an ever-present possible reality when your reality is framed by Mycroft and Sherlock Holmes. Mycroft was wrong, before, to call her life the first chapter of a disaster story — it is their lives, all of them, that are pieces of a spectacular novel of potential calamity.

And John is right to say that there is no right thing to do, no decision that will untangle everything and leave no mark.

She's alone for the first time in an age, her mother with Ben visiting his children, the nurses in between shifts, Anthea deputized to conquer Waitrose for the weekly shop. George doesn't have to make any decisions now, she can just sit in the brisk evening air and stare into the sky looking for wisps of smoke — or she could pick up her phone and make the mistake that will make her the happiest.

***

Come home. GL.
Epilogue

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

George is reasonably certain that her involvement in this case stems from some sort of larger karmic punishment, as it had started with a note from the first officers on the scene saying, "Bring some tarp," and rapidly escalated to this terrible moment: her watching poor Hatcher trying not to expire from embarrassment as he stands in a room with five dead bodies arrayed in the center and fairly overflowing with graphic pornography: videos, photographs, heaps and heaps of magazines.

"Sir — ma'am," he says to her, miserable.

George makes a face at the carpet, sniffing. "Is that — ?"

"Yes," Hatcher rushes to say, before she can fully articulate her question, which is probably for the best when he adds, "Soaked through." He holds up some plastic shoe coverings. "I saved these for you."

She takes them with a sigh. "Tell me, Hatcher, why have I been rousted out of my cosy, non-urine-soaked office to come to Hampstead and stare at ugly, naked, dead middle-class people?"

Experience and age haven't conquered Hatcher's reflexive and eternal professional anxiety, and he fumbles a notepad out of his shirt pocket and paws at it for long, awkward moments while Davison rolls his eyes in the background, openly admiring some of the grainy photos of gangbangs on the walls.

"Well," Hatcher starts, "it's a quintuple homicide."

"I think it's a sex accident," Davison calls, having moved away from the still photos to one of the computer monitors, spooling out mildly revolting footage of an exceptionally hairy man churning the cream. George hates that she knows that terminology at all.

Hatcher looks at George urgently. "There is the possibility that this is a sex accident," he admits.

George glances at the bodies: unmarked, their eyes all open, each expression a rictus of perimortem shock. The doors and windows to the house were locked from the inside, the security alarm had still been engaged when the officers had been forced to break in to investigate the missing persons report. There's no apparent murder weapon or indeed a cause of death, and guessing from the smell, they've been dead at least 48 hours.

"Hatcher, I want you to think very carefully when I ask you: what kind of sex accident kills five people without leaving a mark?" George queries him, slipping the plastic covers over her tan flats and watching expressions of mortification, uncertainty, annoyance, and eventually mortification again flit across Hatcher's sweet, bright red face. "Separately, it's high time you stop falling for it when Davison tells you things."

Glowering over his shoulder over at the officer in question, Hatcher says, "Yes, sir — ma'am."

George leans forward to peer through a doorway, at where Sally is rooting around the kitchen in a deeply unflattering blue jumpsuit. "Anything?"

"Everything in this bloody house is biodegradable and nontoxic," Sally calls back. "If they were
poisoned, then whoever's done it has taken the poison with him."

"Except the alarm was on," George says to herself, picking her way around the bodies to a circa 1996 Nokia phone abandoned on a side table, calling out, "Gloves, please!"

Davison squishes across the carpet — vile — and stuffs a pair into her hands, and George is trying to negotiate the latex around her rings when her phone buzzes dully in her pocket. She says, "Bollocks," and answers it with, "Hello?"

"Let me in," Sherlock says.

George pinches the mobile between her shoulder and ear, swearing under her breath at the Holmes family's proclivity for five carat antique diamonds and trying not to tear the latex of the glove. "What?" she asks, smoothing the material over the platinum wedding band, blessedly unmarked.

"The house," he snipes at her.

George rolls her eyes, shuffling over to the phone and bagging it for evidence. She says, "Hey, catch," and hurls it at Hatcher's head. As he's diving for it and risking a shirtfront of pee, she says, "I thought we'd confiscated your police scanner."

"I'm standing on the front walk with a number of your even more idiotic slack-jawed subordinates," Sherlock complains. "Your lot are clearly clueless."

There's a very large, disgusting crust of semen on the ottoman, and George whistles at one of the crime scene techs, waving him over. "Here," she tells him, and says to Sherlock, "By the way, insulting my people is an absolutely brilliant way of convincing me you deserve to be let onto an investigation again."

Sherlock is sullenly mute for half a minute before he says, "It's been more than a year."

"And?" George prompts, circling through the kitchen and laundry and downstairs loo to the front sitting room, where she can see the cluster of panda cars and forensic vans arrayed out front, the nosey neighbors thick on the ground, nannies whispering at each other over exorbitantly priced prams. Also: Sherlock, incensed.

"And I've been extremely gracious in all my professional interactions with you," he lies through his teeth.

George says, "False, try again."

"For God's sake, Lestrade!" he roars, except — she doesn't hear anything from outside, no odd stereo effect of him shouting at her, despite how loud he is, and how thin these single glaze panes are.

She turns round and calls through the hall, "Oy! I think this house may be soundproofed!"

Over the phone, Sherlock is saying, "Soundproofed?"

George turns back to the window, where she can see Sherlock creeping ever closer to the front door of the house, dodging stray officers on the scene and being surprisingly sneaky despite the mid-winter drama of his Belstaff coat blowing out behind him.

"Nothing you need to worry about," George says, grinning and leaning against the window frame, waving where Sherlock's spotted her.
"It has been fourteen months!" he yelled at her, looking completely bonkers screaming into his mobile on the front lawn of a crime scene. In a sick way, George has missed this a little bit. "If one more useless heiress comes to me with one more ridiculous missing brooch or vanished show pony my brain is going to liquify in my skull — give me murders, Lestrade, give me work!"

She laughs, "Christ, you sound desperate."

"I am," he grinds out. If looks could kill, honestly.

"Will you behave?" she asks.

"Yes," he snaps, and advances two steps up the walk.

She moves away from the window, toward the door, pressing her fingers against the lock. He could pick it, but he knows that would lengthen the terms of his probation indefinitely; George is a capricious parol officer.

"Will you have John here, too?" she asks.

"He's on his way," Sherlock says, annoyed by this. "Apparently he had to perform surgery or something similarly dull. I stopped listening."

George laughs, and mostly to be a twat at this point, she asks, "Will you wear the jumpsuit and follow proper scene procedure?"

Sherlock makes a series of hilarious and hilariously wronged noises before composing himself and managing, "Yes, fine. I will."

"Good," George says, smiling, and opens the door.

Chapter End Notes

This story started the way most of them do: with an idle thought and no planning.

It grew like kudzu, sprawling into a labor of tortured affection and television transcription. If I never watch the Great Game again, it will still be too soon. Trying to catch all the dialog in the scene on the riverbank will haunt my dreams until my dying day.

That said, I've loved writing George, and I've loved writing George's London. Like her, it is a perceived unglamorous thing, filled with high streets in Islington and hidden-away restaurants, ordinary things like weekly shops at Sainsbury's and angry lunches at Pret and long weekend lines at Ottelonghi: lovely in their smaller, very precious ways, as people who have been lucky enough to know the high streets and brunch lines are aware. (I didn't expect it, but this story has in many ways become my love letter to London, as well.) It's a side of the city I don't get to read about often, and that I wanted to write down and remember.

Importantly, it is in no way an overstatement to say that without the contributions of Leupagus, this story wouldn't exist. She's been my faithful beta reader, sounding board, and barometer from hour one on this thing, and hung in there through the logical fallacies and gross abuse of the m-dash and despite the fact that having feelings
for Mycroft and Lestrade is anathema to her. She abandoned her principles for this, for which I am eternally grateful.

- Pru (2/20/2013)