After the Storm

by Librarianmum

Summary

Sherlock is back and John should be pleased... but it's never that simple, is it? Follows on immediately from Lighting Fires, as Sherlock struggles to return, John struggles to adapt, Greg and Mrs Hudson struggle to forgive and Mycroft struggles to make his brother understand. Focuses on Sherlock's POV of view on the events in Lighting Fires and afterwards, so read that first.

Notes

This story directly follows on from Lighting Fires, so it would definitely help to read that first. It's from Sherlock's point of view and will explore his struggles to resume his old life after Reichenbach, as he reflects on his side of the story during Lighting Fires.

Like the previous story, I originally wrote this before series 3, which is why certain facts about Sherlock's background and family don't fit that series.

The characters belong to Arthur Conan Doyle; their modern incarnation to Steven Moffatt/Mark Gatiss. I make no money from this.
The Night

The first thing he'd ever noticed about London was that the city never slept.

He'd been seven years old and his mother had brought him up with her from Sussex for the first time. Ostensibly it was for some high society event – an elaborate tenth birthday party for the daughter of a duke – and she must have wanted a handy child to justify her presence at it. It must have been during term time, as Mycroft would have been away at his boarding school. He couldn't quite recall the circumstances, but, looking back, it was obvious that she wouldn't have been desperate enough to bring him if the older, better behaved child had been available.

The party was a disaster, of course.

Or perhaps it was just a cover – to hide the real purpose of the trip. Perhaps the main point was the man in the expensive suit with his falsely cheerful smile and the hard eyes behind the glasses that he clearly didn't need but wore to make himself look older. The man who asked him inane questions and made him look at some pictures of ink blots and tell him what he saw – as if he were supposed to see something other than the obvious. It seemed a little odd that this strange individual should make him look at so many pages when they were all essentially the same thing (albeit with different shapes) and he could see no useful pattern. Perhaps the man did not realise? He told him so, adding details of the type of ink and the process used to achieve such an effect. The man wrote this down, very carefully.

His mother did not seem particularly pleased with him when they left, but then he was used to a faint air of disapproval by that stage. When he'd been younger, he vaguely remembered a softer, more affectionate woman who might even embrace him from time to time if she was not too busy entertaining guests or engaged in some other activity. He must have done something to change her feelings towards him since those far-off days – he wasn't exactly sure what, but then he didn't much care.

He preferred his father's company – well, not company as such, but his father would lock himself away in his office and essentially ignore his younger son – which was just how he liked it. No disapproval or disappointment, just indifference. He was left to pursue his own interests from dawn to dusk, except for the nervous tutor who appeared from time to time to stutter unnecessary suggestions of topics that he could study - always suggested, never enforced. It was an idyllic childhood. In the back of his mind, he had a vague awareness that this would all end and that he would shortly be following his brother to boarding school. For now, though, it was perfect.

HeeH sat rapt in the taxi next to his silent mother, taking in his first sights of London. If Mycroft were present, he would probably talk to him, pointing out features and buildings, relating the history of the city – and he could absorb these useful facts, decide what he needed to remember and discard the rest. But his older brother was not here, and when they returned to their town apartment, he was delivered into the waiting hands of his current nanny, who chivvied him up into the nursery for tea, followed by a bath and then bed.

But he couldn't sleep. At home in Sussex, he'd be able to hear the rustle of the wind through the tree outside his bedroom window, neatly harmonised by the distant trickling of the stream over the rocks. This music was occasionally punctured by the hoot of an owl or the guard dogs barking at a fox or the sound of a door closing somewhere in the house, but when all other noises ceased, the rhythm would still be there. Those sounds soothed him; they were familiar companions during the long dark hours when the household slept and he lay awake. Sleep had always eluded him for as long as he could remember, but if he focused very carefully, the calm rhythm of wind and water could lull him
But here, the sounds were different – unfamiliar and unpredictable and strangely exhilarating. No rhythm. Constant traffic from outside his window – their three-floor apartment was located on a busy main road opposite a large square park – but there was no pattern in it. It ebbed and flowed with the changing of the traffic lights; he closed his eyes and began to make estimations about the number of seconds between each change. Occasionally, he'd hear an angry shout from an aggrieved driver. In between traffic light changes, he could hear the tap tap tap of pedestrian heels on the pavement down below. There was no discernable pattern in that, either. Hours later, the footsteps became more numerous, and he could hear loud talking and laughter and the occasional gruff comment from the night doorman standing in the entrance to their building.

In Sussex, there would usually be silence at some point of the night, punctured only by that familiar rhythm of wind/water. Even the hunting owl would fall silent. But here, the hours ticked by and the cars carried on driving back and forth and the footsteps carried on tap-tapping and there were sirens and the occasional shout in the distance. And then, at some indiscernible point, late night gave way to early morning, and there was the rumble of lorries and vans delivering milk and newspapers and the high-pitched whine of the street cleaners brushing along the kerb.

And he loved it.

The overload of data made his head swim as he sat in the nursery that morning, toying with his breakfast cereal and hot milk. So much to process; so much new information to analyse. He sifted it all into one section of his mind, to revisit at his leisure when he was back in Sussex. By the time Mycroft came home for the next holidays, he had isolated the important facts and had a new set of questions for his brother to answer.

He missed his brother when he was away. Mycroft wasn't like the others. He didn't talk to him as if he were a baby, like the various nannies would (before handing in their notice), or pull a face as his mother did, or look bored, like his father. The older boy would sit patiently, outlining the facts in his quiet voice. They would go into the library and pore over the volumes of the encyclopaedia, Mycroft tapping his podgy finger at the salient fact or image to illustrate his point.

No one knew as much as Mycroft. He was prepared to give each and every question serious consideration and he always had an answer. How old was London? How big was it? How many people lived there? Why did London have so many parks and why were they square? Why wasn't the timing on the traffic lights altered so that the traffic didn't build up so much on the south side of the park? Why did the girl at the party cry when he spoke to her? Why did the man show him all those ink blots? Admittedly, his brother did falter a little at the last question, his usually impassive face twitching slightly, but then he commented that the man must not have realised that all the pages contained ink blots. So that was all right.

At first, Sussex remained the only place where he could be soothed to sleep, thanks to that wind/water rhythm. Sleep was hard to come by at the dreaded boarding school, in a dormitory of snoring, snuffling boys; and then later, in his halls at Cambridge, where partying students staggered in late. Later on still, in a series of flats in all-night London, sleep would only come as a welcome friend whenever he collapsed from sheer exhaustion or from the aftermath of indulging in alcohol or illicit drugs.

However, as time went on, and he grew intimately familiar with its night sounds and learned to read the rhythms, London eventually spoilt him for sleep in any other location – and no more so than after the Fall. He lay awake and unrested in a series of comfortable beds - in an old Maharajah's palace in rural Rajasthan, in his brother's unlisted apartment in Manhattan, on a canal boat in Amsterdam, on a
remote ranch in Patagonia - and yet he slept like a baby while wrapped up in newspaper in a Soho doorway on a cold November night.

Now he lay awake on the sofa. He could have slept, but he resisted. There was a pattern to be observed.

He was currently listening out for the lorry that rumbled up Baker Street every morning to deliver supplies to the Tesco Metro next to the tube station. The lorry would pass 221B between 6.04 and 6.13. And then John’s alarm clock would sound at 6.15, followed by a thud as his flatmate’s clumsy hand knocked it to the ground while trying to turn it off. There would be a prolonged creak from the ancient bed in the upstairs bedroom – a bed that quite possibly pre-dated Mrs Hudson and was now so saggy that John frequently woke up with low back pain and didn’t appear to know why, which was odd for a doctor. Before the Fall, Sherlock had kept meaning to point it out, but had been distracted by something else before he had a chance.

Then he would hear the sound of heavy footsteps across the bedroom floor, as John attempted to get his brain together enough to put on his dressing gown. There would be quiet footfalls down the staircase – John, having woken up properly, would be attempting not to wake his flatmate up on his way to the bathroom, something which used to amuse Sherlock before the Fall. He wondered vaguely whether John would return automatically to his old habit or whether he had never actually lost it. And also why he had never moved into the more convenient and comfortable downstairs bedroom. Sentiment, presumably.

John was usually an early riser and set his alarm for the same time each morning whether he was working or not. Sherlock supposed it was military training. His flatmate needed a full night’s sleep, though, which was disappointingly banal. If he didn’t get his full seven hours, he was likely to drop off again after turning off his alarm. On those mornings, he’d hurry down the stairs, late for work and cursing under his breath.

It was still too early for the lorry. Sherlock closed his eyes and cast his mind back…

…To another night, this one in the Sinai Desert. A year ago.

He sat in a crevice in the rocks, pulling his knees up to his chin to keep out the night-time desert cold. He cupped his hands over his mouth, lighting up the stub of a roll-up and sucking the burning smoke into his lungs gratefully.

He peered through his binoculars at the camp of domed luxury tents in the valley far below – lit up like a Christmas tree in this uninhabited and largely unlit landscape. It looked (but only looked) deserted; he knew that there were plenty of guards lurking in the dark outside the camp. Far enough away not to disturb the guests’ false impression of solitude in the desert but close enough to attack any intruder.

The night here was strangely quiet. No bird song, no sound of small animals scurrying in the dust. Just the occasional thrum of aircraft passing overhead on their way to the Red Sea resorts and the powerhouses of the Middle East.

He took a last drag of his cigarette, careful to hide the glow, and then stamped it out under his heel. He leaned forward slightly, peering at the rocks below. He knew that there were eighteen men out there in the dark and was certain of the location of sixteen. That left two.

Two years ago, he would have taken the risk. He would have left his hiding place, uncaring of the danger, and inched his way down towards his prize in the camp below. The luxury Bedouin camp that wasn’t really a luxury camp; the rich Qatari tourists that weren’t really tourists. The harmless-
looking middle-aged banker who wasn't really a banker.

But then, two years ago, he hadn’t yet been hit by the bullet that chipped his left humerus and left him feverish and in danger until he’d been able to seek proper medical attention. Two years ago, he had thought himself invulnerable. He had survived a fall; he couldn’t possibly be hurt. He had been wrong.

No. He would wait until he was certain where the two unaccounted-for guards were, so he was able to make a safe judgement call. He huddled into his niche, pushing his hands into his armpits to warm them up. In any case, there was time. All the time in the world.

So, he sat on in the silent, dark night and waited, biding his time…

… Sherlock jumped slightly, shaken out of his reverie by the rumble of the early morning Tesco lorry. He opened his eyes and stretched his head back on the sofa to see the last glowing embers of the fire. His neck creaked painfully – he must have dropped off for at least an hour in a cramped position.

He took more notice of the room. The armchairs were still drawn up close to the fireplace, where John had arranged them last night, along with the coffee table - on which sat the empty boxes, dirty plates and general detritus from last night’s Chinese takeaway. Sherlock could smell assorted aromas of spice, grease and the sickly sweet-sour smell of the empty wine bottle from here.

"Still up, then?"

Sherlock jumped again, genuinely caught out this time. There stood John, alert and fully dressed. He saw Sherlock’s confused expression and smiled. "Early clinic at the homeless shelter before work."

Of course. He had failed to take account of the fact that John had changed his working patterns while he’d been away.

Unsure how to respond, Sherlock lay back on his cushions and rubbed his face, as his flatmate walked into the kitchen, dim in the pre-dawn. "Coffee? Anything to eat?" Without waiting for a reply, he pulled two cups from a cupboard and switched the kettle on.

Sherlock closed his eyes again and listened to the tinkle of the teaspoon in the cups and the splash of hot water and then milk. Then quiet footsteps across the worn carpet and the clink of a cup being set down on the coffee table. A sigh at the mess and then steps again towards the kitchen – John fetching a bin bag and returning to collect the remains of Kung Pao chicken and special fried rice. Plates and cutlery were stacked in the sink, and then John returned to the lounge to drag the coffee table nearer to Sherlock. His nostrils flared at the acrid smell of hot coffee…

… And he was back at that sleepy harbour in the early hours of a warm August night, the moonlight shining on the calm waters of the Mediterranean. He was sitting at a table outside a scruffy all-night cafe, with a pot of Turkish coffee served by a sleepy-eyed waiter. Not the kind of place that a tourist would normally visit.

On the far side of the circular harbour, there was the sound of muffled laughter under the glittering lights of a bar; this side, all was quiet apart from the gentle tinkling of masts.

He bent over his island tourist map, pretending to study it carefully by the faint glow of a dockside light, as a dark figure moved around on the deck of the yacht docked fifty feet away. The bitter aroma curled like smoke from the silver coffee pot and assailed his nostrils…
"Do you have any plans today?"

Sherlock’s eyes flickered open. John had abandoned his cleaning to lean against the wall by the window, his mug of coffee in his hand. He was watching Sherlock intently, and the detective had to force himself to meet that sharp gaze.

"Well, I… No, not really." His voice sounded rusty, like an underused tool. And yet, only a few hours ago, he had been giving evidence to an internal committee with his usual confidence and machine-gun clatter of verbal delivery. What had changed?

"Only -," John's head dipped to one side a little, a sign of discomfort. "Only, if you had nothing else to do, you might contact Greg. Or… perhaps pop down to see him."

Sherlock frowned. It was on the tip of his tongue to reply But why would I want to…? when John distracted him by moving suddenly, turning towards the window and looking out at the still-dark sky.

"He missed you," he announced to the waking world at large. "He nearly died for you."

For you too, Sherlock thought, but did not say.

His eyes wandered over his friend, taking in the dark work trousers and equally dark sweater covering John's shirt and tie. He'd had little chance up to now to fully absorb the physical changes that had taken place in over three years. He'd seen a battered John very briefly in Sebastian Moran's hiding place and on a rooftop in the dark; after that, John had welcomed him back to 221B last night and then had plied him with food and wine and almost desperately cheerful talk until Sherlock had felt disoriented and unable to make his usual deductions. Either he wasn't trying hard enough or John was trying too hard – he wasn't sure which was the case. Probably a bit of both.

Now he took in the leaner, harder lines, the practical almost military-style clothing and the glint of silver within the dark blond hair at the back of his head. These were new – this new John was battle-ready and older than his years. As his friend sighed and turned away from the window, gulping down the last of his coffee, Sherlock saw and catalogued the severely combed back hair and the extra lines around the mouth and under the eyes…

Surveillance pictures never picked up the full story. Too grainy and too distant, even with the best equipment. And night-time images were even worse.

Sherlock sorted through the images and hissed his displeasure at the quality.

He couldn't see John – not properly. The pictures didn't show more than the faintest impression of bruising around the neck, of a fast-forming black eye, of a swollen jaw. It was not enough information. And the video surveillance was just as bad. The jumpy motion served to disguise the limp – he could see there was a limp there, but couldn't make out enough to diagnose the injury or its cause.

"Doctor Watson is fine."

Sherlock glared at his brother. "Surveillance, you said -.""

"John is a free agent. He does not welcome my interference." Mycroft shifted his capacious backside against his desk and folded his arms. "If he chooses to follow strangers in the dark, there is little I can do -.""

"Try harder," Sherlock spat, pushing the photographs aside…
John glanced at his watch suddenly, the movement jerking Sherlock out of his reverie. He walked back into the kitchen, briefly leaving Sherlock's line of sight, and the detective had to resist a strong urge to sit up and lean forward to regain his view of him. John dumped his mug and picked up his jacket, which was lying over a dining room chair.

"Think about it, anyway," he suggested, as he buttoned up the jacket and picked up his briefcase. "Contacting Greg, I mean. If you haven't got anything more important to do, of course."

Sherlock noted the emphasis on 'important'. It gave a bitter edge to John's friendly tone.

He lifted his head, straining the muscles in his neck to watch his flatmate walking slowly towards the door. As he expected, the doctor hesitated before opening the door.

"I -," he stopped and cleared his throat nervously – a characteristic that was almost painfully redolent of the John that Sherlock remembered. But then he turned around to eye Sherlock in a world-weary manner that was decidedly not John. "I'm glad you're back and I - I hope that you… will feel able to tell me what happened to you. Some time or other. It doesn't matter. I'm here – if you ever want to talk."

And, with that, he turned back to the door with military efficiency and left the flat, closing the door firmly behind him.

Gratefully, Sherlock let his heavy head sink back on the cushions, as he flew away once more on the wings of memory.
Possessions

John closed the front door quietly, clearly out of consideration for their landlady. Good old John, predictable as ever. Always thinking of others. What must it be like to be that reliable?

As his friend's quick footsteps faded away, Sherlock opened his eyes again. A dim wintery light crept into the corner of the window, and the sounds of traffic grew louder. London was waking up.

He stood up, moving too quickly – and then had to grab the sofa arm as black spots danced in front of his eyes. The blood caught up with his brain and he blinked rapidly, trying to regain his vision.

Where to start?

He turned towards the mantelpiece, reaching out for the skull. It glowed in the dawn light; John had clearly buffed it up to a high gleam. When? Last night, probably, as part of his frantic clean up after getting Mycroft's confirmation. Sherlock lifted the skull and peered inside; this had been one of his hiding places. Nothing there now, of course. Impossible to tell exactly when John threw them away as he'd polished off the evidence, but probably quite early on. His blood sang to the siren call of nicotine. He could guarantee there wouldn't be a single cigarette in the flat by now.

His eyes fell on the neat piles of A4 paper – his printouts and notes, carefully stacked by John. There'd been some old police files there too – cold cases. No doubt Lestrade had removed those early on, probably during the raid that took place a couple of days after his fall…or probably not Lestrade, in fact, as he wouldn't have been allowed anywhere near Baker Street.

Was John here when they raided? No. John wouldn't have been able to stand there watching Sherlock's possessions being rifled through and his stacks of notes cascading on the floor. It would have been dangerous for him to be present; he would have lost his temper, tried to intervene and ended up getting arrested for his pains. There were no records of any such arrest, so presumably John had still had some friends on the force, who had been prepared to warn him to be elsewhere. Lestrade almost certainly.

His head continued to turn, his eyes flickering rapidly over books, pictures, lab equipment carefully stowed in a corner, including his precious microscope, the old silver magnifying glass that he'd inherited from his grandfather. The archway to the kitchen; he blinked again in confusion at the clean surfaces and gleaming taps.

If John had wanted him to feel at home, he might have done better not to have cleaned. But then, perhaps this was normal for John now? Gleaming taps, polished surfaces? Everything in its place?

Did John prefer this? Would he really welcome the familiar chaos of half-finished experiments and human parts in the fridge? John was older now, in his forties. Was he ready to settle down into cosy domesticity? Wife, two perfect children, a garden? The evidence of the last few years suggested not, but then the trim military figure of this morning seemed at odds with this lovingly cleaned room: the skull shining, the windows gleaming, the carpet clean enough to eat off, the cushions judiciously plumped. This was not the room of a man who was still prepared to chase criminals through seedy London back-alleys at 3AM. Sherlock's stomach clenched with sudden nausea as he opened the fridge and looked at the packets of food, neatly arranged and not an experiment in sight.

He shut the fridge door abruptly and moved through the flat, seeking a distraction. His bedroom door was closed and he advanced upon it slowly. He felt oddly tentative, a guest in the house of someone who had popped out for a bit, leaving him alone to snoop. This…emotion was frankly odd, because
Sherlock had never treated anyone's house with particular respect, let alone his own.

He pushed the door open; it swung back with a creak. The ancient hinges hadn't been oiled recently, which suggested that John didn't venture into this room much, but clearly he did so, once a week or so, to dust and hoover. He hadn't got around to oiling the hinge; each time he cleaned, he would tell himself that he must do so, but would then get distracted by something else.

Sherlock stared into the room of a stranger.

It contained his possessions; there was no doubt about that. The bed was made up with his usual sheets and duvet – cream-coloured high-count Egyptian cotton; an old Christmas present from Mycroft that was worth keeping as it saved him having to buy such mundane items himself, but as usual with Mycroft's gifts, the items looked decidedly out of place in this eclectic mix of vintage furniture. There were no boxes, so his clothes must be hung in the ancient, solid wardrobe. His books were neatly piled up in corners of the room; his pictures were still on the wall - the periodic table, the Judo certificate.

He stepped tentatively into the room and ran his fingers over the duvet. Freshly made up, and the bedding smelt of cheap detergent. So John must have left the mattress bare to air it and made up the bed only yesterday. At some point, he must have boxed Sherlock's bedding up, or was it just left in the laundry cupboard, along with John's cheaper cotton mix sheets, waiting for its owner to return?

What about his clothes? Were they ever boxed up? John probably hadn't packed away his clothes before he found out that Sherlock was alive. When Sherlock had seen him in the cemetery, it had been perfectly obvious from his flat-mate's appearance that he hadn't been sleeping in Baker Street. When had he gone back? Immediately after learning that Sherlock was still alive? Had he ever been tempted to clear out his friend's belongings during his lengthy absence or had he always had faith that Sherlock would return for them one day?

He walked around the bed towards the wardrobe and opened the door, running his eyes over the neatly arranged suits and shirts. Here they were: his favourite outfits – the Spencer Hart charcoal-coloured suits, the Dolce and Gabbana shirts in shades of purple, burgundy and green. Sherlock was a creature of habit, he detesting shopping so if he found a shirt or suit he liked (often a reluctantly accepted present from his mother or brother), he would order online several in the same size and colour – then if one were ruined during a fight or pursuit, he wouldn't need to replace it.

The coat was a different matter…

"Here they are."

Molly handed over a bulging bin liner, her eyes anxious.

He grabbed the bag, keen to get out of the damned joggers and hoodie. They'd been all Molly had been able to buy at short-notice; she'd had to dash into a Sainsbury's and get what she could. The cheap synthetic irritated his skin; he opened the bag and ran his hand lovingly over the fine cotton of his favourite shirt.

"I hope it's come out all right, I had to put the scarf through the wash twice. The coat and suit had to go to the dry cleaners - you should have seen his face when he saw all the blood." She laughed, nervously. "I had to tell him that my boyfriend had been in a road accident. I don't know what he thought of me. Are they all right? Did he do a good job? I was worried he might -.

"Molly." He cut across her anxious rambling and she closed her mouth with a snap.
The words 'shut up' were on his lips, but somehow he managed to prevent them from emerging. "It's fine. It's all…fine. Really it is. Thank you. I – I'm just going to change -.

She nodded enthusiastically as he gestured towards her bedroom. "Oh, of course, go ahead."

He grabbed the bin liner, stepped into her bedroom and shut the door firmly behind him, wincing at the floral theme as he did so.

He quickly stripped and upended the bin liner. Jacket, trousers, shirt and underwear tumbled onto the bed. The coat was at the bottom of the bin liner; he had to shake the plastic to dislodge the bulky item.

He dropped the bag and shook out his beloved coat. It was creased - Molly had clearly tried to fold it carefully before bagging it, but the expensive wool garment wasn't used to such rough treatment. He could understand why - she obviously couldn't be seen entering her flat with his distinctive coat over her arm – but...

He sat down slowly on the bed, uncaring of his nakedness, and clutched the creased coat to his chest, almost protectively...

...At the thought of his coat, he turned from the wardrobe door and looked over his shoulder at the hooks on the opposite wall. The coat was hanging on the back of it, along with his dressing gowns, as logic suggested it would be.

He owned only one Milford coat. It was one of the few items that he'd bought in a store rather than online.

It had not been very long after leaving rehab for the second time. Mycroft had offered him a job and had advanced him the sum of two thousand pounds. Sherlock had wondered whether this was some kind of test – even Mycroft must have realised that giving hard cash to an ex-drug addict could be asking for trouble. His brother had always denied it, claiming that the advance was to allow Sherlock to find somewhere more salubrious to live.

In any case, he had decided to stay put in his current, slightly seedy, flat. The day after Mycroft had advanced the cheque, he had cashed it and had walked straight from the bank into the Belstaff store on Conduit Street, with the notes folded up in his wallet. He'd had no particular objective in mind beyond annoying his brother by blowing the cash on something suitably expensive. He'd walked out of the store wearing a Milford coat – and, later that day, had texted Mycroft to turn the job down.

Once he'd started making money on private cases, he'd tried to buy another Milford as a back-up, but irritatingly the model had been discontinued. Sherlock was not a vain man in the traditional sense, but he had a strong sense of the aesthetic and was well aware of the figure he cut in the strong, flowing lines of the coat. He took a great deal of care of it when he was not actively pursuing criminals – in fact, John would have been surprised to see the loving care and attention lavished on the pure Irish wool behind the closed doors of his bedroom. He didn't take anywhere near as much care with his other clothes.

He crossed the floor and ran his hand slowly over the soft wool, meditatively.

He'd only worn it on a handful of occasions after the Fall. It was far too distinctive. It had been a mistake to wear it at the cemetery that day.

He'd deduced, not long after, that John had recognised him that day and had realised the truth. It was confirmed when his Network reported that Doctor Watson was starting to haunt specific locations for
He'd stopped wearing it altogether after that. Clearly, the damage had already been done, but he couldn't risk the doctor's sharp eyes seeking out the familiar silhouette around every corner.

At first, the coat had been stored in a locker at Waterloo Station; later on, he had reluctantly relinquished it to Mycroft's safe keeping. He hadn't worn it at all during the weeks after his public resurrection – in fact, he had been dressed from head to toe in clothing provided by his brother's nameless assistant (he had of course known for years that her real name was the rather prosaic Claire, but it was fun watching John trying to guess). At some point, Mycroft had no doubt sent the coat back to Baker Street along with his brother's other belongings.

He glanced to the left, towards his dresser and its eclectic collection of objects: books, photographs and memorabilia relating to various famous murders and their perpetrators.

Despite the untidy nature of the flat (he imagined John muttering unflattering comments as he meticulously dusted around the clutter), Sherlock usually placed little value on possessions. It would be closer to the truth to say that he couldn't be bothered to offload new acquisitions once he'd added the salient information to his mind palace. And, in fact, an occasional review of his books had sometimes thrown up something new that had previously been deleted as unimportant, so it was perhaps just as well that he was lazy about de-cluttering. John had tutted about it from time to time, but by-and-large left well alone, just as long as his own possessions weren't moved.

The exception to the rule about possessions was the collection that he kept in his bedroom. He moved towards it now, eyes darting jealously over the arrangement, looking for any sign of disturbance. Somewhat miraculously, nothing was missing, not even the sharply pointed bamboo stick propped up in the corner, the tip of which had once been coated in curare.

He ran his fingers over his bust of Goethe and moved back to the bed to sit down, his mind flying back three years...

…The scrawny girl jumped down from the wall and threw the backpack on the ground in front of her, almost at his feet.

"He gave it to me," she announced as she sank down on the broken concrete of the rubbish-strewn playground, sitting back on her heels.

Sherlock looked her over, analysing whether she'd taken anything from the stash before passing it onto him. Rather surprisingly, he couldn't detect any signs that she had – not even the drugs, which must have been a temptation.

He glanced around. The broken-down playground was a popular hangout for local teenagers, but this was an unpleasantly damp evening and even the hardiest of them had long gone.

Bex gave him a knowing look. "You staying here all night? The bushes over there are usually quiet in the winter."

He looked over at them and nodded, repressing a shudder. He hadn't had to sleep rough all that often; there was usually a hostel somewhere or a derelict house that he could break into.

He turned his attention back to the backpack. John had packed it as full as possible. As he pulled the zip back, some cereal bars fell out from a packet that had already opened – John probably offering them to the skinny young homeless woman. There were more packs of dry food at the top: energy bars, bags of dried fruit and nuts, even some military-style condensed meals that looked foul. He
smiled slightly at the bar of chocolate: Sherlock was fond of good quality dark chocolate when he remembered to eat, and John had packed his favourite brand. He had once complained that it was the only way to get calories inside his friend while he was on a case; in fact, John had taken to carrying a bar to crime scenes and would occasionally slip a square to the detective.

Repressing the memory, he pulled handfuls of food out and dropped them on the ground. Bex leaned forward, her eyes gleaming at the sight.

"Can I-?"

He nodded and waved his hand at the food distractedly, as he flicked through the contents of the bag. The girl helped herself to some chocolate while he pulled out the medical kit, the jumpers, socks and underpants, the scarves and gloves. Most of it would be passed around. It was a kind gesture by John, but Sherlock preferred to travel light. The less possessions, the better. They would come in useful, though – the clothes and drugs could be used to pay for information.

He cast them aside, shivering a little in the frigid air. On second thoughts, he might just keep one of the thick winter sweaters…

Well, so far, so predictable. John, ever the doctor, thinking of Sherlock's physical well-being – nutrition, body temperature, wounds and illnesses that might need treating. But where was the money?

Ah… He pulled out the padded parka, his size and in a safely anonymous colour. So John had also been concerned about that distinctive coat…

As he spread it out on his knees and patted the lining, trying to find the cash that John had no doubt sealed into the coat, he suddenly caught the familiar scent of home – of 221B Baker Street. It was Mrs Hudson's acrid polish - John must have spread out the new coat over the table while he sewed in the flap containing the bank notes. He lifted the coat and buried his face into the rough material, inhaling deeply…

Sherlock woke with a start. He was sprawled out over his bed, face down.

He must have passed out from sheer exhaustion. His head felt fuzzy and his mouth agonisingly dry. Sitting up and licking his cracked lips, he tried to remember when he had last had more than a couple of hours' sleep at a time. His sleep patterns, never all that well-established, had been fatally disrupted during his three and a half years' away. He'd learnt to cat-nap, taking an hour or two when he could, and now he was unable to sleep any other way. He glanced at the bedside clock and winced. He had resisted sleep last night and had now just lost almost two hours entirely. Losing control over his body in such an undignified manner was…unacceptable.

He stood up, wrinkling his nose in disgust at the creases in his bespoke suit. As it was provided by Mycroft's assistant, he didn't really care about the expensive linen, but he felt unkempt. His unwashed state was suddenly intolerable to him – he stripped quickly, leaving his clothes in a pile on the floor. He grabbed his blue dressing gown off the hook and pulled it on, inhaling the scent of raw silk gratefully.

He needed a shower. Needed to wash the expensive stench of Mycroft's city apartment off his skin and immerse himself in the far more subtle and friendly scents and textures of Baker Street. He grabbed one of his bath towels off a chair and cast a final glance around his bedroom before stepping out into the corridor.
The bathroom was next door, far more convenient for him than for his flat-mate. As he pushed back the door, there was a sudden knock at the door, and Sherlock froze.

The knock came again, a little tentative. And then her voice: "Sherlock…are you there?"

Mrs Hudson, of course. "Only, John left a note saying you were back and I wondered… Are you there, dear? I just wondered – I was going shopping and I thought…"

Her slightly tremulous voice faded away. Emotional…but what type of emotion? She didn't sound…happy. Perhaps that was what made him hesitate in a way that was alien to him.

He leaned against the wall, as if he could fade into the dated wallpaper. Not that it would help if she decided to come in… Why wasn't she coming in? She didn't usually have any compunction about wandering in if there was no immediate reply from either of her tenants. This did mean that he and John had grown careful about wandering about half-dressed, for the sake of their landlady's sensibilities if nothing else.

So why wasn't she coming in? It wasn't the usual pattern and he couldn't deduce the reason, which wasn't acceptable. What had changed? He dropped his head against the wall and closed his eyes, trying to control his breathing. Why was he so reluctant to face her?

After half a minute, he heard a shaky sigh and then footsteps retreating as she went back down the stairs. Five minutes later, he heard first her door and then the front door slamming shut.

He let out a breath and sank to the ground, his legs suddenly unable to support him.
Scars

It was entirely ridiculous to be perched on the floor, unable to move or breathe. Ridiculous and quite illogical. If he were genuinely experiencing fear, the adrenaline would keep him upright and ready for action. It would certainly not leave him slumped on the floor and hyperventilating. Even if he hadn't had an excellent understanding of the biochemistry of such a reaction, he'd had enough experiences of fear to recognise how his own body usually reacted.

And fear of what? A harmless, elderly woman? The only danger would have involved being bored to death by her endless chatter. Ridiculous in the extreme.

But, in any case, he was not experiencing fear. What, then?

Sherlock focused on his breathing. He repeated an old mantra to himself: slowly, slowly, breathe in through the nose, breathe out through the mouth. Count to four on each inhale and each exhale. He counted obediently, feeling his heart rate slow and his respiration ease.

As he did so, he was able to regain his feet, although his legs trembled a little. His head still spun slightly, and he had to lean against the wall to avoid falling over. Perhaps John was finally being proved right. Too little sleep, too much caffeine and not enough food to absorb it. The very thought stiffened his resolve – his body had never slowed him down before and there was absolutely no reason why it should now.

He straightened his back and pushed away from the wall, cautiously. This time, he managed to keep his balance. He walked slowly into the bathroom, locking the door behind him before he even thought about it. That was new too – in the past, Sherlock usually hadn't bothered with the lock, on the grounds that a closed door was usually enough to deter John and Mrs Hudson. If they had wandered in, he wouldn't have cared anyway; it would have been their fault if their sensibilities had been offended as a result. However, in the intervening years, he'd developed an appreciation of privacy – it was hard to come by in a homeless hostel or a public toilet.

He had an additional reason for wanting to guard his privacy now.

He pulled off his dressing gown, hung it on the door and glared at the mirror. Mycroft's well-appointed apartment was full of the bloody things; he'd hardly been able to avoid his reflection during the last few weeks. Fortunately, they'd never seen the point of decorating 221B with mirrors; the only ones here were in the bathroom and their bedrooms.

Sherlock stared at his face in the mirror. At first glance, it hadn't changed much. He'd always been thin, of course. Some superficial cuts and bruising to his lips and jaws had healed well, and his broken nose had been re-broken and set properly. Mycroft's hairdresser had restored his hair to its natural state and colour. It was still a little shorter than it used to be, but the unruly curls were starting to reassert themselves on the top of his head. They would never be able to hide the long silvery scar that ran the length of his left cheek. It was an old injury and was not particularly severe at the time, but the evidence had remained nonetheless…

…He was no stranger to street fighting. He'd trained in martial arts, of course, but had discovered a very long time ago that the carefully learned moves were a poor defence against a desperate, cornered criminal or an assassin who had a very good motive for wanting him dead. It had taken a few encounters in dark alleyways to teach him how to really fight.
And, even then, his hand-to-hand combat skills didn’t mean much when faced with a sharp knife.

The annoying thing was that he had not predicted this. He’d been busy installing a virus that had been designed for him by a hacker to bring down the almost-entirely untraceable communications network that Moriarty had set up. It was vital to bring this down before starting on the task of systematically destroying each strand of the deceased criminal's web. As it had proved impossible, even for Les, to hack remotely into the system, Sherlock had had to break into the innocuous-looking bookshop to install it directly on the computer.

And the elderly, harmless-looking shopkeeper who had disturbed him had proved to be anything but.

He’d needed all of his lightning-fast reactions to avoid the vicious blade – not easy when he was still bruised and stiff from the minor injuries he’d sustained during his faked fall. Even as he’d dodged and managed to trip the 'shopkeeper', he’d felt a burning agony flash down the side of his face just before gaining control of the man’s knife hand. Careful to avoid contact with the knife itself, he’d twisted the man’s hand inwards and pushed the knife in hard, just below the ribs.

It might have surprised certain Detective Sergeants at Scotland Yard to learn that, despite his high-risk lifestyle, Sherlock had never actually killed before. He knew the principles, of course - knew them like the back of his hand – but despite what Sally may have thought, it had never been him wielding the knife or firing the gun… which was why he’d been so fascinated by John's cool reaction to shooting the cabbie. In view of his lifestyle, he had given a lot of consideration over the years to how to carry out a killing, and had concluded that if he ever had to, it would be with his bare hands. He knew exactly the best place to grip the neck or where to punch or kick the sternum to ensure that death would be quick and efficient…

But he had discovered that all his mental considerations were very different to actually committing the act. In the first place, he’d had little time to think about perfect locations; it had been a mixture of pure instinct and luck that had helped him push that blade under the ribs and then sharply upwards. And then there was the physical response – somehow, he’d not given much consideration to how it would feel as the life of another person slipped away. The way that the man grunted in surprise and his throat gurgled as the internal blood surged up to fill his mouth… the sudden stiffening of the body under Sherlock's hands…

It ought to have been fascinating - this immediate aftermath to the process of death that he had only ever theorised about. It was not.

It was only while he was scrubbing his trembling hands in the shop's tiny cloakroom (the installation wasn't quite complete and he couldn't afford to leave forensic evidence on the computer) that he’d had the presence of mind to look at his face in the mirror, and realised that not all of the blood currently swirling down the sink belonged to the shopkeeper...

...Sherlock touched the top of the scar gingerly. It started just millimetres under his left eye. If he had been a fraction shorter or the would-be assassin had aimed just fractionally higher…the course of the last three years might have gone very differently.

He winced as he remembered how he’d rifled through the man’s first aid kit in that dingy cloakroom and had poured neat antiseptic liquid over the throbbing cut, making him hiss with the sting, before padding it with lint and surgical tape. There hadn’t been time to do much more. It was at that time more than any other that he missed John’s medical skills. If the doctor had been on hand to clean and stitch the cut up, it might not have scarred quite so badly.

Sherlock was not a vain man. He knew his looks to be unusual and had learned fairly early in his
adulthood that he had some kind of appeal to both women and men. It was an appeal that eluded him personally; his pale, thin body, dark curls, sharp features and oddly-coloured eyes reminded him far too strongly of his remote, unlikeable, habitually adulterous mother. It would have been far better to have resembled Mycroft, who took after their stockier, rather plain father – an aesthetic preference that would certainly have surprised his brother if he'd ever heard about it. The reality was that if Sherlock had been just another dull-faced, anonymous Londoner, instead of the striking individual that the press and public loved and hated in equal measure, Moriarty might never have developed his obsession in the first place. If nothing else, it would have been a useful way to illustrate to Mycroft that it was, in fact, possible to avoid getting overweight, genetics notwithstanding.

Anyway, his striking looks had proved useful over the years, not least in his interactions with Molly and with certain witnesses who required some encouragement to reveal what they knew. So he supposed he should be grateful for his appearance, even if it disgusted him to some degree.

His eyes dropped to his body, noting the new scars. Some of them covered older ones. He'd been a particularly clumsy child. His natural interest had led him into plenty of nasty situations, much to the distress of a number of nannies (none of them lasted more than a year or so). He'd developed a greater sense of preservation as he grew older, but his awkwardness returned at around the age of fourteen when he began to grow, gaining ten inches in height over a thirty month period.

During his three years in the wilderness, he'd had to travel fast in risky places, often on limited food or sleep. Beyond the fights with Moriarty's associates, he'd also fallen victim to all the usual dangers of homelessness. He'd receiving bruised ribs and a broken nose from the boot of a drunken sadist as he slept in a shop doorway. Ironically, that had been less than half a mile from the haven of 221B Baker Street. As he had automatically hunched into a protective ball to avoid further injury, he had comforted himself by imagining a certain ex-army doctor suddenly coming around the corner and rushing to his aid. John hadn't appeared, of course, but the thought had given Sherlock the impetus he needed to fight back more efficiently and knock the drunk out.

The worst injury he had received came courtesy of the bullet that had entered the back of his arm and exited through the front, having ripped away a large chunk of flesh and, as he later discovered, chipped his humerus. High on adrenaline, he had somehow kept running from the chateau, located high in the mountains of Switzerland. He had only become fully aware of the injury while hiding in the middle of a haystack in a cowshed. At first, it had seemed unimportant compared to the stolen microchip he had tucked in an inside pocket. A week later, as infection set in and he had staggered feverishly through the streets of Zurich seeking the safe house that Mycroft had arranged for him, it had become clearer that the injury might prove disastrous. It had left him weak for a couple of months, slowing his progress down, and even now his left arm and shoulder could be vulnerable in a fight.

He turned his body slightly, comparing the entrance wound to the exit wound. Ironic that it should be the left arm. They had matching wounds now…although he could hardly compare the reasonably small wound on his upper arm with the extensive scarring he had spotted from time to time on his flatmate's shoulder.

John was sensitive of his scar, and rarely removed his t-shirt, even on a hot day around the flat. Sherlock had occasionally hinted (and, on one occasion, had said outright) that it would be interesting to trace the trajectory of the bullet, but John had always refused his request. Back then, Sherlock hadn't fully understood his flatmate's reluctance – it wasn't as if he would be repulsed by the sight, after all – and John presumably didn't object to showing it to those vapid women he bedded from time to time. Nonetheless, John was firm on this point.

Now, looking the ugly ragged wound, which had been treated far too late, Sherlock felt he could
understand his friend's reaction rather better. And he realised that it had little to do with personal vanity.

He'd had many encounters with the emergency services over the years and had reluctantly submitted to treatment when it really couldn't be helped, but he hadn't particularly cared what the attending doctor had thought of him or his lifestyle. However, being poked and prodded by Mycroft's team of private physicians had been...unpleasant. There had been something particularly impersonal about it - and he was constantly aware of the fact that he was being treated by doctors who were used to assessing MI6 prisoners and determining whether they were strong enough to bear another interrogation that might (or might not) comply with the Geneva Convention. One doctor had wanted to take photographs of the bullet wound – something to do with the unusual angle and the fact that the bullet had merely glanced off his bone instead of getting lodged in it – but he'd put his foot down. Rather surprisingly, Mycroft had supported him, his mouth twisting in mild disapproval at the idea.

Sherlock moved his arm, carefully testing his current range of motion. He'd laid on the bed in that anonymous Zurich flat, one moment delirious with fever and the next howling with impotent fury that his plans had been unravelled by one stupid, stupid shot. By then, he'd realised the severity of his injury and knew that his inability to seek immediate medical help might mean his arm would never fully recover. The cold fact that such a small thing might hinder his ability to see his mission through was devastating… and he sobbed openly in his lonely frustration, which he hadn't done since he was a child.

While he recovered from the belated treatment received at a private clinic, using a passport provided by Mycroft and claiming a hunting injury that they didn't even bother to dispute, he even began to consider whether it was worth bringing John in to help. A text from an anonymous number, an arranged meeting. Mycroft could book the flight, set up the assumed holiday. It could work, and John was aware that he was alive and had already made clear his willingness to assist. But, against this was the fact that he knew John was being followed. It hadn't yet been possible to work out who the slim, shadowy figure was that followed the doctor (ex-military going by the clothes and body language that he could make out in his brother's grainy CCTV images). He really needed to be back in Britain to observe properly, and that was something he couldn't risk at this stage. With the stolen data on the chip, he was so close to bringing down the first few strands of the Empire…

So, no John. And he kept on treating his own injuries when he could, or just ignoring them. The arm was the only time he consulted a doctor in three years. Even the broken nose was left to heal crooked, and the cracked ribs received no care other than a few pain-killers.

Abruptly, Sherlock shifted his eyes from the mirror and stepped into the bath. He ran the water as hot as he could bear and stood under it for a long time, scrubbing furiously at his hair. John had thoughtfully laid out bottles of the shampoo, conditioner and shower gel that he had always favoured, and he lathered his hair thoroughly, breathing in the familiar smell of home.

He bent his head back to rinse the soap away, having to bend his knees slightly as always to get under the shower head. The water cascaded over his face and thundered onto the enamel below… and a memory stirred of Reichenbach…

...He walked slowly, cautiously, up the mountain path, hyper-aware of any movement ahead or behind him. It was, of course, impossible to hear any footsteps over the roar of the mighty waterfalls.

It was a chilly, gloomy morning, and he had been the only passenger to emerge into the drizzle at Meiringen station. Which didn't mean he wasn't being followed, of course.

He stepped with care on the slippery path as it climbed up over the falls; his injured arm was still in
a sling and he was wary of aggravating it. It was folly to have agreed to this meeting while he was not back to full strength, but his investigations had come to a halt. He needed a certain name if he was going to be able to resume his trail...and this informant had promised to provide it, but only in person.

He paused on the bridge at the top of the falls, looking through the spray. He was already late for the meeting due to his indecision. Something – some instinct – had been screaming for attention, telling him to hold back, to wait and see.

Through a cascade of water that was now caused by heavy rain as well as the spray from the mountain stream, he could make out a dark figure moving back and forth in an agitated manner on the path leading down the other side of the falls. At one point, the figure hesitated and appeared to be peering up the hill in his direction and, for a moment, Sherlock thought he had been noticed on the bridge. He backed up slowly, pressing against the rock wall behind him. Moving a little way back along the path, he was able to find a chasm in the rock to squeeze into. A gap in the spray allowed him to get a better impression of the man waiting for him across the falls.

It had been an anonymous note, tucked into his receipt at the street café in Interlaken. Sherlock, deep in depression over another false trail and struggling with pain from his slow-healing wound, barely noticed the waiter as the bill was placed by his coffee cup. By the time he had noticed, it was clear that the genuine waiter was surprised to see he'd already received his bill, and that the fake waiter was long gone.

That incident only illustrated the dangers of trying to carry on while injured. It was extremely unusual for him not to be paying attention to someone in such close proximity to him. He should have spotted that the waiter had changed; if he had, he would have been able to observe the man and work out whether or not it was a trap. He was dangerously vulnerable in his current state. If he sent a certain message to an unlisted number, Mycroft would send a helicopter and have him conveyed to a safe place for proper rehabilitation within a matter of hours. The thought of being beholden to his brother any more than absolutely necessary made him grind his teeth in displeasure. There was no doubt Mycroft owed him, but he'd already called that favour in. Any more help, and he'd end up in debt to his brother for years.

So here he was, dangerously exposed and trying to deduce the true motivations of the mysterious note-writer. He’d already ascertained from the handwriting and the terminology used that the man was young, no more than twenty one or twenty two, that he had gone to a minor English public school but that English was not his first language, and that he was absolutely terrified. The son of one of Moriarty's associates, looking for a way out? From what he could see of the slim, young man, his deductions so far were correct. The man clearly wanted something for his information - almost certainly protection and an escape route. That helicopter of Mycroft's might be required after all.

Or perhaps not. Sherlock became aware that the man was not looking in his direction after all. Another dark figure walked down the path from the top of the mountain above Sherlock's hiding place; an older, stockier figure. The two men talked, the younger one gesticulating wildly while the older folded his arms. Undoubtedly related; the elder a brother or a cousin of some sort. The same generation in the family, despite the obviously large age gap. He could hear nothing and dared not risk moving closer; in any case, it would be a waste of time since he couldn't hope to hear their conversation over the thunder of the falling water unless he were standing right next to them.

He was not entirely surprised to see the larger man draw back his fist and punch the young note-writer – it had been clear by his stiff posture that he had lost his temper with his younger brother/cousin. Knowing there was little he could do, Sherlock leaned against the rock and watched as the young man recovered and flung himself on the other in a hopeless attempt at revenge. The
two grappled, getting dangerously close to the falls; the path down that side of the falls had eroded, but the assailants either didn't know or didn't care.

John would have reacted. Seeing the danger and predicting the outcome, the former soldier and current healer would have rushed out into the driving rain and run down the path, risking his own neck in defence of someone else's.

But Sherlock was frozen in position as he watched it happen. As the feet of the larger man started to slip on the wet grass; as he grabbed desperately at the coat of the other; as the younger man tried and failed to find a foothold. As the two unknown men hurtled over the edge and disappeared into the furious spray, their bodies thrown apart as they fell...

...Sherlock closed his eyes against the memory. The water beating at his face was starting to cool. He'd used all of the hot water stored in the flat's ancient tank; any minute now, it would turn freezing cold. He grabbed a handful of shower gel and rubbed it over his skin, deliberately roughly, digging the tips of his fingers into his thighs hard enough to leave marks. He wanted – no, needed – to feel physical pain. He deliberately over-extended his weak shoulder and hissed at the sensation…but it felt good. It grounded him in the reality of the present.

Towelling himself dry, he reflected on those scars that could not be seen, not by John nor by Mycroft's doctors and not by him, even by stripping himself naked. He wondered whether the unseen, unacknowledged scars lay over the top of older ones too, like the visible ones on his body did. Just as the brutality of a boot print disguised the older marks left by a school bully and the scar from a pistol whip across his hand covered an acid burn from university days, were the memories of the last three years building up a web of scarring in his mind? A web that would eventually bury older memories of childhood? If he ever sought to recall his fourteen-year-old self on that day when his family finally fell apart, on that day when his beloved older brother finally left him behind, with a look of barely-concealed disgust on his face… would he instead see those bodies, forever falling into the spray, broken apart by force even as they clung together in an mutual attempt at survival?
John returned at twenty past six. Sherlock observed him unseen from behind the window curtain. The doctor was walking with a military stride – the gait he always reverted to when he was bone tired. Unlike others, who might slow their stride or start to limp, John would automatically revert to the firm rhythmic pace that had no doubt carried him safely through long marches in Kosovo and Afghanistan. As he watched, Sherlock wondered absently whether this was a common characteristic in ex-military personnel or just peculiar to John.

His flatmate was holding four bulging Tesco carrier bags. At some point during the day, he must have remembered that he now needed to shop for two instead of one…or else this was his regular shopping day. It didn't use to be – as Sherlock recalled, the doctor had never been that organised.

The front door opened and closed briskly and John walked up the stairs with that same, firm stride. Sherlock noticed the moment that the doctor opened the door and hesitated, for just a fraction of a second, at the sight of his flatmate. Something like surprise flashed over his pale, tired face before he smiled a cheerful greeting and walked through to the sparkling clean kitchen to unpack.

Sherlock stood in the archway, watching as the shopping was removed from the carrier bags. Bread and milk; some fruit and vegetables; eggs and bacon and cheese; pots of fat-free yoghurt; packets of rice and pasta and red split lentils. Staples. Healthy choices.

The John he remembered had had a terrible lifestyle for a doctor, who really should have known better. He couldn't cook much and relied far too heavily on baked beans on toast, scrambled eggs and a pile of takeaway menus when all else failed. Not that Sherlock cared how his flatmate ate, just as long as he wasn't nagged into eating in the middle of cases.

This John was trimmer and more muscular. It made sense, of course. He was a busy man, what with his full-time job and his voluntary work with the homeless, so a good diet was a must. Meals would be regular and regulated; he almost certainly attempted to consume the recommended five portions of fruit/veg each day – Sherlock shuddered at the very idea.

His suspicions were confirmed as John put some of the vegetables on the kitchen unit along with some tins and packets, putting aside the ingredients for a vegetarian chilli even as he continued to place the perishables in the fridge. Sherlock noticed that there was no hesitation in the way that John placed each item in a precise location in the fridge without more than a quick glance: the yoghurt at the top, the bacon lower down. A habit, then. This had become his kitchen. His fridge. No longer any sign of caution in opening doors, out of fear of encountering a body part.

"You know, you could help me unpack instead of just standing there," John grumbled, half-heartedly.

"I don't know where anything goes."

John snorted his amusement. "Hardly rocket science, Sherlock. The cold things go in the fridge, the bread goes in the bread bin, and the tins go in the cupboard."

"I don't want to ruin your system," he replied, watching his flatmate carefully. It was clear from John's teasing tone that he didn't really mind that Sherlock wasn't helping, and in fact he confirmed this by the way he moved around the kitchen in a proprietary manner.

"Tea?" He asked as he filled the kettle. Without waiting for a reply, he snagged two mugs off the
mug tree and dropped tea-bags in them in the same easy manner. "I'm making chilli if you're eating tonight. I wasn't sure if you'd be in. Thought you might be out and about, getting reacquainted with things. Did you see Lestrade?" His voice was mild, but Sherlock sensed the underlying tension.

"No. I didn't go out."

John gave a casual one-shouldered shrug, but as his head turned towards the fridge, his mouth was a thin line of disapproval. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say anything, there was a knock at the door.

"Yoo hoo! John, are you there?"

Sherlock's head shot around to see their landlady enter the flat in her usual bustling manner.

"I thought I heard you coming in, dear – oh!" She paused at the sight of Sherlock, her hands flitting to her chest in a familiar gesture. "Oh, Sherlock, of course you're here too. I'd forgotten."

It was on the tip of Sherlock's tongue to say 'well, where else would I be?', but he swallowed the words, distracted by the unusual coolness in her tone. "Mrs Hudson," was all he managed to say.

John laughed. "Honestly, you two! You're acting as if you haven't seen him for three years, Mrs H. Don't pretend you haven't spent all day catching up. I know what you two are like." The words sounded casual, but Sherlock noted the way his smile faded into a slight frown of concern.

"Oh – well yes, of course we have." Sherlock glanced quickly at Mrs Hudson, who was looking at him steadily. There was something about her eyes… "It's just – I wasn't used – he gave me a turn, that's all."

John seemed to relax a little. "He gave me a shock too," he admitted. "Just for a moment, when I came in. I can't get used to seeing him here again."

Sherlock looked between the two of them. Yes, John had looked a little shocked when he came in, but only for a second – and it was only surprise. But Mrs Hudson's face told a different story. He looked at her again with renewed interest, noting that her eyes hadn't left him… but there wasn't the usual gleam of pride in them. It took him a moment to place the emotion…

It was an expression he remembered seeing in her eyes, just a few years ago, when she thought her abusive husband would be released from that Miami prison to torment her again. The husband he had sent to his death. It was an expression of fear.

John coughed, drawing her attention once more. "Oh - John dear, that nice young man called this afternoon. You know – the one with that hair and all the nose studs. Said something about a cut. He wouldn't come in and he wouldn't show me, but he was limping."

John heaved a great sigh, his eyes alight with good humour. "That'll be Robbie. Only you could call a petty thief a 'nice young man', Mrs H. I wonder what it is this time. Probably barbed wire again. OK, I'd better go and see to him."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear - I didn't think to ask him where he would be."

He shook his head, as he gulped down his scalding tea. "No matter. I know where he hangs out." He shrugged on his coat again and grabbed his medical bag. "I may be a while, Sherlock, so go ahead and eat if you're hungry."

"Robbie…" Sherlock was trying to place the boy.
"No, I don't think he's one of your irregulars." John seemed to anticipate the question. "I met him at one of my drop-in clinics in the Salvation Army Hall – you know, one those 'no questions asked' sessions. He's a walking disaster area – thinks he's an accomplished thief but always manages to catch himself on a bit of wire or some broken glass. I dread to think how much of his DNA is spread around London's crime scenes." He shook his head, grinning, but Sherlock noticed his weary eyes and the slump of his weak shoulder. And it was a dark, drizzly night out there.

"Do you want some company?"

John stiffened in surprise at this unexpected offer, but then shook his head. "Best not. Robbie and his mates don't take that kindly to strangers. They only accept me because I'm useful."

He nodded his thanks to Mrs Hudson as he left the flat.

Strangers?

Sherlock was so disconcerted by the use of that word in relation to him and London's homeless community that it took him far longer than it should have to notice that Mrs Hudson was still staring at him.

"He works too hard, that one," she said, looking away to frown at the stairs as the downstairs door slammed shut. "All day at work and his early clinic, and now he's off again. And it's the same every day. Most weekends too. It's not right. It's far too much for a younger man, let alone him."

He said nothing in response - how could he when he had no real notion whether John worked too hard or not? Surely it was up to John to decide?

His mind was more occupied by two concerns at present: the first being why, after this morning's uncharacteristic nerves, he now felt reasonably calm in the presence of his landlady. Possibly it was the sudden nature of the encounter. He had scarcely had time to react. Now they were finally together, she seemed more agitated than he.

He was also struck by that note of fond concern in her voice; those warm tones that spoke of the motherly instinct to protect and support. It was the same instinct that prompted her to make frequent trips up the stairs in her slippers, carrying a plate of fresh-baked biscuits or a pot of stew that she had 'happened to make too much of'.

Before he went away, that motherly concern had been directed at him, and John was merely the lucky individual who benefitted from Sherlock's general lack of interest in food...but now, it was directed at John.

"Why did you lie to him?" he asked her.

She turned her head to look at him again, and he was struck afresh by the fearful expression in her eyes. Why fear? "I didn't know what else to say, Sherlock. Why didn't you answer the door this morning? I know you were here."

"I – I'm not sure…" he said, slowly.

"Three years," she said, equally slowly. "Three years, Sherlock. And all that time, I mourned you."

He expected to see anger then – it would have been natural - but there was nothing of that nature in her expression. Just fear and...was it disappointment?

He recognised that emotion well enough, having seen it reflected in his mother's eyes more times
than he could remember. He had never expected to see it in his landlady's face.

There had been a time when he could do no wrong in her eyes. She'd started out as another of his private cases – a rich British woman living in Florida with her mafia husband. It had been an unusual case – unusual enough to get his attention during what was otherwise a quiet time among London's criminal element. In his experience, most Mob wives wanted him to prove their husband's innocence. Mrs Hudson was the first wife to ask him to ensure her husband's guilt. He had done that with ease and, taking a rare liking to his lively, garrulous client, had helped her to 'liberate' as much of her husband's fortune as possible and spirit it out of the States back to London.

And, for some reason, he'd kept in touch. He didn't really know why at the time. It may have had something to do with the fact that right from the start she'd treated him like a difficult but strangely loveable son. He wasn't used to being spoken to with that degree of familiarity. He couldn't remember the last time someone had told him to straighten his collar and speak 'with bit a more respect, young man'. At first, it had amused him. Later, he had sought it out – occasionally visiting the old lady in her new house in Baker Street as a way of briefly forgetting his current difficulties in the face of her friendly interference and mindless chatter.

She'd used her money to buy the house with its three apartments and had let him know that if he ever needed somewhere to rent... He'd got the flat for under the going rate, but she still needed enough rent to live on, and central London flats were expensive. Having achieved the miracle of finding someone who was prepared to share the costs with him, he'd settled happily into 221B Baker Street.

A strange friendship had developed between the socially awkward consulting detective and his friendly, chatty landlady. She was one of very few people for whom he felt any genuine affection. It was natural for her to mother her 'boy', and while he'd affected to scorn the sentiment, he'd actually enjoyed the attention in a strange way. He knew he was too cold and distant to inspire much affection – attraction, yes, possibly lust, and in the case of Molly Hooper, hopeless fantasy, but not the basic love and care of a parent. And yet, strange though it seemed to him, that was what she offered.

She'd been more of a mother to him than his own mother, inasmuch as that meant anything at all. He realised now that it had never occurred to him to wonder what he meant to her...

"She's not coping particularly well."

Mycroft was reclined in the expensive leather armchair in his home office, with a glass of his favourite whiskey, after a hard day spent terrorising UK politicians and international diplomats alike. Or whatever it was that he did all day in that office of his.

Sherlock shrugged absently, his eyes on the CCTV images of the man following John. Sebastian Moran. Old colleague and sometime friend of John's, by all accounts, at least until that trial. What was his motive in following the doctor? Mycroft's minions could trace no link to Moriarty. Could it be unrelated? But in that case, why John and not some other ex-soldier?

He realised, belatedly, that Mycroft had spoken and looked up. "Hmm?"

Mycroft gazed into his tumbler, shaking the golden liquid gently. "I was just saying that your housekeeper seems to have taken your death a little to heart."

"Not my housekeeper - my landlady," he murmured almost automatically before glaring at his brother. "What do you mean?"
Mycroft paused deliberately, as he sipped his whiskey with a gentle exhale of satisfaction. When he spoke, it was in a light, unconcerned tone. "She has been visiting your grave every day for the last eight months. I doubt Dr Watson knows about it. I have not enlightened him."

Sherlock put down the photographs, frowning as he considered this new data. "She didn't do that at first. No more than once a fortnight. It's a new pattern."

"Indeed. It would seem that her visits have increased just as Dr Watson's have ceased." His brother raised an eyebrow as he continued gazing into his tumbler, adding, "It's a shame that I am not in a position to warn him that it would be prudent to make an occasional visit, to avoid attention."

After a few minutes of silence, during which no further information regarding Mrs Hudson appeared to be forthcoming, Sherlock gritted his teeth and asked, "What does she do?"

"Absolutely nothing." Mycroft took another delicate sip. "She sits on a nearby bench for an hour each afternoon. Even when it's raining. Doing nothing."

Sherlock frowned again. "What makes you think she's visiting my grave?"

His brother favoured him with a withering look.

He continued, undeterred, "It might be someone else. Her sister died last year. And she lost a baby when she was first married and was on good terms with her first husband when he died."

Mycroft gazed into the liquid in his glass, as if it held the answers. "Her sister was cremated and the spouse and deceased child are both buried elsewhere."

Sherlock stared at the CCTV images. "John doesn't know." He couldn't know about it, or he would have tried to intervene before now.

Mycroft nodded towards the images as he gulped down his drink and set the tumbler aside. "It would appear that Dr Watson has other problems. Have you enough data from those? I have matters to attend to – off the clock, as it were."

It was a clear dismissal. Sherlock pushed the photographs across the desk as his brother stood up.

"Why are you telling me this?" His eyes narrowed and he glared at his brother in sudden suspicion. "What motive could you possibly have in revealing such irrelevant information?"

Mycroft shrugged, but Sherlock fancied he saw just a flicker of sorrow in those cold grey eyes. "No ulterior motive, I can assure you. I thought you might wish to know."

Sherlock wrinkled his nose in confusion. "Why would I want to know that?"

His brother gathered the images together and slid them into a file. "I merely thought it might be a comfort to know that you haven't been forgotten."…

…Sherlock recalled this conversation now, as he looked into the careworn face of his landlady – his friend – his…mother? The potential for uncovering some previously hidden but deeply-felt emotions that he could not fully comprehend made him uncomfortable, and so he launched into the, by now, familiar mantra in an attempt to ward them off.

"Mrs Hudson, I do understand that you must have been shocked to hear -.

"Do you?" Her eyes were wide in her face, and the fear was back – it reminded him uncomfortably
of the time he had rescued her from the violent thugs seeking Ms Adler's phone. *But fear of what?*
"Do you *really* understand how I felt?"

He stared at her in confusion. "Well, obviously I don't really -.

"You're not a parent, Sherlock."

He frowned, a little floored by the interruption and unsure how to respond to this non-sequitur.

Her face quivered a little. "Well, come to that, neither am I. There was a baby once. A boy. I never told you before, but you probably know it anyway – you always did know everything about me. The facts anyway, although you were never so good at emotions that didn't relate directly to murder, were you? Well, anyway, they let me hold him just for a moment before they took him away. Said it was easier that way. Said I shouldn't keep dwelling on what wasn't meant to be – and anyway I was young and healthy and there would be others. Well, there weren't any others, but that's another story." Her eyes dropped to the ground and she wrung her hands restlessly – a familiarly nervous gesture. "I never even got a chance to name him. They buried him with my husband's name – Archibald Pitt. I suppose they thought that was the name we had probably meant for him."

He stood, silent and deeply uncomfortable. What was expected in this situation? Should he put a hand on her shoulder – attempt some form of physical comfort? He fervently wished that John would return, illogical though that was, since he'd only just left. The doctor would know what would be appropriate – it was instinctive for him to care for the bereaved and the distressed. A visual memory rose of John's comforting arm around her shoulders after her assault by those Americans.

He was just lifting a tentative hand when she removed the necessity of it by looking back up at him, her eyes dry and hard.

"What I was going to say before I got distracted was that if you *had* been a parent, you'd know how it might feel to hear that your boy had killed himself. Yes, I know – not *my* boy, not really, but sometimes it felt as if you were *my* boy. Foolish of me, but there were times... It probably never meant anything to you of all people, but I had no one left apart from Hilda, and I..." Her voice died away and she fiddled with her pearl necklace in an agitated manner. "I *would* have been a good mother. I know I'm not very smart, but I would have done *that* well. When you think of all those bad mums you see these days - screaming at their toddlers on the bus, too busy with their texting to pay any attention. It's *not fair*. Well, anyway, when you and John moved in, it felt as if I could – you know. Just for a while. And you were so clever – so smart. I was so proud of you, Sherlock. As proud as any mum."

She sighed. "So you can imagine how I felt when John called me on that awful day. I thought I'd never stop crying. You drove me *mad* sometimes, but I loved you anyway. *Three years* of thinking of how you must have suffered to do what you did. And then to hear that it was all just a trick. I should have guessed – you've always been such a clever man."

He took a deep breath and began again. "I didn't want to cause any distress, but I had to do it – I had no choice -.

She raised a hand, stopping him. "Oh, no, you don't need to explain to me what happened. John has told me everything – all about the snipers. To think – that nice man who came to fix the electricity was aiming a gun at me the whole time." She shivered. "It must have been *terrible*, Sherlock. To be standing on that roof, knowing that the three of us were in danger. I don't know how you managed to concentrate on your trick. I know I couldn't have."

"That's the –." He stopped quickly, realising he was about to say something that John would
"You were going to say that that's the big difference between us, weren't you?" She peered up at him, inquiringly. "That you would be able to forget about the dangers to us; put them out of your mind so you could focus on what was important, while I wouldn't be able to do that. Do you think that makes me weak?"

He hesitated before venturing cautiously: "In certain circumstances, it is a disadvantage to be distracted by one's feelings for others."

She smiled, gently. "You see, I don't agree with you there. I know people think I'm just a foolish, gossipy old woman. Your brother definitely does, you probably do too, and maybe even John, although he doesn't realise it. I mean, I can understand it, because of the way I go on and on, and – well, I know I don't seem that bright."

He felt a strange roughness in his throat – an odd inability to swallow. "I have never thought that of you, Mrs Hudson."

"Really? But you still think I'm weak because I care about you. Was I a liability to you, Sherlock? Do you think that was why that horrible man used me to attack you?"

"No," he burst out, suddenly. "It was nothing to do with you caring about me. He targeted the three people that I cared most about."

She sighed, seeming unsurprised by this revelation. "I thought so. I was a liability, then."

How could he get her to understand that it was his feelings that had been the real liability? He sought desperately to provide some kind of comfort. How on earth did John go about this kind of thing? "Mrs Hudson, you should know that -.

Rather to his surprise, she interrupted him again, as if uninterested in any comfort he might provide. "You see, it's easy for me to imagine that you didn't give me a single thought in those three years. That man decided that you cared about me, but I think he was wrong. Or if you did, you must have decided that it was a weakness. Because I couldn't have done what you did. I couldn't have left someone to mourn me for three years without trying to leave them some kind of message – some hope. It would have killed me."

Her eyes had closed on this last sentence; they opened again, quickly, and she fixed Sherlock with a steely glare. "And before you start talking about how difficult it was for you during those three years, you just remember who you're talking to, young man. I've been through a lot too, so I know." Her eyes took on a far-away expression as she counted on her fingers. "Mum dying in the Blitz, being brought up by my sister, struggling to find enough food during the rationing, losing my baby and then my first husband at Suez. A shiftless, unfaithful second husband and a violent third husband. All those years of misery. But in all that time, I never stopped caring. I don't believe that makes me weaker than you – in fact, it makes me stronger. Because I think it was actually quite easy for you to forget all about me while you were away…wasn't it? And it wouldn't have been easy for me – or for John."

He had no notion of what to say. She was wrong – oh, so wrong - but he couldn't seem to find the right words. Her eyes were steady on his. "Do you know how I really felt when I heard you were still alive? I was scared, Sherlock. At first, when I heard it on the news, I was so happy – it seemed like a
miracle. I remember phoning all my friends. But when you came back here, to Baker Street, it felt different. More real… This morning, I stood there in my flat and I thought 'how can I go up there and talk to him when I'm scared of what I will see in his face?'. That's how I felt. I thought you would try to behave like nothing ever happened, and all I'd be able to think is 'well, it's all an act, isn't it?' Because it was – wasn't it? All those hugs, those cheerful greetings, those times you used to come in after a case and help yourself to my biscuits, just like a son would. All that casual affection – and yet you could leave me to grieve you without a single thought. Well, it couldn't have been very real in the first place, could it? The way you can cut it off, just like that, whenever it doesn't suit you to care. It frightens me, Sherlock. It terrifies me to know what you're capable of."

She paused, her eyes wide with fear again. "That's how I felt this morning. You have no idea how difficult it was for me to walk up those stairs. And then you didn't even have the decency to open the door." She shook her head, slowly, almost wonderingly.

He swallowed again; his throat felt like sandpaper. "I don't know why I didn't answer you this morning. I was… I suppose I was…tired." His voice petered out. The excuse sounded weak and pathetic to his ears. It certainly didn't fool her.

Her next words were very quiet. "I thought I knew you, Sherlock. I thought that my boy would never have been so cruel. Not to me. Not to Martha Hudson. Not after all we've both been through. I was wrong. I never knew you at all." She shifted slightly, as if preparing to leave. "You should cook him a meal, by the way," she added.

He was startled. "What?"

"John." She gave him a critical look, no trace of fear now. "He works far too hard, and he hasn't had anything to eat."

He hesitated. Was she suggesting that he…? "You could make something for him," he decided. That made much more sense.

"Not me. You."

"But I -." He shrugged and gestured at the kitchen, hopelessly.

She glanced meaningfully in the same direction, at the little pile of ingredients John had gathered together. "You could make him a meal. Show you actually care about someone, just for once. You can do anything you set your mind to – you always could. You've always been such a clever man. The question is, will you?"

She gave him one last, hard look and left the flat, her footsteps sounding heavy and frighteningly weary as she descended the stairs.

Sherlock went into the kitchen and gazed rather blankly at John's ingredients for a while. Eventually, he shrugged and went back into the lounge. His armchair was in its usual place, and he perched on it, bringing his feet up and leaning his chin on his knees.

The flat was cold. John had said that the heating was on the blink again, but Sherlock had forgotten to lay the fire earlier and couldn't be bothered to do it now. Too much effort and it would take too long to warm the room up now. When it came to personal comfort, John was the one who always looked ahead.

She was wrong, of course. Completely wrong.

She had not come to him in conscious, uninterrupted thought, but she had in a million fragmented
ways. In sudden images at the most unlikely moments…

…She came to him in the wife of a luxury yacht business owner at an exclusive party in the French Riviera, at which Sherlock was waiting tables – a clearly abused wife with a nervous habit of fidgeting with her priceless diamond necklace…

…and in the fond, indulgent smile of a fierce-looking babushka sitting opposite him on a Siberian train, as her adult sons bantered with one another…

…and in the tiny Chinese woman who rushed down the street after her husband early one morning, in a western Sichuan village, clutching his wrapped lunch and loudly berating him for forgetting it…

…and in a hundred, briefly glimpsed women in cities from Paris to Phnom Penh, with just that same shade of hair dye or that bright, chatty voice or that perky, proud angle of the head…

And each time, his heart would stutter and he would open his mouth automatically, his lips silently mouthing the syllables of her name…

…The door downstairs banged shut, and Sherlock gave a start. How long had he been sitting there? His legs felt cramped in his current position, and he lowered his feet to the ground gingerly.

The door opened suddenly and John came in with a sigh. "Well, that's that. Barbed wire, of course. Silly kid." He shook his head. "I'm sorry I'm so late - I thought I might as well do a quick round of the area as I was there. Found another case of pneumonia and had to call an ambulance. And then of course it was the usual rigmarole of having to go with them and fill out forms for him. Not that I knew many of the details. First name and a rough age calculation was the best I could do."

He shrugged off his coat and hung it up. Sherlock noticed that the cheap material was soaked through. Raining heavily now, then, and it was late – almost half past ten. He had been sitting in his chair unaware of the passage of time for almost four hours.

John shivered in his damp jumper and walked into the kitchen. He barely glanced at the ingredients on the unit before putting a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. "Jesus, it's cold in here. You been sitting there all evening?"

He gave Sherlock a curious glance as he busied himself with making tea.

"Yes."

John shrugged. "Nothing new there, then. Tea? Will you eat anything?"

Sherlock gave this some consideration. When had he last eaten? Not since last night, when he'd picked at that Chinese takeaway, too overwhelmed by his return to Baker Street to enjoy it. At the thought of food, though, his stomach cramped with nausea and he decided not to risk it.

"Just tea for me."

John frowned, but didn't pursue it.

"You said 'strangers"."

"Mmm?" John was too busy putting the kettle on to pay much attention.

"Earlier. You said that that boy Robbie and his friends didn't take too kindly to strangers. What did
"What – the strangers bit? Oh – I see." John stuck his head into the lounge, frowning. "Well, I suppose you are a stranger to a lot of them. Three years is a long time on the street, Sherlock – you know that better than anyone. Robbie’s only sixteen. When you jumped from that roof, he was probably still at home, fighting with his stepfather and pissing off his teachers."

Sherlock bit back the obvious rejoinder: that this hadn’t been a problem in the past. His reputation as a generous purchaser of information received had usually preceded him. Everyone on the street knew the name of Sherlock Holmes, even if they had never met him.

"It bothers you that they no longer know you, doesn’t it?" John had come into the lounge to perch on his usual chair. He peered at Sherlock in a manner that appeared both interrogatory and yet strangely gentle – a combination that only served to offend Sherlock’s sense of pride.

He wrinkled his nose, fastidiously. "Why would it bother me? It’s a simple matter of building up the contacts once more – a task that wouldn’t challenge even you, so is hardly likely to cause me any trouble." He leaned back to grab the top book from a pile of teetering volumes and settled down in his chair to read, contriving to ignore his friend.

A flicker of his lashes showed John sitting very still for a moment, an odd look on his face, before he got up and returned to the kitchen to continue preparing his late night snack.
Betrayal

The following morning, John had been like a dog worrying at a bone. Every sentence seemed to contain the words ‘Greg’ or ‘Lestrade’ or ‘Yard’. The doctor had tried casual reminders, nagging, blackmail, threats, even begging, but Sherlock wouldn't be moved. He would visit the Yard in his own good time. He was fed up with being pushed around – the past few weeks with Mycroft and his utterly ridiculous minions had reminded him of the benefits of independence.

He had underestimated John's dogged determination, though, and after three similar days, the detective had given a huff of exasperation and promised to visit his old Yard associate. At least it would get John off his back… and there was no reason why his flatmate needed to know that Sherlock's curiosity had been piqued by Lestrade's latest case and he would probably have gone anyway.

Standing around the corner from New Scotland Yard and looking up at the faceless windows, Sherlock experienced a momentary doubt. What was it that John had said about Lestrade? After all, he had told him to go and see the DI. And then there was that case which had the potential to be interesting. Why, then, this hesitation?

He had never wavered for a moment in his dealings with the Yard. Even right back at the start - when he was just a skinny, drugged-up drop-out student trying to find a cause worth living for – he'd been utterly confident in his value to the fresh-faced and newly-qualified DI whom he had approached at a murder scene. He had learned very early on that the best way to approach figures of authority was to confuse them with confidence – with arrogance even - so they would start listening before they had a chance to consider kicking him out. He'd learnt that from Mycroft. It was all a matter of attitude.

Of course, that same young DI, Gregory Lestrade, had kicked him off his scene, but Sherlock had kept coming back and wearing the man out with his air of superiority and his machine-gun delivery of the salient facts. Eventually, the effort had paid off.

Lestrade had amused him back then. The man was similar in age to Mycroft, but what a contrast between the two! The DI's mind was far simpler. It was relaxing to be able to pour his deductions into a relieved and accepting ear, knowing that the recipient of his deductions was in no position to challenge them.

Also, insofar as he liked anybody, he didn't entirely dislike Lestrade. Yes, the man irritated him sometimes with his pedestrian habits, slow mind and boring insistence on following procedure. And it was also inconvenient to have to deal with a person who had seen him at his lowest ebb before rehab. But, on the other hand, the DI had proved over the years that he trusted Sherlock. OK, so he had set up that fake drugs raid, which had been extremely awkward with John about to move in, but apart from that, he'd treated Sherlock reasonably well over the years and had never judged him. His idiotic officers had, of course, but they had been so far off the mark that it had been a source of entertainment – and Greg himself would never join in.

There was one thing in particular to be said for the man, Sherlock reflected. Greg Lestrade was as straight as a die. The DI would never have betrayed him…unlike certain other individuals…

---

…If there was any pleasure to be gained from his current, miserable situation, it was most definitely this.
The gasps of astonishment from the stuffy porters as the scruffy man with the bleached dirty-blonde hair arrogantly pushed his way past them were amusing enough. He could tell that they didn't dare stop him; he'd punched in the correct code to the private quarters of the Diogenes Club without a moment's hesitation, so he must 'belong' here – surely?

But the most glorious moment was opening the door without knocking and watching his brother look up – and drop his pen.

Sherlock smirked. Dropping his pen was probably the closest Mycroft would come to demonstrating shock. He perched elegantly on the arm of the leather armchair that faced his brother across the desk.

"Surprised?"

Mycroft's face was carefully blank. "Hardly. Although I didn't expect you to return quite so soon. There you have surprised me, I confess. Surely you're not already out of ideas?"

"Then you knew. I might have guessed." Sherlock narrowed his eyes, interest briefly overcoming his animosity. "What gave it away?"

Mycroft rolled his eyes. "Did you really expect me to believe that you would kill yourself to satisfy the whim of a pathetic creature like Moriarty? Hardly. What possible advantage could there be in it? And then there was the careful choice of Dr Watson as witness. Who better to spread the news of your death? A man incapable of the slightest deception."

"Oh, I don't know," Sherlock murmured, picking casually at a ragged fingernail. "He hasn't done too badly so far."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "Is that a not-so-subtle test to establish whether or not I am aware that the good doctor knows of your survival? Really, Sherlock. I should have thought it was obvious. By the way, it is a shame that Doctor Watson has taken to wandering around the seedier locations of London looking for members of your Network. At best, he's acting out of character; at worst, his behaviour is a risk to you. After all, Moriarty's people are certainly aware of your homeless contacts and will be wondering why he is trying to trace them."

He picked up his pen and made a quick, efficient note at the bottom of a report before pushing it aside. He made a show of carefully replacing the pen in its holder before leaning back slightly and smirking at Sherlock's appearance.

"Interesting disguise. Sleeping rough at present, I suppose?"

"No better way to hide in London."

Mycroft shrugged. "A little unnecessary, I would have thought. But then you always did enjoy a sense of the dramatic. The 'suicide' illustrates that perfectly. Well, arrangements can be made." He pulled a notebook towards him and turned to a blank page, picking up his pen delicately. "An apartment has already been prepared, for however long you wish to remain in London."

"That's not why I'm here."

Mycroft didn't look up, but his hand seemed to hesitate before he scribbled a note. "Why, then?"

"I knew." Sherlock leaned back, bringing his folded hands up to his chin. "I thought you should be aware of that. I already knew – before I jumped."
"John told you then?" Mycroft didn't look up; his voice remaining calm and even, although his hand shook very slightly before he disguised it by making another note.

"He didn't need to." Sherlock observed his brother, noting the discomfort with some satisfaction.
"You are assuming that I was unaware of the agreement you made with Moriarty. If I were an emotional man, like John, I suppose I might say that you…sold me to the highest bidder. That's the phrase, isn't it?"

"But you are not an emotional man," Mycroft murmured to his hand.

"No, that is true," Sherlock agreed, watching his brother carefully.

Mycroft placed his pen very precisely on the desk, still not looking up. "You know why I did…what I did."

Sherlock leaned forward, making a play of reading the notebook upside down. "I hope the intelligence was worth the family betrayal." He took care to keep his voice light and flippant, seeking to give the impression that Mycroft's actions meant less than nothing.

Mycroft looked up at this. Sherlock could see his brother analysing his words and body language, trying to weigh up the situation and deduce the best response. Annoyingly, body language analysis was one area in which Mycroft was often more accomplished than his younger brother… and then, of course, he knew Sherlock far too well.

The civil servant gave a slight smile that didn't quite reach his eyes. "The benefits have been... incalculable."

Sherlock leaned back again, eyeing his brother under his lashes. "Oh, I'm quite sure you can calculate the cost, Mycroft."

There was a flash of irritation in his brother's eyes before the blank mask descended again. "I asked Doctor Watson to convey my apologies -.

Sherlock raised a hand to stop him. "Spare me the apologies. We both know that you're not remotely sorry. Presumably the intelligence was worth it. What was it? The liquid explosives on the aeroplanes? That aborted attempt to blow up a Eurostar train? Clever cover-up, by the way – even Broadcasting House didn't pick up on that one. Or did they – did you have to pay someone off? It was rather a close call, after all, and you would hardly wish for Eurostar profits to suffer. Or was it something more subtle? A computer virus - something designed to bring the City down in a second? Please tell me it was something big." His voice dripped with sarcasm. "I'd hate to think that you betrayed your brother - your own brother - for anything less than a global terrorist threat."

Mycroft's eyes were hard, grey steel. "What do you want?"

Sherlock's lips curled into a mirthless smile. "So you're not going to tell me what secrets he gave you in payment for me? Still, it would have been boring if you had - much more fun to deduce it."

"I ask again," his brother replied, icily. "What do you want, Sherlock? There's clearly something; you wouldn't be here otherwise, trying to disconcert me with emotive words that mean as little to you as they do to me. You're not looking for an apology or an explanation, so -.

"John."

"I beg your pardon?"
"Keep him safe. That's the only payment I demand of you. Leave me alone, don't interfere in my activities... but protect him, so I don't have to."

"I see..." Mycroft leaned back, looking at his brother speculatively. "That's rather altruistic of you, isn't it? I was not aware that the good doctor's well-being was so...important to you."

Sherlock huffed his irritation. The usual implication... how pedestrian of Mycroft. "Oh, please, Mycroft, do try not to be so infantile. You've said it yourself enough times. He's a potential chink in my armour. An attractive target. Moriarty tried to use him against me at the pool. Don't you think his associates may have the same idea? I do not need to be made weak at this stage – to be forced to protect or rescue him exactly when I need to be concentrating on other matters."

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. "You are presuming that Dr Watson will require protection or rescue? You don't appear to have much confidence in his abilities."

Sherlock shrugged. "I have every confidence in John. But he is just one man and Moriarty's remaining web is wide. If they really want him, they will get him – I have no doubt of that. I have given him the best protection I can, but the optimum strategy is to minimise his importance."

Mycroft picked up his pen and twirled it, thoughtfully. "Has it occurred to you that he may not react positively to my interference? I am hardly his favourite person at the moment."

"I was not intending that you should tell him. Not yet, at any rate."

"And if the danger becomes severe?" Mycroft gave him an inquiring look.

Sherlock hesitated for just a moment. "Remove him to a place of safety. By force, if necessary."

For once, Mycroft's mask slipped and there was genuine shock in his eyes. "If it becomes necessary... I can certainly make the arrangement and put the option to him. But, Sherlock, I won't force him to leave his home."

"You will do this," he hissed, furiously. "You betrayed me! You owe me, Mycroft!"

Mycroft sighed, painfully. "I suppose the semantics are correct if somewhat emotive. I did indeed betray you, as you put it. I have been responsible for many difficult deeds over the years – some of them decidedly unpleasant. Some of them I have had to do, simply because someone must and nobody else would. And I like to think that what I have done has always been for the good of this nation. However, I cannot compel a British civilian who has committed no crime to follow a course of action that he does not wish to take."

Sherlock scoffed. "As if you haven't done it a hundred times before, when it suits you. Even John – don't pretend that you've never attempted to manipulate him."

"This is different." Mycroft looked at him seriously. All of the bureaucrat's protective layers were suddenly stripped away and Sherlock was suddenly looking at his twenty-year-old brother, filled with genuine care for him. "The fact is that I did betray you, Sherlock. I admit that now. At the time, it seemed right, but there are certain actions that one must never commit. And I won't be the tool that enables you to make the same mistake with John."

…And so, now, he took a deep breath, straightened his shoulders and rounded the corner, with his usual brisk stride, his coat billowing out behind him. He had trained his eyes a long time ago to flicker over the Yard's minions, observing what was necessary while ignoring their reactions. Surprise, hostility, even fear – he'd seen it all before. Dull - utterly dull – the lot of them. Where did
Scotland Yard unearth its recruits?

He swept past the main desk and into the lift before anyone could even think of stopping him. Rather to his surprise, they didn't even seem to try.

It occurred to him suddenly that there was something almost untouchable about him these days. That was the power of Mycroft's influence; Sherlock had spent the entirety of his adult life disdaining that political power, but there was no doubt that Mycroft's solution for his reappearance had had a profound impact on his reputation. As far as the ordinary constable on the desk was concerned, he was an international spy who had single-handedly protected Queen and country from foreign terrorism. Just like that agent from those awful films that John insisted on watching on Saturday nights when he didn't have a date. Clearly, the desk staff thought that Mr Holmes was on important business and should not be detained even for a moment.

Sherlock revelled in his momentary power before frowning in irritation. It was unacceptable that it should be Mycroft's influence that had got him into this building without question. Once, his freedom of access would have been due to the deductive skill that made him so indispensable.

Well. He would have to remind them of his importance. That was all.

As he strode across the serious crimes department, his eyes flicked from left to right, picking out the officers he remembered as well as the new faces. No time to size them up beyond a few basic deductions. He noted a new name on one of the offices: Sally Donovan. Of course - the woman must have been promoted. She wasn't entirely unintelligent, of course, so it was inevitable. His skin crawled at the thought of having to work with her without Lestrade's protective presence. Hopefully, she wouldn't get any interesting murder cases.

Lestrade was in his office, but the door was open. He was talking to his new DS, a young, bright-as-a-button officer, who was leaning over the desk, looking over some photographs. The man's fair head jerked back as Sherlock appeared in the doorway, and Sherlock caught the briefest spark of jealousy in his pale blue eyes before his face rearranged itself into a blank mask. He noted the emotion with absent interest. Should Lestrade be warned that this young man had a more-than-professional interest in his boss?

No time to consider that now.

"You've got it entirely wrong," he announced to the room at large.

Lestrade hadn't looked up at his approach, and still didn't. He was perusing the photographs of the young woman's mutilated body, but his shoulders seemed to tense a little and a small muscle in his jaw was twitching.

He had clearly heard… Sherlock tried again. "The lover – it's all wrong. It's the sister you should be investigating."

Lestrade did look up then. He gave Sherlock the briefest of glances before addressing his DS. "Thanks, Halliday. Can you organise the door-to-door enquiries?"

"Yes, sir." The young man gave Sherlock a smile that didn't quite reach his eyes as he brushed past him to leave the office.

Sherlock watched him go through narrowed eyes and closed the door behind him. Through the glass, he could see Sally approaching the office; at first sight of him, she paused, and he saw the shock in her eyes. She continued to walk towards the office but lingered outside, clearly irresolute.
Lestrade gave a half-sigh, half-laugh. "Well, it took you enough time to show up. I was beginning to think we'd seen the last of you. To what do I owe the honour, Sherlock?"

He spoke lightly, in a slightly parody of Mycroft's accent, and Sherlock briefly wondered about the degree of influence that his brother had had on the DI.

"Your new DS is gay and is seriously considering whether he has a chance with you," he said, changing the subject. "He seems more than a little delusional; it must be clear to even the most dull-minded plod that you're straight and are currently in a romantic relationship with Donovan, officially in secret, but it's the least well-kept secret in the entire Yard."

"For Christ's sake, Sherlock, I know about Rob Halliday." Lestrade gave him a weary look as he ran his hand through his hair. "It's just a harmless crush. He hasn't got the balls to do anything about it – and it'll blow over soon. He's a good bloke. Didn't have you down for a homophobe, though."

Sherlock bristled. "I'm not. I just thought you would like to know."

Lestrade sighed. "Of course you did. Oh, and by the way, don't close my door. You don't have the authority to do that."

He got up and opened the door. Heads turned briefly in their direction before various junior officers bent industriously over their work again. Donovan looked at him enquiringly; he gave her a 'wait a minute' gesture and sat down behind his desk again. "You didn't answer my question. What are you doing here?"

Sherlock was briefly distracted by the DI's appearance. He knew about the accident and its ramifications, of course. Lestrade was leaner – there were clear signs that he made more than just a token attempt to keep fit these days. His diet and exercise regime were very important to him and probably dominated his day: that was clear by the controlled manner in which he sat in his seat. His large brown eyes were clearer and less reddened by alcohol, caffeine or late-night takeaways. He was also far greyer and there were new creases in his face. Not just of age but of worry. The DI was afraid. Afraid that, sooner or later, he would be found unfit for service and invalided into some boring desk job. That explained the strict regime – he could not afford to fail any of his health checks.

Sherlock made a mental note to check what role Mycroft had played in the fact that Lestrade had retained his active role despite the limitations placed on him by his splenectomy.

He took a deep breath, forcing his mind back to the case. There was something a little 'off' about this encounter, but he couldn't quite work out what it was. What was it that John had said…?

"The case," he repeated. "The twenty-five-year-old accountant found in the alleyway in Blackheath with knife wounds. At the press conference, you said you were trying to locate her business partner. You implied he was her lover. He was – but he was not the killer. In fact, he is almost certainly dead. Quite possibly killed before her. The killer of both was her sister – the woman sitting next to you at the conference."

Lestrade rubbed his face, wearily. "And you know this how?"

"Her hands. Her arms. Very muscular. She's a heavy manual worker of some type – a tree surgeon, possibly? The abrasion to her forearm, caused by splintered wood, would indicate that. Why did you think it was the lover? Because he was a man. Common misconception. The wounds presumably indicated that the knife had been wielded with a certain degree of force, indicating male strength, and from an angle that showed the perpetrator was rather taller than her, and you – or Anderson probably
– made the assumption that it must be a man. But the sister is five foot eleven inches, unusually tall for a woman. Also, you did not give full details of the attack, but your demeanour at the conference indicated that the murder was particularly gruesome – I deduce from this that the attack was frenzied and was presumed to be a crime of passion. Again, you assumed it must be the lover. Look into the sister's background. There's a reason why she killed her sister and staged that scene, and then appeared to make that tearful appeal on television that was so clearly contrived. And why display the sister and not the lover? Because his murder was unintentional. He disturbed her; she was forced to leave her sister bleeding but still alive while she laid into her sister's lover. Search the bins outside the victim's flat. You'll probably find him dumped in one of them, covered by a bin bag. Look for the green heavy-duty ones used by foresters. She will have killed him quickly; probably hit over the head and stabbed through the heart. Not a frenzied killing, not like this one. She didn't dislike the lover, he was just inconvenient. It was her sister who received the full force of her hatred. And she used that anger to her advantage – she displayed her sister in a location very near his flat, hoping that it would look like a crime of passion, and not one of familial hatred."

The DI looked down at the photographs, appearing to study them afresh. Sherlock stepped closer to the desk and was able to make out that his assumptions about the degree of violence were correct before Lestrade moved to shield the images from his view. He glared up at Sherlock as he slipped them under a folder.

"And why did the sister kill her?"

Sherlock stared at him. There was a strange jarring note of … of mimicry in the DI's voice. As if he was laughing at Sherlock – laughing at him! Was he jeering?

"I don't know," he replied slowly, frowning in confusion. "How could I when I haven't even looked at the files yet?"

"And what makes you assume that I'm going to let you look at the files?"

Again that strange jibing tone.

It dawned on Sherlock that this was not going to be as easy as he had thought. What had John said…?

"This is about St Bart's, isn't it?" he managed, scratching the back of his neck in his confusion.

Lestrade leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "And what makes you deduce that?"

"You're angry with me." That much was obvious. "Did John tell you why I did it?"

"John?" Lestrade betrayed his confusion. "Why would he tell me anything?"

Sherlock bit his lip, feeling that, in some way, he had erred by mentioning John. It dawned on him that it might have been wise to have checked with his flatmate first – found out exactly what Greg Lestrade knew – before bowling in here. Too late now. He started again, trying to find a way forward.

"About why I jumped."

Lestrade narrowed his eyes. "And why did you jump?"

And Sherlock made his explanation for what felt like the millionth time. Three targets, three snipers, one suicide, one jump. Three years of chasing shadows, of bringing down an empire from the inside, working alone. His voice felt weary to his own ears. He tried to inject some empathy into his words,
but his attempts sounded artificial – forced. He just couldn't make the story come alive any more.

And Lestrade was not buying any of it. His eyes were mere slits by now. Sherlock could see the DI's biceps tensing inside his shirt as he kept his arms folded, attempting a casual posture that would fool nobody.

He finished his narration and listened to the silence as his voice faded away. Lestrade continued looking at him for a few minutes - in the past, Sherlock would have been able to hold that hostile gaze; now he squirmed uncomfortably.

Lestrade gave one dry laugh. "And you couldn't tell me any of this? You couldn't have let me know that you were alive? I don't know – leave a note or something?"

*How many more times would he have to go through this?* "It would have been very dangerous – for you as well as for me," he pointed out, trying to keep the impatience out of his voice. Didn't these people understand?

Lestrade looked away, focusing on his desk. He shifted a file and Sherlock saw his right hand shaking slightly. The DI looked up and followed the sweep of his eyes; he scowled and sat a little straighter, clenching his fist to hide the tremor.

"I spent over three years thinking that you had killed yourself. And that it was my fault." He was speaking very slowly and distinctly, emphasising his words by tapping his fingers on the desk. "*My fault, Sherlock. I'd involved you once too often, and it was my officers who had brought false suspicion upon you. I never really believed you were responsible – it was no surprise to me that they found no evidence of your guilt. All I knew was that a man had killed himself in terrible circumstances – an admittedly fucking annoying man, but a brilliant one nonetheless… and one that I'd known for years. I thought I knew you, Sherlock. I couldn't believe you would do such a thing."

His voice died away, and Sherlock assumed he had finished speaking. He opened his mouth to make the usual comment about the necessity of the deception, but Lestrade's head jerked up and he glared at Sherlock, all the anger and pain and misery laid bare in his face.

"But I was *wrong*, wasn't I? Stupid, plodding, old Greg Lestrade. I didn't know you at all. If I *had*, I'd have known that you didn't feel any pain at all - because you're not capable of it, are you? I'd have known that you were just playing some kind of cruel game on the few friends you have in this world - *you utterly selfish bastard*. How you must have laughed at me – eh? Stupid, dull Greg – he'll buy it. If he thinks I'm dead, the whole world'll believe it must be true. Did you enjoy watching me on TV back then? Being thrown to the wolves, publicly disgraced, the press at the door of the Yard, dogging my every move. It was a great cover for you, wasn't it?"

Sherlock opened his mouth again to deny this, but the words wouldn't seem to emerge from his suddenly dry throat.

Without even looking up at him, Greg gave another unamused laugh. "And what do I get? Do I get an apology for what you put me through? Do I get a proper explanation? *No*. You just swan in here, full of your usual deductions, and expect me to say 'Oh, welcome back, Sherlock, pull up a chair, however have we managed without you?' As if nothing had ever happened. As if we can just carry on as before. Well, you know what? We *can't*. I won't carry on as before. As of now, you're not welcome here. You never should have been in the first place. If I hadn't been so bloody weak back then, you wouldn't have been."

He stood up and stared into Sherlock's eyes to make his words very clear. "*Do you understand me? Get out, Sherlock. And don't come back. I don't want to see you at a crime scene again.*"
He looked away, his body language indicating that the meeting was at an end.

Sherlock licked his lips, the panic freezing his limbs momentarily. "You need me." His voice emerged as little more than a whisper.

Greg Lestrade hesitated and then raised his eyes to meet Sherlock's again. He enunciated his words clearly. "Not enough to put up with this."

He looked away again; it occurred to Sherlock that the DI was trying to give him some dignity by not witnessing his humiliating departure. Not so his officers; the consulting detective turned away slowly and saw the faces looking at him. Embarrassed, curious, amused, triumphant, scornful. They had heard the entire exchange, of course. Their expressions gave him the strength he needed to straighten his spine and attempt a dignified retreat.

Sally Donovan stood between him and the exit. There was a strange expression on her face; it was not exultant, as he might have expected. She was biting her lip worriedly and she stepped forward as if to stop him. Her lips moved on a single word, but he could not hear it above the roaring in his own ears.

He gave her the iciest look he could muster, wondering whether he would be able to call forth an insult on the current state of her love life. It wasn't necessary; she saw the hostile look on his face and stepped back, her mouth straightening into a grim, angry line.

It was only after he had swept past her and stalked out of New Scotland Yard that he realised the word she had been saying was his name. Not Freak. Sherlock.

But, by then, it was too late.
Sherlock stormed out of New Scotland Yard, rudely pushing his way past a couple of constables, who took one look at him and wisely decided to leave him be.

He was trembling with rage and hot humiliation. How dare they? They'd have been lost without him all those years. He clenched his fists as he remembered the many moments when Lestrade had called him in – begged him for help. Did all that mean nothing now? All the crimes that no one else had come even close to solving – those same crimes that he had later been accused of committing himself. He knew that his name had been officially cleared not long after his death, but had anyone at Scotland Yard shown even the slightest remorse for blackening it in the first place? Not that he would have cared in the slightest if they had apologised… but it was the principle of the thing.

It took half the length of the street that he strode down, unseeing, for the automatic defence responses to begin to kick in – and that was new, too. His iron control over his own body would slip further if he were not careful. He had maintained it for three years in often extremely challenging circumstances, but now…

The dry voice of his brother came back to him, as it so often did in these moments: "Calm, Sherlock, calm. Remember, emotion is ammunition. Never give them ammunition". He felt his heartbeat begin to slow down, taking a deep breath and letting the adrenaline flow into more expedient channels. His brother's voice again – or rather his own voice, but couched in the well-modulated tones of Mycroft, the consummate strategist in a hostile world: "Aminohydroxyphenylpropionic acid – adrenaline. A beneficial hormone. Use it wisely, as a tool for survival, a defence mechanism. Do not waste it on senseless anger."

His breathing returned to normal, but his feet continued to move fast, determined to put some distance between himself and the Yard as quickly as possible. Briefly, he considered returning to Baker Street, but dismissed it. His fingers itched to take his phone out and text John – again he resisted the temptation. What would he say? What would be the point? "I told you so"? But then, wouldn't John be entitled to return the same message? Hadn't he warned Sherlock that Lestrade was upset with him?

His feet slowed a fraction, as he remembered a snippet of John's words a couple of days' ago. He'd been looking through some old notes at the time and had responded with barely-concealed impatience as John had said: "Greg might be a little difficult at first, so you should at least try to seem sorry if you can. It's important, Sherlock – not everyone sees things the way you do…"

He might have texted "Difficult was a bit of an understatement".

His mobile beeped and, without looking at it, he knew that John had already been informed of the situation by the gossip mongers at the Yard. He didn't bother to check the message. His phone beeped again, twice more in quick succession, before falling silent once more.

The weather seemed to match his mood; the dark clouds gathered overhead and a blustery rain shower gusted across the river as he strode across Westminster Bridge, neatly dodging the moronic tourists. He had intended to cut along the South Bank to Blackfriars Bridge in the hope of catching up with some members of his Network, but at the sight of the hordes queuing outside the Aquarium and sauntering along the river he wrinkled his nose in disgust and continued along the bridge road, turning into Belvedere Road instead.

The inevitable black limousine appeared at the pavement nearby. Sherlock sneered and picked up his
pace, ignoring it as it began to cruise alongside. As he drew level with an alleyway, he tipped an ironic salute to the car and darted off into the dimness. Without hesitation, he dashed up a fire escape, sprinted across the top of the high roof and swung himself down the matching metal steps on the other side of the building.

He paused, glancing towards the corner of York Road. Naturally, the car turned into it but, just as he had predicted, the traffic lights changed and it was caught in the suddenly stationary traffic. He smirked in its direction as he darted across the road up the stairs into Waterloo Station. He emerged at the far end of the train station and contrived to lose himself in the backstreets until he was confident he had shaken off his pursuer.

He drew a blank at Blackfriars Bridge and strolled on up the riverside with no particular purpose in mind, crossing the Thames again at the Millennium Bridge. Whether by accident or design, he found himself a very short time later in the environs of St Bartholomew's Hospital.

He frowned. It was out of character for him to wander without a purpose, and he certainly never ended up in a familiar location without any intention of visiting it. And yet, this was a journey that he was familiar with. He would normally take a taxi from the Yard to Bart's, of course, but there was the odd occasion when he had preferred to walk. Possibly his feet, given no clear direction, had followed an automatic route.

It was a route that he had not taken for over three years.

Suddenly curious, he strolled around the side of the building, looking up at the roof. There it was – that spot exactly where he fell… which meant that John was standing right… here. He stepped back a little, his eyes darting from the roof towards the concealed pavement. Yes… he'd chosen the location well.

He stepped closer to the wall of the building that had, crucially, blocked the view of both John and Sebastian Moran, his sniper. As he did so, his eye was caught by a few red flakes of paint on the rough brickwork, at about eye level.

He frowned at the paint, leaning closer to get a better impression. The words had been scrubbed off, rather half-heartedly, and then weather and pollution had done the rest. Very little remained of the words and symbol that John had sprayed here almost six months ago.

The phrase "I believe in Sherlock Holmes" had been painted in a large variety of locations across the capital, some by John and by Raz and his mates; and then later on by a bunch of females who seemed to have developed an inexplicable obsession with his person. The graffiti had become something of a public nuisance in the end and most of the phrases had been painted over. Many of John's original messages still remained however, because the doctor had been clever enough to paint them in hidden-away locations most of the time. He knew that the one in the alleyway on Baker Street that he had later added his own symbol to was still there, having paused by it earlier this morning.

"Interesting view, isn't it?"

Sherlock scowled, as his brother emerged from behind the building, looking pointedly up at the roof. "Piss off, Mycroft. I thought I made it perfectly clear that we had nothing to say to each other."

Mycroft ignored this. He stopped a couple of feet away from Sherlock and leaned on his furled umbrella, eyeing his brother. The civil servant was as immaculate as ever. The brief rain storm had passed over, leaving just a few drops of moisture on his coat which he brushed off fastidiously with
His handkerchief.

"I'm a little surprised that you haven't returned before," he commented, stepping around Sherlock and backing up to take in the view properly. "Hmm, yes. Very clever of you to pick this position."

Sherlock sneered. "I had little option."

"Yes, indeed," Mycroft agreed, thoughtfully. "In fact, you appear to have had very little time to set up your intricate stunt. One wonders how much time precisely." He gave Sherlock a sharp look before returning his gaze to the roof. "Tell me, what do you think of your fall as seen from this angle?"

Unwillingly, his brother lifted his eyes. He had never suffered from vertigo, but he couldn't quite suppress a shudder as he recalled that day. So much could have gone wrong – the angle, the timing… As it was, he'd sustained a couple of cracked ribs and a painful amount of bruising, which had made it hard for him to lie motionless on the ground as the fake medical team clustered around him, impeding John's movements.

"Well, quite." Sherlock dropped his eyes in time to catch the brief gleam of sympathy in his brother's usually cold eyes. "I'm sure you can imagine the impact on Dr Watson."

Sherlock scowled, disliking the direction that this conversation was taking. "What do you want, Mycroft?"

His brother smiled. "I merely wished to enquire whether you needed some help in convincing the Detective Inspector to allow you to return to your old role. If some…encouragement is required, I believe I have some influence."

"What have you got on him?" Sherlock asked, and then shook his head impatiently. "No, on second thoughts, don't tell me. You paid for his private medical care, of course, kept him at the manor and ensured that his job was kept open for him. And, knowing Lestrade, he feels deeply indebted."

His brother raised a delicate eyebrow. "It seemed the decent thing to do, in the circumstances. After all, the man did become a victim of your game."

"Not my game," he muttered, looking away.

"Really?" Mycroft gave him a sharp look. "Consider, though. Whatever grudges Colonel Moran held against Dr Watson, he would hardly have had the opportunity to seek an efficient revenge had it not been for the resources of James Moriarty. He may not have even had the motivation without the influence of a poisonous tongue. You view that incident merely as an annoying interruption to your mission - in fact, you believe that you were forced to come out of hiding to save Dr Watson's life. I cannot agree with that assessment. Moran was a part of that web and a very dangerous strand indeed. Nevertheless, you blame me for the incident."

"I asked you to do one thing – one thing –," Sherlock began furiously, but Mycroft held up his hand in a manner that brooked no argument.

"You asked me to keep Dr Watson safe." His voice was mild, but Sherlock could hear the ice beneath the well-modulated tones. "And I told you then that I would not compel him to take any action that he did not wish to. I kept him under surveillance and protection to the best of my ability. He has hardly been my sole concern during the last three years." The reproach was implicit.

Sherlock narrowed his eyes. "And I told you to keep out of my affairs."
"Just as long as it suited you," his brother countered, calmly. "I did not see you complaining when I sent that team to rescue you and the good doctor."

"You wouldn't have had to if you'd kept better control over the situation in the first place," Sherlock replied, but there was no real venom in his tone. He felt inexplicably weary. "Oh, and don't bother to contact Lestrade. It's not necessary. He'll come around when he realises that he needs me."

His brother raised an eyebrow. "You are certain of that?"

Sherlock sneered. "Just wait until he gets another locked-door mystery. Oh, he'll come running. In any case, he doesn't appreciate the full circumstances – not yet. John will win him over. He understands - and he's far better at that kind of conversation than I am." He could visualise it now – over a Friday night pint at Lestrade's local, a few well-chosen words from John, and the DI would be texting his apology before the following morning.

Mycroft's knowing smile set his teeth on edge for a reason that he didn't entirely understand. "So you expect Detective Inspector Lestrade to behave similarly to John? Do you suppose he has the same understanding of your motives for keeping him in the dark for three years? And remember that John knew the truth almost from the start. He had ample opportunity to get used to the idea – and he was able to be of help even if only in a small way. Don't you think that DI Lestrade, also a man of action, might have preferred to play the same role?"

"What are you suggesting? That I should have left messages all over the place, informing all-and-sundry of my miraculous survival?"

His brother pulled a face. "Hardly. I merely meant that Gregory Lestrade may require some time and patience to come to terms with the situation, as may Martha Hudson incidentally -."

Sherlock interrupted, impatiently. "The situation that they are still alive because I threw myself off a building? Well, how selfish of me to survive it! I should have realised that it is far easier to mourn a dead hero than an inconveniently living one."

Mycroft was silent for a moment before replying, cautiously and with none of his usual air of certainty. "It is…not something that I have much understanding of, but I am led to believe that anger directed towards oneself can be turned outwards and redirected at the…the perceived cause of the anger. I do not entirely understand the motivation, or indeed the point, but I am informed that it can provide some form of minor comfort."

His younger brother sighed, leaning his head against the rough brick. "I don't ask him to blame himself."

"I know you do not."

Strangely enough, it was Mycroft's hesitancy and obvious discomfort in trying to explain emotional reactions that made Sherlock open up to his brother for quite possibly the first time since childhood. He closed his eyes, trying to avoid that all-seeing gaze. "I'm tired of it, Mycroft. Tired of the – all the fear… resentment… guilt. I recognise the sentiments as a motivator, of course, but I just don't see the point. Fighting Moriarty's empire alone and with no help was easier than this. Why can't people just use their logic, move on from the past and let me do my job? I know I'm no good at dealing with people – John has told me so enough times – but they know that. For God's sake, Lestrade has known me for years. Did he really think that the last three would have changed me fundamentally?"

"Haven't they?" Mycroft gave him a speculative look.
"I … don’t know," Sherlock admitted, frowning. It was pointless to try to put on an act for someone who knew him almost as well as he knew himself. He hadn't felt different until he had returned to Baker Street, only a few days' ago…and he was only just beginning to notice the differences. He hadn't yet had a chance to analyse what they might mean, or what they could be attributed to.

He pushed a distracted hand through his damp curls, making them stand on end. "I – this is wasting my time. I need to be back at work, Mycroft. I need a case. I can make sense of things if I have a case to work on."

"I can't help you there." His brother sounded aggravated, as if he detested having to admit that this was one problem that he could not solve. "Unless, of course, you were prepared to consider -." "No."

"I thought not." Mycroft sighed in resignation. "You could do a great deal of good, you know."

"Not by becoming your lackey," his younger brother snapped. "We've been through this before."

And, just like that, the barriers went up again. Sherlock felt the briefest flicker of regret at the loss of that moment of unity and wondered whether his brother felt the same way. He didn't appear to; his face was impassive as he glanced at his watch.

"I must go." He began to turn, but hesitated for a moment. "You might, perhaps, consider answering Dr Watson's texts. He worries about you."

"Texts?" Sherlock chose to play innocent just for the hell of it, while his mind was racing to work out how his brother knew.

Mycroft rolled his eyes and gave him a look laden with meaning – an inference that irritated Sherlock beyond measure.

"There's no reason for John to be worried. Don't interfere, Mycroft."

His brother shrugged, his face blank once more. "At the moment, John is the only friend you have. I highly recommend that you do not take him for granted."

He nodded, a little curtly and turned towards the black limo waiting for him at the curb.

Sherlock watched as his brother disappeared into the back of it and the vehicle drove away, before turning back towards the hospital. He gazed at the buildings speculatively for a while before making up his mind.

The forensics laboratory hadn't changed in the slightest. There was Molly's cluttered makeshift desk, piled high with files. She had a small office but, for some reason, had always preferred to do her paperwork in here. When they had first met, he had briefly speculated that she'd moved her desk deliberately in the hope of seeing more of him, but had dismissed that notion almost immediately due to the familiar way in which she moved between her desk, the laboratory equipment and the examination tables next door.

There stood the long tables with their state-of-the-art equipment (or as state-of-the-art as the NHS allowed), carefully sterilised and laid out, almost as if ready for his use. For a moment, he could almost pretend that he had never been away.

"Oh! Sherlock, what on earth are you doing here? You gave me such a shock."
Molly, of course. Who else would it be? She stepped through the door that led from the forensic storage, pulling off her gloves and throwing them into a bin as she did so. Her eyes were wide at the sight of him.

"Well, what a surprise!" he snapped. "Someone else who would rather not see me." Not that he cared in the slightest.

"What? No, wait, Sherlock." He had turned to the main door but hesitated as she approached him, moving carefully as if trying to calm an unpredictable animal or a temperamental child. "I didn't mean it that way. You're always welcome here – you know that."

He turned to face her, his eyes narrowing in concentration. New hairstyle, subtle make-up to hide tired eyes, shoulders straight, spring in the step despite a late night...

"This one's good for you," he announced. "He's a…forensic pathologist, so he keeps similar hours and won't be put off by graphic stories. You wanted to ask him out for a while but were hesitant. You needn't have worried; he's been interested in you for at least a year."

She blinked. "How did you…? No, don't answer that – I don't think I want to know. How have you been, Sherlock?"

She sounded calm and it was his turn to blink in surprise.

He'd seen Molly on a number of occasions during the intervening three and a half years; the last time being on his return to the UK, but he hadn't seen her since Moran's death.

When he'd left her flat nearly a week after his fall, shortly after she'd returned his clothes, he'd fully intended never to return. He'd known that he could trust her to keep his survival a secret, but it was folly to involve her beyond that. And, in any case, he didn't need her now. Her immediate usefulness to him was at an end… Besides which, only a fool would have continued to believe that she was unimportant. If any of Moriarty's associates suspected that he was still alive, it wouldn't take them long to work out exactly who had assisted him…and that would not end well for Molly Hooper.

And yet, he'd found himself returning to her, over and over, with an instinct that he didn't entirely understand. Whenever he was in London, his feet would take him in the direction of her small flat in Bethnal Green. It was as if a survival response took over, sending him in a direction as far away from Baker Street as possible…and yet, there would have been other options had he simply been seeking a distraction from 221B.

She would return from work or a rare night out with friends to find him passed out on her couch, having climbed in through a window or, on one occasion, already weakened by blood loss, having forced the lock of the front door. And she'd reacted as calmly on those occasions as she had to his initial request for help. She'd patched him up to the best of her ability, tutted over the broken nose, made tea, offered her bathroom and a couch for the night…and never asked any questions. She had known instinctively that it was probably best not to know.

He was never entirely sure why he'd initially sought friendship from the mousey little pathologist after the fall. He had never felt the slightest attraction for her. He'd known from the start that she was interested in him, of course, and had used her crush to his advantage without a moment's regret. He had never even counted her as a friend. She wouldn't stand up to him, which was dull; her interests were pedestrian; her rambling pointless conversations were best tuned out. She was merely another of his useful contacts – and one he didn't have to bribe with money or promises.

And yet…bit by bit and very gradually, something approximating a tentative friendship had
developed between them. For a few brief hours each time, she had provided a sense of peace - of safety and comfort. She'd even managed to divert his mind from his troubles for a brief time. As he'd lain on her bed for a couple of days, weakened by blood loss due to a knife wound to his thigh and frustrated by his inability to chase his assailant, she'd perched on the end of the bed and had chatted brightly for hours on end about some of the weirder causes of death she'd come across. She'd ignored his initial huff of irritation and had persevered until, almost against his will, he'd found himself chuckling at the images she'd conjured up.

He'd sometimes felt that he was seeking something from her that he had missed desperately since his fall. For years, Sherlock had worked and lived alone and had been happy to do so. No one disturbed his thought processes, no one complained if he covered the kitchen units with samples of graveyard soil or if it was imperative for him to play the violin at four in the morning.

Then a certain doctor had walked into his life. Sherlock had initially seen an opportunity to afford the flat he wanted, but had very quickly recognised a kindred spirit. He had enjoyed having someone rather more animated than the skull to bounce ideas off; someone that he could share a joke with at the expense of the Yarders or his pompous brother; someone who might have the occasional tantrum about the night-time violin playing but was generally easy-going to have around. It just…worked. He didn't entirely understand why, but somehow John had managed to tolerate him for eighteen months and had shown every intention of sticking around for longer.

And Sherlock had liked it. On Sunday afternoons, when he emerged from his mind palace, he'd open his eyes and would immediately hear the quiet sounds that told him he was no longer alone: the tapping of untutored hands on the laptop keyboard, the off-key humming that John probably wasn't aware of producing while he composed his awkwardly-phrased stories. And then John would look up and smile when he appeared in the kitchen doorway, and would get up to put the kettle on. And later on, he'd order in a curry… and sometimes Sherlock would sit opposite him at the kitchen table and eat a bit of it. Or if he wasn't eating, he'd sit in his chair and gaze at nothing while listening to the rhythmic chink of John's fork on his plate and the smell of hot spicy food… and it was comforting. Even those awful detective programmes that John insisted on watching on a Sunday night were comforting.

He hadn't known it was a comfort until he no longer had it.

Whenever he was missing Baker Street most during his three years away, it was always those lazy Sundays that came into his mind – and he was never entirely sure why. It was strange, because Sunday was the one day of the week that Sherlock was not normally in charge. It was the one day that John dug his heels. He absolutely refused to be dragged out on a case, except in very extreme circumstances, and he wouldn't tolerate any experiments taking over the flat. Sunday was John's day. The doctor had a routine. After a lie-in and a leisurely lunch over the Sunday papers, he would go for a stroll around Regent's Park, whatever the weather, and then would check his e-mails and update his blog in the late afternoon. There would always be a takeaway; there would always be a dreadful programme that John would insist on watching. Eventually, Sherlock had found himself acquiescing – fitting into someone else's routine for once in his life. He would slow his own pace down to match; would take the time to practise his violin, work on compositions, reorganise and declutter his mind palace. He'd even, on one occasion, refused to attend a crime scene – although admittedly it had been no more than a five, or possibly a six, on his personal scale of interest.

On one of the early Sundays following his 'death', before heading overseas, he had hidden in a doorway almost opposite 221B and had closed his eyes and heard that tap-tap-tapping, and smelt that hot spice, and heard that inane detective programme… Even though logic suggested that John wouldn't be following his usual routine, he still yearned to cross the road, climb up those steps and lose himself in the peace and predictability of that Sunday atmosphere.
But that comfort was denied him now, and so he had turned away and had forced his footsteps east towards another flat. And Molly had provided some elements of the comfort he was looking for. Sherlock had realised then, if he hadn't before, that he was not as solitary by nature as he had always assumed. John Watson had spoiled him for solitude.

It was Molly from whom he had sought more significant information on John…

"Here." She passed him a plate of melted cheese on toast, her face apologetic. "I'm sorry – it's not much. I meant to go shopping tomorrow…"

"It's fine – this is sufficient, thank you."

He gulped down nearly half a mug of scalding tea before attacking the pile of toast with the hunger of a man who hadn't eaten for almost three days. It was interesting that the deliberately enforced starvation at Baker Street during cases had been far less of a challenge. Clearly, the influences of security, physical warmth and psychological comfort were factors to be investigated for their impact on metabolism. That would make an interesting research project once he returned from the dead. But, in any case, the current evidence was flawed - Sherlock was not typical in his homeless situation. While most homeless people focused their compromised strength on the daily struggle to survive and locate food and warmth, he didn't have time to do so. And begging wasn't natural to him in any case – he had occasionally brushed away well-meaning offers of money or food to focus his attention on a significant sighting.

All of which meant that he fell upon Molly's simple cheese on toast with the same degree of enthusiasm as that shown by Mycroft when tackling a cream bun or by John with an Indian takeaway.

Talking of which…

He glanced up at Molly who was hovering nervously near the kitchen door. "Have you seen him?"

She didn't need to ask who he meant. "I...no. Not at all, actually. He's been keeping away from me. I suppose the memories of that day are too much..."

He didn't bother to tell her that John knew of his survival. He had his own suspicions for the reasons why John kept his distance from Molly.

"And I haven't tried to contact him," she continued. "I'm afraid that I might say the wrong thing – let something slip." She laughed, a little self-deprecatingly. "You know me."

He shook his head. "I don't think you would. You've kept the secret so far. You're far stronger than you know, Molly Hooper. And that's not intended to be a meaningless complement," he added firmly, as she flushed in sudden pleasure and opened her mouth to reply. "I'm not attempting to flirt with you. I'm only stating a simple fact."

She subsided, smiling ruefully. "I should know that by now, shouldn't I? You played me for a fool enough times... Well, anyway, I'm sorry I can't tell you anything about him."

He nodded, hiding his disappointment. It would have been helpful to have obtained an opinion on the doctor's well-being other than that of his brother's, which was usually conveyed with an air of unnecessarily smug implication. "It's probably just as well that you have kept away from him. There's no point in risking discovery."

She very tactfully didn't point out that he was risking discovery by returning to her flat so often, even
Molly had reacted far more calmly to his request for help than he could have hoped, so he shouldn't have been surprised by her calm reaction to his unscheduled appearance after a six-month absence from her life.

"Sherlock? Are you alright?"

"I'm fine." He knew his voice sounded angry still, and he took a few deep calming breaths as he paced up and down.

"I heard you'd returned to Baker Street. John texted me," she added, by way of explanation. "We usually meet up for a quick drink on Friday nights, so he let me know he couldn't make it."

"Mmm." He was still pacing, only half-listening. "Any interesting bodies for me?"

She hesitated for a moment, but it was just long enough to make Sherlock to roll his eyes. "Not you too! Is anyone glad that I'm still alive?"

"Of course! And I'm sure that John -.

"Don't bring John into this," he snapped, rubbing a hand across his eyes. "And that's another thing. Why does everyone always assume that we are a couple?" Mycroft's parting comments still smarted.

Her mouth twitched, as if she was trying very hard not to laugh. "Possibly because you are a couple?"

He stopped pacing and glared at her. "We are not! I am not interested in… that. Why on earth would I want to indulge in… activities that would slow my mind down? It's messy, both literally and figuratively, and the inevitable emotions are – are… surplus to requirement!"

"Yeah, I think I've worked that out by now," she murmured. He expected to hear the usual note of bitterness in her tone, but it was not there. If anything, Molly still sounded rather amused and he turned away, offended.

"Hey, stop – wait a minute!" She grabbed his sleeve. "What is it Sherlock – really? You can't tell me that you're really upset by the gossip about you and John. You've never cared about what people think before. It's something else – isn't it?"

He subsided a little, biting his lip. "It's unimportant."

"No, it isn't – not if it bothers you that much." She pulled at his arm, making him turn towards her. Her large brown eyes were very serious in her pale face, but there was a warmth in them that seemed to welcome his scrutiny.

Looking closer, he could see that that, under the light, there were a few flecks of green among the brown, turning her eye colour to hazel. It was something he hadn't troubled himself to notice before. Momentarily fascinated, he let his eyes wander over her face, noting the smudge of freckles across the bridge of her nose and the creases around her eyes and at the corners of her mouth that spoke of long hours under harsh lights but also of smiles and laughter.

It had never really occurred to him before, but Molly Hooper was a happy woman. It probably wasn't an emotion that most people would attribute to the nervous little pathologist, but the signs were there. He hadn't bothered to pay much attention until now, but he remembered the quick smiles,
the little laughs… Even when lonely, betrayed in love or humiliated by his caustic putdowns, she had always been quick to smile - and to forgive.

He remembered now the gleam of sympathy in John's eyes whenever the doctor encountered Molly. John had seen her as a victim – someone to be pitied. Sherlock had never shared the same view – and he was beginning to understand why.

Her eyes crinkled in amusement as she grinned up at him. "Do I even want to know what you're deducing about me at the moment?"

He started a little, realising how close he was standing. Not that he hadn't used his proximity as a weapon on this woman before… As he stepped back, he was interested to note that she didn't seem all that bothered. The pulse in her neck was steady; her breathing not elevated, her pupils not dilated.

Molly Hooper had grown up a lot in the last three years.

She kept her hand on his arm, as if afraid he would sweep out of her laboratory, as he'd done so many times before. "Look, why don't you stay for a while? I'm in no rush. I'll get some coffee and we can talk."

"I had assumed I wouldn't be welcome here. I should warn you that I'm no longer authorised by the Yard," he cautioned.

She waved her hand, casually. "Oh, don't worry about that. I mean, it probably wouldn't be a good idea for the authorities to see you here, but they never bother about me these days. It was a bit awkward at first when the story came out, but then everything was sorted out by -.

" - Mycroft. Yes, I know," he interrupted, sinking onto a stool as a dark cloud of despondency descended again. Bloody Mycroft. Always there, always lending a hand, however unwanted…

She gave him a stern look. "Don't wander off. And don't mess around with the bodies while I'm away."

"I wouldn't dream of it." He smirked, feeling some semblance of normality returning, as she hurried through the door in the direction of the staff kitchen.

Her dress sense hadn't improved in three years and the sight of her dark pony tail bouncing on top of a hideously fluffy beige cardigan was almost achingly familiar. The coffee would be cheap and foul, of course, but there was a pleasing familiarity about that too.

He stood up and wandered around the laboratory, a little aimlessly. Molly had some case notes on her desk; he flicked through those, but it was all standard stuff – cancer, heart attack, a road accident. Nothing remotely interesting. His skin itched with the desire for a case – something to sink his teeth into. Lestrade's case had promised something interesting – not who had done it, but why – but it was quite clear that he'd have no involvement in it now. He wondered idly whether the DI was taking his advice about checking the dustbins for the boyfriend's body.

If Lestrade was going to be difficult, he would need to get involved in some private cases – or he would go mad. He'd only been back at Baker Street a few days and already he felt trapped. Not by John, and not by the flat itself. Just...something – an instinct that made him want to fling a few clothes into a backpack and head back out into the world, slipping silently away from the CCTV and the press and the curious or hostile faces until he was just another anonymous face once more…

… The worst aspect of being homeless was the anonymity.
The way that the eyes of passing strangers would quickly slide past you or over you, as if you were not really there. The awkward, embarrassed glances – sometimes sympathetic, sometimes hopeless, sometimes hostile, but always brief. Being made to feel like an object – nothing more than a physical barrier to be overcome. Knowing that no one gave you more than a moment's thought, and forgot your existence just as quickly.

Paradoxically, the best aspect of being homeless was also the anonymity.

He could stare at people, even memorise their faces, without being noticed – or, if he was, he could be passed off as just another crazy. He had been quite sincere in his comment to Mycroft – no better way to hide in plain sight. He had done most of his tracking in this most effective of disguises.

And not just of strangers, either.

John's limp had returned. Hard to tell at this distance whether it was still psychosomatic or was a lingering injury from his fight on the canal bank – the fight that probably had saved Bex's life. Or possibly some other injury that Sherlock was unaware of. He hated not knowing something about John...and that was new too – that desire to know everything, and not just as a method of showing off.

On the surface, to those late Christmas shoppers, hurrying past him in their anxiety to make their last purchases, he was just an ordinary, middle-aged man of below average height with a gammy leg. None of them noticed the military bearing, the determined gait of a soldier refusing to allow an old injury to hinder him. Not one of these insipid shoppers gave a moment's notice to the keen blue eyes that had viewed scenes of bloodshed and anguish, the like of which they probably couldn't imagine, with a clinical calmness. No one paid any attention to the strong, calloused hands that had sewn up wounds and set bones and soothed away countless agonies. John kept his experiences tucked carefully away behind an affable exterior and brought them out only during nights of disturbing dreams – nightmares that made him shout out in terror. The dreams had grown less frequent while he'd been at Baker Street, but Sherlock knew they could still return to haunt him without much warning.

His friend's face was pale with a fatigue that he was attempting to conceal, and Sherlock wondered if his nights were being disturbed again. Were the dreams the same? John had never discussed them, perhaps thinking that Sherlock was unaware, and Sherlock had never been sufficiently interested to inquire. Post-traumatic stress following military duty – it was case-book. Nothing new.

Now, he found himself wishing that he had talked to John about them. He'd always shied away from personal talks of that nature. Emotions like fear made Sherlock nervous. He hated being in situations where he might be expected to show a degree of sympathy that he did not feel. He was good at pretending such emotions to others, of course, but at the time he hadn't thought he'd be a good enough actor to fool John Watson... which made it all the more poignant that he had managed to fool his friend so easily on that last day at Bart's.

This encounter had been entirely chance. It was two shopping days before Christmas, and just over eighteen months after the fall. Sherlock, currently disguised as a teenager in jeans and a hoodie that was insufficient to keep out the winter chill, was lurking in Cavendish Square.

It was a foul day – had been overcast and bitterly cold all day and now rain was starting to fall. He was relieved to know that he had shelter for the night. It was one of his old flats – Sherlock knew that the landlord had never cleared it up and hence it had stayed untenanted since he'd moved to Baker Street. It would be easy enough to break in – he'd done it himself enough times when he'd mislaid his key.
He'd been waiting for an informant that hadn't arrived, and was about to leave his quiet corner of the square when a familiar figure appeared.

John must have been attending a seminar or meeting at the Royal Society of Medicine. It would have made more sense for him to walk up Wimpole Street to the north, past the Wigmore Hall but instead, for some reason, he crossed Cavendish Square in the direction of the bright lights of Oxford Circus.

Unlike most passers-by, John was not the type to ignore the homeless. As he paused to exchange a friendly word with a group of kids sitting on a bench, clearly checking they were OK and had somewhere to go for the night, Sherlock shrank back into the bushes. He was not entirely sure that his disguise would hold up under close scrutiny. From past glimpses of his flatmate, he knew that John was in the habit of peering intently at homeless men, as if seeking out his missing friend's familiar features. He pulled the hood of his hoodie over his face and stuffed his hands in his jeans pockets, affecting the defiant posture of a disenchanted adolescent.

As it turned out, John didn't notice him in the dimness of a late December afternoon. He gave a genial farewell to the group of teenagers and carried on across the square with his slightly awkward gait. Sherlock noted that he hadn't reverted to the cane and derived a strange comfort from that fact. It made him feel that, whatever John might be suffering currently, he at least hadn't regressed to his former state - not entirely, anyway. He slouched out of his dark corner and began to shadow his friend.

Oxford Street was teeming with panicking shoppers. John moved slowly and surely against the traffic of hurrying bodies. He was in no hurry – there were no loved ones at home for him to buy presents for. Sherlock had no doubt that he had already bought and wrapped up presents for his sister and Mrs Hudson. John paused from time to time, gazing at the Christmas displays and seeming to gain some mild pleasure from them. Sherlock wondered at this, but then remembered the one Christmas they had shared, when the doctor had been keen to bring some of the festivity of the season to 221B – decorations, seasonal music, a Christmas tree... that horrific party. Sherlock had gone along with it all with amused tolerance, although the party had been a severe trial.

He turned to the right and Sherlock continued to follow him down Regents Street. Outside Hamley's, excited children were watching the animatronic displays, pressed up against their weary but indulgent parents. John paused, distracted by a little boy aged five or so, perched on his father's shoulders while his older sister pulled at her father's leg. The expression of sheer longing on John's face as he gazed at this family tableau made Sherlock's throat close up for a moment.

His friend walked a short distance further along Regents Street before turning left and cutting up a side road towards Soho. There were smaller, more specialist stores in this area, including a music shop that Sherlock had frequented from time to time to get replacement strings, resin and sheet music. He somehow wasn't surprised to see John stop outside this shop and gaze into the display window.

The crowds were sparser here, and Sherlock knew he was taking a big risk as he walked slowly towards John. The doctor was gazing intently at something in the window and seemed unaware of the people around him. His hands were moving restlessly in his pockets – a familiar old mannerism that meant he was tempted by a purchase but didn't think he could really afford it. His eyes were running slowly over a large object displayed in the window – clearly the cause of his temptation. Moving slightly nearer, Sherlock caught his expression in the light of a street lamp, and was confused to see that same look of longing in his face. His curiosity overcame his caution – what was John so distracted by?

As he approached, his gaze was arrested by the violin displayed in the window. It was a beautiful
thing – a replica of the del Gesu 18th century 'Kriesler' model, fairly modern but made with a loving attention that instruments rarely received these days. He'd never played one, having preferred the German 19th century models, but the violin glowed red in the shop's muted light and he felt his fingers itching.

He blamed this momentary lapse in concentration on his inability to realise that he had strayed close enough for his image to be reflected in the shop window. He had just a moment to see John meeting his eyes in his reflection and to note his shoulders tensing in sudden realisation before the doctor began to turn towards him.

"Hey! Wait!"

He didn't pause for a moment, turning away and walking across the road, making sure to affect the rolling, casual gait of a teenaged boy. He had half expected John to follow him, but there was no sound of urgent footsteps hurrying behind, so he paused behind a parked van and glanced behind.

It came as a surprise to see the doctor still standing by the music shop. His shoulders were hunched in a posture of defeat that Sherlock found he hated intensely. Why was John not following? Oh...but of course. In some way, possibly on a subconscious level, John knew it was him. As he watched his friend wavering, half-willing him to follow, the doctor stiffened his shoulders and, with them, his resolve. John's head was bent and his face in shadow as he walked slowly, determinedly, in the opposite direction.

It took every ounce of Sherlock's strength of mind to turn away...

On an impulse, he pulled his mobile from his pocket and checked the unread texts. All from John, of course.

08:54 Just heard from Greg. For fuck's sake, what did I tell you this morning? You never listen!

08:57 Sorry, having bad morning already, didn't mean to take it out on you. I'm sure you tried. You OK?

09:03 Sherlock, please reply. Just want to know you're OK. Have to turn mobile off now, surgery just starting, but leave a message if you can. We can sort it out.

I'm sure you can, Sherlock thought, rather uncharitably.

"Here we are. I hope you're not stealing my notes."

Sherlock jumped and stepped away from the desk, as Molly entered the office, carrying two mugs of steaming coffee. "Not that there's anything of interest to you there. Here you are – black, two sugars. See – I can still remember how you take it."

He took a gulp of the acrid black liquid – yes, it was as bitter as he remembered. Same cheap hospital brand, then. He winced at the taste and sat down on a stool. As he did so, his phone beeped. John again.

11.17 So I take it you're still sulking?

Molly glanced at his phone as she pulled over another stool and sat next to him. "Oh, is that a message from John? Is he checking up on you?"
He stuffed the phone back in his pocket, ignoring her question. "What did you mean when you said that John and I were a couple?"

She laughed, flushing slightly. "I didn't mean *that*. I mean, not that it wouldn't be fine, but I'm fairly sure that John doesn't lean that way, judging by his sexual history. And as for you – well, you're not really wired like that…are you?"

He looked at her quickly, but there was no mockery in her face. As if she sensed his tension, she smiled, gently. "There's nothing to be ashamed of, Sherlock. It doesn't matter in the least."

It was his turn to flush. "I'm *not* ashamed."

And it was true – he really wasn't. It had always struck him as odd that so many people – acquaintances, colleagues, strangers, even the press – had become almost obsessed with the one aspect of his life that he had very limited interest in. John had demonstrated a frank disbelief in Sherlock's lamentable ignorance about the culture of dating, and even his own brother had sneered at his lack of sexual experience (which was rich, coming from Mycroft). He was aware of the mechanics, naturally, and his body was not *entirely* unresponsive. In fact, he could remember some fairly impressive physical reactions in his university days.

John might have been surprised to learn that Ms Adler had not awakened any sexual interest – his fascination with her had been purely intellectual. Insofar as he identified with any sexual orientation, his past reactions suggested that he might be homosexual – but that was irrelevant information in any case. The fact that he chose never to take such reactions to their (apparently) logical conclusion appeared to be of considerable interest to others, for a reason that he could not comprehend.

"All I *meant,"* Molly continued, "is that there's a different level of friendship between you and John. There always *was*, right from the start. You trust him in a way that you could never trust anyone else."

"I trust *you,*" he muttered, putting down his mug and rubbing his hands together distractedly.

Molly was silent for so long that he looked up at her in surprise. When she spoke again, she seemed to be choosing her words very carefully.

"It's just… almost from the moment you first met, you became a… well, a couple is the best word I can think of to describe it, although I don't mean that in the usual way that people assume… Look, all I know is that one moment you were 'just Sherlock' and the next moment, or so it seemed, you were 'Sherlock-and-John'. A sort-of new entity. It got to the point where, whenever *you* turned up, I'd be automatically looking over your shoulder for *him.*"

Sherlock looked down at his hands, unsure of how to respond to this.

Her face softened and she put a hand over his. "When you were away from home, you just weren't the same person. Back when we first met, you could be so *cruel* at times – you know? Especially before John came along. It's almost as if he acted as some kind of moral arbiter. I mean, you still *were* cruel, but there was less bite to it – it felt like more of a habit by then. Before John, I used to feel as if you despised me, but after he came, it didn't feel quite so personal." She laughed. "I knew I still irritated you – that's why I used to babble nervously whenever you were around – but you didn't *hate* me. Even at that Christmas party… you were so horrible to me – and yet you apologised. I don't think you would have bothered before he came along. After you fell – well, I thought you'd revert back to the Sherlock I remembered. I thought you'd be harsh and uncaring…but you weren't. Just sort-of… diminished. Less…*you.*"
He sighed, rubbing his face. "I don't need John. I can operate perfectly well without him."

"Yes, I know you can – is that what all this is about? I didn't mean you were weakened by John not being there. I meant more that, when he was around, you had a new perspective. A kind-of alternative way at looking at the world. You could sneer at it or dismiss it, but it was still there, in your mind…"

She paused before going on, rather diffidently. "You didn't need me before your fall. I didn't count. No, don't –," she added quickly, as he tried to interrupt. "Please let me say this before I lose my courage… I know you're about to say that I did count, but I really didn't. But…after the fall, it was different, wasn't it? We became friends. I don't know how, but somehow we did. And I – I liked it."

She had dropped her head to avoid his eyes, but he could see how flushed her cheeks were. "For a little while, I thought I'd finally got what I wanted. You came back, you kept coming back… and you wouldn't do that unless you wanted to – would you? That's what I told myself. You needed me. I knew by then that I would never have you, not in that way, but I could at least be your friend." She looked up then, smiling at him, her eyes brimming with unshed tears. "I can't tell you how much that meant – to know that you liked me, even just that much."

"Molly…" He clenched and unclenched his fists uncomfortably. Crying women had always been a challenge. Should he touch her? Squeeze her hand or pat her shoulder? Would that be considered appropriate?

She seemed to read his mind and smiled more broadly, a single tear coursing down her face. Her hand sought his and squeezed it. "It's OK, Sherlock. You're doing fine. You don't have to try to be someone you're not. It's me – remember?"

She sighed and took her hand away to wipe quickly at her face. Remembering suddenly, he rummaged around in his pocket and produced a handkerchief, mercifully clean and pressed, and she smiled her gratitude as she used it to mop her eyes.

"Anyway, ridiculous though it might seem, I was happy. I felt terribly guilty about John and Greg, of course, and half the term I was scared out of my wits that I was going to do or say something stupid, something that might put you in danger. But every time I came in and you were there, it was such a relief! You were still alive and I could do something to help – I could be useful. Do you remember me sitting on the bed and trying to stop you leaving it out of sheer boredom by telling ridiculous stories about forensic cases?"

"And at least half of them were untrue," he commented, but he was smiling at the memory.

She laughed briefly, but then her face sobered. "But no matter what I did or said, there was one thing I couldn't ever do. I could never take that expression off your face. I told you once that you looked sad whenever you thought that John wasn't looking. Well, after the fall, you looked like that all the time. And eventually I knew. I knew why we were friends, why you came to me all those times. It was because you couldn't go to him. I was a replacement for John – wasn't I?"

He grimaced a little, but there was no point in denying it. "Probably."

She let out a little tense breath. "I thought so. Not that it…well, I suppose it ought to matter. I should feel offended."

"But you don't." It was a statement of fact, as it was so obviously true, but he couldn't disguise the wonderment in his voice. She heard it and smiled again.
"I was never proof against Dr John Watson, not from the moment he walked into the lab. No – I didn't mind, not really. I was glad that I could try to bring you memories of him – of what you had with him before you had to leave. I..." She swallowed, looking at the floor again. "I'd like to hope that we are still friends, even though he's back..."

He recognised the tentative question for what it was – he might be slow at picking up emotions, but not that slow. Without thinking about it much, he slid his hand across his lap and put over hers. It was a natural, instinctive move, and he wondered at his own body language – was it really that simple? His longer fingers entwined with hers. "Always, Molly. I won't forget what you did for me. We – we share something that has nothing to do with John."

She seemed to relax, looking up and giving him a wide smile. It was not the nervous smile of old; this was a broad, warm grin of pure pleasure that reminded him of the smile lines on her face and why they were there. Had she always been the woman sitting before him now? Had he gone wrong with her right from the start? If he'd been honest with her and patient with her unrequited crush on him, instead of flustering her with artificial complements and wounding insults, would they have reached this stage earlier in their relationship?

"You know you can talk to me, don't you?"

"Hmm?" He was startled out of his thoughts.

She flushed a little under his curious scrutiny and removed her hand, curling it around her coffee cup. "I mean, I know you've got John to talk to and you probably don't need to tell me anything anyway... I just meant that if there's anything you need..." She broke off and gave him an embarrassed smile as they both recognised her words from three and a half years ago. "It's just that... you're clearly unhappy, and I'm sure it's not about John."

"It's not as easy as I thought it would be," he admitted.

"Coming back from the dead?" At his nod, she sighed. "I wondered how that was going. John knew all along, didn't he? So it's not him you're having problems with."

"Yes. No. Maybe." He shook his head and gulped down the last of his now-cold coffee, grimacing. "I'm not really sure."

"You need a case," she stated firmly as she put her cup down her dangerously overflowing desk and stood up. "Does my face look alright?" she added, glancing at the streaks of black mascara on Sherlock's handkerchief.

His head shot up at this, hope blooming. "Do you have anything?"

She looked startled. "Me? No. I'm sorry. I expect you've already looked through the current files. It's very quiet right now."

He subsided again, as she snagged her handbag, pulled out a compact mirror and frowned at her eyes. They were a little red and the make-up had been wiped away. "Damn. Well, I'll have to do. Sherlock, I have to go – got a lunchtime staff meeting in ten minutes."

"OK." He watched her worry over her hair for about half a minute before saying, "You needn't bother. It looks fine – and in any case, your boss is far too busy flirting with that new nineteen year old lab assistant to pay any attention to you."

She flushed and laughed. "Ok. I'm going to assume that was an attempt to be comforting and not an insult at all. And I suspect you're right – he is pretty sleazy. I'm not going to tell you what marriage
he's on right now, as you probably already know. By the way, if you're hanging around here, you might want to look at my completed files. You'll find them on the laptop."

He leaned back idly. "Why would I want to do that?"

She shrugged. "Look at the ones over the last three years. Since you left, I've been coding them for you. The interesting ones, that is. Unusual causes of death, particularly gruesome murders. You know, just in case you'd be interested."

He raised an eyebrow. It might be worth a look – if nothing else, he could catch up on the results of some old experiments. "How have you coded them? Numerical or a mixture? In which field?"

"Ah." There was just the impression of a smirk around her lips as she swung her bag onto her shoulder. "I think I should leave you to work that out, don't you?"

His eyes gleamed as he recognised the challenge. "And the passwords too?"

She grinned. "Of course."

He smiled, feeling his heart lighten as she left the lab. Already, the permutations were running through his mind. Now what was the name of that pathologist she was seeing…?

Three hours later, he was still looking through the files, noting down some areas that might be worth investigating – in particular, an unusual method of administrating poison that might or might not have affected the toxicity – when he heard the external doors to the forensic storage bang back.

Molly looked up – she'd obviously returned some time ago and had perched herself at a laboratory table to go through some notes rather than disturbing him. "Sounds like my afternoon is about to get more interesting."

"Hmm." He got up and trailed behind her to the adjoining door between the laboratory and the storage room. His suspicions were confirmed when she opened it in time to see a covered body being wheeled in, closely followed by Greg Lestrade.

The DI showed no surprise at Sherlock's presence behind Molly in the doorway. He nodded formally at them both, his face impassive.

"Murder victim. Thirty-year-old male Caucasian. Stab wound to chest." His words were addressed to Molly, but his dark eyes shifted to Sherlock briefly, as he added: "Boyfriend of the other victim."

He nodded again, the briefest of acknowledgements, before turning away sharply and leaving the room.
Isolation

Sherlock tried.

Or, at least, by his own estimation he tried. Harder than ever before.

As the months passed by and he was kicked off crime scenes again and again, and his texts and e-mails and even (God help him) voicemail messages were ignored, and no clients with interesting mysteries turned up at the doorstep of 221B, he had the leisure to recall that he had never had to try to find a case before. His confidence, his air of arrogant authority and his quick-fire delivery had been enough.

Maybe it was because he hadn't really cared back then. In the early days, the police could take or leave his helpful advice; it was entirely up to them, because Sherlock had never needed them. Back then, he had had the blessed sting of the needle, the warm liquid rush through his veins, setting his cortex alight. At first, the drugs had still mattered more than the cases – just.

But then, one day, he suddenly realised that Lestrade and the Met had needed him. It never occurred to him that he had come to need them too - that he had merely swapped one addiction for another.

Strangely, it never once occurred to him to return to his prior addiction. He knew that John was watching him for the signs like a hawk, but even without the irritatingly obvious surveillance, he simply didn't see the point. A part of him wondered at this – *once an addict, always an addict* – and yet, the saying didn't seem to apply in this case.

He knew himself to be without direction – dangerously so. He might have dedicated more time to his experiments – possibly set up something long-term that he could devote his attention to. And yet, without the lure of the occasional case to elevate the adrenaline, he found that he just couldn't concentrate. He'd start a project with fresh enthusiasm, but after just a few hours, he would find his mind wandering. He ruined more than one experiment by simply walking away and forgetting about it.

He couldn't understand his behaviour. The last time his concentration had been this poor and his brain this sluggish had been during his last period of rehab. It had been that more than anything that had convinced him to stay clean – the fear of losing his brilliant mind - his most precious commodity. Since his return, it seemed to be happening naturally and the very thought terrified him.

As a result of his absent-mindedness, John would frequently come home from work to discover the detritus of his latest aborted experiment. Sherlock would expect the mess to be the catalyst for the doctor to finally lose his temper, but it never happened. He would clear the experiments away silently, his mouth in a thin line. It was something that Sherlock had come to hate – that self-sacrificial look, that silent air of martyrdom. As if Sherlock was a fucking child to be humoured.

His flatmate's obvious pleasure at Sherlock's reappearance had lasted a few weeks – longer than Sherlock had anticipated, in fact. He had expected John to explode after just a couple of days, but during this period, each of the consulting detective's annoying habits was greeted with an amused, almost relieved, grin. Even Sherlock's silent, morose demeanour over Christmas had been shrugged off – John had spent most of the holiday watching terrible TV and making too-bright comments about how nice it was to have a quiet Christmas for a change.

Eventually, the doctor's visible relief had given way to puzzlement at the detective's behaviour, and then silent discomfort and, finally, a kind of mute frustration. He would bite his lip to shreds rather
than give voice to his irritation.

Sherlock thought he knew why. The last words John had said to him before seeing him on the roof had been ones of anger. *Machine* – that's what he had called Sherlock. Clearly, his flat mate had regretted those words bitterly – Sherlock had no real idea why they mattered, but he could recognise guilt when he saw it. John was *afraid* – terrified that if he allowed his anger to get the better of him, he would end up saying something hurtful. Something that would make Sherlock leave again.

So John would huff and mutter under his breath and doggedly clear away the mess. He never complained; he never lost his temper; he never stormed out or shouted or swore at his indolent flat mate. He carried on making meals and cups of tea that Sherlock would ignore. And, every now and then, Sherlock would spot the momentary fear that John was usually careful to hide behind a blandly cheerful expression.

He was the model flatmate, never complaining, creeping up and down the stairs when he thought the detective might be asleep. Out of sheer boredom, Sherlock started trying to provoke him – letting his drinks go cold, ignoring the doctor's friendly greetings, deliberately leaving a mess, playing his violin loudly and discordantly at 3AM when he knew John had an early start. Nothing seemed to work.

And Sherlock found himself hating it – resenting John for being so bloody *perfect*. If he would only lose his temper *just once*, the way he used to…

John continued in his usual regimented routine – full time Monday to Friday at the surgery; two early mornings and one late evening at the Salvation Army clinic; regular walks to check on his homeless contacts. His home life was equally ordered. Friday night drinks at a city wine bar with Molly. Cleaning the flat on Saturday mornings and shopping in the afternoons. Regular Saturday evening trips to the pub with Greg and some of the other Yarders; friendly but platonic dinners with Sarah; the occasional weekend rugby match with old army mates. He never brought a woman home – in fact, there was no sign that he *ever* sought female company, which seemed out of character for the John that Sherlock remembered. Had he finally given up on his feeble but ever-optimistic attempts to form a lasting relationship?

The Sunday evening routine that Sherlock had once craved so desperately during his exile remained. However, when John served up the takeaway, Sherlock would, more often than not, leave his portion untouched. John would compress his lips in *that way* that Sherlock hated, and discard the uneaten food before wishing his friend a polite good night.

And the worst of all was that Sherlock couldn't seem to do anything about it. He *knew* he was behaving badly. Occasionally, he would wake up – always late these days - and determine that *today* would be different. He'd clean the flat. He'd go out and find something constructive to do. He'd cook a meal for John… or at least put the kettle on…or at least be grateful when John put the kettle on. He might even ask him how his day had been… and John would think he'd finally gone mad.

And then he'd remember that there was *nothing* constructive to do, not now, unless he took his smug brother up on his frequently repeated offer of work… and then the black cloud would descend again. And by the time the doctor walked in the door after work, his face grey with fatigue, Sherlock would be moody and snappish again, shrugging off all attempts at friendly conversation.

He knew John was worried. From time to time, the doctor looked as if he wanted to make a suggestion, but he would give Sherlock an uncertain look and change his mind. On one occasion, he casually left a leaflet on depression on the table. Sherlock tore it into a dozen pieces and threw it into the fire.

He couldn't talk to John without making the atmosphere even more uncomfortable. Mrs Hudson still
avoided him and seemed a little nervous whenever they met, so he could no longer knock on her door and perch on her kitchen chair, sneaking home-made biscuits as she fussed over him. Molly was sympathetic, but didn't seem to understand why he couldn't confide in John. And Mycroft, who might perhaps understand better than anyone, was a non-starter – Sherlock had far too much pride to go begging to his brother.

His sleeplessness was worse than before the fall. He'd suffered with insomnia since early childhood, but now his rhythm was completely thrown – he'd be unable to sleep at all for a couple of nights and then would collapse for fourteen hours at a time. John would probably perceive it as a 'symptom'. Sherlock had always been suspicious of 'symptoms'.

As winter passed and the weather began to improve, he found himself desperate to escape the claustrophobic atmosphere of the flat. He took to walking around the capital, reacquainting himself with old haunts and spotting the changes to his usual routes caused by the interminable road works and building developments. The months passed and still he walked, striding with quick, impatient steps, adding the changes to his mind map of the capital.

Whenever he grew tired of his own company, he would visit Molly, who was always glad to see him, even if she occasionally had to push him into her cramped office to avoid being noticed by her boss or colleagues. She even had a key to the office cut for him – very generous, considering she would certainly have lost her job if she'd been found out, and even Mycroft wouldn't have been able to save her this time. She reasoned, though, that as he was likely to break into the mortuary anyway, as he'd done so many times before, this at least meant he had somewhere to hide if someone came in suddenly.

Anyway, this provided Sherlock with somewhere else to go when he was too exhausted to continue walking around the streets. It seemed ironic to him that he was actively seeking a sanctuary from Baker Street – from the very place that had been precisely that for eighteen months before his fall.

The months passed, and an unusually cool spring was followed by a heatwave in June. Sherlock's only concession to the warmer weather was to leave his Belstaff at home. He still dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and a suit, however hot it got, and his unusual appearance drew some curious glances.

He ignored the attention; however his pace also slowed a little, partly from the heat but partly for another reason. He began to walk for pleasure rather than just as a form of escape. He paused on bridges overlooking the Thames and gazed down at the passing boats, for once not estimating how long it would take a corpse to drift from one bridge to the next on the current tide. He passed the great monuments with a new appreciation for their history and significance. He lingered in the British Museum, spending hours walking among the exhibits.

He had always loved London, but his enthusiasm had never quite equalled that of his first night here, as a boy. From the moment he'd moved here as a university dropout with a drug problem, he'd always known that London was a great city – but it was his city. He'd always viewed it in terms of opportunity – opportunity for criminals to commit murders and opportunity for him to solve them. He had sat almost at the centre of this huge, sprawling, alive city, and had – not controlled it, not like the leaden hand of his brother – but had manipulated it. Had understood it, innately and had known which strings to pull and when.

And now? Now he felt a curiosity that he hadn't felt in thirty years. Once more, he could hear Mycroft's adolescent voice, calmly answering his excited childhood questions about the history, and geography, and politics of this great metropolis, which was no longer entirely his.

He found himself focusing on different areas. The London parks had not been of particular interest to him until now. He'd visited crime scenes on most of them, of course. And, from time to time, when
he'd had nothing better to do, he'd accompanied John on his regular Sunday afternoon strolls around Regent's Park. Insofar as these things went, it had not been unpleasant, but walking across parks had not been his first choice of a leisure occupation.

Now, he strolled across the great parks – Hyde Park, St James' Park, Greenwich Park, Hampstead Heath, and looked with fresh interest at the birds and mammals and insects. The flora and fauna arrested his attention in a way that they had not done since he was a boy. He dug out some of his old boyhood books on nature (rather surprised to discover that he still had them) and spent an afternoon reminding himself of the habits of bees and the science of beekeeping, much to John's obvious bemusement.

He suspected that, to some degree, his cunning brain was merely preparing him for an early retirement. He ought to care more about that than he did. He should be raging against the pointlessness of his current life – should be praying for another Moriarty, another great Game… and yet he wasn't. John would probably see this as yet another manifestation of depression – perhaps a stage in the clinical journey - but he wasn't interested in diagnoses. He knew – he just knew – that if he was given just one mystery to solve, his mind would instantly jump into action and he would be back to his old self. He didn't need therapy – and he certainly didn't need his flat mate to tell him what was wrong.

It was while on one of his solitary walks that he happened across a crime scene. It was an early morning in late June that threatened to become the hottest day yet in this interminable heatwave. Sherlock had been out since 4.30, having found himself unable to sleep and unwilling, for once, to disturb John with the violin. He had taken an all-night taxi to Hampstead and had crossed the Heath. He'd passed the open air swimming ponds, recalling a case that had required him to assume the persona of a regular swimmer here, before strolling across the meadows to Kenwood House, and then cutting back towards Parliament Hill and gazing down on the London skyline before walking back into Hampstead Village. It was almost 7AM.

There was a small, second-hand bookshop that Sherlock knew of, on one of the side streets leading up the hill into the Village; he'd visited it on occasions to locate older chemistry and forensic pathology tomes, of which it seemed to have a strangely large number. As he approached it, he saw the familiar orange tapes surrounding the door and felt the familiar frisson of expectation course through his body.

Hampstead was just waking up, and the constable on duty was occupied with patiently answering the queries of curious passers-by and asking them to move on. Sherlock sidled closer with a practised ease, using his body language to convey the confidence of someone authorised to be there. He was able to slip past the tape and get a good look from the doorway before the policeman noticed him.

The interior was dim. There was no sign of a struggle, and in fact the shop would have looked perfectly normal, had it not been for the woman's naked and obviously dead body lying supine on the floor in front of the old-fashioned cash desk. Sherlock ran his eyes over her, instinctively knowing that he had very little time to note the details. She looked as if she had been garrotted by a thin cord…

"Excuse me, sir? What are you doing here? This is a crime scene and you need to get back behind the line now, please."

It seemed astonishing to Sherlock that there was a single member of the Met who didn't recognise him what with all the publicity, but the constable's young, slightly red face was entirely blank – he was merely annoyed to have his authority challenged. It was a strange fact, but he had often observed that people could be perfectly familiar with the photographs of the famous (or notorious)
and yet not recognise the same individual in the flesh.

"Barker! Could you come here a minute?"

Sherlock had just opened his mouth to formulate an excuse for his presence, when he froze at the new voice – one that he recognised all too well. Of all the people it could have been…

The constable gave him a suspicious look before darting through the doorway. Sherlock leaned on the frame and watched as he made his way over to Sally Donovan, who was clearly in the middle of interviewing the shop's proprietor. Sherlock remembered the man – a mild, mannered, small, shabbily-dressed German in his early seventies who didn't want his neighbours to know that his father had been a low-ranking Nazi concentration camp guard during the war.

Her dark eyes rested on Sherlock as she spoke intently to the uniformed officer. Sherlock returned the gaze coolly before allowing his eyes to wander over the scene again. There was something about the position of the naked body on the floor… To her left was a dark brown leather briefcase, flat on the ground. That didn't fit the picture either. It quite clearly wasn't the property of the proprietor (too new) or the victim (too masculine). Sherlock narrowed his eyes, focusing on the woman - about thirty two years' old, divorced twice and a serial adulterer, hair dyed blonde but a natural brunette, skin… what was it about the skin…? Sherlock leaned imperceptibly closer, knowing instinctively that the very moment he stepped over the threshold he'd be evicted in no uncertain terms. A forensics officer stepped around the body, taking photos from every angle and blocking his view, and he swore under his breath. Without a closer look he could be certain of one thing only -.

"Mr Holmes?"

His eyes snapped back to the uniform, who had returned with instructions from DI Donovan. She had turned back to continue her interview with the distraught bookseller.

The young man looked deeply uncertain, biting his lip. It was clear that if he hadn't heard of Sherlock Holmes before, he certainly had now. The old Sherlock would have been impatient with this sorry excuse for a police officer and would probably have ridden roughshod over whatever he had to say, but now he listened patiently as the man spoke.

"Inspector Donovan has requested that you leave the scene. She says that she'll text if there is anything of interest to you."

Sherlock managed not to outline his views on how likely it was that Donovan and her cronies would manage to spot anything interesting. He looked at the young man for a moment, assessing him and wondering whether to tell him that his girlfriend had an undiagnosed case of chlamydia, but then shrugged. "I presume she realises that the woman was not murdered here," he commented casually, straightening his sleeves as he prepared to turn away.

"Yes, we are aware of that, sir," the constable replied, although it was clear from his eyes that this was new information - to him at least, if not to Sally.

Sherlock shrugged again and turned away. It was Donovan's case – let her stew over it. There was nothing for him here. Even on better days before the fall, she would sooner have let a murderer get away than ask him for help.

It was interesting that she had made a half-hearted offer to involve him on this occasion. That was out-of-character for Sally Donovan, but then so had been that brief moment when she had seemed to reach out to him after Greg's public humiliation. He wondered whether anything would come of this apparent change of attitude, as he strolled away in a faux casual manner.
As soon as he was out of sight, he stopped and leaned back around the corner. He ran his eyes over
the passers-by and nosy onlookers, but could see no one out of the ordinary. They were clearly all
locals or Heath walkers. No one was lingering for an abnormally long time; none of them looked
anything other than confused, curious or mildly anxious. So far as he could tell, the murderer was not
present. But then why leave the corpse there, if not for effect? The bookshop owner was innocent
and had obviously just walked into his shop this morning and found the gristy evidence. No – some
outside individual had placed the body in that location for a reason…and in Sherlock's experience,
having done that, the murderer usually hung around to witness the effect.

He turned away, thinking through the possibilities, sifting his mind palace for any similar cases.
There was something about her skin that eluded him frustratingly… If only he'd been able to get a
little closer.

On the main road, he flagged down a passing taxi and got in, without paying much attention.

"Where to, then, mate?" The cabbie eyed him curiously.

Sherlock jumped, startled out of his musings. He gave the directions to Baker Street and settled back
in the seat. Again, the woman floated before his vision, and he closed his eyes, trying to focus on
what her body had been saying to him.

The flat was silent when he arrived, and he remembered suddenly that it was one of John's early
clinic days. He would have got up at 5AM, only half an hour after Sherlock had gone out. The
detective frowned; this was another case of his brilliant mind beginning to let him down. He could
have stayed in and played Bach and it wouldn't have mattered if he'd woken John up after all. Was it
a decline in his abilities? Or was John right? Was this simply a depressive state in which he found
himself unable to think clearly about anything or anyone but himself?

Dismissing such thoughts as unhelpful and unnecessary, he removed his jacket and threw himself on
the sofa. Assuming a meditative position, he began to sift through the scant evidence.

The moving of the body to the bookshop from…where?... The position of the body - she had been
placed in that supine position post-mortem – any significance?... The briefcase that was not hers and
not the owner's… The appearance of her skin… what was it that had caught his attention? He
opened his eyes, frowning at the ceiling. Something to do with the time of death… He sifted all this
information through his mind palace, trying to find connections, but to no avail.

He snarled in frustration, yanking at his hair. It was in there somewhere – he knew it… He had seen
something like this before.

Just one cigarette – that was all he needed. Just enough nicotine to fire up the synapses. But John had
got rid of all his emergency supplies a long time ago, and Sherlock had not thought to lay in more.

His stomach rumbled, but he ignored it. Food was a distraction. His mouth was dry though, from his
long hot walk that morning, so eventually he got up and fetched a glass of water. There was a mug
of coffee on the kitchen table – stone cold. It was in the mug that John usually reserved for Sherlock,
so the doctor must have assumed he was in his bedroom. He had probably called out before he left,
telling his flat mate that the coffee was made. Sherlock stared at the cold dark liquid for a moment
before pouring it down the sink.

He stood by the window, looking down at the street and watching people pass by, moving sluggishly
in the mid-morning heat. As always, on the rare occasions that London experienced a prolonged
heatwave, business in the city had slowed down and the shoppers and tourists lacked their usual
energy. As he turned away from the window, his eyes rested briefly on the small potted plant that
John kept on the sill. The doctor fussed over this one wretched piece of greenery as if it were an entire allotment – watering it regularly, spraying its leaves and moving it around to gain the most advantage from the sun without getting scorched.

Sherlock ran a finger over one of the smooth dark-green glossy leaves meditatively. John had never shown the slightest interest in plants prior to the fall and didn't seem able to explain his sudden interest now. It was the same with the regular housework, the constant smell of polish (that had not been applied by Mrs Hudson out of desperation) and the sparkling clean kitchen surfaces. Was this just a natural progression to middle-aged domesticity? Would John have developed his obsession for tidiness even if Sherlock had never fallen from that roof?

And what about his own recent obsessions – watching the birds in the parks, examining trees as if they held the answer to a great mystery? Reading books about the properties of bees? Was he – were they – just getting older? Was it as simple as that? And what did it mean for his deductive abilities?

He turned away, abruptly. It was all beside the point, anyway. Already, his early morning stroll across the Heath was beginning to feel like a foolish waste of energy. The reality was that his brain was being stirred into action again. When he closed his eyes, he could see dead bodies and crime scenes and possible assailants once more. And all it had taken was one vaguely interesting murder…

He took out his phone and thumbed through it, looking for Donovan's number. Annoyingly, he didn't have it. Not surprising, really – they had hardly been the best of friends. He seemed to think that John might, and quickly searched his jacket pocket in case the doctor had forgotten to take his mobile with him this morning, however unlikely that might seem. Again, he drew a blank.

Muttering under his breath, he searched his phone directory again for Lestrade's number. It was a long shot, but…

**Need to contact Donovan urgently re skin of victim. Please pass on my number. SH.**

It was unlikely that Lestrade would respond, but it had occurred to him that Sally might not have his number either and might wish to contact him. On the off chance, he fired off a second message, this time to John.

**Do you have Donovan's number? SH.**

There was no immediate reply. Glancing at his watch, he realised that John would be in his morning surgery. Before Sherlock's fall, the doctor had taken to turning off his phone during consultations after one embarrassing interruption too many. Presumably, he hadn't changed his habits, even though it was unlikely that Sherlock would text him during working hours these days.

At a loss for anything else to do, Sherlock began to work through his forensic books systematically, trying to recall what had confused him about the skin colour. A few hours later, he was no nearer to the answer. It didn't help that he'd only got a brief glimpse from a distance into a darkened room.

His phone beeped. He fumbled it out of his pocket in his eagerness. It wasn't from Sally Donovan, however. Molly's name was on the screen instead:

**Need your advice. Unusual death. Can you come as soon as possible?**

He frowned at the wording. She hadn't said 'unusual cause of death'. If she knew how the individual had died, why contact him for advice? If it was an unusual *method*, she might think he was interested… but in which case, why did she need his advice? Still, it was something to do, and he was getting nowhere with Donovan's case – and wouldn't get any further without some fresh
He fired off a reply, gulped down the glass of water, pulled on his jacket and hurried out of the door, taking the steps two at a time. As he did so, he realised that John still hadn't replied to his text, not even during his lunch break. A taxi appeared the moment he reached the kerb and raised his arm. He smirked: he hadn't lost *this* ability, whatever else had changed.

He gave the address and sat back, looking out at the passing buildings and pedestrians as the taxi darted bravely into London's teeming traffic. He had a sense that something significant was happening. It wasn't quite the frisson of excitement that ran down his spine whenever Lestrade called or a client knocked at the door, but it was *something*. He felt more energised than he had for months, despite the humid weather.

Molly was at her computer when he arrived. "Ah, there you are. I didn't think it would take you long."

"You called, Dr. Hooper?" he drawled, laconically.

She giggled, getting up and brushing her hair off her forehead. It looked damp and limp, and her cheeks were pink from the heat. It wasn't a good look, and he had to bite his lip not to comment. She looked him up and down.

"God, look at you! How do you manage to look so *good* in this weather? Everyone else I know is melting. *I'm* melting – even down here."

"A good suit," he replied, absently. "You said you had something for me?"

"Yep. And before you go any further, you'll need to put a biohazard suit over that lovely suit of yours. And put on a mask." She grabbed a set and flung them at him.

He muttered a bit, just for the look of it, but couldn't help feeling intrigued as he removed his jacket and pulled the scrubs on over his clothes.

She led him past the general examination area in the morgue and into an isolation room, putting on her mask. He copied her, raising his eyebrows as he did so.

She glanced up at him, noting the query in his eyes. "It's not what you think – nothing contagious."

He snorted, snapping on the gloves that she passed to him. "Well, I didn't think I'd be the first person you called if it had been."

There was a body lying on a slab, under the sealed yellow covering used to indicate a public health hazard. As she unzipped the covering, he saw that it contained Sally's victim from this morning. Despite the precautions, there didn't seem to be much cause for concern – no sign of anything communicable or any obvious toxicity. Molly had already carried out a post-mortem examination – quick work and neat sutures even by her high standards, he noted absently.

He frowned at the body, noting the marks around the neck. "Ligature strangulation," he murmured, not really understanding what Molly was getting at. It looked straightforward enough.

She rolled her eyes over the top of her mask. "It's not what you think – nothing contagious."

He snorted, snapping on the gloves that she passed to him. "Well, I didn't think I'd be the first person you called if it *had* been."

There was a body lying on a slab, under the sealed yellow covering used to indicate a public health hazard. As she unzipped the covering, he saw that it contained Sally's victim from this morning. Despite the precautions, there didn't seem to be much cause for concern – no sign of anything communicable or any obvious toxicity. Molly had already carried out a post-mortem examination – quick work and neat sutures even by her high standards, he noted absently.

He frowned at the body, noting the marks around the neck. "Ligature strangulation," he murmured, not really understanding what Molly was getting at. It looked straightforward enough.

She rolled her eyes over the top of her mask. "Yes, that's easy enough to see, but how long ago, do you think?"

She hadn't warned him not to touch the body, but an instinct suggested that it was not necessary. It might have been useful to pull his mask down, so he could smell properly, but observation alone
would have to do at present. He stood still for a minute or so, running his eyes over the usual tells. The depth of the wounds around the neck, the amount of blood and its degree of coagulation, the degree of decomposition, the colour of the skin... The first obvious point was that there was very little blood. Clearly, someone had cleaned the body before disposing of it. Secondly, there was very little decomposition, which, in this heat, would mean that death had occurred less than forty-eight hours before the discovery, a fact that should be backed up by the skin...

Ah.

He looked up at Molly and she nodded, rather smugly. "Yes. Not so easy now, is it?"

"Hmm." He peered more closely at an arm. The skin had taken on a 'marbled' appearance, making the veins more prominent. It was a process that usually began between four and seven days' post-mortem, indicating that the woman must have been dead for longer than the evidence suggested. But there was no sign of decomposition...

He looked up at the pathologist again. "What tests have you done so far?"

She grinned behind her mask, looking far too gleeful for someone standing over the corpse of a brutally murdered young woman. Clearly he had rubbed off on her. "Come on, I'll show you."

She zipped up the body again and led him into the adjoining small laboratory, also sealed off from the outside world. On the examination table, there were a number of bagged-up organs. She uncovered a tray containing a liver and gestured at it.

"I ran the usual tests. Just checking that the primary cause of death was by strangulation and that she hadn't been poisoned or drugged first. Look what I found."

She pointed at a printout on the table, which he scanned quickly, reading the chemical symbols. "Bendiocarb."

She nodded. "Hence the precautions. It's not highly toxic, of course, but I didn't really fancy breathing it in. The liver is laced with it. I checked the kidneys and the lungs and some skin samples. It's everywhere. She was dosed with it liberally – her body must have been dusted all over with the stuff, long enough ago for it to have penetrated the skin and the major organs. And I mean all over – I can't find a single place on her body that isn't covered with it. Well, I haven't looked everywhere yet, but it's in her mouth, her eyes, her nose, her hair – underarm and pubic too, her genital region, her nails..." She shook her head. "But this is the really weird thing..."

But he was ahead of her. "It was applied post-mortem."

She nodded, emphatically. "I'm certain of it. A dose that strong, even if only absorbed through the skin, might have made her feel pretty unwell, but if she'd been alive, she wouldn't have been able to avoid breathing it in. There would have been signs of distress – vomiting, constricted breathing, convulsions, possibly sudden respiratory failure - and there aren't. And why would he then need to garrotte her if she was already dead or dying? Those wounds around her neck are vicious. She would have struggled violently before she died."

She shivered briefly at the thought, and then cast it aside in her usual pragmatic manner. "So I'm as sure as I can be that this chemical was introduced after her death. There are other chemicals present in much smaller quantities, but it's not clear whether they were introduced at the same time or not. They're only mildly toxic. I'm currently working out the combination. Oh, and there were traces of sawdust and gravel on the body – external only. I'm currently working out what type of wood the sawdust is from, but it looks like beech."
They walked back through the sealed area, discarding their masks and gloves as they crossed the main part of the morgue. He frowned, thinking it through. "Bendiocarb. Almost certainly from an insecticide."

She nodded. "Yes, that's what I thought. I looked it up just before you arrived."

"Yes, but why? This looks deliberate; if she'd just been stored somewhere containing it, the absorption level wouldn't have been so high. And she'd been covered all over, as if it were used to… Oh…" He stopped suddenly.

She looked up at him, quickly. "You've got an idea?"

"What?" He was distracted from his thoughts. "Yes. Well, possibly. What estimation did you give for the time of death?" He stepped out of the scrubs, flung them and the gloves and mask into the disposal bin, and strode back into the main laboratory.

She hurried after him. "I haven't been able to come up with anything very exact. So far, I can only confirm that she's been dead for at least a week, and probably longer. The lack of decomposition doesn't make much sense – even in a sealed unit such as a box, there's going to be gaps somewhere. And it doesn't look as if she's been stored that way."

He spun around suddenly, grabbing her by the shoulders. "Insecticide! That's your clue, Molly, don't you see? Think about it. What effect would that chemical have on the decomposition process?"

"Well -." "It would stop it – or slow it down considerably. That insecticide would have prevented the egg-laying process from occurring. The victim could have been killed weeks ago – months even. Her killer probably didn't even realise what he was doing – he might have just been trying to cover up the smell while storing the body." He retrieved his mobile from his jacket and tapped some instructions into it, impatiently. "You need to discount decomposition from your analysis. Look for the other signs." He frowned at the results of his Internet search. "I have to go. There are 19 commercially-available insecticides containing Bendiocarb, and probably even more professional products."

He shrugged on his jacket and turned to go, before hesitating. "And I need some tissue samples, preferably healthy ones from young accident victims, with no toxic substances present."

She sighed in resignation. "OK. Should I send them to Baker Street?"

"Please, Molly." Turning off his Internet browser, he noticed that John had finally replied to his earlier question, although there was no text from Lestrade or Donovan. John's had been sent at 3.30, during his tea break, suggesting that he either hadn't turned on his phone during lunch (date with that attractive receptionist perhaps?) or that he had been mulling over Sherlock's request.

**What do you want Sally's number for? JW.**

He ignored the question, tapping out another text:

**Tell her she should look back six months for reports on missing females, not just the last week. SH.**

Molly had turned away, muttering under her breath. "One of these days, Sherlock Holmes…"

"I appreciate it." He paused again, suddenly feeling that he should have mentioned something. "Um – that pathologist… How is it – how are…things… going?"
She smiled, taking pity on him. "It's going well. Thanks for asking, Sherlock."

"Good." He hesitated, and then added a little awkwardly. "Um – that's good. I'm pleased for you, Molly."

He tried to pretend he hadn't heard the hastily smothered giggle as he left.

Sherlock directed the taxi to a number of garden centres and professional wholesalers, finally returning to Baker Street with a large number of bottles and boxes containing a variety of powders. He dumped the shopping bags in the kitchen and began to line up the containers of insecticide on the units with an energy he had not felt in a long time. While he was in the middle of this, he heard the bell go and hurried downstairs to sign for the cold box being delivered. He smiled when he removed the lid and saw the stored tissue samples – good old Molly.

He kept a large stack of petri dishes stored in the flat, but there were not quite enough for the experiment he had in mind. He looked around the kitchen, frowning, and then brightened up as an idea struck him. John's ceramic bowls and plates were pulled out of the crockery cupboard and carefully lined up. They were perfectly sterile, having been subjected to John's viciously efficient washing-up methods – the doctor tended to approach his domestic duties with the vigour of a surgeon scrubbing for an operation. They would do. Sherlock began to dissect minute sections of flesh and deposit them in various dishes and plates.

It was undoubtedly the insecticide that had halted the putrefaction, but Molly had found a number of chemicals present in the tissue, which couldn't be entirely discounted. The exact contents had not yet been identified, but she could work on that and let him know. It wasn't yet clear whether the perpetrator had used a pre-mixed powder from one of these containers or had made his own mixture – either way, the purpose had clearly been to disguise the small of decomposition. But then, things had gone wrong. The body had not decomposed due to the unwitting process of sterilization which had prevented insects from laying their eggs. The murderer had been forced to dump the body whole.

But why keep the body in the first place? And where? His hope was that the identified product would be a professional one, which would narrow the field. In that case, it could be that she was kept at a farm, or possibly a processing plant. If a farm, the Hampstead Village location was odd…

And was there any chance that the sterilization had been deliberate rather than an unfortunate mistake? Had it always been the perpetrator's intention to release the body late and to disguise the exact time of death, or had he panicked when he realised that his victim wasn't going to disappear naturally? A prepared cocktail of chemicals would suggest the former, whereas the use of a single insecticide product might suggest the latter.

Gravel and sawdust, Molly said. Which suggested that the victim had been kept in a workshop of some nature or a garage – pre- or post-mortem? The evidence – no trace of sawdust in the lungs – might suggest the latter, although it was possible that she was gagged. However, his instincts told him that she hadn't been held alive for any period of time. This was a quick killing – she'd been pounced upon and had fought desperately for the last few seconds of her life. There were no other signs of violence on the body – no signs that her wrists and ankles had been bound, no bruises or grazes from rough handling, no torn nails or other signs of a struggle to escape from somewhere. No sexual violence either. Her wounds were confined to her neck alone, and the killer had shown some delicacy towards her body after death – wiping the blood from her wounds, for a start.

Sherlock began to deposit grains of insecticide on each sample. The quantities were tiny and of no danger to him or John – the point was merely to work out which of the products prevented or
delayed decomposition at room temperature. He was just on the last one when the door downstairs crashed shut. He glanced at the clock – half past six already.

The footsteps on the seventeen steps that led to 221B were slow and slightly unsteady. John had had a difficult day – he'd been up since 5 AM to go to one of his homeless clinics and had then done an eight hour shift… and the hot weather probably hadn't helped either. Sherlock glanced up very briefly as the doctor entered the flat, placing his briefcase by the wall just inside the door, as was his habit.

He bent his head back over his dishes, focusing his concentration on the products he had set up a test for. He really needed to make his experiment wider, but limited equipment meant he had to test the single insecticide products first before turning his mind to possible combinations. It would have been difficult to have covered the entire body in a power product, so he suspected that the product had been combined with other, less toxic, liquid products and then sprayed on – or possibly the perpetrator had used water.

John usually headed straight up the stairs to change out of his sweaty work clothes, but on this occasion, Sherlock heard his flatmate's feet falter and then change direction abruptly.

"What the… bloody hell… is that?"

Sherlock glared at the finger that was currently prodding at one of the ceramic bowls. "Busy. Don't touch," he added quickly, although it was unlikely that John would touch something so obviously organic with his bare hands.

John gave an unamused laugh. "Oh, come on, Sherlock. Since when have you been 'busy' since you returned? I asked you a question – what the hell is this?"

Sherlock reached over and nudged the bowl away from John's fingers. The doctor was staring at the contents as if they had offended him personally. "I'm setting up a decomposition experiment."

"A decomposition experiment? In my bowls? Well, cheers for that, Sherlock." John broke off and wrinkled his nose in disgust. "No wonder it stinks in here."

"It doesn't really matter what I can smell." John's voice was dangerously quiet. "The issue is where I can smell it. It may have escaped your notice, but this is a kitchen. A place for food – not for toxic chemicals and human flesh that has been dead for Christ knows how long. Didn't we have a rule about no experiments in the kitchen?"

It was quite clearly a rhetorical question. Sherlock hesitated. There probably had been a rule to that effect, set at some point following some major infestation or something, although he couldn't exactly remember what. His desk in the lounge hadn't been big enough this time, though.

"It's for a case," he responded, warily.

"What case?" John's eyes were narrow. "Have you been asked by the Met to get involved?"

"No, but I -.

"Is this something to do with Sally?" John stepped closer, his eyes never leaving Sherlock. "Is this why you wanted her number? Are you asking me to believe that Sally Donovan of all people would
"ask for your advice?"

"Well, she didn't in so many -.

"Oh, so this is a joke then, is it? You can't get to Greg anymore, so you thought you'd start in on Sally? Is it some kind of revenge? Are you trying to discredit her?"

Sherlock stared at his friend. "What on earth makes you think that I care about something that happened four years ago?"

John returned the stare. "It may have escaped your notice, but it was something that changed your whole life, Sherlock. And -.." But he compressed his mouth quickly and looked down, refusing to say it. And mine hung unspoken in the air between them.

"Sally Donovan had very little to do with it. She was just one of Moriarty's tools – and an unwitting one at that. I couldn't care less about her role," he said, impatiently. "You shouldn't care either, John. You should move on."

John's head shot up. "What the hell does that mean? I have moved on, there's nothing wrong with my life. If anything, it's you -.." Again, the words were cut off.

"Well?" Sherlock narrowed his eyes, trying to deduce something he hadn't seen in his flatmate's face before. Was that guilt? "Why don't you say it, John? You think I haven't moved on from what happened?"

John's face was working furiously, clearly struggling before he burst out suddenly, "Well, look at you! You've had no sense of purpose since you came back. You have no energy, and you just drag yourself around with that blank look on your face, as if you can't work out what you're supposed to be doing. You behave like a sulky brat most of the time; you can hardly be bothered to be civil to me – well, there's nothing different about that, you always were an obnoxious bastard, but at least you were a cheerful one. You hardly ever play the violin any more – and I mean proper playing, not that awful screeching in the middle of the night. And you don't eat half as much as you need to – and yeah, I know you never did, but at least you'd eat after a case…but then there's none of those anymore, are there? That's not living, Sherlock, it's just existing."

Sherlock stared down at his experiment, feeling a dull anger inside. "And you're doing such a great job of that, are you?"

"What?" John looked confused as Sherlock glanced up at him again, sharply.

"This 'living' that you're talking about. Are you 'living', John, or just existing?"

He prodded at John's chest to emphasise the point, and John pushed his hand away, irritably.

"I don't know what you mean. At least I'm getting a full night's sleep and eating three meals a day. And working," he added, nastily.

Sherlock laughed, coldly. "Because, of course, that was precisely what you were doing before I fell, wasn't it? No midnight dashes after killers, no going for days without enough food or sleep, no ringing work at the last minute to say you couldn't come in, no Chinese takeaways at 2AM after a case?"

"That -," John swallowed, visibly. "That wasn't the same thing."

"Wasn't it? Because I distinctly remember that you walked with a limp the day you met me… and the
following night it was gone. I texted 'could be dangerous' and you came. You laughed. You enjoyed it – the uncertainty kept you alive. That was living. Not three square meals a day and a full-time job and a pint with Greg every Saturday. And you accuse me of 'just existing'? Why don't you take a look at yourself, John?"

John stood like a stone for a moment. When he moved, it was with lightning speed – Sherlock had time only to note that his years out of the military hadn't slowed his reactions one bit before he was forced to duck as one of the ceramic bowls that John was so fond of flew over his head, crashing against the wall and shattering into hundreds of shards. He kept his head lowered as the doctor followed up with two more bowls before swearing loudly and thumping his hand against the doorway.

He straightened up and stared at the part of his experiment that was currently sliding slowly down the wall, before turning towards John. The doctor's face was chalk-white, his breath coming fast.

"And that's another thing," Sherlock remarked, with an attempt at levity. "There was a time when you wouldn't have made such a fuss about an experiment in the kitchen. As if a few dishes matter when there's a murderer to catch."

John was staring at his left hand, as if it had betrayed him. The knuckles were bleeding slightly and Sherlock passed him the kitchen roll to stem the flow.

The doctor accepted it, giving a shaky laugh. "That was... I don't know what that was. I'm sorry, I don't know why I -." He broke off and turned away, abruptly.

Sherlock stared at his friend's back, feeling rather useless. He deduced by the expectant silence that he was supposed to say something vaguely reassuring or comforting, but he had no idea what. The point was that he was right, and deep down inside, John must know it too...

"You're right - naturally," his flatmate said, suddenly, with a strangely bitter tone. "I have fallen into a routine. When you – when I knew you were safe, after Moran and all of that business - I had to move on. I didn't know when you would come home, so I tried to sort out my own life. Settle down into a routine and put everything into 'nice tidy boxes'."

He turned back to the kitchen, looking at the mess of china and organic matter spattered over his scrubbed clean units, and gave a dry laugh. "It felt like the only way I could control my life. Let's face it, I didn't have much bloody control over it when you were here." He sighed. "Surprising as it may seem to you, I didn't want to give that control away when you returned. It didn't occur to me that it bothered you."

Sherlock feigned nonchalance. "It doesn't. It's just not you, that's all. All this cleaning and tidying and your safe, boring nights out with Molly or Greg. And no dates? Why is that, John? Why stop now? You were always the first to notice an insipidly pretty face. What's changed?"

John opened his mouth and then closed it again, his face twitching violently. For a moment, Sherlock thought he was going to walk out, but he lowered his head, avoiding the detective's all-seeing gaze.

"What would be the bloody point?" he snapped, but with no real venom. He sounded exhausted and depressed. "I mean, let's face it, Sherlock, you're the biggest cock-blocker there is. If I ever succeed in getting a woman to agree to go out with me, it's a toss-up whether she'll be insulted or end up being tied up and threatened with violent death before the evening is out. And that's if our first date doesn't get interrupted by some case that involves me dropping everything to go running after you."

"I don't make you run after me," Sherlock hissed, suddenly furious. "I don't need you to run after me.
"You're the one who used to come running whenever I called, but I have never forced you."

"That's true," John acknowledged, wearily. "Sherlock, I'm really tired and I don't want to talk about this right now -.

"But in any case," Sherlock interrupted, his blood up now. "I don't understand why you didn't find someone when I was away. If I'm such a 'cock-blocker', as you so delightfully term it, then why didn't you take advantage of the fact that I wasn't there? Surely it was the perfect opportunity?"

The doctor ran a hand through his greying hair, still not able to meet the detective's eyes. "I don't – I can't - Look, why can't you just forget it?" he burst out, suddenly. "It's not – I mean… did you think it was easy for me, knowing all the time that you were out there fighting criminals and not being able to do a damned thing to help? Sometimes, it was so hard, Sherlock – I felt helpless. I couldn't even think of – well, anything else."

"Hard?" Sherlock laughed incredulously. "Do you think it was easier for me?"

"Well, at least you were doing something," John snapped. "I would have rather been out there with you than stuck here, waiting. It would have been different if I hadn't known you were alive. I could have grieved you and then moved on with my life."

Sherlock laughed, bitterly. "Yes, that would have been so much easier for you, wouldn't it? You could have forgotten about me, found yourself a nice, dull woman to settle down with." His voice took on a mocking quality. "Pushchairs in the hall, a cot in my bedroom? Or would you have moved out to the suburbs? A nice little four-bedroomed house with a garden and off-road parking? How delightful. How very pedestrian of you."

John flushed and turned away. Sherlock knew he should stop there, but the invisible demon on his shoulder compelled him to continue:

"I don't know why you don't admit it. It would have been much easier for you if I hadn't survived. Wouldn't it? After all, I've already ruined your life. Come on, John. Why don't you be honest for a change? Say what we both already know… or are you too much of a coward?"

John's head shot up at this, and his eyes flashed with fury. "You want me to say it? Yeah, shit, why not? Sometimes I think it might have been easier if you had gone for good. At least I wouldn't have had to put my life on hold for you for four bloody years -.

He broke off as the full implications of his words hit him. The two men stared at one another. Sherlock was the first to break the silence. "You wish that I had died," he intoned, slowly and very quietly.

"Oh, for Christ's sake!" John let out a big breath, visibly trying to calm himself. "I didn't mean it like that – and you know I didn't. Don't put words into my mouth – you're far too intelligent for that. You know I'm glad you're alive. I was glad back then, too. It just didn't seem right to bring someone else into the chaos that was my life back then. If I'd thought you were dead, I might have found someone else that I could settle down with, and – yes, why not? – get married and have that life that you think is so pedestrian. Because, you know what, Sherlock? It might seem boring and pointless to you, but that's how the rest of us live our lives. We 'normal people' fall in love, get married, have kids if we're lucky enough. We make a difference – and it might not be big or dramatic, like you, but that doesn't mean it isn't important. And the main point is, we're happy."

"And you're not happy now?" Sherlock leaned against the doorway, observing John carefully.
"I – well, I'm - oh, I don't know!" John rubbed his forehead, wearily. "It's not something I really think about. It is what it is, and I'm too busy or too tired or something to give it much thought. And anyway," he added, angrily, "when did we get on to what's wrong with my life? What about you? You can't make me believe that you're really happy just existing, like this." He gestured at the ruined experiment. "And the bloody stupid thing about it is that you could be out there solving crimes again. If you'd only apologise to Greg and actually mean it…"

Sherlock cut across his words, coldly. "I am not going to crawl to that…imbécile."

His flatmate flushed. "Yeah, and that's all we are to you, even after all we've been through together. Imbeciles. We just don't get the 'grand master plan', do we? Not like you and that bloody brother of yours. Me and Greg and Sally - we're just too stupid – too pedestrian for that."

Sherlock stared at him, genuinely bewildered. "What do you mean? You know I don't mean you."

John swore under his breath and turned away. "You know what? I'm too tired for this. Forget it."

"But -.

"I said, forget it." John glared around the kitchen and his mouth twisted in revulsion. "Do me a favour, for once, Sherlock. Get this bloody disgusting mess cleared up."

He turned away and limped towards the stairs to his bedroom.

Sherlock stood, looking down at the surviving bowls on the unit as he heard John closing his door. And then, abruptly, he turned and hurled each of them viciously after the others, one at a time.
I have a particular affection for this chapter, for reasons that are tied into the third work in this series and will be explained there. It's probably a bit more 'slashy' than I intended - not that I have a problem with slash, I'm just no good at writing it!

It was beginning to get dark when Sherlock eventually returned to Baker Street the following day. Not that that made much difference to the temperature. He wondered when the weather would finally break. It was only mid-July, but it was unlikely that August would be as hot. In fact, an unusually hot early summer in Britain usually led to an extremely wet late one.

He hesitated as he closed the front door behind him. The kitchen…

He had meant to clear the insecticide samples up as requested by his furious flat mate, preferably before he returned from work. There was not a sound from the upstairs flat but, despite that, he was fairly sure that he'd missed his window of opportunity.

Entering the dark flat, he could tell immediately that he was right. Even if he hadn't noticed John's discarded jacket over his armchair or the doctor's briefcase propped against the wall in its usual position, he could hardly miss the overwhelming smell of bleach and pine-scented disinfectant.

He switched on a side lamp and strode into the kitchen, his eyes flickering over the units and taking in the gleaming surfaces with a growing sense of dread. He had a horrible feeling that John had done more than just clear up yesterday's disaster. As he opened the cupboard that had been set aside for his various experiments these days, he realised he was right. The tarmac samples he had been planning to catalogue had disappeared. There was a mini-fridge in the kitchen these days; John had bought it shortly after Sherlock's return and had made it perfectly clear that the main fridge was for food only. Sherlock opened it now and swore quietly under his breath; the hair and nail samples that he'd got from Molly only a couple of weeks' ago were also gone. Admittedly, he had promised to return them last week (part of the rule was that he couldn't keep body parts for more than a few days at a time), but he hadn't yet got around to the tests he had been planning…

This was a new departure for John – he might not have liked the mess, but he'd done his best to accommodate Sherlock's experiments within his new cleaning regime. Sherlock might even consider it revenge for his comments last night, except that John was never petty. The doctor might have a temper, but he never bore grudges for long.

Sherlock opened the main fridge and stared at the neatly-arranged contents. It reminded him of that first day back at 221B, six months ago. And now, as then, he felt a shiver of nausea go through him. Was John trying to delete him?

He backed out of the kitchen and glanced around the dimly lit lounge. John's cleaning frenzy appeared to have been confined to the kitchen. The living room was in its usual shambolic state. John had shoved a pile of papers off the coffee table and onto the carpet, presumably so he could prop his feet there while reading the medical journal that had been left open on the arm of the sofa. The net curtains fluttered feebly, stirred briefly into action by the stifling breeze. They did little to mitigate the heat; Sherlock wondered why John had bothered to open them.
He flung himself onto the sofa, carelessly folding his body into the semi-permanent body-shaped indentation in the ancient upholstery. He wasn't usually bothered by extremes of temperature, but he suddenly became aware that his shirt was adhering uncomfortably to his shoulders underneath his suit jacket. It probably didn't help that he'd been wearing the same clothes since his early-morning walk across the Heath yesterday. He wriggled uncomfortably, vaguely feeling that he ought to shower and change into something less crumpled and sweaty, but unable to summon the energy to do so. There was a good chance he might sleep tonight, having stayed awake the previous night.

He closed his eyes and sorted through the events of the day…

After his admittedly childish attack on the remaining crockery, he had stormed out into the humid evening, slamming the door behind him. Once again, London's streets had been pounded into submission for some hours. Eventually, admitting exhaustion, he had crept into Molly's office in the mortuary and had curled up on her tiny sofa. Frustratingly, sleep had eluded him. Molly had found him there when she'd arrived at 8AM – red-eyed and wild-haired and trembling with misplaced energy. She had more-or-less marched him to the showers, presented him with some aspirin, a coffee and a pastry when he emerged, and had stood over him sternly until he had consumed them.

Once he'd submitted to her orders (and who knew Miss Hooper could be so emphatic?), Molly had been prepared to show him the results of her work so far, although she'd had a flurry of other autopsies in the meantime and hadn't got very far. One of the benefits of the heatwave was that most of Molly's superiors had taken themselves off on leave. Only essential staff appeared to be present, so Sherlock was able to stay in the laboratory undisturbed, taking over some of the tests from Molly. The peaceful atmosphere calmed him – the work and the silence, broken only by the occasional exchange of comments between the two of them. It was paradise to be working like this, doing the work he loved but with the additional knowledge that there was a killer to be found.

By late afternoon, they knew exactly what chemicals had been present in the body and in what quantity. None of them had been in significant amounts. Sherlock thought it was more likely that they had been inadvertently added to the mix when the insecticide was added to water before being poured over the victim, who was still nameless. As most of them were agricultural products, likely to be present in minute quantities in a watering can or a hose, this supported his growing belief that she had been kept somewhere rural after her death.

The confirmation that the sawdust came from beech trees was significant, as there was an avenue of them near Hampstead Gate, which was just down the road from the shop. Molly had texted this information to Sally Donovan and told Sherlock that the DI was sending a team to search the outhouses used by the rangers. Sherlock could have told Sally that she'd find nothing there. It was far too obvious. No, it was more likely that the killer was trying to implicate someone working at the Heath - the vicinity of the body, the use of professional agricultural products and the inclusion of the extra 'clues', if not the sawdust then the gravel, which matched the Heath pathways. Unless this killer really was that stupid…

At six, Molly bought him some more coffee and a sandwich and made him go and sit down in her office. After a few token protests, he recognised that he was feeling a bit light-headed and that it would probably be a good idea to follow someone else's advice for a change. He must have dropped off for a bit, because he was suddenly aware that he was slumped sideways on the sofa in a very uncomfortable position and that his coffee had gone cold. He glanced at his mobile and winced when he saw it was almost 8PM.

He was also aware that Molly had pulled the door to, leaving it very slightly ajar, so that no one could see him. She normally worked a twelve hour shift four days a week and then one night shift
every two weeks. There were voices and at first, his sleep-addled brain assumed that she was going 
through the handover with one of her colleagues. But then the male voice rose slightly in volume, 
and he recognised Lestrade’s voice.

He crept towards the door and peered through the crack. He saw that Lestrade had his back to the 
office door and was talking loudly into his mobile. Molly glanced towards him, anxiously. It was this 
that prevented him from walking back into the lab; right now, he wouldn't put it past Lestrade to 
alert the hospital authorities to his presence. Part of their deal for hushing up the fake autopsy and 
allowing Molly to keep her job had been that he never returned to the Bart's mortuary – and Greg 
almost certainly knew that. Sherlock could only hope that the DI was loyal enough to Molly to 
overlook the infringements, but there was no need to test that loyalty.

He strained his ears to hear Lestrade's words.

"Down by St Katherine's Dock? Yeah, the art shop, I know it…no, of course I've never bought 
anything there, what do you think my salary is, for Christ's sake… OK, clear the area… What 
festival? Well, how the bloody hell would I know? I haven't even seen the body yet. Tell 'em it can't 
go ahead until I say so… I'll see you there – on my way from Bart's now."

He put away his phone, muttering, "Bloody classic boat festival…", before remembering Molly. 
"Oh, yeah, thanks for that, Molly. I'll let Sally know." He gave her a slightly formal nod and left, his 
face more than usually troubled.

Molly looked at Sherlock as he emerged from the office. "He came in to talk about the results from 
Sally's victim. I think he must be helping her out. Anyway, he just got called away, sounds like 
another body's been found."

"Yes, I know – I heard." Sherlock frowned, remembering the look on Greg's face. It wouldn't be 
normal for one DI to interfere in another DI's case, even if they were dating – in fact, especially if 
they were dating, he assumed. The only exception might be if both were working on linked cases. 
Judging by his raised voice and tense body language, Greg was extremely worried. He only looked 
like that when there was a serial killer to be apprehended.

He looked thoughtfully at the door…

Thirty minutes later, he was standing on the marina at St Katherine's dock, looking at a cordoned-off 
art gallery. He vaguely recalled being dragged along to some charity auction there a few years' ago 
– some fund-raiser for Help for Heroes that John had insisted on attending. It had been in the early 
days of their friendship, before John realised that Sherlock and social occasions designed to raise 
money for good causes did not mix well.

Now he lingered near the inevitable crowd of onlookers, watching the scene and wondering how he 
was going to slip past the cordon this time. As it turned out, he didn’t even get that far; Lestrade 
emerged from the gallery, spotted him immediately and strode across the marina towards him.

Sherlock had braced himself for more public abuse and possibly even an arrest on some trumped-up 
charge, so it was a surprise when Greg grabbed him by the arm and dragged him away from the 
crowd, none too gently.

"For Christ's sake, Sherlock!" he hissed. "How many times do you have to be told? You can't be 
here. I don't even want to know how you know about this, but I can't have you at the scene -.."

"It's a man, isn't it?" Sherlock interrupted. "Early thirties, naked… was he garrotted with a thin cord 
of some sort?"
Lestrade gave him an uncertain look. "How can you possibly know that? Even I've only just seen the body. The owner only found him an hour ago – the gallery was closed for renovations."

"Was there a case?" Sherlock persisted. "Near the body – a briefcase – or perhaps some kind of carrier for pictures? Something related to art that obviously doesn't belong to him? Like the briefcase in the bookshop?"

The DI's expression was guarded. Sherlock felt a light switching on inside, and knew he was on to something.

"There was – wasn't there?"

For a brief, sweet moment, they were working together again – the older, experienced DI and the younger, brilliant analyst, heads together, working through the case while the Yard's minions waited patiently for them. Lestrade leaned towards Sherlock in his old confidential manner and opened his mouth –

"Sir? Forensics are ready for you."

Sherlock cursed silently, as Greg glanced quickly over his shoulder at the anonymous uniformed officer who was looking at them curiously. When he looked back at Sherlock, the shutters had come down over his eyes again.

"I've got to get back. You need to leave."

As he turned away, Sherlock grabbed his arm. "They're related. You know I'm right, Greg." He used his first name deliberately, trying to appeal to the man rather than the DI.

Lestrade wouldn't look at him. "We don't know that yet -.

"They are," Sherlock insisted. "You've got a serial killer on your hands. You need me – and you know it. Come on, Greg."

The DI glanced nervously over his shoulder again and turned away. "Just… go home. I'll be in touch."

Sherlock stood, watching the DI walk back to the gallery. Somehow, he very much doubted that.

Lestrade was being entirely ridiculous. The on-going ban was all very well, but the point was that he needed Sherlock for this one. The murders were linked – he just knew they were – and the DI and his team would never work it out. No – this unknown assailant was clever and his messages were subtle. Sherlock had an innate understanding of that type of mind – an insight that Lestrade could never emulate.

The point was that this crime would never be solved without Sherlock's input.

It struck him that Greg had become a victim of his own obstinacy. There had been a hesitancy about the DI… just a fraction of indecision in his dark eyes before his resolve had hardened once more. He'd made his original position on Sherlock's continuing involvement very clear and had done so in an extremely public manner, in front of his entire team. To back down now would be to admit to weakness – and Greg Lestrade could not be seen to be weak.

Sherlock felt a bitter taste in his mouth when he contemplated the DI's behaviour today. For all his criticism of Greg and the Yard, the one thing he had always respected in the older man was his
courage, and the Greg he remembered would have defied his superiors if he genuinely believed that Sherlock could help bring a criminal to justice. But that had been the pre-accident Greg Lestrade – this new version was a fearful man, forever looking over his shoulder and waiting for the axe to fall one last time on his chequered career.

Sherlock's mind shifted to Donovan. She'd been more than usually conciliatory at that last scene… He wrinkled his nose in disgust. Just a few years' ago, he would never have believed that he might one day be considering asking Sally Donovan, of all people, to intercede with Greg on his behalf.

He frowned and half sat up, suddenly aware of the flat's silence. It was always possible that John had gone out again, but the doctor had probably not had much sleep the previous night, so that was unlikely. He might have made an effort if he'd had an arrangement with Molly, but it wasn't their regular evening. The casual evenings with Greg had become less frequent of late – in fact, some coldness had entered that friendship since John had tried to convince Greg to give Sherlock another chance. Judging by last night's conversation, it wasn't likely that he was meeting a woman… unless, of course, he was trying to prove something…?

Sherlock sagged back into the sofa. He could remember last night vividly; every angry word and that strangely blank, hopeless look on John's face when he said that there was no point…

He closed his eyes, trying to delete the memory, but it burned beneath his lids.

He looked over the side of the sofa at his flat mate's work shoes on the floor. That, in itself, told a tale. John was usually careful with his clothes, not being able to afford to replace them frequently, and he would usually keep his shoes in his room (quite possibly to protect them from inadvertent exposure to one of Sherlock's experiments). The fact that he had kicked them off in the lounge suggested that he'd had to walk at least part of the way home. Sherlock picked one up and examined the dust on the sole.

He dropped it again, and looked towards the stairs leading up to John's solitary attic room. He might be asleep… but John wasn't one to go to bed until 11 at least. Possibly he was using his laptop in his room, but Sherlock didn't think so. The flat felt far too quiet.

On an instinct, he rose and climbed the stairs, stepping quietly. At the top of the staircase, he froze outside John's empty room, his eyes fixed on the open skylight and the chair beneath it.

So John had discovered his secret. He had wondered how long it would take his remarkably unobservant flat mate to work out that this was one of Sherlock's routes in and out of the flat.

Not that he had used it much prior to his fall. He'd investigated the external ladder to the ground shortly after moving into 221B, had catalogued it away in his mind palace as a possible escape route should the flat ever be invaded by Mycroft, and then had more-or-less forgotten it. He hadn't even bothered to investigate the flat roof space just above the skylight back then.

It was only after his return that the roof had become a … well, he wouldn't say temptation as such… But Sherlock had never suffered from vertigo and had always found high roofs to be useful locations. They provided wide vistas, of course, but also he had always enjoyed getting away from the crowds, getting some peace and quiet.

One frigid February night, he'd scrambled up onto the roof and stood, looking down at the icy streets and smoking fistfuls of cigarettes, lighting the next from the stub of the last. He'd shuffled to the edge and peered down, remembering that moment. What he'd done, what he'd said… whether he could have avoided it. Had there been something he'd missed at the time? Some clue he had discounted earlier in his association with Moriarty that might have helped him avoid the fall?
Since then, he'd been up there several times, usually at night, while John slept peacefully just below him.

Sherlock walked over to the chair. He was usually able to lever himself up by jumping to catch the edge of the skylight and walking his feet up the wall, but he stood on the chair as it was already there. He stepped out onto the ladder and climbed up the slope, jumping over the edge of the roof and landing on the tarmac as gracefully as a cat.

He hesitated briefly at the sight of John sitting with his back against the chimney, nursing a bottle of beer, but the doctor just watched him calmly, with no sense of resentment. Sherlock sat down, careful to keep some distance between them. He pulled his knees up to his chest and rested his cheek against them as he looked out over the view, and thought morosely about the fact that he could, at this very moment, be in the incident room at the Yard.

"Busy day, then?" John murmured, quietly.

Sherlock curled his lip, bitterly. "Stupid, myopic, narrow-minded imbeciles…"

There was a pause and then he heard a quiet sigh. "Who was it? Donovan?"

"Lestrade," he muttered, in response.

He could almost hear John's thoughts on the matter, but the doctor was silent, obviously trying to restrain himself. Sherlock sighed and decided to save him the bother. "If I'd said sorry and really meant it instead of just marching into his office in my usual manner, he might have forgiven me by now," he said, in a mocking imitation of John's voice. "Yes. I know that, John."

"Well…" was all the reply he got. John was trying - oh, so hard - to be understanding.

"Sentiment. That's all it is – pure sentiment. Human emotions," Sherlock mused, wonderingly, all the light mimicry gone. If only he could understand why… "He knows the truth now; he knows why I did it," he added, quietly. "He knows that he would have been lying on a slab himself if I hadn't."

"Not as simple as that," John murmured, a little drowsily.

Sherlock glanced at his friend, trying to ascertain how much the doctor had drunk. John was currently slumped against the chimney with his eyes closed. Sherlock had a momentary fear that the doctor would actually fall asleep up here – how on earth would he get him back through the window in that case?

"Why? Why?" Sherlock picked up a small stone and flung it viciously at the opposite roof, partly out of annoyance and partly to make sure his flatmate wasn't dropping off. "Why don't I understand it, John? I'm aware of the emotions of anger and betrayal; I know all about their manifestations, the role they play in the violent crimes I solve. How is it that I can know and yet not understand?"

"Truthfully? I really don't know." John's eyes opened again and he stared up at the stars.

Sherlock hunched forward, trying to curl himself into a smaller ball. He'd been ungainly, with long, coltish legs and arms, since the age of sixteen, and one thing he'd never been all that good at was hiding in small places. He would inevitably hit his head on something, or his large feet would slip out. John's compact body was far better at that, he mused, a little sleepy himself now.

He suddenly remembered something. "About the kitchen," he began, a little awkwardly. "I was going to clean it up, but I – I appreciate it – what you did."
Why were apologies so difficult? But John didn't seem to mind – or if he did, he wasn't going to admit to it – not tonight. "S'ok," the doctor muttered, giving him a strangely dispassionate look.

Sherlock had an uneasy feeling that he was being assessed in a clinical manner. As the silence lengthened, he shifted uneasily. "Well if you don't know why…"

John sighed. "I'm not a psychiatrist, Sherlock. And it was you who identified yourself as a sociopath to Dave Anderson. Did you ever really believe that, by the way?"

The detective shrugged, trying not to meet John's gaze. "Why not? It's as neat an explanation as any - ."

"It's bollocks, and you know it." John interrupted, impatiently. "I'm no psychiatrist, but even I could see through that on the first day. You know that's not your clinical diagnosis, so why pretend it is?"

Sherlock smirked, ridiculously pleased by John's insight. "Why not? Imbeciles like Anderson want a straightforward diagnosis. They can't cope with the complexities of human nature. That's why he's such a liability on a scene. He sees, but he does not observe."

"Just like me, then?" There was an oddly bitter note in his friend's voice, and Sherlock couldn't bear it.

"He's not like you – not even remotely," he whispered, not entirely sure whether he wanted John to hear him.

John leaned forward a little, suddenly wide awake again. "So all that 'I'm a sociopath' crap – all that's just laziness, is it? It allows you to swan around, being offensive and making the most outrageous observations with impunity - under the guise of a clinical diagnosis? It saves you from having to be aware of the feelings of others. You don't need to adjust your behaviour accordingly."

Sherlock thought about this for a moment. There was some truth in John's words. He'd learnt as a child that he was, quite frankly, terrible at showing empathy. At some point, it had become far easier to simply pretend that he just didn't understand. A clinical diagnosis? His mother had clearly thought along those lines, hence the psychiatric assessments, although no doctor had been able to pin him down to any specific disorder. It had been quite a lot of fun varying his symptoms at each assessment.

Later on, this vague, unconfirmed diagnosis had become a useful tool. It was far easier to get the insults in first, since it was inevitable that they would be flying in his direction at some point anyway – he'd learnt that very early on from the over-privileged, unintelligent, bullying little horrors that he'd been at school with. Monster… Machine… Freak… even (no surprise, this) Fag…

"It works both ways," he countered. "It allows them to justify their instinctive dislike of me. I'm the 'freak' – the genius with no emotions, no feelings to hurt. And, that way, it's perfectly acceptable if I can solve the 'unsolvable' – and equally acceptable that they cannot. After all, why should they be made to feel inadequate? Clearly, the 'freak', with his lack of understanding of the 'normal' human psyche, will have skills that they cannot be expected to have. You see? Everyone's happy."

"Except that they're not, are they?" John sat forward and gestured with his finger to emphasise his point. "All that happens is that they resent you more. You just all go on exchanging insults – they carry on accusing you of inhumanity, of being a psychopath, and you carry on embarrassing them with loud observations on their private lives and general level of intellect. Don't you see? In the end, all you injure is yourself. How long has it been since you were invited to a crime scene? How long since your presence was even tolerated? You just keep turning up, insulting them – and then you
wonder why they tell you to piss off?"

Sherlock was tempted briefly to counter this with "but why would you care what they think of me?". The last time he'd said that, he had been genuinely perplexed, not just by John's concern but also by the momentary look of sadness on John's face before he'd changed the topic.

The trouble was that, this time around, he was beginning to suspect that he did understand that look on John's face… but that was a topic for another time. He didn't feel ready to go down that route, and despite his limited understanding of such emotions, he was fairly sure that John didn't either. It hovered there between them, a little cloud of tension that needed to be resolved at some point…but not tonight.

So, no. Not a good response, and not just because he was beginning to recognise the answer.

Instead, he responded with, "They need me."

"But you were only ever there in the first place under sufferance - and at Greg's invitation," John pointed out, logically. "And now you've lost your only genuine friend on the force. If Greg won't have you there, no one will. Sally dislikes you anyway, so it's a perfect excuse. Dimmock is more sympathetic, but they're both angry at the way you treated Greg. Neither is prepared to put their necks on the line. And Greg feels all the pain and bitterness coming back, every time he sets eyes on you – on a good day, he can probably hide his feelings and be professional. I'm guessing that today wasn't a good day?"

Sherlock rubbed his hands over his face, wearily. "You know why I faked my death. He knows why."

"No, Sherlock," John went on, quietly. "I'm not talking about the Fall. I'm talking about the day you walked back into his office as if nothing had ever happened. No apology. No patience with his natural anger; his need for explanations. Just that typical arrogant attitude of yours – 'here I am, so let's get on with it'. As if nothing had ever changed. As if you hadn't faked your death and left him to grieve you for three whole years."

Sherlock felt the anger rise in him again. That old reproach again. Why couldn't they just let it go? Did they think he wanted Greg to suffer – that he wouldn't have avoided it if he could? "Why should I apologise for that? I never apologised to you – not in so many words, anyway."

"No, you didn't, did you." The words were dry and flat.

Sherlock eyed John, warily. It was true that he never had, not in so many words. Somehow, the timing had never been quite right. And John hadn't seemed to mind.

"Should I have?" he ventured, cautiously.

The doctor sighed. "No, I suppose not. But it's different for Lestrade. He doesn't know you the way I do. I mean, I know you're sorry – or as sorry as you ever can be, anyway. But there's another dimension you haven't considered."

"Which is?" Sherlock asked, even more warily.

"You keep going on about how you took the fall for him." John's voice was hesitant and the detective tried to see his friend's face in the darkness. He wondered whether the doctor would shy away from the truth, but he continued, doggedly. "But you didn't – not really. Not for him. And he knows it. So, in a way, your explanations are meaningless."
And there it was. It was as if the warm dark cloak of night, shielding them from the world far below them, had finally allowed the truth to emerge.

Sherlock remained silent, unsure of what to say, but John continued. "Three snipers. Three targets. Unless you fell. But you didn't fall for Greg, did you? Or for Mrs Hudson. There was a reason why you wanted me to be there, wasn't there? A reason why I had to see it. What was it Moriarty said – back at the pool? 'I will burn the heart out of you'. And that's what he tried to do … wasn't it?"

A cool but invigorating breeze blew across the rooftop, taking away the lingering heat of the summer day and giving Sherlock's half-drowsy mind the clarity he needed… and the resolve to finally say the words. Words left unsaid for so long.

"I took the fall for you," he whispered. Only you. Always you.

He heard the sigh and the gentle reply. "I know."

And that was it. They both knew. They had both always known.

Sherlock felt frozen in place for a moment, wondering what now? But John made no movement, beyond putting his empty beer bottle down carefully and lying flat on his back, his hands behind his head. He began to speak, slowly.

"Don't you ever wonder how your life might have been different? If you'd made a different decision at some point in your life – something that might seem trivial at the time? If you hadn't left your course at Cambridge to move to London. If you'd never met Lestrade. If I hadn't gone back to Bart's with Mike that day. If you hadn't decided to move to 221B. So many choices. Sometimes I – I wonder..."

Dare he move nearer? Taking a deep breath and a considerable risk, he shuffled closer, but not too close, and lay down on the dusty, warm tarmac, careless of his expensive suit.

He closed his eyes, listening to the sound of John's even breathing. He was acutely aware that this was the closest he had ever laid next to another human being, and the physical intimacy threatened to overwhelm him. There they lay, side by side with just a few inches between them… It was a dangerous indulgence… he opened his eyes and stared at the clear starry sky as a memory struck him…

Sherlock sat the leather sofa in Mycroft's office and tried not to gulp down his sandwich too eagerly. It was the only piece of furniture that his fastidious brother allowed him to sit on while wearing his 'homeless' clothes; Sherlock having ignored the pointed offer of a shower and fresh clothes. Two hours ago, John had been taken to hospital following his fall and Moran's demise. Despite Mycroft's protests, Sherlock was not removing himself from this study until word had come through that the doctor was recovering from the operation to set his broken wrist.

He'd discarded the beard that had hidden his features from the first officers attending the scene. As soon as he'd been picked up by a couple of his brother's agents, he'd removed it with great relief. His cheap dirty clothes made his skin itch. Just for once, he'd been happy to accept Mycroft's help and had sunk into the luxury of the London apartment. He was looking forward to an extremely long and hot shower, just as soon as he'd heard from the hospital.

Tomorrow, there would be endless debriefings, and medical examinations, and much tutting over his weight, and he would no doubt get his wounds treated and his nose re-broken and fixed properly. And then, once the remaining minor strands of Moriarty's web had been demolished, there would be
key decisions about how to 'reintroduce' him to society and the press. He was sure there was an entire PR team working on it right now.

But that was for tomorrow. Right now... there was peace. Peace and the satisfaction of a job well done. A case complete, and the knowledge that John was injured but would make a full recovery. There was a slight worry over his head injury, but he had seemed responsive during that brief moment before sinking into unconsciousness. He appeared to have managed to get away with very light injuries considering he had fallen from the roof of a two story building onto a paved terrace - it was extremely lucky that he'd landed above Moran rather than below him.

He inhaled the aroma of expensive coffee with a sigh of pleasure. All he needed to make this moment perfect was a Chinese takeaway and Baker Street and John... but they would have to wait. He didn't have to even look at his brother's face to know that there would be consequences to Sebastian Moran's death and that it would be necessary to stay hidden for a while yet.

His older brother sat at his leather-bound desk as usual, despite the lateness of the hour – Sherlock supposed that the job of running the country didn't fit in naturally with the traditional 9-5 working day. He was stirring his tea, absently, a frown on his face as he looked at a memo that not-really-Anthea had just delivered.

Sherlock watched him as he gulped down some coffee, wondering as he often did why Mycroft was still so reliant on paper. His assistant clearly wondered too; Sherlock noted how she often had an air of incomprehension on her face when she delivered files of paper to her boss – his speculation was that it explained her pointed attention to her Blackberry while in Mycroft's presence. However, Sherlock felt she was wasting her time; he suspected that his brother's addiction to print copy was a direct rebuttal of his own more modern methods of data gathering.

He looked at his brother, noting the fatigue beneath the smooth expression. Mycroft looked old. Of course, there was a nine year age gap, and Mycroft had always been old for his years, so Sherlock had often privately thought that the gap could easily be doubled. It was a shock for Sherlock to remember that his brother was only forty-five.

"Don't you ever get tired of this?" he asked.

Mycroft eyed him over his reading glasses. "By 'this', I assume you are referring to my work?"

Sherlock looked back at him, not bothered by the slightly forbidding tone. "You could probably retire by now," he pointed out. "It's not as if you haven't got enough money to live extremely comfortably for the rest of your life."

His brother snorted, returning his attention to his tea, picking up the tongs and delicately adding two lumps of sugar to the cup.

Sherlock was preparing to follow up with a rude comment on Mycroft's diet when the bureaucrat's head snapped up and he favoured his younger brother with a smirk.

"And what would you do then?"

"What?"
Mycroft raised his eyebrow. "Well, you can hardly continue running after criminals through London's streets for the rest of your life, can you?"

Sherlock sneered, unimpressed by his brother's deflection.

"I mean it." Mycroft's voice was unusually serious. "The criminals will get younger but you won't, Sherlock. I know you feel invincible now, and one might say you are in the prime of your life, or at least you could be -," he gave Sherlock's battered appearance a look laden with meaning, "- but that won't last forever. How many more years? Ten? Fifteen? At some point, you will need to give some thought to your future."

Sherlock shrugged, negligently. "Unimportant. When I get my life back, I can start thinking about it. I expect Lestrade will need me back for cases as soon as possible," he added meaningfully.

Mycroft ignored this, staring blankly into space for a moment. "Ah. That's an angle I hadn't considered." He made a quick note on his pad. "I think I shall pay a visit to the good Detective Inspector in his hospital bed very soon. I must make sure he is moved to a private room. I'm sure he'll appreciate the favour."

"You mean Moran? Do you think John might be implicated?" Sherlock asked, suddenly a little worried. He had done his best to set the scene, moving John's unconscious body a safe distance from that incriminating knife.

Mycroft glanced at him. "It can't be discounted. A deflection may be required. Gregory Lestrade is no fool, whatever you may privately think."

Sherlock glared. "I never said he was." When his brother paused and looked at him meaningfully, he moderated. "I mean, in comparison with the other imbeciles – oh, you know what I mean," he added, irritably, as his brother's mouth curved into a private smile.

"I do. I am, perhaps, less obvious in my…insults," Mycroft commented, mildly.

Sherlock scowled, but didn't bother to pursue it.

There was a silence. Sherlock could hear the old grandfather clock ticking in the hall. It surprised him that Mycroft had retained so many of the family possessions in his London home. He hadn't credited his brother with much sentiment. The clock had been their father's.

Mycroft removed his reading glasses, tidied his documents away into various folders in a fussy manner and then leaned back to drink his tea, giving his brother an inscrutable look.

"You didn't answer my question, by the way."

"What? Oh -," Sherlock frowned at his cup. "I don't know."

"You could write books," Mycroft suggested, with just a hint of mockery in his voice. "About your cases. The science of deduction."

Sherlock snorted. "I think John's got that area covered already."

"Talking of John," Mycroft murmured, and Sherlock had the familiar impression that his brother had carefully manipulated the conversation around to the topic that he really wanted to discuss. "You might need to give some consideration to his own plans for his future."

"Why?" Sherlock shrugged casually, trying to ignore his brother's gaze. "John will do what he
"Will he?" Mycroft sipped his tea, delicately, and contemplated his shiny shoes.

Sherlock was suddenly, deeply, irritated by his smug brother. "Look – what is your point, Mycroft?"

Mycroft looked up at him and there wasn't a hint of smugness in his face. "My point is that John's ambitions and dreams may not coincide with yours. You know – we both know – that we are not easy to live with. We are not... domestic creatures. Neither of us crave intimacy –," he gave Sherlock a sharp look, "- or the 'comfort' of children. You run the danger of denying John the lifestyle he wants on the grounds that you personally place no value upon that lifestyle."

Sherlock gave an incredulous laugh. "Do you really think I have that much influence over him?"

Mycroft was silent for a moment, looking down at his tea, before he met his brother's eyes again. "I don't think. I know. John will always mould his life around you. If you were to ... to let him go, to make it clear that he can leave Baker Street and actively seek a life away from you... It might be easier for him, Sherlock. He would have a chance at happiness. I have been observing the doctor for years now, and he is a lonely man. He craves something that will replace his unhappy memories of his existing family – his neglectful parents, his alcoholic sister. He isn't too old to find it. If you care about him, you must surely want him to be happy?"

Sherlock opened his mouth to respond indignantly, but at that moment, Mycroft's phone rang and the discussion was over.

Sherlock closed his eyes again, trying to banish the memory so he could focus on enjoying the unaccustomed proximity and John's warm, sleepy voice.

"Why the army, for a start?" the doctor continued. "Why didn't I just go into surgery – some specialty? Or into general practice? I could have had my own practice by now, a house somewhere in the suburbs. Maybe a wife – kids."

There was an expectant silence and Sherlock realised that John was waiting for his usual deductions – welcoming them, even. He opened his eyes and addressed the stars:

"Why the army? That's easy enough. You would have been bored to death if you'd gone straight into general medicine. Even now, you dislike the mundane nature of day-to-day practice – the mild illnesses, the minor wounds, the vomiting children and the over-anxious lonely older women." He relaxed into the deduction, feeling more comfortable. "Once you chose medicine – which was an obvious choice by the way, due to your clinical mind, natural sympathy, almost pathological need to be of use to others and desire for the adrenaline rush that comes with emergency situations – you would not have been content to follow the usual route to general practice or a hospital specialty. Yes, you entered the army out of necessity initially, as they offered you the opportunity to fund your medical training, but it turned out to be merely the perfect environment for you. If you hadn't stayed in for military service, you would have been drawn to emergency services; possibly you would have specialised in orthopaedics. Definitely surgery."

The familiarity of the deduction process grounded him. He felt less tentative, a little more sure of himself. It was almost as if John, wonderful John, understood his need to retreat for a while from the unfamiliar emotions that had prompted his confession.

"So, would I still be in the army now if I hadn't been shot?" There was a tone of mild amusement mixed with admiration in John's voice, and Sherlock relished it, felt a small spark of pride in his
"Well, your record suggests you would have stayed on for a third tour of duty – probably back to Afghanistan, or perhaps to the Basra base in Iraq. That would be typical of your desire to remain alongside your comrades, and you would, of course, wish to be of use to the soldiers serving there. You would hate a desk job, miles away from the front line. After that, I…"

And then Sherlock faltered… For the first time, when it came to John, he didn't know, and the surprise loosened his voice: "You know, I'm not absolutely sure… Would you?"

"How does it feel? Not being sure?" He could hear the smile in John's voice and was grateful for the lack of teasing about his admission.

"It's… not something I enjoy," he admitted. "But then, that's my acknowledged weakness, isn't it? I can extrapolate the likely facts based on deductions of environment, upbringing, past behaviour, current and past experiences, motivations, psychology… but they are only the most likely outcomes. There's always something – if it's not a sister rather than a brother, then it's some quirk of character, some hitherto unknown quantity that can affect the outcome … and there, I am as uninformed as the next man."

"Unless the next man happens to be Anderson," John murmured.

"Well, that goes without saying, naturally," Sherlock responded drily, and they both laughed.

Sherlock lay still for a moment, closing his eyes and enjoying the close, easy atmosphere. They hadn't been like this since before the fall.

Then his eyes opened again, genuinely curious. "Well… would you?"

John sighed, rather ruefully. "I don't think so. I enjoyed the camaraderie, of course. And you're right – I would have stayed on for that third tour, if I could have. But beyond that? Front line medicine is a young man's game, and I wouldn't have been all that interested in staying in just to train others. I would have -.

He broke off, but Sherlock finished his sentence for him. "You would have married and had children and lived in the suburbs." He tried to keep the distaste out of his voice, remembering John's hurt face from the night before.

"Yeah. I think I might have." John's voice sounded a little defiant, and he knew his friend was thinking of the same conversation.

"You might still?" Sherlock asked, tentatively. If you care about him, you must surely want him to be happy?

John hesitated for a moment before replying, very quietly. "No. Not now."

Sherlock felt something ease in his chest. And yet he had to still worry at the painful topic like a loose tooth. "You are still young. Only early forties. Many men marry and procreate later in life." Against his will, he recalled that Christmas season a couple of years ago and the way John had looked at that father with his son and daughter outside Hamley's. If that what was John really wanted…

"I think you know that it has nothing to do with age." John spoke with a certain degree of resignation.
Sherlock was silent. There was nothing he could say to this. He could sense the unexpressed sadness, but he had never wished to become a father, so he couldn't entirely understand it.

"Don't you ever wonder, though?" asked John, quietly. "Having a kid, passing something on. Experience, knowledge, all that stuff. Watching that kid grow up, do all the things you always wanted to do but never got around to.Producing another human being that might resemble you, might inherit the best of you or, alternatively, the worst. Trying to see whether you could do a better job than your parents."

John was silent for a moment before adding: "That's what I think of sometimes. Not so much about finding love -," his voice faltered for a moment and then continued hastily. "That's what I think of mostly – having a child. What about you? Don't you ever think of becoming a father?"

"Not me. Never me." Sherlock had never been so sure of anything in his life. But he had heard the wistful note in John's voice and his heart ached. Was Mycroft right? Was he selfish in wanting to hold on to John, knowing he could never offer him what he really wanted?

Almost as if he sensed Sherlock's thoughts, John asked: "And Mycroft?"

Sherlock laughed shortly, not bothering to reply.

"Then your name will die out," John stated, almost wonderingly.

That was something Sherlock had never understood. Why did people place such importance on names? It may have simply been the defensiveness of someone who had been mercilessly teased at school for his unusual forename, but he had never placed much value on titles.

"Would that be such a loss?" he asked, curiously.

"What?" John sounded surprised. "Do you really think so little of your own importance?"

He sighed, a little impatient with the topic – and his impatience made him reckless and loose-tongued. "I could hardly be described as falsely modest, John. I am perfectly aware of my skills and knowledge – and their benefits to the world… just as Mycroft is, no doubt, fully aware of his. But, tell me truthfully, apart from you and Mrs Hudson and a handful of others, who may or may not include my brother and mother among their number, who would really care if I were to throw myself off this roof right now?"

And, in the silence that followed, he knew that this was very much not a good thing to say. If he hadn't realised immediately, he would have been able to tell from the way that John sat up quickly, tension radiating from his body.

He laughed, trying to break the sudden atmosphere. "Relax, John. I'm not about to pitch myself off the roof."

"But you've thought about it? Haven't you?"

"I -," he hesitated, gazing up at the sky to avoid John's intent gaze. "Well, there are easier ways of achieving a relatively painless death if I had thoughts in that direction…" His voice trailed off, dreamily, forgetting the topic of conversation as he started to think through the endless possibilities…

"As you would know, of all people," John muttered. "So how would you do it, then? Overdose? A cocktail of drugs? Do I need to check the flat?"

Sherlock lifted his head, startled by the degree of anger in John's tone. "No, of course not -." Did he
really think that Sherlock would -

"Are you sure? You need to be sure, Sherlock, because I am not going through that again – I mean it." John broke off and took a deep breath, clearly trying to calm himself.

This was definitely not good. "John, I –."

"No, Sherlock! I don't want to hear it." John sprang to his feet and turned towards the chimney, the tension obvious in the stiff lines of his back. His breathing came fast and he brought his clenched fists up and pressed them into the rough brickwork. "I – I know things have been difficult since you returned -." His voice faltered.

Sherlock stood up and walked towards John, appalled by the turn in the conversation. How could he have been so stupid? He had to make this right, nothing was so important, but he felt out of his depth as usual. He paused behind John, wondering whether or not to touch him.

"John," he whispered. Almost instinctively, his hand came up to rest very lightly on his friend's shoulder, and his felt the muscle tense at the contact. John's head turned towards it, and he withdrew his hand quickly, a little afraid.

"I am not contemplating suicide – I swear it to you, John. Not now, not ever."

"Then why do you come up here so often?" John turned his head away again. "You do, don't you? That window hinge – it looks rusty, but opens easily. It wouldn't do that if you'd only been up here occasionally."

Sherlock paused to appreciate the insight. John was far more observant than when they had first met. He gazed at John's back, at the stiff set of his shoulders, and half raised his hand again before letting it drop, feeling useless.

"I do come up here, quite frequently, that is true," he confessed, closing his eyes for a moment. "But not for the reason you think."

He turned away, walking slowly towards the edge and looking down at Baker Street, so far beneath them. His eyes were stinging for some reason and he had to close them again for a moment.

"Can you give me a reason?" He knew by the altered volume that John had turned to face him again.

"I – it reminds me…" But he couldn't say it; his throat closed up when he tried. He turned towards his friend, his eyes begging him to understand without words.

And John – wonderful, brilliant John – suddenly understood. "It reminds you of what you did and why you did it. Whenever things get really bad, like today - when Greg ignores you and Sally insults you and Molly asks you to leave and Mrs Hudson looks hurt… when you wonder why you took the decision to jump. You come here, and stand on the edge and look down, and it makes sense once more. And – and it gives you the strength to carry on."

He was wrong about Molly at least, and possibly also Sally, but Sherlock couldn't focus on that now, his gratitude for John's understanding of his reasons almost overwhelming him. He gave a stiff nod, unable to speak.

John walked over to stand next to him, his movements a little tentative. Sherlock felt the warmth of the doctor's solid body standing next to him and couldn't prevent his own body from leaning in just a fraction.
John looked down at the view and winced. "You know," he began, conversationally. "I've seen – and done – a lot of scary things in my time. I was in a helicopter that crashed shortly after take-off – just minor injuries that time. I've had to perform rudimentary surgery on scared lads with their limbs hanging off, while bullets ripped the ground all around us. I earned medals. They – the authorities - called me brave. But… but all those times, it was the adrenaline that kept me going, made me do all those amazing deeds that I am praised for. If I'd stopped just once to really think about what I was doing, I'm not sure I would have had the courage."

He sounded a little embarrassed by his confession, and Sherlock couldn't find the words to tell him how very wrong he was. "That's not true," he murmured, weakly.

He felt John shrug. "Well, whatever you may think, there's one thing I know for sure - I can't stand at the edge of a great height and look down without feeling absolutely terrified. The very thought of going closer to the edge makes my feet literally freeze. Even more so since I went off the edge of that roof with Seb Moran. What I'm saying is that I can't even contemplate the courage needed to stand on the edge of a high roof and say goodbye to your best friend before jumping off. And to do all that knowing that three lives depend on your ability to make it look convincing… I still don't know exactly how you did it, Sherlock, and I hope that one day, you feel able to tell me. But I do know this… that the man who had the presence of mind and courage to go through that for the sake of his friends is no sociopath. And the man who cared enough about his friends to get through the terror of that fall – well, that man can make things right. He will make things right. 'I believe in Sherlock Holmes' – that's what I wrote on those walls while you were away. And I stand by it – by you."

Sherlock felt a tear break free from his burning eyes and flow down his cheek. His breath came in anguished sobs that he tried to muffle in the back of his throat. He never cried and he wasn't about to start now. Not here. Not with John. His body trembled with the effort of restraint.

He felt the other man's hand touch his arm and jumped in shock. Did John not realise he was touching him? He half-expected his friend to move his hand away again with an apology, as so often in the past. He was used to people shying away from touching him – the 'freak'. But John's hand moved deliberately down his wrist and grasped his hand.

Sherlock jumped again, and found that his own fingers had entwined with John's with a desperate eagerness.

They stood silently, side by side, looking out over the city, their joined hands hidden in the dark, between their bodies. Part of Sherlock's brain was busy considering the possibilities. What does this mean? A far bigger part of it was simply enjoying the contact and the warm night.

John broke the silence after a few minutes. "Do you ever wonder…?"

He broke off again, but Sherlock knew what he was struggling to find the words for.

"Bees," he whispered, hardly knowing where that had come from.

"Mmm?" John sounded a little startled.

"Bees. When all this is over. When I'm old and I can't keep running any more. I'll keep bees. Always been interested in bees," he added, suddenly realising that it was true.

"I didn't know that. All these years, and I didn't know that." There was a sense of wonder in John's voice. Wonder… and contentment.

So many things to learn… He had a sudden vision of the far future. Of a country cottage with bee
hives and a laboratory at the end of the garden. Of a short, compact, silver-haired man, still trim and fit in his retirement, pruning the plants. He could close his eyes and see it… But – his eyes opened again – did John want it too? He hadn't said yes.

His fingers twisted nervously in John's hand, seeking reassurance from his sudden doubts, and the doctor tightened his hold, rubbing his thumb soothingly over Sherlock's wrist.

"Sussex," he said, suddenly.

Sherlock tensed in surprise. "Sussex?"

"I loved it there – when I went to visit Greg at your old home," John admitted. "The countryside, the peace… I told myself then that I'd go back one day."

Sherlock was silent for a moment, absorbing this. He hadn't known that John had been there. Had he seen the stream where Sherlock had paddled as a boy, the trees he had climbed, the fields and hills he had run across barefoot, his old bedroom with its eclectic collection of fossils and leaves and bird's eggs, the library where he had spent so many happy if solitary hours absorbing information?

Living here in the city, he'd forgotten how happy he'd been back then. Suddenly he craved it again. The peace. The solitude. The freedom of unsupervised exploration, before school had taken it all away. But not yet, not while there were still cases to be solved. And not alone. Not anymore.

He smiled, feeling a ball of warmth expanding in his stomach, flowing through his body. "Sussex," he agreed, as he leaned his weight more comfortably against John's shoulder, dropping his head to lean against the doctor's fair head. John seemed to approve, squeezing his hand and leaning into him more firmly.

Far below them, the city continued its bustle and its people carried on with their busy, messy, oblivious lives throughout the warm, heavy night.
He ran headlong through the teeming crowds. His target was just a few feet ahead but kept disappearing from sight. Sherlock followed him half by instinct alone; the two of them darting and dodging as gracefully as dancers between the fish stalls and traders shouting out their wares and the lingering shoppers and curious tourists. As the man disappeared through some curtains, Sherlock dived after him and found himself in a narrow crowded lane, thick with locals and very much off the tourist trail. Of his would-be assassin, there was no sign.

He cursed and swung around wildly, trying to deduce. It was pure luck that he caught a flash of black at a window in the second storey of a nearby building. He sprinted across the road and up a rickety wooden staircase. By instinct, he continued past the second floor and up onto the flat rooftop.

He was expecting the man to be waiting for him there – and he was not disappointed. Sherlock paused and flexed his hands cautiously, trying to anticipate the next move of this smiling assassin, an efficient and cold-hearted member of the local branch of the Black Lotus Tong. What he hadn’t been expecting was the second figure, who pounced the moment he stepped onto the roof. A woman - small but deadly as she grabbed his arm and aimed a hard, bare-footed kick at his kidneys. He gasped and doubled over, temporarily paralysed. Her fingers came up and yanked roughly at his shaggy hair, pulling his head back and exposing his neck.

As he gasped and tried to get a hand to the hard fingers gripping his throat, at the periphery of his vision, he saw the smiling killer step forward, the glint of steel in his hand…

Two shots rang out. The hands on him faltered and dropped; raising his head, he saw the scarlet bloom of blood, almost obscene against the clear blue sky, as the man dropped to the roof. He didn’t have to turn around to know that the woman was also dead, shot as cleanly through the head as her colleague.

A figure stepped out of the shadows. She was clad from head to foot in black, but even before she removed from the scarf from her lower face, he knew…he would have recognised those ice blue eyes anywhere.

He was unprepared for the flash of pure fury that ran through him at the sight of her. "I work alone," he rasped out, through suddenly dry lips.

She laughed at the look on his face, as she stepped towards him, light as a cat. "Oh, you misunderstand. I am not on your side."

Her lips were as dark red as the blood spreading across the roof tiles and the scent of Chanel perfume wafted in the stagnant air as she leaned close. Her breath was hot on his cheek as she whispered, light and deadly, in his ear. "I have saved your life, and I believe that makes us even… Sherlock Holmes. I shall not be so…accommodating…the next time we meet."

He closed his eyes, refusing to flinch as he felt her lips, hard and uncompromising, against his own…

"Sherlock?"

He opened one gummy eye at the voice and suppressed a groan. His cheek were squashed into a damp pillow and his head felt as if it were about to split open. He moved fractionally and opened the
other eye, feeling the dull thump of his sluggish pulse as he did so.

John stood just inside his bedroom, ruffled and more than a little red-eyed, in his bathrobe. He was wiping shaving foam off his face with one hand and holding his phone in the other.

Sherlock struggled to turn onto his back. He looked down at his legs, realising that they were tangled in his twisted sheets. His pyjamas clung damply to his perspiring body, and sweat dripped from his hair into his eyes. He slumped back onto his wreck of a bed, groaning weakly and trying to shade his eyes from the hot ray of mid-morning sun that sliced across the room.

John chuckled wearily. "I think we overslept a bit."

Hardly surprising, really. When they'd finally climbed down from the roof late in the night, they'd decamped to the lounge by common consent, neither of them quite ready to retire to their own rooms. It felt too much like a retreat from the almost unspoken, newfound affinity between them. John had grabbed another beer and Sherlock, much to his own surprise, had opened the expensive scotch that had been a Christmas present from Mycroft. He was not much of a drinker, but it seemed somehow appropriate. An Indian takeaway had been ordered, and it had apparently been perfectly sensible to consume it while sitting on the floor, leaning against the sofa and watching crappy late-night TV. It had been after 3AM by the time Sherlock had helpfully nudged his tipsy, giggling flatmate in the vague direction of the stairs before staggering towards his own room.

He opened his eyes a fraction and squinted up at the overly bright ceiling. He was certainly not hung-over. It was precisely the reason why he had stuck to the smooth expensive scotch instead of indulging in that cheap, disgusting beer that John insisted on getting drunk on.

"You OK? Must admit I never thought I'd see you with a hangover, but the way you were putting that stuff away…" John winced and rubbed his head. "When you feel up to joining me, I'll have strong black coffee and aspirin lined up ready in the kitchen."

"I am not hung-over," Sherlock responded, haughtily, trying to ignore the continuing thud in his head.

His friend sniggered. "Yeah, if you say so."

Sherlock looked up at him through narrowed eyes. "Why are you in here, anyway?"

John looked for a moment as if he was pondering the same question, but then his expression cleared. "Oh, yeah, that's right," he waved his phone at his flatmate. "Message for you. From Sally Donovan."

"From -?" Sherlock sat up, catching the phone neatly as John threw it in his direction.

The message was brief and to the point:

Tell him to meet me at Ray's Café at 1PM today. SD.

He read it with a frown before sending a quick reply, tossing the mobile back at John and lying down again.

"I take it you're going to meet her?" His flatmate was watching him curiously as he continued rubbing his face with a towel. "Wonder why she's contacted you – and whether Greg knows."

"There's a link between those two scenes. She knows it – and so does Lestrade if he'll only admit it. There'll be a third murder soon," he added, casually as he began to disentangle himself from the
sweat-stained sheets. He hadn't recalled that particular memory of Irene Adler for some time, but whenever he did, his dreams were unusually vivid…

John's sharp inhale recalled him to the present. The doctor's face was tight with anxiety at the prospect of more victims. His mouth set in a determined line that Sherlock remembered well. "I should probably come with you."

"You're not working today?"

"It's Saturday, Sherlock," his flatmate pointed out drily before turning away.

And that, Sherlock reflected, indicated precisely why he needed a case.

Sally's chosen venue was an anonymous and characterless West London cafe – the kind of establishment where the proprietor had clearly (and mistakenly) thought that tagging on a common London name like Ray's would lend an air of authenticity. If there had ever been a Ray in charge of the place, he certainly wasn't now, and it served the usual range of bland baguettes and muffins with over-priced coffee. Even John winced at the offerings and stuck to plain tea. Sherlock didn't bother to order.

Sally was sitting by the back wall, gazing glumly into her paper cup as they approached. She had positioned herself to be out of view from the window and looked as unhappy to be there as they felt. It occurred to Sherlock that this was precisely the type of place that no self-respecting Yarder would be seen dead in, and that might be why she had chosen it. He wondered briefly whether it had featured in her illicit assignations with Anderson and if that was the reason for the more-than-usually bitter twist to her lip before she saw them.

The moment she did, her mouth twisted even more, and he saw the flash of hostility in her dark eyes as he sat opposite her.

"Always a pleasure, Sally," he greeted her, mockingly.

Her face cleared a little at the sight of John. She glanced from him to Sherlock and gave a tense nod. "Thanks for coming…I suppose. Didn't know if you would."

Sherlock glanced briefly at John as he sat next to him. The doctor's face was impassive. He looked annoyingly fresh and clear eyed in the circumstances; Sherlock presumed, resentfully, that he was inured to hangovers by now. The pain in his own head had dulled somewhat, but his brain felt dangerously sluggish.

As John sat down, pushing his chair back a little to sit at an angle, very much the passive observer, Sherlock felt a strong sense of déjà vu. It was almost shock to have John back by his side – sitting on his side to the table, so to speak, but he hadn't quite forgotten that sense of security - of feeling backed up. And yet, he had meant what he had said to Irene Adler that day...

"I could help out, you know."

Sherlock took a deep drag of his cigarette and sent smoke wafting across his brother's face. The only response was a delicate cough and a wave of the hand.

"If you'd let me help," he went on, "you could finish this in half the time. You're very close to a breakthrough."
"I prefer to do this alone." He turned away, contemplating the frozen lake. The Canadian winter's bite was particularly sharp this morning, and he thrust his gloved hands into his armpits in an attempt to keep the blood flowing.

Mycroft was wearing more layers than Sherlock had ever seen him in. His padded coat had the unfortunate effect of emphasising the number of cream cakes he had eaten during the summit. It seemed more than a coincidence that the G8 should be called together for an emergency summit in Toronto at the same time that Sherlock happened to be in the vicinity – and that Mycroft had elected to go for a private tour along the shores of Lake Ontario during his morning off. The civil servant had waved away his younger brother's acerbic comments on the matter.

"The point is, you don't have to," Mycroft continued after a period of silence. "My resources are at your disposal."

"And be beholden to you for the rest of our lives, I suppose," Sherlock muttered, dropping his stub and stamping on it viciously.

Mycroft was quiet for a moment. "It might be argued," he said, delicately, "that I am responsible for your current situation. It would therefore seem fair that I assist you in any way that I can."

Sherlock contemplated this for a moment. "I work alone," he repeated, eventually.

"You did not work alone before the fall," Mycroft pointed out.

"Until a certain army doctor limped into your life," his brother commented. Was there a note of regret in that smug voice?

"Yes, and look what that led to." He lit another cigarette and scowled at the snow. "Moriarty was able to manipulate my weakness. I should have seen that at the swimming pool."

He felt, rather than saw, Mycroft glance at him. "Do you consider John to be your weakness?"

He pondered Mycroft's question as John settled in his seat. He hadn't answered it then, and he was not sure he could do so now. It was not John precisely that was the weakness…

John coughed a little, as if to redirect Sherlock's attention, and he realised he had been starting at his flat mate. He flushed a little and turned towards Sally.

The DI's body language was stiff and rather defiant as she opened her briefcase and withdrew a file. "It's about the -.

"About the murders, of course," he interrupted impatiently, ignoring John's sharp glance at his rudeness. "Why else would you contact me?"

"Why indeed," she agreed, with a rather blank expression before pushing the file across the table to him.

John leaned in to look at the contents. Some photographs of the woman's body, Molly's preliminary report… Sherlock cast those aside, picking up an EU passport and flicking to the back page. Elisabeth Kimmel. A thirty-five year-old hospital administrator, from Freiburg in Germany. Married but travelling without her husband. She looked younger than her actual age, but it was an effect achieved through the use of clever make up and some minor cosmetic surgery.
"Details came in from Interpol last night. She was staying at the Travelodge near Kings Cross."

John raised his eyebrows, picking up a driver's licence and looking at the photograph. "She doesn't look the type to be staying in a budget chain," he commented.

"No – we think she was travelling on the cheap on this occasion. She and her husband were having problems – and he was her third too. He's a doctor at the hospital where she worked. She - ," Sally had the grace to look a little embarrassed at this point, "um, they were having an affair and she eventually left her second husband for him. But he suspected she was seeing someone else. The German officers who interviewed him said he didn't seem all that shocked at the news."

"So she came to London alone?"

"She was supposed to be on one of those summer school courses that the London universities run for international students. Having a break from the marriage, I suppose. According to the programme administrator, she turned up only once, for a pre-course drinks party that was organised for the mature students, and she never went back. They didn't think to investigate – her fees were paid up front and apparently that sort of thing can happen, although more usually with non-European students. You know – pay for a short course, get your study visa and then spend your allocated study time travelling around Britain instead, possibly looking for work. Being fairly well-off and from an EU country, she wouldn't have had to resort to those tactics. In her case, they just assumed that she had decided the course wasn't for her after all."

"When was the party?" John asked as he picked up the passport and compared the photographs.

"Wednesday 26th June." Sally glanced at Sherlock. "You were right, by the way – Molly told me about your theory. I mean, she hadn't been dead for six months or anything, but we think she's been dead for exactly a month."

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. "You have proof of the date?"

"Well, not exactly," Sally admitted. "But we do have a sighting of her on 29th June, and no later. She was at an open-air concert by the lake at Kenwood House. CCTV images show her walking away across the Heath in the direction of Belsize Park at 10:37PM." She shuffled through the documents to find a grainy black and white image, which she pushed across the table.

Sherlock peered at it intently, muttering about the quality of the image. Elisabeth appeared to be alone. She was well dressed in an expensive-looking linen dress with a cashmere wrap around her shoulders, and was holding a clutch bag in one hand and something small and rectangular in the other – a concert programme, perhaps? She was walking confidently along the path, with no sign of fear. It didn't look as if she was being followed, but it was hard to judge, as there were a number of people trailing along behind her, in either small groups or couples. Crossing Hampstead Heath alone at that time of night couldn't be described as a sensible decision, but she looked like the type of woman who wasn't afraid of strangers.

"She didn't return to the Travelodge that night," Sally went on. "And there was no sign of the bag or clothes she was wearing that night among her belongings in her room when we checked yesterday. And no ticket or programme for the concert - ."

"Wait a minute," John interrupted. "Are you telling me that she was missing for a month and no one thought to report it?"

Sally shrugged. "The University course administrator thought she'd just decided to drop out of the course and had been too rude to let them know. I got the feeling that she hadn't thought very much of
her. Her husband thought she was on the course and just hadn't bothered to contact him – from what he said to the police over there, that wasn't particularly unusual. The Travelodge staff hadn't seen her, but then she could quite easily come and go with her key card without them being aware. She was paid up until August 5th – apparently, the course she was booked on was due to finish on the 4th. And she'd given specific instructions that the room wasn't to be cleaned while she was staying in it. They only realised she hadn't been back when we contacted them. They were able to check the computer logs and see that her keycard hadn't been used since 5.30PM on the 29th, when she'd left the building."

"Unbelievable," John muttered, and Sherlock glanced at him, wondering which of Sally's statements offended the doctor's sense of decency the most. The uncaring husband? The disinterested hotel staff?

"You said the course administrator hadn't 'thought much of her'," he quoted to Sally. "Why?"

"Well…” she consulted her notes. "It seems she was a little – um, obvious at the welcome party. Flirting with the younger male professors. She eventually went off with one of the American mature students - and it was fairly obvious what for. And then they didn't see her again."

"No wonder the husband didn't bother to contact her," John commented. "But what about the man she attached herself to?"

Sally frowned at her notes. "That's the funny thing. He hasn't been seen for two weeks. But he did attend the first part of his course. Didn't mention her to anyone, and no one liked to ask. I get the impression he's a bit of a drinker – might not have been entirely sober when he went off with her. He wasn't doing all that well on the course – in his case, they did think that it might have been an excuse to get a study visa for an extended stay in London. He seemed to spend more time socialising with a group of friends outside the university. For example, he kept talking about getting a private tour of a Sunseeker boat that an associate was thinking of buying."

"And he hadn't been seen for a couple of weeks?" Sherlock pressed the tips of his fingers together and smiled slowly. "Has Greg's victim been identified yet?"

She shot a look at him. "You think it's the same man?"

"Hmm." He closed his eyes for a moment, visualising the first crime scene. "No sign of forced entry at the shop. I assume she wasn't known there?"

She shook her head. "The shop owner didn't recognise her. And you're right – no forced entry and the door was locked when he arrived that morning. How did you know that?"

He smirked. "No damage to the door or windows and no debris on the floor. I remember that much."

She frowned, too used to his methods to be particularly impressed by this. "I have to say that, at first, it didn't look too good for the old man."

"Oh, please tell me you didn't bother to arrest a man showing clear signs of early Parkinson's," Sherlock sighed.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "I'm not entirely stupid, Frea –," she broke off quickly as John made a quick movement, " - er, Sherlock. I noticed the tremor in his dominant hand -."

"Good to hear that our Yard detectives have some powers of observation," he interrupted, impatiently, trying to ignore John, who was rolling his eyes at Sally. "What was in the briefcase left by the body?"
She shot him a hard look before returning her attention to her own briefcase. "I knew you'd spot that. It was empty apart from this."

She passed him an evidence bag, which he held up to the light. It contained a scrap of paper – a carefully cut-out rectangle of a page taken from a textbook.

John took it off him, frowning at the small text. He was at the stage where he probably needed reading glasses but wasn't prepared to admit it yet. "What does it say?"

Sherlock took it back and read out the rhyming couplet:

"Others with softer Smiles, and subtler Art,
Can sap the Principles, or taint the Heart."

"It's from a poem," Sally put in, helpfully. "It's – "

"Yes, I know," Sherlock said, absently as he carefully examined the corners of the piece of paper. "London by Samuel Johnson."

"So…" John frowned. "Some kind of reference to her behaviour? What do those lines mean?"

"I have no idea."

"But you recognised the poem - ."

"That doesn't mean I bothered to work out what the blasted thing meant."

He recalled tediously long afternoons in class, surreptitiously reading a chemistry textbook under the desk as, all around him, tiresomely sentimental poetry was clumsily reinterpreted by ignorant young minds. One of the curses of a didactic memory was that he could remember every wasted moment of his English literature classes and most of the texts studied. The temptation to delete certain works had been resisted only on the grounds that too many unimaginative killers seemed inclined to leave quotes from the likes of Shakespeare, Blake or Dickens at their crime scenes. He sighed – another would-be killer-poet. How tedious.

"Any prints on this, or on the briefcase?"

Sally grimaced. "Yes. Hundreds on both of them – particularly on the page."

"Either a much-used library book or a new book in a prominent position in a heavily frequented bookshop – not the shop that this was found in," Sherlock mused. "More likely a library book – it's from a book that would inspire a lot of casual interest. No – it's required reading…" He turned the little rectangle of paper over, frowning. "What was the name of the course she was supposed to attend?"

Again, Sally consulted her notes. "It was called London and Its Literature."

"And which course was Greg's victim on? A different one, I assume? Something relating to art…or architecture. He was an architect, wasn't he?"

"You're assuming it's the same man, and we don't have any confirmation – ."

"Come on, Sally." Sherlock drummed his fingers on the table. "Why did you call me? You don't want me involved in this – we both know that you'd much rather never see me at a crime scene again. I'm only here because you need me. There's a link and you can't work it out. I'm right, aren't
She gave him a look that was both uncertain and a little defiant. "I don't know about this…"

He leaned over the table, pressing his palms down. "What was in the bag at the second scene?"

Sally shot John a look of appeal, but the doctor sat silently by Sherlock, watchful and waiting. He had a certain instinct, Sherlock recalled, for knowing when to be quiet and keep his counsel.

Eventually, the DI sighed and fiddled in her case again. "I knew this was a mistake," she muttered to herself as she withdrew a single sheet of paper. "Look, it's only a photograph of the evidence and no one must ever find out that you've seen it…"

It was a colour photograph of what looked to be part of a page from a brochure or magazine. Again the piece was neatly cut, but the rectangle was slightly bigger this time. It showed part of a reproduction of a painting – the misty greys and dun browns of a river and the bottom half of a building.

"The page was found in an otherwise empty art folder. The gallery owner didn't recognise it. Greg was assuming it belonged to the victim," Sally explained. "Forensics are looking for prints on it now."

John grabbed the paper from Sherlock's hand. "I know that painting! It's by Claude Monet – it's kept at the National Gallery. This must be one of their brochures. It's – it's… something about Westminster…? Yes, that's right – The Thames Below Westminster. That's it – there's the river and that's supposed to be the Houses of Parliament."

Sherlock was ashamed to admit that the look he gave John was quite possibly identical to that of Sally's.

He shrugged at their stunned expressions. "What? I've always been interested in art, especially the Impressionists. Don't go in for that modern stuff, but I like looking at a good landscape. Why should that be a surprise?"

Sherlock reflected that it really shouldn't have been a surprise to him, but he made no comment. He couldn't recall a single occasion before the Fall when John had expressed more than a passing interest in anything art-related.

John gave him a defensive look, quite probably guessing his train of thought. "Well, alright, it's more of a recent interest. I mean I used to like art at school, but nothing ever came of it. I wouldn't have been good enough to make much money. And then other things took over… but just recently I've started going to galleries and exhibitions." He paused as a thought seemed to strike him. "Earlier on, you said that the student that this woman - Mrs Kimmel – went off with was an architect. Why not an artist?"

Sherlock shrugged. "You've just said it yourself. It's hard to make much money from art unless you're one of the favoured few. And an art student would hardly have been her type. She was a social climber. She left her second husband for her third because he was a senior doctor at her workplace – rich and influential. A woman like that wouldn't have been interested in an impoverished artist, but a smart, up-and-coming young architect – that's a different story. What was it they said about him? A bit of a drinker. More interested in spending time with his rich friends than studying. Luxury speedboats. Oh yes," he nodded, emphatically. "Our woman was interested in more than his good looks. Whether she meant anything to come of it isn't clear. It's most likely that she recognised him for what he was – a drinker and a time-waster – and decided not to bother
beyond the first night."

He drummed his fingers on the table top, thinking hard.

John flicked through the documents. "What University did you say they were studying at?"

"I don't think I did mention it, but it's Kingston University London. They run a summer school for international students. The administrator is a Dr. Emma Rogers."

The doctor hummed lightly and glanced at Sherlock. "What do you think? Worth a look?"

Sherlock frowned and gave a non-committal hum. He didn't like to admit that he wasn't entirely sure what his next move should be. Bart's or Kingston University? The aspirin had done its best, but his head still felt as if it had been stuffed with cotton wool. He craved caffeine, nicotine...a stimulant of some nature to shake his sluggish brain into full life again.

He felt eyes on him and looked up.

Sally was watching him with her usual hard, blank look, but there was the faintest impression of anxiety – the signs were there in her furrowed brow and the way she was chewing her lower lip as she shuffled the papers unnecessarily. He could tell that she was beginning to regret involving him – this one fatal move could affect her career, her reputation and even, possibly, her relationship with Greg. His eyes flickered over her, deducing. Yes, she wasn't entirely confident in her status with Greg. She was the one who'd made the initial moves; was making them still, while her lover remained fairly passive in the matter. And she was the one with the most to lose – she'd managed to get through one scandal, but she wouldn't be able to weather another messy relationship breakdown in her place of work.

She squirmed uncomfortably, looking away. "Do you have to do that? Feels like you can see right inside me..."

He smirked. "Hardly necessary, Sally. It doesn't take a genius to work out that things are not going that well between you and -.

John shifted suddenly and pushed an elbow hard and painfully into his ribs. It was the most severe version of his patented 'bit not good, shut up right now' warning – and Sherlock shut up immediately, mostly, it had to be said, from shock at the old familiarity of the gesture.

He took a deep breath and smiled over-sweetly at the glowering DI, who was busily stacking up the documents and putting them away. "Do you have a time of death for the second murder?"

She looked down at her notebook. "I don't think we have that information yet."

Mind suddenly clear, he jumped up in his usual abrupt manner, startling John into action. "I don't require that information, anyway. I can inform you that he was murdered on Saturday 13th July, stored with the first victim and sprayed with insecticide. These bodies are only coming to light now because your killer is panicking about the lack of decomposition."

He pushed his chair in and leaned across the table looking intently at Sally. "Tell your colleague, or lover, or whatever he is at the moment, that he needs to act quickly. You both do. Time is of the essence. Come on, John!"

"Wait a minute – why the rush?" Sally stood up, her eyes calculating. "You think he's killed a third person, don't you?"
"No," he replied, shortly. "Not yet – but he will. Later on today, if I'm not mistaken. The question is where – and who."

And, with that, he darted out of the café with John in his wake, leaving Sally staring after them.
Weakness

As Sherlock strode from the café, he was sure that Sally would be depressingly predictable. And sure enough…

"Oy, you!" She slammed through the door and stalked straight up to him, prodding him unnecessarily hard in the chest. "Don't just walk away leaving me with that information, Fre – Sher – Holmes."

"Oh, for -," Sherlock rolled his eyes as she stuttered. "Why don't you tell it like it is, Sally?" He put his hands on his hips and smirked in a way that was guaranteed to annoy her. "You always thought I was a freak. What has changed your mind? Or who?" he added, as a sudden suspicion formed in his mind, making him glance briefly towards John.

She glared at him. "Alright. I'll say it if that's what you want. Freak."

They both ignored John's sharp intake of breath as they stared into each other's eyes, neither prepared to back down.

Deep down, she'd always despised him, perhaps always would… but there was something else there in her eyes now, lurking beneath the more overt hostility. A grudging respect. When he'd first returned, he'd half expected embarrassment, shame, stammered apologies and awkwardness from her, but he'd forgotten Sally Donovan's sheer bloody-mindedness. She'd never back down or give him the satisfaction of seeing her beaten. And yet… for all that, she was a good copper. She had a strong sense of justice and a determination to seek it out, whatever the personal cost, and that was what made her good at her job.

And it was the same bloody-minded nature that she appreciated in others. She could admire his fortitude against all the odds and his determination to keep his head high amid the accusations, but that didn't mean she had to like him.

Well. He could live with that. It wasn't as if he liked her much either.

Sherlock found his lips curving up, almost against his will. "OK, then. We both know where we stand."

He was amused to see her smile very slightly in response before returning to the more familiar sullen frown. "No we don't. You don't get to make comments like that and then just bugger off. You said another victim, probably today. What the hell am I supposed to do with that? I can't just twiddle my thumbs and wait for it to happen! And what are you going to do?"

John made a slight movement as if about to intervene, and she spun her accusing finger towards him. "You keep out of this. I mean it, John."

He subsided, giving Sherlock a resigned look. Sally turned the full force of her glare back onto the consulting detective. "You keep out of this. I mean it, John."

He subsided, giving Sherlock a resigned look. Sally turned the full force of her glare back onto the consulting detective.

"You do realise that I'm just about the closest thing you have to a friend on the force right now – and the irony about that is that I hate you. I want to help – no, I do," she added in response to his cynical laugh. "Not because I care about you, but I do care about Greg. He worked better when you were there. He needs you, even if he won't admit it right now. We need you. I acknowledge that. But you can't just mess around the way you used to, Sherlock, treating us like idiots, trampling over everyone's feelings - you really can't. You have to work with us, otherwise you're always going to be
an outsider – and there won't be any second chances." Her dark eyes softened, and she lowered her voice. "And you need us too. So, come on – talk to me."

Sherlock sighed. If there was one thing he detested, it was having to stand still and explain exactly what he was going to do, when he could be getting on with doing it. To some degree, John understood that and was able to judge when he should and shouldn't bother Sherlock with questions. The Yarders, however, had never possessed the same insight - they had always viewed his dramatic and unexplained departures as just another sign of his arrogance.

He took a deep breath. "Your second victim is undoubtedly the would-be lover. They are linked, but it might not be due to their brief liaison. I need to find that link – and until I do, it's impossible to predict who the third victim is likely to be."

"But you're sure that there is going to be one," she persisted.

He rolled his eyes. "Well, I'm not entirely sure - obviously. There's always a chance that the murderer got himself knocked down by a car in the meantime. Or perhaps he's at the bottom of the Thames. Who can tell? But yes, if he is still active, there will be a third. He is establishing a pattern – and quite possibly a taste for it."

She gave him a shrewd look. "In that case, I need to tell Greg. You do understand that?"

"Do what you like – but he's not turning me off this case," he snapped, suddenly furious. "Remember, you called me in. You need me to solve this. We're wasting time here."

She blew out a frustrated breath. "You can't even guarantee to find him before he strikes again – not if it's going to be tonight. For all we know, he might be killing someone right now, and we have no way -.

He closed his eyes for a moment, heard her sharp intake of breath and waited, wearily resigned to the inevitable insults. Monster. Heartless freak. Psychopath. There are people involved, real people, Sherlock – just so I know, does that mean anything to you? You...machine..."

"What can I do?"

He opened his eyes to see her observing him gravely. It may have been the first time ever that she had looked at him without an expression of disgust or open anger or derision on her face.

He sighed again. "You really want to help? Then, let me do my job. Try to keep Greg off my back if you can. Get your patrols mobilised. And – this is just a suspicion at present - but get some officers down to Kingston University to round up the other students on that summer programme."

"You think the third victim may be among them?"

"It's a distinct possibility."

She looked at him for a long moment and then nodded briskly, seeming to make her mind up. "OK. I'll get onto that. I'll be at the Yard, getting Greg up to speed. You," she prodded Sherlock again, hard enough to make him wince, "– keep me updated and as soon as you have any new information
on the killer or any potential victims -.

"Yes, yes," he interrupted, impatiently. "Come on, John."

As he turned away to hurry to the nearest main road, in search of a taxi, he was aware of a wary look passing between Sally and John, but she said nothing else and after a minute, John hurried after him.

"So you think there'll be someone else today? Do you have any clue who, apart from a half-formed idea that it might be another student?"

Sherlock threw him an impatient look. "No – of course not. If I did, I'd tell her. I only observe that there is a pattern. Both were killed on a Saturday two weeks apart, with the second victim two weeks ago. It could be significant."

"It might not be, the days might be a coincidence."

"Yes. That is also a possibility." He almost said I need more victims to be sure, but managed to bite his lip in time.

"But -.

"But what?" Sherlock stopped and swung around so quickly that John almost bumped into him. "What do you want me to say, John? Are you going to accuse me of not caring about the third victim, because if you are, you need to stop now. You know by now how I work. I can't fundamentally change that, and I need to investigate this in my own way. I won't change, John." Not for you. Not for anyone.

"I wasn't going to say anything! Only just… if you have any idea – any idea at all…” John was trying but failing to hide the anxiety in his eyes.

"I don't. Not yet."

John took a deep shuddering breath and glanced at his watch. "So, where now?"

"Kingston University." Sherlock raised his arm and felt a certain degree of satisfaction when a black cab pulled up immediately. He heard a quiet snort and gave John a side-glance; the doctor's lips were twitching suspiciously, almost as if he had read the detective's body language.

It was true that Sherlock felt an energy fizzing through him that he hadn't felt for a very long time. It was the siren call of the Work; that incessant buzzing sensation under his skin that told him there would be no rest for him until the case was solved. It was not a sensation that he could easily put aside. He was not being stubborn in refusing food or sleep while on the Work; it was, quite simply, that his mind would not allow his body to partake. The Work took priority; it had to take priority – and not just because it was likely that someone else would lose their life today, if they hadn't already.

It wasn't news to him that John was able to recognise the signs so easily, but as he entered the taxi, his feet stumbled a little as he had a sudden revelation: yes, John understood, but did he feel the same compulsion? Or had he merely always followed behind, putting up with the hours of tedious investigation and the missed meals and interrupted sleep for the sake of the addictive adrenaline that would accompany the inevitable chase? Before the fall, Sherlock had grown used to John following him, to the degree that it felt utterly natural… but John had his own life these days. Would he still be prepared to follow without question? And what did that adrenaline rush mean to him now anyway?

John followed him into the taxi and settled back, seemingly unaware of his momentary hesitation. "You really think that summer school is the link, and not their relationship – such as it was?"
"Obvious." Sherlock gazed out of the window as they proceeded slowly down Shepherds Bush Road, not really seeing the stop-start traffic. "The sexual encounter is a red herring. If it had been significant, one of them would have been targeted, not both. If an illicit sexual act is the reason for murder, it is not usual for both participants to be murdered at different times. More likely they would be killed together with a considerable degree of violence – a genuine crime of passion, if you like. No, they were killed at different times and in different locations, so it's for another reason."

He leaned back, warming to his theme. "She was alone when she left the concert. This wasn't a random murder – she was known to her victim. He knew exactly where to find her and when. No sexual assault or gratuitous violence. More of an assassination," he added, thoughtfully. "Someone decided the world would be a better place without her. He took no pleasure in her murder. It was an unpleasant task to be done – and he did it efficiently. Surprisingly so for an amateur."

"An amateur? You think so?" In the window's reflection, Sherlock saw John shift and give him a surprised glance.

"You don't?" he murmured at the glass, not bothering to look around.

"Well, I thought, when you said 'assassination' that perhaps the husband - ."

"Not involved."

"You can't know that! How can you be so sure without even seeing a transcript of his interview?"

"Because he would have hired a professional. This man was not a professional, as evidenced by the sloppy attempt to dispose of Kimmel's body. He'd probably learnt a good technique for the murder – I suspect he may have been in some form of military service at some point where he learnt hand-to-hand combat, Territorial Army most likely – but his training didn't cover how to get rid of inconveniently dead bodies. He didn't know what to do with it; initially he stored it in a location where there was a significant risk that the stench of decomposition would attract attention. Probably a workshop or a garden shed. Hence the insecticide – to disguise the smell. It must have been a shock to him when the body did not decompose – or rather I should say bodies, as undoubtedly her would-be lover had joined her by then."

"So you're certain that this other student is the unidentified man?"

"Yes. Mark Hodder." Sherlock drummed his fingers on the window frame, impatient to be there. "Post-graduate student, architect by profession but not a particularly successful one, from Chicago. More interested in luxury speedboats and other possible business deals than in either art or architecture."

He smirked at the glass as he sensed John pondering his words. John was the unacknowledged master of the 'double-take'. If Sherlock had ever wanted to know how the 'ordinary' person would react to a comment or a revealed fact, John's reaction would always tell him everything he needed to know. There was a time when the doctor would have reacted to Sherlock's deductions with obvious surprise – would have been openly incredulous or admiring, muttering the ever familiar 'amazing'. He was less effusive these days, and a little more reflective - one of the many tiny but significant ways in which he had changed during Sherlock's years away.

"You looked him up in Sally's notebook," John said, finally. "When you asked her for a time of death for the second murder – didn't you? I wondered why you leaned towards her like that. You must have read it upside down while she checked."

"Of course I did. Obvious," Sherlock snorted, but he smiled very slightly all the same.
They were both silent for a while, lost in their own thoughts. As the taxi weaved its ponderous way through the heavy traffic, the atmosphere was strangely peaceful despite the urgency of their objective. Sherlock wondered at his own sense of ease, lying just beneath the more familiar thrum of excitement caused by the thrill of an unsolved mystery.

He had rarely been entirely at ease in his life. Even before the fall, there had always been too many topics occupying his ever-buzzing mind – cold cases, new experiments, endless deductions to be made, even his music didn't always give him much tranquility. There might be moments of satisfaction caused by a good deduction or an expected result, but they did not lead to ease – not mental, anyway. His mind, if not his body, was in perpetual motion - it always had been, from his earliest memory. John's eighteen-month presence at 221B before the fall hadn't changed that. It had only been in the later months before the fall that he had allowed those peaceful, meaningless Sunday evenings, with the takeaway and the terrible TV programmes, to take over his life - mind, body and soul - for just a few brief hours.

He frowned a little. During the last few months, he'd forgotten just how much he'd missed those Sunday evenings before the fall, and he wasn't sure that he cared for the reminder. John had tried to return to their old life, and no more so than with the Sunday evening routine, but Sherlock had been awkward, refusing to join him to eat, and downright sulking on occasions. He had actively resisted falling back into that comforting old routine – but why?

He turned and stared at John. The doctor was gazing out of his own window, seemingly unaware of his friend's gaze. Or perhaps it might be more true to say that he was aware but tolerated it. Was John so used to being deduced that he no longer paid it any heed?

To the untutored eye, he looked completely relaxed, but Sherlock knew better. His posture was one of 'watchful waiting', as Sherlock always termed it in his mind. The off-duty soldier, seemingly at rest and happy to sit back and observe, but ever alert to the slightest danger, simply as a force of habit left over from his Afghanistan days. His gaze, apparently unfocused, was deceptively sharp, his eyes running over the passing pedestrians. Looking for…what? Bulges in clothing that might be concealed firearms? A familiar face in the crowd? His shoulders were tense, his body ready to respond in a second.

It was a familiar pose… and yet, there was something different. Something missing… and Sherlock found his mind returning to his earlier, uncomfortable, revelation.

What did John get out of this?

"Could be dangerous" – that's what he'd said all those years ago, by which he'd really meant "could be fun". Back then, that's all it was – the thrill of the chase, of 'solving the unsolvable', of making fools of the Yarders… He was young, at the height of his powers, he was invincible. 'Dangerous' had been a remote concept – he might have got himself into hazardous situations, but he would always be able to use his considerable wits and physical prowess to get out of them too. That was before Moriarty.

Could be dangerous. And John had come running, because he had felt the same siren call. And he had loved it – the midnight chases, the standoffs, the fights, the laughter over a takeaway once the case had been solved. Sherlock had recognised a kindred spirit in him from the moment they had met – that same restless need for adventure. He'd had seen it in the limping doctor's eyes after that first chase - sparkling, suddenly alive. John had an extraordinarily expressive face and even at the most dangerous moments, whenever he had slipped into his 'watchful waiting' pose, his eyes had always glittered with that same excitement.

John’s head turned suddenly and his eyes met Sherlock's in mute inquiry. And Sherlock realised,
with a sinking feeling in his stomach, exactly what was missing. The eyes, still keen, were harder now. There was no spark.

At some point, during the last three years, 'danger' had stopped equating 'fun' for John.

The doctor frowned at the scrutiny and his mouth opened, forming a question that was just as quickly swallowed. The initial confusion in his face cleared to be replaced by a rather odd, blank expression. Sherlock dropped his eyes quickly; as he looked away, he wondered what it was that John had seen in his own expression that had stopped him asking his question.

"He was right, you know."

Sherlock glared without bothering to look away from the glittering water. "Piss off, Mycroft. Don't you have rogue nations to terrorise?"

He was leaning on the Serpentine Bridge in Hyde Park, taking a break from one of his furious walks across the city. It had been two months since he had been accosted by his brother outside Bart's on the same day that Lestrade had ousted him from New Scotland Yard. Since then, he'd heard nothing from Mycroft. Too bad the idyll was clearly over.

He heard his brother's heavy, rather ponderous steps on the wet tarmac as he approached. "Moriarty. He was right."

Sherlock sneered. "You surprise me. About what?"

"Your weakness." Mycroft leaned on the bridge next to him and peered down at the ducks with some satisfaction, as if their continued peaceful existence was entirely down to his own diligent efforts. As well they might be.

"I don't want to hear it, Mycroft, whatever your latest ridiculous theory might be."

"Caring is not an advantage," Mycroft said softly, putting a faintly ironic emphasis on each word, as if he was quoting someone else's words. "Do you remember the very first time I said that to you?"

He remembered. Oh, how he remembered.

"I was nine."

Mycroft was silent for a moment before continuing. "You...asked me why Mother did not appear to love you. You were old enough by then to recognise that her behaviour was not that of a normal parent, but not yet old enough to understand why... or to care. You were more fascinated than hurt by it."

"She did not want me. She never wanted me." Sherlock stated the matter flatly. It had ceased to hurt a very long time ago – if it had ever hurt. Had it simply been the excuse he had needed for the drugs? The psychiatrist had certainly thought so, in that dreary place that Mycroft had forced him to enter for rehabilitation. The over-intelligent youngster whom her mother had once contemplated abortion and had always regretted not seeing it through. The behavioural problems, the social deficiencies. Textbook case.

"That aside," Mycroft's dry, emotionless voice broke across his thoughts almost brutally. "The reality was that you sought an answer that I was - perhaps - ill-prepared to give at that time. I was about to go away again - to University. I wouldn't be there any more to act as a buffer between the two of you. So, I did what I thought best in the circumstances... You required an answer and I told you that
He broke off and peered intently at the water, focusing very carefully on a great crested grebe as it passed underneath the bridge.

"It occurs to me," he continued, very quietly, "that you may have taken that advice to heart."

Sherlock gave a brief, mirthless laugh. "You repeated it to me enough times over the years. So, tell me -," his voice took on a mocking quality, " - what was my weakness? Oh, let me guess. He exploited the fact that I cared far too much for three people. Enough to throw myself off a building for them. It's old information, Mycroft. I know. So yes – you were right and I was wrong. Congratulations, dear brother. Caring really isn't an advantage."

Mycroft continued to lean silently on the rail, not looking at him. After a minute of this, Sherlock gave an impatient huff and turned away.

"Has it ever occurred to you," Mycroft called after him. " - that I may have been wrong?"

John cared about him. He hadn't at first – oh, he had in the sense that he wasn't prepared to allow a slightly mad consulting detective die needlessly at the hands of a psychotic taxi driver, but that was just John. The soldier; the doctor. The decent man. It had had nothing to do with Sherlock.

But later on, yes, he'd cared. And Sherlock hadn't seen it, hadn't wanted to acknowledge it as the months passed. There had been that moment, just before Moriarty had struck again so fatally. "It really bothers you what people say about me? I don't understand – why would it upset you?" And John had said nothing for a moment – had just given him that same, slightly blank look. That look that meant yes, it was fun once…when it didn't matter so much.

And now that it did matter and it wasn't fun anymore… what did that mean? Roof-top promises were one thing, but in the clear light of day, when there was a job to be done, where would John be? Would he still be there, hurrying obediently after Sherlock, or would the day come when he would decide that it just wasn't enough anymore – not for him? Or that he simply couldn't bear to continue watching Sherlock plunging into danger?

And was he still Sherlock's great weakness - the one person for whom he would give up any case, relinquish any fight? Was there another Moriarty out there somewhere, preparing to exploit that once more?

As they crossed Putney Bridge, the subject of his musings cleared his throat and appeared determined to change the tense atmosphere. "How did you know that Hodder was killed on the 13th?"

"Easy. Exactly two weeks after the first murder."

John frowned. "You mentioned that before. You think he – I assume it's a he? – picked those dates deliberately?"

"Not so much the dates as the days. Both Saturdays."

"What – so the guy only kills on his day off?" John laughed, a little uncertainly, as if he was unsure whether Sherlock would take the lame joke well.
Sherlock restricted himself to a mild huff of irritation. "This man compartmentalises his life. He works, almost certainly full time, Monday to Friday, sometimes evenings during the week. He also works late every other Saturday. These killings have nothing to do with his work life – in fact, he takes a great deal of pride in his profession and wouldn't want to see it tarnished by something so… distasteful. So alternate Saturday nights are his time. And look at the murders. Elisabeth Kimmel was killed in an extremely clean and efficient manner. No unnecessary injuries, minimal blood loss. Mark Hodder will have been dispatched of in a similar manner, no doubt. This man takes no pleasure in his kills. There's no sadism there. And the manner of their disposal. She was cleaned to the best of his ability and disposed in an orderly manner. Again, I'd have to see Hodder's body, but – actually, that's a good point -.

He broke off to send a quick text to Molly.

"And why not Sunday?"

Sherlock shrugged. "Another day, another man – quite literally, in his view. I suspect he goes to church."

John whistled his disbelief. "Not very Christian behaviour."

"Hmm." Sherlock stared blankly out of the window. After a minute, he said, as a sudden revelation came to him: "He wants to be found. He – what he has become… He wants it to stop. Why does he want it to stop? It's not natural to him. It disgusts him – the act of killing – and yet, now that he's started, he can't stop. And why remove her clothing? There was no sexual element. No, it was because he wanted to clean her, to try to wipe away his act of violence. No doubt he did the same with Hodder's body. And the clues -"

"Are they aimed at the police?"

"Yes." Sherlock frowned. "Or perhaps not precisely at the police. This individual wants to justify his acts to the world at large. And he hides behind cultural references to do so. This is not a worldly man. It's a…confession, if you like."

"Oh? A Catholic, then?"

"Possibly." Sherlock shrugged; religious motivations had always discomforted him a little because he couldn't understand them even remotely. It was possible that John had a greater understanding, as a doctor who had treated people with a wide variety of cultural and religious beliefs. He dismissed this line of inquiry, moving quickly onto the facts. "The first murder is easy to interpret. That quote from Johnson's London. As you suspect, the lines relate to the victim. He probably believes that the victim did, quite literally 'taint the heart'."

"And where she was left? The bookshop?"

"Possibly significant. The murderer clearly knows the location and its proprietor. He may know that the shopkeeper is German, even though he has lived in Britain for most of his life, sounds English and has adopted an English name - he may even know that he has sought to hide a family background that he considers shameful. However, I don't think our man intended the shopkeeper to come under suspicion – it was merely the location and quite possibly the nationality of its owner that was symbolic."

John considered this for a moment. "And the second murder?"

"The message is a little harder to interpret. A painting – well, he was clearly on an art-related course.
He had probably visited the National Gallery as part of his study. As for the painting - *The Thames Below Westminster…* He frowned.

"He was found by the river," John put in, helpfully. "And was interested in speedboats."

"Irrelevant. The gallery he was left in was the key… but I can't see any link between that and the bookshop…"

John paused, frowning. "Actually, there is -.

But he was interrupted by the taxi driver, who pulled in suddenly. "Here you go, gents."

Sherlock looked up at the University building, putting his hand on the door latch to open it. He glanced back at John. "What were you going to say?"

John stared blankly at the seat in front of him for a moment, before shaking his head. "Nothing. I thought I had something, but it's gone." He shrugged. "It probably wasn't important anyway."
Strength

Sherlock leapt out of the car and strode to the entrance, ignoring John's muttered complaints about having to pay the taxi fare as usual. As he opened the door, his mobile beeped and he paused and read the message from Molly with a slight frown before continuing into the building.

The university was located in the pleasantly leafy London suburb of Kingston-Upon-Thames. Inevitably, on a warm Saturday afternoon during the long summer vacation, there were very few students or staff to be seen.

As Sherlock entered the air-conditioned modern building, he wrinkled his nose instinctively. He had an old-fashioned dislike of the modern, glossy, technical institutions, with their focus on business enterprise and publishing at the expense of pure theoretical research. He had hated the Cambridge days intensely, so much so that he had eventually abandoned his chemistry degree, but at least there he had been left to his own devices to develop his ideas and focus on his interests…apart from the obligatory one hour tutorial each week with an elderly, rather unworldly don, who hadn't contributed much to his work but had cultivated his preference for fine wines.

He smirked at the memory and then frowned as it occurred to him that his stuffy older brother would probably have had the same disdainful reaction to this modern educational institution.

"Don't be such a snob." Almost as if he'd read Sherlock's thoughts, John was standing at his shoulder, sounding rather amused.

Sherlock rankled at the very notion. "I am not Mycroft."

"Yeah, but you still look down on the red-bricks – you Oxbridge types always do," John replied easily, grinning as he looked around the bleakly modern foyer. "I wonder about your upbringing sometimes, mate – actually, no I don't. I've seen how you grew up. Seen the photos too."

Sherlock stiffened in the horrified realisation that John had visited the Sussex house. "No, you haven't," he snapped.

John giggled. "Yeah, I have, actually. Mycroft was very informative. The sailor suit that you wore at your seventh birthday party was particularly you, I thought."

Ignoring his friend's frozen expression, the doctor led the way towards a reception desk at the far end, where a bored-looking young woman had woken up a little at the sight of two visitors who clearly didn't belong here.

Sherlock noticed that her eyes flitted up and down his body in a blatantly obvious manner, and he made sure his most charming smile was in place when he asked if Dr Rogers was available. She took her eyes off him reluctantly to go and make enquiries, and John snorted his amusement at the admiration.

"Haven't lost your touch, then."

"I don't know what you mean," he replied, trying to avoid John's knowing gaze.

John snorted. "It's the cheekbones. Wasted on you, though. Now, if only I had them…" He sighed wistfully, letting the sentence drift away.

Sherlock ignored him, drumming his fingers lightly on the counter while he waited. He was
expecting to get the brush off and was preparing to bypass the laughably minimal security when, rather to his surprise, the professor appeared.

In the brief moment before her hopeful expression turned to disappointment, Sherlock ran his eyes over Dr Emma Rogers and made his usual lightning-fast deductions. Tall and slim; early forties; taught modern languages. She was divorced and currently living with a female lover who was at least twelve years younger than her and probably a former student, but she was also losing interest in the relationship. She was an ex-smoker, who was very much regretting that fact today. She had minimal interest in her job as a whole and absolutely no interest in the summer school; had only agreed to organise it because she was eyeing a promotion and it looked good on the CV.

"I had thought you might be the police," she explained, her eyes running over John in a dismissive manner. "That detective promised she'd let me know as soon as she had more information. We're having a slightly difficult time at present; it's a terribly sad situation, naturally, but we do need to carry on with the programme with as little disruption as possible…"

Sherlock noted the way that John bristled at her cold tone. That hadn't changed since he'd been away – the ex-army doctor might be a little more 'army' than he used to be, but he hadn't lost his national instinct for compassion towards the victims of the crimes Sherlock investigated.

Before the doctor could make the acerbic reply he clearly wanted to, Sherlock interceded smoothly. "DI Donovan sent us over to check a few points." This had the advantage of being true… up to a point. No need for her to know that this wasn't an official visit.

She looked at him with more interest and he saw a sudden light of recognition in her eyes. "Oh! It's you. I didn't realise you were working for the police again." He noted that the slightly dismissing tone had given way to awe. Clearly a fan, albeit not one of those tedious girls in mini-skirts and the stupid ear hat. Perfect.

Choosing not to contradict her, Sherlock gave his warmest smile. "We appreciate all the help you've given the police so far. There are just a few points that we need to check, and DI Donovan mentioned how helpful you were before, so I thought perhaps…"

As he spoke, he glanced quickly around the large foyer, taking in the environment. A café with a few summer school students hanging around. Offices along a corridor, most of them shut. Doors to a lecture theatre. A security barrier in front of the library, which was open. As Sherlock's eyes flickered in that direction, he became aware that he was being watched, and his gaze sharpened as a shadow flitted across the doorway, moving further into the library.

"Well, I did tell the detective all I could remember about Mrs Kimmel, but if there's anything more I can tell you…"

He focused on Dr Rogers again, forcing the insincere smile back onto his face. He was aware of John wandering casually in the direction of the library as he did so, and wondered precisely when the doctor had become a mind reader. Or was it simply that he hadn't noticed, or fully appreciated, John's instincts until now?

"I understand that you met her only the once – at the pre-course welcome party on the 26th of June. Was that held here?" He looked around the foyer again.

"That's right." She nodded, briskly, clearly keen to be of help. "It's something we set up specifically for the mature students, to help them adjust to University life and give them a chance to meet other older students on their courses. We hold it in the student's lounge – over there. Just a few drinks and nibbles, to break the ice. But I didn't speak to her beyond shaking her hand and welcoming her to the
"University. I wasn’t -," she smiled, a little ironically, "– you might say that I wasn't her 'type'."

"By which you mean that she was only interested in talking to the men present – particularly unattached men around her own age," he stated.

She shrugged. "I'm no prude, Mr Holmes. But she was… well, pretty blatant. As far as I could see, she didn't make any attempt to discuss the course, and well, I know it was a party, but most of the mature students tend to do that. The programme isn't cheap for many of them, so they are usually fairly committed. She was very flirtatious – clearly looking for someone to… um…"

"Have sex with?" Sherlock suggested, frankly.

She looked a little startled – something that he found intensely irritating. Why couldn't people simply state the facts?

"Um, yes, that's right. Thing is, she seemed a bit obsessed with finding someone. We've had plenty of single women – and men, of course – on these programmes who hook up at some point, but they're usually more discreet about it. And she was married, so it stood out a bit. I mean, she seemed to move from man to man – she even tried something on with our librarian, and if you meet him, you'll understand why that was a bit odd. Not that there's anything wrong with Phillip, but he's not exactly 'one-night-stand' material. At first they seemed to be getting on alright, chatting away about classical music and such, but then he got flustered and I soon realised why."

Sherlock nodded, working hard to conceal his impatience. She was the type of witness who couldn't be rushed – if he tried to interrupt, she might leave out something important.

This was where John was invaluable. He could nod patiently and listen carefully until the salient points were revealed. It wasn't Sherlock's usual style, and he had come to rely on his colleague's complementary manner of interrogation. He hadn't realised how much until he no longer had John to rely on.

With a brief stab of regret, he reflected that he would miss John's soothing presence if the doctor decided to stop working alongside him on cases. He had certainly missed it during the three years away; without John as a diplomatic buffer, he'd had to work far harder to fit in with the people around him and gain their trust. He could do it, just as he'd had to before John came on the scene, but it wasn't natural to him. He had felt oddly lonely most of the time, imagining John's lightly ironic voice during one or two tense encounters – not good, Sherlock…

And yet… on this occasion, their roles were reversed. It was Sherlock who painted an understanding expression on his face and diplomatically endured an irritating witness, while John prowled impatiently in the background, only his clenched fists revealing his tension. Even unsettled, the doctor continued to stake out the territory with a professional eye, noting the positions of the security cameras and running his alert gaze over the students in the café.

As Sherlock put his head on one side in an attitude of interest, his eyes flickered towards his friend again. Mycroft had implied – had more than implied on more than one occasion – that John might prove to be Sherlock's downfall. And Moriarty had believed him to be Sherlock's great weakness… and yet…

And yet… here he was, backing Sherlock up, in that familiarly understated manner. After the cabbie's death, John had stood solidly behind that cordon, unimportant and overlooked by everyone. As their association developed, this had proved to be an asset on many occasions. Sherlock had never quite decided in his own mind whether this ability to slip below the radar when required was a natural characteristic or a talent cultivated by necessity, perhaps the survival instinct of a serving medic in a
war zone. It had hardly been a weakness over the years – in that, surely, Mycroft was wrong…?

But was John himself the weakness that Mycroft had referred to, or was it merely the act of caring about him that had compromised Sherlock so fatally? And what had Mycroft really meant when he had suggested he might have been wrong to lecture his younger brother on the disadvantages of caring all those years ago? In all the years since childhood, Sherlock had never known his brother to admit to any mistakes. Why now?

Were both Moriarty and Mycroft fundamentally wrong about John's quiet influence on Sherlock – albeit for very different reasons? Both were formidably intelligent foes – even if Sherlock despised his brother, he had a respect for his fierce intellect, as he did for that of his arch-enemy – and both had professed an understanding of human motivations that went far beyond his own acknowledged powers. Worse still, both had claimed an innate knowledge of his own motivations – his hopes and fears, his weaknesses and vanities and fears. And both had been ruthless in their exploitation of such weaknesses for their own, opposing, purposes.

He shook his head slightly, trying to dislodge such disturbing thoughts and focus on the matter in hand. What was wrong with him – why couldn't he just concentrate on the case anymore? Was he that much out of practice?

Dr Rogers had carried on describing Kimmel's behaviour at the party, quite unaware of his distraction. "And then she finally settled on an American student. They left soon after – actually, it was quite a relief. He was fairly drunk by then – and he's obviously a loud drunk." She shuddered, theatrically. "It was getting a little embarrassing."

"Yes, I was wondering about that," John put in. Sherlock hadn't noticed that he'd returned from his investigation of the library entrance. "Where would they have gone? Don't the students stay on campus? Why was she staying at a hotel in Kings Cross?"

She threw the doctor a quick glance; Sherlock was amused to see the lack of interest in it. And that was the chief beauty of John's unassuming appearance - he was often able to get information from intimidated witnesses simply by looking harmless, and the persona also worked on arrogant, self-important witnesses, like this woman.

As he had hoped, Dr Rogers' answer was less guarded. "We tend to encourage the undergraduates to stay on campus for their own security if nothing else. They are still very young and often don't speak English all that well. However, the mature students usually make their own arrangements. They can stay on campus if they want to. There is a charge, although a small one, but most of them prefer to be independent." She sighed with an air of apparent sympathy that didn't fool anyone. "If she had been on-campus, of course, we would have noticed her absence sooner. As it is…well, you understand, don't you?"

Sherlock nodded with an understanding smile, although he was aware that John very clearly didn't understand and was desperate to say so. It was time to retreat a little and let John work his magic.

John appeared to agree with Sherlock's view, as he subtly drew the woman's attention towards himself. "What about the American – Mark Hodder, wasn't it?" He dropped the name into the conversation casually.

She looked a little startled for a moment, although neither of them was fooled by that. "Mark Hodder? Did you get his name from that detective? What about him? He dropped out of the course – at least, I think he did. We haven't seen him for two weeks."

"And yet you didn't report him missing," John responded, quietly. It was more of a statement than a
question, and was guaranteed to rile her a little.

"Well, why would I? I had no reason to believe he was 'missing', just because he didn't show up for
his course."

She sounded defensive, and John shrugged, clearly letting it go. "Where was he staying?"

"I'm not entirely sure," she admitted, reluctantly. "We usually record the addresses they are staying at
for the duration of their course, just in case we need to get in touch and they don't reply to messages
left on their mobile. For example, we knew that Mrs Kimmel was staying at that Travelodge. But Mr
Hodder was a little harder to pin down. He gave the address of some friends living in Knightsbridge,
but when he dropped out of the course, we contacted them and it turned out that they were only
casual acquaintances of his mother. They had no idea that he was in London at all."

"I notice that you say 'was'," Sherlock commented. "Do you have any notion that he may no longer
be in London or the UK?"

She stared at him. "No – I have no idea at all. I only used the past tense because he did - just before."
She nodded her head jerkily in John's direction.

Her gaze was unyielding, and he was reminded that this witness was extremely intelligent – and
more than a little manipulative. As he met her gaze, her eyes widened slightly and he saw a new
awareness in them. Was that surprise? Shock? Fear? And yet, her face remained blankly polite.

He narrowed his eyes at her; it was clear that she was pitting her wits against him, and he was
unlikely to get anything useful out of her. He had no proof that she had lied at any point, but she was
clearly being careful not to reveal anything beyond what she had already said to Sally Donovan.
Something was clearly worrying her, but she wasn't going to reveal what – not to him and certainly
not to John.

He was reminded suddenly of the fact that she apparently hadn't made any attempt to contact
Kimmel when she hadn't attended the course – not at the hotel at any rate, although she may have
called the women's mobile. Why not?

John asked before he could. "You say you contacted Mr Hodder's friends when he stopped attending
his course and didn't respond to mobile messages. But you didn't follow up on Mrs Kimmel, did
you? If you'd contacted the Travelodge, they could have told you that she wasn't there anymore. Her
disappearance might have been discovered sooner."

She flushed at the note of accusation in John's voice and began to lose her composure.

"Well, he had at least started the course. It was a completely different situation."

"Was it? I don't see why." John's voice was perfectly neutral, but his words were uncompromising.
"Don't you have a duty of care to all your international students, not just the undergraduates? She
might have had a road accident, she might have been in hospital and struggling to communicate in
English with her carers. Didn't that occur to you? Or did you just assume that she wouldn't bother to
get in touch based on your initial assessment of her character at a single meeting?"

"Of course not!" Her cheeks were pink as she snapped out her reply. "I did leave her a couple of
messages, but it was perfectly obvious to me that she wasn't remotely interested in the course. I never
saw a less likely student. Frankly, I just assumed that she was too busy sleeping her way around
London to bother to contact us."

Her tone was acid and Sherlock nodded to himself, noting the dark rings beneath her eyes and the
way her hands shook slightly before she put them behind her back. Not just an instinctive dislike, then. Unhappy in her private life, Dr Rogers had made some kind of discreet advance to Elisabeth Kimmel at that party, and had been firmly rebuffed at some point during the evening. Not so loyal to her young lover, then.

He leaned forward, getting her attention. "What about Mark Hodder? Did he ever mention what happened between them?"

She shook her head, calming a little. "Not that I heard, although he might have done to someone on his course."

"And when did he stop attending his course – and what courses were they on, by the way?"

She frowned. "I'll have to double-check that, but it's my impression that it was about two weeks into the course. He was on the British Art and Architecture course and Mrs Kimmel was supposed to be attending London and Its Literature."

Sherlock nodded briskly. Time was of the essence – he needed to get the investigation moving. "We – the police - need to talk to as many of the students as we can and as soon as possible. How many do you have on the summer courses and how many courses are there?"

Her eyes darted between him and John and, once again, he had a sense that this woman understood a lot more than she seemed to. "There are twelve courses altogether, and we have a total of eighty-nine enrolled students across the programme, not counting Mr Hodder or Mrs Kimmel. Many of them will be somewhere around the campus this afternoon, if you want to talk to them."

"On a Saturday afternoon?" John queried.

She shrugged. "It's a fairly full-on course. Only four weeks, and they have to produce an essay. The course finishes next Friday, so most of them will be busy working in the library or in their rooms – particularly the undergraduates. He seemed to get on better with them," she added, reflectively. "Most of the mature students found him irritating. He was quite a drinker – was often late for his lectures and usually hung-over. I think he was considered to be rather immature."

"Are there any field trips today?"

She shook her head. "No. There should have been a trip to the Globe tonight for one of the groups, but it had to be cancelled due to some administrative mix-up by the theatre, and we weren't able to organise anything else at such short notice."

Sherlock released a breath. That would make things easier. "We'll need lists of all the students attending the summer programme and their courses. It doesn't sound as if she conversed with any of her fellow students to any great degree apart from Mark Hodder, but we need to make sure. We also need addresses for each of them. And the list should be e-mailed to DI Donovan at Scotland Yard as quickly as possible. Tell that girl at the desk. My colleague will give her the address if you don't have it."

"That's OK, we have her contact card here." She half-turned towards the reception desk.

"What about the lecturers and other staff?" John queried. "Who else was at the party?"

She hesitated, giving him a cool, unfriendly look. "There were a few of them. They're not obliged to show up – it's purely for the mature students to meet each other, but some like to pop in for a while – to show their faces and so on. I'll get you a list of programme leaders – I can't recall exactly who did and didn't attend, but there aren't that many of them to follow up."
"Oh, another thing." Sherlock forced a casual note into his voice. "It would probably be a good idea if those currently on campus stayed here for the rest of the day."

She hesitated and looked at him. "You think -?"

He met her gaze firmly. "Witness statements. Could you arrange for someone to inform them?"

There was a pause while she processed this information, and then she gave him a brisk nod. She turned towards the young receptionist to issue some instructions and, as she did so, John gave Sherlock a meaningful look and jerked his head towards the library. Sherlock glanced in that direction and saw the shadow flit across the entrance once more.

Dr Rogers turned back to Sherlock. "Rachel will run off the lists for you and e-mail them to the DI too, but is there anything else I can help with now? Only, I do have quite a lot of work to get on with." She gestured towards her office meaningfully.

"Oh, of course," Sherlock responded, quickly. "There are a couple of items relating to the students' required reading that we wanted to check, so we'll just visit the library."

"What?" She started at this, frowning. "Is it absolutely necessary to do that today? It's all very unsettling for the students – and doesn't do much for the reputation of our summer school either."

"Only for a few minutes," Sherlock assured her, with another disarming smile.

Dr Rogers hesitated for a moment, looking as if she'd rather say no. "Well…OK, then, if it really can't be avoided. You're in luck, actually," she added. "One of our senior librarians is on duty today. It's not his usual day, but I believe he had some orders to check for next term. He organises the summer programme reading lists for us, so I'm sure he can help with any queries you have. Ask for Phil Gleeson."

She gave them a tight smile and walked away.

Sherlock, watching her carefully, noted the moment that her shoulders sagged as she turned into her office.

"Does she know, do you think?" John asked in a low voice.

"She doesn't know, but she suspects," Sherlock replied, glancing over at the receptionist, who was occupied in printing out a list of names for them and e-mailing the same item to Sally. "Kimmel might have been an unfortunate coincidence, but Hodder is anything but, and she knows it. Up to now, she'd been hoping that he'd just abandoned the course. She didn't want to consider the alternative – that's why she didn't report him missing, even though she should have done since he would have been on a short-term study visa. That was obvious by her disappointment when she saw us – the receptionist told her that a tall dark-haired smartly-dressed man in his 30s was asking for her and, for a brief moment, she'd hoped that it might be Hodder, back to explain and apologise."

"How do you know what he looked like?"

"Molly," Sherlock replied, succinctly. "She texted me a description of the second victim. Apparently, we are startlingly familiar. So…Emma Rogers thought for a brief moment that I was Mark Hodder. And then," he grimaced, "I rather gave the game away. I queried her use of the past tense in relation to Hodder – and she put two and two together. She's no fool, and now she knows that we at least suspect that Hodder has also been murdered even if we don't know for certain. Anyway, her initial reaction to me just confirms the victim's identity – we now know that Hodder's appearance matches the second victim."
"What about the third victim, if there is one?" John murmured, quietly. "Likely to be another student?"

"Very likely."

"Do you… do you think it's already too late?"

"Possibly. I don't know if I can solve this in time." Sherlock clenched his fists in frustration. "We need to find out where Hodder was staying – and where did they go that night? Back to her hotel or somewhere else? And did anyone else go with them, or see where they went?" He strode over to the door and glanced up at the security camera. "Text Sally to confirm the second victim's identity and ask her about CCTV footage for 26th June – here and at the Travelodge, and at that Knightsbridge address he gave, just in case. Here -," he stalked back, grabbed the printout from the startled receptionist and prodded at the address given for Hodder. "And tell her about the list of potential witnesses that's just been e-mailed to her. They should get a team down here immediately – check out the campus and the accommodation block and try to track down as many students as they can, find out who was friendly with Hodder, if he said anything about Kimmel, and if he mentioned any other friends here. Oh, and if any of them have gone off campus today, we need to try to find out where."

As John phoned Sally, presumably having decided that texting would take too long, Sherlock crossed the foyer again. Slipping in front of the security barrier and looking into the library, he saw a dark figure disappearing around the corner.

Sherlock followed quickly, and found himself in a short, narrow corridor leading towards the main section of the library. A tall young woman was leaning against the wall, watching him.

"You look a bit like him," she commented. "I was hoping…" she broke off and looked away for a moment.

Sherlock hesitated. This was exactly the type of situation where John was likely to achieve a better outcome. Hysterical and emotional young women were not his area. However, she seemed reasonably calm from what he could see of her.

He took a deep breath and willed himself to slow down. "Who were you expecting?" He walked towards her and took up a position that mirrored her own, leaning against the opposite wall.

She looked back at him, clearly considering whether or not to talk. She was dressed from head to toe in black, which must have been sweltering in the current heat wave. Her long straight hair was dyed a severe black and her kohl-rimmed eyes stood out in an artificially pale face. The Goth look was dramatic, but didn't really suit her. In fact, the girl looked over-warm and more than a little uncomfortable in her own skin. She was clearly bright, from a wealthy family, definitely north American, probably Canadian – a rebellious second child who just didn't 'fit' into the family structure. It was a family that was falling apart anyway, although her parents hadn't yet realised she was intelligent enough to know that. She was trying a new look and a new life, but so far it wasn't going very well.

Sherlock looked at her hostile face and saw his own eighteen-year-old self staring back at him. Miserable, unsure and already aware that she was far brighter than the imbeciles that surrounded her…but lacking the maturity to know how to cope with that knowledge.

"Who were you expecting?" he repeated with a restraint that surprised even him, let alone John, who suddenly appeared around the corner and raised his eyebrows.

"He dresses like this – for lectures?"

She snorted. "He hasn't been to many. Just a couple at the beginning. He didn't wear them at first – just jeans and shirts but good quality, you know? Like he came from money but was trying to hide it. And then, after a week, he turned up in a suit – said something about an investment meeting. When I asked, he said he couldn't tell me because it was a big secret – and anyway, I wouldn't understand." She snorted her opinion of that before frowning. "I haven't seen him since."

"When was that?"

She paused for a minute, as if thinking, although it was pitiably obvious to them that she remembered exactly when it was. "I guess… it was two weeks ago today. In the morning, here in the library, just before lunch. He said he had to return some books. I was hoping we might go get some lunch together, but he said he had to leave for his meeting. Is he OK? Have you heard from him?"

Sherlock ignored the questions. "What's your name? Are you on the same course?"

She shook her head. "My name's Ellie Bower and I'm on the British Culture and Society course. But we have lectures at the same time, and in the first week, there was a joint trip to the National Gallery." She smiled a little. "And he's one of the few students here who's also from 'across the pond' as you guys call it. Most of the students here are from Europe or Asia. It's nice to have someone to speak to – even if he is American. The older guys on the course are a bit hard on him. They say he drinks too much, but I've never noticed it. He's nice. I like him."

Sherlock considered her. "Do you have a photo of him?"

The hostility returned to her young face. "What about it?"

John had kept his distance, giving Sherlock the space he needed, but now he stepped closer, giving Ellie a sympathetic smile. "We're hoping to find him, just to make sure he's OK. A picture that we can show possible witnesses would be a help."

She looked at John for a long moment before nodding and pulling out an iPhone. The brand new model was at odds with her deliberately down-at-heel look, but she handled it with familiarity. Clearly a gift from her parents, ostensibly given in celebration of her passing her exams, but really to assuage their guilt at sending her abroad while they finalised their divorce.

She swiped through some photos before stopping at one. "Here." She held it out to Sherlock; he took it and looked at the group photograph as John peered over his shoulder.

It had been taken at a down-at-heel pub late at night, with a disparate group of twenty or so individuals, mostly international undergraduate students, clustered together around a long table. It was clear from their body language that any cultural or language barriers had long since been broken down by alcohol and camaraderie.

Mark Hodder stood out in the photo for several reasons. For a start, he was right at the centre of the group and appeared to draw the focus of the camera. He was significantly older than most of the others. He was also extremely good-looking – tall and slim, with dark hair that curled over his collar. Sherlock reflected that while there was indeed a startling resemblance to himself, just as Molly had said, Hodder was in fact far more conventionally attractive than he was – the American's features were softer and his eyes were a warmer blue. He was sitting in the middle of the table, his arms laid
along the back of the seat on both sides. Ellie sat on his right, tucked in under his arm and leaning confidently into him as she smiled uncertainly at the camera – she looked as if she could hardly believe her luck. There was a scantily-clad young blonde woman on his other side, who looked fairly inebriated – as did most of the group. There were a number of empty bottles on the table – and yet Hodder himself looked quite sober. He clearly had the high alcohol tolerance rate of the habitual drinker.

"Looks like it was quite the night," he commented as he looked at each student. "When and where was this taken?"

Ellie grimaced. "It was a bit lively. I don't like drinking much – don't mind the odd beer but it's not my thing. I don't like getting out of control, if you know what I mean – too much like my father," she muttered to herself before carrying on. "It was early on – the Wednesday of the first week – and we were at the student union bar."

She moved to stand between Sherlock and John and began to point people out, starting with the blonde. "That's Johanna, from Sweden. She's on my course. We're sharing a room." From the look on her face, this was not an ideal situation. "She's probably still in bed; she was out most of last night. Jean next to her - he's not so bad - from Carcassonne, doing International Business. Adrienne and Pui Ling next, both on Creative Writing. Kim, from Sydney, doing Museums and Galleries…"

She continued naming the students and their courses. She had a good memory and was able to match courses to names. She also had a good sense of where each might be today, and she had clearly noted their little idiosyncrasies, such as tendencies for late night parties or early morning jogs, favourite study spots, who secretly fancied who, and so on. He was impressed by her level of observation.

"Who's that?" Sherlock pointed at a dark haired, slender young man, who was leaning against the bar in the background, a little apart from the group. Like Hodder and Ellie, he looked more sober than the rest and was glaring at the back of Hodder's head.

She peered at the man and wrinkled her nose. "Oh, that's Lucio Diomato. He's from…Milan, I think? He's on the Live Theatre course - fancies himself an actor. You know, 'undiscovered talent' and all that. He's a bit of a misery. I don't know why he bothered coming here. He spends most of his time moaning about Britain – the food, the weather, the culture. According to him, it's all rubbish compared to Italy, and the course is a complete waste of his valuable time. It didn't help when they had to cancel a trip to the Globe due to some problem with the tickets. You should have heard him moaning on and on about it. I don't think he likes any of us very much either. He hates Mark for a start."

John tensed and looked at the man with renewed interest. "Does he? Why?"

"Oh, it was nothing really. Only Mark teases him a bit. He teases us all, in a way. Me too. Well, you would, wouldn't you?" she added, self-deprecatingly. "We're so much younger than him. He must get bored of hanging around with us."

Clearly not that bored, Sherlock reflected as he noted the way that Hodder's hand curled around Johanna's shoulder, his fingers slipping intimately beneath the strap of her skimpy dress.

"Has he ever talked to you about someone called Elisabeth?" he asked.

Ellie flushed. "I heard about her. He's never mentioned her, but one of the older guys on my course – well, he was teasing me a bit recently. He described me as Mark's little dog, always following him around and doing everything he says. I'm not," she added, defensively. "He's a nice guy, but he isn't
like that – not with me anyway."

Her voice sounded almost regretful. Sherlock glanced down at her pale profile, which suddenly looked very young. In leaving her alone, Mark Hodder had shown some decency at least, whatever his other faults.

"Anyway, this guy told me about Mark going off with some German woman after a party. He said that the next day, Mark was in a really foul mood – snapped at anyone who mentioned it. And the woman never showed up for her course. Mark doesn't seem bothered about her – not with us, anyway. He always hangs out with us instead of with the mature students. In fact, he tends to ignore them. Says they're boring – only interested in the 'stupid' course."

"So he's not enjoying it?"

She shrugged. "Not really. I was… well, I was enjoying mine actually. It's quite interesting. I like Britain – wouldn't mind living here. It's better than being at home anyway," she added, with a small, private frown. "But Mark – well, I think everyone knows how he feels. He was complaining quite loudly in the library one day. Throwing his books down on the table, saying it was a waste of time when he had far better things to do -.

"Did he say what?" John asked.

She shook her head, a little mournfully. "He's left the course, hasn't he? I thought he might."

Sherlock stared at the photo as John muttered some meaningless platitude that was, presumably, intended to be comforting.

"This man – Lucio. Any idea where he might be found this afternoon?"

She shook her head. "I haven't seen him today. He might still be sulking about the Globe trip – that was supposed to be tonight -.

They were interrupted by a man hurrying out of the library, almost bumping into them.

"Oops, sorry." He smiled at them cheerfully and then hesitated, giving them a more careful look. "You OK? Are you looking for something?"

"Um, yes - we were looking for Phil Gleeson," John offered, quickly.

The man looked startled and then smiled again. "Well, you've just found him. How can I help you?"

Sherlock glanced at him, making a quick deduction. Mid forties. Career librarian and keen bibliophile. Currently single; slightly naïve when it came to relationships. Owned a dog. Had worked at the University for nearly ten years, rising to the post of senior librarian, but was still very much 'hands-on', hence working on a Saturday during the vacation. Well-liked by both colleagues and students for his cheery demeanour, but also kept himself to himself most of the time. He was a fit man but not noticeably sporty, with calluses on his hands – suggesting that he worked outdoors a lot in his spare time, probably in a voluntary capacity. He liked to keep himself busy.

He smiled in an attempt at friendliness that made John shift from foot to foot. "We wanted to ask about the reading list for one of the summer courses. It is…" he hesitated, making a show of checking the prospectus. "…Ah yes. London and its Literature – that's the one."

"Yes? What do you need to know? You're not on the course, are you? I usually recognise most of the students. They usually make their way to the library at some point, even if only to browse the
Internet or catch up with their Facebook friends." He laughed, self-deprecatingly.

Sherlock shook his head. "We're just checking something, on behalf of Scotland Yard. Is there a book of Samuel Johnson's poetry on the reading list?"

Gleeson had stiffened at the mention of the police, and he looked at them with fresh interest. "Ah, I see. So it's about -," he broke off quickly, with a glance at Ellie. "OK, why don't you come through to my office? There's a book of eighteenth century poetry on the list, which includes some of Johnson's works. Is that what you mean?"

"Can we see it?"

Gleeson gave them an obliging grin. "Well, as long as you're quick. I've got tickets for something tonight, so I can't hang around too long - got to meet someone." He flushed a little. Sherlock remembered Dr Rogers' comment about him not being the 'one night stand' type, and mentally added 'sexually inexperienced'.

John followed him. Sherlock turned back to Ellie, quickly texting the photo to his phone and then adding his number as a contact on her phone before handing it back.

"Don't go out anywhere today," he murmured in a low voice. "Go back to your bedroom and tell anyone there to stay in too. And contact me if you need to."

Her eyes widened, but she nodded and hurried away.

As Sherlock entered the library, Phil Gleeson came out of his office, holding a book. "Here you are. I like to keep one reference copy of each book on the reading lists to hand. You'd be surprised how many students use a quote in their essays but then forget to reference it properly."

Sherlock took the book from him and examined it. It was a standard hardback reference book. He checked the index and looked up the Johnson poem. The stanza found in the briefcase left next to Elisabeth Kimmel's body appeared at the bottom of a page. He flipped the page; the other side was blank.

He passed the book to John. "Do the students have their own copies?"

"It depends on the course. For example, there are fifteen students on the London and its Literature course, while there's only five or six on some of the less popular ones. We do try to make sure that there are enough copies for everyone to have one for the entirety of the programme, but sometimes, it's a case of short-term loans." He sighed. "It doesn't help when some of the books get vandalised. I don't understand it – I really don't. Even copies of this book – look."

He led them back into his office, where there were a number of books piled on his cluttered desk. He pulled an identical copy from a teetering pile and flicked to the poem page. The same section had been neatly cut out of this copy.

"I mean, what's the point of that? They could've photocopied it, scanned it…" He shook his head, wearily. "And then they complain that there aren't enough resources. What do they think we have to spend our limited funds on?"

"Who had this book out?"

"It was handed in by one of our PhD students, Priya Himesh, yesterday. She took it out the previous day and noticed the missing section." He sighed. "The trouble is it could have been missing for a long time. It's not as if it's easy to notice when part of a page is cut out. It's a short-term loan, so only
goes out for two days at a time. With so many people on that particular course, so say nothing of other students like Priya who might also be interested…"

"Can you check the loan history?" Sherlock persisted.

Gleeson took the book over to the loans desk and scanned it before turning the screen towards Sherlock and John.

Casting his eyes over the list of names, Sherlock could see that the book was popular. It had been out of the library most of the time over the last month. His eyes ran down the screen quickly, before stopping at one particular name.

John had noticed it too. "Mark Hodder borrowed this?"

"Did he?" Gleeson swivelled the screen back to check. "Yes. That's weird. According to this, he had it out on 10th and 11th July. It's not uncommon for the summer students to borrow books on other topics, of course, but he didn't seem particularly academic, from what I recall. He didn't even borrow the books on his own course. I heard that he left the programme a couple of weeks' ago. Not that I saw much of him."

"You met him at the mature students' welcome party," Sherlock prompted.

"Did I? Probably, but not to talk to," he replied, shortly. "I don't remember seeing him there."

"And yet he made an impression on you?"

The librarian grimaced. "You tend to remember a man who had what can only be described as a hissy fit, tossing books on the table and shouting about how stupid the course was, which is what he did at the end of his first week. Bit childish, I thought. I wouldn't expect an eighteen-year-old to behave that way, let alone a professional man in his thirties." He glanced at his watch, his mind clearly on his date. "Is there anything else I can help you with?"

When they shook their heads, he ushered them out of his office and locked the door. "Library's open until five, feel free to stay longer. Alison's on duty if you have any other questions - or just ask for my number at the desk."

"So now what?" John asked, as he watched the librarian hurry away.

Sherlock frowned. Why had Hodder borrowed that book…? "The students next, I think." He pulled out his phone, opened the new message and stared at the photo. "Particularly these ones. I doubt he had much to do with the others on his own course. In fact, I doubt he ever planned to attend that course. Going along to a couple of lectures and field trips was just a cover – an excuse for being in London -"

He broke off and focused on the lean, dark figure by the bar. "We need to track down that Italian boy that Ellie mentioned – Lucio Diomato. Check at the desk – find out where they're all staying."

John hurried off, recognising the urgency of Sherlock's manner.

Sherlock frowned down at the photograph, noting the sullen expression on the young Italian's face, and wondering what he was missing.
Sherlock had to hand it to Sally. Whatever her faults might be – and in his view, there were many - a lack of efficiency wasn't one of them. She had clearly mobilised all the resources immediately available to her. By the time he and John arrived at the small green in front of the accommodation block housing the summer students, there were several patrol cars parked nearby. Uniformed officers had divided the bemused students into small groups to take standard witness statements. Each was being shown a photocopy of Elisabeth Kimmel and asked if he or she had encountered the German woman or had heard Mark Hodder or anyone else talking about her.

"Is that a good idea?" John wondered. "I mean, at the moment, they don't know about Hodder's death – or Kimmel's for that matter. Do we want them to be that clued in? What if it tips the murderer off?"

"They still won't know about Hodder's death, if Sally does her job right," Sherlock replied, his eyes skimming the scene. "She's not going to bring his death into it, especially without absolute confirmation that it is him. And where Kimmel is concerned, they're all going to know about it soon, if they don't already. Even if Rogers and her staff haven't let anything slip, there was a paragraph in Badische Zeitung today – local Freiburg paper." He waved his phone in John's direction, by way of explanation. "I did a quick scan of the press on the way here. So far, they're treating it as 'the unexplained but tragic death of local hospital administrator while studying in London'."

John grunted. "Won't be long before a reporter starts sniffing around for possible scandal, and then it'll be in the national press of both countries. It's only a matter of time. I'm amazed the Met have managed to keep the full story quiet so far."

Sherlock hummed his agreement, looking at the lines of apprehensive students waiting to be interviewed before focusing his attention on the smaller group of those who had already gone through the process. They'd clearly been told to wait around in case any of their statements needed verifying. They were wide-eyed with excitement and perhaps some mild shock, but it was clear that none were particularly affected by the news that one of their fellow students had been found dead and that another student might be involved. It wasn't as if any of them had known her. There was much excited chatter and speculation going on.

Sherlock spotted Ellie among this latter group. She was standing quietly near the blonde girl Johanna, looking rather miserable. The fact that Mark Hodder's name was being linked to that of a murdered woman had obviously come as a shock. She glanced towards Sherlock and John but gave no indication that she had already met them, and he felt a rush of admiration for this intelligent young woman, who obviously had an instinct that it would not be wise to draw attention to herself. After all, there was every possibility that the murderer might yet be found among their number... although his instincts shouted that this was unlikely. He continued gazing at each student, doing his usual lightning-quick deductions. So far, so predictable in their appearances, personalities and backgrounds. No killer here, from what he could deduce.

John muttered under his breath, counting the numbers present. "There's seventy-four here, and Rogers said there should be eighty-nine altogether. Who's missing?"

"The mature students that are staying off campus. And others probably went out – after all, it's their last full weekend in London before the end of the course, and that's probably more appealing than sweating over an essay, whatever Dr Rogers may think. Sally will be chasing them, I imagine." Sherlock scanned the area with a sudden frown. "Wonder where she is now?"
Almost as if she had heard her name, the woman in question appeared from the line of parked police
cars, accompanying someone that Sherlock would much rather not have seen.

"Oops," John said quietly. "This could be interesting."

Greg Lestrade was striding across the lawn towards them, with the air of a man who was very much
at the end of his tether and distinctly not inclined to take any prisoners. He was moving swiftly with
an energy that belied his years and general health; the much younger Sally was struggling to keep up.
As she half-ran, half-walked, she was waving her hands animatedly and trying to explain something.
He ignored her, his eyes focused on the consulting detective alone.

Sherlock eyed the DI warily. Yesterday evening, at the dock, he'd seemed as if he might be more
conciliatory, but that was before Sherlock had shanghaied Sally's case. He wondered whether she'd
been honest enough to tell Greg that she'd invited his help.

Lestrade halted suddenly a couple of feet in front of them, his chest rising and falling rapidly with the
effort. His eyes, very dark in his unusually pale face, drilled into Sherlock.

"You'd better have a bloody good reason for being here," he informed them in a quiet but dangerous
tone. It was the tone he adopted when he hadn't had enough sleep – and his red rimmed eyes and
pouchy cheeks seemed to bear out the observation. He seemed to have lost even more weight since
Sherlock had last had a good look at him – and he looked years older than his actual age. Sherlock
dropped his eyes to Greg's trembling hands, and the DI thrust them behind his back and glared at
him, as if daring him to make a comment.

"I asked Sherlock for help with the Kimmel case," Sally said quickly, throwing them a frustrated
look.

His head spun to look at her. "You? You went against my orders? What the bloody hell…I can't
believe it! You - of all people? You hate him! What the hell gives? How come I only found out he
was involved when you ordered half the fucking uniforms in the department to drop everything and
come here? The most junior DI in the office and you think you've got the right - ."

He jabbed a finger at her and she flinched away from his visible anger. For just the briefest of
moments, Sherlock presumed that she would back down and he would be summarily removed from
the scene. Not that he had the slightest intention of letting that happen, but his heart sank at the
through of wasting precious time and energy on such a pointless and ridiculous battle.

However, he'd reckoned without the full force of DI Sally Donovan's anger. In response to her
fellow DI – and whatever else he might be to her at this moment in time - Sally's spine stiffened with
indignation. He saw the spark of familiar hot anger in her eyes and breathed a silent sigh of relief.

"I invited Sherlock to consult on my case," she informed Greg, furiously. "On his recommendation, I
have instructed the officers to interview potential witnesses to the interaction between Elisabeth
Kimmel and one of the last people that we know for certain to have seen her before her death - apart
from the hotel staff, who appear to have seen nothing. I'm not interfering in your case – and neither
are they," she added, nodding towards Sherlock and John.

Greg scowled at his colleague. "That is just so much bollocks, and you know it."

She put her hands on her hips and gave him a defiant look. "I'll do whatever I need to do to solve my
case. It overlaps yours, but that's not my problem. We can combine forces and work together on this,
or you can carry out your own investigation, but I will not stand down this one. And, by the way,
you can't bloody well tell me what to do. I'm not your DS anymore – we have equal rank."
And she proceeded to out-glare her former boss to a degree that even Sherlock was impressed. It wouldn't be true to say that he didn't think Sally had it in her, it was just that he hadn't expected the infamous Sally Donovan 'look' to ever be employed in support of him. Usually, he was the receiving end. Judging by John's hastily muffled snort, the same irony had occurred to him.

After an extremely tense sixty seconds (Sherlock counted every one of them), Greg subsided very slightly, although his capitulation would not be detected by any of the curious uniforms standing nearby watching their superiors argue. He stepped a little closer to Sally, speaking very low.

"I am not taking the flak for this. You got me? Not this time. No bloody way."

"You won't need to," she answered, quickly. "Come on, Greg, you know the freak must be right. He always was."

He glanced at Sherlock briefly before nodding. "Yeah, I know… Just never expected you to agree."

She smirked. "Well, maybe I've grown up a bit." She looked directly at Sherlock and sobered a little. "Learned a bit more, at least."

Sherlock saw reflected in her eyes the apology that she could never bring herself to make verbally. He gave her a terse nod of acknowledgement and focused his gaze on Lestrade again.

There was defeat written in every line of the DI's weary, battered body. He barked out a humourless laugh and scrubbed his eyes with his knuckle.

"You've won again, haven't you." It wasn't a question and he didn't look at Sherlock, but they all knew who he was addressing.

Sherlock opened his mouth to point out that it was hardly a case of winning - but John suddenly lurched towards him and trod heavily on his foot, making him wince. The doctor removed his heavy boot, muttering an insincere apology, and Sherlock pressed his lips together firmly.

Greg didn't react to John's movement. He focused on Sally, his face deeply troubled. "I can't take another fall for him, Sally. I just can't. They've already got their knives out for me. If they know Sherlock is helping us out again, it'll be the end. You know that."

"If there's any trouble…" she paused. "I could always say it was my fault."

He sighed, his eyes warmer as he looked at her. "Not gonna happen, Sally. I can't let you do that - you've got your career ahead of you. And anyway -" he shrugged. "- it's me they want to get rid of."

He glanced at Sherlock. "Even your brother can't prop up my flagging career forever."

Sally stepped a little closer, reaching for Greg's hand and giving it a little squeeze with her fingers. Sherlock looked away, made uneasy by this show of affection from tough, hard-nosed Donovan of all people. He glanced at John and noticed that the doctor had dipped his head a little, as if out of respect for a private moment, but his eyes were still fixed with a keen curiosity on the couple in front of them – if indeed couple they still were. Their current behaviour would seem to suggest it was the case.

Fortunately for his state of mind, the two of them managed to retain some professionalism in public. Following this brief and discreet clasp of hands at an angle that would not be easily noticed by their juniors, the two DIs moved apart, all business once more.

"Well…” Lestrade shrugged. "What the fuck. Might as well go out with a bang, I guess."
He turned towards Sherlock with an abrupt movement and seemed about to speak, but then stopped and stared at his former associate. Strangely, there was no hostility or accusation in his expression; merely a rabid, almost desperate, curiosity – as if he sought answers that he could not find elsewhere. And still he did not speak.

Sherlock bore the stare stoically, sensing in some way that this was his due. As Greg's eyes ran over him slowly, he wondered whether this was how it felt to be on the receiving end of one of his eagle-eyed deductions – this feeling of being observed to the bare bones in a manner that was almost more intrusive than the searching, unfriendly hands of an arresting officer.

After a few moments, Greg's expression altered in a subtle, indefinable way.

"From now on, you don't keep anything hidden," he told Sherlock in a quiet, even voice. "You don't keep your deductions to yourself or go running off somewhere without telling us where or why. You don't insult my officers – and that includes Anderson, I don't care how much of an annoying little shit he is, you keep your feelings to yourself. You don't intimidate witnesses; you don't break into my office or hack into my computer; you don't steal evidence or charm Molly into helping you out without my say-so. While you're on police business, you'll do exactly what I – we – say. Clear?"

As crystal, was on the tip of Sherlock's tongue, but he managed to bite back the sarcasm, sensing that this was not a good time to test Greg's brittle sense of humour. "Yes."

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw John visibly relaxing. Sally let out a long breath. "Right." Greg looked a little embarrassed for a moment by his outburst, but clapped his hands together and gave the three of them a business-like look. "Get me up to speed."

For some reason that he could not comprehend, Sherlock hesitated and glanced at John, as if seeking approval. The doctor gave him an odd look, but nodded at him to continue.

Sherlock took a deep breath. "These are the facts so far. We know that the second victim is Mark Hodder, a fact that will be confirmed by DNA when his genuine place of residence in London has been tracked down – unless you decide to speed things up now by bringing the family in?" He raised an inquiring eyebrow, and sighed when Greg shook his head. "It would save time, but if you're determined to wait until you find some evidence that it's really him... Anyway, we know that Hodder and Elisabeth Kimmel were killed by the same individual, execution style, exactly two weeks apart. Having done so, the assassin kept the bodies in a semi-rural location, quite likely in the vicinity of Hampstead Heath, going by external detritus found on Kimmel's body, which may have been deliberate – the killer may be trying to implicate someone working there. He or she – most likely he – used industrial-grade pesticide to counter the odour. The killer then released the bodies in locations significant to him, and left clues in the form of documents relating to their study programmes." Sherlock frowned. "The second clue – the one left with Hodder – is more significant, but I'm not yet sure why."

Greg nodded. "You told Sally that you believe that someone will be killed today. Is that because it's exactly two weeks since Hodder's murder – assuming that you are right about the date of his death?"

"That's correct."

"But how can you be sure there'll be a third one? We know Hodder and Kimmel were connected - ." "But that's not why they were killed," Sherlock interrupted. "There's another reason."

Sally frowned. "Are you saying it's a coincidence that they had a one night stand?"
"No, no – not a coincidence. One of them was killed because of their liaison, but that's not the reason both were killed in the first place. No, wait - ," he said quickly, as John opened his mouth. "Hear me out. Kimmel was killed first and we initially assumed that the motive for her murder related to her slightly chaotic lifestyle – the estranged husband in Germany, perhaps, or someone she had offended here. But Kimmel wasn't the reason for her own death – it was Hodder. Kimmel's death was a warning to him. The killer saw them together and assumed that she was more involved with him that she really was. The irony is that Hodder missed the warning. Because they had no further connection after that night, he had no idea that she'd been killed. Even if he had, he probably wouldn't have associated her murder with his own activities."

"Which were?"

Sherlock frowned. "Unknown. But he wasn't here to take a course. Or, possibly, he had planned to, maybe he was thinking of making a fresh start or escaping from his problems, but he very quickly changed his mind."

"So…you think he had some problems back in the States?" Greg asked.

"I think that if you looked into his background, you'd find that he's not a very successful architect." Sherlock shrugged. "He'll have money problems; possibly he’s in debt. He's an alcoholic, with some expensive habits – luxury powerboats for a start. And he was keeping things from his family – pretending to stay with some family friends in London who had no idea that he was currently in the country. My speculation is that he thought he'd found a way of solving his financial problems – and that's your motive right there."

"Blackmail?"

"Very likely."

"According to Ellie, one of the mature students noticed Hodder behaving oddly after spending the night with Kimmel," John commented.

"There was a simple reason for that. Hodder had been drinking heavily that night. Like most habitually heavy drinkers, his lifestyle was starting to affect his sexual stamina. I suspect the main reason for his behaviour after the event was simply that his performance, so to speak, was not up to her high standards. He may have simply passed out before anything happened. Whatever transpired that night, she was clearly unimpressed and told him so before leaving, either that night or in the morning. His pride would have been dented – and he certainly wouldn’t have wanted to discuss her with anyone else or investigate why she hadn't turned up for her course. He was probably relieved that she hadn't. If she had, she might have humiliated him by making reference to it."

"So Kimmel was murdered simply because she'd made the mistake of picking Hodder up that night," John mused, his lips in a thin line. "Christ."

"But in that case, if Hodder was the target, then that must be it - surely? Why do you expect a third victim?" Greg asked.

Sherlock shook his head, slowly. "It's not quite that simple. This man is not a professional hired killer, but he's not entirely amateur either. He's been trained to kill at some point in his past. I don't think he ever intended to use his skills in this manner, but something triggered him off. Having killed twice, relatively easily, it's in danger of becoming a habit for him. Also we don't yet know why he killed Hodder. It may be that someone else is perceived to be a viable target due to his or her connection with Hodder… or at least that's what he's telling himself. Look at the pattern. This man strikes at a specific time – every other Saturday. It's his 'danger' time now. It would have started out
being, quite literally, the only time during the fortnight that he was free to kill...and now it's the only
time that he can kill. During other times of the week, he's not violent at all, in fact, he probably
wouldn't even contemplate doing such a thing. That's why I believe that he will seek out a victim
today – likely tonight."

"There's one thing I don't get," Sally began, and paused for a moment, as if waiting for the inevitable
caucustic rejoinder about her level of intelligence. When it didn't come, she blinked and went on: "You
keep saying the killer is one individual and that it's a 'he', but how do you know for sure?"

"Several reasons." Sherlock began to count them off on his fingers. "Two execution-style murders
that required considerable upper body strength. A woman might have the strength and speed, but
they would have been considerable, so it's statistically unlikely. The victims had very little time to
resist, and that's a mark of military training – he was probably a Territorial recruit at some point. And
then there's the disposal of the bodies."

"What about them?"

"Look at how – and where – they were left. One in a bookshop, one in an art gallery. What do those
businesses have in common? Both sell stock, which could quite feasibly be delivered in heavy crates.
How else would the killer leave the bodies without being seen?

"In the case of the bookshop, he delivered the body late in the evening, after the proprietor had
locked up and gone home. He was familiar enough with the shop and its owner's habits to know
when it would be safe to arrive. But it's in a residential area – he couldn't guarantee that no one
would notice, even if he arrived in the middle of the night. And there were no signs of forced entry.
So, the killer turned up in a delivery van. He was dressed as a delivery man and he had a key – he
had stolen it on an earlier visit, having befriended the owner, who is an elderly man and forgetful, so
probably gets extra keys cut from time to time without thinking about it. The killer unlocked the
door, opened his van and wheeled in a large crate of – presumably – books. Anyone watching would
have simply assumed that he was working for the owner.

"Secondly, the art gallery. Even easier – it was closed for refurbishment. He turned up when the
decorators were just packing up, so the premises were open and largely unguarded, being currently
empty of any art. Again, just an unremarkable, friendly delivery man, wheeling in a large crate,
presumably containing some art work. The workmen would have had no reason to challenge him,
and anyone else would have assumed he was working with them. A female delivery driver would
have been memorable – the men might have offered to help her with the delivery or attempt to chat
her up. So, it was definitely a man."

"And working alone?" asked Greg.

"Definitely. This is a lone killer, and a lonely individual. He leads a quiet life in theory, but he feels
things passionately, and he has no conventional outlet for those strong emotions. No close
relationships, no one to talk to, no one who 'understands' him. In carrying out these killings, he's
reverting to a 'heroic' version of himself. He thinks he's doing something good – moral, even."Sherlock frowned. "He...I can't quite make him out. He's not a professional, he's not been paid to
carry out an execution... and yet, that's exactly what these are. Professional executions. I think... I
think he's been asked to do them – no, not actually asked... and yet he's carrying them out on behalf
of someone else; someone who probably has no idea what he's done. Another thing - he's a literary
man, as evidenced by the clues he has left."

"Yes – what about those clues? Why leave them?"

"It's a message – a justification. Not necessarily aimed at the police, although you were the ones most
likely to find them. 'Clue' is probably not the right word; he doesn't intend for the documents to lead you to him. Rather, it's a way of justifying his actions to the world at large. In the case of Kimmel, the justification lays in the lines from the Johnson poem, studied as part of her course, probably a reference to her character as seen by the killer. For Hodder, it's the painting… That's more significant – it symbolises the perceived crime for which the victim was actually murdered, as opposed to a mere indictment of character."

Greg looked at Sally. "Do you have that evidence here – the painting, I mean? On the grounds that he appears to know all about it, I assume you took an unauthorised copy to show him?"

She had the grace to blush a little before turning away to issue some instructions to a uniformed officer, who hurried over to her car.

Greg glanced at the group of students, milling around uncertainly. "What about that lot? Can we get rid of them now? I take it there's no potential murderer there?"

Sherlock looked them over one more time before shaking his head. "I don't need to speak to any of them at the moment, unless any confesses to having known or spoken to Kimmel. There's a specific group that seems to have been closer to Hodder, but I suspect that I've already spoken to the most observant of them." His eyes flickered over Ellie Bower's tense figure for a moment. "They should stay in, though – no trips out, escorted or unescorted. That goes for all of them, but particularly for this group." Taking out his phone, he scrolled to the group photograph and passed it to Greg, who studied it and nodded his head. The DI texted it to his own phone, passed Sherlock's phone back and then turned away to talk to some of his officers.

Sally's officer returned with her briefcase. She rifled around in it and pulled out the photocopy of the picture.

Sherlock took it from her. "The Thames Below Westminster…" He pulled out his phone again and quickly Googled the title, getting up a copy of the full painting. "Denoting…what?"

"Why don't you ask John?" Sally asked, giving the doctor a sly look, just as Greg returned. "Never pegged him for an art critic."

John flushed a little, snatching the copy from Sherlock's hand. "Never said I was one. Nothing wrong with visiting a few galleries, is there?"

She smirked. "Must be nice to keep at least some secrets from the freak though, eh? Should've seen his face when he realised you knew what that picture was."

Greg glanced first at his smug-looking girlfriend and then at the two men, who both looked rather annoyed. "What have I missed?"

"Very little of consequence," Sherlock muttered. He glanced at John and handed over his phone with the full painting on the screen. "Ideas, John? Anything? What do you see?"

The doctor peered at the picture, comparing it with the version on Sherlock's phone. "Well…first of all, it's only part of the painting. The bottom right hand side of it, so you can only see the bottom of the Houses of Parliament and the jetty over the river in the foreground with two men on it. So you can't see Big Ben or the bridge or the steamboats in the middle of the river. So, nothing to do with politics or boats, I guess?" He shrugged. "I don't know where that gets us, though?"

Sherlock peered over his shoulder and prodded the photocopy. "Who are those men on the jetty?"

John gave him an incredulous look. "How the hell should I know? Can't imagine they're supposed to
be anyone in particular. Just a couple of river traders probably?"

"Aha! Traders." Sherlock nodded, emphatically. "There was a reason why the entire picture wasn't included. They're the focus of the fragment."

"Meaning what?" Greg's shoulders were slumped in defeat. "That Hodder was trading information or offering to keep his mouth shut for money? That doesn't exactly narrow things down much, does it? I mean, we still have no idea where he was staying, who he was associating with, who he might have been blackmailing. Could be half the criminal element of London wanted him dead, for all we know. How do you know he didn't have fingers in several pies?"

He snapped his fingers, turning to a hovering DS. "We need a background analysis on his financial dealings - both personal and related to his business, and we need to know what recent contacts he had with British organisations and individuals, particularly anyone based in London. Get onto Interpol. And contact the Chicago PD – we're not sitting on this any longer. Tell them to let the family know he's missing and we've found a body, and ask them if there's anyone over here that can ID the body. We need London addresses to follow up, as soon as possible. Someone must know where he was staying."

Sherlock watched as the officer hurried off, already on her phone. "It's possible, although not probable, that he confided in someone from that small group of students that he was friendly with." A vague visual memory was nagging at his subconscious – the expression on someone's face… but he couldn't get clarity. It was just that – a faint image and no more.

He looked at John, who was still frowning intently at the picture. "What is it?"

"Hmm?" John looked up at him, his eyes vague for a moment before his expression cleared. "Oh, nothing. It's just that I keep thinking that there's something significant that I'm missing."

You and me both. Sherlock moved from foot to foot restlessly, looking at the straggle of students slowly making their way back into the building. He noticed that some of Lestrade's officers had separated out the students from the photograph and were talking to them.

He ran his eyes quickly over the group, sensing that someone was missing but not immediately able to place exactly who. As he did so, Ellie's face turned towards him suddenly, and she began to type something on her phone. There was an air of frantic urgency about her that attracted his attention.

He reached his hand out towards John without looking. "I need my phone - ."

"Oh, sure." John tossed him the phone and went on, seemingly oblivious to Sherlock's distraction. "It's a funny thing about art. I mean, it's not just about what the picture actually shows. That's one perspective. But I guess the other perspective relates to where exactly the picture is painted from. If you think about it, Monet painted a picture of Westminster, but actually that part of the image is quite misty and faint. The most focused part of the painting is the foreground – and that's not Westminster at all. If anything, it's the Embankment or even Charing Cross…"

Sherlock stopped dead and stared at his friend. It couldn't be that simple… could it?

"John…that's probably the most important comment you've made all day. In fact, I would go so far as to say that you are – without a doubt – absolutely brilliant."

"What?" John looked at him in confusion. "What did I say?"

As Sherlock opened his mouth to answer, his phone beeped, signalling a new text message. Glancing down, he saw Ellie's name on the screen and opened her message. It was terse and to the
Lucio Diomato not on campus. Not seen for hours.

Sherlock stared at the message for a moment. He closed it, navigated back to the photograph and stared at the young Italian leaning against the bar, glaring at the back of Hodder's head. When he had looked at the photograph before, he had simply thought that the young man disliked the arrogant older American who had been teasing him by Ellie's account, but he had been wrong. The expression on Lucio Diomato's face was one of pure, murderous hatred – of utter repulsion.

"Sherlock? You got something?"

He looked up. Greg was frowning at him.

"Yes…” He looked back at that twisted expression. "Yes, I think I have."
Doubt

Sherlock stared at the photograph on his mobile, contemplating the ugly expression on the face of the young Italian student, Lucio Diomato. As he worked through the facts in his mind, he was acutely conscious of John and the two DIs standing nearby, waiting for more information with varying levels of patience.

It was no surprise to him that Sally was bristling with ill-concealed impatience. Meanwhile the usually unflappable John bounced nervously on his heels, as if tensing his muscles for action. It was a surprise that the only outwardly calm member of the trio was Greg, who observed him with steady eyes. It was as if, having made a decision to involve Sherlock, he had fallen instinctively into his old role of providing a solid buffer between the brilliant detective and his many detractors.

As Sherlock glanced up at him, he wondered whether Greg would live to regret his decision. Even if he and Sally were prepared to cover up Sherlock's involvement in this case, there were at least thirty Met officers dotted around the campus to provide witness to the lie. He wondered, uneasily, whether Greg's calmness was merely resignation to the inevitable end of his career… and then he wondered precisely why he felt so uneasy. He'd hardly bothered to concern himself with Greg's career in the past. It was only the cases that had mattered.

Before the Fall, doubt had been an unfamiliar emotion for Sherlock, in terms of his own actions. Doubt in others – yes, he had experienced that from time to time, not least for the briefest of moments in John at the swimming pool. But doubt that he was doing the right thing? Never.

Even on the rare occasions that his deductions had failed him – Irene Adler sprung to mind – he still hadn't doubted the essential rightness of the decisions he had taken at the time. It had never occurred to him to consider whether or not he should get involved in cases; once a mystery had ignited his interest, he was a man obsessed. Every decision, every deduction, every action – they all had one objective: to solve the crime. Doubt would have been pointless in that respect.

He had never doubted the need to involve others in his cases, nor the necessity of keeping them in the dark from time to time. It was true that the need for secrecy might lead to increased danger for his colleagues, but John and Greg could take their chances. A better man than Sherlock might have considered other options in certain circumstances – the events at Baskerville were a good example – but he had never seriously doubted John's ability to look after himself, as he had proved many times. When it became apparent that Moriarty's network needed to be dismantled under cover, Sherlock had been equally convinced that John should not be involved, and had not doubted that decision for a single moment. And while he was away, even when he missed his friend quite acutely and had been tempted to contact him, he'd always known that he'd taken the right decision on that roof. A sniper did not leave room for doubts.

Why, then, was he experiencing doubt now? Why, when the outcome he had been seeking for months had finally been achieved? He was finally back where he needed to be; solving crimes, working alongside Greg instead of having to fight him. And, better still, John seemed keen to carry on as before, almost as if Sherlock had never been away.

Why did that worry him so much?

As Sherlock wriggled on the cold concrete floor, working out how to loosen his bindings, he reflected that there had been more than a few occasions on which he had missed John's presence during the past eighteen months.
The ex-soldier would have been extremely useful in more than one fight, the doctor could have played a vital role following that random gunshot wound that had laid Sherlock low for so long, and it would have been helpful to have had a lookout from time to time.

In particular, he might have avoided this situation, he thought rather grimly, as he worked a hand loose. Not that he wouldn’t be able to escape his amateurish guards without much effort, but it was yet another waste of his valuable time. It had been difficult for him to keep track of the guard’s movements while simultaneously hacking into the computer’s mainframe. He had been too focused on downloading the undetectable software that would enable him to access the oil company chief executive's correspondence, and find the proof that he had hired Moriarty to assassinate the politician who had threatened to expose their illegal Siberian drilling operations.

His only consolation was that he'd just managed to finished the download before being discovered and, with any luck, the programme would work. As far as the guards were concerned, he was just a petty thief. After throwing a few random punches, they'd tied him up and locked him in this largely empty sub-basement. He could assume that they hadn’t left him to go and contact the local police force – another good reason not to hang around.

He wrenched his hands free and pulled the filthy rag from his mouth, spitting with disgust as he started on the ropes around his ankles. The harsh reality was that the entire project was taking far longer than it should; already it was looking likely that his work would carry on into a third year. It was better to be working alone; there was no doubt of that. After all someone else would have slowed him down; all that wasted time spent trying to explain his reasoning to a pedestrian mind… and yet…

He freed his feet and sprang up, quickly scanning his surroundings. These men really were amateurs. The broken skylight was easily reached by piling up some of the empty crates, and he could tell from the direction of the sunlight that he would emerge on the opposite side of the building to the main entrance and would be able to scale the fence leading directly into the forest.

And then? He reflected, rather sourly, as he pulled the crates over, that it really would have been quicker if John had been working with him.

But then, if he had…it might have John who took the knife wound. John who took the bullet. John who ended up being beaten and tied up, having to escape. And all for Sherlock.

As he looked at Greg, Sherlock felt a very strong sense of his own power - and its potential for destruction. The Met waited on his decision. John stood by, waiting to act on his friend’s recommendations. And any decision he made now might affect them – possibly adversely. If not today, if not on this case, there was always tomorrow. The knife slash, the random shot. The risk was there; it always had been, but he had never acknowledged it in any significant way.

He felt an alien shiver going down his spine, as unwelcome as a trickle of cold water. For three years, he had been at significant risk of death or injury almost every day, but the risk had been for him alone. Before the Fall, had he really been so inured to the dangers of his actions to those around him?

As he saw Sherlock's eyes on him, Greg’s face twisted into a half-smile; one corner of his mouth curving up, just a fraction. He murmured a quiet "Focus."

Sherlock flushed slightly and turned his attention back at his phone, trying to ignore the way John's head snapped between him and Lestrade in genuine confusion.
It was possible that his distraction was at least partly down to the fact that he knew – with some kind of jaded instinct – that he was, quite probably, already too late to save this boy's life.

His gaze took in Lucio's hairstyle, clothes and posture as he replayed Ellie's description in his mind. No impoverished actor, this one. The son of a wealthy Milano businessman and his aristocratic wife – the second, no, third son, sent away to an exclusive private school. The older brothers went into their father's business, but Lucio was his mother's favourite, perceived to be 'special', and she had encouraged him to go into acting. She had expected him to be an instant success, but the sullen curve of his mouth suggested that her wishes had not come true. At the age of nineteen, he was already disillusioned by life. His attendance on the course suggested that he was directionless and bored – perhaps dangerously so.

Ellie had said he was sulking because the trip to the Globe had been cancelled. Why – when he could almost certainly afford to visit the theatre every night if he wanted to? And why was someone as rich as Lucio living on campus in the first place? He peered more closely at the Italian designer shirt and saw the tell-tale signs of fraying at the blue silk collar – the result of one-too-many washes in a cheap laundrette. At some point during the last six months, the boy had had a severe falling-out with his father, probably over his flagging career, and had been cast out of the family home, much to his mother's distress. Since then, he'd lived off his remaining allowance and whatever she'd been able to give him, but that money had dwindled to almost nothing. There were lines around that sulky mouth and dark circles under the eyes. Lucio Diomato was a worried young man, but had too much pride to discuss his problems with anyone. Unless… had Mark Hodder charmed the truth out of him and then used it as a weapon? Was that why he disliked Hodder, for being 'teased', as Ellie had put it?

But, pride notwithstanding, the degree of loathing on his face as he looked at Mark Hodder in the photograph suggested something more. It suggested that Diomato was beholden to Hodder. The American had offered him a little job in return for easy money - and the young Italian despised him for it while being too desperate not to agree.

Lucio quite clearly hated Britain or, more specifically, the circumstances he now found himself in - almost certainly it was his mother who had paid for this course and he'd been unable to refuse her. It would have been extremely tempting for him to accept the chance of good money, even if he felt debased by his need to do so and consequently resentful of the man who had pushed him into it. In fact, he would probably embrace almost any opportunity he had to pretend that he was still the rich young man that he used to be, and would probably accept any offer –.

But of course… That was it…

He turned quickly towards John. "What were you were saying earlier about the painting? You implied that the real focus in it was not on Westminster itself but on the Embankment, the location in which Monet stood when he painted it. Would you be able to specify exactly where?"

John looked bewildered. "I'm not sure I can be that specific. I know he painted some of his works on the Thames from his bedroom at the Savoy hotel – but that was much later on, in the 1900s." He lifted the scrap of paper containing part of *The Thames Below Westminster* and peered at it with a frown. "He painted this one around 1871. I would say… he's on the Victoria Embankment. Near Hungerford Bridge, I would guess."

Sherlock typed rapidly on his phone. "At the south end of Northumberland Avenue?"

"Yeah, probably – Sherlock, why - ?"

Sherlock swiped through the results on the news page. "I know I saw something… Aha! Got you!"
He stabbed on a link and read the news story quickly. It had been nearly a month ago – a robbery that had taken place at an art gallery in Northumberland Avenue. He remembered reading about the incident in the papers one morning and thinking in a vague way that the story didn't ring quite true before putting it to the back of his mind.

He waved his phone at Greg. "I take it Eddie Carter's been released since I returned?"

The DI blinked at this apparent non-sequitur. "Um – yes, I believe so. Out on good behaviour. Why?"

"Has he been interviewed about the art robbery yet?" Sherlock rolled his eyes as Sally and Greg looked at each other. "Oh, come on. An accomplished gang breaks in to an art dealer's shop just to crack open the safe? Hardly. It was quite obviously an organised crime, look at the way the door was opened without setting the alarm off – they knew exactly what they were doing. Tell me why this news report doesn't mention the fact that some very expensive paintings were also taken?" He answered his own question. "Because, of course, it wasn't apparent that anything was taken. And why not?" He smirked. "Our old friend Eddie Carter has been up to his old tricks again."

"Eddie Carter – who's he?"

Sherlock answered John's question. "Best art forger in this country – and a few others too. Recently discharged from prison, where he was serving a five year stretch for fraud. His work is brilliant…just a shame that it's not original. Who's he been copying this time?" He nodded towards the DIs. "They know that some paintings were replaced by some very clever forgeries when this shop was burgled on 28th June, but no doubt the dealers want to keep that quiet. Can't have everyone panicking that they may have invested their money in a fake painting. Well? I'm right, aren't I?"

Sally nodded, reluctantly. "He was clean when we took a look, though."

"Of course he was," Sherlock went on, impatiently. "He's not entirely stupid – he would have known you'd come calling. He did the paintings somewhere else. And there's no sign of the missing paintings, is there? They've already left the country."

"How do you know that?"

Sherlock smirked again. "Obvious. Mark Hodder was involved in that robbery. That's what his killer was trying to tell us – the clue was the location of the painter, not the painting itself. And, of course, it was a section of a painting, hence an art-related crime that Hodder was being 'punished' for."

"The stolen paintings left the country by private speedboat. That's where Hodder came in – or not precisely Hodder, actually. He had a plan, but he couldn't come up with the money required. However, he had a stroke of luck."

He navigated back to the photograph on his phone and waved it at them. "He met Lucio Diomato. Rich and disenchanted adolescent, cut off by his father, desperate for some ready cash and, crucially, with access to exactly what Hodder was looking for. I suspect you'll find that the Diomato family has a power boat that was moored here in London at some point over the last couple of months – and if you investigate further, you'll find that it left the UK sometime during the weekend of the 29th to 30th June."

"But the course didn't start until the 1st July," John objected. "How could he have known Lucio before then? We know they met on the course."

"No, we don't. We know he met Ellie on the course. As far as she knew, he hadn't met any of the
others before that first day. But remember he was there the previous week, at the mature students' drinks party, where he met Elisabeth Kimmel. He met someone else at that party."

"Lucio? But he wasn't a mature student."

"No, but I imagine he had arrived early, and Emma Rogers invited him along to the party. It wouldn't have hurt her to play nice. I expect his mother had made a big donation to the university to smooth her son's way; she was probably hoping he'd stay on in London after the summer school and get a place on a degree course. Anyway, he went to that party and met Mark Hodder.

"Hodder was having a difficult time. He'd come to Britain on a study visa, arriving a couple of weeks previously. He may have had a genuine intention to get something out of the course, at first. Possibly he hoped to settle in Britain, escaping the financial problems he had back home. He wouldn't want his family to know that at this stage, so he deliberately avoided visiting family friends."

Sherlock clicked his fingers as an idea occurred to him. "You should check his university background – find out if any of his friends moved to London. It may be a former colleague, but it's more likely to be a student friend – someone who wouldn't judge him. He would have stayed with that person. Look for any Americans currently living in London who have previously been suspected of involvement in art crime.

"It wouldn't have been hard to convince Hodder to get involved. He's no thief, but he does know a bit about art. He'd know what's 'hot', what's selling well this year. His main job would have been to get the art out of the country and store it somewhere until the trail went cold. He had a contact living in mainland Europe who would receive the pictures – and I think you'll find that, by pure chance, that person is based in Italy, or they are at the moment at least.

"Hodder also had an interest in powerboats. He knew the Sunseeker rally was going on in London, and it occurred to him that it would be a useful way of getting the pictures out of Britain. After all, why would customs bother with an expensive powerboat when looking for stolen art? They wouldn't expect the gang to have access to that kind of luxury. Also, he had a weakness for expensive purchases. He had some funds that he'd managed to steal from his company before declaring bankruptcy, and he intended to use that money to buy a boat. However, things didn't go well. He had probably underestimated the costs – his fatal weakness, both in business and in his personal life, was over-optimism.

"However, he also had a gift for spotting people who might be useful to him. At the party, he noticed a young Italian who was quite obviously from a wealthy background, and put himself out to befriend him. It wouldn't have taken long for him to find out about the family rift and that Lucio was currently resentful and not sure what to do with his life. Hodder's big problem was his inability to control his drinking. He had too much, as usual, and left the party with Elisabeth Kimmel, but before he did, he would have made arrangements to meet Lucio for coffee the next day.

"After his disastrous night with Kimmel, he met Lucio as planned, and discovered something very useful. He might have been hoping to get Lucio to invest whatever money he had into a boat, but it turned out that Lucio's family already had one and, better still, it was currently in London. Lucio had probably travelled to London on it, with his mother. Look at his tan in this photo. He's had weeks of exposure to the sun – far longer than the current heat wave in this country has lasted. They cruised here from the Mediterranean. His mother went to the university to make her sizeable donation and then flew back to Milan, leaving him behind.

"Hodder expressed casual interest in the boat and discovered it was due to leave London to return to Italy. No doubt Lucio told him which port it's usually moored in. Hodder recognised someone who
needed ready cash and could be persuaded to get involved in the planned robbery. It's not clear how much Lucio knew about what he was doing, but he was talked into hiding the paintings on the boat before it left. He probably convinced the boat staff that he wanted to send some presents to a friend in Italy. He may even have told them that the cases he left on board contained some paintings. They wouldn't dare to disturb them anyway. Hodder's Italian contact would know when and where to meet the boat and be posing as Lucio's friend, to collect the cases."

Sherlock looked at Sally. "Trace that boat, find out where it moored, and you'll be closer to finding out who took those paintings. Put pressure on Eddie. He'll crack easily – he's not going to want to go back inside. That'll solve your art crime… but it's not that significant in relation to this case, anyway," he added, casually.

He gazed back at his phone and at the teenager's bitter expression in the photograph. "Lucio wasn't happy about what he did. He went along with the plan and agreed to keep his mouth shut, for the sake of the money he was promised once the paintings were sold on. However, he didn't like it. He may have been afraid, as he was certainly out of his depth with the art smugglers. He wasn't afraid of Hodder, but he resented him very strongly for involving him, and his family's name, in such a sordid crime. And he may have been scared that Hodder would blackmail him into involvement in another job. The American had a hold over him. Ellie noticed that – she thought it was just harmless teasing – but Hodder liked to keep reminding Lucio. He enjoyed his power a little too much."

Greg shifted a little. "Can I just get this straight? You're not trying to tell me that the spoilt Italian kid killed Hodder, and then – what? Went on the run? 'Cos I'll believe a lot of strange things, but that little brat's no killer."

Sherlock gave him a Look, not sure whether or not to dignify this comment, and was rewarded with a sheepish grin and a shake of the head from the DI. "Well, I s'pose that's my answer right there. Good to know you haven't changed."

"Who else, then?" Sally wondered. "Someone in the gang? Did he get too greedy, or was he threatening them?"

Sherlock frowned thoughtfully. "No… not a gang member. This killer is not a common criminal. More likely it's someone who found out what Hodder did and disapproved for a personal reason. Possibly the crime affected him, or someone he cares about, and this was a revenge killing. Not carried out with any degree of sadism, just a quick, efficient hit. But, also, there's the fact that this person knew less about the art crime than he realised, because he picked the wrong second victim. A killer connected to the gang would have known who Hodder's accomplice was. This individual didn't. Moreover, he must be connected to the University, because he had seen Hodder and Elisabeth Kimmel together and had assumed, quite incorrectly, that she was involved - which was why she was targeted. There was only one occasion when they were definitely seen together and that was at the mature students' party… so the killer must have also been present at it. There's a chance that he met them after they left, but that's unlikely. I suspect they took a taxi straight to wherever he was staying."

"And he didn't know Lucio was involved?" John spoke slowly, as the implications occurred to him.

Sherlock stared at him, absentmindedly noting the light of sudden realisation appearing in the doctor's eyes. Realisation, followed by horror. "No, he didn't... back then. But he does now..."

He opened his Internet browser and began typing quickly, snapping at Sally and Greg as he did so. "Check the CCTV on the theatres. All the central London ones – no, wait!" One in particular would appeal, particularly as he had just been denied the opportunity… "Focus on the Globe. They're showing..." he navigated through the pages, deftly, "...they're showing Henry VI part 3 tonight. Get
some officers down there immediately. Lucio will be in the company of someone else – someone who was at that party. And that's your killer. He's planning to finish the job… and he's using a theatre ticket to lure his prey."

Greg looked at the image of Lucio and nodded his understanding, but even as he pulled out his phone, it rang.

Sherlock noticed the look of dread in John's eyes as the DI answered his mobile, half turning away from them to listen to his DS. John knew. And he'd pity the spoiled, foolish young man who had made such poor choices and paid for them with his life. John would pity him and be angry on his behalf, and the emotions would be as plain on his face as if Sherlock had painted them there. And Sherlock wondered afresh whether he really had the right to put John through this.

He looked away from John, just as Greg disconnected his call. He wasn't even remotely surprised when the DI turned a grim face towards them and announced: "Another body has been found."
Caring

For once, Sherlock didn’t refuse to travel in a police car. He could tell by the set of John's jaw that there would have been serious words if he had, but in any case, he was too preoccupied to be bothered by the blue flashing light. And Lestrade blue-lighted them to the scene without compunction, urging his driver to speed past the stationary traffic, with Donovan's car following close behind.

The early evening crowds were milling about the gates surrounding the Globe Theatre when they arrived. There was the inevitable press of patrons with tickets for that evening's performance, waiting impatiently to be admitted. However, the chaos was increased by groups of tourists and Londoners being drawn to an obvious crime scene like moths to a light. The throng threatened to get out of hand, and Greg hissed his annoyance at the sight and jerked his head sharply at a couple of the uniforms guarding the theatre gates. They began the difficult task of moving on the curious passers-by politely but firmly.

"We need some more officers down here," he commented to Sally, who nodded and pulled out her phone. "They need to get rid of the ticket-holders too; make it clear that the performance won't be going ahead tonight."

Very little breeze disturbed the sluggish surface of the Thames, the air was still swelteringly hot at half past six, and Sherlock's shirt adhered uncomfortably to his back. But, for all that, there was just a whisper of change in the atmosphere; an extra humidity indicating that the inevitable thundery breakdown to this prolonged heatwave would soon arrive.

As if to confirm this, the late afternoon sun was eclipsed briefly by a fractured dark cloud, which dispersed the light, sending strong diagonal beams across the glittering Millennium Bridge. One of them struck John's face harshly, highlighting his thin lips and cut-off expression. Sherlock found himself resisting a strange instinct to reach over and touch his friend's stiff shoulder – an instinct borne, he assumed, from a need to judge the doctor's current mood. In truth, he hardly needed to touch; John's tension and restrained anger were emanating from him in waves that could almost be seen.

It was a mood that Sherlock was familiar with. John may have made an excellent soldier with his watchful protectiveness and disciplined aggression, but he was also, first and foremost, a healer. He could kill, and extremely efficiently when required, but it was never his first instinct and was only ever employed when all other possible options had failed. Untimely death distressed him intensely, although he had sufficient self-control to keep his feelings to himself on crime scenes. Sherlock had always noted John's facial expressions and silent reactions absently, even as he continued to carry out his deductions. It had fascinated him – this dichotomy between the soldier and the healer; the killer and the pacifist. And, in any case, John's full range of reactions from mild disgust to deep distress had often given him a useful insight into the emotional reactions of the 'ordinary' individual towards a specific crime.

Before the fall, it had never occurred to him to be concerned about the emotional impact of his profession on his friend. Interested, yes, actively concerned, not at all. He had always reasoned that John was a tough veteran who had seen more than his fair share of violence in Afghanistan and Belfast. There had been odd moments – in particular, he recalled the look of sick horror on John's face when he realised he'd left Soo Lin to die alone in the museum of antiquities – but Sherlock had never experienced a sense of guilt. If John had felt all that strongly, he needn't have got involved; Sherlock wasn't forcing him to.
Now, and with the benefit of hindsight, he could see that it might not have been quite that simple a choice for John. From the moment he'd aimed his gun at Jeff Hope and pulled the trigger, he'd followed the detective apparently without question or doubt. That didn't mean it didn't hurt from time to time, though, and the victims that distressed the doctor most were the younger ones, those who had had most of their lives still before them. Right now, John clearly knew perfectly well that the killer had struck again, and that it was more than likely that his victim was the young Italian student Lucio Diomato.

He pondered his options, wondering whether it would be wise to attempt some form of comfort… and feeling a little perplexed that it felt necessary for him to do so. Should he say something – make some banal comment to the effect that Lucio would have died quickly, that he wouldn't have suffered for long? Meaningless words that people seemed to find comforting, for some strange reason? Should he remind John that it wasn't his fault, that he couldn't have prevented Lucio's death, even though such truths must be entirely obvious to his friend?

His hand rose tentatively of its own accord and hovered briefly over John's forearm before he dropped it again, attempting to disguise the aborted gesture by fumbling his phone out of his jacket pocket. The doctor seemed to have anticipated it anyway, jerking his arm away, irritably.

"I haven't gone soft since you went away. There's no need to say or do anything to make me feel better. Not exactly *your* strong point, anyway." His voice was deliberately harsh, as if attempting to hide a deeper emotion.

"I just thought you might - ." Might *what*? Be reminded of something far better forgotten? Get an unpleasant flashback to the last time he had been leaning over a young man's lifeless body, feeling hopelessly for a pulse stilled by violent death? He wasn't actually sure how he had meant that sentence to continue.

"Well, *don't*." John took a deep breath, and went on in a softer, more conciliatory tone. "Just so I know…*it* is Lucio, right? *We* were too late."

Sherlock said nothing, but John sagged a little, taking his silence as confirmation of the mere fact. Sherlock was wary of initiating any further physical contact and it was clear that John didn't want to be patronised. However, as they were buffeted by the crowds, he contrived, rather timidly, to push his shoulder firmly against his friend's. He wasn't sure whether this minor act provided any reassurance, but John took another deep breath and relaxed his own shoulders very slightly as they reached the gate into the theatre courtyard.

Greg's keen young DS strode towards them at the gate. Sherlock tried to recall his name – something like Hadley, wasn't it? He didn't seem quite so enamoured of his boss and was perfectly civil towards Sally; evidently the fires in *that* quarter had been banked in the intervening months. He still threw Sherlock a less-than-pleasant look, though, and Sherlock reflected on the strange irony that none of Greg's sergeants ever seemed to like him. Was it an instinctive desire to protect their boss?

"Alright there, Rob?" Greg asked, just as Sherlock recalled the name: Rob Halliday.

Halliday nodded, glancing awkwardly at Sherlock and John.

"They're helping us," Greg told him without preamble and pushed the gate back, letting them through.

Halliday shrugged. "OK. Body's backstage. By which, I mean *literally* back of the stage. You got here faster than I thought." He paused and moved nearer to Greg, lowering his voice. "He's not been dead long, body's practically warm. Killer might still be here…?"
Greg glanced inquiringly at Sherlock, who considered for a moment before shaking his head. "It's possible, but it doesn't fit the profile. He doesn't gloat over his acts. I suspect he will have left as quickly as possible."

Halliday threw Sherlock an indecipherable look before leading them back into the open-roofed theatre, across the famous 'yard' where the Groundlings stood during performances, and up some steps onto the stage. They could see the familiar yellow tape, which had been put up hurriedly around the body lying just inside one of the arches by which actors would enter the main stage.

Sherlock didn't even need to look at the boy's face. He could tell by John's tired sigh exactly who was lying there.

"One of the backstage boys just found him," Halliday explained. "While checking the props were in position. Didn't see anyone else at the time – but then they've been flitting in and out all afternoon, so I doubt he'd think it was unusual if he had seen someone."

"Thanks, Rob. Do me a favour - ," Greg nodded towards the entrance. "- get over to the box office and make it clear that the performance won't go ahead, so we can get rid of the vultures out there. But no one on the staff is to leave, and that goes for the actors too. We want statements from anyone who was here this afternoon."

Ignoring the white-overalled forensics officers (thankfully, there was no sign of Anderson), Sherlock stepped over the tape and crouched by Lucio Diomato's body. He could see at a glance that the cause of death was identical to that of Kimmel and Hodder. Strangulation with a thin cord. Quick and efficient, with no signs of a struggle. The only differences this time were that the victim was fully dressed and that the death had occurred fairly recently.

He lifted his eyes to the young Italian student's face again. Lucio's blank open eyes looked up into the blue sky far above, his face frozen in an expression of panic.

He glanced towards John, who had snagged a couple of pairs of sterile gloves and now threw him a pair before snapping the others onto his own hands. The doctor stepped around the body, crouching on the other side of it.

John hesitated briefly before his examination, looking at Lucio's face with pity and apology; a momentary reverent pause that Sherlock recalled occasionally from previous cases. Sometimes, as now, it made the hairs prickle on the back of his neck: this gentle respect for the dead that came so naturally to John. How many bodies had he seen in his life? And yet, in the doctor's eyes, each life had a right, a dignity, no matter how violent or sordid their ending. Where Sherlock saw nothing but a cadaver and set of clues, John saw the person, their history and their thwarted potential.

Do you ever wonder if there's something wrong with us?

Sherlock turned his head away quickly, and only looked back as John ran a gloved finger with professional precision over the deep gauges in the young man's neck, lifting the hair at the nape to peer underneath.

"It would have been very quick. The killer knows the best angle to use and how much strength to apply. No major signs of a struggle – assuming he was killed right here?" He looked around.

"He was killed here." Sherlock stood up, gesturing at the floor of the backstage area. It was dusty in places. "No signs of a body being dragged, or of very heavy footprints if he'd been carried. Look - ." He walked around the body and pointed. "Two sets of footprints over there, so he definitely walked here. And there -." Near the body were scuffed marks. Lucio had certainly put up as much of a fight as he possibly could. He'd been caught by surprise, knocked off balance and had kicked out desperately in an attempt to regain his footing and relieve the pressure around his neck.
Sherlock looked back at John, who was testing the heat of the body. He looked up. "Not long. Within the last two hours, I'd say, and possibly less. Maybe just over an hour ago. The DS is right, he couldn't have been discovered long after death."

Sherlock looked away from the body quickly, feeling an unaccustomed heaviness in his throat. When he'd looked at that angry young man in the photograph and asked Ellie about him, Lucio Diomato had still been alive – had still been in the process of making a fatally bad decision. Could he have acted sooner to prevent this? Logic suggested not, but if he had taken John's sound advice, made his peace with Greg a little sooner…

He cleared his throat and scanned the theatre, looking up towards the upper seating area and the sky beyond, before bringing his gaze back to the ground. There were some nervous-looking backstage workers clustering around the outside of the Pit, staying behind the lines. They would have been in here preparing the theatre for the performance, and the actors would have been in their own dressing rooms or flitting between each other's rooms. No one would have noticed another two men among the press of backstage staff, dressers, makeup artists and so on. The killer had taken a risk carrying out the murder right here, where anyone could have seen him, but perhaps the risk was the point.

He stepped through the archway, squinting in the dimness of the backstage area. There, propped by a wall, was the object he was looking for.

He reached down and picked up the bag by its strap, carrying it back onto the stage.

"Another clue?" Sally asked, looking at the shabby leather satchel in Sherlock's hands. "Why on earth a satchel?"

Sherlock glanced at the body and curled his lip slightly. "Fairly apt." He gazed off into the distance and excavated the ancient memory from his mind palace, murmuring:

"And then the whining schoolboy with his satchel,
And shining morning face, creeping like snail,
Unwillingly to school".

She gave him a blank look, but Greg gave a faint smile of recognition at the quotation and muttered. "All the world's a stage…"

At the incredulous looks on their faces, he sighed irritably. "Oh for f… Even I did bloody 'O'-levels. Hours and hours of memorising sodding Shakespeare to pass English, just so I had the qualifications to get into the Force. I know how that schoolboy bloody felt…” He looked around him at the scenery and the tiered rows of seats. "I wonder if he would have appreciated the irony. His mother probably wanted him to be on this stage one day. And he was obviously keen to come here."

Sherlock raised his eyebrows. The DI was being unusually reflective. He opened the satchel's fastenings and upended it, catching the scrap of paper that fell out when he shook it. The bag was otherwise empty.

He unfolded it one-handed and rolled his eyes. "Another Shakespeare quote:

"Nor to be seen: my Crown is call'd Content,
A Crown it is, that seldom Kings enjoy."

John frowned. "What the hell's he getting at there? Lucio was hardly 'content'."
Sherlock sighed, wearily. "These little 'clues' are getting really tedious. It's from Henry VI Part 3 – tonight's play. He's a deposed king, basically saying that he is happier now than he was as king. I assume the intention is to suggest that Lucio would have been happier had he not been so busy trying to be more powerful or wealthy than he was. It's a clumsy analogy."

"Sounds like a comment on morality or something," John remarked. "Did you say that you thought our man was a church-goer?"

"Yes." Sherlock gazed at Lucio's body, thoughtfully. "He has a strong sense of justice – a warped moral code. It's not the reason why he killed Lucio, but it's what he wants us to think…and he may even believe it himself."

"What do you mean?"

"He killed Lucio because of the art theft, but he doesn't want to acknowledge that his action is that…crude. To justify his behaviour, he has to dress it up as some kind of moral crusade. Otherwise, he'd just be another 'common criminal'. There's another thing. These clues…" he waved the paper, "they're clever, very apt, and yet strangely shallow. He's intelligent and extremely well-read, but his knowledge is wide rather than deep." He wrinkled his nose and dropped the paper into Greg's waiting hand. "He probably has a quote for any occasion, but he has no particular specialty. He's not a scholar by any means."

"So, how did he get Lucio in here?" Greg wondered. "Even if he had a ticket – I assume you think he lured Lucio here with the promise of one - even then, they wouldn't have been allowed to come in before the performance. Would they?"

"He must work here, or be very familiar with the staff. Either someone let them in today without thinking much about it or he knows how to get in unseen. More likely the latter, although it's worth checking whether anyone on the staff does remember seeing Lucio in the company of someone they knew." Sherlock shrugged. "They may have, but it's unlikely. He probably picked the best time to do this, just a couple of hours before curtain up, with everyone fully occupied with their own tasks."

"But I thought you said it was someone at the University -."

"Someone at the party – yes. Not necessarily someone working there. Maybe another student. Or somebody's partner," Sherlock mused. "We need to find out exactly who was there - and check the CCTV images. Did a man follow Hodder and Kimmel that night? How did he know where to find Kimmel a few nights later, and Hodder two weeks after that? Especially the first murder – you don't just spot someone by chance at a concert in an area as big as Kenwood. Which suggests…he may have been on friendly terms with them at the party. It's not impossible that he made arrangements to meet Kimmel that night. Does anyone remember her speaking to someone for a long time? … It would help to know exactly when and where Hodder was killed."

He looked around the theatre again and turned to Greg. "This location isn't significant; it was just an opportunity to get the victim alone. The art theft is the key. That crime affected the killer or someone he cares about enough to compel him to 'punish' the perpetrators. I need to know exactly which paintings were replaced by fakes – who painted them, who sold the originals to the gallery, and who bought paintings there since the theft, in case there are any fakes you haven't found out about. Track down Hodder's associate in Italy and find out which have been smuggled out on the Diomato boat."

He smirked. "You could try scaring the facts out of Eddie Carter by letting him know that he could be the next victim."

Greg stared at him. "So you don't think the bloke's finished yet? What's he gonna do, work his way
through the entire gang, dispatching one every other Saturday?" He sighed, scratching his head. "I suppose that's something to be grateful for. If you're right about the pattern, we've got thirteen days to find him before the next one."

Sherlock frowned, feeling a vague sense of unease. It was true that the killer had probably been compelled by his working hours to restrict his crimes to a specific time period…and it was also highly likely that he had compartmentalised his life as a way of coping, but… "I wouldn't necessarily depend on that timespan. He's just as likely to strike before."

Lestrade snorted, without any humour. "I don't depend on anything these days."

221 Baker Street was quiet as Sherlock entered the building. He climbed the steps to flat B without his usual speed. It wasn't late, had only just turned nine, but he felt fatigue seeping through his bones. Getting mildly drunk with John in the early hours of that morning probably hadn't helped, and he hadn't eaten all day either.

He pulled off his damp suit jacket (if anything, the humidity was climbing even higher this evening), threw it on the floor and flung himself down on the sofa in his usual 'thinking' position. His crumpled shirt was sticking to his back again, and he idly wondered whether it was time to bow to the inevitable and dig out one of his rarely-worn summer t-shirts. On the other hand, he did have a certain image to maintain, and one of the things his three years of having to assume various disguises had done was to leave him with a strong distaste for 'dressing down'.

The witness statements at the theatre had been as uninformative as he had predicted. No one recalled seeing someone unusual on the premises, and certainly no one had given anyone access. Which meant the killer must have had insider knowledge in order to navigate the security systems, including door codes to the backstage area. Having worked out the likely route and indicated where forensics should look for evidence, he had left them to it, ordering a list of current and past staff to be e-mailed to him as quickly as possible.

He'd been tempted to go onto Bart's after that – as luck would have it, Molly was on duty. However, John had talked him out of it, pointing out that even she wouldn't be able to speed up an autopsy just for him. When Sally informed them that there'd been a major incident in the City and that the morgue would be busy dealing with the fatalities from that, Sherlock reluctantly conceded the point and agreed to go home to wait for the list.

As they'd exited the taxi at Baker Street, John had been approached by one of his regular charges – a skinny sixteen year old girl that he'd been trying to get into some Halfway House scheme – and had dashed off, muttering something about someone Sherlock had never heard of. Sherlock had frowned and turned towards the flat, telling himself firmly that he absolutely didn't care that John had a better handle on the finer workings of the Homeless Network than he did these days.

He wondered what the emergency was. He'd grown used to John hurrying off at random times, but he usually took his medical bag with him, and it would have been a matter of minutes to have retrieved that from the flat. So…not a medical emergency. Information, then? On what? A case, surely, to make John rush off like that. But the doctor wasn't involved in any other case but this, so why not take Sherlock along?

"John, are you in here, dear? I just wanted to let you know that – oh!"

Sherlock sat up as Mrs. Hudson peered around the corner of the door. "I saw the door was open, but I didn't realise it was you, Sherlock. I thought…well, you're not so often here these days…"
Her hands fluttered to her necklace in an achingly familiar gesture. He eyed her cautiously as she stepped slowly into the room.

Since his return, he hadn't had much occasion to speak to her. If they happened to meet on the stairs or outside her flat, she would hurry away on some pretext, and he didn't quite have the nerve to follow her and force a confrontation. She still wandered into the flat in her usual casual manner, but clearly only when she knew that John was around – he assumed she could tell by the sound of the doctor's steadier footsteps. Her comments were almost always addressed to John. If forced to speak to Sherlock, her voice sounded stilted, although she did seem to try to be cordial for John's sake if not Sherlock’s.

Ironically, he suspected that she genuinely wanted to get back the easy relationship they had shared before the Fall, but didn't quite know how to. And since Sherlock had pretty much taken her lead when it came to their friendship, it was impossible for him to work out what to do. She appeared to have lost her fear of him, but still clearly distrusted him and didn't appear to know how to stop.

He expected her to retreat as usual having realised that John was not present, so it may have been surprise that prompted him to stand up as she approached. She looked up at him, for once seeming to gaze directly into his eyes rather than just somewhere in their vicinity. "Are you working on a case?"

He felt a dull pain in his chest at her brave attempt at small talk. "Yes. Well, trying to, anyway," he amended. "I'm not quite sure which elements to focus on."

She blinked at this unusual honesty. "Oh, so you'll be up all night then? On the case? I was looking for John…"

"He was called away," he explained, waving his hand vaguely towards the window. "One of his… clients."

Her face softened. "Well, it wasn't that important…" She made as if to turn away, but then seemed to steel herself. "Is it an interesting case?"

"It…” He hesitated. On the face of it, it really 

 wasn't 

 that interesting. No more than a five on his personal scale of interest. Forged paintings, extra-marital affairs, disenchanted young men, a literate killer with a penchant for clumsy metaphors – what a cliché.

Balanced against that was the look on John's face when he gazed at Lucio's body…

"People have died," he said, finally.

She gave him a bemused smile. "People usually do."

He felt his lips curving just a little, in acknowledgement. "That sounds like something I might have said once."

"Funnily enough," she replied, "it wasn't you. I mean, you might have said it to him once, but it was John that I heard it from."

"Did you?" Sherlock was genuinely interested. It didn't sound like something John would have said. "When was that?"

"Oh, it wasn't that long after he moved in. I think you were both working on a case and you must have worked it out because you suddenly dashed out of the door all keen, like you usually do, and John was telling you to wait for him. You said there was no time to wait – you said: "People have died". And he said - well, muttered it really: "People usually do…just not before their time." Just as
he went out of the door after you, it was. I just remember the tone of his voice. He sounded all… bitter. I don't think you could have heard him."

"I certainly don't remember it, so you're probably right," he conceded. He turned and walked towards the window, wondering where John was now. "He was right, of course. Everyone dies."

"Just not before their time." Her voice sounded a little closer as she carried on. "Is that what's happened, Sherlock? A young man or woman has died?"

"Yes. A nineteen year old man." He thought of the sulky young face in the photograph and then of the glitter of fear in a dead man's eyes.

She sighed. "I'm sorry to hear it. Sorry for John, because he particularly hates the ones involving young people, doesn't he? And sorry for the young man and his family. Was he a nice man, do you think?"

He hesitated. "I'm…not sure. He wasn't liked much, but I think there's a chance that he might have been misunderstood."

She gave a little sigh. "That's even more of a shame. Not to be able to clear up the misunderstandings…" She joined him at the window; he could see her neat little grey-brown head out of the corner of his eye as she peered down at the street below. "That's what I would hate most about dying suddenly. Not being able to get things sorted out first. Make my peace with my loved ones."

Was that a note of regret in her voice?

"Can you clear his name?"

"Not really." So much was true. Lucio was an accessory to theft and fraud.

"But you can help, can't you?" she persisted. "Get him justice, give his parents some comfort by finding the killer? That's what you do, after all."

He spun away from the window, restless and angry all of a sudden. "Is that what you think? That I spend my time solving crimes out of an altruistic desire to be of use to the victims and their families?"

She turned towards him. "Well…you do – don't you? Whether you mean to or not - ."

"But that's not what I do," he burst out, pacing energetically. "Why don't people understand it? It's not the victims – it's the science. It's the ability to find out the why and how. The motivation and the method. That's what I do – and it's not out of compassion. You all expect me to care - but you wouldn't expect a microbiologist to care about his samples, would you? Or a pathologist about the disease she's studying? So why do you imagine that I should care about my cases?"

She watched him, wide-eyed, as he continued to pace. "Don't you see? That's why I disappoint you – and John and Greg. That's why I'll always disappoint you. You – you expect something that I can't give and I - ."

"Sherlock!"

He stopped, shocked out of his rant by the fierce tone. She walked towards him, her hand raised slightly and held out in front of her as if in parlay. Her eyes were hard in her pale face, and for the first time in years, he caught a glimpse of the tough motherless urchin who survived the Blitz; the strong woman who had come through three marriages and far too much bereavement and had still
been able to smile.

"In the first place -," her voice was firm but calm, "I said 'whether you mean to or not'. I'm not stupid, Sherlock – none of us are. We know it's not your motivation for doing what you do. But, whether you like it or not, it's the impact you have. You have this – this amazing talent that I could never have, or John, or any of them at the Yard. Or even your brother, clever though he is. People believe in you, and not because you are nice to them, but because you are good at what you do. That gives them hope. Don't you see? It's the impact you have on people's lives. You can save lives; you can bring justice to those whose lives you can't save. That's why we have expectations."

"You expect me to care." His voice sounded sulky to his own ears.

"Oh, Sherlock." Her voice was gently fond; mother to errant son. "You do care. You just can't see it. That monstrous mother of yours, and all those stupid doctors, and even your clever brother… what did they do to you to make you believe that you're not capable of it?"

"I don't feel things the way you do. And John -.

"Is just John." She gave a little laugh. "I don't think anyone cares as much about people as John Watson. Friends, strangers. He's able to look past all their defences and see the need. You can't live up to his standards, however hard you try. No one expects you to, Sherlock."

"But -.

"Do you feel absolutely nothing all the time? No fear, no confusion, no frustration? No satisfaction when you get it right? No anger, no amusement, no hatred?"

"Well, of course not..."

"Well, then. You do care. You do have emotions, even if you don't wear them on your sleeve, like I do, or go out and tackle things directly, like I do, or go out and tackle things directly, like John does..."

She sighed, that little smile fading away. "I said...things that I shouldn't have said. I accused you of not caring because you didn't react the way I would have done." She shrugged her shoulders. "I was wrong. You can't be expected to care the way everyone else does. You've got your own ways, Sherlock. They're different, that's true enough, but who says they're worse than anyone else's?"

"Mrs. Hudson." His chest felt tight. "I am sorry..."

She gave him a bright smile and patted his arm, suddenly right back to her perky self. "I know you are, dear. Well, I must get on – I've already missed Casualty." She gave a little tinkling laugh. "Whatever did we all do before good old catch-up TV? Good luck with your case."

And she left the flat without a backwards glance.

He stared after her, wondering whether the last few minutes had actually happened or were a figment of his feverish imagination. Was he that tired or hungry, or had his erstwhile landlady really lectured him on his emotional abilities with a confidence that all those childhood psychiatrists had lacked? Since when had his diagnosis been that simple? Just a 'you're different, but that doesn't mean you don't feel'. Not for the first time in his life, he wondered what the world might be like if it were run by fierce, wise, little old ladies.

He shook his head and pulled out his phone as if, by staring fixedly at it, he could will the familiar beep of an incoming e-mail. They should have that staff list ready by now… As he waited impatiently, he opened his pictures and stared at the photograph once more. He ran his eyes over the
faces, noting the little intricacies of their body language. The smiles, both genuine and forced. The relaxed poses and the stiff shoulders. The tension during what should be a happy occasion…

As he looked at the faces, he had a sudden premonition – a little shiver of understanding that slithered down his spine…an understanding that told him he had been completely and utterly wrong about this case. An understanding that told him exactly who the next victim would be.

And, all at once, he knew that Mrs. Hudson was absolutely right. Sherlock Holmes did care about some people. And he was not immune to the emotion of absolute terror…
Apart

Chapter Notes

I describe a painting at the end of this chapter; if anyone's interested, that painting does exist and can be seen at jamesblandpaintings dot com. I used to know the model in the painting when I lived in London some years ago; she's the artist's girlfriend and features in quite a few of his works. Like 'my' Sherlock, I'm not a huge fan of art, but I do like James Bland's work.

Sherlock's fingers fumbled with unusual clumsiness as he located the correct number on his speed dial. He pressed the phone to his ear to listen for the dialling tone as he paced across the lounge and grabbed his crumpled jacket. He shrugged it on one-armed as the tone continued before giving way to the familiar beep of a standard voicemail service.

"Damn!" He disconnected the call without leaving a message. His breath was coming fast; it was an effort to see properly, to hear over the frantic beating of his heart –

*Focus.* It was his brother's voice, calm, even, quiet… He closed his eyes and focused on breathing through his nose, out through his mouth. In…out…slowly….slowly. He needed to clear his mind, it had never been so difficult in his life, but why – no, no time for that, he had to think, *he had to think*….

*Think how the killer would think. Come on, Sherlock,* came that steady, cold voice, *you know how. It's what you're best at.*

Now he knew who it was, he had to focus on that individual. What were his motivations, what would his next move be? There was still time to save the latest victim…perhaps…

*No.* There *was* time. There had to be. He didn't know how he knew it, but this one was different. This time, the killer would wait for him.

He had to believe there was time, because if he allowed himself to visualise the cord around the neck, the hands scrabbling hopelessly, the body tensed in the agony of breathlessness, the fear… *No.* He couldn't do it. Go *there* and he'd never be able to solve this. And this time, it mattered. This time, he cared. *Caring is a disadvantage,* came that voice again, and he shook his head violently, trying to dislodge it.

Doing up the buttons of his jacket, he hurried down the steps, two at a time, while scrolling to Lestrade's mobile number. Mrs Hudson, just at the doorway to her flat, gave him a startled look but made no comment as he rushed past her and out into the street to hail a taxi.

He'd just been redirected to Lestrade's voicemail as a black cab pulled in. He disconnected the call and jumped in.

"Where to, then?"

Sherlock opened his mouth, and then hesitated. Truthfully, although he knew who the victim was, he had no idea where the killer would go. What was the name of that course – something like British
culture and society, wasn't it? Well, he'd have to start at the source and work it out on the way.

He gave his directions. The driver muttered a bit about having to go south of the river at this time on a Saturday night; Sherlock ignored this as he opened his Internet browser and navigated to the required page. He flicked through the course notes quickly, considering and rejecting each possible location due to opening hours, likely volume of people and convenience.

He had narrowed it down to three potential locations, spread out across London, but none of them stood out in his mind as a possibility.

An incoming e-mail flashed up on the screen - the list of current and former staff at the Globe. He opened the attachment and scanned quickly before his eyes stopped on a specific name. Good to get a confirmation, anyway.

He sighed and dialled Lestrade's office number. This wasn't the usual number for the switchboard at the Yard, it was Lestrade's second, private desk phone, which he'd be more likely to answer quickly. Sherlock had automatically memorised the number on the day he'd wandered so blithely into the DI's new office.

The phone picked up after only one ring. "Halliday."

Sherlock grimaced and tried to force a reasonably polite tone into his voice. "Is Lestrade there?"

The DS's voice sharpened. "Who wants to know? How did you get this number?"

"It's Sherlock – Sherlock Holmes. I need to speak to…Greg as quickly as possible." Hopefully, the use of Lestrade's first name would suggest that they were on more friendly terms now.

To his credit, Halliday hesitated only fractionally before replying. "He's in a meeting with the Commissioner at the moment. He, um… he didn't say, but I'm pretty sure someone's let on that you were at that crime scene earlier." There was a faint note of accusation in his voice.

Sherlock paused for a moment. This was a waste of time, and he was tempted to ring off so he could focus on the matter in hand. Still, he had promised that he wouldn't simply rush off after a killer without keeping Greg informed.

"It's vital that I speak to him as soon as possible. I have a lead on the case – a potential next victim and I know who…” He broke off quickly, not wanting to tell an officer he hardly knew that he'd just worked out who the killer was. "Just tell him that – interrupt the meeting if you have to. Or if you can't get him immediately, tell Sally Donovan."

"Wait a minute, Mr Holmes!" Halliday's voice was alert. "Before you go, where are you now? Do you require back-up?"

Sherlock had fully expected to get the usual tedious speech about not doing anything until the police arrived to take control. This simple and eminently practical offer of support came as a shock to his system - so much so that he nearly opened his mouth to say "yes", before good sense prevailed.

The last thing he needed right now was an already jittery killer getting freaked out by uniformed officers turning up at the scene –wherever that scene happened to be. Greg would probably understand that instinctively, knowing how Sherlock normally worked, but he wasn't so sure of this officer.

"No. Just see he gets the message," he said instead, and disconnected the call.
He briefly considered trying to ring Sally himself, but in reality, there was only one person he trusted absolutely not to mess things up when there was a life at stake. He selected the familiar number, leaning back against the seat as the dialling tone sounded. The traffic was surprisingly quiet this evening, and they were already turning off Westway and heading down towards Shepherd's Bush.

John took an unusually long time to answer. When he did, his voice was faint and kept breaking up.

"Sh…lock? …you?"

"John, where are you? It's urgent, I have a lead - ."

"Can't… Signal bad… I am… What…"

"John, listen - ."

"No, wait a minute." John's voice was suddenly a little clearer. "Sherlock, there's something you need to know - ."

The line suddenly went dead. He redialled, but was redirected immediately to the answerphone.

He cursed under his breath, staring out of the window. How could he have been so stupid? The answer had been staring at him in the face for at least half a day. Was he out of practice; had his six months of enforced isolation affected his abilities so greatly? Or was it his sudden, quite ridiculous, obsession with his friends' opinion of him – was he weakened fundamentally by his desire to be understood when, before the Fall, he hadn't cared in the least what people had thought?

He remembered that argument with John, all those years ago, before that fateful meeting with Moriarty. "I've disappointed you… Don't make people into heroes John. Heroes don't exist and if they did I wouldn't be one of them."

And whatever he'd become since then, it certainly hadn't been a hero: by definition, a man known for his nobility, achievements, courage. Well, his motives had hardly ever been noble, had they? He was on stronger ground with the other two – he'd never lacked for courage, although John would have called it pig-headed stupidity more often than not. As to achievements…well, to the vast majority of people, his achievements were what defined him. Take them away, and who was Sherlock Holmes? Just a rather eccentric, unlikeable individual, who most people found rather ridiculous, even if they dared not say so to his face. Not that he minded particularly; he'd never sought to be liked.

But, in any case, all those cases solved, all those lives saved: they were hardly the achievements of a hero. Not when he'd only done them out of morbid interest, or to avoid going mad with boredom, or even, perhaps, out of the childish desire to be the best at his craft.

It didn't occur to him for even a minute that his actions nearly four years' ago might be considered heroic. Pretending to throw himself off a roof just to protect the lives of a harmless old lady, an overworked police detective and an ex-army doctor? Merely logic, not heroism.

Well, if he'd ever wanted to be a hero, he had his chance now. John would be proud of him, he reflected, rather bitterly.

He watched the traffic passing by and drummed on the door handle, as his mind raced, thinking through the possibilities. Where would the killer go? Was the course a red herring? He knew he was about to be caught – he knew that Sherlock was on the case and that his hours were numbered, which was why he would be striking again tonight instead of waiting. But he wouldn't just strike at the victim's location; he'd move his victim somewhere symbolic - and that might just give Sherlock
the time he needed to save a life. Where, though?

He pressed his fingers into his forehead and closed his eyes, trying to block out all external stimuli. *Think, think!* The man knew this was his last act; he knew Sherlock was almost certainly on the way. And the choice of victim was significant. He wanted to go out with a bang. And then there were the clues, which had grown less subtle. This man wanted Sherlock to know. He was leading him to what he considered to be the real crime…

He opened his eyes suddenly and tapped on the glass. "Wait! Forget Kingston. I need you to take me to Northumberland Avenue instead – to Villiers – as quickly as possible."

"Fuck's sake, mate!" The driver's incredulous eyes met his in the mirror. "Don't you know where you're going?"

"I do now," he snapped. "You'll get triple the fare if you shut up and get me there in good time."

The driver muttered something uncomplimentary under his breath as he swung left at Shepherd's Bush roundabout. He seemed to take Sherlock's promise seriously though, as he weaved his way through the traffic efficiently.

Sherlock looked out of the window, watching as they drove past the small greens of Holland Park. It would take about eighteen minutes judging by the current traffic, even with the driver's extra incentive to oblige, but he knew now that the killer would wait. He wanted his 'big confrontation' with the famous detective before he carried out his last act. Sherlock only hoped the man would want to talk first – the longer he could keep the man talking, the more time he would have to find a way out for the man's hostage.

He took the time to consider likely scenarios. He briefly regretted not bringing John's gun with him, but then it was possible that John would need it himself. Besides which, Sherlock preferred to rely on his wits in these situations.

They were now passing the large green sweep of Kensington Gardens and Hyde Park. Inevitably, it was a popular location for walkers on this stiflingly hot Saturday evening, but the sky was ominously dark, and the canny among them were pouring out of the gates to get on the Underground before the long-awaited storm came.

His phone rang, but it was Mycroft and he rejected the call with an impatient jab. He considered texting the location to John, but it wasn't clear that the message would get through to the doctor in his current location. Clearly he was underground somewhere, in a location where his signal was being blocked. Not the Underground, since his phone would still work there, and not one of the subways that his clients usually hung around in. Where, then? A basement? Somewhere with signal-dampening technology? And what had he found out that he needed to tell Sherlock so urgently?

He drafted the message, thinking that John might pick it up later, but something made his fingers hesitate before he pressed send.

He stared at the screen, not really seeing it. He had a sudden, strong memory of an earlier taxi ride today – of a moment when John turned blank, joyless eyes towards him and Sherlock's stomach had dropped like a stone. It was the moment when he realised that he could no longer use the lure of danger to drag the doctor into his misadventures.

He hunched his shoulders as if to ward off an unexpectedly sharp pain, and dropped his head to stare at his feet.
"He's changed a bit. Hasn't he?"

Sherlock glanced up at Molly from his slumped position on her cramped office couch. She was biting her lip as she leant against the tidy desk that she rarely used. He could hardly blame her - it was a horrible little office with little natural light. No wonder she migrated to the lab as often as possible.

And the sofa was stupid. He couldn't spread out on it in his usual manner. When he tried to, his lanky limbs dangled over the arm, making him feel like an overgrown schoolboy. The first time he'd tried it, she'd turned her head away and he'd suspected that she was trying not to laugh at him.

He scowled at the foul hospital coffee that she held out to him, but took it anyway. The rough, acrid liquid burnt his mouth, but provided a welcoming warmth as it went down.

He'd been caught out by a torrential downpour, having been thrown off yet another crime scene, and his soaking jacket was currently draped over her ancient, barely warm radiator along with his socks while he tried to dry off his shirt with some paper towels. He'd been tempted to remove the shirt too, but Molly had given him a stern look…which showed just how much her attitude towards him had changed. The old Molly would no doubt have enjoyed the view.

He shivered and took another mouthful. "I don't know what you mean."

"John," she continued, thoughtfully. "I saw him in the canteen the other day. He was visiting one of his surgery patients - a new patient. Eight year old boy, grumbling appendix." She smiled. "He was quite pleased with himself, I think. Seems the boy had been having problems for a while and was initially misdiagnosed with food intolerance. The parents wanted a second opinion. John was the first doctor to work out what the problem might be."

"So?" Sherlock gave up on his shirt and started rubbing irritably at his trousers with a fresh pile of paper towels.

Molly was quiet for so long that he stopped and looked up at her again in confusion.

"It's just that – well, it's silly really," she went on, slowly. "It's just that I always used to forget that he's a doctor – you know? I mean, he was always just John - just there, helping you out, or arguing with you, or trying to calm down someone you'd just insulted. It wasn't until after - ," she stopped, quickly. "I mean, it wasn't until we started meeting up for drinks, after I found out that he knew you'd survived, that I really got to know him without you being around. And even then, he was just a mate – you know? And half the time we'd end up talking about you anyway. But this time, he was just – just being a doctor. Talking about atypical symptomology and the investigations he had done and how he'd worked it out...and he was so proud. Quietly, but I could see it in his eyes. He knew he'd saved that boy's life. Pride and satisfaction and – and... authority." She was struggling to explain.

"Yes, that's it – authority. He was in charge. His own person, just for once."

"He always was his own person," he insisted, glaring down at his trousers. "It's not as if I ever forced him to be there. People never understand that; they just assume I dragged him around. He did it because he enjoyed it."

She smiled. "I suppose so. I just got the impression that he was...happier, maybe a bit more confident than he used to be. I've got it wrong, I expect. Here – give me that cup. I'll nip out to Costa's and get you something better – and a sandwich?"

He stared at his bare feet on the cold vinyl, hardly noticing as she left.

"Oy, you alright, mate?" the driver called out. "You need me to stop?"
Sherlock realised that, with his head bent over his knees, he must look as he was about to vomit. He took a deep breath and straightened up. "I'm fine. Just keep going."

"Yeah, well, don't puke on my seat, will you."

Sherlock pulled a disdainful face at the very idea and brushed down his creased jacket, trying to calm himself. It was not as if he was unaware of John's profession. Ninety-seven point nine per cent of the time, it was routine work – the usual mundane complaints that every GP dealt with. John had often complained about it – snotty noses, mysterious aches and pains, warts, embarrassing STDs, sore throats...

The doctor had once commented, only half-jokingly, that it didn't really matter if he had been out half the previous night since he could do the day job with his eyes closed. And that was why he'd always enjoyed accompanying Sherlock on his cases – he freely admitted that they gave him the adrenaline rush he'd craved since his army days which was not fulfilled by his everyday work.

Only occasionally was he called upon to diagnose something more complicated or potentially life-changing. On those occasions, John became a different person. He would focus all his energies on the individual patient, every bit as single-minded as Sherlock was over his experiments. For all his complaints, there was no denying the fact that he was a dedicated doctor and an excellent diagnostician. Occasionally, he would share the more interesting diagnoses with Sherlock, and his face would gain extra animation as he talked, waving his hands expressively.

Although Sherlock never made much of it, he privately felt that John was wasted in general practice. He'd be better placed in some rare specialism where his inquisitive brain could be put to better use, but it never occurred to the consulting detective to encourage John in this career path. A specialism would take up more of John's time, diverting his attention from Sherlock's work. And anyway, it wasn't necessary, as long as the Work was there to keep John happy.

But what if it didn't make him happy anymore?

Sherlock had worked alone for three years, out of necessity, and had known instinctively that it was best to do so. There had been times when he'd yearned for John's company – for someone to bounce ideas off, someone with combat experience, someone to watch his back, someone who understood him instinctively and without words - but he'd never given in to temptation. It had been even harder when he knew that John was aware of his survival and was seeking a way to help him, but it had still been safer to work alone back then. That didn't mean he wanted to work alone now.

So why had he not sent that text, telling John where to find him?

The taxi turned into Northumberland Avenue and he shook his head, impatiently. He'd have to examine his motives later; now was not the time. They passed Northumberland Street, scene of their first case together, and he grinned faintly at the memory of the 'Study in Pink', as John had insisted on calling it in his blog entry.

As the taxi drew up outside Villiars, he pulled a handful of notes out of his wallet and shoved them at the driver, not bothering to count them. The driver blinked at them and gave Sherlock a sudden grin.

"You want me to wait?"

"No," he replied, shortly, and slammed the door shut, staring up at the art shop. He was vaguely aware of the cab driving off and then the street fell strangely quiet for such a central location.

From the front, it was hard to tell that the shop had been burgled recently. The door had been
repaired and the window display was as normal. The only tell-tale signs were stronger locks on the door. The gang had been careful and had entered the premises with the minimum of damage, presumably because they wanted the real crime to go unnoticed for as long as possible. In that, Sherlock felt, they had made a major mistake. A gang that professional would never have broken into an art dealers just for cash – if he had been present at that crime scene, it would have been immediately obvious that the cracked open safe was a red herring.

His eyes flicked quickly over the shop front before focusing on the narrow dark little alleyway to the left of it. There was no sign of entry at the front, either forced or legitimate, but clearly the dealer had a back door for large deliveries. This side of Northumberland Ave had an access road running parallel behind. There'd be office space there too and, in theory, a small apartment, although the owner wasn't living there. There was a patina of dust on the surface of the little-used alleyway and he could see the faint imprint of two sets of footsteps.

As he stepped into the dimness, there was a rumble of thunder in the distance and he felt the first few drops of rain. At first, it was a slow patter on the dusty ground of the alleyway, but suddenly the heavens opened and within seconds, his curls were plastered to his forehead and he was soaked to the skin. He pulled his phone and wallet out of his jacket and moved them to his trousers in an attempt to protect them from the elements.

His initial feeling was one of relief from the energy-sapping heat, but he soon started shivering as he made his way cautiously down the alleyway, stopping to read whatever signs he could. The sky had been darkening before the storm, and it was suddenly very dark in the narrow space – enough that he needed to use his torch to follow the faint impression of footprints in the dirt. The evidence would be washed away soon enough with this rain – in fact, within a few metres, the footprints had disappeared altogether.

He passed a metal fire escape – not much more than a ladder with hand-holds – halfway to the back of the building. He flashed his torch up it to the door to the second story. It was shut and there was no light showing through the cracks. He hesitated for a moment before moving on.

At the back of the building, the access road was deserted. The loading bay was silent, the doors were bolted and a small dirty window indicating an office to the right of the building was dark.

Sherlock peered through the window, but couldn't make out any light or movement. He stepped back and looked up at the silent building, considering. He refocused his gaze back up the alleyway towards the fire escape, and then made a quick decision.

He darted back along the alleyway, placed his hands on the ladder's handholds and began to climb as quietly as possible, looking up at the black painted wooden door. It had no handles on this side; it was designed purely as an emergency exit with a push bar to release it on the inside.

It was only when Sherlock stepped onto the tiny balcony that he could see the door had been left open but only very slightly, so it still looked shut from ground level. There was just enough of a gap for him to slide in a credit card and lever it open.

The door opened directly into an empty open-plan apartment that stretched the length of the building, furnished but dusty and unused. He was standing in the lounge/bedroom area; to the back of the building were a small kitchen area and a closed door presumably leading to a shower and toilet. At some point, the proprietor must have lived here, or perhaps he'd had some vague idea of letting it – even a tiny flat in this central location could have made him a lot of money. The furniture was neutral, clearly ordered from a catalogue and hardly used, most of it covered by dust sheets. The apartment was dark, lit only by the streetlamps on Northumberland Avenue.
The apartment might be deserted, but someone had been here very recently. A scent of perfume lingered in the air. Sherlock took a deep sniff, and knew he'd smelt it only recently. *Clinique Happy*. She would have bought it in the Duty Free at the airport, probably – a medium-priced perfume, but still normally outside her price range. She was treating herself to celebrate her new-found freedom. It didn't fit with the rest of her carefully cultured image, and he remembered thinking that at the time.

He moved silently across the room towards the door in the opposite wall. It too was unlocked and he pushed it open to see a short landing and a spiral staircase leading downwards.

The old wooden steps creaked as he walked down them. The floor immediately below contained a staff room, a tiny kitchen and an office; he flashed a torch around them, but they were empty. The scent continued to linger in the air; he could almost follow his nose alone down the next flight of stairs.

They ended in a long narrow corridor on the ground floor, carpeted and in considerably better condition than the quarters above. The closed door to his right would lead into the main showroom, and on this corridor, there was a customer toilet to his left and another two doors in the opposite wall, which almost certainly led to small rooms used for private viewings and confidential negotiations.

At the left end of the corridor, there was another closed door, beyond which must lie the warehouse at the back of the building. The safe that had been forced by the gang would have been there, and they would have hoped that the police would focus their attention in that area, while the actual crime had taken place in the showroom. The top half of the door was glass, but the room beyond was dark. The faint scent had now dispersed and he couldn't sense any movement or hear a sound beyond the faint roar of passing traffic.

He stepped off the last stair and crept towards the back door, listening intently. Peering through the crack, he was unable to make out anything in the darkness. He grasped the handle and gently tried the door, not particularly surprised when it refused to budge.

He turned back towards the wood-panelled showroom door. It was unfortunate that he was stepping into an unknown area. If it was as he suspected, he would have very little time to scan his surroundings and identify potential escape routes. He had gained an impression of the area through the front window and could extrapolate from his knowledge of similar shops in the area, but in a gallery, they were quite likely to have messed around with the layout to better display the artworks. It was quite possible that his only quick exit would be back up the stairs and down the fire escape. Not ideal - not if the killer was armed and he also had to drag someone with him.

Sherlock took a deep breath and walked up the corridor, no longer attempting to hide his presence. He reached for the handle and this time it gave easily.

The showroom was lit dimly by spotlights, and extra light came in through the windows from the street lights outside. As he had feared, there were a number of floor-to-ceiling panels, ideal for displaying paintings but making it impossible to get a clear line of sight. He quickly scanned the area he could see as he stepped into the room. The room appeared empty, but instinct told him that this was the right place.

He walked over to the right wall. As with most galleries of this type, very few works of art were actually on display at any one time, the purpose being to give each item plenty of space to maximise the impact. Most would be stored in the warehouse, and potential customers could browse online catalogues and make appointments to view specific items. The irony was that if the gang had replaced paintings in the warehouse rather than currently on display, their crime might have gone unnoticed for longer.
The paintings on display now would be replacing the fake paintings that had been used to conceal the theft. He stood in front of a still life of a young woman in a simple white dress with a blue sash, kneeling on the floor and half-reclined against a bed. The background was stark, just a few pieces of dark wooden furniture and a vase of flowers in the foreground. He glanced at the label: Late Spring; oil on canvas, by James Bland.

The finer points of art were something that eluded him; he understood the principles, but failed to appreciate the overall effects. The only art that had ever appealed had been music, with its focus on form and rhythm and the rules of notation. He played well – he knew he was technically brilliant – but the true challenge for him in the early days had been to perform with expression and a sense of interpretation.

What knowledge of visual art he retained was mostly as a result of investigating art-related crimes. He knew what was considered valuable enough to risk stealing and exactly which artists the forgers preferred to copy. He understood which types of visual art appealed to specific personality types and could use a person's collection of paintings or sculpture to deduce information about them. Beyond that, art left him cold. Mycroft had a greater interest, but it was essentially the appreciation of a connoisseur and collector of expensive pieces. He doubted that his brother's interest extended beyond knowledge of their investment value.

He stepped back a little, to take in the painting. Insofar as he cared for any art, this was not too bad, and he wondered whether John would appreciate it. He'd been caught out by the doctor's earlier revelation of his interest in art. The interest must have been fairly recent, or perhaps an old hobby that had been resurrected while he was away, because he certainly had no memory of John visiting art galleries for pleasure.

There was a creak of a floorboard behind him. He ignored the step, continuing to gaze at the picture. Let the killer come to him now.

The voice, when it came, was just a couple of feet behind him.

"So, you worked it out at last. I knew you would eventually. Well done, Mr Holmes."

Sherlock turned around slowly…

…And looked directly into the eyes of the young Canadian student, Ellie Bower.
Ellie's red-rimmed eyes were enormous in her white face, but she was surprisingly calm, despite – or perhaps because of - the thin cord knotted around her neck. It was pulled tight - not quite enough to restrict her breathing, but enough to remind her not to attempt to escape. Sherlock could see a thin red line on her neck and knew the killer had been testing his hold and checking the position of the cord. He had to suppress a hot flame of rage - it wouldn't help her now.

She emerged more fully from behind the panel, moving towards Sherlock very slowly and carefully. The cord ends were knotted together loosely at her back and held in the large, calloused hands of her captor.

As he emerged behind her, the mild mannered University librarian Philip Gleeson looked at Sherlock with a slightly self-deprecating smile on his face. It looked smug – but only looked. In fact, it was hard to tell which pair of eyes showed the most fear – those of the hostage or of her captor.

Nevertheless, he assumed a shaky air of bravado as he addressed Sherlock in an achingly predictable manner. The consulting detective might have rolled his eyes in disgust, except that he believed the girl to be in genuine danger – of Gleeson panicking as much as anything.

"Well, I knew you'd get there eventually. Once the police started including you in the case, it was only a matter of time. Out of interest, what did give me away?"

Sherlock didn't answer him immediately. His eyes were on Ellie, assessing her current state of mind. She was unnaturally still and her eyes were focused on him in mute appeal. His biggest fear at present was that she would collapse, or else suddenly break and flail to escape. He'd certainly be able to overpower Gleeson to prevent her death, but her oesophagus and vocal chords might be damaged irreparably in the meantime.

If she stayed calm…well, then he had time. Gleeson wanted to make his confession. He was that type of murderer – a small part of him appalled by his own actions, a bigger part wanting to justify his behaviour. He would tell all, with only the slightest encouragement from Sherlock. There'd be no further violence until he'd got it off his chest. Vital minutes for Sherlock to work out an escape plan.

He tried to reassure the girl with a faint smile before turning his attention to Gleeson. "There were several factors."

Gleeson nodded, as if so much was evident. "But the breakthrough moment?"

"The photograph on Ellie's phone," Sherlock replied, his eyes back on the young Canadian student. "No one knew that Lucio Diomato was involved in Mark Hodder's crime. He was careful not to speak to him at university; in fact, he was deliberately offensive towards Lucio to hide their association. Ellie thought that Lucio hated Hodder because he had humiliated him, but it was more than that."

His hand went to his trousers pocket and Gleeson tensed, gripping the cord. Sherlock pulled out his phone carefully, waving it at Gleeson.

"Do you mind? I'm not calling the police; they're on their way anyway. But you knew that, didn't you?"

This was a blatant lie; he had no way of knowing whether Lestrade was on the way or not. The odds suggested not, since he doubted the DI's ability to work out where he'd gone, even assuming he'd
received the message yet. He certainly hadn't called back.

However, Gleeson merely shrugged, as if the police's imminent arrival was a minor inconvenience. "Go ahead."

Sherlock thumbed through his photos to pull up the relevant one. He used the movement to hide the fact that he'd also activated a recording app – he might as well get the full confession for Lestrade now. "I saw something else in that boy's expression. Hatred, yes, but also fear. He hid it well, but it's there in his eyes as he looks at Hodder."

Sherlock looked up, first at Ellie and then Gleeson. "But who else saw that? Everyone else in the photo is facing the camera. More to the point, they are facing the cameraman." He met Gleeson's eyes. "The one question I forgot to ask Ellie when she showed me this photo was who took it. The entire group was in it, and I suppose I assumed she'd asked a stranger in the pub to take it. My mistake."

He smiled at Ellie, trying to exude an aura of calm that he didn't feel. "She'd never hand her new iPhone to a stranger in a pub. It was a gift from her parents, and she wouldn't risk giving it to someone she didn't know. So, there was someone else in the pub that night that she had already met - someone who wasn't part of the student group but whom she trusted instinctively. It could have been anyone from the University – it's the local, frequented by students and staff every night. But I believe it was you. The group had only been there a couple of days, and they hadn't met their lecturers yet. I double-checked the schedule. The courses started on Tuesday and the first two days consisted of administration, 'getting to know you' sessions, checking out books from the library, and so on, with the first lectures starting on the Thursday. By Wednesday night, the students had met the course organisers…and the librarian. And she liked you."

Gleeson smiled slightly. "They usually do," he admitted frankly, without any boastfulness in his voice.

"Yes – and why is that?" Sherlock eyed him. "Quite simply, it's because you're friendly, obliging and always ready to help when asked. Even outside work – you volunteer at the Globe from time to time, and also at Hampstead Heath, don't you? And you're always simply there at work – attending programme meetings, helping to plan. The perfect course librarian, in fact. Everyone knows and likes you - even the new students. You were there to help them find their feet during the first few days."

"You weren't there that night to meet them, though," he added, warming to his theme. "You wouldn't have gone there by yourself – drinking alone is not your idea of fun. So, you were there with someone else – but who? Location suggests someone from the University. But then, why the students union bar, why not meet at the University instead? Because you couldn't – or more to the point, your colleague couldn't. And why? Because you were discussing something that you couldn't discuss at work." He smiled, faintly. "You were with Dr Emma Rogers that night – and you were talking about the fact that she had just lost the University a considerable sum of money."

Gleeson seemed to relax slightly. He took a deep breath, his eyes flickering to the painting behind Sherlock.

"So you know about that? Well, you would – wouldn't you? It's what led you here." He nodded at the painting. "It's a beautiful piece of art, isn't it? He's an up-and-coming artist, of course. Not worth so much right now, but in a few years…"

"She had an eye for that kind of investment, didn't she?" Sherlock added. He had a brief memory of a solemn, seventeen year old Mycroft perusing the art pages of the Telegraph, and not out of any great aesthetic appreciation. Even then, his brother had kept an eye out for potential investments to
boost the considerable private income that had been set aside for him as soon as he reached the age of twenty one.

Gleeson nodded. "She had received a gift – a donation. Directly related to the summer school - it was from one of the parents - ." 

"Ironically, from Lucio's mother," Sherlock observed quietly.

"Was it really?" Gleeson showed genuine surprise for a moment, and Sherlock was struck by his coldly objective reaction to the mention of Lucio. He shrugged, dismissing the thought. "Well, anyway, Emma had this donation, but she hadn't declared it yet. Don't get me wrong - ," he gave Sherlock a sharp look " - she wasn't a criminal. She fully intended that the money should be invested in the University - eventually. She's an honest person."

Sherlock said nothing, tempted though he was to point out that non-declaration of a financial gift wasn't exactly honest. His eyes flickered quickly to the door behind Gleeson; the one he had entered by, which had closed again. If any retreat were possible, it was the only likely route. He knew from his observations outside that the other exits were heavily secured. He considered the prospect of having to drag a traumatised girl up two flights of stairs and down a fire escape, even assuming he was able to release her without danger... The alternative was to stand and fight, but the area wasn't ideal - too many obstacles, and always the risk that Gleeson could grab Ellie again...

Gleeson sighed. His grip on the cord had loosened a little; in fact, he was almost acting as if Ellie's presence had become irrelevant. Sherlock played up to this, deliberately directing his gaze above her head. He had the impression that her stillness had as much to do with a survival instinct as with her understandable fear.

If his grasp only went a little slack...already the cord was almost loose enough for Sherlock to hook a couple of fingers through. However, he was still a couple of steps away - if he lunged forward to grab the cord, Gleeson had time to tighten it again first. And, against that, was the danger of damage to his own hands, which would be a problem if he then had to fight...

"See, Emma's quite ambitious. She hates lecturing; what she really wants is a Deanship, preferably in research and development. She's got some great ideas. What she hasn't got is the financial clout. A donation of a few thousand...well, that's OK. But triple it, or even quadruple it, and people would start to take notice."

"So she tried to invest it in a piece of art," Sherlock stated.

The librarian nodded. "Yes. She kept an eye on sales and critical reviews. Her... her girlfriend, she's an artist and she knew who was exhibiting where. They went to auctions a lot – at first, it was just that Emma was thinking that the University might fund some new artist and, that way, get some publicity out of it. But then she changed her mind - she wanted to raise some money for the University. There's an artist she's interested in – a painter called Janet Smiley, who her girlfriend knows well. Smiley has managed to set up a small exhibition at the Viennale later this month – it will make her name. In just a few weeks, if the critics are favourable, her work will shoot up in value- the Viennale guarantees it. Emma felt sure it was a safe investment. She could sell the painting on in a couple of months for a big profit, and then declare the donation – which would be from a 'grateful parent' whose child had done well at the summer school."

He glanced at the paintings around him. "What do you think of them, Mr Holmes? Are you interested in art? They look real enough, don't they? But then, what's real? If someone's talented enough to produce an exact replica, good enough to fool the gallery's experts at first glance anyway, then why should their work be considered less valuable?" He smiled, faintly. "The forger must have
spent weeks on the paintings - visiting the gallery, working from images in catalogues. Incredible. Would you be able to tell?"

"No," he admitted, using the opportunity of a casual glance at the paintings to mask a quick examination of his surroundings. Would Ellie run if he managed to get her away from Gleeson's hold or would she be frozen by fear? Was there a hidden corner, a niche to which he could move her to relative safety while overpowering the other man?

"Neither would I. And Emma certainly couldn't. She bought the painting a couple of days before the burglary and arranged for it to be delivered the day after. The gallery didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. It was Sasha, Emma's partner, who noticed that something didn't seem quite right – something to do with a symbol that Janet uses on all her works. It was there, but it didn't look quite right. So they called Janet in, and she immediately identified the painting as a forgery."

"The stupid thing is that I begged Emma not to do it. I was terrified that she would get caught out. And I was right. Oh, the gallery will refund her, of course, but it's not something she can keep quiet. The authorities will find out eventually – she'll have to be a witness to the crime, and then it could be months before she gets the money back. And if the gift is not declared, the donor will start to wonder why they haven't received any official acknowledgment."

"Of course, she could use her own money to pay the donation, but the thing is, she's not as well off as she seems. She's invested a lot in Sasha's work – tuition fees, a studio, exhibition space and so on - but her career hasn't taken off, not like Janet's. And then things haven't been going all that well for them lately…" He paused. "That's why I was there that night. I don't much like pubs – you're right about that. But she couldn't talk at work, and she couldn't really talk at home either. She wanted my help. We were going to try to scrape the money together, but she seemed so...defeated. Not like the Emma I know at all. It had all happened so quickly – she'd picked up the painting on Saturday, discovered the forgery on Monday and it was only the following Wednesday that we went to the pub."

"You were right,' she said. 'I shouldn't have tried to be so clever.' I – I didn't know what to say. I felt - ."

He broke off suddenly, looking away, but Sherlock finished the sentence for him. "You felt guilty."

"You felt guilty," Sherlock continued, "because you had already known that a crime was going to be committed before it took place. You'd known since the morning after the party, thanks to a partly overheard conversation. Oh, you didn't know the full nature of the crime and you certainly didn't know Emma would have been affected by it. All you knew was that Mark Hodder, who you remembered from the party, was planning something illegal relating to the movement of paintings. You didn't even know who his accomplice was. You believed it was Elisabeth Kimmel…but as it turned out, you picked the wrong person for your first victim."

There was a tense silence. It was a dangerous moment and Sherlock could see that Ellie sensed it by the way her body stilled even more, if that were possible. He looked directly at the girl and gave a minute nod in the direction of the stairs. She didn't respond in any way, but her eyes were still on him. The cord around her neck slackened again and he could see the livid red marks.

"Yes," Gleeson acknowledged finally, heavily. "Yes, you're right. I did pick the wrong person."
He paused again, but Sherlock stayed silent, instinctively knowing that the librarian needed time to continue. He gave an involuntary shiver; for one moment, Sherlock thought he might drop the cord around Ellie's neck, but instead he gripped it more tightly, as if seeking support from it. His eyes dropped to the polished floor, unseeing, and he laughed, but it was a hollow sound.

"You don't think you're capable of doing certain things – certain acts. You know? I could never – if I imagined it for an instant, I didn't think I could ever do...that. I knew the technique – they taught us that back in the Territorials, exact angle and location for a 'quick kill.'" He swallowed. "That was self-defence, though...and they can never teach you how it feels. The – the sounds they make, the way they struggle. That moment when they go slack, when they stop...kicking."

Sherlock had a sudden memory of the scuff marks in the dust at the Globe and the look of terror in the young Italian's lifeless eyes.

Gleeson took a shuddering breath. "You believe that you could never go that far." He looked up at Sherlock with tortured eyes. "Do you believe that you don't have it in you to – to take someone's life?"

Sherlock looked back at him...and remembered looking in a mirror at his own, white face and shaking hands, stained by someone else's blood... His eyes back then had looked a little like Gleeson's now.

Gleeson's eyes took on a harder, more knowing look. "You have killed – haven't you? So you do know. Although, it was probably self-defence for you, right?" His face twisted a little. "In the army, when they teach you how to kill with your bare hands, they don't tell you how to feel afterwards. They probably do in the regulars, especially if you're going into a war zone, but I never got that far. I had no one to tell me whether what I felt was...right."

"What did you feel?" Sherlock's voice sounded croaky to his own ears.

Gleeson laughed again – or perhaps it was just a bitter cough. "That it was easy. Before you kill someone, you believe you could never do it. But once you have killed...well, you know that you could do it again, and again, and again..." He gave Sherlock an intense look. "Well – is that normal? Is that how you felt? Or is it just me?"

Before Sherlock could respond to this, he went on, speaking quickly. "Even the first one wasn't that hard, as it turned out. Even if I did make a mistake. She -," his nose wrinkled in disgust, "- she wasn't a nice woman. You should have seen her at the party. Repellent. Draping herself over practically every man there – and she's supposed to be married."

There was an odd note of old-fashioned outrage in his voice, and Sherlock realised that the man's true nature was starting to assert itself. Even when describing his reaction to killing, he had sounded reasonably sane, but now he appeared to be coming unravelled, and Sherlock's anxiety for Ellie increased.

He'd talked enough madmen out of committing a final act of revenge, but the stakes hadn't always been so high. His gaze flickered over those red lines on Ellie's neck – enough of a reminder, if one were needed, that there was no point in reiterating the fact that Gleeson liked Ellie. She was a departure from his previously selected victims, all of which he'd detested for different reasons, but was that reason enough to stay his hand? He feared that Gleeson was already beyond that point. Ellie was now no more than an object, to be disposed of as and when he chose.

He sought to keep his face as blank as possible. It would do no good to transfer his apprehension to either the killer or his potential victim. "She tried to interest you, didn't she?"
Gleeson snorted in righteous disgust. "She seemed just friendly at first. We talked about classical music, and she wanted me to recommend some concerts."

"Hence the opera at Kenwood," Sherlock prompted him. His eyes rested very briefly on the cord in Gleeson's fingers and its angle against Ellie's neck, carefully assessing the action needed if he was suddenly required to break her free. \textit{Just a little looser...}

"Yes." The librarian nodded. "I was going myself. She wanted us to meet there, but I was meeting some friends." He bowed his head in that falsely self-deprecating manner characteristic of him. "As you guessed, I do voluntary work on the Heath, and we – the volunteers – were meeting there before our annual party."

Sherlock nodded. That explained the evidence from the Heath that was found on Kimmel's body.

Gleeson paused, frowning in what seemed like genuine confusion. "I thought she was just another lonely overseas student. I offered to meet her afterwards for a quick drink – it would give me a chance to get out of the party early, since it can get a bit beery and I'm not keen on that kind of thing, and also we could discuss the opera. She seemed genuinely interested. But then she – she started getting a bit too... \textit{personal}. Did I have a girlfriend and if not, why not. Did I want to leave the party early, go somewhere more private..." He flushed, and Sherlock found himself reflecting on how it was that an apparently normal man's sense of morality could become so twisted that he felt murder was justified while casual flirting was not.

But then, as he was beginning to realise, Phillip Gleeson was really quite insane. He was no Moriarty, but this was the restrained insanity of a quiet man who had always sought to fit in. Had he always known, despite his words, that he was capable of such fits of murderous rage? How many years had he fought to control his tendencies? And how did he seek to justify himself now?

He gave the man a half-smile, possibly more of a grimace, although it was intended to convey empathy. "You must have been relieved when she gave up on you."

"Actually, it was Emma who, um, 'rescued' me," Gleeson admitted. "Some urgent business on the phone, which of course didn't exist. We stepped out for a couple of minutes just to get away from the woman, and it was then that Emma told me she'd bought that painting. I was – I must admit, I was pretty annoyed with her. I'd told her not to go through with it. We argued about it for a few minutes, and then Emma went back to the party. I hung around outside for a few minutes – I wanted to get some fresh air. And then \textit{she} came out with \textit{him}."

Sherlock noted the way that Kimmel's and Hodder's names were scrupulously avoided. To Gleeson, they had already become less than human.

"I remembered \textit{him} at the party, though I didn't speak to him myself. He'd had too much to drink and was getting a bit loud. And here he was with \textit{her}. They didn't notice me standing there, they were far too busy groping each other against the wall outside the building." His voice dripped with contempt. "When they walked away, she was practically propping him up - he was that far gone. To be honest," he added, thoughtfully, "I was a bit surprised when she went off with him. It was almost – well, it didn't look to me as if they had only just met. I mean, I knew what she was after. She couldn't have thought that he was in any condition to...well, \textit{you} know. If she was happy to go with him despite that, well, perhaps they were already partners – right? That's the impression I had, anyway."

He adjusted his grip on the cord to wave one hand, airily. "Not that I cared much. I was just confused by her behaviour and, frankly, quite relieved that they had gone. I didn't follow them," he added. "I just went back to the party. The atmosphere was more relaxed with \textit{him} gone."
His voice had turned reflective and he fell quiet, gazing at the floor again.

"So, the following morning," Sherlock prompted. "You saw Hodder again somewhere."

Gleeson's eyes flicked up at him again, almost startled, as if he'd forgotten that Sherlock and Ellie were still present. "Yes, that's right. I sometimes stop in a café on the way to work to get a takeaway coffee. I was later than usual because I was working the evening shift; it was just before eleven. I didn't see him until I'd given my order. I heard his voice first, and it seemed familiar.

"He was sitting in an isolated booth around the corner – I could only just see the back of his head by leaning right around, and I didn't dare move any further in case he saw me. I couldn't see who he was with, but I heard bits of what he said. What really drew my attention was him saying 'When I saw you last night, I just knew' – something like that, but I didn't catch the rest. It was noisy and I couldn't hear or see the person he was with. Whatever they said to him, he laughed and agreed that it was a deadly boring party and leaving early was the best decision. Then he said - and I heard this very clearly: 'Yeah, I saw you talking to her. Stuck up bitch. Thinks she's more important than anyone else just because she's got those degrees. Just wait till tomorrow night. You and me will be better off than her in no time.'

"The other person said something else, and he said 'Don't worry about it. It'll be easy enough for you. All you've gotta do is get those paintings out of the country. Leave the rest to me. You'll get your share once the money comes through.' The other person said something else, and he added: 'Trust me, these guys are professionals. Their painter's brilliant – it'll be days before anyone notices the real ones are gone.'

"At that moment, my coffee arrived, and I couldn't really hang around there any more. I could've gone around the corner and challenged him – but for what? He wasn't starting at the university until the following Monday and I had no good reason for talking to him. What he did in his own time was none of my business. And also, I thought – I assumed - that she was the one he was talking to. I saw them going off together, so it was reasonable to assume that they were having a late breakfast. And I didn't want to see her again – bad enough that I'd promised to meet her Saturday night.

"So I left. During the day, the more I thought about it, the more I felt sure that they were involved in a planned art robbery. I thought about calling the police, but what proof did I really have? A few overheard snippets of conversation? I thought they'd laugh. I could have talked to Emma, but she was in meetings all day. And I knew that she'd invested a lot in the summer school. The last thing she needed was to have one of the students arrested – and if he'd been innocent, he'd have probably sued us."

He shook his head. "Stupid of me, really. I still believed it was her with him, and I didn't know why she wanted to meet me on Saturday night. Was it some kind of alibi while they moved the paintings somewhere? But then why would she want an alibi the night after the robbery?"

"By Saturday night, I was…frustrated. I realised that there had almost certainly been an art theft somewhere in London the previous night, and it could have been anywhere. And the owners might not know for weeks, if they didn't notice the forgeries. It didn't occur to me that Emma might be affected – there's got to be thousands of museums, galleries and art shops in London, and that doesn't even include all the private collections. It was too late to contact the police –and what would I say, anyway? I decided I didn't want to meet her. I stood near the planned place and watched while she waited for me. She hung around for about fifteen minutes and then started walking across the Heath towards the ponds.

"I wasn't sure what to do. I felt…unsettled. Frustrated and angry. That…repulsive woman knew something, I just knew it. I had an idea that I could try to find something out. So, after agonising over
it for a while, I decided to catch up with her. I made some excuse – held up by someone. She seemed happy enough, but when I mentioned him, she clammed up right away. Said she didn't want to talk about him, she was much more interested in me. She was flirting quite blatantly. I couldn't understand it – she had a husband at home and appeared to have a casual partner, or whatever he was to her, right here in London. And yet, here she was, all over me again! Maybe it was just an act?"

He shuddered at the memory. "She – she just kept on at me. The comments – about my looks, hadn't anyone told me how sexy I was? About how she'd always had a 'thing' for librarians and for British men. Ridiculous – even I knew she couldn't be sincere – not about me. Women don't usually react that way towards me. And she kept giggling and deliberately bumping into me - and touching me, my arm, my leg, she even pinched my bottom. All I could think was that some obnoxious man had got away with a crime, and I couldn't do a thing about it or even tell anyone because then they'd want to know why I didn't call the police before, and – and then this stupid, shallow little bitch kept grabbing at me – and I tried to be polite at first and then even pushed her away firmly, but she wouldn't – she wouldn't stop and…"

He was gasping by now, his cheeks flushed as he remembered that night. His fingers clenched and unclenched reflexively on the cord and Sherlock glanced at Ellie, his concern growing again.

"I – I had a piece of cord in my pocket - it was from some parcels that I'd been opening in the office at Kenwood. I don't know – I don't know what finally made me do it. I don't remember. All I know is that one minute she was laughing and then the next, the cord was around her neck and she was making this harsh noise and was flopping around like – like a fish. But the main thing was she was quiet at last. The stupid cow had finally shut up, and that felt so, so good. And I kept going – I don't know why. There was...it was like a red mist in front of my eyes. And then she just went...still.

"I – the mist cleared away – and there I was, in the middle of the Heath, with this body in my arms. There was no one around – we'd wandered onto a side path, a short cut that I knew. I – I panicked a bit. I didn't know what to do. I could just leave her there, but what if someone had seen me catching up with her? And even if they hadn't, I must have left any amount of DNA evidence on her. I'd touched her bare arms, her dress, her neck... I needed to hide her away – remove the evidence.

"I knew of a ranger's hut nearby that isn't normally used at this time of year. I carried her there, shouldered open the door and left her inside, covered with a tarpaulin. Then I went home - I live near the Heath. I drive an old van – inherited it from my dad, he was an electrician – so I drove back near as I could get. I collected the body and some pesticide and got them back to my garage. Stripped the body, shoved the clothes in my wood-burner and sprayed the body. I was going to keep it in a crate until I worked out what to do."

He let out a shuddering breath. "Sunday was hell. I'd spent most of the night sorting out the body. I usually go to church Sunday morning, but I couldn't bring myself to do it. I went to the Heath, just walked and walked and walked until my feet ached. But still I couldn't sleep. And then, Emma phoned me Monday morning, in a panic. She'd found out about the picture, and didn't know what to do. So, I knew then that I was right. There had been a robbery and he had got away with it." He looked up at Sherlock, calming a little. "I still believed that she was his accomplice – and I went on believing it until Wednesday night."

Sherlock reactivated his phone and waved the photograph. He needed to take control of the conversation; Gleeson was getting dangerously unsettled. "I don't suppose you even wanted to take this photo. Dr Rogers had already left and you were worried about her situation. You were on your way out of the pub when Ellie spotted you. Worse still, the very man you blamed for Emma's problem was there too. But, despite your state of mind, you couldn't resist the request, and so you did
as she asked. When you took this photo, you saw that look on Lucio's face and recognised it for what it was. And, at that point, you realised that you'd made a big mistake."

Gleeson smiled, very faintly. "You're right, of course. Although I didn't really blame him at that point. I could see he hated Mr Hodder as much as I did. The man was a parasite. He'd been throwing his weight around at the University. Behaving like a complete idiot in the library on Monday – and I couldn't understand that either. His partner had gone missing and he hadn't even reported it, and didn't seem upset either! Emma was – was just devastated. And there he was, smirking at the camera, trying it on with one of those girls that were far too young for him. Just as repulsive as her…"

"Where did you kill him?" Sherlock asked, quickly. He could see that Gleeson was getting worked up again. "I know when – it was on Saturday 13th, because that was your next opportunity with your working hours. But where? How did you locate him – or did you get him to talk to you?"

Another shrug; again, one of those self-deprecating smiles. "You said it yourself, Mr Holmes. People can't help liking me - even if they shouldn't. A few days after that night at the pub, he went off on one at the library – shouting, chucking books around, before finally storming out. But then, the following week, I bumped into him at that same coffee shop. He acted as if nothing had ever happened. He was dressed in a smart suit and was perfectly pleasant. Said he'd made a few useful contacts recently. He seemed pretty pleased with himself.

"I was wondering what I could do to help Emma. We were struggling to find the money she needed to replace the donation, and we knew the story would come out soon, whether or not the donor started making noises about what had happened to her money. And here was the man responsible for her problem, offering me a coffee! I desperately wanted to say no; I couldn't bear the thought of spending even a minute in his company, but he insisted. Almost before I realised, I found myself sitting down with him.

"We talked for nearly an hour. He was utterly charming company – talked very knowledgably about architecture, asked me questions about the history of some London landmarks and listened attentively. He talked about his childhood in the States and then went on to speak about powerboats –said they were his real passion. I feigned an interest. An idea had come into my head – if he knew that his actions had had such a profound effect on Emma, perhaps he'd be willing to lend, or even give, her the money? I know that sounds crazy, but having spoken to him, it seemed to me that he wasn't such an unpleasant person as I had thought. He might be a chancer and a thief, but I was convinced that it might be possible to appeal to his better nature. And he appeared to have money and I was –well – quite desperate. It was only a few thousand – hard for us to raise on our University salaries, but it would be surely easy for him?

"So, I pretended to be interested, talking about the Sunseeker Rally – I'd heard a couple of colleagues going on about it. He said he was going to try to get tickets for it through a friend and was I interested in joining them? I said yes, and we agreed to meet for a drink on Saturday night. He was having dinner with some business associates in Hampstead Village, so it would suit us both since I live near there.

"I was…terrified. First of all, she was still in my garage and I had no idea what to do with the body. I was going to tell him that I knew what he had done and try to appeal to his better nature. If that didn't work, I would have to threaten to report him to the police unless he paid me off. Either option was risky. Anyway, we met at a little pub I know close to the Heath, and then I mentioned the gallery robbery, making it clear that I knew what had really happened. I saw by the look in his eyes that he knew exactly what I was getting at. He suggested a quiet evening walk on the Heath – obviously wanted to talk to me without being overheard."
Gleeson paused and gave a shaky laugh. "As soon as we were away from everyone, he…well, there's no other way to put it. He gave it to me with both barrels. If I'd thought his outburst in the library was bad enough… It was like he was two different people. Utterly charming and pleasant when he needed to be, but as soon as anyone crossed him…” He shook his head slightly, as if trying to dislodge the memory. "I'd made a massive mistake. He threatened to expose Emma's actions, to report me for accusing him of carrying out a crime when I had no proof. Some of it was probably bluster - he wouldn't have wanted to draw any attention to himself. But at the time, I was panicking. He threatened me physically too – pushed me against a tree. Got right in my face, was shouting, prodding my face with his finger. I pushed him away and tried to walk off, but he grabbed my arm, and…”

He broke off, looking at the floor for a moment before meeting Sherlock's eyes. "We struggled, but he was no fighter. Didn't know how to pace himself and was too busy attacking the obvious targets. I don't know that I meant to actually kill him," he added, thoughtfully. "It was just – it just felt…easy. Too easy... Afterwards, I had to shove his body under some bushes so I could fetch the van and get him to the garage. I stored him with her."

His gaze rested briefly on the back of Ellie's head, but he didn't seem to see her. "It could have stopped there. It should have. Only, the damned bodies wouldn't go away. You know? I thought they might decompose – actually I was dreading it. The idea of the flies, the smell…” He shuddered. "But after a couple of weeks, I was desperate for it to happen. One idea was to build a bonfire and burn the evidence, but it would have had to be a hell of a big fire to burn bodies. And but my neighbours are nosy and might have noticed something. And anyway, I…" He paused. "I'm not sorry they're dead. I can't pretend that I care about them – they were both repulsive individuals, and the world is better off without them. But they had families – her husband, his parents – who would want to know what had happened to them. They hadn't done anything wrong. So I decided that the bodies needed to be found."

He smiled at Sherlock. "The locations were significant, of course. The bookshop was easy – I'd helped the old man out from time to time, moving stuff around, so it was easy enough to steal the spare keys. The gallery was even easier. And did you enjoy the clues I left you?"

"They were...diverting," Sherlock ventured, cautiously. "Why kill Lucio, if you had meant to stop with Hodder?"

Gleeson's expression turned cold. "That spoilt little brat? He'd found me out. Turns out he'd known Hodder was meeting me. Hodder had told him he'd get his share of the money that night – said he was meeting his associates after having a quick drink with me. Lucio didn't trust him not to run off with all the money, so he'd lurked outside the restaurant. When Hodder didn't turn up, Lucio was convinced that something had happened. He knew Hodder well enough by then to know that he would definitely turn up for a payment. He wandered off, trying to find the pub that Hodder had mentioned, and ended up walking onto the Heath. He saw my van in the bushes and crept over to get a better look."

He sighed, almost in contrition. "The really stupid thing is that I had nothing against him personally. I knew he was involved with the gallery robbery, but he had obviously been influenced by Hodder. Since he hated the man so much, I didn't think he'd care about what had happened to him, but it turned out that he did care – if only because without Hodder, he wasn't likely to get his cut. So he tried to blackmail me. Not that I had anything to give him, but I promised him that I'd get the money if he gave me a few days. That was just before I moved the bodies. I'd managed to buy myself a few days and I felt safer once the bodies were moved, but he made it clear that, if I didn't give him the money he wanted by Saturday, he'd phone the police."
"I told him that I'd get the money from a friend who worked at the Globe. That wasn't entirely untrue – I used to do volunteer tours and some old colleagues were still there, including a friend who'd just offered to lend me the money for Emma. Anyway, it was probably the only way of luring him away from the University. I had some tickets and I suppose he thought he'd be safe in a crowd. I told him that we'd get the money from my friend backstage just before the performance."

Gleeson shrugged. "I guess you know the rest, anyway. I remembered the security codes from when I volunteered there. There were staff around backstage, just enough to make him feel safe, and no one bothers to challenge someone who obviously knows his way around." He gave an odd little smile. "Quite an appropriate location, don't you think? He was a failed actor; if he'd been more successful in his career, he wouldn't have come to London in the first place and – who knows? Maybe he'd have stood on that stage one day."

He paused, frowning reflectively. "I suppose…in a way I feel the most sorry about him. He was a spoilt, stupid boy, but he wasn't – he wasn't like the others. He wasn't corrupt. Not like them. He just…he made a mistake, don't you see?" he appealed to Sherlock. "He saw what I was capable of – he saw Hodder's body. If he'd had any sense, he'd have stayed well away from me. He didn't know – that's the problem."

"Know what?" Out of the corner of his eye, Sherlock saw the door behind Gleeson move, opening very slightly. He forced himself not to react in any way. His eyes went to Gleeson's hands, not liking the way that they were tightening slightly on the cord.

"Like I said earlier, Mr Holmes." Gleeson's voice was shaking as he adjusted his hold. "Once you start killing…it's easy."

Ellie's eyes widened in terror and, before Sherlock could react, Gleeson kicked her feet out and tightened the cord around her neck savagely.

Sherlock dived forward, his hands reaching out instinctively to hold the falling student up. As he did so, a single shot rang out, and he stumbled to his knees, holding Ellie's suddenly limp body in his arms.
Together

Dropping to his knees and trying to prop up the unconscious girl, Sherlock heard John swear under his breath as he ran across the room.

The doctor knelt next to Philip Gleeson, who was lying on his side, moaning and clutching his leg. At the corner of his vision, Sherlock could see a small puddle of red blood forming on the polished floor under the librarian's body and could tell that John had carefully aimed his shot to maim only. A part of him strongly resented the necessity for this pause besides Gleeson while Ellie's own wellbeing was in question, even if logic told him that John was acting responsibly. He moved the slumped-over girl onto her back and felt anxiously for a pulse.

"Just a flesh wound," John announced, after a cursory examination. "No major artery hit –which is more than you deserve, mate."

He shuffled on his knees across to Sherlock, his face grim. "Police are on the way – I called them before coming in. Paramedics too – better to be safe than sorry when it's bloody you. How's she doing?"

Sherlock was fumbling to loosen the cord as carefully as possible. He winced at the ligature injuries on Ellie's neck as John took over, gently checking her pulse and respiration. Sherlock saw that his friend's hands were already gloved as he removed the cord completely and laid it out on the floor for the forensics team to bag before returning his attention to the young Canadian student.

"Breathing's OK at the moment. Fainted – from the shock, I imagine." He raised her legs to encourage blood flow to the brain, propping her feet on Sherlock's knees, as he leaned closer to her neck to examine the ligature wounds. "These are nasty, but… I don't think there's any carotid damage. Wouldn't like to gamble on it though, and I'm not sure about the larynx… I don't like the fact that the bastard's obviously been playing around with her for a while, testing out strangulation positions. There might be internal swelling or a delayed collapse of the trachea…"

"My leg…" Gleeson moaned as he writhed, his face pale and glistening with sweat.

"Can bloody wait," John muttered between gritted teeth. He glanced up at Sherlock, his eyes hard. "I may have inadvertently shot through a nerve or two in my attempt to disable him without actually killing him. If you wanted to get any confessions out of the scumbag before Greg arrives, I'm not likely to notice."

"No need," Sherlock waved his phone. "All recorded."

"Ah," John nodded and returned his attention to Ellie, who was beginning to stir. "OK, Ellie, you're alright now. It's me - Doctor John Watson – we met earlier. You're safe. Don't move, just take it easy and breathe nice and slow. Don't try to speak. The ambulance is on the way."

Sherlock leaned over the girl. She looked at John without any sign of recognition, before her puzzled eyes moved to Sherlock and widened slightly in sudden panic.

"It's OK. Everything's OK now," he soothed, as he patted her arm, a little clumsily. John was so much better at this kind of thing. "He can't hurt you now. Just do as John says – keep still and breathe slowly."

The fear in her eyes dimmed a little, but then they turned glassy as her breathing grew a little harsher, with a slight check to each inhale. Sherlock saw John tense and lean closer still, his face tight with
anxiety. "Her larynx… where the hell is that ambulance…?"

The faint sounds of emergency sirens could be heard in the street outside. Sherlock stood and used the full adrenaline of his emotions to wreak havoc with the locks on the front door.

"You're a bloody idiot. You do know that, don't you?"

Sherlock lifted his head from his brooding perusal of the dark river to regard his friend.

John was propped against the wall of the Embankment, arms folded and head cocked in the interrogative and slightly bristling manner that usually pre-empted a full-on argument. He was drenched from the heavy rainstorm, which had only just abated; his usually spiky hair lying flat to his scalp and his jacket dripping. Sherlock noted belatedly that his own sopping wet clothes were clinging to him rather uncomfortably.

He also realised with a start that it was after midnight. The last couple of hours were currently a confused muddle in his head – a disordered collection of impressions that would require some sifting and sorting out before the important points were filed away in his mind palace. It bothered him – this sudden inability to immediately sort out and identify the valuable lessons from the miscellaneous facts that could be discarded.

Right now, his strongest memories were of seeing Ellie and Gleeson being loaded onto separate ambulances and then having to bring his fear and anger under control sufficiently to be able to explain his deductions to Greg and Sally - who were as frustratingly dense and disbelieving as ever until he produced the recorded confession. There was the awkwardness of John's gun to be explained away, which could hardly be concealed on the grounds that John was there, was clearly still armed with a gun that matched Gleeson's bullet wound and had, unfortunately, been recorded confessing to the shot by Sherlock's own phone – the detective having, at the time, been too preoccupied to switch it off.

As the arguments had grown more heated and it had looked increasingly likely that John was going to be arrested, Mycroft's car had drawn up at the kerb. Lestrade had said an extremely rude word and stalked over to the older Holmes brother just as he emerged from the back. After a brief and somewhat tense conference, he had returned, confiscated the gun, informed John with a glare not to leave the country and told the two of them to get the hell out of his sight until Monday morning first thing when "we will bloody well get this illegal gun business sorted out once and for all".

Sally had given Sherlock a surprisingly friendly wink before following Greg back to his car, leaving him so confused that he was only able to shake his head distractedly when Mycroft offered them a lift home in his usual supercilious manner. John had followed Mycroft to his car and spoken to him quietly, and had even, to Sherlock's further confusion and Mycroft's obvious distaste, clapped him soundly on the shoulder before returning to Sherlock.

As the street grew quiet, save for a few constables guarding the crime scene and forensics taking their usual samples, the two men had wandered rather aimlessly towards the Thames. It was at such a point that Sherlock would normally assess John's nutritional requirements and current menu of choice before locating a suitable restaurant or takeaway shop in his mind palace…but on this occasion, he could sense a tension between them that would not be resolved by a blithe offer of Chinese food.

He became aware that John was still propped against the railings, waiting patiently for his reply.

"I couldn't wait for you. He might have killed her in the meantime," he pointed out.
"No, he wouldn't." John gave him a shrewd look. "I don't pretend to know anything about that little shit's motivation, but I do know you, better than you think. If you'd thought for a single minute that she was in immediate danger, you'd have called the police as soon as you knew where to send them. You're not that much of an idiot. No – you knew you had time. You knew he wouldn't do finish it until you were there. Which meant you also had time to send me one sodding text." He sighed in weary resignation. "You're just bloody lucky that I knew where to find you."

It was on the tip of Sherlock's tongue to say he'd had the situation under control, but since that would only make John laugh, he instead asked: "How did you know?"

"Psycho." John gave him a wry look. "You don't know him, and I strongly doubt that's the name he was given at birth, especially since a distinctly middle-class accent keeps slipping out from beneath the tattoos and numerous piercings whenever he forgets that he's supposed to be hard. Anyway, I did 'Psycho' a little favour a while back when one of his mates got an infection from some broken glass. And 'Psycho', for all his posturing, ironically has a strong sense of justice and an equally strong dislike of men who beat women up – I rather think that might be a clue as to why he's not still living at home with Mummy and Daddy and revising for his 'A'-levels…but I digress. It's why he sent for me when one of his gang, who was begging somewhere right about here, reported seeing a girl being taken out of the back of a parked van and forcibly marched up Northumberland Avenue. Talking of which…"

He turned away from Sherlock and walked towards a shadowy figure lurking under Waterloo Bridge. Sherlock saw him exchange a few words with the individual – impossible to tell from here whether it was male or female – and then pull a small package out of his pocket and hand it over.

"Not money, if that's what you're thinking," he informed Sherlock drily as he returned. "I'm not like you – I never give them money. I know where it's likely to be spent and, unlike you, I actually care whether or not my money is being used to fuel a heroin addiction."

The acidic comment was a little unfair; it was not as if Sherlock encouraged drug addiction, but he decided let it pass, merely raising an interrogative eyebrow.

John sighed. "It was methadone. That kid back there, Mouse – Mickey's his real name – I've been trying to get into regular rehab, but he won't turn up, so this is the next best thing. I've had the tablets on me for a couple of days, waiting for an opportunity pass them on… Anyway, his brain's not as scrambled as it could be, fortunately, so when he saw the two of them and noticed that she seemed less than keen, he told Psycho, who sent for me. They don't get on with the police, as you can imagine, but occasionally they pass things on to me, and I let Greg know. At the moment, they're squatting in the cellar of a partly burnt-out house just off Southwark Street.

"Of course, I had no reason at first to think this had anything to do with our case. It took me a good while to get the full story out of Mouse, but as soon as he said that it looked as if she was being forced and that he thought he saw something like a rope around her neck, alarm bells began to ring. When I got a better description of the girl, I guessed it might be Ellie, because she has quite a distinctive appearance. I didn't recognise Gleeson from the description – to be honest, I didn't give him a thought – but from what Mouse said, he didn't sound like the type of person that a would-be Goth would be hanging around with. They just sounded like an odd couple and the possible glimpse of a rope was a worry. Anyway, I was just quizzing him about where they went when you rang, but the reception around there was terrible. When I heard which direction they were walking in, I guessed there was a connection with the gallery, but I wasn't absolutely sure. While I was running to the main street to try to find a taxi, I tried ringing you again, but I couldn't get anything but emergency calls."
He grinned suddenly. "I then thought of trying Mycroft's number - and it worked. Might've bloody
known - his number would probably be accessible from a nuclear bunker. He tried to ring you, but
you didn't reply, so he traced your location and texted me regular updates on where you were going.
I finally managed to get a taxi at London Bridge – by which time, your taxi had just stopped at the
gallery. The rest you can guess. I walked around the side, saw that open fire escape door and called
the emergency services before following you in." He paused. "It was pure luck that I had my gun
with me. Since…well, since what happened at Bart's, I've tended to carry it around more often,
especially if I'm out on an investigation with you."

He glared at Sherlock. "So…now you've got my story, are you going to answer my question?"

Sherlock rubbed the back of his neck, feeling unutterably weary. "Which was?"

"About you being a bloody idiot and whether you're aware of the fact." Despite the glare, there was
no real rancour in John's voice.

"Because I didn't ring you before going in?" Fatigue and worry about Ellie made his tone sharper.
"It's not the first time, John – and probably won't be the last. I thought you said that you knew me
better than I imagined."

John blinked at this. "Actually, I wasn't thinking about that. Not that I'm not basically pissed off that
you didn't bother, but I'm used to that by now. And so is Mycroft, which is why he tends to help me
out. I think he knows all too well that its best if I know where you are at any given time, and am
ready to jump in with a gun if needed." He stopped, frowning thoughtfully. "Actually, that's a bit
worrying, now I come to think of it. I feel like I'm working for the sarky git these days."

Despite the circumstances, Sherlock felt his lips quirk slightly. "It'll be confirmed when he replaces
your gun. And he will, of course. Same model…probably same gun, in fact."

John shook his head, regretfully. "I don't know about that. Greg looked pretty fed up this time…
What? What is it?"

Sherlock was staring into thin air, his mouth hanging open in disbelief. "She knew. That's why she
winked at me! How did she know?"

"What are you on about now?"

"Sally." He shook his head, even more confused. "She knows that my dear brother has some
influence over Greg – and that he'll have to find a way of getting your gun back to you without his
superiors finding out. That's what she meant, just before she left. She was telling us not to take his
threats too seriously."

John let out a huff of amusement. "That ought to annoy her even more – especially if Mycroft really
does have that much power over Greg… What does he have on Greg, anyway?"

Sherlock snorted derisively. "Who knows? I suspect it's more a case of Greg's unending gratitude for
the continuation of his career."

John sobered suddenly. "Poor Greg. He has suffered a lot by his association with you."

"Mmm." It was not a topic of conversation that the consulting detective cared to pursue.

"On the other hand…" John's tone was light – apparently unconcerned. "He's also got a lot out of it
when you think about it. Lots of 'unsolvable' cases solved – doesn't look too shabby on his record.
But I don't think Greg Lestrade would continue associating with you just to further his own career.
He's not that self-centred."

Sherlock looked away from his friend quickly. John's eyes were a little too knowing for his liking.

"See, that's the thing about you," John continued, casually. "You're a magnet – aren't you? For the likes of Moriarty – the criminals, the mass murderers, the psychopaths… tonight, Phillip Gleeson, tomorrow – who knows? They're drawn to something in you. You think it's just your genius - that they feel threatened by it or fascinated perhaps, and want to challenge it or own it… but I don't agree with you. I think that what really fascinates them is that small difference between you and them – that little scrap of humanity that you possess and they don't. It's the small difference that leads to them destroying people's lives while you use your skills to try to stop them. They don't think that they crave that humanity," he added, thoughtfully, "but they do. Even Moriarty. His resentment of - and desire for - that little spark in you made him want to destroy you. Without it…" He shook his head, "you'd just be another criminal – albeit one with an extremely brilliant mind – for him to manipulate."

"You've given this a lot of thought, haven't you?" Sherlock responded sharply, to disguise his surprise at John's unusual perspicacity.

"Hah!" John was unconvinced, as Sherlock might have guessed he would be. "I've had plenty of time to, believe me. And then… there are the rest of us. Me. Greg. Molly. Dear old Mrs H." He laughed slightly. "Perhaps there's something wrong with us too, eh? Maybe we're also drawn to you by something that we lack? Other than your genius, I mean," he added, sarcastically.

"That hardly seems likely," Sherlock muttered.

"And there you go again," John muttered, rubbing his forehead. "D'you know what really bothers you about tonight? And why I think you're a bloody idiot? OK, then, tell me - why did you rush into the scene tonight without waiting for back-up?"

"I told you!" Sherlock clenched his fists compulsively, irritated by John's didactic delivery even as he was impressed by the unusual level of insight. "He had Ellie and he would have killed her if I hadn't turned up."

"But he wanted you to see it, didn't he? Wanted to unburden himself first – so she was always going to be safe until you got there. In that sense, there was no great rush." John was watching him carefully. "Why do you think he selected Ellie?"

"She's bright. Dangerously so. It was only a matter of time before she put all the clues together and worked out who the killer was. It was Ellie who told me that Lucio had disappeared."

"Yeah, but you're missing my point - why select her for you to witness? Why not just lure her somewhere quiet and kill her? Because he saw you with her, outside the library – and he could see that you cared about her."

"I'm not - it's not what you -," Sherlock ran his hand through his unruly wet hair, frustrated. "It's… She reminds me of… someone. That's all." He remembered the sullen, unhappy little face, the awkwardness of a girl surrounded by imbeciles who didn't understand or appreciate her sharp intellect, who had spent years being laughed at by her peers for being far too clever for her own good. He remembered looking at her and recalling how it felt all those years ago – a square peg trying to fit into a round hole.

"It's alright, Sherlock, I do know you haven't gone and fallen in love with a girl less than half your age," John replied, wryly, and then added, more gently, "She's going to be OK, by the way. Once they intubate her, they'll be able to assess the damage. But she's young and fit. She'll make a full
recovery."

He cleared his throat, meaningfully. "Anyway, he knew you'd come for her. That's why he took her, to guarantee your attention. And that's what worries you – isn't it? You think that all this -," John tapped the side of his head, "gets scrambled by this," pointing at his heart.

"Going by past evidence, I would say that it must," Sherlock snapped. "You know how I operate, John! If I don't get distracted by the victims – if I don't care – then I get results. You don't like it and Lestrade's minions certainly don't. But that's irrelevant. Sally can call me a freak as much as she likes, but even she has to acknowledge that what I do works."

"And you think that caring about someone means it won't?"

Sherlock waved a hand, a little randomly. "Moriarty. The swimming pool, the rooftop. Mycroft was right all along." He shook his head. "Moriarty knew how to play me, he knew my weaknesses. You. Lestrade. Mrs Hudson. But…mostly you." He gestured between them vaguely, hoping John would understand without further explanation.

John nodded, his expression softening. "I can see why that would worry you. But…Sherlock, are you absolutely sure that caring is a weakness? Isn't it a strength, instead?"

Sherlock stared at him. "Haven't you been listening to what I've been saying? The pool -.

"Yes, OK, let's take the pool," John interrupted. "What really happened there? Moriarty had me, so he thought he had you too. He saw me as your weakness – thought you'd do anything he wanted, just to keep me safe. But I know you, Sherlock. You were startled, yes, but you were still able to think. To buy us time. And you made the right decision, aiming the gun at that bomb. If it had gone off, I was prepared to launch you sideways into the pool. We might even have survived, who knows? But, the point is, it never would have, would it? You were bluffing him. Even at that moment, you were able to work out that he was playing with you, trying to make you give in. You challenged him right back – and you won. That phone call, right at that moment? Very convenient. Gave him a chance to walk away and not look as if he was giving in to you."

He grabbed Sherlock by both shoulders suddenly and shook him a little, pushing his face close to the startled detective's. "You did what you had to do – and you did it brilliantly, Sherlock! And the roof? Extraordinary. I could never have pulled that stunt off - I still don't know exactly how you did it, but I know I'd never have had the presence of mind to work it all out. And what I also know is this: you didn't do it alone. You had people – friends! – helping you. Molly, your homeless network… they helped you because they cared about you."

His hands slid down Sherlock's arms, tightening almost painfully. "And I would have helped you too, anyway I could. If only I could have been there – I know I couldn't, I know you had to do it this way, because it was all part of some grand plan, but -." He let go of Sherlock and stood back a little, his eyes glistening suspiciously. "I would have done anything to help you, because I'm your friend, you daft git. And that makes you your strength, not your weakness, whatever Moriarty or bloody Mycroft may think. I said it back then and I'm saying it now – alone doesn't protect you, friends protect you."

Abruptly, he turned towards the river, rubbing his face. "Well – say something, then. Tell me I'm being ridiculously over-emotional." His voice was a little muffled and from what Sherlock could see of his face, he looked flushed – with embarrassment, probably.

"I…” He swallowed. "Actually, I'm genuinely unsure what to say."
John snorted without looking around. "You mean I've finally left Sherlock Holmes lost for words?"

Sherlock pulled a face as he stepped up alongside John to lean on the railing. "Well, it has been a long day."

"You can bloody well say that again."

Both men looked down at the dark, fast-flowing river for a while, before Sherlock broke the silence.

"To be honest, I didn't think you'd still be here – with me. I believed you would move on with your life while I was away - get married, have children, have all the things you've always wanted. Settle into a permanent job without me around to mess things up. You used to complain about it in the past – the way I dominated your life. What changed?"

John shrugged, not looking at him. "I went back to war, that's all. I stopped being someone who was being dragged along for the ride and became a foot soldier again. I had to. I couldn't do much, but…"

His voice faded away, but Sherlock replied, a little gruffly.

"You did. More than you'll ever know."

John turned his head and smiled at Sherlock. "Thank you. It means a lot to know that. You know – the Network, they're as much yours as they are mine. They'd still do anything for you – if you asked. And so would Molly and Mrs H. And Greg – and I think even Sally, if you'd let her. And me, of course."

"I didn't think you'd want to, anymore," Sherlock said, awkwardly. "You didn't seem to want to… you've changed."

"I've had to change," John replied, softly, as he looked back at the river. "It was that or be dragged along with the current. You know, before you fell from that roof, I was always one step behind you. It was all about you – I was either marvelling at your genius, or moaning because I didn't understand what was happening, or getting pissed off with your attitude. But after you fell, when I was left alone, I had to take stock. No one was there to order me around anymore, no one made their deductions, told me where to find the truth. You might have needed help at any time, for all I knew, so I had to be ready for anything. Do you see? It wasn't a matter of enjoying the chase anymore – of just going along with the ride. It was a matter of necessity." He shrugged. "I'm a soldier by profession, I guess. A doctor first, but a soldier second. And a good soldier knows when to have fun and enjoy the chase, but he also knows when it's time to get serious. Doesn't mean I don't still want to be doing what I'm doing."

"And now I'm back?" Sherlock observed John closely.

"Now?" John looked up at Sherlock again, cocking his head in that characteristic manner. He sighed, but his smile was brilliant in the streetlights. "I'm still here."

Sherlock looked back at him, running his eyes over the familiar features. A little older, a little greyer, the posture a little straighter, the expression more confident, the eyes keener. There were new lines that spoke of sleepness nights and pain that could never be forgotten. The Fall had changed him, there was no doubt of that... and yet here he was. Still fundamentally John Watson.

There were things to do, so many things. Put pressure on Mycroft to get John's gun back. Talk Lestrade into giving him some cold cases. Charm Sally just enough to get access to her crime scenes – she didn't seem quite so clueless these days, so he might be able to tolerate a new DI. See Molly to
get some body parts to experiment with. Buy Mrs Hudson… well, whatever John thought might be best – a bunch of flowers, perhaps? Or some perfume.

And then there was Ellie to visit, to make sure she was well. If she decided to stay in London, and Sherlock rather thought she would, he might just have some work for her. What with John working longer hours and not quite so available, they could do with a fresh pair of eyes, someone a little more in touch with younger people. Perhaps it was time to train someone up…

But all that could wait until tomorrow. Right now, looking at John, he could think of only one thing to say.

"Dinner?"

John grinned back at him before turning away to walk towards Westminster. "Starving. And I just bet you know a good Chinese round here that's still open."

He laughed, his heart lighter than it had probably been in years, and pushed himself off the railing to follow in John's footsteps. "Always."

The End

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!