**The Rudest Man In London**

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**The Rudest Man In London**

by hobbitsdoitbetter

**Summary**

London, 1895

All newly-minted heiress Molly Hooper wants to find is an agreeable husband and a patron to keep her father's East End clinic going.

What she encounters is a rather ridiculous detective in an equally ridiculous hat.

But thanks to an unintentional faux pas with said idiot, she is now stuck in an engagement with the person The Times has dubbed, "The Rudest Man In London."

How will her reputation survive? Will she really want it to?

And what will happen if this supremely inconvenient marriage of convenience turns into something more?

**FINAL CHAPTER ADDED: WOOHOO!**
An Affair To Forget

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CHAPTER ONE: AN AFFAIR TO FORGET

London, 1895

"The Knights are to be congratulated," Ms. Mary Morstan murmurs in Ms. Molly Hooper's ear. "Without any effort whatsoever, they have managed to throw the most boring party of the Season. Brava."

Molly shakes her head, gives another quick shake of her fan. The heat in the room is becoming unbearable, and the tightness of her blue silk dress, let alone the corset beneath it, is not helping matters. "Oh, hush," she admonishes, rather than dwell on it. "They'll hear you."

Mary grins wickedly. "We can only hope. Some scandal might improve the evening."

And the other woman shoots her a cheeky wink, carefully linking her arm in Molly's and walking her through yet another turn at the edge of the ballroom's dance floor.

Her words are directed, sotto voce, to Molly's bowed head.

The crowd parts for them, most of the gentlemen shooting Mary appreciative smiles and glances; Those few who don't know who she is completely ignore Molly, something which the young heiress can't help but feel relieved about. Mary however doesn't notice, instead back at all and sundry in her bright, friendly fashion, though she keeps most of her obvious attention for the matrons and mamas of the Ton-

After all, they’re the ones you don’t want to alienate.

And if Mary is to gain her goal for this Season- that of finding herself a wealthy, half-agreeable husband- then she had best keep on the good side of that would-be suitor's matriarch.

Not, Molly thinks, that that will be any challenge for her friend. Vivacious, charming and clever, Mary Morstan is exactly the sort of bride most mothers would choose for their sons- Particularly if those sons are to inherit estates which they are far too silly to run themselves. In fact, the young woman provides a most unflattering comparison for Molly: Despite her lack of fortune- she comes from an Army family, one recently fallen on hard times but with an illustrious pedigree stretching back to before Cromwell- Mary can be everything that is agreeable to both a man and his Mama, so much so that Molly often envies her.

After all, Mary never gets tongue-tied or nervous or says stupid things to people she really needs to think highly of her, if she is to stay in society.

Mary never, ever blurts out evidence of her ill-gotten medical degree when she is around gentlemen, no matter that she seems to have almost as good a knowledge of anatomy as Molly herself and will never explain why.
And Mary never gets so nervous that she tries to actively flee a ballroom, a tendency of Molly's which has already elicited a great deal of gossip and no small amount of cruel, whispered jibes from the Season's debutantes-

No, Mary is a lady. So much more so than Molly knows she will ever be, her late father's wishes and her unexpected inheritance from Great Aunt Georgiana be damned. 

\textit{That such a fact was of no interest to the young Ms. Hooper before her father's death is something on which Molly would rather not dwell.} 

So she decides not to dwell on it, nor indeed on anything unpleasant. She even elects to ignore Mary's comment about the Knights' party, if only because she can see their hosts' heir, poor Sir Henry Knight, being shooed in her direction by his Mama though it's obvious he doesn't want to go. Molly can't say she blames him: The mumbling, hesitant young gentleman engineer has trouble speaking with most people, let alone women. She and he have already attempted small-talk once before and once was more than enough. Between her crippling shyness and Henry's natural reserve they had barely uttered more than three sentences for the entirety of the endeavour, and had both all but fled the drawing room in which it had taken place. 

Molly had been able to see his embarrassment and hesitation: She knew he had not intended to be rude to her when they spoke. But she also knows that re-enacting the endeavour now is unwise—Deeply unwise—

And besides, she suspected Henry has his eye on someone else, someone far more interesting than Ms. Molly Hooper (not, Molly muses, that such a thing is difficult). For the young man has spent the entire night shooting clandestine little looks at the ball's true star, the Dowager Countess Anthea Utterwood—

And for once Lady Anthea appears to be looking back at him. 

\textit{Well, well, well, Molly thinks. That's not something that you see every day.} 

For Lady Utterwood never shows any particular favour to men: At nine and twenty she is a strikingly handsome woman, a diamond of the first water with the proportions of a classical statue and the charisma of an opera diva. There is not a man in society who doesn't want her, but she doesn't appear terribly interested in them—And why would she be? 

\textit{She is more than fascinating enough,} Molly has always thought, \textit{to keep herself occupied.} 

Rich, educated and brilliant, Lady Anthea outshines \textit{all} in her orbit. 

For this reason, Molly always feels vaguely… boyish in her presence. \textit{Scrawny.} Artemis to her beautifully formed Aphrodite, a comparison which even the normally self-confident Mary has grudgingly admitted to understanding. Molly knows that neither she nor her friend are alone in that reaction: The thinly-veiled rage with which the party's debutantes are staring at the woman is enough to convince her of \textit{that}. Beneath all that white satin, the sweet little girls of the Ton are furious at having their thunder stolen by the glamorous, scarlet-dressed widow and they have not the slightest idea what to do about it—

For their cruelty to her, Molly can't help but be a little amused at their ire. 

And yet, she can't help but feel a twinge of… unease, as she watches Lady Anthea give Sir Henry what would, from anyone else, constitute the glad eye.

\textit{Poor Henry isn't going to know what's hit him,} she muses.
And Molly is not entirely convinced that's a good thing.

For Sir Henry really isn't the sort of man Lady Utterwood has ever before favoured: Since she'd lost her husband three years ago the young widow has spent her days and her money entertaining scientists and artists, bohemians of the highest order. Poets rub shoulders with political thinkers in Lady Utterwood's house, discussing the important questions of the day and debating their theories until the early hours of the morning, their chatter fuelled by brandy, absinthe and God knows what else. But an invitation to "The Merry Widow's," salon is still amongst the most sought after by the Ton, mainly because it is almost impossible to come across; Lady Utterwood, being completely unimpressed by either wealth or breeding, only accepts genuine brilliance amongst her circle.

And since few in the Ton are genuinely brilliant- and since even fewer know what actually goes on at those gatherings- the rumours get more wild and (in Molly's opinion) less likely to be true with each season.

The one about the infamous adventuress Irene Adler being a regular visitor is, she believes, amongst the most ridiculous she's yet heard.

As she thinks this, Molly watches Lady Anthea surreptitiously, wondering whether she should warn the Knights of her suspicions- Though to what end? Sir Henry certainly wouldn't be impressed. And this really isn't her business, after all. He's a grown man.

Besides, she must allow that at least some of her reaction to the other woman is jealousy; She is, quite frankly, everything that quiet, mousy Molly Hooper is not, no matter that that same Molly Hooper now miraculously has an income of £20, 000 a year. As she thinks this her gaze turns inwards, the old, familiar guilt pressing in on her as she contemplates the unexpected turn her life has taken-

"Careful, darling," she hears Mary whisper, the blond woman lowering her head so that her words can't be heard. "You're staring at poor Henry and scowling; people will get it into their heads that you have some sort of tendre and you're angry he's paying attention to Lady Utterwood."

Molly blinks and shakes her head, not because she doubts Mary but because she knows her friend is right. The Ton, having little to amuse themselves with besides parties and gossip, can make the most massive of mountains out of the most miniscule of molehills. And she doesn't want to get poor Henry into any sort of bother: He'll have bother enough, she knows, if he's pining for the Season's most sought after prize.

Though it would appear that prize may be pining for him too, something which Molly can't help but doubt.

So she averts her eyes, turns her attention back to Mary. "Can't have that," she murmurs, and the other woman gives her shoulder a small, sympathetic squeeze, smiling at her again. She knows she hates these parties, just as she knows that Molly feels she has to come. Since she became unexpectedly wealthy it has been impressed upon her repeatedly that she had best find herself a husband. If nothing else, it will mean there is someone with whom her bankers will actually communicate. And so she must step into what the girls her father worked with in the East End term, "The Matrimonial Noose." It is a matter of necessity.

But everyone she encounters is such a terrible… bore. The hunting and fishing set are not interested in a formerly poor, female doctor, except for the wealth her inheritance might provide. They look at her and see nothing but a nonentity at best and a social climber at worst, a reaction which is disheartening to say the least. And at least those gentlemen are politely disinterested in their avarice: Those of a more mercenary nature have taken to coaxing, flattering or occasionally trying to drag her
bodily into empty rooms in an attempt to ruin her reputation and force her into marriage-

It's why she'll only attend these parties with Mary now: The other woman is, essentially, her bodyguard.

That her protectiveness means she gets to mix with a higher class of suitor than she might otherwise meet is Mary's reward for her good-heartedness.

"How about we take a turn down to the ladies' relief room?" Mary asks then, correctly reading Molly's distaste for the gossips in her darkening expression and silence. (She is remarkably adept at that).

"Could we?" Molly asks. "And we'll make a point of not looking upset and chatting to everyone, just to take the sting out of any incipient rumours."

Mary's smile widens. "You see, that's where you and I differ, Molly," she says. Her eyes turn wicked. "You're always looking to avoid trouble."

"-And you're always looking to encounter it." Molly has to grin. "You're addicted to danger, do you know that?"

The blond woman nods. Her answering smile is splendidly cheerful.

"Exactly," she says. "Which is why we're such good friends: I'm always hell-bent on adventure, and you're always here to help me hold my demure, ladylike course."

At the use of the word ladylike in describing her friend Molly snorts and Mary's eyes twinkle with glee.

One of the Ton matrons throws them a disapproving look at both women have to fight back an unexpected fit of giggles.

"Between the pair of us, we're practically the perfect woman," Molly says. The young doctor is having a great deal of trouble keeping a straight face. "So come out and get some fresh air, and leave the gossips to their fodder… I'm sure Sir Henry will survive our absence."

Mary grins. "I'm sure he will," she says dryly. "Poor lamb."

"Poor lamb, indeed."

And with that the two friends head off, in search of the ladies' refreshment room. The darkness, and the quiet, and the lack of irritating, mercenary men and society Mamas awaits—It will, Molly muses, a rare moment's peace.

Thinking that anything she does tonight will be peaceful turns out be her first mistake of the evening, however.

For it is on her way to the ladies' room that providence elects to jump out at her, and it takes the form of a rather odd man better known for wearing a rather odd hat.
CHAPTER TWO: FRATRICIDE, CONSIDERED

"Why am I here, Mycroft?"

Sherlock Holmes, Consulting Detective and Extremely Bored Younger Brother glares at his Elder Sibling, his best friend John Watson at his elbow; That Mycroft (the Elder Sibling in question) isn't impressed with this reaction does not exactly promote a sense of filial harmony, and he wishes to share this fact.

That John doesn't give a toss, and rather wishes his friend would just shut up and ask someone to dance is likewise obvious to all and sundry- Not that Mr. Holmes the Elder notices.

"I often ask myself why you're here, Sherlock," the older man opines instead. His tone is long-suffering as he swirls his brandy in its glass. "I have decided you are a trial, sent to me by the Almighty in order to make me a better man…"

He sniffs, turns to look down his nose at Watson.

"Either that, or you are proof that we live in a Godless universe. I'll take either answer, really."

Sherlock snorts. "Whereas I regard you as proof that the Almighty has an odd sense of humour," he says. "And that Mummy's creative abilities improved with age-"

At these words he turns and, much to Mycroft's chagrin, gives John Watson a roguish wink.

Knowing that it will annoy the older man, John winks back.

"Won't you two ever behave like grownups?" Mycroft asks despairingly as two older (though extremely well preserved) matrons shoot John what can only be describes as a glad eye. The appreciative glad eye.

This time it's John who grins, raising his glass playfully to the women and turning 360 degrees to watch them go by.

They titter behind their fans as they sashay away and he smiles more widely, feeling proud as punch with himself.

Mycroft merely looks disgruntled.

"Not likely," the army doctor says, rather than give Mycroft the chance to start into one of his lectures. "Acting like a grownup isn't any fun." Mycroft opens his mouth to snap out a retort but John speaks over him. "Besides, you told us we absolutely have to be here and here we are. What do you want with us?"

He gestures to the Dowager Countess Utterwood, being thronged by her multitudes of admirers.
She's handling them admirably, their puppy-eyed host Sir Henry Knight in particular.

"Or is it that you think Lady Anthea needs our help?" he continues, "Because somehow I doubt it-"

Mycroft shoots him a look of deepest scorn at that.

Sherlock seems quite amused by it.

"In choosing between who needs help, you or Lady Anthea, the smart coin will always be placed on you, my dear Doctor Watson," Mycroft says severely. The older man looks over at his protégé with an expression which, on any other man, might be considered admiration. Maybe even… affection. The lovely young widow gives no indication that she's seen it, but both John and Sherlock suspect she has. "And as for why you're here, if Sherlock can't deduce it then I shall start asking Mummy for proof we're actually related-"

"Of course you're related," John interrupts. "You're both afflicted with a similarly massive amount of intelligence and a similarly miniscule amount of sense.

And you're both have the same shaped head."

Mycroft and Sherlock both shoot the doctor a darkly affronted look, which John responds to with bland innocence, rocking back on his heels.

He may have even whistled.

He enjoys winding his best friend, as well as his former- now secret- commander up and he's not going to stop just because said commander has developed a puss.

If he wants to wander around with a face like a smacked arse, then that's his business.

Mycroft opens his mouth to snap something back but Sherlock interrupts him.

"Come, brother," he says instead, almost jovially. "That expression you're wearing is practically an engraved invitation for a ribbing: Asking John not to notice is like waving a red flag in front of a bull."

Mycroft actually gives a tiny sputter of outrage, at which both Sherlock and John both give louder sputters of amusement.

Their games are so much more fun when the audience is allowed to participate.

"Since nobody here present wants to picture that though," Sherlock continues blithely, "how about you narrow down which one of Henry Knight's inventions you want spirited out of here and be done with it?"

Mycroft's eyebrows lift and John gives out a pleased, "Aha!"

At both Holmes brothers turning to him he shrugs.

"Knew you'd work it out," he says diffidently. Sherlock preens at his words while Mycroft rolls his eyes heavenward and seems to pray for patience.

This is his usual, default facial expression when dealing with his brother and his brother's best friend, and John has grown used to it over the years.

"Fine!" the older man snaps. The grin Sherlock shoots him should be justification for murder. "We
need plans for some sort of mechanical animal he's creating," Mycroft says. "A wolf or a dog or some such. He's trying to run the damn thing on steam, something to do with scaring poachers off his estate, but he's keeping it terribly hush-hush, as usual. My masters are… intrigued.

There could be battle-field applications: Britain will want to be at the head of this new development, considering the rumblings we're hearing from the continent-

John frowns. "But why wouldn't they just ask Knight for his drawings? Wouldn't he give them up for Queen and country, etc. etc.?

"Why am I more handsome and interesting then Mycroft, John?" Sherlock interjects this before his brother can snap out another retort. "Why are you incapable of not flirting with any woman under fifty? Why did our mother manage to pass her genius on to me, but not to Mycroft?"

He's wearing the look John has learned means he should stop asking questions and John decides to heed it. It's saved his life more than once.

"Over some inquiries, I fear, a veil must be drawn," the detective intones gravely. "Need to know, Her Majesty's business and all that, isn't that right, brother dear?"

"Yes," Mycroft grits out through clenched teeth.

His expression is extremely sour.

He looks like he's regretting inviting them here, and this indicates that the night thus far has been a success, as far as John's concerned.

"Excellent!" Sherlock makes a show of grinning, just to infuriate his brother further. "Then let's get on with this…I have appointments later this evening."

A faraway look comes into his eye just for a moment and both John and Mycroft exchange glances, wondering what mischief precisely Sherlock has gotten himself into. There are rumours that Adler's back in London, and John would prefer if they turned out to not be true. The Woman is not what he would term a good influence on his best friend. But just as quickly as his mind wandered the younger Holmes is back with them, grinning brightly.

That grin does not necessarily make John feel better.

Sherlock being Sherlock however, either doesn't notice or doesn't care. "Let's try our hand at burglary, shall we, John?" he asks instead, walking swiftly away from his brother with an alarmingly cheerful spring in his step. "Chop chop! Game's afoot, and all that," he calls. "No need to say goodbye to Mycroft!"

And with that, he's off.

John might be mistaken, but he swears Lady Anthea shoots Mycroft a fleeting, amused-yet-pitying glance, but it happens so quickly he can't be sure.

Just as he also can't be sure, but he swears his former commander's ears turn a tiny bit… pink, at the gesture.

It's quite a disturbing sight.

Rather than ponder that though, John trails after his best friend, trying to ignore the unease beginning to coil in his stomach. He has a sense, however illogical and undefined, that something is about to
happen tonight. *Something that will be more than a Bit Not Good.* It's the same sense that got him through Afghanistan, the same sense that got him through Kandahar. *It's the ability to feel a change in the atmosphere and to adjust his plans accordingly.* Not that he thinks Sherlock will listen though; He can give no reason for his suspicions, and will thus simply have the piss pulled out of him for stating them.

But still… He has to admit that something feels ineffably... *off.*

He and Sherlock head off to into the bowels of the house anyway however, the better to get a sense of the building and which room might belong to Sir Henry and thus contain his plans. The better to enjoy the distraction which, it has belatedly occurred to John, Lady Anthea is providing with her show on interest in Henry Knight.

Squat and solidly built, Knightsmoore House was not designed to be difficult to navigate; A manor house in the Tudor style, it had never been meant to keep anyone out, nor had it ever fallen to any invader, the Knight family being remarkably adept at holding onto the place through the centuries. Bearing this in mind- and knowing that the current heir, Sir Henry, is about the least suspicious human being on the planet- John and Sherlock skulk through the corridors of the old house, John trying to be stealthy, Sherlock so cheerful he's bloody *whistling*-

In later years John will always suspect that, had he been paying better attention that night, the rest of what transpired never would have transpired at all.

But then, had he been paying attention, Sherlock Holmes would never have even met Ms. Molly Hooper, and that wouldn't have done, now would it?

For as Sherlock whistles and pulls open the door to what he swears is Sir Henry Knight's study with a self-satisfied "Aha!" he walks slap bang into his future wife and knocks her completely for six.
A Happenstance of Hellions

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CHAPTER THREE: A HAPPENSTANCE OF HELLIONS

Sherlock Holmes had never been accosted by a pair of breasts before.

But then, given that he has just a) smacked into the owner of said bosoms, b) lost his balance, knocking said owner down and landing, face-first, in said bosoms and c) is being beaten about the head and shoulders with a reticule wielded, presumably, by a friend of the afore-mentioned bosoms owner, he supposes that he can't really complain-

Or rather, he would complain- he loves to complain- if he weren't desperately trying to get up and finding it impossible.

Being blinded by décolletage whilst being beaten about the head and back with a large purse will do that for a chap, don't you know.

So he keeps his thoughts to himself. It's not like he's in a position to voice them, anyway. To his right he can hear John blathering on, trying desperately to make his purse-welding attacker withdraw. The woman- and Sherlock has no doubt it is a woman- is entirely unwilling to be reasonable however, haranguing both Watson and her unfortunate victim in a harried, muffled voice which tells Sherlock that she, at least, has no wish to rouse attention of their hosts-

Given that he was on a secret mission of theft, albeit for Her Majesty's government, when he came in here, Sherlock can't help but feel a little relieved at her reticence.

After all, he's not sure that even he, with his years of experience in confabulation, could come up with a plausible explanation for his presence here.

Be that as it may however, his justification for being here- or any lack thereof- is not his most pressing problem for the moment.

No, that would be the Bosom Owner he can feel kicking and clawing beneath him, her struggles entirely ineffectual in aiding his extraction from her person-

In fact, they're actively getting in the way.

For every time Sherlock thinks he's gotten enough of a handle on his balance to raise his head away from her chest she shifts, screeching, and he finds he can't move. Just as every time he tries to get free he finds himself constricted by the monumental amount of silk and petticoats which females are required to wear these days. And that's without the efforts of the woman herself: For such a little thing- and she does indeed feel very small beneath him- she's putting up a fierce fight, muttering and growling under her breath and using a whole litany of profanities, the likes of which Sherlock hasn't heard since he and Watson left the army-

"You bloody git," she hisses, "get off me!"
"Madame," he snaps, "that is precisely what I am trying to do!"

With a monumental huff, he manages to pull himself loose, only to find himself rolled fiercely across the carpet, the little hellion rolling right along with him as they tumble one with the other.

They both smash messily into the legs of an ornate Louise XVI chaise long, the impact knocking them apart, Sherlock landing on his back as his opponent skids across away from him, that mountain of skirts no impediment to her or her trajectory.

She comes to a halt on her side, her loud pants (and those of her friend, and Dr. Watson) filling the room; Free at last, Sherlock kicks and flails his way free of his dress coat (it had come up over his head during their altercation, both blinding him and contributing to his difficulties in freeing himself).

He manages to get himself loose, sitting up and glowering at his assailant, entirely determined to give her a piece of his mind-

What he sees stops him cold however.

It's the sort of cold he's rather happy his brother isn't here to witness, impossible git that he is.

For the Bosom Owner (and yes, he's sure that's probably not what her parents christened her but for now the designation will have to do) is glowering at him, her intricately coiffed hair in disarray, her pale skin flushed scarlet with the results of their struggling and her own, obvious annoyance at being accosted. Two large brown eyes are glaring at him and though the sentiment they convey is obviously homicidal that makes little difference to how luminous they appear to him.

Turns out, The Bosom Owner is rather… winsome, Sherlock thinks. For a hellion, that is.

And for a man with a proven weakness for hellions, that's rather a dangerous thought.

Sherlock takes in a pale, English rose complexion, a thin-lipped, pink mouth. The small frame, tiny in what looks like a mountain of blue silk and petticoats, the white of her shift showing tantalizingly at her shoulder where he's disturbed her bodice and sleeves. She is breathing heavily, her chest rising and falling in angry, frustrated rhythm and though Sherlock knows it's utterly unmannerly (and that he's already had, theoretically, a very good look) his eyes slip down to the fichu at the scooped neck of her gown before he can really help himself- Her breasts are infinitely nicer when they're this far from his face-

The Bosom Owner sees where his gaze is going and then does what even Sherlock must allow is entirely defensible.

She hikes up all those skirts and petticoats to the knee and darts her little foot out, smacking the heel of her satin slipper right into the Holmes family jewels and sending that pain unlike any other, that pain that only a man can know, rocketing through him. It's so sharp he sees stars.

Sherlock winces.

John winces.

Hell, even the reticule-wielding, Bosom Owner's Friend winces.

"That," The Bosom Owner growls, "is for grabbing me, you bloody bastard! Now get the Hell out of here, you'll not get a penny out of me- "

And as if to punctuate her point she picks up her tiny, bead-encrusted little slipper and draws her arm
back, preparing to throw it at him-

Which is when Sir Henry Knight, Lady Anthea and Mycroft spill into the room and all Hell really breaks loose.

"This isn't what it looks like."

Even as the words leave her mouth Molly Hooper knows that a) nobody ever believes that and b) everyone probably thinks that had they walked in five minutes earlier things would look even worse. In fact, judging by the arrayed faces all around her, that's precisely what everyone believes. To her right she can see Sir Henry and the Countess Anthea staring at her, the former's mouth agog, the latter's expression surprisingly… shrewd. Knowing.

If Molly didn't know better she'd almost think the other woman looked… amused, if a little pitying. But then, given what everyone is clearly assuming, Molly supposes that reaction is to be expected.

There's a rather tall, red-haired gentleman standing right behind the Countess, an absolutely horrified look on his face; When her (admittedly handsome) assailant looks up at this gentleman he winces, some hitherto unknown sense of shame apparently surfacing.

Not before its time, Molly thinks.

"Then what is it?" Sir Henry demands. The quiet young engineer is practically trembling with rage and it occurs to Molly that this is the first time she's ever seen him truly upset. "What is the meaning of this, Mr. Holmes?" He gestures to Molly. "Why would you attempt to manhandle a guest of mine in my own house? And so lovely a guest too?"

Her assailant- Mr. Holmes, apparently- glares up at Knight, his expression turning mulish and petulant. It reminds Molly rather strongly of little Jamie, the five year old son of one of her father's East End patients, and as the man gets to his feet the impression intensifies.

"I have not "manhandled," anyone, Sir Henry," Mr. Holmes bites out tartly. "If anyone was being in any way abused, it is I-"

Sir Henry's expression is far from convinced. "By Miss Hooper?" he asked in the same tone of voice Molly thinks he'd use if asked to verify that pigs can fly. Or that the moon really is made from cheese.

At his cynical tone Mr. Holmes stance gets more belligerent, more stiff, his face arranging itself into the sort of haughtily aristocratic sneer it takes centuries of blue-blooded inbreeding to perpetuate.

"Miss Hooper-" Mr. Holmes says the name as if he's pronouncing a particularly virulent type of poison, something which causes Molly to glare at him- "accosted me whilst I was innocently on my way to perusing the paintings in the Great Hall. I understand that yours is one of the finest selections of portraiture in the country and I wished to enjoy them at my leisure. I had no idea she was in here, I assure you, and I sought only to deal with the situation without resorting to violence, an example which, I must note, the woman herself elected not to follow-"

"You planted yourself face first in her chest, Mr. Holmes," Mary growls before Molly can speak, her trusty reticule held out before her like some sort of beaded battle-axe. Holmes and his short blond
friend eye it with well-deserved wariness. "How do you explain such behaviour, if it wasn't an attempt to waylay my friend?"

And Mary cocks a cynical eyebrow, her sweet smile every bit as insolent and galling as Holmes' own expression. Molly's matches her.

The young doctor might be imagining it but she thinks Holmes' short blond friend rather perks up at the sight.

\it{Men really are the strangest creatures sometimes}, Molly thinks.

"Or are you honestly asking us to believe that you just happened upon the only unmarried woman at this party with an income of £20,000 a year?" Mary continues slyly. His expression shows Holmes likes her tone not at all. "Because if you do then you obviously think rather little of our intelligence-"

At this Holmes rallies. "If you wish to make assumptions about the filial coffers," he sniffs, "then assume away. Anyone with even the vaguest familiarity with my family knows that we Holmes have no need to make a mercenary match, or indeed any match at all-"

A look of triumph lights Mary's eyes. "Then this was just about inducing some sort of carnal dalliance!" She looks at Molly. "Which at least explains the way he landed on you."

Holmes looks horrified, as does his brother. "I meant nothing of the sort!" he says sharply. "This was in no way pre-planned!"

"As if that wasn't obvious," Molly mutters- \it{After all, she doubts a man who wanted to drag her into a compromising position would look so panicked at the notion he'd managed it.}

At this that Holmes' gaze comes to rest on her and she immediately realises that she possibly shouldn't have said that out loud. But the damage is done: She can see it in the relieved way Holmes- and his blond friend, \textit{and} his red-haired friend- are looking at her.

All three gits are now looking rather… smug and it makes her want to hit Mr. Holmes with her shoe all over again.

"So you concede this was unplanned?" the red-headed man- \textit{Mycroft?- asks her silkily. She glares at him. "Because if you do then surely you concede you share the blame? And that forgetting all of this would be rather the best thing to do…"

Molly opens her mouth to answer but she doesn't get the chance to, for with a deep sigh Lady Anthea shakes her head, clucking her tongue in disapproval. She speaks- as so many have tonight- before Molly can.

"I'm afraid whether the faux pas was intended or not is inconsequential," she says severely. "Ms. Hooper will still have to marry Mr. Holmes, there's absolutely no help for it. Is there, Sir Henry?"

Henry Knight shakes his head sagely, obviously agreeing with her, and Molly, Mary and Mr. Holmes all start swearing at the same time.
The Muffin Cornered

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for their reviews go to springbok7, roosickle, Katya Jade, emmajoe, lilsherlockian1975, Aclysmic, skeptic7 and Limaro. This one was hard to write so be gentle with it, people. But I hope you enjoy it anyway...

CHAPTER FOUR: THE MUFFIN CORNERED

The swearing continues for several minutes, until it is brought to a halt by an entirely nefarious-though irritatingly effective- method.

For Countess Anthea Utterwood, protégé of Mycroft, leading female spy in the realm and Sherlock's nearest relation in both age, qualifications and temperament, elects to feign a swoon at that very moment and drops into Sir Henry's arms.

 Needless to say, she manages to make it look effortless too.

A swoon, Sherlock thinks in disgust. A swoon, I bloody ask you.

I've watched that woman fight off twelve Cossack pirates in Sebastopol, armed only with her reticule and a judiciously-wielded cricket bat, and now she wants to pretend to be some sort of maidenly sylph.

The gall of some people.

He looks across at his brother, seeking to share his ire, but Mycroft isn't looking at him.

No, he's staring at the sight of his young agent in Knight's arms with an expression of slight distaste though why precisely the elder Holmes is doing so, Sherlock's afraid neither he nor Watson possibly say.

Ahem.

Fortunately however- or unfortunately, depending on which way you wanted to look at it- he's in no danger of being called to account. For Sir Henry Knight is entirely taken in by Anthea's display, cooing over her like a puppy and carrying her gently to the chaise long into which Sherlock and The Bosom Owner so recently smashed. Sherlock's surprised he hasn't starting wagging an imaginary tail. He's murmuring soft, sweet things to her and Anthea's batting her eyelashes with reckless abandon, something which anyone familiar with her actual personality would find disconcerting, to say the least-

At seeing what Knight's about though The Bosom Owner and her friend set to righting the chaise long for him, setting it onto its feet with an ease which surprises Sherlock. It's not that he doesn't think them strong enough- Anthea, his mother and the other women he's worked with in the service overturned any unscientific notions he might have harboured about female delicacy some time ago. No, it's the fact that neither lady waited for the men present to do it. This would suggest that they were used to having to shrift for themselves, something belied by their expensive gowns, polished manners and- the swearing notwithstanding- presence at a Season party.

Sherlock would like to investigate more but just as he's about to ask one of his Awkward Questions
Anthea lets out a low moan, breathy and just the right side of ladylike to not sound indecent-

Instantly Sir Henry straightens up, the pinkish hue now decorating his ears making John smile in

amusement.

*Again Sherlock reflects on the sheer brazen élan some people- particularly feminine people- possess. He rather wishes he could get out of difficult situations so easily.*

A beat of uncomfortable silence stretches out.

"Would you like anything, Lady Anthea?" Knight asks diffidently and she nods, playing the part of

waif-like invalid to the hilt.

"A glass of lemonade, please," she says hoarsely, blinking up at him from her place on the chaise

long with the sort of girlishly beseeching expression which has brought stronger men than Sir Henry

low. "I'm afraid… I'm afraid I feel rather faint…" And she lets her head fall back onto the couch with

a sigh.

"I'll, I'll, um, get it right away," the young engineer stammers, practically tripping over himself in his

haste to do Madame Anthea's bidding. Judging by how fast he's moving, one would think the Devil

himself was at his tail.

As soon as he's out the door Anthea sits up, nods to Watson who closes the door promptly behind

him.

The Bosom Owner and her homicidal blond friend exchange sharp glances at this development and

again Sherlock's estimation of their intelligence takes a step up.

He can't concentrate on that now however, not with more pressing things at hand. Instead he opens

his mouth to demand an explanation- *really, what on Earth made Anthea say that he and The Bosom

Owner must get married?*- but before he can utter a word the Countess speaks over him, her voice

brusque and no-nonsense.

"First of all, Muffin," she says, using the childhood name he had always hated, "Spare me the lecture

and listen- I'll brief you later but right now we don't have a great deal of time.

I don't know how long Sir Henry will be gone."

And without waiting for him to agree she nods to John- "keep an eye out, would you?" Immediately

the doctor steals out of the room, acting as lookout and doubtless keeping any unwanted visitors from

entering. That dealt with she stands, miraculously recovered apparently, and walks over to The

Bosom Owner, her hands held before her peremptorily, her expression understanding.

Her theatrics have not had nearly so mollifying an effect on the two women as they had on Sir Henry

though and the thought amuses Sherlock greatly.

"I can see you're upset, Ms. Hooper," Anthea begins, "but just hear me out, yes? I'm aware this has

been a trying night for you."

The Bosom Owner- *Um, Ms. Hooper, apparently*- nods curtly but crosses her arms over her chest.

This does all sorts of interesting things to her neckline, things Sherlock tells himself sternly not to pay

attention to.

*After all, he's already had a fairly good look.*
"I'm listening," Ms. Hooper is saying. "And I assume you have a good explanation as to why you would suggest marriage in front of Sir Henry when you know well what a stickler for propriety he is-"

Anthea nods. "Which is precisely why I had to say it in front of him. If I hadn't suggested it he'd have done it himself, and probably thought himself honour-bound to make sure an engagement came to pass. Nobody here present wants that."

She shakes her head with a sort of amused mournfulness; Ms. Hooper's expression at least tells her she understands why.

"At least with my doing it I can keep his nose out of things, something which for my own reasons I think would be best," Anthea continues after a moment. "To suggest I would endorse anything but the highest standards of behaviour might prove a little… Sticky for me at present." She looks over at Mycroft. "Wouldn't you agree, Sir?"

Mycroft, still looking a little disgruntled at the fact that Sir Henry had manhandled his favourite pupil, nevertheless gives a curt nod.

"It would be… unfortunate, were we to arouse his suspicions at the present moment," he says slowly. He frowns, does that thing he does with his forehead when he's trying to intimidate someone. "Very unfortunate indeed."

The forehead thing doesn't work on Sherlock however and it would appear not to work on Ms. Hooper either for the young woman stalks over to the elder Holmes, glowers up at him.

From the corner of his eye Sherlock sees her friend bite the inside of her cheek.

Were John here Sherlock rather thinks he'd be doing the same.

"So instead you decide to suggest I must get married?" Ms Hooper demands. "Why? Because you're afraid of Lady Anthea losing Sir Henry's good opinion, so you'd rather throw me to the wolves?"

Mycroft looks slightly taken aback by the vehemence of Ms. Hooper's reaction but Sherlock finds he rather likes it. A hellion ought to talk back to those who've upset her, and if he had any doubts about Ms. Hooper's hellion bona fides this would put them to rest. But though the elder Holmes looks to be getting annoyed- he's not at all used to being challenged- Anthea keeps her calm. She takes Ms. Hooper's arm, turns her towards her.

When she speaks her tone is sympathetic but matter-of-fact.

"Firstly, marriage to Muffin here-" She gestures to Sherlock, who glowers at her- "Is far from "being thrown to the wolves," Ms. Hooper. Do stop being so melodramatic, I had though you to be a more sensible sort of woman than that."

Ms. Hooper opens her mouth in outrage but then shuts it, perhaps unsure whether she's just been insulted or not.

Anthea takes the opportunity her silence presents to keep talking, the better to get her to agree to whatever scheme she has clearly devised for tonight.

"Secondly," Anthea continues, "as I understand it, Ms. Hooper, you are looking for a husband, are you not?"

The young woman gives a reluctant nod. "Yes, I'm looking to get married-"
Anthea rushes to speak over her. "Then what on Earth is wrong with our Sherlock here?"

And she gestures to Sherlock, who glowers at her.

Again Ms. Hooper's blond friend snorts in laughter; Again Sherlock regards all and sundry with unfettered disdain.

Ms. Hooper and Mycroft both roll their eyes in unison, their expression practically mirrors of each other.

"After all," Anthea is saying, "Sherlock's clever, rich, and badly in need of the love of a good woman. Or, if not a good woman then at least one who has enough self-control not to murder him the first chance she gets. Believe me, such women are scarce on the ground." Sherlock lets out a huff of indignation at her words, balking at this description but Anthea ignores him, lowers her voice to a mock-confiding tone. *It's obvious she'd getting through to Molly so she brings out what most women who've known Sherlock regard as his coup de grace.* "And you might not have noticed but he is rather handsome too-"

"He is not!" Ms Hooper snaps the words but nobody present believes them. Certainly not Mycroft- you can tell by the look on his face- and certainly not Anthea.

Despite himself Sherlock preens- *who doesn't like knowing they're thought handsome? Even if it's business as usual?* - but though he's pleased with the notion Anthea clearly has larger fish to fry. (The last time he saw her doing this much fast talking they were facing certain death from a squad of assassins in Tangiers, which means there's a great deal more to this than she can say in company, so Sherlock for once elects to hold his tongue.)

"Add to that the fact that he'd not impinge upon your time overmuch, Ms. Hooper," Anthea's saying warmly, "He works as a detective and he's a terrible bohemian, he'd never be underfoot."

"All of which is interesting," Ms. Hooper says dryly, "But that's still no reason to marry him-"

"Then how about this?" Anthea says. "He'd not prove any impediment to your medical career- In fact, I'm sure he'd actively like it. Wouldn't you, Muffin?"

And she shoots him the sort of coaxing, incendiary smile which would probably make young Henry Knight- let alone most of her admirers in The Ton- combust with either lust or happiness. *Possibly both.* Sherlock responds in the only way he can- By sticking his tongue out, something which causes Ms. Hooper's companion to snicker in amusement again.

Anthea looks like she'd rather like to match her but can't.

Mycroft gives the sort of delicately disgusted shudder which Watson would normally tease him mercilessly for.

This last point seems to have caught Ms. Hooper's attention though because she's looking at him astutely now, seeming interested in him for the first time since Anthea suggested her ridiculous scheme.

"Is that true?" Ms. Hooper asks him. "Would you allow me to continue my medical career?"

Sherlock has no idea what game Anthea's playing, he only knows that the woman never does anything without a reason so she must have one- beyond keeping in Sir Henry's good graces, that is- and so he nods once. Gives Ms. Hooper the assurance she seems to need.
"I'd never interfere," he says, and in this he can be honest. For however long this engagement lasts (and he suspects he'll discover this just as soon as Anthea and Mycroft can brief him) he would never get in the way of a woman exercising her own perogatives- Particularly those which would keep her out of his hair. In fact, he finds the notion that Ms. Hooper might be an educated woman- in possession of a strong enough stomach and a sharp enough mind to study anatomy, in point of fact-rather… intriguing. There's not many women he finds intriguing.

An image of Irene Adler pops into his head and he forces it deftly away, to be savoured later.

*His dealings with The Woman are always best enjoyed after the fact.*

But Ms. Hooper appears to be mulling her options over now; She's now staring at him with a downright speculative look in her eye. That last offer has genuinely intrigued her and Sherlock finds he rather likes that notion though as to why he should, he'd rather not speculate. She looks at her blond friend and calls her over with a jerk of her chin; The other woman walks over to her and they lower their heads, whispering together for what seems like an age. After several moments' speaking they nod to one another and Ms. Hooper walks back to Sherlock, Anthea and Mycroft, her head held high. Her eyes gleam with purpose.

With the air of one making a momentous decision she holds her hand out to Sherlock, lets him take it in his large one. They shake, those brown still eyes fixed on him, and when she speaks her voice is low and calm.

It send the most unexpected prickle down Sherlock's spine.

"Molly Hooper," she says. "It's a pleasure to meet you- Since I suppose we're to become engaged now."

Sherlock may not have many manners but he knows the appropriate action in this instance. "William Scott Sherlock Holmes," he says. "But you may call me Sherlock."

And with that he brings her hand to his lips and kisses it.

"Charmed, I'm sure," Ms. Hooper murmurs but he believes *that* not one jot.
Pre-Nuptial Agreement

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. I'm glad people are enjoying this, and thanks for their reviews go to springbok7, reesiesteve, lilsherlockian1975, Pam, emmajoe, roosickle, Limaro and sceptic7. And now- onwards!

CHAPTER FOUR: PRE-NUPTIAL AGREEMENT

The corridor outside the ladies' retiring room,

Two minutes later

"So," says John.

"So," says Sherlock.

The silence stretches out, news of Holmes' new engagement sitting between them like a doily-encrusted elephant in a rather small room.

Even now, Sherlock's not quite how what just happened happened, and he was there.

"So… basically, thanks to Anthea, Mycroft and your loyalty to Queen and Country, you're now engaged?" says John.

He sounds doubtful.

Sherlock doesn't blame him.

"Apparently so," the detective says. "I will take this horrified silence as your own unique brand of nuptial felicitation." He inclines his head. "Many thanks."

"You're welcome, mate. Felicitate away."

Again the silence stretches out.

John looks searchingly at his friend for a long time, studying his face though for what that friend cannot say. Opening his mouth to speak several time and then closing it, apparently at a loss for words. But then-

"Right. You, me, the ballroom and a stiff brandy," John says. "Doctor's orders- We're not nearly drunk enough to discuss this yet."

And back to the ballroom the two friends promptly head, Sherlock's dishevelled curls and discombobulated air drawing curious looks as they meander along.

Meanwhile, in the ladies' retiring room

"Well," says Mary.

"Well," says Molly.
"That was unexpected," says Mary.

"Yes," says Molly. "Quite."

And she sets to fixing her gloves, fiddling with the pristine white silk in an attempt to get them to sit straight; She would say more but it is slowly beginning to dawn on her that she just got engaged to a perfect stranger and, well, that's the sort of thing a young woman finds distracting. Very distracting.

Mr. Holmes' rather striking blue-green eyes pop into her head, the unruly image making her feel oddly… flustered. Muddled. Distracted.

She has no idea what to make of her reaction.

When she looks at Mary though she has a grin on her face, the sort of sly smile probably worn by that proverbial cat who got that proverbial cream and for no reason she wishes to investigate it makes Molly feel out of sorts. Entirely disagreeable.

"What is it?" she says crossly and Mary's knowing grin widens.

"Nothing!" her friend says, her voice singsong, and Molly glares.

Mary narrows her eyes in mock retaliation at this, her smile widening and clearly unrepentant. The look on her face makes Molly feel unaccountably… guilty, as if Mary knows precisely what she was thinking of just now, and that it was not honourable or ladylike at all. Which Molly knows makes no sense- Why ever should she feel guilty thinking about the man she so recently agreed to marry?

But despite herself she finds that in picturing Mr. Holmes' disconcertingly bright eyes, or his patrician, chiselled profile, or even in remembering the weight and warmth of his body above hers as they rolled across the floor, she does indeed feel… guilty. Hot and cold and shivery and tingly and guilty, like a child caught stealing a sweet, or a schoolgirl sent down for wool-gathering in her lessons-

"Breathe, my dear," Mary says, interrupting her rapidly escalating train of thought with a few quick flicks of her fan. "Believe me, I quite understand your reaction."

"What reaction?" Molly demands and, mortifyingly, Mary laughs.

"The reaction of a woman who's just gotten engaged to by far the handsomest man she's ever laid eyes on," she says. "Well done on that, by the way. I know several debutantes who will be crushed-Holmes the Younger has quite the coterie of female followers."

And she has the temerity to wink, bloody wink. The giggle she gives is practically evil.

Molly's certain her face just turned bright fuschia at her inference and she starts to stutter out denials. Mary's not listening though.

"I honestly didn't think you had it in you," she's saying, "And I will never allow you to refer to yourself as mousy again. Not after that display-"

"What display?" Molly demands. "I made no display. I simply called out when someone attached himself to my person in an entirely improper manner!"

Mary looks unimpressed. "You scared the living daylights out of a man twice your size, you mean," she points out bluntly. "And then you somehow ended up engaged to him. You. Molly Hooper. The woman who refers to herself as a mouse and who swears blind she can't attract a proper suitor is now
engaged to one of the richest, most handsome, most sought after men in London, and you've gotten him to agree to let you keep practicing medicine—"

"We don't know if he'll keep his promise," Molly points out soberly. As soon as they're married- if they're married- her legal rights will be quite curtailed.

Realistically speaking, Mr. Holmes could go back on his promise at any time.

The look Mary shoots her is pure vixen though. "Oh, he'll keep his promise darling, believe me," she says. "He's far too taken with the notion of your calling to back out now."

Molly crosses her arms again. "How could you possibly know that?"

Mary's smile turns predatory.

"You didn't see the twinkle in his eye when you said you wanted to pursue medicine," she says matter-of-factly. "The last time I saw a man looking so intrigued with a woman, they were trying to sneak a French chorus girl into my father's barracks." She shakes her head, clucks her tongue. "He'll stay the course, love," she says, "you see if he doesn't..."

And with those cryptic words she extends her arm, invites Molly back to the ballroom for her first dance with her new fiancé. (If they can find him, that is). The young doctor agrees, desperately hoping that her friend is right and her, her future husband can be trusted-

She just doesn't know why the thought of dancing with him sets her insides doing a jig.

____________

Meanwhile,

In Sir Henry Knight's Library

"Are you sure about this, Anthea?"

And Mycroft Holmes, head of Secret Operations for Her Majesty's Government and Anthea's direct superior looks at her over the rim of his brandy glass, the fire in the library throwing his gaunt face into shadow.

He's giving her that look he gives the Prime Minister when he wants to remind him who's actually in charge of the country and she must admit, it's quite a sight.

Having been on the receiving end of it since she was a child however, Anthea doesn't feel its impact overmuch, choosing instead to merely incline her head in acknowledgement.

What she'd suggested tonight had been a risk, she'd known it before she opened her mouth, but she has no doubt she made the right call.

"I had to keep Knight on-side, Sir," she says now, moving so that she stands opposite Mycroft in front of that fireplace. She stands in military at ease posture, a soldier just like her father, for all the lace and toile. "If you want me placed in his house then I couldn't risk saying anything else-"

"Come, come, my dear," Mycroft speaks over her. His tone is silky. "I've heard you talk your way out of far more thorny situations than that without trying for anything so... permanent. Not unless it involves a weapon."

He leans forward in his chair.
"What is your real point in this?" he asks. "What are you really up to?"

For a moment Anthea considers not telling him but she knows better- No-one alive can lie to Mycroft, not even she. And since she did what she did for Sherlock, she suspects that he'll approve. At least she hopes so. So-

"Adler's back in London," she says flatly. "Had to hot-foot it out of the Continent, apparently. Some business with Baron Marpuissis that went rather spectactorily South. She's holed up in the Metropole Hotel and she's telling anyone who'll listen that you're brother's footing the bill for her rooms-"

At the news she sees Mycroft give a tiny, well nigh imperceptible curl to his lip, his expression making his opinion of the infamous adventuress obvious.

There is no love lost between he and Irene Adler, everyone in their merry, black-hearted little group knows that.

"We haven't recalled her for duty," he bites out and Anthea nods.

"My point exactly," she says. "She's not here for work- She's here for Sherlock. Or maybe she's here to work Sherlock, I don't honestly know. What I do know is that such a situation might prove… undesirable, for all parties." She inclines her head slightly, aware that the latter is a vast understatement. "Sir."

It takes a moment's silence but comprehension moves through Mycroft's eyes.

She's happy she doesn't have to be more circumspect.

"Ah, I see" he says. "You find my brother a nice little wife to distract him from The Woman and you think he'll stay out of trouble?" He shakes his head. "If his libido and his brain were in any way connected, don't you think he's have thrown Adler over by now?"

Anthea shrugs. She's surprised Mycroft doesn't see this.

But then he's always been easily blinded, where his younger sibling is concerned.

"Ms. Hooper is calm, patient, educated and sufficiently odd that I suspect she'll pique your brother's interest," she points out. "She enjoys the sort of unwholesome things Sherlock enjoys, she just aims to interact with them for a living, something which might prove a valuable example for your brother."

At this Mycroft openly snorts in disbelief.

Apparently he lends little credulity to the notion that his younger brother will ever support himself and Anthea is inclined to agree.

"Everyone knows she's trying to save her father's practice in the East End," Anthea continues, "and Sherlock might well enjoy the opportunity to move through that area as her husband- It would do wonders for his crime-solving and allow him to spend more time with her, doing whatever gruesome things it is couples who are fascinated with anatomy and murder do."

Mycroft looks far from convinced and Anthea has to tamp down on the urge to shake the stupid, stubborn, dear man.

It's because he's thinking of this as a spy and not a civilian, that he refuses to see what she's trying to do.
"Look, you've been talking about getting the Muffin to settle down for years- As has your Mother," she says.

*At mention of the dreaded M Word he visibly recoils and Anthea has to bite back a smile.*

"If he takes to Hooper and settles down- That's a win," she says. "If trying to keep the engagement looking legitimate takes up his time and distracts him from Adler- That's also a win. If Adler behaves coldly or with disinterested over it and leaves him alone- That's a win. And if Adler should become jealous and try to seduce him away…"

"That's a win too," Mycroft nods, finally seeing it. "Sherlock would see such a mundane motivation as disappointing and it might break this strange… power she has over him- I say, that's rather good."

And now he smiles, his eyes alighting warmly on Anthea.

As always she bites back a proud smile at having come up with an angle even her commander couldn't foresee.

"Clever," Mycroft's saying. "Very clever. Just the sort of thing that I would think of…"

Anthea knows he means this as a compliment so she forces herself to leave the obvious reply- that he didn't think of it at all- unspoken.

But he's warming to the plan now, beginning to see the usefulness of it. Watching him work sends a thrill down Anthea's spine but then it always does- She loves watching him like this though she knows she should never be foolish enough to say.

For he's smiling now. Pleased with her. He's starting to see the angles she's already mapped.

"And I take it that while you're overseeing the courtship," he's saying, "and making sure Sherlock behaves himself, you'll have an excuse to spend time with Sir Henry and further our interests there, is that it?"

She nods eagerly and suddenly, inexplicably, Mycroft's expression turns unreadable in the firelight.

For a moment he says nothing, the silence almost… uncomfortable. And then, just like that, he's the man she knows again.

Anthea knows better than to pry.

"Well, then sit down and pour yourself a brandy, my fine girl," he says, "I must say you've earned it, with a plan like that."

And he pours her a snifter and toasts her, allows her to share a companionable silence, broken only by the spitting and hissing of the fire.

When the pair of them head back to the ballroom an observer would swear that this little tête-à-tête never happened at all.
By the time Molly and Mary find her new… fiancé, he and his best friend have already had made a dent in their host's brandy supply.

That Mr. Holmes- *ahem, Sherlock* - has taken to drowning his sorrows at this unexpected turn of events is not something which Molly takes personally. Were she in a position to do so she'd happily be quaffing with him- In fact, the bottle of whiskey her father kept in his surgery in case of emergency is looking rather attractive right now.

But delicate, ladylike heiresses are not, nor have they ever been, permitted to get sloshed whilst out in polite society and Molly is well aware that she dares not flout that particular convention-

She's planning on mentioning this to Mary but before she can she sees her friend scan the crowd shrewdly. Finding her target, she marches promptly over to Mr. Holmes and his companion, sidling in between them. Her body language is open and flirtatious but Molly can't help suspecting there's steel beneath it.

*After all, she's seen Mary on the war path often enough to recognise the signs.*

She is proved correct when Mary leans in coquettishly to Mr. Holmes' companion, eyelashes batting, before bluntly asking him, "Has your friend always been an idiot or is this latest exploit a departure for him?"

Mr. Holmes' companion blinks at her, a surprised smile breaking out across his open, handsome face as he sputters into his drink.

"I beg your pardon?" he asks, obviously shocked at Mary's forwardness.

Molly doesn't blame him; Ladies are never supposed to just *walk up* to gentlemen and insult them, even in the relatively relaxed environs of a house party.

Mary's answering smile is incandescently lovely however. It is also tinged with that knowing cheekiness which seems her stock in trade and as always it smoothes away any feathers it might ruffle.

"The woman your friend has agreed to marry has just entered the room, and here you two are getting sloshed rather than speaking to her," the blond woman says primly, her voice kept low. "Rather poor form that, especially since the next dance is about to begin."

And Mary shoots Mr. Holmes that same cheeky, slightly admonishing grin, making a shooing motion in her general direction.
To Molly’s disappointment- for she refuses to characterise the twinge in her chest as anything else, like, for example, jealousy- Holmes favours Mary with an amused smile before standing and downing the last of his brandy.

It would appear that he and her best friend are going to get along splendidly.

Molly cannot be altogether certain this is a good thing.

"So is this your- admirably forward, might I say- way of telling me to dance with Ms. Hooper?" Mr. Holmes asks and when Mary nods matter-of-factly both men laugh.

It's such an unusual sound that a couple of heads turn in the ballroom but Mr. Holmes, his friend and Mary all ignore them.

The fact that they don't garner much attention for such loudness tells Molly that they're already well known for it and she wonders with a twinge of apprehension what sort of reputation Mr. Holmes might have; Before she can dwell on it however Mr. Holmes- Sherlock! She reminds herself- walks over to her and holds out his hand in invitation.

When Molly takes it he bows and she must remind herself to curtsy, something difficult since she feels rooted to the spot. There's something about the way he's looking at her, those electric blue-green eyes trained on her face as he stares at her from over the ridges of her knuckles that's making her feel rather, rather… discombobulated really-

"Sectoral Heterochromia Iridum!"

The words just seem to pop out of her mouth, so abruptly that she immediately pulls both her hands from his, pressing them in front of her mouth in mortification.

If ever there was a moment she shouldn't have started in with her medical knowledge- even if it is medical knowledge about those extraordinary eyes- then this is most definitely it.

Mr. Holmes doesn't look angered however, more intrigued at her knowing the medical term for his eyes' quicksilver colour.

Without missing a beat he holds his hand out to her again and when she takes it, still wincing, he arranges both their arms in the correct posture, nodding to his friend- who has asked Mary to dance- before silently counting off under his breath as the music begins.

They swing out into the circle of dancers, the waltz rhythm lulling them along nicely. Molly tries to look at her feet, too mortified (and too nervous) to look up but after a moment she hears him give a slightly annoyed huff.

"This really would be easier, my dear," he says, "if you would just let me lead."

At that, she does look up.

"I am letting you lead," she points out timidly, only to have him shake his head condescendingly at her.

Annoyance starts tangling in her belly.

"No," he says. "You were staring at your feet, something only an amateur or someone who doesn't trust their partner does." He makes a show of taking a slightly larger step than usual and Molly finds her feet easily match it. "See?" he says. "I can be trusted to lead, so you needn't keep an eye on what
my shoes are doing."

And he nods to himself, shoots her another smug, self-satisfied smile.

That anger in Molly's belly intensifies.

She's starting to remember why she wanted to hit him with her reticule earlier and though she knows such an unladylike swell of temper is unbecoming in so public a setting, she finds she can't will it away.

"Besides," he's continued, "I'd rather you explain what you find so compelling about my eyes that you had to snap out the medical name for it to the entire room when you looked at them."

And again he flashes her that smug grin, bouncing slightly on his heels and looking entirely too pleased with himself as he does it.

It is infuriating.

It is also the sort of thing designed to drive Molly Hooper to violence.

For in barely a second, Molly's small, slippered foot drops down to slam "accidentally," into Mr. Holmes, the man letting out a small hiss of pain though, to be fair, he doesn't miss a step even though she hears Mary and Mr. Holmes' companion chortle in that delight which only seeing a haughty friend harmed can provide.

When she looks up at Mr. Holmes however he's wearing a look of wounded petulance which grates on her last nerve. So-

"I blurted out your condition because I've never seen a case in real life before," she hisses, making sure to lower her voice.

This is entirely untrue but she's not going to give him the satisfaction of telling him it's because whenever he looks at her she starts to feel all queer and out of sorts.

"And as for paying attention to you- Thanks to your woollen-headed stumbling I'm now engaged to be married to you: Can you blame me for paying attention to the man who is going to end up sharing my bed, probably sooner rather than later should news of this shambles of a night ever get out?"

The moment the words are out of her mouth Molly feels mortified: What sort of a lady speaks of bedroom matters to a man she's only just met? And why would it even occur to her to do so?

Mr. Holmes looks likewise horrified, his mouth opening and closing once, then twice, even though his feet continue to move mechanistically, never missing a step. (His hand has tightened though, quite noticeably, where it rests at her waist.)

The silence stretches out, tense with… something. Something Molly tells herself she hasn't a name for.

"Forgive me," she says eventually. "I was- That was-"

"Yes," he says distractedly. "Quite."

And with that he pointedly turns his gaze to the wall over her shoulder. The tips of his ears have turned pink and his eyes seems directed inwardly to some image or other which he must find rather distracting, judging by how thoroughly it's engrossing him.
At the thought of this Molly's skin flushes, gooseflesh raising on her arms though she has not the first notion why. After all, she's not picturing anything bedroom related. *She absolutely, positively isn't.*

Ahem.

They sway back and forth to the music for a few breaths, neither one of them looking at one another but then she hears Mr. Holmes clear his throat and she looks up.

The tips of his ears are still pink but his gaze is now directed entirely at her.

From the corner of her eye she sees Mary smile at Dr. Watson though, whatever he has said making her laugh, and again she feels a tinge of envy, for the fun her friend is having rather than any attention that friend might be receiving it-

She sneaks another look at Mr. Holmes and when she does she can see this stiff, aloof expression has settled on his face, one she can't help but suspect isn't altogether honest. He notices her looking up at him and gives a small sigh, some of his stiffness going out of him.

Again he flicks his head in Dr. Watson's direction.

This time his look is… chagrined. Wry.

For the first time this evening he isn't looking pompous and my, but Molly realises she likes that.

"I must confess," he says softly, "I seldom envy John anything, but I do envy him his ease in conversing with others. Sometimes."

He shoots her a dark look.

"I'm afraid I'm rather… terrible at it, Ms. Hooper, as you can no doubt attest."

Despite herself Molly smiles. Something tells her that admitting to his shortcomings is not something this man easily does and yet, that's precisely what he's doing. There's something rather… admirable, in that.

"Considering my conversational choices tonight," she says, "I can hardly criticise you for it."

Again Mr. Holmes smiles that warm smile and this time Molly returns it.

An odd, warm feeling begins stealing through her at the sight, catching her breath, but as to what it is? Molly really couldn't say.

"Well, yes," he's saying, "you are also rather atrocious at conversation, but at least you have the excuse of an earlier upset to mitigate it."

She shrugs. "You were set upon by two women," she points out.

"Well, yes, there is that." He makes a show of thinking about it, looking sternly at her. "In fact, yes, I'm feeling rather… fragile, since you two hellions got through with me…"

And he shudders almost comically; Molly snorts with laughter then looks mortified at having such an inelegant thing in public. One look at Sherlock however tells her he's not put off by it and she grins, pleased with herself.

This time the smile they share is warm.
She opens her mouth to retort but as she does the music comes to a halt, the other couples on the floor moving apart to clap the orchestra; Suddenly they have no real excuse to continue their conversation but much to her surprise Molly finds that she'd like to. Rather a lot, in fact.

A beat stretches out. Molly can't decide whether it's comfortable.

Mr. Holmes is staring at her now though, his expression puzzled. Thoughtful. Molly feels rather like a specimen in a lab being assessed before it can be labelled. But then-

"May I call on you tomorrow?" Sherlock asks stiffly. He reaches into his jacket pocket and produces a card, elegant and thick. It's one of the nicest Molly's seen. "If you and your mother have a particular hour in which you'd prefer to see me-"

Molly has to speak over him. "My mother is no longer with us, Mr. Holmes, nor is my father," she says. "Were you to visit me I fear it's General Morstan, Mary's father, whom you'd have to meet. And Mary too, of course."

Holmes narrows his eyes. "I see."

"I doubt that," she says defensively and instantly she regrets her bluntness. But she hates the way people talk about her because of her orphan status, and she hates the way they refer to Mary's father. *After all, it's not his fault he was ruined by his predilections.*

There are few in the Ton, she knows, who can afford to cast stones there.

She doesn't want to part from Mr. Holmes in bad spirits though so she tries to back-pedal. "What I meant to say," she says hurriedly, "is that were you to come and visit tomorrow, I'm afraid you'd find me in my surgery. In Whitechapel. That's in the East End-"

"I know where it is," Sherlock says. Understanding moves through his eyes. "Ah, I see. You're *that* Dr. Hooper. The one who runs the clinic for unfortunates."

Molly knows well what he's thinking when he says that. She's encountered enough such assumptions over the years, in fact it's one of the reasons she wishes to marry. She's entirely too tired of men assuming that because she doesn't leave those women who have to feed themselves through prostitution to their own devices then there must be something wrong with her personal morals.

*Oh yes, she's encountered far too many men who assumed *that*. *

"I run a surgery for the poor," she points out hotly. "Children. The elderly. Often working women-Since they seldom get the chance to take care of their health and often prefer a female physician-"

"Yes, yes, of course," Mr. Holmes says, waving his hand dismissively. "I'm sure you're quite the angel of mercy."

By this time he has moved away from her, gesturing to Dr. Watson to join him with a curt flick of his head. The good doctor looks rather unwilling to leave Mary behind but nevertheless he goes, his gaze cast back over his shoulder at her friend. Molly can't help but feel that both she and Mary are being dismissed and she likes it not one jot.

"Expect me at twelve tomorrow, Dr. Hooper," Sherlock's saying. "I'm afraid John and I must be going but I assure you, I'll be there tomorrow."

And with that he trots out, his friend at his heels, leaving Molly feeling slightly… bewildered. Discombobulated again. And angry. Really, rather angry.
However did the dratted man manage to do that?

She watches him leave and she thinks she might be imagining it but she could swear Mr. Holmes shoots Lady Anthea a filthy look as he goes. If the Countess sees it she gives no sign of it however.

And neither she nor Molly notice those other, prying eyes which have taken note of her actions- and choice of dance partners- tonight.

She doesn't know it yet, but this is a lapse which she and Mr. Holmes will come to regret.

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A/N For those wondering, Sectoral Heterochromia Iridum is indeed the medical name for the condition which causes La Batch's eyes to appear to be different colours at different times. I'm not sure whether it would have been named by this point but, like a lot of things in this story, I decided to take a little liberty with history...
Mycroft's Townhouse, 

Mayfair, 

The next day 

Sherlock wakes up the next morning feeling extremely bad-tempered and extremely hung over. He's also contemplating murder, but that's because John Watson is in his room, whistling and making noise and being. Bloody. Cheerful. 

It is a thing not to be borne. 

For the good doctor is pottering around, opening curtains and slamming shut doors and waving his morning coffee under Sherlock's nose as if he were a particularly shy snake which could only be lured out with caffeine— 

At his third attempt- Sherlock has yet to open his eyes- the detective reaches out and grasps his friend's wrist. Squeezes it into stillness. 

He smiles in vindictive pleasure when the motion causes some coffee to overflow its cup and land (judging by the sound of John's swearing) on his trouser legs. Huzzah! He thinks. Victory. 

"Git," John says conversationally and, putting the coffee cup on Sherlock's bedside dresser, he begins to poke his friend rhythmically in the side, just hard enough to leave a bruise. 

It's annoying even through the bed-clothes. 

"Get," poke, "your backside," poke, "out of bed," poke, "NOW," poke, "or I'm fetching Mrs. Hudson-" poke, poke, poke- 

Sherlock deigns to open one eye at that. 

Fetching the formidable Hudders could prove a problem; she's already on the war-path over those eyeballs she found in the pantry last Friday. 

So Sherlock decides to play along; The grin he shoots his friend is probably considered justification for murder in some constituencies as he cocks an eyebrow. 

"And if I don't get up?" he asks archly. "What then, pray tell?" 

John narrows his eyes. Leans into his friend with the air of one about to impart an indescribable
mystery. "I'll start bouncing on the bed," he says, his voice grave.

Sherlock closes his eyes. Rolls over.

If John's not even going to make a decent threat then he doesn't deserve the pleasure of Sherlock's scintillating company.

"I'll do it," John warns. "You wait and see: I'll, I'll-

"Make the bed-springs dance?" Sherlock asks archly from the relative comfort of his pillow. "Wouldn't be the first time, according to some…"

"Oi, there's no need for that!" And John picks up a spare pillow, smacks his friend with it. Sherlock doesn't need to have his eyes open to know that he's in a huff now.

He can hear the pout in the other man's voice.

John absolutely hated the rumours that initially swirled around about them when they first started living together, doubtless because so few ladies were willing to investigate their veracity and his amorous reputation had been damaged. (Or because so many other ladies had asked to be included in he and Sherlock's presumed… adventures.)

For his own part, Sherlock doesn't rightly know what John's problem was: Titled, clever, rich and handsome, he imagines being known as Sherlock Holmes' Bit o' Stuff would be rather the feather in anyone's cap, male or female.

He has no idea why John won't admit it.

But since he also has no idea what would possess John to call on him this early (unless a case were involved), and since his friend is making the sort of irritated threats that often lead to actual difficulty for Sherlock, it occurs to him that he might want to give his friend some… attention. (He refuses to characterise what he's doing as giving in to Watson's tactics, something which would set a frightfully bad example.)

So to that end he huffs out an impatient, martyred puff of breath and sits up in bed, crossing his arms mutinously over his chest and finally looking at his John, his expression dripping sarcasm.

"And lo!" John intones dryly. "The dead arose and did appear to many."

"Comparing me to the Second Coming, John?" Sherlock says. "Rather good call, that."

He's about to say more but the doctor picks up his jacket, left out (like all his clothes) by Mrs. Hudson the night before and throws it in his face.

It means that Sherlock's- rather suave- follow-up statement gets lost in a muffle of coughing and cloth.

"Haul yourself," John says bluntly. "You told Ms. Hooper you would call on her last night. You gave your arrival time as noon, and it's nearly eleven already.

Best you get your backside in gear, mate."

And he turns, makes to give his friend some privacy; No matter the rumours, there are still some boundaries in their friendship.

At the mention of his sudden and, admittedly intriguing, would-be fiancée however it's Sherlock's
"But why on Earth should that matter?" he whines. "If I don't end up marrying her- which is by far the most likely ending for this- then I'll have inconvenienced myself today for nothing."

John ignores that, not even turning around.

"And if I do, God help me, end up wedded to the poor chit," Sherlock continues, "surely my turning up on time for our first appointment is setting rather a rum example, eh?" He snorts. "It's not like I'll be keeping up that behaviour, now is it?"

John is clearly unimpressed by this logic; He elects to express this through silence and also through the theft of one of Sherlock's breakfast scones, which Mrs. Hudson must have thoughtfully brought in with his morning coffee.

Sherlock scowls at this and this time it's John's turn to grin insolently.

"I'll eat them all if you don't get a move-on," he says and since Sherlock knows a) his friend will follow through on that threat and b) Mrs. Hudson's delicious breakfast scones are only ever, ever available at breakfast, the detective elects to get out of bed. Hunt around for his smalls, since he never even wears a sleeping shirt to bed. Not being the sort of man who keeps a valet either he finds it easy to get dressed, making sort work of putting on trousers, shirt, tie and jacket though he elects to leave off his cuffs. (They're rather too fiddly for this hour of the morning.)

He can't seem to find underwear anywhere though thankfully a pair of socks turn up, as do his gloves.

When he's finished he informs his friend by the entirely defensible method of taking John's purloined breakfast scone right out of his hand and finishing it in one, admittedly impressive, gulp before smacking him curtly on the back of the head.

John shoots him a look of deepest loathing and Sherlock smiles through a mouthful of crumbs, cream and jam.

Again, he thinks. Victory!

"You went to three of the finest educational institutions in this country," John intones in mock wonderment. "You have a double first in chemistry and physics from Cambridge and you've been offered a knighthood. Twice."

Sherlock makes sure to turn his smile disgustingly sunny.

"And yet here I am, crumbs and all, John," he says. "Now chop, chop, let's not leave the unfortunate Ms. Hooper waiting."

And with that he gestures to the bedroom door; John shakes his head in wonderment but pushes it open. Sherlock ambles through it, Mrs. Hudson's last two scones in his trouser pockets, whistling merrily as he goes, his hangover quite forgotten-

"That poor girl doesn't know what she's getting herself into," John mutters, rolling his eyes heavenwards.

"I couldn't have put it better myself," Sherlock says and with that they're off.
One of the more useful things about staying at Mycroft's townhouse—*it's far nearer to the Knights' than his own lodgings, and thus more convenient*—is that it means Sherlock never has to look long for a cab. Being in the middle of Mayfair, the hansoms jolt into one another in their haste to pull over, the better to get a well-heeled local call.

(And unlike the cabbies in Baker Street who know him well, they never react with suspicion when Sherlock gets in).

For that reason Sherlock and John are barely on the street more than a minute before they find a cab, and though the driver makes it clear that no amount of coin will induce him to go anywhere off Whitechapel Road and into the surrounding rookery they still begin their journey. In fact, they reach the point where Whitechapel Road and Commercial Street cross with time to spare and Sherlock, by now in the correct mood to appreciate their destination, eagerly hops out at the earliest opportunity and pays before setting off at a fierce clip—

**He loves** wandering through London whatever the cause.

Molly Hooper's clinic lies up ahead, in one of the less decrepit houses overlooking St. Mary Matfelon and he has about ten minutes to get there.

He walks so fast John has trouble keeping up with him though as they walk the two men make sure to keep a sharp eye about.

Whitechapel Road itself, lined as it is with inns and coaching houses, is fairly salubrious; Walk off that road however into any one of the labyrinth of side streets and one is as like to find oneself in a middle class square as in the worst sort of slum, something Sherlock *and* John have both discovered to their cost.

Luckily however, trouble seems to be ignoring them today, something for which Sherlock is grateful. Though he walks with his hands thrust firmly into his pockets to make sure nothing he values is lifted by any of the passing crowd, he feels cheerful. Chipper almost.

The two scones he ate in the hansom have done wonders for his constitution.

It occurs to him that the prospect of meeting Ms. Hooper again might be responsible rather than the food and at the thought he scowls, his good humour fading. In fact it feels rather like being dunked in cold water, a sensation he likes not at all. It was this same thought which had so soured their parting last night, and his bidding farewell to Lady Anthea: He hadn't liked the jolt of attraction—of lust—which had gone through him when Ms. Hooper hotly defended her practice and her name and he hadn't liked the knowing glance Thea had shot him while it was happening and so he had stomped scornfully out of the Knights' townhouse—

He slows as he thinks on this, something a little… bitter in his mouth now, for all that the scones' sweetness remains.

He notes idly that they're nearly at the most respectable alley he can take towards St. Mary Matfelon and Ms. Hooper's surgery and despite himself he scowls a little more, irritation beginning to move through him.

**He doesn't like this train of thought one jot.**

"Breathe, Sherlock," John says quietly beside him then. He blinks, surprised; for a moment he'd forgotten his friend's presence. "We're nearly there," John's saying, "you look admirably Bohemian
and rakish and you've managed to bring the most charming man in London- namely me- to help your cause.

Ms. Hooper is going to be delighted with you."

Sherlock turns his scowl on his friend, not at all pleased with his presumption.

"I am perfectly fine, John," he bites out, "and I could care less what Ms. Hooper thinks of me."

To his annoyance the doctor snorts. Grins.

_He does not look terribly convinced of Sherlock's veracity._

"Of course you don't," John says. "That's why you didn't want to come and face her, you're now moving along like the devil's at your heels and you're as stiff as a broom.

All of that conveys that you couldn't give a hoot, mate."

And he has the cheek to waggle his eyebrows, his display making a bonneted, brunette girl walking on the street beside them giggle.

This in turn is enough to make John tip his hat and shoot her his most flirtatious grin.

Sherlock rolls his eyes in disgust- _however does John get anything done, when he's this easy to distract?_- but before he can say anything he freezes. Pulls his friend to a halt.

"Vatican cameos," he mutters and immediately John falls silent and taut.

For ahead of them, in the general vicinity where Sherlock would put Molly Hooper's surgery, he can hear the hiss of fire and the sound of wood breaking. Voices screaming- feminine voices- their tone bespeaking worry and anger and, yes, he thinks, bespeaking fear.

The detective and the doctor break into run, easily rounding the corner to Ms. Hooper's clinic, both of them wondering what trouble the young lady doctor has gotten herself into, and as they burst into the square a single gunshot rings out, loud and surprisingly close to them-

A brick beside Sherlock's head practically explodes as another bullet hits it and that, quite naturally, is when all Hell breaks lose.
Mr. Holmes' First Riot

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CHAPTER EIGHT: MR. HOLMES' FIRST RIOT

It would appear he and Watson have wandered into a bit of a… fracas.

It's a thought which brings an expected bounce to Sherlock's step- After all, he didn't think his visit to Ms. Hooper would be as interesting as this.

But interesting it certainly is- A large group of rough-looking working men are standing belligerently before the steps of Ms. Hooper's clinic, their hands filled with bricks, bats, crow-bars, burning bundles of rags and whatever other detritus might be found in a rookery and turned to mischief.

The clinic windows and its front porch are likewise filled with women, each of them yelling and cursing at the men and hurling objects, mainly rocks and bits of coal though one enterprising new mother has elected to throw her baby's filthy swaddling at the interlopers-

One such projectile lands with a disgustingly wet plop at Holmes' feet and he grins delightedly at Watson.

"You were right, John," he calls, "this visit was a capital notion!"

Watson's feeling about the matter go unrecorded however, for as he speaks the crowd of men clears slightly and he sees, standing in the middle of all this, Ms. Hooper, her chin raised defiantly. Her hands are fisted at her sides as she snaps out an impressive litany of Polish swearwords, gesticulating sharply towards her clinic and (presumably) the women therein. One of the men is holding his torch to the straw on the street by the young doctor's feet, leering at her and threatening to set it alight. Every time she looks at him he makes a mock jump at her, laughing when she instinctively jerks back.

As if, Sherlock muses dryly, a willingness to have one's skirts set on fire betrayed some sort of stupidity on Ms. Hooper's part.

Moron.

The largest of the men- doubtless their leader- is hissing and yelling at Ms. Hooper in Polish, gesticulating viciously towards the clinic and demanding the return of "his property," something the young doctor is resolutely refusing to countenance-

"You have no claim here," she bites out in (again) only slightly accented Polish. "This clinic belongs to Lord Stamford and if you have any issue with how I run things then you may take it up with him-"

"I don't need to talk to some bloody toff," the large man snarls, to the loud cheers of his fellows. "Just like I don't need some woman's permission to take back what's mine-"

And without any warning his large, beefy fist darts out, grabbing Ms. Hooper by the back of her neck and yanking her physically towards him with such force that her boots scuff through the muck,
her toes barely touching the ground. She lets out a small gasp and without really thinking Sherlock
find himself darting forward, about to intervene though he's painfully aware of how outnumbered he
and John are-

Before he and John get even two steps another bullet sounds though, this one hitting the ground at
the assembled men's feet and driving them skittering backwards. The crowd promptly falls silent, the
beefy man dropping Ms. Hooper into the dirt, his expression turning thunderous as he spins around
trying to see who's shooting at him. John and Sherlock do likewise, though the detective assumes
they look a jot more friendly-

"That was a warning shot, Oskar," A new voice says. "The next one won't be."

This voice sounds poised. Authoritive. Feminine. A Southwark accent curls through it, sharp as sea-
salt and rope, and underneath that Sherlock thinks he hears a trace of the Caribbean.

It is, he thinks, the voice of a true daughter of London Town.

As Sherlock, Watson and the assembled mob watch a slim, dark-skinned woman stalks out from the
clinic's porch, a hunting rifle at her shoulder. Two pistols hang at her hips and she's wearing men's
trousers. She's also wearing a man's shirt, waistcoat and boots and the sort of viciously angry
expression Sherlock's only ever seen on Anthea or The Woman.

Most of the men instinctively move back to avoid her, their eyes flickering from their leader to Ms.
Hooper to the newcomer with a sort of nervous, animal energy that tells Sherlock they have dealt
with this hoyden before and come off the worst for it.

Her weapons still pointed at Oskar the Giant, this newcomer reaches out her hand to help Ms.
Hooper up.

Feeling a rare flash of embarrassment Sherlock collects himself and takes her place, going to
automatically lift Ms. Hooper to her feet bodily and only remembering at the last moment how such a
thing would look. Instead he offers her both his hands, pulling her easily up and holding her between
himself and Oskar while the newcomer keeps her rifle trained on him.

"This one alright, Mols?" the newcomer asks sotto voce, cocking her head to indicate Sherlock. Her
expression is rather suspicious.

"Yes, Sally," Ms. Hooper answers, averting her gaze from the detective's, her cheeks pinking.

He is reminded of her reaction to him last night at the house party and despite himself he has to fight
back a small, pleased jolt at the thought.

Clearly his grin has annoyed her though because the look she shoots him is deeply unimpressed.
"Mr. Holmes," she says severely. "Your timing has not improved, I see."

"This is the Holmes from last night?" the gun-wielder- Sally- demands. "The cove with the
wandering hands?" She shoots him a brief, dismissive glance. "I see what you were talking about."

Sherlock, not having ever been called a cove to his face (let alone having been accused of having
wandering hands before) opens his mouth to object but before he can one of Oskar's men makes a
grab for Ms. Sally's rifle. With one swift, vicious motion she brings her knee up to his crotch, his
eyes crossing with the pain of it even as he titters back and Ms. Hooper jumps out of the way- and
closer to Sherlock- before delivering a sharp, ugly slap to his face and then another kick to his family
jewels. (And lo, her reaction to being manhandled last night is explained).
This one-two reaction from the ladies seems to much for the poor man who falls to his knees to the jeers and shouts of his comrades, a couple of men howling about how he'd been knocked on his back by a woman.

As soon as he's down Ms. Sally brings her rifle back to up her shoulder though, this time pointing it right at Oskar's head, her finger on the trigger.

Her expression is not friendly.

"That wasn't very nice," she mutters and Sherlock might be wrong but he thinks she's going for understatement of the year.

*She's making a good hash of it, too.*

"You heard Doctor Hooper," she's saying. "You have a problem with how we run this clinic, you take it up with Lord Stamford. Or you have a conversation with myself and my darling Bertha here-" And she gestures to her rifle. "Is. That. Clear?"

Oskar leers, his smile showing a mouthful of filthy teeth. There's a smugness in his eyes now, a smugness Sherlock likes not one bit though he raises his hands, palms up in mock surrender.

"That's plenty clear, Sal," he says with mock sincerity. "I can tell if I do this, I will have to do it, what is the English phrase? Oh yes, "On the books.""

And he looks around, grins at his boys. Signals for everyone- even the man still mewling on the ground- to stand and leave.

"We're done with the little doctor- For now," he says, his tone mocking. Almost jovial.

It makes Sherlock and John grind their teeth on general principles.

Maybe this shows because his eyes come to rest on Sherlock, his smile turning sharp as he takes in his expansive clothes and jacket. Having been on the receiving end of that look before, Sherlock recognises a man assuming he's a target and reacts as he always does.

He straightens up.

Smiles.

He stares up at Oskar, refusing to back down, letting his muscles loosen and his balance shift as he prepares to fend off whatever the miscreant throws at him.

His lack of fear must have the intended effect though, for Oskar shoots him a shark-like smile, staring down at him for a full, tense moment before stepping away, his massive bulk relaxing in a gesture of extreme indifference. It's the only way he can save face now he's elected not to take Sherlock's invitation and fight.

*He's showing the detective is so little of a danger that he'll turn his back on him.*

Were Sherlock the sort of man who gets into measuring contests he'd feel very aggrieved indeed, but given he knows he has nothing to worry about he can afford to be gracious. So he smiles his friendliest, most charming smile. Offers his arm nonchalantly to Ms. Hooper.

"I do hope my little visit hasn't come at a bad time," he says brightly and behind him he swears he hears Ms. Sally snort with disbelieving laughter. Watson's joins her.
The tension in the crowd fractures, snaps, and a couple of the women laugh, even a couple of Oskar's crew.

Suddenly the entire house can breathe again.

Taking his arm Ms. Hooper leads him into the house delicately stepping through the detritus of the fight and leads him into her sitting room. It's shabby, overused and loved, and it reminds him pleasantly of Baker Street.

*He feels instantly, worryingly at home there.*

"I wasn't expecting you," she says as she potters about, trying to clear her desk and the room while every woman in the house bobs their head around the door to get a look at the man she's supposedly involved with.

John, being John, offers to help but Sherlock feels that would be setting a dangerously unlikely precedent. Instead he smiles, delighted at the notion that this isn't going to be some boring old house-call; He stands as Molly mutters something about "finding the tea things," and watches her watch the room with the sort of enjoyment he had certainly not expected to find today. He doesn't even mind when he looks down and finds a filthy, goo-faced infant with his hand in his pocket, trying to lift his pocket-watch.

*To get that close the child must have talent, after all.*

A woman- presumably the child's mother- lets out a string of colourful imprecations to the Blessed Virgin Mary and lifts the little one up and away, her accent and her choice of patron telling Sherlock that she originally hails from Ireland, Cork City by the sound of it. She gives the child two sharp slaps on the back of his legs but he looks completely unrepentant from what Sherlock can see. The detective doesn't blame him.

This impression is heightened when he looks over to see another child, this one clearly a sister of his little thief, with her hand in Watson's pocket. The good doctor catches her in time and shoots her a dirty look but she shrugs, smiling sunnily and skipping out of the parlour to find another target.

"What?" John asks. And then, following his line of sight. "You are enjoying all this entirely too much, mate."

Sherlock shrugs innocently. "It's good to finally find a female you won't flirt with," he says. "I was beginning to despair..." He mock-frowns, willing to goad a little. "And beside, shouldn't I be enjoying myself?

Don't you wish Ms. Hooper and I to get along?"

And he grins. Bats his eyelashes.

Watson loudly prays for patience.

John shoots him his patented pull-the-other-one-mate-I-swear-it-has-bells-on look and just as Sherlock is about to answer him a young woman tumbles out of the chimney- and thence, the fireplace- in a loud puff of soot and noise and swearing.

She appears to be wearing an absolutely filthy wedding dress.

Molly stumbles into the parlour at the furore, Ms. Sally at her heels, both their facial expressions
practically screaming *GUILTY* and Sherlock decides that today is officially the most fun he’s ever had paying a call-

*He really must thank Anthea.*

---

*Meanwhile,*

Irene draws her hood more deeply over her head and hurries back towards Whitechapel Road, her eyes sharp, her mind on what she’d just seen.

It was, she has to admit, very interesting.

*She had barely believed the information she’d received, but it appeared to be correct.*

At this thought she smiles, a plan beginning to form, and as she does so she quickens her pace. She doesn't run, mind, she walks- Only the guilty or the frightened run in a rookery and she is not nearly foolish enough to let anyone mark her as that.

So she glides back to the main road, her head held high, and hails a hansom. Orders it to Mayfair and the associate she has there: They have strategy to discuss.

As she sits in the back of the cab she scribbles a note to her dear Sherlock, telling him she simply *must* see him this evening-

When she reaches Mayfair she sends her best runner back to Ms. Hooper's clinic before squaring her shoulders and heading in to wage her own peculiar brand of battle again.
For a split second all anyone in the room seems capable of doing is gawking.

For once Sherlock doesn't blame them.

After all, it's not every day that one encounters a young bride, hiding in a chimney and recently (forcefully) ejected thence, who is now covered in soot and wailing in what appears to be Yiddish.

It's also not every day that one realises the hither-fore boring heiress your cousin has set you up in an engagement with is actually some sort of thrill-seeking danger addict who's clearly involved in something illegal with said bride (since if no illegality were taking place then why would the girl have been hiding?)

And it's also not every day that Sherlock Holmes, the world's only consulting detective, gets to look at his possible future wife and realise that she has the same charmingly sensible attitude to illegality which he does- Namely that the Law is more a set of guidelines than actual rules.

*Because rules are boring. And useless. And neither he- nor, apparently, Ms. Hooper- could be described as that.*

It's this notion which prompt him to say (with a gleam in his eye), "So this is who Oskar the Giant was looking for, hmm?"

This is the reason that idiot tried to attack you?"

At his words both Ms. Hooper and Ms. Sally blink in surprise, both opening their mouths to snap out matching rebuttals though Sherlock hand-waves their attempts with his usual panache and charm. (Well, he calls it "panache and charm."

The look on John's face would suggest it's rather more along the lines of Watson's traditional, "You Bloody Pillock.")

The women's denials- for they are mainly denials- fall on deaf ears however as the bride begins crying, staring at Sherlock and John with wide, frightened eyes and babbling away a mile a minute in her native tongue, her gestures becoming more and more panicked the longer she goes on.

Ms. Hooper darts forward, drawing her shawl from her shoulders and settling it over the girl's, murmuring softly to her in Yiddish as perfectly pronounced as her Polish had been. Even if Sherlock weren't familiar with the language- and frankly, working in the East End these days is near impossible without it- he'd have recognised the doctor's attempts at reassurance.

"It's alright," she's saying. "There, there, Anna, you've no need to fear these men, they're not going to hurt you-"
"But they'll tell," the girl- Anna, apparently- answers. She sounds absolutely desperate. "They'll tell Oskar and he'll, oh you know what he'll do-"

"He ain't doing nothing," Ms. Sally says bluntly, glaring at Sherlock and John as if daring them to contradict her. John, idiot that he is, looks distinctly smitten at the sight. "Oskar's not coming in here," she says, "and you're sure as Hell not going back to him-"

"But he can make me!" the girl wails, still in Yiddish. "He can, he can force me- He said that a man has a legal right to his wife, that nobody can take her away from him-"

Molly shakes her head. "He has to find you first," she points out sensibly. "He has to find proof that you're here and then he will have to find a sympathetic judge or policeman to sign off on a raid on a house run by an heiress and owned by an Earl, something which could take days."

And this time she looks sharply at the two men, her expression leaving no room for disagreement. "And if he doesn't find that proof then he hasn't a case and nobody will be making you go back- Will they, Mr. Holmes? Dr. Watson?"

And at his prompting Watson shakes his head. "Of course not," he says, his tone matter-of-fact. "Perish the flippin' thought."

And he smiles too, gives the young woman that ridiculously trust-worthy look The Formidable Hudders has nicknamed the "deal-clincher."

"You may of course depend upon our keeping this to ourselves, Ms. Anna," he says courteously in Yiddish, kneeling down so that he doesn't appear so imposing. "Just because your husband says he has a right to you doesn't mean he's earned it, now does it?"

"You need not worry yourself," he continues gently, addressing the girl, "Neither myself nor John will say anything- Will we, John?"

This latter question he adds in English so his friend can understand.

And at his prompting Watson shakes his head. "Of course not," he says, his tone matter-of-fact. "Perish the flippin' thought."

And he smiles too, gives the young woman that ridiculously trust-worthy look The Formidable Hudders has nicknamed the "deal-clincher."

Apparently it translates into Yiddish since at this- and rather, it appears, against her better judgement- both Ms. Anna and Ms. Sally smile in return. Even Ms. Hooper's lips twitch as if she'd rather like to join in but feels it wouldn't really be proper and Sherlock has to force back a twinge of petulant annoyance, that it wasn't he who had elicited such a reaction.

Not that that's the pertinent detail here, of course; He would never be so uncouth as to be jealous of
As ever when presented with female attention though John grins like a toddler with a bucket of treacle, making Sherlock fight the urge to roll his eyes. Rather than give his friend the satisfaction of seeing this reaction however, he turns his attention back to Anna: As soon as she notices his movement though she goes stock still and Sherlock knows without having to be told what such reluctance from a child of the rookery means.

She is clearly nervous of men and doubtless has good reason. Sherlock has encountered such reactions before and he knows well the cause.

He pictures Oskar's treatment of Ms. Molly- *ahem, Ms. Hooper*- outside just now and he has to admit, if it doesn't make his blood boil it certainly makes it simmer. It also narrows his list of suspects in Ms. Anna's abuse down considerably- Namely, to one.

Now it's his turn to glower, irritated by the images such a thought brings to mind.

Perhaps Ms. Hooper misreads his momentary annoyance for she looks at him askance, opening her mouth in a clear effort to tell him off.

"I'm thinking of that blighter outside's treatment of you and this young lady," he says to waylay her before shuffling back from Anna, who visibly relaxes at his movement.

Ms. Hooper blinks in surprise at both his words and his action and once again Sherlock has to fight the urge to preen.

"How did you know that's what I was about to say?" she asks and he grins, delighted with the chance to show off. (He may be wrong but he could swear he hears John mutter a martyred, "here we go again," under his breath.)

As always he ignores him with magnificent, Holmesian disdain.

"It wasn't a difficult deduction," he announces loftily. "During out conversation last night your behaviour indicated that you have not learned to expect the most… courteous conduct from men, especially given your class, profession and experience working here in the East End.

If that's the case then it stands to reason that you would assume such ungentlemanly conduct in my dealings with Ms. Anna, since I looked angry when she moved away- As if I were insulted by her reticence and didn't understand it, which I do."

Ms. Hooper blinks. "You do?"

Ms. Sally blinks. "You do?"

Irritatingly, John blinks with mock disbelief- "You do?" and Sherlock has to fight the urge to stick out his tongue at his friend.

He nobly fights the desire however and instead nods impatiently. Continues.

"Of course I do," he scoffs. "This is a rookery, hardly the safest environment for a young woman. And now she's being stared down at by a strange, tall brute of a man whom she knows not at all. No wonder she scampered away."

At his words John opens his mouth, doubtless to ask whether Sherlock really considers himself a, "strange, tall brute of a man," but as ever Sherlock speaks over him, magnanimously blocking his
opportunity to make an idiot of himself in public.

*John should be thanking him. He really, really should.*

"The question is, why though?" the detective continues instead. "Why would she be here? After all, judging by her attire," - he gestures to Anna's (now filthy) wedding dress- "she comes from a reasonably prosperous family. She's well-fed and apparently cloistered enough in her upbringing that she hasn't had to learn English, which means she's never had to walk the streets or earn her keep in a brothel, an unusual circumstance in an area like this."

And he taps his lip thoughtfully, warming to his theme, the facts moving into place with reassuring predictability.

That he gets to show off for his (possible) future bride is something which he finds rather… fun.

"And then there's our aggrieved giant outside- What was his name? Oskar? Demanding his "property," back," he continues. "Making threats to Ms. Hooper which suggest that this clinic has a certain reputation in its dealings with women and perhaps the less deserving of my own sex."

"Now, the presence of several different coloured hairs on Oskar's clothes suggest that he already has several children but he doubtless wants more," he goes on, his voice getting faster. "No man can have too many and all that guff, whether he can feed them or not. Since bigamy is illegal in this country and frowned upon even in the slums that tells us that he wants a new bride: One just like Ms. Anna. One young, healthy, pretty and possibly "unspoilt," since men like he usually find the notion of a woman with any actual experience terrifying-"

"But not you?" Ms. Hooper's words stop him cold.

When he looks at her she turns bright red, apparently mortified she said them.

"I beg your pardon?" Sherlock stutters and Ms. Hooper's cheeks go absolutely puce.

Sherlock's match them.

The knowing smile passing between John and Ms. Sally does not help matters any, but Ms. Hooper stands her ground.

"But not you?" she repeats, more faintly. "You- That is to say, a woman with experience doesn't terrify you?"

"Of course not," he scoffs, cleverly covering his discomfort with irritation. It doesn't happen often, but he has the distinct feeling that he's been… exposed. "Expecting your wife to know less than you only leads to a very boring wedding night and thence a very boring marriage, a basic application of logic confirms that-"

And an image flashes inside his brain, Ms. Hooper smiling. Ms. Hooper on her- their- wedding night. In his imagination she's wearing a shift and shawl and… well, very little else. It occurs to him to wonder quite what a medical woman might mean by "experience," and really, it's rather distracting, is what it is…

He glances around, the thread of his thought and his deduction lost as John snaps his fingers in front of his eyes.

"Sherlock?" John says. "Sherlock, you were being an arse and showing off: Maybe you should get back to that, yeah?"
He belatedly remembers that he's in the presence of ladies and winces, mutters, "beg pardon," to Ms. Sally though she seems rather too amused by Sherlock and Molly's reactions to be offended.

No, one look at the dark-skinned woman tells him that she knows precisely how far gutter-ward Sherlock's mind just went.

Ms. Molly is still staring at the detective though, her face still puce though her gaze seems oddly… distant. As if she too were pondering her own words and, perhaps, a possible wedding night. Sherlock orders himself sternly not to notice such a thing, even as he muses on how funny it is that they can't seem to stop mentioning bedrooms in one another's presence-

He opens his mouth, wanting to finish his deduction and show Ms. Hooper just how clever he is- And that's when, without any warning, there's another unexpected blast on this most eventful of eventful mornings.

For a brick flashes through the window of Ms. Hooper's clinic, showering the floor with a hail of glass.

Ms. Anna lets out a scream while Ms. Sally lets out a flurry of surprisingly inventive swear-words, picking up her gun and running to the window.

"It's that little git Inspector Dimmock, Mols," she calls. "And he's got Oskar and some of his boys with him-"

Sherlock and John exchange looks, and as always Watson realises when he's about to do something Possible A Bit Not Good before he does it.

"Oh no," John says.

"Oh yes," Sherlock retorts.

He can't help the grin he shoots his friend: *This is going to be splendid.*

And then he wanders over to Ms. Hooper and inquires whether she and her friends would like to come stay with The Most Honourable Arthur Ignatius Mycroft Holmes, Viscount Undershaw and Sherlock's darling older brother, just until they work out what they're going to do with Ms. Anna?

It's the second window being put in that persuades Ms. Hooper to say yes.

But it's the notion of Mycroft's reaction that makes Sherlock smile.

John's too busy swearing.
CHAPTER TEN: AN AUDITION FOR THE CHOIR INVISIBLE

Surprisingly enough, despite spending her formative years living in the East End, Molly has never attempted anything illegal before.

In fact, she's never done anything even remotely… naughty, since her upbringing beautifully illustrated for her the consequences of straying from the path of righteousness.

So given those facts, she muses, why does she now find herself running desperately after a stolen hansom, Anna and Sally at her heels and Mr. Sherlock Holmes urging her to "hurry the devil up," whilst Dr. Watson tries to manoeuvre the purloined vehicle delicately enough for her to catch it?

Oh yes, she muses, huffing a breath and reaching desperately for Sherlock's out-stretched hand, she doesn't find herself in these situations.

At least, not usually.

But then, ever since the madman she's engaged to walked into her life yesterday, she has found herself in positions which she would normally never permit herself to fall into. Even her current predicament, committing theft rather than risk going to a cabbie in Oskar's employ, would have been anathema to her. She frowns at the thought.

It would appear her fiancé is not exactly the best influence on her.

At this Sherlock gives a gleeful whoop and laughs, his arm swooping down to (finally!) lock around her waist and pick her up, her feet leaving the ground.

Molly's stomach lurches in fright and she gives out an entirely unladylike "Oomph!" which causes the detective to grin more widely.

At the sound she flicks her head up to stare at him, horrified by the notion that he might be enjoying this madness; As soon as their eyes meet she feels it again, that queer, jittering warmth he seems to elicit in her and scarlet flushes across her cheeks. Her breath catches and she loses the run of herself, her grip on his hand- let alone her attempts to pull herself into the hansom- nearly forgotten-

But then he drags her to him, his other arm hoisting her up the last of the way and pulling her to his chest, her momentum knocking them both backwards and into the hansom's cab.

She lands messily, splayed atop him, and now it's his turn to let out an undignified, "Oomph!"

For a moment he blinks up at her, their bodies once again pressed together with an indecent-seeming thoroughness. His hands are heavy and warm and they've- They've found their way to her backside.

Molly would object if her own weren't splayed across his chest, her little fingers pressing into the
warm, solid mass of his pectoral and abdominal muscles as her palms slide, completely of their own volition, across his flesh-

"Oi, you two!" Sally's voice barks from the door of the cab. She's managed to pull herself halfway in, one arm around Anna. "The goo-goo eyes can wait until later, have you got that?"

And with a huff she pulls herself and thence the younger woman into the cab, gestures for her to take a seat. The cab turns sharply and takes off at a fierce clip, now that they're all inside. Anna is jolted into the back seat and as she is Sally mutters something in Yiddish that Molly doesn't catch, probably referring to herself and Sherlock since at these words Anna's saucer-wide eyes narrow in understanding.

"What did you tell her?" Sherlock asks sharply and the young woman smirks.

"What do you think I told her?" Sally counters. "Considering what she's just seen?"

And she gestures to he and Molly; Holmes closes his mouth with an audible snap, the very tips of his ears turning red.

"Yes, well, I'd rather you didn't try to make my interactions with Ms. Hooper appear... tawdry," he says stiffly.

Sally snorts and his cheekbones... Good God, his entire face actually turns pink.

"There's nothing tawdry 'bout a woman and a man figuring out how they'll fit together," Sally says wryly. "We get into your brother's house and you and Mols can work your... configurations out to your heart's content."

Her grin turns wolfish.

"Just keep your eyes on the road until then." She cocks her head in Anna's direction. "Not in front of the children and all that, eh?"

Sherlock sputters, annoyed clearly at Sally's impudent tone but as he opens his mouth to speak three sharp raps sound from the roof of the hansom.

Dr. Watson's voice sounds, and Molly could be wrong but he appears to be less than happy.

"Sherlock!" he yells. "Get up here- Dimmock and two of Oskar's boys are giving chase, I think they've stolen a couple of horses- I mean, who steals horses these days-?"

At this news- news which should be absolutely horrifying to any normal man- Sherlock lets out a crow of pure delight and, without any warning whatsoever, pulls Molly to him and presses a scorching, sharp kiss to her forehead.

"Excellent!" he grins, "you are the best fiancée ever!"

And then sets about clambering out of the cab and, assumedly, up onto the driver's perch where his friend sits. He succeeds, his long, lanky limbs making short work of something which even Sally would have found difficult.

Despite herself, Molly's rather sad to see him go.

Her ennui doesn't last long though: There's a hiss and a whole lot of swearing then, the sound of a gun going off behind them.
A bullet pierces the back of the hansom, causing Anna to scream in fright and throw herself to the floor. Molly and Sally follow suit.

It sounds like a localised clap of thunder to the young doctor, the noise reverberating through the cab as she puts covers her ears with her hands and tries to struggle over to Anna (the girl is clearly more frightened than she or Sally).

"Hold on," she hears Sherlock call from his perch, the wind outside snatching at his voice, making it sound breathless.

They must go over a pothole or some such because the hansom takes a sickening, bouncing lurch, throwing Molly painfully onto her side.

"What the bloody hell else are we going to do?" Sally yells but even as she does it the payment hatch in the front of the cab opens, one of Sherlock's large, white hands appearing through it.

"Ms. Sally?" he calls. "I say, I could rather use another shot up here, John and I are having some trouble controlling the horses…" His head appears suddenly and he grins gamely at her. "Care to help?"

Another bullet rips through the back of the hansom, at the far right corner this time, and again Anna screams. The poor girl is now crying, praying desperately under her breath.

Letting out a string of curses- and wearing the expression of a martyr- Sally scrambles forward and slaps Sherlock's hand. "Get out of the way, toff," she barks and she pushes herself in through the money hatch, starts wriggling. She's small enough to shuffle up to the driver's perch that way, something neither Sherlock nor John would be able to do.

For a moment her feet dangle and then she either pulls herself up or is hauled up by the two men driving-

Anna and Molly share matching, worried glances as another bullet sounds behind them, this one causing the glass of the cab's right lamp to explode in a shower of shards, the bullet itself lodging in the lamp's brass.

This time she distinctly hears Dr. Watson yell, "Oh bugger," something Molly doesn't feel bodes well.

Sherlock's voice sounds again- she can't make out the words- but whatever he says mustn't calm Watson because the other man lets loose a string of invectives, all of them aimed at his best friend and most of them questioning Sherlock's paternity, sanity and justification in foisting himself upon his unfortunate friend.

"I left the army, Sherlock," she distinctly hears the other man yell. "I lived through Kandahar and Afghanistan, I am not dying in a hansom cab just so you can show off in front of a girl!"

Whatever Sherlock's answer to this accusation might have been is lost however: Three shots sound from the front of the hansom- Sally, no doubt- and then there are yells. Noise. The sounds of horses neighing, angry voices shouting, gravel hitting the cab's windows with angry, staccato force. The hansom bounces violently again, lurching so sickeningly that it nearly goes over onto its side-

Anna, seated and holding onto the ceiling bars to keep her in place, is merely jostled. Molly on the other hand is knocked against the sides of the coach once more, the impact sending pain hissing through her even as the hansom rights itself and picks up speed, the sounds of honking horns and yelling, angry cabbies demonstrating what desperately bad drivers Messrs Watson and Holmes are
"Mols?" she hears Sally's voice call. "Mols, I need you and Anna to brace yourselves- The Gentleman Idiot's about to try something which is, and I quote, "A Bit Not Good.""

Knowing better than to ask needless questions of her friend the young doctor nods, pulls herself over to Anna who helps her into the hansom's seat. The pair grip each other's hands and then reach up, Molly securing herself with the roof ties as the young woman has done. The cab increases speed, its bouncing becoming more nauseating as it jumps and slides all over the road-

And then there's a joyous, wild yell, she thinks from Sherlock. The distinct feel of wheels leaving the pavement, the hansom rising into the air.

For a split second it hangs, weightless, flying -

And then gravity claws back her hold on it, the vehicle smashing into the ground with a teeth-rattling force which nearly forces both Molly and Anna out of their seats.

There's a sound like branches smashing against wood, greenery clattering against the windows and turning the interior of the cab a dark forest green.

The hansom lurches forward though, its movement jerky and ungainly even as it clears whatever foliage it had found itself in and bursts back into daylight: Now there are yells and calls but they are demure. Confused. The sounds of pedestrians, not drivers.

Using the roof ties Molly pulls herself forward and peeks through the window: the vista before her is one she knows.

For they're now in Hyde Park, one of the Royal Parks in which, she happens to know, driving a conveyance is forbidden (not that she thinks such a thing will stop Sherlock). Several people are staring at them and she does her best to smile back. Leaning back in her chair she and Anna exchange glances, the young girl clearly looking to her for reassurance-

So Molly smiles as if nothing's wrong and pretends a high-speed carriage chase is something she does every day.

It seems rather the best strategy, all round.

Meanwhile,

Back at Molly's Clinic

Thomas Jenkins, runner extraordinaire and grateful employee of the Milverton Press Group bangs tiredly on the door to his destination.

The note in his hand is important- as he has been made painfully aware by Ms. Adler- and he needs to get it delivered right. Bloody. Now.

When the door opens to reveal a tired, cross, supremely indifferent-looking woman with four small children at her heels however, it occurs to Thomas that he may have underestimated how difficult this task would be-

"There's no Sherlock Holmes here," the woman says belligerently when he tries to deliver his missive.
The note feels like it's burning a hole in his pocket.

He opens his mouth to inquire where the detective might be but before he can say a word the woman closes the door in his face.

And, at the same time

By the time they get to Mycroft's townhouse- taking, to quote Sherlock, "the scenic route," - Anna has calmed down nicely.

Molly's still clutching her side however and wincing when she moves.

When the battered, decrepit, ill-used hansom clatters up to Mycroft's front door Sherlock jumps lightly down, John and Sally following him.

He reaches in and hands Anna out before gesturing to Molly to do the same.

As she moves she hisses in pain however and this prompts the- entirely thrilling, completely unnecessary- reaction of Sherlock jumping into the cab and physically lifting her from it. He hefts her easily into his arms and up Mycroft's front steps, ignoring both his brother's horrified stare and Anthea's amused smile.

"You owe me," the Countess whispers as he passes her.

To this Sherlock merely rolls his eyes heavenward.

"Behave yourself, Thea," he mutters back, shifting Molly a little closer to him and she can't help but smile at his words.
"What the devil did you do?"

Mycroft Holmes is glaring at his brother, following him into his townhouse, Anthea at his heels.

That younger brother is ignoring him with magnificent disdain, opting instead to grin cheekily down at Molly, waggling his eyebrows and making the lady doctor blush.

"You," she whispers, sotto voce, "are incorrigible."

The detective grins at her, his eyes alight.

"And you," he answers, "are delectable- Especially when you've been all brave and law-breaking and not-boring."

Molly frowns. "Not-boring is not a word," she points out sternly.

Sherlock's grin widens. "Not-boring is absolutely a word," he says gravely, "and it describes you to a tee."

At his words a ferocious blush covers Molly's face, its colour so obvious that Sally snorts in laughter and even Anna seems amused by it.

John Watson thinks it so funny he has to physically restrain himself from laughter though Anthea, being Anthea, settles on looking her usual mysterious, alluring self and says nothing at all.

As Mycroft continues to bark out objections Sir Henry Knight wanders out of the parlour to Molly's right, looking for all the world like a lost little puppy; When he sees Sherlock carrying Molly he instinctively makes a move towards the couple, only to be stopped with a pistol to the chest by Sally.

"Somewhere you think you're going, sunshine?" she growls, one eyebrow cocked.

Again John Watson can be seen, restraining himself from laughter.

Sir Henry blinks down at her from his rather more impressive height and gulps. Stares. The tips of his ears turn pink and though she's only seeing it from the corner of her eye, Molly swears he- My, she could swear he just shivered.

Well, she thinks. Fancy that. I never, etc, etc, etc.

Molly has seen the Sally Affect on young men before, but never to that degree.

"I beg pardon, Miss," Henry says, sketching a quick bow in Sally's direction and taking the hand not holding a gun in his. Bringing it to hover beneath his lips in the sort of swift, chaste almost-kiss so
popular with respectful young men these days.

Mycroft lets out a disgusted snort and Anthea's smile turns slightly… predatory. Cunning.

When Molly looks at her, her eyes are gleaming.

For her own part, Sally is clearly unused to being addressed with such formality and politeness: She stares at the young gentleman, surprised and unsure what to say.

"You- I'm-That's a very fine way to say hello, I'm sure," she stammers eventually.

Sir Henry beams and at this display of happiness Sally seems to recollect herself.

"You've nice manners," she sniffs. "For a cove.

Now give me back my hand, sunshine."

And she returns to pointing her weapon towards Knight, her eyes trained on Molly. At these words John openly chortles and she shoots him a filthy look. She trots rather quickly up the two stairs Sherlock has scaled and mutters, "You want me to head back to the clinic?" in a rather more worried tone than Molly feels the subject requires.

The young doctor doesn't say this aloud however, merely forces her face straight.

It feels strangely pleasing to be amused by Sally's reaction to Henry after all the other woman's quips about her and Sherlock's reactions to each other.

So she nods. Reaches inside her blouse and pulls out the leather tong she keeps around her neck at all times. On it are the keys to the clinic's larder, liquor cabinet and drugs chest. In other words, the three things most likely to be targeted in a burglary whilst she is away from the premises.

She presses the keys into Sally's hands and nods towards the door.

"I'll send word about Anna," she says and the other woman frowns. Throws a sceptical look at Sherlock.

"You send word if you need anything, you got that Mols?" she says, her expression perfectly illustrating her opinion of Sherlock and his ability to meet Molly's needs. One look at John Watson tells Molly he doesn't blame her. "I'll keep the clinic safe until you're back with us, yeah?"

And with that Sally hops lightly back down the stairs, stopping only to whisper something quiet and soothing to Anna. The girl nods, already being fussed over by an elderly, dark-haired woman wearing a tight bun and a starched, perfectly pressed apron.

"Hudders," Sherlock calls, addressing this older lady, "do stop fussing with that imp and fetch me some water, bandages and salve, there's a good woman."

The older woman glares at him- "That's it, no breakfast muffins for you!"- and then bustles away, taking Anna with her.

The girl watches Sally forlornly over her shoulder before she disappears through the door to the kitchen, presumably to be fed.

Sally looks sad to see her go but steels herself, setting her shoulders back and walking out the front door to Mycroft's townhouse with the same forceful confidence with which she entered it. She nods to Watson as she passes and then steps out into the street.
"You're not going to allow that young lady to travel all the way back to Whitechapel on her own, are you Sir Henry?" Anthea asks, her tone one of perfect, maidenly horror.

*The last time I heard a tone that melodramatic, Molly muses, it was treading the boards in Drury Lane.*

Henry blinks again- "Of course not, Lady Anthea,"- and scrambles out the door, picking up his coat, hat and cane and calling loudly for his carriage to be brought around as he goes. As soon as he's out the door Anthea turns to Sherlock and Molly, arms folded, and raises her eyebrows in question. In near-comic unison, Mycroft follows suit.

They look almost like they might be Sherlock and Molly's parents.

For a moment it looks like Sherlock is going to answer their unspoken questions but then-

"Oh bugger off," he says, "and find someone else to bother."

And with that, Mycroft's objections ringing in his ears, he carries Molly upstairs and in the direction of what she can only assume is his guest room.

He shuts the door behind them with a rather final-sounding click.

The Formidable Hudders brings his requests in a few moments, still muttering under her breath about his having no manners.

"I've known that one-" and she points accusingly at Sherlock- "since he was a boy.

You take my advice, my dear, and put up with none of his nonsense."

And with that she bustles out of the room, leaving Molly sitting on the guest bed with Sherlock an unmerciful, unchaste, thoroughly delightful distance from her.

"Thank you for the salve, Mr. Holmes," Molly says. She looks around, appears slightly impressed with the, admittedly well appointed and luxurious, room. "I shall have need of a changing screen if I'm to examine myself: Can you procure one?"

And she frowns, tries to move. Her hand goes to her shirt to start unbuttoning it and at the last moment she seems to remember his presence. She stills herself.

Sherlock raises his eyes at her, surprised by this display of prudery.

"Surely a woman of the world such as yourself has no need to hide her body?" he asks, voice mock innocent. He smiles at her slyly. "After all, a possible injury to your ribs won't be easy to treat on your own-"

Molly's eyes narrow. Harden. Her voice is venomously sweet.

"Whereas a possible injury to say, your teeth, would require the intervention of Dr. Watson, would it not?" she inquires.

*Sherlock sees where she's going with this.*

"Ah," he says, "I've done something a Bit Not Good, haven't I?"

Molly crosses her arms, wincing again at the motion.
Something horrifyingly like remorse flutters through Sherlock at the sight but he forces it away.

"If by "Not Good,"," she says, "you meant "Implying That I Am Unchaste and Likely To Undress In Front of A Gentleman I'm Not Married To," then yes, Mr. Holmes, you did."

He pouts. "But I told you to call me Sherlock!" he points out. "We're engaged to be married- Aren't we? And you're all modern and impressive and saving women from their husbands and living with people who carry pistols-

Are you honestly telling me you're boring when it comes to romance?"

Again he pouts.

"Because if you are then I take it back: You're not the best fiancée ever."

And he leans back, feeling- and knowing he's looking- childishly petulant.

He just happens to be lucky that "childishly petulant,"- like every other emotion- looks rather well on him.

Be that as it may Molly narrows her eyes though; something devilish moves through her expression and he finds his heart- and various other parts of his anatomy- rather stutter at the sight of it.

"Oh, I'm not romantically boring, Mr. Holmes," she's saying quietly. "Far from it, I assure you…"

And she cocks her head to one side, looks at him coquettishly. Licks her lips, her eyes growing dark. Warm. One little hand reaches out and delicately presses its weight upon his own. Despite himself and his best intentions, Sherlock finds himself leaning into her, closer with every second. There's this rather remarkable sense of… need, setting him on and he can't seem to be rid of it.

"So what I'm getting is that you're not..?" he mumbles, tries to remember what he was saying.

"You're not actually-"

"Boring," Molly breathes. "Oh, no."

Her eyes flicker down to his lips, her pupils dilated.

Her tongue flicks out to wet her mouth- so small, so pink- and Sherlock resolutely does. Not. Gulp.

"What I am, however, is aware of biology," she says suddenly, pulling back tartly and cocking an unimpressed eyebrow at Sherlock. "It's the damndest thing: You spend your days delivering babies and you become rather conversant with where they come from, so to speak." She glowers at him with a delightful forcefulness.

"So knock this nonsense off, there's a good chap."

Sherlock lets out a gusty sigh, recognising a woman whose mind is made up when he hears one. (He might even, perhaps, agree with her).

"Fine!" he says. "Be sensible! It's really rather overrated, just so you know."

And he throws himself back against the bed windily, jostling her. She winces at the pain and instantly he feels that unwelcome, nay, disturbing remorse raise its ugly head.

"Here," he says more quietly. "Let me help you up-" She shoots him a look and he raises his hands in mock surrender. "No funny business, I promise." He frowns down at her. "Just let me make you
comfortable, alright?"

With a small, distrustful frown she nods and he takes her by her elbows. Lifts her. Helps her into sitting, his hands as gentle as he can make them until he settles her down more comfortably.

She feels really… little, there in his arms and he likes that thought not one jot.

"I'll see about finding you that dressing screen," he says quietly, staring at her with eyes he wishes weren't quite so wide or quite so obviously smitten-

"I'd appreciate it," she murmurs. "Thank you… Sherlock."

He stares at her and she stares at him, that tension once again turning taut between them-

And that's when Anthea enters the room and loudly announces that they all have to talk about Mycroft and Sir Henry and Queen and bloody Country-

Sherlock swears to himself but acquiesces.

*He can always assassinate Anthea some other time.*
Lady Anthea slinks into the room and Molly breathes a silent sigh of relief, turning away from Sherlock and the rather… tempting sight he makes.

Luckily, he seems unaware of how wayward her own thoughts have become or he'd doubtless grow even more obnoxiously big-headed than he already is- Something which would not, she is aware, be a good outcome.

For anyone.

As she thinks this Molly closes her eyes and tries to calm her breathing. There's an odd, fluttery warmth in her belly, between her legs; Her heart's still drumming in her chest, restless as a trapped hummingbird and it's making her feel ridiculously out of sorts.

She doesn't know what to make of it: Obviously she recognises the signs of arousal but their presence surprises her. Perplexes her. She's always known that sexual congress can be pleasurable for her own gender- Whatever the popular ballads may claim, she's seen women be just as wilfully idiotic in the pursuit of passion as men.

But she's never before understood why a woman would risk a brazenly carnal course. She's never before understood the desire to just give oneself over, to indulge one's body without a thought for prudence, consequences or even (in the case of a woman with possibly damaged ribs) basic, physical capability.

And yet…

There had been a moment before she gave her ringing, prim rejection to Sherlock's advances where she'd genuinely been of two minds. When her body had been clamouring so loudly in its desires that she'd considered giving in. Had even let herself imagine it, just for one moment, those dark, tumble-down curls of his raked by her fingers, his mouth beneath hers and moaning for more. Because while Molly may pride herself on being a lady she also can't help how unladylike her fiancé tends to make her feel-

And that is a bit of a pickle, she's beginning to realise.

In fact, she thinks with a sense of dawning dread, it might be less of a pickle and more of an outright disaster.

This thing between them has the potential to become explosive- her own reaction proves that.

And since Sherlock is apparently none too fond of the righteous path himself, things could get decidedly… messy.
Unexpected.

Absolutely bloody marvellous, a voice (which sounds suspiciously like Mary) whispers in her head.

It makes Molly shiver.

She blinks at the thought, her mind conjuring another image: She and her host, both entwined around each other and as blissfully naked as the day they were born, doing the sorts of things normally referred to as "wanton," and "shameless," and "possibly illegal in every corner of the Commonwealth,"

A finger is suddenly clicked loudly in front of her face and Molly blinks. Frowns.

Over his shoulder Molly can see Lady Anthea, watching her through the sort of amused, narrowed eyes which leave no doubt the young aristocrat knows just how gutter-ward her thoughts have tumbled-

"My, he does have you distracted, doesn't he?" she says and out of the corner of her eye Molly sees Sherlock frown. Stiffen.

When he turns back to her he's wearing precisely the sort of delighted, self-satisfied grin she'd been trying to avoid and Molly belatedly remembers why she'd just rejected him-

Namely that he's an utter git.

If Lady Anthea notices it though she gives no indication, instead sitting lightly down on the bed beside Molly and smiling her most friendly, persuasive smile. She takes Molly's hand and pats it; immediately Molly, well used to Mary trying to butter her up to do something she doesn't want to do, heaves a gusty sigh and elects to get this over with.

"Alright," she says. "What is it you want me to do? Because I doubt you're laying it on this thick unless it's something you don't think I'll agree to on my own."

And she shoots Anthea, then Sherlock the closest thing she can summon to a severe look.

It makes, as she had suspected it would, not a dent in his smugness now he's realised the effect he had on her.

What I wouldn't give for Sally's firearms, she thinks, at a time like this.

Anthea is smiling though. "You see that, Muffin?" she says lightly, indicating Molly. "That's why we women should be running the Ministry- We're able to get right to the bloody point."

Sherlock lets out a sharp bark of laughter and both Anthea and Molly smile before the young widow gets down to business.

She leans into Molly with the air of one imparting a great confidence and lowers her voice.

"Ms. Hooper," she says, "I would like you and Sherlock to attend a ball with me tonight, if at all possible. It's being held here in Mayfair and both myself, Mycroft and Sir Henry will be in attendance, as will several members of the rather… eccentric circle in which the Holmes brothers and
I predominantly move."

She shoots Molly a smile far too dazzlingly innocent to actually be reassuring.

Molly can't be sure but she could swear Sherlock just became tense.

"So?" the young widow asks. "Would you like to go?"

She lowers her voice, makes it coaxing.

At this Sherlock frowns and now Molly's certain- He *is* tense.

"I'll make sure that you look absolutely stunning," the young countess is saying, "and it will give you a chance to meet all of Sherlock's friends-" she sniffs- "Such as they are.

I promise, it will all be great fun, you won't be sorry you agreed to it…"

Molly opens her mouth to reply, nonplussed.

She can't imagine why Lady Anthea would make such an event out of so simple a request and yet her intuition is nagging at her.

"I should be happy to go," she stammers. Her mind goes to all those rumours about the Merry Widow's Salon. "So long as you can tell me whose house we're going to visit."

She sees Anthea and Sherlock exchange looks and instantly her suspicions strengthen.

There's something going on here that they're not telling her and she doesn't like that one bit.

Lady Anthea smiles that dazzling, lovely, utterly unreassuring smile though and nods jovially.

Responds to the question as if she's actually happy Molly asked.

"The party is being held in the home of an acquaintance of Mycroft's, a gentleman by the name of Charles Augustus Magnusson," she tells her. "He's foreign of course- Scandinavian- and since Lord Smallwood's death he's purchased his Evening Gazette group of newspapers, as well as all but three of London's largest printing presses."

Again she smiles, claps her hands like this is all a laugh.

Again Molly thinks that Sherlock looks tense.

"I swear, it's going to be oodles of fun," Lady Anthea is saying. "If you're worried about being at the mercy of The Muffin's moods then you can bring your friend Mary Morstan along as your chaperone. I'll even give you the use of my carriage to get home and help you pick out a dress for the night."

She shoots Molly the look that has broken hearts for the last four seasons.

That look is many things but reassuring it is not.

"Oh, do say you'll come," she says. "I'm so looking forward to introducing you to everyone- I know we haven't made the engagement official but this will be such a lovely opportunity to get to know the group you're marrying into."

Molly knows the sound of flattery when she hears it, just as she knows the sound of calculation.
By her way of thinking, Lady Anthea is currently engaging in both.

And yet she can't think of a single, respectable reason to refuse—A visit to a prominent businessman's home on the arm of Sherlock Holmes is hardly the sort of thing she should be turning her nose up at. If she's worried about propriety, there's little more proper than Lady Anthea's scheme.

*And yet, and yet...*

She looks at Sherlock and she can see his tension. His disapproval. For a moment she feels a flash of embarrassment, wondering whether it's the unwillingness of a peer to be seen in public with a woman of low birth who has her hand in trade. But then he meets her eyes and she sees something there, something both reassuring and disturbing: Worry.

The man she's so recently become engaged to is worried about the idea of her going to this Magnusson's house and Molly can't help but think he has a reason for that.

For a moment their gazes hold and then he, very deliberately, looks away.

"If you're concerned about my behaving myself, Ms. Hooper," he says, "I assure you that it won't be a problem. I am capable of controlling myself, even around so intriguing a woman as you. Just..."

And without warning he walks back over to her. Reaches down at tilts her face up to look at him, one thumb beneath her chin.

Those quicksilver blue eyes burn when he looks at her and for what feels like the hundredth time since she's met him Molly's heart stutters in her chest.

Lady Anthea takes in a sharp breath at so public an impropriety and he shoots her a quelling glance, one which makes her turn away, her expression turning... uncomfortable. Contrite.

For a moment the silence stretches out. But then-

"You'll take care of her, Thea?" he asks and though Molly has no reason to think it, she can't help but suspect that he's not asking about Anthea keeping her company this evening.

"*We'll* take care of her, Will," Anthea says quietly, using that tone she used the other night, the one with which she ordered Dr. Watson to stand watch outside Henry Knight's study.

It is the tone of a woman used to getting her own way.

With a single, sharp nod Sherlock steps away from Molly. Straightens his shirt and waistcoat, both covered in soot and detritus from their hansom-stealing jaunt over here.

He addresses Molly. "If you're not averse," he says, "I'll ask John to come in and have a look at your injuries: Would that be amenable, Ms. Hooper?"

Molly nods and he sketches her a quick bow before darting out of the bedroom.

With another lovely smile Anthea rises and bids Molly good day, clearly following him out.

The young doctor lies back in her pillows, wondering just what she's gotten herself into-

Dr. Watson and Anna arrive a few minutes later, the young girl carrying a changing screen and a length of bandages. Molly makes sure to greet her warmly and tries to dismiss her worries about the coming night.
She does not succeed.

Meanwhile,

"What are you playing at, Thea?"

Sherlock’s words stop Anthea in her tracks, make her turn around and look at him.

Her nearest comrade in both age, temperament and experience, she should have known he would have problems with this.

But she has her orders from Mycroft and even Sherlock has to respect that, whether he likes being reminded of it or not.

Chain of command only works when one allows it to and she's his nearest superior, he knows that too.

Still, she chooses avoidance as her first reaction, rather than confrontation.

Confrontation would only play into Sherlock’s hands, they both know that.

"Do stop glowering at me, Muffin," she says jovially, trying to set him at his ease. "I meant what I said: This is an excellent opportunity to introduce Ms. Hooper to the others without giving away your full cover or painting a target on her back. You should just be grateful I came up with it-"

In three strides he's right beside her.

His hands come down to squeeze her arms, rather more firmly than she'd like.

"You forget, Thea," he says. "I'm not the member of the family you've got wrapped around your finger- That's Mycroft."

He shoots her an assessing look, one eyebrow cocked and, knowing him as she does, she shoots him an assessing look right back.

"I've known you too long to be fooled by this little show," he's saying, "so why don't you come clean? What's in this for you? What's in this for my darling brother?"

Since avoidance isn't working she elects to try redirection next.

"Can't you deduce what the scheme is?" she asks, her tone designed to hit Sherlock straight in the ego.

She sees anger spark through his features and she knows she's found her mark.

"I don't pry," he says tightly. "I follow orders- For the most part. I do my bit for Queen and Country and I always bloody have. But I swear, Thea, if you do anything which results in Dr. Hooper's being hurt there will be repercussions-"

And with that he turns on his heel and stalks off, looking terribly Byronesque and mysterious.

He is doubtless going to spend the next God-Knows-How-Many-Hours brooding on what she and Mycroft are up to. *Drat.*

Anthea shakes her head to herself, wondering when she decided finding Sherlock a new interest was
a good idea and then realises she probably doesn't want to know.

Instead she goes and reports to Mycroft-

And then she sends a note off to Irene Adler regarding tonight.
The Thick Plottens

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for their reviews go to oOkatiekinsOo, lilsherlockian1975, springbok7, sceptic7 and Katya Jade. There'll be more action next chapter, I promise, but we do need to set this up, so...

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: THE THICK PLOTTENS

The missive arrives on a silver tray, brought in by a white-gloved servant.

This handsome young man sets it in front of Irene and then scuttles back in that delightfully cowed way her host's servants have, standing by the door with head bowed.

Irene smiles: She has several slaves of many years' standing who aren't as well trained as that.

She wonders idly at the discipline which might be responsible, before deciding it would probably not be in her interests to know.

So she opens the letter impatiently, scans it. She recognises the hand-writing - *So Anthea scribbled this herself, did she?* - as well as her maid, Agatha's, scrawl at the bottom. It tells her that she feared leaving so important an invitation unanswered and so sent it on, despite the fact that Irene's host seeing it might not be completely… optimal.

Irene's smile widens at such thoughtfulness though and she raises her eyes, demands a pen. That oddly cowed young footman brings one over, his gaze still floor-ward, his shoulders hunched.

He winces when he comes within arm's reach of his employer and steps out of range as quickly as he can.

Irene sketches out an answer in her own elegant script, informing Agatha that she should respond to Lady Anthea with a yes and also telling her to start airing her newest black silk gown, the one she'd just had imported from Paris. She also tells her to start cleaning and mending her professional accoutrements- they'll have Sherlock Holmes as a guest tonight.

At this thought she allows herself a decadent little shiver.

*Let that little Whitechapel mouse announce an engagement, it's Irene he'll come back to after all.*

Once finished she summons the footman, send him off to dispatch the letter homeward. Her host makes a point of not asking, merely sips his tea blandly.

"Forgive me, Charles," she says and he raises his cup to her. "Business never rests, I fear- But then you know how that feels."

"That I do, Ms. Adler," he answers and they continue to discuss their plans, their heads bent together, their subject of discussion the Holmes boys.

Though he tries to take her hand more than once Adler manages to keep those moist, bland hands at bay.
Meanwhile,

"Is it done?"

And Mycroft looks up from his desk, cocks a single, cynical eyebrow at Anthea.

His hands are steepled, as always, beneath his chin and he's trying his best to exert a calm, centred exterior.

As happens more often than ever these days however, he finds himself wondering whether his young protégé is convinced by this façade-

In fact, one look at her face tells her she isn't.

Not that she's letting on though. *Well, not much.* The young widow frowns slightly, thins her lips. She has little in the way of tells, something on which she has always prided herself, and such circumspection serves her well now.

"I've spoken to them," she says. "Ms. Hooper says she'll come. She's bringing Morstan's girl with her, which I think is wise."

At this they share a small smile; General Morstan's daughter has a certain… reputation, much the same one her father once had, when it comes to mayhem.

As bodyguards go, Molly Hooper could have chosen far worse.

"Sherlock wasn't happy though that's to be expected," Anthea continues. "But he claims he'll behave himself- Well, as much as he ever does- and I believe him."

Mycroft's eyebrows rise in surprise though.

Anthea is, he believes, leaving something out.

At seeing this she sighs slightly, looks over her shoulder to check the deserted hall behind her before stepping into Mycroft's study and quietly closing the door behind her. This behaviour is unusual; here in the townhouse she is usually scrupulously careful about being caught in a compromising position with her superior. Before she married her late husband Anthea had spent many hours in this room, listening as Mycroft trained her in every aspect of spy craft he thought could help her. Soaking up every ounce of knowledge from someone to whom she had always been a favourite. After her wedding however such intimacies had had to be curtailed: Mycroft didn't want anyone speaking ill of his protégé, and certainly not in the same breath as he.

It would have painted an indefensibly large target on her back and he would never allow that.

Looking at her now though, he can tell something is weighing on her. That it is something to do with Sherlock is a logical deduction. So-

"Sorry you got involved?" he asks quietly, gesturing to the chair before his desk.

Anthea nods, takes a seat. She instinctively draws her eyes away from the letter in front of him, the letter which had started off today's mess.

*Bloody Magnusson, Mycroft thinks, and his bloody, stupid curiosity.*

Rather than swell on that though, he focuses on Anthea, gives her that look which has always signified openness between them. Even when she was a mere girl she had known she could speak to
him when he looked at her thus and her confidence would be respected.

"Are we sure this is wise, Sir?" she asks quietly, gesturing to the letter she's so carefully not looking at.

"You question my judgement?" he counters and for the first time in years she winces. Very nearly blushes.

It makes her look a great deal younger than he feels comfortable being cognizant of.

"Not your judgement, per se, Sir," she says slowly. He can see the effort she's putting into wording this diplomatically and he feels that familiar tug of pride as he watches her work. "I think it wise that Ms. Hooper be introduced to our little… circle," she's saying, "especially since Sherlock does indeed seem rather taken with her. Smitten, even. I merely…"

And she sighs. Frowns. Shakes her head.

"Out with it, recruit," he says tersely and she looks up at him.

Her eyes are blazing.

"I don't like that Magnusson is making demands of us, Sir," she says bluntly.

She gestures to the letter, the letter she hasn't read but which he's sure she's guessed the contents of.

After all, there's only so many reasons Mycroft would demand she talk Ms. Hooper into coming tonight.

"I understand the game he's playing," she says. "He demands we bring Molly Hooper along tonight just to show that he knows she's involved with the family. It's neither subtle nor clever but he doesn't intend it to be."

Mycroft inclines his head. "In that you are correct."

She lets out a short, impatient huff of breath. "Then why are we indulging him?" she asks. "Telling you that he knows your brother's business is a provocation: Giving in and bringing Ms. Hooper along tonight tells him that you're cowed, or at least willing to be diplomatic.

That didn't work for Lord Smallwood, and it won't work for you."

Mycroft shrugs. "We make peace when we need to," he points out.

"Tell that to Lady Smallwood," Anthea retorts. "Tell that to her children. Magnusson has no use for peace: He's coming to make war, and you know it." Again she sighs. Leans forward. Her gaze is intent.

"He's not a foreign government or a common criminal, Sir: he's something else. Something we're not equipped for, I fear.

And now he's giving you orders."

Mycroft sees it then, that tiny chink in her armour: Worry. Anthea is worried, not about Sherlock (who is wild and quiet mad enough to take care of himself) but about him.

It's been so long since he's had anyone express concern over his welfare- besides Mummy- that Mycroft doesn't know what to make of it. Instantly he feels tongue-tied and uncomfortable, falling
back into his usual furrowed brow and haughty stance rather than give his discomfort away.

Sherlock is the one who's good with sentiment, after all.

"Fortunately for us all, recruit," he bites out, "you are not the person who makes those decisions, are you?"

He sees surprise, anger, and then embarrassment flit their way through her eyes in quick succession.

When she answers him though, her voice is every bit the incorrigible coquette she's learned to present to the world.

"Of course not, Sir," she says and she makes the word a purr. A flirtation. She never flirts with Mycroft like that, she'd never insult him by showing him her mask and not her face-

Well, not until today, apparently.

"I'll just finish getting dressed and send out for dear Henry," she's saying. "I'm sure he'll be back from Whitechapel by now, aren't you?" Her smile turns wicked. "He was so looking forward to dancing with me tonight- If Ms. Adler doesn't get there first."

Mycroft feels the stab of annoyance Knight's name produces but he won't look at it. The reference to The Woman is beneath his notice too. Instead he curls his lip into a sneer. "Continue stringing the dear boy along," he says sharply, "there's a good girl. Since that's your skill-set."

"Oh, I shall." Anthea doesn't wait to say goodbye but marches out of his study, her head high and her cheeks flushing red.

She doesn't bother to slam the door behind her, but then she doesn't need to.

Mycroft sits back at his desk, staring at a letter from the most dangerous man in London right now. The man interested in his brother and his brother's new… acquaintance. The man who has even his little Thea worried about him.

With a sigh he reaches into the cabinet behind him and produces a crystal carafe of whisky and a tumbler to match. Pours himself out three fingers.

This is, he thinks, going to be a long bloody day.

While at the same time…

"You have to eat something," Mrs. Hudson says mildly.

She pokes gently at Sherlock's shoulder before going back to her cleaning, tutting all the while and moving things around which absolutely do not need to be moved (or, to use her favoured euphemism for vandalism, "tidying.")

Sherlock elects to ignore her. He's had rather a lot of practice at that, over the years.

Besides, he's worried about Molly Hooper and he's worried that he's worried about Molly Hooper, something which makes no sense at all, and which he can't help but feel does not bode well for his continuing bachelorhood.

He just can't seem to suppress the thrill of dread which contemplating tonight's outing provides.
"I made your favourite and everything and you haven't even touched it, Will," Mrs. Hudson tries again, more coaxingly. It's at this that he realises she's brought him a plate of his favourite biscuits, fresh from the kitchen. She's even using his hated childhood name- It's the second time today that he's heard it and it doesn't make him feel any better this time than it did the last.

He pouts, turns his back on her and she throws up her hands.

Says something about going to check on Ms. Anna and see how she's settling in before scurrying out the door in high dudgeon.

Sherlock ignores her though. Frowns, walks deeper into his Mind Palace as he tries to put the pieces together. Why would Anthea insist on Molly coming to this ghastly shindig tonight when she knows how dangerous Magnusson is? The entire intelligence community gives him a wide berth, from Paris to Constantinople, and Thea's introducing him to Molly as if his presence is a lark? Obviously Mycroft put her up to it but the question is why? What could it serve? The last thing Mycroft would want is Magnusson becoming familiar with their family, unless-

Sherlock frowns. Shakes his head. Mycroft wouldn't try to actively tempt Magnusson with Molly, would he?

He wouldn't be using her as bait, not when she might soon be part of the family?

The thought is repugnant and it makes his blood boil with indignation. He and his brother do not agree on many things but family is sacrosanct- And besides, if Mycroft mucks up Sherlock's first engagement- At least, the first he's been inclined to stay in- then Mummy will kill him.

An army of secret service agents couldn't keep him safe.

So no, Mycroft's not using Molly as bait, not really. Which still leaves the question of why he'd insist she come along at all.

He's still pondering what's going on when evening comes and John calls him down, tells him it's time to head to Magnusson's. He heads down to the hall to find John, Mycroft, Anthea, Mary and Molly waiting for him, the latter in the most stunningly gorgeous dress he's ever seen on a woman.

He stammers a greeting to her as he takes her arm and she blushes as pink as her gown.

They sweep out to Anthea's carriage and he silently swears that he'll not let Molly out of his sight the entire night, if he has to drag her into a dark room and get her caught in a compromising position a second time. He keeps his hand in hers all the way to the house party and she never once tries to let go- It doesn't occur to him to wonder where Henry Knight is, or why he's not here to leave with them.

The absence of that young gentleman engineer will, however, have quite the impact on his night.
Mr. Holmes seems… nervous as he ushers Molly into Mr. Magnusson's home.

His breathing is shallow, his grip upon her elbow immoveable. He said not a word in the carriage though Dr. Watson spent the entire ride trying to draw him out of his shell.

It didn't work though. He seemed distracted. Distant. Though he'd maintained his grip on Molly's hand he'd said not a word.

Now all that scintillating attention of his seems focused on her though: He stands in impertinently close proximity as he guides her through the ballroom, nodding to the varied and glittering people who populate it, greeting them by name.

They all seem to know him.

Molly is not entirely comfortable with this realisation.

Nor is she comfortable with the contrast she must produce when viewed in front of so many beautiful, accomplished society belles.

Despite the ludicrously low-cut dress Mary elected to bring for her she knows she makes a dowdy picture next to such beauties as these, let alone the man beside her-

The thought makes her pulse quicken, anxiety starting to claw at her. Her head pounds, teeth gritting together.

*She hates being the centre of attention and right now she is.*

Out of force of habit she looks around for some form of distraction or comfort and her eyes fall on Mary, gliding into the ballroom on Dr. Watson's arm. Mycroft is snaking his way in after them, his expression frozen in that hauteur she's learning to associate with him. As the highest in rank- her late husband was a Count, after all- Lady Anthea entered before anyone and has headed straight for a small, bespectacled man whom Molly assumes is their host, Mr. Magnusson-

Sherlock follows her line of sight to Anthea and thence to Magnusson. She hears his breath hitch, thinks he mutters a couple of decidedly off-colour oaths. He's wearing this charming, ingratiating smile which is so obviously false that merely looking at it is painful and without breaking stride he nods to several more bystanders before sweeping Molly's hand up to his mouth and- in an entirely shameless display of flirtation- pressing his lips to her knuckles.

Despite her gold-coloured gloves it sends a spark of electricity right up her spine.

She gasps at the uncalled-for familiarity, frowning up at him and about to give him a piece of her mind but before she can he drops his head down, bestows another kiss on her cheek.
It has a similarly electrifying effect upon her bare skin.

"Don't stare at Magnusson," he murmurs, his lips pressed close to her ear. "Pay no attention to him whatsoever and give him no reason to pay attention to you."

And with that he pulls away and winks at her, throws her another, more playful grin which seems utterly at odds with how tense he is. Several of the women in the crowd titter and Molly feels her face go bright red. She doesn't know what to make of it: Instead she tries to smile in return, her head held high despite her fiancé's overly-familiar (but apparently non-shocking) behaviour-

**Clearly Sherlock's friends are every bit as bohemian as Anthea had led her to believe.**

"I hardly think I'll be gaining Mr. Magnusson's attention, Mr. Holmes," she bites out quietly, trying to keep that friendly smile plastered on her face.

It's going to become painful if she keeps it up much longer.

Sherlock throws her a sharp, assessing glance, his expression haughty. "In that dress, Ms. Hooper," he drawls, "you'd draw the attentions of St. Francis of Assisi and all the Christian martyrs. There are angels of the Lord whom I doubt could resist you."

His eyes turn hard as flint.

"So for the love of medicine, and rifles, and runaway brides and anything else you hold dear, stay away from Mr. Magnusson, there's a good girl."

And he nods again, as if that is entirely the end of the matter. Despite the fact that she no idea why he's giving her orders or why he's staring at her like that. His tone grates; Only Sherlock Holmes, Molly muses, could give a compliment and make it sound like an order to enjoin battle. Or a diktat imposed from on high.

Since Molly Hooper is not a woman used to being given orders however- particularly orders which seem to have no reasoning behind them whatsoever- she feels her annoyance build.

It's really quite startling, how infuriated he can make her.

"Mr. Holmes," she bites out, "I'm not a good girl, I'm a good woman. And good women don't let anyone speak to them like that-"

She attempts to move away, meaning to go speak to Mary but Sherlock must misunderstand her. His grip on her elbow tightens and he pulls her even more scandalously close than she already is. He reaches down and breathes into her ear, his breath all hot and indecent and, and **lovely** against her nape.

For what feels like the thousandth time in their acquaintance, she thinks him a git even as she looks up at him through lowered, suddenly heavy lashes.

"Am I going to have to find a quiet room to pull you into, Ms. Hooper?" he whispers. His body is really rather indecently close to hers now. **He feels big and warm and hard and, and discom-bobulating.** But he doesn't feel unwelcome.

"Or am I merely going to have to take my cravat off and tie you to a bloody chair, hmm?"

The words are different from any he's said to her before but it's his tone that seems truly new. It's arrogant, almost cruel, and utterly unlike that of the mischievous, boyish, somewhat idiotically
headstrong gentleman she has thus far had the pleasure of dealing with.

This hardness makes Molly feel flustered - uncomfortable - and when she's flustered and uncomfortable she has a tendency to say rather hasty things, rather loudly.

Tonight proves to be no exception.

"I'm not going anywhere with you," she says loudly and pulls her arm tartly away. Moves over to join Mary and Dr. Watson, head still held high.

Several men who have had been staring at her since her arrival chortle loudly and several of the ladies give that same, mocking, tittering laugh, the taunting sound making Molly's cheeks burn even redder -

She takes two steps and suddenly walks right into an exceptionally tall, grey-eyed man with a mass of dark hair, worn unfashionably long and pulled back from his face with a leather tong.

A similarly tall, dark-haired woman stands beside him, her expression somehow both bemused and concerned.

"Are you all right, my dear?" the woman asks and Molly blinks.

Her accent is American.

Before she can say anything Sherlock has regained his place beside her, his grip back on her elbow. He nods to the man and the woman - "Greystoke, Lady Clayton," - and the couple throw him matching, appraising looks.

"I know you don't normally court women, Holmes," the woman says wryly, "but you must be doing something wrong: This one looks even more irritated than Adler usually does -"

She grins at her husband, her voice pitched like that of one imparting a confidence.

"Let us hope she is not similarly armed- We all remember Karachi."

Again Sherlock smiles that infuriating, false smile. "I shall take it under advisement, Lady Clayton," he says before turning a patently unconvincing look of remorse on Molly.

"Forgive me, my dove?" he asks and the endearment is so ridiculous Molly very nearly snickers aloud at it.

*My bloody dove, indeed.*

She opens her mouth, about to tell him precisely what she thinks of being designated his pet fowl and that, naturally, is when Mr. Charles Augustus Magnusson wanders over and elects to say hello.

It's also when she notices that Mary is staring at her.

"Ms. Hooper," Mr. Magnusson says, "How delightful that you could join us."

He holds out his hand and when she takes it bows over it. Despite herself Molly feels a thrill of revulsion go through her though she cannot rightly say why. Before she can work it out though music floods the ballroom, the orchestra warming up -

"May I have this dance?" Magnusson asks and he's pulling her onto the floor before she even says yes. For a split second she could swear that Mary will object but then she's up and away.
Sherlock is left, looking bereft and somehow furious, Lord and Lady Clayton trying to offer what consolation they may.

_Bugger_, Sherlock thinks.

_Bugger, bugger, bugger, bugger, BUGGER!_

He watches Magnusson tow Molly out onto the dance-floor, the man's expression showing that he knows there's no way Sherlock can interrupt without seeming unbearably rude. That same expression showing that he believes he has Ms. Molly Hooper right where he wants her. _Good luck with that, old chap_, Sherlock can't help but think.)

Unfortunately that thought brings no comfort at all.

Trying to be discrete Sherlock looks over at his brother, most unusually _not_ standing beside Anthea. Said elder sibling is instead staring at his protégé, his thunderous expression a far cry from his usual aloof disinterest. _He is also paying no attention to Sherlock whatsoever_. The detective tries to meet Anthea's eye but she's busy flirting with one of their newest recruits, Lord Wotten's handsome young favourite Dorian, and is paying scant attention to him-

"Don't worry," Lady Clayton murmurs beside him. "She'll be fine- Not even Magnusson would try anything untoward in a room so crowded as this."

"Indeed." Sherlock tries to hold onto his temper- Greystoke can be tediously protective when it comes to his wife- but before he can say anything a familiar scent taunts his nostrils.

He senses more than sees the perfume owner's arrival.

He turns to find Irene Adler, looking resplendent in black silk and rubies, that familiar, coy smile tugging at her scarlet-painted mouth.

She looks- as always- absolutely stunning.

Upon her arrival she shoots a come-hither look at Lady Greystoke, earning a low, rough growl from her husband and an unimpressed glance from the woman herself.

The couple march stiffly away and she blows the lovely American woman a mocking farewell kiss before sidling up to Sherlock.

"Hello, lover," she says. "I was hoping you'd be here."

Her eyes glitter with merriment, as sharp and wicked as ever.

For some odd reason though, they don't spark their usual spurt of adrenaline within Sherlock's heart- Or other (less polite) parts of his anatomy.

_How strange_, he thinks.

"I've spent all day in the company of idiots," she's saying. "I've been looking forward to a decent… conversation."

Sherlock knows that one thing at which he and Irene seldom excel is conversation but he elects not to mention that.

He has no desire to sit through one of her tantrums.
"Be that as it may," he says, "I'm afraid I'm rather tied up here. In fact, there's someone I have to
dance with-

And he makes to move by her, his concentration still too fixed on Molly and Magnusson to really
pay attention to the faux-disappointed pout she's now wearing. (And since when did Adler become
so predictable that he can tell what she'll do before she does it?)

The Woman though, being utterly unused to his ignoring her- And not, he knows, being the kind to
willingly share- gets in his way. Stops him, one hand pressed coyly to his chest even as she steps
closer to give him a spectacular look down her décolletage.

The hand at his chest starts heading resolutely… south.

"So we're playing tonight, are we?" she coos. "Do you want to be hunted, my darling boy?

Do you want me to corner you and give you the thrashing you so obviously need, hmm?"

Any other time those words would have prompted a jabbering, delighted response from Sherlock and
a shedding of both clothes and inhibitions, post haste, but tonight they have no effect, mainly because
as she says them Magnusson's hand strays a great deal lower than is gentlemanly on Molly's waist,
the action resulting in Molly freezing, her eyes wide and frightened as she does.

Without thinking, without even bothering to take his leave of Irene, Sherlock marches onto the dance
floor and grabs Molly. Pulls her behind him. His right fist clenches, the desire to thump his host
almost overwhelming and the only thing which keeps him sane is the fact that Molly's wrapped her
hand around his wrist as she tries to keep him calm.

His blood is absolutely boiling.

"What is the meaning of this, Mr. Holmes?" Magnusson asks and there's a smirk in his voice.

It's the sound of a man who is utterly convinced of his own invincibility and it makes Sherlock want
to smash things on general principles.

"Ms. Hooper is to be treated with respect," he manages to bite out and the other man merely laughs
at him. Cocks an eyebrow.

The look he rakes over Molly's form is practically obscene.

"No harm was intended, Mr. Holmes," he answers mockingly. "I meant merely to check whether
your companion were as lovely a piece of merchandise as all your others have been-

My apologies."

Sherlock steps into him, glowers. He feels suddenly, viscerally happy that he is so much taller and
bigger than his host.

"Don't apologise to me," he hisses, "apologise to her."

And he indicates Molly with a curt cock of his head.

For a moment Magnusson's eyebrows raise in surprise and then smirks again and bows, hand held
mockingly over his heart.

"Apologies my dear," he tells Molly. "I meant no insult- Quite the opposite, in fact."
He winks at her.

"Everyone knows Mr. Holmes has fine taste, after all."

Molly gives a single sharp nod and moves to step away but Sherlock doesn't let her. Instead he leads her through the now silent crowd and out into the relief and darkness of the veranda. The stars are a blanket of shadow and light before him. Her hand is shaking in his own.

He turns to offer his apologies, to check if she's alright, but before he can say anything their eyes meet and suddenly, suddenly-

Suddenly he and Molly Hooper are locked in a passionate kiss.

*Because, he muses, this night just wasn't complicated enough already...*

She moans, her lovely little arms tightening around him, and Sherlock's capacity for rational thought just up and leaves him in the dust.
A Fistful of Sherlock

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for their reviews go to NotQuiteSoBigKid, lostandfoundbox, renniejoy, springbok7, muchado, Limaro, Katya Jade and oOkatiekinsOo. Also, everyone got one of the cameos from the last chapter, but not the second... Answers on a postcard, people...

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: A FISTFUL OF SHERLOCK

Molly Hooper thinks she might be losing her mind.

In fact, given the armful (and handful, and mouthful) of Sherlock Holmes that she currently has about her person, and given the passionate, wanton, thoroughly debauched way she's interacting with it, (ahem, him) Molly thinks she might have to just give in and declare herself insane right now-

Insane and lascivious and thoroughly dangerous to bohemian detectives with curly, tuggable hair, she muses.

Insane and wanton and thoroughly uncaring of what such behaviour as this might do to her reputation, her common sense argues, which might be slightly more to the point.

Because while she can allow that this wet, delicious, mouth-meeting, hair-pulling, backside-squeezing behaviour she's engaged in is the very epitome of unladylike conduct, she can't seem to make herself stop it. In fact, she can't even seem to make herself mind it, not when Sherlock is kissing her too and holding her too and tugging at her hair too-

He pulls her closer, fitting her body even more tightly to hers and her arms winch closer around his neck, her tongue finds its way inside his mouth.

He mumbles something which sounds like, "absolutely bloody fantastic," but it comes out too muffled for her to be sure. (In fairness, she's sucked his lower lip into her mouth by this point so the indecipherability is as much her fault as his.) Not to be discouraged though he continues snogging her to his heart's content-

It feels bloody divine-

Her weight- and let's face it, her own legs- push and propel him backwards until his back and shoulders hit the wall of Magnusson's charming faux roman grotto.

His momentum dislodges a small stone cherub which he kicks aside without a second thought.

He lets out this pleased, delighted little grunt on impact and it does all sorts of naughty things to Molly's insides- She's really not sure what to make of it-

At this thought she pulls back from him- she must, irritantly, do so in order to continue breathing- and when she looks up at him in the moonlight he's wearing this astonished, boyish, beautiful grin, similar to the one he wore when he first realised that she was hiding Anna.

It's quite the loveliest thing she's ever seen and it makes her stop. Stare.

It feels like the first time she's ever really seen him.
Her heart starts going like a jackhammer there in her chest and when she presses her hand to him she realises that his can match her, beat for beat. Breath for breath. Heart for heart.

She's never really experienced that before.

"Molly," he breathes, his nose at her throat, in her hair. "Wonderful, fierce, brave, stupid, brilliant, bloody-minded Molly-"

And he kisses her again, pulls back to stare at her. It takes her a moment to realise that her own expression has pulled itself into a grin- one which she hopes matches his- her hands coming up to stroke across his chest even as his own come down to take her face in his hands. To pull her up to him.

Now that the initial oomph of takeoff has passed, Molly finds she can't quite reach him.

Not one to be discouraged she clambers up to stand on that (rather forlorn) little stone cherub Sherlock dislocated earlier.

The extra height means that he has to look up at her and she finds she likes that rather a lot.

Her feet find purchase, squishing the unfortunate bit of statuary further into the muck. His arms come around her, steadying her; He smiles up at her again, those quicksilver eyes gleaming and she pushes him back further against the grotto wall, her mouth finding his even as her arms twine around his neck and his around her waist. This kiss isn't like the last few; it's quieter, gentler even though every bit as passionate, as wanted-

She pulls away from him again- stupid need to breathe!- and as she does she hears a long, slow, mocking smatter of applause punctuate the night.

Still holding onto Sherlock Molly looks over her shoulder to see a woman she doesn't recognise staring at her.

This unknown woman is clapping.

This mysterious beauty walks forward, sidles up to Sherlock. His eyes narrow as they meet hers and, as he had in the ballroom with Magnusson, he shifts himself so that Molly's behind him, his shield a body for her own.

Beneath her palm, she can feel his heartbeat racing.

"Irene," he says politely though, inclining his head to the newcomer. "I know you said you wanted to chat earlier, but I'm afraid I'm rather… busy, just at the mo."

He gestures to Molly, that sharp, false smile back on his face.

"Surely you understand."

Irene's eyes glitter in the darkness, amusement evident in her expression. "Oh, I absolutely do, darling," she says wryly. "What a lovely reason to keep busy she is."

And her eyes rake over Molly with every bit the same assessing interest that Magnusson's did. Somehow though, from her the attention seems more… honest. Less designed to offend.

It's also more obviously lascivious.

She takes a step towards Molly, her hand held out and instinctively Sherlock backs up, keeps himself
between the two women.

This time he looks distinctly… nervous. (And irritated, that he's nervous.)

"Never had you pegged for the sort who'd enjoy being shared," Irene purrs at his reaction, her words turning the tips of Sherlock's ears noticeably pink, even in the pale moonlight.

"That's because I'm not the sort for being shared," he retorts, and there's something of a warning in his tone.

In fact, there's something of a warning in everything about him right now.

Irene merely steps closer to him though, running a single, elegant, glove-clad hand up his arm. Her expression is careless and it makes Molly grits her teeth. The other woman's hand starts making its way towards Sherlock's nape and without really thinking about why she reaches out. Takes her wrist and removes it from the person of her detective.

"There'll be none of that," she hears her own voice say, quite without her volition.

Sherlock seems rather happy at this development.

Irene merely laughs, a genuine sound that is surprisingly attractive. It's low and deep and lovely, like the chime of an old brass bell.

"Oh-ho," she says, "it looks like you've found herself another hellion, Sherlock."

At her use of his given name Sherlock stiffens, throws a slightly worried look at Molly.

The young doctor, on the other hand, takes it in stride; Molly's spent her life living in the East End, surrounded by toms and game girls and all manner of female malcontents. She know she rules of this particular battle, just as she knows how to wage it. Lose her temper and behave in a territorial manner and this Irene will consider her worried; act as if she's discomfited or frightened at the thought of losing Sherlock's attention and he'll think her just another clinging, overly-needy female.

Since Molly is neither of those things however- And since she thinks she has some idea what Sherlock's relationship with this Irene might be- she elects to play this as she would any other competition: coolly.

To that end she tightens her grip on the detective, smiles calmly at the other woman.

Irene cocks a single, elegant eyebrow at this display of female bravura and Molly smiles back, as warmly and as calmly as she can. Takes Sherlock's hand in her own.

"I'm not sure about you," she says, her tone friendly and conversational, "but I'm also rather uninterested in sharing, Sherlock."

She sees it, the miniscule surprise which passes through Irene's expression at her use of the detective's given name, but as quickly as it was there it's gone.

*Interesting*, Molly thinks.

"Since we haven't discussed our policy on his keeping a mistress yet," she continues, "I can understand why Ms..?"

"Adler," Sherlock supplies.
"Adler," Molly says, hiding (she hopes) her own surprise at encountering the famed adventuress, "might be under the impression that your… protection for her was ongoing."

Her voice hardens. "Of course, in that she is mistaken."

She doesn't add an isn't she? Because it's not a question, it's a statement of fact.

Adler opens her mouth to argue and without any warning Molly hops down off the stone angel on which she was standing. Darts around Sherlock so that she's face to face with her, though she's nowhere near her height.

The other woman turns that same mocking smile down at her but Molly's having none of it: showing a woman like Adler either fear or weakness is simply not wise, so-

"Thank you for your interest in my future husband," she says sweetly. "But- as you doubtless just saw- we can get along fine without the assistance of a professional-

Isn't that right, Mr. Holmes?"

And she reaches back, takes Sherlock's arm in hers. Presses this rather… possessive kiss to his lips. He lets out a sputtered, half-choked bark of laughter at her word when she pulls back and as he does Adler's eyes flick to him, just for a moment.

Just for a moment there's… there's hurt in her gaze. Worry. Bafflement. And then just as quickly it's gone.

Had she not been watching for it, Molly might not have seen it at all.

Adler is not yet ready to leave though; Hips swaying, face set in a pout, she sidles up to Sherlock and leans into him. She takes out a visiting card and checks it, tucks it into his coat pocket, right behind his handkerchief and then presses a kiss to his cheek.

"You know the address, darling," she whispers, "after all- You're paying for my rooms." She winks at him. "You should make sure you get your money's worth."

And with that she glides back into the ballroom, casting one last, coy glance over her shoulder at Sherlock before disappearing into the party.

Sherlock's look at Molly is nervous. Tense. Less-than-proud-of-himself.

He rakes a hand through his hair, sending his (already tussled) curls into eve more disarray.

"This is one of those conversations I'm not going to enjoy having with you, isn't it?" he says and to that Molly can only nod.

"Yes," she says quietly, as she pulls him farther into the darkness of the garden. "Yes, it is."

Meanwhile,

"So, that's the state of play, is it?"

And Magnusson leans over Irene, makes a show of lighting her cigarette.

They've repaired to the gentlemen's study, the better to get away from all the nosy eyes outside.
Irene nods carelessly, smiles. It is vitally important that her host not realise how that last little interaction with Sherlock has unsettled her.

*This is the first time since she's known him that he's turned her down.*

She can ponder the import of that later though. "Alas, yes, Charles," she says instead, making sure to keep her voice even. *It wouldn't do to show weakness, not in front of this man.* "It would appear that my dear boy has indeed been pierced by cupid's arrow…"

She forces herself to smile.

"And by arrow, I mean the cheap, gnawing little teeth of an East End mouse…"

Magnusson laughs at this though. Claps his hands. He pulls out his check-book and begins cheerfully writing her a bank draft, one with a great many more zeroes in the figure column than she had initially been offered.

The figure makes Irene's mouth go dry.

"For your expertise, Ms. Adler," he says, blowing on the ink. A moment later he sprinkles it with salt, the better to force it to set. "It's been a pleasure to work with such a professional- Take the added amount to your fee as a thanks." His smile hardens.

"And as a retainer," he adds, still in that bland tone. "Should I decide I require your services again, you will be available."

Irene knows the sound of a threat when she hears one but nonetheless she smiles. Nods. She needs to be alone, needs to work out what her options are in all this.

She doesn't like this bastard thinking he owns her, but it may be politic to let him believe it- *For now.*

So, taking the bank draft she tucks it into her reticule and smiles coquettishly, makes her way towards the door of Magnusson's study-

Which is when she discovers that the party has apparently been raided by the Metropolitan Police, led by an old friend of Sherlock's, one Gregory Matthew Lestrade. He has Inspector Dimmock with him.

What she *doesn't* realise is that it's also been infiltrated by Sir Henry Knight and his new best friend, Ms. Sally Donovan who is, needless to say, fully armed.
Do you have any idea how much trouble you are in, Inspector Lestrade?"

Mycroft's tone is unhurried. Unruffled.

Absolutely lethal.

He's staring at Inspectors Lestrade and Dimmock with his patented I Could Have Your Entire Family Shipped To The Colonies For This look, an expression John knows all too well. As does Lestrade.

Ten years' as Mycroft's inside man in the Met will do that for a man, don't you know.

The blissfully ignorant look on Dimmock's face tells John that that particular plonker, on the other hand, has not a notion of how much trouble he's in, something the doctor hopes to see him disabused of, post haste. After all, Dimmock has stormed into the home of one of London's elite and caused annoyance to the man universally acknowledged as the most dangerous person in the British Empire- Why, the last time Mycroft looked this miffed a new Franco-Prussian War nearly kicked off.

John's is drawn abruptly away from such musings however, for to his right he can see Ms. Mary Morstan stop. Freeze.

She glances surreptitiously from the Inspectors to the ballroom doors and then back again before she elects to glide over to him, managing to hurry without at all seeming to.

"How well do you know this house?" she murmurs, sotto voce. Her lips barely move as she speaks, a look of politely mortified surprise plastered on her face. As disguises go, John has rarely seen better. "Could you get to Molly?" she's asking. "Could you find her and spirit she and Mr. Holmes out of here without drawing any attent-"

She doesn't get to finish her question though- Which is a problem, because John rather thinks she'd be an interesting person to stage a ballroom-break with. She certainly appears to the stealth skills necessary to pull it off.

Alas, it is not to be however; Inspector Dimmock glances her way, then past her, to John.

Suddenly he's looking awfully bloody chipper.

The policeman's lip pulls itself into a sharp little sneer, his eyes narrowing as he glares at the doctor and instantly John feels his hackles raise. He and Dimmock have never gotten along- John can't imagine why, what with him being such a charmer and all- and it appears the little git is going to take an opportunity to get one over on the man who has, along with his best friend, repeatedly embarrassed the London Metropolitan police by showing up their own incompetence-
With three quick steps Dimmock's across the room, in John's face and grinning.

"Guv," he calls excitedly to Lestrade, "Guv, we've got one of the coves already."

Mycroft shoots him a look that could ossify glass, his disdain obvious- Not that Dimmock notices, of course.

At his words though- and John hadn't thought this possible- Lestrade looks even more embarrassed than he did when he walked in; The grey-haired detective shakes his head. Brings his fingers to pinch the bridge of his nose, rather like he does when forced to deal with Sherlock.

His is not the face of a happy commander. Not. At. All.

Dimmock doesn't notice that though. "Guv," he repeats instead, more loudly, "I told you we were on the right track about that stolen hansom: we've got good old Three Continents here already-"

He grins. Lestrade looks like he'd rather like the floor to open up and swallow him.

"And if he's here, you can bet that skinny little ponce Holmes is here somewhere too," Dimmock continues, his smile turning into a leer as he throws an impressed, interrogatory look at Ms. Morstan, tries to essentially elbow her out of the way. "Sorry, darlin'," he says dismissively, "but I'm going to have to break up this little shindig-"

Ms. Morstan cocks a single, epically unimpressed eyebrow.

The sight sends a jolt of electricity to those parts of his anatomy about which John seldom speaks in mixed company and instinctively he grins. Throws Dimmock an ingratiating, obnoxiously innocent look.

He has a feeling that this is going to be, as Sherlock would say, rather good.

"Really?" Ms. Morstan asks archly. "And why would you want to do that?"

Dimmock's smile widens. He looks idiotically pleased with himself. "Dr. Watson here, and his, ahem, "gentleman friend," one Sherlock Holmes esquire," - he says Sherlock's name as if giving directions to a brothel- "are wanted in connection with the theft of a hansom cab from Whitechapel today, taken at approximately half twelve in the afternoon and seen by several upstanding members of the local community-"

Something flickers through Ms. Morstan's expression, so quick that Watson almost misses it. It looks… It looks like that same wiliness he sometimes sees in Anthea, when an opponent has made a-usually fatal- mistake in her presence. When she looks at Dimmock though, she's all ladylike sweetness and light, her expression cheerful and happy- Something which makes John suspicious on general principles.

"Oh la!" she says brightly, "but you are funny!"

Instantly Dimmock glowers at her, straightens.

"I don't know what you'd find funny about a man breaking the law," he snaps. "Not if you're so high and mighty as you want those here to believe-"

"Oh, Inspector, don't be cross!" Ms. Morstan says. The angrier he gets, the calmer she seems to become. "I meant no disrespect, of course I didn't, but I'm afraid I must protest." She leans into him confidingly, lowers her voice as if speaking to a dear friend. "You see, you have the wrong man, I
know you do."

And she bats her eyelashes. Smiles charmingly. Her cheeks even pink a little, though John takes such coy sentiment with a pinch of salt.

Dimmock blinks though. Shakes his head, rather like a dog that's been winded.

"I beg pardon Ms.," Dimmock says, "but what?"

Ms. Morstan smiles again, a blinding grin this time, and hooks her arm around John's.

"I meant merely," Ms. Morstan is saying, "that you simply couldn't have the right man for this hansom theft. And the reason I know you couldn't- aside from the fact that gentlemen don't steal hansoms- is that at half twelve this afternoon Dr. Watson was at my father's house in Mayfair paying me a call, weren't you, diddums?"

And she looks up at John expectantly. Gives him another dazzlingly lovely grin.

Amazingly, she doesn't trip on the doctor's jaw as it promptly hits the floor.

John looks around at the room, gives something thought to his situation and then does the only thing he can do, given the circumstances-

"Oh, you are bad!" he says. "You promise you wouldn't tell anyone we're courting, you naughty girl!"

The smile Ms. Morstan shoots him could cut diamonds. "Darling," she murmurs under her breath, "you have no idea."

Meanwhile,

Sherlock's not really sure how to go about this.

Not being a man given to either apology or explanation- unless the latter pertains to his genius, of course- he has never before felt the need to discuss his… predilections.

With anyone.

He's also never had to justify his behaviour to anyone- Mycroft, John, Anthea, the other members of their organisation, they never question the things he enjoys or how he goes about his business so long as he gets results. (And he does get results).

Looking down at Ms. Molly however, feeling the heat of her hand in his, still able to taste lips on his own and still able to picture her utterly charming, completely ruthless handling of Adler, he finds that, though it seems daunting, he wants to have this discussion with her.

He wants to let her know at least some of who he is, some of what he wants. Should they end up wed- and he finds the idea not entirely unpleasant- she deserves to understand the sort of man she's getting involved with.

The sort of man who loves danger and puzzles.

The sort of man who steals a hansom rather than try to flag one down.

The sort of man who would kiss her, knowing- after the first few moments, anyway- that what she's
feeling is the visceral gut reaction common to those who've just been through a frightening experience and not some new, hitherto unsuspected wantonness-

"You're scowling," she says quietly, apropos of nothing.

They've walked more deeply into the darkness of the garden so he's surprised she can tell.

At his look she smiles wanly. Gives his hand a little squeeze. "It's not so hard to see you," she murmurs, "even by starlight."

He nods. When he looks at her, she's outlined in the pale moonlight and it turns her silvery. Wan. Elfin.

She really is such a little thing, he thinks, to have such a large impact as she has.

At his staring she halts, pulls him to a stop with her. They're far further from the house than is proper but he suspects he knows that- Just as he suspects she's guessed that his friends inside won't care.

A slight wind thrills across them both and she shivers, the warmth she would have felt when they were kissing having doubtless dissipated. Without any warning Sherlock takes off his dinner jacket. Drapes it gruffly over her shoulders.

It looks almost comically huge on her.

She blinks, surprised, but he shakes his head curtly. Barks out a sharp, "think nothing of it," and then instantly regrets his gruffness. They've come to a halt at the entrance to Magnusson's garden maze and Molly stares at the gaunt, shadowy monstrosity. Raises one small hand to trail it over tumbling roses and vines, her fingers catching in green, before she turns to face him.

"You have things you want to tell me," she says softly. "Seems to me that you'd best start telling them."

Sherlock opens his mouth, determined to speak, but at the last minute shuts it. Shakes his head.

It seems that words just won't come for once.

"Would it be easier if I asked questions?" she asks and he nods. For some reason he won't examine, he feels rather… queasy at the thought of this discussion.

Molly smiles encouragingly though. "I assure you, Mr. Holmes," she says, "I doubt there's anything you could say that would truly shock me-"

"You've ever seen Ms. Adler wield a whip," he quips and then instantly regrets it.

Understanding moves through her gaze though. "So," she says softly. "You're a flagellant?"

Sherlock opens his mouth to sputter out objections- how did a gently raised woman even know of such things? - but she holds up her hand in surrender, shakes her head. Without either Sherlock or she quite knowing how her palms come to rest, warm and secure, against his chest.

After a moment his own join them, pressing the tops of her fingers into his palms.

"I grew up in Whitechapel, remember?" she says softly. The words are addressed to his third shirt button. "There's a… House of Correction just around the corner from the clinic. Madame Maxime's.
I understand it's quite well known in certain circles and sometimes I'm called upon to take care of the girls. And the boys."

She frowns.

"The patrons can usually afford to shrift for themselves, in my experience."

Sherlock finds his voice. He can't believe he's having this conversation. "So you know, then?" he asks. "Or at least you've some idea of-"

She nods. "Oh yes. As I said, I'm rather hard to shock. And what's it Sally always says? A little of what you fancy does you good." She pauses, bites her lip for a moment. "I do have to wonder though: Are you an, um, schoolmaster? Or are you a student?"

He knows what she's asking and a pleased little smile tugs at his mouth, that she could phrase it so chastely.

"I- That is to say, I prefer to be the one misbehaving, rather than the one in charge," he says quietly. "Does that answer your question?"

Again she nods, smiling, and he finds- quite to his astonishment- that his own grin matches hers. There's a lightness in his chest that he hasn't felt in a good long while.

This is going rather better than he thought it would, although that's not saying much.

"I suppose I'm not surprised," she's musing. "I've seen the things you like to do for fun. Being a naughty schoolboy is something I think you'd enjoy- You and your friend John. And besides, Ms. Adler doesn't strike me as the type for letting anyone manhandle her."

Sherlock knows that's not exactly true, not all the time, but he elects to say nothing. Correcting Molly will have no value, not from what he can see. Instead he slowly, carefully steps closer to her. Takes one of the hands at his chest and raises it slowly to tuck a stray strand of hair behind her ear. He holds her gaze as he does it, happy that she doesn't try to move away and that she doesn't appear to be nervous of him, even after what he's told her.

"You are brilliant, Molly Hooper..." he says softly, leaning in to kiss her-

Just as she breathes out, "So is Ms. Adler your mistress?" Something which quite puts a stop to Sherlock's gallop.

Her wide brown eyes stare up at him. He can't believe she just said that.

She doesn't look angry, she looks calm. Curious. She really is, he has to agree, a rather astonishing creature.

"Why would you ask me that?" he breathes and she frowns, confused.

"If we're to marry," she says sensibly, "then I'd best know your history now. If you've shagged your way through half of London that could have a rather painful impact on me."

He sees what she's asking, he just never thought she'd have the brass balls to do it. "Are you actually asking me whether I've any diseases?" he asks, half horrified, half impressed.

She merely nods, looking for all the world like she's asked him a question about the weather.

"Why yes," she says. "You do understand that I have to ask: If you're the sort who chases skirts,
especially if you intend to continue such behaviour after our marriage, then I might well end up with a nasty, sexually transmitted disease and that wouldn't do at all, now would it-"

There's more to that sentence, he's sure, but he doesn't want to hear it. Instead he leans down and kisses her soundly, his own face breaking into a grin. All his life he's wanted to meet someone as blunt and as honest and as brilliant as himself and now he has, now he's even managed to get himself engaged to her-

"Sherlock," she gasps when they pull apart. She's staring at him, eyes wide. "What in the blue blazes was that for?"

He grins though. Kisses her again. This time her grip on him tightens as she tries to stay upright, her cheeks burning red beneath the stars.

"It's because you, Molly Hooper, are brilliant," he says. "And because a) I have never kept a mistress before Irene, b) I have no intention of keeping a mistress when we're married and thus will no longer be seeing Irene c) cannot wait to tell John this story because I know he's going to be so bloody jealous at how wonderful you are-"

She frowns at him like he's mad, but of course she does. Praise, he can't help but note, seems to discomfit her somewhat. He shall have to do something about that. She frowns, opens her mouth to protest but Sherlock is rather too pleased with life right now to let her go and stop kissing him-

Which is why it takes him a moment to realise that they have been found by none other than Ms. Sally Donovan- dressed as a maid- and Sir Henry Knight- dressed as a footman.

Neither of them look happy.

It's also why he almost doesn't notice the man with the gun who's coming towards them before it's too late and he, Molly, Sally and Sire Henry are forced to scramble for cover into Magnusson's maze.
The Lamentable Ballad of El Pina Colada

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for all the reviews and the feedback on the last chapter goes to: lilisherlockian1975, springbok7, oOKatiekinsOo, spuffygirl, Katya Jade, Westwinder, Sesshie and zeynel. Thanks so much ladies, and now: on with the story...

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: THE LAMENTABLE BALLAD OF EL PINA COLADA

"What was that?"

And Ms. Mary Morstan's blond head flicks up, her entire body tensing painfully.

John can tell because he's standing beside her and, well… He might have been staring at certain parts of her person with a little more than gentlemanly interest. (Suddenly having to tell a room of spies that you're engaged to someone will have that effect upon a man, don't you know).

As she speaks another gunshot sounds, this one slightly farther away; At this Lady Anthea's eyes flicker to Mycroft, the older Holmes meeting her eyes before rather pointedly looking away and bringing his gaze to bear on Lestrade.

Without saying a word she glides from the room, her pace brisk enough to be hurrying.

She could be heading for her carriage but John somehow doubts it.

"Don't you think you ought to investigate, Gregory?" Mycroft says tartly as she goes and the grey haired policeman nods. He looks worried, his tanned face folding itself into a frown.

"Yeah," he says, "of course. You stay here Dimmock, protect the, em, ladies…"

Dimmock straightens up, proud as punch of his assignment, little realising that most of the women here present could probably wear him as a hair ornament were he to so much as look at them funny. The Misses Murray and Westenra in particular look rather… pleased with the notion of culling him from the herd and despite his dislike of the bloke John winces in sympathy.

Ms. Lucy in particular has been known to enjoy playing with her food.

Be that as it may though, the men in the room begin fanning out throughout the ballroom and thence the garden. The women- with the notable exception of Lady Clayton, who walks hand in hand with her husband into the darkness- begin busying themselves with preparations for their leaving. As is always the case when ladies begin moving it causes the most massive commotion. They flock and call farewells to one another and generally make noise- So much noise that, should one of them break free of the group and do some snooping, John muses, it's doubtful anyone would notice.

Only Ms. Morstan makes no attempt to follow suit, her hand moving down to gently clasp John's own.

When he looks up at her in question her smile is sharp. Bright. Hard.

There's steel in it, he can't help but think, and he finds that absolutely bloody marvellous.
"Come on, darling," she says with a quiet smile, "let's you and I find our host— Perhaps he'll be good enough to act as chaperone?"

And with that the pair of them sashay into the house, the better to corner Magnusson.

After all, Anthea's probably already looking for Sherlock and Ms. Hooper.

Meanwhile,

Sally is starting to think that this Sir Henry is a little… touched. In the head, like.

Or to put it in more romantic parlance, he seems to be a bloody idiot.

For the young engineer— who followed her all the way back to Whitechapel, just to "make sure she arrived safe and well," and who then spent the entire afternoon entertaining the clinic's children with magic tricks while Sally explained to their mothers where Molly and Anna had gone and that they were fine, and who then agreed to accompany her here when Sally realised she had to speak to Molly and it couldn't wait-

That young engineer is keeping himself between she and the man shooting at her (and, admittedly, Molly and The Holmes Idiot).

In other words, he's endangering himself for her, and he's not even attempted to inveigle his way into her knickers. It defies belief.

Sally's never before encountered such a man and she's rather alarmed at how much she finds she likes him— After all, she knows it can't last, and surely he must too— Theirs are two worlds which can't ever meet—

The thought brings an inexplicable pang to her chest (and other, considerably less ladylike parts of her person). Raised on the streets and possessed of more weapons than anyone outside Scotland Yard, the thought nevertheless makes her feel unaccountable… vulnerable. Sad.

Even contemplating it makes her feel like a muppet and in order to make herself feel better she tightens her grip on her favourite pistol.

Sir Henry shoots her a slightly worried look and she fights the urge to either kiss him or smack him on the back of the head. Hard.

Irritatingly enough, she suspects he's endure either reaction.

Of course, at that moment the gun man lets loose another couple of shots, causing she, Molly, Knight and The Idiot to scramble even further into the greenery maze in which they're now hiding and whatever musings she may have had about Sir Henry's idiocy or attractiveness flee.

In this sort of situation— as she well knows— she can't afford to have her attention swaying about like a drunken rat, and certainly not a drunken rat that's sweet on some puppyish little toff—

So she reaches behind her, grabs Sir Henry's (pleasingly large, surprisingly calloused) hand and drags him after Molly and The Idiot Holmes, swearing quietly under her breath. Ahead of her, she can hear the curly-headed detective calling to Molly, telling her to follow him, that he can work his way into and out of any maze. Mols, clever woman that she is, looks decidedly unconvinced about this but given the darkness, their pursuer and their complete lack of options she agrees—
"I have to say," Holmes calls over his shoulder, "there's never a dull moment when I'm with you- I find I rather like it!"

Molly lets out an impressive string of curse-words under her breath, causing Holmes to grin in delight and Sir Henry to stare in shocked horror.

"Before today," she huffs, "I was ever so much as sneezed at, let alone shot!"

Sally elects to remain silent on the many, many times she has had to persuade interlopers to leave the clinic alone, feeling it would undermine her friend's case.

*Can't have that, can we?* She thinks. *Sets a terrible precedent, don't you know.*

"But thanks to you, Mr. Holmes," Molly continues breathlessly, "In the last ten hours I've been accosted, shot at, bounced about inside a stolen hansom and am now fleeing for my life: Remind me why any of this is a positive turn of events, would you?"

Holmes stops suddenly, so suddenly that Molly ploughs straight into him. Sir Henry manages to come up short before he can do likewise, his arm hands automatically coming up to grip Sally's elbows and keep her upright.

Without a word of explanation Holmes dips Molly low like a tango-dancer before swooping down and laying what the local game girls would call, "one helluva snog," on her.

"I say," Sir Henry breathes, his eyes going wide and his cheeks turning scarlet.

His gaze flashes back to Sally and then skitters guiltily away.

When Holmes lets her up Molly takes a moment to catch her breath and then reaches out, clipping her wayward fiancé sharply around the ear.

"For God's sake, Sherlock!" she snaps. "Priorities!"

Holmes grins smugly at her, his air that of a man well-pleased with having made his point.

"Kissing you is a priority, you foolish woman," he beams, even as another bullet rips into the ground besides Sir Henry's feet and all four redouble their pace, slipping and sliding about in the darkened maze, their only light that of the full moon above-

Holmes pulls ahead- "It's a simple Merovingian maze, can't imagine how anyone could get lost in it,"- and as he round the next corner Molly disappears after him.

Being a couple of feet behind them neither Sally nor Henry see what happens next.

For there's a sound of scuffling, a faint yell (and scream) and then a metallic growl which to Sally sound like nothing so much as London Bridge being drawn up to allow a boat to pass-

When she and Sir Henry turn the corner they find nothing but a slightly mussed patch of grass where Molly and Holmes should be.

That, and Molly's fan, lying on the ground and broken in two.

"Gosh," Sir Henry says, "It's all go with you lot, isn't it?"

Sally opens her mouth to answer him- She intends to make her answer entertaining-
But before she can their pursuer round the corner behind them and launches himself at the couple, his gun held aloft like a mace.

**While at the same time,**

Molly and Sherlock tumble head over feet, head over feet, until they land.

Once they do- and they manage to untangle themselves from each other, Sherlock in particular taking care to make sure Molly is unhurt- they look around and take stock of their location.

They would appear to be underground.

*This realisation is rather less than reassuring.*

To their right they can see the hatch and ramp through which they tumbled, small bits of dirt and detritus clinging to its sides. Peering up it they can see a square door faintly outlined in starlight, about twelve feet up. It was through this they originally fell.

"So, I'm assuming the trapdoor which brought us here is pressure- sensitive?" Molly says, gesturing to the hatch.

Sherlock grins, pleased with her observational powers.

"Well, obviously," he says and when she glares his smile widens. Presses a playful kiss to her knuckles. "But they question is- Where are we? What brought us here?"

As if disturbed by his words, a second hatch slams shut across the tunnel which brought them here, its loudness frightening and causing Molly to jump.

It also plunges them both into utter darkness.

Sherlock swears and Molly hears scuffling. A moment later a lit match flares, Sherlock holding it above his head. Its light throws the room around them into focus in flickering, orange tones; Molly sees a stone corridor, supporting arches of the sort one associates with cellars or old pantries. There are no windows- of course- but the corridor is flagged by six doors, each one wooden and polished to a high, impressive gleam.

As she leans closer to examine the nearest one the match sputters out, causing Sherlock to yelp at his burnt fingers even as he shuffles to the side and lights another match.

This time she sees him kneel down beside a lantern she hadn't even noticed, lying on the ground at the foot of the hatch and probably left their for the comfort of anyone using it. Cupping his hand around the match's flame he tries to coax the lantern's shutter open. Seeing his difficulty Molly helps him- her hands are smaller, after all- pulling the gas lamp open and allowing him to light the wick.

Instantly their surroundings are bathed in a warm, yellow glow.

Sherlock rises and takes her hand in his, his eyes on the stone floor at their feet.

He tows her after him, tracing a set of footprints which are clearly discernible on the dust-covered floor. They lead to the nearest door from the hatch and with a slight push from Sherlock it gives, the door swinging open on silent (and obviously well-oiled) hinges.

Inside they find a beautifully appointed bedroom, replete with velvet drapes and damask bed-linens.
The space is dominated by a massive four-poster bed, its curtains drawn, and every inch of the walls are covered in gilt-framed mirrors, the effect magnifying the light from Sherlock's lamp and making everything glow in red and gold. It's rather lovely, though Molly can't help but observe that she is, once again, in a rather improper place with her rather improper fiancé-

Sherlock frowns though, reaches out and touches the mirror nearest him.

There's something rather odd about its surface, even Molly can see: The mirror looks more like polished metal than glass.

Sherlock lets out a soft, controlled breath and puts the lamp down on the ground beside him. He shoots her this odd, lop-sided smile which she suspects is supposed to be charming but appears rather false. When she opens her mouth to ask what the devil's the matter he takes her in his arms, brings his lips down to press indecently close to her ear.

"Don't be alarmed," he murmurs, "but I do believe we're being watched, darling…"

And with that he kisses her again, pulling her body to his even as he leans back against the nearest well, his embrace taking her with him-

Molly hears a creak, feels a sudden draft.

When she opens her eyes Sherlock's keeping himself between her and a black, cavernous space, the mirror they were leaning on having peeled away from the wall rather like… Rather like a door.

"Oh," Molly murmurs. "Oh, bugger."

"My thoughts entirely, my dear," Sherlock says as he disentangles himself from her and hops through the mirrored door to the room beyond.

A/N I'm taking another small liberty with history here: the so-called "two-way mirror," wasn't patented until 1903. However, given the simplicity of the design- and the fact that the technology to build one would have been available in 1895- I decided to have a little fun with history.
Up, Up and Oh Dear!

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for their reviews go to oOkatiekinsOo, springbok7, Katya Jade, icecat62 and Limaro- I hope you enjoy the next bit.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: UP, UP AND OH DEAR!

Molly lasts approximately 30 seconds before she hoists her skirts up to her knees and clambers through the mirrored door after Sherlock.

After all, she's seen the trouble he can get into on a crowded city street; She shudders to think what mischief the man could cause here.

In the dark.

On his own.

In a millionaire's mansion.

It really doesn't bear thinking about.

And so, her heart in her throat and her slippers in her hand (the better to smack someone with or run away, she's not sure which is more likely) Molly creeps stealthily through the corridor beyond the mirrored door, following Sherlock. As she walks she traces the wall beside her since it's too dark to really see where she's going; After a moment she realises she's holding her breath and blushes at her own foolishness, making herself breathe. (She really can't afford to pass out right now.)

The corridor appears to follow the basic outline of the gilded bedroom in which she and Sherlock had found themselves, essentially allowing one to traverse the periphery of that room's back wall and- through the two-way mirrors- watch anything that happens therein. Not being overly naïve, Molly has no doubt why such an arrangement might have been preferred by Mr. Magnusson, though she does wonder uneasily how many of his guests might have been aware of it-

Even as she thinks this she feels a large, bony hand descend upon her elbow though and without hesitation she raises her shoes, about to pummel any would-be interloper.

"You're really rather violent, has anyone ever told you that?" Sherlock whispers conversationally, grinning down at her.

His eyes glitter gleefully and she feels the impact of it right down to her... toes.

That's right, her toes.

Rather than explore any possible lack of conviction she might harbour at that thought, she elects lowers her weapon instead.

Glaring at Sherlock feels quite the better option, right now.

"There's someone here?" she whispers and he grins brightly at her for her deduction.
"I'm not actually sure," he answers.

She can't help but note that he's using the need to keep his voice down as an excuse to stand rather scandalously near.

"I just rather suspect there might be," he's saying, "Either that or we'll be heard by the occupants of the next room…"

And he gestures ahead, indicating the corridor before him. She frowns, pushes forward. Follows the corridor further on, past more bedrooms, each one laid out like sets on a stage.

All are equipped with massive beds though each follows a rather different colour-scheme and style; One looks like something straight out of the Middle Ages, replete with oak-panelled walls and forest green damasked linen while the other is set up to resemble the interiors Molly had seen in the Japanese Village in Knightsbridge several years ago. Yet another is covered in white and gold silk, the only place to sleep provided by a massive white bearskin rug set in front of an equally impressive white marble fireplace-

A pair of ponderous-looking manacles are attached to said fireplace by heavy, bronze chains, a white leather flail nestled innocently in the fur tufts of the rug and when she and Sherlock notice it they both blush scarlet, Molly's toes curling against the bare cold of the floor.

Oh, she thinks.

Oh, my.

When she looks back at Sherlock though, her expression is curious.

She can feel his gaze resting on her like a physical weight.

"What might we hypothesise about Mr. Magnusson's reasoning in building these rooms, Ms. Hooper?" he asks softly. His grin is mischievous. Teasing.

Molly instantly knows that she's being tested: He's trying to make her blush again. What Ms. Irene Adler didn't manage, however, Sherlock Holmes is not going to bring to pass so she crosses her arms. Glares at him.

Not for the first time in her life, she wishes she were taller.

"Obviously," she sniffs, "he set these rooms up for his own amusement.

I've heard of places where such things are paid for. In fact some toms prefer it to dealing with, with, you know…"

And she gestures to the room in front of her, the one with no bed, just that massive, inviting, luxurious-looking fur rug.

An unaccountable shiver goes through her at the sight.

It doesn't escape Sherlock and that nearly does make her blush but she holds fast. Watches him approach her- If he thinks she's going to back away he is sadly bloody mistaken-

"And you believe his amusement is the only reason for this… scheme?" he asks softly, now that he's nearly atop her.

The words are (once again) whispered into her ear from an indecently close range.
"You believe there couldn't possibly be any other explanation for a newspaper man setting up something like this, hmm? Other than his own personal... satisfaction?"

And he smiles wickedly.

Encouragingly.

Though her hormones may be leading her about by the nose, Molly again catches the hint of challenge in his words and it's enough to dispel some of her distraction. She blinks at him.

"Surely nobody of note would be foolish enough to do something sordid in the home of the country's foremost newspaper magnate?" she says and he laughs in delight. Leans down to press a small kiss to her cheek.

Said cheek tingles rather noticeably where he touches it.

"Alas, Ms. Hooper," he says, "were all our leading lights so sensible as you then the world would be rather a better-run place, I suspect. Unfortunately, however, stupidity is all too common amongst our elite- Personally, I think it's an over-reliance on those damnably over-blown English qualities like good breeding."

Now it's his turn to sniff.

"I never can seem to convince Mycroft of that, though."

And with another grin he gestures upwards, to what Molly had assumed was the corridor's ceiling.

Now that she's looking at it however, she realises that it's quite a lot higher than she thought it was. In fact it stretches up to at least twice the height of the bedrooms, spanning (she would guess) this basement and the next two floors of the house. It might even go higher.

With another small smile Sherlock moves a little forward and then starts to scale what she belatedly realises is a wrought-iron ladder. It's been attached to the wall by a series of metal struts, making it quite secure. As he climbs higher he pauses, gestures for her to follow him; She's forced to tuck her skirts (and shoes) into her bodice in order to do it but she manages to make the ascent, the metal of the ladder biting sharply into her hands.

Truth be told, she feels rather... giddy, this high up.

Sherlock reaches the ladder's top before she; He hops onto a massive wrought iron platform, about the width of all four bedrooms across and nearly their depth, and when Molly's head appears he helps her off the ladder, holds her steady. He even turns away as she un-tucks her skirts from her bodice, though she does see his gaze flash, just for a moment, down to her uncovered ankles. (She finds the appreciative look he shoots them rather... gratifying, however.)

She's nervous to set foot on the platform but it feels quite solid beneath her feet. The ironwork digs into her bare soles and she puts back on her slippers but once she's done so she feels comfortable. Secure.

Perhaps to reassure her Sherlock reaches down and slips his own hand into hers, the gesture startling though by no means unwelcome. She's getting used to his being near and she finds that she likes it.

"Look around," he says quietly and as she does so she takes a sharp little intake of breath.
For a moment she experiences that rarest sensation for so clever and worldly a woman as she: Genuinely not understanding what she sees.

For she stares into the darkness of this hidden chamber and all around her she there are images from other rooms. Other places. They're projected onto the walls, the only indications of how wide this darkened platform actually is.

She recognises Magnusson's ballroom, his hall, even the garden outside where she and Sherlock had been kissing. Every room in his townhouse, it would seem, is represented here.

She frowns though, confused. "What am I looking at?" she asks Sherlock.

"Camera obscura," he replies, sotto voce. "It's an ancient device. Painters use them: a small aperture in each of these rooms' walls allows the light from that room to be projected into the wall of this one, creating a completely perfect image-"

"Yes, yes, I know all that. But doesn't a camera obscura image appear upside down?" she interrupts. "Because light travels in straight lines from its source, etc. etc. etc.?"

The look he shoots her borders on the lascivious.

"Oh, I am going to have to buy Thea something massive- like a small principality- for introducing me to you," he says in delight.

"But in answer to your question- A camera obscura image can be turned the right way up by bouncing the image off various mirrors. It's been possible since the 18th century, that."

And he gives one of his dramatic pauses, the ones she's learning to expect every time he does anything even remotely impressive (which, she must admit, is often).

She gets the feeling that, more than anything else, this man needs an audience.

"So the question becomes," he intones grandly, "not how he might be doing it but why he might be doing it?"

Unfortunately however, Sherlock's thoughts on this subject were not to be forthcoming.

For at that moment he and Molly both hear the click of a door opening and Mr. Charles Augustus Magnusson strolls right into the middle of their evening, a worryingly mild smile on his face.

A/N For a more thorough explanation of a camera obscura, try the wikipedia page on the subject. Cards on the table, I'm not sure what I describe in this chapter is physically possible, given the shortcomings of the technology. But once again, I'm taking liberties so... All I can do is shrug. Hope you enjoyed it anyway, see you next time.
CHAPTER NINETEEN: THE DEFINITION OF CRICKET

It is exceedingly rare that Sherlock Holmes find himself freezing in the face of danger.

In fact, it is exceedingly rare that Sherlock Holmes finds himself freezing at all.

But then, it's also exceedingly rare that he finds himself worrying about the safety of another—John is, after all, so wonderfully capable of handling himself in any situation—

John isn't here though, he muses as he watches Magnusson stalk across the platform. Molly is.

Wonderful, headstrong, vulnerable, not-trained-for-combat Molly.

And she's currently standing in the dark, about to be discovered in a compromising position with a man even Mycroft thinks is dangerous. A man who can ruin her life with little more than a whispered word in the right ear—Or a well-timed headline. Sherlock's protected, the brother of the most feared man in England and a notorious bohemian to boot but Molly? Molly?

Everything she loves could be taken from her, Sherlock knows. She's barely respectable, practicing medicine as she is; The slightest whiff of scandal could ruin her life and that of everyone she cares about. He can't let that happen.

It's a this thought that breaks him out of his stupor, that prompts him to latch an arm around her waist and pull her bodily into the darkest part of the platform, the better to keep her from Magnusson. Years of practice allow him to do this gracefully, his movements as close to silent as a human being can get. Molly goes to gasp in surprise but then tamps the instinct down, her common-sense clearly warning her not to make any noise—

With a grin Sherlock smiles down at her, pleased at her intelligence even as he tucks her tightly inside his night-black dress coat, her face pressed into his chest.

It's a good thing he manages to do so when he does because just at that moment Magnusson walks right by them, apparently oblivious. His eyes are glued to the wall before him and the scenes from his house which the camera obscura images show. They sweep backwards and forwards, forwards and backwards, his greedy, pale-eyed gaze clearly looking for something—

"There you are, my dear," he murmurs suddenly, his gaze coming to rest on an image of Anthea from what looks like his library.

Sherlock's cousin is going through Magnusson's desk with the sort of swift, perfunctory professionalism which only years of practice can hone.

The newspaper magnate reaches out as she works, his long, pale fingers gliding across Anthea's profile, his tongue darting out to wet his lips. The look on his face is greedy, nearly lustful, as if merely looking at the young spy work is enough to make him feel aroused.
As Holmes watches Magnusson takes the finger with which he'd traced Anthea's face and licks it, murmurs something which sounds almost like "yum, yum," though the detective can't be sure.

He glances down at Molly to see a look of disgust flit across her face, her brows drawn in consternation.

That's just not cricket, he mouths to her and she nods in agreement.

No, she mouths back. No, it's bloody not.

Sherlock has to stifle a snort at her words, his head dipping to bury his face in her hair—it will muffle the sound, don't you know—and it's for this reason he doesn't, for a moment, see what comes next. For with a small, smug smile Magnusson reaches into his coat pocket, pulls out an oblong wooden box.

He sets it on the table before him with a disturbingly contented sigh.

It's so small that for a moment Sherlock thinks it must be a cigarette case but it's a little too big for that. As he watches Magnusson opens the box, takes out several small metal pipes, a highly polished glass lens and what looks like a roll of thick plastic about 35mm across. The plastic roll has a line of what look like sprocketed holes running along its length; With the ease of long practice Magnusson hooks it into a notch at the back of the wooden case before pressing the lens into a similar notch at its front. He then pulls the sides of the box apart, enlarging it (this is possible because the box's corners are held together by paper, giving it an concertina-like appearance) and lifts it to his eye, almost like-

It comes to Sherlock: Almost like a box camera, though without any sort of apparatus to produce illumination.

As a final step Magnusson pushes his thumb sharply up into the box's bottom, the object whirring to loud, mechanical-sounding life though Sherlock can't see what power-source it could be using. The sounds of cogs and other moving parts can clearly be held though, telling the detective that it's not a mere box camera but some other apparatus, possibly something like Mr. Dickson's kinetoscope device. Magnusson may be taking footage of Anthea's actions rather than mere photographs. One look at Molly tells him that she agrees, her eyes narrowing as she watches Magnusson (possibly) record the image of the young Countess-

"There," Magnusson murmurs, "there you are.

I have finally you, you dirty, dirty girl..."

And he moves, shifting the box until it's right in front of the of Anthea's image. His tongue clicking approvingly, lips still wet.

The look on his face is enough to make Sherlock feel in severe need of a good, cold scrubbing.

At the thought the detective looks around, now certain that Magnusson is distracted enough for he and Molly to make their escape. He and she crawl towards the ladder which brought them here though it turns out their escape is not meant to be.

For at that moment his brother, the Right Honourable Arthur Ignatius Mycroft Holmes Snr. elects to stalk into view of Magnusson's camera, his expression thunderous, his arms crossed across his chest- Sherlock knows his brother rather well but even he's surprised at what happens next.
Meanwhile,

In Magnusson's Library

"What the blazes are you doing in here?"

And Mycroft marches up to Anthea, arms crossed over his chest, his expression that of a small boy who's just had his favourite toy taken from him.

Anthea, being in no mood to deal with his temper (and being rather worried about discovery by the servants), elects merely to roll her eyes and continue her search.

If her commanding officer wants to be an idiot, she thinks, then he's going to be treated like one.

Besides, she saw Adler come in here and she wants to find what darling Irene was up to while she has the chance.

When she doesn't answer his question he barks it out again, taking her elbow in his grip and trying to physically pull her to him. Anthea reacts to such manhandling from him as she would from anyone else: she strikes out. Retaliates. Her fist darting out, landing a light, jarring punch to Mycroft's stomach before grabbing the wrist he's holding onto her with and forcefully pulling it away.

Unfortunately for her, however, Mycroft is rather better at hand-to-hand than most of the agents she deals with; Though it's been a long time since they sparred he easily anticipates her move and counteracts her, grabbing both her wrists in both his hands and using his rather greater height and weight to press her back against Magnusson's desk.

The length of him is pressed against her and she swears she feels it right down to her toes.

It's a clever move, she has to admit: With anyone else she would simply knee him in his gentlemanly particulars and call it a day. However angry she is with him though, Anthea knows she couldn't bring herself to do that to Mycroft, and by the looks of things he knows it too-

So she sits. Glares.

His expression is unbearably self-satisfied.

"And they say the Muffin is the bastard in the family," she mutters vindictively. He snorts in laughter, cocks an eyebrow at her and releases her wrists, crossing his arms back over his- rather large, rather impressive, utterly ridiculous- chest. At seeing this Anthea raises her chin, glares at him some more. He really is the most beastly, insufferable, glorious creature. So full of care for her when she doesn't want him to be, and so prickly and stiff with her when it's of no use to her at all.

Sometimes it seems she cares about him so much she genuinely wants to punch him in the nose.

He must guess some of her thoughts for he continues to stare at her, that even, measured glance which used to convince her to tell him all her secrets, to entrust him with everything (since he is her commander). After a moment though he sighs, his expression turning long-suffering. Put-upon.

"What a pair are we, eh?" he says softly. "Why is it we always seem to bring out the worst in one another?"

And he shakes his head, looks away. Anthea stiffens at that, insulted.

She has always felt her commander brings out the best in her and she has always assumed the same
could be said for him. *The thought that he doesn't agree is... disquieting.*

"Magnusson has orchestrated this entire night," he's saying, "he's managed to set our entire organisation literally running like rats through his maze and all I can seem to worry about is you-

Don't you think that's perverse, Thea?"

And again he shakes his head, more mournfully this time, his expression bereft. It's the look of a man adrift, one who doesn't know what to do. Anthea's never seen Mycroft look like that, has never seen him unsure of himself before. (Well, there was that one time in Calais that they never speak of, but then they retook the train on which they were travelling and managed to save the Queen's jewels after all.) She knows that his discontent should worry her- it does - but she can't find it in herself to focus on her own feelings right now, oh no. Instead she frowns. Leans closer.

Her earlier anger is forgotten, but then she never could stay angry at Mycroft.

"What is it that you need, Sir?" she asks, one hand reaching out to stroke along his cuff. His arm. He turns his head to look at her and she blinks, almost mesmerised, by the feeling of his nearness.

His gaze drops down to her lips and she instinctively licks them.

It makes his ears turn the most delightful shade of pink.

For a moment they just stare at one another, watching, waiting, but then- *Then-*

"I have to stop being such an idiot and learn to ignore you," he says, "that's what I have to do, little Thea-"

And he takes her hand. Pulls her into standing. Those sharp, hawk-like eyes stare down into hers but neither of them appear able to look away.

Instead, without any warning, he leans down and, quietly, confidently, he kisses her.

It feels bloody wonderful.

*What she doesn't know- what she can't know- is that this private moment is far from witness-free and will soon come back to bite them both, right on her bustled backside.*
"Oh my giddy aunt."

And Anthea raises her head from Mycroft's—More's the pity.

They really were starting to enjoy themselves there.

She peeks around his shoulder to find John Watson and Molly's friend Mary Morstan framed in Magnusson's doorway. They're staring at her, her commander and the spectacularly inappropriate position in which they've managed to find themselves and they're—There's no polite word for it. They're gawping.

John in particular looks like he's about to swallow his tongue, his eyes wide as saucers though as Anthea watches, Ms. Morstan reaches nonchalantly up and presses his jaw shut with an audible click.

He swallows, murmurs his thanks.

He was, apparently, "being a pillock."

Ms. Morstan breathes out something into his ear in answer, something which sounds distinctly like, "my word but it's a good thing you're a looker," and in this moment that Anthea decides she rather likes Mary Morstan, no matter that she and John interrupted what was warming up to be a rather fabulous kiss. Because—

"You're—"

John gestures to Mycroft. Anthea nods curtly.

Ms. Morstan snorts in delight.

"With—"

Again John gestures to Mycroft. Again Anthea gives him a small, precise nod.

Mycroft gives one of his trademarked Why me, oh Lord? sighs and rakes a hand through his hair, making it stick up rather raffishly.

At this Ms. Morstan laughs out loud.

It is only with great reluctance that Anthea forces herself not to try smoothing the misbehaving tresses in question down: Should she attempt anything of the sort, she muses, poor Dr. Watson's faculties might permanently fail him.

Proof of this comes as John starts babbling, apparently unable to work out for himself the, "but how—"
why- how..?" His bewilderment reaches such an extent that Mycroft snorts and rolls his eyes, stalks away from Anthea, draws himself up to his rather-more-impressive-than-Watson height and glares down at the doctor.

The expression he wears might best be described as "thunderous." (Or, if you're Anthea, yummy.)


He thins his lips in distaste.

"Any misunderstanding about that will result in your entire family being shipped off to the Colonies, is that clear?"

And he throws both Watson and Ms. Morstan his most impressive glare, the one that even seasoned assassins quail at the sight of.

To John's absolute mortification Ms. Morstan snickers at the threat in his tone, something Mycroft elects to ignore.

It's probably just as well.

"Secondly," he continues, "what on Earth are you doing here, and why aren't you looking for my brother?" He glowers. "Or do you honestly think he's not half-way to causing an international incident, or another war, or some other devilry, even as we speak?"

And he gestures as if to indicate the grounds beyond this room's walls where Sherlock is, even now, doubtless getting himself into trouble. After all, Anthea thinks, everyone had noted Sherlock sneaking off with Ms. Hooper, Ms. Adler trailing behind. And then, even more scandalously, Ms. Adler reappearing mere moments later, looking rather… disconcerted. Piqued, even.

Things tend to get blown up, Anthea knows, when Ms. Adler is feeling rather piqued.

As Mycroft speaks however Ms. Morstan and John's eyes narrow: His anger is coming across as more than a little rehearsed. Stilted. It sounds rather more like embarrassed sleight-of-hand than genuine rage. Not even John Watson, darling soul that he is, would believe that performance, Anthea thinks, and when she cogitates on why Mycroft might be slightly discombobulated she has to force herself not to grin.

After all, she thinks, when I'm good, I'm good. Give me a chance to be bad and I'll be even better.

One glance at Ms. Morstan tells her that the blond-haired woman knows just what she's thinking; Again it occurs to Anthea that she's going to get along rather well with Ms. Morstan and she smiles at the young woman, deftly moving forward and pressing Magnusson's drawers closed. As she does so she shoots her commander her most dazzling smile, something which prompts John to mutter something about wishing to be blind.

She could be wrong but she thinks he quotes the Book of Revelations too, the bit about the End of Days.

Anthea pays him no mind though, preparing to glibly leave Magnusson's office and glide into her carriage- Sherlock's more than capable of shrifting for himself and she has plenty to be getting on with-
Alas, however, such a serene exit is not to be, for at that moment a scream sounds outside, bullets peppering Mr. Magnusson's exquisitely bourgeois hallway. There's a yelp of pain outside and then Sir Henry tears into Magnusson's office, the dark-skinned woman who accompanied Ms. Hooper to Mycroft's townhouse today tightly held in Knight's arms-

She appears to be bleeding from a wound in her thigh.

"Help me," Knight says, his voice quite desperate. He looks down at the woman in his arms and his face twists with more tenderness than Anthea has managed to squeeze out of him in months. "We were in the maze," he's saying, "and your brother was there. The man in the hall was shooting and then, then…" He gulps. Shakes his head.

"Please," he says quietly, "please. She got this because of me. You have to- You have to- I can't let anything happen to her-"

Anthea and Mycroft exchange glances. They both open their mouths to speak too, but they needn't have bothered.

For at that moment Dr. John Watson elects to illustrate why the Holmes family- and, indeed, the War Office- have kept him around for so long.

"Alright, Henry," he says calmly, "let's get her to Magnusson's desk."

Anthea wisely gets out of the bloody way.

Meanwhile,

Sherlock's starting to get, well, he hesitates to use the word nervous but would admit to feeling… restless, as he watches John begin operating on Sally.

Yes, he thinks, that's quite the correct euphemism he's looking for: Restless.

And by restless, he means stiff from all this standing and hiding. Sore from trying to keep so bloody still. He's pretty much ready to just get out of here and spirit Molly away from Charles Augustus Magnusson and all of tonight's madness (once they've checked on Sally, of course). He wants to take her somewhere far safer and far nicer and infinitely more private, somewhere, possibly, maybe, perhaps on the off chance, possessed of a massive bed-

An image flashes through his brain, the look on Molly's face when they'd discovered the room with the manacles and the rug downstairs and despite himself he can't help but grin.

A shiver moves through him, his body warming at the thought of it and it's only with a great deal of discipline that he manages to keep himself still.

As he thinks this he glances down at Molly, still curled against his chest, her lovely dark hair tickling his throat. Her little hands are pressed inside his jacket, holding onto his shirt as if it were the difference between life and death. She's trying not to move, trying not to make any noise and he's so proud of her for making such a wonderful effort- Molly, he thinks. My glorious, mad Molly-

Despite himself, despite everything, he reaches down and presses his nose to her hair, inhaling as deeply as he can. She smells, it seems to him, of vanilla and lemons and he's surprised but pleased to realise that even when in danger he likes this being-near-her malarkey.

He hopes she can tell.
She freezes when he moves, apparently mistaking his movement for a warning of danger. Her eyes flash up to his, a question in their depths. He shakes his head though, smiles at her; Slowly, determinedly, she relaxes. Presses into him. She grips him more tightly, there where her fingers have his shirt, until her nails scratch with delightful brusqueness against his chest. His right nipple. His heart.

His skin tingles with the sensation and it feels exquisite.

She stares up at him and he stares down at her, their location, their peril, every impropriety of this moment temporarily forgotten as their lips edging closer, ever closer to one another-

And then suddenly, there's light.

Quite a lot of it, actually.

Brightness floods the darkened platform, the vivid camera obscura images on the walls becoming little more than milk-pale ghosts.

Sherlock and Molly both squint in the sudden brightness surprised because they've never seen a room entirely illuminated by electrical lights before. It's rather… It's rather lurid, is what it is.

"By all leans, Mr. Holmes," Sherlock hears Magnusson say. "Please give me something else with which to bargain with your family."

And the newspaper magnate grins, turns the device with which he was filming Anthea and Mycroft on Sherlock and Molly. Instinctively Sherlock pushes Molly behind him, his rather larger bulk hopefully masking hers.

It probably does little good however, for the other man lets out a laugh. Claps his hands in amusement at the action.

Bold as brass he walks forward, his gaze tight on Molly.

"So Ms. Adler was correct," he says, those too-pale eyes resting on her with the same hunger with which they'd rested on Anthea's image moments ago. His tongue slides out as he does it, edging hungrily across his teeth and there's something about the gesture which seems to Sherlock to be distasteful. Almost… feral.

He tightens his grip on Molly at the thought.

Magnusson puts down his filming device and reaches for her; Sherlock catches his wrist though and pulls his hand back. "You will not touch my fiancée," he says quietly. "Not if she doesn't want you to."

Magnusson laughs out loud at that, a horrid, mirthless thing that Sherlock likes not at all. "Oh she'll do whatever I say, whenever I say it," he says. He smiles blandly, reaches out to touch Molly's hair again though this time she shrinks away.

Her reticence just seems to amuse him more.

"After all," he's saying, "I've all this lovely, sordid footage of you and she, doing all sorts of naughty, sinful things… Things you wouldn't want to have end up in the papers…"

And without saying another word he flicks the lights off again, plunging the room into darkness. The camera obscura images flicker into sharp relief again, the devices showing Magnusson's office.
His ballroom.

His library.

And, Sherlock realises, a sense of dread stealing over him, that very picturesque, very secluded, very not-private faux Roman grotto where he and Molly were interrupted by Ms. Adler. That very picturesque, very secluded, very not-private faux Roman grotto where he first realised that he might be engaged to rather the most wonderful woman in the world. Of course, it wasn't the being interrupted by Ms. Adler so much as the things that they were doing before which might be cause for concern, what with Magnusson's business and everything-

Magnusson leans into him, his tone of voice gloating. Pleased.

His gaze is ravenous where it rests on Molly.

"They told me you were quick, Mr. Holmes," he said quietly. "But not even Sherlock Holmes is quick enough to out-think me."
"No."

Molly narrows her eyes, takes a step towards Magnusson.

His gaze flickers from Sherlock to her, as if he'd quite forgotten she's there.

"No," she repeats firmly, "No, I'm not playing this game-"

And, as she has with every other high society bully she's encountered since her inheritance she raises her head high, continues walking forward. She keeps her gaze fixed on Magnusson- _she's a clever woman, after all_- her heart hammering despite her words.

This feels like it might, quite possibly, be the longest moment of her life.

Sherlock and newspaper magnate merely stare at her, their expressions matching in their mutual disbelief. Magnusson in particular seems quite unable to process what she's said, those too-pale eyes flashing over her face as if to find some hint of uncertainty, but then-

"Didn't you hear what he said?" Sherlock asks, his voice pitched low.

She shakes her head, tries to move by him but he grips her elbow, forcing her to stop.

"Molly," he says quietly, gaze boring into hers, "Molly, I know what news like this would do to you. I can't in good conscience allow you to-"

"I'm not asking you to _allow_ me to do anything."

And she shakes her head, shoots him a look to quieten him. She wishes Magnusson weren't there, weren't listening, for there's a great deal she'd like to say. She'd like to explain to the great, noble, flummoxing idiot that she's met men like Magnusson before, that she knows how to deal with them. That for all his fine clothes and impressive mansion, he's not very different from Oskar nor any of the other thugs she's seen try to control others through fear. She wants to explain to him that if she gives Magnusson what he wants now then she'll never be free of him- _neither of them will_— that instead he'll wind them tighter and tighter in his control, his demands becoming ever more impossible until they finally find something they can't do for him-

And then, then he will finish them. Then, when they've become his creatures entirely.

_She will not allow that to happen to anyone she loves._

But she can't say that, not in front of their host. She knows the counter-arguments he'd employ,
knows too that in his worry for her they may seem convincing to Sherlock. Knows that for all his idiocy he will protect her, even if it's at a cost to himself. And she cannot permit either herself or her-she makes herself think it- her future husband be put in that position.

Instead she stops, leans into him. One hand traces his cheekbone- so sharp, so stern- and then she scoots herself up onto her tiptoes, presses a gentle kiss to his lips.

She hates that Magnusson's here to see it but she'll not treat her feelings as if they're a source of shame.

"Do you wish to marry me?" she whispers. They've danced around their arrangement ever since Sir Henry and Anthea caught them but right now she feels deadly in earnest. For her plan to work she has to know. So-

"Yes or no, Mr. William Scott Sherlock Holmes," she says. "Do you wish to marry m-"

"I do."

He says the words in a rush, almost like he's afraid they'll bite him. Once they're out though he grins at her, rightly, properly grins, as if they're quite the most delightful thing he has yet uttered aloud and he finds this realisation surprising. Without stopping to ask he swoops down and kisses her again, his greater height forcing her to cling to him even as she struggles onto her tiptoes-


And she shakes her head, wraps her arms around him and snogs him, as her neighbours would say good and bloody proper. Eventually they both have to come up for air and only then does she give his hair a sharp, admonishing tug.

"You know damn well my name is Mary Margaret Catherine," she says and he nods again. Grins again.

"Too right," he says. "That's just what I was about to say."

Magnusson doesn't seem to know what to make of all this though. "But don't you understand what I'm saying?" he asks, his expression incredulous. "I will release this information- I'll publish it for all the world to see. Everyone will know that you debauched her, everyone will know that your darling lady wife is nothing but a common whore-"

Molly's actually surprised that Sherlock's capable of hitting anyone- and so fast, too!- but his fist comes out of nowhere, connecting with Magnusson's jaw and cutting off his insults quite nicely.

It also has the added advantage of causing him to bite his own tongue.

The older man gasps and stumbles, his eyes flicking up disbelievingly to Sherlock. Aristocrats simply do not punch people they're annoyed with, his expression seems to say, and in that Molly would normally agree.

But her Sherlock isn't any stuffy old aristocrat, now is he?

Sherlock, being Sherlock, shoots him a grin so smug Molly's fairly certain it could be considered justification for murder. "Oh bugger off," he says to Magnusson. "If anyone was getting debauched
in that grotto it was me- Thank God."

And he looks down at Molly, his smile gentling, and strokes a stray tendril of hair from her face. It really is rather… scintillating, all that focus brought to bear on her.

Her skin tingles with the pleasure of it.

"Publish and be damned," he tells the newspaper magnate, still smiling down at his fiancée. "Lord Hadleigh owes me rather a lot of favours and he owns The London Tribune- He'll print whatever I tell him and I'm going to tell him a lot."

"We'll explain how I've reformed you," Molly says, nodding, glad he's cottoning on. That was her plan, after all. "We'll swear blind that the love of a good woman tamed the infamous bohemian, Sherlock Holmes. The public will be delighted and I'm afraid you, Mr. Magnusson, will appear rather an old prude in this scenario-"

Magnusson snorts. "Will I?" he snaps. "I very much doubt that. You've no idea how infamous your fiancé is or what people think of him. He's keeping Irene Adler in rooms at the Metropole and that's not even half of what we know. And you think anyone will believe that he gave all that lascivious behaviour up because he met you? Nonsense.

By the time you get the story out I'll already have ruined you."

"Not if we marry tonight. Right now." And Sherlock grins at her more widely, his eyes glinting with that light one sees when he's contemplating some new devilry.

Molly's not afraid to say she adores it.

"Darling," he says, still tenderly stroking her hair from her face, "would you mind terribly if we didn't have the big church monstrosity Mycroft's planning, with her Majesty and the Cabinet and all those other idiots? Would you mind a quiet little wedding? Preferably some time in the next half hour?"

She nods. She knows what he's talking about.

"I take it we'll have to break in?" she says and again his eyes alight with mischief.

"Best fiancée ever!" he crows. "And yes, we will."

"Will it be dangerous?" she asks and again he nods.

"Oh yes," he says. "Very. I'll need you to be very protective of me."

Again she reaches up and kisses him. "Sounds like a plan to me…Husband." And with that he slings his arm around her waist and begins leading her from the platform.

His grin is so bright it could probably rival the moon outside as he presses a kiss into the crown of her hair.

"We'd best get going, old bean," he calls carelessly to Magnusson. "Mycroft will want to have a chat with you though, Charlie, about misuse of surveillance equipment- As if he's one to talk."

And with that he and Molly make their way over to the ladder which led them to this platform.

Magnusson's staring at them in astonishment, genuinely not sure what to do though neither of them pay him any mind.
For both of them are thinking about the adventure that lies ahead of them, the adventure that will ensure even if Magnusson does publish, he's slandering a peer's wife and not some mere female doctor from Whitechapel. You see, there is only one place in all of England in which a couple can get married without a marriage licence, their family's permission, and without the Banns being read, and that place is Fleet Prison. *Fleet bloody Prison.*

Molly supposes that she's not surprised that she'll end up tying the knot in a jailhouse- *I mean, just look at who I'm marrying,* she thinks.

---

Magnusson watches his guests disperse via his camera obscura images, a glass of brandy in his hand. His tongue still aches from where he bit it and rage is crawling through him, pacing about his chest like a wolf.

He's been had, he thinks.

*He's been had by Sherlock bloody Holmes and his little mouse of a mistress.*

Calmly, without an ounce of drama, he takes his crystal brandy glass and hurls it against the wall to his left; It shatters on impact and he decides right then, right there that one of the servants will be beaten tonight for its loss, no matter how much they beg.

Because his plan had been excellent. Concise. Controlled. He had engaged Ms. Adler to spy on her comrades. He had invited Mycroft Holmes' toy army into his home and set them running through his maze, first through the introduction of Inspector Dimmock and his accusations, and thence through the arrival of one of his Whitechapel associates, Mr. Wozniak, and his rather large gun. He'd even let Mr. Holmes discover his beautiful observation suites below, hoping his deviancy would prove vulnerable to opportunity as well as suggestion-

The purpose of all this had been to test the metal of Mycroft's men and his brother, to see how they would react in a place in which he held all the power. *Too see which of their number might be suitable to make his own.* And then, when he had something on each of them, he would play his usual game of blackmail, the prize this time the secret service of the mighty British Empire-

It was a good plan, he thought. A prudent plan. An achievable plan- None of which had mattered.

Because Molly Hooper and her idiotic fiancé have doubtless just explained to that idiotic fiancé's brother just what sort of game Charles is playing and just who he was willing to play it with- Who he was willing to tamper with-

*He's pretty much a walking dead man,* he muses, *his plans in tatters.*

This time his gaze flickers across the room but there's nothing else to smash and again it occurs to him that a servant might be rather more fun to crack apart than a glass.

As he does so his gaze alights on the camera obscura image of his hallway though. He narrows his eyes, watching, and he sees Sir Henry Knight carry a dark-skinned young woman in his arms towards his waiting carriage. Her trousers and shirt are spattered in blood and there's blood on the young engineer's hands. His clothes. Under his fingernails.

It's on noticing this small detail that Charles picks up his homemade kinetoscopic device and starts to film the scene before him.

For as he watches Knight slowly, tenderly lifts the young up and deposits her in his carriage before taking off his coat and tucking it around her. She shakes her head and seems to murmur something in
her sleep, her expression slashed with pain. Knight frowns, leans forward and brushes her hair from her face before placing a swift, chaste kiss on her forehead and then climbing into the carriage with her. Ms. Hooper's companion, Ms. Morstan, hops in with him but that's not important-

Charles knows only too well how to rid footage of pesky, inconvenient details like the presence of a chaperone or witness, he's done that before.

Slowly, slowly, the newspaper magnate puts his device down. He sits, tapping his finger against his lips as he thinks about what a turn this night has taken. What possibility has just presented itself. Far off he can hear the sound of footsteps, knows that either Mycroft Holmes is coming to speak to him or he has dispatched one of his servants with a summons to meet tomorrow-

None of which matters, he realises as he stares at his kinetoscopic device.

He doesn't need to own Mycroft.

He certainly doesn't need to own Sherlock Holmes or his little whore.

No, he muses, owning a brilliant engineer and someone Mycroft's grooming for service will work just as well, especially since everyone knows what a prude Sir Henry is-

He pictures the headline: "Knight and Dark-Skinned Beauty In Carriage Dalliance," he murmurs. "Sir Henry Knight and Foreign Mistress in Public Indecency Outrage."

Slowly, quietly, he smiles. Nods to himself. He can feel his anger receding, going to that place he locks it down until he can it out again. He still beats the maid who comes to clean up his mess but it's more out of glee than anything.

Oh yes, he thinks, oh yes.

I am rather too clever for Mr. Sherlock bloody Holmes.

Chapter End Notes

As you may have noticed, this is not the most historically accurate fic and this chapter is another example. While there was a period- mainly in the 1700s- where Fleet Prison was indeed the only place outside of Scotland that those under the age of 21 and not in possession of their parents' approval (or a licence, or a reading of the Banns) could get married, by the Victorian Era the practice of "Irregular Marriages," had largely been done away with in London. On the other hand, this is Sherlock and Molly and well, we can't have them getting hitched like a normal couple, now can we? Hence yet another historical inconsistency was born. Ah well, it makes for a better story.
Wedlock

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Thanks for their reviews go to muchado13, Iccec62, renniejoy, oOkatiekinsOo, spuffygirl and springbok7. This is mainly pre-smut, but narratively important nonetheless. Enjoy!

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: WEDLOCK

Sherlock can't help but think that Molly's career in wifely infamy is getting off to a brilliant start.

For, shortly after she deposits Sally, John, Sir Henry and Ms. Morstan in the parlour of her clinic in Whitechapel she slips out. Heads upstairs. After a moment she calls for Mary to join her, which the young blond woman immediately does, a mysterious smile on her face.

What happens next will populate Sherlock's more fevered daydreams for many years to come.

For as the group fusses, striving to make Sally comfortable- she's threatens Sherlock with dire punishments should he hurt her friend- Molly slips out of her beautiful pink gown and dons the sort of attire more suited to breaking into Fleet Prison. The sort of attire which properly bred young English ladies are never supposed to contemplate wearing. The sort of attire that only a certain type of woman would ever try to pull off.

She isn't to know it, but it's the sort of attire that Sherlock Holmes absolutely adores.

And he does adore it, when he sees her. He adores it so much that he stares, his distraction only brought to a halt by John's delicately cleared throat and Sally's throwing one of her shoes at his head. (He ducks, unsuccessfully; The sound of show-on-wall-on-cranium impact seems to cheer its thrower immensely however). But though he notes these things, he doesn't pay attention to them, not really.

For Molly is wearing trousers. Actual, real trousers.

The sort that men wear.

The sort that are considered shocking when worn by ladies.

The sort that cling to your legs and hips, that rather ingeniously outline the shape of your derriere- "Seriously," Sally yells when she catches him staring. "Just give me a reason to shoot you, cove. I'm in a lot of pain and it would make me feel better."

At her words Molly blinks- she'd been staring at him, surprised, apparently, by his reaction- and smiles. Walks over to her friend and sits down on her bed. She brushes Sally's hair off her face, whispers questions to her about whether she needs anything.

She seems to be happy in John's care but Sherlock can tell his Molly wishes to make sure.

Sally nods, tells Molly not to worry. She was briefed in the carriage- they all were- and though she doesn't like that Molly feels she has to rush into this she also does her friend the courtesy of respecting her judgment.
"I'd do the same, if I had to," she tells her, though the look she shoots Sherlock makes him suspect that widowhood would follow shortly thereafter.

"It's not only that," Molly whispers. "I-" She trails off, blushes scarlet.

Sherlock grins at her, proud as punch, and John helpfully smacks him on the back of the head since Sally is too far away.

"I want to do this," Molly continues whilst he rubs his poor, abused skull. "I know it's mad and ridiculous and all but... I want to. I want him." She reaches back, takes Sherlock's hand and he beams. "God help me but I'd like to be married to him."

At these words Ms. Morstan lets out a delighted little clap and even Sally smiles.

Sherlock could be imagining things but he thinks he sees stars in Sir Henry's eyes when she does that, the poor sod.

"Then you should marry him," Sally says. "Life's too short not to do what you want."

Her grin turns decidedly sly.

"Besides, he gives you any trouble and I'll shoot him. Just make sure you take out a decent life insurance policy on him, yeah?"

The room dissolves into laughter, even Sir Henry grinning, and, thus reassured Ms. Molly Hooper and Mr. Sherlock Holmes rise and head out to Fleet Prison, the scene of their soon-to-be nuptials.

They can't hold hands- God only knows what looks they'd get- but Sherlock finds himself grinning from ear to ear the entire way there.

Getting in proves to be easy.

Apparently Basher Magee, chief enforcer for the Pickford Crime Family and all around menace to society, has picked this night to attempt a jailbreak. He and his boys try to smash their way through the huge, medieval oak door at the prison's rear, something which does not, alas, go well.

(Sherlock could have told them that plan was abysmal but one doesn't like to interrupt someone else's evening, now does one?)

The guards attention thus distracted, scaling the front wall and hopping down proves surprisingly easy for he and his intended. Molly makes a good job of it- Too good a job, something which eventually prompts the revelation that she has loved climbing as a child. She'd had to give it up, she tells him, once her wearing petticoats and a corset became mandatory rather than merely advised.

"I'd never have made you do that," Sherlock huffs, his greater height allowing him to alight from the wall more quickly and thus reach up for her.

He grabs Molly around the waist and swings her down easily, depositing her on the ground with a huff which she answers with a grin.

"So you don't think I should have been made into a lady?" she asks wryly, grinning up at him.

Sherlock looms over her, his grin matching her own, before reaching down and giving her bottom a swift, light pinch, just to show how much he likes it.
"Definitely not," he says, only to yelp in surprise as she snakes her hand around and pinches his own backside in retaliation.

She has a surprisingly strong grip and it makes his toes curl in his boots.

"I'll bear that in mind, darling," she laughs before darting into the darkest part of the shadows, Sherlock dutifully following her. From there it's a mere hop skip and a jump to Father Wiggins’ cell, the night cleaner and one of the more aristocratic drunks being hauled in to act as witnesses. (They can't afford to skimp on those.)

Soon candles have been lit, the prison chapel opened. When Molly stands beside him in front of the priest and takes his hand, Sherlock finds himself searching her face for any sign of disappointment and he's relieved when he sees none. There'll be another wedding ceremony, he's sure, one with flowers and a big puffy monstrosity of a dress and all of their friends but for now this is all he can give her. All either of them can have, thanks to Charles Augustus Magnusson.

She stares at him with stars in her eyes before wrapping her arms around his neck and giving him the kiss of his life, and with that they become man and wife.

They head to Baker Street after, the first time Sherlock's been back in days.

He doesn't want to examine why but he feels rather… shy, when he contemplates showing her his home.

After all this place is his, only his. It's really the only "only his," thing he's ever had, the reach of his brother and family and career being what they are.

_He's not sure how he'll feel if it turns out she doesn't like it._

If she dislikes it though, she gives no indication. Instead she stares around with wide eyes, taking in the lit fire- _thank God Archie was up today_ - as well as his laboratory equipment. The comfortable, threadbare furniture. The library, with its myriad books and knick-knacks, from his tobacco slipper to the minor mountains of magazines to the skull sitting proudly on his mantelpiece, unseeing eyes agape.

On noticing this she walks over to the fire, lifts it. She examines it carefully, her bare fingers sliding over every notch and bone. "This is real," she says quietly. "It's not a replica."

"It was left to me by a dear friend," he says, carefully removing the skull from her grip. Putting it back.

He’d really rather not talk about his past this evening.

His tone must warn her as much because she nods. Walks away from the fire and over to the books. Her slim little fingers dance over each weathered spine, each volume.

She caresses them as lightly as a lover might and at the thought Sherlock feels himself starting to grow hard.

She pauses at one book, pulls it out. It's a copy of Vesalius' _De Humani Corporis Fabrica_ and as she sees it her eyes again go wide in delight. She opens it, scanning hungrily over the pictures. Though there are several more modern works on anatomy none has ever managed to quite rival the beauty of Vesalius' illustrations, Sherlock has always felt- _And by the looks of things Molly agrees with him._
She sets the book down on the experiments table to his right, her fingers tracing the drawings reverently; Sherlock walks up behind her, peering over her shoulder and she gives a tiny shiver.

It's at that moment that he realises just how closely to her he's standing.

"Molly," he begins, even as she turns to him and says, "Sherlock."

They both end up speaking over each other and they both give a nervous little laugh.

"Molly," Sherlock tries again, "Molly, I don't know what you've been told about, um, wedding nights-

"I've been told to submit to my husband."

She says the words in a prim, tiny voice, directing them to his chest.

They're spoken so quietly he's surprised he heard them at all.

There's something about the way she says them that sets an uncomfortable... buzzing inside Sherlock. It's oddly protective but he doesn't know quite how to articulate it.

"And," he says, "by submit, you mean..?"

"Allow him his pleasure. Do my wifely duty and do not complain about the, the," she takes a deep breath, forces the words out. "About the... pain of it."

And she gulps. A furious blush starts making its way up her throat. Her cheeks. Her fingers again trace one of Vesalius' anatomies but Sherlock reaches out. Stills them.

"Do you really think it will hurt?" he asks and she nods.

His brave, cheeky Molly is nowhere to be seen now.

"I think it must hurt, the first time," she says. "I've spoken to- I've heard the toms talk, I know it can be pleasurable afterwards but the first time..."

And she shakes her head. Frowns. She seems to be... frustrated with herself? over this.

"I fear the pain," she says eventually. "I know you don't want to hurt me. I know I agreed to this and I want it, I do. I just..."

She gestures to the anatomical figure before her.

"I know my body," she says softly. "I know the process of it. That's familiar to me, as familiar as a book like this. But I don't know your body. I don't know you. Not enough to feel comfortable with, with..."

"With sex. With my being inside you."

He says the words matter-of-factly because he believes that she'll like that and when she nods, seemingly relieved, he feels a tiny spark of pride that he guessed.

"My word but I must seem like a ninny to you," she says. Finally she shuts the book, finally she turns to look at him. "All my big talk in front of Adler and when it comes right down to it-"

"When it comes right down to it you're woman enough to tell me what you feel and what you think."
He smiles at her. "Yes, I must admit I'm rather impressed."

She blinks up at him in surprise at the praise and he raises her hand to his mouth, presses a kiss to it. When she doesn't recoil he continues, reaching down and pressing another to her cheek. Then her earlobe. Then, to make her giggle, the tip of her nose.

This last has the desired effect.

With her laughter the tension breaks and he leans rather more into her, picking her up and depositing her on his laboratory table. Her little feet are left swinging in space, so great is her shortness, and those lovely, trouser-clad thighs part to let him step in close.

She lets out a breath and stares up at him, then hesitantly reaches her hands out. Places them flat against his torso. She slowly strokes her way up his belly, his chest, the weight and warmth of her touch bleeding heat into him. Through him. The hardness between his legs is getting rather difficult to ignore, but he tries. He's happy to try, for her.

She only stops when she reaches his cheeks and then she takes his face in his hands. Turns it down to look at her.

"You're really not disappointed?" she asks and he shakes his head.

"It's all been a bit sudden, this," he says. "I think I'd be more disappointed if you were demanding I take you in a prompt and manly fashion, without having any idea what you might like." He reaches down, presses his forehead to hers. This time when the inhale, they do so in time. "Because that would be a disappointment," he says, "to realise you think me so bloody ordinary."

She snorts and it's a welcome sound. "I assure you, Mr. Holmes," she says, "I've never thought you ordinary."

"Good." He grins and without any warning picks her up, starts carrying her into the parlour. He feels more than sees her smile. Her breath is a puff of sweetness against his skin before her arms lock more tightly around him.

"And since there's no way that I'm ordinary," he says, "there's no way this night's going to be ordinary either."

Which is why he plops her down in John's chair in front of the fire and proceeds to begin divesting her of her clothes- Trousers (he hopes) last.
The Venus of Baker Street

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Please note that this chapter is good old-fashioned smut; if you prefer not to read that you can easily skip to the next one but be warned. And as always thanks for their reviews go to springbok7, lilsherlockian1975, reesiesteve, dailyobsession, spuffygirl, atomicflea and oOkatiekinsOo. Hope you enjoy this, and hobbits away, hey!

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: THE VENUS OF BAKER STREET

Molly's throat is dry as he deposits her on the chair.

There's something, something almost devilish in his expression and it's setting a fluttery, warm feeling loose inside her.

She doesn't know what to make of it.

He grins down at her, his eyes warm as he drops to his knees before her and starts slowly, gently pulling off her boots. Her socks. He stands and disappears off through a door to his left only to reappear moments later with a small basin, jug and wash towel.

She doesn't know what to make of that either.

She looks up at him, opens her mouth to ask him what the devil he's doing but as their eyes lock the words die in her throat. Instead he once again drops to his knees, the movement slower, more sinuous this time.

He always moves, she muses, with the strutting grace of a stray cat.

Without saying a word he reaches down, picks up one of her feet and brings it to his lips before pressing a small kiss on the arch of her foot. She gasps in surprise at the contact.

"Did that hurt?" he asks, the words mischievous though they should sound solicitous.

She shakes her head and he ducks down again. Presses another kiss, to the smallest toe on her other foot this time.

"Good," he says quietly, looking up at her through his lashes. He licks his lips and instinctively her tongue darts out to mimic him.

To her utter shock he reaches down and swipes his tongue swiftly across the spot he just kissed, making her breath stutter mortifyingly.

"Nothing is going to hurt tonight… wife," he says quietly, turning his attention back towards her feet. He picks up the cloth, dips it into the water and then begins washing her, slowly. Thoroughly. He strokes the cloth beneath her arch, against her toes and ankles.

The water's pleasantly warm and it feels so, so soothing.

As he does it he hums in appreciation, stopping every so often and kissing her again. Licking her again. He murmurs how lovely he finds her feet, how perfect, how *her*. His tongue feels ticklish,
warm against her skin, and she's surprised how much she likes it.

Never in a million years had Molly imagined that she'd like the feel of something like this, but there, she muses, you have it.

Too soon though, her feet are clean. He puts the water away, straightens up and leans over her. "It really pains me to do this," he says, voice mock-mournful. "You've no idea how much I like the look of you in those trousers, but…"

And he trails off, holding eye contact again even as his hands creep down towards the fly of her trousers.

With slow, deft movements- she thinks he's trying not to frighten her- he opens the buttons and pulls the fabric apart, baring her shift, bloomers and corset for the first ever time in mixed company.

It feels as intimate as if he'd pulled all her clothes right off.

Instantly she stiffens but he shakes his head. Leans forward. He presses his nose to the cotton of her shift and breathes in deeply. As he does so that she realises- She's wet. Slippery. He'll be able to smell it and he'll- He'll-

"I'm going to love that scent, you know," he says quietly, pressing another little kiss to her abdomen, the heat of it burning through the shift's cotton. He breathes in deeply again and grins up at her from between her knees.

The sight of it makes her stomach tighten with lust.

"If you taste half as delicious as you smell," he's saying, "then I rather fear I'll have trouble leaving the marital bed, Queen and Country and Mycroft be damned."

And without another word he strokes his hands gently down along her hips, each one curving up to cup her backside. Molly blinks in surprise at the feeling- she may even have let out some sort of squeak at it- and again he grins at her, his fingers tightening indecently against her flesh. Squeezing and kneading her.

"I'll need you to raise yourself up for me, darling," he says quietly.

Molly frowns. "Raise myself up for you, why-?" But then what he's proposing occurs to her.

She blushes absolutely scarlet.

Still, she does as he asks. She takes her weight onto her elbows, splayed as they are against the chair's armrests, and she lifts her backside up off the seat.

Sherlock calmly pulls her trousers and her bloomers off in one swift motion, folding them neatly and setting them aside her chair.

He looks terribly pleased with this development.

She freezes though, unsure what to do now she's so suddenly, so embarrassingly bare in front of him. Her hands reach down instinctively, trying to cover herself up. He stills her though, kisses her. Covers her with his body. She should feel pinned beneath him but she doesn't, she feels protected.

The wetness between her legs increases at the thought, the juxtaposition between her tension and her arousal something she doesn't really understand.
"There," he says. "I rather gave you a fright, didn't I?" He shakes his head, presses kisses to her cheek. Her lips. Her hands find his hair and she digs her fingers in, holds his head still until she's kissed her fill. It makes her feel... It makes her feel steadier, somehow. "Patience is not my forte, alas," he says when they break apart, "but I promise you I'll not do anything so fast again-"

She looks him in the eye- they're nose to nose- and nods. Shows him that his promise is satisfactory. She half expected him to berate her but his tone was conciliatory. Kind, even. She likes that he's being so solicitous with her. She can feel the scratch and press of his trousers against her knees though and as delicious as it feels she can't help but be a little put out by the disparity of it. It's a firm reminder of their differences in power and experience here: she's near-naked and being touched by him. Surely he should be in the same position as she?

"Undress." She says the word quietly, uncertainly.

It's genuinely questionable, whether he'll hear it.

"What was that?" he asks and when she looks in his eyes she knows: He heard her. He just wants to make her say it again, the devil.

So she leans forward, takes one of her hands from the armrest and, her pulse pounding, reaches down. Strokes her fingers to the fly of his trousers and gives the fabric a quick tug.

When she looks up at him again, she has the pleasure of seeing his pupils dilate.

"Undress," she says again, more clearly, and he grins. Nods. He reaches forward and presses a swift kiss to her lips before rising, pulling off his clothing with a great deal more speed- and completeness- than he's thus far permitted her. His clothes seem like a jigsaw puzzle, revealing himself to her in pieces. His body is pale, white, like the marble nudes she's seen in the British Museum though not nearly so... unreal. So idealised. He has scars. Wobbly bits. His skin is so translucent he might be part albino and those electric blue eyes stand out darkly in his stern, angular face. His hair too, dark, wiry curls winding their way down his belly and snaking her attention down towards his-

She swallows. He's... It's not that she thinks he's terribly large, she's just never before seen a man's genitalia so... engorged. So, so... ready.

It does rather make her wonder how that's going to fit inside her though she has seen plenty of evidence in her practice that Mother Nature finds a way. (The human race would be in dire straits if she did not.)

When her eyes flick up to his he smiles though. Steps closer. Without an ounce of self-consciousness he licks his fingertips. Takes himself in hand and strokes his palm briskly down his rapidly-firming length.

His gaze turns dark-eyed, lazy, as he does it and Molly feels a shot of sheer, scorching want go through her.

Instinctively her hand twitches towards him- she can't help it, she wants to know how he would feel in her palm- and he steps forward. Leans over her chair. He takes her hand and places it against his member, slides her fingers along in mimicry of his own.

The texture is surprising, soft and supple as kidskin though hardened beneath it.

She tightens her grip on him, curious as to how much give the organ has and he yelps. Laughs. Covers her hand with his and stills her.
She can see the cords at his neck straining, just a little bit.

He leans down and kisses her, breathes something about her trying to kill him, the words themselves lost in a long, yearning sigh as she kisses him back. "Did that hurt?" she asks him, worried, but he smiles. Shakes his head.

"I assure you, my dear, that your hands on that part of my anatomy will never hurt me."

He still takes her fingers from him though, folds them across her belly. Leans down and darts another kiss to her abdomen- to her bare skin, this time- and again she squeaks, a little less loudly than before. She's trying to find the will to be embarrassed about it but before she can he's dropped to his knees again though he continues to lean over her. (This is only possible because of his rather greater-than-she height). For a split second his eyes remain closed, his brow furrowed as if he's trying to focus-

When he opens his eyes however they're clear. Bright. It feels to Molly as if they could look right through her.

"I'm going to remove your shirt now, and your under-things- Is that alright?" he asks and his tone is everything that is thoughtful and conscientious.

Molly shivers at the sound of it.

She nods, confused- they're going back to what they were doing, even though he's naked and apparently ready?- but as she wonders Sherlock slowly unbuttons her shirt and cravat, laying the latter aside whilst pulling both sides of the former apart. This time she's had some warning and she doesn't freeze.

No, instead she lets herself experience- no, enjoy- the sensation of being bare to him. Lets herself meet his gaze and hold it, neither of them apparently able to look away.

For he strokes his hands across her clavicle, again murmuring softly at how lovely she is. How wanted. He keeps calling her wife as if he's only just learned the word and he's afraid a lack of repetition will wipe it from his memory. By the time he's gotten the shirt down her shoulders he's pressing kisses to her throat, her arms, the swell of her breasts. She can feel the rasp of his stubble against that delicate skin and it feels exquisite in a way she didn't expect. His hands are moving up her knees, her thighs and calves in warm, firm strokes and every place he touches feels delicious and shivery and good and brazen-

It feels so wonderful that Molly finally understands how Eve could bear to Fall.

But she can't think about Biblical matters now. There's nothing in the world she can think of but what her new husband is doing to her. For her breathing is getting faster, louder, the need to draw oxygen into her lungs becoming ever more difficult. When he reaches for her corset and pops open the busks- "Open sesame," he murmurs- she doesn't really register it. When he hooks his arms around her to pull it loose all she can find in herself is the will to sigh.

So she holds him. Touches him. Her mouth keeps finding his again and again. She can't seem to stop kissing him. At his urging she leans forward- he can't get the corset off without removing the shirt too- and as she does so he presses into her. Tightens his hold on her. He slides his tongue teasingly into her mouth and then suckles hers when she chases it back into his.

Molly could almost swear this makes her heartbeat stop.

He strokes his fingers delicately cross the bare skin of her back, downwards, downwards, to once
again squeeze and knead at her backside. *The pressure is delicious.* When she's free of the corset she lets out another sigh, this one of pure pleasure, and she feels him press kisses to her eyelids. Her jaw. Her earlobe.

"There you are, wife," he murmurs. "There you are…"

And she opens her eyes to find him kneeling before her bare body, his gaze bright. Burning. There's a hunger in him she's never seen before- At least, she's never seen it directed at her. Slowly, holding eye contact, he wraps a hand around each of her ankles. His grip is surprisingly… tender. He lets her get used to the feeling of his hold and then gently, oh so gently, he pulls her legs apart. Presses them backward.

He folds them up until they're near her chest and still she doesn't know what he wants her to do.

Once he gets her into the position he wants he releases her ankles before taking her knees and hooking them over the chair's armrests. She gasps as he does it- He's opening her entirely up to his gaze. *She's never felt vulnerable in this way before.*

Still staring at her he strokes his hand up her inner thighs, up her belly and hips, his fingers reaching longingly for her breasts even as he slowly brings his lips down to the warm, wet place nestled between her legs.

"Sherlock?" She hates that her voice is so unsteady but she can't help it. "Sherlock, what are you..?"

"I'm going to kiss you, wife," he says and there's something in the way he says it, something that makes her shiver. It feels… *It feels wanton. Dangerous, almost.*

And yet, she doesn't feel unsafe.

Again she feels the wetness between her legs, feels to her mortification that a tiny trickle of it is now running down the back of her thigh, towards the cheeks of her arse and as she watches he leans down, places his lips to her skin and he, he *licks* it.

*She can't believe he licked it.*

He makes a small moan of satisfaction as he does, breathing in deeply, his face pulling into a lovely, contented smile and in that moment Molly thinks he's the most beautiful thing she's ever seen.

Slowly, greedily, he kisses his way up her thigh until he's face to face with her opening. He stares at her, parts the soft, wet flesh of her with his fingers and then… Then he licks her *there* too. Molly moans: She can feel his tongue moving within her, slowly at first, circling her pearl gently before moving down to suckle and lap at her cunny.

After a moment he takes a deep breath and gives her labia a tiny, gentle nip before suckling at her pearl again.

The sensation makes her hips buck, fingers tightening on the armrests. Her nails dig into the leather, marking it, and she feels absurdly embarrassed at the thought. She senses rather than hears his chuckle, the vibration of it making her bite her lip. It seems such a wicked, private thing for them to share on their first night together and at the thought wetness gushes between her legs again. As if encouraged by this arousal his tongue starts moving within her. Pleasure arcs through her, swift and sure as lightning, as he laps and sucks and licks. Again embarrassment raises its head but this time she fights it down. *This feels to wonderful for her to be ashamed.* Instead slowly, hesitantly, she reaches down and rests her hand on his head. Her fingers stroke through his curls and when she has a good enough grip she tilts her hips upwards, pulls his head down towards her again- Hard.
It forces his mouth to work more tightly against her and oh but that feels good.

He lets out a delighted bark of laughter as she does and then she can feel him. Licking her. Kissing her. Suckling her. Exploring ever inch of her his lips and tongue can find, even as his hands stroke and caress all over her thighs. Her calves. The cheeks of her arse. Without realising it she moves her knees from the armrests, her legs locking tightly around his head and shoulders, hips rocking with both their movements. He reaches down, takes her backside in his hands and tilts her pelvis where he wants her, one hand sliding between her legs even as the other stays at her backside. He digs his nails in sharply and the sensation makes her moan. His fingers join his tongue inside her and it's that, that fast, helpless pleasure which sends her over and into bliss. It twists through her until she feels herself coming apart from it, feels herself coming apart for *him*-

Her back arches, her body spasms, her legs tightening helplessly against his shoulders.

When she comes back to herself she's staring at him, wide-eyed, her body flushed and shaking and drenched in sweat. He still kisses her like she's as fresh as a May morning.

"That, my dear, is how one kisses one's new bride," he says, his voice playful. Gentle. As she stares at him he reaches up and kisses her, running his nose along her cheek even as he folds her into his arms. She can feel his hardness still pressing into her hip and for once Molly is amazed. Speechless.

"That was… I felt… What was that?" she eventually settles on.

She knows there are probably much more clever, witty things she can say but that piece of idiocy will have to do.

He takes her chin in his hand though and tilts her face up to meet him. When he looks into her eyes what she sees in his is kind. "That's the thing we start with," he says. "We can do other things when we know each other better. Or when you're not worried anymore. Or when Mycroft once again unleashes the powers of darkness and we have only a few hours trapped in a cave left to live."

He frowns.

"Actually no, scratch that one. It's highly unlikely that brother dearest would bring *that* about twice."

And with those words he pulls her to him and down onto the floor before the fireplace. He also tugs the crocheted cover off the sofa and tucks it over the pair of them, shielding them from the cold. Still surprised, and discombobulated, and delighted, Molly leans into him, her head resting on his chest. The silence stretches out as the fire crackles merrily.

"I think I like being married," she murmurs eventually, pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

"I think I like being married too," he answers her, and with that they fall asleep.
Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. This chapter was supposed to be all plot and no porn but it just didn't turn out that way- The perils, I suppose, of writing a wedding night into the middle of the story. Here, therefore, be smut but if you don't want to read it you can skip right to the next chapter without missing much. If you do want to read it on the other hand... Oh, and as always my thanks for their reviews go to SimplySpectating, springbok7, calicar, whatcolourmyeyes, oOkatiekinsOo, lilsherlockian1975, atomicflea and spuffygirl. Enjoy! Back to the plot next chapter.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: THE WICKED SIDE TO ONE'S BETTER HALF

She can feel someone poking her.

Molly Hooper- no, some groggy, smug part of her brain reminds her, Molly Holmes now- frowns and stirs in her sleep. Curls in tighter against the warm block of personage beside her and elects to ignore the interruption.

Every inch of her feels liquid and rested after her wedding night and she resolutely does not wish to open her eyes.

It would seem her new-made husband feels the same way for she hears a muttered, "Bugger off, John, and find your own bed." She feels the displacement of wind as her bed partner kicks spitefully out at whoever is attempting to disturb their rest and she smiles, cuddling in tighter to him.

"Oi!" she hears a young, boyish voice protest. "You leave a bruise and I'm telling Great Auntie Martha, you see if I don't!"

And there's a sound of irritated, thumping footsteps moving away from her, their owner presumably getting out of Sherlock's kicking range.

At these words Sherlock lets out a comically petulant string of curses and sits up. His warmth now missing, Molly finally elects to open her eyes, rubbing them against the early morning light. She stretches her arms above her head, smiling at her husband as he finally comes into focus-

"So that's what breasts look like," she hears the boyish voice say in interest. "Tommy Philbourne's wrong: they're not marvellous at all."

In her tiredness it takes a split second longer to process what the voice said than it should have but when she does she reacts with horror, pulling the crocheted settee cover up over her torso. Her bare breasts.

She's suddenly and painfully aware that she's blushing from head to toe.

Sherlock has already risen and turned to their interlocutor- "Archie," he snaps, "How many times have I told you to knock before you enter my rooms, you little reprobate?"

The boy- Archie- squeaks out something that sounds like, "this week?" before holding his hands up over his head and ducking backwards. As soon as he's far enough away however he lobs one of the settee cushions at Sherlock. (It bounces rather magnificently off the detective's forehead.)
With a war-cry Sherlock arms himself with another cushion and takes off after his attacker, hollering as loudly as a troupe of chimpanzees. What started as a display of rage rapidly devolves into a childishly gleeful throwing match however, complete with cushions and knick-knacks and running around the couch like children whilst calling one another names-

Molly's not sure whether to be annoyed or amused by this.

She settles on picking up a cushion of her own and lobbing it at her husband when his back is turned. (It too bounces rather magnificently off his head.)

The boy Archie laughs and points when it hits him, mocking his employer mercilessly. "You got hit by a girl!" he crows and Molly gives a self-congratulatory cry of "hurrah!" His eyes widen like saucers when Sherlock turns on her in retaliation however, looming over her and mock-glaring before darting in to steal a kiss and with it, Molly's breath.

"Mr. Holmes," Archie objects. "Great Aunty Martha will be furious if she finds out you're purporting me-"

Sherlock sighs. Pulls back from Molly and looks at the boy.

He grins beatifically and the detective snorts.

"First of all, you know damn well the word is, "perverting," boy." Archie's beatific grin gets wider and now it's Molly's turn to snort. "And secondly, go down to the pantry and take some money out of my greatcoat. Buy yourself some sweets- nothing too extravagant- for this attack on your childhood and we'll call it even, eh?"

Archie crows happily and Sherlock turns to glance rather sceptically at Molly.

"I suppose you want sweets too, do you?" he demands and she smiles at him. Quite without meaning to her mind flashes back to last night and if possible her flush gets worse.

"The sort of sweets I want aren't sold in a shop," she says. As she speaks she reaches out, takes his hand in hers and, feeling rather daring, brings it to her lips to kiss.

Archie whines extravagantly at this, opining loudly that "grownups are disgusting." Sherlock doesn't look away from her though, his eyes flashing darkly as he locates his trousers, hunts through his pockets and hands Archie a golden guinea.

Apparently he's not willing to risk his great-coat's pockets being empty.

"Be gone, spawn," he says and the boy sighs like a martyr. He still takes the guinea though, and he still makes his way towards the stairs. "Is breakfast made?" Sherlock calls as he beats his retreat and Archie nods.

"On the table downstairs, Mr. Holmes," he says. "Set it out myself, as well as the clothes Great Aunty sent for the lady-"

He's already halfway out the door.

"You'd best go down and get it now though," he calls with studied casualness as he reaches the threshold, "Lord Haddleigh's sent his man to talk to you and he's waiting in the kitchen!"

And with a delighted, devilish whoop the boy takes off down the building's stairs, his purloined guinea in his hand while Molly and Sherlock swear at one another and the detective make a half-
hearted swipe for him.

The front door bangs shut however and the new Mr. and Mrs. Holmes stare at one another.

Molly swears she must be blushing to the roots of her hair.

"Well, I suppose we shouldn't keep Lord Hadleigh's man waiting," she says softly and begins hunting about for her shift and pantaloons, wondering briefly whether Sherlock could be persuaded to pop downstairs and fetch whatever this Great Aunty Martha sent over for her.

*She doesn't want to risk being seen in this state by a stranger.*

Sherlock comes up behind her, wraps his arms around her. He's so much taller than she that he easily lifts her off the ground. He nuzzles into her hair, kissing her neck and making these rather appreciative, rather marvellous little moaning noises as he pulls her more tightly against his long, lean, *naked* body-

She feels his lips press to her earlobe and he sets her back down, arms still locked around her waist. She tips her head backwards until her crown rests against his chest and he presses a sweet kiss to the very tip of her nose. Her eyelids. He leans down, sucking her upper lip into his mouth and she swears that for a moment her heart actually stops. This close she can feel something hard pressing into the small of her back and as she realises what it must be she blushes again. Leans farther back into him.

"Good morning, wife," he mutters in her ear, the bass rumble of his voice raising gooseflesh all along her arms. Her shoulders. Other, rather less mentionable parts of her anatomy, choose this moment to make their opinion of his voice felt too. They're unanimously in favour.

*Oh, she thinks.*

*Oh, my.*

"Good morning husband," she breathes back. "I trust you slept well?"

He gives a low, rough bark of a laugh. "I did," he says. "Eventually."

And before she can ask what kept him awake he starts kissing the back of her neck in earnest, his left hand snaking up from its place at her waist to gently cup and squeeze her left breast. He rolls the nipple between thumb and forefinger and it feels exquisite, just as the roughness of his unshaven face feels exquisite when it nuzzles into the crook of her neck-

Not knowing what to do- and yet, not so nervous as she was last night- Molly presses back into him again, allowing him to pull her downwards into the chair they debauched so thoroughly last evening.

They land messily, her splayed on top of him, and she lets out a nervous giggle, one joined a moment later by his lower, bass laugh. The vibration of it tingles through her.

She can feel him hardening rapidly against her backside now, and the realisation turns the muscles in her belly into a sticky, liquid mass. Perhaps she's having a similar effect on him for he grunts, one arm tightening around her and pulling her against him; The ridge of his member juts against her backside and for no reason she can fathom it makes her pulse stutter, wetness beginning to seep between her legs. *She has the unaccountable instinct to spread her them, an instinct she of which she feels both proud and slightly ashamed.* The thought makes her face flush but she presses into him, leaning back so that she can feel the warmth of his bare chest between the suddenly-sensitized flesh of her shoulder-blades. It feels so good and she moans at the thought, her hips beginning to move in
"Christ, Molly," he mutters and his voice sounds breathless. Ragged, almost. One hand tightens on her breast, the other snaking down her belly. She tilts her pelvis upwards, longing to feel his fingers in that place where they played so beautifully last night and he lets out another ragged growl.

"Molly, we can't do this right now," he says, "Hadleigh's man is downstairs and I'll be damned if I let him hear you-"

She means to answer him logically, she does, but at that moment his hips begin pushing upwards to meet hers and when she opens her mouth another, louder moan tumbles out instead of her planned, practical words.

Were she a little less aroused she suspects she'd be embarrassed about that.

Instead she shifts, angling her hips so that his hardness slides deliciously downwards, parting the cheeks of her backside before pressing into her wetness. Though she can feel the large, blunt head of him at her entrance he doesn't push in- Indeed he mutters softly in her ear that she doesn't need to be scared, that he's not going to try. That, apparently, is a pleasure for another day.

Rather, he pushes up and this time she presses down. Their bodies meet, lush and wet, and electricity flashes through her, a sense of pleasure and rightness she's never experienced before. It sets her every nerve-ending alight. Sherlock lets out a string of harsh, loud oaths at that contact and then she feels his hand slide down between them. His fingers clench around his member and when the ridges of his knuckles press against her she shudders. Gets wetter.

He's pleasuring himself and the mere thought of it makes her moan even more loudly than before.

She hears his breath stutter, feels his fist pump, up and down, down and up, and the wetness between her legs doubles. That sticky, liquid feeling in her belly erupts into embers, then bursts into naked flame. With a mutter she scrambles around so that now she's straddling him, one knee on either side of his hips, her chest pressed tightly against his. Her mouth can't seem to get enough of him, their lips meeting again and again. He shoots her a delighted smile- "Good girl,"- and with his free hand pulls her head down by the back of her neck to hold her steady for him. His tongue tangles with hers before he presses their foreheads together, his breath leaving him in a great, gusty sigh.

"Beautiful, beautiful wife," he says.

"Beautiful, beautiful husband," she answers him.

And then she pulls away, kisses his forehead. His brows. His jaw and cheekbones. His lips and his eyelids. She kisses every inch of him that she can reach and as she does so he redoubles his efforts with his cock. His breath comes like a locomotive and he bares his teeth, the cords on his neck standing out. He is, she can't help but think, really rather splendid when he's like this. Her hand creeps down to help him but he stills her. Shakes his head and kisses her again, ignoring her confused look. "Don't- Don't have time to teach you," he bites out. "And I'm certainly not attempting it when there's a stranger in the house-"

Molly wants to argue but then he kisses her again, steals her breath. His grip on her is tightening and she thinks his moment must be nearing.

"Touch yourself instead," he tells her. "Touch yourself and let me watch you- let me see you come apart, my sweet, sweet Molly-"

The thought sends a thrill through her- could there be anything more shameless?- but she knows
she's going to do it.

Shameless or not she wants it, wants him, with a decidedness that borders on a physical ache.

So bracing one hand on his shoulder she brings her fingers up to his mouth. Presses them tenderly against his lips until they part for her. He suckles without being asked to and his eyes grow darker, the fist pumping his cock speeding up. *The sight of it makes her feel almost unbearably aroused.* Maintaining eye-contact, she slowly slips her fingers inside herself. Begins pressing and stroking. Caressing. She's tentative at first, nervous, but she doesn't stay that way for long-

The way his pupils dilate, black completely drowning out the blue, sees to that.

For he watches her, strokes the hair from her face with his free hand. Hisses that this is what he wants her to show him. They both seem to be having trouble breathing but neither of them slows down. No, she begins matching her pace to his rhythm, then catches it. Though she normally prefers her pleasure slow and languid she likes that they can be equals in this. He may be the one with the experience but nobody knows her body better than she. And this realisation works: She sees it in his eyes, the moment he puts together what she's doing. This time it's *his* eyes that grow wide, *his* mouth that falls open, teeth bared and helpless.

His body bucks wildly against her own and this time *he* moans for *her*.

"Imp," he hisses, "fiend." He kisses her roughly. "Have you any idea what you're doing to me?"

And she nods. Nips playfully at those corded muscles on his neck as she licks them.

She thinks she's going to enjoy making a habit of that.

"Better an imp than a tease," she mutters and at her laugh he hisses, back arching, whiteness spurting over his fist and through his fingers. Wetness spatters onto her knees, her thighs and belly; The liquid is warm and sticky but its sudden appearance does not cause her alarm.

*No,* Molly muses, *watching her husband come doesn't alarm her at all.*

For he is beautiful in his completion. Languid and luxurious and thoroughly, utterly him. *She knows she's going to remember the sight of him like this until the day she dies.* After a moment though he goes limp, body relaxing completely. He stares up at her with hooded, half-closed eyes, as she works herself against her hand, chasing her own end. *Now* she feels powerful, wicked, as if her pleasure's a gift for both of them. *Now* she feels confident, too far inside the bliss her body's providing to feel scared. He murmurs to her, whispers encouragements. Endearments. He strokes and caresses her, fingers grazing over her breasts. Her thighs. The cheeks of her arse. He can't seem to stop touching her.

And then lazily, languidly he pulls her head down to kiss him.

Slips one long, elegant finger inside her, hooks this digit just *so.*

He murmurs to her that she's beautiful like this and pleasure crashes through her, bright and hot and sharp and inescapable-

*She comes apart, flying asunder and she can't seem to stop saying his name.*

He holds her close as her climax ripples through her and Molly wonders what she could have done to deserve such pleasure. It's even better than it was last night, something she finds hard to believe. His body is warm and strong against hers and she feels... She feels so unbelievably *safe* with him.
"Husband," she murmurs, "darling, darling husband..."

He kisses her slowly- sweetly- and holds her close while she does the same for him.

Eventually they untangle themselves, Sherlock going downstairs first to fetch Molly's new clothes and steal some breakfast.

By the time he returns she's managed to heat some water over his Bunsen burner and, taking her fresh clothes from his hands, she sits him down on his chair. Bathes him with a clean, soft cloth, taking special care to wash the white stickiness of is climax away.

_How she managed to find both cloth and soap to do so he doesn't know, nor can he bring himself to care._

When it's done he stands. Does the same for her. She feels small and delicate beneath his hands but when she smiles at him… When she smiles at him, she's as brilliant and as bold as sunlight. As brilliant and bold as the chase.

It makes Sherlock feel both protective and vulnerable, a mix of feelings he doesn't understand yet instinctively won't push away.

Instead he dresses and then he sets about dressing her too. He knots and buttons and ties her into her under-things. Her corset. Her dress in a fortress of skirts and petticoats but he must admit she looks ravishing. _She even looks ravishing when she has to pin up her lovely, morning-wild hair._ As he works explains to her what he knows of the man downstairs, Hadleigh's secretary- One Sebastian Wilkes Esq. _This cretin's nickname in university was Floppy and it came courtesy of the same person who created the much-hated, "Muffin."_

"Don't give him an inch," he tells her. "And please, please disregard anything he says about me."

Sherlock doesn't want to think about why it might bother him but he doesn't like the notion of Molly believing Wilkes' tall tales about him.

So it's a relief when she nods and tells him of course she won't. It's a relief when she takes his hand as they walk downstairs.

What's not a relief is the way Wilkes looks at Molly, the knowing little smirk he shoots her which makes Sherlock want to thump him on general bloody principles. What's not a relief is the sceptical tone he takes when he inquires whether their marriage is real.

It soon turns out, however, that Wilkes' potentially libellous rudeness is the least of their problems....

For during his and Molly's much-truncated honeymoon it appears all Hell may have broken loose.
"So this is your darling little bride, eh?"

And Sebastian Wilkes' Esq. rakes his eyes over Molly, his tongue poking out to lick at his lip in a most impertinent manner.

His expression tells her that he is not impressed.

It makes Molly feel rather uncomfortable- he is not, alas, the first so-called gentleman who has looked at her like that- though the effect is alleviated somewhat by the feel of Sherlock's hand tightening slightly on her arm.

When she turns to look at him he's smiling blandly.

"Why, of course she's my bride, Wilkes," he says brightly. "You don't imagine there's any other reason why a beautiful, intelligent, gently-raised woman would have slept here without a chaperone- Do you?"

And his grin widens, turning slightly cheeky. Daring.

In almost perfect unison, Wilkes' expression sours: A line has been drawn. Sherlock is clearly willing to call out any underhanded or insulting insinuations Wilkes wishes to make about his new wife.

At the realisation Molly feels her heart expand in her chest, relief and gratitude making her smile: After so long being treated as an interloper or social-climber by the Ton, it's lovely to know that her husband will champion her cause with his fellows without having to be asked to do it. In fact, judging by the mischievous look on his face he'll positively enjoy it.

Molly shakes her head: whoever would have thought that "git," could be a suitable endearment? She muses.

And yet there it is.

Wilkes must come to the same conclusion for, clearing his throat he belatedly gets to his feet, bowing over Molly's hand when she extends it to him. He huffs out a slightly petulant, "How do you do?" whilst Sherlock's eyes dance and Molly inclines her head with as much severity as she can muster. (She is, after all, technically a society matron now).

"I'm rather well," she says. "But then I imagine that's what all new brides say, isn't it?" She allows herself another small smile.

"Perhaps, however, they do so with less reason than I, Mr. Wilkes- After all, you've met my husband."
And she turns to Sherlock. Beams at him so brightly that Wilkes seems rather taken aback.

Sherlock on the other hand seems quite enamoured of her smile- Indeed, he dips his head in to kiss her before remembering that they are in company and pulling back.

She thinks she hears him call Wilkes a "bloody nuisance," under his breath.

Without another word Molly seats herself and Sherlock begins heaping food onto her plate, then his, then Wilkes'. Archie had apparently been warned to buy in extra for there's eggs, kippers, blood pudding, sausages and all sorts of toast. There's even a selection of tea, coffee or drinking chocolate.

Molly pours the latter for herself and her husband whilst Wilkes makes do with tea.

He looks rather like he'd like to complain about this but appears to know what reaction he'll get from Sherlock-

*It might not be polite, Molly muses, but it will certainly be entertaining.*

She smiles more widely as she thinks this, taking Sherlock's hands in hers and folding them into her lap. Her shoulder brushes his and- completely to irritate Wilkes, she's sure- he holds up a forkful of scrambled eggs to her mouth. Feeds them directly to her, laughing that low, rumbling bark of his when she takes a bite. Not to be outdone she holds her own fork up, offering him some of her kippers-

Mr. Wilkes makes a horrified harrumph. Indeed, he looks rather… scandalised.

But there's something else in his gaze, something Molly can't put her finger on.

She finds she doesn't like this "something else," at all.

Sherlock merely looks at their guest though, his eyebrows raised in question; Wilkes' eyes flick from Molly to he and back again before coming to rest on the detective. There's genuine surprise in their depths. "Good God, Muffin," he says, "I thought Mycroft's boy was joshing but you've actually gone and done it, haven't you?" He shakes his head.

"You've gone and put your head in the old matrimonial noose- And with a common little blue-stocking, too."

Sherlock's smile is serenity personified, despite Wilkes' scepticism (and rudeness). *Or, perhaps, because of it.*

"Why of course I've gone and done it," he says. "Why ever else would I tell your employer I want the news splashed across the papers?" He frowns. "And knowing me as you do, why are you surprised I chose a clever wife?"

Wilkes sputters to answer but Sherlock doesn't let it.

"Spare me your attempts at diplomacy," he says. "You can't imagine the joys of a clever spouse, your mundanity won't allow it. But I can assure you, Sebastian old chap, that there's no type of woman more worthy of pursuit, nor more satisfying in discovery, than what you would term a common little blue-stocking."

And he grins at Molly. Waggles his eyebrows.

She can't help it, she giggles.
"Besides, there's nothing common about my Molly," he says staunchly, "so you can bugger off."
And this time he gives into temptation. Leans down and kisses her.

Wilkes opens his mouth to protest, either the kiss or Sherlock's claims about Molly, but one look at
the detective stops him. Instead he throws Molly the single least sincere smile she's ever seen- and she grew up in Whitechapel- before nodding his head. Shooting her what he must fondly imagine is a
conciliatory smile.

Again, she spies that something in him that she doesn't like.

"Yes, well," Wilkes allows. "You always were rather an… outlier, amongst our set, eh, Holmes?"
He takes a sip of tea. "Always a bit eccentric- Not that there's anything wrong with that."

Sherlock inclines his head graciously and Wilkes' eyes narrow, his tone turning almost… gloating. It
makes Molly stiffen.

Her husband stiffens likewise, telling her she is not alone in her suppositions regarding Mr. Wilkes.

"And," Wilkes continues with forced casualness, "after your brother's sudden scandal, I suppose one
shouldn't be surprised that you've opted for marital drudgery over adventure-"

Sherlock frowns. Holds up his hand to stop the other man.

"I beg your pardon," he says, "but did you just say Mycroft has found himself in some sort of
bother?"

He says this in a tone which indicates disbelief. A tone best used when speaking of the claim that the
British Empire is secretly run by cats, or that the French really had the right of things at Agincourt.
At his words Wilkes' smile turns decidedly nasty and Molly has to remind herself rather sternly that she really shouldn't thump him-

"Why, I suppose you hadn't heard," Wilkes says silkily, shooting another insultingly insinuating
glance at Molly. "Can't say I'm surprised, wedding night and all.

"But it turns out that your brother's gotten himself into quite a spot of bother with one of your circle.
Lady Anthea Utterwood- Or should I say the Merry Widow?"

And with that Wilkes takes out a copy of The Daily Interrogator, one of Magnusson's more
respectable rags. There's a blurred photograph on the front page, right beside a far clearer line
drawing apparently depicting the same scene. It shows a room which might be Magnusson's study,
shows a large, dark-haired man who might be Mycroft Holmes kissing a lovely, dark, shapely
example of womanhood Molly knows is Lady Anthea.

He's bending her rather dramatically back over Magnusson's desk as he does so and the picture's
caption reads, Spare The Rod and Spoil The Lady.

The double meaning isn't lost on anyone, least of all Molly.

"Oh," Sherlock mutters. "Oh, bugger." He looks at her. "Oh bugger, bugger, bugger."

Molly finds she has to agree- In fact, she'd rather like to start swearing too but she won't give Wilkes
the bloody satisfaction.

Meanwhile,
Mycroft can't believe that Magnusson would do this.

He can't believe that the jumped up little sewer-rat would even attempted this.

And he casts his morning copy of The Daily Interrogator from him in disgust. Almost reaches for one of Mrs. Hudson's delightful breakfast scones before catching himself and picking up a piece of toast instead.

He does permit himself the indulgence of a bit of marmalade.

For there- in admittedly blurry glory- is a photo of him kissing Lady Anthea. There is photographic proof for his superiors- and the Great British Public- that he has no problem attempting to debauch one under his command, one he should have taken care of rather than indulging this, this childish little tendre of his.

He should, he knows, be ashamed of himself.

He certainly wishes he could bring himself to regret his actions.

That he can't is not something with which he knows how to deal, and not knowing how to deal with things tends to make him feel very cross indeed.

But he can't focus on that now. He won't let himself. Rather, he shakes his head, helping himself to another piece of toast as his butler stands gingerly behind him, waiting, apparently, for his temper to explode. If that's what Jenkins is waiting for, however, he'll be waiting a long bloody time. Instead Mycroft picks up his tea cup. Sips. Mulls over what this might mean, what Magnusson might be up to-

He knows it might take a while, but this is far too important to try and hurry the process along.

So he sifts through what he knows of the man, what he can plausibly deny of this and what he might be able to do for Anthea, too. (She is his true worry in this, after all.) He should be able to help her, he thinks. At the very least he should be able to come up with another identity for the man in the photo. Someone she wouldn't actually mind being forced to marry, someone liked by her and worthy of her rather innumerable fine qualities than an old man like he. At this thought Mycroft frowns, makes a mental note to ask Thea when he sees her whether she has a preference for any particular fellow in their set- There must be someone she wouldn't mind being set up with-

He tells himself that the plummeting feeling in his stomach which such a plan elicits isn't a plummeting feeling at all but even he can't bring himself to believe it.

For if he had no untoward feelings for Thea then the circumstances that photograph illustrates might not have taken place at all.

It could be moments or it could be hours but after some time he hears another servant- Parker? Stevenage?- clear his throat. Step up to him. He realises with a jolt that his tea has gone cold as he's been thinking and he indicates tersely that the man should pour him a fresh cup. As the servant does so he leans down, murmurs in his ear that Lady Anthea is here to see him. Apparently she's waiting in the small parlour.

Mycroft steels himself and rises, bids the servant fetch more tea as he heads to her location-

While across town Charles Augustus Magnusson smiles and welcomes Sir Henry Knight into his home.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: BOTHERATION

Anthea floats in, a cloud of pale blue silk and French perfume, her hair up, her eyes hidden behind blue-tinted glasses.

She's so lovely she makes Mycroft stare on general principles, something he hasn't done since he was naught but a young, green boy.

He finds this realisation ever so slightly mortifying.

Without standing on ceremony she smiles flirtatiously at him, sits. Takes off her ridiculous little spectacles and puts them away. She also takes off her gloves.

With a small smile she nods to Jenkins in thanks for pouring her coffee and Mycroft's tea before gesturing tersely for the servant to leave.

The young footman's eyes flicker to Mycroft in question and she clucks her tongue.

"He'll be quite safe in my presence, I assure you," she says. She sounds amused. "Now run along, that little shop girl you're keeping company with won't appreciate you making her wait outside on her day off."

And she reaches into her reticule, pulls out a large, silver penny.

She tucks it coquettishly into the footman's pocket, getting rather closer than Mycroft feels is strictly necessary to accomplish her task.

"Buy her something sweet from me, there's a good chap, and leave myself and your master to handle our own affairs," she says before making a shooing motion, ignoring the young man's stammered protestations.

Recollecting himself and his usual role as Older Prude and General Voice of Reason, Mycroft rolls his eyes and nods. Gestures for the footman to leave.

This the boy does with remarkable alacrity.

The door to the small parlour closes leaving Mycroft and Anthea staring at one another, the latter amused, the former (if possible) even more mortified.

Silence stretches out, each of them staring at one another, before Anthea opens her bag again, takes out a badly-crumpled newspaper. It's The Daily Inquisitor.

"Of course, he thinks, of course it's The Daily Inquisitor.

"So, darling," she says gamely. "Where were you thinking of holding the ceremony?"
Mycroft opens his mouth to answer her and for quite the first time in his career, he finds there are no convenient lines forthcoming.

**Drat.**

*Meanwhile.*

Magnusson licks his lips, gestures to the seat before him.

It is at this precise moment that Sir Henry Knight realises- The man makes his flesh crawl.

"I'd say welcome, Sir Henry," he drawls, "but since I know why you're here, I doubt you'd appreciate the sentiment."

Instead he gestures to the tray his servants had set out. There are cakes. Scones. Tiny sandwiches. It all looks surreally appetising.

"Tea?" Magnusson asks silkily. "Coffee? I know how you British love your hot beverages."

Henry shakes his head sharply, unwilling to feign enjoyment of this visit. Good manners towards one's host may be expected but he's not sure he could deliver even an approximation of them right now.

Instead he takes the seat offered, his gaze fastened on Magnusson. He may not, as a rule, be an intimidating person but he is rather bigger than the newspaper magnate and he feels grateful for that, right at the minute. So-

"I don't know how these matters usually go," he says pointedly, "but hadn't you better start making your threats? I mean, that's why I'm here, isn't it?"

And he gestures to the note Magnusson's man sent him last night. The one which drew him from Sal-Ahem, from Ms. Donovan's bedside. In it the man before him suggests that he has information, information which would result in Ms. Donovan's good name being damaged, and being damaged though her association with Henry, specifically.

The young engineer will not permit that to happen.

Ms. Donovan's reputation may have no champion-beyond Molly- within her own class, but he is more than happy to defend it within his.

His expression must say as much because Magnusson's smile widens. "I would say you're here because you have rather poor taste in women, Sir Henry," he retorts jovially. "That and the fact the you English have a rather salacious interest in gossip, one which has made me very, very rich."

He smiles jovially as he says the words, the expression making him look rather… wolfish. Predatory. Henry doesn't like that at all.

He is not, however, going to be bullied by it.

"I have no idea what you mean," he counters stiffly. "There's nothing scandalous or gossip-worthy about my association with Ms. Donovan. She works in a medical clinic in Whitechapel; Philanthropy is my family's passion, and given that it's not surprising I took an interest in her work. An interest. I might add, encouraged by Ms. Donovan's benefactress, the respectable heiress Margaret Hooper-"
"Margaret Holmes, now," Magnusson says, speaking over him. Henry hears a touch of chagrin in his voice. "She got married to that unbearable Bohemian just last night, didn't she? So I suspect her respectable days may be behind her."

Henry inclines his head. "She and Mr. Holmes will make a fine pair, I'm sure you'd agree."

"Indeed." Magnusson's eyes narrow. "I'm sure they will. They're rather well suited, perhaps painfully so." His gaze flicks up to Henry, glee moving into its depths now. "But be that as it may, what of you and Sally?" he asks innocently. "Do you two make a fine pair?"

Henry stiffens in affront at the sheer... presumption in his tone and he shortles.

Again it occurs to the young engineer that this man makes his skin crawl.

"Or do you in fact make a disgraceful duo?" Magnusson continues silkily. "A woman of her low class and morals, paired with a peer of wealth and privilege like yourself?"

And he grins, his enjoyment becoming obvious as Henry tries to rein in what is usually his rather placid temper.

He is irritatingly aware that of his lack of success in that endeavour.

"After all," Magnusson is saying gloatingly, "that is what everyone's going to ask, were I to publish the information I have. They would ponder what skills and enticements so lowborn a creature could have brought to bear in ensnaring a respectable man, what appetites lurk under that placid surface which so many have applauded that respectable man for possessing."

He leans forward, his eyes alight.

"And the conclusion they will come to- the conclusion they always come to- is that you're a normal, red-blooded man who simply couldn't resist a little whoring when the opportunity presented itself," Magnusson says. "They'll assume that you're just like every other good-for-nothing little toff they read about in the papers, a hypocrite like the rest."

He grins.

"I mean, nobody will blame you, of course. You'd know she's a filthy good tup, you can tell as much just by looking at her-"

Rage sparks through Henry like fire through kindling.

"Take. That. BACK. Now," he snaps, his voice so loud it bounces off the walls and Magnusson laughs.

The bastard actually laughs.

Henry's never been the loutish or aggressive sort but he almost doesn't recognise himself, he feels so angry. Just as he almost doesn't recognise for a moment that he's gotten to his feet, that he's leaning over Magnusson's desk as he brings both fists down on the polished, dark wood. He's breathing hard too, trying desperately to keep a hold of his temper whilst the other man stares at him in cool, collected amusement-

"Make me," Magnusson says quietly. His laughter has stopped. "Make me take it back, since school-
room tantrums seem to be your forte, Sir Henry."

And he too stands, leans into Knight.

His demeanour is utterly, completely unfazed- Arctic, for all his affable smile.

The silence stretches out as he stares, Henry painfully aware he doesn't have an answer for him-

Still holding Knight's gaze he opens a folder by his elbow, takes out and tosses a set of photographs careless in his face. The engineer catches them easily, looks at them.

What he sees makes him blush.

For in the photographs he leans over Ms. Donovan and presses that scandalous, instantly-regretted kiss to her forehead. *Of course their chaperone, Ms. Morstan, is nowhere to be seen.* Her eyes are closed and she looks- She looks like she's inebriated. Unaware.

But that's not the worst of it.

For the look on his face is unmistakeable, lustful, and Henry feels a sliver of shame at how obvious his appetites appear in that moment. He shakes his head with the thought, disgusted with himself, disgusted with his behaviour; Were Ms. Donovan to see his conduct she might well shoot him and he's willing to allow that he might well let her. All his life he has fought to be a gentleman, to match his behaviour to that title, so rarely descriptive of his fellows-

And one moment of weakness appears to be all that's necessary to wash such good intentions away.

Silence stretches out again, tense as a cello string. When he looks up at Magnusson he can see knowledge there, knowledge that the newspaper man has him right where he wants him. Were he to publish this Henry's reputation might take a small knock- Or more likely it would soar.

*He 'd be just another clever little rich boy, getting himself acquainted with the pleasures of the flesh.*

The person who wouldn't survive would be Sally. The person who would bear the brunt would, undoubtedly, be she. Sally who risks her neck to defend Molly Hooper and her clinic. Sally, who'd pushed him out of the way of a bullet last night and been pierced herself. Sally, who he finds himself thinking more of than he ever has for another woman-

Sally would be utterly ruined by this, he has no doubt of it, and the thought makes him a little sick.

"Ah," Magnusson says brightly. "I see you understand my point at last."

He gestures for Henry to take a seat.

He's tempted to refuse but in the end, Knight knows that he had no choice in this. If Sally should ever wish to marry, or find a respectable trade, or even live in peace, then this photograph would destroy her prospects completely. *The consequences for misbehaviour are, he knows, far more serious for those in her class than those in his.* Given that lethal sense of pride she had, it might even break her, and he cannot- will not- have such a thing on his conscience. He will not make her pay for a moment's weakness on his part.

So he squares his shoulders. Sits back down.

He feels revulsion bubble up through him, helplessness, but he forces himself to say it.

"Fine," he bites out tersely. "Then I rather think we should discuss terms, Mr. Magnusson, don't
you?"

He gestures to the photographs.

"After all, you already appear to have me," he says. "Tell me what you want to do with me."

The bastard looks at him, his eyes alight and fierce, almost feral. This time is smile is genuine, and it shakes Knight to his core.

"My dear Sir Henry," he murmurs, "I was hoping you'd say that-"

And with those words Sir Henry Knight elects to sell his soul.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: HELL IN HEELS

"So, darling," Anthea repeats gamely. "Where were you thinking of holding the ceremony?"

And she gestures to the front page, to the photograph of she and her commanding officer in such a compromising position.

It doesn't often happen but Mycroft feels the tips of his ears go bright red.

"I was going to suggest a honeymoon on the Continent," she continues, "but given how many different nations' governments want us dead that simply may not be possible-"

Mycroft blinks at her, the words managing to jolt him out of his discomfort.

"I beg your pardon?" he says and no sooner are the words out of his mouth then he realises how asinine they sound.

"I mean…” He clears his throat and tries to come up with something more closely related to a full sentence. He is not all that impressed with the results. "He is not all that impressed with the results. "That is to say,” he stammers, "I was about to summon you here to discuss this." He gestures to the headline. "The, ahem, you know. The situation."

Her grin is practically sinful. "The situation?" she murmurs. "Is that what the bright young things are calling it these days?"

And she smiles more widely, rises. With slow, nearly predatory deliberation she sashays around to his side of the table, perches herself on it.

She crosses her legs as she does so and Mycroft gets- He gets a flash of quite the prettiest little ankles he's ever seen- It's rather a lovely show, actually.

Never breaking his gaze she leans down and forward, taking his tie in her hand and tugging it gently until he does as she bids and leans in closer to her.

He resolutely refuses to acknowledge how discombobulated her actions are making him.

"Very well then, Mycroft," she says. Her voice has dropped, become throaty, and even he must admit that it sounds rather pleasant. "I shall elect to call it The Situation," she's saying. "Not The Cock-Up or The Emergency or The Dear God, Get Me Out Of This, which is probably what you've already termed it in your head."

And she grins at him, practically daring him to correct her.

Suddenly his throat is dry: It always disconcerts him, to have evidence of how well she knows his mind.
"I haven't called it any of those things, Thea," he whispers.

Her look is sceptical. "Oh really? And what have you termed it then?"

He shakes his head, wills a confidence into his voice which he knows he doesn't feel- *He must bring this to a halt. I've termed it a danger to you which I must remedy,*" he says stoutly.

This time it's she who shakes her head, one lovely eyebrow cocked.

"A danger to me?" she asks, her tone cynical. "You think marriage to you would be a danger to me? Any more of a danger than being the Empire's premiere female spy? Or being known as your favourite?"

He takes umbrage at that. "*You are not* known as my favourite," he snaps.

The look she shoots him should be justification for murder, it's so smug.

"Please, Mycroft," she says wryly, "I've been dealing with the accusations for years."

She shrugs, a delicate, elegant thing which seems designed to give a man ideas.

"Half of the kidnap attempts when I first entered the service were because of you," she's saying. "There was a period in my early twenties when there was a higher price on my head than on Sherlock's."

He frowns. "There's still a higher price on your head than on Sherlock's," he points out.

Her smile is brilliant. "Oh I know that. But these days it's because everyone knows I'm infinitely more dangerous than he- Back then it was because everyone assumed that I was your little poppet."

And she looks at him, smiles flirtatiously.

She runs her boot slowly- suggestively- against the side of his calf and he's reminded, rather alarmingly, that one's upper lip is not the only part of a British man which can become stiff.

"And aren't I your little poppet, after last night?" She asks. Her tone is positively sinful.

"After all, you must admit that was quite a kiss…"

And without any warning she reaches forward. Kisses him again. Having prepared herself, she's infinitely better able to respond than he was last night. For she knows how to move- How to indulge herself- *And oh, how she does indulge herself-*

Mycroft blinks, surprised, and wills himself not to respond to her kiss or any of the delightfully novel places in which her hands have found themselves. (It's not for nothing his nickname in private circles is The Iceman, and it's not for nothing that he's kept his distance from her all these years.) For he knows this for what it is: She's trying to make the best of things. Just as he knows that he can't afford to give into her, no matter how much he might like to.

So he holds on, holds still. Does nothing to encourage her.

It's a close thing but he manages- He manages to control himself.

As the kiss finishes Thea sighs. Pulls away. She looks at him, breathless and slightly dishevelled and magnificent, and he is reminded, rather forcefully, of just how lovely she is-
Damn her to Hell and back.

For a moment silence reigns, allowing her to catch her breath. When she realises he's not going to say anything however she sighs again. Leans back. Contemplates him openly through narrowed, burning eyes.

The look she shoots him is as sharp and incisive as a scalpel.

"You're going to be all irritating and noble about this, aren't you?" She says and he nods. Glares at her.

"One of us has to be," he points out bluntly. "I will not allow Magnusson to besmirch your name or narrow your matrimonial horizons. I will not have that on my conscience."

And he straightens, takes his tie back from her and tucks it back inside his waistcoat. Sometimes being the eldest in this little circus is difficult, he muses, and instantly pushed so self-indulgent a thought away.

He's doing all this for her own good.

Thea rolls her eyes in consternation though. Crosses her arms. "Mycroft," she says sharply, "My matrimonial horizons, as you put it, have been rather narrow for quite some time."

He can cock a cynical eyebrow too. "Oh?" he says.

She sighs. "I know you don't like to contemplate such matters but I have long known whom I wished to marry," she's saying. "In fact, I've known since I was seventeen with whom I wished to tie the knot."

The knowledge brings a pang to Mycroft's heart but he ignores it. He wants her to be happy, it was why he had objected to her first marriage all those years ago: The old Count has been rich but utterly unworthy of her.

He's not sure there's a man alive whom he'd feel was worthy but he's not willing to say that aloud.

"Then why don't you marry this man you want?" he demands instead. "Why try to talk me into a wedding you clearly do not wish for?"

She rolls her eyes, raises her hands to heaven as if beseeching the Almighty; The gesture reminds him, disturbingly, of his mother's whenever she's forced to deal with her younger son.

"Why am I doing this?" she asks. "You're actually asking why I'm doing this?"

He nods, quite put out by how unbelievably melodramatic she's being about their situation and she completely loses the plot.

"I'll tell you why," she snaps loudly. "I'm doing this because you are the person I have wanted to marry since I was seventeen, you great, unwieldy clot of a man! You are the person I've wanted ever since I worked out how to want someone, and believe you me it was not an easy process to get through on one's own!"

Mycroft opens his mouth, shocked at such frankness, but no words come out.

Anthea, on the other hand, suddenly seems incapable of holding back, now that she has begun to speak.
"And all this time you've been treating me with kid gloves, keeping me at a distance," she's saying. "All this time you've been acting as if I'm some delicate little porcelain Madonna you couldn't possibly importune with affection or touch. Oh, you'll send me on missions, you'll bid me go to the other side of the world for Queen and Country. You'll have me learn how to lie, steal and kill for Britannia and reward me for it- That you'll do.

"But you won't even bloody kiss me back when I give you the chance. You won't listen when I try to tell you how I feel about you, and that I believe you feel the same for me.

"And that, my dear Mr. Holmes, makes you every bit as insufferable an idiot as your darling brother- With the exception that he got his head out of his arse long enough to actually get married and you're still buggering things up with procrastination!"

And with that final snap and a small- well, scream of frustration is probably the nest description of it- she hops off his desk, pushes her way past him like a small, swift, silk-covered bullet.

She's in high dudgeon now and Mycroft pities anyone who might chance across her path.

Before she even gets halfway to the door though she collides with her commander, who has scrambled to halt her exit. Who, for the first time in a long time allows him to be thankful at how much bigger than she he is- And it's really rather a lot.

Mycroft grabs her by her arms, halts her. He puts himself between her and the door, pulling her to him with ease though she's spitting and hissing like an angry cat.

*He won't let her leave but he's not ready to admit to himself why.*

Thea glares up at him, disbelieving- "What the blazes do you want, Sir?" she snaps and to her visible astonishment he shakes her arm and tells her to shut up.

"What do I want?" he demands. "What do I want?"

Truth be told, he's not sure but he's hardly going to admit *that* to her.

Instead he leans down, breathing heavily, and places in forehead against hers.

She frowns at the action but doesn't pull away, which he takes as an encouraging sign.

"What I want is to tell you that you can't just march in here, flash your ankles at me and order me to marry you," he snaps.

"What I want is to tell you that you can't just announce that you've wanted me- me, stick-in-the-mud-Commander-Mycroft- since you were seventeen and just flounce away!"

And he pulls her to him harder. Holds her more tightly. She snarls. Shows her teeth to him. She's so fierce, his little Thea.

But she doesn't kick him or use any of the more lethal tricks he's shown her over the years and he knows she could do- Which leads him to conclude that she really must want him close.

"So what are you going to do about it, Sir?" she hisses, pushing closer to him. "Come on, think really hard: What do you think you can do to me?"

And she glares up at him whilst madness descends- If by madness, Mycroft means finally giving in and reaching down and kissing her. *If by madness one means giving in to a passion he's fought for*
years. For he pushes her against the wall beside him and, well, he believes the common parlance is
snogs her to within an inch of her life. It feels out-of-control. Demonic. Completely bloody brilliant.

Which, of course, is why the door beside them opens and Sherlock and Molly stroll through it, arm
in arm and clearly worried.

The sight before them however, that of the Mycroft-on-Thea clinch, stops them in their tracks.

For a moment silence reigns, tense and unbearable as the silence in a graveyard. But then-

"You know, John's right," Sherlock murmurs quietly. "That sight really does make one yearn to be
blind."

Meanwhile,

Henry steals back into his townhouse, running upstairs to check on Sally.

Ms. Morstan's sitting with her and though the doctor's declared she'll live she still looks awfully still.
Awfully pale.

Henry feels his gut tighten in guilt at the thought.

For a moment he sits with her, staring, contemplating, her cold hand in his and her eyes closed-
Unseeing-

And then he takes his leave of both she and Ms. Morstan. Rises and goes to set about doing that
bastard Magnusson's bidding.

Mary's eyes follow him as he hurries away.

It doesn't occur to him to check whether they're still on him as he sets out for the Hotel Metropole
and Irene Adler's last known port of call.
There was a general consensus, when Mary Morstan was a girl, that she was born for trouble.

In fact, all but one of her school report cards had named it as her single most defining trait, placing her knack for it far behind her skills in languages, music and drawing.

It had even stumped her skills in sports, much to her annoyance.

In fact, every nanny, every tutor and every unfortunate bodyguard her father ever placed her with noted her extraordinary- nay, preternatural- capacity for homing in on and setting the scene for mayhem. Be it a shipment of experimental rockets which she managed to ignite as a toddler, or the ingenious method for feigning influenza which she had marketed to her fellow schoolgirls when in Ms. Harwood's Finishing School for Young Ladies, Mary Morstan had shown herself to have an unerring eye, nay, spectacular eye for the main chance-

And it is for this reason that she takes one look at Henry Knight, one look at the way Knight's looking at her unconscious friend Sally and then one look at the doomed-yet-noble mien he's wearing as he quits her house and hails a hansom cab and she realises that there's trouble afoot.

Big, brooding, Henry Knight-shaped trouble.

It's the sort of trouble she's fairly sure Sally will shoot her for, should she awake and discover that the "cove," she's been making goo-goo eyes at for the last twenty four hours has been harmed, and that being the case, there's only one thing a trouble-magnet like Mary can do.

She throws in her heaviest riding habit, darting out of the drawing room in which Sally is lying and heading to the back of the house.

Her gelding, Agra, is there, already wearing harness and saddle since she had thought she might invite Dr. Watson to go riding with her today.

With a carelessly tossed word she dismisses her maid and climbs up, manoeuvring the horse out onto the street and standing in her stirrups until she finds the hansom Knight hopped into. (It's not particularly difficult since an overturned coal-cart ahead has brought the street to a standstill). She gives the gelding a spry little kick and sets her off, head held high, doing her damndest to look like nothing so much as a well-heeled lady out for a leisurely afternoon jaunt.

It's a good plan. A logical plan.
And it would have all gone swimmingly had Dr. Watson not chosen this moment to march up to her horse, pulling carefully at its bridle and bringing the unfortunate creature to a halt.

When Mary throws one haughty, raised eyebrow down at him he holds his arms and glowers up at her.

Mary must admit that the sight is, well, rather scrummy actually. She’d thought it the moment she’d set eyes on him the other night and she’s thought it many times since: the army doctor cuts rather a dashing figure, even next to his handsome detective friend.

In the spirit of not giving the game away however, (men's heads, in her experience, being highly susceptible to inflation in the face of compliments) she merely holds his gaze, her expression unimpressed.

It is, she knows, a look which finer men than this one have quailed at.

"You do know the cocking her eyebrow thing makes you look like a ponce," he tells her.

His expression is, to be charitable, unimpressed.

Despite herself Mary feels her face breaking into a small smile, a snort of laughter escaping her. Watson's pleased-with-himself grin is rather a lovely thing to behold.

"Don't get cocky," she tells him, even as he opens his mouth to add something else. "I'm merely admitting your superior experience with pones- I've met your best friend."

Watson's smile turns sly. "That you have. But I must allow that you're a far lovelier specimen of the species than he is- So why don't you tell me who you're chasing after, eh?"

And he crosses his arms, looking for all the world like he hasn't just accused her of anything. His blue eyes warming, mouth quirked into a grin as he stares up at her.

For a moment Mary considers not telling him- **secrecy has long been her ally, after all**- but then it occurs to her that having a man with her might well be useful. Especially one who routinely uses a firearm. So-

"Our good friend Sir Henry has made a break for it," she says quietly, leaning down to breathe the words in Watson's face. Lucky for them both, the traffic has yet to progress. "He wandered out of Sally's chambers today with the air of a man going to his death and since I know of no reason why so strapping an example of British manhood should do such a thing, I ascertained that he was-"

"About to go a-poncing?" Watson inquires wryly.

Mary frowns. "A-pillocking, actually. At least, that's what I'm imagining." She gestures discretely to the hansom into which he jumped. "He got into that hansom, and no peer takes anything besides his own carriage, unless he's up to something."

Watson nods. "I see. And so you saddled your trusty steed and set off after him- As any intelligent lady would, I'm sure." He makes a show of looking at her horse. "Alas, however, there's nowhere for me to sit, should I wish to join you on this little jaunt of yours-"

Mary's mouth tugs to the side. "You could always hop on the back," she point out. "Agra's a very strong horse, I'm sure she could hold you."

The mental image of this must amuse Watson as much as it does she for- rather against his better
judgement, apparently- he lets out a laugh. It's rich, warm.

Mary finds she likes it.

"She might prove able, but I assure you that I would not." Mary makes sure to give him a little moue of exaggerated disappointment which he appears to take in with a legitimate amount of suspicion. "Fortunately, however, I can ride," he continues. "I even have a horse, I rode him over here today." He lowers his voice in mock-confidence. "I was trying to look manly for you, don't you know."

Mary smiles. "Well, coming with me and helping me spy on a dear friend would be rather a better way to prove your machismo than standing here talking to me, don't you think?"


"I'd say keep out of trouble, but that's a faint hope with you, Ms. Morstan, isn't it?"

And with that he wanders off, looking for all the world like he hasn't a care. Mary looks after him for a moment, enjoying the sight of his back (well, certain parts of it, in anyway) before turning her attention back to Henry's hansom.

The damn thing hasn't moved an inch.

She's still staring at it when Watson manoeuvres his way back to her, not looking nearly so comfortable on the brown bay he's riding than he should do. "Need a hand?" she inquires archly and he shakes his head. The horse dances and skitters, as if unused to him, but he holds on all the same. "Mycroft and I are fine, aren't we, Mikey?"

This last is directed to his mount. MARY'S ABOUT TO INQUIRE WHY, PRAY TELL, HE NAMED HIS HORSE AFTER HIS COMMANDER BUT BEFORE SHE CAN DO SO THERE'S A SIGH OF RELIEF FROM HER FELLOW TRAVELLERS AND, THE STREET NOW CLEARED OF DETRITUS, THE TRAFFIC BEGINS TO MOVE.

In fact, it begins to move rather quickly.

The hansom pulls takes the first right, moves onto a mercifully quiet road and then picks up such speed that Mary and her new companion are forced to do a great deal more than trot. Soon they're almost cantering. She could be wrong but she thinks she can see Dr. Watson grinning and she finds herself smiling in return.

They dodge and duck through the midday traffic, lumbering after the hansom as best they can-

It's only when it pulls up in front of the Hotel Metropole, however, that Dr. Watson starts to swear though Mary hasn't a clue why.

Meanwhile,

In Mycroft's Townhouse

For a moment Mycroft stares at his brother, mouth open, face showing the closest expression to panic Sherlock has ever seen it wear (and that included the night the Palatine Guard caught he and his brother sneaking into the Holy See.

Returning Queen Victoria's cameos had been a massive bloody bother.)
To his right the detective can see Thea, head held high, one arch eyebrow cocked, as if daring him to say anything for her attempting debauchment of his brother-

"Well," he hears Molly say quietly. "Isn't this awkward."

And she smoothes one small hand over her coat-sleeve, eyes trained judiciously on the floor.

Mycroft's eyes flash to her, annoyance- probably with himself- flashing in their depths.

"My, aren't you the scintillating commentator," he snaps and instantly Sherlock straightens up, moves in front of his wife.

"Mycroft," he snaps. "I know she's family now but you'll not speak the same way to my Molly as you do to John, Anthea and I. Apologise."

Mycroft's gaze snaps to his. "Or what?" he demands haughtily.

Sherlock draws himself up. He has, after all, an ace to play now. And he's bloody taller.

"Apologise- Or I shall inform Mummy that you're being beastly to my new wife," he says. "She shan't be impressed, Mikey, and you know it-

"No matter how pleased she might be about finally getting moving on the Thea Front."

And he inclines his head to his cousin, who nods back curtly before throwing Mycroft a, frankly blood-curdling grin.

"Oh, unclench darling," Thea tells him. "I know this is all rather abrupt but really, can't you at least pretend you're not terrified by all this?"

The tack works; Mycroft turns his ire on her. "I am not terrified of anything," he grinds out hotly.

Anthea cocks an eyebrow. "Oh?" she asks. Sherlock can't help but feel it's a rather accusing little syllable. "Then why are you behaving as if you've been caught sacrificing kittens to some sort of pagan deity?"

And she sidles up to him. Places her hand shyly on his lapel. This has a disgustingly obvious effect on Mycroft; his pupils dilate slightly, his expression softening. His gaze goes from her hand to her lips and back again before he catches himself.

Anthea smiles and Sherlock can't help but think that the words cat, cream and finally immediately spring to mind.

The older man sighs though. Shakes his head. He reaches down and takes her hand in his, brings it to his lips to kiss. "You're going to be the death of me, Thea, do you know that?" he says quietly.

Anthea's smile is wicked.

"So long as it happens when we're both ninety, flat on our back and shagged to exhaustion then I shan't mind… Sir."

She purrs the word and instantly Mycroft's ears turn pink.

Once again it occurs to Sherlock that being blind wouldn't be a terrible fate at the moment.

But then he feels Molly's hand move into his, her grip tightening even through both their gloves. He
looks down at his new wife and sees her smiling. An image flashes through his mind, her beauty last night as she stared down at him, naked as the day she was born.

He shouldn't like it, he muses, were blindness to prevent him from seeing that sight again.

In fact, the ability might even be worth seeing Mycroft reach down and press a small, chaste kiss to Anthea's lips. She cocks her head, giving in for a moment before a yelp escapes her and she jumps.

She pulls back from him and playfully smacks his arm. It's only then that Sherlock realises his brother… Good God, his brother pinched her backside.


Molly lets out a low whistle and grins, wrapping her arm around Sherlock's. "This is making you unspeakably uncomfortable, isn't it?" she murmurs and he nods.

"This is the sort of thing one imagines when one reads the Book of Revelations," he mumbles and he has the pleasure of seeing his new wife laugh. She looks up at him through lowered lashes, grinning as she raises herself up onto her tiptoes and he dips his head to kiss her-

Which is precisely the moment when one of Mycroft's footmen barges into the room carrying a silver tray with a message on it, a message written in John Watson's handwriting.

"Hotel Metropole, Vatican Cameos," is the only thing he's written on it and it's enough to set Sherlock, Mycroft and Anthea swearing all at once.

While at the same time,

In The Hotel Metropole,

Irene Adler has always known that she is, to put it bluntly, scintillating.

Beautiful, clever and accomplished from an early age, she has long known that few men- and even fewer women- are capable of ignoring her rather abundant charms.

After all, the human race- generally speaking- has taste.

So when she receives a missive from Magnusson telling her to pack up with that dear little dish Sir Henry Knight and let him to take her to his estate in the country, she's only too pleased to help. The boy has that delightful mix of upright honesty and innocence that she's found in all her favourite pets- Sherlock notwithstanding- and she's sure that even an hour in her company will be all he takes to crack.

And from then on… Oh, from then on he's going to be such fun.

Unfortunately, however, one look at his haggard, unhappy mien when he arrives to pick her up puts paid to such notions (at least for the time being). The boy's jumpy, unhappy, and he looks at her rather like most men would look at a snake. Irene wonders whether the Holmes' brothers have been telling tales about her but no- This is something else. Something more personal.

Irene smiles at the notion, allowing her maid Abigail to buckle her into her skin-tight black riding habit as he paces her rooms and tries not to look. (This is made more difficult, she knows, by the fact that she was purposefully not wearing anything underneath, a fact he registered when he walked in.)
Sir Henry frowns, his gaze on the floor, everything about him practically screaming his unhappiness though he's too well brought up to actually say anything-

Irene cares not a jot though: *Nervous men have never made her nervous.*

So when she's ready she clears her throat. Holds out her arm to him. He takes it sullenly, as if he'd really rather not. With a brilliant smile however she nods to Abigail, indicates that she should put her travelling case in the waiting cab below.

"You and I are going on a trip, aren't we, Sir Henry?" she coos.

Though he looks like he'd rather like to start swearing the young peer nods. Leads her outside.

With studied indifference the hotel guests and staff pretend not to see them pass.

He bundles her into an unmarked hansom, her case set beside her and they set off for his estate, just outside London proper.

Irene grins like the Cheshire cat all the way there.
CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE: THE ODDS ARE GOOD BUT THE GOODS ARE ODD

By the time Sherlock, Molly and Anthea reach the Hotel Metropole, Henry Knight and Irene Adler are long gone.

They've hopped a train to Dartmoor, a runner sent by Mary informs them, the news causing Sherlock, John and Anthea to swear in unison.

Apparently they're heading for one of Sir Henry's more… secluded estates.

When Molly opens her mouth to inquire why this news might be unwelcome her new husband hushes her, shaking his head sharply and mouthing not here though Molly can't imagine his reasoning. She respects his request though and keeps her questions to herself; She trusts that he will reveal all to her once they're alone.

And if he doesn't, well… She has, as they say, ways of persuading him to talk.

So she closes her mouth, listens as John hastily (and defensively) explains his reasoning in allowing Mary to trail Adler and Knight alone to her- A single woman in pursuit of the infamous adventuress would not, as Mary had pointed out, raise alarm in the way a possibly spurned protector might. As John talks Molly can't help but smile to herself, amused that after a grand total of two days her friend has apparently managed to wrap the army doctor around her finger-

She sees Sherlock grin wryly from the corner of her eye and she knows he's thinking the same thing.

Since this is not the time to start teasing him though- and since Mary returns mere minutes after Sherlock and his party have arrived- Molly elects to hold her tongue about that too.

Instead she sits in as Sherlock, Thea, John and Mary all discuss what Sir Henry could be up to. They seem to have few ideas though Molly suspects both Sherlock and Anthea know more than they're letting on. This idea is compounded by Mycroft's arrival, the elder Holmes having stopped off at HQ to pick up a vehicle for their journey-

The small group of friends troupe around the back of the hotel to find the largest, sleekest, most elegant motor vehicle Molly has ever seen parked and waiting, the engine humming hungrily as it sits and waits for them.

It looks, she can't help but think, rather like a giant metal beast, waiting to pounce.

Sherlock's eyes widen at the sight. He looks at his brother, nods to the car. "You're lending us Lollie?" he asks quietly.

His tone tells Molly that this is quite the coup.
"Looking at the beautiful black and chrome contraption, she can't say she blames him.

Mycroft nods darkly. "You need to get to Dartmoor as quickly as possible and the odds are good that Magnusson is watching the railway stations, as well as the roads.

"Taking Lollie is merely good sense, under such circumstances."

This time Sherlock grins.

"And the fact that you get to show her off in front of Thea has nothing to do with it, eh, Brother Mine?"

For the first time since he heard the news about Adler and Knight Mycroft a sliver of a smile warms Mycroft's face. "Indeed," he says. "If I'm to try scoring points with my… fiancée, then this vehicle is the best way to do it."

And with another small smile he pulls out a set of keys, grinning at Sherlock but nonchalantly tossing them over his shoulder to Anthea, who catches them easily.

The young agent lets out a delighted whoop as she does.

"She's driving," Mycroft announces to the group at large and though Sherlock pouts he doesn't object.

"Yet another reason to keep my Molly near me," he sniffs instead. He turns his head to her, grins wickedly. "If you think your friend Mary's a hellion of a driver, you've never experienced Thea's… tendencies." He gives an exaggerated shudder. "I shall need to hold you tight the entire way to Dartmoor, darling, or I shall fear for my life."

Molly and Mary shoot matching, cocked eyebrows at him. "Is that so?" Morstan asks but Molly smiles. Raises herself up on tiptoe and presses a kiss to her husband's cheek.

"I'll have no issue with sitting in your lap, husband mine," she says. "Can you say the same?"

For a moment Sherlock grins at her and just like it always does the world seems to narrow. Lose focus. Her heart starts beating wildly, her pulse stuttering (as, it appears, is Sherlock's).

The moment is broken by John Watson clipping his friend sharply around the ear and telling him to, "stop being a bloody pillock."

Mary, Anthea, even Mycroft snicker as Sherlock pouts but Molly merely laces her fingers through his, begins pulling him towards the motorcar.

"This will be my first time inside one," she says quietly, trying to distract him from his pouting. "Are they really as fast as everyone says?"

Sherlock nods, seating himself inside the car and then pulling her into his lap, folding a rather complicated, strapped contraption around them in an apparent effort to keep them in place.

Molly's pulse dances at the thought.

"Lollie here is on loan from our counterparts in the Americas," he says. "There's no faster machine than this, Mr. Coulson assured Mikey of it when he sent it along last winter…"

"So it's American," Mary announces, waiting for John to take a seat and then squeezing herself into the space beside Anthea, who has seated herself at the steering wheel. "We shall have to pray it
doesn't blow up or fall apart on the road."

"My dear Ms. Morstan," Anthea admonishes. "In Lollie we trust, is that quite clear?" She pats the dashboard soothingly. "Don't you mind the mean lady, darling," she coos before pulling the throttle and kicking the car into life. It howls loudly, two incredibly bright lamps flickering on as Anthea manoeuvres the vehicle in a sharp turn and then sets out onto the road, waving to Mycroft as she goes.

The smile he shoots her is fond, impressed even.

And then Anthea takes off onto the Whitechapel Road, heading towards Aldgate and out of London. She whoops and laughs as she goes, Mycroft standing and watching her drive away.

The car sways precariously, forcing Molly to hold onto her husband but though she knows she shouldn't be, she can't seem to stop grinning at the feeling.

Meanwhile,

Mycroft stands for as long as he dares before making his way back into the hotel, booking Adler's former room for the night and demanding pen and paper.

Given the easy way he lays down his coin the staff of the Hotel Metropole are happy to assist.

By the time he reaches his accommodations for the evening he has finished his note, sealing it with a flourish and directing a runner to deliver it to Mr. Charles Augustus Magnusson, post haste.

The boy is told not to wait for an answer.

For the note is merely a summons: We are about to have a conversation you will not enjoy, Charles. Come to the Metropole and I won't have to do anything tedious, like arrest you for treason.

Yours, M. Holmes

Mycroft orders up a brandy from room service and waits for his nemesis to arrive.

While at the same time,

Sir Henry's getting tiresome, Irene can't help but think.

For he's sitting at the window, staring into the darkness, looking every inch the heartbroken swain. Not even having Abigail cut Irene out of her riding habit (once they had entered their private carriage, of course) could rouse him.

He had merely glanced morosely at her bare body once and then turned his attention back to the rapidly-darkening scenery outside.

And Irene can't help but feel a little bit… under-appreciated, actually, with that reaction. After all, she's Irene bloody Adler. She's the crème de la crème, the courtesan's courtesan. Men have lost fortunes and women have lost husbands in pursuit of her, and Sir Henry Knight won't even give her the time of day when she's starkers right in front of him.

It's all rather disheartening.
It's only when he sighs for what sounds like the fiftieth time though, casting his eyes to the rapidly-darkening skies above and sighing out something which sounds distinctly like, "Sally," that Irene walks over to him and pinches him arm sharply.

He does not, she knows, deserve one of her more… creative pinches but she's not bloody well listening to him hmm and haw all the way to Grimpen about some proper little Miss he thinks he can't have.

"Ow." Knight shoots her this bewildered, puppyish look and she has to fight the urge to slap him harder, really give him something to pout about. (Of course she can't do that, aside from the ethical considerations she's supposed to be helping bring him onside for Magnusson.) So-

"She'd be happier if you took advantage," Irene says confidently, seating herself with coquettish propriety across from Knight. "No woman likes a man without experience, you know."

He shoots her a look of deepest cynicism, not even bothering to deny the existence of this, "her."

Despite herself, Irene finds herself rather entertained by this.

"She's not like you," he says tersely instead. "She'd not be impressed, that I had so little respect for myself and for her that I let myself be debauched by the first adventuress I crossed paths with."

And he crosses his arms. Turns away from her. All he needs is a teddy-bear, Irene muses, and he'd make the perfect little toddler for her discipline…

She opens her mouth to tell him as much but even as she does the train slows. The conductor walks past their carriage, announcing loudly that their next stop is Grimpen, the village near Sir Henry's most secluded estate.

This is their destination.

The young aristocrat throws her a glance. "You might want to put some clothes on," he says sharply. "I doubt very much that the Dartmoor night will agree with you, should you decide to go naked."

And with that he turns his back on her, returning, no doubt, to his love-sick mooning over this, "Sally," person.

Irene rolls her eyes heavenward and prays for patience even as Abigail pulls out her favourite tweed travelling dress and sets about lacing her into it, shaking her head all the while.

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Grimpen Village

In The Bushes Just Beside The Train Station

A Surprisingly Short Amount of Time Later

Molly shivers and pulls closer to Sherlock, watching carefully as Adler and Sir Henry exit the Grimpen Train Station, the adventuress' cases born before her like some ancient empress' train.

A coach bearing the Knight livery is waiting for her and she climbs into it with an imperial nod, not even checking to see if Sir Henry will join her before pulling the curtains and making herself comfortable therein.

Molly sees John and Sherlock exchange rather pointed looks at this.
Sir Henry follows behind, nodding to his servants worriedly and gesticulating, clearly giving orders for the arrangements of Ms. Adler's cases. An older man in livery— a family retainer, Molly guesses—is supervising, his face set in that mute, unflinching expression which senior servants often elect to take up when dealing with their masters' behaving in ways of which they themselves do not approve.

This impression is heightened every time Sir Henry looks at the older man; he winces, clearly uncomfortable but unwilling to bring this to a halt.

Molly would be willing to bet that this is the most reluctant protector Irene Adler has ever ensnared.

By the time the cases are packed and ready the sun has set, stars beginning to prick and sparkle in the sky. The night's turned chillier too and Molly feels a certain comfort in having Sherlock here to wrap her arms around when she shivers.

She turns and dips her head, about to whisper as much in his ear…

Which is when that liveried servant Sir Henry had looked so guilty in front of pulls a pocket-watch from his waistcoat and presents it to his master.

The young aristocrat looks at the object, taps it gently twice…

At which point it opens up with a flare of odd, burnished light and Molly's night gets a whole lot stranger.
Of Paragons and Animals

Disclaimer: This fan fiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Not beta-read so all mistakes are mine. Thanks for their reviews go to springbok7, renniejoy, oOkatiekinsOo, Westwinder, MycroftWatts, SimplySpectating and Katya Jade. Enjoy!

CHAPTER THIRTY: OF PARAGONS AND ANIMALS

Grimpen Village

In The Bushes Just Beside The Train Station

A Split Second Later

For a moment Molly simply stares at the scene before her, unable to fully comprehend it.

She's seen artificial light-sources before, of course- They're becoming ever more fashionable in London, one of the newest ways to showcase one's wealth is to have one's house wired for electrical lights. But she's never before seen something as small as a pocket-watch emit anything like the sort of brightness she's seeing now.

It is an entirely new sight to her.

Unfortunately, however, it is not the only new sight before her-

For as Sir Henry raises his little device she hears something odd. Something… mechanical. Ponderous.

Heavy.

It sounds a little like the workings of an improperly oiled grandfather clock.

At the noise Anthea, John and Sherlock straighten up, the doctor pushing Mary behind him even as his colleague reaches into her reticule and pulls out a small calibre pistol. Sherlock's grip on Molly's hand tightens though he doesn't put her behind him-

Were she to hazard a guess, she'd say he wants to keep her right where he can see her and she can understand why.

For, large and slow-moving as shadows, two things, two… automata, simply stalk out of the darkness beside the railway station and pad to Sir Henry's side. Their joints clicking harshly in the pale moonlight. Their mouths agape in matching attitudes of menace, heads cocked in cold, mutually symmetrical question. In appearance they favour wolves or hunting hounds most strongly; sharp, over-lapping spikes of metal and sinew cover a metallic skeletal structure lit from within. Heavy feet crack harshly against the footpath as they move, the noise of it enough to make the Knight family servants shudder though he doesn't put her behind him-

"Don't be alarmed," Sir Henry addresses the nearest servant, that older family retainer who brought him the pocket-watch. "They're far less dangerous even than a live hound."

And with a sharp hand gesture he signals to the creatures to sit.
This they do, looking awkward and unnatural, their badly-oiled limbs making such a manoeuvre difficult. Their fitful, glowing eyes devoid of life.

Even in rest they look profoundly… wrong, Molly can't help but think.

The older servant looks like he'd rather like to correct his master- and like he would probably agree with Molly's assessment- but dares not.

"As you say, Mr. Henry," he says, trying for jollity but not quite able to manage it. "We're still getting used to having them in the house but I'm sure we'll improve in time, won't we lads?"

And he gestures to the two younger footmen he'd brought, the unfortunates who had been charged with wrestling Adler's suitcases into submission and onto the Knight carriage.

The two young men nod automatically though Molly can't help but note they look far from convinced.

"Aye, Sir," one of them ventures. "And they've worked right well on the moors, so they have. Right well. There's not a poacher for miles around who'll touch Knight poultry nor deer, they've seen to that right enough."

Sir Henry gives the young man a small, tired smile. "Well, I suppose then that I should think myself lucky, that my invention is doing what it was designed to do," he says quietly.

He doesn't sound like he believes this.

Before he can say more though the carriage window opens and Adler looks out, pouting. "Henry!" she admonishes with mock coyness. "You promised me a decent bed for the ni-"

As soon as her eyes fall on the mechanical dogs however her voice trails off.

Eyes widened, she pushes her way from the carriage and slowly, carefully approaches them; At her nearing they rise, moving in the same eerie, identical formation as earlier.

With another sharp gesture from Henry they shudder over to the dark-haired adventuress, mouths open, teeth bared though they make none of the natural, animal sounds a real creature might.

Molly can't help but think them rather frightful- And frightening.

She appears to be in a minority, however. For, with a small, astonished huff of laughter Adler reaches out, strokes her leather-clad hands over each hound. They do not move or react in any way to her touch but there must be something pleasant in what she feels for Irene smiles in wonder, staring at Henry as if she's never seen them before.

"You made them?" she murmurs and he nods.

He doesn't look proud to admit such a thing, no matter how successful and uncanny his workmanship.

"They're why Magnusson sent you here," he answers stiffly. "Or didn't he bother to explain it to you?"

Irene shakes her head, still smiling, though now when her gaze comes to rest on Henry there's something new in it. Something speculative.

Were it coming from anyone else, Molly would describe it as respect.
It occurs to Molly, somewhat randomly, that she's seen Sally punch people for a great deal less and the thought brings a small smile to her face despite the horror of the scene before her.

This realisation must be pushed aside however, for, with an elegant inclination of her head Adler silently invites Henry to join her in his carriage. This he does, first gesturing to the mechanicals to rise and leave. The two beasts stalk off into the darkness, as unnatural and metallic as when they arrived, and with that the Knight carriage pulls away -

The coachman and servants huddle down in their seats as they go, their fear and furtiveness obvious to see.

Sherlock, John, Mary and Anthea stay rooted to the spot for several moments after the carriage disappears, however, unable to quite believe what they've seen, it seems to Molly. After all, it's not every day one realises that a friend is actually creating artificial animals in the wilds of Dartmoor. Just as it's not every day one realises, as Sherlock surely just has, that one's former mistress is actually in league with a major threat to the Nation.

But then -

"Your brother owes me ten pounds," Anthea announces, returning to the car and revving the engine. Her eyes flash, daring anyone to cast aspersions on her insouciance. "Now let's go and do something about this."

And with that the others pile inside and she pulls out onto the road to Knightgower House, in hot pursuit. Her jaw is set, as if John's, Mary's and Sherlock's own.

Sherlock doesn't relax his grip on his new wife the entire journey there and for once in her life Molly is really rather glad of it.

Meanwhile,

*In Irene Adler's Former Rooms, The Metropole Hotel*

Mycroft doesn't rise when the boy comes in, announcing the arrival of Charles Augustus Magnusson.

He doesn't even look up, his attention apparently trained far too strongly on both his tea and his paper. (He had better start looking for peaceful places in which he and Thea can enjoy a honeymoon free from strife but has been, thus far, slim pickings.

They really are a bit too infamous for their own good, he and Thea).

When the door opens and the boy clears his throat, Mycroft doesn't look up.

When the boy shrugs at Magnusson and ghosts out of the room, content to leave his strange guests to their strange business, Mycroft doesn't look up.

That Magnusson will understand this as a dismissal is obvious, just as it's obvious that the newspaper magnate must now know how badly he's erred in attempting to control the man who is the British Government.

And given that small fact, Mycroft can't help but enjoy letting the man stew.

So he gives it a moment more, contents himself to adding just a tiny bit more milk to his tea. Taking
another bite of his biscuit. He hears the other man snort derisively but he's not to be rushed, not he. Oh no. *He's Mycroft bloody Holmes*. Instead he waits, centres himself and then finally, finally deigns to look at the man who tried to turn one his agents and besmirch the name of his protégé-

"You know," he hears Magnusson say wryly, "I didn't believe the stories, but you really do have a flair for the dramatic, don't you? You and your reprobate brother…"

And now, knowing he has forced the other man to speak, the Right Honourable Arthur Ignatius Mycroft Holmes looks up and fixes his enemy with the sort of look which has, in the past, started wars.

*It might well start one this evening, and oh he's looking forward to it.*

"Ah, Charles," he says crisply. "So kind of you to join me. I was starting to think you'd try to run away. And as for my flair for dramatics… You have no idea."

He puts the teacup down. Smiles like a devil. To his great surprise, the other man's smile matches it.

"Let's remedy that, eh?" he says and so it begins.

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*Knightgower House,*

*Thirty Minutes Later*

Henry Knight frowns, looking out into the darkness outside his bedroom.

The crescent moon hangs above, a sliver of light buffeted by clouds and as he stares at it, he muses how he got himself into his current situation.

*Because he is, at the moment, in the one state in which he did not wish to find himself.*

Behind him, Adler is going through her nightly ablutions, thankfully wearing a night-rail this time and not naked as she had initially threatened. (Their not sharing a room would, he knows, have caused more questions that he wished to answer amongst the servants but he still doesn't feel right, having her here.) He's never bringing a woman to Knightgower House before, save as a bride, and as he thinks this he feels his heart twist quite perversely in his chest, his thoughts going to a hospital bed in Mayfair and its lovely, dark-skinned occupant.

It is only with great difficulty that he manages to push this image away.

But he must, he can't think about Sally now. He won't, not with Adler here in his room, attempting to charm her way into his bed. He can see the adventuress, reflected in the glass before him and as he looks at her he feels again that twist of worry he'd felt when his creations had come to him at the railway station. He had hoped that seeing them would be enough for his guest, that she would merely bring confirmation of their existence back to Magnusson and that this delay might make it possible for him to come up with another plan. Another way to save himself and, more importantly, Sally.

Unfortunately, however, the fact that she had no information tells him that Magnusson is looking for more than confirmation of his beasts' existence.

It tells him that he probably wants a sample to look at and Henry doesn't like the thought of that.

But it's the only thing which would make sense; Adler has been sent here, Henry suspects, not as a courtesan but a highly trained mercenary, one adept at moving sensitive property. (At least, that's
what most of the more interesting stories about her claim. She can operate under the assumption that she's snared a new protector, all the while keeping tabs on him for her employer and never raising an ounce of suspicion…

*It is, Henry is forced to admit, rather a good plan.*

And if this is the truth- If she has been sent to secure one of his creations and bring it back to her master in London- then Henry knows he has very few options. Very few. Though he doesn't want to risk his safety, or Sally's, he likewise doesn't want one of his creatures falling into the wrong hands. He's managed to keep Mycroft Holmes and his department away from them, mainly by playing the hapless fop to Lady Anthea. (And, in fairness, it's not like it's a difficult part for him to fall into; he has, on more than one occasion, tripped over his own feet.) But were anyone to get word of what he's done here, what his discovery on the moors last year *allowed* him to do, then he knows hellfire and damnation would follow every single use made of his discoveries-

At the thought- the memory- of what he discovered out by the old Knightgower Abbey his eyes flicker over to his pocket-watch, the one he'd had Hobbes bring earlier.

The one he can't risk Ms. Adler getting her hand on, the one he knows he has to keep safe.

So he closes his eyes, squeezes the bridge of his nose. Tries to think of a way out of the pickle he's found himself in. He's so engrossed in these thoughts that it takes him a moment to realise that there's something moving beneath his window- No, he thinks, make that two somethings. One rather tall and thing, the other rather short. (They're both human-shaped and male-looking). *They also both look oddly familiar.* Henry frowns at the sight, leaning closer to the window-pane and trying to make out what the two figures are doing-

Which is when a small ladies ankle boot hits his window and bounces off the glass, ricocheting back down to the ground below and then bouncing into the darkness.

It is also at this moment that he hears a voice- which sounds distinctly like John Watson- mutter, "Good God woman, patience certainly isn't your strong suit, is it?"

"No," a female voice says tartly. "Sharp-shooting is."

The answer to this is lost as Henry hears Adler's steps coming across the room- "What are you looking at?" she's demanding and in his anxiousness to prevent her from seeing the people he suspects are downstairs he panics. Grabs the pocket-watch and skirts his way out of the room, being sure to pull his curtains closed behind him.

*He can't risk her seeing what's going on out there.*

"It's nothing," he stammers, "nothing… I just… you're awfully naked and I need to, I need to…"

Inspiration hits. "I need to run out and check on the dogs, make sure they're running as I'd wish them to.

"Can't trust it to the servants, you know."

And with that, pocket-watch nearly crushed into his palm, he escapes, darting along the corridor and heading straight for the servants' entrance, his heart hammering loudly in his chest, hope for what he'll find outside pounding right along with it.

He's walking so fast and concentrating so hard on not being followed by Adler that he doesn't realise the pocket-watch is starting to glow with ominously brightness…
In fact, he doesn't realise anything's amiss until he hears the sound of screaming and with that he breaks into a run.
Chapter Thirty-One: Mad Dogs and Englishmen

Knightgower House Gardens

Approximately 20 Seconds Before

"Molly, run!"

And Sherlock, noble, idiotic, apparently suicidal Sherlock throws himself in front of his wife, his eyes riveted on the mechanical hound before him, the one which so suddenly and so unexpectedly appeared before them in the dark.

The one which she so recently saw Henry Knight control.

As Molly skids back the beast lands on top of him with a hideous, unnatural, rather painful-sounding thunk, its metallic jaws snapping at his throat even as its claws pound and scratch against his chest.

It centres its attentions on his throat and face, something which Molly finds entirely terrible to watch.

In fact, she finds it so terrible that she reaches out for the thing, hands grasping in an attempt to pull it off him but before she can John picks her up bodily, drags her away from her husband. She screeches in protest like a banshee but the medical doctor is unimpressed. He's holding onto her with one arm around her waist, a pistol she hadn't known he was carrying in the other.

"Stay back," he hisses in her ear. "We'll needs a clear shot if Anthea and I are to take this blighter down-"

"And if an entirely metallic beast isn't dissuaded by a bullet?" Mary demands tartly, pulling her friend behind her and scanning the ground, her gaze alighting on a rather large, sharp rock.

She lifts it and hefts it in her hand, throwing a blood-curdling grin at the creature attacking Sherlock as she does so.

Molly realises what she's doing, follows her lead- *She'll show that bloody hound how what happens when it hurts the person she loves.*

"Then even better to keep a civilian back," John snaps. "Or haven't you ever heard the term *ricochet*?"

Mary opens her mouth to offer what Molly assumes is a withering retort but before she can speak a bullet slashes through the night, fired from Anthea's snub-nosed little pistol. John Watson steadies his arm a split-second later and matches her, the flare of gunpowder lighting up the night.

Their bullets hit the creature's foreleg and bounce, as Mary had suggested they might, lodging in a tree to John's right with painful force. Watson, Anthea, and Molly all wince and duck though it fazes
Mary not at all.

It also, unfortunately, does not faze the hound.

For the beast keeps going, doesn't even pause its attack. Rather than reacting with fear however, Mary narrows her eyes, moves a couple of steps to the right as she gauges her opponent. "Aim for the head and tail," Mary says announces briskly.

"Try to knock it off balance."

And without any delay she pulls her arm back and hurls her rock with deadly accuracy at the beast's cheek and jaw.

The stone lands with a loud, hollow boom, knocking the beast's head- and much of its body- to the side as it goes.

The creature wobbles- unlike a living being, it must not be able to instinctively correct its balance, Molly muses- and at seeing this she takes her own stone, hefts it at the brute.

She aims for its neck and shoulders, the force of her throw making it stagger and sway. John and Anthea exchange surprised looks and then follow her example, raining rocks down upon the beast. Three or four stones are all that prove necessary; with the creature distracted and off-balance Sherlock manages to scramble out from under it, skidding sharply back towards his friends, hands scrabbling in the dirt to find a stone. He finds one, one rather bigger and sharper than the others', and pulls his arm back, about to throw-

Which is when Sir Henry dashes into the fray, his hands held before him in surrender.

He holds the glowing pocket-watch Molly saw him using earlier in Grimpen and as soon as the beast sees it, the creature grows still. Its fever-bright eyes dull, its body folding into a crouch.

Suddenly it is merely a cluster of clockwork and metal again. Sir Henry stares at the beast for a moment, apparently ascertain that it is, in fact, done with its attack and once he does so he turns his attention to Molly. Mary. John. Anthea. Sherlock.

Molly has crawled over to him in the dirt, her arms wrapping protectively around his shoulders and chest. She feels his hand come up to tighten on hers. To bring her palm to his lips to kiss.

"Oh," Knight says. "Oh, you're all… here."

He clears his throat, shifts awkwardly from foot to foot. His face is positively scarlet.

"Well, isn't this awkward?" he says.

For the first time in her life Molly actively contemplates murder.

"Awkward?" she snaps. "Awkward? That thing nearly tore my husband's throat out and you say it's awkward?"

And she makes to rise, only for her attention to be drawn back to Sherlock when her movement jostles him and causes him to wince. She frowns at him, tries to check him for bleeding, but he shakes his head, tells her not to fuss. He's fine.

Which of course he is, she muses tartly. *He was only nearly mauled to death by a mechanical hound.*

Knowing that if she starts arguing with him she might never stop, however, she holds her tongue.
Besides, John and Anthea are looking quite murderous enough for her tastes. Henry stares at them, his gaze skipping over to her and her husband before skittering away.

Guilt is written all over his features though he says nothing.

He just stares at them all in mortification, apparently at a loss as to what to say.

More out of discomfort than anything else he turns his attention back to the beast, gestures with the pocket-watch and mutters a quiet, "sleep." Immediately the hound's eyes- its entire body- go dark, the metal collapsing in on itself like a puppet whose strings have been cut. After a moment its outer, metallic shell cracks in two like an egg, spilling cogs and clock-work parts everywhere.

Anthea and Mary approach it cautiously, the young spy eventually hitching up her skirts and hunkering down beside the creature, poking it with the muzzle of her pistol.

To Molly's great relief, it doesn't poke her back.

"This is what Magnusson's interested in, isn't it?" Anthea says quietly. "He knew what you'd been up to, and he wanted, what is it the Americans say? A piece of the action."

And she shakes her head to herself, partly in admiration, partly in exasperation. "I must say, Sir Henry," she quips. "You are a great deal more interesting than I took you for."

She inclines her head sharply to him.

"Apologies for my lapse- It doesn't happen often, just so you know"

Henry flinches but nods. Walks over to her and places his hand on her shoulder. "You are, as always entirely correct, Lady Anthea," he says. "And I am honoured to be on a list of those who have managed to fool you, even a tiny bit. Though perhaps we might discuss this somewhere else?"

His eyes wander back to the manor-house, worry in their depths, and it occurs to Molly that he seems rather more afraid of Irene Adler than he does of his diabolical metal beasts.

"There is more than you know to the story," he's saying, "and I rather fear for my life should I prevent Mrs. Holmes from seeing to her husband's injuries."

"Too bloody right," Molly mutters.

Both her husband and John snicker at this.

Sir Henry nods his head. "Then if you'll allow me, shall we reconnoitre at my workshop. I would invite you up to the house but I'm afraid-"

"You're afraid Adler may make another pass at your gentlemanly modesty," Mary sniffs. "I believe you may be right, old bean."

And with that Mary shoos John towards his best friend and takes Anthea's arm. The young spy smiles and nods, gesturing with her pistol for Henry to lead the way. John and Molly manage to help Sherlock to his feet despite his muttered imprecations about being "mothered," or "coddled," or "injured."

"Shut up Sherlock, and let your family help you," John mutters which quite puts an end to his chatter.

The two doctors and their patient follow Henry into the darkness but Molly can't help the odd feeling
that she's being watched.

In Sir Henry Knight's Laboratory,

Quartermass Grange

Ten Minutes Later

When they reach Sir Henry's workhouse, they find a fire lit and food waiting for them.

"I was about to make my excuses to leave Adler and come here," he explains at John's cocked eyebrow. "She doesn't know where this is- I thought I'd be safe."

He colours.

"In fact, I asked the staff to leave enough food for several days' retreat."

That John clearly finds this amusing doesn't seem to register with Sir Henry, but then Molly's not surprised. Inside this room, he is clearly in his element.

In fact, she thinks this might be the most relaxed she's ever seen him.

For the moves with confidence, lighting gas lamps, pulling ledgers and books and metal furbelows off lab benches so that his guests may sit down. He even clears off space on one of his work tables and then carefully pulls several of his plans off the far wall to his right, laying them flat and face upwards so the group can see.

Each plan shows the interior and layout of one of his abominable creatures.

"There are sleeping quarters through there," he tells Molly quietly as he does so, gesturing to Sherlock. "The bed is made, you may see to Mr. Holmes there in perfect privacy."

"Not yet." Sherlock rasps and indicates a bench to his right. Despite his misgivings, John begins to lower him onto it and Molly, being unable to take his weight on her own, must follow suit. She huffs at her husband to show her displeasure but he merely smiles, wincing slightly before pulling her down into his lap and bracing his arm tightly around her waist.

"You may do whatever you wish with me once I get some answers," he murmurs in her ear. "Or are you so hungry for a husband's touch that you can't bear to wait a few minutes more, you imp?"

Molly shoots him an unimpressed look but acquiesces. Knowing how to choose one's battles was always, according to her late father, the key to a happy marriage. But still…

"You will behave, once this is done with," she tells him sternly. "I don't care if I have to steal some of Henry's girders and nail you to that bed, you'll do as I say, is that clear, Mr. Holmes?"

Even injured his smile is sinful. "Absolutely," he purrs. "Imp."

And he presses a small kiss to her nose. John Watson rolls his eyes at this but leaves the two of them together, moving to sit down beside Mary, who grins at him. She mouths *you're welcome* to Molly.

Anthea takes a seat to his right and with that Henry seems to feel he can begin.

"I want you all to know that it was never my intention to create a weapon," he begins. His voice is quiet. Hesitant. He is, for once, every inch the diffident gentleman engineer everyone in London
Society thinks they know.

"In fact, it was never my intention to create anything other than a rather complicated and fanciful scarecrow."

And he gestures to the plans and drawings before him, the ones which look the oldest. They all show a mechanical shell, a dog-like chassis complete with articulated legs, tail and head. There is no indication of a power-source in these drawings however, nor indeed, is there any suggestion that the creature therein depicted might be remotely controllable, either by spoken commands or a glowing pocket-watch.

Sherlock clears his throat loudly. "So then the question becomes, how did you move from that-" he gestures to the drawings- "to the creature which just tried to tear my throat out?"

Henry winces. Molly doesn't blame him.

Sherlock must feel her distress for he presses a small kiss to her shoulder, his arms tightening around her one hand stroking soothingly at her back. It feels lovely, so lovely that she's almost distracted by what Henry says next.

"First of all, I must offer my sincerest apologies for that, Mr. Holmes," the engineer says. "I am afraid I activated the dogs by accident tonight- I hadn't realised there were strangers on the estate. Had I done so, I would never have woken them up."

"So they react with instinct?" Mary inquires. "They can tell when someone doesn't belong?"

Henry shakes his head. "They're drawn to movement. Any movement. The people on the estate lock their doors at night and don't investigate if they hear anything. That way they are simply never around for the hounds to disturb. Anyone who doesn't know to do that, however…"

"Becomes fair game." Sherlock shakes his head. "So Mycroft was right- Originally it was about scaring poachers off the estate?"

Henry nods. "Yes, originally. It was only ever supposed to be a prank. A lark. A way to pass the time while I hid here and tried to get out of the London Season. People have dreamed of building automata for centuries but I never thought it a true possibility- I'm not Mary Shelley, I don't believe that a bolt of lightning or anything man-made can create life anew-"

"So what changed?" Again Sherlock asks the difficult question. "What led your creation from this-" he inclines his head to the drawings Henry laid out before him- "to that brute I just encountered?"

Henry winces again, looking uncomfortable.

The eyes of the entire part rest on him and he doesn't appear to like that at all, but eventually-

"You won't believe me, if I tell you," he says. His shoulders droop, head hanging slightly. His fingers tighten, almost imperceptibly, around the pocket-watch he still holds. "And yet…" He looks up, forcing himself, apparently, to meet the group's collective eye, "and yet, I must tell you. It's the only way you'll understand what a dangerous position we're in…"

And with that he takes a deep breath. Steps forward.

He places his pocket-watch on the table before him, twisting a couple of the dials as he does so before stepping back. Lowering the gas lamps until only the dancing light of the fire remains.
Once they're in darkness he leans forward again, taps his fingers against the pocket-watch three times until it opens. As it does, a low, soothing light spills out into the room. Bundles of light appear, ribbons of pale, white brightness twisting and binding together, dancing on the air. Amid them are larger balls of light, each differently coloured. Some are white. Blue. Most are red or green.

All appear to spin slowly, elegantly.

And as they do Henry reaches into a small, locked box to his right. Opens it. Takes out a pair of tweezers and uses them to carry a tiny ball of what appears to be metal over to the pocket-watch. He hesitates before slowly, carefully taking the speck of metal and placing it on the pocket-watches face.

He gestures to Mary to give him her hand and this she does.

With infinite care he takes her bare fingertip and presses it down to touch the speck of metal. As soon as she makes contact the metal turns liquid. Messy. It splays out, like a raindrop hitting glass.

But then slowly, silently, it pulls itself back together. Starts changing. Moving.

After a moment it settles into a long, thin shape, all articulated joints and sections. This new shape mirrors, almost exactly, the contours of Mary's finger, right down to her rings.

The room stare at this sight, stare at one another. Mouths open and shut, speechless, but nobody seems to know what to say. Until-

"Where did you find this?" Sherlock asks quietly. "Where does this substance come from?"

Henry lowers his head. His voice is quiet.

"I found it in Quartermass colliery, just at the farthest edge of my estate, Mr. Holmes. But as for where it comes from?

"I believe that it comes from the very stars themselves-"

Which is when they hear something moving outside.
Outside Sir Henry Knight's Laboratory,

*Quartermass Grange*

Irene Adler knows herself to be many things.

Beautiful.

Seductive.

Surprisingly inventive with both rope and leather.

One thing she is not, however, is gullible. *Nor is she easily put off.* So when the delectable Sir Henry elected to sneak out and away from her, he should have known it would only be a matter of time before she followed. In fact, on some level she suspects he may have wanted her to. Men like Henry are, after all, always at war with themselves, wanting things they believe they shouldn't-

She knows their plight well, has profited from it for years.

And since she knows his plight, and since she knows that she is not a woman who takes no for an answer, and since Henry's unwillingness to acquiesce to her has managed to make what should have merely been an employment opportunity into a genuine interest, once she realised that he had left the house she elected to sneak out into the darkness surrounding his house and search for him. It was a search which had led her to his darling little laboratory, a building which she can tell is the adult version of the tree-house in which he doubtless played as a child. But the cornering of her quarry in so private a location is not the reason she's smiling now, oh no-

For she's looking in through the laboratory's windows at something truly spectacular.

Wondrous.

It's a sight so utterly unique that even a jaded aesthete like herself can't help but stare.

For, right in front of her (and, tediously, Sherlock and all his friends) is a piece of metal which can apparently change its shape.

A piece of metal which is currently aping the finger of the mysterious blonde Irene saw with John Watson at Magnusson's last house party.
And, as Irene watches, this piece of metal proceeds to turn itself into an exact, metallic replica of the blond woman's hand, right down to her rings-

The shock of the sight is so great that she lets out a gasp, one clearly audible inside the laboratory.

It causes her to wince, breath held as she waits to see whether she has been heard.

Though the group within notice though, Sir Henry assures them that it's probably the wind and with so marvellous a sight before them, they're all apparently happy enough to believe him-

"Wondrous," Irene hears Sherlock's little mouse of a bride breathe and despite herself she grimaces.

She finds the adoring look which the detective shoots her rather more irritating than she might want to admit to.

The adventuress refuses to concentrate on that though, staring in through the window at the enrapturing sight before her instead. Holmes is trying to struggle to his feet, to get a closer look at the mysterious metal and though the Mouse-bride shoots him a stern look she helps him do so, holding him up and moving out of the way so that he can get a closer look at the wondrous substance.

"How fascinating it is," Irene hears Sherlock murmur, and he presses a delighted kiss to his bride's cheek, his grin bright. Delighted. "Don't you think so, imp?"

Molly nods in agreement- "Indeed, husband,"- and once again, Irene is made aware of the irritation clawing at her chest.

Irene blanches; She didn't think Sherlock even capable of such a thing.

By the look on Anthea's face, the young spy agrees with her.

"Don't worry yourself, love," he's saying softly, kissing the mouse's knuckles. "I'll not damage myself any more- We have, after all, our next night together to look forward to…"

And he grins at her cheekily. Pulls her to him and kisses her more soundly, on the lips this time. The woman blushes bright red (as does Sir Henry), even as her blond friend and Anthea chortle and Dr. Watson rolls his eyes heavenward as if praying for patience-

Which is when Irene makes the mistake of letting out another, louder, disgusted huff of breath and stepping away from the window, her high-heeled boots digging sharply into the gravel at her feet.
From the very corner of her eye she sees the figures within the laboratory freeze, sees Anthea, the blond and Dr. Watson draw pistols from about their person even as Sherlock pulls his mouse protectively to him, trying to push her behind him and act as her shield.

Inwardly Irene curses. Stares at the people inside the lab in worry. She knows she's about to be caught but she doubts this will seriously interrupt her plans- *She'll easily give anyone, even Sherlock, the slip after all.*

But even as she thinks this, her mind turns to that wondrous metal. The uses it could be put to. The mysteries it might contain. *The price Magnusson might pay for it, now that it's obvious what he really wants from Sir Henry.* And then there's just the beauty of it. The mystery. All her life Irene's been curious, sometimes voraciously so, and this new metal is calling to her in a way few things have-

*It's practically begging her to steal it.*

She makes the decision in a moment. A split-second really.

The ability to make the right choice under pressure has always been her second most valuable asset as an operative after all.

So, with a small smile she reaches down. Picks up a handful of gravel and tosses it, with her usual accuracy, towards the side door of the laboratory. She then picks up the thickest, heaviest branch she can find and creeps to the back of the house, smashing it sharply into the door there before hurrying back to her original vantage point.

The ruse works; with a single look and nod the blond and Watson spread out, each heading in a separate direction, the better to investigate each noise and its possible source whilst Anthea moves to shield Sir Henry-

With another smile Irene darts in through the door they're not investigating, her mind already sorting through ways she can create a suitable distraction and make her getaway…

Unfortunately for her, however, her former protector and his new wife aren't nearly as stupid as they apparently look.

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*Inside Sir Henry Knight's Laboratory,*

*Quartermass Grange*

*For a little thing,* Sherlock muses, *my wife certainly knows how to throw a punch.*

For as Irene sneaks into Henry's laboratory, her triumphant grin showing she had bought Holmes' distraction hook, line and sinker, Molly picks up what looks like a large wrench and swings it viciously at the adventuress.

Adler, doubtless imagining Molly to be utterly helpless in the face of violence, doesn't see the blow coming at all.

Rather she staggers, surprised and embarrassed, only to be hit by a decent one-two punch combination from Mary, who has not, it turns out, taken her invitation to go and check the doors of the laboratory-

"You can thank Three Fingered Willy for that," the blond woman says with a vivacious grin at John.
"Taught me how to box the year I left for finishing school."

She snorts. "Those little Swiss misses never knew what hit them."

"Impressive," John answers with a grin, stepping quickly over her to stand beside Adler. Mary does likewise. He trains his pistol directly at her face, keeping himself (and his gentlemen's particulars) far out of the reach of her nails.

Suffice it to say, he has learned to do so through bitter experience.

"Hello, Irene," the doctor says conversationally, keeping his eyes on his target as he hands her pistol back to Mary. She trains it on the adventuress with a rather cool efficiency and Anthea follows her lead, hefting her little snub-nosed pistol at the other woman. "So nice of you to drop by- Especially since we were just coming to speak to you."

Adler glowers up at him, her eyes narrowed, but doesn't say anything. Rather, with studied insouciance she leans back, crossing her arms behind her head and throwing him an arch, bored look. She then crosses her feet, at the ankles.

At his cocked eyebrow she shrugs.

"Mycroft sent you," she says, her tone bored. "Which means he knows something.

"It also means that, as usual, he's open to negotiation."

And she makes a show of arching her back, "stretching." It's a trick Sherlock knows well. She thrusts her breasts upwards in slow, lascivious fashion. Runs her fingers lazily across her throat. Her belly. Her tongue darts out to wet her scarlet-painted lips.

It has the effect it always has on John, namely none.

In fact, both he and Anthea sigh loudly in boredom.

"So you want to make a deal," Sherlock announces, because it's obvious.

Adler looks at him, eyebrow cocked. "I'm sorry, lover," she purrs, "did you say something?"

This time Molly, Mary Anthea and John all roll their eyes. Despite himself, however, Sherlock smiles at her. Forcing himself to his feet he walks gingerly over to her, making sure (like John) to keep himself well out of the reach of those long, blood-red nails.

He presses a kiss to Molly's palm- she'd walked with him- and then releases her. Hunkers down beside his former mistress.

The look Adler's shooting him is rather hostile, though he can tell she's trying to hide it.

Purely for devilment he throws Molly another smile and he has the pleasure of hearing the other woman harrumph in irritation.

"Look, you're caught," he says evenly. "We know you're in the pay of Magnusson. We know he sent you here. He know he wants something from Sir Henry and I'm willing to bet we both know what it is- But I doubt he knows about what you just witnessed.

Am I right?"

His smile widens at Irene's studiedly bored expression.
"Come now, Irene," he says when she doesn't answer. "We both know you were planning to steal it-"

This time she pouts.

"That's an awful accusation to make, lover," she mutters coquettishly.

Behind him Sherlock hears Molly mutter something which sounds suspiciously like, *Are you bloody kidding me?* But he doesn't bother to turn around.

He remembers well how Molly handled Irene the last time they met.

So he ignores Molly. Lets his smile widen. He knows how stubborn Irene can be and he has no desire to have to beat the information they need out of her- Not if there's another alternative in sight. Instead he sits down beside her, shoots her another friendly smile. She responds, reaching out her hand to stroke it up the inside of his thigh. Sherlock catches her hand before she can get anywhere… interesting, grateful that Molly is to try to push her hand away.

*Her getting close enough for Irene to grab would not be wise, he knows.*

With another pout Irene pushes herself up onto her elbows, letting out a spectacularly gusty sigh before throwing him a displeased look. "Fine!" she says. "We can make a deal."

I'll tell you what I know and you and your darling wifey can get back to your conjugal bliss, or whatever other nonsense you want to do together-"

And she sits up, necessitating both Watson and Mary taking a step backwards to keep their guns away from her-

Which is when she slams her fist into Sherlock's jaw, her sharp-heeled boot ramming into his inner thigh. The detective hisses in pain and as she Molly darts forward to help him Irene jumps to her feet, pushing her into the table on which the gas lamp sits and knocking it over.

This plunges the room into darkness.

Sherlock searches for Molly even as he hears a grunt as Sir Henry is laid into.

By the time he gets to his feet and finds a match inside his pocket, Irene has already fled the laboratory with Henry's pocket-watch and miraculous metal about her person.

One of his mechanical dogs stands snarling at the back door, blocking he, Watson and the women's getaway while another two crash through the laboratory at Adler's heels-

Which is when the real trouble begins.
Sherlock has always known, deep down, that Irene Adler would be the death of him.

He'd just always assumed that when it happened he would be tied down, oiled up and so blissfully, ridiculously satiated that he wouldn't mind meeting his end, praise for Irene and her skills still dancing on his lips-

Now however, looking at the growling mechanical hound she apparently left between he (and Molly, and his friends) and the door, he finds himself rather less happy with the notion of dying because of his former paramour. In fact, he finds himself rather wishing he could strangle her with his bare hands. For while he has no real problem with the threat of death, he will not allow his Molly to be harmed by Adler's vindictiveness-

"Sir Henry!" he hears Anthea snap. "Is there any other way to control your mechanicals besides that pocket-watch Adler just took?"

As she speaks, she feints towards the mechanical hound blocking their exit.

The creature snarls at her, lunging, and she only barely manages to fall back without losing a limb.

The young engineer, his face a mask of panic in the brief glow of Sherlock's match, shakes his head. "None that I've ever found," he stammers. "Though I've never been able to control them without the watch present-

"Which means that they're no longer under the watch's control," Mary speaks over him. "Either that, or Adler's figured out a method of control which you had not-"

"Wouldn't surprise me," John answers. "If anyone could work out how to control a group of mechanical, possibly extra-stellar automatons, it would be Irene bloody Adler-"

As he speaks, John picks up a metal pipe to his right, doubtless an ingredient for one of Sir Henry's pet schemes. With a small, feral smile he moves forward, crouching down, the pipe held before him like a lance. He allows the hound to snap and snarl at it, poking the creature sharply, annoying it as one might any other unruly dog. With a frankly alarming smile Mary must understand what he's doing for she nods to him, picks up a pipe of her own.

Anthea follows suit.

Then Molly, despite Sherlock's protestations.

Once she does it, Sherlock feels he really does have to join in, despite the fact that he can't actually stand entirely upright.
Not that he's doing the heavy lifting on this task. No, using his initial pipe as his guide John is poking at the hound, making it snap and snarl. Letting it chew and bite at the metal and checking, Sherlock suddenly realises, how sharp the creature's teeth are. How strong it really is.

*There are moments, Sherlock muses- admittedly scarce, but definitely moments- when John is every bit as clever as he claims.*

Sparks fly from where the beast's metallic teeth gnash into the pipe, but the object itself holds. *Though the hound lashes out with its claws, the pipe does not give way.* Using John's efforts as a guide, Anthea, Molly, Mary and Sherlock start poking at the creature, jostling it though they're not quite able to knock it over-

John keeps up his goading, finally managing to get the creature to latch onto the pipe entirely, its entire circumference fitting inside the hound's jaws.

The creature bites down and with a surprisingly deft movement John braces himself, tilting the pipe upwards and- gravity being what it is- forcing the pipe further down the beast's throat.

It slides along the pipe, its own weight having been turned against it; Having no viscera or muscle to stop it the pipe jabs its way entirely inside the creature's body, leaving the hound hanging on the pipe like some macabre bead on a string.

It's really rather… ingenious, Sherlock must admit.

Too late the beast realises its danger but it's no use; John has already managed to trap it. Though it releases its hold on the pipe, it's no longer able to escape. With a hurried, "Get out! Get out!" the army doctor nods to the door the creature was guarding, sending Mary, Anthea, Molly and a still-injured Sherlock scurrying out into the night before swinging the pipe towards the wall to his right, smashing the beast into it with all the force he can muster-

Sherlock stands at the door, watching what happens next in a sort of dazed fascination.

Behind him he can hear Mary and Anthea thundering through the undergrowth, though Molly has halted not far from him.

The sight before him is ghastly: Given its skeletal nature, the creature falls to pieces as soon as it makes contact with the plaster. But of course, given its uncanny nature, it also immediately begins reassembling itself, the cogs, wheels and metallic bones dragging themselves towards each other as surely as a compass needle is dragged North.

"Oh," he hears John mutter. "Oh, bugger..."

And he finds himself entirely in agreement with the sentiment.

For a moment both he and Watson watch, horrified, as the beast starts knitting itself back together before it finally seems to occur to them both that they really do need to haul their collective backsides.

To that end John scrambles towards his friend, helping him out into the darkness; Sherlock briefly considers grabbing a gaslamp from among the many he spied about the workshop but decides against it, aware that such light will make him a sitting duck. Helped by his best friend- joined, after a moment, by his wife- Sherlock limps out into the blackness of Sir Henry's estate, already trying to pull together some sort of plan to save himself.

Unfortunately for him however, just as he begins to make progress the night sky lights up as if it
were on fire and suddenly, suddenly-

Suddenly his problems get a whole lot bigger…

For there's a light in the sky and something, some... thing, the size and shape of a battleship, or maybe a choir of angels. Its vastness is so great it blocks out the stars; the moon is but a sliver of reflection against its smooth, metallic edges.

It glows in the darkness, eerie and beautiful and entirely uncanny, and seated in its very heart he can just make out the smiling figure of Irene Adler.

She's looking rather pleased with herself.

"Someday, mate," John says, "someday, we're going to have a long conversation about your taste in women…"

Before he can answer however, there's a barely contained hiss of, of energy about him and Sherlock, John, Molly and most of the trees on Sir Henry's estate find themselves knocked flat on their back.

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*Meanwhile*

*In the Hotel Metropole*

Magnussen sounds bored.

"So you've come to scare me back onto the path of righteousness, have you?" he drawls, grinning over the desk at Mycroft, pouring himself tea. Helping himself to a finger sandwich.

The elder Holmes merely cocks an eyebrow at him.

His is not the face of a man in the humour for making small talk.

"I must admit," Magnussen continues, undaunted, "I'm rather surprised how easy it was to find something salacious on you-"

"Enough."

Mycroft speaks so softly, and so certainly, that even the infamous Charles Augustus Magnussen stops.

Blinks at him.

When Mycroft looks at the newspaper magnate now, he has the great pleasure of seeing the other man grow a tiny bit pale.

*Good, he can't help but think.*

"We know about Henry Knight," Mycroft says simply. "We know you sent him off with Adler. We know you're planning on using the invention he has been hiding away in Quatermass, and we know you're going to use it against the interests of the crown and this realm- Something that, I assure you Mr. Magnusson, simply will. Not. Do."

And he takes a small sip of his tea.

Frowns before adjusting the taste by adding sugar.
He knows he shouldn't be drawing this out but truth be told, he can't bring himself to care: This bastard threatened his organisation. He threatened Sherlock.

Perhaps, more pertinently, he threatened Anthea.

Mycroft is simply not willing to allow anyone to start thinking that a wise choice and so here they are.

Magnusson, for his part, doesn't seem to understand how much trouble he's in. The sort of man who always has a way out, he can't contemplate the notion that he might have gotten himself into a situation from which even he cannot walk away.

"Come now, Mycroft," he says jovially, and though his tone is conciliatory, there is venom beneath it. "Don't tell me that you're upset I made a try for your precious organisation!"

He grins, showing unbelievably white teeth, and as he often is in this man's presence, Mycroft is reminded of a shark.

"You know my methods," he's saying. "And you know how to deal with me. I'm a businessman, and while I admit that yes, I may have overplayed my hand, I have no doubt that there's something I have which you might find a need for…"

"There is nothing."

Mycroft doesn't make it sound like a threat, but then he doesn't have to.

The bland calmness of his statement is clearly enough to make Magnusson's blood run cold.

The other man frowns at him, reacting as if he had spoken in a language he doesn't understand. Mycroft supposes he's right: He doesn't understand the tongue in which Mycroft is speaking now. It is the tongue of sentiment. Of love and devotion.

*Though he may seldom use it, that does not mean he knows nothing of it at all.*

And not being the sort of man who has ever loved another, Charles Augustus Magnusson knows as much about it as a kingfisher does about the life of a dolphin- Though unlike the kingfisher, Magnusson is about to (finally) be held accountable for the lengths to which his selfishness has driven him.

Mycroft will see to it.

"When you created your little… distraction for me," Holmes asks mildly, "did you think about the consequences, Charles?"

Magnusson frowns. He clearly doesn't understand. "I thought you might get your leg over," he says reasonably. "Thought I might finally get that unsufferable chit, Anthea, out of my hair, to boot."

Mycroft's smile is wintry. "She is a Countess- As well as my bride to be." He raises his cup to Magnusson in near-playful toast, but the look on his face does not seem to reassure his guest.

"I have you to thank for that," he continues, "which is why we're having this conversation here, and not with my superiors in Whitehall." Again he smiles. "Although they, of course, have much more experience getting rid of unhelpful things like corpses..."
"Corpses?" Magnusson asks. He's starting to look a little paler. "What are you saying about corpses?"

Mycroft's smile is serene as he pours himself more tea. Takes out his pocket watch and finally, in the presence of another, unscrews the back. With tender, delicate hands he plucks out the small portrait of Anthea he has been carrying with him since the day she first wed the Count, so many years ago.

He shows it to Magnusson and the other man's eyes widen as he realises what he's done. What's to become of him.

A man in Mycroft's position would never give such important information in the presence of someone he intended to let live.

"Yes," Mycroft says, seeing realisation set in. "It was in the tea—Or rather, in your teacup. Couldn't risk poisoning myself too—Thea would have my hide." Again that wintry smile. "And yes, the fact that I've admitted that means you won't be leaving this room alive—But cheer up, Charles, I've at least made it quick. Relatively painless.

Believe me, I didn't want to…"

And with that, Mycroft pours himself some more tea.

Finally helps himself to a finger sandwich.

Charles Augustus Magnusson stares at the photo of Anthea in Mycroft's hand, his face draining of colour, his breath beginning to fail him...

Mycroft watches him with cool, disinterested eyes as he tumbles to the ground.
The Most Vatican of Cameos

Disclaimer: This fanfiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Not beta read, so all mistakes are mine.

Apologies for how long it's taken me to get back to this; season 4 (and a certain coffin scene) ran away with my muse for a while. I also wasn't sure I could write Mary alive after T6T but, well, now it's a completely AU story. At least I get her back for a while. So, hang onto your top hats, bustles, and whatever other Victorian paraphernalia you have to hand because this story is back, and we're reaching the, ahem, climax...

~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR: THE MOST VATICAN OF CAMEOS ~

The Dark and Unlit Countryside
Sir Henry Knight's Laboratory

Quartermass Grange

"What the bloody Hell is that?"

And Mary Morstan points up towards the sphere of light in which Irene Adler is now suspended before embarking on a string of muttered invectives which leave absolutely no doubt that she grew up around military men.

In fairness to Miss Morstan, Sherlock can't exactly blame her for her reaction: Were he not so intent on refusing Irene the satisfaction of knowing him to be amazed, he'd probably be doing the same thing.

But he's far too intent to start swearing now. He is, after all, aware of how dangerous a foe Irene Adler can be. He's not alone in that: to his right he can see John, already casting around for something with which to defend himself, even if it's only a stick or rock.

This being John, he could probably fashion his own bootlaces into an efficient device, if given enough time.

There's plenty of candidates to choose from: the eruption of light and energy which just emanated from Adler's sphere has knocked everything around them- including trees, plants, and even Sir Henry's beloved private laboratory, to the ground. Detritus is everywhere, as is dust, and it's making the air so thick that Sherlock's finding it rather difficult to breathe.

Of course, the fact that his former mistress appears to be hovering in mid air without the aid of dirigible or parachute might also have a bit to do with that, he must admit.

To his great relief however, while Molly is on the ground beside him, she appears to be uninjured and merely winded by being knocked over. In addition, Miss Morstan is trying to keep herself between the sphere and her friend, the better to save her from Adler. This prospect pleases him, though he would rather he weren't in so poor a physical condition, the better to defend his wife himself. (And speaking of defending family, he thinks, where the Devil is Anthea?) On Molly's other side, Sir Henry is also trying to keep Molly behind his rather greater bulk, his eyes wide as saucers as he stares at the sight before him-

"It's beautiful," he's murmuring, "So, so beautiful..."
He reaches out a hand, entranced almost, taking a step forward.

Sherlock hears Irene's laugh, low and smoky and warm even as John stills him with a steady hand on his arm. A quick, worried shake of his head. "Don't do it, son," he mutters.

"Isn't it though, Sir Henry?" Irene calls, ignoring Watson. She appears to be suspended within the orb but she doesn't seem to be under any physical pressure because of it. Her arms and legs, though outstretched, are not tensed as if she's being strung up, a sight Sherlock knows well. "You can't imagine how good it feels, my sweet boy," she's saying, that sweet low laugh thrilling again. "You can't imagine what this sort of clarity feels like..."

And she takes in a deep, luxuriant breath. Leans lazily back, bathing in light almost as a swimmer might bathe in water. Her smile widens, and she opens her hands, tilting them palm-upwards;

She raises her arms and suddenly the sky is swathed in swirls of yellow and violet light, far brighter and more lurid than any star.

Soft and diffuse, the streams of light thread through the air around Irene, weaving and re-weaving the sphere with varying degrees of solidity. Darting into her flesh and wrapping around her. Sliding through her hair and across her nose. Her lips. Her lashes. She closes her eyes, giving in to what looks to Sherlock's- admittedly well-informed- eye like pleasure and as she does her body convulses. Lights up suddenly.

Her lids snap open and there is blindingly bright yellow and violet in their depths, but no iris, pupil or sclera. No humanity.

No Irene.

For the first time in a long time, Sherlock feels a tremor of real fear slide down his spine.

"I can feel it," she's murmuring. "I can feel everything! Everything that was. Everything that is. Everything that will be.

"This thing, Sir Henry, you had it in your keeping for all that time and you never understood what you had... You never even listened to its calling, you foolish boy..."

"I tried, Ms. Adler," the young engineer said stiffly. "I must, however, admit that it never took to me even half so well as it seems to have taken to you."

"That," Adler snaps, "is because you were too blind to open your mind and surrender to the possibilities..." She shrugs, her old, insouciant self once again for a moment.

"That and the fact that it clearly has excellent taste- As do I."

And with these words her gaze comes to rest on Sherlock, her smile turning almost feral. He feels the force of it, the weight.

It's almost like someone has placed a physical burden on his chest.

Head cocked coyly, lashes lowered, Irene reaches out to him. Her hands are beseeching, her smile is blinding. Even three months ago, he would have been utterly unable to resist- He's surprised he can now. He hears her voice but by now her lips aren't moving.

It really is the most peculiar sensation he's ever felt.
Come to me, she whispers. Come to me and I'll make you happy, my darling boy. Come to me and I'll make you whole again. I'll make you everything you ever wished to be, every bit as extraordinary as I've always known you could be. You haven't seen it- You can't imagine what I'm offering, Sherlock- The things that you could know- The things that we can show you-

And images flash behind his eyes, as if his occulatory faculties have been bypassed entirely. He sees seas and oceans, ships and carriages. He sees London as it might one day be, a monolith of glass and steel and so many streetlamps they twinkle like a galaxy. He sees London as it once was, a mud-brick-and-wattle settlement, an upstart city crouched in the dirt.

And then his mind reels and other sights assail him: An ocean of stars. The utter, perfect silence of that void. The Earth, a mere jewel amongst many, and beyond it field after field of worlds, each one as different from his own as silver is from tar. He'd never let himself imagine there could be so much to know and now that it's before him, he feels it, feels his old friend curiosity rise in him, a tide that's not to be dampened- Not to be dismissed for anything-

Yes, he hears Irene as if from very far away. Yes, she whispers. Yes, that's it... That's it, mu darling...

Sherlock feels it now, the pleasure in Irene. The joy. The delight of it. The violent tumult going on under her skin- And for a moment it's under his too. Because for all that Mycroft had dismissed her as a mere hedonist, Sherlock had always known that there was more to her than that. Her hungers had been for more than sex or obedience or even affection.

Her hungers had been for anything in the world there was to have.

And this is his proof: He can feel her joy, her desire for knowledge. For wonder. Just as he can feel her desire to share it all with him. Incandescence, that's what she's after, and he must admit that she has found a way to that, however unconventional- Maybe, he muses, her desire is the real reason that she has gotten so much farther with the pocket-watch than even Sir Henry did-

Sir Henry... His mind sticks on that name.

There's something about Sir Henry... No, there's someone with Sir Henry...

And he feels it. A shiver of memory, too fleeting to be fully glimpsed. There's a press of sweet lips against his own. A soft, fond, exasperated sigh exhaled against the crook of his neck. Like this, husband? A voice whispers. Like this? And then-

I assure you, Mr. Holmes, I've never thought you ordinary...

He opens his eyes- when had he closed them?- and turns. Sees the person behind Sir Henry, the person Sir Henry is trying to protect. The person Sherlock's actually looking for.

Molly, his mind whispers, and he feels rather than hears Adler's hiss of anger as he remembers her.

My sweet, lovely Molly... My wife, my own Molly...

He looks up at Adler and he sees her face contort with a strange, animal rage.

For a split second she looks alien, looks utterly unlike the woman he knows.

"You should have let her take you," a voice utterly unlike Irene's hisses, though the words seem to come from her throat.

Their loudness makes the ground shake, causes ringing in Sherlock's ears.
Holmes stumbles back, shaking his head and trying to clear it. Molly has gotten to her feet now and she's reaching for him, her eyes wide and afraid. Dark and urgent.

Her fingers, thin as twigs, slide out to touch the sleeve of his coat and pull him to her.

Of a sudden, Sherlock realises that he has moved nearer to Adler, something he does not remeber deciding to do. He feels an odd queasiness as he thinks on it; He can tell by the frightened look on both his wife and his best friend's faces that his behaviour has been noted, and it has them frightened.

"Sherlock," John says, and there's warning in his voice. "Sherlock, this is, without a doubt, the most Vatican of any cameo situation we've found ourselves in. So I need you to for once in your life do as I bid you and step. Away. From. Adler.

Now."

And, like Molly, John places a hand on his friend's coat. Pushes himself gently back until he's standing beside Molly, Mary and Sir Henry again.

Though he is the smallest of the three men, John draws himself up to his full height and glares at the light-bathed dominatrix.

The furious glare she shoots him looks to Sherlock like it could turn him to stone.

"No more," John says. "You can't have him, Irene."

"I already have him," Adler answers in that same booming alien voice from a moment ago. "He will be one with us, whether he wills it or no."

"No, he won't." Sherlock feels Molly's hand slide into his and warmth rushes through him. A flash of home. Of certainty. That queasiness from earlier recedes slightly in its wake. "I rather think, Miss Adler," Molly's saying, "that you should leave my husband alone- Or face the consequences-"

"Jealous, are we?" Adler coos in her own voice and Molly shoots her the sort of look which normally gets a man beaten to within an inch of his life- Whether he will enjoy it or no.

"If I thought it would make him happy, I would give him up," she says quietly. "I rather doubt there's anything I wouldn't do for him. I-I love him dearly, and I hope he knows that."

Sherlock squeezes her hand to show that he does.

"But you're not yourself, Miss Adler," Molly continues, "that much is clear. And that being the case I cannot permit you to importune my husband further-" Her hand tightens on Sherlock's- "So as I said, leave him alone- Unless you are willing to deal with the conseque-"

Before Molly can finish her sentence, a tendril of violet light slashes out from the orb and darts towards her.

It strikes the ground at her feet, the impact hard enough that Sherlock feels it through the soles of his shoes. It knocks earth as high as his knees, bits of stone and grass spattering against his trouserlegs; Other tendrils reach out, hitting the earth at Mary, John and Sir Henry's feet.

Immediately- and unsurprisingly- they scatter.

In the illumination from Adler's sphere, there's plrecious little darkness to hide in though. And thanks to her first appearance, the trees which might have provided cover have all been knocked flat. But
that doesn't stop them from trying; Molly skitters back, her hand still in Sherlock's, pulling him with her. Another sliver of light smashes into the ground in her wake, then another and another.

Each one misses her just a tiny bit as she someone manages to stay an inch ahead.

Irene's aim is getting better, however. She's a crack shot, and like any other professional the more time she fires a weapon the more accurate with it her aim becomes-

"Run, little rabbit," Sherlock can hear her calling in her own voice, "run little rabbit and see if you can escape us!"

Molly turns and pulls Sherlock with her, running pell-mell and making for the remains of Sir Henry's laboratory.

Sherlock tries to steer her elsewhere- he understands her desire for cover right now, but the ruins are not suitable for that at all.

As he tries to pull her in another direction she turns and looks at him. Shakes her head. "Trust me," she mutters, pulling him farther towards the lab's ruins, and though he knows he has more experience in combat than she, there's a sureness in her eyes that convinces him-

So with a curt nod he dashes through the incoming fire, his hand in Molly's, his grip on her tightening. Out of the corner of his eye he can see John doing the same for Miss Morstan, though he cannot make out where Sir Henry has gone. The orb in which Adler is hanging has started moving, weaving through the night and coming closer, closer, then closer again to them- He can hear Irene's calls and they're setting his teeth on edge-

And then, without warning Molly throws herself forward and hits the ground, just meters from the ruins of the lab.

Her momentum is so great that she manages to take Sherlock with her.

"Now!" she shouts, and there's a sudden flash as bullets hit the air, the sound of them piercing the night like thunder-

He hears the sound of running footsteps and then there's a flurry of silk and heeled ankle boots in Sherlock's line of vision, making their way towards Adler.

Anthea has not, apparently, been buried under the remains of Sir Henry's lab or run away.

She is, in fact, currently exiting the ruins of said lab and is firing a shot gun right at Adler as she goes.

"That's the girl," he hears John call.

"Well done, Lady Utterwood!" Sir Henry whoops.

Sherlock can't help his grin as he watches his cousin work; If ever there was one of them who could handle Irene, it was Thea. The Countess is hissing under her breath even as she rounds on her foe, the weapon in her hands letting off far more round than Sherlock knows it ought.

"Back off, Adler!" she's yelling- "If anyone's going to kidnap Sherlock, it's going to be my sister-in-law!"

And she lets off another round, this one coming even closer to her target.
Holmes wants to help, to draw Adler's fire, but he can't; Molly has thrown herself bodily atop him and seems unwilling to move. In his current state of injury, he's reluctant to wrestle her too much lest he open his wounds again, and yet-

"Look where she's aiming," Molly hisses at him, because she must realise what he wants to do. "Look at what she's trying to hit- She knows what she's about, husband."

And so she must, for Sherlock belatedly realises that Anthea isn't shooting at Irene, she's shooting at a spot about a foot above her head, a spot of pale blue light which looks oddly familiar.

As he squints at it, he realises that it's not a spot of light, it's the pocket-watch which Sir Henry had found and which he had used to animate his mechanical hounds.

Well, Thea, he thinks. That is a capital notion.

I can't wait to hear Mycroft tell Mummy how clever you are.

It makes sense, Sherlock thinks. He had seen that the pocket watch could create light, though he hadn't been aware it could make something solid enough to convey Irene Adler through the hair like some sort of avenging Valkyrie- Nor had he been aware that it could conjure destructive blasts of light from the ether either. But taking the pocket-watch had set Adler on this course; destroying it was, therefore, the most logical way to stop her.

If, of course, she didn't succeed in hitting Thea with one of her bolts of light first, he muses.

If his bride-to-be is unjured, Sherlock realises, Mikey's going to be absolutely unbearable for weeks.

With this thought- and his desire to distract Adler and protect Molly at the forefront- he forces himself to his feet, shaking off Molly's attempts to keep him down.

"Thea needs a distraction," he whispers, "and I intend to give her one."

He pulls Molly to her feet.

"As should you- imp."

And with a grin, he kisses her before pushing her towards the ruins of Henry's lab, knowing that if she draws fire she will at least be safe there once he's gotten Adler's attention.

Mary and John must agree because they've started throwing rocks and stones at Adler, darting through her field of vision and distracting her. Morstan, in particular, in hollering like a banshee- Or perhaps Queen Boudicea, coming to fight the Romans single-handed and anxious to send them on their way.

It's working: Adler's put off, unable to keep track of all her targets. It's the problem with fighting multiple enemies, Sherlock muses, even when one's artillery is superior to theirs. The dominatrix is frowning, turning this way and that, and now the short-comings of her sphere make themselves known; it has no walls, no shields and, apparently, no way of manoeuvring that's easy to control-

"Irene darling," Anthea calls suddenly, "would you like to see my engagement ring?"

And she twists her hand, letting the light from Adler's sphere hit the multi-faceted diamond which Mycroft had placed on her finger just as she left London.

The reflection flashes in Adler's eye, for a split second blinding her, and in that moment Anthea
raises her weapon and hits the pocket watch with a single, precise blast.

The effect is instantaneous: The watch bursts apart, springs and coils and ephemera flung every which way. For a split second the sphere of light flickers like a candle and then it just sputters out. Like a puppet whose strings have been cut, Adler falls to earth, her body hitting the ground with a vicious-sounding thump which seems to knock all the breath out of her-

She lets out a groan of pain and instantly John is beside her, a large rock in his hand.

Miss Morstan is standing beside him, a bloody big stick in hers.

"Twitch," the blond woman bites out sharply, "And I shall bloody end you, Adler."

The expression on her face leaves little room to doubt.

By now Anthea is moving cautiously towards the remains of the pocket-watch; she summons her cousin with a flick of her chin and of course, Sherlock comes.

As they watch, the pieces of the pocket-watch- alien, twisting things the likes of which Sherlock has never seen before- start moving back towards one another, as the pieces of Sir Henry's mechanical hounds had done.

*This cannot be allowed to continue.*

With a perfunctory rip of her petticoat, Anthea tears off a piece of linen and bends down, scooping a few small pieces of the device into her makeshift net. With a nod- and a similar tearing of her underthings- Molly does the same, picking up other pieces of the watch. After a moment the woman are joined by John and Sir Henry, both of them using their pocket handkerchiefs for the task.

They are careful to keep their bundles of cloth and cogs as far way from one another as possible.

Sherlock, being without a kerchief- and also, not to put too fine a point on it, not entirely sure he won't reopen his wounds if he bends over- elects instead to walk back towards Adler.

Anthea wordlessly hands him her weapon as he goes, though he suspects Mary Morstan has the matter rather netly covered in anyways.

When he finds his former mistress she's lying on her back, staring up at the sky.

To his surprise and genuine dismay, he sees that her eyes are wet with tears.

"It was so beautiful," she whispers. "So beautiful and so, so wondrous. I was free, for the first time... I was finally free..."

And she shakes her head. Her expression is sorrowing. Her eyes focus on him and there's something in them he's never seen before. An... absence. A hollowness.

She is not the woman he knew, he realises with a start. Not anymore.

A quick glance at Morstan tells him she's seen it too.

"The man I knew first would have come with me," Irene says then and Sherlock nods. He sees no point in lying.

"He would have come with you," he tells her. "But he wouldn't have been able to appreciate it- That is a thing love has only recently taught him to do."
A snarl-like smile curls Irene's lip. "Is that what you want to believe?" she asks. "That your little mouse has finally taught you to appreciate something besides yourself?"

Sherlock sighs. Shakes his head. For the first time in his life, he looks at Irene Adler and finds her rather ordinary. Dull. Her spitefulness is far more human than he might have expected.

"What do you think?" he asks mildly, standing and moving away to Morstan's side.

Adler turns on her side, her back to him, and doesn't answer.

After a moment he realises, however, that her shoulders are shaking with what would, from anyone else, look like tears.

**Knightgower House**

**Later That Night**

The servants are roused- Or rather, they coaxed out of their hiding places and told to send an urgent message to London.

*Mycroft will have to be asked to come here, to check on Anthea if nothing else.*

This the servants do- Pointedly ignoring the fact that half their master's estate has been flattened and there's not a one among his companions will explain the cause. (They have, after all, been long enough in Sir Henry's employ to recognise the fallout from a botched experiment when they see one- And to know that asking questions is rarely wise).

They therefore set about cleaning up as best they can.

Once the message has been dispatched and Mycroft found- he'll be down to Grimpen by first light- Sherlock, Molly and the rest of their group make their way back to Henry's manor house.

Mary and John agree to stay up and take first watch over Adler, allowing Sherlock, Molly and their host to finally get some sleep.

The bedroom Molly and Sherlock are shown into is opulent by the standards of Baker Street; there's a fire waiting for them and a meal has been rustled up from somewhere. A night-rail and sleeping shirt have also been procured, and so with gentle, patient hands the newlyweds help one another into their nightclothes. Bath each other with the room's washing jub, trying to remove at least some of the evidence of the evening.

There's no question of consummation- Sherlock is far too tired to make it worth her while, at least that's how he puts it to Molly- but despite that, they're happy.

Rather they get into bed together and lie, nestled up in one another's arms.

For a long while the room is silent, as they simply breathe in time. Eventually though, the question he knows is coming must be uttered. Molly, to be fair to her, doesn't try to hedge things (not that he really expected her to).

"Were you tempted at all?" she asks quietly. "Not by the, well, the light and the possiblity of it, but by Miss Adler's offer?" She pauses; her next words are directed to Sherlock's collar-bone.

"You must admit, it shows she cares for you, if nothing else. And you have, after all, known her a great deal longer than you've known me-"
"And yet," he interrupts, "had it been you in that thing, I would have gone. I would have taken you up on your offer.

You may ponder what it means, that I stayed earth-bound, to your heart's content."

He feels it then, a small huff of breath. Her cheek curving into a smile against his chest. Her body loosens against him.

He realises, belatedly, that she was worrying about tonight.

"I love you, Molly Hooper," he says softly. "I may not have known you long, but I do know that-and I will never give you cause to doubt it."

"Nor I, to you." He feels a kiss pressed to the bare skin of his throat, a hand resting on his heart. She nuzzles sweetly into him and he gives a contented sigh. Holds her more tightly.

After a few moments her breathing evens out into slumber.

Tomorrow there will be hell to pay in London, and he will have so much explaining to do that it literally makes his head ache to contemplate it, but for here and now he's with Molly and he's happy.

It's with this thought that Sherlock falls asleep, a smile on his face.
A Shocking Lack of Chaperones

Disclaimer: This fanfiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Not beta-read, so all mistakes are mine. My spellcheck is also on the fritz, so there may be more typos than usual. Please note that this here is some good, old-fashioned, conjugal smut for Sherlock and Molly. If that's not your thang, you can stop reading after we leave Mycroft and Anthea, and you can pick up at the next chapter on. Thanks for their reviews go to Simply Spectating, renniejoy and Limaro. Hope you enjoy this one too...

~ CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE: A SHOCKING LACK OF CHAPERONES ~

Grimpen Station

The Next Morning

Mycroft arrives with the dawn, his face drawn and grave, his demeanour impenetrable.

He barely even glances at Molly or his brother, his gaze drawn like a magnet to Anthea instead.

(He has already dismissed the group of operatives he's brought to take care of Adler, sending them to take her from Mary and John's care).

As soon as she sees him Anthea freezes. The young spy opens her mouth- perhaps to assure him that her sundry bruises and scrapes are not nearly so serious as they appear- but the elder Holmes shakes his head. Stops her. She frowns at him in confusion; Rather than say anything however, he walks up to her and backs her, quite peremptorily, up against the counter of the (thankfully deserted) train station.

She stares up at him with wide, surprised eyes.

"I must see, Thea," he says in a low voice which brooks no disagreement, and the young Countess Utterwood is left with no choice but to nod. Gulp.

Her breathing has become slightly... accelerated.

With swift, efficient ease Mycroft hoists his bride-to-be up onto the station counter and brushes the hair off her face. Sets about checking her person for injury, his perusal as no-nonsense as any doctor, his only communication raised eyebrows or narrowed eyes when he encounters a bruise which causes Anthea pain. (This does not, admittedly, happen often).

It's a strange thing to witness, Molly can't help but think: Though there's not a touch of sentiment about it, the young doctor still feels like she should look away. Like she's witnessing an act which is actually rather intimate. The fact that Anthea's clearly enjoying it merely adds to the sense of voyeurism.

By the time he's finished, Anthea's cheeks are flushed slightly and her eyes are starry.

Though he seems to be composed, Molly can't help but notice that the back of Mycroft's neck has turned bright red, too.

"So do I pass muster, Sir?" Anthea asks in a low voice, and her commander nods. Moves to step
away from her.

She swings one deft little ankle out, hooks him in place with it.

Mycroft cocks her an imposing, questioning eyebrow.

"Do I pass muster, Sir?" she asks again, and this time there's coyness in her voice. Flirtation.

Behind her, Molly hears Sherlock give a snort of amusement.

"You are, as ever, effervescent, Thea," Mycroft says curtly. He lowers his voice, leans into her. "I merely wished to be certain..."

"Certain I was alright?" Anthea's voice is soft. Sweet. Hopeful.

For one moment, she might almost be that harmless dowager that everyone thought she was.

Perhaps he understands what showing such vulnerability has cost her, for Mycroft shoots her a small, crooked grin- it's rather like his brother's- and nods. Tips her chin up so that her eyes meet his. Without any warning he reaches out, his large, calloused hand gripping her nape gently and pulling her to him. He doesn't kiss her, merely lays his forehead on hers, and Anthea closes her eyes. Sighs in delight.

Her hands come up to grip his jacket lapels and hold him in place and again Molly is tempted to look away from so intimate a sight.

"You're coming back to London with me," Mycroft says then. "No arguing: We'll drive the automobile, and let Sherlock and his new wife enjoy the comforts of the train..."

And with that- and a mere nod to his brother and Molly- Mycroft picks Anthea off the her on her feet.

He threads his fingers through hers and pulls her in the direction of station's exit.

"M will want to debrief us, brother mine," he calls over his shoulder as he goes. "Best you don't keep our paymaster waiting..."

"Remember that when you and Thea are in Mr. Coulson's vehicle unsupervised," Sherlock retorts, and to Molly's amusement Anthea looks over her shoulder and sticks out her tongue at him as she's disappearing out the door.

Sherlock being Sherlock sticks his tongue out right back.

A moment later the sound of Lolly's engine roars and Molly assumes that Mycroft and Anthea on their way back to London. On their way back to deal with the repercussions from Magnusson's plot, though when she asked about the older man Mycroft had merely thrown her an icy smile and assured her that he had the matter, "in hand."

"We'd best be getting back," Molly says quietly, trying to push away the slight chill which moves through her at the thought of Magnusson. "Especially if you're to speak with your superiors, I suppose we oughtn't to wait..."

"Bugger all that." And with that bright, mischievous grin she likes so much, her new husband brings one of their joined hands up to his mouth. Presses a small, sweet kiss to it.

He stares into her eyes and oh, the things that his look is doing to her right now...
"Seems to me," he drawls, "that if Mikey and Thea get to take the long way back to the city, the least we can do is match them..." He presses another kiss to her hand. "Either that, or completely outclass them."

Molly lets out a laugh. "Marriage is not a competitive institution, husband mine," she points out. "And I have no intention, I assure you, of entering into some sort of rivalry with Lady Anthea..."

The kiss he presses to her lips steals her breath. Makes her heart race.

When he pulls away from her, his grin is wider than before.

"Let me rephrase that," he says. "What I intended to say is that if Mikey gets to have a honeymoon before he's even married, then I certainly get to have one now that I am."

And without warning he swoops down. Picks up Molly and tosses her playfully over his shoulder. She lets out a surprised whoop of laughter and he smacks her lightly on her bottom. Orders her to behaved herself.

"Aren't I supposed to be telling you that, Mr. Holmes?" she asks him and he grins.

"That's the spirit," he tells her. "Mrs. Holmes."

And with that he carries her towards the night-porter and inquires about tickets back to London, Molly laughing all the while.

_Baker Street_

_Later That Night_

The journey back to London is usually tedious, Sherlock knows.

After an adventure one is too keyed up to be stuck in one place for long, which is exactly what one must endure when one travels by train or cab.

And yet, when the hansom pulls into Baker Street and he shakes Molly gently awake, he finds that he is merely happy to be home. Not keyed up or anxious. Not irritated with anyone.

He supposes travelling with one's wife will do that to a man- If one's wife happens to be as perfect as his.

"Molly," he calls softly as they come to a halt, "Molly, it's time to wake up now..."

And he gives her a gentle shake. Hooks his arms underneath her knees, preparing to lift her if necessary. (He's sure that whatever his injuries, he can manage such a thing). The young doctor blinks up at him, her face flushed, her eyes still sleepy, and shoots him a soft, scorching sort of smile.

He feels the force of it down to his toes, and he is suddenly awfully grateful that they're so near home.

"Are we at your rooms yet?" she asks huskily, and then blushes, her eyes widening as she realises what she's just said out loud.

_Such matters are not spoken of in public._

To add insult to injury, the cabbie can clearly be heard snickering through the pay-hatch in the front
and for a moment Sherlock is tempted to give him a piece of his mind. His wife, is, after all, a respectable woman—*But for being married to him*.

Given, however, that his new bride requires sleep and that he, too, would like a night in his own bed, he elects to toss a few coins through the payment hatch and pop the hansom door open instead. He tries to lift Molly out but finds that the cab is not spacious enough to support the effort.

"I can do it," Molly says softly, getting to her feet and holding her hand out.

Sherlock alights and then helps her down.

"Welcome home, Mrs. Holmes," he says softly, tucking her hand into the crook of his arm and escorting her up the steps to 221B. "I assure you, this night will improve dramatically, once we are indoors..."

And he pulls out his keys and opens the door. Escorts her inside.

The door lock's barely snapped closed when he feels himself pressed back against the wood and his wife treats him to a sweet, scorching kiss.

For a moment his senses scramble, brain rushing to catch up with the sensation of what's happening, and then Molly's pulling away from him. Grinning up at him.

*She's really rather spectacular, he cannot help but think.*

"I've been wanting to do that for ages," she says softly. "It's a wonder I could keep my hands to myself this entire day."

Sherlock doesn't often experience such a thing, but red stains his cheek.

"You were thinking about that on the train, eh?" he asks and she shakes her head. Drops her chin to look up at him through her eyelashes.

Suddenly it's her turn to blush.

"Not thinking about it," she says softly. "Dreaming about it. On the train. In the cab." The blush gets darker. "I was rather afraid that I'd made some... noise to that effect, and that's why the cabbie was laughing." A frown marrs her brow and he reaches out. Smoothes it away.

"I shouldn't like to have shared such an intimate thing with a stranger," she says and he nods. Frowns, remembering the image of her asleep in their train carriage as the sun went down, her dark head pressed against his shoulder. She had been slightly restless, he'd thought, but she had given no indication of what her dreams had consisted of.

It's probably just as well, he muses, since (injured or no) he would doubtless have ended up doing something that got them both kicked off the train if she had.

"So you were thinking about...?" He finds his throat is dry.

"Wedding nights," she supplies, nodding. She can't seem to stop looking at his lips. "I was dreaming about wedding nights, and husbands, and, well, you, and all the lovely things those words might entail..."

And she smiles. Presses her hands to his chest before rising on tiptoe to press a sweeter, more chaste kiss to his mouth.
She sighs as she does it and Sherlock's hands tighten on her waist.

She starts pressing butterfly-light kisses along the skin of his throat and his fingers fist together in the cloth of her skirt.

"I know I'm a bit... bruised," he says breathlessly, "but I was wondering whether we might... Whether you felt ready to..."

"Perform some conjugal rites?" She says the words with ridiculous properness but when he looks at her she smiles, all innocence. All sweetness.

As he had in Grimpen Station, he taps her backside playfully.

This time, however, she slaps his back, her eyes alight with mischief.

It's the shock of it, more than anything. It's not as if it actually hurts. *Sherlock's tolerance for pain, is he knows, really rather remarkable.* His pupils dilate slightly however, arousal starting to course through his veins, and she sees it, she must do, because with slow deliberation she steps closer to him. Presses him back against the door again. She takes his face in her hands and tilts his head down until he's where she wants him.

Her eyes are dark and warm and excited now, as she leans into him and presses her lips to his.

This time he lets his hands wander, allows them to come to rest on her hips. Her breasts. The squeeze her through the thick fabric of her newly day dress. She lets out a wicked little moue of arousal and pushes more forcefully into him, her knee sliding between his legs to press against his crotch. To tease him as he's teasing her.

What she feels there- he's growing hard- makes her moan a little, her eyes popping open and flicking down his body, her hands stilling from where they've anchored themselves in his shirt and coat.

She blinks, cheeks heated, and with a playful kiss her to cheek Sherlock presses his hardened flesh against her knee.

He hisses in pleasure and her eyes flicker up to his. "You like that?" she asks and he nods.

His hands travel down from her hips to grip her backside. Pull her more roughly to him. "I thought you were familiar with your effect on that particular part of my anatomy, love," he says.

"I thought I was." She nods, frowning. Curious. One hand leaves his shirt and, just as she had the other night, she takes him in hand. Squeezes him, her eyes on his. Her sweet little teeth biting her lip.

He is both pleased and dismayed to realise that she remembers *exactly* how he likes to be touched.

"It's like this, isn't it?" she says, and her voice has gone breathless and deep. Arousal threads through it, making it sound absolutely delicious.

Quite without his willing them to, Sherlock's hips have started moving in time with her.

"Yes," he murmurs, "Yes, just like that..."

And he tips his head back. Closes his eyes, surrendering.

He can feel Molly's own hips starting to cant against his, matching his rhythm. For a moment he's tempted to gather her to him and see if they can find climax even here. Even clothed.
When he looks down into her eyes he knows that she would like that too.

But still, but still... She's his wife, he reminds himself. This will be their first time together. They have their entire lives to have a filthy, gorgeous tup against their own front door. So he tries to regain his focus. His control. He knows it only right that he show her. Teach her. Make sure that it's good for her. He wants, he reminds himself forcefully, to give her what she needs...

And what she needs her first time is pleasure, that she won't fear that act again. That she'll enjoy it for the rest of their lives together.

And so, though her body and his are moving in time, winding themselves tighter and tighter into ecstasy, he stills. Shakes his head. Pulls away.

He's breathing rather heavily.

She looks up at him, brows puckered together. "Wasn't it good?" she asks quietly, worriedly, and in that moment she looks so very dear that he wants to kiss her and never, ever stop.

"Too good," he says with what he suspects is a pained smile. "So good that if we keep this up I'm going to come in my smalls like a bloody schoolboy."

Her smile turns slightly... wicked. "Isn't that what you want, though?" she asks. "To be a pupil, and for me to be your governess? Didn't you say you enjoy being punished?" Her smile again turns wicked. "I'm sure that I could do that for you."

And she reaches around, fills her palm with the fullness of his backside. Watching him carefully, she pinches the rounded flesh of his buttocks and her smile widens when he lets out a reverent, aroused, "fuck, oh fuck, Molly."

"What was that?" she asks and she pinches again, harder this time. Again he finds himself swearing. "Is that any way to speak in front of your lady wife, darling?" she tuts. "You know, I think you need to be taught a lesson, Sherlock Holmes."

"I think you are the lesson, Molly Hooper," he moans and as suddenly he pushes against her. Switches their places. Now her back's to the door and his hands are full of her. Now his knee's between her legs, the warmth of her obvious against his thigh. She blinks up at him, breathless. Aroused. Without another word he sets to kissing her as thoroughly as he can, determined to steal her breath and steal her heart until she's aching with the need for him, just as he's aching with the need for her.

Her arms wrap around him and pull him to her.

His hips push forcefully against hers, meeting her thrust for thrust, gasp for gasp, until they're both so far gone that Sherlock's certain they'll both come right there and then.

Molly's head tips back, eyes closed, and he can't help himself. He tosses up her skirts. Buries his hand beneath them. His fingers find the wetness of her bare flesh- Mycroft had brought her a fresh dress but no underthings this morning- and as he does she moans. Spreads her thighs for him.

"Good girl," he mutters raggedly. "Sweet, good girl..."

His fingers slip into her wetness and she lets out a soft, keening moan.

It travels straight to his cock, but if there's one thing he's not willing to do, it's take his wife's virginity up against a door where anyone can hear.
Instead he pushes aside her opened coat roughly, drags sharply at her dress's bodice. The fabric gives way and he slides his teeth against her bared throat. With his free hand he tugs at her pelisse and corset, managing to free one fresh, succulent little tit for the pleasure of his mouth. He suckles her, and now it's her turn to moan.

"Like that," she gasps, "Oh, just like that, my darling..."

She starts riding his fingers and soon she's finding her climax, her cunny spasming against his hand. Her mouth dropping open in pleasure. Sherlock hears her muffled gasp of completion, feels it against his throat, and when her eyelids flutter open she's staring up at him in awe.

He reaches down and presses a small kiss to her nose, and to his utter delight she gives a soft, womanish laugh.

"No wonder the human race is forever expanding," she gasps, and despite himself Sherlock smiles. Lets out a matching bark of laughter. He kisses her and- yes, he feels it, his climax comes with her cuddled in his arms and laughing, but then that's the way these things happen, sometimes.

She strokes his hair and kisses him, holding him tight through it.

When he opens his eyes, her smile is bright and sweet and wide.

"I love you," she says softly and he feels a wash of warmth go through him as he says the words back to her. As he feels how much he means them.

"Come along, Mrs. Holmes," he tells her. "Let's get you into bed."

When they've both gotten their breaths back they make their way upstairs. Heat water for a bath. Molly bathes him carefully and checks his injuries, makes sure no serious damage has come to him. He does the same for her, finally getting to check for himself, to make sure that she's alright. He breathes a sigh of relief as he does.

All the way through it he savours the way she smiles at him. Touches him. Though he can tell she's a little nervous- "it's more anticipation," she says when he asks her- she doesn't seem frightened by his touch, as she had been at first. Rather, she leans into it. Reciprocates. Having realised the pleasure which sexual congress can bring she is, perhaps, now eager for it, Sherlock thinks.

"Are you sure you'll be alright?" she asks when he tells her. "That you'll be- That is, that I won't damage you-"

He silences her with a kiss. Hushes her. Her damp skin and wet hair clings pleasantly to his own, the sound of her moving in the bath a deeply soothing thing.

"Sir Henry's abominable mechanicals did me some damage, but not much," he tells her. "You've examined me, Dr. Hooper: what is your diagnosis?"

She shrugs. Directs her gaze to his chest. "I can see nothing too severe," she says softly. "The wounds aren't serious, the creatures didn't break the skin. But still, I couldn't live with myself if I ended up being the reason you were damaged..." A wry smile ticks up her lip. "Well, in a way besides the way you reportedly like..."

And she looks up at him, holding eye contact even as she presses a kiss to his damp chest. His
fingers stroke through her hair, holding her forehead against him. Knowing that allowing her to continue to reflect more darkly on his injuries will probably just discomfit her, he takes this opportunity to suddenly splash water at her, making her gasp in outrage and flick water back at him.

She scrambles out of the bath-tub, completely naked, and that's it: the game's afoot.

Within moments there's a full-blown water-fight going on, the two of them splashing about like a pair of particularly adventurous ducks.

Sloshing water at one another and laughing loudly, they tear around the flat in loud, demented glee. When Sherlock finally corners Molly in his room he wrestles her onto his bed. Presses her beneath him. Her eyes are bright and warm as she stares up at him: He can see the trust glowing in their depths.

He feels it then, that twist of... that twist of Mollyness in his chest. That twist which only she brings out in him.

Slowly, tenderly, he leans down and kisses her. Strokes her bare body with his hands.

She sighs contentedly into his mouth, and when he pulls back, he can see not a trace of nervousness in her. Not a single one.

"What do you want to do?" she asks softly, her voice low and aroused.

There's gooseflesh rising on her arms and legs, and it belatedly occurs to Sherlock that she might catch a chill.

"Can't have that," he thinks.

"I want to dry you," he answers her. "And then I want to kiss every inch of your delectable little body. I want to lick and suck and touch you all over, you even more times than I already have."

Her skin flushes and he feels himself begin to grow hard. She's so bloody gorgeous when she's ready for him. "Oh, I want that," she says. "I want that so much..."

"I know, love," he answers. "I know-

And then, then I want you to tell me how you wish us to consummate our relationship, for the choice is yours."

Again, he kisses her. This time she's staring at him. She looks like she's surprised, like she doesn't know what to say.

"You'll find I'm rather insistent about that, I'm afraid," he tells her. "As I mentioned, I like a woman who can take charge."

She gulps. Her eyes are wide as saucers. "And that woman is me?" she asks, almost breathless.

He nods. "Oh yes," he tells her. "That woman is most definitely you."

He sees the spark of joy- of gratitude- in her gaze and then she's running from his room, her feet pattering through the flat. She returns a moment later with her arms full of towels and his comb, though whether it's up to the challenge of taming her long locks is anybody's guess. True to his word Sherlock dries her thoroughly (as she dries him) and when they're both ready he asks her what she wants. How she wants him.

"Is there any position you'd rather not assume?" she asks him and he shakes his head.
"Just nothing to do with grabbing my ankles," he tells her. "You may not believe it, but it's hell on my back."

Molly giggles and smiles. Places her hand on his chest and presses him onto his back on his bed. She kisses him again, her hands roving everywhere. Searching. Tasting. Learning- And oh but her curiosity's one of her more wonderful traits.

Pretty soon she has him gasping, babbling with want. Sweating and shivering and ready to come. When she's ready- and when he's hard enough- she rolls him onto his back. Pulls astride him.

He's careful as he takes himself in hand and pushes himself gently into her.

He's careful as she leans back, opens herself up to him.

He has to go slow- there's pain, of course there's pain- but he manages it, as does she.

When he's finally seated all the way inside her he looks up and sees that there are tears in her eyes.

He wants to ask but she hushes him. Kisses him. Though he's trying desperately to stay still she starts moving, and within moments she's found her rhythm, just as he's found his.

"You're inside me," she whispers, and he nods to her.

"I never knew anything could feel like this."

He reaches down, presses his fingers against her pearl. She gasps and bucks, moans in pleasure but although he thinks she's enjoying it, he doubts that she'll come. It's why he'd been so eager earlier: he wanted her to have one climax, at least.

His Molly is clever though, as well as brave and kind and carnal. She shifts her position so now when he pitches his hips up towards her, his pubic bone hits her clitoris. That bud of pleasure must be well-treated because with a hitch of her breath she lets out a tight, low wail. Starts to thrash. Starts to come. She fists the sheets beneath her as she comes with him inside her. The pleasure of it is too much, the joy of it, and with the sound of her in his ears Sherlock comes too, his body spasming, coming apart. Aching with joy.

When he comes back to himself, he realises he has a death-like grip on his Molly, as if afraid she'll be spirited away.

She meets his eyes and smiles at him. Kisses his lips. She runs her nose along his and he presses kisses to her closed eyelids.

"So now, we're married," she murmurs.

"T'would appear so, darling," he grins at her.

She smiles into his chest and presses a kiss there. "You're a cheeky little thing, Sherlock Holmes," she says, "but I find I adore you all the same."

*Sherlock finds he couldn't have said it better himself.*
Molly wakes up to the sound of a violin playing.

She rolls over, cocking an ear, and smiles at the beauty of the tune.

After a few moments the music starts becoming louder, and the door to the master bedroom opens: Sherlock enters and grins down at her, the instrument at his shoulder, his hair tousled and messy with sleep.

He is, it should be noted, as naked as the day he was born.

With a wide smile he puts the violin down and kneels on the bed, crawling up towards Molly, a gorgeous, sinful smile on his face; by the time he reaches her she's already opened her arms to him, pulling him down to her and tangling him against her body for a long, sweet kiss. They pull apart, the need to breathe having overcome them both, and she sits up. Pulls the bedclothes open and beckons him to join her beaneath the sheets.

It's only then that she remembers that she's absolutely naked.

The cool air of the morning is feels surprisingly pleasant against her bare breasts.

She starts, embarrassed, her hands coming up to cover herself but at the last moment she stops herself. Places her hands on her husband's shoulders instead and smiles up at him. Nods to him before taking one of his big, calloused hands and placing it on her heart.

Her skin feels afire, red stretching all the way from her hairline to her abdomen.

Her heart is beating very loudly in her chest.

Something tender moves in Sherlock's eyes, his smile softening, and with gentle, exquisite care he leans in. Ghosts his fingers over one, puckering nipple, wetting it. He presses gentle kisses to each of her breasts before nuzzling his nose into them. Licking and caressing their undersides. Pushing them together and burying his face into their warmth. Molly sighs in pleasure, winding him closer and spreading her thighs for him in invitation: as she does so however, she is unfortunately reminded of last night's activities, and their repercussions.

She winces, a soreness unlike any other she has experienced spreading through her muscles.

She is suddenly, viscerally reminded that she is no longer a virgin, and while she welcomes the news

Disclaimer: This fanfiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Not beta read, so all mistakes are mine. My spell-check is still on the fritz so apologies if there are more typos than usual. And thanks for their reviews go to MizJoely and devilgrrl. There's also more smut in this one- If you don't want to read it, jump down to the section in Belgravia. Enjoy!
she doesn't welcome the messenger.

She shifts uncomfortably and instantly Sherlock stops, looks at her askance, before his expression clears and he nods. Pulls away to press a softer, more chaste kiss to her cheek.

"Ah," he says. "I'd forgotten about that."

"You'd forgotten already, husband?" she murmurs, trying for nonchalant. "I fear I shall have to do better next time, then."

And she smiles, tries to make light of it, though truth be told she's a little disconcerted by how sore she is. How... raw. Though she had expected it, the reality is something different. More... visceral, somehow. More real. Hearing about something and experiencing it for herself are two different things.

She does hope that such pain will keep her out of her husband's arms for too long, however.

Sherlock's looking at her closely, perhaps cateloguing her reactions in that way of his. She wishes to reassure him- She is, after all, aware of her duties to him, in bed as well as out of it. She doesn't want to disappoint her new husband with her lack of fortitude. Holding eye contact however, he slides his hands down, twines one around her ankle, the other beneath her arch. His palm looks big and white and unexpected, there against the skin of her calf. He takes her hand at her arch and slides it up her body, presses her heart until she's lying on her back, her eyes staring up at the ceiling and her breath coming quick and sharp-

And then he sets to stroking every inch of her legs, kissing and caressing her toes. Her calves. Her thighs.

Within minutes he has her panting, gasping, though she winces when she imagines him pushing his way inside her again.

He must realise as much, for he hushes her, pressing a kiss to her lips before telling her to relax. "It's merely an experiment, love," he says. "I shan't put myself inside you- I know you're too sore today."

Molly blinks in surprise, raising her head to look down at him. He looks absolutely delicious, resting between her splayed thighs. "Then what do you intend to do?" she asks and his smile turns sly. Wicked.

The mere sight of it makes her cunny grow hot. Her cheeks can match it.

"Why, I'm going to see how many ways there are to get you off without my cock, darling wife," he says matter-of-factly, as if such an asperation were the most normal thing in the world to voice. "I have heard of women who can come merely by being caressed, or licked," he continues. "Perhaps you are one of them?"

I wish to find out."

Molly lets her head fall back against the pillow. Trust Sherlock, to think on such a thing. "To be perfectly honest," she tells him, "I have no idea if I am, husband mine."

She feels, rather than sees, the wider smile which splits his face at this information.

"And ascertaining that, my dear," he tells her, "is the point of the experiment." He presses a sweet little kiss to her ankle before she can gainsay him. "That, and letting me see you come so beautifully again- I rather fear I'm growing addicted to the sight of it, you know."
And before she can ask him anything else- or even offer him some relief, for she doesn't wish him to be left wanting- Sherlock sets his wry, clever mouth and his calloused, inventive hands to her. He spreads her, splays her. Licks and sucks and caresses her. He discovers every nook and crevice and secret place in her body that can make her gasp. That can make her shudder.

It turns out that she can indeed come without the aid of his cock, or even his tongue.

Eventually- about three climaxes later- Molly finally persuades him to lay back and allow her to explore him in the same way, her experiments ending with him gasping, hard and sweet and needy beneath her as she suckles him in her mouth.

He comes undone with a muttered oath.

When he kisses her in the aftermath, she can taste both herself and him on her tongue and she finds the notion excites her terribly. He's delighted when she tells him.

They lie together in the pale light of morning. Gasping. Boneless. Satisfied; By the time their breakfast, papers and mail arrive (courtesy of young Archie) Molly is convinced she might just be married to the most wonderful man in London- Or, perhaps, the world.

And then she sees the morning headlines- Magnusson's death has made several front pages- and the invitation for her and Sherlock from the head of Mycroft's organisation, M.

Even the handwriting in which it's written looks severe.

"I'd try to hide you away," Sherlock says. "But I've found M to be bloody relentless- Best we get this over with."

And so he and Molly dress and summon a hansom, heading straight for Mycroft's townhouse in Mayfair.

They hold hands all the way there.

Mycroft's Townhouse,

Grosvenor Square,

Belgravia

By the time they reach Mikey's house, Sherlock has managed to regain control of himself.

After all, waking this morning with Molly had brought out the hedonist in him, and he's been a little worried that it might shock his wife. (She is, after all, a lady, however she may have been raised).

Molly had, however, reacted with her usual aplomb, much to his delight: Her willingness to allow his explorations was really rather unexpected, and her insistence on reciprocating had him eager to be alone with her again- As soon as possible.

Sooner, if he could manage it.

But before such a thing could happen, he suspected that he would have to give the head of his organisation- and the only person Mycroft truly answers to- their proverbial pound of flesh.

M really did get tiresome, when she felt she had to drag news out of him.
And so, with as much dignity as he can muster, he makes his way into Mycroft's morning room, Molly's hand in the crook of his arm.

Perhaps she senses his unease because she's smiling encouragingly at him.

Inside he sees Anthea and Mycroft, sitting side by side and looking utterly unruffled. The only giveaway that this is not a meeting of mere comrades is the slight flush of red at the back of his brother's neck- And the small, serene smile which tugs at Thea's lip.

John's sitting in too- at Mikey's right- and with him is Mary Morstan. The blond woman's fist is wrapped where she punched Adler during an apparent escape attempt, and she's trying to hide it by keeping it under her reticule (Sherlock can tell just by looking at it that the binding is Watson's handiwork).

To their left stands Greg Lestrade, M's contact in the Metropolitan Police Service, while to their right Mrs. Hudson doles out tea and sandwiches (she alone has security clearance to serve at functions such as these).

And there, looking resplendent in a deep burgundy day dress with matching hat, sits M, head of the British Secret Service and most wanted spy in the known world.

The Holmes brothers know her as Mummy.

"Will!" she calls when she sees him, gesturing to two places which have been set (ominously, in Sherlock's opinion) beside her.

There's no way around it, so Sherlock squeezes Molly's hand and leads her forward, darting forward to press a kiss to the older woman's cheek.

*Best get this over with.*

"Mummy," he rejoins warmly. "You look radiant as ever." The older woman's eyes flicker to Molly and he takes the hint, realises that trying to deflect her interest with flattery will not work in this particular instance.

He can hear Mycroft snickering behind him and it is only with great difficulty that he represses the urge to stick out his tongue.

"And may I present my new wife?" he says instead, trying to keep his voice officious. "Doctor Molly Hooper, may I present my mother? This is the Viscountess Undershaw, Lady Alexandra Holmes.

She is the head of our little organisation."

Molly blinks, surprised, but she quickly rallies and sketches a passable curtsy, dropping her head. Sherlock guesses that this is not the strangest personage she has ever faced. "My lady," she says politely. "Forgive me, I didn't realise I was to meet any more of Sherlock's family today-"

"Tosh!" the older woman speaks over her, smiling. "Don't worry yourself, my dear- I'm just relieved you're actually real, and not some sort of figment of my son's sordid imagination."

Before Molly can comment Mummy stands, starts walking around her. She looks her up and down and Molly cocks an eyebrow, drawing herself up to her full height, a reaction which makes Mummy bark with laughter.
Looking slightly unsure, Molly nevertheless smiles back.

"She's a game little thing, I'll give you that, Will," Mummy tells him. Her tone in impressed. "She'll not be bullied by you, I imagine- Not that I would expect any less from either of my boys."

And she winks at Molly, then at Anthea. Behind them Sherlock hears Watson give something which sounds suspiciously like a snort, but when he looks at him from the corner of his eye he appears as blandly calm as ever, even if Mary Morstan is stroking her shoe surreptitiously against his calf. (The action is making Watson somewhat hot under the collar).

Maybe Mummy sees this too because she again laughs, before gesturing to the chairs beside her and indicating Molly and Sherlock should sit. Anxious to show that he has some manners, Sherlock pulls out his wife's chair before seating himself, something which causes Mycroft to mutter in despair behind him.

Mummy merely nods, looking thoughtful.

"Now that that's out of the way," she says, "I shall need my mission report: I've read the headlines about Magnusson's death, but I assume that's not the whole story?"

"No," Mycroft supplies. "No, it is not."

His gaze goes to Thea and then slides away, the back of his neck again turning red.

If Mummy makes a note of it, she elects to keep it to herself.

"Magnusson made a play to gain control of our organisation," the elder Holmes begins. "He was using surveillance equipment to gather compromising material on anyone who visited his home."

"Photographs?" Mummy asks with asperity and Mycroft nods.

"Images, as well as cinematographic material-"

The older woman blinks. "He had a camera which could be kept secured?" she asks. "All of our prototypes have been too loud or unreliable for spywork- Your father's tried everything. In fact, it's been making him rather boorish around the house." She shakes her head, mutters to herself that, "I rather fear he needs another hobby."

Mycroft nevertheless nods. "When we raided Magnussen's house this morning, we took his device," he says. "I'll make sure it's sent to Daddy's workshop in the Quarter Master's Lab, you may depend upon it, Mummy."

Mummy gives a sharp nod. "Thank you, Mikey." Her eyes go to Sherlock and Molly and both, despite their best intentions, fidget slightly beneath her gaze. "But what about this business in Sir Henry Knight's house?" she asks, turning back to the rest of the party. "Knight was a person of interest for us, but I hadn't expected him to come into play nearly so early."

"That was my fault, Ma'am," Mary says.

Mummy cocks a challenging eyebrow, surprised at being interrupted. "Oh?"

And before Molly or Sherlock can say anything, Mary launches into an explanation of her surreptitious following of Knight, followed by a description of the race to Grimpen and the eventual extra-stellar menace they encountered there. She spares no detail, even going so far as to describe how Molly managed to persuade Sherlock to actually accept medical assistance, and Anthea
managed to stop Adler before the pocketwatch device took her over entirely.

This former impresses the party more than the latter, Sherlock can't help but think.

Mummy listens in silence, stopping her only occasionally to ask questions before nodding and pulling a small pocket-book from her reticule. Scribbling something inside it and handing it to Mrs. Hudson. "See that it gets to Sherrinford, Martha," she tells the other woman and Hudson nods, bobbing a curtsy before exiting.

Mycroft watches her go, a frown on his face, but he says nothing.

Mary, likewise, appears to recognise the name Sherrinford, though she has the good sense to keep it to herself.

"Do we have any idea why the device responded to Adler, and not Knight?" Mummy asks. The question is directed to the room at large.

Mycroft shrugs. "She was more susceptible to it," he says. "Feminine weakness, perhaps-"

Mummy and Anthea both clip him sharply around the ear and he pouts but nods in acquiescence. He should have expected nothing less, in this room."Yes, well, that's General Sharlto's opinion, not mine," he points out.

"What is yours?" It's the first question Molly has asked and all eyes turn to her, causing her to blush slightly.

Sherlock curls her hand in his and brings it to his mouth to kiss, in an effort to soothe her. Mycroft smiles though, impressed perhaps that she guessed he had a theory.

"Adler was born near Torchwood House," he says. "Spent her formative years in the convent school there- As did many others in our secret current service. Those who've spent time in that area have exhibited abilities, tendencies beyond the usual."

He shrugs.

"There have been reports of meteors and sundry other extra-stellar objects arriving for centuries- Even when our family had land there, the place was infamous." Again, the elegant shrug.

"A link may be in evidence," he says. "Or it may be nothing but coincidence."

Sherlock can tell nobody in the room believes that- The universe, according to both Mummy and Mikey, rarely being so lazy.

Of course, nobody in the room has the poor manners to say as much either, so the party slumps into an uncomfortable silence.

Apparently deciding that the briefing is finished, Mummy rises and dismisses the group. She nods to Molly, offering her her hand and welcoming her to the family; She says the same to Anthea, though she seems rather more amused by the young spy's success with her elder son than she is with the young doctor's success with her youngest-born.

Sherlock supposes that if either of her children were going to end up married, the smart coin would have been on him.

Greg Lestrade, apparently relieved that he will not have to explain how he ended up allowing
Magnusson to convince one of his (admittedly more stupid) officers to try arresting Sherlock and John stands and shakes Sherlock's hand, wishing he, Molly, Mycroft and Anthea luck before heading towards the door-

As he opens it, however, he is greeted by the sight of Sir Henry Knight, standing in soot-covered clothes and looking rather worried.

Sherlock can see two of Mycroft's burliest footmen standing behind him, apparently at a loss as to how to keep the young engineer out of the house.

"Good God," Mary says on seeing him. "Whatever is the matter, Sir Henry?"

Knight's eyes, worried and grave, come to rest on Molly. He opens his mouth, once, twice, as if afraid to speak, but then-

He holds out his hand, and there is a fire-blackened key is it.

"Miss- That is, Mrs. Holmes, I fear I am the bearer of bad tidings," he says. "I went to visit your clinic today, and I found- I found this in the ruins." He shakes his head. "I am afraid it has been incinerated-"

He shakes his head, closing his eyes and muttering something which sounds distinctly like, "Sally..."

Which may be why he seems so relieved when the less-than-dulcet tones of Miss Sally Donovan cut through the house, demanding what that silly cove Knight's done now?
Knight Fever and Other Ailments

Disclaimer: This is fanfiction is not written for profit and no infringement of copyright is intended. Not beta read, all mistakes are mine. Thanks for their reviews go to.

And since this is the last time I shall be coming to this universe, thank you to everyone who read, favourited, given kudos or asked about this story. It's been a blast lads, I hope you enjoy it.

~ CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN: KNIGHT FEVER AND OTHER AILMENTS ~

Mycroft Holmes' Townhouse,

Mayfair

"Sally?"

And Henry Knight blinks.

Looks around.

Makes his way towards the door to the breakfast room.

He follows the sound of clomping boots and swearing, unaware, apparently, that a large swathe of the British Secret Service is trailing along after him-

Molly rather suspects that, even if he were aware, he simply wouldn't care.

And she is proved correct: As he makes his way to the main hallway he finds the source of the swearing. Sally Donovan is hobbling down the house's main staircase, a heavy cotton peignoir draped over her, the sight somewhat incongruous considering she's wearing men's boots and is carrying her firearm.

Anna, the young girl she and Molly were hiding from her husband, is trailing behind her, a tall, skinny young groomsmen at her heels. She's begging Sally to go back to bed in a mixture of Yiddish, Polish and broken English. "Please," Anna keeps saying. "You will be hurt, Miss Sally…"

At hearing these words Henry hurries forward, coming right up the stairs and getting in Sally's path. Halting her trajectory.

She glares up at him. "You're in my way, Knight," she snaps. "I have a clinic to check on, since apparently I can't be away for even one night-"

Henry- to everyone's surprise- merely crosses his arms over his chest and refuses to move.

Though Sally glowers up at him he doesn't back down.

"You should be in bed," he says evenly. "Not even the great Sally Donovan can simply walk off a bullet-wound, and you're of no use to the clinic if you're bleeding to death."

Though his blocking her way should seem boorish, there is no bravado in his voice.

He is merely stating a fact and Sally knows it, something which seems to irritate her no end.
"I'm not bleeding," she points out tartly, putting her hands on her hips. "I'm clearly on the mend. But I've been in bed for nearly two bloody days and if I don't get some' exercise then I fancy I'll end up shooting something."

"That can be arranged," Knight says in that same calm, quiet tone. "Just not now, and certainly not in your current condition- I cannot in good conscience allow you to endanger yourself."

Sally blinks warily up at him, perhaps surprised by his implacability, and the ghost of a smile tugs at his lip.

He leans into her, whispers gently into her ear and the suspicious look on her face gets worse.

"When you're able to travel," he says, "I'll gladly take you to my nearest home and let you shoot things to your heart's content. I'll even buy you a new rifle, set up some targets, all for you.- And believe me, the sort of targets I create will give you some excellent sport. But until that time, you should go back to bed- I- I don't want to see you... hurt again."

He looks away, pain moving through his expression. Sally frowns, her eyes softening to see it. "Witnessing that awfulness once was more than enough for me," Henry says. "Please. Don't make me go through it once more, Miss Donovan."

And he uncrosses his arms, gestures with one hand back towards the staircase.

Sally looks torn, equal parts obstinacy and contrition written across her face. But at least she's willing to listen, something which has not always, Molly knows, been the case.

Silence spreads out, the situation apparently having reached an impasse. So-

"Sal," Molly says, walking to the bottom of the staircase and looking up at her. "Sir Henry and everyone here has your best interests at heart: Please let us take care of you until you can resume your normal duties and start taking care of everyone else. Again."

Sally narrows her eyes at Molly, knowing, as she does, that her friend has often teased big, tough, no-nonsense Sally Donovan for essentially insisting on taking care of everyone except herself. It is an old, old argument between them, one which Molly suspects will never truly be solved. Bringing it up must work though, for Sally turns her attention back to Henry. She raises her chin to him in challenge and, much to Molly's delight, the young engineer visibly gulps.

"You got a strong back, sunshi- I mean, Sir Henry?" Sally asks archly.

If her cheeks are slightly red and her voice is slightly nervous then nobody in the room is so patently suicidal as to call attention to it.

The young engineer nods, a small touch of pink beginning to stain his ears too. "That I most certainly do, Miss Donovan," he says courteously. "What, um, use do you wish to put it to?"

Sally's eyes light up at the flirtation in his tone; Henry must realise it too for the back of his neck is now turning a rather rosy shade of puce.

"You're going to carry me back up those stairs, young man," she says stoutly, pointing with her pistol. "I need to test how strong that back of yours it- Not that I can't manage it myself, mind. I just need to know."

Henry's own lip curls slightly as he fights the small smile threatening to break over his face. The
notion of having his Sally in his arms again seems perfectly delightfully to him. "Of course, Miss Donovan," he says politely. "I should be delighted- And I'm well aware that, were it necessary, you could carry me up those stairs as easily as I might carry you..."

Sally nods her head sharply. "Too bloody right."

Without waiting for her permission Henry steps in close to her. Takes her arms and placed them around his neck. (He wisely makes no mention of giving up her firearm).

"I shall try to be gentle," he murmurs to her, "but you must tell me if I hurt you..." he looks her in the eyes. "I shall never willingly hurt you, I promise you."

Sally looks at him in surprise; it's likely, Molly knows, that that is the most tender or kindly a man has ever been with her. For women of Sally's class, kindness and respect are seldom-spotted beasts. Donovan bobs her head, acquiesces. Gulps, and then glares at the room in general, as if daring them to say a word to her about it.

Nobody takes her up on the offer, but as previously mentioned, nobody feels like doing themselves in.

"I'll tell you if anything's wrong... Henry," she says quietly, and with that Sir Henry picks her up and begins to quickly ascend the stairs, Anna running after them. Mrs. Hudson looks to M for permission before darting after them too, signalling to the groomsman following Anna- "Quickly, young Jarvis!"- to fetch her medicine kit.

The room seems oddly empty with Sally and her entourage gone.

"Something you left out of your report, dearest?" M asks Mycroft as she watches the older woman leave, her lips pursed in amusement, but the elder Holmes shakes his head.

"You of all people know that one should never act on incomplete intelligence, Mummy," he says, and the older woman gives a short bark of laughter. Anthea joins her and this makes Sherlock and John grin.

Molly rather suspects that she's going to like Sherlock and Mycroft's mother.

"Your intelligence won't be "incomplete," for long," M says. "Not judging by what I just saw, darling boy." And the older woman grins at Anthea. "About time someone took young Knight in hand, isn't it, Thea?"

The young spy smiles and inclines her head curtly. "Whatever you say, Ma'am."

Again the older woman lets out that bark of laughter, before turning to look at Molly, holding her arm out to the young doctor in invitation.

"Now, darling," she says. "Let's go and see your practice, eh? And see if there's anything to be salvaged." she clucks her tongue. "Whoever is responsible, you may depend upon them paying for it..."

Arm in arm the two walk out of Mycroft's house, Mummy's boys trailing at the rear.

Molly Hooper's Clinic

Whitechapel
"Sally's going to be annoyed we didn't tell her about this," Molly says under her breath, poking through the still-smoking remains of her clinic with her parasol.

*Everything she owned, she thinks, everything she'd worked for, all has been sent up in smoke, leaving nothing but a ruined shell of the place she once called home.*

She feels a great swell of sorrow at the thought.

Though she had tried to keep her voice even, she still feels Sherlock's arms lock around her from behind, the unseemliness of so public a show of affection offset by the comfort his nearness gives her.

Mycroft, Anthea and Mummy Holmes are all looking rather pointedly away, the latter speaking quietly to any of the small crowd gathered to see their doctor's reaction, mother and son consulting quietly amongst themselves.

"I'm sorry, imp," Sherlock is saying softly in Molly's ear, his arms tightening on her. "I know what this place meant to you…"

The young doctor nods, leaning back against him. *It's slowly becoming familiar, the sense of support in having him near. "It's not the expense," she says hesitantly. "Thanks to my inheritance finding a new building will be of little consequence. But…" She sighs, shakes her head. Surveys the scene before her. "My books," she whispers. "My instruments. My clothes and all the clinic records… Everything I had built in the last five years, they're all gone. Gone..."

And she turns in Sherlock's arms, lays her cheek against his chest.

Suddenly, for the first time in a long time, she feels like crying- And for the first time in a long time, there's someone to comfort her through it.

The thought is oddly… shocking.

*She hadn't let herself realise how much being alone had weighed on her,* she thinks disjointedly, *until now, when she's aware that she no longer is.*

"Was this the last home you shared with your father?" Sherlock asks and she nods mutely. Squeezes her eyes shut. The tears come then and she finds not even her husband's comforting embrace can ease them.

"I know I should be relieved that nobody was hurt," she croaks out. "I know I should be thankful that it didn't spread- If the wind had been strong last night then who knows what might have happened? But still… Still…"

And at that, at the thought of how much worse it could have been she begins to… Well, the only term for it is *bawl.*

Her throat clogs up, her chest tightens. All the tension and all the fear and all the emotion of the last few days seems to ball together until they simply pour out of her in big, fat, embarrassingly sloppy tears. Suddenly heiress Mrs. Molly Hooper- Holmes is gone and plain old, heartbroken old Molly Hooper is in her place. Any semblance of calmness she had been holding onto since leaving Mycroft's house has entirely disintegrated, and the sheer enormity of what has befallen her is now setting in-
She closes her eyes and gives in, momentarily, to her distress. Wraps her arms around her husband and squeezes him so tightly, she worries she may end up cracking his ribs.

"Hush," he's saying softly as he rocks her. "Hush, imp, we'll set things to rights... I know the things which were lost can't be replaced, but we can at least rebuild the clinic-"

As he says the words Molly nods and tries to calm herself.

At least, she reminds herself again, she isn't entirely alone in this.

And she might have succeeded in bringing herself back under control, had a certain party not chosen that moment to make his presence felt, laughing and clapping and strolling through the wreckage of her clinic as if he bloody owned it.

Unfortunately however, this certain party did make his presence felt.

Molly would recognise the blighter anywhere.

For she looks up from Sherlock's chest to find that, that bastard Oskar strolling towards her, his gang of boys at his heels, his chest puffed out in pride at her distress. At the ruin he has made of her life's work, and the destruction he has caused his own community.

Suddenly, and for the second time in as many days, Molly finds herself viscerally, completely willing to inflict harm on another human being.

"You like my handiwork, Little Daughter?" he asks smugly in Polish, gesturing to the smoking ruin which had once been Molly's clinic. "You'll think twice, next, won't you, about stealing from me."

At her back, she feels Sherlock physically tense; without even needing to look, she knows that Anthea and Mycroft are doing the same. Even Mummy Holmes' attention seems… focussed.

All of a sudden, the air is vibrating with tension.

"You did this?" Sherlock asks in Polish and his voice is tight. Hard. Rather like the way he sounded when he dealt with Magnusson, Molly can't help but think.

It sends an odd shiver of pride down her back to hear it.

Oskar, of course, doesn't understand the danger and nods proudly. Sidles over until he's close enough to touch, his rather greater bulk giving him the erroneous impression that he's at an advantage where her husband's concerned.

Realising how mistaken he is in that, Molly can't help giving him a slow, hard smile.

The confidence in Oskar's expression dims somewhat, unsure, suddenly, about why the mousey little lady doctor he's been tormenting for months might be grinning at him. His eyes flicker from her and Sherlock to the ruins of the clinic and back again, though when he speaks he tries to keep the same confident, careless boom as before.

"I told your woman there would be consequences," Oskar says sharply. "She took from me, I take from her- That's the way these things work, is it not?"

And he turns to his lads, eyebrows raised in question- And command. Thus prompted they let out a cheer of agreement, laughing and clapping him on the back. Congratulating him like the toadies they are. Instantly his confidence returns and he leans in close to Sherlock, makes a show of reaching out
and grabbing Molly's wrist roughly-

The parasol comes out of nowhere, darting between the two of them before even Sherlock can say anything.

It pokes Oskar in the chest- hard- and when he turns to look at the person wielding it his expression turns almost comically confused.

Tall, regal and utterly unruffled, Mummy Holmes cocks an eyebrow at him, pressing him away from her son and his wife with the point of her parasol. To Molly's- and, evidently, Oskar's- surprise, bloody starts to pool brightly against his shirt where the umbrella's point pokes into it.

The scarlet blossoms across his chest as Oskar stares dumbly down at it, before looking over at Mummy.

"You'll pay for that, you bitch," he hisses, raising one beefy fist back as if to strike the older woman. Sherlock, Molly and Mycroft all move, about to intervene, but before they can Oskar drops his fist, his face grimacing with pain.

Mummy Holmes gives a slight jab of her parasol and he steps back, away from Sherlock and Molly. His face is turning oddly… ashen.

"Now, now," Mummy tells him, "there's no need for that- Not if you want me to stop the venom."

"What are you doing to me?" he hisses in English, the effort of speaking in something other than his mother tongue obvious.

Mummy's smile is gentility personified.

"Why, my good man," she drawls (in Polish), "I am merely showing you the consequences of your actions." She gestures to Sherlock and Molly. "This is my son," she says. "That is his wife. I'm rather fond of her, as you may have guessed, not least because she's the first person who's managed to bring my youngest under some semblance of control.

And yet you, apparently, have destroyed everything she holds dear for the sake of, what? Manful pride?"

She raises her eyebrows in question, her tone as conversational as if she were discussing some knitting with a vicar's wife.

Of course, she also digs her parasol more sharply into Oskar's chest.

He lets loose a string of Polish curses, dropping to his knees and flinching. His face has started to turn a most peculiar shade of green and his hands have started shaking.

"She stole from me," he snaps, gesturing towards Molly. "That whoreson Jakob, he gave me his girl to pay for his gambling debts. She was going to be my wife, she was going to give me children-"

"She was a child herself." For the first time Molly finds her voice and when she speaks Mummy nods to her. Smiles sharply.

"Is that true?" she asks Oskar and he nods. He does not look pleased, but nevertheless he answers.

"You must get the young," he says. "At least that way you have enough time for fun before you wear them out and you have to start again." He looks at Sherlock, Mycroft. "If you have the choice,
you take then young," he repeats stubbornly. "That's what you English gentlemen do, isn't it?"

Mycroft cocks an eyebrow. "Child-brides aren't really my forte," he drawls. "Though I do understand that some men aren't as discerning as I."

Sherlock nods. "One really can't beat finding a woman who knows herself well enough to bloody know you," he says brightly, bringing Molly's hand up to his mouth to kiss. "Give me an imp over an angel any day."

Oskar rolls his eyes, unconvincing, and tries to stand, but as he does Mummy steps closer and presses the point of her parasol into his chest once more. Instantly he hisses with the pain of it.

"I'm pouring and alcohol and saline solution into your wound," she says conversationally. Oskar glares at her and with a sharp flick of her wrist she pulls the parasol off him. Steps briskly away. She hooks the parasol tidily over her arm and smiles at her victim.

"The other solution I gave you should pass within a few hours," she says. "Of course, those few hours will be unspeakably unpleasant, but then that's what one gets for threatening my family and causing property damage to those the hold dear."

And as if to confirm her words, Oskar turns entirely white and then doubles over, vomiting forth what looks like the entirety of his stomach contents.

Molly and Mummy Holmes look at them with mild interest and Sherlock beams in pride at it.

Mycroft and Anthea merely look slightly bored.

Two of Oskar's boys come forward and help him into standing; they're rewarded for their efforts by his getting sick again, the remains of his breakfast spewing down his shirt to the disgust of all. They start to carry him away and as they do, Mummy Holmes catches the biggest one by the wrist, leans into him.

"Should anything else happen to this clinic," she says softly, "then a little poison in his system will be the least of his worries- Is that clear, my good fellow?"

The man narrows his eyes in annoyance but nods. Steps away and, keeping his eye on the older woman and backing away slowly, breaking into a quick jog once he's at a safe distance.

As soon as he's gone the tension pops like a bubble.

Immediately those in the vicinity disperse, making sure to throw Molly timid, friendly smiles as they do.

Within seconds Molly and her family are alone in the ruins of her clinic, nobody here to bother them. Only the sounds of the traffic breaking the quiet. Molly looks at her mother-in-law, holds out her hand. The older woman shakes it.

"Thank you," she says quietly and M nods. Reaches out and touches her cheek, her smile surprisingly maternal.

"I take threats against my family terribly badly, my dear," she says. "Ask this one-"

And she grins brightly at Sherlock before gathering her skirts and heading back to her carriage.
Mycroft and Anthea fall into step with her, something Molly can't help but suspect is indicative of how that relationship has always worked. They all climb in, Thea leaning out and waving goodbye—"Oy!" Sherlock snaps. "We might want a ride!"

The young spy smiles slyly.

"Do you?" she asks. "Or would you newlyweds get to enjoy an unalloyed hour in one another's company?"

Before Molly can answer Sherlock squeezes her hand, and shakes his head. Tucks her hand into the crook of his elbow and begins walking her away. "Good call, Thea," he throws over his shoulder. "Trot along now and leave the imp and I to our adventures..."

They walk out onto the Whitechapel Road, still arm in arm, and though Molly knows that the next few weeks—nay, the rest of her life—will be eventful, she can't help beaming at her husband.

"You really are the rudest man in London," she says.

The wink he throws her is devilish.

"But that, imp, is why you love me," he points out, and Molly laughs because she knows it's true.
Epilogue

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~ EPILOGUE: AND STILL THE EAST WIND BLOWS ~

**Sherrinford Fortress**

*Location: Classified*

*Cell 18/95*

*The boredom is going to bloody kill me, she thinks, well before Her Majesty gets the chance.*

And Irene Adler, for what feels like the fiftieth time today, stands. Stretches. Paces across her cell, counts off the footsteps as she listens to them echo.

"Sixteen by six," she murmurs, before laughing, adding, "Whatever else did you think it was going to be, you foolish woman?"

And she walks over the so-called bed they have given her. Lies down upon it. She supposes as prison stays go, this one isn't so bad: At least they've chosen to be merciful and given her access to books.

No needlework or other ladylike pursuits, but then she supposes she isn't surprised: they doubtless know how she got out of that last Caliph's private prison, a place where she doubts any prisoner will ever be given so much as a crochet hook again. And given her way with chemicals, they don't feel paint or charcoal would be a wise gift either.

So it's books they give her.

Books, and the privacy to read them.

Most of the time Irene takes that for a mercy, just as most of the time she accepts that she will have to wait for her chance before she can get out of this place- *She has, after all, some quite valuable information to sell once she does so*-

She's so intent on thinking of this- and of not letting herself think of the thing which saw her landed here, the thing which showed her so much and was then snatched from her- that at first she doesn't notice it. Doesn't notice that there's a certain… shiver to the air. A readiness. A… watchfulness. The cell seems stuffier than it should be, and when she raises her head from her copy of *Wuthering Heights* to notice she finds herself oddly… discomfitted by the thought.

She feels gooseflesh rise on her arms and she doesn't know why.

Casting the book aside she stands. Paces again. Six by sixteen, six by sixteen, over and over again it goes through her head. Over and over again.

She's so distracted that she almost doesn't notice the click of a key turning in her cell door. Doesn't realise it's opening until it already has done.
A woman stands in the doorway: She's beautiful. Pale. Dark-haired and blue-eyed.

She reminds Irene of someone but she can't put her finger on who.

Nevertheless, the adventuress raises her head up. Pops a hip and cocks an eyebrow. If this is to be her interrogator then let the games commence. "Have you come for a show?" she drawls, and at this the newcomer merely smiles. Reaches inside her heavy travelling habit.

"I'm not here for a show, darling girl," she says and her voice is low and soft and soothing. "I have it on good authority, however, that you are."

And she takes her hand out of travelling habit. Holds it out to Irene and opens it.

A tiny clockwork globe, like nothing so much as a miniature chronograph, glimmers in her palm. It glows with the same unearthly light that Sir Henry's delightful pocketwatch had and Irene feels a rush of joy, of homecoming flow through her at the sight.

"So you are the one we're looking for," the newcomer says softly.

Her blue eyes glitter, and again, just for a moment, she reminds Irene of someone though she just can't place who.

"May I..." Irene dips her head. Looks at the other woman with her most beguiling expression. "May I touch it?" she asks and the newcomer throws back her head. Barks out a huff of sharp, mirthless laughter.

"You're going to do much more than that, my fine girl," she says as she steps inside the cell and closes the door...

~ The End..? ~

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