**Paracosm**

by **BiancaAparo**

**Summary**

"Dear God, what have I done?  
Brother, forgive me for what I must do..."

It all starts to crash down and come apart...

**Notes**
Hi everyone!

Here it is, FINALLY!

For those who have read Parts One and Two, welcome back! For those who haven't, you REALLY should for the back story or else big parts of this won't make sense. Please don't let how long the first two stories are deter you... I didn't understand the formatting of the AO when I first posted. I thought I was posting short chapters, in reality... not so much... In 20/20 hindsight, I should have broken the chapters up into shorter sections... oh well :^(

Anyway, this fic is loosely (LOOSELY!) based off of ACD canon stories "The Second Stain" and "The Speckled Band" as well as Edgar Allan Poe's "The Purloined Letter."

Also, I've got twelve chapters completed, and three of those chapters beta'ed by the wonderful cadoganwest. Also, LucanaelDelSayan has kindly offered to help me with my crappy French. (Thanks beta'ers!)

And I plan on posting on Sundays again.

So, without further ado... Part Three.
The Solitary Hunter Trilogy
Series Three: Paracosm

From childhood's hour I have not been
As others were—I have not seen
As others saw—I could not bring
My passions from a common spring—
From the same source I have not taken
My sorrow—I could not awaken
My heart to joy at the same tone—
And all I lov'd—I lov'd alone—
Then—in my childhood—in the dawn
Of a most stormy life—was drawn
From ev'ry depth of good and ill
The mystery which binds me still—
From the torrent, or the fountain—
From the red cliff of the mountain—
From the sun that 'round me roll'd
In its autumn tint of gold—
From the lightning in the sky
As it pass'd me flying by—
From the thunder, and the storm—
And the cloud that took the form
(When the rest of Heaven was blue)
Of a demon in my view—

From Alone by Edgar Allan Poe
"—Un dessein si funeste,
S'il n'est digne d'Atrée, est digne de Thyeste."

They are to be found in Crébillon's 'Atrée.

From The Purloined Letter by Edgar Allan Poe

“Alone is what I have, alone protects me...”
- From The Reichenbach Fall

Chapter One: Spoiler Alert

“John?”

Mycroft Holmes frowned at his mobile when he realized he was listening to John Watson’s voice mail message and not to the man himself.

Where on earth was he? Normally he glued himself to his brother’s side. Embarrassing, really, how he trailed after Sherlock. Like a moonstruck school boy. Like a loyal yet slightly brain-damaged lap dog, panting after his master, eager for praise.

People talked. Thought the doctor and the Great Detective were in love.

Now the one blasted time he actually needed John to be here, at Sherlock’s side, he vanishes.

He was last seen outside the pathetic surgery he volunteered at but after that, no trace of the good doctor with a flair for purple prose and an addiction to adrenaline rushes.

The CCTV couldn’t even locate him.

Anthea couldn’t even find him.

But John didn’t like Mycroft. Possibly could be avoiding him out of spite.

Or fear.

There was that murderous wife of his that Mycroft still needed to deal with…

“It’s me again,” Mycroft put a lot of frost into his voice. “Since you are not responding to my texts please do me the courtesy of returning my call. It’s urgent. I need…” he found himself faltering.

I need you to catch Sherlock as he falls again.

Only this time, he doubted his little brother could rise from this fall.
This fall, was the final fall.

“You. I need you. Call me back,” he rang off abruptly when he saw Agent Mitton walking towards him.

He tucked his mobile into the pocket of his impeccably creased trousers. Lifted his eyebrows authoritatively at Mitton, silently asking him what he wanted.

“They’re here,” the handsome dark-skinned man said simply.

Mycroft closed his eyes, feeling a headache coming on. Since John Watson couldn’t be here physically, he had hoped at least to have him on speaker phone.

Hearing his voice would have comforted Sherlock.

But maybe it was better John didn’t witness… this.

In an uncharacteristic display of nerves, Mycroft smoothed the lapel of his jacket down and adjusted the hook of his umbrella as it hung off the crook of his arm. He looked around the airplane hangar, vividly remembering the Bond Air disaster.

This promised to be a million times worse than Bond Air and that double-crossing tart Woman.

The metal doors swung open behind him. He turned around, back ramrod straight, and kept his face immobile as he regarded his baby brother as he searched for… something. Anything. A clue to what he was thinking. Or feeling.

But Mycroft had taught him too well. The Belstaff coat their father had bought him as a Christmas present years and years ago concealed his body language. His face was a porcelain mask. His eyes could have been made of glass for all the emotion they emitted.

His companion, on the other hand, made no attempt to conceal her feelings. In fact, she projected them. She wanted Mycroft to know exactly how she felt.

Her eyes blazed with unrelenting fury. If her hazel eyes could kill, Mycroft would have died three times over.

*Look what you have done, she silently raged at Mycroft. Look what you have done to your only brother, your last living brother.*

Mycroft Holmes also noticed Violet Hunter was not hiding who she really was any longer. No fake spectacles, no layers upon layers of cosmetics. Every freckle popped out on her pale face. A strange, small crescent-shaped scar could be clearly seen on her cheek.

Her chestnut hair, normally straightened or tied back in an uncompromising bun, hung loose and waving over her shoulders. She wore jeans, sensible black boots and a black trench coat belted around her waist and Sherlock’s scarf around her throat. A black messenger bag was looped over her shoulder and across her body.

Her hands were balled into fists. Her mouth was held in a tight, thin line.

Her alter-ego, the prim and proper “Miss Smith” was definitely dead and buried.

The trio stood there silently as the tension mounted. While brother gazed at brother coolly the woman continued glaring at Mycroft. Every muscle in her body was tensed, fuelled with adrenaline, as if she
readied herself for the precise moment when she could leap forward and kill Mycroft with her bare hands.

“Well,” Sherlock burst out, as he was prone to do. “No sense in delaying. A moment of privacy, please, brother dearest,” He laced the last two words with as much poison as he could as he cupped his massive hand underneath Violet’s elbow. Completely wired, she jumped at his touch. But she never broke her angry stare-down with Mycroft.

Mycroft moved aside, pointing with his umbrella toward where they were to stand, far enough away where they could converse quietly, say their final words to each other, but close enough so that Mycroft could watch them.

Violet let Sherlock walk a few steps ahead of her. She paused near Mycroft to hiss into his ear, her American accent nasal and grating, “Keep your promises, Mickey.”

“I shall,” he hissed at her.

“You better,” she snapped then walked quickly to catch up to his brother.

His brother, The Great Consulting Detective.

Why couldn’t he have just been a scientist like he was supposed to be? It would have been so much better if he would have been sequestered away in some lab, curing Ebola or discovering an alternative fuel source, lessening the world’s dependency on petroleum.

He would have never gotten caught up in this sordid, black world Mycroft lived in.

Both Sherlock and Violet kept their backs to Mycroft so he couldn’t read their lips. Clever, Mycroft thought, a sardonic smile quirking his lips.

Then Violet did something odd. She turned her head around and furrowed her brow. “John?” she called out, very loudly and clearly.

Even Mycroft turned around.

But John wasn’t there and Mycroft whipped his head around just in time to see Violet and Sherlock fighting. Physically.

Oh, not violently. But Violet’s hand was definitely rooting around in Sherlock’s coat pocket and Sherlock was desperately trying to stop her.

But she found her prize and skipped away from Sherlock, thumbing in his pass code.

Why does she know the pass code to his mobile? Mycroft questioned to himself.

Sherlock grabbed her slight shoulders but she shrugged him off as she started scrolled through apps. He tried to grab her again, but she pushed him in the chest, hard enough to make him stagger. She backed away from Sherlock but stopped when she saw… something on the mobile. Something that made her entire body recoil in horror. Something that made her cover her mouth with her hand while exclaiming “Oh my God!”

Then she was running (running!) towards Mycroft, crying out Call it off! Call it off! Call it off! in a uncharacteristically high-pitched, panicked voice.

Mycroft swiftly turned his head towards his brother just in time to see the porcelain mask crumble
into bits. Defeat and sheer exhaustion darkened Sherlock’s face.

Suddenly, he didn’t see the austere six-foot tall man in front of him.

He saw a small, dark-haired little boy, bleeding and bruised, limping towards him.

*Mickey, please, make him stop... make this stop... please... help me.*

Violet now stood in front him, shoving the mobile in front of his face, trying to force him to *look.* Her voice shook violently as she begged him to *please please please, call this off.*

Mycroft had never felt so heartsick in his entire life.

This was far, far worse than when he had to tell Anthea her mother was dead.

But he couldn’t call this off. He couldn’t stop this.

As Violet now fistred the lapel of his suit jacket while she beseeched him to call it off, he closed his eyes, refusing to look at Sherlock’s mobile screen.

*Dear God, what have I done?*

“Mycroft, please... just put it off for a week, a day... a fucking day, please...”

He opened his eyes and looked over the American woman’s shoulder at Sherlock.

*Brother, forgive me for what I must do...*  

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23 November 2015  
City of Westminster, London, England  
Tuesday afternoon  
4:10 PM

John Watson, M.D., war veteran, blogger and partner to the infamous Consulting Detective, sipped at his foamy cappuccino in the back seat of a black cab. He watched his beloved city zip past while the cab driver navigated their way through London’s hideous rush hour traffic.

John had only been half-listening to the radio but the last bit caught his attention.

“... baby boom continues,” a staid, bored voice droned from the speakers. “PharmaLogistics LTD, the pharmaceutical company responsible for manufacturing Trifexanor has officially issued a country-wide recall of the popular oral contraceptive. While they haven’t issued a public apology as of yet, officials from PharmaLogistics provided a statement to the National Health Service stating they felt “deeply concerned about the situation and have consultants working around the clock to make sure an error like this does not occur again.”

John snorted. *Deeply concerned my left arse cheek.*

A whistleblower had come forward last month, presenting documentation to the NHS showing grievous lapses in quality control within the manufacturers of the contraceptive. A computer coding error caused the order of the pills to be packaged incorrectly. The placebos were placed in the middle of the cycle instead of the end. *Thousands* of these improperly packaged birth control pills had been shipped out to unsuspecting women... for over a five-month-period.
And PharmaLogistics had known about the error for two months before doing anything about it.

John idly wondered if Molly Hooper Lestrade had been on Trifexanor. She had admitted to John on one of the last times he had visited her she hadn’t been faithful about taking her pills during the brief period where she and Greg had been split up.

But John knew the odds of conceiving after missing one or two pills were still pretty slim. But if she had been taking birth control pills that had the same effectiveness against pregnancy as breath mints, well, an unplanned pregnancy made a little more sense.

Anyway, it wasn’t as if Molly felt completely upset about the situation. Last month, she gave birth to a lovely little boy the muddy grayish eyes most babies are born with, but also with a thatch of auburn hair, just like his mum Last he heard, she had fallen into motherhood like it was the most natural thing in the world. And for someone like her, it probably was. Lestrade also had puffed up like a peacock when he first held the red-haired baby, assuming the role of Proud Papa with ease.

The child was born on Hallowe’en. Fitting, if one realized who the father really was, that is.

It wasn’t Lestrade.

John shoved that drama out of his head. He just… couldn’t deal with that mess right now. He knew he had to, they all had to eventually. But after the crap week he was having, he just didn’t have the energy to start refereeing the ongoing feud between Lestrade and Sherlock again.

You would think, John sighed to himself when the cab turned onto Baker Street, Greg would forgive him after Sherlock prevented the baby from being kidnapped.

After John and Mary’s two-day old daughter, Marissa, had been abducted right out of the NICU, there naturally had been concerns someone would try and take away Molly’s baby. Sure enough, Sherlock’s old enemies from Jim Moriarty’s network had tried to snatch the baby in his first hours of life. But their attempt had failed. Sherlock had planted himself outside the nursery immediately after his son had been born.

His son. Sherlock had a child. Sherlock… a dad.

John couldn’t wrap his head around it.

Oh he knew how it happened. Molly and Greg had a row and split up. During that time, Molly had come home from a party, alone, drunk and heart-sore. This already dangerous combination was then coupled with the possibility of taking faulty birth control pills.

On that same day, John and Sherlock had one of their worst fights ever. So bad, John had actually screamed at him he wished Sherlock would have stayed fucking dead.

Sherlock handled it the way he always handled massive emotional trauma.

He found the first dealer he could and scored, or so John assumed. Because Sherlock had showed up on Molly’s doorstep, strung-out with all his usual inhibitions obliterated.

It was simply a night of Love the One You’re With.

With colossally disastrous results.

Well… not entirely.
The baby was cute.

But his near-abduction had been the final straw. Any chance of a ceasefire between Sherlock and Lestrade evaporated.

Along with possible reconciliation, a great deal of their Work vanished as well.

The cab pulled up in front of 221 Baker Street. The pavement was clear of paparazzi, for once. The only positive aspect of the decreased work load was that Sherlock’s fame diminished a bit as well. He could stay out of the spotlight when he wasn’t working high-profile cases for The Met.

But the boredom had to be killing him.

No wonder Violet had texted John. Sherlock must be close to driving her around the bend.

John dug into the pockets of his heavy winter parka and pulled out his wallet. He paid and tipped the cab driver. Then he reached for his cappuccino as well as the cardboard carrier holding two other drinks.

Just then his cab door opened. “Need a hand?” a chestnut-haired woman with a cultured, pear-shaped voice asked with a smile. Next to her sat an Alsatian, his tail thumping in pleasure.

“Violet, hey, yeah, could you?” he held up the carrier.

Before taking the carrier, she tweaked the scarf she wore over her head. Just in case there were prying eyes still lurking about. She was less of a fan of the paparazzi than Sherlock.

But she had far more to lose than Sherlock if she were to be photographed. Her freedom, possibly even her life.

Most of London (and anyone who read John’s blog), knew her as “Violet Smith”, a decorous, level-headed woman in her late thirties. Her hair was always sleekly styled, her make-up flawlessly applied. She wore spectacles, modest tops, pencil skirts and sensible shoes.

She also acted like she was carved from a block of ice. That was probably the only reason why the world believed she was willingly dating and living with someone like Sherlock. With his cold logic, ruthless deductions and unyielding work ethic, he really did seem to be more machine than man sometimes.

Since “Miss Smith” acted uncompromisingly rigid as well as glacial, the match made sense. A robot of a woman together with a machine of a man.

John knew better.

Violet was no robot nor was she made of ice.

She also didn’t need glasses.

She was also not British.

Her actual surname was Hunter. Her true nationality was American. She had gotten caught up in Jim Moriarty’s web in the most extraordinary way. If John hadn’t personally witnessed some of these events, he would have scoffed. Her situation was too unbelievable, too much like an action film. A James Bond flick.

While William Sherlock Scott Holmes grew up on a posh estate and John Hamish Watson made the
streets of London his playground, Violet Jane Hunter led the life of an American Army Brat. She wasn’t alone though. Her little brother Michael was her constant companion and best friend.

Brother and sister clung to each other more tightly when they became orphans. Their mother had perished in a car accident. Years later, their father was murdered, under the pretense he had gotten in the way and was killed by “friendly fire” during Desert Storm.

Major Hunter’s mother assumed guardianship of the orphans. Violet had quite the culture shock when she left the military bases in Europe for a family farm in Indiana. After a few rocky years during her teens, she grew up to become a criminal profiler for the Federal Bureau of Investigation. She had been on the fast track to greatness… until she discovered a traitor in their midst, one of their own selling national secrets to the enemy.

Before she had a chance to act, shadowy forces had already used her as a pawn in their ongoing chess game for power. An influential and corrupt Congressman informed an equally corrupt Deputy Director in the FBI that Violet and her team were traitors. The crooked Deputy Director Hammermill signed off on a secret order to “burn” Violet and her teammates while they were in England for a conference about international kidnappings.

Then the insidious Congressman, a Senator named Josiah Woodhouse ordered the true traitor and his own nephew, Jack Woodley to try to recruit the clever Violet Hunter as well as her supervisor Section Chief Robert “Bear” Carson to join their Consulting Criminal Syndicate, known as the Rouge Dirigé Liguecase.

He also told Jack to eliminate the rest of the team.

Jack started picking off the disavowed federal agents one by one.

Violet and her partner, Agent Steven Morgan fled for their lives, leaving London for Birmingham. Meanwhile their families and the families of their team were told their returning flight had crashed into the Atlantic. No survivors.

Her brother Michael, a highly respected journalist for The New York Times, didn’t believe the lies. When Violet succumbed to temptation and called him, instead of convincing him to drop the matter, his desire to clear her name had become even more inflamed.

So the Rouge snuffed him out.

The guilt over his death nearly drove her mad.

Her guilt over the apparent suicide of Sherlock Holmes almost drove her over the edge.

Prior to the event now officially and simply known as “The Fall”, Violet had returned to London and started freelancing for the True IRA. She had needed money and information. She needed information on the ipso facto British government Mycroft Holmes because of his potential ties to the Rouge Dirigé Liguecase, a tie created from a childhood friendship with a horribly disfigured man named Lord Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, the Earl of Winchester. She needed to know more about Mycroft’s and the Earl’s relationship to prove her innocence. Violet had determined the real traitor was Jack Woodley at the conference they had attended. She had watched him disregard the correct protocol on how to treat an English lord. She had also known this particular member of the British peerage was about the biggest piece of shit she ever had the misfortune of profiling. So she had known Jack had treated him familiarly to tip the Earl off that the American Feds were getting too close.
But she couldn’t prove that. A meaningful glance and usage of a first name was not proof of innocence. So she needed tangible information and she needed money to pay for it.

So she had accepted the offer from a doe-eyed young man with black hair named “Ciaran” to spy on Sherlock Holmes. He paid her, paid her well.

Ciaran explained that Little Brother Sherlock was a pressure point for Big Brother Mycroft Holmes, which was why he wanted Violet to spy on the weirdo. Ciaran claimed to want leverage so he could blackmail Mycroft into creating a Free and United Ireland once and for all. Soon Violet saw through the lies. As Ciaran became more unstable as he continued to obsess over Sherlock Holmes, Violet only gave Ciaran meaningless information about the detective.

Too late, Violet and Steven realized Ciaran, to their collective horror, was really Jim Moriarty. They ran.

Moriarty found them anyway.

As he held a knife to her throat, leaving a permanent scar, Violet gave Moriarty the names of the three people Sherlock Holmes loved. Now they were known as the Golden Trio, the three Sherlock fell to save: John Watson, Greg Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson.

But Violet had maintained her wits enough to lie. To conceal the only other person Sherlock had truly ever felt just as passionately about as he did his best friend and partner, John Watson.

She gave up names of the detective-inspector and landlady to protect Molly Hooper, the sweetly awkward, yet surprisingly strong pathologist. And “Jim from IT”s” ex-girlfriend.

Moriarty had thanked Violet for her help then viciously stabbed Steven in the throat, leaving him to bleed out. He had then attacked her on all levels possible. Finally he had left her bleeding on the kitchen floor with a promise to “Pick up where we left off…”

To this day, Violet still had visceral nightmares about that bloody day. Her face and yoga top covered with Steven’s blood while her own blood trickled down her neck where Moriarty had cut her…

And the inside of her thighs after Moriarty had put his hand in her.

Like John and Sherlock, Violet didn’t sleep much. Insomnia sometimes was preferable to the nightmares.

Despite the pain, she had cobbled together Moriarty’s pièce de résistance, his magnum opus. John had reassured her that she had done everything she could have to prevent The Fall. But the events had been already been put into motion, the game already in play. She would have been like an ant trying to stop a lorry.

On top of everything else, she had suffered a head injury and passed out in a cab as she tried to get Baker Street to tell Sherlock and The Met about the evidence she had to prove Moriarty was real. She had his fingerprints. Moriarty, as he continued to decompress, to spiral downwards into madness, had not worn gloves. She had the knife he had used to kill Steven.

But she wound up in the hospital instead of at Baker Street. And Sergeant Sally Donovan had ignored all the voice mails Violet left for her.
And then Sherlock fell.

More blood had been on her hands. Her brother, her teammates, her partner. And now the eccentric detective. Or so she thought.

During Sherlock’s hiatus, she joined forces with her old boss, Section Chief Robert Carson, the man she affectionately called “Bear.” He helped her create “Miss Smith,” an unperturbed, imperial Englishwoman. Her skill for languages helped her to command a very believable English accent as well as to use British slang correctly. She became the personal assistant to “Mr. Carruthers” (Carson’s false identity). She worked with “Carruthers’” at the insurance agency he seemed to run. In actuality, it was a front for a money laundering business belonging to Jack Woodley, the actual traitor within the FBI.

The two of them against the world, Violet and Bear gathered evidence to prove Jack’s treachery as well as the sinister Earl of Winchester.

During her time in England, Violet found her morals corroding.

She just wanted to kill the bastards.

She did get the pleasure of killing Jack Woodley, after he had kidnapped and tortured her.

But the Earl loomed above them all, like a shadow created by storm clouds.

So did the specter of Moriarty.

After Sherlock’s return from his Great Hiatus, Violet had waited in dread, wondering when her path would cross the Great Detective’s.

She thought maybe she had dodged a bullet when Sherlock caught one in his chest.

But no such luck. Three months after Charles Augustus Magnussen’s mysterious death as well as Jim Moriarty’s digital resurrection, Sherlock arrived on Violet’s doorstep for a case. Sherlock’s visit to their office was the worst possible scenario imaginable for Violet and Bear.

Violet had later tried to dissuade John and Sherlock from investigating Carruthers’ insurance agency firm any further. But Sherlock only grew more intrigued, especially after he deduced she was not British and had laconically asked her if she was “FBI or CIA?”

Now, nearly eight months after that fateful meeting last March, she was bound more tightly to the Great Detective than either one of them had anticipated.

After a bomb had leveled her flat, she had nowhere else to go but Baker Street. Also, Mycroft Holmes had become convinced she possessed some secret information given to her by Jim Moriarty himself. Instead of extraditing her back to the United States, he informed Sherlock he essentially was putting Violet under house arrest and Sherlock was her gaoler.

To protect her identity, a false “relationship” was created. The world thought she was madly in love with the oddball, socially-impaired genius.

The underworld knew she was protected by the Holmes brothers and not to be touched.

But as usual, Mycroft had ulterior motives. He most definitely wasn’t protecting Violet out of the goodness of his heart.
John sighed as he followed Violet and her beloved dog into the building.

He didn’t have the patience to deal with Mycroft’s constant manipulations and scheming either.

“Hey Stone,” he scratched the Alsatian’s black cropped ears. As he watched Violet remove her coat, he suddenly realized Violet had lost weight. It wasn’t a trick of make-up that gave her sharply pronounced cheekbones. Her lavender jumper was baggy and her skinny jeans threatened to slide off her arse.

Immediately he went into “Dr. Watson” mode. “How’ve you been?”

Violet Hunter gave him a patient smile. Using her “real voice”, she informed him as she smoothed back a strand of sleek, straightened hair, “I already made a doctor’s appointment, Dad,” she teased him as she did whenever she felt he was getting too overprotective. “My appetite’s off and I’m tired all the time but…” she shrugged. “No use getting worried until I get checked out, right?”

But John was worried, for good reason.

Last summer, Violet went undercover as a nanny for an haute couture fashion designer named Jepthro Rucastle, a narcissistic woman-hater who was accused of murdering his first wife. He did not, in fact kill his first wife, but it turned out he was indeed responsible for the abductions and deaths of several young women, all aspiring actresses. His staff consisted of a mother-son serial killing team. Rucastle didn’t actually kill the women, just… played with them like dolls until he lost interest. Then he turned his prisoners over to his staff, the Tollers, and let them have their way with them.

Arthur Toller had liked playing with fire.

Mrs. Toller had been particularly fond of poison. She had made sure Violet’s food and drink had been laced with arsenic while Violet had been working for Rucastle. The poison mimicked flu-like symptoms. Even Sherlock hadn’t deduced straight away why Violet felt so lousy all the time.

But of course, Sherlock managed to piece together all the puzzle pieces. One of Rucastle’s insidious plots was to poison Violet slowly then let the Tollers give her a lethal dose. And then set John up for her murder.

Of course, Violet never received the fatal dose. But she also hadn’t bounced back from the poisoning as quickly as John would have liked. And now this sudden weight loss…

Cancer… the word flashed in his head before he could stop himself.

It was one of the side effects of prolonged exposure to arsenic.

“OK, if you’re going to insist on being a worrywart,” she took one of the drinks out of the carrier, a bright pink strawberry smoothie, “Worry about your BFF up there.” She tilted her head towards the stairwell leading up to 221B and then lowered her head to take a long drink. “You told them to put a shot of protein powder in this, right?”

“Yeah,” John said as she sucked on the green straw, “In both drinks. So how long has he…?”

Been starving himself?

“… been like this?”

Violet rolled her eyes and shook her head, “Since the day before you left.”
“What? But we left nearly a week ago!"

“Shh!” Violet put a finger to her lips, giving the door to 221B another apprehensive glance. “If he realizes what we’re going to do…”

“Right, right, right, sorry,” John muttered, lowering his voice.

“No, God, I’m sorry.” Violet pressed her fingers to her forehead. Then she looked up at John, her face full of concern. “How are you? How was the funeral?”

“Oh… it was… quite nice,” he lied.

It was not nice. Not nice at all.

“Full military burial,” John said gruffly, “All the honors.”

All the honors, yes, but hardly anyone attended the services.

Most people still blamed the recently deceased man for the deaths of all those new recruits on their first military mission in Afghanistan.

That burned John just as hotly as it had when he saw the tabloid’s headline “SUICIDE OF A FAKE GENIUS” splashed all over the front page after Sherlock fell.

It was not James’ fault all those boys died. Young people die in war.

Major James Sholto had been more than just John’s superior officer. He had been his best friend while they were in the military together. They had drifted apart once John received his medical discharge after getting shot. But John had still valued his friendship and had emailed him quite regularly. Even invited him to his wedding…

His eyes clouded over, recalling how Sherlock saved Sholto from certain death that day…

But Sholto had first contemplated suicide, to give the people what they wanted. His head, in exchange for the lives of all those young men who never made it home.

Sherlock had talked Sholto out of dying at John’s wedding. But Sherlock lived in London and Sholto in Durham.

There was no way Sherlock could have been there to talk out of Sholto from dying this time. No way for him to tell him not to put the gun barrel in his mouth and not to pull the trigger.

Even the great Sherlock Holmes couldn’t be in two places at once.

John felt his heart hurting again. He knew there would be no grand return from this suicide. Sholto would not be coming back two years from now to interrupt a romantic moment with Mary.

There was no rising from this Fall.

Besides Mary and him, the only attendants to the funeral were the vicar, a handful of cousins and an old widowed great-aunt. Oh and some hippie anti-war protesters who had the gall to show up with their hand-painted signs with overwrought slogans.

War is Hell!

You have no idea…
“It was just as he wan-” John started but found himself engulfed in a giant hug.

Violet Smith could act like a right toffee-nosed bitch, frigid and unapproachable. Violet Hunter however was a hugger.

“It was awful, so awful,” he admitted, trying not to spill his coffee as he hugged her back. “The weather was terrible. It was freezing rain the entire time. None of his friends came and it was just so fucking depressing. He was a good man, he didn’t deserve… this.”

He thanked God she didn’t say anything trite like “It’s God’s Will” or even worse “It’s not your fault.” Instead she just said “Shit happens sometimes, John and it’s just not fair.”

“No,” he agreed. “It’s not.” He cleared his throat and broke the embrace. Although he had deeply mistrusted her when they first met, she had become one of his closest friends. Practically like a sister. She was an exceptionally good listener and she spoke her mind, even if she knew what she was going to say would piss him off.

He respected that.

“But,” he said as he watched her pick up her smoothie as well as the other one, a slimy green thing, concocted from spinach and kale. “I’m glad I went. Got some closure, got to say good-bye. Helped get his estate squared away. Funny, nobody came to the service, but oh they all showed up when the solicitor read his will.” He suddenly blushed.

Violet was not in Sherlock’s league when it came to making deductions, not that she felt she had to compete with the detective. However, she could hold her own when it came to reading people. “He left you everything.”

“Yeah,” he said sheepishly. “Not like I’m going to see any of it. His ex-wife immediately pitched a fit and contested the will, saying he wasn’t in his right mind when he drew it up. This will be in courts for years. But,” he shrugged. “I appreciated the gesture. And who knows, by the time the courts make up their minds, we’ll have a cottage in Sussex to move into when I retire.”

Violet grinned, some of the weariness leaving her face. She wasn’t a beautiful woman, per se, but her sharp intelligence made her hazel eyes sparkle like topaz and her smile always transformed her face into something quite lovely.

“Shall we?” she used her head again to point up at 221B.

John hesitated. “Are you sure we’re not going too far? This is a pretty drastic step.”

“John,” a hint of exasperation tinged Violet’s voice. “We’ve been threatening to do this to him for how long now?”

“I know, I know,” John said hastily. “It’s just that… seems a bit mean.”

Violet’s nostrils flared in irritation. But in a very calm voice, she said, “Baskerville, John.”

That stopped John cold. Why was he worried about hurting Sherlock’s feelings when Sherlock had put a fear-inducing hallucinogen into his coffee? Not to mention the time he drugged Mary, and while she was pregnant to boot. Of course, there was the whole interrupting his marriage proposal fiasco. As well as pretending he didn’t know how to disarm the bomb in the Tube.

And because Sherlock ran off, John was the one who had that graffiti violation on his criminal record. *Graffiti*, for God’s sake.
And, oh yes, the whole pretending-to-be-dead-for-two years bit.

“You're right, let's do this,” John growled, marching past Violet and Gladstone.

Violet winked at John as he stormed past her. But he politely waited for her at the top of the stairs. She pushed the door open with her toe and called out, “Sherlock? Earth to Sherlock? John’s back from his trip.”

“Hey Sherl…” the greeting died on his lips.

Sherlock Holmes, wearing a crumpled t-shirt (inside out, as usual) and wrinkled black slacks, sat cross-legged on top of his coffee table. His steepled fingers were pressed against his mouth and nose. His bushy black brows were furrowed together in fierce concentration.

There were newspapers and magazines scattered all around the coffee table like a paper moat.

John stepped inside the flat to see what Sherlock was looking at.

The wall behind the sofa was completely covered with photographs, newspaper clippings, map and red string. The spray-painted yellow smiley face and the bullet holes were completely covered up. However, there was an 8 x 10 picture of a grinning Jim Moriarty right smack dab in the middle of everything, with red strings surrounding him, like a spider-web.

There was a stripe of yellow spray paint across Jim’s eyes. John’s stomach jolted as he realized it was the “Richard Brook” headshot Sherlock had found taped to the back of an ugly painting Harry had given as a wedding present.

John jerked his thumb at the Moriarty headshot as “Richard Brook” as Violet shut the door behind her. “Yeah, I know. Nightmare fuel,” she said caustically.

“How long has he been like… this?” John now noticed the beard stubble and the dingy curls.

“Two days?” Violet guessed, taking a drink from her strawberry smoothie, trying to get as many nutrients as possible before her stomach lost interest.

“Christ, right, OK,” John rubbed his eyes then put his cappuccino down next to Sherlock. He tapped Sherlock on the shoulder. “Hey, mate, it’s me.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock droned, his mercurial eyes fixed on a spot on the photograph and map covered wall. “AXE deodorant, Close-Up toothpaste, Brut cologne.” He paused. “I don’t like the cologne. Neither do you, but Mary bought it for you as a present and you’re wearing it to please her. You also used her Dove body wash because you were out of your own. How was the funeral? Sholto was murdered by the way.”

“Wait, WHAT?”

“Angle of the gun, not possible for him to have held it himself based on the projection of the bullet, although the crime scene set up was quite convincing. I was nearly convinced it was suicide as well. I rang his ex-wife and offered to take the case pro-bono but she told me to piss off. She’s not a suspect. She was in South Africa with her new lover when Sholto died.”

John’s eyes nearly fell out of his head. Mouth hanging open, he turned to Violet and wordlessly gestured to Sherlock, as if asking, “What in THE HELL am I supposed to do with THIS?”

To which, Violet only shrugged, shaking her head, utterly bemused.
“Uh, mate? A little warning before telling one of my best friends was murdered instead of committing suicide? That caught me off guard just a bit.”

“Oh,” Sherlock contemplated this then announced, “Spoiler alert. Your friend was murdered.”

“Great, that’s great, thanks tons,” John pinched the bridge of his nose in despair.

Meanwhile, Violet sighed as she set down the drinks and draped her coat over the red armchair that would always be considered “John’s chair.”

“That’s not how you use the Spoiler Alert Warning, Sherlock,” she informed him as she picked up the green-colored smoothie.

“Hmph,” Sherlock rubbed his temples as he continued his vigil in front of his clippings.

Violet frowned. “You OK?”

“Mm, headache, just waiting,” he picked up a small white bottle next to him. “For the ibuprofen to kick in,” he shook it, the remaining pills inside rattling. “Nothing to be concerned about.”

“Right, uh, yes. So, I’m back…” John started.

Sherlock slowly turned his head and looked up at John, giving him a Black Look that clearly communicated exactly what he was thinking: Please don’t make me explain to you just how very stupid that comment was.

John pursed his lips together. “AND I was wondering, since I haven’t seen you in a fortnight, would you like to go out? To dinner and catch up? Maybe Angelo’s?”


“Working? What do you mean working? You’re not working. Lestrade’s cut you off from all Met cases and I’ve been checking emails while I’ve been gone. There’s nothing in there above a Three. What on earth could you possibly be working on?”

“It’s all connected somehow, but there’s a dissonance,” he leapt off the coffee table like a frog, landing on the sofa. He stood to his full height and jabbed the wall with his forefinger, “Here.”

Violet and John looked at each other again. Then they looked at where Sherlock was pointing. Violet was too far away to see but John walked around the coffee table to get a better look. “Margaux Vos?”

“Mm,” Sherlock now put his hands behind his back.

John looked over his shoulder at Violet again, his brows knit in consternation. “You’ve been obsessing over this dead double-agent all this time? Since I’ve been gone?”

“Violet, explain the conundrum to John. Use little words.”

John scowled at Sherlock as Violet rolled her eyes. “Vos, in short, was just a pain in the ass. Born Dutch, but she was no Mata Hari. She had no affinity and no loyalty to any faction or nation. She dealt mostly in secrets. Got cozy with her sources, sucked as much information out of them as possible and either threatened to blackmail them or sell them. It was all about the money. She was basically an Irene Adler, only without the fucking.”

“Oh, well, that’s charming,” John bristled like he always did whenever anyone mentioned The
Woman. He knew his anger was irrational, especially since the poor slag had been murdered in the most grisly way imaginable. But he still resented how she had toyed with Sherlock, tried to make him dance to her tune, lead him on a merry chase only to crush him. Twice.

First with her faked death then with her faked indifference after nearly professing her love for him… after John had found out how she had tried to mind-game Sherlock, he wished he would have just turned her in to MI-6 himself when he had the chance.

Plus her arrogance had just royally pissed him off.

But let the record show, John never wanted her dead. Her murder had been appalling. Beheaded, of all things. How utterly barbaric.

John devoutly hoped Sherlock would never deduce the truth, or the version of the truth John had received from Mycroft…

… although from time to time, he had found himself thinking She had faked her death once… Sherlock faked his… could she have faked it a second time…?

Today was not the day he wondered about that, however.

“So the first question is,” Sherlock interrupted Violet’s narrative, as he was apt to do. “Why on earth would an informant risk her neck to pose as a double-agent? The second question is why in the world would Agent Margery Jensen (while she was posing as Molly Hooper’s friend Maggie Jenner) allow herself to be overheard by Mary while the NICU nurse Jennifer Boyle poured her heart out in the Ladies, confiding that she thought your daughter had not died of a lung infection but had really been abducted.”

John blinked after that very long sentence that Sherlock uttered without taking a breath. “I… hadn’t thought about it.”

“Of course you didn’t,” Sherlock hopped backwards off the sofa and sat back down on top of the coffee table again. “I have been pondering it non-stop ever since I proved Mycroft was wrong about his precious Agent Margery Jensen.” A self-satisfied smirk appeared on Sherlock’s face.

Margaux Vos, under the guise of Agent Margery Jensen, posed as a nurse named Maggie Jenner at St. Bart’s. Her mission was to stay close to Molly, become her friend and keep her safe because of her role in The Fall.

At least, those had been her orders from MI-6.

“But even though the proof is irrefutable that Margery Jensen was indeed the duplicitous Margaux Vos, the reasons behind her actions still elude me,” Sherlock ruffled his sooty curls, making them stand up on end. “I have the Who, just not the Why.”

John frowned. It really didn’t make sense. This Margaux… whoever, was supposed to be a world-class spy and a high-dollar snitch. Why on earth had she not made sure the loo was empty before Jennifer Boyle had started spilling her guts about her suspicions?

Even Mary had mentioned that seemed like an amateur’s move.

“OK,” John finally said putting his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “It’s fishy, I agree with you. But I can’t… not today, Sherlock? OK? I just came back from a funeral for a close friend that you literally just minutes ago informed me it was murder not suicide. Then in the very next breath, you tell me this double-agent wanted Mary to overhear that conversation about my daughter at Molly’s wedding.
A conversation that got that poor nurse Jennifer killed, by the way. I can’t… I just can’t process that much information all at once.”

“Then why did you come over?” Sherlock turned his head and looked up at John, well and truly confused, “If not to work the case?”

“To see you, you idiot,” John reached down to flatten Sherlock’s unruly curls.

Then jerked his hand away, remembering Violet was in the room.

*Because that would just be bloody brilliant,* John thought, rubbing his hand on his jeans, as if to remove the memory of the ermine-soft curls. *Having one more person speculating about my relationship with Sherlock… to have one more ruddy person think I’m gay.*

John was beginning to wish he would have just stayed home, especially when he caught Violet quirking an inquisitive eyebrow over her fake eyeglasses.

“Well, I’m right here,” Sherlock’s irritated voice jerked him back into the present. “You’ve seen me, so how about you do something productive? How is that woman,” Sherlock pointed again at the photograph of Margaux Vos, her MI-6 ID picture identifying her as “Agent Jensen”, “Connected to Jim Moriarty and more importantly, why?”

But John saw how Sherlock’s hand trembled as he pointed as he remembered why Violet had called him. “OK, alright, fine, you win. We’ll get to work. After dinner,” John added pointedly as he finally shucked off his parka.

“Ugh, boring. Eating,” Sherlock spun around on the coffee table and stood up, “Makes me feel full and slow. Cuppa’d be nice though. John, since you’re here, be of use and start the kettle. After eight years in the UK my dear flat mate is still incapable of making tea that’s palatable.”

Violet scowled at him. “There is nothing wrong with the way I make tea.”

“If by ‘nothing wrong’ you mean ‘repulsive and undrinkable’, then yes I quite agree with you.”

“John,” Violet spoke through her teeth.

“Sherlock, your hands are shaking. You just complained about a headache a few minutes ago. You are famished and probably dehydrated. You need to eat a proper meal,” John adapted his “Captain Watson voice” for this lecture.

Normally Sherlock responded to this forceful tone of voice.

Not this time however. “Oh, honestly,” he snarled, walking towards the kitchen, his back to John and Violet. As John stood up, Sherlock added, “If you only came to give me another one of your dull lectures about nutrition, you can just go right home, John Watson. I don’t have the time to endure listening to you blathering on about a well-balanced and proper diet. You are both over-reacting anyway. I have explained countless times, I do not starve myself, I fast because digesting slows me down while I’m worki-”

“John, now!” Violet suddenly cried out.

“John, now! Now what?” Sherlock turned, confused. Then a second too late, he deduced Violet’s plan. “Don’t you dar-oomph!”

John tackled him. Wrapping his arms around Sherlock’s waist, John slammed his best friend down
onto the hard wood floor.

“GERROFF ME!” Sherlock howled, bucking his hips, trying to throw John off of him. It should have been easy, since John was so much shorter than Sherlock. Not to mention he also had finally shed all the weight he had packed on after meeting and marrying Mary, so he was lighter too, actually.

But the weight loss had been fat, not muscle. John was back to his fighting form. He also still had the stamina and strength as he did when he was twenty-five years old. Also, he had learned how to fight, really fight, in the school yard and the streets of working-class London, not during some boxing classes at a posh public school.

Then the Army just fine-tuned those existing skills, made him lethal.

Finally, John had learned long, long ago how to use his small stature to his advantage. He had always been short, the runt of the litter. Learning how to fight back was one of his first childhood lessons. The second lesson, of course, was fighting back and winning.

So even though Sherlock thrashed about as if he was having a seizure, it was quite easy for John to pin the tall, thin man. When Sherlock tried to get up, John swiftly put him into a cradle hold, grabbing Sherlock’s long, lanky leg closest to him as he wrapped his other arm around Sherlock’s skinny neck. He then locked his hands together, encircling Sherlock’s leg and throat. He gave Sherlock a sense of false security by letting him wriggle out of his grip for just a second. Then the soldier deftly put the detective on his back again.

As Sherlock clawed at John’s forearms and kicked out with his free leg, Violet pounced. She straddled his waist, holding the green smoothie in her right hand. Cold, green sludge sloshed over her hand and onto Sherlock’s inside-out t-shirt.

“Not too tight, John,” Violet admonished him as she roughly grabbed Sherlock’s free arm as it flailed around, trying to hit her. She caught it and slammed it down on the floor, pinning it with her knee. “He needs to be able to breathe and swallow.”

Sherlock next tried to buck her off. “GET OFF!” his eyes looked almost black in his fury, with only the thinnest band of icy blue irises encircling his pupils. Splotchy red patches blossomed on his normally translucent cheeks.

“Sherlock,” Violet seethed, an angry blush appearing on her cheeks as well, despite the layers of cosmetics. “We’re doing this because we love you.”

“GO TO HELL!” the detective raged in a strangled voice.

Violet slopped some of the smoothie into Sherlock’s mouth. He immediately spat it out. “What is that?” he snapped as the green slush dribbled down his chin and throat as well as John’s arm.

“A kale-spinach-green tea smoothie with a shot of protein and ginseng,” Violet informed him primly but then gasped and grabbed Sherlock’s shoulder to stabilize herself as Sherlock tried to buck her off again. More of the smoothie spilled down her arm and onto Sherlock’s shirt. John immediately tightened his hold around Sherlock’s neck and shoulders. The detective gagged then went immediately and suspiciously limp.

John naturally didn’t trust Sherlock’s sudden passivity. “Sherlock, your blood sugar gets too low when you “fast.” That’s why you get headaches and the shakes, mate. Yes, that green shit is foul, but drink a little bit, OK? You’ll feel better and we’ll let you go. I promise.”
Sherlock stubbornly folded his Cupid’s bow lips tightly shut.

Violet responded by pinching his big nose shut. Sherlock’s face immediately started turning bright pink.

“You’re acting like a child,” John rasped, becoming uncomfortable in his stance, with his arse sticking up in the air as he continued to hold Sherlock down. His knees also ached as he knelt on the hard wood floor. Plus Sherlock had wiggled his arm free from underneath Violet’s knee. The detective had started clawing at John’s arms, which hurt a lot more than John thought it would. He was actually afraid his best friend would start drawing blood.

Violet, meanwhile, continued to hold Sherlock’s nose shut as she engaged in a fierce stare-down with the furious detective. “Your face is turning purple,” she gleefully told him.

“What if he passes out?” John grunted.

Violet shrugged. “Be easier to get this into him if he’s unconscious, wouldn’t it?”

Because he was Sherlock Holmes and because he would outlive God to have the last word, he opened his mouth. “Actua-

Violet slopped more smoothie into his mouth and this time clamped her hand down over his lip before he had a chance to spit it out again. “Swallow,” she ordered him, her tone brooking no argument this time.

John loosened his hold around Sherlock’s neck so he couldn’t use that as an excuse. “Come on mate, this is ridiculous,” he coaxed him.

Sherlock swallowed then pull a face. “Are we done?”

Violet held up the still-half full plastic glass. The other half was the smoothie was mostly splattered on Sherlock’s shirt and coating Violet’s hand and arm. “Not even close.”

Sherlock started fighting against them again, hefting his hips up and down like he was performing a half-bridge yoga pose. But Violet realized Sherlock was just trying to get her to spill the rest of the smoothie so she managed to set it down before Sherlock could do any real damage. She pinned his free arm with both her hands this time. “OK, we’ll make you a deal,” she snapped, tired of his antics. “Two more swallows and we’ll let you go, but John’s going to fix you a sandwich and you will eat it, do you understand?”

“Let me go first,” Sherlock crooned, his voice deep and dangerous.

“Not a chance, sweetheart,” Violet purred right back at him.

She put her face right into his. Close enough for a kiss.

John suddenly felt uncomfortable. Like Third-Wheel uncomfortable.

“Oh my,” an unctuous voice drawled about them all. “Am I interrupting something?”

Sherlock, John and Violet all looked up to find Mycroft Holmes towering over them. Leaning on his umbrella with his thin lips twitched into that insufferable smug grin of his.

“My,” he drawled as his reptilian black eyes took in the sight of the three of them. “How the people would talk if they saw this.”
Chapter Summary

“Not even for John?” Violet taunted her. “You won’t even call it off for him? That will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. He will leave you, Mary.”

Mary, Mary, quite contrary, what does your garden grow....

Also, Mycroft is a jerk, Sherlock an idiot, Violet is furious and John’s worried...

Happy Sunday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Two: Tempest in a Teapot


Violet was the first to leap off Sherlock. She glowered at Mycroft as John let Sherlock go. He slowly stood up, his normally friendly blue eyes narrowed to slivers. He also had no love for Mycroft. He still blamed Mycroft for his daughter’s disappearance.

Granted it had been Moriarty’s league of consulting criminals who had initially stolen Marissa Watson. Mycroft’s people had retrieved her, but what happened after that, no one knew. Mycroft claimed to have been shut out of the loop, due to the mysterious mole in his department that kept leaking information to what was left of Moriarty’s network. All Mycroft was allowed to know and all he was allowed to tell John and Mary was that Marissa was safe.

John thought Mycroft was lying.

Sherlock wiped the green gunk off his lips, chin and mouth then wiped his long fingers onto his trousers. Then he rose nimbly to his feet in some sort of martial arts move. One minute he had been on his back then next he was on his feet.

John felt an affectionate smile tug on his lips. Sherlock hadn’t been fighting them back, not really, John now realized. As unsentimental as he claimed to be, Sherlock hadn’t had the heart to actually fight them back, to take a chance of actually hurting either one of them. Maybe it would have been a fair fight between John and Sherlock, but Sherlock could have easily thrown Violet off like a rag doll.

John risked a quick look at Violet again.

She did look really unwell, as if the earlier tussle had sapped her of all her energy and strength. She had always been a slender woman but an active and fit one. While she didn’t appear to be dangerously emaciated, the weight loss still troubled him. John also didn’t like this sudden aura of fragility around her.

“Mycroft,” Sherlock’s resonant and displeased baritone boomed, breaking into John’s musings.
“What fresh hell are you delivering to me?”

“You’re needed,” Mycroft intoned, solemn as a monk.

Both John and Violet visibly bridled. “No,” Violet Hunter immediately snapped, taking off her fake glasses. Mycroft Holmes knew who she really was. There was no need for artifice around him. As John instinctively moved to stand in front of Sherlock, Violet added in a venomous tone, “We have a deal, Mickey.”

Mycroft smiled thinly. “I know, dearest sister-in-law.”

While investigating the case John would name The Copper Beaches for his blog, Sherlock got the brilliant idea to make Violet his fake fiancée for when she went undercover as a nanny at Rucastle’s London home. Because Rucastle was a known narcissist, Sherlock knew Rucastle would want what he could not have. Rucastle was also a notorious fame-whore. Sherlock had gained just enough notoriety to appeal to Rucastle’s need for celebrity friends. The fake engagement was indeed the perfect bait. Rucastle swallowed the lure, hook, line, sinker.

Violet agreed to go along with it. After all, she was already pretending to be his fake girlfriend. Why not pretend to be his fake fiancée? It was just for a case, after all.

But Mycroft insisted the engagement become more… permanent.

During the aftermath of a very stormy night, Mycroft informed Violet that it was John Watson’s own wife who had shot Sherlock a year ago. To protect her own hide, she had placed a double-hit. If Mary was killed, an enormous price was to be placed on Sherlock’s head. In short, if Mary died, Sherlock died. Mycroft insisted he needed Violet to protect Sherlock from the deceitful Mrs. Watson. But a promise wasn’t enough, Mycroft wanted a commitment.

Violet had vehemently balked at his “proposal” (for lack of a better word.) She had flat out told Mycroft his idea was “positively medieval.” But Mycroft had then explained (or rather, threatened her) that marriage was the only way he could ensure Violet would stay permanently shackled to Sherlock, to the Holmes family and to MI-6.

“This is the only way you get to stay alive,” he had told her as they stood in the drizzle in the middle of Baker Street during the black hours between midnight and dawn. “May I remind you that Homeland Security and the CIA are fully aware that the FBI burned you and your team on the flimsiest of pretexts? They currently don’t care about you or what you do… as long as you stay here, in the United Kingdom.” After Violet had argued some more against his ridiculous and misogynistic plan, Mycroft really applied the thumbscrews. “If you return to America, you are a dead woman, along with your deceased brother’s wife and daughter. What is her name, your niece? Vivian, isn’t it?”

Her last living relatives, her sister-in-law and her little seven year old niece had been her breaking point, her pressure point.

She capitulated, crumbled in fact. Dissolved into tears, right in front the British Government.

And then she gave in.

But for a price and not just for her security either.

After all, she was expected to turn her back on her country, her home and who she really was. She made demands of her own.
Mycroft was to create a sizable trust fund for her brother’s daughter so the child could go to university when she was old enough.

And Mycroft was to stop exploiting Sherlock’s genius to further his own political agendas.

Violet knew just how cruelly Mycroft had used his little brother.

How Mycroft had maliciously manipulated him when he was only a child, a little boy.

She didn’t care that Mycroft himself had been only fourteen years old at the time.

In her eyes, he was old enough to know better. Old enough to know he should have gone to an adult. If not their parents, a teacher or a police officer or a physician, someone who could save his seven-year-old brother from the torment and anguish he suffered at the hands of the sadist Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper, an actual sociopath who grew up to become an Earl and a member of the House of Lords.

But no, the fourteen year old Mycroft did not go to an adult.

He had told the dark-haired, quick-witted, tender-hearted child to keep silent and bear it. Learn to tolerate an intolerable situation.

John had overheard a heated argument between Violet and Sherlock during which Violet had brutally confronted Sherlock about the abuse. Upon realizing John was eavesdropping, Sherlock had told him to come inside. After he had confirmed for John what Violet said about the emotional and sexual abuse was true, Sherlock then asked him not to treat him any differently than he had before…

Don’t…

Don’t what? John had asked.

Sherlock had replied: Look at me, treat me like I’m broken. Despite what you just recently overheard, I’m still the same person as I was when you left to pick up the take-away from Speedy’s. There is nothing wrong with me. One part is not the sum of the whole. Don’t let my past define who I am now. I don’t treat you like a crippled war veteran, do I?

No, Sherlock did not treat John like an invalid.

He just tricked him into walking without his cane.

John didn’t know how to trick Sherlock into overcoming his psychosomatic disorders, to handle his PTSD. The only thing John knew for sure was how much he hated Mycroft.

Mycroft, after all, had helped Sherlock mastermind The Fall. Helped hide Sherlock away for two years, two fucking years, that John believed his best friend was dead.

And then his daughter, his baby girl, sweet little Maisie, spirited away from him by Moriarty’s minions… Mycroft knew she had been abducted, but he never bothered to tell John. Never told him that he had created a special task force to retrieve her, to save her…and supposedly he didn’t know where she was now.

But John knew why Mycroft lied about Maisie. Mycroft knew Mary Watson’s true identity, knew she was the assassin called AGRA.

Knew she was the one who had shot Sherlock in Magnussen’s suite nearly a year and half ago.
A fool would believe Mycroft kept Maisie away from her mother as punishment for her attempted murder on his brother. But John was no fool. He believed the real reason why Mycroft wouldn’t order Maisie to be returned them was to send a message…

*This is what happens to those who damage the property of Crown and County.*

The cold, remorseless man did not view Sherlock as his sibling at all. Both John and Violet believed that Mycroft regarded his little brother as his personal property, nothing more than useful chattel, a valuable asset.

And, in a way, Mycroft did own Sherlock, after the Magnussen shooting and all…

But John and Violet still hated it. Hated the situation as well as hated Mycroft.

So, unconsciously, John stood in front of Sherlock, his fists balled. He had no idea he had moved in front of Sherlock until the detective placed his hand on John’s shoulder. “It’s alright,” he murmured into the doctor’s ear as he moved to stand next to John.

Violet followed John’s lead and stood on Sherlock’s other side. She crossed her arms, despite the green goo still coating her right arm and hand. She never broke her angry gaze with Mycroft.

“What is it, Brother Dearest?”

“Sherlock,” Violet hissed.

“I have the right of refusal, do I not?”

Violet ground her teeth, finally breaking her glare with Mycroft. Her face became flushed with anger again. “Anyone want tea?” she finally grumbled.

“No,” all three men said a bit too quickly.

Sherlock was right. Violet’s tea was crap. Even John couldn’t figure out why her tea tasted so wrong. It wasn’t like making tea was difficult. Boil the water, pop the teabags in, steep then add milk and sugar, if you wanted milk and sugar. Easy.

But her tea always tasted like sand dumped into a cup of hot water. And after all his years in Afghanistan, John damn well knew what sand tasted like.

Violet’s lips turned down when the three men refused her offer. Her face still red and taut with unspoken irritation, Violet flung herself down in John’s chair.

John then noticed her hands tremble. An involuntary spasm, really.

Violet’s hands didn’t twitch from malnourishment. That was her “tell.” They always shook when she was frightened or enraged. The tremors were normally slight, unnoticeable to the average eye, to the unobservant. But lately, they’d been worse.

That also concerned John, enormously. Especially since at the end of last March she had been in a motorcycle accident not to mention two explosions as well as being thrown into the boot of a car. She claimed she hadn’t hit her head during those accidents… but still… John worried.

She *did* have a head injury a few years ago, after all.

Violet, in the meantime, just gripped the armrests and swiveled her head. She kept her eyes trained on Mycroft. “What is it?” she demanded, her voice a dark and growling thing.
Her English accent held a hint of refinement. Public school, trust fund, gentle breeding. Her true voice was not the gentle caress her faux British accent was. Her American voice was born of the Heartland. Husky and adenoidal. Cornfields and gravel roads. Cigarettes and Templeton Rye. But whether or not she was playing Miss Smith or being Agent Hunter, her autocratic nature always bled through.

She was not a woman who took kindly to having her requests ignored.

So she fumed when Mycroft disregarded her completely and turned to Sherlock, informing him: “I have a request direct from the Prime Minister for you and John to take a case,” Mycroft took a thick, creamy envelope from the inner pocket of his smart suit jacket.

“Me?” John was taken aback, “Me too?”

“Yes,” Mycroft sounded resigned. “He likes your blog.”

Both Sherlock and Violet hid their smiles as they noticed John’s chest puffing out a bit.

“May I?” Sherlock held out his hand.

Mycroft looked warily at Violet and John, as if he expected them to attack him. Then he hooked his umbrella over the crook of his elbow and walked over to his brother. He wrinkled his nose as he handed the envelope over to Sherlock. “You may want to bathe prior to meeting the Prime Minister. He wishes to brief you and John tomorrow morning, over breakfast.”

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed noncommittally as he slit the envelope open with his thumbnail. He wandered back towards the coffee table as he read. Then he snorted and shook his shaggy black head. “Oh my,” he said with a touch of dry amusement in his voice. “My, my, my… the webs you weave, brother mine.”

John craned his head behind him to look at Violet. Her face had faded back to its natural coloring. She shrugged, looking as confused as John felt.

“Tempest in a teapot, Mycroft,” Sherlock droned, throwing the envelope to the floor then folding the letter up into a square.

“Tempest in a… Sherlock, this is a matter of national security!”

Sherlock chuckled as he picked up a pair of scissors that had been lying next to the ibuprofen bottle on the coffee table. “Oh yes,” he dragged out the final “S” of that word into three syllables. “The almighty national security,” he started snipping away at the folded letter with the scissors. “Did it ever cross your mind that the loyal British subjects may not desire your protection?”

“Oh don’t be ridiculous, of course they do!” Mycroft snapped.

“Given a choice between freedom and protection, which do you think the people will choose?” Sherlock continued to cut away at the Prime Minister’s letter.

“Everyone longs for security,” Mycroft informed him regally.

“No.”

“No?”

Sherlock shook his head. “Adults need freedom of choice, an opportunity to learn, even if they fail,
especially if they fail.” He cast Mycroft a sideways glance. “Children need protection.”

Both John and Violet held their breath. This was the closest they had ever heard Sherlock come to accusing Mycroft of failing to protect him from the Earl when he was a child.

Or perhaps he hinted at the failure to protect Maisie Watson.

Or both.

Mycroft’s cheeks flushed but he only said, “A large population of people is equivalent to a nursery school classroom. People do stupid things when they are frightened. You saw how a panic nearly threatened to overwhelm London when Jim Moriarty made his New Year’s Day broadcast? And that was just one city, Little Brother.”

Sherlock gave his older brother a negligent shrug. “Well, this is what I think about the Prime Minister’s request.” He held up the letter, which he had turned into a paper snowflake. It was actually, quite pretty, with intricate curlicues and asymmetrical patterns. “Thank you for the opportunity but I must regrettfully decline Mr. Bellinger’s request as I am quite occupied with other cases.” He carelessly tossed the snowflake to the newspaper-strewn floor and resumed his vigil in front of his giant collage on the wall.

“Sherlock,” Mycroft’s voice was quite silky, “Do be reasonable.”

John steeled himself, recognizing that dangerous tone of the British Government’s voice. Violet did too. She hoisted herself out of John’s chair, her lips folded tight. “Gladstone, komm,” she called out for her dog.

John recalled he still, after all this time, possessed the dog whistle Violet had given him eons ago. He wished he had it now, so he could blow it, giving Gladstone the command to attack.

John had watched Gladstone savage Jack Woodley. John himself had been bitten a few months ago by a deranged bull mastiff. He thought it would serve Mycroft right if Gladstone would bite him in a few strategic places. Kidneys, arse, ankle… John wasn’t fussy.

Gladstone padded back into the lounge. His hackles rose and a low growl rumbled from his chest as he circled around Mycroft to get to Violet.

Mycroft betrayed his nervousness by adjusting his necktie even though he said blandly enough, “And what is the beastie’s problem?”

“He senses evil,” Sherlock droned. “Go away now, Brother Mine. Text me what you plan on getting Mother for Christmas, I’ll mail you a cheque for my half.”

“Sherloc-”

“You have worn out your welcome, Mycroft,” there was an edge to Sherlock’s voice now.

“Sherlock, I insist you hear me ou-”

“Good-bye, brother.”

Violet chirped in, “Don’t let the door hit you on your bony ass on the way out, Mickey.”

“Bony?” Sherlock swiveled his head around. “Oh, I don’t know about that. Looks like he’s put some weight back on. Has Mrs. Pringle been baking again?”
“Mm,” John eagerly joined in with Sherlock and Violet as they ganged up on Mycroft. "But the weight gain is around his middle, not his backside.”

“Ahh,” Sherlock eyed his brother. “Yes, of course, you are quite correct, John. Mycroft’s gluttony always affected his abdomen first. Well spotted.”

Even Gladstone made some sort of snorting, sneezing sound that almost sounded like a laugh.

“If you three teenage girls are quite finished having your fun,” the words fell out of Mycroft’s mouth like ice cubes, “I would like to let you know I would not have bothered to bring this case to your attention Sherlock, if it didn’t have to do with Moriarty.”

That foul name sobered and silenced them all. Violet recovered first. She scratched Gladstone’s ears then made her way to Sherlock. “What do we know?” she asked, standing next to Sherlock. When Mycroft glared at her as he pursed his lips like a fussy old woman, she rolled her eyes. “Oh come on. They’re either going to tell me or I’m going to profile them and figure it out anyway. Besides, you know I have unique insight into Jim Moriarty. That’s one of the reasons why you’re still keeping me alive, right?”

“She’s right, Mycroft,” John instinctively dug into his back jeans pocket for the little notebook and pen that he always carried on him. “Out with it.”

Even Sherlock turned to face his brother, still seated cross-legged on top of the coffee table. But his fingers were tented, his elbows on his knees, his eyes, currently the same cold greenish-blue color of a winter sea, locked onto Mycroft’s face.

Aware he finally had everyone’s attention, Mycroft said, “We need you two to go to Paris.”

“Paris?” John looked up from his little notepad. “France?”

“No, Texas, yes of course France,” Mycroft said testily. “Don’t be obtuse, John. Enough of my valuable time has been wasted already.”

“What’s in Paris?” Violet interrupted briskly just as John opened his mouth to retort.

“The MI-6 mole,” Mycroft said succinctly.

“Wrong,” Sherlock intoned, his voice ringing out like a solemn church bell.

“Pardon?” Mycroft lifted his thin brows.

Sherlock shrugged. “The mole’s still in London. If that’s all, brother,” Sherlock lifted his bare feet off the floor again and spun around to face his clippings and pictures on the wall.

Mycroft rubbed his temple, appearing to count to ten. “We have substantial reason to belie-“

“A belief based on circumstantial evidence,” Sherlock corrected his brother.

Mycroft’s nostrils flared. “That the MI-6 mole lifted top secret information and that information is currently in Paris.”

“What kind of information?” Violet asked, her interest piqued now.

“Classified,” Mycroft’s voice held a sibilance that reminded John of a snake. A viper, actually.

“Um… how classified?” John stopped his note-taking for a moment.
“Classified enough to start a world war,” Mycroft informed him.

“Aren’t we already in one?” Violet shook her head in confusion.

“Not officially,” Mycroft sighed, as if disappointed.

“So is the information electronic? Are we looking for a jump-drive or…?”

“We?” Mycroft gave Violet the most patronizing of looks. “Oh my dear sister-in-law, there’s no ‘we’. You are to remain in London.”

“What?” Violet squawked. “Oh come on Mycroft! Haven’t I proven myself by now? After all the shit I’ve been through, after all the shit I’ve done for you? Besides,” she held up her wrist, showing him a dainty, golden wristwatch. “The GPS tracker is still in here. It’s not like you can’t find me. And you all know I’m too sentimental to throw this watch away.”

The wristwatch had been a gift from her deceased brother Michael.

“We do need her to come along, or at least I do,” John insisted. “I don’t speak a word of French.”

“Even if I could authorize her release from house arrest, which I can’t,” Mycroft purred, “Violet Smith doesn’t have a passport.”

“Then get me one,” Violet snapped.

“Oh, but that wouldn’t do at all,” Mycroft said. “Why would I give you a key to escape your gaol?”

“As if you wouldn’t have it flagged at all the airports, harbors and at the Chunnel anyway,” Violet groused. “Anyway, it wouldn’t be like I would be on vacation or anything. I would be useful. I interned in Paris for a semester when I was an undergrad. I remember the city enough to get around. John needs a translator and Sherlock needs someone to stand there and look stupid when in reality I understand exactly what they’re saying.”

“Do you not comprehend the strings I had to pull to get you remanded into Sherlock’s custody in the first place,” Mycroft’s temper showed signs of fraying. “Not to mention how many favors I owe in order to allow you to remain in England when I should have shipped you straight back to America the minute your double-life was exposed? It’s a minor miracle Sherlock is even being allowed to leave the country, what with the Magnussen ordeal and all.”

“Fortunately,” Sherlock got off the coffee table only to lie down on the sofa. “Everyone loathed Magnussen so much that no one was truly heartbroken that I did their dirty work for them.” He let his eyelids flutter shut, “Still not taking the mission, Mycroft.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes to the heavens. “It’s not just MI-6, Sherlock. It’s CIA and it’s Interpol and the UN as well. This is more than national security, it’s global security. But,” he poked the sole of Sherlock’s foot with the point of his umbrella. When Sherlock’s eyes popped open and he jerked his foot away, Mycroft played his trump card, “You weren’t their first choice. Or second.”

His ego immediately wounded, Sherlock sat straight up. “What? I wasn’t… why not? Who did they want to solve this?”

Mycroft gave Sherlock a mean little smile. “C. Auguste Dupin,” he pronounced.

“Who?” John asked just as Violet said “Really?” in a slightly awed voice.
“Really,” Mycroft assured her.

“Huh. I thought he was dead.”

“Not yet.”

“Who’s Dupin?” John asked again.

“A hack,” Sherlock leapt off the sofa. He stormed over to the window where he liked to play his violin. Angrily he flipped open the lid of his violin case. “Did they really ask for Dupin instead of me first?” he demanded of his brother.

Meanwhile, John murmured to Violet, “Who is this Dupin?”

“Later,” she susurrated back at him.

“Oh, yes, all the international law enforcement agencies only wanted the best for this case,” Mycroft ruthlessly played on Sherlock’s arrogance.

Taking the bait, Sherlock bawled out, “But I’m the best.”

“Sherlock, you’re walking right into his trap,” Violet pointed out.

“Hush, now, the grown-ups are talking,” Mycroft gave Violet another belittling smile.

“Really, where?” Violet feigned looking around the flat. “I just see two little boys picking on each other. And now I really want to go along. I studied several of Dupin’s cases in grad school and at Quantico,” she visibly brightened at the possibility of meeting someone who clearly had been a guiding light to those being trained in American law enforcement. “He was a visionary in his field. He was able to marry,” she linked her fingers together, “deductive reasoning with inductive thinking, which changed investigative procedures as well as forensic science forever.”

“Pah,” Sherlock spat angrily as he fumbled with the tuning pegs. “He was in it for the glory, not the work. The work comes first. The work is what is important.”

“He asked for you,” Mycroft sweetly told his brother, “Specifically.”


“Oh yes. He refused to take the case unless he could collaborate with,” Mycroft heaved a great sigh, as if admitting this out loud caused him great agony, “The Great Consulting Detective.”

“Really?” Now Sherlock beamed with pure pleasure.

“Hook, line, sinker,” Violet grumbled.

Sherlock ignored her. “John too?” he asked eagerly.

“Oh yes, he requested Dr. Watson as well. He,” Mycroft visibly suppressed a groan. “Also likes John’s blog.”

John felt his ego expand a bit as well, even though he didn’t know who the hell this bloke was.

But apparently this Dupin fellow was an idol of Violet’s. “Mycroft,” now she sounded deceptively sweet. “It has always been a dream of mine to work with Dupin. I would really appreciate the opportunity to be included in this case.”
“Oh, but you have a new dream to pursue,” Mycroft said in that slithery voice of his. “You have a wedding to plan, which as you know, is loads of work.” He paused for a beat then struck. “As you very well know, since you’ve planned a wedding before… haven’t you?”

If looks could have killed, Mycroft would have dropped dead right on the spot.

Rage robbed her of speech and her entire body shook with a ferocity John had never seen her display before. Oh, he had seen her enraged, had watched her beat the hell out of Philip Anderson, had watched her murder Jack Woodley but this…

John discreetly removed the scissors lying on the coffee table. Violet could be a bit… murdery sometimes, especially when she was this angry.

Even Sherlock said in a low, dangerous tone, “Mycroft, that was uncalled for.”

Violet whipped her head around to look at Sherlock. John was surprised to see unshed tears standing in her eyes.

That was when John realized Mycroft’s jape at her had been deeply personal. Cruel, even.

“Apologetize to her,” John snapped at Mycroft.

“*Mea culpa*, Violet” Mycroft said stiffly. “That was quite rude of me.”

Violet gave him a look that clearly communicated how much she loathed him. Then she said something to Mycroft in beautifully pronounced French that made Sherlock giggle and made Mycroft glower.

He had a feeling Violet had told Mycroft to fuck off.

*Good girl,* John grinned.

“I said I was sorry,” Mycroft sulked like a child.

“And I told you I didn’t care,” Violet fluttered her eyelashes at him, apparently recovered from her anger and her shock. “What about security? Is it these two against the world, or will they have support from MI-6?”

“And Interpol,” Mycroft promised. “Sherlock and John will have access to all of their resources.”

*Oh… balls…* John snuck a look at Sherlock. Just as he had been afraid of, Sherlock looked like a little boy who had been promised a very large shopping spree at a very large toy store.

“All?” Sherlock tried to sound nonchalant and utterly failed.

“All,” Mycroft said flatly.

“I don’t give a shit about gizmos and gadgets,” Violet spat at Mycroft. “I asked about security. They are going into a foreign city. No Homeless Network, no Met. We’ve been caught with our pants down more than once now. Sherlock getting kidnapped last spring, the shit-storm that was the Copper Beaches, the almost abduction of Greg and Molly’s baby,” she ticked off all the ways they had all been caught by surprise by their enemies. “I don’t want John and Sherlock at the mercy at the *Rouge Dirigé Liguecase* because they don’t have adequate protection.”

“*You do realize that Rouge Dirigé Liguecase is a mistranslation, don’t you?*” Mycroft apparently couldn’t resist toying with Violet’s temper. “*What you just said actually doesn’t make any sense.* The
correct translation is actually *La Ligue des Roux*.”

“Oh ignore him,” Sherlock rested his chin against the violin. “Granted, the translation is incorrect. But Big Brother is just bitter because it was an American agent who had discovered the existence of the Cult of the Consulting Criminal and not a Briton.” He then started playing *The Star Spangled Banner* with great relish.

“How about,” John raised his voice to be heard over the violin. “We just call it “The Red-Headed League” and not even bother with the French?”

Sherlock stopped playing. John then found himself on the receiving end of three annoyed looks that all seemed to broadcast the same thought:

You uncultured swine...

But Violet shook her head and said “Fine. Red-Headed League. Or RHL. Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” John muttered. “I’m going home.”

“I’ll have a car come fetch you in the morning,” Mycroft told him as John picked up his parka.

“How do you know we’re even taking the case?” John demanded.

“We’re taking the case,” Sherlock said.

“That’s how I know,” Mycroft sweetly told John.

“Brilliant,” John tugged his coat on, “Just bloody marvelous.”

John said his good-byes (to Sherlock and Violet while ignoring Mycroft) then made his way out of 221B Baker Street and started walking towards the nearest Tube stop. The wind had picked up, the temperature had dropped and rain threatened. But John, mindful of his budget, decided it was best not take two taxis in one day.

That didn’t mean he didn’t contemplate learning how to drive again as he sat squashed between commuters. The carriage he rode in smelt like stale air, unwashed bodies and a miasma of cheap perfumes and strong colognes.

But, as usual, once he got off the Tube and took the short walk to his own terrace house, he decided he was too old to learn. Besides, when one lived in London, a car really was pointless.

If Mary’s car wasn’t paid for, he would have encouraged her to get rid of it.

Oh shit, Mary... John groaned to himself as rain started to spit down from the grey skies. He steeled himself for this particular chat:

Hi love, how was your day, oh by the way, am going to Paris soon, not sure when I’ll be back, what’s for dinner?

John had a feeling that this conversation was going to go about as well as an unexpected burst of flatulence during church.

“Mary?” he called out as he let himself in. An irresistible aroma of beef, potatoes and bread wafted through the house, punctuated by the vanilla scented candles his wife had in the lounge.

“Kitchen,” she called back.
John peeled his gloves off, hung his damp parka up on the peg by the door and kicked his muddy shoes off. Just then the ugliest bulldog imaginable trotted out of the kitchen, making a beeline for John.

“Hello Sweetie,” John knelt down to become the recipient of several slobbery kisses. Sweetie had been one of Jepthro Rucastle’s many victims. Among his many other sins, the self-absorbed bastard had also been a fan of dog-fighting. Sweetie had been one of his bait dogs. Mary, taking pity on the poor battered thing, asked John if they could adopt him. Taking one look at the dog’s missing ear, the bald patches and the scars, not to mention the missing part of his tail, John caved in to Mary’s request.

Not that there had been much of a fight. Once they got him healed and fattened up, Sweetie transformed from a terrified, pathetic mutt into a cheerful, loving hound. Plus John had never had a pet before in his life, so being a first-time dog-owner was rather fun for him.

“OK, OK, enough boy, come along,” John stood up and started walking towards the kitchen, with Sweetie following, the stump of his tail waggling happily.

Mary had just taken a fresh loaf out of the bread-maker when John and Sweetie entered. “Hi, love,” she beamed at him. “Could you set the table?”

“Sure, OK,” John went to gather the cutlery and crockery from the cupboard. But before doing so, he stopped to wrap his arms around Mary. “Hi,” he pressed a kiss on her cheek.

“Well, hello,” her smile deepened.

Ever since the debacle at the Copper Beaches, John and Mary’s relationship had steadily improved. Granted, there were still the occasional setbacks. John still had major trust issues. Mary still tended to lie when she felt threatened. But John’s misgivings and Mary’s deceptions usually were minor offenses. A harmless white lie or an honest misunderstanding would lead to one or both of them sulking for a day or two. Then inevitably they’d have a serious conversation that put them back on the right track.

During the hellish night at the Copper Beaches, Mary had offered herself in John’s place when that vile servant, Mrs. Toller, held him prisoner at gunpoint. She willingly did this despite the fact that she was perilously close to being estranged from her husband again because of her lies. When she sacrificed herself for him, John had felt a powerful surge of love for her that he hadn’t felt since before she had shot Sherlock.

Once everyone was safely accounted for and the villains were all deceased, John and Mary had a long discussion about the status of their marriage. They decided to stay together and not just because of their missing daughter. They decided to give their marriage another go because it was something worth fighting for, that the idea of John-and-Mary was worth fighting for.

But it wasn’t going to be just John-and-Mary for very long.

“And hello,” John’s hand lowered, his fingers splaying across Mary’s abdomen, feeling the soft, slight swell of her new baby bump.

Every morning when he woke up and every night when he put his head on his pillow, John swore to himself that this time was going to be different. Not that he was going to give up on his search for Maisie and neither was Mary. But this time, for this pregnancy, John would be there, he would be present. This time, he would go to every single prenatal appointment. This time, he would be there for the ultrasound. This time, he would go with Mary and pick out the cot, the changing table, the
rocking chair. *This time* he would help paint the nursery.

*This time*, he wouldn’t leave his baby’s side for one second. Not even Sherlock would make him leave. *This time*, he was going to be a proper father. He was going to protect his child.

And, God forbid, even if things with Mary still became a complete shambles, he wouldn’t hole himself up in 221B to wallow in self-pity. Guiltily, he realized he could have gone back to Mary about a month or so after Sherlock had been released from hospital after the First Shooting. He really hadn’t needed John to stay with him for those six months.

But John had stayed. And Mary had been pregnant and alone.

Until Christmas, the ultimate Christmas-from-Hell. The Christmas of The Second Shooting.

And John had thought that disastrous Christmas party where Sherlock had mocked Molly Hooper and Irene Adler had turned up “dead” had been awful.

Those final two weeks of last December were still blurred together. Christmas, the shooting at Appledore, Sherlock leaving, Moriarty, Sherlock coming back, Mary going into premature labor, Mary nearly dying… then the ultimate nightmare, his little girl, dead, after not even two days of life.

Except, she wasn’t dead, she was nearly eleven months old. Out there, somewhere…

John vowed he would find his daughter and make up his failures to her somehow.

And that this time, this child, this new life would never know the life his (or her) elder sister had.

“How are you feeling?” John murmured into Mary’s neck.

“Nausea’s finally letting up,” Mary admitted. “Felt ill in the morning, but didn’t get sick. And,” She turned her head so she could give John a kiss on the lips. “I’m ravenous.”

“Oh,” John feigned hurt. “Here I thought you made a proper meal for me.”

“Why would I do that?” Mary held a straight face for only a moment then grinned. “Go on now, the table.”

John produced a gusty, theatrical sigh, acting like a very put-upon husband. But he laid out the plates, glasses and cutlery neatly on the small table in the kitchen. Then he helped Mary bring to the table dishes of roast beef, boiled potatoes, cauliflower cheese and bread, still warm from the breadmaker.

“I’m going to gain back everything I lost,” John pretended to grouse before tucking in.

“Oh hush,” Mary smeared strawberry jam onto warm bread. “Don’t even talk to me about gaining weight. I’m going to be swelling up like a balloon before you know it.”

“And you will look beautiful,” John told her sincerely, saying what he should have been saying to her when she had been pregnant with Maisie.

During the meal, they spoke about pleasant but inconsequential things but eventually Mary asked “So how did things go at 221B?”

John closed his eyes, realizing they never really achieved their objective, never really got Sherlock to eat anything. “Well,” he opened his eyes. “I have some news. Not sure if you’re going to like it.”
“What?” Mary steeled herself for the worst.

“The British Government showed up at the flat,” John watched the color drain from Mary’s cheeks and with good reason. Mycroft hated Mary, hated her for shooting Sherlock. Or so he had claimed to Violet. “It wasn’t about anything personal,” John sought to reassure Mary. “But, it’s not great news. I mean, the timing’s awful, especially since we only just got back from James’ funeral and all.”

John had to pause to swallow a sudden lump in his throat.

He felt Mary’s hand gripping his wrist. Her thumb making reassuring circles on his hand, she told him, “Go on, what happened?”

“MI-6 wants us to take a case,” John placed his hand over Mary’s, “In Paris.”

“Paris?” Mary screwed her face, not pleased at all. “Why?”

“No idea,” John admitted. “One of Mycroft’s minions is coming for me tomorrow. Going to have breakfast with the P.M. and find out more details.”

“Ooh, brekkie with the P.M., very la-di-dah,” Mary tried to joke but her voice fell flat.

“I’ll tell Sherlock I’m staying in London,” John said quickly. “We’ll communicate via mobile and Skype. We’ve done that before.”

“No,” Mary sighed with a shake of her blonde head. “You need to go. You need to get out of your head. An adventure with Sherlock would fit the bill, I think.”

“Are you sure? I mean, I don’t know how long I’ll be gone and it could be dangerous.”

“Sounds like something right up your alley,” Mary quipped. But her voice softened as she gazed fondly at John, “Oh love, do you think I don’t see what you’re doing? Trying to make up for the time when we were separated while I was carrying Maisie?” She shook her head. “I forgave you for that a long time ago, now shut up, I’m trying to say something meaningful and heartfelt,” she said sternly when John opened his mouth to protest. “I never married you to change you. Even if Sherlock hadn’t come back, well, I was a breath away of suggesting you go back being a private detective. You’re a great doctor, but your heart’s just not in it, love. Not like it was when you were a surgeon for the Army. Running about with Sherlock, solving crimes,” she shrugged. “It fills the hole left by the sniper.”

John nodded in agreement as he flexed his left hand open and shut. He had been a brilliant surgeon. His stints at various surgeries post-Afghanistan held none of the allure of the operating theater. But there was no way any hospital in their right mind would hire a shell-shocked ex-Army surgeon with shaky hands. The stupid tremor would crop up when he least expected it. But even though the last time his hand had shook was when he was on the tarmac, saying good bye to Sherlock before his suicide-mission to Serbia, John knew he’d never get a surgeon’s post again. If the tremor was a stumbling block, then the PTSD was an impenetrable wall.

Shaking hands… “Mary, if I go-”

“When,” Mary corrected him.

John gave up. “Fine. When I go, could you pop in on Violet? She’ll be alone too and I’m worried about her. She’s not well.”

Mary hesitated slightly then said brightly, “Of course.”
John studied his wife then shook his head in exasperation. “OK, I’ve kept my mouth shut and minded my own business, but now I have to ask: did you and Violet have a falling-out?”

“A bit,” Mary finally admitted, drawing criss-crosses with her fork in her mashed cauliflower.

John sighed. “Do I even want to know?”

Mary hedged again then said, “Not really, John. It’s… between Violet and me. I’ll sort it out while you and Sherlock are gone. I promise…”

**

10 October 2015
221B Baker street
Saturday afternoon
3:35 PM

Mary Watson was just getting out of her taxi when she saw a track-suited Violet Smith jogging towards the block of flats.

Or, at least Mary assumed it was Violet. She wore ridiculously huge sunglasses and the brim of her blackball cap shielded her face. Mary was surprised she hadn’t pulled the hood of the track-suit jacket over her head as well. But Mary supposed that would have looked ridiculous. It was a brisk, autumn day but the weather wasn’t that chilly.

As for herself, Mary wore her favorite long red coat but sans scarf since it was rather sunny. “Hi there,” she called out to the woman she believed was Violet.

The faux English accent confirmed it. “Hello, Mary, how are you?” Violet Smith asked as she stopped her run, lifting her right leg behind her so she could stretch her quad muscles.

Mary felt herself plastering on a fake smile. Violet had been perceptibly cooler towards her ever since the disastrous Copper Beaches case. She never showed the slightest bit of discourtesy towards Mary, but she also made sure she was never alone with Mary either.

Mary couldn’t put her finger on why exactly Violet kept her at a distance, but she suspected Violet might have had enough of Mary’s lies. Which, to Mary, seemed horribly hypocritical, given all the lies Violet told on a daily basis to stay alive. Each woman knew the other led a double life. But they weren’t friends, not really. More like allies.

And Mary wanted to make sure Violet was still her ally.

“What brings you to Baker Street?” Violet asked as she stretched her left leg.

“Errand for John,” she replied cheerfully. “Left his laptop here and he’s off on a case with Sherlock. Told him I’d pop in and fetch it for him since I planned on stopping by Mrs. Hudson’s today for tea and a chat anyway.”

“Oh, right, of course, Sherlock told me but I clean forgot,” Violet shook her head. “He left it on the coffee table,” Violet dug into the pocket of her track suit jacket, which seemed a bit baggy on her slight frame. “Come on.”

Mary followed Violet inside the flat but walked ahead of her as Violet lagged behind taking off her hat and sunglasses. Having her back to Violet made her quite uneasy. Half-way up the flight of stairs to 221B, Mary started to turn around to ask Violet what exactly her problem was. But before Mary
could speak, she found herself slammed against the wall. Violet pushed her left arm hard across Mary’s chest as she jammed her very illegal Glock flush against Mary’s forehead.

“I know it was you who shot Sherlock last summer,” Violet Hunter snarled at her. “And I know about the double-hit.”

“Ah,” Mary stayed very still. Last spring, Mary had stayed with a newly pregnant Molly Hooper after their terrace house had been broken into by *Petits Rouge*, child recruits of the Red Headed League. Mary had lied, said she couldn’t tolerate staying at 221B Baker Street. In reality, she used her time at Molly’s to set up a contingency plan in case Mycroft felt the need to detain her.

She dipped into her little nest egg, her savings from her dark, bloody days as an assassin and set up a double-hit. If Mary was assassinated or if anything should happen to her that would cause an unnatural, premature death, a hit would automatically go out on Sherlock. The price tag on his curly, black head was five million euros.

“I see,” was the only thing Mary dared to say with a gun against her head.

“And so does Mycroft and so does Sherlock,” Violet informed her. “The only person who doesn’t know is John.”

Mary’s insides turned to liquid and for a minute she thought she was going to be sick. But she only held her lips tightly together. She knew Violet wasn’t going to kill her, not with the double-hit. *Hurt her* on the other hand…Mary couldn’t rule that out.

“Call it off,” Violet ordered Mary.

“I can’t,” Mary finally said. “I tried. Before the Copper Beaches, I tried to get them to un-do the hit, but they won’t. The best I could do was add another million and add the clause that the hit on Sherlock is only valid if I’m murdered by MI-6.”

“But I’m not MI-6,” Violet purred. “I’m a nobody. I’m a ghost.”

“You’re Violet Hunter, former FBI agent,” Mary informed her, watching with some satisfaction as Violet’s face paled. “Presumed dead but in actually thrown to the wolves by corrupt FBI bureaucrats. I’ve been doing my research, dear.”

“And you’re Anzhela Anasenko, better known as the assassin ‘AGRA’,” Violet sweetly informed Mary Watson. “You have five outstanding warrants, two of them in the United States, one of them in Texas, which has the death penalty. The guard throwing the switch wouldn’t be MI-6. I’ve been doing my research too, darling.” She pressed the gun barrel harder into Mary’s forehead. “Call off the goddamn hit.”

“I can’t,” Mary gritted her teeth.

“Not even for John?” Violet taunted her. “You won’t even call it off for him? That will be the straw that breaks the camel’s back. *He will leave you, Mary*.”

“No. He won’t.”

“What makes you so fucking confident?”

Now a triumphant little smile appeared on her lips. “For the same reason I knew he’d come back to me after the shooting.” Instinctively, protectively, she covered her abdomen with her hands.
Violet caught the motion and backed away immediately, lowering her weapon. “You,” hate burned in her hazel eyes, “Fucking bitch.”

“John and I want more children,” Mary said serenely. “We had discussed it last March even, before any of us had met you.”

But Violet shook her head. “You’re a goddamn liar. This… this…” she pointed her gun again at Mary’s belly. But her finger was not on the trigger. “This is just to save your ass. Again.”

“Tell your future brother-in-law,” Mary’s voice became stiff and angry, “To stay away from me, from John and from this baby,” she pressed her hand against her belly again. “And he still has hell to pay for taking my daughter away from me.” She squared her shoulders. “And now, I really do need John’s computer, if you please.” When Violet didn’t move, Mary added, “This isn’t the first time a gun has been pointed at me, Violet.”

Violet clicked the safety on and lowered her weapon. “Maybe you should find a way to make it the last time you’re held at gunpoint.” She shook her head as she said in a low, pitying voice, “Fix this, Mary. Or else Mycroft will never let you or John or any children you have together live in peace. Don’t you get it? He won’t let you have Maisie until he knows Sherlock’s safe.”

“He didn’t give a toss whether or not Sherlock was safe when they were kids, what makes him care now?” Mary demanded.

“Guilt,” Violet sounded eerily like Sherlock with that one clipped word, overemphasizing the “T” at the end. Then she blew out a breath and, sounding like herself, repeated, “Fix this, Mary. You have to fix this. Because I can’t, I’ve got my own shit to deal with.”

**

23 November 2015
John and Mary’s residence
Tuesday evening
6:59 PM

“I’ll fix it,” Mary promised her husband. “I promise. We’ll sort things out while you and Sherlock are in Paris. Do you know when you’re leaving?”

“Not sure,” John admitted. “Soon, though, I have a feeling. Maybe tomorrow even.”

Mary now fixed John with a stern look. “We’re meeting with your sister tomorrow night.”

“Oh bloody hell, I forgot,” John ran his hand down his face.

“John Hamish Watson, if you leave me alone to deal with Harry while you and Sherlock traipse off to Paris, I will be positively furious.”

“But, dearest, it’s for national security, joking, I’m only joking!” John quailed when Mary gave him a filthy look. “I would never leave you to handle Harry by yourself. Especially if her latest bender is as bad as Clara makes it out to be,” John shuddered. “As tempting as it is to skive off, I’ll tell them there’s just no way for me to go to Paris tomorrow.”

“Tell Sherlock and Violet to join us,” Mary suggested.

“Oh yeah, the more the merrier,” John groused. “And Sherlock would encourage her addictions, not dissuade her. I don’t think he’d be the best guest at an intervention.” He stood up and started clearing
the table, “As if any of the interventions have ever worked.”

“You’re still going to try though, aren’t you?”

“’Course I am,” John said gruffly, pausing to kiss Mary’s temple. “Even though she’s undeniably useless, she’s still my sister, isn’t she?”

Mary smiled.

Chapter End Notes

Huge thanks to Lucanael Del Sayan for helping me with my French... and I’m totally poking fun at myself for being an "uncultured swine." I'm fluent only in English, sarcasm and bullshit. And I know just enough Spanish to order a beer and to ask where the bathroom is! :^)
Two Twitter-Pated Idiots

Chapter Summary

“I have already deduced what you are thinking and have already thought of five counterarguments to your opinion, say what is weighing on your mind anyway. You’re going to sit there all po’faced until you say your piece.”

“Fine,” Violet turned her head and looked up at the too-thin man next to her. “I don’t want you and John going to France.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock huffed. “You made that clear enough indeed. Will you stop sulking now?”

“I’m not sulking.”

“Your body language completely contradicts the words coming out of your mouth.”

“I’m not sulking. I’m…” she clamped her mouth shut, trying to think of the right words to say.

“Sulking because you’re being left behind...”

Plus John and Sherlock meet the Prime Minister and Secretary of State... then Sherlock is more Not-Good than usual...

Happy Sunday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Three: Two Twitter-Pated Idiots

23 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Tuesday night
9:40 PM

Wearing one of his old t-shirts and her favorite pair of yoga bottoms, Violet sat on her piano bench. She stared unseeingly at the sheet music in front of her. Her nails only tapped on the black and white keys, her fingers not providing enough pressure to produce any music.

She turned her head towards the window as she started chewing on her lower lip, a habit Sherlock had assured her was entirely unattractive. Her left leg started jigging up and down as her mind mulled over today’s events.

She tried not to think about events long past. Tried not to let Mycroft’s taunts drudge up painful memories…. *Fuck you Mickey. Fuck you and the high horse you keep riding*...

She ran her hands down her thin face then rubbed her arms. The unpredictable English weather had
turned again, from a tolerable misty rain to a cold snap, promising sleet.

She wondered if she could coax Sherlock into turning up the thermostat or at the very least, starting a fire. The kindling was ready in the fireplace, it just needed a match.

Violet sighed. Sherlock liked the cold. He might not be very receptive to additional requests, not after today’s events.

Only after coaxing Sherlock to consume a cup of tomato soup and a half a cheese toastie (feeding Sherlock often felt very similar to feeding a toddler) did Violet dare to go take a shower. After Sherlock declared he was going to have a long soak in the bath and did not wish to be disturbed, Violet retreated to her piano. Usually the gorgeous cherry-wood upright piano had been a refuge, a way to clear her head. But her thoughts were too discordant and refused to be assuaged with music, even though Sherlock had brought her a copy of Bach’s Partita No 1 per her request.

It had been one of her favorite recital pieces from when she was a girl. She wanted to reclaim the music from Jim Moriarty.

The last time she had met him as “Ciaran”, her True IRA contact, he had sat in front of her and played the greasy café table like a piano. It had taken her a bit, but she recognized the finger motions as the keystrokes from Partita No 1. Even relied on her own muscle memory and made the same keystrokes under the table on her thigh. Just to confirm she really wasn’t seeing things, that she wasn’t losing her mind.

Violet shook her head to push that memory away. She ran her hand through her hair, free from its usual severe hair styles, loose and curling. She tucked two chestnut locks behind her ears and contemplated again whether or not she should get it cut. The longer it grew the higher maintenance it became.

She felt a wave of weariness overcome her, but not the type of tiredness that precluded sleep. But rather the kind of exhaustion that comes from constant pressure and anxiety, coupled with always acting like someone else. She honestly didn’t know how she survived these past seven, nearly eight years.

She didn’t know how she was supposed to endure a lifetime of being Violet Smith.

No… Violet Holmes, if Mycroft had his way.

“Jesus Christ,” she whispered to herself as she halfheartedly played the first few notes of Fur Elise with only her right hand.

Then she looked out the window and caught his reflection in the window pane. He now wore clean pyjamas and his second-best dressing gown. Violet wondered how long he had been standing there, watching her.

He did that sometimes. Snuck up on her and just… stared. Observed. Deduced.

At first, it was disturbing. Then it was irritating. Now she was just used to it.

“Sit down, you’re making me nervous,” she sighed.

Sherlock, smelling like soap and fresh laundry instead of yesterday’s socks and a vegetable smoothie, walked around the piano bench first to draw the curtains shut. Then he ordered her to “Budge up,” poking her shoulder with his long finger. Violet scooted over on the bench, making room for him. Gracefully, he slid onto the bench next to her. “Oh, give over already,” he rumbled in that wonderful
baritone of his, That Voice that gave many people the misconception that he was desirable and attainable…

A few minutes in his company usually corrected that line of thinking.

“Give over, what?”

“Even though,” he rolled his eyes dramatically. “I have already deduced what you are thinking and have already thought of five counterarguments to your opinion, say what is weighing on your mind anyway. You’re going to sit there all po’faced until you say your piece.”

“Fine,” Violet turned her head and looked up at the too-thin man next to her. “I don’t want you and John going to France.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock huffed. “You made that clear enough indeed. Will you stop sulking now?”

“I’m not sulking.”

“Your body language completely contradicts the words coming out of your mouth.”

“I’m not sulking. I’m…” she clamped her mouth shut, trying to think of the right words to say.

“Sulking because you’re being left behind,” Sherlock said triumphantly. “And here I thought you’d be pleased to have the flat to yourself for a bit.”

“It’s not that.”

“Yes, it is.”

“No. It’s not,” Violet snapped at him. When Sherlock merely lifted one black brow at her, she grumbled “OK, it is. A little bit. I don’t trust Mycroft. This… this case? This mission? Feels more like Divide and Conquer, separate you and John from me and Mary so Mycroft can pick us off one by one, along with anyone else he feels could be a threat to you. He’s not going to be happy until he has you leashed and muzzled. Turn you into a good little pet for MI-6.”

“Mary is with child again, Mycroft won’t touch her, not out of sentimentality for the unborn,” Sherlock sounded bored. “But because he knows John will kill whoever harms another one of his children, born or unborn. As for you… well, my dear Violet, you’re more valuable alive than dead. I do believe your own country is starting to come around to that line of thought, although I believe they would still hold you prisoner and sweat you for any relevant information they think would aid them in whatever war they’re fighting now.”

“Oh good, progress,” Violet said flatly.

“Exactly!” Sherlock said brightly. When Violet gave him a withering look, he asked “Not good?”

“Not really.”

“Hm,” Sherlock scratched his chin as he tried to suss out his latest faux pas.

“Speaking of babies,” Violet hesitated before diving in. “You sure Mycroft still has no clue about who Henry’s dad really is?”

“Henry’s dad is Galchobhar Lestrade,” Sherlock murmured. “I am the anonymous sperm donor.”

“Galcho-what?
“Galchobhar. It’s Gaelic.”

“Wow, you really are running out of “G” names, aren’t you?”

Sherlock shrugged. “Not as if Lestrade plans on speaking to me again, so his Christian name is irrelevant to me.” Before Violet could ask him an irritating question about how he felt about the stalemate between him and Lestrade, he added, “And Mycroft doesn’t know, to answer your original question. More importantly, he doesn’t care. He would think I’d be as unsentimental about the child as he would be.”

“Are you?” Violet pounced on the opening Sherlock left for himself.

“It provides no advantage to me to care about the child.”

“Says the man who briefly contemplated kidnapping the baby to protect him from Moriarty.”

“Says the man giving up all rights and privileges from his son to protect him from Moriarty,” Sherlock darkly corrected her. “Caring is not an advantage in this case, my dear Violet. Caring makes the burden worse as well as distracting me from the tasks at hand.”

“But,” Violet smoothed the sleeve of his rumpled dressing gown. “We are going to catch Moriarty, whoever he is, whether or not someone assumed his name when he took over the RHL or if somehow ‘Richard Brook’ survived a self-inflicted gunshot to the head, we’re going to catch him. He’ll go to prison or get killed but we’ll get him and then we’ll be rid of him,” Violet proclaimed with a certainty she did not feel.

“That is the current goal, yes.”

“Then what happens after that?” she prodded. “You still continue to act like the kid’s not yours?”

“Let us cross that bridge when we reach it,” Sherlock circumvented her questioning because in all honesty, he did not know what the right answer was.

He didn’t like questions that didn’t have answers.

He never wanted to be a father, not really. He had never wanted any sort of distraction from The Work. And yet, even though he still felt quite fond of Molly Hooper Lestrade, he very much resented how he was being left out. That he was being cheated out of something very special, something incredibly important. But he didn’t understand why he felt that way since he never wanted the sprog in the first place…not to mention the child’s life would be placed in mortal peril once word hit the streets who his natural father really was…

So it is a good thing Henry will grow up calling Lestrade “Dad”… right?

Maddening…the entire situation was maddening.

Bloody useless feelings.

So instead of answering Violet’s question, he said: “There are other calamities that take precedence such as locating Marissa Watson. You and I ending this ridiculous engagement.”

“Figuring out how to stop the double-hit,” Violet rubbed her hand with her forehead. “OK, OK, I get it. Let sleeping dogs lie.”

“Exactly,” Sherlock expertly hid his relief when Violet dropped the subject. “And never fear, my
dear Violet, you will not be sitting here idly while John and I are in France. I have loads of work for you to do as well.”

“Oh goodie,” Violet tried to sound sarcastic, but Sherlock caught the spark of interest in her hazel eyes.

Despite her claims to the contrary, Violet had an insatiable curiosity, almost on par with Sherlock’s. Her nosiness actually made her quite a thorough investigator. Sherlock had often wondered what it would have been like to work with her in an official capacity, with access to the full resources of the FBI.

He bet it would have been fun.

“Margery Vos,” he announced. “I’m turning that over to you to handle. Create one of your profile-thingys for me,” he ignored the sour look the former profiler gave him. “I want to know everything about her, even the things that seem irrelevant or trivial. I want to know how she got ensnared into both MI-6 and the RHL’s nets. I fear I have been looking at this case for so long I can no longer distinguish the trees from the forest. A fresh pair of eyes may be just what is needed,” he rubbed his left wrist as he flexed his fingers.

“OK. Anything else?”

“Sort things out with Mary,” he commanded her. When she made a noise of disgust and made a move to get off the piano bench, he grabbed her arm and held her. “We need to stay on friendly terms with her, Violet.” He then reminded her. “I have the scars to prove what can and will happen if she becomes emotionally unstable.” When Violet still balked, he asked her softly, “What do you think would happen if she fell out of love with John?”

“He should praise Jesus and run for the hills?”

“You think he would live long enough to make that run?”

Violet sat back down again. “Do you think she would… actually kill John?”

Sherlock could feel her starting to tremble as that horrible possibility took hold in her heart and in her mind. Just like Sherlock, John was a pressure point for her. She adored John the same way she had cherished her brother Michael.

“Oh yes,” he breathed, shamelessly playing her love for his best friend.

“But she loves him, you said so yourse-”

“She loves her children more,” Sherlock said flatly. “She also would kill John without hesitation if she felt she had to choose between Marissa and John. Or the new baby and John…”

His own mouth went dry in fear as well. Tried to imagine a world without…

No. Unacceptable.

He felt her pressing against him, felt her positively vibrating. He wrapped his arms around her, lightly clasping his fingers around her wrist. Her pulse felt too high so he drew her close, into a proper hug, in an effort to calm her, slow her speeding heart rate.

“So,” he pressed his cheek into her hair. “Let’s not give her any ideas. Let’s make her feel as secure as possible. Let’s make her feel she has friends to turn to just in case Mycroft starts making threats or
if another one of her old enemies finds her and starts making demands.”

He felt her nodding against his chest. He heard her mutter “We have to find Maisie.”

“Agreed,” Sherlock pursed his lips, trying again to outwit his clever and chilly older brother.

*I wonder… when I solve this case, if that would grant me certain privileges? Say, security clearance to certain MI-6 files?*

He filed that idea away for later.

“Anything else you need me to do while you’re gone?”

“Yes, check on my maggots experiments.” When Violet jerked away from him, frowning, he rolled his eyes: “They’re not in the kitchen. They’re up in John’s old room.”

“Maggots?”

“It’s for a case.”

“Maggots?”

“They’re in a glass case!”

“Oh my God,” Violet covered her face with both hands. “Really?”

“You said no body parts, no living animals.”

“Maggots are animals.”

“Maggots are larvae.”

“Maybe it is a good thing you’re going to Paris,” Violet groused, already planning on accidentally ruining Sherlock’s experiment.

“That’s the spirit,” Sherlock said approvingly.

The look she gave him was not kind. “Are you going to be up for a while?”

“For a bit, yes. Need to think. Why?”

“Trying to decide if I should make a pot of coffee or not. If you’re going to be awake for a while, I might as well.”

“You should really sleep,” Sherlock’s eyes flicked down towards her hands.

Her fingers were twitching.

She didn’t notice.

“So should you,” now she was the one arching a brow at him.

He placed his large hand, covering her quivering fingers. “Caffeine is the last thing you need right now, my dear Violet.”

She snorted, “Like I’m going to sleep with you sawing away on the violin.”
“Mm, not tonight,” he rotated his left wrist again with a grimace. “My wrist aches.”

“That’s new.”

He shrugged. “Not really. You just never observed it before. I always believed it was an idiotic old wives’ tale about bones and joints aching when the weather changes. But ever since I broke it, it plays up whenever it becomes damp and cold.”

Tentatively, she asked “Fall-related or Hiatus-related injury?”

Rubbing his wrist, he muttered, “From The Fall. I didn’t land quite as I should have. Reflexively I reached out, trying to stop myself but that was an involuntary action and I’m very fortunate I didn’t shatter both wrists or sustain any more injuries than I did.”

Violet lifted both eyebrows but didn’t say a word. She turned around so she sat sideways on the piano bench, facing Sherlock. She criss-crossed her legs and held her hand out to Sherlock. Deducing what she meant to do, he added hastily, “That’s quite unnecessary, it will go away on its own accord.”

She beckoned him with her fingers.

Sighing, he flipped his hand over and gingerly placed it in hers, palm facing up. But, when she started to gently massage his wrist and palm with her other hand, applying pressure with her thumb, he had to admit, it felt better.

They sat in silence; the only other sounds were the leaky tap in the kitchen and the beginning of sleet lashing the windowpanes. Then Violet said again, in a low, fierce tone, “I don’t want you to go to France.”

“This is getting tedious,” he threatened her. “You will be perfectly fine on your own.”

“I’m not thinking about myself and you know it,” Violet growled right back to him.

Sherlock leaned over, twisting his body so he could press his forehead against hers.

“I know.”

**

24 November 2015
London, England
Wednesday morning
9:31 AM

John felt quite underwhelmed by the location of his breakfast meeting with the Prime Minister.

At first, at any rate.

A helicopter didn’t whisk him away to Buckingham Palace, for starters. Instead, one of Mycroft’s black SUV’s picked John up at nine o’clock on the dot. And, to his dismay, Anthea, Mycroft’s pretty but perpetually texting personal assistant sat in the backseat of the government vehicle.

Texting, of course.

“Hi, good morning,” John had said, trying to be cheerful and polite. When Anthea ignored him, John muttered. “Right, OK,” and turned to stare out the window. Except the window was so darkly tinted,
He couldn’t see anything. So he had pulled out his own mobile and tapped on the app that opened up a poker game. He had always loved playing cards, even as a boy. As an adult, poker, blackjack, baccarat, red dog, all gambling games gave him a small rush. A rush similar to (but not quite the same as) being elbows deep in a complicated operation or working a particularly baffling case with Sherlock. It was like a hard core heroin addict getting a slight buzz off of a cigarette. It wasn’t the same, but it wasn’t nothing either.

But as for playing for money, he rarely did as a young man and never did now. He couldn’t bring himself to do it now, not with the birth of his daughter and another little one on the way.

His father had been a terrible gambler.

John had frowned to himself. It had been years since he had thought about his father. But he knew why family weighed heavily on his mind this morning.


Having lost his taste for his game, John had turned the app off and studied his good black shoes for the rest of the car ride to the Prime Minister’s office.

But they didn’t go to 10 Downing Street like he thought they would. Instead, when the car had come to a full stop and John got out, he found himself inside some grotty old indoor car park.

Just as John and Anthea had gotten out of their vehicle, another black SUV pulled up right next to them. Sherlock had hopped out once the vehicle stopped, looking disdainful and disgruntled, as usual.

But John had just been relieved Sherlock was wearing his swishy old coat and his usual charcoal black suit instead of a sheet or dirty tracksuit.

Anthea had then chivved Sherlock and John towards the lift and then escorted them down a bland, beige hallway and into a bland, beige conference room that reminded John of the old television program The Office. Except this particular conference room had caterers (or John had assumed they were caterers) putting the final touches on a buffet-style breakfast spread out on a long, white, plastic-looking folding table. There wasn’t even a proper table cloth.

Anthea had told the detective and the doctor please to take a seat. As if her words had been some sort of cue, the caterers wrapped up their work and exited the room, except for one, who offered to take their coats. John accepted and handed her his good black coat and scarf, the same ones he had just worn to James Sholto’s funeral.

Sherlock merely fixed his chilliest glare upon the poor woman as he flipped up the collar of the Belstaff. She paled and scuttled off with Anthea trailing behind who was still bloody texting away as she walked.

John had wondered how it was possible she had not run into a pole. Or fallen down a hole.

He hoped “Texter’s Thumb” became a real thing.

Anthea had no more than shut the door when another one swung open at the other side of the room. Prime Minister Bellinger entered briskly, wearing a smart navy suit and a no-nonsense expression on his horse-like face. Mycroft followed close behind, his face implacable and unreadable as usual. The Secretary of State, a Mr. Trelawney-Hope, brought up the rear, his round face serious and somber but otherwise unremarkable.
And yet, John couldn’t help but notice Sherlock took immediate interest in Trelawney-Hope. His eyes glittered, the irises fluctuating between aquamarine and sea green, as he tracked every move Trelawney-Hope made. While the PM had told everyone to help themselves to the breakfast waiting for them, Sherlock had made his usual request for “Just tea,” and had leaned back against his chair, his eyes never leaving Trelawney-Hope, as if the solemn, plump politician was the most fascinating creature in the entire universe.

As usual, John had wondered what on earth Sherlock had observed that no one else had.

John had a feeling that this was going to one of those irritating occurrences where Sherlock was going to be two steps ahead of everyone and would start talking circles around all present and accounted for while expecting John to keep up. He would most definitely make That Annoying Face he made whenever he believed John understood what he was talking about. In matters like this, John rarely did.

That was yet another reason why That Face was so annoying.

But, John consoled himself as he tucked in, at least the food’s ace. Croissants, pain au chocolat, two kinds of quiche and fresh fruit. Plus piping hot coffee and a full tea service complete with lemon, milk and sugar.

“Yes, right then,” Bellinger said after Mycroft had finished “playing mother” (which caused Sherlock and John to simultaneously suppress immature little smirks while Mycroft shot them both a dirty look.) “No sense in delaying the matter. Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson, I will not waste time with sycophantic praise for your unique talents. We need your assistance and time is of the essence. Your contributions to this mission will not go unnoticed but will not be announced either as this is of a most sensitive nature.”

“Pity, I thought you said you were going to get to the point?” Sherlock drawled, “How disappointing.”

Mycroft looked like he wanted to slide underneath the table and die of shame.

“Sherlock,” John whispered, “Not good. Mouthing off to the P.M.”

A half-smile crooked Bellinger’s lips. “Actually, I’d prefer some straight talk as opposed to the faff I’m forced to listen to all day. Very well. The point is this: two days ago, a classified document was stolen. You two and C. Auguste Dupin have been asked to locate the information. Trained operatives from MI-6 and Interpol will perform the actual retrieval. I’ve been led to understand that burglary is not your forte?” The prime minister looked at Sherlock’s chest, then lifted his light grey eyes to meet Sherlock’s mercurial gaze.

“If you’re alluding to the dreadful Magnussen affair, then I believe the ‘straight talk’ you are seeking is that the entire case went, ahem, ‘tits up’.”

He very clearly and loudly enunciated “Tits Up”, popping the T’s and the P and rolling the U in his mouth like it was a piece of hard candy.

John giggled out loud but recovered quickly. Sherlock barely cursed. John didn’t know why, but it just almost always tickled his funny bone to hear the Great Detective swear.

“Yes,” the prime minister said dryly. “So I’ve been informed.”

Mycroft still looked like he wanted to dive into the nearest hole and disappear.
John wished he would just disappear… *Cold-blooded bastard*…

John also wished he had dressed better. Despite having everyone take the piss out of him for his comfy jumpers, John didn’t really dress as shabbily as everyone claimed he did. Today he wore a black-button up dress shirt paired with a smart blue cardigan that had managed to escape Sweetie’s unfortunate chewing habit. His charcoal-colored trousers were neatly pressed and his shoes had a military shine to them.

And he still looked like a Country Mouse compared to these City Mice with their posh tailored suits and designer shoes.

Belatedly, John realized he should have worn a tie and a proper suit jacket.

Meanwhile, Mycroft voiced his displeasure regarding his brother’s manners or lack thereof. “Brother mine, must you always bite the hand that feeds you?”

“Um,” John struggled to get the meeting back on track before the brothers ended up in another row. Going for his best ‘Dr. Watson’ tone, he asked “What information are we looking for then?”

“Classified,” Trelawney-Hope spoke for the first time.

“Um, right, and what kind of classified information?” John reached for his tea cup.

“The kind we can’t tell you about,” Mycroft said patronizingly.

“Now hang on,” John scowled at Mycroft. “You mean to tell me, we’re supposed to locate this secret document, but you can’t tell us what it is?”

“The information is unimportant,” Sherlock droned. “What is actually important is how it went missing in the first place and what led you lot of fools to believe it’s in France?”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft’s normally reptilian cold eyes blazed with an unusual volcanic heat. “Please bear in mind that these two gentlemen you just referred to as fools agreed not to try you for Charles Augustus Magnussen’s murder.”

“Oh of course they weren’t going to try me,” Sherlock scoffed. “Anyway, you know that I had deduced the dirty little plan to assassinate him. So obviously, they weren’t going to try me for something they had intended on carrying out anyway. And I know it was you who came up with the genius plan to send me back to Serbia on a suicide mission. Dear, dear,” Sherlock smiled his unpretty smile at his elder brother. “What *would* Mummy say?”

“Ladies,” John snapped at the Holmes brothers, “Big picture, yes?”

“These two must be a handful for you,” the Prime Minister sympathized.

“You have no idea,” John grizzled.

Now both Holmes brothers glowered at John.

“Right, big picture,” Trelawney-Hope jumped into the conversation. ”My home was burgled two days ago. At first, my office appeared to be only ransacked. After the Met left, I realized the letter was missing.”

“Letter?” John jumped on that word. “So this correspondence, it’s a letter? An actual letter, writing on paper with a pen or pencil?”
“Yes, John, people do still employ the ancient art of letter writing,” Mycroft sneered.

Meanwhile Trelawney-Hope flushed. “The letter was, ah, is private, not meant for others’ eyes.”

“How can a letter start a world war?” John wondered out loud, privately cursing himself. He had left his little notepad and pen in his coat pocket.

But, as this was a secret mission, John supposed note-taking would be frowned upon.

“Again, the contents are unimportant,” Sherlock butted back into the conversation, “Boring, in fact. What would launch a world war is who sent the letter, not what the letter appears to say, correct?”

“Yes,” Trelawney-Hope nodded eagerly, like a little boy wanting to impress his schoolmaster.

“Why Paris though?” John asked. “Why would they take a letter all the way to Paris?”

“Think John,” Sherlock picked at the pain au chocolat John had brought him with a mug of very sugary tea. “What is in Paris?”

The obvious flew through John’s head. Eiffel Tower, Notre Dame, the Seine, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre… hang on… wait… think John… what unique talents are Sherlock and I bringing to this case? We’re not secret agents, we’re… hang on…

John suddenly recalled an old conversation with Violet and Sherlock from last March:

Coincidentally, about four years ago, Rouge footholds in Europe and the US started crumbling. The first to fall was Paris, a blow to morale since that’s supposedly where the Rouge originated, burn the heart out of them, so to speak…

And then Sherlock had purred Paris was fun.

“It’s where the Red-headed League originated,” John finally said. “And you,” he hesitated, turning towards Sherlock. They so rarely spoke of this time-period, the Great Hiatus, as John had mockingly called it in his blog, still in his first flush of anger about Sherlock’s return from the dead. “You went to Paris first, after The Fall. Paris was your first target. That was the first cell of Moriarty’s network you destroyed.”

Sherlock gave John one of his rare, approving smiles. It was the smallest quirk of his lips, but the small smile actually reached Sherlock’s eyes, giving them warmth they usually lacked. That small, proud smile always made John feel like he was the one who was over six feet tall.

“And Paris has been rebuilding,” Mycroft informed John.

“Were they hired to steal the letter for someone else? For some terrorist group?”

“Oh John, you were doing so well,” Sherlock sighed.

John felt five-foot-five again. He gave Sherlock a foul look. “They are the Cult of the Consulting Criminal. That’s what they do. They are hired to consult on how to commit crimes.”

“Yes, John,” Mycroft used the same voice John did when throwing a ball to Sweetie and he brought it back to him instead of running away with his prize. “That’s just it. They rarely perform the crimes themselves. They usually tell others how to commit the crimes.”

“Unless it is necessary for them to commit the crimes for their own self-preservation or amusement, as it was usually in Jim Moriarty’s case, for the fun of it,” Sherlock pushed the French pastry away
from him. “If they took the letter, then they needed it.”

“To do what?” John asked.

“Sell it,” Mycroft said flatly, “To the highest bidder.”

“That letter can’t possibly be that valuable,” John protested.

“It is,” Mycroft assured him stoutly.

“How am I supposed to believe you when you won’t even tell us what the ruddy thing says!” John snapped then immediately turned to Bellinger and said “I’m so sorry, my apologies, sir,” with flushed cheeks, embarrassed he let his temper flare up in front of the Prime Minister.

“Please,” Bellinger waived his hand dismissively, letting John know his little outburst was of no great concern. “I understand completely, your frustration. It is maddening not to tell you, but for security’s sake, we cannot.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, his boredom evident now. “When do we leave?” he asked.

“Leave what?” Mycroft asked, “This meeting or for Paris?”

“Paris, obviously. I have everything I need from this meeting,” Sherlock declared. “Except for… Mr. Trelawney-Hope?”

“My friends call me Tree,” Trelawney-Hope offered eagerly.

“Mm. Right. Mr. Trelawney-Hope,” Sherlock stood up from his seat. “I need to visit your house. I would like to go now, if convenient.”

“Well… it really isn’t. I have a lot on my plate today, Mr. Holmes.”

Sherlock gave Trelawney-Hope a look of supreme irritation. “I would like to go to your house today, even if it’s inconvenient.”

“Oh, of course, yes. Absolutely,” the secretary of state looked flustered.

John wondered how this idiot held onto his post.

“Is that all, Mr. Holmes?” the idiot asked the detective.

“How is your marriage?” Sherlock blurted out.

“What?” squawked Trelawney-Hope. “It’s just fine, not that it’s any of your bloody business.”

But Sherlock had that smug “ah-ha” look on his face when he just busted someone in a huge whopper of a lie. John looked Trelawney-Hope up and down and could not find a single hint of an unhappy marriage. “He just wants to make sure we don’t upset things any more than necessary,” John expertly smoothed over Sherlock’s bluntness. “Sometimes when a marriage is tense, unannounced detectives make things worse.”

“Hmphf,” Trelawney-Hope said but he also stood up. “Well, Hilda, my wife, is home, but she won’t mind. If you have the time, we can go now.”

“Excellent!” Sherlock beamed.
“And when do we leave for Paris?” John asked Mycroft.

If it was tonight, Mary might actually contemplate murdering him.

“Tomorrow afternoon,” Mycroft had to swallow a large bite of pastry before speaking.

Sherlock snickered. “Come along John,” he beckoned to his best friend. “It’s feeding time at the zoo and I dare not disturb the animals.” He smiled sweetly to Mycroft and then said, just as polite as he could be, “Prime Minister, good morning,” and dramatically swept out of the room.

John trailed after him, hoping Sherlock’s theatrical exit wouldn’t be ruined by the fact that John still needed to get his coat and scarf back from Anthea.

**

24 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday morning
11:45 AM

Violet checked her pretty golden wristwatch with a crinkled-up nose and a deep frown. Surely Sherlock and John would be finished meeting the PM and Secretary of State by now…

“Shit…” she worried at a hangnail then stopped, still frowning. Miss Smith didn’t bite her nails, after all. Crap, going to have to get a new manicure, she grizzled to herself. Probably should touch up the old hair again too.

She really hated how high-maintenance and snooty Miss Smith was. More than just that, she hated how vulnerable she felt at the hair-dressers, especially while her hair was being washed. Or at the nail salon, while her nails were being soaked, clipped and painted. Most women relaxed while being pampered. Violet’s anxiety merely rose up to another level whenever she had to freshen up her disguise.

But Violet always theorized she could manage to pull a trigger while her nail polish was still wet. She just hoped she would never have to test that theory.

Maybe the guys stopped somewhere for lunch, Violet threw the copy of today’s Guardian on the coffee table and sat up, swinging her legs down. Then smiled wryly, Scratch that, John stopped for lunch and Sherlock grudgingly went with him.

“Screw it,” she said, pushing the long sleeves of her faded Oxford sweatshirt up. Then she dug into her jeans pocket for her mobile.

Not the fancy Smartphone Sherlock had purchased for her last spring after it had gotten ruined when she had fallen (… been pushed…) into the Thames. But a boring little black flip-phone, a pre-pay. A gift.

From her future brother-in-law. God help me…

After she pulled the mobile out of her pocket, she fumbled it. It fell to the floor with a clatter. “Fuck,” Violet mumbled, reaching under the coffee table to retrieve it. Sitting back up, mobile in hand, Violet hit the pre-set speed-dial number for Mycroft.

“Yes?”
That one little syllable chilled Violet to the core, but she didn’t let it deter her. She let her hot, fiery hatred fuel her resolve. “Can you talk?”

“Briefly.”

“How the fuck am I supposed to keep my promise about keeping Sherlock alive if I can’t leave the goddamn country?” she spat into the phone.

“There are other ways you can preserve my brother’s life from 221B, my dear Violet.”

“Don’t fucking call me that…Mickey.”

“Point taken,” but Mycroft still sounded as smooth and cold as a frozen sea. “Very well, Agent Hunter. Is it safe to assume Sherlock asked you to take over the investigation as to how an independent blackmailer got into bed with the Red-headed League?”

“Yes,” Violet massaged her forehead. “But I don’t have a lot to go on. I’m not Sherlock. I need more data to create a profile as well as a working hypothesis.”

“Done,” Mycroft said after a beat. “Also, did my brother ask you to reconcile with Mrs. Watson?”

“Yes,” Violet gritted her teeth.

“Good. We need to keep her happy.”

“Give her daughter back to her,” Violet sweetly suggested. “Then everyone’s happy.”

“Unfortunately, that’s just not possible,” Mycroft attempted to sound regretful.

“You’re a lying sack of sh-”

“Yoo-hoo?”

“Just a moment, Mrs. Hudson,” Violet Smith called out, then hissed at Mycroft, “I have to go,” and closed the pre-pay with a snap. She tucked the mobile back into her jeans pocket and reached for her fake spectacles and her Glock lying on the coffee table. She flicked the safety on and jammed the gun into the couch cushions as she put on her glasses. She rose from the sofa, plopping the Union Jack pillow on top of the cushion where her gun was hidden. She plastered a smile to her face and answered the door.

“Hello, dearie,” the Not-Your-Housekeeper beamed, her arms laden with dry-cleaning and grocery bags. She had taken Violet under her gentle wings the same as she had Sherlock, John, Mary, Molly, Greg and all the other odds and sods that had come through the doors of 221 Baker Street and become a part of “The Baker Street Irregulars.”

But Violet knew she occupied a special spot in Mrs. Hudson’s heart because she was engaged to her precious Sherlock.

It made Violet feel guilty as hell.

“Mrs. Hudson, what on earth are you doing? Let me help,” Violet took the grocery bags from Mrs. Hudson before ushering her inside.

“Oh, it’s no trouble, dear,” Mrs. Hudson assured her as Gladstone trotted out of the kitchen, his ears perking up upon seeing the landlady. “Well, who’s my good boy?” As the Alsatian’s tail wagged enthusiastically, Mrs. Hudson added, “I purchased another box of dog treats while I did the shopping
this morning. Hope it’s the right brand.”

“The shopping…?”

“Oh, Sherlock told me you’ve been a bit out of sorts. He asked me to pick up a few things since you wouldn’t feel like going out.” She paused. “Although I do confess, I became a little worried about you. I thought it was something serious, since he was… ah…”

“Actually being considerate?” Violet supplied with a half-smile.

“Oh, he means well in his own funny old way,” Mrs. Hudson sighed. Then hastily added, in case Violet thought she was being rude. “And you do look a bit peaky dear. Am I intruding? I can always come back later.”

“Oh, I’m a little under the weather, but nothing serious. Really, this wasn’t necessary.”

“Nonsense. Happy to help, just this one time. After all, I’m-”

“Not the housekeeper,” a genuine smile lit up Violet’s wan face.

Cosmetics couldn’t even conceal her fatigue anymore. If anything, the heavy foundation she wore to hide her freckles made her look worse. The color of her foundation didn’t match the pallor of her skin anymore.

So, around the flat at least, Violet had been going sans makeup, hoping Mrs. Hudson wouldn’t notice she was really as freckled as a plover’s egg.

And wouldn’t ask about the scar on her cheek.

So far, the housekeeper hadn’t noticed. Or if she had noticed, she hadn’t commented. “Exactly, pet. And it really was no trouble. Only picked up a few things.”

Violet looked down at the shopping bags again. To Violet, it looked like she could stock the pantry of a homeless shelter. A large homeless shelter.

“I’m going to pop these into Sherlock’s wardrobe. I know you have trouble with the dry-cleaning sometimes, with the fan-girls trying to steal his shirts,” Mrs. Hudson nattered on, her voice trailing down the hallway towards the bedroom.

Violet hefted the bags to the kitchen with Gladstone following, his nose quivering hopefully. The poor hound walked with a slight limp now. That bastard Rucastle had shot Gladstone when the Alsatian (per John’s command) attacked him.

Violet was really happy to hear about how that sadistic pile of shit had gotten fatally savaged by the bull mastiff he had abused. That news had put a smile her face for weeks.

After a cautious peek into the refrigerator to make sure there wasn’t something horrible festering in there (like body parts), Violet started putting the groceries away. She had just finished putting the milk, cheese, lettuce, yoghurt and fruit away when Mrs. Hudson came into the kitchen, still talking away. “… maybe make some nice sarnies and heat up some soup?”

“Hm? Oh, yes, of course, that would be very nice to have some company for lunch.” Violet said distractedly. “Would you like a cuppa?”

“Oh, that would be lovely on a damp day like this,” Mrs. Hudson started helping Violet put the rest
of the groceries away. “If you don’t mind, I know you’ve gone off tea.”

Violet Hunter never liked tea in the first place. But she when she’d “gone native” to stay alive, she learned to hide her distaste for the stuff. After Rucastle and the Toller (unsuccessfully) tried to poison Violet Smith by putting arsenic in her tea, she used that as her excuse not to drink tea again. Ever. The emotional trauma and all that…

“Oh, I’ve got instant cocoa if you don’t mind doing a pour-and-dunk with a tea bag,” Violet reached for the kettle, intending to fill it with water. “Or if you’d rather have coffee?”

“That’s just fine, I’m not a tea-snob like Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson said then covered her mouth, looking very much like a little girl who just got caught out using a disgusting swear word.

Violet winked at her. “I won’t tell,” she said as she filled the kettle.

She had just switched it on when the front door banged open. “Oh, good,” Mrs. Hudson sighed. “The boys are home,” Mrs. Hudson always looked relieved when Sherlock and John returned to the flat, even if it was from somewhere as mundane as dinner at Angelo’s or an afternoon at John and Mary’s house.

But John came stomping into the kitchen like a man on a mission. He threw open the freezer door and immediately said, “Shit.”

“What happened?” Violet demanded just as Mrs. Hudson uttered, “Oh dear, John, what’s wrong?”

“Ice,” he said tersely. “I need ice, we need ice.” John paused, took a deep breath and started over. “Mrs. Hudson, do you have any ice? Or frozen vegetables in your freezer? There’s nothing in here except frozen toes.”

“Toes?” Mrs. Hudson quailed.

“Human or animal?” Violet sounded resigned instead of disgusted.

“John, I’m fine,” a deep, annoyed voice sounded from the living room.

Mrs. Hudson and Violet looked at each other, then at John. “What happened?” both women said at the exact same time, in the exact same aggrieved tone.

“What did he do?” Mrs. Hudson whimpered.

“What did he say?” Violet crossed her arms, looking like a furious headmistress.

“Today Sherlock learned that one cannot insult the wife of a prominent government official in her own bloody house!” John bawled the last bit over his shoulder.

“How is it my fault she’s an idiot?” Sherlock shouted back from the lounge.

“I’ll fetch the ice,” Mrs. Hudson shook her head, “And perhaps something a bit stronger than tea? It’s five o’clock somewhere?”

“That would be magnificent,” John said through clenched teeth.

As soon as Mrs. Hudson had cleared the flat, John stormed back into the lounge, Violet following closely behind.

Both stood in front of Sherlock, who sat cross-legged in “his” chair, fingers tented, eyes closed.
Violet Hunter looked at Sherlock over, then back at John. “He looks fine to me.”

John walked around Sherlock’s chair then pressed his fingers against the back of Sherlock’s head. This action catapulted Sherlock out of his mind-palace. “Arggh! Ow, John, stop it!”

“She hit him over the head?” Violet clinically asked.

“Yeah, chucked a vase at him as we were leaving, after he called her an idiot…”

“Oh God…”

“And a twit…”

“Jesus Christ,” Violet moaned.

“And an imbecile,” John finished.

“You forgot ‘liar’,” Sherlock added.

“Yes, of course, how stupid of me to forget that,” John snarled. “I got distracted as I was picking teeny tiny shards of glass out of your hair.”

“Well, she is the moron who caused the letter to go missing in the first place,” Sherlock carefully ruffled his hair, as if there was a chance there was still bits of glass lurking. “Mark my words. Before we leave for Paris, she’s going to come here to confess what really happened to The Letter.”

“The Letter?” Violet quirked up an eyebrow, upon hearing how two mundane words had become capitalized.

“Yes,” John said testily, hands on hips, still glaring daggers at the back of Sherlock’s head, “The Letter, the Effing, Bloody Letter that could cause the next world war.”

“That Trelawney-Hope’s stupid wife lost,” Sherlock pointed out.

“That we get to find, lucky us,” John snapped back.

“Whoa, wait, back up,” Violet held up her hands. “What Effing, Bloody Letter?”

But before John or Sherlock could explain, Mrs. Hudson was back with an ice-pack. “Here you go, Sherlock,” she made a beeline for her favorite tenant and gently pressed the pack to the back of his head. “Just hold that there and you’ll be right as rain. Now, who’s hungry?”

Sherlock, of course, said he wasn’t but after receiving looks of death from both John and Violet, he meekly ate an entire bowl of vegetable beef soup without complaint while everyone else consumed the little finger sandwiches Mrs. Hudson had made.

After Violet ushered Mrs. Hudson out, assuring her she would handle the washing-up, she said to John and Sherlock as they both sat drinking tea at the big table, “OK, spill. What Letter?”

“As I said, a tempest in a teapot,” Sherlock scoffed. “Two idiots have been letting their hearts rule their heads. A love letter was intercepted.”

“Who are the two idiots?” Violet asked.

“Don’t know,” John muttered darkly.
“Don’t care,” Sherlock added blithely.

“Then why do we care about this Letter?” Violet started gathering up the soup bowls then stopped.
“And why am I the only one clearing the table?” She crossed her arms and fixed her hazel eyes upon the two men.

“Oh sit down for a bit,” John pulled out a chair for her. “We’ll help after we talk, well,” he threw Sherlock a displeased glance. “I’ll help after we talk.”

“Thank you John,” Violet said archly. “That’s very nice of you.”

“Passive-aggressive tactics have no effect on me,” Sherlock reminded the pair of them.

“Oh there’s nothing passive about this,” Violet snapped. “Would it kill you to push the vacuum around once in a while?”

“Right, I’ll leave that discussion to you two,” John said hastily, kicking himself for opening that can of worms. “So, yeah, the Letter. Apparently what I gathered—”

Sherlock obnoxiously cleared his throat.

John gave Sherlock his infamous “I was in the Army and I had Bad Days” look. “Is that the sender and recipient of The Letter are two young people who had met in uni and fallen in love.”


“Whatever,” John brushed Sherlock’s correct aside. “It’s like this. These two love-birds have no business corresponding with each other whatsoever. They are on opposing teams, so to speak.”

Violet looked just as unimpressed and bored as Sherlock. “So, this is like some Romeo-and-Juliet scenario? Two households, both alike in dignity… and all that shit?”

“Apparently there’s nothing dignified about these two houses,” John sighed as Sherlock sniffed. “Of course, Mr. Smarty-pants over there deduced who and what those ‘two households’ are but he won’t tell me.” There was a bit of a sulky tone to John’s voice, as if Sherlock was holding John’s teddy bear up and out of his reach.

That mental image made Violet smile a little but she re-arranged her face when Sherlock said “Its best you don’t know, John. Ignorance is bliss. The contents of the letter are truly unimportant. The problem is that war-mongers and bureaucratic idiots see who the sender and recipient of The Letter are, and those said idiots will create a panic.” Then he muttered, “And actually, if the two twitter-pated idiots would follow the plot of Romeo and Juliet and just off themselves, that would save us all loads of time and effort.”

Violet, ignoring Sherlock’s nasty remarks, put the puzzle pieces together. “The Letter can be twisted to look like Bad Guy A is courting Bad Guy B so they can team up like the Germans and Japan did in World War II.”

“Exactly so,” Sherlock murmured, sipping at his stone-cold, sugary tea.

“The Red-headed League will sell it to whoever wants to stir the pot,” John added. “There are several, ah, Bad Guys, apparently, who would pay out the nose to have this Letter to advance their own agendas. At least, that’s as far as Trelawney-Hope got,” now John turned to Sherlock again. Even though John gave his best friend a very black look, his voice was reproachful, not angry. “That’s as much as Trelawney-Hope managed to tell us before Lady Hilda came into the study and
she made her acquaintance with Sherlock.”

“Oh God,” Violet hung her head for a moment then swung it back up to give Sherlock a most displeased look. Chestnut brows (dyed, of course. Violet didn’t overlook one minute detail of her disguise) furrowed, she demanded, “What did you say?”

“The truth,” Sherlock said angelically, before taking another sip of cold tea.

“Oh God,” Violet pressed her face into her palm.

“Yeah, it was marvelous,” John now got up and started clearing the table, “Nothing like calling the wife of one of the most powerful men in England names.”

“If you had been observing instead of feeling offended,” Sherlock said shortly, “You would have seen how clearly guilty she felt. She came in with a tea trolley, laden with biscuits and fairy-cakes obviously over-compensating for her culpability with food and hospitality. But she refused to make eye-contact and was wearing loads of cosmetics, like you do, Miss Smith. She had especially done up her eyes, mostly to hide the circles, dark circles under her eyes caused by lack of sleep. But nothing could be done to hide the redness of her sclera, which clearly indicates excessive weeping. She tried to claim allergies, and yet there was cat hair all over her skirt. Most people with allergies do not tolerate animal hair and dander.”

“You didn’t have to ask her if she was the, ahem, ‘the twit who caused this kerfuffle in the first place?’ Quote and end-quote,” John shook his head. “Not good, mate.”

Sherlock looked nonplussed. “The throwing of the vase merely confirmed her fault in this matter. Rest assured, tonight she will confess her role in this affair. Most likely she’ll show up at your front door instead of mine, John.”

“Wonder why,” Violet now rose as well. “Would it kill you to be nice once in a while?”

“It is a possibility so I shan’t take the risk,” Sherlock fed his uneaten sandwich to Gladstone, who swallowed it in one gulp.

“Stop feeding the dog people-food,” Violet snapped. “And when do you two leave for Paris.”

“Tomorrow,” John said over his shoulder as he took bowls and plates to the kitchen.

Violet nearly dropped the mugs she had been gathering. “To… tomorrow?” she turned to Sherlock, who had started scrolling through his Smartphone, “So soon?”

“You’ll be fine, Violet,” Sherlock said under his breath, so John wouldn’t hear.

“I know. It’s just that…” Violet faltered then shook her head. “Forget it, you’re right. I’ll be fine,” and she bustled off towards the kitchen.

Sherlock watched her go, watched her nearly run into John as he came back out of the kitchen.

“Sorry,” she said, skirting around him.

John came back to the table, “She alright?” he mouthed to Sherlock.

Sherlock, his eyes never leaving his mobile, shook his head.

“Maybe we shouldn’t go?”
“We must,” Sherlock continued to study his mobile. “Can’t really back out now. The game is on.”

“You’re… looking forward to this, aren’t you? Finding this rutting Letter?”

“Why do you insist on asking questions that have glaringly obvious answers?”

That little comment pushed John over the edge. “Alright, you pretentious dick, since you insist on behaving like an arsehole, hey, eyes up here. *I’m talking to you.*”

Sherlock snapped his eyes up at John. He placed his mobile face down on to the table and gave John his full attention.

“I insist you join me and Mary for a delightful family dinner with Harry tonight.”

“Another tedious intervention?” Sherlock started to ask but Violet had re-entered the lounge at a rapid clip. She had heard John’s angry voice from the kitchen.

“Of course, we’ll be happy to help, *won’t we* Sherlock?” she dried her hands with a dish towel.

“Enchanted,” Sherlock muttered.

“Good,” John snapped, snatching up the cutlery and stomping off into the kitchen.

“I think being a dick is going to get you killed before being nice does,” Violet observed.

“Me encantas,” Sherlock murmured as he reached for his mobile again.

She shook her head in exasperation as she picked up the platter that had been piled high with sandwiches but now was just littered with crumbs.

“Y tú,” she said so low, only he could hear her.

Then Gladstone made a low, hacking noise and proceeded to sick up all the sarnies Sherlock had been feeding him on the sly all over the rug.

Violet threw the dish towel at Sherlock, hitting him in the face. “Told you not to feed him people-food. You’re cleaning that up.”

Sherlock grimaced, but stood up to comply, deciding it was not in his best interest to press his luck any further this afternoon.

“Bad dog,” Sherlock scolded the Alsatian.

Gladstone merely licked Sherlock’s hand and trotted off to nap on the sofa.

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I know the "real" British PM is David Cameron but in the ACD canon stories, the PM was Lord Bellinger. :^(

Also… I really suck at self-promotion, so thank you to everyone who have recommended this fic as well as all the comments and kudos. Y’all are the reason why this is fun for me :^)
"Sherlock, Mary and Violet all turned their attention to the fifty-one year old woman sprawled out in an armchair in front of an electric fire. As she stared unseeingly at an old tube-style telly, she held a mug in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other.

“Harry,” John said firmly, breaking an uncomfortable silence that had only been punctuated by Clara’s weeping...."

Everyone... meet Harry Watson.
Let me know what you think of her 0:^)

Chapter Four: Pretty, Practical and Lethal

24 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday evening
5:25 PM

Instead of taking the Tube or a taxi back over to his house, John elected to stay at 221B. After calling Mary and telling her (as much as he dared over the phone), what happened that day, she agreed it made more sense for him to stay put. Harry’s flat was closer to Baker Street than it was to John and Mary’s little terrace house. She agreed to pick him, Sherlock and Violet up at 221B and they would all ride together to Harry’s flat.

John sat in “his” chair, legs stretched out, sock-footed. He watched the fire for lack of anything to do. Sherlock decided to have a good long soak in the bath and Violet had departed upstairs to apply her layers of cosmetics and to change into something a little more appropriate for “Miss Smith.”

After all, Miss Smith wouldn’t be caught dead in jeans, fuzzy socks and an old Oxford sweatshirt.

John wondered if it had been Sherlock’s, then dismissed the thought. Sherlock wouldn’t be caught dead in a sweatshirt.

What’s going on with those two? He wondered while the wood cracked and popped as the fire slowly reduced it to smoldering ashes. Their relationship was an act, part of the Miss Smith Cover Story. John knew Sherlock was too unsentimental to give in to romance and Violet too practical to consider pursuing a relationship, especially with Sherlock.

He had enjoyed taking the piss out of Sherlock for finding Violet visually appealing. He teased Sherlock just because it was fucking fun to get him flushed and flustered.

He never said anything to Violet because someone like her didn’t have the luxury of creating permanent relationships. She might be here today, gone tomorrow. He didn’t need to add to her already considerable anxiety.
And yet… and yet… John couldn’t place his finger on it, but something had definitely… shifted since The Copper Beaches.

Maybe… something could have… but John couldn’t finish the thought. It tore him apart to even approach it. The guilt of leaving his best friend on his own while enjoying married life battled the jealousy for a woman he cared for like a sister who spent all her time together with his…

With my… what? Best friend? Yes, of course, but…

But…

Idly, he scratched Gladstone’s ears when he padded over to John’s side. “Hey you,” he said affectionately, glad to have the dog arrive to distract him from his troubled thoughts.

“Hey you,” a feminine, American voice said warmly behind him.

John crooked his head around, saw Violet approaching as she fastened pretty, dangly earrings from her ear lobes. She looked very “Miss Smith,” wearing a pearly-pink blouse with a ruffled collar, a heather-grey cardigan with a matching woolen grey skirt that reached her knees, and flat-heeled black boots paired with thick, charcoal grey stockings. Her face was encrusted in its “Miss Smith” cosmetic mask and her luxurious hair had been flat-ironed stick-straight. But for once, she let her hair flow free. It hung well below her shoulder blades now.

John also knew she wore a Glock in a hip-holster underneath that woolen skirt and there was a switchblade tucked into her right boot.

But that was Violet. Pretty, practical and lethal.

“You look nice,” John offered, knowing Sherlock would never compliment her looks.

“Thanks,” she sat in Sherlock’s chair, facing him. “Penny for your thoughts, My-Brother-from-Another-Mother?” She made kissing noises and Gladstone abandoned John for his mistress.

John longed for a stiff drink. But he figured it would be bad form to show up for an intervention with alcohol on his breath. “Just really not looking forward to tonight, that’s all.”

“Then why?”

“Put myself through this? She’s my sister. And I like Clara. It’s more of a favor to Clara than to Harry. Harry could give two shits about anyone anymore, including herself.”

Didn’t come to Mum’s funeral. Didn’t come to my wedding.

Didn’t call me at all after Maisie “died”…

That last one hurt the most. All he had gotten from his sister was a miserable text.

Sry abt baby - HW

Pathetic.

And painful.

“I don’t want to talk about this right now, Violet,” he pleaded with the profiler. “You’re going to see it all in a few minutes anyway. Can we please change the subject?”
“OK,” Violet gave in much too easily. John knew he’d be getting a follow-up telephone call later tonight, which was fine. He just didn’t want to discuss this now.

“How do you feel about Paris?” she asked instead.

He shrugged. “Waste of time, to be honest. Hard to take The Letter seriously when I don’t even know what it says or who sent it to whom, but…” he picked a bit of fluff off his smart blue cardigan. “Sherlock’s excited, happy to have something new to investigate. And this Dupin bloke… tell me a bit more about him, so I know what to expect.”

Violet brightened. It was like John had asked a teenage girl to describe her favorite member of One Direction. “Let’s put it this way, if Sherlock’s considered to be the Father of Deductive Detective work, as the Internet likes to claim, then Dupin is the Grandfather. But Dupin takes it one step farther than Sherlock. Where Sherlock completely divorces emotion from the equation, Dupin incorporates inductive thought with deductive reasoning. He’s one of the staunchest supporters of the science of criminal profiling. The FBI consulted him when the BAU wanted to update VICAP. He’s not just a living legend, but also a wealth of information. I was lucky enough to hear him speak when I was in grad school, before I joined the FBI. I wouldn’t be surprised if Sherlock studied Dupin’s methods before starting his consulting detective business.”

“Who does he work for exactly?”

“He’s… retired.”

“You hesitated.”

“You’ve been watching Disney movies again.”

“Mary likes Frozen,” John blushed.

“Sure she does,” Violet deadpanned.

“Why did he retire?”

“Well,” Violet chewed on her lip. “Dupin is… different.”

“Different how? Different like Sherlock-different? Or Different like Mycroft-different?”

“Different like… what we in the psychology field classify as ‘bat-shit-crazy.’”

“Oh. Lovely.”

There was a tap on the door. “It’s me,” Mary’s voice came from the other side.

Violet’s face darkened for a moment but she pulled her fake spectacles out of her cardigan pocket and put them on. “I’ll get it,” she told John as she stood up.

The face she showed Mary was polite. And unreadable. “Hi, Mary,” she said courteously, but with little warmth.

John noticed Violet sounded more “Miss Smith” than “Agent Hunter” whenever she spoke to his wife. He hoped Mary would be able to sort things out with Violet. He decided he really didn’t want to know what the problem was because it was probably something horrible. And John had had his fill of “horrible” these last two years, thank you very much.

Mary wore her good grey winter coat, a loose-fitting, white fuzzy jumper and black jeans with

Not Intervention weather.

Mary also held up a black gym bag. “Brought you some things from home,” she said as Violet let her inside the flat. “Thought you might want to change into jeans, it’s Baltic out there.”

“Great, thanks,” John heaved himself off the chair just as Sherlock entered the lounge.

His hair was still damp but he was dressed neatly in one of his black suits paired with a midnight blue dress shirt. He carried his socks and shoes in his hands. “Ah, Mary, hello,” he leaned over and pecked her on the cheek.

“Oh, hello Sherlock,” Mary said with genuine affection while ignoring Violet’s spiteful gaze.

John caught the look and everything came crashing down. Buggershitfuckpiss, Violet knows Mary shot Sherlock. Bloody goddamn hell, I did NOT need this right now.

John shook his head. “Just need a moment to change, be back in two shakes,” and he escaped into his bedroom…

… which, as he looked around the bedroom on the second floor, was indeed still kept as if it were his bedroom. After Sherlock’s “death,” John had gathered his clothes, his laptop and a few of his favorite books, vowing to come back for the rest of his things and to sort through Sherlock’s possessions.

That never happened.

John had stayed with Harry after the “Suicide of the Fake Genius.” That had been a fucking nightmare. He had swallowed his pride and called Lestrade. Camped out on his sofa for a few days. Then Mycroft had called and told him about the legacy Sherlock had left for John, enabling him to afford a small flat at a reasonable rent… well, reasonable by London standards.

After Sherlock had come back and John had (mostly) let go of his anger, he had asked Sherlock if he wanted the money back. “And, uh, we can set up a repayment plan for what I spent while you were… away.”

Sherlock had looked utterly confounded. “Whatever for? That money is yours. Do what you like with it. Set it on fire for all I care.”

So John had paid some debts and put a down deposit on the church and the reception hall.

He had thought he was happy.

But here he was, standing like a fool in his old bedroom, looking at all the things he had left behind. His old duvet and sheets. The lovely memory foam pillows he had abandoned in his haste to flee from the painful memories. All his remaining books plus the medals he had earned in Afghanistan. Stacks of old CDs. Photographs of his mother and old chums from the military. Ticket-stubs and postcards from friends stuck in the frame of the mirror hanging above the chest of drawers. Newspaper clippings of Sherlock’s exploits tacked up to a cheap bulletin board Mrs. Hudson had purchased for him at a jumble sale. The room was just as spick-and-span as he had kept it while he had lived here. It still smelled faintly like lemon polish and cedar wood. Masculine and clean.
Well, the glass case (filled with dirt and horrible, white, squiggly things) was new.

John decided to ignore it because here he felt safe, here he felt secure. Here he felt like he knew who he was.

Below, his wife and his best friend waited for him.

His wife, the killer. And his best friend, who had someone new to confide in.

John Watson had never felt lonelier before in his entire life.

He took a shuddering breath, shucked off his trousers and pulled his jeans on while telling himself to pull himself together.

**

24 November 2015
Harry Watson’s residence
Wednesday evening
6:50 PM

Sitting in the backseat of Mary’s car with Sherlock, Violet found herself gazing upon a new London, another London she had never known about.

During her exile in England, Violet had found herself in shady neighborhoods no one in their right, law-abiding minds would ever visit. She also had found herself on the other end of the spectrum, spending time in swanky neighborhoods she would have never imagined herself visiting in her wildest imaginings. She had lived in Soho, she had lived in actual City, next to the very heart of the financial district.

And of course, now she was in Westminster, in snug little 221B.

But this London was a forgotten London. A disappearing London. The working-class London.

By the streetlamps, Violet could see the creative class attempts to gentrify the area. But for every dilapidated warehouse a passionate hipster had converted into a microbrewery or trendy condominiums, three more remained with the wood sagging and grey, the brick chipped and cracked. Other weather-beaten buildings contained businesses that had been there for generations stubbornly refusing to update or relocate. No Tescos or 99p Stores within sight for miles.

It looked utterly depressing.

“How much farther?” Violet had asked as Mary turned off a main road and onto a side street, not liking how dark and ominous the street appeared.

She jumped when she felt Sherlock’s large hand covering hers. She looked down and saw her left hand trembling. She patted Sherlock’s hand then placed her small right hand on top of his.

“No far,” John said without turning around to face Violet.

He clenched and unclenched his left hand. His own goddamn tremor had come back too.

Bugger this, he wanted to say, longed to tell Mary to just fucking turn around. Let's go home…

But soon, the familiar and drab rows of council housing appeared. Sooner than John liked, Mary parked her little car behind a very nice Audi R8 luxury car. Next to the car, a petite woman was
wearing a posh fur coat with a fuchsia cashmere scarf wound around her neck. She stood alone, next to a street lamp, smoking a cigarette. She was a dark-haired beauty who looked very, very out of place for this neighborhood.

Sherlock slipped his hand from out of Violet’s hold and bounded out the door. John, Mary and Violet followed suit.

Sherlock made a beeline towards the smoking woman. Upon closer inspection, the woman had a lovely olive complexion but enormous rings under chocolate-brown eyes. Deep frown lines formed parentheses around thin lips. “Clara, I presume? Sherlock Holmes,” he held out his hand. John, Mary and Violet had just joined them as Clara tentatively took Sherlock’s hand. Sherlock then intoned, “There are three roughs standing across the road, hiding in the alley, don’t look,” he snapped at Clara. “They plan on mugging you, stealing your handbag, quite possibly your jewelry and your car. Might I suggest,” Sherlock let go of Clara’s hand and crooked his elbow as Clara’s jaw dropped open, the cigarette falling to the pavement. “That you allow me to usher you inside?”

“Oh my God,” she gasped with just a trace of a Spanish accent. She clutched Sherlock’s arm in a death-grip.

The detective rolled his eyes. “John, Mary, Violet,” he droned as he started escorting Clara towards the front door of the council house. “Show our guests what they will have to contend with if they continue with their current plan of action.

The doctor, the assassin and the agent stood in front of Clara’s posh car. John opened his good winter coat, showing his Army Browning in a shoulder holster. Mary lifted her loose jumper up, showing the Beretta tucked into the waistband of her jeans. Violet hiked up her skirt, showing the Glock strapped to her thigh.

“Shit!” a voice yelped from the darkness and soon there was the sound of running footsteps.

“Thank you,” Clara said in a shuddery voice as John, Mary and Violet re-joined them. “I didn’t think this was a bad neighborhood.”

“It’s not,” John muttered, letting his coat flap shut. “Or least it didn’t used to be. Harry and I grew up around here.”

Clara had the grace to look embarrassed. “I wanted Harry to come to our fla- I mean, my flat,” she corrected herself. “But she refuses. Said if we wanted to talk to her, we can come here.” She looked despairingly up at the council house.

“What happened?” John asked just as a sheet of drizzle started to cover them all.

Clara explained as Sherlock stared at the keypad, trying to deduce the correct code that would allow the security door to open. “She got sacked, John,” she shook her sleek hair, midnight-black except for a stripe of grey, framing the left side of her face. “She couldn’t hide her drinking problem anymore. The senior partners smelt liquor on her breath.”

“I know that,” John said tersely. “What exactly happened? I want to know what I’m walking into.”

Mary slipped her mittened hand into John’s. “Breathe, love,” she whispered.

“Right,” he squeezed Mary’s hand as he thought I can’t do this...

Violet looked up from the Smartphone she had swiped from Sherlock’s coat pocket and pursed her lips at Mary. Bitch… she thought as she thumbed in Sherlock’s pass code.
“She came to court intoxicated.” Clara’s doe-eyes filled with tears. “She’s not only cocked up a major case and got sacked but she’s going to lose her license to practice law now as well. I found out that she also missed two payments on her flat and got evicted. That’s why she’s here,” now she glared at the bland, tan building with hatred, “With her new girlfriend.”

“Ah,” John closed his eyes, “Her new enabler.”

“No,” Sherlock corrected him. “Harry’s new amour called you, didn’t she Clara?” Sherlock keyed in a series of numbers. There was a buzzing sound. Sherlock grabbed the door handle but it didn’t budge, “Crumpets.”

Meanwhile Clara’s eyes welled up. “Do you know how humiliating it is,” she tried to stifle her sobs, “To have your ex-wife’s new lover call you and ask for your help?”

“Oh my dear,” Mary put a comforting hand on Clara’s shoulder. “It will be alright. We’ll sort it out. You’re doing the right thing.”

“I don’t care if it’s the right thing or not,” Clara shrugged Mary’s hand off her. “I need this to be over. I need this to end. I need this nonsense to stop. John, do you understand?”

“Liar,” Sherlock drawled as he entered a new series of numbers. “You love the drama, you thrive off of it. If you wanted this to be over, you wouldn’t be here now, oh bloody hell!” he snapped when the door wouldn’t open again.

“Oh for heaven’s sake, move,” Violet Smith shoved her fiancé to the side and entered in three digits. The door pinged instead of buzzed. Violet grabbed the handle and opened the door.

“How did you do that?” Sherlock demanded as John, Mary and Clara filed inside the building.

She tossed his Smartphone back to him. “Pickpocketed your mobile, found Clara’s text that included Harry’s new girlfriend’s mobile number. I texted her for the entrance code,” she then laughed at Sherlock’s pouty face. “Don’t sulk. Serves you right for trying to show off.” She then grabbed the sleeve of his Belstaff. “Come on,” Violet Hunter whispered. “John needs you.”

“I know,” he whispered. Stalled then lowered his head to hers. “I can’t fix this for him, can I?”

Violet reached up and cupped his cheek.”I’m sorry, but… no. You can only be there for him.”

“Right,” he pulled away from her touch, Sherlock Holmes once more. “Ladies first.”

Violet entered the building, her nose wrinkling. The interior was tidy, but dated. Ugly overhanging florescent illuminated the lobby. The walls were butter yellow and hideous olive-green and pumpkin-orange colored linoleum covered the floor. The plastic sofa was also olive-green. The potted plant in corner was also plastic. And the entire room smelt like Lysol and piss. Violet could only imagine the havoc the odor played on Sherlock’s super-sensitive nose.

“God,” he complained seconds later.

“Sherlock?” Mary called from the stairwell. “Violet?”

“Coming!” Violet Smith called back.

The detective and the agent joined everyone else at the flat door that was ironically labeled “221B”.

*Does God hate me?* John wondered as he knocked on the door.
“Whozzit?” a voice slurred from the other side.

“Here we go,” John sighed then in a louder, stronger voice. “Harry, it’s me. We’re supposed to have dinner tonight, remember? You were going to meet Mary and I was going to meet your new girlfriend?”

The door flew open. A young woman with creamy white skin, big blue eyes and long orangish-red hair opened the door, clutching a candy-pink mobile in her free hand. Her skinny jeans and her tight red jumper showed off a fantastic figure: long legs, round and plump backside, narrow waist, huge breasts.

Upon seeing how young and attractive the girl was, Clara stifled another sob.

“Quiet,” Sherlock snapped. Violet stomped on his foot. “OW!”

“Be nice,” she hissed.

“I’m Siobhan,” the girl had a thick Irish accent. “Come in, she’s already pissed. I tried but…” she wrung her hands, her own eyes tearing up. “I dunno what else to do.”

“How old are you?” Mary, aghast, demanded. She knew how old Harry was.

“Twenty-five,” Siobhan sniffled.

“Who taught you how to count?” Sherlock asked.

“Sherlock!” Mary and John snapped.

Violet reached up and smacked Sherlock on the backside of his head. “OW! That’s where the vase hit me!” he complained.

“Well, it must have knocked all the good sense out of you,” Violet seethed back.

“But Violet, she is only se- err, eighteen!”

“Sherlock! Shut it!” Mary handed Clara a handkerchief as she started to sob in earnest.

“I said you needed to be here for John. Being here doesn’t involve talking,” Violet snapped.

“It’s fine, really,” John squared his shoulders. “Just…” he ran his fingers through his hair and licked his lips. “Let’s get this over with.”

They entered the flat. It was just as cheerless as the neighborhood. Siobhan must have tried to fix it up properly but the second hand furniture was all stained and scuffed. Throw pillows and blankets had been strategically placed to hide the worst of the stains on the sofa and armchairs. Posters of Monet’s water lilies were taped to the yellowing walls, probably trying to hide where the plaster had cracked. The dingy carpet cried out for a good shampooing. The coffee table was littered with take-away containers, pizza crusts, chopsticks, scraps of paper, receipts and booze bottles. Empty booze bottles.

So many boozy bottles.

Sherlock, Mary and Violet all turned their attention to the fifty-one year old woman sprawled out in an armchair in front of an electric fire. As she stared unseeingly at an old tube-style telly, she held a mug in one hand and a bottle of whisky in the other.
“Harry,” John said firmly, breaking an uncomfortable silence that had only been punctuated by Clara’s weeping.

The drunken woman’s head lolled towards the sound of John’s voice. She smiled cruelly. “Well,” she lifted her mug in a mock toast. “Lucky me. Graced by the presence of the faaaaaamous blogger and war hero, Dr. Watson,” she slurred. “But you’ll always be ickle Johnny to me. Wotcher, baby brother? What brings you here? Slumming?” She threw back the contents of the mug and swallowed. She filled the mug again, sloshing booze all over her hands and the nice black trousers she still wore.

Violet’s profile for John was nowhere near as extensive as the ones she had created for Mycroft and Sherlock. John had barely been a blip on her radar, until The Fall, of course. Even then, she hadn’t known very much about him, except that he was very loyal to his friend and flat-mate. While Sherlock had been “dead”, she hadn’t felt the need to research John further.

She knew, of course, that John’s sister struggled with alcohol abuse, but she had no idea Harry had slipped this far down the spiral.

“Harry,” John searched for Mary’s hand again.

“Johnny,” Harry sneered.

Once Mary’s hand was in his, John felt Sherlock stand very close to him on the other side, his arm pressing in John’s. Meanwhile Violet slipped around Sherlock and stood behind John.

Love and gratitude swelled up inside John once he realized the two people who loved him the most were closing ranks around him. And protecting his back was the woman who was more of a sister than the pathetic slob sprawling on the armchair.

He immediately felt ashamed of his earlier pity party in his old room at 221B.

Both Clara and Siobhan approached Harry now. Clara had stopped weeping but Siobhan still hiccuped and whimpered.

“Hello, Harry,” Clara tried for a smile.

“Clara,” Harry dragged the name out, infusing two syllables with hatred. “Come to have a go at me, eh? Come to laugh at the wash-up? Breaking up with me wasn’t enough?”

“That wasn’t a break-up,” Clara reminded her. “That was Tough Love. I told you, it was either the booze or me. You chose the booze and gave the mobile I had gotten you as a gift to John.”

“Johnny needed a mobile after he got back from Iraq.”

“Afghanistan,” John corrected her, as usual.

She waved her hand around, “Afghanistan, Iraq. Nasty place, full of terrorists, who gives a shit?” Harry staggered to her feet. Both Mary and Violet were shocked to see how tall Harry was.

Taller than Mary, taller than Violet even, but Sherlock was still the tallest person in the room, naturally. Harry also had stick-straight strawberry blond hair that hung all the way down to her backside. Horse-faced with a waist thickened from middle-age and alcoholism, the only characteristic she shared with John was her midnight blue eyes…

… and the Watson stubbornness.
“Why are you even here, Clara?” Harry stood, weaving on her feet, but at least she stood. Clara held her hands together, as if at prayer. “Harry, I still love you, we all love you.”

“Wel-” Sherlock started but Violet reached up, grabbed one of his curls and pulled. Hard.

“Deduce silently!” she hissed at him as he massaged his scalp.

Harry, meanwhile, took no notice of Violet and Sherlock. Her glazed-over eyes were fixed on Clara as a mean-spirited smile crossed her face. “Oh, which rehab you want me to try now, Clara? Where are we going to dry out me out at this time?”

“It’s… it’s a very nice place,” Clara reached inside her Hermes purse and pulled out a glossy brochure. “Very discreet, highly recommended, they can help you.”

“Help me?” Harry cackled. “Why do I need help?”

“You were drunk during a major trial,” Clara reminded her, struggling to keep her voice even. “You brought the wrong files to the wrong trial and there was alcohol on your breath.”

“Oh, he was guilty anyway, he deserved to hang, if we had a death penalty that is. You should know,” she wheeled around, facing Sherlock. “You and Johnny cracked the case. You found the evidence proving that the prick was dead guilty,” she pointed at Sherlock with her mug of booze. “And you wrote about it,” she then pointed at her brother. When John only gave her a blank look, she snorted with exasperation. “Colonel Lysander Stark?”

“Oh, The Engineer’s Thumb,” John closed his eyes in recollection now.

“Yeah, that one,” Harry took another fortifying drink, “The berk who cut off his employers’ thumbs. He should go to gaol, the sicko.”

“Drinking to sabotage your career will not absolve you of the guilt you feel for defending criminals,” Sherlock intoned, naturally unable to keep his deductions to himself.

“My career’s not sabotaged, Mr. Holmes,” she brayed with inebriated laughter. “It’s fucked.” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “Good and fucked, it is.”

“Harry,” Clara crept closer, still proffering the brochure. “Harry, if you don’t want to practice law anymore, it’s fine. It’s all fine. Just… come back home, please.”

“I’m staying right here,” Harry declared.

“You can’t.” Siobhan squeaked. “M’brother said you had to be out before he got back from visiting Mam and Da’ in Dublin. That’s why I called your… your family. I called them so they can take you home and take care of you.”

“Take care of me?” She screeched and Siobhan cringed. But Harry paid no mind to the young girl’s flinching. “Although, it would be nice for someone else to take care of me for a change, it’d be nice not to be the breadwinner,” she shot Clara a nasty glance. “Enjoying your posh flat that I bought and paid for, hm?”

Clara flushed and said resolutely, “It’s my name on the deed.”

“Stupid me for trusting you to add me once we were properly and legally married, oh wait, we never got married, we had a civil commitment ceremony because it wasn’t legal for us to be married at the
time,” Harry thumped herself on the side of the head. “Of course, you had kicked me to the kerb by the time it became legal for us to marry.”

“Harry, I told yo-”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah, I know what you told me. And you, Johnny,” she narrowed her eyes at her only sibling. “You gonna take care of me now too?” She shook her head. “You refused to help me when I asked earlier this year. And last year too.”

“I refused to give you money because you had started drinking again,” John gripped Mary’s hand tightly. “Is that why you refused to come to my wedding?”

“Oh, I didn’t think it was a good idea to come, what with all the temptation around. The wine, the champagne, I heard you,” she smirked at Sherlock, “Gave a touching Best Man speech. Brought down the house, everyone boohooing,” she mimed wiping away tears. Before Sherlock could issue a nasty retort, Harry gasped dramatically, “And who’s that, hiding behind your swishy coat, Mr. Holmes? Yeah, you ginger. Don’t be shy love, come into the light.”

Violet walked around Sherlock slowly, her hazel eyes fixed on John’s sister.

“Well, well, well. Sherlock’s bird,” Harry said when Violet stood in front of John. “Nice to meet you at last, Miss Smith.”

“Pleasure,” Violet said in a cool, crisp voice.

Harry staggered towards her. “Maybe I don’t need my little brother to help me out. Last I heard the tabs upped the price to ten thou for a decent photo of the infamous Other Woman, double for a shot of you and Hat-man snogging. But I’m not greedy. All I need is one picture of you, madam.” She mimed taking a photograph.

Violet paled. “I’d prefer you didn’t.”

“Oh, I know, I read Johnny’s blog, you know. You’re private, you’re reserved. Bollocks,” she snorted. “You’re mad to be with him, you know that, right?”

*The thought has crossed my mind…* Nearly as an accomplished actor as Sherlock, Violet hid her true thoughts behind a concerned face. She looked Harry right in the eye as she held her arms at her sides, willing herself not to ball her hands into fists.

Relying on her psychology training, she gave Harry a reassuring smile and said “Well, I appreciate it very much that you’re not going to take my photograph. And I’m sure John and Clara are very grateful that you took care of them in the past,” she lied easily. She actually had no idea how Clara felt, except for she was obviously jealous of the carrot-haired tart Harry had replaced her with. John on the other hand… the only thing Violet could pick up on was frustration and rage.

She wondered what Sherlock was observing…

She soldiered on, “They love you and they’re worried about you. Otherwise they wouldn’t be here tonight. They want you to get better and you can and will. Alcoholism is a disease and you can get better. And John and Clara will be there for you, as well as your other friends and family as you go through treatment. It’s time, Harry. I believe you want to get well as much as John and Clara want you to.”

“Wrong,” Sherlock boomed out from behind her.
Violet whipped around, her fingers hooked into claws. She positively itched to throttle him. “What are you doing?” she snapped at him as Mary yelled at him, “Sherlock! Shame on you!”

Meanwhile Clara started crying again and John covered his face with his free hand. Siobhan looked like she very much wanted to be anywhere but here.

But Harry, unbelievably, threw her head back, producing a great big horsey laugh. “Oh go on, he’s right, he’s right,” she neighed. She gave Sherlock a big toothy grin. “Takes one to know one, right? Addict? What was your poison? Blow, wasn’t it?”

“I preferred injection to inhalation, but yes, cocaine,” Sherlock’s voice had that contemptuous tone to it whenever he felt like someone was wasting his time. “And, after observing your actions as well as based upon my own personal experience, you have no desire to ‘get well’ as my well-meaning but utterly misinformed fiancée expressed it.”

Violet glowered at Sherlock from over her shoulder. *I have a Masters’ degree in psychology, you ass,* she thought as her hazel eyes flashed at him.

He gave her a look as if he could read her mind. *Don’t care…*

“Miss Watson, despite her torpedoed career and current destitution, has not hit the proverbial ‘rock bottom’ yet,” Sherlock drawled. “She has not been on a ‘bender’ as Sheila claimed she was.”

“Siobhan,” the redhead whispered.

“Whatever,” Sherlock said breezily, walking around Violet, strolling around Harry and stopping in front of her, his arms clasped behind his back. “Your addiction is not alcohol, not really. You asked John for money, twice, large sums, I presume.” When Harry took a step back, scowling at Sherlock, he murmured: “Interesting. You know his income is far less than yours is, was, pardon me. And you also know he’s too proud to ask *me* for a loan. So what caused you to be so desperate to ask him for money?” He turned, his chameleon eyes scanning the littered coffee table until he found what he was looking for, peeking out from underneath a half-empty Thai take-away box.

He plucked the betting slips from Romford Greyhound Stadium out underneath the rank and greasy take-away box. “Dear me,” he held the slips up for everyone to see. “You really took a bath with these races, didn’t you?” he tossed the slips at Harry, who suddenly didn’t seem as drunk as she had earlier. “If you lost that badly at the dog races, how badly did you lose at the horse races?”

John’s hand slid off his face. “Gambling,” he spat at his sister. “After everything Dad put us through, you’re following in his footsteps? Is that why you asked me for money?”

“I didn’t need it last spring for gambling or booze!” she spat at her little brother. “I needed it for Inland Revenue. I needed it to pay the property taxes on the house.”

“The house…” John’s voice petered out. Then he shook his head in sudden realization. “You mean, our old house, Mum’s house? Did you lose Mum’s house, Harry?” When his sister turned brick-red, John shouted “Did you lose our house?”

“It wasn’t our house,” Harry shouted back at John as he turned his back to his sister while running both hands over his face. “It was my house, mine. Mum gave it to me before she died. You were busy playing Military Man. You had no need for a house in London.”

“It’s was still the house I grew up in, we grew up in,” John turned around, his voice low and dangerous. “And I would have bought it from you if you couldn’t keep up on the tax payments, you know that. You knew I was engaged. You knew Mary and I had started a baby, you…”
He stopped abruptly. Saying anything more would involve mentioning Maisie.

But Harry laughed again, “As if you would move back here, to the old neighborhood, Doctor Watson. As if your pretty, blond wife would actually be happy living in that grotty little cottage we called home as kids.” Finally noticing Mary, she purred, “Funny, you’re not as pretty as some of Johnny’s other lovers.”

Mary flushed.

Even though John knew Mary could probably kill Harry with her pinkie if she really wanted to, he still stood in front of his wife to defend her. “Don’t talk to her like that.”

“Harry, John’s wife is very nice. You’ll see once you get to know her,” Clara pleaded.

Sherlock rubbed his chest absently.

“Yes, she’s delightful,” Violet added in a sweet voice. Mary shot her a dirty look when no one (save Sherlock) was paying attention. Violet responded by pushing her fake eyeglasses up with her middle finger.

Meanwhile, Clara folded the brochure up and said, “I’ll still help you get through this, Harry. Gambling, drinking, it’s all the same, isn’t it? Addiction? Come home and we’ll get through this.”

“And that’s why Harriet will never hit rock bottom,” Sherlock droned.

“He’s right, as usual,” John scowled at Clara. “If you keep enabling her, she won’t stop the booze or the gambling.” He ran his fingers through his silvery-blond hair, making it stick up like hedgehog quills. “Harry, you lost Mum’s house because you lost your shirt at the racetracks. Everything Mum did to keep that house for us whenever Dad pissed everything away on the ponies, you just…I can’t…I don’t understand,” he shook his head. “Why?”

“The adrenaline rush,” Sherlock supplied. “She substituted gambling for drink. However, she still abuses alcohol, but more as a binge-drinker, not a steady alcoholic.”

He turned his attention back to Harry. “Judging from the fact you just had your hair colored recently and you are wearing this very smart suit, you actually had a job interview, didn’t you? Not in law, but still, a decent post with decent wages. But you felt it didn’t go very well, so you thought you’d have a little nip before meeting your baby brother and his new wife. Of course, the little nip turned into,” he gently took the half-full bottle of whisky from Harry. He sniffed it, wrinkled his nose. “Harry claims she got intoxicated before Stark’s trial because she knew he was guilty, I proved he was guilty. However, I cannot understand why you just didn’t remove yourself from the case due to conflict of interest? John Watson is your brother and he did help me prove Stark’s guilt.” When Harry quailed under Sherlock’s unflinching gaze, he smirked. “No, you got drunk for another reason, a very mundane, pathetic reason. You saw something that day that you weren’t supposed to, didn’t you? And you found something before your interview that turned your self-confidence into rubble, didn’t you?”

He turned now to Siobhan, elegantly as a ballet dancer. “Give me your mobile.”

“Wha’… why?” Siobhan took a step back from Sherlock.

“Your mobile,” he insisted, unfurling his long fingers.

“No,” she quailed, tucking the candy-pink mobile into her jeans’ pocket.
He shrugged. “Very well, we’ll go the more embarrassing route,” and he meandered towards the armchair Harry had been sitting in just a few moments ago. He reached his hand down the cushion and extracted a frilly, lacy brassiere.

A brassiere meant for a woman with very small breasts.

Sherlock held the bra up for Siobhan to see. “This doesn’t appear to be yours,” he said to her before turning to Harry. “Found this stuffed away in the laundry hamper, didn’t you? You meant to confront her later tonight, didn’t you? By the way, Sheila doesn’t want you out because her brother is coming back to London. She wants you out because she has a new girlfriend moving in. Someone, judging by this tacky lingerie, much younger, but someone with money, as while this is hideous (and I assume would offer no support, even though the owner of this undergarment probably doesn’t need a bra) the material is quite expensive.” He dropped the offensive undergarment as if it had suddenly burst into flames. He then murmured to Siobhan, “You could have just given me your mobile to show me the texts from your new lover. Less humiliating, less time-consuming and far more entertaining; the spelling errors alone would have kept me amused for days.”

Her face mottled now, Harry roared at the young girl, “You little slut!”

“I’m sorry,” Siobhan whimpered. “It’s just that… I do care about you, Harry, really. I want to be friends, but I met Georgina at the club and… and I started fancying her, I didn’t mean to…”

“Just get out!” Harry screamed at the girl.

“No! I live here!” Siobhan said, as if she had just remembered this fact.

“Jesus Christ,” John moaned. Mary put her arms around John’s shoulder.

Violet crossed over to Clara, “You sure you want back into this?”

“Of course she does,” Sherlock announced. “Clara will always enable Harry. That is why Harry will continue to drink and gamble. This is why tonight was an utter waste of time. So, John, shall we be off? We’ve got loads of preparatory work to do before leaving for Paris tomorrow.”

“Oooh, Paris, oo-la-la,” Harry’s voice cut across the room. “How do you feel about that, Mrs. Watson? Miss Smith? Your men? Trotting off to the City of Lights, just the two of them?”

“Harry, don’t do this, don’t be cruel,” Clara cupped Harry’s face in her manicured hands, but Harry pushed Clara violently off of her.

“Cruel?” Harry laughed again, but this time without any humor. “No, what’s cruel is your dad threatening to disown you for being gay while covering up for your little brother. The golden son gets all the accolades while the girl remains the fuck-up, right Johnny?”

“Harry,” John took a breath. “Our childhood wasn’t perfect but it wasn’t terrible either. And I hated how Dad and his side of the family treated you after you came out, you know that. I defended you, I always defended you, I still do,” his voice was soft now.

“You defend me out of guilt,” she snarled at him. “Guilt and cowardice.”

“Harriet,” Sherlock’s voice held a note of ominous warning. “Do not say something for which I will make sure you feel regret later on.”

“Like what?” she challenged the Great Detective. “Ohhh…you’ve already deduced what I’m thinking about saying, haven’t you? Has his wife?” she pointed at Mary. “Has your fiancée?” she
pointed at Violet.

Shit, Violet felt her heart freeze as she remembered a conversation she had with Sherlock shortly after they first met…

… You’re his best friend, he’d die for you and he thinks his feelings for you are wrong so he hides them, even from himself. And… you broke his heart when you jumped. Why is it so hard for you to see what he is going through?

Sherlock had responded darkly, bitterly: I see it. I see everything…

Meanwhile Mary had replied, “If you’re insinuating what I think you are, I’ve read the tabloids. According to the Daily Fail, Sherlock’s shagged everyone from John to Magnussen’s PA to Violet’s dog. While making them all wear the deerstalker. There is no point being so hateful when your brother is trying to help you.”

“How so?” Harry narrowed her eyes at Violet as she started to sway on her feet again.

Oh honey you have no idea, Violet Hunter thought. But Violet Smith said: “By being polite instead of saying what we think or feel,” Then she said to John, “This is not healthy. This is not good for you, John, let’s go. Sherlock’s right, she doesn’t want to get better. She just wants to hurt you because she’s hurting right now.”

She’s right, love,” Mary gripped John’s coat the best she could with her mittened hands. “She’s right, let’s go, please.” She stroked John’s cheek, despite the mittens.

“Oh no, please stay,” Harry insisted with a cackle. “Please stay so I can entertain you with stories about ickle Johnny when we were kiddoes. Oh the stories I have,” she sneered.

“That’s enough,” John said a bit too quickly.

“I can tell you about Johnny’s first word, his First Communion, his first band recital, oh how you loved wailing away on your clarinet,” she sniggered. “I can tell you about his first dance, his first kiss, I say, Johnny, what was the name of your first kiss again? Wasn’t it… Gary? Gary the Fairy, I think the neighborhood kids called ‘im.”

“Her name was Teri and you know that,” John’s voice could barely be heard but everyone felt the anger vibrating from him.

“Oh, that’s the first kiss you bragged about,” Harry took the bottle of booze back form Sherlock. “He
doesn’t love you,” she told Mary as she poured herself another drink. “And he,” she tilted her head towards Sherlock, “Doesn’t love you,” she informed Violet. “Beards, the pair of you,” she shook her head, her strawberry blond hair rippling down her back, “Fools, both of you. Open your eyes and see who the good doctor really wants.”

“That’s it, I’m done,” John burst out. “Harry, I love you, I do, but I. Am. DONE with this shit!”

The room went completely silent.

“Clara, if you’re idiot enough to take her back, she’s your problem, not mine. Harry, we share DNA. That’s it. I have bigger problems than your self-inflicted drama. My daughter is missing, not dead. Did you know that? Do you even care?” the last word cracked like a whip. “I needed you when we lost Maisie and all I got was a bleeding text? Where the hell were you? At the track? At the pub? Well… you… you can just sod off. Piss away all your money. Drink until you die. I don’t care. I don’t want anything to do with you ever again, understand?”

With that, John turned and stormed out of the room with Mary chasing after him.

“You are a horrible person,” Violet Smith said while Violet Hunter thought You cunt.

John’s words must have sunk in because Harry called out in a quavering voice, “Johnny,” and took an unsteady step forward.

But Sherlock held out his hand, much like he did that night when he stopped a pair of motorcyclists so he could borrow their motorcycle in order to save John from the bonfire.

“No,” his voice plummeted to subzero temperatures. “Stay away. We’re his family now.”

Violet tugged on the sleeve of his Belstaff. “Let’s go home,” she whispered to Sherlock, fixing a baleful stare on Harry.

“Yes, let’s,” he dropped his arm, took Violet’s hand and together they left Harry alone with her two ex-girlfriends.

“No, wait!” Harry cried out.

Sherlock made sure to slam the door behind him.

The window panes and the booze bottles rattled when he did so.
The Tell-tale Heart

Chapter Summary

“Doesn’t it get boring?” John let his eye shut again. “Following me about?”

“John.”

He opened both his eyes in time to see Sherlock delicately push the mug of piping hot coffee and the plate of biscotti towards him with those long fingers of his.

“Only if you have some,” he pushed the plate back towards Sherlock.

“Emotionally blackmailing me into eating something, are you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well played...”

The aftermath of the intervention.
Also, if you thought Harry was a treat, meet John's mum and dad... let me know what you think of them...

And, oh yeah, another wrinkle in the case appears...

Happy Sunday!

Chapter Five: The Tell-tale Heart

Sherlock and Violet found John bracing himself against the boot of Mary’s car. Mary rubbed his back. The drizzle had let up but the air was damp and frigid.

John looked up when he heard Sherlock’s and Violet’s footsteps on the pavement. “I’m fine,” he said much too quickly, standing up. “I’m fine, let’s just get out of here.”

Both Violet and Sherlock observed John’s left hand trembling.

As the doctor let himself into the front passenger side of the assassin’s car, the profiler and the detective had a silent conversation only they could have...

He’s not fine...

Once everyone was inside, Mary started the vehicle and pulled away from the kerb. Soon, the miserable council house was in the wing mirror.

John stared unseeing out the passenger side window as Mary took them all back to Westminster. His left knee jiggled up and down. An uncharacteristic feeling of claustrophobia started crushing him. He ran his hand down his face and said in a low voice, “Stop the car.”

“Are you alright?” Mary kept her eyes on the road but she wasn’t able to keep the worry from her voice.
“Just… stop the car.”

Mary pulled over the first opportunity she had. John unsnapped his seat belt and reached for the door handle. “John?” she asked as he opened the car door. “John, wait, wher-”

“I’m fine, Mary,” he snapped then was immediately contrite. “I’m sorry, I’m so sorry, I just need… take Sherlock and Violet back to Baker Street, please. I just need some time to myself.”

Mary folded her lips together, but she nodded.

Violet Hunter leaned forward from the backseat. “You text me when you get home.”

A faint smile appeared on John’s exhausted face. “OK, Mum,” he teased her and with that he slid out of the car and shut the door. He started walking towards the nearest Tube station.

“Sherlock, could you go after him?” Mary turned around but Sherlock had already exited the car.

Mary exhaled and leaned her head against her seat. “I should have bloody shot her, Harry,” she muttered darkly.

“Yes, you should have,” Violet found herself agreeing, albeit grudgingly. “Did you know?” her natural curiosity couldn’t be contained. “That she was… like that?”

Mary turned around again in order to face Violet. “John said once, a very long time ago, that she was a mean drunk. Mostly he only complained about her thoughtlessness and self-pity. He always seemed more upset about how unreliable she was. I most certainly wasn’t expecting to see that level of cruelty. The things she was insinuating…”

“You know that was all bullshit, right?” Violet instinctively lied. “What she was implying about John and Sherlock.”

“Well, yes, of course,” Mary said, but she sounded like she was trying to convince herself. Then she said in a stronger voice. “Like you said, she just wanted to hurt John and those gay rumors have plagued him for years. She knows his pressure points, alright.” She ran her hand down her abdomen unconsciously. “I don’t care if she does stop the booze and the gambling. She’s never coming near John or our children again.”

Get back on her good side, Hunter, she told herself sternly then forced herself to ask, “Any new leads on Maisie?”

Mary shook her head, “You?”

“No,” Violet leaned back in her seat, closing her eyes. “I haven’t given up though.”

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“Sit up front,” Mary patted the front passenger seat. “I feel like a prat. Chauffeuring you around.”

As Violet went to join Mary in the front seat and as Sherlock skulked in the shadows, John descended into the Underground and stepped into the first train that arrived, not caring where it took him. The carriage was deserted. Relief washed over John as he sat down, the plastic seat beneath him crinkling as he did so.

And then he immediately felt guilty as hell for what he’d said to his sister. “Jesus Christ,” he said out loud as he bowed his head and clasped his hands between his knees.

John rode the train like that for what felt like an eternity but really was probably only a quarter of an hour. He lifted his head when he heard the pleasant announcement that they were approaching the Liverpool Street station. He huffed an unhappy sigh, not sure what to do or where to go next.

His body made the decision for him. When he stood up as the train slowed to a stop, John felt a bit light-headed. Then, to his utmost surprise, his stomach rumbled. Since he hadn’t eaten anything since the sarnies and soup Mrs. Hudson had made for lunch, he supposed he should listen to his body and refuel. Or at the very least, find a snack.

He wasn’t confident he could consume an entire meal at the moment.

The original plan was to go to Angelo’s after sorting things out with Harry, hopefully with Harry and Clara joining them. A nice, quiet dinner on their last night in London for who knows how long… this is not how I wanted to spend tonight, John thought as he dug into his coat pockets, only to discover his good leather gloves were missing. Of course, he thought as he stuck his hands into his coat pockets; Perfect end to a perfect night.

Afraid he’d have to make do with a fish-and-chips vendor, he found himself passing by an old tea warehouse that had been renovated into a pizzeria. By now, the drizzle had come back and John would have been content to just have a warm place to sit and nurse a cup of coffee.

Or a beer.

Or a glass of wine.

Or a bottle of wine.

John hesitated when the sweet, perky waitress asked if he wanted to see the wine list. Then he shook his head. Last thing he wanted to do was board a plane with a massive hangover.

He ordered a cup of coffee, a few biscotti and a margherita pizza. He really didn’t want an entire pizza to himself. Then he figured he could bring the leftovers to Mary. Least he could do.

John rested his cheek on his hand and closed his eyes. He suddenly felt bone-crushingly weary.

Of course, I’m tired. I buried one of my closest friends, who might have been murdered. My sister is a selfish twat. And I’m expected to play Secret Agent in a foreign country where I don’t speak One Fucking Syllable of the language. And, oh yeah, my wife’s pregnant with our second kid but we don’t know where our first one is…

John immediately decided after they got back from France, he was going to find a way to take a month off from… everything.

John heard the sound of a coffee mug and then a plate being placed on the nice wood table. “Ta, miss,” John mumbled, not even opening his eyes.
Then he heard a chair scraping against the floor as it was being pulled out from his table. John opened one blue eye to see his best friend sitting in front of him.

“Doesn’t it get boring?” John let his eye shut again. “Following me about?”

“John.”

He opened both his eyes in time to see Sherlock delicately push the mug of piping hot coffee and the plate of biscotti towards him with those long fingers of his.

“Only if you have some,” he pushed the plate back towards Sherlock.

“Emotionally blackmailing me into eating something, are you?”

“Yeah.”

“Well played,” Sherlock grumbled after a beat. He flagged down a waitress to bring him a coffee so he could have something to dunk the rock-hard almond biscuit into.

They sipped coffee and munched in silence until John, shaking his head, said, “I’m sorry I dragged you along tonight, you and Violet.”

“I would not have been pleased if you had faced that harpy on your own.”

John looked up at his best friend over his coffee mug. Sherlock’s thin face, as usual, was inscrutable. But something in Sherlock’s voice caught John’s attention. It lacked its usual detachment and arrogance. However there was no anger either. He sounded… not like himself.

Sherlock shifted in his chair, suddenly looking abjectly uncomfortable, as if there was a price tag still attached inside his trousers. “I suppose it would be… good… if you did that…” he gestured miserably with his elegant hands. “Talking… thing… that you like to do when something upsetting to you has occurred,” he hunched up his shoulders, looking like a gargoyle.

“Feeling sorry for me?” John joked.

Sherlock’s nostrils flared. “Don’t be absurd,” now the hauteur was back in his sonorous baritone. “I wish for you to divest yourself of this idiotic guilt you are carrying within you about your wretched sister so you and I can focus completely on the case tomorrow.”

John smiled.

Order had been restored to the universe.

John laughed silently through his nose. “If my mother had heard the way I spoke to my sister tonight, she would not have cared that I’m a forty-six-year-old man. She would have scolded me soundly like I was still a little boy and then ordered me to bed without supper.” He put his mug down and rubbed his forehead, “Christ-in-a-cup, what a cock-up.”

The waitress came round just as John finished swearing. Her cheeks were a trifle pink when she asked, “Need top-offs, luvs?”

“I do and I apologize, that was rude,” John’s own cheeks reddened.

“Bad night,” Sherlock informed the waitress in a clipped voice.

“It happens,” the young lady shrugged, apparently recovered from the coarse language. “At least
you’re not having a bad night alone, yeah?” She deftly refilled their mugs, gave them both a friendly, encouraging smile and went to check on her other tables.

Once the waitress was gone, Sherlock tore open two sugar packets. As John added milk to his coffee, Sherlock murmured, “Harriet certainly knows your pressure points.”

“Oh, that she does.” John stared intently into his mug as he swirled the milk and coffee together. “She was born to be a barrister, you know. Really knows how to get you all twisted up and turned around, Harry does.” A bitter smile quirked up his lips, “Funny how you regress to the nursery whenever you row with your siblings, isn’t it? And shut it, don’t even try arguing with me,” John’s smile became less bitter as he lifted his eyes up towards Sherlock. “I remember when we went to Mycroft’s birthday dinner at your Mum and Dad’s. And somebody had decided it would be a brilliant idea to play Monopoly after we all had a few cocktails.”

“I still maintain Mycroft cheated,” Sherlock said stiffly. “He always pilfers notes from the bank.”

“You threw the game pieces at him!” John sniggered. “Like feed to the pigeons!”

“Well, he was the one who flipped the game board over and said he wouldn’t play anymore.”

Both Sherlock and John looked at each other then started giggling at the memory. Then John became serious and somber again. “The ‘first kiss’ thing, Harry always used that to take the piss out of me. My first kiss was with a gir-”

“Obviously,” Sherlock huffed, sounding bored.

John ignored him. “But Gary, he… he was a lad who lived two doors down from us. Knew him since we were in nursery school and he was, well, different. Shy. Bookish and, err, well he was a bit effeminate, I suppose, but we got along all right. We swapped comics and football mags, went to each other’s houses for tea, snuck into the cinemas and I dunno, he was a nice kid but because he was a bit girly, he got bullied and…” his voice gave out.

He hadn’t thought about this in years.

He cleared his throat and went on, “Anyway, some of the neighborhood kids used to take the piss out of me for hanging around with him, asking us when we were going to announce our engagement and stupid shit like that.”

“Used to?”

“They stopped after I knocked a few of them out. Wasn’t much fun for them after that,” John said sheepishly. “Bit embarrassing for them too, having their arse handed to them by a runt,” he added self-deprecatingly. Then he sighed, “But of course, I couldn’t beat up my sister. That was a good way to get caned for sure. At least it was in my house. Harry knew it bothered me so she used that against me. Whenever I was winning any sort of argument, she’d bring Gary up, just to take the mickey out of me.”


Normal people were usually reduced to gibbering eejits under that severe gaze. After all these years, John felt mostly immune to it. But he found himself unable to meet Sherlock’s eyes when he said: “Gary was nothing like me. He wasn’t a fighter. He was kind of a pansy, really. And I don’t know if he was straight or gay or… whatever. He was only thirteen when he died, you see. Got jumped on his way home from school, which happened on a semi-occasional basis; only on that walk home, the bullies went too far and…” John’s mouth twisted. “He got kicked in the head, which rendered him
unconscious. The trauma caused a subdural hematoma, which caused his brain to swell, which didn’t get treated in time and…” he brought the mug to his lips. “That was that.”

Sherlock said nothing, but John could tell he was rapidly assimilating the new information and either finding an appropriate place to store the new data in his mind-palace or deciding if he should delete it. He steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair. Cocking his head to the left, he said, “It’s stupid to blame yourself for his death. You couldn’t have saved him any more than I could have saved Carl Powers.”

“I know,” John said shortly. “And I know I shouldn’t let it get to me when Harry takes low shots like that, but still… it’s just… Jesus Christ, she lost our mother’s house, Sherlock. You don’t understand what Mum had done just to keep a roof over our heads after Dad would piss all his wages away on the ponies. And my darling sister has the nerve to be angry with me? For not giving her money! The sheer cheek of it, asking for a handout from me, the bleeding nerve of her! Wanting me to bail her out when she’s been on the sauce again, plus gambling to boot. Not to mention cruising secondary schools looking for dates. How old was that little tart of hers anyway? Did you say eighteen?”

“Actually, she was seventeen,” Sherlock had enough sense to look abashed. “Didn’t seem… appropriate to disclose her actual age under the circumstances.”

“Fucking hell,” John clutched the mug as if it was the only thing keeping him sitting upright. “I meant what I said to her, I did. I can’t take her rubbish anymore. But she’s still my sister, how’m I supposed to just turn my back on her?”

Sherlock sat silently for a moment, while picking a piece of fluff of the sleeve of his Belstaff. Then he said, slowly almost hesitantly, “When I was having a very difficult time dealing with Mycroft, more difficult than usual, a very wise man advised me what to do. I shall repeat those words of wisdom to you, only I’m going to substitute Mycroft’s name with Harry’s.”

“OK,” John fixed his eyes on his cooling coffee as Sherlock leaned forward and said:

“Fuck Harry.”

John jerked his head up in surprise, his mouth dropping open.

Sherlock’s eyes blazed as he quoted John’s own words back to him: “You two share a last name and parents, but that’s it. We’re your family now. All of us. Mary and me. Lestrade and Molly. Mrs. Hudson. Even Violet. OK?” Then Sherlock dropped his gaze and finished quoting the rest of John’s speech in a softer voice: “We will always find you. We will always protect you. We will always believe in you. We’re the ones who love you, never doubt that.”

John would be damned if he would be caught blubbering in a restaurant. So it took him a good minute to get himself under control before saying, “I thought you were in withdrawal when I said that.”

“I was.”

“I didn’t think you’d remember.”

“I must confess, I don’t remember very much after Jack Woodley injected me with that speedball,” Sherlock touched the spot in his neck where Violet’s nemesis had jammed the needle in. “I strongly believe there was more to that cocktail than cocaine and heroin, some sort of hallucinogen. Bits and pieces come in and out of focus though. I remember an explosion.”

“Yes, the candy factory blew up to bits.”
“I remember a little girl.”

“Beatriu,” John nodded. “Anderson was using her as a human shield.”

Sherlock pressed his lips together then muttered, “I remember being a bit unkind to Violet.”

“You were a complete dick.”


John might have succumbed to tears if the waitress hadn’t come with the pizza.

“Here you go,” she said cheerily, “Careful, pan’s hot.”

“Smells great,” John prayed his eyes didn’t look too red and watery.

She winked at him and seconds later, she had set down a candle and a vase containing a single red rose in the middle of the table.

“Thought that might set the mood a bit better for your date,” she beamed at them. “Hopefully your night gets better,” she added with a sympathetic pat on John’s shoulder.

“I’m… but… I’m…” John spluttered. “This isn’t a date, _I’m not gay!_” he cried out as the waitress sauntered away.

John turned to see Sherlock positively shaking with suppressed laughter. “Shut up,” John said weakly. “Just… shut your mouth for once in your life.”

Sherlock obediently clamped his lips together and his face contorted with the effort of keeping his mirth contained. But he just looked so damned ridiculous, John did the only thing he could think of: he started laughing. Soon Sherlock joined in with him and together, they laughed until their sides ached.

“Alright,” John wiped his eyes.”Am I going to have to eat this by myself or are you going to help me?”

“If you insist,” Sherlock handed John his plate.

**

As Sherlock and John tuck into their steaming hot pizza, Mary and Violet had made dinner plans of their own.

After Mary finished explaining exactly why she shot Sherlock, Violet had just sat stunned in the passenger seat of Mary’s car. “Jesus…” was all she had been able to manage. She blew out a long breath, her cheeks puffing out a bit as she did so. “Talk about a rock and a hard place.”

“So you do see,” Mary, looking very teary-eyed, tried to smile, “Why I panicked.”

“Yes, I do,” Violet sighed, looking up at the roof of the car. “Jesus, Mary. What a fucking mess,” she groaned. Closing her eyes, she said in a dark voice, “Mycroft will never forgive you.”

“I know,” she whispered, gripping the steering wheel as tightly as possible.

“We need to get out from underneath Mycroft’s thumb,” Violet opened her eyes, making a decision.
A decision she wasn’t thrilled with, but she did not see any other viable options.

*I’m crawling back in bed with the devil... yippee.*

“And that means we need to get leverage on him,” Violet took her fake glasses off and rubbed her tired eyes.

“Great!” Mary nodded then frowned. “How, exactly do we accomplish that?”

“No idea. Look, just take me to your house instead of Baker Street. We can talk more there. And you know Sherlock won’t leave John until he’s safe and sound back at your place. He and I can take a cab back home. Plus, after tonight,” Violet shook her head, her hair starting to curl after being out in the damp weather. “I really don’t want to be by myself right now.”

“Me either,” Mary admitted, then added, “Plus, I’m starving.”

“Really?” Violet honestly had no appetite, not after witnessing Harry and John drawing blood.

But then, her appetite had been lagging these past few days.

“Pregnant,” Mary reminded Violet.

“Oh, yeah, right,” Violet mumbled, remembering her angry words about Mary’s latest pregnancy. “What are you in the mood for?”

“Well, we were supposed to go to Angelo’s so I’m still craving Italian. Well, sort of,” Mary turned the ignition back on as well as the headlights. “All I want is gelato and cannoli.”

“That actually sounds amazing right now,” Violet lied. She wanted her pyjamas, her thick woolly socks, her dog and sleep.

But she agreed to Italian take-away and Mary pulled over again so she could call in an order to an Italian restaurant near the little terrace house she and John lived. She ordered enough food to feed the nation of Monaco. Violet ordered Italian wedding soup and breadsticks.

The drive to the restaurant was uneventful as was the drive to the Watson’s terrace house. But as they got closer to the terrace house, both women saw a Volvo parked right in front of the house and someone dressed head-to-toe in black waiting for them by the front door. A hood was pulled over her head. Even her scarf and large handbag were black.

“Expecting anyone?” Violet asked in an oh-so-causal voice, setting the brown bags of hot food onto the floor of the car and reaching the Glock strapped to her thigh.

“Nope,” Mary said as she parked the car. She unbuttoned her coat so she could pull her gun out in haste if necessary. She studied the figure by her front door. “Amateur,” she muttered.

“Yup,” Violet agreed then gasped, “Shit! I think that might be the Secretary of State’s wife!”

“What?”

Violet explained what she knew of the case John and Sherlock had taken on then added, “Sherlock said she might show up here tonight.

“Why?”

“Because John is the less threatening of the Dynamic Duo, or so he seems,” Violet put her gun back
in its hip holster and smoothed down her skirts. “Sherlock said she’s involved in this stupid case with the stupid Letter.”

“Ah,” Mary cottoned on, “Of course, obvious. John’s nicer than Sherlock. She’ll feel more comfortable talking to John than Sherlock. Should I text him, John?”

But Violet was biting her lower lip, debating. “No,” she finally said. “Because Sherlock’s with him now and he’ll come back here with John. If Lady What’s-Her-Face sees Sherlock, she might freeze up or worse, run.” She smiled at Mary and as ‘Miss Smith’ said. “I think Her Ladyship might like a cuppa and a bit of gelato, don’t you?”

“Ooh, the tea-and-sympathy bit,” Mary grinned. “I like it.”

“Let’s get to work then, yes?”

“But of course, Miss Smith.”

“After you, Mrs. Watson,” Violet put her glasses back on and picked the food bags back up.

The woman in black jumped as Mary and Violet came walking up towards her. “Hello, can we help you?” Mary asked in her kindest voice.

“I’m looking for Dr. Watson,” her voice shook. “I’m in trouble.”

“Well, I’m Mrs. Watson and this is my friend-”

“Effie,” Violet jumped in with a lie. If the woman had been mortally offended by Sherlock earlier today, it would serve no purpose to let her know that Violet was Sherlock’s significant other. “Effie Munro.”

“John is out with Sherlock, can we help you?”

“Oh,” the woman in black dithered. “I really should wait for Dr. Watson. In fact, I prefer it, seeing that I’m interrupting supper,” she nodded towards the bags of take-away “Effie” carried. “Could I stop by tomorrow night, perhaps?”

Mary shook her head, “John leaving for a business trip tomorrow morning. Could I at least offer you tea? It’s so cold and miserable out here. You can wait for inside a bit for John if you like.”

“Oh, I’m fine,” but the woman in black did not sound fine.

“I insist,” Mary took her house key out of her coat pocket. “Come along, before it starts raining in earnest.” Mary unlocked the front door and ushered the woman-in-black inside. Before entering however, she turned to Violet and mouthed “Effie?” at her.

Violet shrugged and whispered back, “Just go with it.”

The name had been the first thing that popped into her head. But she was too embarrassed to admit the reason why it popped into her head was because she had stayed up into the wee hours watching a Hunger Games marathon.

She had finally dozed off halfway through Catching Fire and woke up this morning in Sherlock’s chair with a plaid blanket draped over her.

At least I didn’t say Katniss, Violet thought as she followed Mary inside.
The gelato was put into the freezer and the food placed in the oven to keep warm. But Mary put a kettle to boil and served the cannoli with tea.

The woman took her long black hooded coat off, revealing her striking beauty. She wore a heather-grey mohair jumper and ropes of black pearls looped around her long throat. Her ashy-blonde hair, her big blue eyes and her creamy complexion reminded Violet of the late Princess Diana. Not the shy schoolteacher, but the glamorous icon she evolved into before her tragic death. And, similar to the late Princess, anxiety lined this woman’s face just as it had Diana’s while her marriage had publically unraveled to the glee of the press.

Violet also observed that Sherlock was correct: the woman did have an excess of make-up spackled on her face. Her eyes were also very red, as if she had been on a crying jag.

The woman fidgeted with the rings around her fingers. Her nails were perfectly manicured. She said yes to sugar and no to milk as Mary served tea. Violet had excused herself on the premise of using the loo but in reality to text Sherlock and John. She instructed them to take their time and if they happened to come back while the Mystery Woman was still there to call her Effie.

She got responses back from them immediately.

Really? – JW

No more late night telly for you – SH

Violet grinned and returned to the lounge just as the mystery woman was saying, “Will Dr. Watson be long?”

“He might be,” Mary said apologetically. “Might be two, three in the morning before he’s home, if he’s out with Sherlock. Look,” she set her tea cup down. “My husband tells me everything and I say nothing to anyone. And Effie was a former client of Sherlock’s.”

“Oh yes,” Violet nodded enthusiastically, hoping the Mystery Woman wouldn’t notice she really wasn’t drinking the tea. “That’s how Mary and I met, through Mr. Holmes. If you’re concerned about us telling tales, well, my case was of the most sensitive nature.” She paused, acting like she was deliberating whether or not to disclose personal information. Then she pressed down on the Not-So-Mysterious-Mystery Woman’s pressure point. “If not for Mr. Holmes, my fiancé could have been sacked… or worse.”

That did it. The woman’s red eyes welled up again before she buried her face in her hand.

“Oh dear,” Mary rose and fetched a box of tissues. “It’s alright, it will be alright,” she patted the woman on the shoulder as she held out the box of tissues for her. Just then, Sweetie trundled out of the kitchen into the lounge to see what the fuss was all about. “We can help, really we can. Just tell us what happened and I’ll tell the boys. Effie will keep quiet, I promise.”

The woman looked up and gave Mary a watery smile as she took a handful of tissues. “Thank you,” she croaked. “You’re very kind,” she dabbed her eyes. “And I do need help but Sherlock is so…” she shook her head. Then she heaved a great big sigh, “My name is Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope.”

Both Mary and Violet did their best to look awed.

“Your husband told you about the case, about the Missing Letter?” When Mary nodded, Lady Hilda continued, “My husband is a good man, a simple man, a man who tries to avoid conflict. He’s a master negotiator, really. We met in uni, been together for nearly twenty-seven years now,” she smiled fondly. “It wasn’t always easy, especially in the early years. And especially after we
discovered we couldn’t have children, and I didn’t always make the best decisions, especially when I was younger. I,” she looked down at her rings again, specifically her wedding band. “Hadn’t always been faithful, you see.” She shook her head. “It was too easy, in the early days to cheat. He traveled so much and I had too much time and money on my hands. I was bored,” she said baldly. “I loved my husband, but I was young and stupid and reckless. But not so reckless that my husband ever found out.”

“Why did you stop?” Violet asked before she could help herself, “The cheating?”

Lady Hilda smiled without warmth. “I grew up,” the forty-eight year old woman said. “I realized what I stood to lose and the cheating wasn’t such a lark anymore. I haven’t been with anyone other than my husband in well over fifteen years and I’m glad for it. He is the love of my life, he really is and I regret my infidelity.” She pursed her lips, took a sip of tea and continued, “I glance at my past from time to time but I don’t stare at it. I have moved on, resolved to be a proper wife. But… mid-September, while Tree was on a diplomatic trip trying to help sort out the mess in the Middle East, again, I received a strange parcel. Inside were stacks and stacks of pictures of me and my former,” her face twisted, “lovers, in all sorts of… embarrassing situations and positions,” she grimaced as she put her hand to her chest, as if to still her racing heart. There was also a pre-paid mobile and a typed letter stating that these photographs had been converted to digital format and could be quite easily emailed or texted to my husband.”

“Blackmail,” Violet said faintly.

A strange look crossed Mary’s face, as if she had seen a ghost. “Did the letter include any sort of instructions?” she asked.

“Oh yes, to keep the mobile on me at all times,” Lady Hilda nodded vigorously. “It rang on the third day after the parcel came. Of course the voice was computerized or Auto-tuned or whatever,” she shook her head. “The voice informed me that my husband would be receiving an important letter in the next few months and I would need to intercept that letter. Further instructions would follow. Then I didn’t hear a pip until,” she swallowed. “Last week.”

“What happened,” Mary asked as both she and Violet leaned forward in their chairs.

Lady Hilda whispered, “All I had to do was to run an errand while Tree was at work. And leave the door unlocked and the location of the safe where my husband keeps important documents. A safe-cracker must have come into the house and took the letter.”

“Where is the safe?” Mary asked.

“In Tree’s office, built into the floor, hidden by the rug,” she said.

“Does anyone else know about that safe?”

“I didn’t think so,” she told Mary in a shaking voice. “Until The Letter went missing and I had no idea what that Letter contained until Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson came to my house today. When Mr. Holmes started calling me names and blaming me for creating an international incident, I was terrified he would blurt out one of his famous deductions, that he somehow figured out I was being blackmailed just by looking at me. So I became… quite cross with him.”

“Mm,” Mary nodded, knowing full well Lady Hilda had chucked a vase at Sherlock’s head.

“I told him he needed to leave at once, but only after he and Dr. Watson left did I realize I have no way of stopping the blackmailer from forcing me to do something else, maybe something even more
damaging.” She puffed out a breath. “I need Mr. Holmes and Dr. Watson’s help. I know they have been hired by the government to find the missing letter. I would like to hire them to find the blackmailer as well.”

Violet and Mary exchanged a dark look, thinking of another case that had involved blackmail.

“I’ll relay the message to my husband,” Mary said as Lady Hilda reached for her handbag. She pulled out the parcel, the size of a shoebox. “What’s that?” Mary asked as Violet stared at the parcel warily.

“The blackmail package. It’s all in there,” Lady Hilda explained. “The letter from the blackmailer, the mobile, the… pictures,” she added with an embarrassed flush on her cheeks. “Thought Mr. Holmes might want to take a look at it. Maybe there are clues in here that I didn’t notice.”

“I’ll give this to John as well,” Mary took the parcel.

Lady Hilda rose, “Thank you for your time, but I must go,” she checked her expensive watch. “Tree will start to wonder where I am.”

Mary and Violet walked Lady Hilda the short four steps to the front door. The lady shook hands with the assassin and the profiler then pulled the hood of her coat back over her blonde head. Mary reassured her again that the conversation they had would stay confidential and the lady showed herself out.

Both Violet and Mary peeped through the drapes to watch Lady Hilda get into her Volvo and drive away. “The only problem,” Mary watched the taillights of the Volvo disappear down the street, “Is that if we saw her waiting for John here…”

“Then who else saw her waiting here,” Violet grumbled, “The dumb bitch just tipped off her blackmailer that John and Sherlock are working the case.”

“That is precisely what the boys don’t need right now,” Mary snapped the drapes shut. “Let’s talk more when the boys get here. Right now, I need to eat. The little cannibal is practically gnawing on my insides,” she ran her hand down her abdomen as she turned away from the window.

“Do you know who’s blackmailing Lady Hilda?” Violet followed Mary into the kitchen.

“I have an inkling,” Mary patted her thigh and Sweetie got up off his dog bed to trot after her. “And if it’s who or what I think it is…” she sighed.

“Well, don’t leave me hanging!” Violet insisted. “Is this Moriarty?”

“No,” Mary paused by the kitchen doorway. “Not directly, at least not the blackmail bit.”

“What?” Violet’s heart jumped up into her throat.

Mary gripped the doorframe. “The day Sherlock took John out for his stag party, someone left a strange parcel on my front door. It was the size of a shoe box, containing a letter, a pre-paid mobile and several incriminating photographs.”

Violet swiveled her head around to look at the innocuous little box still sitting next to the teapot on Mary and John’s coffee table. “Oh shit!”

“Exactly,” Mary looked at the floor. “Magnussen is dead, but his network of spies survives.”
So Mary and Violet started to tell John and Sherlock the good news when they finally arrived at the terrace house when it was nearly ten o’clock. But John, emotionally spent after the disastrous intervention with Harry, begged off. He pleaded with Mary and Violet to just tell Sherlock because he needed to go to bed. Then, without waiting to see if that was alright, he clipped Sweetie’s leash to his collar to take him out for a wee, then clomped upstairs without saying goodnight to anyone.

But no one condemned or even commented and for that John felt profoundly grateful.

He cleaned his teeth, washed his face and changed into his pyjamas. But once he sank into his bed and pulled the duvet over him, his eyes popped open. Wide-awake, his treacherous mind replayed the day’s events over and over.

Eventually he heard Mary come upstairs. He listened to the tap running, the sound of bristles on teeth, water splashing onto Mary’s face, the toilet flushing, then the tap running again. The bathroom door opened then closed. He then heard the soft whisper of clothes being removed and pyjamas put on. He wished he felt like having sex. Normally a nice roll in the hay would be a welcome distraction. But he just wanted his mind to stop racing so he could get some rest.

Is this what it feels like for Sherlock? He wondered as Mary pulled the duvet back and climbed into bed next to him. Is so, then how awful. Be tempted to self-medicate too, if that’s the case…

He felt Mary’s lips on his temple. “I set the alarm on my mobile to go off extra early so I can pack for you,” she breathed into his ear. “But don’t get up when it goes off. I’ll make sure to wake you in time to get you to Baker Street tomorrow.”

“Thanks,” he breathed back, rolling to his back.

She put her hand on his heart and snuggled up next to him. “Love you.”

“Love you too,” he let his eyelids drop. “Both of you,” he added as he cuddled his pregnant wife closer to him.

As he drifted off, current events bled uncomfortably into the past, becoming muddled and spun-out. But, at least that night, that is.

**

9 April1981
The Watsons’ residence
Friday evening
6:50 PM

“Go talk to him,” Anna Watson wearily asked her husband as she cleared the dinner table.

Jack Watson lowered his newspaper. He was a tall, good-looking man with a devil-may-care twinkle in his midnight blue eyes. His sandy-blonde hair had started to turn silver. “Ah, Anna, don’t fuss. He don’t need to be mollycoddled.”

Anna still wore the smart uniform she wore whenever she worked at a posh clothing store only tourists would be caught dead visiting. She hadn’t had time to change from her shift before coming home to collect her son, attend the funeral and then prepare and eat dinner. But her strawberry-blond hair had finally started falling out of its chignon. She scowled as she pushed a hank of hair out of her eyes. She’d have to do up her hair again before going to her second job.
So, already in a tetchy mood, she glowered at her husband. She put her hand on her hip, “Jonathan Arthur Watson,” she growled, her voice still retaining a slight Scottish burr even though her family had moved to London when she was fifteen years old. “His best mate was buried today. He’s upset. Didn’t eat a bite,” she held up the plate of untouched beef stew, starting to congeal. “Can’t you just talk to him for five minutes? Please?”

“Anna,” Jack looked over his shoulder, to make sure his son wasn’t lurking about. Johnny was a quiet boy. Sometimes one forgot he was even in the room. “I know he’s shattered. But what’n the hell am I supposed to say to him, eh? Sorry your Nancy-boy pal bought it after he got his melon kicked in by a lot of Chavs?”

“Jesus Christ, Jack,” Anna was small, practically tiny. She was barely five-two but formidable when enraged. “We’ve known the Millers since we’ve moved here ten years ago. Johnny and Gary been mates since they were wee lads. Don’t be disrespectful.”

“Sorry, I’m sorry,” Jack got up to help Anna clear the table. He was proud of the fact he wasn’t one those Neanderthals who let their wives wait on them hand and foot. He was a modern husband who helped around the house. Took out the rubbish and Hoovered without being asked. His mates took the piss out of him, but he didn’t care. He liked helping his wife. Would have even helped cook a meal if he wasn’t complete crap at it. He couldn’t even make toast without burning it. “I really am, love. Dead awful what happened to the Miller boy. It’s just that… well, I honestly don’t know what to say,” he admitted. “Or do.”

Anna softened, as she always did. “He just needs his dad, that’s all,” she reached out for him and ran her hand down his arm. “Talk to him about football for all I care, just let ‘em know you’re not going anywhere.” She covered Johnny’s plate with plastic wrap and popped it in the fridge. “Maybe I should call in to the café,” she mused as she started scraping bits of uneaten peas and gravy off the remaining plates and into the bin.

“Now, don’t do that, your boss’d get his knickers in a twist if you do,” Jack started filling up the sink with warm water. As he added dish soap, he added, “And I might have found an odd job to stop the gap until we get caught up on the bills again, but it won’t start until the end of the month. But by May, you should be able to quit that crap café job.” Feeling rather than seeing the suspicious look Anna gave him, he said quickly as he took the dirty plate out of Anna’s hands, “And I’m getting some more hours at the factory, starting Monday. So there’s that.”

“Oh alright then,” Anna finally relented. “And go, talk to the boy. I’ll do the washing up. I don’t have to be at the café’ until eight o’clock.”

Jack took the rest of dirty dishes and placed them into the sink full of warm, sudsy water. He kissed his wife on her cheek and walked out of the kitchen.

He hated how Anna looked nowadays, her hair limp, her face drawn and pale, and her mouth set in a permanent frown. When they had met, she had not only been petite and pretty but a real firecracker. Quick to laugh, quick to fight, quick to make up and make love. But unpaid bills and unplanned babies plus working her fingers to the bone at two jobs had worn her down nearly to the quick. She looked ten years older than she really was.

Jack again vowed to make it up to her, to all of them.

Even to his troublesome, rebellious daughter, damn her.

Jack wasn’t much of a navel-gazer, but he paused at the bottom of the steps that led up to the second floor of this sorry little house. He gripped the banister, trying once again to solve the puzzle that was
Harry, well, she had been difficult from Day One. A colicky baby, she had transformed into a little bolshie brat who was too effing smart for her own good. Argumentative and proud, not to mention she had inherited her mother’s lightning-quick temper. The notes sent home from school had been endless. She hadn’t been like the other little girls who wore pink party frocks, played with dolls and worshipped their daddies. No matter how much they disciplined her, she remained headstrong and willful. Plus she still insisted that she fancied girls instead of blokes, probably just to twist the knife in a bit deeper into her father’s back.

It would be a lie to say Jack wasn’t relieved when Harry finally ran away from home earlier this year. He knew she was staying with the Staffords down the road, in their spare room. He sent them a bit of cash now and then for their trouble. At least the girl was bright. At least she could get a scholarship. Get to university, get a job. Take care of herself.

And good riddance.

Even though shame flooded him for feeling that way about his daughter, he knew it to be the truth as well. Once Harry had packed up her things and departed, the strange tension that had pervaded the house since she announced she was a lesbian had dissipated. He supposed he did love his daughter, but a heavy weight had lifted from his shoulders when she was gone.

Johnny though…

The boy was quiet, sometimes too quiet. He didn’t speak until he was eighteen months old and then it was a bloody full sentence: “I don’t understand.” He liked to read, would read anything he could get his little hands on. He had found a copy of Anna’s Joy of Sex, when he was seven which lead to an awkward conversation. When he wasn’t reading, he was writing. Snippets of poetry, short stories, little essays, hell, the boy even kept a journal. Started when he was nine years old, started it after he had read Anne Frank, the Diary of a Young Girl, which he wasn’t supposed to read. The librarian had told him he wasn’t old enough to read it, wouldn’t let him check it out and told him to shoo.

So, Johnny had nicked it when the old bat wasn’t looking. Then he had nightmares about Nazi Germany for a week after reading it, but he still started his own journal anyway.

But the boy didn’t live in his head like some of the eggheads Jack had known in his life. Despite apparently inheriting his mother’s small stature instead of his father’s height, the kid could scrap with the rest of the neighborhood boys. He would come home dirty, sometimes bloody, but nothing serious: a bloody nose from a football hitting him in the face, scraped knees and hands from tumbling from his bicycle, bruises from falling off of the roof of a neighbor’s shed because one of his eejit friends had dared him to jump.

Some of the bruises and scrapes came from fighting as well, Jack was no fool. Plus he was a little proud how his son always stood his ground. Johnny never started a fight. It wasn’t in his nature to razz anyone, to start anything.

But by God, the boy would finish a fight if he had to, especially if someone was being bullied.

Jack sighed. His son’s tendency to stick up for the weak was probably what spurred his friendship on with Gary the Fairy. God forgive me, but it’s true. That kid was as much a poof as the day was long…

His son’s friendship with the neighborhood ponce caused many sleepless nights for Jack. He constantly worried about his son’s quiet nature. Worried about how he could spend hours with his
nose stuck in a thick book. Granted, the stories the boy read usually were about wars and adventures, but still….

Jack particularly worried about the child’s less-than-masculine hobbies, like his scribbles in his journal and composing fucking poetry…

Worried about this so-called-friendship with the neighborhood poof.

After all, he already had one kid turn queer. Jack reasoned his fear was a legitimate concern.

His worry had lessened a bit last summer when Johnny came home with a dreamy look on his face after attending his first boy-girl birthday party. After some wheedling and teasing, Johnny had confessed a girl had kissed him, his round cheeks flushing as he admitted it “wasn’t bad.” And little Teresa DiLusio, a pretty, dark-haired thing, had started coming over now and again to borrow one of Johnny’s books, or to watch telly with him. And Johnny had been invited to the DiLusio’s house for tea here and there.

Jack and Anna had caught them holding hands one afternoon as they watched some stupid program kids liked.

Anna had cooed how sweet they looked.

Jack had just been grateful how normal they had looked.

But by and by, Teri had stopped coming around and Johnny had stopped visiting her house. And Gary started coming around again.

Jack ran his hands through his silvery-blond hair, making it stick up like hedgehog quills.

Gary hadn’t been a bad kid, not really. He didn’t have a mean bone in his body. Very polite, always respectfully called him “Mr. Watson,” and minded his manners. He always tidied up after himself when he spent the night.

But Gary was… had been… so girlish. More feminine than Harry had been and she still wore skirts and lipstick. Or last he heard she did.

Jack sighed. No matter what, it was right unfair what those arseholes did to him. Gary never did anything to deserve being beaten to death. So he had a lisp and longish hair and didn’t like sports. It’s not as if he pranced out of his mum and dad’s house in drag, for fuck’s sake.

And he had been only thirteen. Maybe, just maybe the lisp might have gone away once his voice cracked good and proper. He might have grown out of his girlish prettiness as well.

But they would never know for sure now, would they?

His gut twisted a bit. He did not get along with his daughter. Not one bit, but she was still his baby, his little Harry. For all her faults, she was clever, she was funny and she was brave, in a pig-headed Watson sort of way.

Jack knew a part of him would die if she had been the one kicked in the head instead of Gary. Another reason why he just wished she’d act normal. Date a bloke, like a normal girl. Be safe, be smart, be like everyone else.

Thank God Johnny had finally showing interest in girls.
Jack knew he was procrastinating so he made himself walk up the narrow staircase to the second floor. He paused at the door to Harry’s room, thought about letting it out, making it a bedsit. Anna might howl about a stranger living in their house, but facts were facts. Harry wasn’t coming home and they needed the income.

While he had told the truth about the additional hours at the factory, the second job was not quite a certain thing, not yet. A lodger might be a more reliable income stream.

He went to Johnny’s door next. He paused, listening. He could hear some God-awful rock song playing on the other side of the door. Jack grimaced. The kid was beginning to acquire horrible taste in music.

He rapped on the door. Then a bit harder when there was no response, then he called out “Johnny,” as he tried to stifle his irritation.

“Yeah?” his son called over the rock music.

Jack opened the door, poked his head in just as Johnny had slammed his desk drawer shut. Then the boy morosely put his head back on his arms. He had taken the clip-tie and school jacket off, but he still wore his khakis and dress shirt. A notebook and pen were in front of him. But instead of doing his homework, Johnny had been playing solitaire instead.

Jack crossed over to the cheap, plywood shelf stuffed with books. He switched off the radio sitting on the top shelf. He sat at the foot of Johnny’s twin bed. “Bad day, yeah?” he started, clasping his calloused hands between his knees.

“Yeah,” the boy didn’t even turn around, just started shuffling cards.

Jack sighed and looked around the room. The room felt claustrophobic. Almost smaller than a broom cupboard, there wasn’t even room for a proper chest of drawers. The boy’s clothes hung from pegs on the wall. His shoes were piled up below his shirts and trousers. Until his mum got after him to tidy up, then he’d line them up as neat as one pleased, almost military-like.

There was only enough space in Johnny’s room for his bed, his bookshelf and an old desk Jack had seized out of a bin one day. He never told anyone where he got it from. Just cleaned it and painted it and placed it in front of the window in Johnny’s room, knowing the boy would be dead chuffed to have a proper desk of his own. He had hated doing his homework and his scribbling at the kitchen table. Liked a bit of privacy when he did his studies and writing, Johnny did.

And the one bookshelf wasn’t nearly enough to hold all the bleeding books the boy owned. Jack had a feeling some of those books might have been obtained via a five-fingered-discount. But they were everywhere. Stacks of them in the corner next to his rugby ball and football and more piled up right next to his piles of shoes. And God only knew how many were under the bed.

As the bedsprings of the narrow bed squeaked when Jack sat down, Johnny slowly straightened up and turned around. Jack saw that the boy’s eyes were red but he wasn’t weeping.

“Mum put your dinner in the fridge. In case you get peckish later,” he told his son.

“’K, thanks,” Johnny lowered his eyes to his lap.

Jack regarded his boy. Still small for his age, he probably wasn’t going to get very tall at all, even when puberty hit him full force. But the puppy-fat was starting to melt away and his eyebrows were starting to thicken. Probably only a matter of time before his voice started changing as well.
“Just wanted to let you know, I’m sorry what happened to your mate,” Jack hated how formal he sounded. He tried again. “Awful thing to have happened, it wasn’t right.”


“Listen, hey, eyes here, I’m talking to you.”

Johnny lifted big, sorrowful blue eyes back up at his dad.

“You didn’t do anything wrong, son,” Jack told him. “You were always a good friend to him.”

“He asked me walk home with him,” Johnny whispered to Jack. “But I didn’t want to, some of the boys in my class asked me to play rugby after school and…”

“And you want to try out for the team when you’re in secondary school, don’t you think we don’t hear you up here at night? Doing push-ups and sit-ups, puffing away, counting reps?” Jack’s eyes twinkled in pride.

Anxiously Johnny said, “Some universities give scholarships for sports. And I’m the right size to play hooker and I’m fast an-”

“And that’s your parents’ problem to worry about paying for uni, not yours,” Jack told Johnny firmly. To his dismay, Johnny got That Look on his round face, the same one his mother got whenever she didn’t quite believe what Jack was saying. Quickly he added, “It’s your job to keep getting all those high marks that you do. And,” he gave his son a gentle smile. “So you wanted to spend time with your other friends. Gary had other friends of his own, did things with them that you have no interest in, yeah? You two didn’t spend every waking minute together, now did you?”

“No,” Johnny admitted but then said, “But I knew that there were bigger kids making trouble for him and maybe if I would have gone with him like he asked m-”

“So I should have just left him to save myself?” Johnny’s dark blue eyes narrowed.

“No,” Jack sighed. “You pick your battles. Learn to use your head,” he reached over and pressed his pointer finger gently against Johnny’s forehead. “Not your fists. Besides, hate to break it to you, son but you’re a kid. Not a little kid I know, but you’re not a grown-up yet.”

“I know,” Johnny grumbled, irritated as all pre-teens tend to get when it’s pointed out they are still children, not adults.

“Good. So the next time you see a mate or a little tyke getting roughed up by someone bigger than you, you don’t fight them,” his made his voice very stern now. Even though he was proud that Johnny didn’t back down from brawls, with these bigger louts roaming the neighborhood, Jack knew it was irresponsible of him to encourage Johnny’s fighting on the school yard or in the street. “You
fetch a teacher or a copper. Or find me or your mum, understand?”

A pained look crossed Johnny’s face just then, but he nodded.

“And you couldn’t have known, what was going to happen that day,” Jack strove to reassure his son, to absolve him of any guilt he may have still felt. “No one can predict the future, yeah?”

“Yeah,” Johnny’s lips twitched, as if trying to hold something back, “Right.”

“Right,” Jack didn’t know what else to say or do. “Well, if you need anything…”

“Dad, is that why you’re cross with Harry?” Johnny burst out. “Because you’re afraid what happened to Gary will happen to her?” As Jack sat in stunned silence, John went on, “I’m not stupid, I hear what the neighborhood kids say about Gary… and me, I guess. But, is that why you and Harry don’t get on? You think she’s going to get hurt because she likes girls instead of boys and she won’t listen to you when you tell her to act normal?”

A lump formed in Jack’s throat. Perceptive little shit, he thought affectionately. “That’s one of the reasons,” he managed to croak out.

“I won’t let anything bad happen to Harry,” Johnny looked as fierce as a twelve year old boy could possibly look. “I won’t be a kid forever. When I’m grown up, then I can really make sure nothing bad happens to Harry, I promise.”

Jack just wanted to take Johnny into his arms and hug the breath out of him right then and there. Smother him with kisses and squash him with hugs. Like he used to when Johnny was a chubby little toddler ambling around the house, dragging his teddy bear behind him.

But the boy was undeniably too old for hugs and kisses now. At least, hugs and kisses from his old man, at any rate.

So Jack merely cleared his throat and said, “You’re a good brother, Johnny, you know that, don’t you? It’s been a rough go these past few months, especially this week with Gary and all. And how you’ve been handling it all, well, I’m proud of you, son. I really meant it.”

Johnny flushed. Then, in a small voice, asked “Dad? Um… can you… could you… well, could you ask Mum to start calling me ‘John’? ‘Johnny’s’ a bit babyish and like you said, I’m not a little kid anymore so…” He then bit his lip, “Unless that hurts Mum’s feelings, of course. And yours.”

Jack felt his chest expand with pride while his heart broke just a little at the same time. That inevitable surge of mixed emotions parents feel when they realize their child is in fact, growing up. So he smiled at his son and said quite seriously “If that’s what you prefer, we can call you that… John. And it doesn’t hurt our feelings a bit. It’s the name we picked out for you, innit? On your birth certificate, innit?”

John smiled, some of the sorrow finally leaving his face.

Jack ruffled John’s hair, still baby-soft and feathery. “I’ve got tomorrow afternoon free. We can spend the day together, do whatever you’d like.”

John considered this offer carefully then asked: “Can we go to The Tower of London, if it’s not too dear? I’d like to see the Fusiliers Museum and the ravens, plus we just got finished reading about Anne Boleyn in History so…” he licked his lips, an unconscious imitation of his father and looked up at Jack, expectantly, hopefully.
Jack inwardly groaned. It was dear, what with the ticket price plus transportation and food. They didn’t own a car, so they’d have to take a taxi or the Tube. And what the pubs and restaurants charged in Westminster was daylight robbery. Plus Johnny…. John would inevitably see a book or a game he would want.

Not to mention the Tower would be full of bloody tourists. Yanks, most likely, which only made the prospect feel that much worse.

As if the boy could hear his thoughts, John quickly added, “Or we can just hang out at the house and play cards, teach me a new game, perhaps.”

Jack didn’t have the heart to say no after that, “Never been to the Tower, to be honest.” He smiled when John’s face lit up. “I’ll check with your mother,” he added as he simultaneously hoped Anna would be willing to be the killjoy and say Absolutely Not. He hated being the Bad Guy, especially since he had finally put a smile back on John’s face.

But that smile faltered now. The boy wasn’t an idiot. As he had just told his father only moments ago, he wasn’t a little kid anymore.

He knew what it meant when Dad said he’d Check with Mother.

And Jack realized it too, a minute too late when John swallowed and said, “Great, can’t wait. It’ll… it’ll be fun. You won’t be bored, I promise. Um,” he pulled his notebook and biro back towards him. “I need to… I have to catch up on my studies since I missed school this week.” He reached for his mathematics book.

“You sure you’re not hungry?”

“I’m fine,” John opened his maths book.

“Sure you are,” Jack’s eyes twinkled as he opened John’s desk drawer; the one John had abruptly shut when Jack had walked in. Jack pulled out a half-eaten KitKat bar and an empty crisps bag. “I won’t tell Mum this time,” he grinned as John looked sheepish. “But no more snacking before meals, Mum works too hard for you to be turning your nose up at her cooking.”

“OK, sorry,” John’s cheeks pinked up.

Jack ruffled his son’s flaxen hair again. “I’ll make a cuppa and some beans-on-toast for you before bed, OK? After Mum leaves for the café.”

“Thanks Dad,” John smiled as Jack left his room.

The smile slid off John’s face as he slumped in his chair. Then he dove into his desk drawer, heart pounding, feeling almost sick.

He took out a battered paperback book, the cover tattered and the pages dog-eared. He had been looking at it before his dad had knocked on his door. He had been so afraid his dad was going to pull the book out instead of his stash of snacks and sweets.

The book was a very old copy of the complete works of Edgar Allan Poe. John had never heard of the American author but Gary had nearly swooned over him. “He’s really good, really scary. ‘The Masque of Red Death’, ‘The Tell-tale Heart’, excellent stuff, really creepy. I’ll loan you my copy,” he had told John the last time John had gone to his house for dinner.

Was that really only last Saturday? A lump formed in John’s throat as he opened the paperback to
the chapter titled ‘The Tell-tale Heart.’ He’d had dinner at Gary’s house on Saturday, chatted with him a bit Monday morning as they’d walked to school… and Monday night he was dead.

There was a folded up piece of paper bookmarking ‘The Tell-tale Heart.’ Feeling sick now, John unfolded it. He hadn’t read it since his parents came to tell him about Gary’s “accident.”

Come over after school tomorrow
We’ll have the house to ourselves again
I won’t tell if you won’t
- G

John immediately tore the note to shreds and then tore the shreds to bits and binned the bits. Then, as an afterthought, binned the book as well. He took a shuddery breath and opened his mathematics book. Took out his calculator and started reading up on the conversion of fractions to decimals.

Meanwhile, as Jack made his way downstairs, he felt himself filling up on good intentions and resolutions. *I am going to make sure he has everything,* he swore to himself as he went to fetch himself a beer. *Maybe I let my daughter down. Maybe it’s too late to make amends with her. But I’m sure as hell not going to disappoint my son. Things are going to be different, he’ll want for nothing. He’ll have the best of everything. I’ll send him to bloody Oxford if that’s what he wants. He won’t ever have to worry about anything, especially money.*

He reached into his pockets and fingered the betting slips tucked inside.

*This time will be different, I can tell.*
"John leaned over again, kissing her the way a soldier kisses his bride before leaving for war. “Stay safe,” he ran his fingers down her face. “Take care of yourself and the little one,” he rested his hand on her abdomen. “I’ll be home before you know it…”

And then there’s Sherlock being... Sherlock.

Additional notes at the end... Happy Sunday :^)
Sherlock would allow someone dodgy or irritating to live next door to him. Still, John would rather risk his clothes getting nicked than his computer.

John trotted up the stairs to the landing in front of 221B. He rapped on the door, but when there was no answer, he fished his key out of his jeans pocket and let himself in.

“Hello?” he called out. He saw Sherlock’s overnight bag and laptop carry-on bag leaning against John’s old chair. His Belstaff and his blue-and-purple checked scarf were neatly draped over John’s chair as well. “Hello?” he called out again, unwinding his scarf and shucking off his heavy parka. The weather, while not damp (for once), had become frigid again. This was proving to be a most miserable November.

John peeled off his gloves (his second-best, he still couldn’t find his good leather gloves.) “Sherlock?” he called out, “Violet?”

“Back here,” his friend’s voice called from the back of the flat.

John folded his lips together tightly and counted to ten before heading towards Sherlock’s bedroom. *If he’s not properly dressed and ready to go, I will kill him with my bare hands, I really will*, John fumed as he marched down the hallway. *I am not dragging him to Paris in nothing but a bed sheet. Buckingham was bad enough.*

Fortunately for John, Sherlock did not have on just a bed sheet, but one of his usual black suits, paired with the aubergine shirt the fan-girls swooned over. He even had socks and shoes on.

But he sat on the edge of the bed, next to Violet, completely lost in thought.

John opened his mouth to call Sherlock’s name again, but stopped. He frowned, taking in the scene. He knew when Sherlock sat still and silent like this, he was deep into his “Mind Palace” so John had a minute to observe the odd scene.

Sherlock’s brow knit in consternation as he stared at the still-sleeping Violet with the same intensity he did a suspect or a new clue. She lay on her side, facing Sherlock. Gladstone slept in the crook of her legs. Her hair was a riot of sleep-mussed curls; one could barely see the pillow she rested her head on, or the hand tucked under her cheek.

Sherlock held her other hand.

That’s what held John’s attention.

He had never seen Sherlock so… demonstrative… before.

Of course, he had been hoping maybe Sherlock and Violet would grow closer, thought it would be nice for Sherlock to have some company, not to be alone all the time…

*(…liar, you want Sherlock and Violet to get together because it would be easier for you since you’re with Mary… you would feel less guilty if Sherlock had someone because you have someone, you got with someone while he was away, you didn’t have faith… you didn’t wait…)*

John shook the malicious thought out of his head and rapped on the doorframe. “Sherlock,” he said softly as possible. He didn’t want to wake Violet.

Sherlock didn’t move. “You’re early.”

“Made good time, traffic wasn’t a blooming nightmare for once,” John suddenly didn’t know what to
do with his hands. Or his feet. Or any part of his body. “Sherlock,” he took a step then paused. It wasn’t as if he had never been in Sherlock’s bedroom before. There was absolutely no logical reason why he felt it was inappropriate to be there now.

But it didn’t feel right to enter.

“I don’t mind, you can come in John,” Sherlock rumbled, still not turning around. “You feel wrong-footed because your world still feels tilted after last night’s confrontation with your sister.”

“Sorry,” John made himself go into Sherlock’s bedroom instead of lurking in the doorway. “Trying to shake it off,” he stood at the foot of the bed. “Sherlock, what’s the matter with her?”

“Five ideas,” Sherlock sighed. “Need more conclusive data. The symptoms are intermittent and contradictory, not to mention vague.”

John inwardly groaned. Nothing a doctor hated worse than vague symptoms, like fatigue or loss of appetite. Symptoms like that could be a sign as something as mundane as a cold or as catastrophic as cancer.

_Cancer…_

“She was exposed to arsenic, Sherlock,” John muttered. “During the Copper Beaches case, that’s what that bitch Mrs. Toller was poisoning her with.”

“Thank you for the recap,” Sherlock sniped. “And you shouldn’t end a sentence with a dangling participle AND a preposition. Shame on you, you’re a writer. You know better.”

“Are you a Consulting Grammar-Nazi now?”

Sherlock snorted with silent laughter but resumed his cold, clinical demeanor. “I cannot make an accurate deduction until after I get the information from her doctor’s appointment on Monday.”

“The doctor may not have a diagnosis after one visit,” John reminded him.

“She’s been seeing the blasted doctor since we realized she had been poisoned and she’s not getting any better,” Sherlock finally turned around to acknowledge John’s presence. His eyes were colder than John had ever seen them. John actually took a step back.

“OK, listen, I know you don’t do well with uncertainty, but let’s not get worked up until after she sees the doctor, alright? And if this doctor is still being an idiot, then we can get a second opinion,” John added hastily as Sherlock’s lips thinned to the point where they actually disappeared, which was actually quite an impressive feat with his Cupid’s bow lips. “Just, be patient, yeah?”

“That’s what I’ve been telling him,” a groggy voice from the bed informed John. “By the way, did you two know it’s creepy to watch someone sleep?” Violet sat up, pushing her wild hair out of her face. She pulled the duvet up to her neck, ineffectively hiding the fact she wore one of Sherlock’s t-shirts as a pyjama top. “Morning John.”

“Sorry,” John flushed.

He had a feeling that the only thing she wore was the thin t-shirt.

He noticed both sides of the bed looked slept in… _Are reality and pretend starting to blend?_

“Didn’t mean to wake you,” he added as Gladstone’s head rose. His tail started to wag upon seeing
“S’OK,” Violet reached over to stroke her dog’s head. ”Need to get up and take the fur-ball out anyway.”

“took care of that earlier,” Sherlock informed her.

“Oh. Thanks,” she yawned. “How are you doing, John?”

John shrugged, “Fine. Believe it or not, we’ve had worse rows, Harry and I.”

“Easter and Christmas must be delightful,” Violet deadpanned.

“Oh yeah, the last Christmas we spent together really made me feel really festive and bright,” John huffed as he reached into his back pocket for his mobile. “Almost eight, Mycroft’ll be here any moment. Or rather, the minion Mycroft will have dispatched to take us to the plane.”

“Will you let me know when you two get to Paris?” Violet asked John, looking anxious.

“Me?” John looked at Sherlock who gave him a negligent shrug.

“Yeah, like he’s going to text me,” Violet flopped back into the pillows, arms crossed.

“Stop sulking,” Sherlock rose off the bed. “Despite what the fashion industry insists, pouty lips are not attractive.”

Violet snorted, “Says the man with lips like Angelina Jolie.”

“I do not know who that is so I’m going to disregard that comment,” and with that, Sherlock flounced out of the room.

Violet gave John a bemused look. “How does he not know who Angelina Jolie is?”

John shook his head and gave Violet a rueful smile, “This is the same man who ‘deleted’ the solar system. And yes, I will text when we are in Paris.”

Now Violet looked horribly anxious. “Don’t let him do anything stupid.”

“I will keep him away from rooftops,” John leaned down and kissed Violet on the temple. “You get better. Don’t be afraid to interrogate the doctor. It’s his job to tell you what he thinks and in a way that’s clear and easy for you to understand.”

“Don’t get your panties in a twist,” Violet gave him an affectionate smile. “I’m sure it’s something stupid like a vitamin deficiency and we all got ourselves worked up for nothing.”

“You’re probably right,” John said lightly.

“You’re a terrible liar.”

“You’re most definitely correct about that,” John grinned.

“John?” Sherlock called from the lounge.

“His Majesty beckons,” Violet dramatically rolled her eyes.

“Oh yes. Better not keep His Lordship waiting,” John reached over and scratched Gladstone’s ears.

Gladstone’s tongue lolled out and his tail thumped the duvet.

“By the way, love the Bride-of-Frankenstein hair, it’s a really good look for you,” John teased Violet as he turned to leave. He ducted as Violet chucked a pillow at him.

“Get,” she mock-growled at him.

Still grinning, John hurried out of Sherlock (and Violet’s…) bedroom to meet Sherlock in the lounge. “Ready?” John asked as Sherlock started knotting his blue-and-purple scarf around his pale, slender throat.

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed absently, his mind clearly miles away.

*Or back in the bedroom…* John couldn’t help but wonder as he put his parka back on. Then mentally kicked himself, *It’s none of your business John, what they do. They’re adults… mostly*

*Besides, better it’s Violet back there rather than The Woman, or worse Janine….* John grimaced, remembering Janine posing like a tart in nothing but Sherlock’s shirt.

A gentle rapping at the door interrupted John’s musings. “Yoo-hoo?”

“It’s open, Mrs. Hudson,” Sherlock intoned as John hefted his rucksack onto his back.

Mrs. Hudson, wearing spectacles, a woolly lavender dressing gown and bunny slippers, opened the door. “Oh, Sherlock, a young lady is waiting for you and John downstairs. Said she’s called Anthea and you two would know why she’s here?”

“She’s our ride,” John’s cheeks pinked up slightly as he flashed back on his first embarrassing encounter with her, his sad attempts at flirting.

“She’s a pain in the backside,” Sherlock muttered. “Texting little twit.” He scooped up his bags. “Did you get my message, Mrs. Hudson?”

“Oh yes,” she trilled. “And everything’s ready.”

“Good,” Sherlock strode over to his landlady and pecked her cheek. “And thank you.”

John’s brow furrowed. Sherlock never *thanked* anyone, unless he was being sardonic, of course. He had actually sounded sincere.

*Or maybe I’m just tired,* he wearily admitted to himself as he followed Mrs. Hudson and Sherlock out of 221B. Last night had been draining and he was short on sleep.

“John, is that your case, down there?” Mrs. Hudson pointed to the bag at the bottom of the stairs as they all clattered down the steps.

“Yeah, sorry ’bout that, felt a bit lazy,” John admitted. “Didn’t want to carry it upstairs, then carry it back do-oof!”

Sherlock had stopped dead into his tracks, causing Mrs. Hudson and John to collide into him.

Anthea actually looked up from her texting.

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John snapped.
“Forgot something, be back momentarily,” Sherlock shoved his bags into John’s arms then wove his way around the landlady and doctor. He rushed back up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

John nearly toppled down the stairs as he juggled Sherlock’s luggage. “You git!” he shouted but it did no good. Sherlock had unlocked the door and disappeared back into his flat.

“Wonder what he could have forgotten,” Mrs. Hudson mused as she took one of Sherlock’s bags out of John’s arms.

“It better be important or I may strangle him yet,” John grizzled.

Having resumed her texting, Anthea’s eyes were locked onto the tiny screen of her Blackberry as she added, “Or Mycroft might, if he makes MI-6 wait.”

“You know, I just can’t see why those two don’t get on,” Mrs. Hudson moaned as she and John made their way downstairs. “Mycroft seems like a nice enough man. A bit stiff, a bit stern… slightly chilly… can be rather rude at times. Quite demanding of Sherlock actually, always acts like Sherlock owes him or something like that.”

“Sherlock owes him nothing,” John said curtly, the hatred boiling within him for the man who John blamed for his daughter’s disappearance and for the abuse Sherlock sustained at the hands of the Earl of Winchester. “We are taking this case on as favor for Mycroft.” He paused in front of Anthea, willing her to look at him. When her eyes finally flicked up from her Blackberry and locked on John’s, he added in a cold voice, “Make sure to remind Mycroft of that fact, won’t you now?”

Anthea’s eyes burned as her thumbs flew over the keypad of her Blackberry. “Done,” she responded quite coolly however.

John rolled his eyes then leaned closer to her, “And you’re about as bad as he is, you know that, right?”

“There are worse things to be,” she dropped her eyes back to her Blackberry.

“God save us from those things then,” John snarled but then turned away from the young woman as Sherlock stomped back down the stairs.

“Did you get it?” John asked.

“Get what?”

The Lord is testing me… “Whatever it was you had forgotten?”

“Yes, of course, I did,” Sherlock breezed past John to peck Mrs. Hudson on the cheek again.

She, naturally, gave him a hug, which he endured with minimal complaint. “Enjoy Paris, Sherlock,” she cooed.

“It’s not a holiday, Mrs. Hudson,” John said warmly as he kissed his surrogate mother goodbye.

“For him, it is,” she winked at him.

“True that,” John shook his head. “Keep an eye on our girls, yeah?”

“Keep an eye on my boy,” she whispered in his ear.

“Always,” John whispered back.
Sherlock fixed his mercurial eyes on the texting personal assistant. “Lead the way, Andrea.”

“Anthea,” she corrected him.

But John noticed a minuscule twitch in her cheek as she continued to text.

“Of course,” Sherlock demurred, but his eyes twinkled with mischief.

*Oh Sherlock, what have you deduced about our little text-happy PA?* John wondered as he followed Anthea/Andrea and Sherlock out the door.

Before entering the black town car idling in front of 221 Baker Street, John looked up and saw Violet standing in the window, where Sherlock liked to play his violin.

Upon seeing that John had noticed her, Violet waved. He waved back and got into the car.

Violet watched the car until it turned the corner and disappeared from her sight.

*God, if you’re paying attention to me at all, keep them safe while they’re in France,* she silently pleaded. She leaned her forehead against the windowpane and said, “Shit.”

She felt Gladstone pressing against her leg. “Hungry, Stone?” she scratched his ears. “I’m guessing Sherlock already fed you a stack of toast. How about some actual dog food?”

Gladstone about pranced into the kitchen as he followed Violet. She opened a tin of Rocco’s, wrinkling her nose as the brown sludge plopped into Gladstone’s food dish.

“Enjoy,” she set the bowl down and watched Gladstone inhale the gelatinous substance.

Violet leaned against the counter, not entirely sure what to do with herself. She felt strangely lonely. Only a few months ago, she would have sold her very soul to have a moment to herself, away from the Great Detective and his eccentricities. Enjoy some solitude and peace and quiet. Read a book or watch a movie without Sherlock walking in and spoiling the ending. Open the fridge and not find a severed hand. Go to draw a bath to have a nice soak and not find koi fish swimming around in the tub.

Now she felt bereft and empty.

She knew this adventure would be good for Sherlock and John, especially for John and especially after last night. The last few weeks had been rough on John. The clinic both she and John worked at (he had helped her get a job as a part-time office manager) had unexpectedly shut down a month ago. With his checkered C.V., John was having trouble finding another part-time position, almost as if he had been blacklisted…. *Which he probably was,* Violet realized. No one wanted an unpunctual doctor who had PTSD to boot working for them.

He still had his Army pension and Mary still worked the A&E at Bart’s, but now there was another baby on the way. With Lestrade effectively boycotting Sherlock’s services, there hadn’t been much work lately. Violet knew the Watsons were frugal, but the diminished income had to be hurting them, if not now, then soon.

On top of that, his friend had just died, possibly murdered, and of course, he’d just suffered through a spectacular row with his truly worthless sister… no, John needed this. More than Sherlock even.

She pressed her fingertips to her lips, closed her eyes then heaved a huge sigh.
“Just wish it didn’t have to be today, that they didn’t have to leave today…”

“Jesus Christ,” she admonished herself. “Enjoy the silence and get some work done.”

Even before she had moved into 221B, she had known Sherlock was not only a homebody, but territorial as a cat. Made sense, really, if one thought logically about it. The shabby flat was his sanctuary from the world that labeled him a freak then rejected him. When circumstances forced her to stay with him, Sherlock had made it clear to her from Day One that 221B was his domain, his kingdom and that she was an interloper. Short of actually marking his territory, he prowled through the flat incessantly, letting her know he was there. Not that his actual presence was necessary. Always, there was noise, either from a nerve-wrecking explosion from an experiment gone awry or from the melodies he coaxed from his violin strings.

Now the only sounds were the dripping kitchen tap and her dog eating.

She never had the entire flat to herself for this long of a stretch of time before. Although, she had to give him credit where credit was due, he was starting to cede some territory to her. He had cleared a space in the cupboard under the bathroom sink for her personal care items and two shelves in his medicine cabinet for her cosmetics and hair products.

And, he had bought her a piano.

A smile tugged on her lips as she decided to stop dilly-dallying. She switched the coffeemaker on and made herself a bowl of instant Cream of Wheat, although she only managed to eat half before her appetite vanished again. She gave the rest of the hot cereal to Gladstone, who wolfed it down as she took her coffee into the master bathroom.

She took as long as she wanted to in the shower, luxuriating in the boiling hot water streaming down her body without fear of interruption. After she washed, dried and straightened her hair, she decided it was time to get a haircut. It was getting too long for her to manage.

She changed into a comfortable white jumper and a pair of black, cotton-knit leggings. She put on a pair of woolly black and white striped socks over the leggings and applied a little bit of make-up, just in case Mrs. Hudson decided to pop in. She didn’t put on her full face, but she put on the thick concealer she used to hide the scar on her cheek and the lavender smudges under her eyes. Then she dusted her face with powder and studied herself in the mirror.

“Good enough,” she sighed, picking up her coffee mug and switching off the bathroom light. She trundled back into the kitchen for a refill.

She picked up her mobile, which she had left next to her purse on the coffee table last night after she and Sherlock finally got home after that awful ordeal with John’s sister.

Then, she turned and went up into John’s old room.

Keeping secrets when one lived with the Most Observant Man in the Entire Goddamn World was no easy feat. Sherlock had already figured out where most of the clever hiding spots in the flat would be, not to mention having invented a few of his own.

But Violet was no fool and she had studied Sherlock, profiling him for years. She didn’t even need to administer the Myers-Briggs Personality test to confirm his personality type was indubitably INTJ. And the biggest weakness of the INTJ Personality was arrogance.

Violet knew Mr. Holmes would be too egotistical to believe she would have the nerve to hide something in the Shrine to John H. Watson, M.D.
Violet looked around the tidy bedroom. It really was a shrine to John, although Sherlock probably didn’t even realize it.

Back in April of 2014, John had convinced everyone in their little circle to gang up on Sherlock to find a new flat-mate. Lestrade, Molly, John and Mary and Mrs. Hudson had all insisted Sherlock find someone else to live with him after John got married so he wouldn’t be alone. Sherlock had spat out logical arguments why he preferred living alone but he always ended up trying again to find a flat-mate, mostly so everyone would shut up and leave him alone.

But Sherlock always managed to drive all the potential flat-mates away. One poor sod had actually fled in terror after a mere twenty-four hours because Sherlock “accidentally” let loose a swarm of bees inside the flat during one of his experiments.

So the new flat-mates never lasted long.

Except for John. He had stayed with Sherlock again for those six months after he had gotten shot… by Mary.

Violet still didn’t know how she was supposed to be able to reconcile herself to that.

She knew why John had. The babies, of course. Maisie and the new one on the way.

But Sherlock…

Sherlock would do whatever John wanted. John definitely didn’t realize that.

Sherlock had even tried one last time to have a flat-mate the beginning of this last March, just to please John. But it turned out the flat-mate had been a lackey of Mycroft’s and he had scarpered literally two days before Violet had met Sherlock.

The universe is rarely lazy.

Violet sipped her coffee and studied the cozy room with renewed interest now. Every time a flat-mate had fled (sometimes screaming), Sherlock had reverted the room to resemble what it had looked like when John had lived with him. She had a feeling his redecorations were totally subconscious. Without even realizing what he was doing, Sherlock’s photographic memory helped him put the things John had left behind after The Fall back the way they had been while John had lived there with him. He probably had no idea sentiment drove him to set the room back to rights, or at least what he felt was right.

Sherlock had constantly grizzled at Violet, muttering that she should stop behaving so foolishly and just take over John’s room. Violet had eventually caved and put her clothes in the chest of drawers and wardrobe because she had no other place to put her things…

… until recently, Sherlock had grudgingly cleared out a drawer for her under-things and socks and made space (albeit a very small space) in his wardrobe for some of her every-day clothes. Since she usually slept downstairs, it was nice not having to tromp upstairs for her clothes only to tromp back downstairs for a shower.

Plus, in John’s room, there was one drawer that was designed for John. A rule Sherlock had strictly enforced with all his flat mates (including Violet) was that one drawer in the upstairs bedroom was designated for John. Inevitably, John and Sherlock got involved in a case that left their clothes tattered, soiled or wet (with water, blood or God only knew what else.) Sherlock insisted John leave a set of fresh, clean clothes at 221B so he wouldn’t have to wear dirty and damp clothing on his ride home.
So Violet’s aversion to sleeping in John’s room was not illogical, as Sherlock insisted it was. To her, it was obvious. This room did not belong to her.

But it was an excellent place to hide things in, as Violet had already known. Sherlock had used the good doctor’s room as a place to hide personal items before.

Personal items Violet had found. A memory stick that contained videos that had been converted from old VHS tapes to digital format. Videos of Sherlock’s childhood therapy sessions with Dr. Gloria Scott.

Therapy sessions that supposedly never happened.

Violet shook her head and started to set her coffee mug and mobile down on the chest of drawers before realizing she was about to set them next to a glass case of maggots. “Ugh, really?” Violet reminded herself to “accidently” destroy Sherlock’s latest experiment as she walked to John’s bed. She put her coffee and mobile on the night stand next to the bed then lay down on the floor on her belly, working a floorboard loose.

“Got it,” Violet muttered as the board finally popped open. She blindly felt around until her fingertips felt something cool and metallic. She grasped it and awkwardly worked it out of its hidey-hole. “Gotcha,” she sat up and crossed her legs, studying the black metal box.

She blew the dust off the top and leaned against John’s bed as she sprung the latch.

Sherlock, John, Mary and Violet all had one thing in common: all were underneath Mycroft Holmes’ thumb. They all needed leverage to get out from under it.

Violet was working on that leverage.

“Hello Ford,” she murmured, plucking an old school photograph from out the box.

Ford was what Sherlock had called him. His full name had been Matthew Sherrinford Holmes. He had been their first cousin but had been like an elder brother to both Sherlock and Mycroft. Had actually been Mycroft’s best friend, according to Sherlock.

Sherlock never met his aunt and uncle. He had been still in his mother’s womb when they died in a mysterious automobile accident that Sherlock believed was no accident. His Uncle Rudy had been a controversial figure, a troublemaker with an obscene amount of money. Uncle Rudy had believed he was invincible, untouchable because of his wealth. The car wreck proved otherwise, and so Sherlock’s father had inherited both his brother’s wealth and guardianship of his brother’s son.

But adopting Ford had been no hardship for Sherlock’s parents. They had wanted more children but Mrs. Holmes had difficulties conceiving Mycroft and there were at least two miscarriages prior to Sherlock’s conception. Taking Ford into their home was a joy, not a burden.

Ford had been Mycroft’s best friend, but he had been Sherlock’s hero. When he was a little boy, Sherlock had idolized the handsome young man, and with little wonder. Sherlock had told Violet that Ford had been very kind and patient with him. No small feat as there was a vast age difference between Sherlock and Ford.

Most fourteen year old boys were positively allergic to babies. Most nineteen year old boys had better things to do than to spend time with a chatty, brainy five year old child. But the black metal box in Violet’s hand held photographs proving otherwise. Ford had unconditionally adored the dark-haired know-all tyke.
But twenty-one year old Ford had gone to Ireland for the summer to spend the holidays with a new girlfriend while Sherlock’s world went to hell. While Siger Holmes was more mild-mannered and tender-hearted than his elder brother, he did not possess an ounce of the business aptitude Rudy had. He nearly lost the vast fortune he inherited from his brother. This financial malady provided the hole for the Cullen-Culpeppers to slither through into the Holmes’ lives.

And Ford was not there to defend his brothers.

While Mr. and Mrs. Holmes had no idea that a snake glided through their back garden, preying on their youngest child, Mycroft knew. Sherlock claimed Heathcliff had successfully manipulated both Mycroft and Sherlock to stay silent about the abuse. Violet and John disagreed. They thought Mycroft was just being a coward, afraid of the fallout if he had spoken up on his brother’s behalf.

But once Heathcliff’s sins were exposed by fire, Sherlock’s old nanny Rose had contacted Ford. He left Ireland at once, went directly to the family estate and proceeded to beat Mycroft into a pulp, nearly killing him for his role in covering up the abuse.

But as Sherlock had laconically explained to Violet: “He was not permanently damaged.”

Mr. and Mrs. Holmes, frightened by the violence, sent Ford away. He was only supposed to stay away a night or two, to calm down. But instead, Ford had dropped out of university and joined the military. He came back sporadically, but he refused to speak to his adoptive parents or to Mycroft. The only person he visited was Sherlock.

Then the visits stopped, and Sherlock never saw him again.

Over the years, Sherlock gleaned from various observations and deductions that Ford had ended up in MI-6. Eventually he had mended fences with Mycroft and had recruited Mycroft into Britain’s shadowy secret agency.

Then, allegedly, Ford was caught with four other men, trying to smuggle government secrets out of the country. Ford had claimed he was deep undercover, trying to expose the other four men, but his claims had fallen on deaf ears. He was quietly tried and convicted of treason in a secret tribunal then hanged, in complete violation of Britain’s laws against capital punishment.

Mycroft had signed off on the execution order then proceeded to obliterate Matthew Sherrinford Holmes’ existence.

Except, he missed a box of family photographs… or more realistically, Sherlock probably stole them. Whether or not the theft had been motivated by sentimentality or practicality, Violet didn’t know for certain. But she knew she held a box full of leverage in her hands.

But it’s not enough. Violet flipped through the yellowing pictures like a deck of cards. They weren’t all of Ford. Some of the pictures were of Sherlock’s ex-boyfriend, Victor Trevor, who actually was a completely selfish bastard. Violet’s nose crinkled whenever a picture of the smiling golden-haired young man appeared.

She felt the irrational desire to rip those pictures up.

Concentrate, she ordered herself as she flipped a picture of Sherlock and Victor in Prague together back in 2000 underneath the stack. Victor’s safely back in the closet with his wife and daughter. After Sherlock dropped him on his ass plus the air-tight pre-nup he signed, Victor will never come near Sherlock again. Ford… focus on Ford… I can prove he existed, but how I can prove he was executed illegally… after all this time, nobody is going to care he existed. And the British populace is
She flipped to the next picture. And the next and the next until she came across a photograph. Sherlock was not in. Both Mycroft and Ford had fake smiles plastered to their faces. Violet could practically hear the photographer (probably Mrs. Holmes) crowing “Say Cheese!” at them. The year on the back of the photograph stated “Summer 1981,” which would have made Mycroft twelve and Ford nineteen. Apparently, Sherlock had not been exaggerating about how heavy Mycroft had been as a child. He looked like he was about to burst out of his Boy Scout uniform. He held up some sort of badge he had earned.

Despite the unfortunate Eighties feathered haircut he sported, Ford looked very handsome. His clothes were not as horrible as they could have been, considering it was the early Eighties. He was wearing black trousers and a nice white dress shirt and a skinny tie. His arm was over Mycroft’s pudgy shoulders.

Wait…

A shiver raced through her body. As her old boss and friend, “Bear” Carson used to say, her “spidey sense” was tingling…

“What if he was innocent?” Violet said through gritted teeth to the photograph. The theory was almost too painful to bear, but she couldn’t ignore the possibility. She put the stack of photographs down and rubbed her forehead. “Jesus Christ,” she moaned. “I hate this family.”

And if Mycroft gets his way, I’ll be marrying into it.

“Fuck my life,” she muttered, more for the pleasure of cursing, to vent her spleen even though there was no one in the room to appreciate it.

But… as terrible as the idea was, she knew she had to explore it.

No one would feel sorry for an executed traitor. But all would pity a murdered patriot.

And demand his murderer’s head.

Her mobile buzzed, causing her to jump.

She put the pictures back in the black metal box and rose, grimacing as pins and needles ran up and down her left leg. “Shit,” she muttered as she limped over to the nightstand, where she had left her mobile and now cold mug of coffee.

She snatched up the mobile after seeing Mrs. Hudson’s name pop up on the Caller ID. “Hello?” she answered in her “Miss Smith” voice.

“Is everything alright dearie? Are you home? I tapped on the door, but no one answered?”

“Oh, yes, I’m in, I’m upstairs in John’s old room. Just a moment, I’ll be right down.”

“Oh no, don’t trouble yourself. I don’t want to interfere if you’ve in the middle of something.”

“No trouble at all, I’ve got a pot of coffee already brewed, come join me.”

“Well, don’t mind if I do. Couldn’t sleep last night, not after that cliffhanger on EastEnders.”

Violet smiled as she rang off. She hurried down the steps, ignoring the tingling in her leg.
She nearly opened the door when she realized she didn’t have her fake glasses on. “Shit,” she hissed to herself, but then spied them on the coffee table, next to her handbag. She shoved them on her face, fluffed her hair a bit and threw the door open. “Good morning, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Oh hello, Violet, sorry to have bothered you,” the sweet old landlady now was properly dressed in her usual cardigan and skirt ensembles. She made a beeline to Gladstone, who was napping in his favorite spot: the sofa. “And hello handsome,” she scratched Gladstone’s ears. “Goodness, it’s really quiet here without Sherlock, isn’t it?”

“I’m trying to get used it, actually,” Violet Smith confessed.

“Shame you couldn’t go with the boys.”

“Perhaps next time,” Violet demurred as she turned to go into the kitchen.

“Ooh, maybe that could be a possible honeymoon destination,” Mrs. Hudson clasped her hands together. “It’d be romantic, Paris.”

“Mm,” Violet hummed noncommitally as she disappeared into the kitchen. She poured two cups of coffee (and made herself a mental note to go back upstairs to retrieve the mug of cold coffee she had left behind) and brought them out to Mrs. Hudson.

“Two sugars and a splash of milk,” she told Mrs. Hudson, holding the mug out to her. “Please, have a seat,” she gestured towards John and Sherlock’s chairs.

“Bless you,” Mrs. Hudson sank into John’s chair gratefully. She sipped at the coffee. “Mm, hits the spot, this does. Really shouldn’t let a television show affect me so much.”

Violet took Sherlock’s chair. “Everyone has their guilty pleasures, Mrs. Hudson.”

“I must say, you’re looking better than yesterday, not so peaky.”

“Oh. Thank you.”

“And I’ll be driving you to your appointment Monday, I insist. Or rather, Sherlock insists.”

“Oh. Well, that’s not necessary.”

“Rubbish. You don’t have a car. The Tube and buses can be miserable on a Monday morning and what if the taxi doesn’t come on time? Besides, I thought you might like a bit of company. A waiting room can be dreadful when you’re alone. When Sherlock first moved in here, shortly after he got my husband convicted, I had a little hiccup with my health. He came with me to the doctor’s office for every appointment. Didn’t say much, of course, just played about on his mobile like he does. But it was nice, having him with me. Especially when the biopsy results came back. Stage Two, breast cancer.”

“Oh God,” Violet’s heart leapt into her throat. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be, dear. We caught it right away. A little surgery, a little radiation, a bit of chemo…”

*And a lot of ‘herbal soothers,’* Violet Hunter fought not to smile.

“And I was right as rain. My son and daughter still live in America so it would have been a hardship for them to take a leave of absence to come help me.”

“I didn’t know you had children.”
“And grandchildren. Three girls and two boys. Don’t get to visit them properly often, but we Skype. They are growing like weeds, bless them,” Mrs. Hudson said affectionately. “So, it was a comfort to have Sherlock with me when my family couldn’t be. I’m happy to pay it forward.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. Hudson,” Violet now had to force herself to smile.

She would have preferred to go to her appointment alone.

“Think nothing of it, pet,” Mrs. Hudson beamed at her over her coffee mug. “That reminds me, the reason I stopped by. Sherlock left me a message last night, specific instructions to invite you to supper tonight. Do you have plans?”

Violet had planned on ordering Thai and binge-watching *The Walking Dead* after spending the day researching Margaux Vos. After meeting Lady Hilda with Mary last night, Violet formulated an interesting theory she had wanted to dig deeper into. “Nothing pressing, no.”

“Good, because Sherlock was very insistent I invite you to supper. He told me you liked roast turkey with a side of mash and gravy and there’s this pumpkin tart you’re fond of… I told him it sounded like the Thanksgiving dinners I used cook when I still lived in America…”

Violet’s eyes suddenly blurred with tears. *He remembered*…

She hadn’t expected him to remember. Why would he? Thanksgiving was not a British holiday.

But it mattered to her. It had always been a family event, even during her exile. She and her old FBI partner, Steven Morgan always had a private Thanksgiving dinner, more as a morale boost than anything else. Their last Thanksgiving together had been turkey sandwiches, cranberry juice and crisps. They had watched *Planes, Trains and Automobiles*, drank cheap beer and laughed until their sides hurt.

Her Thanksgiving dinners with Bear had been a little more extravagant. He always invited Violet over for supper on the last Thursday of November. Paranoid he would attract the wrong attention, he would order in a rich meal from a post restaurant, but nothing that contained turkey. However, a little known fact about Bear was he had loved to cook. He always made two pies. One pumpkin, one apple. Violet would bring a bottle of very good cognac and an overnight bag. They’d stuff themselves until they were sick, drink the bottle dry and gave themselves the luxury of remembering Thanksgivings past. Back when everything still made sense.

Violet’s childhood Thanksgivings couldn’t be considered normal, but they still centered on family. The years she and her family had spent on base and had eaten turkey and mashed potatoes in the mess hall with the other American soldiers away from their families. The men and women in fatigues were just as much family to Violet as her brother and parents. They all patted her head or pulled her braids. Gave her candy when her parents weren’t looking, but she had to give them a hug first. Only now did Violet realize how much the major’s little girl had boosted the soldiers’ morale just by being there. But that had been during peacetime, well over thirty years ago. No way in hell that would happen now.

Then there were the years she and her family had gotten leave to go back to the States and they had spent the long holiday at her grandparents’ farm, playing with her cousins. One year she had gotten into trouble because she had taught some of her cousins how to cuss in German. But she had overheard her dad laughing about it with her aunts and uncles so she knew she wasn’t in *that* much trouble.

The first Thanksgiving without her dad had been incredibly painful, but even though she had been a
sullen teenager at the time, she had been grateful to spend the holiday at her grandparents’ farm. It had been an oasis of familiarity after her entire life had been turned into a desert wasteland.

When she lived in New Mexico, she always flew back to Indiana to spend Thanksgiving with her grandmother. When she had lived in New York though, she couldn’t afford to fly home for both Thanksgiving and Christmas so she always threw “Orphan Thanksgiving” parties. Anyone and everyone who couldn’t afford to go home for the holiday was invited. All a guest had to bring was either a side dish or a bottle of booze. There were some years there were more booze than food. Those were always the best Orphan Thanksgiving parties.

The first time she had met the family of her fiancé, her real fiancé, was on Thanksgiving…

You have a wedding to plan, which as you know, is loads of work. As you very well know, since you had planned a wedding before… didn’t you?

Fuck you, Mycroft… just… fuck you…

Violet covered her eyes with a shaking hand, not caring she smudged her glasses.

“Violet? What’s the matter, dear?”

Violet shook her head, preparing to excuse herself so she could go pull herself together. But Mrs. Hudson gently said, “Sherlock does nothing capricious, dear. If he told me to keep an eye on you, he had good reason.”

I don’t want to lie to her, Violet pressed her lips tight together. I’m so tired… so sick of lying.

She took her spectacles off. “It’s just that… I’m a bit overwhelmed. I don’t have much by family. Well, what I mean is, my parents are gone…”

Her mother, killed in a freak automobile accident. She had lost control of her car.

Her father, shot in the back by a traitor, a real traitor.

“My grandmother passed away two years ago…”

She had died alone in a nursing home, believing her only son’s two children were dead. Her beloved farm that she had single-handedly kept going after her husband passed away, had been sold at auction. None of her daughters were in position to take it over.

“And my brother… well…”

She squeezed her eyes tightly shut…

Michael, do not look for me… they will kill you. Tell me you’ll drop this. Promise me, Mike…

I can’t make that promise, Sis, you know that…

“He…” her windpipe constricted, she could barely catch her breath.

Jack Woodley had laughed as he had showed her the pictures he took while he had personally tortured Michael before they killed him.

“… died in a terrible accident. So,” she swallowed hard. “When I say I don’t have much by family, I mean I don’t have any family left and with Sherlock gone… you… you…” Her entire body shook with suppressed tears. “You’re being very kind,” she said again.
“Oh my dear,” Mrs. Hudson set the coffee mug down. Moving faster than someone who supposedly had a bad hip really should, Mrs. Hudson rose and went to Violet. Perching on the arm of Sherlock’s chair, she wrapped her arms around Violet’s thin frame and gave her a cuddle. “Better out than in, dearie.”

“Sorry,” Violet sniffled, her body still tensed from trying to stop herself from crying. But the treacherous tears slipped down her face anyway.

“Nothing to be sorry about,” Mrs. Hudson crooned as she fished her handkerchief out of the sleeve of her dark purple cardigan. She gave it to Violet so she could mop up her tears. “You’ve lost so much and you and Sherlock been joined at the hip since you’ve moved in here. Now he’s out of the country for a case at the worst possible time, so of course, you’re upset.”

“I know,” Violet longed to lean into the old woman, like she used to do when she was a girl and she’d curl up next to her grandmother after a particularly bad day.

But that would be out of character… for Miss Smith.

“I keep telling you you’ve been good for Sherlock,” Mrs. Hudson refused to release her hold on Violet. “But I think he’s been good for you too, hasn’t he?”

“Yes,” Violet breathed. Choosing her words carefully, she said “I feel like I can unequivocally be myself when I’m with him.”

“Good,” Mrs. Hudson cupped Violet’s cheek and gently tilted her head towards her. Then the old woman thumbed the smeared make-up off Violet’s face, revealing the scar.

“I’m not as daft as some people think I am,” she told Violet kindly. “I used to have a husband who liked to hit me. I remember slathering on make-up to hide bruises and cuts. I don’t know what you’re hiding from, dear and I don’t want to know, it’s none of my business,” she reassured Violet. “But Sherlock won’t let anything happen to you, dear. He promised me my husband would never lay a hand on me or my family ever again. Did he make any promises to you, other than the obvious one?”

She tapped on Violet’s diamond engagement ring.

“He said…” Her voice shook. She took a deep breath and tried again. “He told me ‘If I am not nearby, at any time, day or night, a text will bring me to your side’. ”

She was surprised she remembered verbatim what he had said.

“Well, there you go,” Mrs. Hudson beamed. “He doesn’t have a lot of loved ones, Sherlock. But the ones he has, he loves fiercely. He would do anything for you.”

“I know,” Violet, remembering everything Sherlock had done for John, felt the tears threatening to come back. “It’s terrifying.”

“Love usually is, dear,” Mrs. Hudson gave Violet one last cuddle then stood up. “Go, wash up. Sherlock said you might get emotional, although how he put it was a bit rude… um, yes. Anyway, he told me if you did get weepy,” she produced a black credit card, “To take you out for a bit of retail therapy.”

Violet studied the card, then closed her eyes and shook her head after reading the name on the card: Mycroft A. Holmes. “Oh God,” she laughed. “Mycroft’s going to have him arrested for credit card fraud yet.” But a devilish impulse seized her. “How would you like to go visit your grandchildren
properly?"

“Oh, I couldn’t…” but Mrs. Hudson studied the credit card intently.

“Well, let me clean up and let’s start by having a nice, early lunch. We can decide whether or not we’re buying you a plane ticket later.” Violet stood up. “And I apologize for being a soppy.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Hudson said firmly as Gladstone nuzzled her hand, asking to be petted. As Mrs. Hudson scratched his ears, she added, “Happens to the best of us.”

“Well, thank you for listening and for your discretion, for I am in hiding,” Violet said. “It’s complicated.”

“It usually is, dearie.”

“And, well, I appreciate what Sherlock is trying to do, but I don’t want you to cook. I’d rather we order take-away and watch the *Great British Bake-Off*.”

Mrs. Hudson looked relieved. “Bless you, Violet. I have all the ingredients of course, but I didn’t really fancy cooking a big meal.”

Violet leaned down and kissed the old woman on the cheek. “No. Bless you, Mrs. Hudson. I am truly thankful you’re here.”

**

26 November 2015
En flight approaching The English Channel
Thursday afternoon
4:48 PM

John washed his hands, splashed water onto his face then left the tiny loo.

He had found most of the day slow-going and tedious. And if John had felt this way, he knew Sherlock was ready to start climbing the walls.

Or shooting them.

Sherlock and John had spent most of the day being shuffled from this room and that room. The early morning had been spent signing waivers, signing contracts and getting photographed for identification badges and special permits.

John, for the first time since leaving the military, could legally carry a sidearm.

He didn’t quite know how to feel about that.

Of course, the morning would have gone faster if Sherlock had just kept his damn mouth shut.

To be fair though, the question Sherlock asked was actually a reasonable one: “What is this that I am signing?”

But the bureaucrat had just sing-songed, “Just routine, nothing to worry about. Sign along the dotted line at the bottom of the page, please.”

“Oh God, now you’ve done it,” John had moaned seconds before Sherlock had launched into one of his fiercest diatribes since Anderson had mucked up a major crime scene.
After the poor slob had been reduced to a quivering blob of jelly, Sherlock had stalked off to ring his brother for a private word. “Should have done your research, mate,” John told the ashen-faced bureaucrat. “He’s the one person in the entire world who actually reads the Terms and Conditions before clicking ‘I Accept’ when making an Internet purchase.”

“But how did he know I was shagging my wife’s brother?” the bureaucrat had whimpered.

John had opened his mouth then closed it. What Sherlock had observed to come to that conclusion, John decided he really didn’t want to know.

However, what should have only taken fifteen minutes stretched into an hour and a half as Sherlock took it upon himself to argue with every single person who thrust a piece of paper in front of him and John to sign. Eventually the suits wised up and politely told Sherlock to read before signing. This unfortunately didn’t stop Sherlock from being rude to every single government employee they had encountered. But at least the appropriate forms the British government needed signed were signed… or at least the ones Sherlock had decided needed to be signed…

“Sign this one, John. Not this one… Forward these to my solicitor, if all is in order, then overnight the forms to Paris and we’ll sign them there. This has a typographical error. We’ll sign once this has been remedied. This one is alright to sign… this only requires initials… oh honestly. Did you honestly think we were going to agree to that?”

John, needless to say, felt utterly bewildered.

After all the monotonous paperwork had been signed, stamped and filed, Sherlock and John were ushered into another bland, beige conference room for a “briefing”, but it was really just a boring rehash of what they already knew, only with a lot more seemingly pointless details.

Sherlock had miraculously kept his mouth closed until the very end. In fact, his eyes had fluttered shut and his head had dipped. John was afraid he would start snoring. He had to elbow Sherlock in the ribs once the briefing was over. As they had been exiting the conference room, a well-meaning fellow had started fawning over Sherlock and John.

Well, fawning over Sherlock mostly. John was used it.

“Well, fawning over Sherlock mostly. John was used it.

“Must be exciting, going to Paris to work with Dupin,” the young man had gushed, “Must be chuffed to work with someone up to par with you and your brains. Peas in a pod, you and Dupin.”

Sherlock had flared up, “No doubt you think you are complimenting me in comparing me to Dupin. Now in my opinion, Dupin is quite inferior indeed. That trick of his, breaking in on his friends’ thoughts with an apropos remark after a quarter of an hour’s silence is really very showy and superficial. He had some analytical genius, no doubt; but he was by no means such a phenomenon as you appeared to imagine*.”

And Sherlock had swept off, his coat swishing behind him, leaving the poor chap staring after him, open-mouthed. “I, I, I was just being nice,” he had turned to John, completely flustered.

“That’s usually the first mistake,” John had reassured the well-meaning man with a pat on the shoulder and then had hurried off after Sherlock.

Lunch had been a sad affair, just cheese sandwiches and little bags of crisps in the backseat of the black sedan that chivvied them to the airport. Even Sherlock had grizzled about the unimpressive lunch and he rarely ate while working. As they approached Heathrow, John had been terrified Mycroft would have gotten them seats in economy out of spite. He hadn’t fancied sitting in a tiny
seat next to a parent holding a screaming baby or a wiggly toddler. But instead, they were escorted to a private plane that had large comfortable seats and was blessedly free of crying children.

As soon as the pilot announced they could take off their seatbelts, Sherlock had drawn his legs up and crossed them. It never failed to amaze John how someone as tall as Sherlock could fold himself into such small spaces. But as he watched Sherlock rest his elbows on his knees and tent his fingers, he knew Sherlock would spend the flight in his Mind Palace. So John had fetched himself a Styrofoam cup of coffee and some packets of biscuits from the miniscule kitchenette (if it could really be considered a kitchenette) and settled himself in his seat, doodling and scribbling in his small notebook to pass the time.

And tried not to think about Harry.

He ended up fiddling about some more on a poem he had been fiddling about with now and again. He had challenged himself, just for the satisfaction of seeing if he could produce a decent one, to write haikus. Some he felt were quite nice. Others, he had to admit, were complete crap.

This one he’d been toying with however just wasn’t coming out the way he wanted it to. He had shamelessly plagiarized from Violet. She had once described Sherlock as having “a dyslexic heart” and his writer’s ear had fallen in love with that turn of phrase.

And it was perfect for an ending line in a haiku, five syllables.

As far as the first two lines… John had licked his lips and scratched out phrases, then scribbled over them. Everything he produced was treacle and pretentious.

Eventually he had given up, mostly because he needed to answer nature’s call in that sardine-can of a loo.

When he came out, he found Sherlock had decided to leave his head and rejoin the Land of the Living. After spending the last three hours sitting, John remained standing in the aisle, “So, any theories?”

“‘It is a capital mistake to theorize in advance of the facts’,” Sherlock drummed his fingertips against his chin. “I wish to obtain more data before formulating a theory as to where the letter may be now.”

“And why the Red-Headed League took it,” John added.

“Irrelevant.”

“Irr… what? Why is that irrelevant?”

Sherlock gave John a most quizzical look, “Because that’s not the case, that’s not our job, John. Our responsibility is to find the letter before the wrong sort gets their hands on it.”

“So we’re not going to help Lady Hilda figure out who’s blackmailing her?”

“We’ll know who when we find the Letter.”

“Don’t you think knowing why the RHL took the Letter would help us find it?”

“Nope.”

“Right,” John muttered. “So, just to make sure I’m clear on the facts. MI-6 found this most
dangerous letter. Trelawney-Hope was entrusted with the safe-keeping of the letter but his wife was blackmailed into allowing the RHL to steal the letter. And Mycroft’s spooks believe this letter is somewhere in Paris.”

“Correct.”

“You’re right, that’s not a lot to go on in order to find the letter,” John scratched his head. “How long do you think it’ll take for us to locate it, if we can locate it, that is?”

“Oh, we’ll find it,” Smugness coated Sherlock’s voice like icing does cake. “At the very most, a fortnight, although I believe we’ll locate it well before then.”

“Then MI-6 can get the damned thing themselves and we can go home,” John nodded approvingly. “Good. I don’t like leaving Mary on her own now that she’s expecting again and Violet not feeling like herself… well, hey, I don’t mean to pry…”

“But you are going to anyway.”

“Yeah… I guess,” John sounded sheepish. “But that jibe Mycroft made at her expense? That crack about ‘planning a wedding’? What was he playing at?”

“John, she did live an entire life before coming to England,” Sherlock gazed out of the window, observing the various shades of blue as they drifted through the sky above the water.

“Yeah, I know, it just surprised me. She never said anything about it.”

“It’s a painful subject,” Sherlock murmured, his attention firmly elsewhere as he stared out the window.

“Well, yeah, of course,” John felt nonplussed. “Did she tell about it, wait,” John frowned as Sherlock hastily snapped his seatbelt back on. “What are you doing?”

“Sit down and put your belt on, now,” Sherlock snapped.

Suddenly the plane banked a hard right. John lost his balance. Floundering, he fell against Sherlock’s seat. Then, the plane banked abruptly to the left and John blindly grabbed for something, anything to hold on to.

He found the armrest just as Sherlock’s arms found him. John gripped the armrest with his right hand and a fistful of Sherlock’s shirt with his left.

The plane leveled but only for a moment. Then it bounced up and down as if encountering a bad bout of turbulence.

Then the plane plummeted into a nosedive.

John slid out of Sherlock’s grip but by some miracle, Sherlock managed to seize John’s wrist. Then his other hand clamped over John’s wrist as John’s feet desperately scraped against the floor, which now tilted horribly at a steep angle. John reached up with his other hand, his fingertips scraping the seat Sherlock sat belted into. John knew the seatbelt had to be painfully digging into Sherlock’s waist. John knew Sherlock wouldn’t be able to hold onto him forever.

That was not what frightened John Watson however,

It was the look of pure panic on his best friend’s face.
I can’t control this… I can’t stop this…

That was when John realized they were going to crash into the English Channel.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry (not sorry) about the cliffhanger! *evil grin*

*Sherlock's original rant about Dupin can be found in "A Study in Scarlet." Spoiler Alert - Sherlock REALLY doesn't think all that highly about Dupin:

**Sherlock's comment about it being "a capital mistake to theorize in advance of the facts" can be found in "The Adventure of the Second Stain":

Again, thank you to everyone who has been kind enough to comment and leave kudos. I love comments and I love responding to comments. Right now though, I'm being a massive jerk and not responding to comments tonight because I'm dead tired and it's nearly midnight in my corner of the world. Will respond as soon as possible but until then, my bed is calling me. Have a wonderful week everyone! :^)
Chapter Summary

HEAVY TRIGGER WARNINGS>>>> seriously, if I could make this warning as well as the tags light up and blink red, I totally would. I'm not bothering with one of my usual chapter summaries because there's a section that discusses child abuse and for everyone who's been reading since "Dépaysement", you know who was abused and how. The scene is not graphic or explicit (because that's not my writing style) but it's disturbing and upsetting, as it should be when the topic of abuse comes up...

BUT if this is going to trigger ANYTHING for ANYONE, just start scrolling down like crazy when you read:

22 July 1983
Durhampton Hall
The Earl and Countess of Winchester's estates
Friday afternoon
4:00 PM

And stop at:

26 November 2015
Préfecture de police de Paris
Thursday evening
8:02 PM

So now I'm completely nervous about posting this chapter... here we go...

Chapter Seven: Sort of Like a Bird

John blindly searched for a foothold as he tried to climb up towards Sherlock while the plane continued to plummet. There was an awful clatter as the oxygen masks deployed. Dimly John could hear the frantic shouts from the pilot and co-pilot over the din caused by unidentified obnoxious beeps and irritating alarms. The plane itself shook mightily as it continued its descent towards The English Channel, as if it would completely fall to bits before it even hit the water.

The panicked cries of the pilot and co-pilot didn’t really register with John, however. He could feel his wrist start to slip out of Sherlock’s hands. His own feeble hold on Sherlock’s chair started failing as well. His stomach flopped horribly over and over, especially when his left hand could no longer keep its hold on Sherlock’s chair.

But miraculously, his foot brushed up against the seat in front of Sherlock and it was enough of a toehold for John to hoist himself up. He reached upwards with his left arm and fumbled until his fingers grazed Sherlock’s suit jacket. He desperately seized the jacket lapel just as one of Sherlock’s hands released John’s wrist. But Sherlock had let John go in order to catch hold of him by the back of his jumper, as if he were a toddler running away from his parent. Then Sherlock let go of John’s wrist completely as he roughly grasped John underneath his armpit. John hoisted himself up as much as he could. Then he snaked his other arm around Sherlock’s torso and held on for dear life... the few
minutes left of his dear life.

The plane jerked and jolted. John honestly thought he would be sick before the plane actually crashed. His feet still dangled helplessly below him at an awkward, painful angle. He squeezed his eyes tightly shut…

He felt Sherlock’s arms tighten around him.

There are worse ways to die, I suppose…

… then the private jet leveled out abruptly. It ascended for a bit before leveling out again. The alarms went silent; the beeping stopped.

And John found himself on his knees. Face down. In Sherlock’s lap.

“John, if you’re wondering, yes, people are most definitely going to talk.”

John bolted up so quickly, he banged his head on the seat in front of Sherlock’s. He stood up rapidly but his legs immediately gave way and he plopped down right in the middle of the aisle.

Gasping, John demanded, “What… the… hell… just happened?” his voice pitched up unnaturally at the end.

Sherlock unsnapped the seatbelt and with a grimace, massaged where the belt had dug into his skinny waist. He opened his mouth but snapped it shut when the door to the cockpit opened.

“Oh, we’re just simply marvelous,” John snapped. “What the bloody hel-”

“A bit of engine trouble,” the pilot attempted to be loud and confident again. “Ruddy seagull flew into the turbine, happens all the time. Bit exciting when it does happen but everything is under control. Still, we’re going to land in Calais as a precaution and put you two on a train to Paris instead. Routine precaution, nothing to worry about, lads.”

“Nothing to worry about,” John spluttered as the pilot shut the cockpit door again. “OK, even I can tell he’s a fucking liar.” In a lower voice, John asked, “What did you see? You saw something out the window,” John pointed at the oval window with a shaking finger, “Before we started going down.”

“I saw,” Sherlock’s heavy brow furrowed as his nose crinkled, “A Dassault/Dornier Alpha Jet E.”

“A Dassault… but that’s a fighter jet,” John shook his head, completely confused. As an Army man, he wasn’t very knowledgeable about aircraft. But he had a mate, a drinking buddy, really, who had been in the RAF. Some terminology had stuck with him after spending many, boozy nights taking the piss out of each other. “You mean to tell me that you saw a French fighter jet out there?”

Sherlock nodded, “A fighter jet from the French Air Force with orders to shoot us down if we didn’t turn around immediately and return to England. That’s what the pilots were shouting about in the cockpit. They were shouting in French, so you wouldn’t have understood them even if you had been paying attention.”

“Sorry, I was a bit distracted,” John seethed. “But why? Why would they shoot us down?”

“Someone doesn’t want us going to France,” Sherlock tented his fingers, mulling over the newest
puzzle now that the immediate crisis was over.

“Brilliant deduction,” John wobbled up to his feet, his stomach lurching again as he did so. “I’ll… right back. Loo,” he bolted back towards the small lavatory in the back of the plane.

He barely made it in time. After his meager lunch along with the coffee and biscuits he just consumed came back up, John slumped against the lavatory wall, pressing a hand to his upset stomach. He ripped off a few squares of bog roll then wiped the sick off his lips. He tossed the dirty tissue into the bowl, then reached up and flushed. But he remained seated for a moment, still feeling a bit queasy.

_The insanity has begun and we’re not even in Paris yet._ He leaned his head against the wall and closed his eyes.

Meanwhile, back in London, Anthea relayed John and Sherlock’s current situation to everyone present in Mycroft’s office. “Crisis averted,” she announced in a crisp, clear voice.

Lady Elizabeth Smallwood made a shuddery exhalation of relief. Secretary Trelawney-Hope mopped his brow with a handkerchief. The other men and women in the room, all clad in dark suits, also acted profoundly relieved, as if a nuclear strike had been averted. “Thank God,” one man actually said aloud.

Mycroft arched an eyebrow, the only break in his poker face. But he displayed annoyance, not relief. “If you insist,” he twirled a pen in his long fingers, as if all of this had been a minor inconvenience.

“Mr. Holmes,” Trelawney-Hope daintily tucked his damp hankie back inside his suit jacket pocket. “We would understand completely if you wish to extradite your brother and Dr. Watson from this mission. They are civilians, after all, as well as your family.”

“The younger Mr. Holmes owes us a debt,” one of the black suited men snapped at Trelawney-Hope. “He owes us his very life.”

“Rubbish,” Lady Smallwood bit back at the secret agent with the hauteur only the posh, upper-crust nobility could produce. “He did your agency’s dirty work for you and then agreed upon a suicide mission in order to cover your tracks.” She examined her nails. “I know for a fact Lord Cullen-Culpepper is still pushing for his Bill of Transparency. It would be a bit of an embarrassment to have HRMSS records exposed showing how you botched the assassination attempt on Magnussen only to have it carried off by a civilian. Not to mention the repercussions the revelation would create; how our own government ordered the death of a Danish citizen.”

“HRMSS doesn’t exist, Lady Smallwood.”

She gave him a withering glare. “Neither does MI-6, and yet, here we are.”

“Enough,” Mycroft didn’t raise his voice. He didn’t have to: “If that is all, ladies and gentlemen.”

It was an obvious dismissal. But when Anthea rose, he said _sotto voce_ to her “Not you,” so she sat back down.

When Lady Smallwood paused by the door, lifting her ash-blond eyebrows questioningly at Mycroft, he did not look up from his mobile. “Close the door on your way out, please.”

“Good afternoon, Mr. Holmes,” the lady said curtly.

“Lady Smallwood,” Mycroft murmured, engrossed in whatever it was on his mobile’s screen. Once
she closed the door firmly behind her, Mycroft put his mobile down. “How did this happen?” he demanded frostily of the young woman.

She didn’t flinch. “The mole,” she said simply.

Mycroft ran his hand down his face. “Rat would be a far better word to use to describe this person,” he drummed his manicured nails on the board table.

“My sources tell me that the suspect pool has been narrowed down to three individuals.”

“And who might these suspects be?”

“Agent John Mitton.”

Mycroft’s nostrils flared, “Who else?”

“Agent Eduardo Lucas, from Her Royal Majesty’s Secret Service.”

“Who is waiting for my idiot brother and his pet to meet him in Paris,” Mycroft groaned. That was not good news, if Lucas was indeed the mole.

“And me.”

“Are you surprised they suspect you?”

“No.”

“Good,” Mycroft steepled his fingers together, in unconscious imitation of his brother.

“Do you believe I’m the mole?”

“Do you think I would have you by my side if I believed you were?”

“Yes,” she said immediately. “I believe you would in order to feed me inaccurate information so you could expose me when that information was leaked.”

“Then why are you wasting my valuable time asking me stupid questions?” Mycroft snapped at her. “I did not pluck you out of that forlorn American foster home just to have you annoy me with insipid queries. I need you to help me think. And I need you to learn. After I’m gone, I expect you to carry on with my work, to continue protecting England and her subjects.”

Anthea continued to look unperturbed. Instead she said, “I don’t think the mole is anyone who works with MI-6 or HRMSS. Not directly. I think we’re overlooking the obvious, like The Met did on that first case your brother worked on with John Watson.”

“You think the mole is a cabbie?” Mycroft said acidly.

“I think the mole is someone we interact with every day, but is all but invisible,” she continued coolly. “Someone who has access to our buildings, our offices, our computers, but someone actual agents wouldn’t consider a threat. Someone like janitorial staff, housekeeping.”

Mycroft leaned back in his chair, rubbing his chin. “Investigate your theory, but proceed with extreme caution,” he told her. “Report back only to me.”

“Yes sir.”
“Now,” Mycroft laced his fingers together. “Let’s focus on keeping my brother alive long enough so he can retrieve that bloody letter.” When Anthea stood up, he added, “And if you could be so kind as to fetch me a cup of tea and a biscuit.”

“You’re supposed to be off sweets,” Anthea murmured as she picked up her Blackberry.

“Thank you, Anthea,” Mycroft grizzled as she slipped out of his office.

It wasn’t his office, not really. He just liked letting people believe it was.

And the view of London from here was simply stunning.

As he stretched his back and viewed the Thames River glittering below him and the Tower Bridge just barely visible in the distance, he allowed himself a moment of weakness. He rested his arm high on the glass window then rested his forehead against his forearm. He let go of a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding until now.

He would have dearly loved to have taken Trelawney-Hope up on his offer. Would have loved to radio the private jet and tell those dunces of pilots to turn their plane around right now. Would have truly loved to lose his temper, actually lose control so he could scream at all of those agents that his brother owed them bloody nothing.

Of course, he couldn’t do that. Of course, he couldn’t show his hand, couldn’t reveal his greatest liability, his most secret truth: that he really didn’t disdain his family at all. His family was not nothing to him, but everything.

He had made that mistake once, nearly thirty-three years ago. And he was still paying the price for that error.

_Brother dearest, I would trade places with you if I could_, Mycroft opened his eyes and looked up at the skies. The cold winter skies where his brother had cheated death once again.

“I would, Sherlock,” he murmured out loud. “Truly, I would.”

In fact, he had tried.

Once.

**

22 July 1983
Durhampton Hall
The Earl and Countess of Winchester’s estates
Friday afternoon
4:00 PM

“Oh, no William?”

Mycroft schooled his pudgy face to stay expressionless. He thought he detected a note of relief in the Countess’ voice. But most adults seemed to be relieved whenever his parents left William home instead of dragging him along to social functions. William had a tendency to act out if the atmosphere was less than stimulating. Plus he was prone to blurt out the rudest things, rude things that were usually true, but nothing anyone wanted spoken out loud… especially if they pertained to themselves.
Two marriages had actually fallen to pieces because of William’s big mouth.

Normally he sympathized with the adults, because it generally ended up being his responsibility to entertain the little beast. Mycroft had lost count of how many times one or both of his parents had uttered the phrase “Go play with your little brother!” which was usually code for “Get him out of our hair.” Mycroft had been the one who taught him how to make deductions and lately he had been trying to teach him how to know when to speak up and when to keep his mouth shut.

Today, however, he had wished William were there. Wished he’d make one of his embarrassing deductions that tended to render adults paralyzed the minute the words left William’s seven-year-old lips.

But for nearly a week now, William had been practically mute. Mycroft never dreamt there would be a day he’d long to hear the little chatterbox’s squeaky voice.

There was something seriously amiss with the little beast and Mycroft meant to remedy that this weekend. He felt confident that once he told William he had put Heathcliff in his place, William would revert back to his usual outspoken, bratty personality.

“Oh, Will’s under the weather I’m afraid,” Mrs. Holmes informed Lady Moira Cullen-Culpepper as she, along with Mycroft, walked towards the parlour. The men had already departed for the barns, presumably to look at a new horse Lord Alistair Cullen-Culpepper had purchased but in reality, to discuss business. “Hasn’t been himself for nearly a week,” Mrs. Holmes went on as they passed rows and rows of valuable oil paintings. “Thought he was on the mend, but he was sick last night, then again this morning. We thought it’d be best if he stayed home with Nanny this weekend. Let him rest.”

His mother tried to sound blithe but Mycroft knew she had wanted to beg off and stay home with her youngest boy, still a baby in her eyes. There had been a bit of a row, more of a tiff really. His father ended up convincing his mother to leave William in Nanny Rose’s capable hands.

“God bless the nannies,” Lady Moira nodded, the gratitude in her voice sincere. “I don’t know what I would have done without dear old Colleen and I only have the one boy.”

Well, she didn’t do a very good job, did she? Mycroft thought hatefully. He cleared his throat and said as politely as possible, “Lady Moira, where is Heathcliff?”

“Oh, of course, silly me,” Lady Moira smiled at Mycroft. It disconcerted Mycroft just how beautiful Heathcliff’s mother was as well as how kind. He didn’t understand how a woman like her could have produced a child like Heathcliff. “You don’t want to listen to two old women gossiping, do you? Heath’s in the garden, with his pigeons. Shall I have someone show you where to go?”

“No thank you, Lady Moira, I remember,” Mycroft said gravely then asked, “Mummy, may I?”

“Of course, Mickey, go have fun,” Mrs. Holmes said indulgently, as if he were five.

As Mycroft waddled away, he heard Lady Moira exclaim, “Such nice manners he has.”

He wondered how nice Lady Moira would think his manners were after he beat His Honourable Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper to a pulp.

Relying on his sharp memory, Mycroft made his way across the expansive gardens, towards the old dovecote. He saw Heathcliff, long and lean, blonde-haired and golden-skinned, lying in the grass, watching his pigeons fly, listening to them coo. His birds were so tame, a proper aviary wasn’t necessary. The birds would always come back to their perches in the dovecote.
Mycroft wished he hadn’t stuffed himself with Mars bars and Rolos before leaving for this visit, but his nerves had temporarily gotten the better of him. Now he felt bloated and slug-like, compared to the golden boy, lying in the grass. But his mind felt razor-sharp and lean and that’s all that mattered, really.

“Hey.”

Heathcliff propped himself up onto his shoulders. “Alright, Myc?”

It really was unfair how handsome he was. Not a spot on his face and his body was fit and trim. But I’m smarter than he is; he narrowed his black eyes at Heathcliff.

“I know what you did.”

“What?” Heathcliff’s face was blank, the picture of innocence.

“I know what you did,” Mycroft sneered, balling his fists. “You prick.”

“Ah,” Heathcliff bounded up onto his feet. Stuffing his hands into his jeans pockets, he ambled towards the dovecote. “So, ickle William tattled, did he?”

Mycroft blinked. Already this wasn’t going the way he had planned. “He didn’t tattle, I made him tell me. You really hurt him, Heathcliff. I found him, you see. All bloody and bruised. Hiding in a broom cupboard, wouldn’t let me near him. Was like a wild animal.”

“Well, you’re the one always calling him a wild beast,” Heathcliff held out two of his fingers towards the birds. A grey pigeon with a glossy green-and-purple breast spread its wings and swooped down, landing onto Heathcliff’s fingers. The bird’s orange feet curled around Heathcliff’s fingers as its tiny black eyes studied Mycroft with interest while Heathcliff continued: “Anyway, it’s done. There’s nothing you can say that can undo it, so just let it go, Myc. William will recover.”

While the young lord’s words were blasé, Mycroft observed how Heathcliff refused to meet his eyes, his shoulders hunched forward as he held his stupid pigeon close to his chest. He’s afraid, Mycroft deduced. He may be better looking than I am, fitter than I am, but I’m still smarter… and bigger.

Mycroft decided to use that to his advantage.

“You didn’t have to beat him up, you know,” Mycroft stomped towards Heathcliff. The birds trilled in agitation. The pigeon perched on Heathcliff’s fingers fluttered its wings but Heathcliff smoothed his feathers and the bird calmed down. “He’s an annoying git but he’s my brother.”

Even though Mycroft was bigger than Heathcliff, he never relished fighting. At least not physically. But he knew he could tackle Heathcliff if necessary.

In fact, Heathcliff cringed away from Mycroft as he jammed a finger into his chest, “He’s stupid and little so you don’t need to be bullying him. You just leave him alone from now on or else you’ll have to answer to me.”

As soon as Heathcliff danced out of Mycroft’s arm’s reach, he stopped looking frightened. In fact, he looked amused. “Answer to you?” he crowed. “That’s all? That’s all the punishment you’re going to dole out? Not going to tell Mummy or Daddy? You really do resent all the attention William receives, don’t you? I wouldn’t know, I don’t have to deal with sibling rivalry, being an only child and all. Unless…” something… dark… flickered across Heathcliff’s face. “You were hoping you would become an only child once more and that’s the real reason why you’re cross with me. That I didn’t finish the job once I had my fun.”
Mycroft’s eyes narrowed. Something was off; the odd, black unrecognizable facial expression Heathcliff had just made unnerved the fourteen-year-old boy to the core. The words Heathcliff uttered sounded light, flippant…

But the tone of his voice hadn’t matched that malevolent expression that had flickered on his face.

“Of course I don’t want to be an only child, don’t be stupid. Why would you even say that, that’s just simply…” Mycroft sucked in a horrified breath. “Did you try to kill William, actually kill him?”

Mycroft’s black reptilian eyes always looked out of place in his big, doughy face. But like a cobra eyeing his prey, Mycroft scanned Heathcliff head to toe, closely observing his body language and his facial expressions and his tone of voice, all but ignoring the actual words Heathcliff said.

“No, ‘course not! You’re right. I’m a prick,” Heathcliff looked ashamed. “William was being so obnoxious and I lost my temper. I got carried away. I didn’t realize I had hurt him that badly, thought I just roughed him up a bit. I just wanted to put a good scare into him, that’s all. I’ll make it up to him when we visit next weekend. I promise.”

“You’re lying,” Mycroft’s voice sounded more wondering than angry.

“What? No, ‘course I’m not,” Heathcliff averted his eyes, focusing on petting his cooing pigeon.

“Yes you are.”

“Myc, go on. We’ve been friends since we were in nappies. I’d never lie to you.” Now Heathcliff raised his voice. “I didn’t try and kill your brother! Jesus, Myc.”

“Then what happened, exactly?” Mycroft demanded. “Because to me, it looked like…”

…the blood… the blood on my arms when I carried him upstairs…

“Looked like what?” Heathcliff squared his shoulders. His voice had a defensive edge to it. “OK, so I bounced his head on the ground, so what? I admitted it got out of hand, I said I was sorry and I’ll make amends. What more do you want?”

_I thought that was dirt or mud on the backs of William’s legs… but he wouldn’t let me near him after I put him down and tried to undress him for a bath…_ 

He could almost smell the sanguine, metallic odor again. Feel it drying sticky on his arms…

“The truth,” Mycroft whispered as a dreadful, almost nightmarish idea had taken hold.

His heart began to race as he recalled those horrid rumors floating around school… about the first-years being… but no, that couldn’t be true… it was too ghastly to be true…

“The truth?” Heathcliff scoffed, “About what? What more do you want to hear?”

“I found William huddled in a broom cupboard, after you all had left,” Mycroft advanced on Heathcliff again. Heathcliff backed up again, shielding his pet bird from Mycroft. “All he’d tell me was that you _hurt_ him and he refused to let me help him clean up, help him into the bath. Said he wasn’t a baby and could do it himself. But he could barely _walk_…”

.. it wasn’t mud, you fool. I carried him up the stairs to the bathroom because he said it hurt to walk. I got impatient and cross so I did pick him up and carry him… But when I put him down, there were smears of blood on my hands and arms, but I couldn’t find where the blood was coming from… And
when I started to undress William to give him a bath, it was then he had his tantrum and told me to go away… I saw, but I didn’t want to believe…

God, William, I’m sorry… I am so so sorry…

“So I’m asking you, what did you do?”

Heathcliff’s handsome face twisted, looking feral and ugly again. Mycroft then knew he was looking at Heathcliff, the real Heathcliff, for the first time. “Nothing that little blighter didn’t have coming to him, alright?” He expertly tossed his pigeon into the air and the bird took flight.

Mycroft watched the bird fly around above them. “It was you,” he said softly. “You’re the one who’s been buggering those boys at school. You…” his voice trailed off but when he spoke again, there was a frost in his voice that had never been there before, “Bastard.”

Heathcliff looked frightened again, having never heard his friend sound so cold before. “They asked for it, the little ponces. I gave them what they wanted.”

“Did my brother ask for it? He’s seven, Heathcliff. Seven.”

But Mycroft’s voice had cracked then, the inevitable prepubescent vocal inconsistency. Heathcliff smiled the smug smile of someone who felt utterly secure. The smile of someone who knew he couldn’t be touched because of his wealth, position and good looks.

“And who’s going to believe a little freak like him? And you didn’t even notice, Mr. Know-All. Missed that little deduction, did you?” He held his hand out again and that stupid pigeon came back. As Heathcliff stroked the bird’s sleek head, he said, “Besides you have no proof. Even if you did, you have no money for the court case, because there would be a court case. My father would ensure it. Plus, he’d sue for defamation of character. Your parents would have less than what they have now, which is nothing.”

Even though he quailed at the prospect of losing the life he knew, he stoutly said, “Poverty doesn’t frighten me.”

“Does prison frighten you then?” Heathcliff asked conversationally. “I’ll have you sent to prison instead of the poorhouse instead. See, I like souvenirs. Sexy souvenirs. Things to get me going when I’m alone.”

“You’re sick,” Mycroft felt out of his depth. He wished he had been able to get in touch with Ford before confronting Heathcliff. He would have known what to do, Ford. But Ford was in Ireland, spending the summer with his new girlfriend. Before Ford had left, he had confided in Mycroft he had thought she was The One. He had even put a down payment on an engagement ring. He had promised Mycroft nothing would change between them when he got married, they’d still be the very best of friends.

But every time Mycroft had tried to ring him this week, the phone had been engaged. The one time he had gotten through, he had to leave a message with the maid to have Ford call him back immediately.

But Ford never rang back.

And he had never thought to seek out the advice of his parents because he had thought Heathcliff had just beaten his brother up, not… not… not…

“You’re sick,” Mycroft said again.
“No, I’m clever,” Heathcliff purred. “Yes, you’re book-smart, Myc, but I’m actually clever. I plan ahead. For example, if someone, say one of my classmates or one of my old chums starts nosing in my personal business.” He shrugged, “Well, while it would pain me to part with my souvenirs, I knew if I planted them in your room at school and made an anonymous call to the headmaster, being expelled would be the least of your worries.”

“No, I don’t give a toss about any of that, about what goes on at school,” Mycroft felt himself losing ground. “Just leave William alone, that’s all I ask.”

Heathcliff gave Mycroft a pitying look. “But I like William. He has the sweetest arse I’ve ev-”

Mycroft surged forward and punched Heathcliff in the face before he even realized what he had done. The bird had flown away the minute Mycroft lifted his arm to hit the young lord.

Heathcliff staggered backwards. He touched his lower lip, eyes widening when he saw blood on his hand. He licked his lip and gave Mycroft a savage smile.

“Go ahead,” Mycroft’s voice had gone icy-cold again. He had never felt this… calm before. “Plant the little boys’ pants in my room. Make your anonymous telephone call. I’m a minor. I’ll go to a youth detention center. I can finish school there. When I’m released, I’ll come back for you. By then I’ll know how to properly get away with murder, since I’ll be surrounded by actual criminals. And,” he took a step closer to the golden boy with the bleeding lip. “I will kill you.”

He had never uttered those words, even in jest, before. But he meant every single one of them.

But Heathcliff had reclaimed his equilibrium and his stupid pigeon. It had returned to his fingers, cooing as Heathcliff stroked his feathers. “But how do you plan on protecting your ickle brother while behind bars? I’ll make you a deal. I won’t frame you and I won’t tell my father to stop helping your father, as long as you stay out of my way as far as William’s concerned.”

“If you think I’m going to allow you to touch my brother ever again, you’re mad.”

“William’s sort of like a bird, isn’t he?” Heathcliff continued to stroke the pigeon. “Inquisitive, flighty and-” without any warning, he snapped the pigeon’s neck. “Delicate.” He let the bird’s limp body slide out of his hand. As the pigeon’s body hit the ground, Heathcliff said in a voice devoid of emotion. “Tell anyone about me and I’ll break your brother’s neck as easily as I did that pidgie,” he pushed the dead bird towards Mycroft with his toe. “Close your eyes and your brother gets to live.”

“You’ll have to get though me first,” for the first time ever in his entire life, Mycroft was glad his body was big and bulky. He knew he could flatten Heathcliff if necessary.

“You can’t be with him all the time, Mickey. William does like to run off on his own, doesn’t he? There’s so many places were a small boy can have an accident. He could fall into the creek and drown or fall out of his tree-house and crack his skull wide open. He could fall off his pony and get trampled. He could even suffocate in his sleep if a pillow was accidentally held over his face. Or have a strange allergic reaction at the dinner table. Of course, most people are allergic to poison. So many ways for a little boy to die out in the country,” Heathcliff sighed and shook his head, looking tragic.

“Don’t,” Mycroft lost his nerve. “Please. He’s just a little kid, don’t… I’ll take his place. You can do whatever you want to me. Do whatever you like to get off. Just leave William alone, please.”

“You?” Heathcliff looked disgusted. “A fatty like you? You’re a good mate but probably a lousy lay, no offense.” When Mycroft refused to rise to his taunt, Heathcliff snarled, “You have nothing to
threaten me with and nothing to bargain with either. What you decide right here, right now determines whether or not he lives or he dies, do you understand? And don’t try and tell me you don’t care. You’ve already shown me that you do, with your noble,” he crinkled his perfect nose, “Offer to take his place. So, Mycroft, what’s it going to be? Is William going to live or is he going to die? He kicked the pigeon’s body again, this time hard enough so it hit Mycroft in the shin.

Mycroft recoiled from the dead bird’s weight. “Please, Heath,” he found himself begging.

“Do we have an understanding, Mycroft?”

“Yes,” Mycroft lowered his eyes, feeling like he was committing the most awful of betrayals. But I need to say yes to buy time, he rationalized. This gives me a week to make a plan, to protect William from this monster…

… I’m the only one who can.

“We have an understanding.”

“Good, come on, let’s go inside,” Heathcliff started loping towards the big house. “I’m starving. And I need to catch up with my good friend, William. Make plans for tonight.”

“He’s not here, he’s ill,” Mycroft informed him. “You may not always catch William, you know. He’s clever and he’s fast.”

Heathcliff shrugged. “The game is on, then.”

Mycroft looked down at the dead pigeon.

He followed Heathcliff back to the big house and for the first time in his short life, refused pudding after tea.

**

26 November 2015
Préfecture de police de Paris
Thursday evening
8:02 PM

Most people would have wanted a stiff drink and a lie-down after the flight John and Sherlock had. But Sherlock was not like most people. John knew better to even suggest they stop for a bite and a bit of a sit-down to recover from their terrifying flight and frustrating train ride to Paris from Calais. They had missed the first train by minutes. They caught the next train, but that put them even further behind schedule. But the second they finally arrived in Paris, Sherlock insisted they go to the police headquarters at once. They didn’t even stop first at their hotel to divest themselves of their luggage.

Truth be told, John would not have wanted to stay still for very long. But since he had been sick after the nerve-wrecking near-nosedive into the English Channel, John felt ravenous.

When Sherlock started arguing (in French) with Inspecteur général Gagnon, their French police contact, John had slipped out to find either a snack or at least a cup of coffee. But all the signs were in French, of course. The few people still milling about at this late hour did not seem very keen on pointing him in the right direction. So John had tried to use the Google Translate app on his Smartphone to ask where the vending machines were in the Paris Police Headquarters so he could at least maybe get a bag of crisps or a chocolate bar.
Apparently, he had asked Google Translate to locate the nearest broom cupboard.

Peckish and ratty now, he found his way back to the Inspecteur général’s office. He felt quite proud of himself for finding his way back without getting lost. But the pride gave way to annoyance when he found that the argument between Sherlock and Gagnon still raged on… in French, of course.

“Non non non!” Gagnon railed at Sherlock. The Inspecteur général was not a young man, but not quite ancient, either, probably in his mid-sixties. His florid face and thinning, fading blond hair showed how time had not been kind to him. He also wore trendy spectacles that actually made him look older instead of younger. He continued to shout abuse at Sherlock, then ended his rant with an emphatic: “Absolument pas!” while slamming his hand down on his desk.

Sherlock bolted out of his seat. As his chair tipped over, Sherlock let loose a torrent of rapid-fire French while waving his arms in the air. Gagnon leapt to his feet as well, revealing that he was a big man in every sense, height, weight and voice. Gagnon apparently thought his very presence would intimidate Sherlock as he started shouting back at him. Sherlock, of course, was completely unfazed by the tall, corpulent and loud Inspecteur général. He merely raised his voice over Gagnon’s and continued shouting.

John had no idea what either man shouted at the other but he had a feeling it was Not Good.

“Ah, excuse me? Gentlemen, please?” John interrupted, making himself sound as polite as possible. Sherlock and Gagnon stopped their yelling and turned to regard John with narrowed eyes. “Uh, yeah, so…” John struggled to remember the simple phrase. “Parlez-vous anglais?” he pleaded, completely butchering the pronunciation. Then he hastily added: “S’il vous plaît?”

Gagnon’s big nostrils flared but he muttered, “Of course. How rude of us,” as he sat back down. He gestured towards the chair still sitting upright, meaning for John to sit back down.

As Sherlock righted his chair and flopped into it, still in a strop, John pulled his little notebook and pen out of his back jeans pocket. “Now, what seems to be the misunderstanding?”

“He won’t let us go to the location where the original letter was first found,” Sherlock griped.

“I cannot allow it,” Gagnon blatantly ignored Sherlock, speaking slowly for John’s benefit. He had a firm command of the English language, but his accent was very thick, difficult to understand. “It is still a crime scene and you two are civilians.”

“Didn’t the Met send all the authorization paperwork to your office?” John asked, hoping Gagnon wouldn’t notice his little fib. After all, Sherlock, Mary and Violet always pointed out what a shockingly bad liar he was.

But Gagnon waved John’s words away. “Spare me, Monsieur Watson, your polite fabrications. You say “Met” but I know you mean “MI-5.””

“It’s Doctor,” John corrected Gagnon on that point, but he did not correct him that it was actually MI-6 who had sent him and Sherlock to Paris.

“My apologies, Doctor Watson,” Gagnon almost sounded sincere. “And I am aware of your partner’s reputation for solving crimes, but this is different from what he has encountered in the past as well as more complex.”

“Oh? More complex than dismantling a terrorist group single-handedly while pretending to be dead? Do tell,” Sherlock sniped, clearly unhappy about being excluded from the conversation.
“Sherlock,” John shook his head. “Please. Let me handle this, yeah?”

Sherlock made a big show of crossing his arms and burrowing his chin into his scarf. He locked his eyes onto Gagnon’s face. While he glared daggers at Gagnon, Sherlock mercifully held his tongue.

“So, I don’t understand,” John said, actually being sincere. “We’re here at your request to recover a letter that could cause quite a few people some embarrassment. How is that different from the crimes Sherlock and I have solved in the past? We’ve pursued blackmailers before.”

“First of all, Doctor Watson, you are not here at my request,” Gagnon jabbed a fat finger into his chest. “You are being foisted upon me and my department by MI-5 and Interpol. My responsibility is to be your tour guide and your babysitter, if necessary, which I hope, it is not.”

“Now, hang on,” the former army doctor snapped, starting to understand why Sherlock had lost his temper earlier. “We’re here to help, in any capacity.”

“And thank you for bringing up the second point,” Gagnon leaned forward. “We do not require your help in this matter at this time but when we do, I will contact you. I don’t need the British interfering with a French affair.”

“It’s not about interfering” John spluttered. “It’s about helping. We’re here to help.”

“And my final point,” Gagnon sneered. “I don’t need help from any more amateurs.”

“We’re not amateurs!” John burst out. Feeling Sherlock positively vibrating with fury at that insult, John added, “OK, alright, we don’t have formal police training, but I’m a former Army doctor and he’s a private detective-”

“Consulting,” Sherlock corrected John under his breath.

“Shut it,” John hissed back at him. Then he continued defending their Work to Gagnon: “Consulting Detective. We’ve solved cases for private individuals, large corporations and for the Met. The police don’t hire amateurs.”

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Sherlock produce the smallest of smiles.

But Gagnon rolled his eyes, “I already have an enthusiastic amateur sniffing around this case,” he reminded him. “Dupin.”

“And we’re working with Dupin,” John soldiered on, “Who used to work for Interpol, so he is not exactly an amateur, is he?”

“Then talk to him.” Gagnon stood up again, this time as a dismissal. “As I was explaining to Monsieur Holmes when you stepped out, my orders are clear. I am your contact with the Police nationale, nothing more, nothing less. I am happy to answer any questions regarding policy and procedures. I can give you information that is already public record but as the location of where the original letter was actually found is still an active crime scene, I cannot disclose the address. I also cannot give you any confidential information regarding the case either.”

“But,” John spluttered, “We just want to find the ruddy Letter! Same as you!”

“Oh really,” Gagnon looked like a fat cat let loose in a dairy farm. “And what does this Letter say, Dr. Watson?” When John couldn’t answer, he purred “Just as I thought. This is a highly sensitive case, Dr. Watson. Until you and your partner do something that gives me the power to deport you back to England, I cannot prevent you from…” he frowned, apparently struggling to remember the
correct English word. “Snooping,” he finally said. “But we are not working together,” he pointed back and forth between himself and John. “And we,” he pointed back and forth between himself and Sherlock, “Are most definitely not working together, understand?”

Sherlock muttered something in French that caused Gagnon’s face to turn brick-red. Just as Gagnon opened his mouth (presumably to start shouting again), John quickly said, “Alright, we understand, we understand completely, but ah, should we find anything, do we contact you?”

“I am your Police nationale contact, so oui,” Gagnon clearly had enough of John and Sherlock’s presence in his office. “On the very slenderest of chances you find something of actual usefulness on this case, call me,” he reached inside his suit jacket and produced a business card. As John took the card, Gagnon said, “And make an appointment.”

“Merci,” John tried not to muck up the pronunciation of that word, but the world-weary sigh the Inspecteur général heaved informed John he had not been successful. He tucked the card in his coat pocket while his anger started bubbling up within him again. He wanted out of this stuffy little office and far away this apparently French version of Anderson. But, because it was good manners, he still extended his hand to Gagnon and said, “We’ll be in touch.”

“I doubt that,” Gagnon gave John a somewhat sympathetic smile as he shook his hand. As he sat down and reached for his laptop, Gagnon added: “Enjoy your stay in Paris, even if it’s only a brief stay, especially if it’s a brief stay. I recommend Les Ombres.”

“Sorry?” John frowned as Sherlock rose and started buttoning up his Belstaff.

“It’s a restaurant, John,” Sherlock muttered hastily as he stuffed his hands in his pocket.

“Oh,” John couldn’t help sounding relieved. “Great. I’m famished.”

“I think you and your partner will enjoy it,” Gagnon didn’t bother looking up from his laptop, “Superb food, excellent wines. Magnificent view of the Eiffel Tower, very romantic.”

“Romantic?” now John sounded puzzled. Then stammered out: “Oh, no. No, no…Not partner like that… partner like…” He sighed, then held up his left hand, “Married.”

“Congratulations,” Gagnon still didn’t look up from his laptop. “Why don’t you and your husband leave the crime-fighting to the professionals and enjoy a second honeymoon courtesy of the Met? Marriage is equal parts work and pleasure. I should know,” he finally looked away from his laptop to make sheep’s eyes at a framed photograph of the ugliest woman imaginable. “It will be twenty-five years next month,” he gushed.

“No, we’re not married to each… that is, well, we’re partners but… I’m not gay!”

“You’re an idiot,” Sherlock droned as John snatched up his rucksack and suitcase. John stomped out of the office with as much dignity as he could burdened underneath his luggage.


“Both,” he replied in English as he collected his own bags. With a dramatic swirl of his coat, he took his leave as well.

He caught up with John quickly enough. John’s cheeks were still pink but he sounded calm when he said: “Well, he’s a twat.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock hummed. “But I figured the Police nationale would be more useless than The
Met. Completely understandable why MI-SIX,” he emphasized the correct digit, “Did not wish to
give this imbecile all the pertinent details regarding this case. He probably would have had it posted it
to the blog.”

“Blog? What blog?”

“Dupin’s blog.”

“Dupin… has a blog?”

“Not exactly, he has a blogger and his blogger has a source within the Police nationale. After that
tedious meeting with Inspector Clouseau was concluded (or so he thought it was concluded by
standing up, using his body language as a signal for dismissal as well as a sign of superiority and
dominance), he booted up laptop to email Honoré. I observed the reflection of the laptop screen on
his eyeglasses.”

“Right, brilliant,” John said, unable to keep the awe out of his voice. Only Sherlock would think to
observe something like that. Then he asked “And what’s a Honoré?”

“Honoré is a who, not a what, John. He’s Dupin’s blogger.”

“Dupin has a blogger?”

“Yes, but not a very good one. I clearly I have the superior blogger,” Sherlock grandiosely pushed
the doors open and even held them open to let John outside.

“Really?” Out of habit, John braced himself for the insult following the compliment.

“Of course,” Sherlock sounded smug as they walked to a black Renault Captur waiting for them by
the kerb. “Until just a few minutes ago, did you ever hear of Honoré’s blog?”

“Nope.”

“Exactly,” Sherlock purred. “I’m the one who’s famous, not Dupin.”

John smiled as a flush of pleasure filled him. As far as Sherlock’s backhanded compliments went,
this one was quite tame. It actually was very nice… by Sherlockian standards, of course.

“So,” John asked once they reached the idling car. “Now what? We don’t meet Dupin until
tomorrow afternoon? Should we go check in at the hotel?”

“Yes, to at least divest ourselves of this cumbersome luggage,” Sherlock set his suitcase and carry-on
bag down. “Then…oh… I don’t know,” Sherlock tucked his hands in his pockets and looked around
the City of Lights. “Lovely night. I feel like we should take advantage of it.”

“Take advantage of it how?” John cringed, afraid Sherlock was about to suggest going to Les Ombres
after all.

“I feel like… doing something… illegal,” Sherlock turned to John, his face aglow with mischief.
With his kaleidoscopic irises currently aquamarine and aureate and his full lips quirked up with one
of his rare, genuine smiles, he asked: “Fancy a bit of breaking and entering, John?”

John knew he had promised Violet and Mrs. Hudson to keep Sherlock out of harm’s way. He knew
he had a responsibility to his wife and his children, his missing daughter and his unborn baby, to
make good decisions and to come home to them one piece.
He knew what the right answer to Sherlock’s question was.

But as a thrill of anticipation and a hot rush of expectation flooded his system, John gave Sherlock the answer the detective wanted to hear:

“God, yes.”
“Interesting,” Sherlock hummed as he joined John’s side.

“Hm?” John turned his head to watch the Captur drive away, trundling slowly down the cobblestone street then turning the corner.

“Look, observe,” Sherlock started walking. John had to jog again to catch up, as usual.

“What?” John said, looking around. He knew better to spout the obvious...

Also, a past event comes back to bite everyone in the butt...

So sorry about not posting last Sunday, it’s been a weird past couple of weeks in my small corner of the universe (*whispers* So I’m totally whoring for comments and kudos this week because by weird I mean shitty... :^( )

Anyway, enjoy!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eight: Tallulah

26 November 2015
20004 Rue Feu de Coeur
Montmartre, Paris
Thursday evening
9:02 PM

“Right,” Eduardo Lucas of Her Majesty’s Royal Secret Service turned around to face the two idiots in the backseat of the Renault Captur he drove. “I’ll be on the look-out. I’ll call you, John, if the Police nationale or any other unsavory elements show up. That’s all I can do really. I have strict orders to maintain my cover while in Paris.”

“Understood,” John nodded then clipped the Bluetooth earpiece to his ear. Of course, John was entrusted with the earpiece. Sherlock, while on the prowl, was prone to ignoring everything and everyone. John knew if the Police nationale or any other unsavory elements did in fact show up, John would have to bodily remove Sherlock from the 1920s stone Art Deco building.

In fact, Sherlock had been glued to his Smartphone during the entire ride, ignoring basically everything Lucas had been telling them.

But Lucas took Sherlock’s poor manners in stride. John guessed the extremely handsome man in the sharp three-piece suit and expensive trench coat had dealt with Sherlock in the past. “I will, however, bring your belongings to the hotel and get you checked in.”

“Great, thanks,” John said.
Sherlock seemed to have come out of his reverie when Lucas said he’d check them into the hotel. “John, fetch my tablet out of my carry-on.”

“When did you get a tablet?”

“When Violet moved in.”

John rolled his eyes and reached behind him, “Violet’s going to murder you when she realizes you nicked her iPad… again.”

Sherlock didn’t deign to respond, just exited the car without so much as a “Come along John,” or even a “Goodbye.” Swearing, John fished the iPad out of his bag, thanked Lucas for the ride and trotted after Sherlock.

The block of flats was as a beautiful a building as the rest of the charming Montmartre neighborhood was. It was close enough to hear the bells of the Sacré Coeur Basilica but far away enough from the actual tourist traps and pickpockets. As John got out of the Captur, he felt like he had stepped into a film.

“Interesting,” Sherlock hummed as he joined John’s side.

“Hm?” John turned his head to watch the Captur drive away, trundling slowly down the cobblestone street then turning the corner.

“Look, observe,” Sherlock started walking. John had to jog again to catch up, as usual.

“What?” John said, looking around. He knew better to spout the obvious. He looked up and saw an inky black sky. He people-watched for a bit, listened to them chatter in French. He saw that most of them seemed to be fairly young and trendy. They also all seemed to be locals. None of them consulted their mobiles for directions. He looked at a café across the street, its neon-red sign turning the cobblestone road blood red. Across the road, there was either a bakery or a coffee shop, John was unsure. But golden light spilled out of its massive windows, turning the road a buttery yellow. “The Yellow Brick road?” he quipped.

Sherlock looked irritated, but then, he was Sherlock Holmes and Sherlock Holmes usually looked irritated. “Gagnon said this building,” he patted the wall of the Art Deco building behind them, “Is still the scene of an active police investigation.”

“Um. Yeah. He did.”

“Then where are the police?” He asked. “Where are the barricades, the ‘Keep Out’ tape?”

John blinked. “So Gagnon lied?”

“Or Gagnon was lied to and he was merely repeating the lie, believing it to be true.”

“Uh, right,” John said as Sherlock walked straight up to the entrance door. After giving the café a look of pure longing while his empty belly whined in protest, he followed Sherlock inside.

As John opened the front door, a bell above him chimed. He jumped but only person in the reception area was Sherlock. The small reception area also retained the Art Deco look the exterior exuded. The shiny black desk was unmanned but there was a little sign on the desk next to a tarnished, old fashioned office bell. John had no idea what the little hand-written sign said, but he assumed it said “Ring for service.”
To the left of the desk was an old fashioned lift, one that looked like a wrought-iron cage, with an ornate metal door. John thought it looked terrifying. To his profound relief, Sherlock darted to the right, towards a glossy black door that led to a staircase.

Just in time too because as John slipped into the stairwell, he heard the front door bell chiming again as a female voice called out “Allô?”

“These are holiday flats,” Sherlock murmured as John followed him up the stairs. “For extended stays, a step above a hostel but step below a hotel. Perfect for the frugal traveler, but also perfect for someone who wishes to keep a low-”

A door above them squeaked open and the sounds of laughter and footsteps filled the stairwell.

“Profile,” Sherlock froze in his tracks. He looked up then looked down at John as the sound of friendly banter got progressively louder as footsteps echoed through the stairwell.

“What do we d-” John started to ask but then found himself slammed into the wall with Sherlock pressing himself close against John.

Very, very close.

“What are you doing?” John’s voice nearly sounded hysterical as Sherlock grasped his face with one of his gloved hands.

“Shut up,” Sherlock snapped as he enveloped them both in the folds of his coat, pressing his body even closer to John’s.

John squirmed. He felt suffocated. He felt disconcerted. He felt…

… protected…

“Gerroff,” John tried to push him off when he felt Sherlock’s entire bony body flush against his.

But Sherlock pressed his mouth against John’s ear. In a voice less than a breath, he huffed “Shut Up!” He ran his fingers through John’s hair, his forearm nearly covering all of John’s face as he did so.

Anyone seeing the position of Sherlock’s head and the movement of his lips could be forgiven for assuming Sherlock was giving John a kiss, a love-bite, a nibble on the earlobe. Or at least, the two university students passing them by in the narrow stairwell clearly assumed it was. John couldn’t understand a word of their incomprehensible language, but he knew by their tone of voices and their chuckles the show he and Sherlock were putting on amused them greatly.

The second the immediate danger had passed, John gave Sherlock a hearty shove and snapped. “What The Hell, Sherlock?” as he shook from head to toe with anger.

(... yes, anger. Of course I’m shaking from anger...)

“Oh John,” Sherlock rolled his eyes. “You really need to move past this ridiculous fear that people may think you’re gay. Your mild case of homophobia (while endearing in the beginning) is quickly becoming boring, not to mention slightly embarrassing. It is the twenty-first century.”

“Boring?” John squawked. “Embarrassing…. homopho-” His mouth dropped open as he realized what Sherlock just accused him of being. “I am most certainly not homophobic. I am the last person to give a shit who shags who. You’re my best friend and I know you’re bi, and I told you a very
long time ago that it was fine, all fine, whatever or whoever you fancy. I’m also friends, *good friends*, with Alex MacDonald from The Met. She’s a lesbian, married with two kids. Mary and I’ve been to her flat for tea loads of times. And then there’s my sister—” his throat tightened and he clenched his fists. “Forget it. Just… sorry I shouted. You took me by surprise, that’s all.” He pushed past Sherlock a bit more roughly than he meant to, but his skin was practically crawling…

(*burning*)

… with anger…

(*fire*)

… and he craved…

(*desired*)

… to get away from it all…

(*all of it, all of them… Harry, Clara… Mary…*)

John stopped a few steps ahead Sherlock, pressing his hand against his sternum…

*I haven’t thought about Mary once since I left London…*

… feeling a strange tightness in his chest he hadn’t felt since he returned from Afghanistan to London… *no, that’s not right…*

Since Sherlock fell…

*No, that’s not right either…*

Since Mary shot Sherlock…

(*mary… marymarymarymarymarymarymary…*)

“John?” Sherlock rumbled behind him. “What is it? What do you need?”

“Nothing, I’m fine.”

“John,” now Sherlock’s sonorous voice became a quiet and serious voice. “Don’t lie. What is the matter? What can I do? What do you want?”

*What do I want? I want… I want things to go back to the way they were. I want it to be you and me against the world. I want to go home. I want to be back in 221B. I don’t want to be married anymore, I don’t want this anymore. I hate this, my life now. Violet was right, I only stayed with Mary because of the baby. I should have left, immediately, the minute I learned she tried to kill you to save her own arse…*

John licked his lips, keeping his back to Sherlock. “I’m fine. Just… warn me, next time? If you’re going to pounce on me like that? It startled me,” he risked a glance over his shoulder. “I’m a bit jumpy after our rather exciting flight,” he added, feeling his fucking left hand starting to shake again. He clenched his fist together, hoping Sherlock was studying his face and not his hand.

“Oh,” Sherlock furrowed his brows together, “So, me… pretending to snog you to keep those two Polish university students from seeing our faces a moment ago? That was Not Good?”
“Yes,” John turned away from Sherlock, drumming his nails on the banister. “Bit Not Good, Sherlock, but not because of what you implied. Just didn’t appreciate the invasion of my personal space, that’s all. It’s not the end of the world. Shall we get back to it, then?”

And without waiting for an answer, John started up the stairs again.

Sherlock watched John hurry up the stairs, his brows and mouth firmly turned down into a fierce scowl as John turned the corner.

“Idiot,” he whispered to himself furiously as he jammed his hands into his coat pockets and followed John. When he caught up to John, he said in a perfectly normal voice, “It’s the attic suite we need to go up to, that’s where the letter was located.”

“Right,” John carefully kept his voice bland and clinical, like he did while responding to patients listing their symptoms. Once they reached the top of the landing, John asked “Do we know the name the flat was rented under? When the letter was first found?” as Sherlock tried the glossy black door, only to find it locked.

“Sara Govmux,” Sherlock reached inside his coat and withdrew a lock-pick kit. “Not entirely sure of the pronunciation of the surname. Its etymology is unclear.”

“How’s it spelt?” John asked as Sherlock knelt in front of the door.

“S-A-R-A. G-O-V-M-U-X,” he grunted as he started fiddling with the lock. Then there was a loud click and Sherlock pushed the door open.

“Odd,” John frowned as Sherlock straightened up, stretching his back as he did so. “French in origin perhaps? But Sara is not a French name… maybe an American whose ancestor had their last name changed by the immigration office?”

“Yes, good, good,” Sherlock said in that faint voice he used when he was absolutely ignoring everything anyone had to say. Slowly he reached around the wall and found the light switch. “I find it terribly interesting,” Sherlock said as he turned the lights on in the attic vacation flat, “That this flat is allegedly still an active crime scene, but no police tape and more importantly, no police.” He entered the flat and John followed.

John looked around the large flat. The Art Deco motif was absent. The décor was simple and modern. Everything was various shades of cream, black and chocolate. There was nothing dividing the lounge from the kitchen; everything was in one giant room. And the area designated as a kitchen really couldn’t be considered a proper kitchen anyway. Just a toaster, an electric kettle, a microwave, a wine chiller and a tiny refrigerator lined up on a granite countertop. But the appliances were all very nice, stainless steel, polished to a silvery finish. Next to a small sink, there was a large ebony-colored bowl filed with fresh fruit. Next to the bowl there were two matching mugs and a small wicker basket holding several varieties of tea and sugar packets.

The hardwood floor was buffed to a gleaming shine. The ivory-colored drapes were drawn, blocking out prying eyes. The leather sofa and matching armchair and the large flat-screen telly hanging on the wall as well as the other decorations and amenities were just as posh as in the kitchen. And clean.

“Any other rooms?” John set Violet’s iPad down on the lovely glass-and-iron coffee table.

“A lavatory and a bedroom,” Sherlock murmured, not moving, letting his eyes do the work.
John looked behind a generic picture of the Eiffel Tower hanging on the wall. “So, what are we looking for, exactly?”

“No idea.”

“But you’ll know it when you see it?” John grumbled, letting the picture go. It hit the wall with a clatter and settled with a thud.

“Naturally,” Sherlock sniffed as John straightened the picture.

“Lovely,” John groused as his stomach grumbled. “So glad I could be here, helping you look brilliant and all.”

“I know,” Sherlock said in that same absent tone he had been using before.

John wondered if Sherlock would even notice if he just walked out right now. They had passed a café on the way here, after all.

“Curious,” Sherlock broke into John’s sulk. “How clean this flat is.”

“They probably cleaned it for the next occupant. It is a holiday flat, like you said,” John knew he sounded petulant, but he really didn’t care at this point. Too late, John realized he had been more enamored by the idea of an adventure than going on an actual adventure. In reality, he was cold, he was tired, he was hungry and he was still reeling from not just being nearly shot down over the English Channel but also being pushed up against the wall like… like… like that.

“But this is still the scene of an active police investigation, like Gagnon said,” Sherlock’s eyes fluttered shut, as they tended to do when he entered into his “Mind Palace.”

“Oh for God’s sake,” John grumbled then yelled, “Oi, don’t stay in there too long!”

Sherlock opened one eye, “Problem?”

John shuddered involuntarily. Sherlock had sounded a touch too much like Mycroft just then.

“No.”

“Good. Now shut up. I need to think…” and he snapped his eye shut again. Soon his hands started moving, waving around. He looked like he was rolling yarn for a knitter.

John shook his head and continued poking around the flat. It was a very nice flat, perfect spot for a romantic rendezvous. Not newlyweds. New love, brand new couple on their first big romantic holiday together… it reminded him faintly of the flat he and Sarah, one of his old girlfriends, had stayed at when they travelled to New Zealand…

Sarah… Sara… Something nibbled at his brain, but for the life of him, he couldn’t figure out what exactly. But he definitely had the feeling both he and Sherlock were missing something huge… “MI-6 has no idea who this Sara Whatever is?”

He wasn’t expecting Sherlock to answer and wasn’t surprised when he didn’t. So John took his gloves off, stuffed them in his coat pocket and drew out his little notebook and pen. He jotted down “SARA GOVMUX” then put the pen and notebook back into his jeans pocket.

Then he continued nosing around the flat while Sherlock stood in the middle of the room, with his fingers tented. John poked around the kitchen cupboards and found nothing interesting. He had just
finished examining the bookshelves when Sherlock suddenly shouted “The bedroom!”

“What?” John started to say but found himself being bodily dragged towards the bedroom. “OI! SHERLOCK!” he shook Sherlock off. “WHAT DID I SAY JUST A FEW MOMENTS AGO ABOUT WARNING ME BEFORE POUNCING?”

John sometimes wondered if Sherlock had attention-deficit disorder.

“Yes, yes, yes, personal space, no touching, homophobia, boring,” Sherlock said impatiently as he gave John another push. “Listen. Gagnon said this flat was still an active crime scene. But it’s unprotected and has been cleared, which means any lingering evidence had been cleared away. Gagnon was right, but he didn’t realize he was right. This flat is still an active crime scene because it’s a bolt-hole for the La Ligue des Roux.”

John froze in the doorway to the bedroom. “Do you mean to tell me we’re in one of bolt-holes for a Consulting Criminal?”

“Yes!” Sherlock whirled John around and gave him yet another push, all but shoving him into the bedroom. “And you thought this trip wasn’t going to be any fun.”

“Sherlock!” John turned around again, glaring up at him. “What if that particular Consulting Criminal is bloody Moriarty, the devil himself?”

“He’s mortal, same as you and I,” Sherlock shrugged. “You’re carrying, right?”

“Yeah, but-”

Sherlock steamrolled right over him, “And you have the special gun permits MI-6 created?”

John lowered his head, his shoulders slumping. “Yes, but-”

“Good. Now,” Sherlock brushed past John and started prowling through the room like a bloodhound on the scent. “MI-6 had raided this flat in regards to an entirely different crime, a completely boring crime, not worthy of my interest. MI-6’s discovery of The Letter was a happy accident. The Letter was found in here, in this mysterious “Sara Govmux’s” message bag, along with some counterfeit cash, stolen credit cards and a few memory sticks with nothing of great importance on them. Nuclear launch codes or something boring like that.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

Sherlock ignored John, as usual, “The messenger bag had been found on the bed,” Sherlock pointed to the neatly made bed. Again, this room was just as simple and modern as the rest of the flat and the color scheme again was creams, cocoas and coal-blacks. “Sara had put her messenger bag and her suitcase on top of the bed, intending to unpack. She must have been tipped off because when MI-6 raided the flat, only the suitcase and the messenger bag were left behind. The suitcase had been opened and some clothing had been taken out but not put into the chest of drawers and not hung up in the wardrobe.”

“So?” John shrugged, having heard this already in their morning briefing. Apparently Sherlock had been listening after all. John had thought Sherlock had dozed off from boredom. “That’s already been established. What are you getting at?”

“So that means she took her mobile and her handbag with her when she fled. Apparently those two items were more valuable than the two bags she had left behind. Or she had secured the truly valuable items, decided what was left in the messenger bag was collateral damage and her mobile
and her handbag were the only portable things she could take with her.”

“So she didn’t realize how valuable The Letter was,” John nodded.

“Wrong,” Sherlock suddenly dropped to his hands and knees, now truly looking like a hound-dog on the hunt. Rapping each floorboard with his knuckles, he explained: “She was willing to sacrifice The Letter so MI-6 wouldn’t find the real… ah.” Sherlock pressed his ear to a floorboard and tapped it again. “What she was really smuggling. John, go back to the kitchenette, find a knife or a pair of scissors, something I can use to pry open this board.”

John did as he was told and returned with a butter knife. Sherlock carefully wedged the knife and painfully-slowly, worked the board loose. To John’s disappointment, there was no treasure trove. No priceless jewels or stacks of cash or bags of exotic and expensive narcotics.

Only a little white memory stick.

“That’s anti-climatic,” John quipped as Sherlock put the memory stick on the black duvet and snapped a photograph of them with his Smartphone.

“Or it’s the calm before the storm. Go get the tablet, let’s see what’s on this memory stick.”

“Is it compatible? I mean, most memory sticks can’t be used with Apple products.”

Sherlock held the memory stick up and John saw the logo “iStick” on it. “New-ish product. Came out last year. Thumb-drive that has both a USB connector and,” he slide a button on the memory stick. The USB connector retracted on one side and a Lightening connector appeared on the other, “The compatible iPad or iPhone jack. Should be fine,” and with that, he lifted his heavy brows at John, clearly waiting for John to fetch the iPad.

“OK, fine,” John grumbled as he did what he was told. When he returned to the bedroom with Violet’s iPad, he found Sherlock already was transferring the contents of the iStick to his own iPhone.

“If you were going to download the damn thing to your phone, why’n the hell did you need me to get this?” John held up Violet’s iPad.

“Because I want to view the pictures on a larger screen,” Sherlock murmured, “Obviously.” Then he stood there, humming while he waited for the download to complete. After an agonizingly long wait, Sherlock’s mobile pinged and Sherlock’s elegant fingers flew over the touch screen. Then he plucked the iStick out of his mobile and handed it to John.

John inserted the iStick into the iPad. He sat down on the bed and started downloading the files. Meanwhile Sherlock paced back and forth, jiggling his keys in his pocket as he muttered: “Sara Govmux left The Letter as a smokescreen, knowing that The Letter is less valuable than what is on that memory stick. But she took great pains to hide that memory stick.”

“Why she didn’t take it with her?” John’s brow crinkled as Sherlock, , lay down on the bed. “You said it was valuable.”

“Because her life wouldn’t be worth living if she had been apprehended while still possessing the merchandise.” He tented his fingers and crossed his ankles. “She knew MI-6 was on their way, which tells you what, John?” he arched an eyebrow and trained one of his “Under the Microscope” glares on John.

“Oh,” John hadn’t realized he would be quizzed. “Uh… she knew MI-6 was coming, so… someone
tipped her off. Ah... oh no, the bloody mole.”

“Indeed, our new friend Sara is in touch with Mycroft’s elusive MI-6 mole,” Sherlock looked pleased at John coming to his conclusion. “Miss Sara left behind the memory stick, placed the floorboard back in place, snatched up her handbag and mobile and was out the fire escape.” Sherlock pointed to the bedroom window, also covered with a heavy cream curtain. “Therefore our mysterious Sara must be some sort of courier, a mule, if you will, but of information, not of drugs or other contraband items. This is not just a bolt-hole John, not just a place for members of Moriarty’s syndicate to hide. No. This is a drop-box, a secure place to leave information and to receive payment. This room was cleaned not only to eliminate the evidence of who Sara Govmux really is, but to ready it for its next occupant.”

“Sherlock,” John’s voice had that edge to it that it got whenever he was utterly infuriated at Sherlock’s lack of concern for their safety. “Do you mean that one of Moriarty’s people could be coming here?”

“Probably not, but I haven’t ruled out the possibility.”

“Sherlock,” John clutched Violet’s iPad, telling himself he could not bash Sherlock’s head in with it. If it had been his iPad, he might have considered it. But since the tablet belonged to Violet, he restrained himself. “Have you ruled out the possibility that Moriarty could come here? Be on his way right now?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes, “Too pedestrian, too anti-climatic for him. Violet’s been updating her profile on the ‘new’ Moriarty, the person we believe took Jim’s place after Jim sprayed my coat with his blood and brain tissue,” Sherlock frowned. Jim soiling his Belstaff with his suicide had irked Sherlock more than he had cared to admit. He had been glad to see it again after two years and even happier to see they had been able to get the stains out.

“And?” John prompted him. “What did Violet say about the ‘new’ Moriarty?”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared. “While I still maintain that profiling is an imprecise method to use for solving crimes, a pseudoscience really,” he sighed. “She does make valid points and actually made a startlingly accurate deduction.”

“And that is?” John found his patience thinning. He now wished Violet could be there now, to act as a buffer between him and Sherlock.

“This Moriarty needs an audience, just like Jim did.”

“Jim didn’t have an audience on the rooftop,” John gritted his teeth.

“Oh,” Sherlock gave John a look he couldn’t quite interpret. His eyes shone with a strange mixture of pity and frustration. “He did. The snipers. Me. You, on the pavement. He knew you’d come back. He knew you better than I did. He knew you’d come back. He wanted you to watch.”

John felt sick. He sat down on the bed, next to Sherlock.

He felt Sherlock take his hand. For a weird, wild moment, he thought Sherlock was trying to hold his hand, like they were an actual couple.

He opened his mouth to yell at him, to shout, “Stop it!” But before he did so, he felt several hard candies being pressed into his hand. “You haven’t eaten since London. Your blood-sugar is probably low. Apologies for not observing until now,” Sherlock murmured.
“Thanks,” John dropped his eyes to his hand, feeling like an utter arse. Sherlock had already let him go and had bounded off of the bed to resume his pacing. As John un-wrapped the crinkly foil, he found himself smiling and shaking his head. Whenever she accompanied them to crime scenes, Violet had started carrying sweets in her handbag in anticipation of Sherlock “forgetting” to eat. She must have put sweets in his coat pockets before they left for Paris.

As he popped a peppermint into his mouth, John asked, “So what are we doing here then?”

“Waiting,” Sherlock stopped pacing then flounced off.

“Waiting… waiting for what… oh God,” John groaned then bounded off the bed. “YOU ARSE!” He shouted after Sherlock as he stormed out of the bedroom. “You want to wait here for this Sara Gov-whatever to come back for the memory stick and key, aren’t you?”

“No,” Sherlock commenced filling the kettle. “Tea?”

“Tea? What? NO. Sherlock,” John stomped into the kitchen, gripping the iPad tightly. “I am not going to sit here and sip tea and wait for a bad guy to come back here!”

“Fine. You can stand there and sip tea. There’s no milk though. Pity. Ah well.” Sherlock plugged the kettle in, selected an apple from the bowl of fruit. Tossing the fruit to John, he added, “Sara Govmux will not return for the memory stick.” As John caught the apple (nearly dropping Violet’s iPad as he did so) Sherlock said, “She’ll come back for her payment. She didn’t have time to collect her fee.” Sherlock turned to the wine chiller and opened it, taking out a bottle then putting it back inside. He repeated this two more times until he finally grunted, “And what self-respecting Parisian would stock a wine chiller with an Italian wine?” Smirking, he tipped the bottle upside. Purplish liquid appeared to rush to the neck of the bottle. “Impressive,” he ran his fingers over the bottle, stroking the glass, rubbing his thumb over the cork. “Clever, but not clever enough, for me anyway,” Sherlock peeled the label back carefully then twisted the bottom of the wine bottle as if he was opening a pickle jar.

John’s jaw dropped when the bottom of the wine bottle popped open but no liquid gushed out.

Sherlock’s long fingers dipped inside the bottle and fished out a thick roll of green bills. “American currency,” Sherlock held the roll to his nose and inhaled sharply. “Not counterfeit bills, either.” He held the roll of dollars close to his eyes. “Thirty one-hundred dollar bills, which doesn’t sound like much unless Sara has plans to relocate somewhere where the American dollar has a higher value, a stronger buying power, most likely Mexico,” Sherlock delicately re-inserted the money back inside the wine bottle. He screwed the bottom back shut, smoothed the label back down again and slipped the bottle back into the chiller. “Shut your mouth John, unless you plan on eating that whole apple in one bite.”

“Err, right,” John hadn’t realized his jaw was hanging open. He crunched down and swallowed the last bit of the peppermint sweet then bit into the apple. It was crisp and juicy and delicious. Wiping the juice from his mouth with the back of his hand, John asked “What if she’s dangerous?”

The kettle whistled as Sherlock gave John a withering look. “I think you and I are used to dangerous women by now, don’t you think?”

“Right,” John muttered. “So we wait for Sara to come back for her money and interrogate her about the Letter?”

“Mm,” Sherlock popped tea bags into the ebony black mugs and poured the boiling water over them. “That’s one of the possibilities, yes.”
“Do I even want to know the other possibilities?” John retreated to the sofa and sank down.

“Probably not,” Sherlock carried the two mugs of tea over and sat next to John. “Again, no milk,” he reminded John as he held out one of the mugs.

John put the iPad on the coffee table and took the mug. Blowing on it, he said “After living with you so long, I’m used to not taking milk with my tea and coffee, thank you very much.”

“Well, fortunately for you, Mary has time to buy milk in-between murders and gestation,” Sherlock sniped back.

“Hey now,” John growled. “That was a bit mean, even for you.” He paused then added, “And she hasn’t murdered anyone since The Copper Beaches.”

Sherlock and John glared at each other over their tea mugs. Then started giggling like schoolboys.

“Sherlock, we can’t giggle about my homicidal wife!”

“I should get exclusive rights to giggle about your homicidal wife since I was one of her victims!”

“Yeah, well, maybe Mary’s an assassin but at least I’m not shackled up with an American.”

“John, that was just rude.”

But both men started laughing again.

“OK, OK,” John put the mug of cooling tea down to wipe tears of mirth from his eyes. “Let’s focus. Do you have any idea where the Letter could possibly be now?” He reached for the iPad, curious about the files he had just downloaded.

“Three ideas at the moment,” Sherlock sipped at his tea as John opened the file. “But determining which idea is the correct one requires more data, which is why I sincerely hope Sara is the one who does come back tonight.”

Munching on the apple again, John garbled as he kept his eyes trained on the iPad, “Do you think Sara G. would know where the Letter is now?”

“Most likely not, however Sara will know people. Not their real names of course, but their aliases, their appearances, meeting places. That is, of course, assuming Sara does come back tonight, of course.”

But John was only half-listening to Sherlock now. The file had opened and John started scrolling through the various photographs. The pictures were horrifically familiar. “Sherlock…”

“While it would make sense for either Moriarty or the MI-6 mole to come instead of Sara, those possibilities are remote, quite possibly even nonexistent. Moriarty, for the reasons I had just explained to you. It’s simply not dramatic enough for Moriarty to come tonight.”

“Sherlock,” John tried again, his voice a bit louder and more insistent.

“As for the mole, well, obvious, false information was planted to lead MI-6 into believing that the mole was in Paris, when in reality, the mole is in London. They are completely off the mark in their pursuit,” Sherlock rolled his eyes. “It is not an agent who is leaking secrets to the Red-headed League. It’s someone they interact with everyday, but is all but invisible. Someone who has access to
MI-6 buildings, to their offices and computers, but someone actual agents wouldn’t consider a threat. Someone in the janitorial staff, a housekeeper of sorts.”

“Yes, that’s very well and good bu-”

Sherlock rattled on, as he was prone to do when on a roll: “So if not the mole or Moriarty or Sara, who will come? Most likely the mole’s right hand will make some sort of an appearance. After all, the mole cannot carry on alone. Back-up is required in order for the true identity of the mole hidden. So, if Sara doesn’t appear, then the Mole’s assistant will indubitably panic, make a mistake and show his hand.”

“Sherlock,” John barked. Startled, Sherlock swiveled his head over to John, who was holding up the iPad. “You need to look at this. Now.”

Sherlock’s eyes dropped down then widened.

The picture showing on the iPad screen was not just clearly Violet, but obviously Violet Hunter. No make-up to hide her freckles. No fake glasses to hide her eyes. Her chestnut curls framing her panicked face. No hat or hood or scarf covering her head.

She carried two motorcycle helmets.

And was wearing… “Why is she wearing my coat? I don’t recall giving it to her.”

“Because somebody threw it down from the roof at us when we reached the hospital,” John pointed at Violet’s image. Continuing to tap repeatedly on the mobile’s screen while Sherlock looked bemused, John explained, “This had to have been taken the day you were kidnapped by Anderson when you went off like a tit to go rescue those immigrant kids. Violet and I had received an audio tape of you reading a poem. It was a clue, leading us to the roof at Bart’s.”

“Roof-tops, roof-tops, what do you cover?” Sherlock muttered, remembering. Reading that poem was the last clear memory of that day before Jack Woodley had pumped him full of drugs, the good drugs. “Sad folk, bad folk, and many a glowing lover…” then he sucked in a breath and his mouth formed a perfect O, “Kitty Riley.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“She was murdered John,” Sherlock stood up, nearly spilling his tea.

“Yeah, I’m aware, I remember,” John stood up as well, the half-eaten apple in his hand forgotten, but the iPad was not. “Lestrade said she had been butchered and all the gadgets and devices in her home had been stolen.”

“Including, her cameras,” Sherlock reminded John through gritted teeth. “She had also been stalking me, despite the restraining order,” Sherlock set his mug down on the coffee table with a thud and started texting furiously on his mobile.

“Who are you texting?”

Instead of answering him, Sherlock said, “Kitty lost everything when we won the libel court case. Mycroft insisted on pursuing after I officially returned from my Great Hiatus. She got sacked and no other media outlet would touch her. She had no money, lost her flat and had to move back in with her parents. She became desperate. So she started stalking me in order to get a picture of me and Violet together, to sell it to the tabloids in order to recoup her financial losses.” Sherlock shook his head and stuffed his mobile back into his coat pocket. “Stupid, repellant woman, she lost more than
her flat and life savings because of her folly, she lost her life.”

“Oh God,” John felt weak in the knees. “They found out she had the pictures, this picture. They killed her for it. Now the one thing that can undo Violet’s cover story, Moriarty has…”

“No, we have it,” Sherlock hissed, leaping to his feet. “Destroy it, John, now. The memory stick, do it now then wipe the file from the iPad.”

John fished the memory stick out of his pocket. He was about to drop it to the floor when there was a sharp knock on the door. "Police!" a brusque French voice announced. ["Ouvrez la porte"], M. Holmes, Dr. Watson."

“Jesus!” Now John leapt to his feet. “Why didn’t Lucas call? Should I tell him to call Mycroft?” John reached for the Bluetooth clip on his ear, but Sherlock seized him by the wrist and minutely shook his head.

“I was right, He panicked.”

“Who panicked?” John was feeling quite panicky himself as the knocking and the shouts in French increased But then he felt his knees starting to buckle again as he put two and two together, “Oh God, no. Lucas.”

Sherlock nodded. “The mole’s right hand,” he snarled then slapped the memory stick out of John’s other hand and crushed it with the heel of his shoe. “Do not open that door,” he commanded as he snatched the iPad out of John’s hands. “But do not resist arrest when they enter.” Sherlock shouted over his shoulder as he rushed to the lavatory with the iPad.

“What?” Despite his wobbly knees, John managed to stay upright. Then he heard a toilet flush. John groaned, realizing Sherlock had dropped Violet’s iPad into the toilet. She is going to murder him this time for sure.

In a flash, Sherlock was beside him again. John felt Sherlock tug on the cuff of his coat. “Don’t fight them, John but don’t answer any questions. Play the ignorant foreigner card.”

When the French police kicked in the door, John mimicked Sherlock by dropping to his knees and putting his hands on his head.

“Just don’t resist,” Sherlock repeated as the police started patting them down. “Cooperate.”

As John was being slammed to the floor and handcuffed after the French police found his gun while frisking him, Violet sat in Mrs. Hudson’s frilly lounge. She felt more than just a bit suffocated since the small lounge was crammed full of overstuffed armchairs, plus the sofa, the coffee table, the outdated television set and the footrests. Not to mention there were tatted doilies draped over every possible surface and Victorian style wallpaper even uglier than what covered the walls in 221B. But as ugly as the pink armchairs were, they were blissfully comfortable.

Gladstone had come to the same conclusion about the matching ugly sofa, having made himself at home there. Mrs. Hudson had made a token protest, but slipped him a dog treat when she thought Violet wasn’t watching.

He is going to get fat between Sherlock feeding him table scraps and Mrs. Hudson sneaking him treats all the time, Violet thought affectionately as Mrs. Hudson brought her a mug of cocoa.

“Thank you, Mrs. Hudson,” Violet Smith took the mug from the landlady just as her mobile pinged.
“Oh, is that John?” Mrs. Hudson asked as she crossed over to her chair.

“No,” Violet’s forehead crinkled as her narrow brows furrowed. “It’s from Sherlock.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson picked up the remote and turned the television volume down, as if the noise would distract Violet from reading the message. “Is he asking you for bail money?” she quipped as she sat down. But upon seeing Violet’s face, skin ashy and lips pressed tightly together, she demanded quietly, “What’s wrong, dear?”

“Mrs. Hudson,” Violet’s voice was also quiet, “Do you have any place you could go tonight? Your sister perhaps?”

“She lives outside of London and it’s a frightfully long drive; why do you ask?” Mrs. Hudson said in a voice that clearly communicated she knew why Violet was asking.

“It may not be a good idea for you to stay here at the moment,” Violet still did not raise her voice but her hands shook. “Perhaps you should go visit your sister for a few days.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Hudson jutted her chin up. “I’m in charge of this property and I’m not leaving.”

“Of course,” Violet Smith demurred while Violet Hunter thought Stubborn old woman, I will carry you out of here if that’s what it takes. Sherlock will kill me if anything happens to you.

“But, if you need to step out for a bit, I understand. You young people can only stand the company of the elderly for so long,” Mrs. Hudson said tactfully. “I can keep an eye on Gladstone while you’re gone.”

“I wouldn’t feel right about leaving you,” Violet insisted.

But Mrs. Hudson still kept her chin stubbornly up. “Sherlock wouldn’t forgive me if anything happened to you. Go,” she tilted her head towards her door. “And I’ll see you Monday. We’re still going to your doctor’s appointment, young lady.”

Violet stood up and reached inside her comfortable white jumper. She drew out a silver dog whistle that hung around her neck on a silver chain. Never having gotten her dog whistle back from John, she had eventually gone out and bought a new one. She looped the chain over her head and crossed over to Mrs. Hudson, holding it out to her. “If anyone threatens you, blow on this,” she told the petite, elderly woman. “Gladstone will attack the assailant. He’s a former police dog.”

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson looked at the Alsatian snoozing on her sofa with new respect.

“And no more treats, he’s getting stout,” Violet placed the dog whistle in Mrs. Hudson’s outstretched hand.

“I’ll see you Monday,” Mrs. Hudson curled her fingers around the dog whistle and tilted her head again towards the door.

Still Violet paused, feeling guilty, “Or maybe I can drive you to your sister’s.”

But Mrs. Hudson vehemently shook her head. “I’m not leaving my home,” she snapped. “Besides, with my hip, I’d only slow you down.” She softened her tone. “I’m nearly seventy years old, dear. If it’s my time, I’ll turn up on my toes whether I’m here or I’m on the run with you. Go on now and I’ll see you Monday.”

Violet brushed a quick kiss on her crepe paper cheek and whispered “Thank you,” and darted out of
her flat, clutching her mobile.

Her heart pounded, threatening to hammer its way out of her very chest. Her skin was covered with gooseflesh and her mouth was completely dry. Her throat tightened involuntarily as the only thought going through her head over and over and over was *Run. Run run run run run…*

She fumbled with her keys and pushed the door to 221B once she managed to unlock it. She twisted the lock on the doorknob, slid the chain-lock shut and also shot the deadbolt home. Using her mobile as a torch, she darted into Sherlock’s bedroom, stripping off the white sweater. Standing in just her black, cotton leggings and socks, she threw open Sherlock’s wardrobe and snatched his good black dress shirt, buttoning it up but not bothering to tuck it in. She also reached deep into the back of the wardrobe and pulled out her old rucksack. She hadn’t touched it since her flight from her old flat on Hartwill Street, before the bomb in her kitchen had exploded.

She dug into the rucksack now and pulled out a black balaclava. She jammed it on her head, wearing it like a stocking cap. She hastily yet carefully tucked her chestnut hair up into it until not a lock showed. She took off her fake eyeglasses and dropped them into the bag.

She rushed back into the lounge. Still refusing to turn any lights on, she grabbed her black pea-coat that hung on a peg next to where Sherlock usually hung up his coat. By the glow of her mobile, she found her way up to John’s room.

Still using her mobile as her light source, Violet put on her shoulder holster then slid her gun into the holster after loading a fresh clip into it. She then threw on a man’s navy cardigan. She had long suspected it was John’s and it had somehow gotten left behind one of the times he had moved out. Since the temperature was still incredibly frigid out, she threw a pair of black trousers on over her leggings then pulled on a pair of black motorcycle boots. She wrapped one of her dark blue scarves around her throat.

She bit her lip. Then with a shake of her head and a whispered “Sorry, Michael,” she removed her pretty gold wristwatch she had gotten from her brother on her thirtieth birthday. The wristwatch that Sherlock had put a GPS device inside… a GPS device that Mycroft could access, if he wanted.

Then she finally pulled on her pea-coat, belting it around her waist. Because of the layers of clothing and the gun holster, the rucksack was a bit snug and she looked thicker around the waist than she really was. But the discomfort of it was tolerable and Violet really didn’t care how she looked. Just so long as she could blend into the crowd.

She pulled on her leather gloves, snatched up her mobile then stood on John’s bed, reaching for the ladder that led to the skylight. Minutes later, she crawled across the roof of 221 Baker Street and down the precarious fire escape.

Still, her heart pounded. Still every fiber of her being screamed *Run run run run run…*

*But where?* She thought as her boots hit the ground of the alley behind 221 Baker Street.

As she crept towards the row of skips behind the block of flats, Violet knew she absolutely was not going to do as Sherlock suggested and go to Mary’s. She still didn’t fully trust Mary, even though she finally understood why Mary made the decisions she had. Also, if the Red Headed League did have tangible evidence of Special Agent Violet Hunter’s existence, she did not want to lead them to Mary, especially since she was pregnant again. John would not forgive her if Violet did something stupid that would cause harm to his unborn baby.

Mycroft of course, was completely out of the question. She didn’t need to be giving him more
leverage and she definitely didn’t want to owe him anything. Plus, she had no idea where he actually lived.

Looking over her shoulder surreptitiously, Violet pushed against one of the skips. It groaned but it moved fairly easily, revealing something bike-shaped underneath a dirty, smelly tarp. She couldn’t help but smile as she yanked on the tarp off her beloved Triumph Tiger 800XC.

When she had crashed her motorcycle last spring, she had left it at the scene of the accident, assuming it had been totaled. But it had miraculously re-appeared, looking shiny and new, behind 221 Baker Street towards the end of last September.

One nice autumn day, Violet had come home early from her office job at John’s clinic. Upon seeing Sherlock in His Chair with his fingers steepled, she had started to ask him if he wanted her help on his latest case. Instead, she had ended up screaming hysterically when she saw a hairy tarantula running up his arm... and another one sitting right on top of his curly head like a horrible, hairy brown bowler hat with legs.

Violet had immediately grabbed Sherlock’s riding crop. She had started swinging, aiming for his arm and head, trying to smash the horrid creatures. Sherlock had managed to miss most of her blows and put one of the spiders back in its glass case... but the other had gotten away, scuttling across the carpet, moving all eight of its disgustingly hairy legs as fast as possible.

“You scared off my pet. You get to have a pet, why can’t I have a pet?” he had sulked.

“SPIDERS ARE NOT PETS!”

When she had woken up in the middle of the night, feeling something… crawling… across her belly, her shrieks had woken up not only Sherlock, but the new tenants in 221C, Mrs. Hudson and Gladstone… who leapt to his mistress’ defense and promptly devoured the eight-legged monster in one gulp.

“Why does your dog keep eating my pets? He ate my koi fish last summer,” Sherlock had sulked as Mrs. Hudson tried to soothe a simultaneously infuriated and terrified Violet.

“SPIDERS ARE NOT BLOODY PETS!” she had screamed at him until her throat was raw.

“There, there, poppet,” Mrs. Hudson had said while patting Violet’s back. “And tomorrow, we’ll start looking for a good home for Tallulah.”

“YOU NAMED IT?” She had barely been able to maintain her fake British accent.

“She was my pet, OF COURSE I named her!”

“Sherlock, dear, I think you should sleep on my sofa tonight,” Mrs. Hudson had murmured as Sherlock gazed affectionately at the surviving arachnid crawling around its glass case.

The following day, Violet had nursed a raging case of laryngitis and Sherlock had alternated between moping and fuming. Mrs. Hudson had kindly volunteered to take Gladstone to the emergency veterinarian clinic since no one was really sure the effects eating a tarantula had could have on a dog.

But mercifully Tallulah the Tarantula had been adopted by Sherlock’s little protégé, Archie. The boy had been delighted… his mother, not so much.

Violet’s repaired motorcycle appeared behind the building a few days later.
Sherlock had ingeniously figured out a way to hide her motorcycle close to the flat. It wasn’t just hidden behind the skip, but it was also chained to an old hitching post, a forgotten relic from the horse-and-carriage days. Violet knew repairing her motorbike was his way of apologizing to her. Violet also knew Sherlock understood how important it was for her to be able to blow off steam in a way that was a bit of out of character for “Miss Smith.”

He probably also deduced she may need to make a quick getaway.

But where to go? Violet thought again as she wheeled her Triumph out after unlocking the chain. As she pushed her motorcycle down the alleyway, she fought to keep hysteria at bay…

(... they have my picture... they have my picture... they have my picture...)

“Pull it together, Hunter,” she ordered herself as she swung a leg over the bike seat. “They don’t have you. Not yet. Not today.”

She turned on the ignition and revved the engine, feeling the power of the motorcycle vibrate throughout her body.

Clumsily, she dug the prepaid mobile she used to communicate with Mycroft out of her coat pocket. She was glad it was an old-school mobile that actually had a physical keyboard instead of a touch screen. She really hadn’t wanted to take her gloves off.

She hit the speed-dial number for the British Government.

“It’s late, Violet. This better be important.”

“Additional surveillance is needed for 221 Baker Street and Sherlock and John need bail money, Parisian police collared them for a B and E.”

“A B and what?”

“Breaking and entering.”

A heavy sigh, “They haven’t even been in Paris for twenty-four hours. Very well, I’ll tell Luc-”

“No,” Violet cut him off. “Not Lucas.”

“Oh?” Then another heavy sigh. “I see.”

“He’s not the MI-6 mole, but he’s working with him. Or her.”

“Proof?”

“I don’t know. I just got a text from Sherlock not to trust Lucas and… the words died on Violet’s tongue as the panic started building again.

(... they have my picture... they have my picture... they have my picture...)

“And?”

“And this is exactly why I should have gone with them,” she spat into the mobile. “Get them out of jail and back to London, now. Before this blows up in all of our faces,” and she hung up on him. For good measure, she turned off the prepaid mobile.

Ignoring the pang of guilt for leaving her watch, her dog and Mrs. Hudson behind, she pulled the
balaclava down to protect the rest of her face from the bitter chill. Belatedly, she realized that in her rush she had forgotten her motorcycle helmet.

“Who wants to live forever,” she sighed to herself as she merged into traffic and made her way down Baker Street. As Baker Street merged into Gower Street, she knew where she was going.

It felt liberating, to be inaccessible, even though she knew it was only for a little while.

Meanwhile, still in his “office” overlooking the Thames, Mycroft glowered at the glowing screen of his mobile. “Damn her,” he growled as he punched another speed-dial number.

“Whossis?” a groggy voice answered.

“You know who this is,” he spat with no preamble at all. “And you know who my brother’s fiancée is,” he squeezed his eyes tightly shut and massaged his brow.

“Yeah. And?”

“Find her.”

Chapter End Notes

Merci beaucoup to Lucanael Del Sayan again for helping me with my crap French. Everyone should check out her Harry Potter fics if any of you are in that fandom. Also thanks to cadogan not just for beta'ing but also for her comments, especially the comments for this chapter. I feel like I should share some of her commentary, I was deaded when I read them! :^)
Pranayama

Chapter Summary

“Violet,” his voice was low and uncompromising.
“What?”
“Breathe...”

Also... everyone, meet C. Auguste Dupin.

Happy Sunday :^)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Nine: Pranayama

27 November 2015
Paris, France
Friday
Time Unknown

The only certainty that existed for John was that he was still in Paris.

Everything had gone straight to hell the minute the police officer found John’s gun. Despite following Sherlock’s strict instructions not to resist, the police manhandled John anyway. The handcuffs were just tight enough to be uncomfortable, but not tight enough to completely cut off circulation. The two police officers frog-marching him out of the holiday flat had made sure that John stumbled and bumped into every protruding surface possible.

And John doubted very much it was an accident he hit his head when he was pushed into the waiting squad car.

Sherlock, of course, had not followed his own advice. The minute the police started shoving John around, Sherlock had started shouting French obscenities at them. At least, John assumed they were obscenities, judging by the French police’s reactions. But Sherlock had kept dragging his heels and fighting against the cops, cursing at them in French, while assuring John in English everything was fine, just fine.

Still, John had felt fairly calm. Annoyed, yes, most definitely, angry even, but for the most part John had felt unruffled. He had the permit from MI-6 which was supposed to legalize his carrying a weapon overseas. The police officers who had arrested him were young lads, fresh out of the academy. More than likely they just wanted to show John how big their dicks were. Sherlock would ring Mycroft and more than likely they would be released.

The panic didn’t start until another squad car pulled up and the cop tried stuffing Sherlock into that car and not with John.

“Sherlock,” John had called out, unable to keep the alarm out of his voice.
“John,” Sherlock had pushed back against the police officer as he tried to force Sherlock into the squad car, “Everything’s fine. Just tell them the truth. You don’t speak French, we came to have a look-around and we didn’t find anything important. Oh alright, I’m getting in, you cretin,” he had snapped at the police officer who let him go only to pull out his police baton. “And don’t pretend you don’t understand English. Your mother is Australian. You grew up in Brisbane.”

“How… how did you know that?” the police officer’s jaw had dropped open in astonishment. He probably would have happily stood there listening to Sherlock explain his deduction but the lad’s superior officer barked an order at him in French. Sherlock rolled his eyes and got into the backseat of the police car the best he could with his hands cuffed behind him.

“Sherlock,” John had said again, desperately this time. That was when the impatient superior officer seized him by the back of his coat, like a cat grabbing a kitten by its scruff. John saw stars as his head cracked against the car frame and before he knew it, he was in the backseat, lying on his side. Fortunately he didn’t feel any bleeding and he didn’t feel nauseous, but he knew he was going to have a whopper of a bruise or even a goose-egg tomorrow.

His head aching, he stayed on his side. He now regretted that choice. He hadn’t been able to see where he was being taken. When the car stopped, John had no idea where he was. He felt short of breath as the car door opened and a new police officer told him in very broken English to get out of the car.

John nearly fell over as he did so, but the cop who had originally thrust him into the police car righted him. Then he was all but dragged into a building John didn’t recognize from any holiday blog or Forbes Travel Guide. His chest started to ache as they took him instead through what had to be a back door, but to what building, John had no idea.

The cops had hustled him into a sterile room where two more unsmiling cops wearing latex gloves waited for him. He was frisked again, but he wasn’t fingerprinted or photographed and they didn’t make him strip. John thanked any and all Gods who may exist for that small mercy. But the unsmiling cops took his coat, his scarf, his watch, his mobile, his belt, his keys and his shoes. They gave him a pair of ugly canvas shoes that were too big and didn’t have any laces.

They also took his MI-6 permit, his British identification card and his passport, along with his wallet and little notebook and pen.

The unsmiling cops finally cracked a grin when they located the French-to-English translation book Mary had given him before he had left for this horrible trip. But they did more than smile. They laughed at it, clearly making fun of him. Anger flared up within John, stopping the budding panic attack.

But before John could ask any questions, or ask if he could make a telephone call, he was hauled from the sterile room to a very narrow, cramped gaol cell.

There was no other word for it. There was a metal bench, a stainless steel loo and a tiny sink that only lukewarm water slowly dripped out of the tap. There was also a roll of lavatory paper that obviously had gotten wet at one time and then left to dry. There were no windows. The door didn’t have bars, but it was smooth and metallic and John could hear a heavy-duty deadbolt slamming home.

The walls were cinder blocks and the floors were concrete with a drain in the middle. That ominous, rusted drain triggered John’s panic to come racing back. He had sat down when he started shivering, struggling to keep it under control.
It's alright, it’s alright, he had told himself, like a mantra, like a prayer. Sherlock said it was going to be alright. He can fix this, he will fix this. He will get us out of here…

But his hands had continued to shake, his head hurt and his chest continued feeling very tight.

Then at irregular intervals, the door would fly open. A variety of men had come in, sometimes just one in a police officer’s uniform, sometimes two or three in posh three-piece suits. All of them screamed abuse at him in French. Over and over John just said he didn’t understand French. He had also haltingly asked: “Parlez-vous anglais, s’il vous plait?” doing his best to get the pronunciation right. Once, he had asked for a glass of water. But no one would even oblige him that small courtesy.

John tried and tried to keep calm but as the time stretched on, his resolve started failing him. Panic spread through his chest like a raven stretching out its wings, preparing to take flight. There had been more than one time he had nearly become undone but he had swallowed hard, vowing not to cry like a big girl’s blouse in front of these bastards.

Then a most unwanted memory demanded John to acknowledge its presence: Violet kidnapped by Jack Woodley. The notorious ‘Silver Fox’ had tied her up then laid her onto the floor, covering her face up with a towel. A former FBI agent, she had known what was next.

John had no idea how she had kept it together. How she hadn’t fallen to bits when Jack had started pouring the water over her covered face.

She didn’t… the icy realization cut though him like a bone-chilling winter wind. The insomnia, the hand-tremors… she’s traumatized.

(… no John, that’s you…)

He looked down at his hands. They were both shaking. That had never happened to him before. It had always been his left hand, his dominant hand that trembled.

He had to bite back a scream. Sherlock, please…

Part of him hoped Sherlock was just fucking around with him, like he had been at Baskerville. But the other part of him knew Sherlock wasn’t messing about this time.

That made it worse somehow.

He tried to focus on just breathing, but then another bloody interrogator came in, suit-and-tie.

John endured another bout of screaming, arm waving and finger-pointing. This time, John stood up and shouted back “I don’t bloody speak French!”

All that got him was a punch in the jaw. But mercifully he was left alone after that.

John slumped down onto the metal bench again, holding his shaking hand to his bleeding lip. Then he unconsciously drew his knees up to his chest, making himself small like Sherlock did when he was upset. He told himself, ordered himself to breathe. He rested his forehead on his knees and closed his eyes. He tried to take deep, cleansing breaths like Violet had taught him…

It’s called pranayama, John… deep breaths through the nose… it really does help…

But his treacherous, overloaded brain flashed back to last May, when he and Sherlock rescued Violet from Jack Woodley… Sherlock kneeling down in front of Violet, undoing the bonds that tethered her to a chair… her face bloody, her hair and clothes wet from the water-boarding.
Breathe, Sherlock had ordered her as he took out a snowy-white handkerchief from his coat pocket and gently held it to her bleeding cheek… You’re going into shock. Pranayama, do it now… John, help her… John, help her… John, help her…

John tried again to take a deep breath. He tried to remember helping Violet. John ordered himself to remember he was the one who gave the command to Gladstone to attack Jack.

But then John remembered Rucastle’s mistreated and malnourished mastiff attacking him. The searing pain in his upper arm and in his ankle… the blood soaking through his clothes…

He opened his eyes and saw the battlefields of Afghanistan. The sand and the blood…

He immediately squeezed his eyes shut again… and saw Sherlock’s back. His bare back, striped with puckered pink scars that looked like whip marks… Oh my God, your back. Jesus.

It's nothing John, Sherlock had scowled, freshly home from hospital after Mary had shot him. Stop gawping and hand me my pyjamas and dressing-gown…

John knew damn well those marks weren’t nothing and a new fear struck him just as hard as the last interrogator had punched him: If he hit me for just shouting the obvious… oh God… Sherlock… the man who will outlive God to have the last word…

As if he hadn’t been afraid before, the panic finally reached its crescendo as John’s imagination spiraled out of control. Recollections of horrors he had witnessed in Afghanistan bled into memories of The Fall and the aftermath of Sherlock being shot, producing fantastical horrors of his own imaginings of what could be happening to Sherlock right now.

He covered his face with both his hands now, whispering “No, no, no, please, please, please, don’t hurt him, don’t hurt him…”

Just as he was certain he was going to start hyperventilating, the door swung open again with a metallic clang. His head immediately snapped up.

“Anthea,” he gasped, almost afraid to hope. Terrified he was seeing things again.

“Yes, John,” she nodded.

John felt his bones turn into rubber as joy rushed through him upon seeing the woman standing in the doorway. “Oh thank God,” he scrubbed his hand over his face.

John wouldn’t have ever thought he’d feel joy to see Anthea.

She scrutinized him, eerily similar to Sherlock and Mycroft’s severe and intrusive gazes. Then she fished her ever-present Blackberry out of her trench coat pocket and quickly thumbed a text, probably to Mycroft. “Come on,” she held out his shoes. “You’ll miss the show otherwise.”

“Show?” John shakily got to his feet and made himself hurry to Anthea, in case someone changed their mind and decided to lock him up again. “What show?”

She lifted her eyebrows as John kicked off the awful canvas prison shoes and shoveled his feet back into his worn, brown shoes. “Do you really think Sherlock is going to leave quietly?”

“Right,” John tried to tie his shoes but his fingers had turned all into thumbs.

Then Anthea was kneeling down in front him. “Let me, Dr. Watson.”
“I’m perfectly capable—” John started to say but then looked, really looked at Anthea for the first time. Not just as a pretty face and not just as one of Mycroft’s drones. He made himself observe her and saw no condescension or pity in her eyes. Only understanding.

She placed her steady hands over his tremulous ones. Her nails were manicured and lacquered a pretty feminine rosy-pink, but her palms were rough and callused.

Another memory came rushing back, from the first day they had met Violet. Sherlock had examined her hands, noting several calluses, particularly the one on her right finger, indicating her experience with firearms.

John finally realized Anthea was no ordinary PA.

“Please,” Anthea added, not breaking her stare from John.

So he rose and sat back down on the metal bench, letting the young woman tie his laces as if he were a four-year-old child again. As soon as his laces were neatly tied however, he stood up on his own and muttered, “Get me out of here.”

She nodded and let him walk out of the cell under his own steam. But he immediately had to lean against the wall to orientate himself, “I need a minute after all,” he felt his face heat up. Hating how she was witnessing him after suffering a PTSD-induced panic attack, knowing she would report it to Mycroft. Even though she wasn’t a mindless, texting drone, she still belonged to him.

A Parisian police officer approached them just then, giving some sort of orders in French. Anthea, putting her hand on John’s shoulder, politely told the cop, “He needs a moment.” The cop made the mistake of trying to argue with her. She snapped back at him, “He needs a moment!” Then she let loose a tirade in machine-gun-fast French that had the cop pale-faced and backpedaling. When the cop left them in peace, Anthea said, “Ready?”

John nodded. Then he remembered how utterly rude he was to her when she had picked them up at 221 Baker Street. “Anthea, yesterday, at the flat, I was… I’m really sor—”

“It’s forgotten, John. Truly,” Anthea said briskly, letting her hand drop from his shoulder. “Water under the bridge. Shall we go rescue the Police nationale from Sherlock Holmes?”

“No,” John felt his nerves steadying, felt his sense of humor slowly creeping back into him. “I would like to watch him torment them for a while.”

Anthea smiled a genuine smile that reached her eyes. “This way,” she started walking.

As they walked down the hallway, very faintly, John could hear the most beautiful sound in the entire world: Sherlock Holmes tearing someone a new arsehole. It was music to John’s ears.

“So what’n the hell happened?” John whispered to Anthea as Sherlock’s voice grew louder and louder the closer they got to the end of the hall. “After signing all those papers and getting that special permit, we were still arrested? And I thought the Police nationale were on-board, even if they didn’t know exactly why Sherlock and I are here?”

“Lucas set you and Sherlock up,” Anthea’s voice became tight with anger. It disheartened John to hear someone as young as she was sound so bitter. “If Sherlock hadn’t been able to fire off a text to ‘Miss Smith’ before the police burst into the flat, you both might have disappeared without a trace, I’m afraid.”
John shivered. “Anthea, I’m beginning to think that this Letter is more than just an ill-timed love letter between *Two households, both alike in dignity*...”


“Is he OK, Sherlock?” John burst out, not able to help himself. “Did they hurt him, did they?”

“John, relax, he’s fine. They slapped him around a bit, no worse than they did you. Besides, I think everyone fantasizes about punching him in the face at least once or twice.”

John opened his mouth to argue, then snapped it shut when he realized, she was right.

In fact, he had made fantasy reality. More than once.

“But rest assured it’s nothing like what he endured during the Great Hiatus.” She rushed to reassure him then produced a slightly cheeky grin. “Can’t you tell by listening to him? He’s in rare form this morning.”

John listened and then shook his head. “Yeah, but it’s all in French. And morning? What time is it? They took my mobile and my watch and… everything.”

Anthea took her Blackberry out again. “Nine o’clock on the dot, Parisian time.”

Suddenly they both heard Sherlock bellow at the top of his lungs: “AND WHERE IS JOHN WATSON? Your vapid, useless lives will mean even less than what they do now if you do not produce him, in one piece, *at once*.”

“Right, better hurry before he does or says something stupid,” John feigned casualness but couldn’t help but feel deeply touched at Sherlock’s words.

Anthea and John rounded the corner and went up a short flight of stairs, John taking them two at a time. Then his knees threatened to give way again when he saw Sherlock standing at the top of the stairs. Sherlock was sans coat and scarf and his suit jacket was missing as well. His lovely dress shirt was untucked and rumpled. He sported a magnificent bruise on his left cheek that matched his aubergine shirt. Other than that, he seemed perfectly irate and sounded utterly sarcastic and cruel. In other words, he was perfectly fine.

He stood nose-to-nose with Gagnon, who looked dreadfully uncomfortable, as if his pants had shrank two sizes. Next to Gagnon was the superior officer who had bashed John’s forehead against the police car as he was trying to get into the backseat. He also looked nervous as he fidgeted with his belt, continually to adjust it, as if reassuring himself it was still there.

“Sherlock, Sherlock, I’m here, I’m OK,” John called out. Terrified Sherlock might actually throttle the incompetent *Inspecteur général*, he ran up the remaining stairs.

Sherlock whirled around. A split-second flash of relief crossed his face. Only John would have noticed and recognized that tiniest display of emotion. The way the mercurial almond-shaped eyes had widened just slightly, the way his Adam’s apple had bobbed as he swallowed hard. Swallowing down his feelings as he always did. Forcing down his emotions so his massive intellect and ruthless logic could take precedence.

“Ah, excellent,” Sherlock said crisply as John stood next to him. “That order of business is concluded. I do believe you have something to say, Inspector Clouseau?”
Gagnon bridled at the very obvious insult, but in painstaking slow English, he looked at John and said: “Dr. Watson, my deepest apologies for any mistreatment you may have suffered at the hands of my men. It was all a misunderstanding. You will be… compensated for your trouble.”

“Compensated!” John spluttered, “You’re going to buy me off? Are you barking mad?”

“I think compensation will have to be at least five-hundred thousand euros, don’t you agree, John?” Sherlock clasped his hands behind his back.

“Five hundred…?” Gagnon’s mouth dropped open.

Sherlock leaned forward. “Don’t make me suggest more. But, if you don’t think that’s sufficient compensation, well, I’m sure John can sell his story to the Daily Mail or one of the other British tabloids. At this point, he probably would have to, in order to pay for the damages he’s sustained by you. Lost wages, mental suffering, et cetera, et cetera,” Sherlock sighed.

“Fine, fine,” Gagnon took off his eyeglasses. He fished a handkerchief out of his pocket. Cleaning his glasses, he muttered, “Yes, I agree that is more than adequate compensation for his troubles. Then warily he added, “And you? What do you require for compensation?”

“Oh, I’ll stay out of your way, Monsieur Holmes,” Gagnon’s promise did not sound helpful at all.

“And our things, our coats and wallets and mobiles and passports, bring them to us at once,” Sherlock straightened, talking as if Gagnon hadn’t said a word. As he tucked in his shirt, he said: “We cannot continue our work while standing here, wasting valuable time and oxygen attempting an intelligent conversation with you. As for you,” he narrowed his eyes at the superior officer who had thumped John’s head against the car.

“Will be reprimanded for his mistreatment of the good doctor,” Gagnon clumsily grabbed the officer by the shoulders, turned him around, issued some sort of order in French and pushed him. After scowling at Sherlock and John, he stalked off, clearly displeased. But as the brutish police officer departed, Gagnon put his glasses back on and grumbled: “Anything else?”

After an awkward beat, Sherlock lifted his black, bushy brows and stared down his nose at Gagnon as if he was some sort of loathsome slug. The Inspecteur général opened his mouth to speak, but John cut across him: “Some silence would be marvelous right about now, yeah?”

Sherlock’s lips quirked up into a grin as Gagnon’s face reddened. There was a deep chuckling behind them all. The Inspecteur général looked over Sherlock’s shoulders and shot a dirty look to whoever was laughing behind them. Frowning, John craned his neck, but was unable to see who Gagnon was scowling at.

Sherlock leaned forward again, but he only waved at Gagnon. Like a child, waving bye-bye.

His face crimson now, Gagnon pivoted and marched away, meaty fists swinging back and forth.

John felt nearly like himself again, but he could feel Sherlock’s eyes on him, taking inventory, cataloging everything he observed. In a vain attempt to distract the Great Detective as well as to keep him from commenting on his cut lip, he turned to Anthea and said: “Thank you again so much for bailing us out. I really mean it.”
“Oh, but I didn’t bail you out,” Anthea had taken out her infernal Blackberry.

“What? But you said…?”

Her thumbs flying over the keypad, she reminded him, “I said if Sherlock hadn’t sent a text to ‘Miss Smith’ before the police burst into the flat, you both would have disappeared. She contacted Mycroft. He sent me to find you two. But someone else had posted bail.”

“What?” John shook his head, wondering if Violet had told Mary and she had wired the bail money over. Or maybe Violet had dipped into the millions she stole from the mobsters. But that didn’t make sense, Neither Violet or Mary had known exactly where John and Sherlock were being held. “Who did bail us out, exactly?”

“I did,” a rich, throaty voice behind Sherlock rumbled.

John turned fully around, looking behind Sherlock so he could properly see their savior. “Um, thanks. And… you are?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes and produced a heavy, heavy sigh.

“I am C. Auguste Dupin,” the man announced, the French accent far more pronounced this time.

“Oh,” John’s eyes widened and he barely closed his mouth in time.

John had expected a pedantic, scholarly type at first, wearing crooked, wire-rimmed spectacles and sporting wild, white hair. After Violet had described Dupin as “bat-shit crazy”, John then had imagined him wearing dirty, mismatched clothes and talking to plants and cats.

This man looked like an aging rock star.

Tall, powerfully-built, he even dwarfed Sherlock by a good two, three inches. Older than Sherlock too, but every line in Dupin’s face was like a crag in a mountain, deep and pronounced. His eyebrows and stubble were salt-and-peppered. He wore a black knit skull-cap and had a diamond stud in his left ear, like the younger kids wore. He also wore stylish sunglasses, a long, black leather coat, black jeans and motorcycle boots. A heather grey scarf was wrapped around his throat. Silver rings adorned almost all of his fingers.

“Um, how… how did you know about… what happened?” John stammered just as a young, blonde man approached them. He had the good looks of a fashion model and the scruffy clothes of a university student who had just pulled an all-nighter. But he still had a smile on his handsome face. He carried John and Sherlock’s coats, as well as two large plastic baggies, containing their mobiles, passports and other personal items.

John noticed, with a bit of relief, one of the bags contained his gun and the clip.

“Later, later,” Dupin waved a negligent hand as the young man made the mistake of approaching Sherlock first. “You need food, rest.”

“We need to get to work,” Sherlock snarled as he reached over the young man’s shoulder and snatched his coat and scarf away from him. He then ripped the baggie containing his iPhone, passport, house-keys and wallet out of the poor young man’s hands in the same way a toddler rips a beloved toy out of another child’s hand.

"Monsieur Holmes, ne voyez-vous pas à quel point votre ami a souffert?" Dupin murmured.
"Il a raison, Sherlock," Anthea added her two cents as she continued to text.

John folded his lips tight, then winced, the cut on his lower lip throbbing. “English, please?” he demanded, tired of being left out of the loop.

“I said, ‘he’s right’,” Anthea kept her eyes on her Blackberry.

Before John could protest further, Dupin said quietly to the young man, “Honoré, bring the car around, please.”

**Honoré… ah, the blogger,** John realized as the young man handed him his coat and the plastic bag holding his personal items. John attempted to say “Thank you,” in French, but Honoré gave him a bright smile and said, “No problem, Dr. Watson,” in oddly accented English. He didn’t sound British, but he didn’t sound American either. **Canadian maybe?** John wondered just as his mobile started ringing. John fumbled around until he was able to fish his mobile out of the plastic bag. “It’s an unknown number, should I answer?”

“It’s Violet,” Sherlock said flatly as he started to walk away from everyone, clearly in a snit.

“Oh shit!” John cried out as the call went to Voice Mail.

Dupin arched an eyebrow as he watched Sherlock pull on his Belstaff and knot his own scarf around his throat. Then Dupin silently followed Sherlock. His boots surprisingly didn’t make a sound as he walked. Anthea, not even lifting her head, walked with Dupin. She texted as her heels clicked loudly on the linoleum floor.

John glared at the backs of his three companions as he quickly put his coat and scarf back on. Then he hit redial, “Violet?”


“We’re fine, everyone’s fine,” John trotted after Sherlock, Dupin and Anthea. “Why are you calling me on a prepaid mobile instead of your Smartphone?”

“My Smartphone’s not secure. Mycroft can hack into it,” Violet shivered. Even though she had selected the most secure of Sherlock’s bolt-holes, it wasn’t the warmest. “He sent me the file with the pictures.”

“Oh Jesus. Violet, I’m… God. Are you OK? At you at 221B?” he asked, awkwardly concealing the bag containing his gun inside his coat, holding it close to his torso.

She shook her head as if he could see her. “I’m OK.”

“But where are you?”

“Safe,” was all she would allow herself to tell him.

It was widely rumored that Sherlock had bolt-holes all over the city. Violet knew the locations of two of them. Technically, she knew about three of them. But Sherlock didn’t use Molly’s home as a hideout anymore, especially after she had gotten married.

Last summer, Sherlock had given her the address of a garage he used to keep a van and supplies at when she needed a change of clothes. That particular bolt-hole reminded Violet of a Doomsday preparer’s bunker.
But that particular bolt-hole was clear across the city, not to mention too close to several popular tourist traps and Michelin starred restaurants. Violet wanted to avoid large crowds of people at all costs. So even though that meant nearly freezing to death as she navigated her Triumph through London traffic, Violet selected the other bolt-hole she knew about.

“Are you with Mary then?”

“No,” Violet bit her lip and looked around the narrow space she occupied.

Shivering, Violet held the mobile in one hand, her gun in the other. She sat cross-legged in a chair John had sat in nearly a year and a half ago. A chair John had sat in and watched his wife threaten Sherlock, again. Then point her gun at him, thinking he was Sherlock.

But Violet had shut and bolted the door so she couldn’t actually see the hallway where Mary had shot a hole through the coin Sherlock still kept, facetiously calling it his “lucky charm.”

“Didn’t think going to your place was a good idea,” she swiftly added so John wouldn’t continue in his current line of questioning. “Let me talk to Sherlock.”

Her breath came out like puffs of cigarette smoke.

“Sherlock,” John waved the mobile at him when the Great Detective turned around.

Sherlock huffed and puffed, rolled his eyes and snatched the mobile out of John’s hand. “You panicked,” he immediately accused her as he stormed outside into the wintery brightness.

“Oh course I panicked,” Violet snapped, her voice echoing off the walls of the narrow walls of 23-24 Leinster Gardens. Lowering her voice, as if the people living in the real houses next to hers could actually hear her, she whispered into her burner mobile: “The pictures?”

“The memory stick was destroyed and I owe you an iPad. Apologies,” Sherlock replied coolly as he waited for Dupin’s most inferior blogger to bring the car around.

Violet closed her eyes and rubbed her forehead. Good thing I backed everything up on my phone and on an external hard drive, she told herself. “Where did they come from? Are there copies? How do you know they aren’t in someone’s computer or Cloud or somet-”

“They came from Kitty Riley,” he watched a battered Volvo pulled up to the kerb.

“Kitty Riley? But she’s… oh.” Violet remembered the disgraced journalist following her and Sherlock home from Tesco shortly after she had moved in with him. How she begged for a photograph of Violet. “She needed the money, but the picture wasn’t for the tabloids. She still believed Jim Moriarty was Richard Brook and that you had killed him.” She flipped through the mental files on Kitty Riley. Unlike Sherlock, she did not have a mind palace, but rows and rows of neatly organized filing cabinets. Recalling the profile she had created for Kitty, she added, “She was naive, easily led, and greedy. For money as well as recognition, so she tried to negotiate with Moriarty’s people when they asked for those pictures.”

“That is the most probable scenario,” Sherlock opened the car door for John, “Although it is highly irresponsible to leap to the conclusions without tangible proof.”

“Stupid, stupid bitch,” Violet seethed, ignoring Sherlock’s advice. “Goddamn her,” she cursed again, not because she mourned the loss of life but because her own life was now in immediate jeopardy because of that career-climbing dumb-ass. “What about copies?”
“Violet,” his voice was low and uncompromising.

“What?”

“Breathe.”

Violet inhaled deeply through her nose. Then she closed her eyes as she blew the breath back out through her nose. “What do I need to do?”

Sherlock couldn’t help but smile. Other people in her particular situation would have let fear paralyze them into inertia, would have asked What do I do? In other words, asked to be saved.

But she had asked What do I need to do? Meaning: What do I need to do to save myself?

Sherlock always appreciated her bravery and self-sufficiency. Made things so much easier.

And it also made things easier that she was also a linguist, fluent in Spanish, French and German plus she had a rudimentary understanding of Russian and could speak it well enough to be understood. Also she had been studying Farsi before going on her fateful trip to England. Her lingual skills came in quite handy indeed. Especially when Sherlock needed to relay information he didn’t necessarily care for everyone in earshot to overhear.

So, in German, he instructed her: “You’ll be receiving a text from an unknown number on your burner mobile. There will be an email address. Send the file I had emailed to your hotmail account prior to our inconvenient incarceration to that address, then delete the text and delete the file. Set your Smartphone back to factory settings if you must.”

“OK,” she said while thinking How can I use my Smartphone? Mycroft will activate the GPS the minute I turn it back on. I need to find a computer and a safe place to work… Hmm… “Then what do I do after that?”

“Go home and get back to work,” Sherlock made an impatient hand gesture to John, who had stuck his head out of the car door again. “What I asked you to do is important, Violet.”

“Sherlock, everyone’s waiting,” John told him. “Can’t you finish this conversation in here?”

Sherlock grabbed the car door. John barely got inside the idling vehicle before Sherlock slammed the door shut. “My contact will handle the issue of the pictures once the files have been received. Best you don’t know anything more regarding that. And won’t. The information will be sent directly to me via secure channels.”

“Right,” Violet breathed as she thought Hacker, probably cyber-terrorist. Perfect… just fucking peachy. “If I find anything more about Vos, I’ll let you know.” Violet bit her lip, then dared to ask when Sherlock hadn’t hung up on her, “How is John bearing up? And don’t lie. I can still tell if you’re full of shit even over the phone.”

Sherlock looked down at ancient Volvo again. Then in German, he said: “He had a panic attack while we were incarcerated. He’s trying to hide it from me, but is failing miserably.”

“It’s the PTSD,” Violet immediately went into psychologist-mode, “Sholto’s death triggered it and his horrible sister has made it worse. All these emotions he’s been suppressing for so long, years even, are finally bubbling up now, threatening to spill over. Sherlock, listen,” Violet clutched her mobile and dropped her voice to a whisper again. “I was wrong. John leaving the country was a terrible idea.”
“Violet, do stop fussing,” Sherlock ground his teeth.

“I am NOT fussing! This is stupid and you know it! You are risking your best friend’s mental stability to be Mycroft’s errand boy!”

“You couldn’t possibly be more wrong if you tried,” Sherlock clenched his teeth so tightly together, his jaw actually started to hurt.

“Sherlock this is not worth it,” Violet pleaded. “Come home, both of you. Please.”

Sherlock closed his eyes then snapped, “Do your job and I’ll do mine,” and hit the End Call button without even saying goodbye.

“Sherlock? Everything OK?” John asked as Sherlock finally slid into the backseat of the Volvo.

“Fine, everything is fine. The game’s still on,” he said to John. There was absolutely no room for him in the backseat of the tiny car. His knees practically touched his chin. Still, he attempted to steeple his fingers. Looking at John out of the corner of his almond eyes, he observed how ragged John’s nerves really were: the pallor of his skin, the jiggling of his knee up and down. How (despite the cut) he continued to lick his lips, as he tended to do when he was anxious but couldn’t vocalize his concerns.

How he kept one hand on the door handle, as if he needed to exit the car at a moment’s notice.

Sherlock grudgingly gave Honoré the address to the hotel but did not immediately get out of the Volvo when they arrived. “John, go on without me. I’ve got work to do.”

Before John could argue, Dupin rumbled, “The mind needs rest and fuel just as the body does. One cannot exist without the other.”

“Oh, wouldn’t it be marvelous if it could,” Sherlock seethed.

Dupin lazily turned around in the front passenger seat to face Sherlock. “Do you honestly believe that? Or is that just a comforting lie you tell yourself when life’s disappointments drive you deeper and deeper towards introversion? No, that’s not the correct English word…” Dupin took off his sunglasses now. His eyes were green, like summer grass. “Isolation,” he finally said. “One cannot live on brain-work alone.”

“‘I cannot live without brain-work. What else is there to live for?’” Sherlock scoffed.

“Mmm, I wonder how your fiancée would feel if she overheard you say that, no?” Dupin chuckled, the same deep chuckle he had emitted when John told Gagnon that some silence would be marvelous. “Oh, there is so much I can teach you, Monsieur Holmes.”

“I sincerely doubt that.”

“Sherlock, for the love of God, please just give it a rest,” John sounded exhausted, not angry.

“For starters,” Dupin’s eyes twinkled as he chose to ignore Sherlock’s rudeness and John’s pleas. “You need to master the art of being still.”

_He’s obviously never seen Sherlock in one of his near catatonic states_, John thought as Sherlock opened his mouth to protest. But Dupin sawed him off at the knees.

“Not your body. Here,” he reached over the car seat and pressed his finger against Sherlock’s
forehead. “You need to learn to quiet and calm this. Without the narcotics.”

Sherlock slapped Dupin’s hand away then bolted from the car without another word.

“We’ll return at five o’clock. That should give you sufficient time to rest, eat and freshen up,” Dupin reached into his coat and pulled out his business card. Handing it to John, he said “It has all my contact information if you need to reach me before then.”

“Thank you,” John took the card. “And, apologies about… well… him.”

“Do you think your partner’s eccentricities really upset me, Dr. Watson?” Dupin’s lips quirked up in a smile. “I see it as a refreshing challenge. This is exactly why I requested his assistance in this bothersome matter. Yours as well, I knew he would not come without you,” He stretched out his hand again. As John shook it, he reminded him. “Five o’clock. On the dot. I dislike waiting. Oh and be sure to bring your weapon tonight. Could be dangerous.”

“Oh good. Hate quiet, uneventful nights,” John grunted as he exited the Volvo.

Dupin closed his eyes and said in a dreamy voice, “So much I can teach both of them.”

Honoré put the car back into gear and pulled into traffic, “But is Holmes willing to learn?” he asked, in English, since Dupin continued to speak in English.

“Once he realizes what I have to offer isn’t boring, then yes,” Dupin put his sunglasses back on and said in French, “The Louvre. I need to think.”

As Honoré took Dupin to one of the world’s most famous museums, John caught up with one of the world’s most famous detectives. “Hey,” John said when he reached Sherlock, who stood at the lifts. “Do you think Lucas was kind enough to drop off our luggage before he sold us out?” When his joke fell flat, John asked, “And what’s going through that big brain of yours now?”

“Dupin.”

“And?”

“I hate him.”

“Well, he got us out of gaol so I think he’s delightful,” John snapped as the lift doors opened. “And he’s right about one thing. Your massive intellect dies along with your body if you don’t start taking care of yourself. I’m ordering room service for both of us. And you’re going to lie down, even if you don’t sleep.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes as he and John stepped into the lift but didn’t argue.

As the lift rose to their floor, John cleared his throat and asked, “How’s Violet?”

“Fine,” Sherlock lied.

Violet was not fine, but she was not in a panic. Not like she was last night. Even though she continued to mentally scream at Sherlock for behaving like a prick, she also berated herself for over-reacting. Granted, she still wasn’t thrilled about the existence of that picture of herself. But her nerves had settled down and her normal, pragmatic nature asserted itself once more.

Mycroft needed her. And not just as a public relations ruse, the happy fiancée of his beloved little brother. He needed her skills as an investigator. He needed her to find out how Margaux Vos
infiltrated MI-6 as well how she’d gotten ensnared by Moriarty’s people.

Violet stretched her legs out, wincing as sore muscles protested the movement. “It doesn’t fit her profile,” she said to herself as she made herself stand. She longed for a hot bath. She felt grubby as well as stiff. She ran her tongue over her teeth and grimaced, realizing she’d be content just to brush her teeth and wash her hands.

Reluctantly, she set her gun down on the chair. But she left the safety off. Then she slowly knelt down by her rucksack and peeled off her gloves. “Brr,” she complained, rubbing her hands together. But it was easier to dig through her belongings without the gloves. She found a compact of pressed powder, concealer, mascara, a tube of lipstick and fake eyeglasses. Setting her glasses and the other cosmetics on the seat of the chair, Violet remained in a crouch. Violet unscrewed the wand from the concealer and then flipped open the compact. Studying her wan face as she daubed cover-up under her eyes and on her scar, she reviewed and revisited what she knew about Margaux Vos.

Margaux Vos had been compared to the infamous Irene Adler, but Violet knew better. Irene Adler had been born to misbehave. While she was a naughty girl indeed, Margaux Vos was most definitely a pale imitation of The Woman. She was no dominatrix and no genius either. What Vos was, however, was a masterful actress. Had to be, since she had posed one minute as an MI-6 agent, the next, as a nurse at St. Bart’s.

Fooling Molly Hooper Lestrade was one thing but pulling one over His Majesty Mycroft Fucking Holmes was quite another.

_Bitch deserved an Oscar_, Violet thought as she used her pinkie to blend in the concealer. _But then again, she didn’t fool Mary._

In fact, she had brought that poor nurse, Jennifer Boyle as her guest to Molly Hooper’s wedding. A wedding where she would have damn well known Sherlock, John and Mary would be attending as well. Which of course, circled back to the original question: _What was she thinking?_ Allowing herself to be overheard by Mary while the NICU nurse Jennifer Boyle poured her heart out in the Ladies, confiding to “Maggie Jenner” about what she feared really happened to Marissa Watson. And it didn’t end there either. After Mary had confronted her the first time, “Maggie Jenner” had given her video of the surveillance feed that clearly showed Maisie’s abduction. She wanted Mary to find out about Maisie.

_Why?_ Violet wondered as she dabbed the puff into the face powder. _What would she have gained if Mary learned the truth about her daughter? What game had she been playing at?_ A game she lost, since Mary had killed her in the end.

While Irene had played the game for the game’s sake (and also had paid dearly for playing), Margaux’s focus always had been on the exit strategy. Irene lied, cheated, and played mental and sexual games for the simple fact that it was grand fun for her to outwit her target. She had gloated to be the one who defeated Sherlock Holmes…until she wasn’t, of course.

Her mistake had been getting into bed with Jim Moriarty in the first place. If she had just been content on being “The Woman”, she’d still be playing her little games.

“Forget Irene,” Violet lectured to herself. “Focus on Margaux.”

Born in the Netherlands, immigrated to England in her teens, bounced around the globe but it had been long suspected Paris was her home-base.
“Paris…” Violet paused then resumed powdering her face.

While she had lived in London, she had no known career path. During her Gap Year, she held a variety of occupations, but nothing glamorous. Shop girl, waitress and the like, according to the Inland Revenue records. Instead of departing for university, she had left for Paris (there it is again… Paris… she thought as she applied mascara to her blonde eyelashes) and traveled the world. The usual spots a young woman would visit, South of France, Spain, Portugal, but then she went to Italy and the paper trail for Margaux Vos disappeared.

But her fingerprints and her DNA had been found at places of interest. Not necessarily places that could be considered crime scenes. But rather the homes and offices of powerful people who had resigned in disgrace after a tabloid had published an embarrassing article.

Resigned or committed suicide.

Violet frowned then puckered her lips to apply the scarlet lipstick.

Then she stopped again, thinking about another highly-publicized suicide. Not Sherlock Holmes, but Lord Smallwood.

“How did Magnussen find out that Lord Small-dick was fucking around with a minor?” Violet wondered out loud. “Who gave him that intel? Magnussen wouldn’t have retrieved it himself. Someone sold his Lordship out.”

According to the time frame, Vos would have been approximately the same age as the minor Smallwood had his dalliance with. Violet didn’t think Vos was The Girl… but maybe…

“Did she know her? And if yes, is that how…”

She felt something twanging inside her, that strange sensation her former boss had always joked about, called her “spidey-sense.” Her grandmother had experienced the same feelings and had always said “Someone’s walking over my grave,” whenever she had her odd flashes of insight. Sherlock would have mocked her, of course.

But…

“We’re looking at this all wrong,” Violet said to her lipstick and compact. “She’s a blackmailer, not a double-agent and not a criminal mastermind. Vos didn’t get in bed with Moriarty. She got into bed with Magnussen.”

She could hear Sherlock’s snide voice again: That is the most probable scenario although it is highly irresponsible to leap to the conclusions without tangible proof.

“Yeah, but it’s a theory I can test,” she grumbled to the imaginary Sherlock as her “burner” mobile buzzed.

She traded the make-up for her mobile, flipping it open. She hissed “Shit,” as she read the text:

sally@WASPent.hotmail.com

“How the hell am I supposed to email that file without tipping off My-fucking-croft,” she groaned.

She needed a computer. And she needed to get a step ahead of Mycroft before reemerging onto his radar. He was most definitely going to be pissed about her little disappearing act.
“Shit,” she said again, slamming the mobile down onto the chair and snatching up the lipstick and compact. She finished applying the lipstick then pulled the balaclava off. She rooted around her rucksack again, until she found a comb and a pony-tail tie. Her hair, so sleek and smooth yesterday, was a rat’s nest today. She combed it out the best she could and then plaited it into a sloppy braid. She pulled the balaclava back on, wearing it like a stocking cap. She put her fake spectacles back on and regarded herself in the compact’s tiny mirror. She scrunched up her nose. She didn’t look disgusting, but she didn’t look fabulous either. She looked like a bedraggled hipster, which was fine.

As long as she could blend into the crowd, her appearance was fine.

She knew the shopping centre Whiteleys was not terribly far from Leinster Gardens. She knew there was a Starbucks on the lower level she could nip into quick for a Venti cup of caffeine. She also knew where the closest ladies’ lavatory to Starbucks was so she could freshen up a bit before getting coffee. She ran her tongue over her teeth again, embarrassed even though she was alone. She hated how filmy and scummy her mouth felt. She could only imagine what her breath smelled like. Fortunately, she found a roll of breath-mints in her rucksack. She put her make-up away and immediately popped a mint in her mouth. Suddenly starving, she crunched the candy into bits instead of sucking on it.

She stood up, ready to leave this depressing, narrow and cold bolt-hole. She unbuttoned her coat, preparing to put her gun back into her holster when she heard something metallic clank outside. She froze.

“Alright, I know you’re in here, come out now,” a surly voice demanded.

Violet nearly choked on the bits of candy she swallowed.

But then she lifted her gun, pointing it at the door.

Chapter End Notes

***Sherlock’s whinging comes from here:

"Bill snorted as he reached for the door leading to the outside. “You’re nice enough, Miss Smith. But you ain’t no princess.”

But at least she’s not some crazy murderess like Dr. Watson’s wife..."

Also, John unsuccessfully deals with feelings. Poor John.

Chapter Notes

So sorry for not posting on my usual day! By the time I got home on Sunday and Monday, all I wanted was my bed! So, here you all go - happy Tuesday!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Ten: Multitudinous Seas Incarnadine

27 November 2015
23-24 Leinster Gardens
Friday morning
8:35 AM

“I ain’t got all day, come out, Miss Smith.”

Recognizing the voice, Violet lowered her gun. “Oh for fuck’s sake,” she whispered while rolling her eyes. But she didn’t put the safety back on since she wasn’t sure if he was alone.

She flexed her left hand before opening the door. It wasn’t trembling, but the fingers felt numb. Chalking that up to the cold, she unlocked the door. “It’s open,” Miss Smith announced as she pointed the gun again.

The door slowly swung open. “Aw, for fuck’s sake,” Bill Wiggins groaned as he lifted his hands into the air. “What is it with you ladies and guns?”

“Are you alone?”

“Wha’? Yeah, I’m bloody alone.”

“Were you followed?”

“No! I wasn’t followed. Not stupid you know,” Bill said sullenly. “I’m Shezza’s protégé.”

“No,” Violet corrected him as she lowered her gun. “You’re not.”

“OK, I’m not, but he texted me. Told me to fetch you, said you’d be here.” A crooked smile
appeared on his long face, “Said you ran away from home.”

“In a matter of speaking,” Violet started to put her gun back into her holster.

Bill shook his head. “Nah, your arm don’t rest flush against your body. People’ll be able to tell you’re carrying. Put it in your rucksack. I’m on Shezza’s side,” he said irritably when Violet hesitated. “This means I’m on your side. I ain’t gonna hurt you.”

“I’m not worried about you,” Violet grumbled but realized he was right. She got away with carrying her gun last night, naturally. But with the additional layers of clothes she wore, her coat wasn’t as loose as it normally was. The bulge under her arm would be noticed during the day time. “I’m worried about who else is looking for me.”

“You ain’t the only one worrying, that’s why we need to go,” Bill looked cold and miserable. But he also looked sober. His eyes were clear and his pupils were dilated normally for the gloomy lighting. He shivered because of the chill, not because of withdrawal. He wore tan-coloured trousers, black Converse trainers, a black leather jacket and a thin russet-colored scarf that looked more trendy than warm. But the insufficient clothing bespoke of impracticality, not drug use. Sherlock had probably rang him and caught him having a lie-in. Bill probably pulled on what clothes were within reach. “Rather not hang around and wait for whoever may be looking for you.”

“Did Shez- errr… Sherlock say where he was supposed to take me?”

“He said even though you’d be safe at 221B, you’d just argue with me so I should save m’self the argument, take you to a café and feed you up then take you to the nearest library so you can email whatever you’re supposed to email to whoever. That I know nothing about, ‘cause I really don’t,” he added with a bit of pout in his voice.

“What about my motorcycle?” Violet protested. “Will it be safe in the car park I left it at?”

Bill didn’t seem surprised she rode. Instead, he looked rather impressed. “What kind?”

“A Triumph Tiger 800XC.”

Bill nodded in approval. “Sweet bike. Saddle’s a bit narrow for me and it can’t off-road for shit, I don’t give a shit what the reviews say. But don’t really need to worry about that in London, do you? Going off-road?”

_You’d be surprised_, Violet ran a hand down her thigh as she recalled the nasty road burns she received when she purposely laid her bike down in order to shake MI-6’s tails last spring.

“But yeah, no problem ‘bout that. Shezza said you would’ve taken off on your bike. Brought a mate from the Network,” meaning Sherlock’s Homeless Network, “to take your bike back to Baker Street. So, can we go?” Bill looked at Violet piteously.

The scared puppy look Bill gave her reminded Violet that despite his involvement with “The Baker Street Irregulars”, he was still just a civilian. He didn’t have any sort of formal training. He looked like he was about to wet his britches at any given moment.

Violet finally caved. She needed food now as well as caffeine. “OK, but after we finish breakfast, I don’t want to go to a library.”

“Where do you wanna go?” Bill watched Violet heft the rucksack onto her back. “And you want me to carry that?”
“No, I’m good,” Violet waved her hands and Bill got out of her way. Together, they walked down the narrow hallway of the Empty House, feeling the façade vibrating as an Underground train zipped through underneath them. There was a brief flush of heat as the lights flickered but the heat soon dissipated. “Thank you for asking, though.”

“So, where’re we going then? After we eat?”

Violet eyed his trousers, remembering a conversation she had with Mary Watson about Bill Wiggins. “You still work at an Apple store?”

“Yeah, why?”

“Sherlock nicked my iPad and then he broke it. I need a new one,” she informed him primly.

“Oh, don’t fuss, Mr. Wiggins,” Violet Smith chided him gently. “I already solved that problem before it even became one.” She hooked her arm through his. “Now, I am famished. I have a bit of cash on me so it’s my shout as long as it’s not too dear. Least I can do for my knight in shining armor.”

Bill snorted as he reached for the door leading to the outside. “You’re nice enough, Miss Smith. But you ain’t no princess.”

But at least she’s not some crazy murderess like Dr. Watson’s wife.

Bill wondered if Miss Smith knew what a complete psycho Mrs. Watson was. As he looked over his shoulder, he remembered with a shudder that foul night when Shezza had called him after slipping out of hospital. He remembered how faint and weak his voice was when he ordered Bill to find Mrs. Watson and give her the mobile and earpiece.

Remembered grabbing the good doctor’s wife and hissing into her ear, You don’t find Sherlock Holmes. Sherlock Holmes finds you.

Remembered hiding in the Empty Houses and listening to that bitch spill her guts about shooting Shezza. But he wasn’t the only one who heard Mary’s admission of guilt.

Bill still didn’t understand why in the hell Dr. Watson stayed with that scary bitch. Sure, there was the baby, but it wasn’t like the kid was actually physically there with them, wasn’t it?

As he led Miss Smith down the alley ways he knew so well, he felt glad Shezza ended up with someone like her and not someone like Mrs. Watson. Bit cold, Miss Smith was, but that was because she brooked no nonsense. Straight as an arrow, she was. Mrs. Watson on the other side, was so twisted, nobody knew where Mary started and where AGRA ended.

Bill couldn’t imagine Miss Smith being as big of a liar as Mrs. Watson.

In order to avoid CCTV cameras, Bill led Violet down the back alleys to his car, a decrepit Ford Anglia. It wasn’t pretty, but Bill didn’t buy the vehicle for its looks. It only cost him five hundred quid and it ran. Plus, as idiotically as most people drove in London, if he got rear-ended, well, nothing to get in a tizz over, really. The bumper was already dented. So was the boot.

Keeping his eyes peeled for any suspicious looking people, Bill took Miss Smith’s rucksack and, very mindful of the loaded gun inside the bag, carefully put it in the backseat. Then opened the
passenger door for her, already deciding he wasn’t going to let her buy breakfast. He appreciated the sentiment, but Shezza trusted him to take care of his fiancée.

And Bill was going to do just that. First order of business, getting the right hell out of here.

Fast.

Good thing too that Bill had insisted they hurry. Minutes after Bill and Violet departed from the Empty Houses, Agent John Mitton burst in, dressed in his Met uniform, fully in his “Officer Collins” disguise. He carried only a baton and flashlight, but he had his MI-6 sanctioned Sig Sauer concealed in a shoulder holster, similar to Violet’s. Only his coat was properly let out so the butt of the gun wouldn’t protrude.

“Balls,” he grumbled, taking his police hat off to scratch the back of his head. Then he fished his mobile out of his coat pocket. “She’s not here either.”

Mycroft ground his teeth.

“Everything alright sir?” his housekeeper, Mrs. Pringle, asked while pouring him a cup of tea.

“I’m quite fine, thank you,” Mycroft barely could get the words out.

Mrs. Pringle gave him a sceptical look then dropped two sugar cubes into his tea. “Will you be home for lunch today?”

“Not today,” Mycroft didn’t spare the silver-haired housekeeper a second look. “Nor supper. That will be all, Mrs. Pringle.”

“Very good sir,” Mrs. Pringle had a pleasant disposition but did not overstep her boundaries, like a certain Not-Your-Housekeeper over on Baker Street. He paid her well and she paid him little kindnesses like slipping him biscuits or giving him extra sugar when he was stressed. But that was as far as she went. She did the cooking, the cleaning and the laundering and did it all very well. But she didn’t adopt Mycroft the way Mrs. Hudson had taken Sherlock on.

This arrangement suited Mycroft just fine. He didn’t need a second mother like Sherlock did.

Mrs. Pringle then excused herself to tidy up Mycroft’s bedroom (which was always neat as a pin, seeing how he rarely slept there). Mycroft waited until the door was completely shut before sneering into his Blackberry Passport. “How on earth did you manage to lose track of one red-haired, skinny woman?”

“Mycroft, I told you. I don’t know how she got out of 221 Baker Street without anyone noti-”

“The rooftop you idiot,” Mycroft snapped. “She climbed out of the skylight and then down the fire escape to where her motorcycle was hidden.”

“I don’t know,” Mitton ignored the biting tone of his boss’s voice. “She’s been ill. Do you think she has the strength or stamina to climb down a ladder then handle a bike?”

Mycroft paused. “She’s been ill?”

“Yeah. Tech hacked into John Watson’s mobile while our Frog friends had him and Sherlock detained. He has loads of medical websites bookmarked.”

“Interesting, seeing how he’s a doctor and all,” Mycroft sniped.
“The most recent websites are medical journal articles about the adverse effects of arsenic poisoning.” Used to Mycroft’s acidic tongue, Mitton had stopped taking Mycroft’s digs personally a very long time ago. “He also has a reminder to call Violet Monday after her doctor’s appointment.”

“Hm, that’s actually interesting information,” Mycroft mulled as he sipped his tea. “This means someone is helping her.”

“Want me to pay a visit to Mrs. Watson?”

“No,” Mycroft said after a beat. “I need you in Paris.”

“OK. When?”

“Now.”

“Right-O. My travel bag’s in the car. Just need to dream up an excuse to the Met.”

“That’s been handled. Your granny died.”

“Again?”

“Your paternal granny.”

“Wish that one would kick the bucket, the old cow,” Mitton said cheerfully. “But that’s neither here nor there. What’s the play, boss?”

“I need you to find Eduardo Lucas. You’ll receive further information at headquarters.”

“On my way,” and Mitton rang off.

Mycroft leaned back into his chair, his fingers steepled like his brother’s. When he realized what he was doing, he pulled them away and balled them into fists. “Right,” he stood up, leaving his tea and his breakfast.

“Mrs. Pringle,” he bawled out as he pulled his suit jacket on. “Call the car around.”

**

27 November 2015
John and Mary’s residence
Friday morning
10:48 AM

Mary was so tired she could barely see straight. She had picked up an extra overnight shift at the A & E at St. Bart’s. She was glad she did, the work had kept her occupied. Kept her mind off of John and Sherlock, doing God knows what in Paris.

She was also glad to see a text from John. He had sent it about eight o’clock, London time, nine over there. The text was short and sweet:

SNAFU, as usual.
Need sleep now.
Will call later. XXX – JW

Mary had responded with a simple “OK” and “XOXO” then tossed her mobile back into her handbag. Then she had to scamper off to assist suturing up the forehead of a two-year-old who fell
out of the cot she had been trying to climb out of in a poorly executed escape attempt.

Now, groggy with exhaustion and early pregnancy, she longed for her yoga pants, one of John’s baggy old jumpers and her bed.

She yawned, stretching her mouth open wide as she parked her car in front of the terrace house. Unfortunately, comfortable clothes would have to wait. She would need to let the dog out first, then feed the cannibal within her. Incredibly, her stomach growled.

“All right, all right,” she rubbed her belly after turning the car’s ignition off. “Dog, breakfast, bed,” she yawned again as she trudged up the pavement to her home.

But she immediately woke up when she saw Mycroft sitting on her sofa, sipping tea and reading the newspaper. There was a plate of pastries and fresh fruit as well as the good teapot and cups, the one used for company, on her coffee table.

“Close the door,” he said, as if he was sitting in his own house.

Mary did no such thing. “Get out,” she snapped. She wished Sweetie was a bit more vicious, like Gladstone. But Sweetie had been terribly abused by his previous owners. Those monsters had used him as a bait dog, so he tended to hide whenever strangers entered the house.

Lovable and beloved pet yes, but absolute rubbish guard dog.

“Mary, I’m here to talk,” Mycroft folded up the newspaper neatly. “Besides, do you really believe I’d risk my brother’s and your husband’s wrath by making you disappear?”

“You had no problem making my daughter disappear,” Mary fought not to put her hand on her abdomen, the Number One ‘tell’ of women telegraphing their pregnancies. She wasn’t sure if Mycroft knew she was expecting again. She sure as bloody hell wasn’t going to volunteer that information either.

Mycroft set his tea cup neatly into the saucer. There wasn’t even a clink as china met china. “There will be no disappearances today, at least, none orchestrated by me. Please, Mrs. Watson, close the door. You’re letting all the heat out of the house.”

Mary finally stepped into her own home and closed the door. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw a fire crackling merrily in the hearth.

“Really made yourself at home, didn’t you?” She pressed her back against the door, ready to bolt if necessary. She cursed herself for not keeping her gun in her handbag.

“Mary Watson, you worked a twelve hours shift and you are in your first trimester of pregnancy.” He paused then silkily added, “Congratulations.”

He lifted his tea cup up in salute.

Damn. Now Mary pressed her hand to her belly. “If you harm one hair of this baby’s head, I will kill you. I already lost one child because of you.”

“That was Moriarty’s people, not me.”

“Your people retrieved her and are keeping her from me.”

“MI-6 retrieved her and a division I do not have clearance for is keeping her location classified.”
“Why?”

Mycroft arched his eyebrow. “No idea. Classified.”

“Rubbish,” Mary scowled, clutching her keys and handbag, still planning on making a run for it if necessary. Her cornflower eyes darted around her tidy lounge, looking for something to use as a weapon if necessary. “You are the British Government. You know everything.”

“Sherlock does like to exaggerate,” Mycroft demurred. “Come now, sit down. He examined his nails, frowned at a hangnail. “And do try to think instead of leaping to conclusions like a ninny. You’re sharper than most people.” He fixed his black reptilian eyes onto her. “If I was going to have you terminated, do you really think I’d do it myself?”

“That’s right,” Mary finally inched her way from the door towards the sofa. “You don’t like to get your hands dirty.”

“And as for you,” Mycroft leaned back against the sofa and crossed his legs. “‘Will all great Neptune’s ocean wash this blood clean from your hand? No, this your hand will rather the multitudinous seas incarnadine, making the green one red.’”

Mary paused at the end of the sofa. “I’ve been compared to worse than Lady Macbeth.”

“Mrs. Watson, I wish to have a conservation with you and that is all,” Mycroft laced his fingers over his belly, still studying her with his beady eyes. “As I would very much like to have a productive conservation, I shall lay all the cards on the table. I know your birth name was Anzhela Anasenko. Your mother was American and your father was technically Russian, but he grew up in the Ukraine. His family had always supported a Ukraine independent from the Soviet Union. Pity, he didn’t live long enough to see that happen.” He nodded his head towards her in sympathy.

Mary felt her legs trembling but she didn’t sit.

“Orphaned at a young age, you were made a ward of the state. You went to work for the KGB, but at the first opportunity, you defected to the United States, using the novel concept that you should be considered an American citizen due to your mother’s nationality. The CIA readily,” he smiled coolly. “Hired you on but became quite irritated indeed when you started freelancing on the side. Then approximately eleven years ago, Mary Morstan moved to London, got her certification in nursing and,” Mycroft spread his arms out. “Here we are.” He looked around the terrace house. “Bit anticlimactic, really. Playing the role of the devoted housewife and nurse, how boring it must get.”

“It’s not boring,” Mary still didn’t even bother taking off her bright red coat. “Get on with it Mycroft or get out of my house.”

“Of course,” Mycroft smiled and nodded politely. “How did you get ensnared with Charles Augustus Magnussen?”

“He had blackmailed the person who had created the Mary Morstan persona for me, the one who made all the false documentation, birth certificate, passport, driver’s license,” she looked in him right into his lizard eyes, fully anticipating this question. “The forger gave me and others up to Magnussen to save himself.”

“Then Magnussen started blackmailing you, forced you to spill your secrets.”

“Yes.”

“When did he start blackmailing you?”
“He didn’t find out who I really was until Sherlock came back from the dead. As far as anyone was concerned, I was Mary Elizabeth Morstan. *I am* Mary Elizabeth Morstan. But shortly after Sherlock came back and before John was taken and thrown into that bonfire, someone sold the forger out and Magnussen reached out to me. Wanted me to do one last job, Magnussen.”

“What was the job?”

“You.”


“You were in his way. Magnussen had millions of American dollars invested into a major medical health insurance company. This company wanted to expand into the European markets, specifically in English speaking countries. He wanted you to use your influence to get the ball rolling to do away with the NHS”

Mycroft nodded. This matched the intelligence he had received previously on Magnussen. “But he changed his plan,” he informed Mary. “By Christmas of last year, he had decided to merely blackmail me instead of killing me. Do you know why?”

“Not exactly, but if I were to hazard a guess, I would reckon he had finally dug some dirt up on you,” Mary finally sat down on the sofa, but as far away from Mycroft as possible.

Mycroft nodded. It wasn’t a guess, it was a fact.

The day before Christmas, Magnussen had made a little call to the Diogenes Club. Waltzed right in without an invitation, like the colossal prick he was. Mycroft had quickly escorted him into a private room before Magnussen could inflict any sort of damage in front of witnesses. Magnussen had been amused. He had been even more pleased with himself as he told Mycroft about a long and interesting chat he had with the Earl of Winchester some months back. Long before that regrettable shooting at his penthouse, actually…

Mycroft’s stomach had dropped right down to his expensive Gucci loafers when Magnussen had asked him if it had been a coincidence that his Mummy and Papa bought ickle William that puppy… what was the pup called, oh yes, Redbeard… shortly after William started therapy. The therapy that there were absolutely no written records about. That started up after that mysterious fire at the family estate. Which coincidentally occurred at approximately the same time the Earl, known as Master Heath back then, had been in a dreadful “car wreck”.

Mycroft had gritted his teeth, realizing that his dear old friend Heathcliff had sold them all out to Magnussen. Of all the people the Earl had to blab to, it had to be that bastard Magnussen.

It took every ounce of self-control Mycroft possessed (and his self-control was legendary) not to climb over his desk and throttle Magnussen right then and there.

“Call your little brother off, Mr. Holmes,” Magnussen had said after blowing his nose and throwing his used tissue at Mycroft’s face. Mycroft had sat there, forced himself to appear impassive and unimpressed as Magnussen murmured, “Or he’ll wish Mrs. Watson would have finished the job,” he had said before taking a sip of Mycroft’s tea.

He had grimaced then spit the liquid back into the dainty cup. “Happy Christmas,” he had smiled at Mycroft with unblinking eyes.

Less than a minute after Magnussen left his presence, Mycroft bolted towards the nearest lavatory. He had washed his face vigorously. Then after nearly scrubbing his hands raw, he had texted Anthea
and ordered her to set up an emergency meeting with all the department heads of MI-6.

Forty-five minutes later, Operation von Blücher had been green-lit.

The next day Mycroft brought his laptop to his parents’ house for Christmas dinner.

There had been no earth-shattering secrets on that laptop. Nothing that would have really compromised England, just… embarrassed the old girl a bit. A few sordid stories that would have kept Magnussen occupied, like the royal slag who had hired The Woman, for example.

He had known what Sherlock was planning. He’d deduced it the minute Sherlock had slipped out of hospital the second time to meet Magnussen in that dank, dark little pub. So he went to Christmas at Mummy and Father’s with minimal complaint. Pretended to drink the punch. Pretended to pass out. Already had the helicopters on stand-by. Gave Sherlock enough time to find the records… the blackmail information…

He had no idea Magnussen had a mind palace.

He had no idea Sherlock would have actually… well. John Watson’s life had been in mortal peril as well as his wife’s and unborn child’s. But to this day, Mycroft still kicked himself for not realizing the lengths Sherlock would take to protect John. Sherlock would most definitely kill someone to save John and his murderous treacherous wife.

He also kicked himself for not keeping Mary Watson prisoner when she and Miss Hooper had stayed in one of their safe-houses while Violet and John looked for Sherlock. Mycroft did not believe the story Sherlock spun about Mary intending him to survive that shooting, that she was performing “surgery.” Ridiculous.

Magnussen, was one of the few people Sherlock had actively hated. Mary should have just gotten rid of Magnussen that night instead of shooting Sherlock. Would have saved the good tax-payers of England some money as well as rid the world of a megalomaniac monster. Plus Sherlock would have kept her secret. But oh no, he did the job for her instead. Almost threw his life away for her and her husband… all because Sherlock liked her.

Mycroft loathed Mary.

She nearly gotten his brother killed… twice now.

Like a child Sherlock was, honestly. So easily led astray by the people he liked.

That he cared about… How many times do I have to tell him? Caring is NOT an advantage.

Mycroft had no intentions of reuniting Mary with her daughter.

But as a personal favor to John, he would ensure the little girl’s safety.

That was as far as he was willing to go.

“Why did you shoot Sherlock instead of Magnussen?”

“I panicked,” she said promptly, like a schoolgirl giving the correct answer when called on.

Mycroft studied her. Her facial expression, her hands, her entire body language was consistent with honesty. But something still didn’t add up. “Do explain to me how a master assassin who successfully evaded the KGB, the CIA, MI-6 and Interpol panicked about a simple kill?”
“John was in the building.”

“So?”

“I didn’t want to risk John being accused of murder or as an accessory to murder.”

_Ah, yes, that tired old fiction_, Mycroft uncrossed his legs and reached forward to pour Mary a cup. As he held it out to her, he asked, “As fond of him as Sherlock is, did you honestly believe my brother would have allowed John to be in any real danger?”

Mary opened her mouth, snapped it shut then tried again. “I… ah, I told you. I panicked.”

“Yes, of course. Your delicate nerves shattered upon seeing my brother’s face and you simply forgot the basic functions of assassination. Where is Violet?”

Mary nearly dropped the cup of tea. Lukewarm liquid splashed on her hand. “I don’t know.”

“Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m not lying, I’m worried.” Mary put the cup on the coffee table. “She wouldn’t just vanish into thin air. Not like that, that’s not her nature, she’s too sensible to just run off.” Mary frowned, “Unless she felt that either her life or Sherlock’s was in jeopardy.” A more sinister idea then popped into Mary’s head. “Or she was taken by someone.”

Regretfully, Mycroft scratched Mary off his short list of people who could possibly be aiding Violet in her flight from 221B. But this little visit was not a complete waste. It was always good to remind Mrs. Watson who really was in charge. Plus he had acquired another piece of the puzzle as to what exactly happened in Magnussen’s penthouse that night.

“Well, this has been a most informative chat. I do thank you for your time, as you must be exhausted,” Mycroft stood up and reached over for his umbrella, coat and umbrella.

“Now, hang on,” Mary bolted to her feet as Mycroft put his coat back on. “I have some questions for you. Where is my daughter? Why are you keeping her from me, from _us_?”

“Mrs. Watson, the most I can tell you is that Marissa is safe and in a secure location. I am not permitted to know more than that in the event I am taken. If I am tortured, I will be unable to disclose her whereabouts.” He wound his scarf around his throat and hooked the umbrella over the crook of his arm, “Although I do have one last question for you, Mrs. Watson. Why didn’t you take the job from Magnussen?”

“I should have,” she said darkly.

“But you didn’t,” he smiled at her. “Why?”

“You’re Sherlock’s brother.”

“And?” he said lightly.

She gave him a glacial smile, “Magnussen didn’t want to pay for the job.”

“Ah, of course,” Mycroft chuckled. “If you do something well, never do it for free. If Miss Smith contacts you, please let me know.”

“Why should I?”
Mycroft whirled around. For the first time, Mary saw the dangerous man behind the urbane, mild-mannered mask he usually wore. “Because I can make all of this,” he made a giant circle with his umbrella, “Go away. It would take precious little to have one my agents break in here, obtain your DNA and fingerprints and bring them to Interpol. Countries would queue up to try and convict you and no one would lift a finger to save you. Not even your precious John, not after he finds out about that double-hit you set up. Oh but that was clever, Mrs. Watson,” Mycroft crooned without raising his voice once.

“I tried to un-do it,” Mary swayed on her feet.

“Oh, I know. You’ve increased the payoff while changing the conditions to only having Sherlock murdered if an MI-6 agent killed you. Also clever, but it’s not enough.”

“Not enough to return my daughter?”

“Not enough to forgive you for trying to kill my brother,” he told her coldly.

“Didn’t know you were so sentimental,” Mary challenged him.

“My brother is a genius. The tasks he has accomplished for this country, the services he has still yet to perform are immeasurable. The lives he has saved are invaluable. He’s an asset. We need him. You do not get to shoot one of England’s brightest stars out of the skies.” He pointed his umbrella at her. “I also know you did not call 999 that night. You left him to die.”

Mary finally sank down onto the sofa again.

Mycroft lowered his umbrella. “Never ask about your daughter again,” he ordered her coldly. “She is safe and she will be raised by a normal family to become an ordinary woman. Stop looking for her. Or else,” he pointed at her again with his umbrella, this time at her abdomen instead of her face. “I may reconsider allowing you to keep that brat as well.”

“I will kill you if you touch any of my children ever again,” Mary promised him.

“I wouldn’t expect any less from you,” Mycroft agreed, opening the door. “Until next time, Mrs. Watson,” he nodded and let himself out.

Mary started trembling violently as it sank in what just happened. Meanwhile, Sweetie slunk in from her hiding place in the kitchen (under the table) and into the lounge. Snuffling, he plopped his head into Mary’s lap, nuzzling and licking her hands.

“It’s OK, Sweetie,” Mary pressed her head against Sweetie’s. Embracing the bulldog, she whispered in a shaky voice, “The bad man is gone now.”

But where in the hell was Violet? Mary sat up and reached for her handbag. She started rooting around in it until she found her mobile. She scrolled through her contacts list, her thumb hovering over “Violet Smith” when she stopped herself.

Don’t be stupid, this is exactly what he wanted, she chided herself. He wanted to rattle your cage, that’s all. Wanted you to panic, wanted you to go after Violet so he could tail you.

She leaned back against her sofa, grinding her teeth as she tried to determine what she should do next. Violet wouldn’t have scarpered without good reason… she thought as she scratched Sweetie’s ears. She most likely hadn’t been abducted either. If someone snatched her, Mycroft wouldn’t have wasted his time coming here, asking me if I’ve seen her. Oh no, she scarpered for a very good reason. Mycroft thought I had helped her. When he figured out I hadn’t, he just wanted to show me
how big his pecker is, the rotten bastard.

Right. Don’t let him get to you. Sit tight. Wait for Violet to surface.

Mary ran her hands through her shaggy platinum hair. She needed a cut and a color badly but that could wait until she knew exactly what the bloody hell Violet was up to now. She could live with having roots and split ends for a few more days. And the hell with the naysayers who said pregnant women shouldn’t color their hair. There are far worse dangers to a baby than a bit of hair dye.

Tears now welled up. She stared at the ceiling, willing herself not to weep.

Then she slid off the sofa and knelt down to hug her dog for dear life. Sweetie whined helplessly when Mary started crying. Clinging to the dog, her shoulders shook from the force of her sobs as she thought in an endless, hellish loop: Maisie, Maisie, Maisie…

She wanted her husband to come home right now.

But he lay on a hotel bed in Paris, dead to the world, oblivious to her suffering.

John barely had been able to toe off his shoes before belly-flopping onto the surprisingly comfortable bed in the dismally average hotel. John didn’t care about the décor though. There were two beds, a lav plus a proper bath that had both boiling hot and pleasingly cool water. There was also a restaurant downstairs plus room service was available around the clock. But despite fussing at Sherlock to eat, John had fallen sound asleep before room service had even arrived. He hadn’t even bothered to fold the duvet down to get into bed properly.

Sleep came quickly but so did the old bad dreams. He wasn’t sure how long he had been asleep but he jolted awake with a gasp. Heart pounding, he wiped the sweat off his face as he looked around, trying to get his bearings.


Sherlock sat right next to him, legs crossed and fingers steepled.

Observing every little motion John made. Every flutter of his eyes, every wiggle of his toes.

Lovely.

“Christ,” John exhaled as he rested back down onto the pillow. He licked his lips then winced. Right, cut lip. Fuck.

“The mini-fridge has a tiny freezer so I put an ice pack in there for your lip. Also, I left the paracetamol in the bath for you as well.”

“Thanks,” John gingerly touched his forehead and sure enough, felt a bump from where he hit his head. “How’s your face?”

“Bit sore, but tolerable,” Sherlock touched the purplish-blue splotch on his left cheek. “Nothing feels broken at any rate.”

“Good,” John grunted as he pushed the covers off of him. Apparently Sherlock had thrown the duvet over him after all. As he stared at the ceiling, he mumbled to the tall, lanky man sitting next to him: “What time is it?”
“A quarter to three.” Sherlock rumbled. John risked a glance at the detective and saw that he wore a fresh suit and a clean shirt (the powder blue one, the one Violet always complained made him look like a corpse.) His dark curls still looked a bit damp and his face looked smooth, newly shaven. In this light, his unblinking, analytical eyes appeared to be gunmetal blue.

“Did I wake you?” John placed his arm over his eyes, wishing the sun wasn’t so bright.

“No. I had been awake for some time now. The Work waits for no man.”

“Right, the Work;” John mumbled, still not moving his arm. “Anything new to report?” he finally asked when Sherlock didn’t say anything else. But when Sherlock still remained silent, John finally sat up, rubbed his eyes and ran his fingers though his hair. “What?” he yawned.

“What was your nightmare about? It wasn’t about Afghanistan and it wasn’t about,” Sherlock shifted in his spot, as if he was a guilty child caught being naughty. “The Fall,” he mumbled.

“Oh. Oh, well, I don’t remember,” John shrugged, trying to play it off. Then he scowled as Sherlock continued to stare at him. “And stop with the look.”

“Which look? I have so many ‘looks’ that you claim are annoying.”

“The look you give me when you think I’m lying.”

Sherlock lifted his thick, black brows. “Then stop lying.”

John rolled his eyes and flopped back down onto his pillow. “Don’t want to talk about it.”

“Ah. Harry.”

John shot up like a Jack-in-the-box. “How’n the hell did you deduce that?”

“I didn’t,” Sherlock smirked. “You assumed then gave yourself away by how angry you got.”

“After all the shit that happened just within the last twenty-four hours, I really don’t have time to even think about my drunken sot of a sister.”

“Obviously. That’s why your subconscious brought it up.”

“I’m going to take a shower,” John threw the duvet completely off him now, nearly hitting Sherlock in the face with it in the process. “And for the record, I wasn’t dreaming about Harry, so there. You made a mistake.”

Enjoying the wounded expression on Sherlock’s face, John got out of bed and went to retrieve his shaving kit and toiletries bag from his duffel bag. Then right before John stomped into the lavatory, Sherlock drawled, “You’re a hypocrite, you do realize that, don’t you?”

John whirled around. “What?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes but he kept his voice deceptively calm. “You demand that I tell you everything about my past. You want to know all about what happened to me during my Great Hiatus and my,” his long face twisted in revulsion, “gruesome childhood. Yet, you have never told me one solitary thing about your childhood or Afghanistan.”

“I was an Army doctor and I got shot, that’s all there is to Afghanistan,” John knew Sherlock was trying to goad him into some sort of confession. He fought the urge to throw his shaving kit and toiletries’ bag at Sherlock’s face all the same. “As for my childhood, well, it’s too boring for
someone with your massive intellect and toff background to be interested in.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared. “Your father left when you were twelve.”

John froze. “How…?” he started to say, then immediately regretted it. He cringed, waiting for one of Sherlock’s excruciatingly precise deductions.

Sherlock jumped to his feet, then immediately sucked in a pained breath as he grabbed his waist where the airplane seatbelt had dug into him. Before John could ask if he was OK, Sherlock spat out: “When you first moved into 221B, you did not insist on littering the lounge with mementos of your friends and family. You kept them in your bedroom, clearly indicating that you are an intensively private person, not wishing to share the intimate details of your life with strangers or casual friends nor the ones closest to you.”

“So you rooted around in my bedroom anyway?” John clutched his shaving kit and toiletries bag until his knuckles turned white.

Sherlock rolled his eyes, “Really? You honestly want to quibble about that now?”

“You went through my suitcase while I was sleeping, didn’t you?”

“Stop changing the subject while I’m deducing,” Sherlock scowled, still rubbing his torso.

“Oh, well, excuse me, Your Majesty. Pray, by all means, please continue.”

“I plan to,” Sherlock said blithely. “When I had a look-around in your room after you got settled, I noted that you did not set out or hang up any photographs of your parents. You did, however, have two framed photographs on your bookshelf. Both photographs were of you, your sister and your mother. You were in uniform in both photographs. The first was your school uniform, which clearly indicated you were a fourth year junior. Therefore, you were twelve when that photograph was taken. You were twelve when that photograph was taken because your mother and sister were both wearing summer dresses, meaning your birthday had past. The second photograph you were in service dress uniform. You had just been promoted to Captain, obvious by the collar badges and pins on the jacket.

“The second photograph was at a restaurant, far less formal than the first, your mother and sister had taken you out after your promotion ceremony. So, the first, a typical family portrait and the second a candid snap of an important milestone in your career. But where is your father? He’s still living and your mother never divorced him. How do I know this? Because Mycroft allowed you to make my funeral arrangements, that’s why. You had me buried at the same cemetery as your mother. My plot was not that far off from hers but there’s an empty spot next to hers, why not have me interred there?” Sherlock stood up, in full sway, “Because married people purchase funeral plots together. That spot next to your mother was reserved for your father but there is no headstone. Clearly indicating that plot is yet to be occupied. However, your mother’s grave has a proper headstone that reads “Anna McLaren Watson, Beloved Mother.” It does not say “Beloved Mother and Wife,” even though you had her married name engraved on the stone. Therefore your father is very much alive and your mother never divorced him. Ergo, your father left when you were twelve and you hadn’t seen him since.”

“Nor do I want to,” John said quietly. “Can I go have my shower now?”

“Not convenient for you to tell me about your childhood?”

“Not much to tell. We have to meet Dupin at five. I’d like to wash up and eat before we do so, is that
alright?”

Sherlock gave John a tight cold smile, “I’m going to remind you of this conversation the next time you interrogate me about my Great Hiatus,” he paused as he leaned forward, “Or the Earl.”

“Why do I need to tell you anything?” John snapped. “Won’t you just deduce it anyhow?”

Sherlock gave a negligent shrug. “I merely asked what your nightmare was about out of concern. I thought that was what friends were supposed to do, yes?”

“Yes! No, oh sod it,” John threw his hands up in the air. “My dad gambled, pissed off a bookie and ran like a coward when he couldn’t pay. I haven’t seen him since. Happy?”

“No. Why would I be happy when you’re distressed?”

“Jesus fucking Christ, can you just lay off? Let’s focus on the Work.”

“Finally!” Sherlock beamed, “You’re starting to see things my way!”

“I’m going to murder you in your sleep and make it look like an accident yet, I swear to Christ,” John whirled around, resuming his stomp back into the bathroom.

“You left the same flowers at my grave as you did at your mother’s,” Sherlock called after him in a much softer voice. John stopped and turned slightly, looking over his shoulder. Saw that Sherlock looked genuinely confused by that fact.

“Yeah? So?”

“Why?”

“Sentiment,” John snapped again.

“Yes, obviously, but why?” The Great Detective pleaded.

“Because… because… because you shouldn’t have been such a dick and hid your plans about The Fall and the Great Hiatus from me, that’s why!” John finally shouted. With that, he entered the bathroom and slammed the door. The lights and the hideous watercolors of the French countryside rattled.

Sherlock sat back down on John’s bed, folding his lips. Trying to figure out what exactly just happened. Something Not Good. Obviously.

“Right,” he muttered. He reached for the telephone; embarrassed that his fingers trembled a bit as he did so. But his voice stayed perfectly even as he ordered in French a pot of tea for two plus cucumber and goat cheese salad and crusty French bread and butter for John.

He always got a bit stroppy when he was peckish, John.

Chapter End Notes

Not going to lie... I completely DON’T understand the British school system. I THINK I got John’s grade correct based upon this wikipedia link:
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Education_in_the_United_Kingdom ... but my American brain continues to rebel and say "No - he's in sixth grade!"

If it's wrong and it needs to be corrected, someone please let me know! THANKS!
“Sherlock,” John leaned forward. “Listen. Who bloody cares why Dupin asked for you, let’s just grab a coffee then track down this Sara Whoever. Then we can find the letter and get the hell out of France.”

“Your friend speaks good sense, although France is a lovely country.”

“Oh yes, your prison cells are just divine,” Sherlock fluttered his eyelids at Dupin...
or "How to Make Friends and Influence People by Sherlock Holmes."

Also, another glimpse into John's childhood and Violet had quite the busy day!

Happy Sunday and Happy Birthday to Benedict Cumberbatch :^)

Harry arched an eyebrow. “John, huh? No more ickle Johnny?”

“Shut it,” John grumbled as he slid off his bed. He tried to push past his sister but she caught him in a headlock and rubbed her knuckles into his blond hair. “URGGH. GERROFF.”

Harry gave him a good-natured shove. “Missed ya, midget.”

“Missed picking on me, you mean.”

“Well, duh, baby brother.”

The siblings made their way down the narrow staircase and into the cramped kitchen. Anna Watson still had on the one nice dress she wore to church when she woke up in time to drag John with her. She had donned an apron over it. Seeing John wearing a t-shirt and jeans instead of his church clothes, she cried out: “Oh, you changed out of your good clothes already? And here your sister’s come to visit.”

“Yeah, you slob,” Harry ruffled his hair.

“Stop,” John slapped at her hand. “Why do I have to dress up for Harry? She’s not dressed up, unless she’s dressed up for Halloween,” he turned up his nose as he eyed her Day-Glo pink tights, black skirt and a grey sweatshirt far too large for her. It slid right off her left elbow.

“This is fashion, Johnny.”

“That is ugly fashion, Harry.”


Harry winked at John as she went to the cupboard to fetch the plates. After the table was more or less correctly laid, John sat down as Anna took the roast chicken out of the oven. “Oh, let us serve you, Your Nibs,” Harry joked as she brought the bowl of potatoes and the gravy boat to the table.

“John, get the salad out of the fridge,” Anna grunted as she started slicing the bird.

“Fine,” John grumbled, going to fetch the “salad”, which was really just shredded lettuce, served with a nasty creamy dressing John didn’t like. But he did as he was told and soon the three of them were seated around the small round table, brother and sister teasing each other while mother half-heartedly scolded them.

John could tell, by the way his mother kept sneaking looks at Harry, she was dead chuffed to have Harry home. *Harry should come back home,* he thought for the umpteenth time. *Maybe they can sort it out, when Dad comes back from the races or wherever he’s been at…*

Before he could entertain that fantasy any further, their doorbell chimed.

Tea slopped over the brim of the cup as Anna set it down with a shaking hand.

“Expecting anyone else, Mum?” Harry set her fork down as John scooped himself to another helping of potatoes and gravy.

Anna shook her head, muttered “Stay here,” and wiped her mouth with her serviette. “Be back in a tick. John, don’t eat all the potatoes. Want to make shepherd’s pie with the leftovers for tonight’s
John and Harry exchanged a confused look as Anna left to answer the door. “Yes?” they could hear her say. They couldn’t hear what the person at the door said to her, but they heard her clearly say in a loud voice: “I already told you, he’s not here.”

“What’s going on?” Harry hissed at her brother.

The twelve-year-old towhead bit his lip. “Dad’s been gone since Thursday.”

Harry’s young face twisted into something ugly, hateful, almost scary. “That fucker,” she snarled. Before she could go on, Anna cried out, “No, you cannot come in, oh!”

Hearing their mother’s little yelp of shock, both Harry and John were on their feet and bolted to the lounge.

“Kids, stay in the kitchen!” Anna yelled at them, her burr thicker than normal. Harry stopped dead in her tracks, right in the doorway and wrapped her arms around John as he tried to push through to get to his mother.

Both Watson kids stared in disbelief at the man in a cheap sharkskin-grey three-piece-suit standing in their living room. His hair was blonde and greasy, combed back to reveal a receding widow’s peak. Neither John nor Harry had ever seen him before, but the man smiled at them as if he knew them. “Ah, you two must be Harriet and John.”

John felt Harry’s arms tightened around him as she demanded, “What do you want?”

The man ignored her request. “John, you’re the man of the family now, did you know that? A heavy burden for one so young, you’re all of what? Eight? Nine?”

“I’m twelve,” John let a sullen note color his voice.

“Really?” The man made a big show of being shocked. “Bit of a runt, isn’t he?” he asked Anna.

“Leave him be. Harry, take John and go to the Staffords. Now.”

“Harriet. Stay,” the man crooned, eyeing her. “You’re a very pretty girl, Harriet.” John could feel his sister tense up as she clutched him close to her.

“Fuck off,” Harry jutted her chin up, trying to sound tough. “You heard my mum. Get out. We don’t know where the bastard is and don’t care.”

“Well, that’s a bit of a problem. You should care where your dad is, immensely.”

“Why?” Harry snapped just as Anna bellowed at her: “Harriet, for God’s sake. For once in your life, do as you’re bloody told. Get John out of here.”

“Why do you want to know where my dad is?” John croaked out.

“Well, son,” the man continued looking at his nails. Anna circled him like he was a rabid dog until she stood in front of her children, not that it did any good as she was barely over five feet tall. The man glanced at the petite woman shielding her offspring and chuckled. “You see, John. Your dad owes me money.”

“Ten thou.”

John’s mind reeled. He couldn’t imagine that much money. It sounded like a made-up number, like googolplex. “Dad doesn’t have that much money,” John said in a hushed voice.

“Oh I know,” the man sounded amused now. “He didn’t even have the original five thou he owed me. But well, he doubled-down at the Grand National last month,” his smile was a thin, cold line, more of a slash between his chin and nose. “He lost.”

“Oh Jesus,” Anna moaned in despair.

John shook his head, confused. “No. Dad doesn’t have that kind of money. He wouldn’t lay a bet like that if he didn’t have it.”

“Oh Johnny,” Harry’s voice trembled as she held her innocent little brother even closer to her. “He’s a loan shark. Dad borrowed the money so he could make that bet.” She glared at the blonde man in the cheap suit. “Didn’t he?”

“Bright as well as beautiful,” he nodded at Harry. “And I need my money back.”

“Can’t you just break his legs and call it a day? Hell, I’d even help,” Harry offered.

“Harry!” Anna admonished her daughter. Then she straightened her shoulders. “I told you. I don’t know where my husband is. You’ll have to take it up with him when you find him.”

“That’s the problem, we can’t find him and I still need my money back.”

“But we don’t have it,” John squawked. “And we didn’t make the bet.”

“Ah, then you’re learning an important life lesson, aren’t you?” he knelt down in front of John so they were eye-level. “Life’s not fair. You know what else, son?”

“I’m not your son,” John furrowed his fair brows as he glared at the loan shark.

But the loan shark only laughed at John’s show of aggression. “You’ve got spirit, boy, I’ll give you that. Hopefully it won’t get you killed when you grow up.” He smiled wider as John shrank against Harry. He then lowered his voice to a stage whisper, “But you see, your mummy’s got the money, actually. She just has to make a very difficult decision. Does she want to see her two children go to uni, or does she want them to live another day?” He straightened up and stared Anna down. “So? Mummy?” he resumed his normal tone of voice. “Which is it?”

Anna held her ground. “If I give you an extra five thou on top of the ten Jack owes, will you promise to leave us be? No matter what other foolishness Jack gets himself into in the future, you’ll leave me and my children alone?”

“No!” Harry cried out at same time as John quavered, “Don’t Mum, please.”

“You drive a hard bargain, Mrs. Watson,” the loan shark crooned. “After tomorrow, when you pay me, you’ll never see me again, I promise.” He traced Anna’s cheek, “I’m a man of my word, unlike your feckless husband. Who, by the way, you might not see him ever again either. Will that be a problem?”

“No,” Harry answered for her mother.
The loan shark gave Harry a sardonic smile and winked at John. “Sorry to intrude on your Sunday. Mrs. Watson,” and he bowed, as if making a formal social call. “I’ll show myself out.”

Once the loan shark left, Anna tottered to the sofa and sank down, her face leeched of color. “John, go get the whisky and two glasses. Go,” Harry gave her brother a shove towards the kitchen. “Move it.”

After giving his mother and sister bewildered looks, John ran to the kitchen. He hopped onto the countertop and opened the cupboard. Standing on his tiptoes, he retrieved a dusty bottle of whisky on the very top shelf. Miraculously he didn’t drop and break the bottle or fall and split his head open.

He brought the bottle and two coffee mugs into the lounge. Harry sat next to her mother, rubbing her back. “Mum, listen to me, just… I didn’t get to tell you, but I won a scholarship to London Metro, so I’m OK, I don’t need the money for uni. But that’s your retirement and Johnny’s education you’re giving away. Don’t do it.”

“You heard him, Harry,” Anna buried her face in her hands. “Why do you think I called you home? I thought you’d be safer here than on your own at the Staffords.”

“Jesus Christ,” Harry groaned then snatched the alcohol and mugs out of John’s hands. She poured her mother a generous portion, then one for herself. “Here. Drink this.”

Anna took the pink mug with a yellow smiley face on it from her daughter then looked at the white, chipped mug still in Harry’s hands. “Bit young for spirits, aren’t you lassie?”

“Please, I’ll be eighteen in a few months and it’s not like I’ve never had a drink before,” Harry sniffed but then became deadly serious. “I mean it Mum. Don’t sell your future or Johnny’s. There’s got to be another way.” Inspiration hit her. “Sell the house. As a single mum you can qualify for council housing. I can stay on with the Staffords.”

“I wouldn’t get a brass farthing for this dump,” Anna clutched her mug.

“Why not?”

“Had to refinance it, the last time your father got in trouble,” Anna whispered. “The mortgage is more than the house’s worth.”

John sat down on the other side of his mother. He had heard this happening to other kids, their fathers taking off, it happened in their neighborhood. He just never thought it would happen to his family. “Did Dad really leave us?”

Anna put her arm around John and kissed his temple, “Only for a bit, son. He left for a higher-paying job so he can make the money he owes that…”

“Piece of shit,” Harry supplied, throwing the drink back like an expert.

“Enough, young lady,” Anna snapped. She put her untouched mug of whisky down on the coffee table then turned to face John. “He thought he had more time to pay that debt back but apparently not. But I took care of it and your dad will replenish our savings once he’s back.”

“So, he is coming back?” John looked at his mother hopefully.

“Yes, of course,” Anna smoothed his blond hair away from his brow.

“Don’t be daft! Of course he’s not coming back!” Harry shouted. “He did a bunk and left us holding
the bag. He’s not coming back and he’s not going to have the money to replenish your retirement savings or John’s university fund. He *fucked* you, Mother.”

Anna slapped Harry. The empty mug slipped from Harry’s hand and it landed with a dull thud on the threadbare carpet. The crack of Anna’s hand against Harry’s face reverberated through the small lounge.

Harry sat dumbfounded, Anna’s handprint standing out on her cheek. Then she stood up, her eyes blazing with rage. “I’m going back to the Staffords, do what you want,” she said coldly.

“No, Harry, don’t go, it’s not safe, that crook’s still out there.” John pleaded. “Mum’s sorry, aren’t you Mum?” He grabbed Anna’s wrist. “Mum, please, *please*. If Dad’s really gone like Harry says, don’t let her leave either.”

Anna’s eyes watered and her chin wobbled. “You’re really the best of us all, you know that don’t you?” she brushed John’s hair back again. John tried to smile but there was something cold and hard in her voice that made John feel like she was condemning him instead of complimenting him. So he just dropped his eyes to his lap and studied his knees intently.

Anna stood up, smoothing down her good black dress as Harry watched her warily. She flinched only slightly as her mother cupped her face with both hands. “Forgive me, darling,” Anna murmured. “You spoke the truth and I lost my temper.”

Harry’s face crumpled and she buried her face into her mother’s shoulder, like the lost teenage girl she really was. John remained on the sofa, eyes still on his knees, noticing a new hole starting. Picking at the threads, making the hole bigger, he said, “It’s OK, Mum. If Harry can get a scholarship, so can I. Just pay the prick.”

“Language, young man,” Anna tried to scold her son but a sad little laugh escaped. She ended the embrace with Harry. Pulling her handkerchief out of her dress sleeve, she added, “So, it’s just the three of us then, from now on, yes?”

John nodded mutely as Harry mumbled, “I’ll get my stuff from the Staffords tomorrow.”

Anna blinked back tears as she stood up. She patted John on his round cheek and kissed Harry where she had slapped her. “I’m so sorry, love,” she whispered again then went to the kitchen to start clearing up.

Harry slumped back down onto the sofa next to John. Spying the pink mug, she snatched it up and guzzled it. Then poured herself another drink.

John stopped fiddling with the hole in his jeans as he watched his sister toss the whisky back. “Want to play cards or something?” he asked lamely. “Checkers? Monopoly?”

She shook her head, grimacing as she swallowed. “Turn the telly on. You pick the show,” she said in a hoarse voice, pouring herself yet another shot. She held the bottle up, “Wanna drink?”

“Oh, no thanks,” John muttered, thinking that this day couldn’t possibly couldn’t get any stranger. He turned the telly on and flipped through the channels until he came across a rugby match, just to have something normal to watch. Then he sat on the couch, pressing close to his sister. She stifled a sob then cuddled him when they was very little.

Just like when they were small and waiting for their father to come home.
Dupin did indeed arrive at their hotel at five o’clock on the dot. He drove a different vehicle this
time, a delivery van, or what John assumed was some sort of delivery van, since, of course, the logo
and wording on the vehicle were all in French.

“Stake-out,” Sherlock sounded affronted that Dupin had planned something so boring for them.

Dupin didn’t deign to give Sherlock a reply, just pulled out a pack of Gauloise cigarettes that
Sherlock looked at longingly. But to his credit, when Dupin offered him a fag, Sherlock had just
crossed his arms and huffed a very surly “No, thank you,” and slouched down in the passenger seat.

As Sherlock slouched, John asked from the backseat, “Um, could you not smoke, please?”

“Oh, yes, of course, how rude,” Dupin tucked the pack back into his coat. “Apologies, Dr. Watson. I
don’t have many vices in life. Sadly, cigarettes are still one of them.” He put the van in gear and
merged into traffic that made London rush hour feel like a nice Sunday drive in the country.

Both John and Sherlock thought Dupin was going to take them straight back to the holiday flats in
Montmartre where John and Sherlock had been arrested. Dupin did indeed drive them back to
Montmartre. But instead of turning to go towards the Art Deco building John and Sherlock had
visited last night, he turned as if going to the Basilique du Sacré-Cœur; however he stopped and
parked in front of a café with a bright carnation-pink façade and sage-green shutters and doors.

“Why are we here?” Each word out of Sherlock’s mouth was harsh and clipped.

Dupin lifted his eyebrows in surprise. “It’s a coffee shop,” he used the same tone of voice one would
use as if explaining something complicated to a small child. “We’re here for coffee.”

“I do not require a cup of coffee,” Sherlock ground his teeth. “We need to go back to the holiday
flats on Rue Feu de Coeur. Sara Govmux will return to retrieve her money. We do not need to waste
time visiting a Parisian tourist trap.”

Dupin merely turned the van off and hopped out. Sherlock slid over into the driver’s seat.

“What are you doing?” John sighed.

“Hot-wiring this van so we can go where we are actually needed,” Sherlock grumbled as he
examined the ignition. “Do you have a screwdriver handy?”

“A screw… no. Of course not.”

“Then what good are you?”

There was a sharp rap on the passenger side window. Both John and Sherlock jumped.

Dupin opened the passenger door. “I would greatly appreciate it if you did not steal my van,” he
rumbled, sounding disappointed. “Monsieur Holmes, your education begins now.”

“I came to Paris to solve a crime,” Sherlock sat up, scowling. “My detective skills are more than
adequate, thank you very much. I did not come here seeking an instructor.”
“I know,” Dupin tilted his head, a little smile on his thin lips. “The teacher comes when the student is ready to learn the lesson.”

“What fortune cookie did you pull that out of?” John couldn’t resist.

“I promise you,” Dupin kept his eyes fixed on Sherlock. “You won’t be disappointed or bored.” As Sherlock arched his eyebrow, studying him, Dupin shrugged, “Deduce away. It does not bother me. Actually, it speaks of your good sense to be wary of a stranger and to glean as much information as possible when thrust into an unfamiliar situation.”

A chilly, pitiless smile crept up on Sherlock’s face. “How much is my brother paying you to ‘instruct’ me?”

“Handsome,” Dupin didn’t flinch at Sherlock’s coldness. “But he did not lie to you. I did personally request your assistance in this matter.”

“For a price,” Sherlock huffed, clearly offended.

“Sherlock,” John leaned forward. “Listen. Who bloody cares why Dupin asked for you, let’s just grab a coffee then track down this Sara Whoever. Then we can find the letter and get the hell out of France.”

“Your friend speaks good sense, although France is a lovely country.”

“Oh yes, your prison cells are just divine,” Sherlock fluttered his eyelids at Dupin.

“That reminds me,” Dupin dug into his coat again and pulled out an envelope. “I did not trust that buffoon Gagnon to actually reimburse him. I wanted to give this to Dr. Watson personally.” When neither Sherlock nor John moved, Dupin explained, “It’s the confirmation of the five-hundred thousand euros Gagnon said he’d compensate you for your unfortunate incarceration. I would have had Gagnon email the confirmation to you, but I did not know your personal email address,” he added apologetically. “Please let me know if the funds are not in your accounts by tomorrow morning.”

“Um, OK, thanks,” John tried to mentally convert francs to pounds.

“Three hundred, forty-seven thousand, two hundred and one pounds, give or take a penny,” Sherlock rumbled, staring out the windscreen, still sulking.

John blinked. That was substantially more than what he had made as a general practitioner, when he had still practiced medicine full-time. Maybe we won’t starve to death when the new baby comes, he thought, still gobsmacked.

“And whether or not you want a cup of coffee now, you will need it. It’s going to be another long night for you two,” Dupin pointed out before whirling around, his long, black leather coat fanning out behind him.

“Sherlock,” John pleaded, “Please. Don’t get into a pissing match with this bloke, alright? You always say to focus on the Work, so let’s just focus on the Work. We’re not going to solve this case if you engage in a battle of wits with him. Let’s just find the damn letter and go home.”

Sherlock made a rude noise that sounded similar to a horse whickering. Then he grunted assent and let himself out of the van.

Not that John was reassured by those noises. Sherlock, after all, was a master actor and a marvelous
liar. It wouldn’t be the first time Sherlock had nodded, smiled, told John what he wanted to hear only to turn around and do the exact opposite of what he promised John.

*Damn him,* John thought as he finally got out of the van. It didn’t help matters John still felt cross with Sherlock for interrogating him about his latest nightmare. *I am not a hypocrite…*

*Yes, you are…* Violet Hunter’s voice sing-songed in his head as he trotted after the Great Detective and the French Detective.

*Shut it, Violet,* he admonished the imaginary Violet as he caught up with Sherlock and Dupin.

Once again, frustration clawed at John as Dupin engaged in a conversation in French with a beautiful woman with honey-colored hair and huge, bright emerald eyes. She was either the hostess or the owner. Other than the bare basics such as *oui, merci* and *bon jour,* John had clean forgotten what little he had learned in secondary school. But he had never been any great shakes at languages. He had always gotten his lowest marks in French when he was a schoolboy. He knew Latin by-proxy because of his medical training and he had learned enough Pashto to scrape by during his time in Afghanistan.

The three linguists in his tightly-knit circle always awed him slightly. He liked taking Mary to French restaurants; it was sexy listening to her order for them.

But it irritated him greatly whenever Sherlock and Violet would switch from English to German or Spanish when they wished to speak about something they didn’t want John to know about.

Now he just felt out of his depth, a weight tied to Sherlock’s ankle before they threw him into the water. Even though he had been mentally cussing her out mere minutes earlier, John wished heartily that Violet had accompanied them to Paris.

“Order for me,” John whispered to Sherlock as he sat down next to him. He could feel his cheeks pinking up.

“Do not let your lack of language expertise allow your mood deteriorate more than it already has,” Sherlock admonished him. “If Dupin’s appendix were to suddenly rupture, you would be able to remove it with ease whereas I would probably kill him if I attempted.” In a lower voice, he added darkly, “Of course, maybe you should let me operate if Dupin’s appendix does go bad.”

John snorted then said, “Stop being a brat, Sherlock. Who knows? Maybe you can learn something from him.”

“He’s just another babysitter foisted on me by Mycroft,” Sherlock crossed his arms and slid down in his seat, still in a strop.

“Then tell Dupin to charge Mycroft extra. Hazard pay,” John quipped.

“Hmm,” Sherlock rubbed his chin. “Not a completely terrible idea, John.” Then he turned his head and gave John one of his very rare, genuine smiles, one that actually reached his eyes. “You see, John, though you lack linguistic skills, your common sense more than makes up for that deficiency. Again, proving I have the superior blogger. I wonder where young Monsieur Honoré is at tonight.”

Before John could determine if that was a rhetorical question or if Sherlock was really asking, Dupin had returned from the Gents. “Order what you like,” he said graciously. “I’m never charged for anything here.”

“Did you solve a case for the owner?” John asked.
“Not exactly,” Dupin purred then looked over his shoulder at the beautiful woman he had been speaking to earlier. She winked one of her brilliant green eyes at him as she pushed a lock of her honey-colored hair over her ear.

“Oh God,” Sherlock spat.

“Says the man who proposed to a woman just to get inside a penthouse!” John spluttered.

“That was for a case,” Sherlock sniffed. “Not for free coffee.”

“And crepes,” Dupin added blandly. “They have fantastic crepes. If we had more time, I’d recommend them. Alas, we only have time for coffee. Tell me, Dr. Watson, you seem to be well-read,” he directed his attention towards John. “Can you recommend any good books?”

“Oh,” John found himself drawing a blank. “Like what kind of books? Research books or…?”

“Oh no,” Dupin waved that away. “A good read, something to really sink my teeth into. I was on a classical literature kick for a while. Now I thirst for something contemporary, although I have a weakness for good poetry.”

“Oh… well, as far as poetry goes, I’ve always fancied Edgar Allan Poe.”

“What does this have to do with The Case?” Sherlock snapped.

“Oh no,” Dupin waved that away. “A good read, something to really sink my teeth into. I was on a classical literature kick for a while. Now I thirst for something contemporary, although I have a weakness for good poetry.”

“Nothing,” Dupin leaned back in his seat, “Just making pleasant conversation while we wait.”

“Wait for what?” Sherlock’s teeth were clenched so tight, John was afraid they’d crack.

“Allô,” a waitress appeared, a pretty brunette of about twenty years old, John guessed. Clear-skinned, apple-cheeked, big chocolate brown eyes with long, silky brown that belonged in a shampoo commercial and an hourglass figure that belonged in a dirty magazine. John assumed she had asked for their orders. Dupin ordered for all of them, much to Sherlock’s obvious chagrin. The Great Detective slid further down in his seat as his frown deepened. John poked Sherlock in the side.

“Sit up,” he hissed at him.

Sherlock ignored him, his eyes glued to the pretty girl’s slender fingers as she patted Dupin on top of his be-ringed hand before sashaying away.

“Why did she tuck a note up your coat sleeve?” Sherlock immediately demanded.

Dupin’s lips quirked up. “Noelie is a street-performer by day and waitress by night. She’s also one of the best pickpockets and con artists I’ve ever met. She’s saving to move to Los Angeles to pursue a film career, which I feel is a mistake but you are only young once.” He plucked the tightly folded slip of paper out of his coat sleeve. As he read the note, he said, “You have your Homeless Network, I have my Montmartre Milices, my Montmartre Militia,” he translated for John. “And it is a fortunate thing I asked for those coffees to go. Time for a walk, gentlemen.”

“Yes, of course, let’s go for a pleasant evening stroll instead of pursuing international criminals,” Sherlock sneered.

“Walking helps me think,” Dupin shrugged. Just then the pretty waitress-street performer—con artist returned. As she put the to-go cups in front of each man, Dupin growled at her, “Noelie, rend au Dr. Watson son porte-monnaie et son passeport !”
“What did he say?” John asked as Sherlock buried his face in his hand.

“You see but don’t observe, as usual,” Sherlock grumbled.

The girl sighed theatrically and handed John his wallet and passport back. “You little…” John floundered, wishing he at least knew some French swear words.

“You were so busy admiring the girl’s assets you were not paying attention to your own,” Sherlock popped the lid off his coffee to add two packets of sugar.

Meanwhile the little thief put her hands on her hips and glowered at Dupin. “You’re no fun anymore Auggie,” she said in English but with a Parisian accent so thick, John could barely understand her anyway.

“One of the drawbacks of getting old, I’m afraid,” he rose to his full height then chucked the girl under the chin, like a doting grandpa. The girl rolled her eyes and walked away.

“I’m beginning to really hate this city,” John sighed as he checked to make sure his bank and credit cards and cash were still in his wallet.

“Good thing she didn’t nick your gun,” Sherlock as John tucked his wallet and passport back inside his coat again. Then he thumped John with his shoulder, “Move. His Majesty awaits.”

John stood up so Sherlock could get out of his seat. Dupin waited politely for them by the café door then jerked his head, indicating they should follow him. As they left, strolling casually, John realized Sherlock had just insulted Dupin the same way John, Mary and Violet did Sherlock when he was driving them mad.

Ah, he’s finding out what it’s like to be treated the way he treats us, John hid a smile as he lagged a step behind the detectives. This could be fun yet.

Then it started to rain.

Or not, John groused.

“Unfortunate,” Dupin held out his bare hand as they walked, the rain pattering on his palm. “But this won’t deter us in the slightest.”

The rain chased everyone inside, except for a dark-haired woman valiantly waiting for a bus in the down pour. Her pink umbrella offered little protection from the elements. All it did was hide her face from John’s and everyone else’s sight as they passed her by on their uphill trek.

Not that John was paying attention. “Where are we going?” John felt his calves starting to burn as they hiked uphill. Tonight was promising to be just as miserable as last night. “Where are we going?” John felt his calves starting to burn as they hiked uphill. Tonight was promising to be just as miserable as last night.

“Here,” Dupin took an abrupt turn to the right, disappearing into a dark, dank alley.

“Wonderful,” John groaned as Sherlock tossed his coffee into the nearest bin. John took a swallow of his, grimaced after burning his tongue then threw his cup away as well.

The cobblestone pavement in the alley was uneven and slick. John nearly stumbled twice. The second time, Sherlock had caught him, his big hand gripping him underneath his arm.
“Steady,” he hummed into his ear.

“Thanks,” John pushed his rain-wet hair off his forehead.

They stopped by a large skip next to a metal door. Dupin fished his mobile out of his coat pocket, trying to shield the device from the rain. He texted quickly then stuffed the mobile back into his pocket. Soon (but not soon enough for a soaked and grumpy John,) the metal door flew open. Light filled the alley as a thin, bald man stuck his head out. “Dupin, hey! Sorry it took me so long, my cousin’s in town and he don’t ever shut up,” he said in English, oddly accented English, reminding John of Violet’s nasal Midwestern cadence. But there was an additional harshness to this man’s voice, making John think he was not from America’s Heartland, as Violet was. But the man’s actions seemed friendly enough as he extended his arm to shake Dupin’s hand. His arm was also covered from wrist to bicep with intricate tattoos. John couldn’t make out the design. But what he did observe was the tightly rolled wad of American dollars passed from Dupin to the tattooed, bald man as they shook hands. “Weather’s shit, ain’t it?” he let go of Dupin’s hand then beckoned, “Come in.”

“I’m Tony,” the bald, tattooed man said by way of introduction as he led John, Sherlock and Dupin from the back down a narrow hallway. “Came here in ’98 for an overseas student program when I was in college and never went back,” he added with a laugh. “Decided restaurants and bars were more fun than finance law.”

Sherlock opened his mouth but John turned and stuck his finger in his face. “No,” he quickly nipped Sherlock’s deduction in the bud. “Shush.”

Sherlock pouted.

Tony led the trio into his office. The desk was ugly, constructed of some cheap wood and its paint was peeling. But there were state of the art surveillance monitors everywhere.

“I’ll have Cecily bring you some coffee and towels, you guys are probably freezing to death,” Tony said. “Need anything else?”

As Dupin told him no thank you, both John and Sherlock studied the computer monitors closely. “Looks like this pub is a complete dive,” John whispered to Sherlock as soon as Tony left them in peace. “Why do they need all this technology? There’s more surveillance than the CCTV.”

“It’s a front for organized crime, obviously. Tony is a diminutive of Antony or Antonio. His accent indicates he hails from Chicago, a city notorious for its lineage of gangsters, the most famous being Al Capone. And no, I am not making assumptions based off of stereotypes. He was an open book, his exploits were clearly written on his arms, the tattoo sleeves. He had planned on becoming a solicitor (or attorney, as they are called in America) but he had murdered someone to avenge the death of a woman he loved passionately. Whether she was his girlfriend or fiancée, that I am not wholly sure, need more data to make the correct conclusion, not that the girl’s status is particularly important in this case. He came to France because he knew the authorities would assume he’d flee to Italy. He meant to go back to America but surprised himself by falling in love with France, Paris specifically, the tacky tattoo of Eiffel Tower inside a heart proves that fact,” Sherlock rolled his eyes. “But I digress. While he is no longer intimately involved with his family’s business, he does assist them indirectly, primarily money laundering. He probably has a cousin or brother drop in quarterly and Tony takes his wife on a very romantic mini-break to Geneva, where he makes a deposit into his family’s Swiss Bank account? Wife? Yes, of course a wife, wedding ring, obvious even to a complete moron. But who’s his wife? Cecily, of course, what other woman would he trust to bring two complete strangers coffee and towels while in his private office with all this equipment?”

“Hang on, hang on. This pub is a cover for the mob?” John squawked when Sherlock finally took a
breath, “An American mob family?”

“Yes, John. Do try to keep up,” Sherlock rolled his eyes again. Then with his hands clasped behind his back, he asked Dupin in a syrupy voice, “Did I miss anything?”

“It was his fiancée who was murdered,” Dupin sounded completely unimpressed by Sherlock’s breathtaking deduction. “Now, if you’re finished showing off,” he ignored Sherlock’s murderous glare as he pulled up a chair. “Sara Govmux will be here any moment, along with the duplicitous Eduardo Lucas. She knew the holiday flat would be monitored tonight. She’s meeting Lucas to create an alternative plan of escape. Little do they know they are being recorded,” he kicked off his motorcycle boots and peeled off his damp socks, wringing them out one sock at a time. “A copy will be sent to MI-6 and another to Interpol,” he added with a satisfied grunt, wiggling his toes. But when he didn’t put his socks and boots back on, he shrugged. “I don’t like shoes.”

Sherlock and John looked at each other then at Dupin’s bare feet again. “And people say I’m odd,” Sherlock muttered before returning his gaze back to the multiple computer screens. He crossed his arms and puffed out an irritable breath. “Let the wait begin.”

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27 November 2015
New Scotland Yard
Friday night
10:35 PM

One couldn’t blame Violet for dozing off. It had been a long day for her. However it had been a highly productive day so it was little wonder she was utterly spent.

After convincing Billy to take her to the Apple Store after breakfast she purchased two iPads. She used a pre-paid cash card she carried with her for just such emergencies as the predicament she was in currently.

Then posing as tourists, they took a stroll on Westminster Bridge, pretending to take pictures of Big Ben and the London Eye. Billy pretended to use his Smartphone. Violet pretended to use her new iPad, the larger one. She planned on keeping the second iPad, a mini, for herself. That one was tucked into her rucksack, along with her gun.

Easy, really, pretending to lean back against the bridge and act like she was loading photographs onto social media. Violet’s fingers flew as she entered into the hotmail account Sherlock had set up for her when he wanted to message her without Mycroft’s prying eyes seeing. Unsure if MI-6 had hacked into Sherlock’s mobile while he and John had been incarcerated by the French police, Violet didn’t waste any time.

She had found the email from Sherlock with the attachment containing the incriminating pictures. She quickly forwarded them to “Sally”, then deleted the original email, the forwarded email, then emptied the hotmail trash folder. Then she logged out of the email address and disabled the Wi-Fi on the iPad.

Then, smiling at Billy like a besotted girlfriend, she set the iPad on the bridge rail. Putting her arm around his shoulders, she said “Act like you are taking a selfie,” she instructed him. “But do not take an actual photograph of me.”

As Billy complied, Violet elbowed the iPad, pushing it into the Thames.
“Oh no!” Violet had cried, pretending to be distressed as she and Billy watched the tablet tumble into the river.

“Ah, isn’t that a crying shame,” Billy pretended to sympathize with her. As they walked away, he had asked her, “Bloody brill, by the way. How’d’ja think that up? Going to the Apple Store? One of Shezza’s tricks?”

“No,” Violet had looped her arm through Billy’s. “I have a guilty pleasure for crap telly and comic book films and I just watched Captain America, The Winter Soldier.”

“You’re full of surprises Miss Smith. Thought you’d be more of the classic novels and artsy-fartsy theatre type.”

“Do you think Mr. Holmes would tolerate me if I was predictable, Mr. Wiggins?” She squeezed his arm, finding herself warming up to Shezza’s protégé. “Now then, I need to ask for yet another favor, I’m afraid. But you will be paid for your time, of course. Handsomely, I might add because I’m afraid what I must ask you could be dangerous.”

“Danger is my middle name.”

“No. It’s not.”

“OK, it’s not but whaddya need?”

“Information,” she said quietly as they continued their stroll down Westminster Bridge, shivering as they did so. “Charles Augustus Magnussen did not work alone and I strongly suspect his network is still alive and thriving. I need to know who’s still involved with his organization, still running his dirty old blackmail scams. Can you do that?”

“Can I do that?” Billy’s eyes had blazed with an unaccustomed fury. “Miss Smith, not only would it be my pleasure, but also the entire Homeless Network’s Honest-to-God delight to smoke those rats out. We’ve been dying to go after those cunts ever since the shooting in Magnussen’s penthouse, but Shezza told us to stand down.”

“Well,” Violet honored him by giving him one of her real smiles, a Violet Hunter smile. “I’m telling you to stand up.”

“How will I find you? When I get the intel?”

“I’ll be back in 221B by tomorrow morning. I just need to stay off the grid one more night.”

Billy took her to a pub for a late lunch she had made him leave her side afterwards. Before he left, he slipped her a laminated card. “Fake library card. Use it so you can surf the web under the radar.” He had dithered, fiddling with his ugly russet colored scarf. “You sure you’re OK on your own, Miss Smith?”

“I work best alone, go on now. Scoot,” she had nodded to him as she pulled her own scarf over her head, hiding her face.

Using the Tube, avoiding CCTV cameras as much as possible, Violet made her way to the London Public Library in Lambeth and spent most of the day there. As “Flora Miller **”, she scoured the Internet on everything and anything on Charles Augustus Magnussen. No detail was too insignificant. When she wasn’t on the computer, she read the magazines, tabloids and newspapers Magnussen’s empire had owned.
“But,” she had said to herself, drumming her pen on the notepad she had been making cryptic notes in. “There is nothing available about his early life in Denmark.” She then chewed on her pen lid for a moment then wrote on top of her paper: *Something is rotten in the state of Denmark***. “Something is very rotten indeed,” she murmured as she underlined the Shakespearean quote twice.

Then five o’clock snuck up on her. Exhausted, grubby and famished, she had slipped into another café unnoticed. She ate sparingly and plainly, soup and toast, but drank cup after cup of coffee as she reviewed her notes and computer print-outs. Only when the café was nearly deserted, Violet realized she needed to figure out where to stay tonight.

“Shit,” she had muttered, taking off the balaclava she wore like a stocking cap and pushed her tangled curls off her brow. *I need to work without Mycroft’s interference. I just need one night on my own so I can make a plan. Then I can go back and act like I’m dancing to Mickey’s merry little tune, that I’m happy to be his prisoner again…*

At that moment, inspiration slammed into her. She paid for her meal and gathered her belongings. She darted into the Ladies and scraped her hair back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Then she touched up her make-up, muting the red lip color with a bit of gloss. She looked more like Miss Smith again instead of a too-cool-for-school hipster she had been posing as.

Then she hopped onto a bus and went to New Scotland Yard.

“Hello Alex,” she had said with a bright smile as she encountered Sherlock’s favorite sergeant, or rather, his least-hated sergeant. “Is Greg in his office?”

“Nope,” Sergeant Alexis MacDonald, a New Zealand transplant, was tiny, dark-haired and tight-lipped. Her reticence was one of the main reasons why Sherlock tolerated her. She had her coat and Wellingtons on and was carrying a messenger bag that looked stuffed with files. On her way home obviously but that didn’t stop her from asking: “Why?”

“We’re supposed to meet tonight,” Violet had started to look at her watch, only to remember she had taken it off and left it at Baker Street. “Sherlock’s out of town for a case and he asked me to relay some deductions he had for Greg on a different case.”

MacDonald lifted a slender eyebrow. “Mended fences, did they?”

Violet made herself look embarrassed. “Um, no… I’m the messenger.”

“Immature twats,” MacDonald shook her head. “Go on then.”

“Thank you so much. Have a good night,” Violet had gushed.

“’Night,” MacDonald nodded and walked off. Violet had breathed a sigh of relief. MacDonald was far sharper than many of the other cops working for the Met.

Most of the desks were deserted and the few cops still there didn’t even so much as glance at her as she entered Lestrade’s office. Maybe they had recognized her from when she came with Sherlock. Maybe she looked harmless. Maybe they should have realized that a woman wanted for treason in America had just broken into their boss’ office but they were just that incompetent.

Violet slipped into Lestrade’s office, shut the door, drew the blinds and slumped down into Lestrade’s desk chair.

Despite all the coffee she had consumed, she had nodded off in Lestrade’s chair.
Only to be startled awake two hours later: “The balls on you.”

Violet jumped and her eyes flew open at the sound of his voice. Seeing Detective-Inspector Greg Lestrade glowering at her, she nearly tipped over in her chair. She grabbed the chair arms to steady herself. “Hello.”

“Hello? Hello? Really?” Hands on hips, Lestrade grumbled, “Do I even want to know?”

“Probably not,” Violet mumbled.

Lestrade frowned at her then pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. His thoughts showed plainly on his face. Why in the hell would she come here anyway? The very last thing he wanted to deal with was Sherlock’s duplicitous flat-mate. But he sighed, accepting that she was here because either Sherlock was in trouble, or that she was in trouble because of Sherlock.

“I think you can drop the act around me.”

“What act?” Miss Smith arched an eyebrow and sat up straighter, crossing her arms and legs.

“If you insist,” Lestrade rubbed the back of his neck. “Why are you here? Seriously.”

“Because I don’t have any other place that’s safe to go,” she told him baldly.

“Where’s your loving fiancé?”

“Overseas, with John, working an international case.”

This deflated Lestrade. He had hoped she would say Sherlock was climbing the walls, begging for a case from The Met.

“Trouble overseas then?”

“A bit and it’s blowing back here.”

“How?”

Violet merely lifted her eyebrows. “I was hoping it would be alright if I commandeered your office for tonight. I need a safe, quiet place to work as well as to figure out where I should go until Sherlock and John are home.”

“No place safer than New Scotland Yard,” Lestrade silently applauded her moxie, the nerve of her, really. Waltzing into the police station, looking for sanctuary when she was connected to The Fall as well as those bombings last March. “And when exactly does the Great Consulting Detective return from overseas?”

“Soon.”

“Ah,” Lestrade studied her, really gave her a good look-over. Violet, now used to being scrutinized by Sherlock on an almost daily basis, uncrossed her arms and relaxed in Lestrade’s chair. I’m an open book, Detective-Inspector.

Violet, of course, with her profiler’s eyes, saw all of his emotions and thoughts. Like a professional poker player checking for her opponent’s tells, she noted how he looked up at the ceiling, first scratching his chin, then rubbing the back of his neck. Could tell his fury with Sherlock’s thoughtlessness and her deceit was warring with his concern for her well-being.
She knew that, despite her best efforts, she looked like shit. No amount of make-up could cover up the fact she’s lost weight since the last time he saw her. Or the fact she was wearing the same clothes two nights in a row now. Her hair was also falling out of its bun not to mention it desperately needed to be washed.

She observed however, she was not the only one who looked like shit. She saw the lavender smudges under his coffee-brown eyes, the day-old stubble, the coffee stains on his loosened neck tie, his wrinkled trousers and muddy shoes. *Wait for the opening…*

And Lestrade gave it to her. “You look like hell.”

“So do you,” she countered. “Why are you here?”

“I work here.”

“Thought you were on paternity leave.”

“Dimmock’s appendix ruptured last week. Had to have an emergency operation. They asked me to come back early. Was at a crime scene just now.”

“And you came here instead of going home to your wife and newborn baby?” she questioned him, her feline eyes locking onto his face. When his eyes dropped to the floor, she accused him flatly, “You came here to take a nap, not to work.”

“I did not!” Lestrade flared up. “I actually have to write a report, thank you very much, madam.”

“You have a laptop. I know, because I had to return it to you last September when Sherlock nicked it from you in an effort to get you to come over and talk to him.” Violet leaned forward, rested her chin in her hand while drummed the nails of her other hand on his desk. “So why can’t you work on your report at home?” She continued to stare at him, almost as if she were bored and was waiting for something interesting to happen.

Lestrade buckled under Violet’s unflinching gaze. “I can’t concentrate at home,” he whimpered, face reddening in shame. “He cries, all the bleeding time.”

“Babies do that.”

“No, this isn’t normal,” Lestrade looked like he was the one about to cry. “He’s not crying because he’s hungry or needs a new nappy. He’s in some sort of distress, but we can’t figure out what’s wrong. Molly’s weathering the storm the best she can, but she about to go around the bend. She won’t admit it that her baby’s driving her mad either, and the guilt’s eating her alive. But it’s Molly and she won’t say anything, just smiles her “I’m OK” smile and tries to hide how overwhelmed she is.” He snorted, “As if I wouldn’t notice.”

“Do you have anyone helping you at all?”

Lestrade nodded. “My mum comes during the day to help around the flat. She started shooing Molly out so she can have a bit of a break. Tells her to go do the shopping or go see friends, but then Molly comes back to a screaming baby and she feels all the more guilty for leaving. And her mum’s coming tomorrow actually for a visit,” Lestrade gave her a weary grin. “Mother Hooper says it’s just for a fortnight but I have a feeling once she sees the state Molly’s in and how unhappy the baby is, she’ll stay indefinitely.” Lestrade tried to look pleased but only looked despondent.

“Is he colicky? Or…?”
Lestrade shook his head. “He just doesn’t sleep. It’s a nightmare to get him to fall asleep and then every little noise wakes him up. He sleeps like an hour or two at the most. Then someone coughs and he’s immediately up and howling. We’ve taken him to the pediatrician but that bloody doctor was so fucking patronizing, said the same rubbish you did, that newborns cry but…” Lestrade shook his head. “He’s miserable. I can’t explain how I know this, but I can just tell.” He clamped his lips tightly shut. “Sorry.”

Hyperacusis, Violet immediately thought, thinking of the child’s biological father.

“Don’t apologize,” she said softly. “It’s always difficult when your child is suffering.”

Lestrade jerked his head up. “I said we can drop the act, didn’t I? You don’t have to pretend I’m the dad when it’s just us.”

“What act?” Violet held a questioning hand up. “I’m talking about the heart, not biology.”

Lestrade pinched his nose and swallowed hard, “Yeah. Well… Sorry, this isn’t your problem.”

Cautiously, Violet said “Have you ever heard of hyperacuity or hyperacusis?” When Lestrade shook her head, she explained, “To completely oversimplify the definitions, it is heightened sensitivity to sight and sounds. I’m not sure if it’s hereditary,” she said delicately. “But I can do a bit of research to see the best way to care for an infant with those conditions.”

Some of the anxiety left Lestrade’s face. “Would you?”

“Of course.” Because I have nothing else to do in my spare time. Jesus.

“Um, thanks… that’s… yeah, thanks.”

After an awkward beat, Violet stood up, “I apologize,” she turned to go, knowing she disrupted his train of thought. “This is inappropriate. I’ll… I’ll leave.” She picked up her rucksack, her left hand starting to tremble as she did so, her fingers tingling and numb. Dammit.

“Oh, stop,” he stood up just as she did. “You’re not leaving. But you’re not staying here either.”

“‘Yes, of course, my apologies again. Like I said, it was inappropriate to invade your office.”

Lestrade dug into his trench coat pocket and produced a key fob. “Here,” he tossed the keys to her. “It’s to my brother’s flat. He’s on holiday to the Canary Islands with his girlfriend. I’m supposed to be watching the place.” He flushed. “I take my naps there,” he admitted.

“That’s not necessary. I’m just going to go…” she faltered as a dull thudding started between her ears.

“Go where?” he put his hands on his hips, openly challenging her.

Violet found herself grinding her teeth in frustration, trying to think of a practical argument. Unfortunately there really wasn’t one. She only knew where two of Sherlock’s bolt-holes were located, after all. She really did not want to go back to the Empty Houses. She didn’t dare risk checking into a hotel and she had no other friends.

As her head really started to pound from the stress and sleep deprivation, she decided taking Lestrade up on his offer may not be such a terrible thing after all.

After all, Mycroft probably wouldn’t think about searching Lestrade’s brother’s flat.
Mycroft always wildly underestimated Sherlock’s friends.

“Alright,” she finally relented, letting her tense shoulders drop. She felt the headache abate a bit.

“Alright,” he nodded curtly then smiled warily. “I’m not your enemy either. Just fed up with Sherlock’s games, that’s all.”

“Join the club,” Violet said dryly as she reached for her coat. “When will you realize Sherlock isn’t your enemy?”

Lestrade picked up her rucksack “I know he’s not my enemy,” he finally admitted with a nod. “But he’s not my friend either. No, listen.” Lestrade held her rucksack out to her when Violet opened her mouth to protest. “I just can’t afford to be his friend right now. I have a responsibility to Molly and Henry, especially Henry. He’s so small, so defenseless. After seeing what poor John and Mary are going through, knowing that little Maisie was actually kidnapped instead of…well… and then almost coming so close to losing Henry, I…” his voice caught. “I could never forgive myself if something happened to him.” He took a breath then jammed his hands into his coat pockets. “Just like Sherlock would never forgive me for not taking care of you.” He opened the door and held it open for her. “Shall we? I’ll drive you. Spare you cab fare.”

“Thank you,” she said softly, humbled by his kindness.

“Oh, and if you tell Molly I nap at Hugh’s, I’ll push you off a bridge and into the Thames.”

“Too late,” Violet informed him as they walked down the corridors of New Scotland Yard. “Sherlock already beat you to that.”

“Why am I not surprised?”

**

27 November 2015  
Montmartre, Paris  
Thursday night  
11:15 PM

The wait was terribly boring, John had to admit. Tedious minutes stretched into long, dull hours. He was glad when Cecily (another ridiculously gorgeous woman with cinnamon-colored curls, big doe-eyes and high-cheekbones,) finally got a free moment to bring dry towels and piping hot coffee to them. Do they even make ugly women here? John thought as he watched the woman walk away with the appreciative eye of an artist and the guilty heart of a married man.

“John,” Sherlock snapped.

“Sorry,” John flushed, whipping his head back towards the screens.

“There,” Dupin pointed to a screen, showing the front door opening. “Lucas.”

“That prick,” John growled, the beautiful French women wiped away from his mind.

Sherlock’s eyes bounced from screen to screen as he followed Lucas as he went to the bar. Both John and Sherlock watched Lucas fetch a beer from the bar and then select a secluded corner table.

“Here she comes,” Dupin had kept his eyes on the screen showing the front door.
“You positive?” John squinted at the image of the woman. She wore skin tight jeans, black knee boots, a short black jacket with the hood over her head, shielding her face, of course.

“Oh yes,” Sherlock breathed while Dupin nodded.

They all watched as the hooded woman moved from screen to screen as she entered the pub, looking vainly around and then spotting Lucas. The double-agent did not look pleased to see him. She did not seem very happy either. As she plopped down in her chair and started pointing her finger at Lucas, John moaned, “I wish there was audio.”

“I can read lips,” Sherlock and Dupin chimed in unison.

“Bully for you both,” John kept his eyes fixed on the computer screens. “Come on, sweetheart,” he whispered. “Take your hood off. Let us see your face, Sara.” But when she did finally flipped the hood off her head, John yelped in complete disbelief, “What the…? Am I seeing things?”

“Nope.” A predatory smile curled up on Sherlock’s lips. “Oh, how I do love a good surprise,” he purred as he touched the back of his head.

“Do you know this woman?” Dupin shook his head in confusion.

“Oh yeah,” John watched her intently now. The expression on her face was exactly the same as it had been right before told him and Sherlock to get out of her house at once. Then she had chucked a vase at Sherlock when his back was turned. “We know her.”

“Who is she?” Dupin looked bemused.

Sherlock stopped touching the bump on the back of his head. “Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope.”

Chapter End Notes

**"Flora Miller" is a character from "The Noble Bachelor."**

**"Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" is from "Hamlet."**
“Dupin, I really don’t think we should split up,” John interceded, keeping his voice amenable.

“You don’t want to be separated from your friend, which is understandable. But you two were separated for two years. Surely you can stand one night.” Dupin patted John on the shoulder then turned to Sherlock. “Besides, it’ll be fun for you. The basilica is closed to visitors at this time. You’ll have to break in. You would probably enjoy the challenge.”

“If I refuse?” Sherlock squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. Lifted his brows in that haughty manner that always made John want to punch him in the face.

Dupin shook his head. “Mycroft told me if you stepped one toe out of line, to put you on the first plane back to London.”

“Fine by me,” John chirped then added in a serious voice, “Sherlock, let’s go...”

Meanwhile, back in London, Violet meets a lady from Sherlock's past...

Again, thanks to my beta'ers cadogan who fixes my rotten grammar and Lucanael who fixes my rotten French.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twelve: Be Like the Water

“My wife said Lady Hilda came to our house the night before we left,” John explained to Dupin as Sherlock continued to watch Lady Hilda arguing with Lucas. “She told my wife and Sherlock’s fiancée that she had been blackmailed into leaving her house unattended so The Letter could be stolen. She then asked Mary to relay a message to me and Sherlock, to find the actual blackmailer as well as The Letter.”

“Curiouser and curiouser;”” Dupin quoted Alice in Wonderland as he rubbed his stubble. “The lady is quite desperate, oui?”

“Of course she’s desperate, she’s facing prison if her involvement in The Letter’s disappearance is discovered,” John shivered, wishing he could change into dry clothes, or at least, dry socks.

“This doesn’t make sense,” Sherlock shook his shaggy curls like a sheepdog. “She’s not famous, not internationally known, but she is the wife of a prominent British politician. Why would she commit such a crime?”

“She was being blackmailed, just as John said,” Dupin took a swig of cold coffee then pulled a face of disgust.
“Yes, thank you for the recap, I had missed John’s previous commentary,” Sherlock snarled.

“Wouldn’t be the first time,” John said under his breath. Sensing rather than seeing he was on the receiving end of one of Sherlock’s famous glass-melting glares, he quickly added, “Maybe her marriage to Lord Trelawney-Hope is her disguise. Maybe she’s hiding in plain sight?” John suggested. When Sherlock continued to give him a filthy look, John reminded him, “You know it’s possible.” When Sherlock snorted, John added pointedly, “And it’s been done before,” while thinking about Violet and Mary.

Then his gut twisted. He didn’t want to think about Mary.

“But not forever,” Dupin stood up and started pacing.

John feigned scratching his face, not sure if Dupin could deduce like Sherlock or profile like Violet. Best to conceal his feelings as much as possible, he decided. “Yeah,” he nodded his head, not meeting Dupin’s eyes. “You’re probably right.”

“No one can continue a ruse like that indefinitely,” Dupin agreed good-naturedly.

“You’d be surprised,” Sherlock droned, digging his Smartphone out of his coat pocket. “And put your shoes on. This floor is dreadfully unhygienic.” He thumbed the following text to Violet’s prepaid mobile:

Dig up Lady H’s family tree

He didn’t sign it like he did his other texts because he had sent that message to Violet’s prepaid mobile, the one he gave her for private messages. In other words, texts they didn’t want Mycroft and the rest of MI-6 to read.

As Sherlock watched intently as the three dots flickered on his text box screen, John suggested, “Maybe she’s planning on faking her death. We all know that stunt’s been pulled before.”

“If I believed in something as illogical as an afterlife, I would think you had been possessed by the spirit of Anderson,” Sherlock mumbled as he stared at the screen, toe tapping in impatience as he waited for Violet’s text message to appear.

He wasn’t sure what her original message would have been, but the message he received said:

No. Ask Mary.

“John,” he said pleasantly, as if he hadn’t just insulted him. “Text Mary, ask her to research Lady Hilda’s family tree. I require more data.”

“Oh, I can do that right now,” John took out his own mobile. “She’s a public figure. I’m sure her life history is on Wikipedia.”

“Yes, very good John. Because Wikipedia is such a reliable source of information.”

“You’re right,” John kept his voice light and angelic. “I’ll go to Wikileaks instead.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared as he immediately took umbrage at the jape John made at his expense. “For the last time, I do not look like Julian Assange!”

“Now that he mentions it,” Dupin started while pointing at Sherlock but Great Detective viciously cut him off with a barked “Shut up!”
“He didn’t like the film *The Fifth Estate,*” John informed Dupin with a grin.

“Dr. Watson, nobody liked the *The Fifth Estate.*”

“Yes, yes, yes, if we’re *quite* finished,” Sherlock looked positively homicidal now.

“Stop comparing me to Anderson and I’ll stop comparing you to Assange!”

Sherlock screwed his face up then, like a spoilt child being disciplined for the first time in his pampered life, said “Fine,” in an utterly petulant voice.

“*Seigneur, vous vous comporitez comme un vieux,*” Dupin mumbled.

“What?” John asked while Sherlock snapped “We are not!”

But Dupin only chuckled, “Now that we got that out of our system, Dr. Watson, if I may? I believe Monsieur Holmes requires more extensive investigation regarding the Lady Trelawney-Hope’s family?” He completely butchered the pronunciation of “Trelawney-Hope.” That made John feel better since he kept mispronouncing “Dupin” no matter how hard he tried to say it right. “Maybe your wife should research that? Unless you’d rather not have her involved, of course,” Dupin added hastily.

“No, no, she’d be happy to assist. After all, she’s involved anyway, isn’t she? Since Lady Hilda came to my house and all,” John composed a text to Mary and hit Send. Then he looked up at one of the surveillance screens, “Uh, boys? Lucas and Hilda? They’re leaving.”

Dupin waved an un concernsed hand towards the screens. “My Montmartre Militia has eyes all over this neighborhood. They will not evade us.”

“I’d rather depend on my eyes than the eyes of strangers and idiots,” Sherlock stood up and re-wrapped his blue-and-purple checked scarf around his neck.

“You have a different path to take,” Dupin picked up his socks and frowned when he discovered they were still damp. “Dr. Watson and I will pursue Lucas while my Militia will follow the lady.”

Sherlock lifted his brows. “Where am I supposed to go?”

“Sacré-Cœur,” Dupin sat down and cringed while pulling his soggy socks back on.

“The Basilica?” Sherlock sounded very much like John after hearing one of Sherlock’s insane suggestions. John wondered if he had inadvertently stepped into some sort of alternative universe. “Why on earth would I go to the Basilica while the Game is on?”

“Because you need a time-out,” Dupin reluctantly put his boots back on.

“I despise sports metaphors,” Sherlock’s voice became very calm. John became very worried.

“It’ll be fun,” Dupin clapped Sherlock on the back. Sherlock immediately stepped away from the French detective, his eyes blazing as he scoured Dupin head to toe, searching for a pressure point. John became more worried when he noticed Sherlock pressing his lips tightly together, his eyes slightly widened. John had only seen that particular look only once before but he recognized it, and didn’t like it. Not one bit.

He had made that same face when he tried deducing a very naked Irene Adler.

And couldn’t.
Sherlock inched away from Dupin like a cornered feral cat. John wouldn’t have been surprised if Sherlock had actually started hissing. “Dupin, I really don’t think we should split up,” John interceded, keeping his voice amenable.

“You don’t want to be separated from your friend, which is understandable. But you two were separated for two years. Surely you can stand one night.” Dupin patted John on the shoulder then turned to Sherlock. “Besides, it’ll be fun for you. The basilica is closed to visitors at this time. You’ll have to break in. You would probably enjoy the challenge.”

“If I refuse?” Sherlock squared his shoulders and crossed his arms. Lifted his brows in that haughty manner that always made John want to punch him in the face.

Dupin shook his head. “Mycroft told me if you stepped one toe out of line, to put you on the first plane back to London.”

“Fine by me,” John chirped then added in a serious voice, “Sherlock, let’s go.”

But, arms still crossed, Sherlock turned to study the monitors instead.

“Sherlock,” John stood up now, watching Sherlock uncross his arms and clasp his hands behind his back. But when Sherlock didn’t turn around or answer, John approached carefully. “Oi, let’s go. We got ample proof that Lucas is dirty. Let the HRMSS and MI-6 deal with him and let Interpol find the blasted Letter.” When Sherlock acted like he didn’t hear a word John said, he tugged on Sherlock’s coat sleeve. The wool felt scratchy and wet between his thumb and fingers. “Let’s go home, yeah?” Sherlock shook his head, mumbled something John couldn’t understand.

“Was that English?” he quipped. But when Sherlock didn’t repeat himself, John became serious again. “Hey, remember what I said all those months ago, when Violet and I got you out of that candy factory after Woodley had drugged you? Hm?” Then John lowered his voice, “Fuck Mycroft.” When that obscenity failed to generate a response, John found himself pleading, “Look, the idea of an adventure was a great one, but in reality, this just awful, Sherlock. We’re blundering around in the dark with Mycroft pulling our strings, as usual. Let’s just go home, please?” Then he whispered, hoping Dupin wouldn’t hear him, “Mate, talk to me.”

Sherlock’s eerie, kaleidoscopic eyes finally flicked down on him. “The pictures,” he breathed.

“Oh,” John immediately shut up after that. Of course. Obvious. Stupid John, you’re fucking stupid. Sherlock no longer gives a shit about The Letter. The pictures, the bloody pictures of Violet that bint Kitty Riley took.

John inhaled as he lifted his head up, as if he really wanted to look up at the ceiling. But he really needed to stretch out his aching neck. “Right,” he agreed, knowing they needed to find out who was supposed to receive those pictures of Violet and what they were going to do with them once they received them. “OK. Then we’re going to the Basilica.”

But Dupin shook his head, “He needs to be alone to learn formlessness.”

“What?” both Sherlock and John brayed as they turned around at the exact same time. Sherlock pivoted like a dancer while John made a sharp about-face. Both men wore identical expressions of stupefaction.

But only John spoke what was on both their minds: “What the fuck are you talking about?”

“Some, no, pardon wrong English word,” Dupin took his skull-cap off. John saw he had a deeply
receding widow’s peak. What little hair he had was buzzed as short as possible. “Many people would say Monsieur Holmes’ greatest weakness is his arrogance. This is incorrect. His greatest weakness is his rigidity, his absolute allegiance to logic and order.”

“Standing right here,” Sherlock grumbled. John had to stuff a smile down. How many times have I said that while Sherlock was in full sway in a deduction about me?

“Apolgies,” holding his hat in his hands, Dupin turned to pin his full attention on the sulky detective. “When you planned your last confrontation with Jim Moriarty, you probably had twelve solutions planned for your final problem, did you not?”


“And none of those solutions had factored in Jim Moriarty’s suicide, had they?”

“Of course they did,” John shook his head at Dupin then turned to Sherlock. “Didn’t they, Sherlock… Sherlock?”

John could count on one hand how many times he had seen Sherlock’s face display what he actually felt. Most of the time, he kept his long, pale face carefully disciplined to show only what he wanted people to see. This time, John could see exactly what was going through his friend’s head as if he had spoken out loud…

Shit.

“None of those scenarios you told me about had factored in Moriarty’s suicide?”

“Ilogical, Moriarty’s suicide,” Sherlock murmured. “There was no evidence he had planned on ending his life, only that he wished to just end mine. I didn’t realize the extent of that miscalculation until I reached the rooftop and he started talking about the futility of staying alive.”

“Even then,” Dupin’s voice was kind, as if Sherlock were a schoolboy who had mucked up a complicated algebraic formula rather than failing to deduce a criminal mastermind. “When you realized Moriarty was suicidal, you still thought he would not kill himself after watching you die. The plan was always to take Jim Moriarty alive, was it not?”

“Was it?” John felt the walls of the dingy office starting to close in on him.

When Sherlock merely looked at the dirty floor instead of answering, Dupin added, “And you were only supposed to play dead for two, three months maximum, correct?”

“Months!” John choked out. “You were only supposed to be gone for a few months, not…” Oh God, how different things would have been…

I would have never met Mary…

He pushed that invasive thought out of his head as he demanded, “What happened? Why was it years, oh…Mycroft,” John spat.

“Moriarty’s suicide was a regrettable, unforeseen complication,” Sherlock finally murmured, lifting his head up to look to John. Unfortunately, the mask was back on. His face was as expressionless as a waxen funeral mask, his eyes inscrutable but watching everything.

“And you did not plan for the unforeseen,” Dupin shook his head, once again the disappointed teacher. “When you had recovered JMW Turner’s painting of the Reichenbach Falls, you towered
over all your adversaries, like a mighty tree,” he made a flourishing hand motion, gesticulating towards the ceiling. “But even the most powerful tree with the deepest roots and the strongest trunk can be cut down,” he made a chopping gesture now. “Moriarty wanted to cut you down and wanted you to fall. Even if he would be crushed by your landing in the process,” Dupin took a step forward as he clasped his hands behind his back, mirroring Sherlock.

John instinctively took a step forward as well but Sherlock’s hand shot out, his fingers spreading across John’s sternum. “Don’t,” he whispered.

“What?” John’s brow crinkled as he looked up at Sherlock. He wondered if the thermostat was broken; the room felt blazingly hot now.

“Si protecteur,” Dupin murmured then nodded towards John. “Apologies,” he reverted back to English. “I forget myself, Dr. Watson. But thank you Monsieur Holmes for providing my point. Because you are inflexible, because you telegraphed your plan to keep Dr. Watson safe at all costs when you took him as your hostage so you could both flee from the police when you were falsely arrested, that is when you opened yourself to attack from Moriarty. Your enemies still know that will always be your endgame, that you will risk exile or death rather than to let harm come to him and his family.” Now Dupin shook his finger at Sherlock. “You must accept the fact that nothing is certain. The best way to protect yourself and the ones you love is to be as fluid as water, able to change and adapt to the circumstances as needed. Learn to boil when it’s hot. Learn to freeze when it’s cold. Learn to go with the flow instead of trying to force the world to adhere to your impossible standards of logic and order. Because this,” Dupin spread his arms out wide, “This world is a messy, unpredictable place. Everything changes. Instead of putting yourself at constant risk of destruction by being as rigid and towering as the tree, be like the water. Fluid,” Dupin smiled. “Formless”

“Sounds like New Age faff to me,” John was positive the thermostat was on the blink. Now he felt like he was about to freeze to death.

But Sherlock only murmured, “Dupin, take John back to the hotel, he’s not well.”

“I’m fine.”

“Then why are you sweating and shivering at the same time?” Sherlock challenged him. He pressed his palm a bit harder against John’s chest. “Your heart rate is also racing while you’ve been doing nothing but standing.” Swiftly, Sherlock removed his hand from John’s chest. He stuffed them into his coat pockets, searching for his gloves.

“If Dupin is taking me back to the hotel, where are you going?” John demanded, feeling his knees starting to buckle. As Sherlock opened the door, John cried out, “Sherlock!”

“I’m going to Sacré-Cœur,” Sherlock shouted back.

“Don’t,” John stuttered out. “Just… I’m fine, I’m really fine. I just…”

“Need to go back to the hotel,” Dupin interjected, his voice still as kind as a nursery school teacher. To Sherlock, he said, “When you go to the Basilica, I want you to find a quiet spot and clear your mind.”

“Not think?” Sherlock sneered. “Not possible.”

“It will be difficult and you will not succeed in your first attempt. When you find your mind starting to wander?”

“My mind doesn’t wander.”
“When it does, just let it wander.”

Sherlock looked at Dupin as if he suggested he should strip naked and dance through Montmartre. “Just… let it wander?”

“Yes. For this first lesson in stillness and formlessness, you need to learn to fail.”

Now Sherlock looked at Dupin as if he suggested he should strip naked, dance through Montmartre while singing show tunes. “Need to learn… to… I…” Sherlock huffed and puffed.

John seriously wondered if he was about to witness a complete and total system malfunction; a Sherlockian meltdown of Chernobyl proportions.

But the Great Consulting Detective merely snapped: “For the record, I actually did like The Fifth Estate, thank you very much!”

He slammed the door behind him.

John sank down into his chair again against his will, but his legs would no longer hold him. “What game are you playing at?” his question was nearly an order, despite how his voice fluttered.

Dupin pulled up a chair and sat down in front John. “It’s no game, no laughing matter. I’ve been watching Sherlock for years now. He fascinated me, awed me. As his star rose, I even started imagining working with him, collaborating with him. Then The Fall occurred. Something felt… wrong about the entire scenario. It felt more like a page from a very clever television show rather than real life. I knew Mycroft outside of MI-6 and Interpol,” now Dupin rolled his eyes. “And I think it’s safe to say I like him as much you do?”

John finally cracked a smile.

“But, out of professional courtesy as well out of concern, I called to offer my sympathies. He brushed me aside. That was the next…” he struggled, then said “Red flag?” When John nodded, Dupin smiled again. “Merci. I consider myself fluent in English but some of the slang and idioms still confuse me. Anyway, after that telephone call, I started working the case. More as a hobby than anything else, but I knew, I just knew.”

“You figured out Sherlock faked his death.”

“My instincts,” Dupin tapped his chest, “Told me he was still alive but I had no proof.” He then studied the rings on his fingers. “Once I did solve the case then I became worried. About the psychological damage caused by not only The Fall and The Great Hiatus, but also when he rose from the dead. Reintegration into society can be incredibly traumatic. You should know, you were a war veteran trying to fit back into polite British society. Oh yes, Dr. Watson, I’ve been studying you too, once you started blogging about your adventure with The Great Consulting Detective. You worry about him too. Greatly, in fact. You’re still debating whether or not you should have followed him. Don’t worry,” Dupin held up a reassuring hand. “As I said, I have eyes everywhere in this neighborhood.”

“Why are you doing this?” John asked. “Is it for the money?”

“I wish I could say it was completely from the kindness of my heart, but I am not a wealthy man. I am doing this to earn a living. I am also doing this because it gives me great pleasure to make Mycroft pay dearly for my services. But I am also doing this because your friend is standing on a precipice as we speak, poised for another kind of a fall. He is on the verge of becoming a great man or a monster.”
“He’s already a great man.”

But Dupin shook his head. “He’s famous. He’s gifted. Great men and monsters alike achieve fame and possess gifts.”

“He’s not a monster,” John’s voice shook as he rubbed his temple. He felt dizzy now.

“Not yet, no,” Dupin stood up. He held out a hand. “I have a PhD in psychology. I know the symptoms of a panic attack when I see one. Come. You don’t feel safe here. It is alright. Let me take you back to the hotel.”

“They just started again, the panic attacks,” John confessed. “I don’t know why.”

“Because you saw too much,” Dupin stretched out his fingers. “And it cut too deeply.”

John took his hand and let him help him up.

**

28 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Saturday morning
10:35 AM

Rain spattered down on the black cab’s windows. Violet rested her head against the backseat, watching the droplets running down the glass in various directions. As the taxi pulled up to the kerb, Violet moaned, “Oh no,” when she saw Mrs. Hudson out in the deluge. Clad in a sky-blue raincoat and matching blue Wellies with an unflattering plastic rain bonnet over her hair, she stood underneath a gigantic black umbrella as Gladstone finished up his morning excretions.

Never had a dog looked more miserable as he peed on a fire plug.

Violet quickly paid and blurted a hasty, “Thank you!” in her faux British accent to the cabbie as she snatched up her rucksack. She opened the car door and immediately cringed as the freezing rain pattered down onto her head and shoulders. “Mrs. Hudson!”

“Violet, dearie, you’re back!” Mrs. Hudson’s teeth chattered. “You’ll catch your death of cold.”

Gladstone wagged his tail and let his tongue loll out as his ears pricked forward.

“Oh, I’m fine,” Violet insisted as she felt the rain running down her neck and starting to soak through her balaclava and trousers.

Mrs. Hudson hurried to hold the umbrella over her. “Come on, dear, let’s get indoors.”

Once inside the foyer, Gladstone immediately shook his wet fur out, spraying Violet and Mrs. Hudson, “Oh Gladstone, honestly,” Violet admonished the Alsatian but she knelt in front of him and smoothed his wet fur down from head to rump. “Did you miss me?”

“Of course he did,” Mrs. Hudson cooed. Then in a too-casual-to-really-be-causal voice, she asked, “Everything alright then?” as she took off the extremely ugly rain bonnet.

“Yes, I believe I’ve got everything sorted out,” Violet took her fake eyeglasses off since they were dotted with raindrops. She stood up then winced. “Damn,” she leaned down again to massage her calf.
“Are you alright?”

“Just a Charley horse,” Violet carefully stretched her leg out and felt a rush of pain run up and down her leg. Her toes felt tingly and numb, but since she had been out in a freezing downpour, she wasn’t too concerned. “Dreadful weather. Good day to stay in.”

“Good day for you to be home,” Mrs. Hudson patted her on her wet coat sleeve. “You do look better, I must say.”

“Finally got some sleep last night,” Violet admitted, although some was the operative word.

Violet had thought she wouldn’t be able to sleep in a stranger’s flat. After she had cleaned her teeth and peeled her dirty clothes off (except for her knickers and Sherlock’s good black dress shirt, which was now horribly crumpled,) she was out the minute her head hit Hugh Lestrade’s pillow. Then she woke up again when her prepaid mobile pinged.

Scared again out of a deep sleep, Violet had shot straight up out of bed. After reading Sherlock’s demand to do more work for his stupid case in France, she had composed several text messages, each one longer and meaner than the last. Finally she had fired off a short and sweet message to ask Mary to do the grunt work on Lady Trelawney-Hope. After collapsing back onto Hugh’s pillow, she was snoring and drooling in minutes.

Another text from Sherlock woke her up again at four in the morning. “Are you kidding me?” she had snarled as she reached for the mobile again, the prepaid Sherlock gave her, not the one from Mycroft. That one was still switched off along with her Smartphone.

“Seriously?” she had muttered before reading his message:

Where are you?

She sat up again. Sitting cross-legged on Hugh’s massive bed (really, it took up most of the space in his pied-à-terre flat,) she thumbed an equally succinct text and sent it:

Safe. Where are you?

She had gnawed on her thumbnail, waiting. She couldn’t help but smile when it pinged back:

The same.

Try not to get killed before J and I return to London.

She snorted and texted back:

That’s the general plan.

Try not to come back to London in a body-bag.

She waited for a reply. Just when she had been about to give up and go back to sleep, her mobile pinged again:

I will endeavour to honour your request.

She rolled her eyes and texted:
She had snapped the prepaid mobile shut, a flimsy flip-hone, and lay back down. Of course, it pinged again. “Have to have the last word, don’t you?” she mumbled with affection. She didn’t sit up this time, just flipped the mobile back open to read his message:

No promises ;-)"

“God,” she couldn’t help but laugh. It always amused her when the Great Genius used something as pedestrian as emoticons.

She didn’t reply because she knew they’d stay up all night texting (because he just HAD to have the last word, of course.) She snapped the mobile shut and dozed back off.

She awoke naturally at eight in the next morning. Despite the interrupted sleep, she felt actually well-rested for the first time in weeks. Not wanting to be a bad (unexpected) guest, she stripped the linens and put fresh ones on. She had then washed her face and cleaned her teeth again. Since he had a Keurig, she made herself a solitary cup of coffee. She had sat by the window, watching the rain fall as she enjoyed the solitude and the quiet. She also reveled in the fact that she had pulled one over on Mycroft. But eventually she knew she needed to go back. So she switched her Smartphone back on and called a cab after she made sure to leave the flat exactly as she found it.

The one thing she did not do at Hugh Lestrade’s, however, was bathe. “I’m a fright, I’m off to have a shower,” Violet told Mrs. Hudson as she pulled at a lock of her hair. Her chestnut curls were dingy and wet.

“Oh, take a bath, have a nice long soak,” Mrs. Hudson advised her. “Sherlock’s not here to whinge about you hogging the bathroom.”

Violet nodded and smiled but she planned on working today, not luxuriating in a bathtub.

Besides, she knew the things that had been in Sherlock’s bathtub. The koi fish from last summer still rankled. Plus John had said he came home one day and found pig intestines in the tub. “Or at least I think they were pig intestines,” John had shuddered at the memory.

Shower it was then.

Violet took the leash from Mrs. Hudson. She gave it a slight tug and together, she and Gladstone went up the stairs to 221B. She unlocked the door and let Gladstone in first. “Stone,

“Suche,” she murmured, letting him off his leash.

Ever vigilant, Violet stood in the doorway, while Gladstone, all business now, sniffed around the lounge as Violet scanned it, checking to see if anything had been disturbed. Her ears strained, listening for any ominous creaks that would indicate someone was in the flat waiting for her. She put the rucksack down, unzipped it and looked over her shoulder. When she didn’t see Mrs. Hudson, she took her Glock out and clicked the safety off.

She set the rucksack quietly down inside the flat next to the door. Then she lifted her gun and glided into the lounge, mindful of her blind-spots. The process of investigating her refuge was excruciatingly slow and nerve-wracking. But only after she checked the flat from John’s room on the second floor to Sherlock’s tiny half-bath in the back and found nothing and no one, did she feel secure.
“OK,” Violet sighed, lowering her weapon. Then she caught a look at herself in the mirror. “Ew,” she pulled a face at her own reflection. She tried to wipe away the remains of her mascara but only succeeded in smearing it, making her look deranged.

Then she looked down at Sherlock’s black shirt. “He’s going to kill me,” she rubbed at a soup stain from yesterday. Then she unbuttoned it, tossed it into the hamper and turned the shower on. Steam started billowing in the tiny bathroom.

While she didn’t soak in the tub like Mrs. Hudson suggested, she did take a longer shower than usual. It was heaven, actually. To properly shampoo and condition her hair and shave under her arms and her legs without someone pounding on the bathroom door, hectoring at her: “Why are you taking so long? There is no logical reason for a female to remove her body hair except for idiotic beauty standards inflicted upon you by fashion magazines and daft anorexic runway models. And you do realize I can tell when you use my razor, right? Do you have any idea how disgusting it is to use a razor on my face that touched your underarms?”

As she turned the taps off, Violet smirked as she remembered her retort to one of his tirades: “Keep it up and I’ll use it on my bikini line too.”

When Sherlock didn’t immediately respond, Violet had seriously thought he might have had a stroke and died right there outside the bathroom door.

Instead the next day she found a packet of ladies’ razors on the nightstand with a note:

“Stop wearing my clothes and stop using my razor.”

Always have to have the last word, Sherlock.

Violet cast a guilty look at the bedraggled black shirtsleeve hanging out of the laundry hamper.

Then she smiled an evil smile and snatched his favorite dressing robe off the hook. She wrapped the plush garment around herself, tying the belt around her continually shrinking waistline. She had avoided looking at the ribs starting to show as she had soaped herself.

She pressed her nose to her own shoulder, smelling the fabric. She smelt the cologne he wore, the only cologne he wore, the only one he could tolerate. Some sandalwood concoction he had found in Italy while he had been on his Great Hiatus. She also smelt formaldehyde and, incredibly, tobacco, even though she knew he hadn’t smoked since he had gotten so damnably sick with bronchitis last summer.

Then she told herself to stop acting like one of his star-struck fangirls and get to work.

She picked up her Glock off the lid of the toilet seat. Always paranoid, she always kept her weapon close not only when she was alone, but also when she was vulnerable. She also had locked the bathroom door. And while she had slept at Hugh Lestrade’s, she had kept the Glock underneath the pillow. She had also pushed his armchair up against the door after fastening the chain lock and turning the deadbolt.

But you’re not really paranoid when they really are after you, right?

She padded out of the bath and into the lounge, stumbling over the hems of Sherlock’s long dressing gown. As she paused to scratch Gladstone’s ears, there was a knock at the door.

But when Mrs. Hudson’s cheery “Yoo-hoo!” didn’t follow the knock, Violet’s heart stopped.
“Just a moment,” she said in her best ‘Miss Smith’ voice as she placed her finger on the trigger. She sidled up to the door, put the chain lock on and turned the deadbolt. It unlocked with a loud click. She opened the door as far as the chain lock would allow her. Through the crack, she saw a white-haired woman with a nervous, expectant smile. She had sky-blue eyes and sharp cheekbones.

“May I help you?” Violet held the gun flush against her hip, but out of the old woman’s sight.

There was something oddly familiar about her… the eyes…

“I’m sorry, it’s rude for me to drop by unannounced I know, but I so rarely get to this part of London and I just thought… well, you are Violet Smith, yes? Oh, of course you are, you must be, I’m being silly. Is William home?”

“William…?” Violet Smith started to say but the name died on her lips.

She took another look at the old woman with the sky-blue eyes. Sky-blue, almond-shaped eyes… oh shit.

“Are you Sherlock’s mother?” Violet tried to infuse excitement into her voice.

Shitshitshitshitshitshit….

Mrs. Holmes brightened. “Yes, I am. I’m Lettie Holmes.”

“Oh my God, one moment, I’m not decent… terribly sorry… just…. Two seconds,” Violet held up two fingers then shut the front door again. She safetied her weapon quickly, silently mouthed Shitshitshitshitshitshit! as she sprinted across the lounge, nearly tripping over the tails of Sherlock’s dressing gown. She threw open the lid of her piano bench and stuffed the weapon inside. She covered it with sheet music for good measure and slammed the lid shut.

She then snatched up a pen and devoutly hoped Sherlock hadn’t used it recently to stir his tea (or something worse) as she used it to secure her hastily bundled up bun. My face! She thought in utter panic, touching her cheeks, realizing she didn’t have a drop of make-up on. No time, she snatched up a pair of fake spectacles sitting on the coffee table and jammed them on her face. Fuck she mouthed to herself before undoing the chain lock and throwing the door open wide.

“Hello!” she said cheerfully. “Oh, it’s so lovely to finally meet you! Please, come in, come in,” Violet stood aside so Mrs. Holmes could enter. “Apologies for the state of things, but I’ve been out and well, you know Sherlock is like a force of nature at times,” Violet looked around at the chaos within 221B. She also hoped she was the only one smelling what could be described as turned meat. I forgot to take the garbage out. There were dog food cans in the trash cans… how embarrassing…

“Oh please, I used to have to tidy his room as a boy, I know what an utter slob he can be,” Mrs. Holmes chuckled as she bustled into the flat. “Apologies for the state of things, but I’ve been out and well, you know Sherlock is like a force of nature at times,” Violet looked around at the chaos within 221B.

She also hoped she was the only one smelling what could be described as turned meat. I forgot to take the garbage out. There were dog food cans in the trash cans… how embarrassing…

“Oh please, I used to have to tidy his room as a boy, I know what an utter slob he can be,” Mrs. Holmes chuckled as she bustled into the flat. “What a beautiful dog!” she cried out when she spotted Gladstone. The Alsatian sat up, his nose quivering. “What do you call him?”

“Gladstone, he’s a retired police dog,” Violet said quickly, not wanting Gladstone to be startled if he was unexpectedly petted by a stranger. The last thing she wanted to do was to explain to Mycroft and Sherlock why her dog gnawed off their mother’s face. “Gladstone, freund,” she told him and then said to Mrs. Holmes, “It’s alright, he likes his ears scratched. May I offer you a cup of tea? Or
“Well, I was actually hoping to take you and Sherlock out to an early lunch,” she sounded so wistful, Violet found her heart hurting. Violet was fully aware of Sherlock’s family history and the role Mrs. Holmes played not to mention she had listened to Sherlock complain about his mother’s overbearing nature, but still… she’s just a mom who wants to see her kid.

Now she felt a stab of jealousy. Her mother died in a car accident when she was six. Violet could barely remember her face.

Absolutely couldn’t remember her voice.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Holmes continued to prattle on: “I know I popped in unannounced and all, but I was hoping he wasn’t busy so we could have a nice visit and also to get to know you and…” she trailed off. “Well, if I don’t surprise him, I don’t see him, you see.”

“Oh, unfortunately, he is out of the country at the moment, for a case,” Violet felt another stab in her heart, this one of pity while she saw the bright hope begin to die out of Mrs. Holmes’ face.

“Do you know when he’ll be back?”

Violet shook her head, “I’m sorry, no. I don’t.”

“Oh,” for moment, Mrs. Holmes looked incredibly crestfallen. Then she perked up, “No matter. You and I can still go out. Get to know each other. Have a proper chat without William interrupting every ten seconds.”

“Oh,” Violet slapped a big fake smile on her face, hoping the mother wasn’t as sharp as the son. “What a treat. I’d be delighted. I just need a moment to…ah….” She spread her arms out helplessly, standing in Sherlock’s dressing gown.

“I used to wear Siggie’s shirts when he’d go out of town on business.” Mrs. Holmes winked then flapped her hands at Violet. “Go on,” she said as she took off her coat. It was a pink monstrosity that reminded Violet of the hideous puffy pink coat Mrs. Hudson had given to her after Violet lost everything she had own when her flat exploded. As Mrs. Holmes put her own ugly pink coat on the peg where the Belstaff usually hung, she said, “I can straighten up down here while you’re getting ready.”

“Oh that’s not necessary,” Violet’s thoughts immediately went to the gun in the piano bench.

“No skin off my nose, I’ve been picking up after his experiments and his papers and his books since he was a tyke. Knowing my son, it’s probably best to start in the kitchen,” and she trundled off, disappearing through the brightly colored sliding door.

Violet debated whether or not she should retrieve her gun from the piano bench, but then had a better idea. “Komm,” she said under her breath as she led the dog to the bench. She patted the bench and Gladstone jumped up onto of it. “Bleiben,” she ordered him.

Only then, secure that Gladstone wouldn’t attack Mrs. Holmes but he wouldn’t budge from the bench either, did she go up to John’s room.

Instead of changing clothes however, she dialed Mycroft’s number.

“Yes?”
“Your mother is here.”

“Ah,” Mycroft snickered. “Yes, Mummy has been commenting on how she wants to meet William’s fiancée. This will be such a treat for her.”

“Mycroft,” Violet ground her teeth. “This isn’t funny.”

“Who’s laughing?”

“What do I do?”

“What it is that daughters-in-law do with their mothers-in-law,” Mycroft drawled. “Take her shopping, take her to tea. Make a day of it.”

“A day?” Violet squeaked.

“Consider it your punishment for running off for two days,” Mycroft purred. “Ta-ta.” The mobile went dead.

Violet picked up John’s pillow off the bed and screamed into it.

Then she rang Sherlock.

“What?”

“Your mother is here.”

“Oh. That’s dreadful.” Glancing nervously at the closed bedroom door, she added, “Sherlock, we never came up with a plan as to what to do when we meet your parents.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. Opened them and blinked a few times. They still felt sandy due to lack of sleep. But he could still see as clearly as ever and he could still see everything.

The sun had just crested over the horizon when Sherlock returned to the hotel, cold, damp and in a rotten mood. He had ached head to toe from his nocturnal excursions. He had even caved and stopped at a chemist to purchase something for his sore muscles. When he slid the keycard and opened the hotel door, he had expected John to be sitting up, drinking coffee and watching crap telly. Waiting for him.

Instead, John was dead to the world, lying in bed on his side. His hair stuck up wildly and a slick of drool ran down from his open mouth to his chin. He snored like a buzz saw.

*Drugged,* Sherlock immediately deduced then all but snarled when he saw young Honoré sitting at the small table where Sherlock had put his own laptop and stacks of files and notebooks. He had been clicking away on his MacBook Air, but jumped when Sherlock opened the door.

Dupin’s good-looking, blonde-haired blogger took off the trendy pair of black framed glasses and gave Sherlock a dazzling smile. When he smiled, Honoré suddenly and strikingly reminded Sherlock of his old flame Victor Trevor. His dislike for him trebled.
Worms. My magnificent, well-ordered and highly-functional brain is being eaten by worms, Sherlock had growled to himself, trying to shake off the irrational distaste towards the boy.

Meanwhile, Honoré shut the laptop and stood up. He wore baggy track bottoms, a black hooded sweatshirt and a t-shirt that had the name and logo of some rock band Sherlock, of course, never heard of in his life. Or had and deleted it. Anyway, the lad was in the universal uniform of the sleep-deprived university student.

At his trainers was a black gym bag. Sherlock’s eyes zeroed in on the bag at once as Honoré said in French, “Monsieur Holmes! So glad you've made it back alright.”

“You can speak English if you like,” Sherlock murmured. “Although you grew up in Quebec, English is your native tongue.”

“Great, thanks,” Honoré looked relieved. “Dupin called me, asked me to stay with Dr. Watson. I called in a favor and got an intern working an overnight shift to write a script for a sleep aid. Called in another favor and got it filled for him too.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock droned but his eyes did not flick to the stoned John, they stayed on the black bag at Honoré’s feet.

“Dupin didn’t want Dr. Watson to be left alone. Asked me to stay with him, which was no big deal,” Honoré chattered on as Sherlock took a step closer, then another. “I have a huge exam coming up. Doesn’t really matter where I study, be it here or the library. Definitely quieter than my apartment, since I share it with three other guys.”

“Mm,” Sherlock took another step forward, his eyes locked on the black bag at Honoré’s feet.

“On a Saturday?” Sherlock had purred.

Honoré opened and shut his mouth like a fish who could not believe he had been caught.

He reached down for his gym bag but Sherlock stomped on the strap. Then he deftly reached around the boy, snatched up the MacBook Air and grabbed the boy by the collar of his stupid, rock-band t-shirt. “Does the phrase ‘Classified Information’ mean anything to you?”

“I…” the boy stuttered then whimpered, “Look, you and Dr. Watson have been heroes of mine since I was in college back in Canada. “I know I’d be shit at detective work, but I’m not a bad writer. I’ve always planned on being a doctor, but…you know, if Dr. Watson can do both, why can’t I?”

“Dr. Watson is also a decorated war hero,” Sherlock used that slithering, whispering voice of his that only came out when he was dangerously angry. “He’s been a doctor longer than you’ve been alive.” Slight exaggeration, but this idiot child doesn’t need to know that... “-and he has wits enough to write and post the case after it’s been solved, not while it is in progress.” He pushed Honoré away from him. “You are no John Watson. You’re not even a fully trained doctor yet, you’re barely out of your nappies.” Tucking Honoré’s computer under his arm, he added in a silky voice, “Also, it would be shame if your name was flagged, that the French Immigration Office were told you’re involved in some questionable activities and clubs.”

“You wouldn’t.”

Sherlock only smiled. “This is now mine,” he patted the silvery, thin computer. “And this,” he pointed down to the gym bag he stood on. “Did you really think I wouldn’t notice you had nicked
pages out of our files?” He examined his nails in an exaggerated manner. “Oh, I do think the police would not be pleased if you stole evidence from an ongoing investigation.”

Honoré opened and closed his mouth again.

“None of this,” Sherlock twirled his finger in the air, “Appears on your blog.”

Honoré nodded. Sherlock pointed to the door. Honoré scuttled.

“Idiot,” he snapped, not worrying about waking John. He slept the Sleep of the Really, Really Good Drugs.

Sherlock had been jealous for a moment then shook it off. He stripped to his vest and boxers and allowed himself a two-hour nap to recharge after popping four ibuprofen tablets.

He woke up when his alarm on his mobile sounded, feeling sore and groggy.

John still hadn’t moved. He still snored.

“What the deuce did they give you?” Sherlock had picked up the pill bottle then murmured, “Good God,” when he read the type and dosage Honoré’s intern friend had prescribed for him. “Right, you’ll be useless until noon,” he muttered sourly.

That hadn’t stopped him from kneeling down beside John and smoothing down his hair, then taking a tissue out of the box on the nightstand. He wiped away the slobber from John’s face.

Then he shook his head, gathered fresh clothes and went to draw himself a bath.

He had been enjoying a good long soak in boiling hot water when his mobile rang.

Ringing? Who’s ringing me? I detest calls, text is so much better. He sat up in irritation, taking the wet flannel off his face. He dried his hands on the towel next to the tub and snatched the mobile off the lid of the toilet. When he saw the name on the caller ID, he pressed the Answer button.

“What?”

“Your mother is here.”

“Oh. That’s dreadful.”

“What do I do?”

“Ask Mycroft.”

“I did. He was less than helpful.” Sherlock listened to her take a nervous breath, then say: “Sherlock, we never came up with a plan as to what to do when we meet your parents.”

After blinking his eyes to get rid of the grainy sensation (and failing,) he asked, “Is my father with her or is she alone?”

“I think she’s alone.”

“Good. Father is the more observant of the two. Mother is a bit of a dingbat. She likes to talk. She does not bloody shut up. Get her going on a subject and you will have to say very little. When she does ask about yourself, less is more. While she does not have an eidetic memory like Mycroft and I do, it is very good; do not underestimate how much she can remember. Stick to the basic points of
the Violet Smith persona. Your mother was American, your father British, both deceased. No brothers and sisters. You used to be a PA but you worked at the agency that was bombed last March. You and I had met through a case. We moved in more quickly than anticipated because your flat caught fire and burned to the ground. We,” he screwed his eyes tightly shut. “Haven’t set a date for the wedding yet. Since we rushed the whole-living-together bit, we want to take our time planning the wedding bit.”

“OK,” Violet had unbelted Sherlock’s dressing gown and was trying awkwardly to pull on knickers and fasten her bra while keeping her mobile tight against her ear.

“She likes going shopping. She likes concerts and plays, huge theatrical productions, heavy on spectacle, light on plot. If you can hurry and get to the West End, you can probably get in queue for matinee tickets. Then you won’t have to talk to her for hours.”

“Got it,” Violet managed to finally hook her bra. “What does she like to talk about, if I can’t get tickets to a show?” She frowned at her reflection in the mirror. She had lost so much weight she didn’t fill the cups of her bras anymore. The knickers threatened to slide off her arse as well. 

“Mathematics, but that’s not your forte. Stick to the boring things. Her house, her garden, her friends and family, blah, blah, blather, blather.”

“Family,” an idea sparked in Violet’s head. An absolutely lunatic idea, but still… could kill two birds with one stone. “Like her kids?”

“If you insist,” Sherlock groaned, “Anything else?”

“Want to know what I’m wearing?” Violet said cheekily, putting her hand on her bony hip, as if he could see her.

“No,” he sounded confused rather than intrigued. “Why would I want to know what you’re wearing? Unless it’s one of my shirts, then take it off.”

“Tease,” Violet said in a deadpan voice, then snickered when she heard Sherlock snort of irritation on the other end. “Seriously though, I think I made a breakthrough with the Margaux Vos thing. I’ll call you when I find out something concrete.”

“Text, please.”

“Byeee,” Violet sing-songed then hung up. She dressed quickly, pulling on black skinny jeans, a dark emerald jumper that brought out the green in her hazel eyes, her brown knee-high boots and a dark green, russet brown and orange scarf wrapped around her throat to hide the knife scar on her neck. She scraped her damp hair back into a bun at the nape of her neck. Fortunately she kept the majority of her cosmetics in John’s room so she was able to put her face on properly, her “Miss Smith” mask. She put her fake eyeglasses back on and finally slipped her pretty gold wristwatch back on her wrist.

“You’re crazy,” Violet Hunter told Violet Smith’s reflection.

Then she looked down at the glass case of maggots and gagged. Memo to self… get rid of that.

When Violet Smith entered the kitchen while fastening huge gold hoops into her ears, she saw that Mrs. Holmes had worked a minor miracle. “Oh my goodness, I don’t know how to thank you,” Violet looked around the kitchen in delight. The surfaces had been wiped clean, the had been dishes done and the floor had been swept.
To her mortification, she also saw the rubbish bag, neatly tied shut and sitting next to the door, waiting to be taken out to the skip behind the building. But at least the flat didn’t smell like rotting meat any more.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Holmes stripped off the rubber gloves and tossed them into the now shining sink. “It’s not as if I cleaned the cooker or the refrigerator. Or defrosted the freezer.”

“Mm,” Violet smiled, not sure if she had gotten rid of the frozen toes in the freezer.

“Now,” Mrs. Holmes clapped her hands together. “What would you like to do today?”

“Would you be interested,” Violet gave Mrs. Holmes a beatific smile, “In meeting one of Sherlock’s good friends? I know for a fact she’s home. I was planning on dropping by; would you like to accompany me?”

“Oh, dear, well, I don’t want to intrude if you already have plans.”

“No trouble at all,” Violet reached over to pat Sherlock’s mother on the shoulder. “In fact, it would be my great pleasure. I have a feeling you’ve always wanted to thank the woman who helped save Sherlock’s life during The Fall.”

Chapter End Notes

Happy Sunday everyone!

And thank you to everyone who has been leaving kudos and comments as well as bookmarking and subscribing... but this is where I need to ask for your help. I think I'm a fairly decent writer. What I suck (really REALLY suck) at is self-promotion. If anyone has any suggestions how to lure more readers into Violet's universe, I would greatly appreciate it :^)

Oh and I haven't cross-posted the series to fanfiction.com because arielrose is in the process of beta'ing Chapters 1 - 17. I don't want to post until that's done. :^)

THANK YOU!!!!
The Lady

Chapter Summary

"Oh how could she spring something like this upon me!" Molly buried her face in her hands. "I could just murder her. Surprising me with company on such short notice; my flat is a complete disaster and I’m so moody I’m afraid I’ll either burst into tears or hit someone over the head with the kettle..."

Molly is not happy with Violet. Meanwhile, things in Paris aren't going very well for the Baker Street Boys...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirteen: The Lady

28 November 2015
Greg and Molly Lestrade’s residence
Saturday afternoon
1:20 PM, London time

“How do I look?” Molly Hooper Lestrade whispered to her mother fretfully as she smoothed her ponytail down one more time.

Mrs. Hooper gave her daughter a sympathetic smile. “Like a new mum, relax Molly.”

“I look like a blimp,” Molly gave her post-baby body another disparaging look, “Or a cow that needs milking. Oh, maybe I should ring Violet back, tell her... something. Oh how could she spring something like this upon me!” she buried her face in her hands. “I could just murder her. Surprising me with company on such short notice; my flat is a complete disaster and I’m so moody I’m afraid I’ll either burst into tears or hit someone over the head with the kettle.”

“You look lovely. And it’s good for you to have a bit of company,” Mrs. Hooper squeezed her daughter’s shoulders as she looked at both of them in the mirror. “You can’t stay cooped up in this flat forever, which by the way my love, is not a disaster.”

Molly raised her head and gave her mother one of her too-big, too-nervous smiles, then said, “Better go down to the lobby. If they hit the buzzer, then Henry will wake up.”

Mrs. Hooper patted her daughter on the back and shooed her out of the bathroom. The smile quickly turned into a concerned frown before she started putting the finishing touches on her own make-up. She made a mental note to have a word with her new son-in-law. She had expected Molly and Greg to have the new-parents-weariness to them. She hadn’t expected either one of them to be absolutely run ragged.

She also reminded herself to tell Molly to find another pediatrician. She had come to London for a visit, expecting to cuddle a fat, happy baby. Instead, she discovered that her grandson was a skinny, grizzling thing, unhappy and fitful. Yes, newborns cried, but this.... This wasn’t normal. Every noise
startled him, wound him up. He was impossible to soothe.

Clearly, the baby’s pediatrician was some kind of idiot. Anyone with ears and eyes could tell there was something wrong with the newborn.

There was nothing wrong with Mrs. Hooper’s eyes and ears. She could see how pale and drawn Molly looked. She heard the strain and the self-recrimination in Molly’s voice. Her heart ached for her daughter. She remembered back when Molly was a baby, a sweet, roly-poly girl swaddled in a pink blanket. Mrs. Hooper longed to hold her close, smooth her auburn hair back and tell her she was doing a marvelous job. But, she knew she needed to wait, to let Molly come to her. She knew if she ambushed her daughter with affection, she’d shy away. Molly always was a bit bashful, would retreat into her shell if overwhelmed.

Mrs. Hooper gave her hair one more pat then frowned again. She hoped she wouldn’t have to wait for very long. Cranky baby or not, she had honestly thought Molly would still preen like all new mums did, wanting to show their progeny off to everyone.

Molly, instead, seemed like she’d rather hide the baby away. Granted, he wasn’t the happiest baby in the world, but still… something wasn’t right. Her own maternal instincts vibrated.

Mrs. Hooper, of course, had no idea the real reason behind Molly’s agitation, the constant fear plaguing her ever since Jim Moriarty appeared on every single television and device in England.

She didn’t know that Molly cried over her scrawny son every night not because he wouldn’t sleep, but because she was terrified beyond reason, beyond reassurance.

She had already almost lost this little boy twice. He hadn’t even been born yet the first time. When that monster, that assassin had broken into their old flat last summer, he had knocked Greg out cold then had gone after her, planning to cut the baby out of her. Worse, he planned to film it then play the video to Sherlock, just to torture him, to show him what they did to The One Who Counted.

Molly had at first been opposed to learning how to shoot when Greg had suggested it. He had kept up with all of his certifications. Molly had balked and had fought him every step of the way. But when that evil man kicked in her bedroom door, she had been glad she’d known how to take the safety off of her husband’s service weapon and how to pull the trigger.

Greg’s mother also meant well, trying to get her to go out, run errands or visit friends. She just didn’t feel secure with leaving Henry behind.

But dear God, he never shut up. And worse, he never bloody slept. It was almost as if he was feeding off of her fear. Irrationally, after going without sleep for three days in a row, Molly had wondered if panic could be transmitted by breast milk.

Other times, she wondered if it was possible if the infant already hated her.

Molly stifled a sigh and paused in the hallway, blinking back tears. God, she was always so teary-eyed now. She rubbed her temple, feeling another headache coming on. She didn’t know if the headaches were from sleep-deprivation or plain old-fashioned depression. She made a mental note to make an appointment with her OB/GYN.

Maybe this isn’t all panic, she thought as she started plodding back to the lift. Maybe this is post-partum depression, like Greg suggested… then her stomach twisted with guilt. The last time he had hinted that maybe she had a bit of the Baby Blues, she had taken great offense and started a row with him. Of course, their row woke up the baby.
Just as she reached the lift doors, they slid open. “Hi!” Molly automatically rearranged her face into one of her brilliant, stretched-out smiles as she saw Violet, Mrs. Hudson and a white-haired lady she didn’t know. “I was on my way down to meet you.”

“Well, what perfect timing,” Violet Smith smiled as she stepped off the lift. After kissing Molly on the cheek, she beckoned to the white-haired lady. “Molly, this is the surprise I was talking about on the phone. I would like to introduce you to Sherlock’s moth—”

But before Violet could finish, Mrs. Holmes had engulfed Molly in an enormous hug. She squeezed Molly so tightly, for so long, Violet started to wonder if the woman really was American instead of British. “Let me look at you,” Mrs. Holmes finally broke the embrace, but kept her hands on Molly’s shoulders. “I can’t thank you enough, for saving my son’s life.”

“Oh. Well, it was a pleasure, I’d do it again. Not that I plan on doing it again. I would, if I needed to, but I hope I don’t have to, save him, I mean,” Molly babbled.

“And I hear you’re a new mum as well,” Mrs. Holmes looped her arm though Molly’s and walked down the hallway, with Mrs. Hudson and Violet behind them.

“Um. Yes, I am. He’s just about four weeks old. He’s sleeping now,” she added, her voice sounding a bit panicky. “So, we’ll have to be quiet, sorry. I hate being bossy, but…”

“Oh, my dear, it’s alright,” Mrs. Holmes chuckled, patting Molly on the arm. “I’m just so pleased to finally meet you. My boy talks about you frequently.”

“He does?” Molly squeaked.

“He does?” Violet squawked then lamely covered, “Of course. He does speak of you often, Molly. You’re one of his closest friends.”

“I brought nibbles,” Mrs. Hudson broke the awkwardness by holding up a Tesco bag. “So sorry it’s store-bought instead of homemade. But when I ran into Mrs. Holmes and Violet in the foyer and learned where they were going, well, I invited myself along. But that meant no time to actually bake something, dear.”

“Oh, that’s…. fine, thank you,” Molly dug into the pocket of the baggy dress she wore. The dress wasn’t completely unattractive. It was a deep plum and fuchsia plaid dress that looked more like an oversized shirt than a proper dress. She wore black yoga bottoms underneath it and fuchsia fuzzy socks. But the coloring was all wrong for Molly’s ashen face and auburn hair. She only wore it because it was comfortable rather than flattering.

But it made the bags under her eyes look even purpler and her lips even whiter. Violet’s sharp eyes had zeroed in on those two traits immediately. She also noticed Molly’s nervous tic, the enormous smile, looked tenser than ever. Violet also observed how Molly kept blinking her eyes. Whether she was blinking to stay awake or to hold back tears, the jury was out on that one. It would take Sherlock Holmes to make a deduction like that.

I hope this works, Violet thought, with a sidelong glance as Mrs. Holmes. She gnawed on her lower lip as she worried about the risk she was taking.

I have to get Sherlock back on Lestrade’s good side, Violet told herself as she followed everyone inside Molly’s flat. He needs access to the Met. If he doesn’t have real cases to work on, he’ll either obsess over Moriarty and drive himself crazy or Mycroft will take advantage of his free time and keep enticing him with dangerous cases for MI-6.
She touched the mobile tucked inside her jeans pocket. *Come on Billy…*

Introductions were made in hushed tones then everyone tiptoed into the kitchen.

Violet also noted there were still moving boxes here and there. They had moved in the beginning of October. They got the nursery set up and the essentials put away, but had not made much progress after that when it came to unpacking. But that was understandable as they had moved in a great rush. After Lestrade’s flat had been broken into twice after he and Molly had gotten married, finding a new place had been the number one priority. Especially since the first time the flat had been broken into, Molly’s cat had been gruesomely murdered. The second time, of course, was when the attempt on Molly and the then unborn-Henry’s lives had been made.

Their new place was considerably bigger and probably cost Greg and Molly a small fortune. But the security was tighter in this block of flats than it had been in Greg’s old place. Plus it had three bedrooms. Tiny rooms to be sure, but at least they had a guest room that could be converted into another child’s bedroom if Greg and Molly decided to have another baby.

But the minute everyone sat down to tea (coffee for Violet), a high-pitched wail emitted from the baby monitor.

“Oh damn,” slipped out of Molly’s mouth. Then she slapped her hand over her lips. “Oh God, that… that sounded…”

“Like a new mother,” Mrs. Hudson nodded sagely as she arranged the store-bought biscuits on a serving platter while Mrs. Hooper volunteered to check on the baby.

“It happens to us all, dear,” Mrs. Holmes added, patting Molly on the hand.

Violet looked at her own hands, at the diamond ring twinkling on her finger. Not all of us.

When she realized she was trapped in England, she had found a doctor who didn’t ask a lot of questions and took cash for tying her tubes. One less thing to worry about, keep things simple and clear-cut. Stay a step ahead of the people trying to kill her and her loved ones.

Thank God too. She couldn’t imagine how high the price would have been on her head if she had been the one knocked up by The Great Asexual Misogynistic Detective. Not to mention the child’s… no. It wasn’t worth the risk.

Plus… raising a child, much less raising the child of a genius… no. Just… no.

*I would have gotten an abortion, but that’s me,* Violet thought as she studied Molly over the rims of her fake glasses. *And this is her, so stop being a judgmental bitch and help her get through this. After all, we can’t put the genie back into the bottle.*

Through the monitor, everyone heard Mrs. Hooper crooning, “Oh, what’s the matter, Raffles?”

Three pairs of eyes locked onto Molly, who looked mortified.

“Did I mishear?” Mrs. Holmes set her tea cup down. “I thought you said his name was Henry?”

“Henry Ralph,” Molly fiddled with the cuff of her dress. “Ralph was my dad’s name. Mum used to call Dad ‘Raffles.’ It was her pet name for him. She started calling Henry that the minute she found out what his middle name was. And it stuck,” she finished grimly, “On my side of the family, at least.”
“Oh, my dear, I can sympathize,” Mrs. Holmes smiled at Molly. “You pick a perfectly nice name like William and then everyone goes and calls him Sherlock.”

A smile, a real smile, quirked up at Molly’s lips, “Didn’t know his Christian name was William.”

“I didn’t either,” Violet lied. “Not at first, had to pry it out of him.”

“My son’s name is Rupert,” Mrs. Hudson pushed the platter of biscuits towards Molly. “Everyone calls him Scooter.”

“Scooter? Why?” Molly innocently asked. “Does his like scooters or motorbikes?”

“No,” Mrs. Hudson’s cheeks turned rosy. “Someone once said he looks like Scooter from The Muppet Show. I wholeheartedly disagree, of course,” she added with a sniff.

Molly and Violet’s eyes met but then they immediately had to look away from each other as they both imagined a life-sized orange Muppet with spectacles. “How rude,” Molly said in a strangled voice, striving to be polite.

“Mm, indeed,” Violet provided one of her default Miss Smith non-answer answers.

The moment dissipated as the sound of wailing came closer and closer. Any pleasure Molly may have experienced by visiting her friends and family faded away. An expression of grim determination replaced the genuine smile that had been on Molly’s face only seconds ago.

“Well,” Mrs. Hooper tried to sound optimistic as she brought the caterwauling baby into the kitchen. “He didn’t need a new nappy and you just fed him before everyone came over. Maybe he just wanted his mummy?”

The baby’s face was bright red from his continual wails. One of his little arms had worked its way out of the blue blankets swaddled tightly around him and he shook it frantically.

“Oh dear,” Mrs. Hudson rested her finger against her chin as she watched Mrs. Hooper transfer the baby from herself to Molly. “He’s certainly not happy, is he?”

“Not really, no,” Molly tried to sound joking but tears definitely stood out in her eyes now.

“Dear, no one really knows what they’re doing the first time around, do they now?” Mrs. Hudson looked at Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Hooper with a knowing smile.

Violet wasn’t sure if she should feel irritated or relieved she was being left out of this conversation. However she did noticed that while Mrs. Hooper had nodded in agreement and smiled back at Mrs. Hudson, Mrs. Holmes kept her eyes trained on the red-faced, squalling baby in Molly’s arms.

Uh-oh… Violet felt her stomach lurch up into her throat, then bounce down to her feet. Sherlock, you told me your mother was a ditz. Shit. Shitshitshitshitshitshit…

Now Violet studied the miserable infant while Mrs. Hooper and Mrs. Hudson attempted to console Molly by telling New Mummy War Stories. Desperately, she looked for some physical attribute, something that screamed to the world that his father was in fact, William Sherlock Scott Holmes.

Nothing. Nothing! He looks like every other month-old baby… just a… pink blob.

As she did every single time she was in close proximity to an infant or a very small toddler, she waited for her maternal instincts to kick in. She waited to feel a desire to create and protect, to pass
her DNA to someone else, creating a new generation in her familial line. To go buy tiny little shoes and to feel someone growing within her and outside her.

To hear someone call her *Mom*.

And as always, she felt nothing.

She knew if Jim Moriarty, the devil himself, burst into this kitchen right this very second, she would gladly lay her very own life down to protect the helpless child in Molly’s arms. But that was because that was the right thing to do, not because she had a motherly impulse to protect the young. Once upon a time, it had even been her job to shield the innocent.

Maybe someday, if Sherlock could keep his word, it would be again.

In her late teens and early twenties, she had wondered if there was something wrong with her when her girlfriends had talked about getting married and having babies and she felt no desire to do either one… of course she had changed her mind about getting married…

… but he hadn’t wanted children either.

Violet closed her eyes, mentally shaking that bittersweet memory away while again cursing Mycroft for digging up the past. Her past, her life… her old life.

*Fuck you, Mycroft…*

At any rate, in her thirties, she had made her peace with her decision to be childless. Even though extreme circumstances forced her into tubal ligation, afterwards she had felt a profound sense of relief. She also had wondered why she hadn’t done this for herself earlier.

Instead of longing, she felt relief again as the baby continued to cry.

“May I…” Mrs. Holmes burst in, thankfully interrupting a horrifying story of Mrs. Hudson’s that involved the words “Nappy” and “Explosive” in the same sentence. “May I try something?”

“Oh… OK,” Molly hesitated for just a moment before handing the baby over. She probably fretted about the same thing that Violet was worrying about: that the baby looked like his father.

If she had noticed something, she hid it well. Humming under her breath, she un-swaddled the baby while cradling him close against her warm, soft body. Continuing to hum, she started to sway on her feet in a gentle rocking motion while rubbing his tummy in a circle. The wails started to dwindle, then turned into snuffles and snorts, then… blessed silence. All the while, Mrs. Holmes continued to hum.

“How…” Molly’s eyes were the size of dinner plates. “Did you do that?”

Mrs. Hooper tilted her head to one side. “I don’t remember any of my children being so difficult about going to sleep.” She sounded almost personally affronted that a virtual stranger had managed to calm her grandson.

“Oh, every baby is different,” Mrs. Holmes continued to sway on her feet. She kept her voice soft and singsong. “I was spoilt by Mycroft. He was a fat and happy baby, content to eat, sleep and lay in his cot, watching his mobile. But along comes William and he was just a sour little mite. Startled so easily, he did. Never would stay asleep. When he was old enough, we got his hearing tested and learnt he has extraordinarily sensitive ears. Probably why he’s such an excellent musician, isn’t it?” she cooed to the now sleeping baby. “The way this one was crying reminded me how worked up
William used to get. I’d try keeping an electric fan in the nursery, not to blow on him, of course, can’t have him getting cold.”

“You mean, like white noise?” Molly sounded hopeful and looked desperate. Desperate for any solution and hopeful that Mrs. Holmes’ suggestion would actually work.

“Mm-hm, exactly,” Mrs. Holmes continued swaying. “My husband and I also recorded ourselves reading children’s books so he’d get used to our voices. When he was being particularly grumpy, we’d play the audio cassette tapes we made reading *The Hobbit* or *Paddington Bear* instead of his mobile or his music box. The tinny noises and flashing lights from those old things frightened him half to death. We ended up giving them to a church jumble sale.”

“How… how old was Sherlock when you had his ears checked?”

“Oh, the daft doctors made us wait six months,” Mrs. Holmes still sounded sweet but her face looked murderous. “Six months of hell for all of us, yes, little one. But not for you, I think.”

“I think,” Mrs. Hooper rose, “I saw a fan in one of the opened boxes in the guest room. I’ll go get it and put it into the nursery.”

“Thank you, Mum,” Molly called after her mother as Mrs. Hooper departed from the kitchen.

“I’ll put this little one back into his cot,” Mrs. Holmes gazed down on the now placid little face. “If you want me to, of course.”

Now that he had stopped screaming, Violet finally noticed the baby’s almond shaped eyes and Cupid’s bow mouth.

*Shit. Shitshitshitshitshitshitshitshit…*.

“Look at all that ginger hair, and it hasn’t fallen out yet, oh my,” Mrs. Holmes crooned, daring to stop rubbing the baby’s belly to run a fingertip over the silky, auburn hair. “Isn’t he just the spitting image of you, Molly?”

*Well… not so fast. Violet’s panic screeched to a halt. Sherlock said she wasn’t that observant. Maybe she just really likes kids.*

“I always liked kids,” Mrs. Holmes resumed rubbing Henry’s tummy. “Wanted a houseful of them, but, it was only the thr- two boys.”

*Ah-ha, Violet saw an opening and made a mental note. Three. There were three boys. Matthew, Mycroft and William. Ford, Rat-bastard and Sherlock…*

*Wonder if Mrs. Holmes would like to have dinner tonight? Wonder how chatty Mom gets after a few cocktails?*

“So, would I be daring too much to hope for grandchildren?” Mrs. Holmes asked brightly.

Molly nearly choked on her tea.

*Shiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii
“Yes,” Molly came to Violet’s rescue. “Absolutely, please feel free to visit whenever you like.”

Violet wasn’t sure if that was a great idea, since they were supposed to hiding the fact who Henry’s paternal family was. And Sherlock had the same eye shape as his mother. But Mrs. Holmes had looked so crushed when Violet told her she couldn’t have children, Molly probably felt compelled to invite Mrs. Holmes over to play Nana.

Violet sneaked another glance at Molly and her profiler’s eyes told her that Molly also felt guilty as hell right now. When she decided to cut Sherlock out of their son’s life, she never considered that she would be cutting this kind woman out of the boy’s life as well.

*What a twisted web we weave…*

“And, of course, it’s alright for you to put Henry back in his cot,” Molly looked like a thousand pound weight had lifted from her thin shoulders. “I don’t know how to thank you.”

“Think nothing of it,” Mrs. Holmes ran her fingers over the silky strands of Henry’s auburn hair. “Happy to help, that’s all.”

Mrs. Hudson, meanwhile, had been watching the entire scene with teary-eyed satisfaction. Once Mrs. Holmes had taken the baby back to the nursery, Mrs. Hudson shooed Molly and Violet out of the kitchen. “Go, I’ll clear up and make a fresh pot of tea. We’ll have a proper chat in the lounge. Relax a bit, you deserve it, dearie,” she squeezed Molly’s shoulder as she walked past her. “Sounds like you had a rough go of it in the beginning.”

“Yeah, a bit,” Molly laughed a little, sounding like herself for the first time that afternoon.

Once in the lounge, Molly grabbed Violet by the arm. Looked over her shoulder then whispered intensely into Violet’s ear. “You did this on purpose, didn’t you?”

Violet nodded.

“Thank you,” Molly breathed then added, a bit sheepishly, “Although I did seriously consider wringing your neck for springing Sherlock’s mother on me like that!”

“Apologies,” Violet flushed. “I must confess my motives were not purely selfless. *She,*” Violet tilted her head towards the nursery. “Sprung *herself* upon me and, well. I needed reinforcements.”

Molly laughed, then asked softly while fidgeting with the sleeve of her dress, “He’s told you then?” Her cheeks started to turn crimson as well. “He said he would, but I wasn’t sure.”

Violet nodded again.

“Does…does it bother you?”

Violet crinkled her brow in confusion at first then cottoned on. “No, of course not,” she shook her head then smiled. “It happened before I was even in the picture. I’m not jealous. Truly,” she kept her voice down, like Molly.

“OK,” Molly looked like she was about to weep again, only out of relief this time. “But… does *she*,” now Molly was the one tilting her head towards the nursery. “Know?”

Violet shook her head. “At least, I don’t believe so.”

“I wish I could tell her,” Molly crossed her arms, as if she was cold. “She’s so sweet.”
“You know you can’t,” Violet breathed. “It’s not possible. It’s not safe. You made a decision, you must stick to it.”

Before Molly could say anything more, Mrs. Holmes and Mrs. Hooper returned to the lounge. “Now,” Mrs. Holmes sat down on an armchair. “I want you ladies to tell me every embarrassing story about my boy that you know and I will tell you all the embarrassing stories about him when he was young.”

Molly and Violet grinned at each other. That was a treat too rich to resist.

“He filled the bathtub with live koi fish last summer,” Violet burst out before she could help herself as everyone else got comfortable and Mrs. Hudson came out with the promised freshly brewed pot of tea (and a cup of coffee for Violet) and the platter of nibbles. “And don’t even get me started about the bloody spider.”

“Oh but that was dreadful,” Mrs. Hudson cringed. “I scolded him soundly for that one.”

Violet finished telling the saga of the koi fish as well as the sad tale of Tallulah the Tarantula. Molly started telling the story about Greg’s stag night, about how John and Sherlock had gotten him absolutely pissed and then all three of them drunk as skunks decided it would a bloody brilliant idea to go to the London Eye.

As the three older women howled with laughter, Mrs. Holmes actually wiping tears of mirth out of her eyes, Violet’s mobile buzzed. She fished it out of her jeans pocket and read the Caller ID.

“Apologies, I need to take this,” she excused herself and slipped out of the flat. Looking around to make sure the hallway was empty, she breathed into the mobile, “Billy.”

“Got it,” Billy Wiggins crowed.

“All of it?”

“All. Told’ja, Miss Smith. The Network wants to bury Magnussen’s cronies.”

“Well done, Billy,” Violet closed her eyes as another puzzle piece of her daring plan locked into place. “That was much faster than I anticipated. Where are you?”

“Getting close to Baker Street, I can nip into the flat and wait.”

“No, don’t! My dog, he’ll rip you apart, no lie,” Violet shuddered, not fancying the idea of finding bits and pieces of Billy all over 221B. “Damn, I’m engaged all day. Sherlock’s mother is in town.”

“Aw, Missus Holmes is aces!” Billy said affectionately. “I’ll hang out at Speedy’s. Pretend I’m some hipster working on a screenplay.”

“Perfect. Stay safe. I’ll text when I’m back at 221B,” Violet rang off. Then leaned against the wall of the hallway, looked up at the ceiling. Then she pressed the mobile against her forehead and bowed forward a little bit as she screwed her eyes tightly shut.

_Please God, let this work…_
3:50 PM, Paris time
Saturday afternoon

“This is just utterly moronic,” Sherlock groused for what had to be the millionth time as he slumped down in the backseat of the Parisian cab. “We don’t have time for this. We have work to do. Ridiculous. Simply. Completely. Ridiculous.”

“Mm-hm.” John no longer even tried pretending he was paying attention to Sherlock’s whining. He blocked out Sherlock’s temper tantrum by fussing with his haiku again.

He still hadn’t figured out what the first line should say, so he started fussing with the second line instead. He scribbled out, “Keeps on running away from” about the line “A dyslexic heart.” Then he frowned and kept crossing out and adding words. Finally, when he got it to his satisfaction, he flipped a page and wrote neatly:

He keeps running away from
A dyslexic heart.

John frowned again, crossed out “He keeps” and replaced it with “Always.”

Always running away from
A dyslexic heart.

There, that sounds better. Not quite right yet, but better, John thought, tapping his pen on the little notebook he always carried with him.

“John,” The Voice definitely sounded peevish. The Great Detective had finally realized his blogger was ignoring him. “If you’re quite finished composing your maudlin Poe-Et-Tree, I’d appreciate it if you would listen to me.”

“It’s for Mary, the poem,” John lied instinctively. “And besides, I’m not going to give you one tiny second of my time if you’re just going to rant and rave like a lunatic!”

Despite finally getting some much needed rest, John didn’t feel much better. He had woken up feeling foggy and slightly nauseated from the tranquilizers the boy Honoré had gotten him. Plus Sherlock had used up all the hot water for his bath so John had to make do with a quick, lukewarm shower.

And to top it all off, it was raining. Again.

“So,” John snapped his notebook shut. “If you’re quite done with your tantrum about how meeting Dupin at the Louvre is a waste of time, I’d be very happy to discuss the case with you!” “Well, why didn’t you say so?” Sherlock said mildly.

“I am going to string you up by your scarf yet, mark my words.”

“Can’t. Material’s not strong enough to support my weight. It would rip.”

“I’ll push you out of this cab.”

“Doors are locked.”

“I’ll punch you in the face.”

“That’s so 2013, John, punching me in the face.”
Before John could riposte, his mobile hummed. He dug it out his coat pocket. “It’s Mary. She emailed me the information on Lady Hilda’s family.”

“What are you waiting for?” Sherlock barked; the snippy tone back in his voice. “Read it.”

John opened the email and squinted at the message from his wife.

“John. When are you going to swallow your pride and get reading glasses?”

“I’ll get reading glasses when I need reading glasses,” John sniped back. “Right, here we go… Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope was born as the Honorable Helen Hilda Stoner, from the western border of Surrey, grew up in Stoke Moran. Father was Major-General Stoner of the Bengal Artillery, killed in action during Operation Granby. Lady Stoner, nee Westphail, remarried to a Dr. Grimesby Roylott, also deceased. Freak accident in India involving a swamp adder...?”

“Mm… that’s one of the deadliest serpents in India,” Sherlock hummed, “Interesting but not pertinent to this case. Continue.”

“Right, anyway,” John soldiered on, holding the mobile closer to his eyes.

“John. For pity sake, buy a pair of reading spectacles.”

“Stop nagging me, Sherlock,” John enlarged the image of the email on his Smartphone screen. “Lady Stoner died eight years ago in train derailment near Crewe. Good God, this reads like a bloody Victorian melodrama,” John exclaimed. “She had a sister, Julia. Dead as well.”

“Sister?” Sherlock’s ears pricked up. “Sister,” he muttered again to himself as the cab slowed down as they approached of one of the most impressive and overwhelming museums in the world. Well, impressive and overwhelming to everyone but Sherlock. He examined his nails as he asked, “Any other family, John?”

“Just a spinster aunt on her mother’s side, a Miss Honoria Westphail but she relocated to Copenhagen ages ago.”

“Copenhagen?” Sherlock squawked, sitting up. He tented his fingers. “Julia Stoner, how did she die? Tell me, quickly. The meter is running and I don’t want to run through the rain until we positively have to do so.”

“Plane crash, fifteen years ago. En route to Copenhagen… to visit her aunt, I presume.”

“In Copenhagen?”

“Yes, I just said that.”

“Copenhagen, Denmark.”

“Mmm, yep. That’s where Copenhagen is, last I checked.”

“When was Julia Stoner born?”


“When was Lady Hilda born?” Sherlock fished out his wallet and peeled off several euros.

“Uh… the 22nd of May…” John blinked. “1967.”
“Gemini,” Sherlock purred then bounded out of the taxi into the downpour.

Both men sprinted through the downpour. John lifted the hood of his parka over his head, but he could feel the turn-ups of his jeans and his socks getting soaked… again. John only got to glance at the massive glass pyramid and didn’t even bother taking a moment to admire the epic palace that housed so many priceless treasures.

Sherlock paid for both their admissions without John even asking. He also bought John a cup of steaming hot coffee, milk no sugar. “Don’t want to listen to you grouse about being cold,” he explained tartly when John tried to thank him.

John tried to drink the coffee as quickly as possible without burning his tongue. However Sherlock seemed to be in no rush. He stood, with his gloved hands behind his back, staring at the French paintings on the landing below him. His strange, pale, shimmering eyes took in everything, missed nothing.

Then he took his mobile out and started texting madly.

“Come along, John,” he finally murmured after he put his mobile back into his Belstaff’s pockets and sloped off. John binned the paper cup and followed, jogging a bit to keep up with Sherlock’s long-legged strides.

John made a mental note to return to Paris on holiday someday. Maybe take Mary. He wasn’t an enormous art buff by any stretch, but he did wish he had time to look at the exhibits properly. Instead, he just pushed through the throngs of tourists, keeping his eyes locked on the back of Sherlock’s head.

Soon, they entered into an open-air space, the bricks now aged to a creamy white. The light through the round skylights was minimal due to the grey rainy day. This, however, did not diminish the sight at the top of the stark white staircase.

Eight feet tall, she stood on the edge of a ship’s prow, as if she had just touched down from her descent from Mount Olympus. Her drapery fluttered around her, as if facing a sudden sea squall. The lack of arms and a head did not detract from her power. In fact, in an odd way, it enhanced it. Besides, who needed arms when one had wings? Enormous wings, like a great eagle, spread out wide. The wings sprung from the back of the headless woman’s body. One giant flap of those wings and the creature would be airborne again.

“Wow,” John couldn’t help himself as he stared at fantastic Hellenistic sculpture. He had an odd desire to run his hand over those marble wings, to feel the smooth, cool stone against his palm.

“The Nike of Samothrace,” Sherlock confirmed, looking up at the statue otherwise known as The Winged Victory. Then, his eyes flicked from the statue to the landing below her, “And the Village Idiot of Paris.”

John tore his eyes away from The Winged Victory, to the man sitting in what Violet Hunter would have recognized as the Agnistamb hasana pose, or Firelog pose. To John, it just looked like Dupin had his long legs twisted up like a pretzel.

He sat on top of his long, leather trench coat, like a picnic blanket. As John and Sherlock got closer, John saw that he wore loose black trousers and a grey t-shirt with “Foo Fighters” screen-printed across the chest. His fingers were adorned again with silver rings and now John could see several copper, silver and leather bracelets around both of his wrists as well as a cheap gold watch. He still wore his black knit skull-cap and heather-grey scarf. But his motorcycle boots, his socks and his
trendy sunglasses were placed neatly beside him.

Sherlock and John looked at Dupin’s bare feet then at each other, but they weren’t the only ones. Several tourists gave Dupin sidelong, confused glances. One tourist even said “Mon Dieu,” and chivvied her children away from him.

“At least I wear shoes on a consistent basis,” Sherlock sniped at John.

“Shame you often forget to put the rest of your clothes on, parading around in a bed sheet,” John replied serenely before tapping Dupin on his broad shoulder. “Mr. Dupin? We’re here.”

Dupin slowly opened his eyes, but looked at the statue instead of the Baker Street Boys. “Beautiful, isn’t she?” he looked at her the way a besotted man looks at his true love. “Whenever I need to think, I always come here. It’s like talking to an old friend.”

Annoyed at John’s dig, Sherlock muttered. “You criticized me for talking to a skull.”

“I never criticized,” John patiently corrected Sherlock. “And it’s Mrs. Hudson who keeps taking your skull away. Mr. Dupin? Err… yeah, doesn’t security get cross, when you’re talking to your… ah, yes.” John looked up at the magnificent statue again. Now it seemed like if she could fly away from this strange man, she would at once. “Talking to your old friend in bare feet?”

Dupin unwound his long legs. Reaching for his dry, woolly socks, he said slyly, “When one recovers the emerald and diamond necklace and earrings of Empress Marie-Louise after they have been stolen from the Louvre, one can do as one pleases in the Louvre.” He pulled on his socks. “Providing you don’t bring food and drink into the museum and don’t take flash photography of the delicate paintings, of course. That would be unforgivable in a place like this.”

“Of course,” John muttered.

“How was Sacré-Cœur, Monsieur Holmes?” Dupin now pulled on his boots.

“Cold.”

“Did you learn anything?”

“I like church bells.”

Dupin stopped pulling his boot on so he could crane his head to stare at Sherlock, puzzled. John, used to Sherlock’s non sequiturs, only shrugged and stood at attention with an angelic expression on his round face.

“Vous ne devriez pas me mentir, Monsieur Holmes,” Dupin snatched his coat up and quickly rose to his full height.

“Vous ne devriez pas me chercher Monsieur Dupin,” Sherlock retaliated, nonplussed.

“Je reconnais un homme au cœur brisé quand j’en vois un,” Dupin swung his coat on. “Ce sera votre chute, pire que ce que vous avez vécu à St Bart. Vous devrez choisir.” He flicked his eyes towards John then put the sunglasses back on. “Vous deux devrez choisir.”

John watched as Sherlock’s eyes widened and his lips disappeared in a thin line. His already alabaster skin turned to the color of a sun-bleached bone.

“Girls? English, please,” John pleaded. “Also, we’re… we’re on an international mission. This
missing Letter is a time bomb. It’s going to spark a war if it falls into the wrong hands, so can you two just get along long enough to find the damn thing?”

“Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope has a twin sister, Julia,” Sherlock said, thankfully in English. “Supposedly she died in an airplane crash to Copenhagen. But I believe we saw Julia last night in your friend’s pub. I messaged my brother and told him to confirm where Lady Hilda was yesterday, both in the daytime and in the evening in order to verify my theory.”

“Does Copenhagen have any special significance?” Now Dupin sounded crisp, almost martial. He started marching away from the Winged Victory.

“Oh yes,” Sherlock caught up to Dupin easily. It took John a bit longer but he reached Sherlock’s side in time to hear him say, “I need more data to confirm but-”

“It’s not an unreasonable theory,” Dupin rubbed his scruff. “That Julia Stoner was working for Charles Augustus Magnussen but got into bed with Moriarty’s people after Magnussen died.”

“It’s foolish to make assumptions without data,” Sherlock said stiffly.

“We will test the hypothesis now,” Dupin walked with great purpose now, as if he were a king and the Louvre truly his palace. “My spies, they located Lucas and The Lady, as we’ll call her until we can definitely confirm whether or not she is Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope or Julia Stoner.” He dug out a slip of paper from his coat pocket, a Post-It note really, and held it between his first two fingers. “They have a flat at 16 Rue Godolphin. Been hiding there as husband and wife, Monsieur and Madame Henri Fourange. Lucas’ spies had been so busy following Sherlock around Sacré-Cœur as well as following me bringing Dr. Watson back to the hotel,” now Dupin sounded insufferably superior, “that they did not have enough people to guard them. And they did not observe my spies following them, which is how we found their bolt-hole.”

Sherlock stopped dead in his tracks. “You set me up.”

Dupin turned around, arching an eyebrow over his sunglasses, “Oui.”

“Well-played,” Sherlock grizzled as he started walking again. “Let us find these villains. I have some questions for them, myself.”

_The pictures of Violet_, John felt his heart starting to pound. One keystroke, one click of the mouse and those pictures could be online in seconds. _Who were they meant for, what were they planning on doing with them and where is the original? Or is it too late and it’s uploaded to someone’s Cloud or…_ 

_Wait, did he honestly set Sherlock up? What if one of those spies was actually an assassin? What if they would have tried… he was alone, he was unarmed, I wasn’t with him, I…_

John shut those thoughts down. He needed to focus.

His gun felt hot and heavy against his body. Once inside Dupin’s car, John unzipped his parka and unsnapped the holster, taking it out. He clicked the safety off and put it back into his holster.

“Are you always armed, Dr. Watson?” Dupin asked conversationally as he navigated through the twists and turns of Paris roads.

“When we’re working, usually,” John shrugged his parka off as well. He might risk freezing to death, but he didn’t want to be wearing the bulky coat if he was going to be running after criminals. He felt an almost savage delight at the prospect of collaring Lucas and hauling him to Mycroft.
Traitor... the ex-soldier thought viciously.

The heavily dented Volvo fit in perfectly in the neighborhood where Dupin parked it. He had taken his sunglasses off while driving, but he put them back on when he parked the car. The rain still came down in a heavy stream. “Allons-y!” he cried out before exiting the Volvo.

“I feel like I’m in a bad Doctor Who episode,” John complained.

“If a giant blue police box comes down from the sky, you’re on your own,” Sherlock informed his friend before leaving the car.

They slipped into an alley at a run. John’s feet splashed in the puddles. This time he did not slip on the cobblestone. He did not feel the cold either. Adrenaline powered through him.

All he saw was the battlefields.

Dupin found a backdoor and jimmed the lock open. He jerked his head, signaling Sherlock and John to follow him. They run up the stairwell at a clip. John kept the gun barrel pointed down, but his finger stayed on the trigger.

Once on the landing, they heard a man’s angry shouting.

A British man’s angry shouting.

“Lucas,” Sherlock confirmed for Dupin and John.

Dupin led the charge, Sherlock stayed close to his heels and John covered them both the best he could. Their feet thundered down the shabby hallway as the shouts continued.

“ARE YOU MAD? WHAT ARE YOU DOING? HAVE YOU COMPLETELY TAKEN LEAVE OF YOUR SENSES, J-”

A single shot cracked through the stillness of the shabby hostel.

The two detectives and the army doctor froze for just a second. Then Sherlock sprang into action. But John pushed past Dupin to grab Sherlock by the back of his coat. “Let me go first,” he snapped. “You’ve already been shot once.”

Sherlock shook John off, but actually obeyed. Dupin charged through and stood in front of the door where the shouting and the shot had come from. John positioned himself so he could point the gun into the room the minute the door was opened. “Do it,” he told Dupin.

The door was incredibly flimsy. Two strong kicks and it all but flew off the hinges. John stuck his gun in front of him, pointed it. Behind him, Sherlock stood scanning the room with his sharp eyes. John checked the room as well. It was a sad, grey studio, perhaps an artist’s garret once. Now, just a dirty room with a sofa and a mattress with newspaper littered all over the grimy floor. Tattered drapes fluttered in the breeze as an open window like the rain and the wind in.

On the grimy floor, lay a handsome man in his early thirties. He wore jeans, black military boots and a black t-shirt.

There was a perfect, small hole in the middle of his forehead. Blood circled his head, like an aureole around a saint’s head in a painting.

His eyes stared unblinkingly at the ceiling.
“Julia!” Dupin strode into the room. “Julia Stoner! Show yourself,” he opened a wardrobe and found only a broken Hoover. He poked his head into what had to be some sort of lavatory. John opened his mouth bawl at him not to be stupid and to wait for John to clear the room. But Dupin retreated, shaking his head. “No Julia.”

“No kidding,” Sherlock said dryly. “That was obvious the minute the shot rang out. She bolted.”

“Probably through this window,” John crept carefully to the window and cautiously peered out. “Dammit.”

“John?” Sherlock asked sharply.

“I can’t see anything, it’s too dark,” John shook his head. “It’s no good. We lost her.”

“Look,” Dupin pointed by John’s foot. “Look and don’t move.”

John looked down and saw a shiny, semi-automatic pistol mere inches away from his foot.

“That looks military issue,” John crouched down to examine it. Then he looked up at Sherlock and Dupin. “Maybe it wasn’t The Lady after all.”

“It was Julia.”

But Dupin crouched down beside John now. “Lucas was British Secret Service, yes? Perhaps she shot him with his own gun?”

“His own gun is right there, on top of that old fashioned television,” Sherlock pointed at the old tube-style telly. “He didn’t keep his weapon on him when he was with Julia because he trusted her. The fool,” he added scathingly. “And if you two would use your eyes, that is a weapon issued to most MI-6 agents, but as to whom that weapon belongs to, we’ll have to run the serial number through the system.”

Dupin straightened up. “We need to call this in to the police, but first, Monsieur Holmes, I would contact your brother regarding this incident. I will personally ensure that the idiot Gagnon sends the serial number to MI-6 at once. Once the police are called, that will give us exactly twenty-five minutes to thoroughly search this place. Let’s hope The Letter is here.”

“It won’t be,” Sherlock snarled.

It wasn’t, of course.

“If you would have listened to me in the first place, if we would have gone here directly instead of the Louvre, we could have prevented this,” Sherlock hectored Dupin as the Parisian police escorted all three of them from the crime scene after they gave their statements.

John, of course, left out the bit regarding his gun. Even though he had the special permit issued by MI-6, his stint in the basement cell didn’t give him any reason to trust the local law enforcement.

Sherlock, meanwhile, still in his state of high dudgeon, ranted on at Dupin’s rain-spattered back. “Lucas and Julia were our only leads to The Letter. Your tiny brain is capable of processing that small of bit information, is it not?”

“What are we going to do?” John asked as he followed them morosely back to Dupin’s Volvo. The rain had dwindled down to mist now. “Seriously, we literally have nothing.”
“Ah, est-ce que vous vous-” a police siren interrupted Dupin’s rant. “-de moi ?” Dupin continued to shout when he saw what had to be a parking ticket slipped underneath the windscreen wiper. “Merde! Merde! Merde!”

As Dupin began tearing the ticket up into tiny bits, a shivering John asked Sherlock, “Sherlock, please tell me you’ve got something up your sleeve.” But when Sherlock shook his damp curls with an uncharacteristic look of apprehension on his face, John whispered. “They were also our only leads to those pictures of Violet as well. What are we going to do?

“No idea,” Sherlock groused.

Then the text alert on his mobile sounded. The breathy erotic moan of Irene Adler.

“Ah for fuck’s sake, Sherlock, will you change that, please?”

Sherlock took his mobile out of his coat pocket and held it as if it were possessed. “I did,” he said faintly. Nobody could hack into his mobile. Not even MI-6, although Mycroft kept having them try on a routine basis. “Violet kept complaining about it so…” he stared dumbfounded at the Caller ID. Sender Unknown.

He slid the Unlock button, punching in his code and opened the text message:

I can see the Eiffel Tower from my hotel room.  Let’s have dinner. XX

“Oh damn it all to bloody hell,” Sherlock groaned, lowering his mobile while lifting his face to the heavens, letting the drizzle coat his face.

“What?” John asked as Dupin finished mutilating his parking ticket.

“I have a lead,” Sherlock scowled and turned away from John, his coat swirling around him.

Dupin threw the bits of ticket up in the air like confetti.

John wiped the drizzle from his own face as he watched Sherlock disappear down the darkened alley at a full run. “Sherlock, wait!”

Sherlock ignored him, speeding up as he flipped his coat collar up, all cool and mysterious.

“I really hate Paris,” John grumbled.

Chapter End Notes

So... I didn't conjure the son of Sherlock (or the nickname 'Raffles') completely out of thin air... there's actual canon (albeit non-ACD) for the existence of this version of Sherlock Jr.:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minor_Sherlock_Holmes_characters#Raffles_Holmes

http://www.amazon.com/Raffles-Holmes-Company-Remarkable-

Also, Raffles' mother's name is "Marjorie" and "Molly" sometimes is used as nickname for "Margaret", plus we don't know anything about her dad except he died... I know it's a stretch... but it's fun to play with! :^)

Also thank you again for reading/commenting/kudos. Apologies for not responding to previous comments, but I really hate typing on my ridiculously small phone and I am about to crash.

Happy Sunday Evening!
“I needed change of scenery,” she looked coyly at him over her smooth, bare shoulder. “Before I did something truly stupid like start… misbehaving again.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared as she reached for a swath of filmy emerald material draped over the dainty chair in front of the vanity.

“Irene…”

“You know how sexy you sound, saying my name. Is that why you only refer to me as ‘The Woman’ when you talk about me to the press and other people?” Irene laughed...

Meanwhile, back in London, Mary gets unexpected visitors while in Paris her husband is getting quite fed up with cool and mysterious detectives.

Thanks for reading/commenting and kudo'ing. Happy Sunday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Fourteen: Solitaire

“You don’t hate Paris,” Dupin crooned as the rain washed away the bits of his torn up parking citation. “And all is not lost. Come,” he tilted his head back to his illegally parked Volvo.

“I should go with him,” John looked down the alley where Sherlock had stalked off. If I run, really run, I can still catch up to him…”

Dupin shook his head. “Let him go, he’ll find his way back to you. Always does, doesn’t he?”

His words sat strangely in John’s chest. Unsettled, he spat at him, “Can’t always guarantee that, can you? Not when his colleague sends him off on a fool does errand, alone, know that his enemies are watching him?”

Dupin laughed. “Do you have any idea how heavily guarded Sacré-Cœur is, Dr. Watson? The candlesticks in there alone are worth a small fortune. Also, I am friends with those guards. They knew he was coming. They gave him a wide berth to explore but stayed close enough to fend off any potential attackers. You see, Dr. Watson, if London belongs to Sherlock,” He spread his arms out wide. “Paris belongs to me.”

“Why did you send him off to Sacré-Cœur in the first place? He’s not religious.”

Dupin laughed. “Neither am I! It’s a fantastic building. Everyone raves about Notre Dame, but I’ve always had an affinity for Sacré-Cœur; but then Montmartre is my favorite neighborhood.”

“He’s furious and I can’t say I blame him,” John pointed again down the alley. By now Sherlock
was long gone. “We could have caught Lucas and Julia.”

Dupin shook his head. “They separated the minute they stepped out of the tavern. We would have had to split up, which is exactly what they wanted. Divide and conquer. So we gave them,” He gave John a wide, know-all grin, “Exactly what they wanted.”

Oh my God, I've met someone more irritating than Sherlock. How is that even possible? John stared at Dupin, dumbfounded. “You should have told us.”

Dupin leaned forward. “You were in no condition to be told anything more at that point, Dr. Watson. You were dangerously close to suffering battle fatigue, an obsolete English term, I am aware, but,” he shrugged, “Very fitting for you.”

“I'm not in the mood to be deduced,” John said sourly as he blew on his cold hands. He wanted to go back into the Volvo to fetch his heavy parka and gloves. I'll text Sherlock and make him tell me where he's going…

Dupin lifted his brows. “I do not deduce,” he all but stuck his nose in the air. “I ratiocinate.”

“I'm sorry, what?” John, a wordsmith, had never heard that peculiar word before.

“Come, you’re freezing to death,” Dupin gestured again towards his battered car. “Ratiocinate; to use ratiocination. It is reasoned train of thought. Reasoning that is precise, exact and logical. This investigative process, which I have created, is based upon obtaining hard, scientific data in order to create a logical conclusion while at the same time, not ignoring the infinite possibilities available despite the absence of data.”

John frowned as he walked alongside Dupin back to the Volvo. He recalled what Violet had said about the former Interpol officer:

He was able to marry deductive reasoning with inductive thinking, which changed investigative procedures as well as forensic science forever.

“You don’t jump to conclusions without proof but you don’t ignore your gut feelings either.”

“Exactly, Dr. Watson,” Dupin unlocked the passenger side door and opened it for John. While Dupin walked around the front of the car, John reached into the backseat for his parka. He awkwardly pulled it on as Dupin got in and started the ignition. “In an imprecise science, such as profiling, you need precise methods. I can see why Sherlock is fond of you, Dr. Watson.”

Fond of me? John felt a blush starting to burn on his cheeks. Dupin must have gotten his English words mixed up… Sherlock’s not… fond of me…

His treacherous brain flashed back to the day he asked Sherlock to be in his wedding party…

I'm your best…

Man…

Friend…

Of course you're my best friend…

… the best and wisest man that I have ever known…

Lost in his thoughts, John stared out the car window, not really looking at anything in particular. A
full fifteen minutes had passed when Dupin nonchalantly commented, “You are not comfortable discussing your relationship with Sherlock are you?”

“What?” John jumped then said irritably, “We’re not… Of course I’m not comfortable discussing our friendship. Not after the way we’ve both been raked over the coals by the tabs, people assuming we’re a couple, which we’re not,” he glowered at Dupin. When Dupin merely kept his eyes on the road as he merged seamlessly into the insane Paris traffic, John took a deep breath. “He’s my best friend and after all the shit he’s been through, that we’ve been through… I’m just… very protective of our friendship. That’s all.”

“Understandable,” Dupin murmured, his eyes locked firmly in front of him. “As well as admirable. I felt that way about my partner, my best friend, when I still worked for Interpol.”

A very bad feeling swirled around John’s gut. Still, he asked, “What happened to your partner?”

“She died,” Dupin sounded very matter-of-fact.

“I’m… sorry.”

“So am I.”

The car ride remained silent. John fumbled in his pockets for his mobile. He thumbed a quick message to Sherlock:

I trust you. You know that.
But please at least
let me know that you’re safe - JW

John held onto his mobile as he crossed his arms. “So, where are we going?”

“I’m starving,” Dupin told him, “You?”

Unbelievably, John’s stomach actually growled. “Uh, yeah, I could eat.”

“Wonderful, there is a little bistro I know, off the beaten path, away from the tourists, thank God,” Dupin rolled his eyes. “We can talk more. I can explain more of my methods to you, plus it will give me a chance to get to know you better… without rudely profiling you, of course.”

“Mm, OK. That would be….” Odd… “Great. Maybe we can throw some theories around about the case as well? Since you’re a profiler, you can try to get into Lucas and Julia’s heads?”

“The only thing in Lucas’ head is a bullet,” Dupin deadpanned, then said impishly, “Too soon?”

“A bit, yeah,” John couldn’t help but snort but then his mobile hummed.

John felt his shoulders loosen as he read Sherlock’s text:

Your vote of confidence
(while unnecessary,) is almost
appreciated. And I am perfectly
fine. Have dinner with Dupin.
Order something expensive.
Make him pay – SH

“I find it interesting,” Dupin said mildly as he pulled his car into a parking spot near a pretty little
café that made John think of the fancy gastro-pubs back home. “That in the entire time you’ve been here… I’ve yet to hear talk about your wife.”

John looked up from his mobile, mouth dropping open. Felt… caught out.

*But I’m not doing anything wrong…*

(… am I…?)

He felt the same claustrophobic sensation he had experienced in the stairwell of the holiday flats, when Sherlock had pressed his bony body flush against John’s… his breath warm on the outer shell of his ear as he huffed “Shut. Up!” as the two Polish lads came clomping down the stairs towards them.

He felt that strange tightness in his chest again as he snapped, “I’m sorry?” to Dupin, screwing his face up into a scowl.

The car felt unbearably warm now.

“Just an observation,” Dupin put the car in Park. “Not one syllable about your wife and yet, you’re texting your partner out of concern because I told you my partner died,” Dupin opened his car door, his arm getting wet by the renewed rain. “Now, I must insist you try the escargot. It is divine, seriously, angels sing as the chef pours the garlic butter sauce over them.”

As hot as he felt, John wasn’t sure if snails were his best option. *Maybe I’m getting the flu…*

“I’m working,” he mimicked Sherlock’s haughtiest tone of voice. “I don’t talk about my wife while I’m working because I don’t let my heart rule my head while I’m on a case.”

He never in a million years thought he’d be quoting Sherlock.

Dupin shrugged again as he waited for John to walk around the car to his side, “As I said, just an observation. Now, the escargot…”

John found himself aching to be with Sherlock. Better *that* madman than *this* madman.

However, if he had known who Sherlock had rushed off to meet, John might have throttled him.

As Dupin drove John to his secret little bistro back in Montmartre, Sherlock, after making a few astute deductions as to where this hotel might be, hailed a cab. His face matched the weather as the taxi zipped and zoomed through the congested traffic with ease. Once they reached the hotel, Sherlock vented his spleen on the cab driver by accusing him of taking him the longest way possible to his destination (he was right of course.) Just to be completely petty, he paid the cabbie in pounds with one euro wrapped around the fat wad of notes. He skipped out of the vehicle before the driver even realized what Sherlock had done.

His ill-humor returned ten-fold however when he stormed into the hotel’s opulent lobby. The expression of fury on his normally controlled face frightened more than a few guests as well as the concierge into silence. A business man engrossed with reading his text messages actually bumped into Sherlock. He opened his mouth to curse at Sherlock, took one look at the gaunt, angry face with the strange glimmering greenish eyes and promptly shut his mouth again. He apologized in Czech and scuttled away from him.

Ignoring them all, he located the nearest lift. The silvery doors slid open and the lift was mercifully was empty. Sherlock stepped inside, hit the button he wanted and watched as the doors slid silently
shut again.

Alone, he puffed out a breath and closed his eyes, concentrating on making his face expressionless. He tried to understand why his emotions were bubbling so close to the surface. But the only thing he could determine was how disconcerted he felt and he didn’t like it. *I abhor distractions,* he thought while the lift whooshed him up to his destination.

He longed for a cigarette. Or something… stronger…

... *a seven percent solution*…

“Full stop,” he ordered himself, stuffing his gloved hands into his coat pockets.

_That bloody church last night… I know what game Dupin is playing and it Will. Not. Work. Do not let him into your head,* he ordered to himself as the lift came to a stop. When the doors opened, he then told himself *Focus.*

Or rather, he heard Molly Hooper Lestrade commanding him to *Focus.*

He, however, did not imagine her slapping him. Thrice in real life was enough, thank you.

But as he walked down the hallway, everything extraneous started melting away… Mycroft… Violet… Dupin… even John… his drive, his craving to solve this crime, to find The Letter pushed everything else out of his brain…

... _not out, never out… just to the side…_

Sherlock paused, squeezed his eyes tightly shut for a moment and bowed his head.

….. just like *pain, Sherlock… it never goes away*…

That particular little voice had sounded a bit too much like Jim Moriarty.

*Delete.*

He lifted his head, his eyes an unsettling golden-green, the blue nearly absent from his irises.

He straightened, lifted his head up, proud and arrogant… and a touch annoyed.

_Time to be Sherlock Holmes._

He meandered down the hallway, taking his time now, his eyes flicking here and there, cataloging everything, missing nothing. He inhaled, smelt the polish used to make the floors shine and smelt the congealing leftover food underneath silver trays outside the doors. He heard the hum of the lights above him and an occasional burst of muffled French here and there from within the rooms.

Sherlock found the door he wanted and knocked twice.

And _she_ opened it.

Wearing nothing but frosty green eyeliner, red lipstick and a coy smile.

“Well, well,” she purred in that throaty, sensual voice of hers. “Hello, Mr. Holmes.”

She caressed her hand up and down the doorframe. With her other hand, her nails painted as scarlet as her lips, she finger-walked her way up from his abdomen to his scarf, each finger playing with a
button of the Belstaff.

Sherlock kept his gaze locked on her sly, mocking eyes. He ignored the brazen display of accessible skin, pale and delicate as the petals of an Easter lily, but nowhere near as pure.

“Oh put some clothes on,” he batted her hand off his chest. “I am not in a gaming mood.”

“Pooh,” Irene Adler pouted as she rubbed her slapped hand. “I remember when you used to be fun, Mr. Holmes.”

“I remember when you nearly got beheaded because you were having too much fun misbehaving,” Sherlock clasped his hands behind his back. “I am not here on holiday and you obviously didn’t text me for dinner. You have some insight which you believe I require for the case I’m working on. Either you divulge this information now or I shall be on my way.”

“And here I thought you were mixing business with pleasure since John Watson accompanied you,” Irene’s eyes still sparkled with mischief as she moved slightly aside so she could let Sherlock inside her suite. “Still in denial, you two? How precious,” she purred as she thrust her breasts forward so they would brush across Sherlock’s arm as he entered the suite.

“We’re not a couple,” Sherlock corrected her smoothly as he shut the door then locked it.

“Yes you are. Drink?”

“No.” Sherlock watched her sashay towards the bar, trying to deduce her.

As usual, he got the same results:

????????

Damn.

“You do realize how stupid it is of you to be here, looking like you, wearing naught but your battle dress.” He informed her as she poured herself a cognac.

He kept his eyes firmly trained on her coal black hair, twisted up in its trademark chignon. He ignored the smooth, white back, the full, round hips and buttocks and long, lean legs.

“Oh, but Rome was getting dull,” She complained as she took her sweet time, meandering from the bar to a vanity table, knowing full well how hard he was trying to ignore her nudity. She took a sip and set her glass down with a delicate clink. “I needed change of scenery,” she looked coyly at him over her smooth, bare shoulder. “Before I did something truly stupid like start… misbehaving again.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared as she reached for a swath of filmy emerald material draped over the dainty chair in front of the vanity.

“Irene…”

“Do you know how sexy you sound, saying my name. Is that why you only refer to me as ‘The Woman’ when you talk about me to the press and other people?” Irene laughed as she pulled on the filmy emerald green cloth that turned out to be a dressing gown. “Because you know what hearing my name from your lips does to me?” She lowered her lashes at him as she tied a silken sash around her narrow waist.
“You do realize how pathetic you sound when you’re trying too hard,” Sherlock droned.

“You really are in a foul mood, aren’t you,” Irene sounded sulky as she crossed over to sit at the foot of the bed. Her flimsy gown swished around her like a princess’ skirt, a very see-through princess’ skirt. It really left nothing to the imagination. She might as well have still been naked.

“Here I set the chess board up and everything,” she added before taking another sip of her cognac. “Lovely, isn’t it?”

Sherlock looked over and sure enough, an ornate, marble chessboard was set up and ready to go, waiting for the first move. “You are bored. Why did you really leave Rome?”

Irene crossed her legs, not caring in the least that she flashed Sherlock in the process, revealing to him (again) she was bare and hairless everywhere… which was something Sherlock never quite understood… Women and full-body depilation, makes no sense, completely illogical, not to mention unnatural. Plus… if Violet clogs the bathtub drain one more time after she shampoos and shaves during a shower, I shall have to have a word with her…

Irene took another drink. This one seemed to be for fortification rather than seduction. “Thought it would be in my best interest to leave town for a bit, go to ground, actually.”

“What have you heard, or should I ask, what have you done?”

“Me? Nothing,” she pressed her scarlet-tipped fingers to her chest, sounding defensive.

“You’re still in the dominatrix business,” he reminded her, hands still behind his back. “Not exactly a wise career choice when you’re supposed to be dead.”

“Except I’m not a working girl any more, I’ve moved up into management,” she said, her tone of voice arch. “Nearly getting killed was a blessing, really. Tedium, listening to rich, fat, old men whinge about how horrible their lives were and then watching them ponce off home to their wives and kiddies and having to hear their irritating voices on the radio pontificating about moral corrosion in England as I am being chauffeured to my next job.”

“Being a madam is better?”

“Immensely,” Irene’s sea glass green eyes flashed at him. “Instead of spreading my own legs, I spread the work out to girls who are, admittedly, younger and more energetic than I.”

“Didn’t realize making a living on your back was so exhausting.”

“Ah,” Irene unclipped the silver clasp holding her coal black hair up in its complicated up-do. As her hair, sleek as a raven’s wing, tumbled down onto her shoulders, she smiled in approval, “There’s the Mr. Holmes I know.” Then she sighed, “Alright, if we’re not going to play, very well. Straight to business,” She straightened up, looking more like a businesswoman rather than a sexpot, despite the see-through gown. “While I can’t possibly forgive Jim Moriarty, God rot his soul, for nearly getting me decapitated, I did take a page out of his playbook. Nobody sees me, nobody interacts with me directly. I have created layers between me, my workers and their clients. I am the puppet-master, the Man behind the curtain, so to speak,” she took another fortifying drink then continued: “Last August one of my girls got in over her head, almost got herself into the Iceman’s sights, thank all the gods she didn’t.”

Sherlock arched an eyebrow, “Why didn’t you text me, especially since it involved my brother?”

“Three reasons,” she lifted her pointer finger. “It involved your brother,” she added her middle
finger, “It happened right after The Copper Beaches and then you were up to your eyes in The Sussex Vampire case.”

“Ah. Still reading John’s insipid blog.”

“It’s delightful and you know it,” Irene gave Sherlock a disapproving look and poked him in the chest with her pointer and middle fingers. “Furthermore, you enjoy it as well. Your ego gets even more inflated with every hit it gets so do stop being mean about it. At any rate, this girl really was an idiot. I was going to have her sacked because of her constant indiscretions. The fool was posting her conquests on Instagram,” Irene rolled her eyes.

“Didn’t even have the good sense to blackmail them then?” Sherlock asked sweetly.

Irene tilted her head, “Still upset over the Bond Air misunderstanding?”

“Misunderstanding? Is that what we’re calling it?”

She furrowed her brows at him, “I told you, many, many times over. That was strictly business and I didn’t realize how dangerous Moriarty was.” Unconsciously she rubbed her neck, recalling how her head had nearly been parted from it. “It’s completely unfair that you bring that up every time I see y-”

“Yes, yes, of course, apologies, moving along to how this prostitute was stupider than you.”

Irene bridled at the use of the word prostitute but she finally got to the point. “And the third reason is she is now dead. Murdered.”

“Oh, you do always save the best for last,” Sherlock purred.

“I know what you like,” she purred right back at him. “She had a client, British Secret Service, not one of Mycroft’s creatures, but worked with him from time to time. I remembered him, from back when I was… still in the field, so to speak. Remembered what he liked too. Liked to brag, he did as well as show-off. Might as well have worn a badge that said Her Majesty’s Royal Secret Service; probably thought he really was James Bloody Bond. Good looking bloke too…”

“Lucas…” Sherlock breathed.

“Mm, yes. Eduardo Lucas. But he told me his name was Henri. Henri Fourange. You would think that a Secret Service agent would have wits enough to change aliases,” Irene shrugged. “Of course, he didn’t tell me per se he was Secret Service, but it was obvious.”

“Painfully obvious,” Sherlock nodded in agreement, becoming more and more interested in her story. “Pray continue... Irene.”

Irene patted the bed, giving him another seductive smile. Sherlock huffed and puffed as was his way but he caved. He unwound his scarf, peeled off glovesand unbuttoned his coat. He shed the Belstaff and walked towards the bed. He carefully put his things on the bed behind Irene then sat next to her. He crossed his legs, steepled his fingers and lifted his brows, waiting for her to begin again.

Instead she closed her eyes and inhaled. “You still wear the cologne I picked out for you. Sandalwood, with faint hints of cinnamon and cedar.”

“Don’t get boring now,” He intoned but secretly was pleased she had observed the undertones. Not even Violet picked up on the cinnamon and cedar although she had commented more than once she liked the sandalwood scent.
“This stupid girl, called herself Mia, blabbed to her flat-mates about her Secret Agent Man. When it reached my ears that her client was Fourange and all that she was saying about him, I made arrangements to get her the right hell out of Rome.”

“What did she say?”

“That he had intercepted his top secret intelligence that could start World War Three. Then he had supposedly told her it had been stolen, but he was going to get it back and look like a hero, get a big promotion, get a pay-rise. If he hadn’t told her his name was Fourange, I would have sent word to her to laugh it off. But because I knew who he was, really was, I knew she was in grave danger. Her own fault, really for not keeping her mouth shut. “Irene rolled her eyes again. “But instead of going to New York like I arranged, the silly cow went and contacted him to come fetch her from Rome. I had no idea she hadn’t gone to New York… but I’m getting ahead of myself,” she took another drink of cognac. “Two weeks ago, a woman approached, oh, I’ll call her Elizabetta. She carries out my decisions, runs the actual house in Rome and no, she doesn’t know what I look like, by the way. Anyway, Elizabetta was approached by a woman, blond. British. Wanting to buy me out, made a reasonable offer. It was an offer not so high that I wouldn’t be suspicious, but high enough to make it worth my while.”

“And that reasonable offer immediately made you suspicious.”

“Of course it did,” Irene drained her glass. “One just doesn’t swan into a brothel and offering to buy it on the spot. Plus the name she used also made me uneasy as well. She had introduced herself as Missy Stroper.”

Sherlock’s ears immediately pricked. “Missy Stroper… she told you she had experience, that she had run Westaways Cortege in London, didn’t she?”

“Mm, aren’t you glad I read John’s blog now?” Irene reached over and started running a fingernail up and down Sherlock’s thigh.

Sherlock delicately but firmly plucked her hand off of him, “Personal space, my dear Miss Adler.”

“Oh yes, wouldn’t want to make John jealous,” Irene laughed then sobered up. “But I knew Missy had been briefly imprisoned for her unwitting role in the Burned Girls Case and the Copper Beaches Massacre. I knew she made a deal to save her own backside and I knew she didn’t have the capital to buy my business. The Copper Beaches actually didn’t make international news, I only knew about it because of John’s blog, but I remembered that name. I immediately told my girls we had been compromised, but I didn’t move fast enough. One of the drawbacks of my protective layers, I’m afraid,” Irene actually looked regretful. “Our office was burgled and the computers were stolen. Then Mia was murdered. Suicide, overdose, prescription drug abuse… but I knew she had been murdered.”

“Then you ran. Why Paris?”

She spread her hands out wide, “Took a page out of your play-book, Mr. Holmes. I have bolt-holes everywhere. And… I saw you and John and that tall fellow, walking out of La Maison Rose, but you didn’t see me.”

“John didn’t see you,” Sherlock corrected her. “I did. Pink brolly.” He fixed a stern look upon her.

“Why did you contact me? Surely you don’t want me to avenge Mia’s murder?”
“No, don’t be ridiculous,” Irene sounded offended. “But you aren’t the only clever one in this room, are you? After having my business threatened, a big-mouthed girl murdered after nattering on about secret documents and a love affair with a secret agents… then you turn up in Paris... not exactly a coincidence, is it? Is Lucas here? In Paris?”

“He’s dead.”

Irene paled. Then she took a deep breath. “Go to the Père Lachaise Cemetery, tonight. No matter what else happens, you must not delay, you must go. Immediately,” She lowered her voice, “Before they move the merchandise.”

“Are you certain?”

She nodded then laughed, “Go on, you’re dying to go down and look at all those old tombs, those old bones and skulls. Bizet, Chopin, Molière… Jim Morrison.” She then quoted the rock star: “Death makes angels of us all and gives us wings where we had shoulders smooth as raven’s claws.”

“I’ve been dead twice now. Not as liberating as one would believe.”

“I never did ask. Did you like the flowers I sent you while you in hospital after The Shooting?”

“I don’t like roses.”

“No,” she looked wicked again. “No, you prefer violets.” She clasped his wrist. “That picture in the Daily Mail of her dolled up in that fantastic electric blue dress didn’t do her a bit of justice. You couldn’t see her face. I’m dying of curiosity. Do you have a picture of her on your mobile?”

“No.”

Irene continued to stare into Sherlock’s eyes. “My, my, what’s this? Your pupils are dilated, Mr. Holmes.” She stroked his wrist with her thumb. “And your pulse is racing. I think the last time you got this excited is when John Watson entered your life.” She laughed when Sherlock snatched his hand away from her. “And how does the good little army doctor feel about your betrothed?”

“He is just as excited about my fiancée as I was about his.”

“Ooh, there’s a loaded statement if I ever heard one,” Irene cupped Sherlock’s cheek then took his hand. Lacing her fingers through his, she said softly, “Although I was sorry to hear about his child. If I had known, if I would have had any inkling, I would hav-”

“I know,” he looked away, squeezed her fingers softly then let go.

As he stood up, she sighed, “Pity about dinner.”

“Next time,” Sherlock wound his scarf around his throat.

“I wasn’t talking about dinner, you idiot,” Irene ran her finger across her collarbone then down between her cleavage.

“Obviously,” he hefted on his coat. “I’m not as virginal as Jim Moriarty led you to believe.”

“Oh I know,” Irene’s smile was back to being seductive. “I’ll never forget Yemen.”

“Down girl,” Sherlock pulled his gloves on. “I’m an engaged man.”

“Je ne suis pas contre un ménage à trois. Miss Smith serait-elle intéressée?”
“Absolutely not,” Sherlock smirked, imagining even suggesting a threesome to Violet. “She’s obstinately heterosexual and does not like sharing.”

“Poor John then,” Irene stood up and buttoned up Sherlock’s coat for him. “He won’t be able to cope, you know. Losing you a third time.”

“He’s not… losing me.”

“Isn’t he?” She stood on her scarlet tip-toes to formally kiss him, cheek-to-cheek, “Until next time, Mr. Holmes.”

“Miss Adler,” he intoned, letting his mask slip just a bit as he looked at her fondly. Then he exited the suite without another word.

As soon as the door shut, Irene’s expression changed immediately from seductive to terrified.

The bathroom room slowly opened. An older woman, with a striking resemblance to the late Princess Diana and an identical appearance to Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope came out. She held a black jumper, designer jeans, plain white pants and an everyday beige bra in her left hand. In her right hand, she held a Smith & Wesson 9MM, pointing it at Irene’s heart.

“Good girl,” Julia Stoner told her as she threw the clothes on the bed.

“Now what?” Irene resisted the urge to cover herself with her hands. Strange, how she had flaunted her body for money all these years. But only now, with a loaded gun pointed to her chest, did she actually feel truly vulnerable.

“Now you get dressed,” Julia tilted her head towards the bed.

Irene, clinging to her dignity, stalked towards the bed, her eyes fixed on Julia’s. There was nothing come-hither about Irene now. Her sea glass eyes flashed with a belligerent light as she snatched the knickers off the duvet and yanked them on. As Irene pulled on her bra and hooked the clasp, Julia gave her a nasty smile, “So, you’re still a pressure point for the Great Detective. That’s good to know. That’s very good to know.”

“I did what you wanted,” Irene stood up, her cheeks reddening with fury. “Either kill me now or let me go…”

Sherlock I’m sorry… please, God, please let him have observed the clue I gave him…

“… once he’s dead, I’m no use to anyone. So,” she put her hand on her hips. “Get on with it.”

The smile Julia produced became even nastier. “Dead? Oh, we’re not killing anyone. At least, not tonight. Just thank whatever God you might still believe in that you’re more valuable to me alive than dead.” She pulled the hammer back with her thumb. “I need you alive, but that doesn’t mean I need you… unscathed. I know you’re into S&M, but you won’t like what I have in store for you if you make me wait. My whips and chains wouldn’t excite you, not one bit. So get moving… Woman.” Julia smirked and picked up the jumper again. “To him, you may be always be The Woman, but Miss Smith… well, she’s The Queen, isn’t she?” She risked a glance at the chess board “And the King’s job is to sacrifice himself to protect the Queen, right?” She threw the jumper at Irene. “And put that on. I’m tired of looking at your tits.”

As Irene pulled her black cashmere jumper over her head, Sherlock had taken the lift back downstairs, mulling their conversation over and over in his mind… something had been… off.
Oh, she had been Irene… no… she wasn’t… she was playing a role… she was… acting like The Woman, not Irene. I didn’t truly get to know Irene until the aftermath of saving her from those terrorists. And we didn’t become friends until I stayed with her in Italy during my Great Hiatus. Why was she acting like the coquette she was when we first met?

The reason she provided me for why she came to France is completely illogical, but I wrote that off as feminine capriciousness. For too long, to me the motives of women were so inscrutable. How can you build on such a quicksand? Their most trivial action may mean volumes or their most extraordinary conduct may depend upon a hairpin or a curling iron**! I thought maybe she came to Paris because she wanted a new Chanel dress…

Maybe Violet is right. Maybe I can be a bit misogynistic… he mused as he flipped his coat collar up and walked out the revolving door, into the chilly winter rain.

Oh… delete, He thought as the rain continued to come down, wetting his hair and coat once again. Focus and THINK. Why would Irene act like The Woman when it’s just her and me… OH.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

Because we weren’t alone. Oh God… I’m such a fool. Emotion is blinding me to the obvious.

“Irene,” he breathed as he whirled around on the pavement and raced back to the hotel. He bolted though the lobby, again earning befuddled looked from guests and staff. “Come on, come on, come on!” he hit the button of the lift until it came down even though he knew that hitting the button over and over did not make the lift move any faster. It just felt better than standing there doing nothing.

But, by the time the lift arrived and Sherlock returned to Irene’s floor, the door to her suite yawned wide open.

The chess board had been overturned.

Sherlock, crouched down, ran his fingers through his matted curls, trying to think… She was trying to tell me something, what? What is it? She left me a clue, I know she did, I know her…

His mobile vibrated.

He bolted up, dug it out of his coat pocket, read the succinct text from Mycroft. “This day keeps getting progressively darker and darker,” he muttered before pulled his right-hand glove off with his teeth. Then he texted John a brief message:

Meet me back at hotel now – SH

His stomach churned as he looked around the hotel room, then back at the scattered chess pieces. Then he bolted up after he counted the chess pieces scattered here and there.

There were exactly two pieces missing.

“Overwrought symbolism,” he muttered with a shake of his head, “Taking both queen pieces.”

Overwrought symbolism or not, he texted Violet:

Go to Mary’s. Now.
No arguments – SH

Then, with a swish of his coat, he left The Woman’s suite behind.
28 November 2015
John and Mary’s residence
8:50 PM, London time
Saturday night

When Violet received Sherlock’s text, this time she steadfastly refused to leave Mrs. Hudson behind. “England will not fall if you leave Baker Street, I assure you,” Violet had stood in Mrs. Hudson’s lounge, arms resolutely crossed until Mrs. Hudson finally bent to Violet’s will.

“But only for one night,” she had insisted.

Claiming a headache, Mrs. Hudson retired early to the Watsons’ tiny guest room upstairs. Mary had apologized over and over for its size, telling her to take John and Mary’s room. But Mrs. Hudson had declined, “Heavens no, I’m not going to chase you out of your own bed, especially now with you in the family way. Your guest room is lovely. Not cramped at all.”

That was a lie, it was little bigger than a broom cupboard. But the second bedroom was meant to be the nursery so the small, oddly shaped room became a guest room by default.

Sweetie and Gladstone, recognizing each other from the Animal Hospital in Falmouth after The Copper Beaches Massacre, curled up next to each other in front of Mary’s fireplace. The fire crackled merrily as if it were a proper fire instead of an electric one.

Violet stared at the two dogs not really seeing them. Her mind was miles away. Approximately 290 miles away, actually.

She jumped a little when Mary returned to the room with a bowl of crisps and a platter of sandwiches. “Sorry for the poor fare,” she apologized, setting the food down on the coffee table. “Wasn’t expecting guests.”

“Thank you, by the way,” Violet selected a crisp and nibbled at it. Her appetite was still poor, plus Mrs. Holmes had insisted on treating her to an early dinner after they spent most of the afternoon with Molly. When Sherlock’s text came through, it was all Violet could do was not to bolt from the table, leaving Mrs. Holmes to fend for herself.

Instead, she continued to ply Mrs. Holmes with more wine and continued asking her about “her boys.” In all honestly, if Sherlock hadn’t sent his cryptic text, Violet would have wound up at John and Mary’s terrace house anyhow.

Please God, let this work…

“I know this is a terrible inconvenience for you,” Violet continued with the “Miss Smith” voice, just in case Mrs. Hudson did decide to come back downstairs.

“Has he texted anything else?” Mary reached for a sandwich and took an enormous bite. “Sorry,” she said around a mouthful of bread, cheese, tomato and left-over roast beef. “Pregnant.”

Violet refused to look at Mary’s belly. She still thought it was a bit… convenient… for Mary to become pregnant again when her relationship with John had still been a bit unstable. Still… if my plan works, Mary won’t be our problem anymore… fuck, this is dangerous… if either Mary or Mycroft figure out what I’m up to…

Well…can’t be worse than Jack Woodley or Jim Moriarty. Dead is dead, no matter who deals the
final blow, right?

Plus I’d rather take the risk than be Mycroft’s bitch or Mary’s ally for the rest of my life.

She gave Mary an understanding smile. “It’s fine, don’t worry about it. And no, I haven’t heard anything recently from Sherlock or John.” She bit her lip as she was prone to do when worrying over something... only this time it was on purpose. “I met Sherlock’s mother today,” she whispered. “I’m getting closer to getting leverage on Mycroft.”

“Really?” Mary’s cornflower blue eyes lit up. “Violet, you are a bloody miracle worker. What did you find out?”

Violet fed Mary her carefully constructed lies, “Nothing yet, just building her trust. Creating a profile, so to speak as well as making sure she adores me. I can’t just be her daughter-in-law. I have to become her friend.”

Mary nodded in approval. She swallowed then said, “Smart. I would have done the same thing.”

What Violet wanted to say and what she should say were at complete odds with each other. However she never got to tell her second lie because her mobile vibrated.

“Is it the boys?” Mary’s cornflower eyes became huge with anxiety.

Violet shook her head. “Are you carrying?” she whispered as she held up her mobile.

The Caller ID was blocked. The message only said:

Backdoor

Mary’s face hardened as she reached behind her, pulling her Beretta from underneath her oatmeal jumper. Violet only then realized she was actually wearing John’s jumper. How cute.

“I thought,” Mary stood up, racking her gun. “That this part of my life was over.”

Violet reached into her massive handbag and pulled out her Glock, “I don’t think it ever ends,” she admitted honestly as she clicked the safety off. “Not for people like us.”

“Cover me,” Mary started walking towards the kitchen but Violet, despite herself, grabbed her shoulder, stopping her.

“You’re pregnant,” Violet reminded her. Even though she really did not fancy having Mary behind her with a loaded gun, she also knew John would never forgive her if she allowed harm to come to his unborn baby. “You cover me.”

Mary sniffed, “I would take anyone out before they’d have a chance to blink,” she informed her but allowed Violet to go ahead.

Quietly the two women crept through the lounge and towards the kitchen Violet looked over her shoulder at Mary. Mary nodded her head and Violet threw the back door open.

Then lowered her gun while exclaiming, “What the bloody hell?”

“Please,” said the man she knew as Officer Collins, Billy knew as Mitty and Mycroft as Agent John Mitton. He flipped the hood of his black jacket down so they could see him better. “Sherlock told me to come here,” he added, looking at Mary, or rather, her gun.
Mary still refused to lower her weapon. “Why?”

“Because,” Mitton’s deep brown eyes were full of desperation. “I’m in terrible danger.” He held his empty hands out in supplication as Mary continued to point her gun at him. “Please, I have nowhere else to go,” he added softly just as Violet’s mobile hummed.

Violet pulled her mobile out of her black skinny jeans. Reading the text from Sherlock, she ordered Mary, “Put the gun down, Mary. We have to help him.”

“Why?” Mary repeated herself, still not lowering her gun.

“Because,” Mitton held his hands up in the air, as if Mary was the cop and he was the criminal. “I’m being framed for murder.”

**

28 November 2015  
Abbesses: Paris Métro Station  
9:50 PM, Paris time  
Saturday night

“I don’t understand!” John puffed as he jogged to keep up with Sherlock and Dupin as they ran past a brick red sign that read “METROPOLITAN.” *Damn those two twats with their long legs.* “Your source, your mysterious source who you won’t bother to tell us who it is, told you that you needed to go to the *Père Lachaise*—” John utterly butchered the pronunciation of the name “-Cemetery.”

“Yes, yes, yes,” Sherlock called over his shoulder. “Hurry, John.”

Soon John found himself running into a shelter made from green wrought-iron and glass with another “METROPOLITAN.” Then down, down, down a spiral of stairs. The gorgeous, brightly colored murals did not register with John as he panted while running after Sherlock and Dupin.

Dupin beat them to the ticket counter and purchased passes for John and Sherlock. Forgetting himself, he called out “Hurry, hurry,” as he waved to Sherlock and John to follow him.

Sherlock snatched the pass out of Dupin’s hand and kept running. John paused to stutter out a “Ta,” but Dupin shook his head. “No time, go,” and gave John a bit of a shove to get him moving again.

Soon he was running ahead John again. Not that John was in terrible shape at all, but it irked him a great deal that he was being outpaced by two smokers.

John saw them duck inside a white and green carriage car and nearly had to jump to get inside before the doors slid shut. Fortunately the carriage was completely deserted. However its trademark rotting fish odor still lingered, despite the highly publicized *Métro* spring clean-up a few years back. John looked up just in time to see Sherlock’s face turn a delicate shade of greenish-white.

Not that John blamed him in the slightest. One of Sherlock’s closely guarded secrets was his hyperactive senses. However, John couldn’t see how Sherlock could happily spend all day around mutilated body parts and decomposing corpses, not to mention various fumes emanating from the St. Bart’s labs, but flowers, perfumes, strong soaps and particularly odorous foods could make him gag.

Then it hit John. *Of course! How stupid we are, we all are. Sherlock’s aversion to food just isn’t due to childhood trauma... the smell sets him off as well. In all the time I’ve known him, we’ve never had sushi and he always, ALWAYS threw a fit whenever I suggested ordering Indian take-away. I thought he was just being a brat...*
Still doesn't explain how he can spend the day examining a manky old rotting toe under a magnifying glass, and be happy about it too.

“So,” John tried to catch his breath as he rubbed a stitch in his side. The minute he and Dupin abandoned their dinner (John discovered he did like escargot after all) to return to the hotel per Sherlock’s command, they had been running ever since. “So it was John Mitton’s gun we found at the crime scene and MI-6 and the Secret Service think he murdered Lucas.”

“Yes, John,” Sherlock definitely sounded irate. “The serial numbers on the gun correlated to the serial numbers logged into MI-6’s network, as I already explained.”

That did not deter John one bit. “No, you didn’t explain it. All you said was the gun belonged to this Agent Mitton and he didn’t kill Lucas, remember?”

“Yes, fine, whatever, John. Now shut up. I’m thinking,” Sherlock pulled his mobile out his coat pocket without looking at his friend.

John ignored Sherlock’s demand. “Yeah, fine, lovely, all good. You’re thinking, terrific. But before you disappear into your mind palace, can you explain why your mysterious source said to go to the cemetery, but we’re going to the Catacombs instead?”

“No,” Sherlock did not sit but rather held onto a pole for support. His long, lanky body swayed as he browsed through his Smartphone while the Métro rattled along its rails.

John strove to ignore the acid in Sherlock’s voice. “Excuse you, but I would like to know why we’re going to the Catacombs when the tours are closed now.”

“We’re not going.” Dupin finally spoke up as he took out his own mobile and started texting. “On an official tour, Dr. Watson.”

John’s dark blue eyes flashed from one detective who dressed head-to-toe in black, standing and fiddling with his mobile looking all cool and mysterious… to the other detective… dressed head-to-toe in grey, sitting and fiddling with his mobile. Looking all cool and fucking mysterious.

Bloody detectives, John dug out his own mobile and started playing Solitaire instead.

Chapter End Notes

The actual misogynistic quote Sherlock makes in ACD canon is: "And yet the motives of women are so inscrutable. You remember the woman at Margate whom I suspected for the same reason. No powder on her nose - that proved to be the correct solution. How can you build on such quicksand? Their most trivial action may mean volumes, or their most extraordinary conduct may depend upon a hairpin or curling tongs."

Sherlock Holmes can be a real ass sometimes... :^)

“Right,” John licked his dry lips as he shone his torch around the station that had been abandoned since before World War II. Flickering florescent lights weakly lit up the underground platforms. “Well. This is terrifying...”

Meanwhile, back in London, Mary and Violet team up to to hide an innocent man and Violet learns more than she bargained for...

Happy Sunday :^)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Mary slowly drove past a very modern looking block of flats. The sleek, clean lines of the steel and glass buildings made it stick out like a sore thumb in this trendy, funky section of London.

“Are you sure this is it?” she asked Violet, sitting in the passenger seat. Violet wore a black hooded sweatshirt she had borrowed from Mary. The hood was pulled over her chestnut hair. She had been slumped down in the seat, away from prying eyes when Mary pulled out of the garage (that John finally cleared out so they could actually park the car inside). She only sat up properly when Mary merged onto the motorway.

Violet nodded in response to Mary’s question. “Go around the corner, the parking lot is right behind the building, away from prying eyes.”

Because that’s how Victor Trevor wanted it, she thought spitefully to herself, feeling an unfamiliar twinge of... what, exactly, she wasn’t sure. Not jealousy. Violet’s naturally practical nature coupled with her military-brat upbringing rarely allowed her to succumb to childish emotions such as envy or self-pity. But whenever she allowed herself to think about Victor Trevor, there was always an undercurrent of loathing, like a slimy, bottom-feeder fish skulking along the riverbeds of the Thames.

Because he hurt him, she finally realized as Mary turned into the car park behind the block of flats. That’s why you hate Trevor. Sherlock loved him and he screwed him over.

With that small epiphany recognized then properly tucked away to examine at length later (... my profile of Sherlock will never be complete...), she turned to Mary, “Don’t wait up for me. I’m going back to Baker Street after this. No, listen,” she snapped when Mary opened her mouth to protest. “I don’t care how many kills you have under your belt, you’re still pregnant and you’re still John Watson’s wife. You need to take care of yourself and that baby. There’s information, evidence
actually at 221B I need to move before Mycroft realizes I’ve slipped his leash again. I’ll be fine. I’ll come back to your place in the morning, before Mrs. H is up. Besides, there’s something I need you to do for me, for us, while I’m out.”

“What?”

“Sherlock texted an alias Julia Stoner was using. Sara Govmux. He wants me to start following the paper and electronic trail, but I can’t, not right now…”

“The glove box,” Mary pointed. “There’s a pen and little pad of paper. John keeps it in there in case he gets a flash of inspiration. Write the name down.”

Violet complied, after fumbling around the cluttered glove box. She printed the name as neatly as possible then tore the slip of paper out, handing it to Mary.

“Are you positive there’s no CCTV here?” Mary took the note from Violet as she cast a wary eye out the windscreen then the driver-side window.

“Positive,” Violet pulled her gloves back on. “That’s why Trevor made this pied-à-terre his hiding place so he could conduct his affairs in secret. Sherlock made this into one of his bolt-holes after Trevor crawled away with his tail tucked between his legs.”

“And how did Sherlock manage that?”

“Threatened to tell Trevor’s wife that he’s gay,” Violet shrugged, picking up the rucksack at her feet, also borrowed from Mary. “Apparently the woman has an airtight pre-nup.”

“That would do it then,” Mary nodded in approval. “Alright, go on. I need to get back, in case Mrs. Hudson awakes or something, not to mention taking care of the dogs. But do be careful. I’d hate to explain to Sherlock why you disappeared.”

Don’t worry about Sherlock, Violet thought darkly as she exited Mary’s battered car. Worry about Mycroft, I’m one of his precious creatures now… or so he thinks.

As Violet circled the car, Mary popped the boot open from the inside. Violet arrived at the back just as John Mitton slowly sat up.

“Mind your head,” Miss Smith cautioned him, holding the lid of the boot up so Mitton could climb out. “Wouldn’t do, if you got a concussion before getting you inside.”

She held her hand out to help him out. He paused, squeezing her hand ever so slightly.

“Thank you for believing me,” he murmured before clamoring out awkwardly, with a groan.

When Violet finally managed to get Mary to look at the text from Sherlock about Mitton being set up, she did lower her weapon and beckoned Mitton to come quickly inside. She wasted no time running up and down the stairs to fetch not only the hoodie and the rucksack but a warmer jumper and thick, woolly socks for Mitton. She threw the dry clothes at Mitton and told Violet to make him some coffee and sandwiches to take. Then swiftly and efficiently, she fetched a moldy-scented sleeping bag out of the crawlspace where a proper attic would have been. She nobly sacrificed one of her own pillows as well.

Mitton carried the rolled up sleeping bag and the pillow while Violet strapped the rucksack to her back. Mary hadn’t asked questions but Violet did as they darted through the dark car park. “How did you get into this predicament, exactly?”
Limping behind her, he explained, “Per Mycroft, I went to Paris to spy on Lucas. That bitch, that Madame… Fromage (or whatever the hell she called herself) jumped me. Tasered me. When I came to, my weapon was missing. Took me a bit, but I figured out where they were hiding. But when I got to the flophouse, I heard the gunshot. I knew I’d have no chance. I bolted.” He leaned against the doorjamb as Violet entered the door code.

As the door buzzed, Mitton continued his tale, although in a much lower voice now that they were inside. “I was already at Charles de Gaulle when Sherlock texted me, telling me to run. I bought a plane ticket, creating a false electronic trail for MI-6 to chase. Then I got the hell out there and went to the train station. Took the Chunnel back, paid cash.”

“You are very lucky,” Violet told him as she led him to the lifts. “Come on.”

They didn’t speak on the ride up to the third floor or during their hurried walk to Victor Trevor’s old pied-à-terre. Once inside, Violet did not turn on the lights, but pointed towards the generic beige sofa. “Sit,” Violet ordered as she locked the door behind her, the deadbolt, the chain-lock and the regular door lock. She dropped the rucksack to the floor and then crossed over to the window to shut the blinds. “Do as I say,” she said over her shoulder as she drew the black-out curtains. “You are about to drop on your feet.”

But Mitton waited until she finished drawing the blinds. Then he stumbled to the sofa and sank down. “Jesus,” he moaned, massaging his temples. “Didn’t realize how badly I was hurt until now. I ache everywhere. All my muscles are cramped up, like a bad Charley horse.”

“Well,” Miss Smith finally switched on a lamp then pulled off her gloves. “Massages will have to wait until you are cleared of this crime.”

“Oh, are you offering then?” he gave her a devilish smile.

To which she offered only a withering stare in return. “Until then,” she continued crisply, as if he hadn’t spoken. “Water and ibuprofen should do the trick, as well as a proper sleep.”

“You do realize,” he said in a velvet voice just as smooth as Sherlock’s, albeit a bit deeper. “That I know who you really are. You can drop the Miss Smith bit.”

She looked over her shoulder at him. “I don’t think that would be appropriate, do you?”

He shrugged and gave her another wicked smile. “Always sensible, aren’t you?”

“Mm,” she gave one of her non-answers, turning towards the corner of the studio flat designed for the kitchen.

“Do you really think Sherlock will get me out of this fix?” he called after her.

She didn’t respond immediately. Mitton felt his stomach swirling uneasily. But as she fetched a glass and filled it with tap water, she said, “Of course. I believe in Sherlock Holmes. Don’t you?”

“Oh, mm,” now Mitton was noncommittal. When Violet lowered the hood of her sweatshirt and took off her fake eyeglasses, giving him a spectacular frown of disapproval, he shrugged. “Loads of people in MI-6 lost faith in him after he started using again to bait Magnussen, then killing him of course. Mycroft had to pull lots of strings to get him out of that mess.”

Keeping her back to Mitton, Violet located a drawer filled with several types of medicines, prescription and over-the-counter. Memo to self, come back later and look for morphine, she sighed to herself.
She found the drugs she wanted. She shook two small blue tablets out then tucked the pill bottle into the hoodie’s pocket. “But,” she picked up the glass of water and brought both the water and tablets to Mitton. “MI-6 was planning on assassinating Magnussen anyway. So—”

“Why the fuss?” Mitton interrupted her as she sat down. He took the proffered glass from her with a genuinely appreciative, “Thanks,” and took a long drink. After wiping water from his lips with the back of his hand, he said, “Because it was supposed to be a covert mission, of course. Sherlock made a right dog’s dinner out of it. Cost a fortune.”

“Neither Mycroft nor MI-6 gives a fig about tax payer’s pounds,” She held out the tablets. “And apologies, it’s only paracetamol. Ibuprofen would have been better, but we’ll have to make do.”

“Ta,” Mitton reached for the tablets she held in her upturned palm.

Violet tried very hard to ignore the fact his fingertips lingered just a bit too long on her skin. But instead of drawing back her hand, she whispered, “What’s the real reason Sherlock’s in trouble?”

“Ah, ah, ah, pushy, pushy,” he teased, withdrawing his hand. “Your American shows when you want something,” he relaxed even more into the sofa, shoulders drooping a bit, legs splaying out in unconscious invitation. His smile softened into something genuine instead of predatory.

Violet’s profiler’s eyes saw and recorded everything. Fatigued, infatuated and lonely… Dangerous combinations. But be careful. He could be playing you too, she admonished herself.

What dark lives we all lead.

So she pushed, very, very delicately, for she did genuinely like the disenfranchised agent as well as completely empathizing with his predicament. She leaned forward, her head dipped down, then looked up at him, her hazel eyes wide and wondering. “No one will tell me the truth,” she lied in a breathy, desperate voice. “What really happened at Appledore?”

Come on Mitton… spill. Give me more… give me Mycroft.

She considered faking tears then decided against it. That would be too much.

“I just can’t believe Sherlock is a… a… murderer. It’s so out of character. I just…”

“But he is, I’m sorry,” and with that, Mitton proceeded to tell her what she already knew, what Mycroft had disclosed to her that night he ordered her to marry his little brother. She managed to make the correct gasps of surprise and shock at the appropriate places during Mitton’s story.

Then, recoiling into herself a bit, as if frightened, she tremulously asked, “What was supposed to happen to Magnussen, if he was such a threat to national security?”

Mitton finally threw down the pills he had been holding in his hand the entire time. “A horrible, fiery car accident,” he explained after swallowing. “To be followed by a factory recall of his particular vehicle, make, model and year, due to faulty brakes and engine problems. No one would have been the wiser.”


“Operation Raven,” Mitton corrected her with a yawn.

Gotcha… Violet Hunter thought behind Violet Smith’s face. “Quoth the raven…’’
“Nevermore,” he finished quietly.

“But why…?”

“Is Sherlock still in barney with MI-6?” Mitton answered her question before she even got it out.

(That was beginning to annoy her, but she held her tongue.) “It’s not MI-6. Hell, all the intelligence divisions were practically dancing in the aisles when they heard Magnussen bit it. It’s Mycroft. He wants Sherlock to believe he’s in the shit with the MI-6, that he owes him.”

_Gotcha again. And, fuck you again, Mycroft…_

Mitton rubbed his eyes. “Bugger. I am knackered.”

“You’re perfectly safe here,” Violet assured him, a bit bitterly.

It would have been nice to know about this place say, oh, about two, three nights ago when I freaked out after Sherlock and John found those pictures of me. “Although I’d recommend moving into the bedroom if you’re this exhausted.”

“Another offer, Miss Smith?” he lifted his eyebrows and gave her another grin.

“No,” Violet stood up. No need to play the minx anymore, not after getting all the information she needed. “Sherlock built a panic room back there. It’s snug, but it’s also impenetrable.”

“What if I need a pee?”

“There’s a jar in there for such a necessity,” Violet held her hand out. “It’s Sherlock, remember? He thought of everything. There’s a thermostat, a mini-refrigerator for cold drinks and snacks, a kettle for tea, a small selection of books and two television monitors. One for surveillance and the other to actually watch telly when you get bored,” she smiled and wagged her fingers at him, beckoning him to stand up. “Since this obviously is not your first dance, I need not tell you about the importance of staying out of sight?”

“No complaints from me. There’s a _Call the Midwife_ marathon on this week anyway.” He took her hand and let her held him stand up. But when he stood, he still held her hand. “Listen,” he clasped her hand with both of his now. Then started tracing her knuckles with his fingertips as he said, “I know you’re a realist and so am I. And yet,” he fixed his warm chocolate-brown eyes onto Violet’s feline irises. “When I first saw you, on Lestrade’s mobile, trying to defuse that bomb at the candy factory? I had asked you if you had a steady hand,” he squeezed her hand gently. “And then asked you if you had anything sharp to cut a wire with then you produced that great bloody serrated knife from your boot,” he chuckled. “Yeah, I think I fancied you from the start.”

“Collins,” she used the only name she had known for him. Until Sherlock had texted her, telling her who he really was and he was en route towards her and Mary, seeking sanctuary.

“No, just, listen, OK? Just… I know it can’t work, it won’t work,” he seemed to be trying to convince himself rather than Violet. “Not in this world. But,” he tilted his head, his dark eyes soft and guileless as a puppy dog. “If things were different, if I was an ordinary bloke and you were a real British girl, and I had asked you to go out with me for a pint or to see a film… would yo-”

“Don’t,” now Violet finally interrupted him. “Don’t even entertain that particular fantasy. It’s a dead end. We do live in this world and we must accept our lot as it is.”

She slipped her hand out of his. Her diamond ring twinkled in the faint lamp light.

“Always the sensible one,” he stifled a yawn. But as he followed her into the bedroom, he added,
“And always evasive, Miss Smith.”

“Evasive is what keeps us alive, Collins,” she opened to what appeared to be an American style closet. There were even suits hanging neatly. Violet shoved the suits aside, found the fake panel and slid it down, revealing a key pad. She pulled on her gloves again then entered the code. She skipped quickly out of the way as a hidden door slid open. “Go on,” she tilted her hang. “You’re dead on your feet as is.”

“M’name’s John,” Mitton yawned again, barely able to keep his eyes open at this point. He staggered towards the opening, barely remembering to duck in order to keep from banging his forehead. “This is cozy,” he muttered before flopping onto the camp bed tucked inside the narrow panic room. “Can’t… keep my… eyes… open…” he garbled as he rolled to his side.

“Have a sleep,” Violet advised him. “There’s a prepaid mobile underneath the bed.”

“Cheers,” he mumbled, drifting off now. Before Violet closed the door, he blurted out. “He doesn’t love you, you know. He’s not capable, sociopath and all that.”

“I know.”

“Then don’t entertain that fantasy either… ’cause Mycroft… thinks… you do…” Mitton finally drifted off.

Violet studied him for a moment, then keyed in the code so the hidden door would slide back into place. Then she rearranged the suits and closed the closet doors. She then took out the pill bottle out of her pocket and read the label again. “Thank you, cyclobenzaprine,” she smirked, giving the pill bottle a little shake before tucking it back into her pocket.

She wished she had time to do a mini “drugs bust.” Her gut told her Sherlock had morphine, possibly even cocaine tucked away in here, but she didn’t have time. Instead she went back into the tiny lounge, took the sandwiches, apples and bottles of fizzy drink out of the rucksack and into the refrigerator. She popped the rucksack into the cupboard under the sink. Then reached under the sink and found the prepaid mobile Sherlock had taped underneath there.

Twitching her hood back over her chestnut hair and putting her fake glasses back on, she switched the lamp off and darted out of the pied-à-terre after locking the door behind her.

She exited out the back of the building, slipping through the damp and dank alleyways of Camden, heart palpitating as she ran, her boots splashing in the rank puddles. Her hands felt icy and cold, despite her gloves.

It was easy, however, to slip out of the alley and back into the ebb and flow of Camden, mixing in with locals and tourists, enjoying a pub crawl or hitting up a dance club. Easy to duck her head, switch on the mobile, click on the hotmail app, to start composing an email to sally@WASPent.hotmail.com:

You helped me once before. Please, I beg you, help me again.
If not for me, then for Sherlock Holmes, his life is in peril.
You will be generously compensated for your time.

She hit Send, switched the mobile off then “accidentally” dropped it down the first sewer grate she saw. No one noticed.

Bowing her head, tucking her cold hands into the hoodie pockets, she walked on until she saw a black cab. Then she lifted her hand, hailing it to take her back to Baker Street.
28 November 2015
Croix-Rouge: Paris Métro Station
Saturday night
11:59 PM, Paris time

“Right,” John licked his dry lips as he shone his torch around the station that had been abandoned since before World War II. Flickering florescent lights weakly lit up the underground platforms. “Well. This is terrifying.”

“Aw, Dr. Watson,” young Honoré sounded amused at John’s complaint. “This is going to be an amazing entry for your blog. Where is your sense of adventure?”

“At home,” John sniped back. “With my wife,” he added pointedly, for Dupin’s benefit.

Dupin, however, remained silent. He had been silent since their train ride to this abandoned Métro station, at first to John’s relief but now it had become irritating. The only noise Dupin made was the sound of his shoes on the cement.

Sherlock had not commented on Dupin’s reticence. He had been, however, venting his spleen upon the young Canadian medical student ever since they all saw the blond boy waiting for them at the Croix-Rouge entrance.

“I’m a Cataphile,” he had explained proudly to John and Sherlock when they arrived.

“You’re an imbecile,” Sherlock had snapped, breezing right past the lad, who looked crestfallen as he put on his headlamp.

John wasn’t sure how the boy had pissed Sherlock off. But he felt certain it was more than Honoré’s face that put Sherlock off.

Now Sherlock snarled, “One more useless comment from you and I’ll be examining your tongue underneath my microscope, trying to determine what makes it wag endlessly so. The rest of you will not be included in my examination.”

“Better take him at his word, lad,” John informed Honoré. “He once dropped a CIA agent out of the window twenty-two times just for roughing up our landlady.”

“Twenty-three times, John.”

“Right, twenty-three.” Continuing to shine his light on the white bricked walls defaced with black, red and yellow graffiti, John jogged until he caught up with Sherlock. In a whisper so Honoré couldn’t overhear, John asked, “Will your mysterious source be joining us?”

“No.”

After the speech he had just given Honoré, Sherlock’s response felt quite snippy to John. So, feeling more than a bit put out, John demanded in a cool, clipped voice, “And why not?”

Because she’s either a prisoner or dead, Sherlock felt a lurch in his gut then sternly told himself to shake it off. She told me very specifically: No matter what else happens, you must not delay, you must go. Immediately, before they move the merchandise. John would think it is Not Good to abandon her. But it would be worse if I did not follow The Woman’s instructions. And follow her instructions I must. Julia thought the hard drive was more important than the Letter. Why would
pictures of Violet Hunter be more important than a Letter that could cause an international incident… think, Sherlock, think…

Instead of coherent thoughts… music flowed through his head instead…

Under the soles of his good Italian shoes, bits of rubbish crinkled and squished. Sweet wrappers. Cigarette butts. Sticky condoms.

*Ugh... and these are my favorite lace-ups too. Why must people copulate in the most disgusting as well as inappropriate places... ah, quit whinging and THINK...*

*Right. So. The merchandise is proof of Violet Hunter’s existence, obviously, that’s why Julia left The Letter as a red herring so MI-6 and Interpol would chase their tails around... but why would The Woman care about the merchandise? Why would she care if it fell into the wrong hands...*

“What Sherlock? I asked you a question.”

Sherlock ignored John. He took two long steps to get ahead of John then started to wander slowly down the eerily lit halls of the forsaken Métro station. Once separated from the others, Sherlock started humming *Bach’s Partita No. 1* under his breath.

A door in his Mind Palace opened. Sherlock peered in, seeing 221B... Violet sitting very poised on the sofa while John pointed a gun at her. In a calm voice, she described to John her transactions with Jim Moriarty...

*He acted like a gentlemen, no a Boy Scout... no. A goddamn choir boy... except, he kept tapping his fingers over and over on the table... I really do play the piano. That was true, the music is mine. I eventually recognized the keystrokes to Bach’s Partita No. 1. I just remembered thinking What the hell...? Watching him play the table like it was a keyboard had frightened me more than if he had pointed a loaded gun at my face...*

*Mycroft believes she possesses some sort of secret information I’m supposed to extract from her... he can’t possibly believe that she kno-“*

“What Sherlock!” John’s cry of surprise completely derailed Sherlock’s train of thought. “Come back, quickly. I think I found something.”

Sherlock whirled around, his Belstaff flapped behind him. He saw Dupin and Honoré running towards John. He was several paces behind them all, his torch-light still shining on the graffiti-covered CROIX-ROUGE sign.

“What is it?” Sherlock demanded when he returned to John’s side.

“Look,” John used his torch-light as a pointer. “Does this graffiti seem familiar to you?”

Sherlock’s eyes widened, “Intimately familiar.”

“Care to clue me in?” Dupin asked, speaking for the first time since they had boarded the Metro carriage back in Montmartre.

“Do you read my blogs at all?” John asked.

“Yes, of course.”

“Do you remember The Blind Banker case?”
“Ahhh…” Dupin took a step closer, looking at the squiggles that weren’t really squiggles. “Oui, oui, the ciphers.”

“These are the same ciphers, look,” John clumsily dug his mobile out of his jeans pocket. He scrolled through several albums, locating the one labeled “B.B.” After opening it, he selected a picture then held it up for Sherlock and Dupin to see. “Look, the tags. The ones up there are exactly the same as the ones I took pictures of that night, remember Sherlock?”

Meanwhile, Honoré had taken out a tattered, out-dated edition of *Forbes Travel Guide to Paris* out of his rucksack. He flipped through some of the pages, juggling his torch and the book. His eyes widened as he looked back and forth from the ciphers to the book. “Guys, I don’t think this is such a good idea after all,” he muttered. “It’s a warning. This part of the Catacombs, it’s been hijacked. Some gang’s taken it over. It happens sometimes. When crooks want to move drugs or other contraband through Paris, they go through the Catacombs, or the old limestone mines and other tunnels. The Catacombs are actually only a small portion of the Paris Underground.”

“What does it say which gang?” Sherlock’s voice was harsher than usual.

John frowned. Sherlock never had much patience with people but something was off. John made a mental note to ask him about it later.

“Uh… yeah, hang on… Red…” Honoré switched his headlamp on to get a better look at the ciphers. He pushed his big, black trendy spectacles back up his nose then looked down at his guidebook with his lips pressed together, then back up at the CROIX-ROUGE sign. “Hand…no, head.” His eyes flicked back down towards the book then back up. “League.”

“Merde,” Dupin breathed just as John grumbled, “Shit.”

Sherlock merely looked annoyed. “Were you two expecting someone else?” he sniped.

Honoré meanwhile turned to Dupin, shaking his shaggy blond head. “I don’t know what that means. I’ve never heard of that gang before.” When Dupin remained silent, he turned to John and Sherlock. His eyes widened as he watched John hand Sherlock his torch, then take his Army Browning out, switching the safety off. Again, the boy stuttered, “I don’t know what that means. What does Red Head League mean?”

“Red-Headed League,” Sherlock corrected him. “Means we found the right entrance.”

“Jack,” Dupin finally spoke out loud, although when he said the boy’s first name, he used the French pronunciation of *Jacques*. “Maybe you should stay behind.”

Honoré shook his head. “The catacombs are dangerous if you don’t know where you are going.” He tucked the travel guide back into his rucksack and took out his own torch, a powerful high-beam Mag-lite. “I’m going with, whether you like it or not.”

“I don’t like it,” Sherlock informed Honoré. “But that’s because I strongly dislike you. However, your knowledge regarding the Catacombs is required.”

“Um… thanks?”

“Not a compliment,” Sherlock grumbled. Then burst out, “Well, what are you waiting for, a written invitation? Where is the entrance to the Catacombs?”

“Uh,” Honoré shone his torch light straight down the yawning black train tunnel. He swallowed hard, “Straight ahead.”
“Very well,” Sherlock handed John back his torch. He fished out his own, albeit, smaller torch out of his coat pockets, then strolled towards the train tracks.

“WAIT!” Honoré yelled after Sherlock. “Come back,” he ordered as he stuck his arm into his rucksack again. “Your cell phones,” Honoré pulled out a gigantic plastic food storage bag. “Put them in here. My knapsack is supposed to be waterproof, but better safe than sorry.”

John’s brow furrowed, “Safe against, what, exactly?”

“Sometimes there’s water, floods, leaks, drips, broken water main. I learned the hard way when I tripped and my phone bounced into a puddle. Good thing I wasn’t by myself when it happened but my phone was toast.”

John and Dupin popped their mobiles into the proffered bag but Sherlock shook his head, taking his own mobile out. “I also learned the hard way,” he showed them all the black case protecting his precious iPhone. “After the last time I fell into the Thames, I purchased a waterproof case.” He clipped the mobile to his belt, then with a dramatic swish of his coat, headed back to the bleak train tunnel.

“Be careful jumping down,” Honoré shouted after Sherlock. “Druggies like to toss their used syringes onto the tracks. You really should be wearing boots for something like this.”

“These shoes are already ruined, no sense in ruining a perfectly good pair of boots as well,” Sherlock sniffed before jumping into the black abyss.

_Shoes that probably cost more than I make in two weeks_, John thought with a wry grin. He had changed into the hiking boots Mary had the foresight to pack, even though it made his luggage heavier. After hearing Honoré’s comment about syringes, he didn’t fancy the idea of stepping on a dirty needle. John walked up to the very edge of the platform but just as he reached the edge, Honoré called out “Dr. Watson, wait!”

John turned around and saw Honoré digging into his rucksack. “Ah, here we go,” he said, holding up a pair of military-looking goggles with a triumphant smile on his young face.

“Night-vision goggles?” John stared at them in utter disbelief. “Where and how did you get this?”

“Amazon,” he held them out to John. “Sometimes I wear these, sometimes just the headlamp, depends on what part of the Catacombs I’m in. Would you like to borrow them? That way you’re not carrying a gun and a flashlight.”

“Err, sure, in that case, thanks,” John switched off his torch and safetied his gun before sticking it in the waistband of his jeans. Then, after setting the torch down, he put the goggles on his head. He didn’t pull them all the way down over his eyes since the neglected station had enough light to see. He took his gun out and clicked the safety off again, then looked down the pitch-black train tunnel. “God…” he whispered then sat down with his legs dangling over the edge. He carefully set the gun and torch beside him then dropped to the tracks. The drop was not a drastic one. John snatched up his gun and torch and softly called after Sherlock. “Wait for the rest of us.”

Once Dupin and Honoré had joined them on the train tracks, John said, “Right. Jack, to my right. Dupin, Sherlock, stay behind me. Dupin,” he tossed his torch to the French detective. “That was a birthday present. I’d like it back.”

“Of course,” Dupin shone the light ahead of them. Sherlock did as well, although his torch didn’t provide the light nearly as much as John’s did.
"We’ve got your back," John now pulled the night-vision goggles properly over his eyes. What was once black turned into a ghostly-green. He held his gun with both hands, finger on the trigger. He was taking no chances. “It’s OK, son.” He nodded Honoré, who positively vibrated with nervousness. “We know what we’re doing. You know where you’re going. Lead on.”

“’K,” Honoré inhaled deeply then let go of a long, steady breath.

“Oh for God’s sake, get a move on!” Sherlock cried out.

“Oi, Sherlock!” John snapped, “Not Good!!”

“Right,” Sherlock snarled then amended himself, “Please get a move on.”

“Well,” John quipped to Honoré. “He did say please. That’s sort of a big deal.”

Honoré finally cracked a smile. “I’m ready. Let’s go,” he took a step forward.

For the first forty-five minutes, the journey was dark, cold and uneventful. When they got to the end of the train tracks, Honoré pointed at part of a wall that had caved in, creating an entrance, albeit a very narrow one, hidden in plain sight by debris and rubbish. Both Sherlock and Dupin had to slouch then shimmy through. Good thing none of us are very stout, John thought as he squeezed through, although he alone was the only one who didn’t have to duck.

The night vision goggles made everything appear in the tunnels appear in various shades of a shimmery green. Even though he could see better than the rest of the group, John felt the same as he did when he was six years old and his mother made Harry take him with her to a Halloween party at her school. The shabby gymnasium had been transformed into a darkened, haunted house, which really wasn’t a stretch. But what John vividly remembered was how dark it was and how the teachers had dressed up in stereotypical Halloween costumes, witches, trolls, vampires and the like. And all those sober, practical teachers would scare the pants off the children, jumping out at them from their hiding spots and shrieking at them.

John had been terrified and wanted to go home. Eleven-year-old Harry, however, had been cool as ice. “Oh. Hello Mr. Reynolds,” she had calmly said to a shaggy werewolf with fangs who had jumped out and growled at them both. Then she had explained to her shaking little brother, “Knew it was him ‘cause he always has the most dreadful B.O. Got to pay attention, Johnny.”

Well, I’m paying attention now, John thought, straining his eyes against the void, acutely aware of how the trigger felt against his finger. It felt natural, like it was a part of him, just as Sherlock’s violin was a part of him.

When John saw strange beams of light dancing ahead of them, he asked, “Am I imagining that?” as his voice echoing off the walls.

“Shh!” Honoré hissed at him. “We don’t know who else is down here. Could be that gang you’re talking about. Or the cops, they have a special task force that patrols the Catacombs. It’s a 60 euro fine if you get caught down here.”

As the dancing lights grew brighter, John pulled the night-vision goggles up as they were now unnecessary. As they drew closer, the lights got brighter still plus there was a loud, throbbing humming sound, like an ancient lawn mower.

Finally, they could all make out what caused the light and sound show.

“What the hell?” John quickly lowered his weapon, but he did not put the safety back on nor take his
finger off the trigger. *I've been unpleasantly surprised before…*

What it turned out to be, was a small dinner party thrown by aspiring artists. There was an enormous portable work-light, like one would find at a construction site, hooked up to a noisy generator. A young man with bushy black hair and even bushier black beard was setting up candles on a table made entirely of rocks. There was a picnic hamper beside him as well as two bottles of Chablis. But he wasn’t alone; he was accompanied by a young woman with thick black hair and huge olive-green eyes and another lad, so blond and so tan the word “California” immediately sprang to mind.

Both the girl and the blond boy wore paint-speckled jeans and t-shirts and boots. Everyone’s winter coats and scarves were in a pile next to a massive rucksack, like what a hiker would use. The girl and the blond boy were engrossed in painting a mural on the old limestone walls while black-haired boy set up supper. Despite the portable light, they all still wore headlamps around their heads. They also all wore fingerless gloves. Both boys wore proper hiking boots but the girl wore black military-style boots. All three of them looked to be in their very early twenties.

“Evenin’, fellas,” the young man with black hair and beard had a thick Liverpool accent. He gave John’s gun a bored look then asked, “What brings you down here?”

“The view,” Sherlock deadpanned.

“Right on,” the blond boy with a spot-on perfect “Surfer Dude” American accent.

John did not miss the irony of the Surfer Dude painting a mural of a gigantic wave.

But Dupin murmured as he shone his torchlight on the wall, “*The Great Wave off Kanagawa.* Beautiful replication.”

“It will be, once complete,” the dark-haired girl said with an accent John couldn’t identify. Something Middle-Eastern, of that fact he felt confident about. But which country he wasn’t sure. *Israel, perhaps…* he mused.

“Might not be such a great idea to be down here now,” Honoré warned the three students.

But Liverpool waved him off. “ERIC’s been through this bit already, mate. We’re boss.”


“Not who, what,” Honoré explained over the hum of the generator. “That’s the task force patrolling the catacombs and I’m not talking about cops. Didn’t you see the warning on the Croix station sign?”

The three artists shook their heads. “We came through…” Surfer Dude started to say then clammed up. “Another way in,” he ducked his head, not meeting the interlopers in the eye.

“This tunnel’s been claimed by some sort of gang, the Red-Headed League? They’re dangerous.” Honoré’s voice became tinged with desperation as Liverpool ignored him and proceeded to take grapes, some sort of fragrant creamy-white cheese and crusty baguettes out of the picnic hamper. “I’m not kidding. They’ll probably kill you if they find you down here.”

Surfer Dude shrugged laconically and resumed smearing a brilliant sapphire-blue paint onto the curved wall. But Dark-Haired Girl fixed her large olive-green eyes on John, or rather, John’s Army Browning. “You seem to be the one who is bad news, carrying a gun.”

“You don’t seem to be frightened,” John told her.
She shrugged. “Hard to be afraid of something you’ve seen used almost every day of your life.” She tilted her head to the left, “That way, straight ahead, until you see the ladder. Then down you go. Then take another left. You’ll ruin your fancy clothes,” she eyed Sherlock up and down. “You’ll have to wade through a partially flooded tunnel after that.”

John, recalling all the times Sherlock had to be fished out of the Thames plus all the other gruesome stains the Belstaff had acquired over the years, grumbled, “Coat’s been through worse than a bit of dirty water.”

She ignored John. “You’ll go through a tunnel of bones then you’ll see it.”

“I’m sorry?” John asked while thinking *Tunnel of Bones? Oh, right. Catacombs. Lovely.* “See what, exactly?”

“Stolen goods,” she narrowed her olive green eyes, her lips a hard line.

“There’s some guys, Brits, like you two,” Surfer Dude pointed at John and Sherlock with his paintbrush. “They knock off delivery trucks, hide the merchandise down here. Sell it for cheap online. Amazon, eBay, whatever,” he shrugged and resumed painting. “As long as we leave them alone, they leave us alone.”

“What do they steal?” Sherlock clasped his hands behind his back.

“Electronics,” Liverpool drawled, “Mostly computers and cameras. I’d swerve if I was you, mate. If you but you go nosing about, could be bad for all of us, like.”

Dupin dug into his coat pocket and produced a black wallet. Then he flipped it open to reveal a silver badge, “It’s our job to snoop.”

Dark-Hair Girl’s eyes widened, then she immediately started barking orders in French at the two male artists. Liverpool started to argue, also in French but Dark-Hair Girl screamed back something apparently horrible and terrifying. After she finished screaming, Liverpool blanched and started putting the food and drinks back into the picnic basket.

“Wise decision,” Dupin nodded his head approvingly. Surfer Dude scowled but continued to clean his brushes and put his painting supplies away.

Dark-Hair Girl locked her eyes onto Dupin. “I left home to avoid trouble. I have no wish to find any here. May I?” she swiveled her head to John and pointed at her coat.

“Um,” John felt like a colossal arse now. Still, every cell of his being tingled with distrust, so he did not take his finger off the trigger, “Go ahead.”

She marched past him, scooped up all the coats and threw the boys their coats then pulled her own on, a surprisingly prissy coat, pink with bows and ruffles. “Happy hunting, gentlemen,” she told him as she put on fluffy white earmuffs on.

“Can we trust her?” John demanded once the artistic cataphiles disappeared into the black tunnels behind them.

“Yes,” Sherlock and Dupin chorused then Sherlock added, “Obviously,” just to have the last word, as usual.

“Of course,” John muttered. “Alright, let’s get going.”
He knew what they should do is ring Mycroft and tell him that they thought The Letter, the Goddamned Bloody Almighty Letter was in the Catacombs. He also knew with Lucas’ death, with Mitton being blamed for his murder and with that bleeding mole still roaming the halls of MI-6, they couldn’t trust a task force to come actually retrieve The Fucking Letter like Mycroft promised they would.

What? Mycroft break his word? Shock and surprise, John thought grimly as the four of them made their way down the dark tunnels once more.

The four men resumed their previous formation, with John and Honoré leading with Sherlock and Dupin right on their heels. A not wholly-unpleasant smell filled John’s nose as they all crept further down the tunnel. An earthy, mushroomy scent, like a forgotten garden left to moulder. He shivered, the passageway becoming cooler and cooler during their progress. Gravel crunched under John’s boots as water dripped from an unknown source. He pulled down the goggles again, once again making his way through the shimmering green gloom of the tunnel.

Then Honoré quickly stopped and whispered, “Hold up,” as he pointed with his torch.

John had stopped a second before Honoré had spoken and instinctively reached for Sherlock to stop him, almost clothes-lining him. John had seen the yawning hole shortly ahead of him. If Honoré hadn’t called out, Sherlock and Dupin might have walked right into it without realizing it. After all, there is only so much one can observe in near-total darkness.

Dread pooling in his gut again, John asked. “Please tell me we don’t have to go down there?”

Honoré had been creeping closer and closer to the edge. He peered over, the beam of his headlamp cutting to the black abyss. “You don’t have to come down,” Honoré quipped, the confidence returned to his voice. “You can stay up here and keep watch.”

“Thank you, but no,” John said firmly. He had visions of Sherlock getting distracted by rows and rows of skulls and then getting lost. “We stay together.”

Self-assurance restored by familiarity, Honoré knelt down and stuck his arm into the void.

“Awesome, OK, it’s not a huge drop but take it slow. The ladder feels pretty secure, but still, I’ll go down first. I’ll hold the ladder for you all when I get to the bottom. After me, then Dupin comes down, then Mr. Holmes, then Dr. Watson. Go slow. It’s not a race.”

The wait was agonizing as Honoré swung his leg into the blackness and then the other. The remaining three circled the hole, shining their torch lights down to help Honoré see where he was going. Heart in his mouth, John watched the medical student’s blonde head disappear down the hole, the sound of his boots hitting the metal rung of the ladder echoing. After an eternity, they all heard Honoré announce, “Go ahead, Dupin.”

“I am too old for this,” Dupin handed John’s Mag-lite to Sherlock. He shucked off his long, leather jacket, laid it neatly next to the hole, then (with an aggrieved groan) got onto his belly and slide into the hole, fingers digging into the ground until his feet found the ladder rungs. Sherlock shone both torches downwards as Dupin crept down the ladder.

“I’m too intelligent for this,” Sherlock groused as he shed his Belstaff as well as his scarf. He tucked his mobile into his trouser pocket and called to Dupin and Honoré, “Catch!” as he dropped John’s Mag-lite down into the hole. Then he descended into the void.

And too soon, it was John’s turn. He didn’t make a witty comment or moan. He just looked at the ladder with loathing then reluctantly removed his own parka, scarf and jumper, sucking in a breath as
the chill of the Catacombs cut through the thin fabric of his button-up shirt. He took another deep
breath then forced himself to scurry down, the hell with going slow.

The night-vision goggles were definitely a blessing now as John slowly climbed down. But as he
carefully inched his way down, he realized the drop wasn’t that dramatic, actually, only six, seven
feet. Still, John would not have cared to fall even that short distance, especially when the ground
was comprised of gypsum and limestone. The sound of dripping water was louder down here, a
ceaseless *plink plink plink*....

Honoré knelt down and swung his rucksack off again. He rooted around until he found a packet of
colored chalk, like what children use on the pavement in the summertime. He drew a giant X with
chalk then handed it to Dupin. Upon seeing John’s befuddled face, he said in a very serious voice
that contradicted his carefree, youthful face: “People get lost down here. People have died. I take no
chances when I enter a tunnel I’m not familiar with. Not kidding around this time, we all stick
together.”

Dupin gave Sherlock a pointed look. Sherlock pretended to ignore him but by the mutinous look on
his thin face, John could easily imagine a six-year-old Sherlock sticking his tongue out at Dupin
when his back was turned. The very idea made him grin a little.

Dupin drew a continuous chalk line against the curving wall as they continued, turning left as the
Dark-Haired Girl advised them to do. But the tunnel was becoming brighter, not darker. “Lights
ahead,” John murmured. “Steady ones too… someone installed electricity down here?”

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed in John’s ear, his face a whitish-green blur to John. Light filling the tunnel
again, John lifted the goggles up again, turning to look at Sherlock. His eerie eyes appeared even
more surreal than usual. There was hardly any color in his irises at all, just a thin band of whitish-
blue, appearing almost inhuman.

“We’re getting closer,” Sherlock sounded as excited as a child on his first trip to Disneyland.

But then their next obstacle arrived, the partially flooded section of the tunnel.

“*Partially* flooded!” John cried out in dismay as he watched Honoré wade in. The brackish green
water already came up to the lad’s sternum and he wasn’t even halfway through the tunnel yet. “I’m
going to have to swim for it,” John moaned after seeing Honoré’s shoulders disappear under the
water.

“You’ll be fine, John.”

“I don’t know how to swim, you knob! And how’m supposed to keep my weapon dry?”

“I could take it.”

“No!” John said, a bit sharper than he intended. Too vividly, he remembered Sherlock digging into
his coat pocket, snatching up his gun, pointing it at Magnussen and…

“May I offer my services?” Dupin intervened politely. “I once was a field agent. I have had firearms
training.”

John hesitated, remembering Violet calling Dupin “bat-shit crazy.” His imagination went into
overdrive. Vividly, John imagined Dupin gunning them all down then painting the Catacomb walls
with their blood as their bodies decayed and their bones became the latest residences of the
underground necropolis.
“Sherlock, you take it,” he clicked the safety back on and handed it to him.

Dupin arched a graying eyebrow, shrugged then walked towards the water.

“Honestly, John, you need to work on your trust issues,” Sherlock sighed as he took two giant steps to catch up to Dupin and pressed the gun into the French detective’s hand. Then, as Dupin entered the murky water while issuing a litany of French curses, Sherlock whirled around and returned to John’s side.

“Trust issues?” John spat at him. “And whose fault is it exactly that I have trust issues.”

“Your father’s,” Sherlock said very matter-of-factly. When John glared daggers at him, he rolled his eyes and said, “You asked me whose fault it is exactly why you have trust issues. Now, come along John,” he stood next to him, his massive hand snaking underneath John’s armpit. “The game waits for no one.”

John would deny it to the end of time, but it steadied him, Sherlock’s hand under his arm, as they entered the water, step by cautious step. Not only was the water filthy with sediment and God only knew what else, but it was also freezing. John winced and bit back a torrent of swear words as he and Sherlock waded in deeper and deeper. Still John managed to pretend to still be annoyed with Sherlock to save face as they staggered through the miniature pond…

… until the water reached his own neck, of course.

“Jesus,” John stumbled, nearly going under. Dirty water lapped into his mouth and he gagged, his arms flailing. Panic started overriding his good sense.

Then he felt Sherlock’s arms around him, pulling him along. He found his footing again then rose to his tiptoes. He grasped Sherlock’s shoulder and spit out another mouthful of foul water.

“OK?” Sherlock asked, hoisting him up the best he could.

“OK,” John nodded frantically. “Let’s go.”

And not soon enough, he and Sherlock staggered out of that nasty pool of water.

Shivering, Honoré tried to grin, “Just think, we get to paddle through that again when we leave.”

“Can’t wait,” John’s teeth chattered as he held his shaking hand out for his gun.

“Shh,” Sherlock cocked his head, very much looking like a hunting dog who heard a fox nearby. Then in a low, near-whisper, instructed them all: “This way. John, you OK?”

“Yeah,” John un-safetied the Army Browning again. “I’m good.”

“Then take the lead. The night-vision goggles will be unnecessary.” Sherlock shucked off his suit jacket, his already skin-tight dress shirt clinging to his trim body now like cling-film.

John nodded and glided ahead of the others, back into solider-mode. But before long he found himself stooping lower and lower as the roof above them got lower and lower and the concave walls closer and closer. Soon, he moved in an inelegant, crouch-walk. He wondered when he would have to get on his hands and knees.

“Ouch! Damn.”

“Sherlock?”
“I’m fine, John,” came the irritated, slightly embarrassed voice.

“He bumped his head,” Dupin chuckled, “Didn’t duck in time.”

“I was thinking,” Sherlock snapped. “I’m fine. Keep going. This will probably be the only time your short stature will be an advantage.”

“Yeah, this is probably like a hobbit-hole for you or something!” Honoré said cheerfully.

“I really hate those fucking films,” John groused as the tunnel curved. He put his hands on the wall to steady himself. Then jerked it away with a sharp gasp, realizing he had just put his palm on someone’s skull. “Jesus Christ!”

“I know, isn’t it beautiful?” Sherlock moaned like a besotted schoolgirl.

“So beautiful,” John rubbed his dusty hand against his wet jeans and kept moving forward. He steadfastly tried to ignore the illuminated skulls grinning at him from all sides.

Soon they were all able to stand up straight to their full heights as the tunnel of bones widened into a great hall comprised of skulls, femurs and tibias arranged from ceiling to floor in various designs. Crosses. Circles. Hearts.


“Yes, Sherlock,” John said in the same patient tone of voice parents use when their child sees Disneyland for the first time. “It’s… err… stunning. But we should really keep going.” But when Sherlock continued to gaze at the walls as if they were made out of cute little fuzzy ducklings instead of bones, John added, “Look, I promise, we’ll come back here on a proper holiday and you can look at all the dead things to your heart’s content, but we need to go now. We’re so close to solving the case. The game stops for no one, remember?”

“Yes, of course,” Sherlock muttered, giving the skulls one more wistful glance before walking towards John. Then he stopped dead in his tracks, his black brows crinkled as his lips pressed together. His “I-think-I-saw-something-but-I’m-not-entirely-sure-but-I-won’t-admit-my-uncertainty” Look.

Then he did a sharp, about-face and marched back towards the skulls, specifically the skulls arranged in a heart.

“Sherlock, what in the hell are you doing, we have to go!” John bawled at him.

But Sherlock had his tiny magnifying glass out, examining the skulls.

“These skulls and bones are only twenty years old,” he exclaimed, straightening up. “You can tell by the discoloration. The rest of these bones,” he made a sweeping gesture with his arms. “Are well over hundreds of years old,” he tucked his magnifying glass into his trouser pocket and started removing bones and skulls.

“ARE YOU MAD?” John wanted to throw something at him. A rock or skull, it made no difference to John at this point.

“No,” Dupin rushed to Sherlock’s side to help. “He found a hidden entrance.”

“Wow,” Honoré’s eyes looked like they were about to fall out of their sockets.
“It gets less impressive as time goes on,” John muttered but he clicked the safety back on his gun and went to help Sherlock and Dupin.

Soon, among the three of them, Sherlock, Dupin and John created a heart-shaped opening in the wall of ancient bonds. “Torch,” Sherlock demanded. Dupin slapped John’s Mag-lite into Sherlock’s palm. He switched it on and pointed into the gloom. “Follow me,” he said and dived into the opening.

“Fuck,” John couldn’t help but curse as he followed Sherlock without delay or question.

He pulled the night-vision goggles down again and scoured the room. He saw shelves, proper metal shelves but no bones. Then he spied another portable work-light tucked away in the corner. As Dupin and Honoré entered the room, John guided Sherlock, “To your left, keep going, there’s a portable light, next to a generator. Ah, but it’s not connected to the generator, must be battery operated.”

“The generator is for the computers, John,” Sherlock’s voice echoed. “And close your eyes.”

“What computers?” John asked just as he closed his eyes. He heard a loud click. Assuming Sherlock had turned the light on; he pulled the goggles up and opened his eyes. “Oh my God,” he exclaimed as he stared at the stacks and stacks of laptops, desktops and digital cameras lining the shelves.

“Those computers,” Sherlock switched on another portable work light. Soon the room was as bright as day. Or rather, cavern, would be more accurate.

“Is The Letter here?” Dupin frowned, looking around at the shelving.

“I thought it was an actual letter-letter, not digital,” Honoré switched off his headlamp.

“The Letter is not here,” Sherlock started pacing, like a caged lion, up and down the shelves.

“Then why are we here?” Dupin asked.

John knew. The pictures! One of these computers and cameras had belonged to Kitty Riley.

“The Letter wasn’t the only bit of confidential information stolen from MI-6,” John strode over to Sherlock. “Tell me what to look for.”

Sherlock pressed his fingers to his temples, scouring his Mind Palace. “She believed she was exceptional but she was so painfully ordinary, which was why it was so easy for Jim Moriarty to manipulate her.” His fingers fiddled, as if he was rifling through pages of paper. In his head, he was flipping through the pages of Lestrade’s police report. “She had a 2013 Asus EeeBook X205TA, recently purchased on eBay from America,” he burst out. “And… and… uh…” His mind went blank… the camera, what brand was the camera?

He squeezed his eyes tight. Why can’t I remember the bloody camera? I remember everything…but I can’t remember what I can’t see. That’s right, I was interrupted. I was reading Lestrade’s report at the Met… and Molly came in. I saw her, but she didn’t see. So I left to avoid an awkward conversation. At that time, we hadn’t spoken since she told me about our… her child… but that’s irrelevant. Concentrate…

“You heard him,” John ordered Dupin and Honoré. “Asus. The RHL has probably realized we’re not coming to the above-ground cemetery now.” To Sherlock, he growled, “The camera, Sherlock, what kind of camera did that cow own?”

Sherlock ignored him, his mind reeling backwards, like a film going in reverse. Back seven months,
back to March, the Ides of March, to be exact…

… we were walking back from Tesco, Violet and I. We were bickering. She accused me of smelling like formaldehyde and cigarettes. I was cross because she was wearing one of my shirts. Then Miss Riley ambushed us, taking picture after picture… Violet tricked Kitty into believing she’d pose for a photograph… then she knocked the camera out of Kitty’s hands. It fell to the pavement. Then Violet kicked the camera into the street. I ran to retrieve the camera so I could destroy the memory card…

Sherlock moved his hands, as if he was really picking up and examining a broken camera.

“Look for a Sigma SD14,” he dropped his hands. “That’s what she had when she ambushed Violet and me at Baker Street, but Violet smashed it. People are slaves to habit and loyal to brands, I being no exception since I prefer iPhones.”

“And you also own a load of Apple stock,” John quipped.

“Only a hundred shares, not that impressive or relevant to this situation,” Sherlock turned away from John but continued to shout instructions. “The camera would look fairly new. She would have just recently purchased it before her untimely but not wholly unwelcome demise.”

John opened his mouth to make a comment about being appropriate then decided there wasn’t time. He started searching the shelves closest to him. Apple, HP, Dell, no, no and no…

“Yes!” Honoré whooped. “Asus! EeeBook X205TA!” He held it aloft for everyone to see.

“Open it,” Sherlock’s head popped up over a shelf. “Is there some sort of label or sticker identifying the owner?”

“Uh…” Honoré flipped the computer open. “‘If found, please return to Kitty Riley at…”’


“Yes, yes, yes, you’re not completely useless,” Sherlock sneered, ducking back down again. “Keep looking for the camera. We…” his voice trailed off. Faintly, he added, “Oh no.”

“Sherlock?” John stood on his tiptoes to look over at Sherlock. All he could see was Sherlock’s black curly head as he lay on his belly, apparently studying something underneath the shelves. “What’s the matter, Sherlock?”

“Nothing,” Sherlock sprang to his feet. “We just don’t have much time left.” Clock’s ticking…” And with that, Sherlock increased the speed of his search.

Five minutes later, Dupin intoned, “Sigma SD14, with a sticker on the base, ‘If found, please return to Kitty Riley.’” He flipped the bottom of the digital camera open. “Memory card still inside.” He snapped the bottom shut again.

“Honoré, do you have any more plastic bags?” Sherlock demanded. “One large enough for the computer?”

“Yeah, in my knapsack,” Honoré swung his backpack off and knelt down. “I’ll get it.”

As the young man rummaged through his bag, Sherlock slowly circled, looking around again. “‘Jim, can you please fix it for me?’” he sneered, mimicking himself from when he confronted Jim Moriarty at the pool all those years ago. “Genius, really. Help a gang steal and hide their stolen merchandise so they can hide their own stolen merchandise as well.”
As Honoré and Dupin put the computer and camera inside a plastic bag, John whispered to Sherlock, “How do we know if those pictures haven’t been shared or uploaded to the Internet already or...?”

“They haven’t been,” Sherlock said grimly. “That was the point. Julia Stoner was supposed to deliver the memory stick.”

“For only three-thou, American dollars,” John looked murderous. “Is that all Violet’s life’s worth?”

“Shh,” Sherlock gave Dupin and Honoré a sideways glance. “Since Julia murdered Eduardo Lucas, it’s obvious she was supposed to receive more than that paltry amount.” Sherlock unclipped his mobile from his belt, checking the time. “We need to leave, straight away. By now, the Red-Headed League must certainly be on their way here.”

Dupin put the wrapped up computer and camera inside the rucksack, then hoisted it onto Honoré’s back. He patted Honoré on the shoulder and pointed towards the entrance. “Let’s go.”

Honoré switched his headlamp back on as John asked, “Is there another way out of here?”

“Oh hell yeah there is,” Honoré called as he squeezed through the heart-shaped entrance. “We’ll have to go further down the City of Bones first, but there’s another way. I recognized the hall once we got out of that tunnel. Didn’t know that route existed. Kinda cool, actually. Can’t wait to blog about it.”

“No,” John called after Honoré. “Not cool, at all.”

“And NO BLOGGING,” Sherlock hollered as he made his way back to the portable work-lights.

John took his gun out again as Dupin squeezed through the opening. He nodded at Sherlock, who switched on the Mag-lite and turned off all lights. Then he felt a gentle push, “Go, John.”

John didn’t argue even though he disliked leaving Sherlock behind. But once back in the great vestibule of bones, Sherlock was soon right behind him. “Right,” Sherlock knelt down, picking up three of the femurs and one of the skulls he had dislodged when he discovered the hidden entrance. “Just need to put this to rights so no one knows...”

“Hush!” Dupin held up his hand, head cocked to the right.

John clamped his mouth tightly shut. Sherlock stood, mimicking Dupin. Honoré simply turned white, once again, looking like he was about to wet his pants.

Voices, indecipherable to be sure, but definitely two voices echoing from the direction Honoré wanted to take them.

John looked to Sherlock. Sherlock slowly crouched down and as quietly as possible, set the bones down. Just as slowly, he rose then pointed at Honoré. Then he made walking motions with his pointer and middle fingers then pointed emphatically towards the direction from where they had originally come.

Honoré apparently understood. He started backing slowly away but beckoned with his hands for John and Dupin to follow. John jerked his head sharply, indicating to Sherlock to go ahead of him. He walked backwards, occasionally glancing over his shoulder so he wouldn’t trip or run into anything. But then Sherlock clamped his massive hand over John’s shoulder. Guided by Sherlock, John continued his backwards march, keeping his gun pointed straight ahead.

Meanwhile, the voices got louder, more distinct, as they all could definitely tell now, the owners’ of
those voices were speaking English. The King’s English, to be precise:

“Oh bollocks.”

“Tellin’ ya. France is going to take it in the International Friendlies.”

“Traitor.”

“Not treason to know we’ve got a crap team this season.”

“Well if you really believe that, fancy a flutter on the game then?”

At the mouth of the narrow tunnel, the four interlopers had a quick, whispered conference.

“What do we do?” Honoré still looked dreadfully pale, even by the weak light provided in the City of Bones (John hadn’t determined where the light source was from and at this point, didn’t care).

“Could be just cataphiles,” Dupin didn’t look convinced.

“If they find this tunnel, we drew them a ruddy map to us,” John reminded them. “The chalk line, remember? The one Jack had Dupin draw so we wouldn’t get lost?”

“Oh, if only I knew Paris as well as I knew London,” Sherlock looked resigned but in control. “Honoré, is there any other way out? Think, quickly. Our very lives depend on your tiny mind and insufficient memory.”

Honoré gave Sherlock a sour look then licked his lips. After an agonizing minute, nodded. “Have to go through the tunnel and the flooded part again, but yeah… there’s another way. It’s a walk, but it’ll bring us to the Jules Joffrin station, then you can take the Métro back to Montmartre.”

“Go, quickly.” Sherlock gave Honoré a rough shove and Honoré dove back down the rabbit hole. Then Dupin squeezed himself down, muttering French curses under his breath. “John…”

“No, Sherlock, go. I’ve got this,” John kept his gun trained towards the sound of the voices. Only when Sherlock scuttled down the tunnel did John pull the night-vision goggles down and follow his best friend.

Crawling backwards through the tunnel was worse than creeping forward. John tried to pretend his arms and legs weren’t scraping across skulls and femurs.

Once out of the tunnel, however, Sherlock did not let up. “We must move, quickly.” He pushed Honoré towards the pool again. “While I was searching for the computer and camera, I made a different discovery.”

“This can’t be good,” John groaned as Sherlock continued to chivvy everything towards the pool. “What did you find?” A horrid thought flashed through his head. He felt the weight of a Semtex-loaded vest across his shoulders and chest again. “You found explosives.”

“Merde,” Dupin gave Honoré a stronger shove than Sherlock had a few moments ago.

“Bombs!” Honoré squeaked as he stood ankle-deep in water. “You led us into a room full of bombs? Are you fucking insane?” But when Sherlock opened his mouth to utter one of his biting diatribes, Honoré cut across him. “You don’t get it! These tunnels are fucking dangerous. And unstable, if someone blows that grotto up, the blast won’t be contained just in there. All of this could cave in!”

“Then stop talking and start moving,” Sherlock snapped back at him as John put the safety back on
his gun.

“Here, take it, go,” John handed the gun off to Dupin just as he heard a faint rumble and the ground beneath him vibrated. Dust and limestone granules fell from the ceiling.

“I don’t think those people were cataphiles,” Dupin grabbed Honoré by the scruff of his coat and hauled him across the water.

Sherlock grabbed John again, roughly this time. John ran the best he could through the water. Halfway through the pool though, there was another vibration and a loud cracking sound from above. Both John and Sherlock looked over their shoulders and saw the tunnel behind them collapsing, rocks and bricks and dust filling everything.

John tried to hurry but he lost his footing and went under. He clawed at the water while trying to kick at the same time. Then he felt something heavy and sharp land squarely on his shoulder, then something heavy and blunt land on his back. The pain was breath-taking. John opened his mouth to cry out and sucked in a lung-full of water instead. His very existence shrunk down to pain. His shoulder and back throbbed. His lungs, aching for oxygen, burned. He reached up again, his arm punching through the water, but everything around him kept shaking and John couldn’t get a firm foothold to push himself back up.

Then he felt strong fingers curling around his bared wrist and another hand grip him by his wounded shoulder. Sherlock… his overloaded brain informed him as he dimly felt his body being pulled out of the water.

But his pain-wrecked body reminded John how much trouble he was in still. After throwing up the filthy water he had inhaled, he blurted out, “My shoulder…”

“I see it,” Sherlock’s black hair was coated with a fine, sandy-colored dust. There was a pinkish-reddish scrape along his forehead, another bruise to add to his collection. “No time, we have to move. Can you walk?” he demanded even though he continued to drag John along.

John stumbled along with him. He blearily looked up and saw the fine, spider-web-like cracks in the ceiling. He made the mistake of swiveling his head around, seeing that the pool he had just been in was almost completely full of rocks. “I can, yeah,” he gasped even though his stomach cramped up again, as if he was going to be sick again. “Jack… Dup-”

“Ahead of us, you can see Dupin’s torchlight. Now, come on!”

John had the feeling if Sherlock could have picked him up and carried him, he would have. He made himself move his legs despite the pain radiating from where the rocks hit him. Broken? Sediment and dust continued to rain down on him as the ceiling above continued to crack.

When they reached the ladder, Sherlock asked in an uncharacteristically desperate voice, “Is there no other way? John’s hurt, he can’t climb.”

“Yes I can,” John disentangled himself from Sherlock. Gingerly he touched his shoulder. It hurt, a lot, but he didn’t feel any bones out of place. He did, however, feel a sticky fluid that could only be blood. Fuck.

“Can you?” Sherlock’s face stretched tight with tension as he examined John by torchlight.

“He can because he has to,” Dupin informed Sherlock as he hopped onto the ladder. “You’ve been in worse predicaments, Dr. Watson.” With that encouragement, he skipped up the shaking ladder as quickly as he could.
Sherlock stood at the ladder base, changed the angle of it then steadied it, “Right, then. Up you go.” There was a loud crash behind them as another part of the ceiling collapsed.

“Yeah,” John clung to the ladder for a moment, feeling it vibrate as the tunnels continued collapsing. Then he stepped up unto the second to the last rung as Sherlock assisted him the same way a kid would help an old man up a flight of stairs. “Thanks,” John grunted as he reached up with his uninjured arm. Clasping the ladder rung for dear life, he tried to raise his other arm but his hurt shoulder wouldn’t allow it.

There was another crash behind them as another part of the tunnel caved in. John, realizing if he didn’t move, Sherlock could be trapped or crushed, forced himself to take another step up, clinging to a lower rung with his bad arm while reaching up with his good arm. Then at a frustrating snail’s pace he repeated the process. If climbing down had been unnerving, climbing up was terrifying.

There was another crash then Sherlock said, as if requesting him to make tea or order take-away, “John, if it’s not terribly inconvenient, kindly hurry as much as humanly possible.”

“I told you to go first,” John rasped but just then, Dupin seized him by his outstretched hand. Honoré appeared next to Dupin. As Dupin hauled John up, Honoré seized John underneath his bad shoulder, making John cry out. “God, fuck.”

“Sorry, sorry,” but Honoré didn’t let go. He also reached around and grabbed John by his belt. Together, Dupin and Honoré hoisted John out of the hole. Agonizing seconds later, Sherlock scrambled up the ladder and leapt to his feet, ruffling his hair, shaking the dust out.

“Honoré, attend to Dr. Watson’s injuries,” Dupin circled the hole to retrieve his and Sherlock’s coats. “He’s still bleeding.”

But Honoré shook his head, “Not here, I’m not sure if this tunnel is stable since the one below collapsed. We have to keep going, sorry, Dr. Watson.”

“It’s fine, I want to get out of here,” John started shaking from head to toe.

He then felt a soft cloth placed on his shoulder. “Sherlock, your scarf, it’ll be ruined.”

“Mm, I have more,” Sherlock lifted John’s hand to his shoulder, making John put pressure on the jagged cut. “I receive a new scarf every year on my birthday from Mycroft, same color and everything. He’s so unimaginative. One year, he did attempt spontaneity.” Sherlock rolled his eyes, “Bought me a grey scarf instead.”

“I remember that scarf,” John mumbled, pressing his hand on the blue-and-purple scarf. It felt soft as a rabbit’s pelt. Cashmere… no, angora is rabbit, fuck, I don’t know, I’m so tired… “You were wearing it the first time I came to Baker Street.”

Sherlock then draped the Belstaff over John’s shoulders. “Can you walk?”
“Yeah but you’ll freeze,” John admonished him even as his fingers curled around the scratchy cloth of the woolen coat, pulling it tighter around him. He smelt formaldehyde, stale tobacco and that cologne he wore, the one that smelt like sandalwood, cinnamon and cedar wood.

“Oh please,” Sherlock scoffed even as he gave John the smallest, gentlest of pushes. “Do you foresee me dying from something as mundane as hypothermia? Boring way to expire.”

Behind them, Dupin smiled a little knowing smile all to himself as Honoré led them all out of the void and back up to the City of Lights.

Chapter End Notes

This is where I got the idea of the three cataphiles painting a picture of The Great Wave off Kanagawa in the Catacombs:


Have a wonderful week! Thanks again for reading/commenting/kudo’ing/recommending/bookmarking!
“Just remember,” Sherlock growled at John as they all plodded up the stairs up towards Dupin’s flat. “I tried to warn you and you ignored me...”

John and Sherlock unearth some of Dupin's secrets. Also John's curiosity gets the better of him and he's not prepared for the truth when he hears it. Meanwhile, back in London, Mrs. Hudson takes Violet to the doctor.

Thanks always for reading. Happy Sunday! :^)
“Please,” he lowered his voice, fixing his eyes on his own ruined boots. “I’m starving. I’m exhausted and I hurt everywhere. Our hotel is at least an hour from here. Dupin said he had clothes we could borrow plus we could use his shower… I’m done in. Please, Sherlock. Just… at least take the morning off? No deductions until noon, please.”

Sherlock dipped his head. “As you wish,” he muttered, jerking away from John’s touch, taking the stairs two at a time.

*What the hell was that?* John wondered then shook it off. Sherlock, after all, was still human. He probably was done in as well, but of course, wouldn’t admit it. But when overtired, Sherlock was as unreasonable as a toddler who *needed* a nap but didn’t *want* to take a nap.

*Or he’s afraid I’m going to take the piss out of him for that pretty pink jumper,* John grinned as he trudged up the stairs. *Which, of course, I’m absolutely going to… wonder if I can snap a picture before he notices?*

Feeling slightly better, John finally made his way up the stairs. “We waited for you,” Dupin put his key in the lock.

“Obviously,” Sherlock snarled but stopped talking after John gave him a look of death.

“*Thank you,*” John said clearly and loudly.

“You might want to wait on that,” Honoré said under his breath.

“What?” John whipped his head around then winced. The sudden movement revived the searing pain in his cut shoulder as well as the duller but no less awful pain in his back.

“Nothing,” Honoré said swiftly. “So, Dupin, how many first aid kits do you have now?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Dupin turned the door knob and pushed but the door only opened a crack. “I only have what I need.”

From inside, John could hear cats mewing. *Oh, I see now. Sherlock knows I hate cats and in his funny old way, was trying to be nice. Must have deduced Dupin’s a cat owner, saw cat hair on his trousers maybe…*

Meanwhile, Dupin continued to shove at the door, pushing at it with all his weight with his shoulder. Finally the door groaned open wide enough for Dupin to enter. “Ah, the newspapers fell over, blocked the door again,” he called from inside.

“Again?” John looked at his best friend, who had the most angelic expression on his long, pale face. *Oh bugger, why do I have a feeling I’m in for a lifetime of hearing I told you so?*

“Honoré, a hand please?” Dupin called for his assistant.

Honoré puffed out a breath. “I don’t get paid enough,” he muttered, slipping inside.

“Perhaps you should ask for a raise,” Sherlock recommended in a sugary voice.

“I want my toque back,” Honoré shouted at Sherlock.

“With pleasure,” Sherlock still sounded as sweet as honey.

Then the front door yawned open.
It should have been a spacious flat, with great big windows, letting in ample sunlight. There should have been plenty of room for a sofa, armchairs, a big-screen telly, plus an eight-person dining room table and maybe even a piano, or giant fish tank, even. The focal point of the room should have been the curving staircase, elegantly crafted with cleverly installed shelves and drawers for extra storage.

Instead, the flat was dark, dank and smelt faintly of cat pee.

But it was not so dark that John couldn’t see the tidily organized rubbish. Stacks and stacks of old newspapers. Precarious towers of old telephone books. Columns of neatly stacked cardboard boxes, all labeled with French words John couldn’t read.

John’s mouth dropped open a bit as he observed the precise rows of computer towers on top of what once must have been a beautiful dining room table. The dining room chairs all had wicker baskets in the seats, filled with what John could only assume was more clobber.

His eyes roved to the stack of post piled up on one of the armchairs. In one of the other armchairs was a tower of perfectly folded blankets. A mangy earless cat sat on top of the blanket tower. Two more calicos sat on the ratty love seat. One stood up and arched her back in a stretch. Only then did John see she had three legs.

Then three more cats appeared out of thin air to greet the two Britons. One of the cats was missing an eye. John felt both of his eyes start watering.

“Oh… my… God,” he couldn’t help himself.

“If you ever, ever, breathe a word of complaint about 221B …” Sherlock threatened him.

“I won’t even think of complaining.…” John said morosely, “Even if I find severed testicles in the fridge, I will never bitch about 221B again.”

“Why on earth would I have severed testicles in my refrigerator?”

“Are you joking? You had a severed head in the fridge once!”

“That was for a case.” Sherlock sniffed. “Besides, Violet won’t allow it, body parts in the flat.”

“Oh, so I ask for no body parts and get ignored. She asks and you comply.”

“She also threatened to beat me within an inch of my life.”

“I threatened the same thing!”

“Yes, but I know you wouldn’t actually go through with it! You only hit me when I ask you to or when I unexpectedly come back from the dead!”

John shook his head, trying not to giggle. “Go ahead, just say it already. You’re about to burst.”

“Told you so,” Sherlock preened.

“Come in, come in!” Dupin waved John and Sherlock inside, then stooped down to pick up two of the three cats comprising the Feline Welcoming Committee. “Ah, hello Lili. And hello to you too Bon-Bon.” Cooing to the cats in French, Dupin got out of John and Sherlock’s way so they could enter.

John felt certain the one-eyed cat gave him the stink-eye as he walked past.
Honoré meanwhile was opening up all the heavy drapery to let in the morning light. “How many cats do you have now, and don’t lie to me. The earless one is new.”

John felt certain now the earless cat was giving him the stink-eye. *I hate cats…*

He had been surprised to learn Sherlock was a dog person mostly because Sherlock’s own movements were so feline. How his heterochromic eyes would flick around lazily until he spied something of interest, locking in on it unblinkingly, waiting for the perfect opportunity to pounce. How he moved so gracefully, smoothly weaving in and out of and around obstacles, twisting his long, lean body into impossible positions. And, sadly yes, the way Sherlock toyed with his opponents the same as a cat tortures a mouse. Playing with his food.

In fact, even now, Sherlock positioned himself near the dining room table, standing perfectly still, except for his eyes. Even in his dirty, ridiculous costume, he still possessed a haughty, feline dignity while his eyes drank in the smallest, most minute details of what John only saw as a filthy, cluttered room.

“Dupin,” Honoré’s impatient voice cut into John’s wandering thoughts. “I’m waiting.”

“Only seven,” Dupin set Lili and Bon-bon on the sofa. Now inside, John could see that the sofa had been made up into a bed. Bon-bon made herself cozy on the pillow while Lili leapt off the sofa and promptly scurried underneath it.

“Really?” Honoré sounded not unlike Mary when she scolded Sherlock for fibbing.

“Eight,” Dupin sighed heavily as he flopped onto the sofa.

As Dupin leaned forward to unlace his boots, Honoré crossed his arms. “I’m warning you…”

“Fine, nine cats.”

“And…”

“And at least two are pregnant, but I plan on giving those kittens to the shelter. Once they are old enough, of course.” Dupin pulled off one boot, then his damp sock. Wiggling his toes, he said. “Anyone hungry?”

“No,” John and Sherlock said in unison. Sherlock because he was never hungry and John because he just didn’t trust that any of the food was safe for human consumption.

“Honoré, give our guests the grand tour. The guest room is mostly clean. I’m not the best housekeeper and my maid gave notice two weeks ago.”

“Can’t imagine why,” John glanced at the bulging black rubbish bags in the corner near the fireplace and tried very hard not to imagine what could be inside them.

“Me either,” Dupin said in complete sincerity. “Anyway, there’s a bathroom right across from the guest room. Honoré, take Dr. Watson upstairs. There’s a larger bathroom up there. He can take care of your shoulder there.”

“Um, maybe I should go to the hospital instead,” John quailed, imagining all sorts of germs and bacteria lurking in this flat. “Shut up, Sherlock,” he snapped when he heard Sherlock snort behind him.

“I do recall I suggested going back to our hotel instead of coming here,” Sherlock sounded
dangerously sweet again.

Honoré sidled up next to John, pretending to escort him towards the back of the flat. “It’s OK, the upstairs isn’t as bad as down here.”

“Not yet, anyway,” Sherlock interjected, removing Honoré’s hat and tossing it to him.

“Besides, I don’t think it’s a good idea to go to the hospital, since whoever it was that stole all that shit is probably looking for us, right?” Honoré added as he twisted his hat out of shape.

John supposed the lad was right. “I don’t think anything’s broken,” he gingerly moved his shoulder and grimaced. “Just hurts like a bitch, is all. I think the bleeding stopped though.”

“We’ll take a look,” Honoré promised but Sherlock had paused by a door.

“Is this the loo?” he rested his long, elegant fingers on the doorknob.

“Yeah, but wait—” Honoré started but Sherlock already opened the door. An avalanche of lavatory paper cascaded down the minute the door was opened, burying Sherlock up to his knees.

A gigantic fluffy grey cat ran out from underneath the dining room table and started chasing one of the bog rolls that had bounced away. The grey fluff-ball happily pounced on the tail of the roll.

Then John noticed the cat didn’t have a tail.

He then noticed Sherlock shooting him a very disgruntled look. I told you so…

“I didn’t get a chance to clean out that room,” Honoré blushed. “But the guest room’s clean…um, kinda.” He kicked a path for John and Sherlock to get through. “But there is a shower in there and I’m sure there’s extra towels somewhere…”

“In the oven,” Dupin announced loudly, as if it were a normal thing to keep towels in a cooker.

“He’s going to burn this place down,” John whispered to Honoré as he let them into the guest room. To John’s profound relief, nothing horrible jumped out at them. The bed was covered with heaps and heaps of blankets, but nothing else. There was a desk that was relatively clean. Right next to the desk, an old-fashioned wardrobe stood. Other than a stack of magazines piled up in the corner, it looked like an ordinary, rarely used guest room.

“OK, John, just... give me a minute and meet me upstairs so I can clean that cut out. I just need to clean out the downstairs bathroom and find some towels and clothes. So, um, yeah,” Honoré, obviously embarrassed that John and Sherlock had discovered his hero’s dirtiest secret, darted off as soon as he could.

Wincing, John eased Sherlock’s great coat off his shoulders. He didn’t dare take the scarf off his shoulder though. Once safely out of the Catacombs, Honoré had tied it into a neat compression bandage. “So, I’m guessing you had already deduced Dupin’s, ah, little problem.”

“Correct,” Sherlock toed off his shoes then removed the offensive pink sweatshirt as quickly as possible. He started unbuttoning his dress shirt, once a snowy white, now a dingy yellow.

John carefully draped the Belstaff over the surprisingly empty leather office chair, looking away from Sherlock as he undressed. John couldn’t stand seeing the scars on Sherlock’s torso. The mysterious knife wound that he had acquired during The Great Hiatus. And of course, the bullet hole, a gift from his wife…
It was surgery, John…

Bollocks, Sherlock…

“How could you tell?” John ran his hand over the prickly wool of the coat, “The hoarding?”

“His rings,” Sherlock rumbled as he peeled the damaged shirt from his body. Tentatively, he reached for one of the blankets on the bed and sniffed it. “noticed them the first day we met, when he got us out of prison. By observing how he had all those rings stacked on almost all his fingers, I deduced he was a hoarder. He doesn’t know how to let anything go.”

“I admit,” John felt torn, desperately longing to take off his sodden boots and soggy socks but not wanting his bare feet to touch the possibly germ-infested floor. “I don’t know much about the pathology of hoarding. This would be more of Violet’s area of expertise, not mine.”

He also kept his eyes fixed to the floor, now not wanting to see Sherlock’s horribly scarred back, those obscene puckered whip marks marring the skin that was once smooth and white, like an ancient statue housed at the Louvre… Winged Victory…

Whenever John saw those long scars, now faded into a tight, shiny peach-color, he always felt sick with shame.… Oh my God, your back. Jesus…

It’s nothing John…

Bollocks again, Sherlock.

Yet another lie told to protect John. Those wounds had been fresh, barely had stopped weeping when Sherlock arrived at that French restaurant nearly two years ago, to announce he was Not Dead. John responded by tackling him, throwing him to the ground and wrapping his hands around his skinny neck, prepared to send him back to the afterlife.

I asked for one more miracle…

I know…

“I wonder,” John cleared his throat as Sherlock wrapped the blanket around his scarred body. “When exactly this,” he waved his arm around. “All manifested.”

“The potential for this sort of disorder had always existed,” Sherlock moved the stack of blankets just enough so he had room to sit on the edge of the bed. “His parents probably accused him of being a packrat as a child and probably the desire to hoard would not have progressed beyond that point. The death of his partner triggered the need to hold on into a compulsion.”

John inhaled sharply, remembering his conversation with Dupin in his car after Sherlock had run to follow up on the lead he had mysteriously received via text. “He told me his partner at Interpol had died. He said she was his best friend.”

“Oh, but she was so much more than a best friend,” Sherlock drawled. “You saw Dupin’s many rings, probably even managed to notice they were all silver. Or, rather, appeared to be silver. The ring on Dupin’s left ring finger is white gold.” Sherlock paused for a beat, being dramatic as usual. “A white-gold man’s wedding ring. And next to it, crammed onto his pinkie, is a matching, yet a bit daintier white-gold ring.”

“A woman’s wedding band,” John suddenly felt the weight of his own wedding ring encircling his finger. “He kept the rings as some sort of a memento mori…”

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“A woman’s wedding band,” John suddenly felt the weight of his own wedding ring encircling his finger. “He kept the rings as some sort of a memento mori…”
“Mmm,” Sherlock stood up again and strode to the wardrobe. A pair of bright pink Espadrille heels tumbled out when Sherlock opened the door. As he pointed out all the brightly-colored dresses, scarves and shawls stuffed inside, still in their dry-cleaning bags, he murmured, “Everything in this flat is a memento mori, John.”

“He’s a very clean hoarder, or appears to be at any rate,” John noted as Sherlock carefully set the pink shoes back inside the wardrobe.

“That won’t last,” Sherlock crossed back over to the bed and sat again. “The death of his partner triggered the hoarding but being booted from Interpol aggravated it. This is a new location. He’s been here less than six months, judging by the dates on the magazines and newspapers,” Sherlock looked behind him at the blankets again then bent down remove his soaked socks. “He moved here because his previous address is now unlivable.”

“Do you think he was evicted from his old place?”

Sherlock shook his shaggy head. There was still limestone dust coating his black curls, making him look prematurely grey. This is what he will look like when he is old. Pray God he lives long enough to grow old and that I live long enough to see it happen… John thought.

Before Sherlock could explain his latest deduction, however, there was a knock on the door, “Could someone get the door please?” a muffled voice called from the other side. When John opened the door though, Honoré stood in the doorframe. His hair was damp from a very quick shower and he had changed into fresh jeans and a Vancouver Canucks sweatshirt. But he did not come inside. Instead he held out a stack of fluffy towels and a pair of pyjamas, still in its plastic packaging. “I think these will fit you, Mr. Holmes,” Honoré said. “And I’ve got the downstairs washroom cleaned out. The shower is ridiculously small, but the water’s hot and I found soap and shampoo so…”

“Take John upstairs and attend to his wound before it becomes septic,” Sherlock intoned magnanimously as he rose. Snatching the pyjamas and towels out of Honoré’s arms, he brushed past the young man, off towards the tiny shower.

“He means ‘thank you’,” John explained.

“Really? ‘Cause that sounded a lot like ‘Fuck you’ to me,” Honoré muttered.

Once upstairs, to John saw to his dismay that it was worse than the downstairs. The hallway, lined with stacks and stacks of shoeboxes, felt just as tight and cramped as the Catacomb tunnels had. The scent of cat piss was stronger upstairs than downstairs. “Is this sanitary?” John demanded before he could stop himself.

“The washroom is, I scoured it myself yesterday before we went to the Catacombs,” Honoré promised. “Just, uh, don’t look in the master bedroom. Or the kitchen, definitely don’t go into the kitchen. He had moved all the litter boxes in there.”

“Charming,” John felt his stomach flop over, remembering Dupin’s offer of food. And there were extra towels in the oven… Jesus… “Uh, not to be rude, but where did the towels come from?” John eyed the stack of fluffy towels as well as a dressing robe folded up on sitting on top the countertop.

“The linen closet,” Honoré promised. “I found a robe and some boxers too, still in the wrapping, never been worn,” he added hastily, seeing John’s face contort in disgust at the idea of wearing another man’s pants. “I’ll be back to look at your shoulder,” Honoré told him as the earless cat wandered into the bathroom. Scooping the cat up, he added, “Be grateful there still is water. They turned off the water and hydro at his old place.”
“Plus Sherlock will hog all the hot water if we let him,” John remembered. Suddenly the desire to be clean overwhelmed him. “Right, so, if you don’t mind…”

Honoré took the hint and departed. Only after moment of hesitation, John stripped then turned on the shower. He would have preferred a long soak in the bath, but still the steaming hot water was bliss. He didn’t even mind the stinging sensation all that much as the water streamed onto the gash into the shoulder. He felt it start bleeding again, but he didn’t stop it this time, letting the water clean the wound out.

After thoroughly shampooing his sandy-silvery hair then scrubbing himself down from head to toes, John finally stepped out of the shower, shivering a bit in the chill of the bathroom. He rubbed his face, longing for a shave. Sadly realizing a shave would have to wait, he dried himself off, then draped the towel around his waist (still a bit pudgier around the middle than he preferred, he had to admit, but all-in-all, not too bad for a man of forty-three.) Then he twisted himself around to try to see the damage the falling rock had done to his shoulder and back.

Awkwardly carrying a steaming mug of something, a pair of clean socks and a first aid kit, Honoré walked in during John’s contortions. “I left your sweater and coat in the guest room with Mr. Holm-” His voice trailed off then he whistled. “Damn. You have been through the wringer, haven’t you?”

To his irritation, John noticed Honoré’s eyes were not fixed on his cut on his shoulder or the bruise on his back. Or even the dog bite scars on his arm from last summer. But rather the medical student stared at the bloody gunshot scar, the pinkish-white wormy flesh wrought into an eternal starburst on the back of his shoulder, as if he had been branded by the devil himself.

“A bit, yes, I suppose so,” John muttered.

“Iraq?” the young man naively asked, staring unabashedly at the ruined flesh.

“Afghanistan,” John turned away from the mirror and sat on the toilet.

Blushing, Honoré muttered, “Sorry, occupational hazard. I forget myself. I see scars and the first thing that pops into my head is, ‘Nice stitch-work.’ I forget sometimes that… anyway,” Flustered Honoré held out the mug. “Mr. Holmes said you like Earl Grey. Little cream, but no sugar.”

“Oh. Thank you,” mollified, John took the mug. He took a tentative sip and happily discovered that the tea was milky, hot and good, warming him to his toes. Swallowing, he added, “And yeah, the surgeon was top notch, one of the best in the Army actually. It was the infection that nearly killed me, not the…but… errr, yeah.” Desperate to change the subject, the doctor asked the medical student: “Tell me more about Dupin, about all of… this.”

“I will, just give me a second…” Honoré flipped open the first aid kit and took out clean cotton wool and antiseptic. He pulled on latex gloves and inspected the cut just as thoroughly and professionally as a licensed physician. “Good news is while it’s long, it’s not deep. Stitches aren’t necessary, but,” he said as he reached for the cotton wool and antiseptic. “This is going to bite a little, sorry.”

“I’ve had worse.”

“I know, just… anyway, about Dupin…”

To his profound relief, John discovered Honoré possessed more than adequate first-aid skills and a decent bedside manner. *Lad might make it as a doctor yet…* John thought as Honoré started explaining how he got tangled up with Dupin while he attended to John’s cut shoulder.
“I don’t know how Mr. Holmes figured out I grew up in Quebec, but my parents are from Ontario. They had moved to Quebec for Dad’s job so we spoke English at home. I did my undergrad and pre-med at the University of Calgary. I then won a scholarship for med school at the Paris Descartes University and I thought, hey, why not? Give me a chance to see the world and brush up on my French, which had gone to shit after moving to Calgary. Well, the scholarship was just for tuition and books. I have to pay for room and board out of my own pocket. Mom and Dad help where they can but… anyway, I saw an ad for a “companion”, someone to act as a personal assistant plus to do minor chores around the house. I met Dupin and his older sister at a café. Dupin explained he was a private investigator, formerly of Interpol. I thought his sister was being bitchy, oh, excuse me…”

“’S’allright,” John winced as Honoré swiped at the cut one more time with antiseptic. The pungent scent of alcohol stung John’s nose. “Go on.”

“But now I know she was pissed off because Dupin was glossing over just how bad his house was. Dupin made it sound like he just needed someone to run errands and do chores, grocery-shopping, throw in a load of laundry, while he’s working. I had no idea…his old house, I can’t even… I don’t know how to explain just how bad it was. Toward the end, right before his family ganged up on him, you couldn’t even make a path to the back bedroom. And if you think the cats are bad in here…” Honoré trailed off, then shook himself and resumed dabbing at the cut. “He rescues them, you see… at the end there were at least hundred cats, according to Société Protectrice des Animaux. His sister had called them to get the cats out of the house while they tried to repair the damage Dupin had done. His house had belonged to their parents, you see.”

“Oh,” John nodded, remembering how Sherlock said Dupin hadn’t been evicted. Then he remembered how his own sister had lost their childhood home. Focus John…

“When we moved him in here, he had been good, for the first month or so. But slowly, he started slipping back into his old habits. We’d try to stop him and he’d get back on track. Then, out of the blue, he stopped taking his anti-anxiety meds. Then he fired his therapist and everything went to shit,” Honoré smeared an antibiotic cream over the cut, pleasantly cool on John’s skin. “And I mean literally, to shit. That’s what made the maid quit. Between emptying the litter boxes and cleaning up after the cats who didn’t use the boxes then arguing with Dupin daily about what’s garbage and what’s not, she’d had enough. So, it’s just been me trying to keep the place livable.”

“What about your education?” John asked as Honoré pressed a long rectangle of clean cotton wool over the cut. Recalling the rigors of his own medical training, he asked, “How on earth are you keeping up on your studies while babysitting him?”

Honoré hesitated. “I’m not,” he admitted. “I’m not failing, yet but… I didn’t do as well as I would have liked on my last exam and… but you see,” he added in a rush, “That’s why I thought I’d switch to blogging, like you do, with Mr. Holmes. Dupin’s brilliant, just as brilliant as Mr. Holmes. I don’t want to be a millionaire.”

“I’m hardly a millionaire.”

“Right, I mean, not trying to count your money,” Honoré floundered again. “But, I can’t keep up with him. I clear out one room, he clutters up two more. I get rid of two cats, he brings home four more. And…” he lowered his voice. “The money is running out. His parents were wealthy and had left a fortune to Dupin and his sister, as well as their house. But his hoarding is bleeding the inheritance dry. And he doesn’t work, you know. Now and then Interpol throws him a bone, but they won’t officially let him back in.”

“Why not?”
“He keeps failing the psych evals.”

“Really,” John heard Violet’s voice in his head again… what we in the psychology field classify as ‘bat-shit-crazy’. “How does he make a living?”

“He does get royalties from the books he wrote, but it’s not enough to keep up with cost of living in Paris. His sister is using her inheritance to fix the house and then she’s going to sell it. Soon she won’t be able to pay me anymore. God I feel like such an asshole for saying this because I do look up to Dupin. He’s a freaking genius but, I can’t work for free either.”

“Nothing wrong with that,” John assured him. “But what started all of this? Was he always…?”

“No,” Honoré looked over his shoulder, as if worried Dupin would burst through the bathroom door. “When his partner, Marie Rogêt, was murdered, that’s when he lost his shit.”

“Murdered?” John’s ears pricked up, remembering Sherlock’s comments about Dupin’s rings.

“Yeah. Found floating face-down in the Seine,” Honoré continued to tape the bandage to John’s shoulder. “But the autopsy showed she died from strangulation, not drowning.”

“How dreadful,” John murmured then as innocently as possible, asked “But they had to be more than just work partners if Dupin, err, lost his shit over her death.”

“Work partner, life partner, same difference.” Honoré stretched his back and John (mindful of the towel around his waist) slowly swiveled around to face him. “I don’t know the whole story, Dr. Watson. He gets very upset when he talks about it, belligerent, even. Then he goes on a three-day drunk. From what I’ve managed to piece together during on his rants, he believes there was this gigantic conspiracy to cover up her death. His sister has told me point-blank that Marie was loaned out to a different agency for a routine surveillance job and it went to hell in a hand-basket. Dupin never recovered from the loss.”

“I can understand how difficult that would be for him,” John looked at the dregs inside the mug.

“Yeah, I think you really do,” Honoré said softly. John jerked his head up, glaring at young man. But he held his hands up, as if John pointed his gun at him. “Look, please don’t take this wrong. I don’t mean this in a gay way, but, you see, Marie just wasn’t his work colleague or his live-in girlfriend. She was his best friend. Marie and Dupin made sense together, like you and Mr. Holmes do. One wasn’t complete without the other.” Honoré rubbed his forehead then scrubbed his entire face. “OK, that sounded totally gay. I’m sorry, it’s just…”

“You’re tired,” John spared him. “You’re short on sleep as is as a med student. Don’t worry about it. It’s fine. It’s all fine. Go home and sleep. After how you helped us in the Catacombs and me and my injuries, you’ve earned it.”

But Honoré stubbornly refused to go home until he inspected the livid bruise on John’s back to make sure it was just a bruise and not a sign of internal injuries. Once he was satisfied it was just a wicked bruise, he said, “OK Dr. Watson, I think you know the drill in this case.”

“RICE,” John slowly rose, last night’s events catching up to him. “Yeah… does Dupin have ice? Or is he keeping kitty kibble in the freezer?”

“Mr. Holmes said he’d make an ice-pack for you since he believes it was obvious it’s just a bruise,” Honoré mimicked Sherlock’s ruthlessly.

John couldn’t help but chuckle. “That’s a spot-on impersonation.”
Honoré smiled then yawned. “Sorry. Alright, I’m going. I’ll be back tonight wi-”

“No,” John said quietly. “Jack, this isn’t your responsibility. You need to attend to your studies.”

“But if I don’t com-”

“He’s a sick man, lad,” John clutched his towel. It was hard being authoritative while being nearly naked. “He needs help.”

“I am helping hi-”

Kindly, John cut him off, “Help from a qualified psychiatrist. You’re doing a marvelous job but he needs a properly trained and licensed doctor. And you need to study.”

Honoré gulped and looked like he was about to cry. But he nodded. “I just feel guilty for leaving and feel guilty for staying because I need the money.”

“Email me,” John said firmly. “It’s on the blog. We’re getting paid for this ridiculous caper, so should you. I’ll get an invoice and see our customer compensates you for your services.”

“My services?”

“Yes, of course. Consultation on the Catacombs and patching me up,” John found himself warming up to the boy. But he kept his voice stern, “Provided that this all remains confidential, of course. I’m not even allowed to blog about this case.”

“Oh,” Honoré went a trifle pale. “Yeah, no, I won’t blog about this.” Shyly he added, “Thanks.”

“You’re very welcome. Now, I’d like to get dressed, so…?”

“Oh, right. OK. Well, not sure when I’ll see you next, but,” Honoré stuck his hand out. “It was very nice meeting you.”

“Um,” John managed to shake the young man’s hand without dropping the towel. “Right, you too. Now, go. Sleep. Eat something. Do your homework, in that precise order.”

Honoré nodded and finally left John in peace.

The boxers were meant for a larger man and so were the dressing gown and socks but at least John didn’t have to go around unclothed and barefooted in the grimy, cluttered flat. His shoulders brushing the shoeboxes lining the hallway, John slowly turned his body so he could walk sideways through the hallway without touching anything.

The fluffy tail-less grey cat chose to try to wind its way around John’s legs as he walked down the stairs. “Scat,” he shooed the cat away from him. “Go on now.”

The cat hissed at him and ran off. “Same to you, mate,” John muttered as he craned his neck to take a look at Dupin, stretched out on the sofa. He had drawn the drapes again while John and Honoré had been upstairs. His shoes were off as well as his hat. Bon-bon, Lili and the calicos were curled up on his belly as his encircled them in his arms. He snored slightly.

John made a mental note to see if any of his medical colleagues could recommend a French psychiatrist who specialized in hoarding disorders. He had a feeling saving all those deformed strays had something to do with it as well. Couldn’t save Marie, so now he saves cats? Maybe Marie liked cats? Who knows, I know how to operate on people, not shrink their heads.
Stepping over the earless cat and the one-eyed cat, John made his way back to the guest room. He realized he would have to put his soiled clothes back on when they left for their hotel, but at the moment, he didn’t care.

The door was slightly open, so he used his hip to budge it open a bit more. “So, you were right about Dupin,” John started talking the minute he walked into the room. Shutting the door with his foot, he said, “Her name was Marie. Marie Row… Rue… Rah… I don’t know. Can’t pronounce it correctly. Ruh-gay? I think? Dunno, anyway,” he dropped his wet and dirty clothes next to the pile of Sherlock’s wet and dirty clothes. “Honoré told me,” he turned to face Sherlock and fell silent. Then he smiled ruefully and shook his head.

Sherlock was dead asleep.

“At least you showered before nodding off,” John turned on the small lamp on the desk. “And thanks for putting bottoms on, by the way.” He glanced at Sherlock’s torso, lean, lined with muscle and marred by not just the two scars but also a very odd rectangular bruise, right above the waistband of the pyjamas bottoms. John then realized that was where the seatbelt had dug into his gut when their jet had been nearly shot down into the English Channel. “You could have put the top on though,” he added lightly, as if Sherlock were wide awake. He had known Sherlock long enough now to realize that when Sherlock crashed like this, an atomic bomb explosion wouldn’t wake him.

Judging by the mountain of blankets on the floor and the way he lay on the bed (flat on back, fingers splayed out over chest, head listing to the side), Sherlock had moved the blankets to the floor then laid down into his favorite Thinking Position, stretched out on his back with his fingers steepled, eyes closed.

And then the transport overrode the brain and everything shut down.

Next to Sherlock’s head was Kitty Riley’s digital camera and laptop.

Now we just need to find the rutting Letter and we can go home, John picked up on the blankets and tossed it over Sherlock’s limp frame then switched off the main light. In the dim glow of the small desk lamp, John noticed on the desk a plastic bowl filled with melting ice, a plastic shopping bag and a tea-towel that smelt faintly of mothballs. “Better mothballs than cat piss,” John told himself as he sat down. After shoving handfuls of ice into the bag, he then wrapped the bag in the tea-towel. Then he gingerly pressed the ice-pack against his bruised back. He sucked in a breath then sighed in relief. He then spied the small white pill bottle and fumbled with the lid. Dry-swallowed four tablets and then reached for his notepad, which lay next to his wallet, his passport, his gun, his gun permit from MI-6, his mobile and Sherlock’s mobile.

He flipped open his casebook, frowning because some of his notes had been ruined by the water in the Catacombs. But, after thumbing through a few pages, he was absurdly pleased that his haiku was mostly intact.

Realizing he had caught a second wind, John decided to play around more with his poem, until his mind caught up with his body and he could have a little sleep as well.

He looked at the bed then at the floor that probably hadn’t been Hoovered since Jacques Chirac was prime minister of France. Then he seriously considered the love-seat out in the lounge. Then he remembered the herd of cats occupying it.

Then he sighed.

“Grow up John,” he told himself as he turned back to his poem, wincing as he did so. “You two
have had to share a bed before for cases. And you nearly passed out on the stairs at 221B during your stag party next to him as well. Stop being a child.”

Shamefully, he knew he’d still be more comfortable with his own bed.

Pressing the ice-pack against his bruised back the best he could, he opened the desk drawer and found stacks and stacks and stacks of little notepads, similar to the pad he kept in his little leather casebook.

Pulling out the water-damaged pad, he replaced it with a fresh one. *Thanks Dupin*, John thought as he opened the next drawer and found it completely full of blue ballpoint pens. “God…” John breathed as he selected one.

*Maybe Ella could recommend someone for Dupin,* he thought of his old therapist. *Since she specializes with emotional trauma, maybe she might know someone.*

John copied what he had from the old notepad to the new. Then he studied it, reading it out loud but in a whisper, “Always running away from a dyslexic heart.” He scratched the back of his head, muttering, “No, that’s not quite right but… hmm. I’ll fuss with that later. The first line, what on earth should the first line…”

Almost not of his own volition, he wrote: The game is on.

Then he counted the syllables. “Four, drat,” he chewed on the biro, pondering. Then he scratched out “on” and wrote “afoot” instead.

He whispered the poem again then muttered, “Not quite…”

He studied the notepad again then muttered, “Not quite…”

He crossed out another word and read the haiku again:

The game is afoot.
Always running away from
His dyslexic heart.

“There,” John felt quite pleased with himself, “Perfect. Maybe I should try iambic pentameter next. Don’t think I’ve ever composed a sonnet before.”

“John.”

“Yeah,” John didn’t turn around, just ripped the paper from his notepad.

“John? Where are you?”

“Right here, Sherlock,” John put his completed poem inside his wallet. “And you are capable of getting your mobile yourself.”

“John!”

The panicky tone of Sherlock’s voice finally made John turn around. “What is it, *oh!*”

Still asleep, Sherlock no longer lay on his back, but curled up in the fetal position. A light perspiration coated his face as he clutched at the duvet. “*John, please*…”

“Shit,” John ignored the gnawing backache as well as the protesting twinge in his shoulder as he nearly leapt from his chair and rushed to Sherlock’s bedside. He moved the camera and computer
quickly to the desk, in case Sherlock started thrashing about. Then, as quickly as his aching back and shoulder allowed, he returned to Sherlock’s side. Sitting on the bed next to him, he said “Hey, Sherlock, wake up, it’s just a rotten old dream, wake up now, OK?”

John had been clueless about the mark the Great Hiatus had left on Sherlock until he had lived with him again during his separation from Mary. He hadn’t fully realized how much his best friend had suffered, body and mind. Possibly the soul as well, but then Sherlock would argue until his dying breath the lack of proof regarding the existence of souls.

Sherlock’s soul was as indecipherable as his heart. But he could not hide what his body had endured after Mary shot him. John finally saw the livid stripes across Sherlock’s back the first time he helped Sherlock change for bed when he finally was officially discharged from hospital.

Later that night, Sherlock revealed to John how badly his mind had suffered when his nightmares woke John up out of a dead sleep. The following morning Sherlock had blithely lied straight to John’s face about suffering night terrors. John had finally confronted him about the bad dreams last March, shortly before they all met Violet. Sherlock reluctantly agreed to tell him what had all happened to him during the Great Hiatus. He had promised John, “In my own time, John. Not tonight, but in my own way, my own time, yes, I will tell you everything.”

But precious little had been revealed to John since then.

So John, the old flatmate and a veteran of PSTD nightmares, continued to worry. And now Violet, the new flatmate and master of psychology, worried as well. But Violet had reported no new nightmares since The Copper Beaches Massacre, so as John carded his fingers through Sherlock’s damp curls, he wondered helplessly, What triggered this?

As Sherlock shivered and mumbled incoherently under his breath, John pleaded, not wanting to startle him awake, “Sherlock, please, wake up, it’s alright.”

“No, no, no, he’s under the water, I can’t find him, but there’s blood, I see blood,” he babbled, “There’s blood in the water. Oh my God, John’s mouth went dry as his eyes grew wet. I’m the trigger. “Sherlock, I’m not in the water. Not anymore, you saved me. I’m here.” He grazed Sherlock’s cheekbone with the back of his knuckles without thinking. “I’m right here.”

“I’m going to find him. I’m not leaving without him,” Sherlock sobbed now, “I left him once before, had to, no choice. I’m not leaving him again. I won’t. I won’t, I won’t…” his long fingers let go of the duvet and wound around John’s wrist again. They felt like steel shackles.

Even so, John placed his free hand over Sherlock’s fingers anyway. Lowering himself the best he could, his back aching every inch of the way down, John studied Sherlock’s contorted face once they were face-to-face. His eyes moved rapidly beneath his closed eyelids. Tears were actually leaking out of the almond-shaped eyes. Unnerved, John dashed the tears away from Sherlock’s face. He opened his mouth to speak, to beg Sherlock to wake up. He put his hand on Sherlock’s thin shoulder, to shake him awake if necessary.

But he only rested his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder as he shut his mouth. He sat up again as an
insatiable curiosity welled up within him. Even as his conscience railed at him that to proceed would violate his friend’s privacy, the need to know overshadowed all moral dilemmas.

*The only time his guard is down,* John thought as he started running circles with his thumb over Sherlock’s bare shoulder. *Is when he’s either high or drunk… or when he’s sleeping…*

*And it’s not like you haven’t done this before. Ask him questions when he’s half-asleep.*

*Oh, but this is so wrong,* John thought as he lowered his head again, to Sherlock’s ear. *But I must know. He keeps dismissing my need to know what the hell happened to him while he had been away those two miserable years. I told him I didn’t care how he faked his death, I wanted to know why.*

*He never told me. Molly Hooper was the one who told me it was to save Lestrade, Mrs. Hudson and me. He never explained why he didn’t take me with him. He knew I would have followed him to the ends of the earth… still would… still want to…*

“Heck,” he breathed into his ear. Knowing damn well he shouldn’t take any somniloquy Sherlock produced seriously, he asked anyway, “Why did you fake your death?”

Sherlock shook his head against the pillow. “Moriarty… had no choice…”

“Yes, yes you did,” John whispered. “You could have told me, you should have told me.”

“No,” Sherlock’s entire body tensed as he rattled off something incomprehensible, punctuated by the words *No* and *Please.* Towards the end, John caught snatches of actual words as Sherlock trembled and clung to John’s wrist. *Owe you… a fall… burn… heart…broken…*

“… love.”

“What?” John froze.

“Love, I love him,” Sherlock curled up tighter into himself, still a prisoner of his subconscious. “Won’t lose him again, I won’t, I won’t, I won’t.” Then in a softer voice, he whimpered, “I can’t.”

John could barely hear him. But he did hear him.

His mind rebelled against it however. *That’s… no, that’s not right… it’s Sherlock for God’s sake. Chemical defect and losing side and all that… Mr. ‘Married to My Work’. He’s rambling, he’s dreaming, he’s confused…he’s doesn’t love me. Not like that, not in romantic or sentiment way. I know he’s bi, maybe he just thinks I’m attractive? But that’s stupid too because he doesn’t pay any mind to appearances unless it’s for a case. Besides I’m not… I’m just… well, at any rate he’s celibate, practically asexual so it doesn’t matter…*

Then John’s treacherous mind produced an image of that handsome, smug bastard Victor Trevor. Then it produced the image of him locking lips with that hussy Janine (*… but that was for a case, John rationalized.*) Then another image, of a very naked Irene Adler popped into his head (*… also for a case and she was fucking with him, not fucking him, John told himself.*)

Then he remembered that only a few days ago, Violet was sleeping in Sherlock’s bed. Wearing one of his t-shirts all the while Sherlock held her hand.

*It’s part of their cover story, John stoutly reminded himself. Plus she’s been ill so I doubt she’s in the mood to shag anyway if their cover story progressed from fiction to fact.*

For some reason, that idea made John feel nauseated.
Childishly, he realized he really didn’t want Violet and Sherlock to get together like that anymore… But only because it wouldn’t last, that’s why. The distance would kill the relationship. Sherlock promised her he would restore her good name and she could finally go home. Home is America for her and home is London for Sherlock. He won’t go with her to America and she won’t stay in England. So, seeing that those two are the most logical and hard-headed people I have met, I doubt they would start anything as impractical as shagging. At least Sherlock wouldn’t…

Then, with a low swooping sick feeling in his belly, he remembered visiting Molly in the maternity ward last October… Isn’t he perfect? We’re going to call him Henry… um, so… has Sherlock been around?

OK, John grudgingly thought. He’s not asexual. And I’m reading too much into his sleep-talking. He did say “The two people who love you the most” during his Best Man speech at my wedding right? He was talking about romantic love from Mary and friendship love from him, of course. John’s thoughts grew more and more panicked as Sherlock continued to shiver and sweat. Because he would never have meant… he didn’t mean that he felt what Mary felt… because that would be ludicrous, he can’t possibly mean that…

“Sherlock,” John whispered, wondering why he was torturing himself. “Are you… in love,” he licked his lips, the old nervous tic, “With me?”

“Oh yes,” Sherlock breathed.

You see but you don’t observe…

John hung his head as he could no longer deny the truth. Still, reflexively, he shook his head, still wanting to reject facts, just as the Catholic Church once refuted Galileo’s claims that the earth revolved around the sun.

Just then Sherlock violently jerked, letting go of John’s wrist and nearly kicking him in the process. He twisted to his back, his hand scrambling. To John’s horror, he clawed at the spot where Mary’s bullet had pierced his body. His head turned left to right, as if he now tried to wake himself up. He started muttering, “You never felt pain, did you? Why did you never feel pain?” as he arched his back. Then he moaned, “Control the pain. Fall now. Fall now…”

“Oh God,” John slid closer to Sherlock as he kept repeating the refrain Fall now. “No, no, no Sherlock, no,” John crawled over to Sherlock and cradled his face again. Stroking his curls again as he crooned, “Listen, listen. You don’t have to fall, you’re safe, we’re safe. It’s fine, it’s all fine. You’re alright, you’re alright…”

But I’m not…

A great, gasping sob broke free from Sherlock again. Then his eyes fluttered. Squinting in the dim light, he whispered, “John?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Sorry,” he closed his eyes, half-asleep again already. “Bad dream.”

“S’alright,” John grinned at him. “I get them too.”

“I know,” Sherlock’s voice faded. “I could hear you. Through the vents, that’s when I started practice my violin at three in the morning until they went away.”

“Brahms,” John’s voice shook while thinking Oh God, Oh God, Oh God…
John had started having his PSTD dreams again almost immediately after their first confrontation with Jim Moriarty at the swimming pool where little Carl Powers died. As he did so, he thought, *I’d be dreaming about Afghanistan again then that ruddy violin would wake me up. I’d be so angry at him for waking me but then I’d just lie there, listening until I drifted off.*

*He’s felt this way since, well, just about the beginning. But he’s never said a word. Just let his actions speak for him. Of course, I wasn’t observing, as usual…*

“Sit up,” he quietly commanded the drowsy Sherlock so he could turn the pillows over to the cool side and fluff them a bit. It was a small comfort, but the only one John could think of at the moment.

Sherlock groggily propped himself up on his elbows then sank back down onto the pillows. Then he jostled himself awake. “No, I can’t. Loads of work to do, I mus-”

“Rest,” John pushed Sherlock back down with the tips of his fingers, “Doctor’s orders.” As John pulled the blanket up over Sherlock again, Sherlock looked away. “You OK?” John asked as his heart pounded.

He kept his eyes averted, very unlike himself. But he nodded, exhausted etched into the lines of his face. Then he closed his eyes, but his face did not smooth out in relaxation. Rather, his brows beetled together and his mouth twisted down.


“Fine, I’m fine, just… experiencing a ridiculous overreaction to a figment of my imagination, that’s all,” Sherlock murmured, his lips twisting up into a small smile. “You worry too much.”

“Stop giving me things to worry about,” John quipped.

“Didn’t,” Sherlock’s head bobbed down then jerked right back up. Just like a toddler trying to fight sleep. “Didn’t,” he repeated himself, determined to have the last word as usual.

“Look,” John hesitated, knowing he was about to embark into treacherous territory. “If we were home, I could write you a script for a mild sleep aid or muscle relaxer, nothing habit-forming, of course. And I wouldn’t write you another one until you go talk to someone about your PTSD.” When Sherlock snorted, John thought, *Good. He’s listening.* “So, we’re going to have to think of another way to quiet your mind so you can sleep. Your brain’s nothing if your transport shuts down due to sleep deprivation.”

“You could keep talking, the sound of your voice might bore me to sleep, if not to death,” Sherlock’s mumbled words were condescending as usual. But John detected a faint hint of desperation, woven within the exhaustion and insolence.

“Shall I tell you a story then,” John couldn’t keep the affection out of his voice and hated himself for it. *Don’t lead him on, that’s just cruel…*

“No,” Sherlock sat up, his curls more riotous than ever since he had fallen asleep with wet hair. “Take the bed. I have work to do. And you’re uncomfortable with… with… *this.*”

“Oh for pity’s sake, don’t be silly,” John shucked off the oversized dressing gown and slipped underneath the duvet. “This doesn’t bother me one bit.”

Sherlock looked down at John, his eyes fixed firmly on John’s face. John hoped the room was dim enough so his blush was hidden.
“It’s fine, John,” he said in a wooden voice as he swung his legs over the bed. “You said so yourself. Personal space and all that… I need to… go through Kitty’s devices and…”

“Christ, it’s The Cross Keys at Dartmoor all over again,” John groaned. “You need sleep. Stop acting ridiculous.” In a softer voice, he added, “Come here.”

Stop leading him on… you’re not gay…

_Oh, but wouldn’t life be easier if I were…?_

After a moment’s pause, Sherlock stretched out onto the bed again. On top of the duvet, fingers steepled, eyes firmly fixated on the ceiling. Not an inch of him touched John’s body.

John could practically feel Sherlock’s body vibrating with tension, the aftershocks of an emotional seismic event.

“Stop forcing yourself to stay awake,” John sat up. “That won’t do, especially after having a PTSD nightmare.”

“It wasn’t.”

“It was,” John said firmly. “You were talking in your sleep.”

John faintly heard Sherlock’s breath hitch in his throat. “Oh,” he breathed.

“The caves got to you, I think,” John added lightly. “Dark, confined. I think you felt trapped and it triggered memories of your imprisonment by the Serbians.”

Sherlock quickly swiveled his head towards John, his mercurial eyes scanning John from the top of his silvery-sandy head down to his duvet-covered feet, searching for a sign of a lie.

_Ha, John thought triumphantly. I’m not lying, just leaving out a bit of the truth._

“You’re becoming a better liar as time marches on, John,” Sherlock said wearily. “What sentimental idiocy did I commit while in a semiconscious state?”

“Nothing,” John immediately lied upon seeing the tension tightening up Sherlock’s face again. He also saw a flash of fear and hurt flicker in those wonderful blue-green-gold eyes. The flash lasted for less than a second, but long enough for John to deduce what was going through his best friend’s mind as well as his heart:

_Please… don’t shame me for my feelings…_

And

_Please don’t reject me._

Then the eyes hardened, became their usual impenetrable wall.

“Absolutely nothing,” John sat up as well, wincing as his back and shoulder reminded him what he had just experienced in the Catacombs. “Now, grab a blanket before you freeze to death,” he kindly ordered him as he fluffed the pillows behind him.

After heaving a wearisome sigh, Sherlock rose. In the dim light of the room, his unblemished skin was as pale white as the purest winter snow, making the scars look that more ominous, like a spray of old, dried blood after a hunter field-dressed a freshly slaughtered deer during winter.
He crossed the room and scooped up the ice-pack John had left in haste. He handed it to John wordlessly and walked around the bed to the pile of discarded blankets. He wrapped himself up in a powder blue quilt much like he did back at 221B with his sheets. Then, snug in his cocoon, he returned to bed, his back facing John.

As John slid the ice-pack between his back and pillow, Sherlock muttered, “Apologies for troubling you, John. It won’t happen again.”

John chuckled. “Yes it will, and would you please sit up?”

Sherlock raised his curly head, clearly confused. John enjoyed a split second of victory for pulling one over the Great Detective then slid a bit closer to his best friend and put his arm around Sherlock’s thin shoulders. When he felt Sherlock startle and jump, John whispered, “It’s alright. Just don’t drool on me like you did at Dartmoor.”

“I did not drool on you,” Sherlock held his body stiffly but did not pull away either.

“Yeah you did.”

Sherlock sniffed but then dropped his eyes down and apprehensively lowered his head to John’s shoulder.

“See, would this bother me if I really was homophobic?” John quipped and felt gratified to hear Sherlock chuckle. Then he added, “Besides, this isn’t the first time you’ve nodded off on my shoulder, so relax,” John started rubbing his hand up and down Sherlock’s upper arm. John loathed himself for giving his best friend mixed signals but at the same time loved the weight of the thin man against him, the sensation of the inky curls tickling his stubbly chin and cheek. “You’ve dozed off on me loads of times on the cab rides back to 221B after saving The Met’s arse again. Plus, you know, when you were detoxing from whatever the fuck Jack Woodley shot you up with last April.”

“Mm,” Sherlock’s eyelids finally fell shut. “I remember. ‘We’re your family now. All of us.’”

John felt his eyes prick with tears. It took him a moment but then he managed to say, “That’s right. We will always find you. We will always protect you. We will always believe in you. We’re the ones who…” He faltered, “Who love you.”

“Never doubt that,” Sherlock finished sleepily. Soon his breathing evened out, became deep and rhythmic. His body finally uncoiled, the tension seeping out of him as he finally slept in peace.

John however could not. He studied his best friend with the same intensity Sherlock studied the world. He kept touching his face, his throat, his hair, even the delicate outside of his ear all the while screaming at himself  

What are you doing? Stop it. Stop it at once, John sternly told himself, even as he held Sherlock closer to him. Bad enough you invaded his privacy while he was talking in his sleep, going to take advantage of him while he sleeps too? Give him a hand-job, kiss him on the mouth and have him wake up like Sleeping Fucking Beauty? Fancy yourself a prince now?  

... but the idea of kissing him did not feel ridiculous.

But how could I do that to him? After what that piece of filth, that disgusting pervert Lord Cullen-Bastard-Culpepper did to him as a child. No. I shall not traumatize him. I will not embarrass him. I
won’t ever let him know what he confessed. I will not hurt him any further than I have…

Because I have, oh God, I have. Everything, everything, The Fall, planning my wedding, shooting Magnussen, even tonight in the Catacombs, he has done for me and me alone. The idea of me leaving him in any fashion terrifies him. What did I ever do to deserve to be loved so unconditionally? I’m not brilliant like he is. I’m not handsome like Victor Trevor or intriguing like Irene Adler. I’m not even remotely as interesting as Violet Hunter. I’m just… me.

Boring old doctor on medical discharge from the military who faffs around on a blog and is married to a woman.

John exhaled a shaky breath. And that’s the real problem, isn’t it? He laughed bitterly, silently to himself as he started to card his fingers through Sherlock’s curls. Because I do love this madman, this ridiculous man, with all my heart and soul. Every fucking time he almost dies, I die. I would follow him to the ends of the world and beyond, but I am not attracted to men. I don’t deny his beauty. It’s hilarious how the Most Observant Man in the World is mostly oblivious the effect his face and body have on people. He thinks people flirt with him because he’s famous, not because he is a rather good-looking bloke.

“Idiot,” John ghosted a kiss on the sleeping Sherlock’s brow.

As attractive as he is (because he is, he really is…) I have no desire to fuck a man or be fucked by one either. There is nothing sexy about sticking one’s cock up another man’s arsehole.

But that sniggering inner voice that had plagued him ever since he became friends with Gary “The Fairy” Miller sneered at him: You were just fantasizing about stroking his knob and kissing him on the mouth. You also just kissed him on the forehead.

“Christ,” John hung his head, his brow touching the crown of Sherlock’s hair.

Even if I was gay, I have no idea what to do or how to do it… I have made women scream my name and praise God at the same time in three different continents. If I attempted sex with a man, I would be utterly lost. I would feel like a fool. I wouldn’t see it as making love. I’d view it as a prostrate exam and that is not fair to him. Not after his childhood trauma. Not after that bitch Irene or that cunt Victor. He needs someone who can fulfill every aspect of a relationship and that’s just not me.

He knows this. He knows all of this. And yet… he chose me. This precise, logical, stone-hearted, short-tempered and bloody magnificent man chose me. And how do I pay him back? By not listening to him on that day, that awful day at St. Bart’s when he was trying to tell me It’s a magic trick. While he was all alone those two years, being persecuted and tortured, what did I do? Wallowed in grief and self-pity, nearly going the same route as my drunken sister and then… and then I married another.

Even if I could love him back the way I should, the way he deserves, I’m married. I took vows in front of God and friends and family that I would be faithful to Mary. I know I have every reason to leave Mary. I can fucking touch the very reason why to leave her, the bullet-hole she left in his chest. But I can’t… my daughter. My little girl is still out there. Plus, I have another child on the way and for better or worse, Mary is their mother.

I will not abandon my wife and children the way my father abandoned his.

And Sherlock knows this as well.

That was the thought that nearly unmanned John. His face, still buried in Sherlock’s curls, twisted.
He squeezed his eyes tight, just like when he was a child and didn’t want to cry.

He managed not to weep. He just held his best friend, the very best person he knew in the entire world in his arms while he slept. Instead of succumbing to tears, John just whispered over and over, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry…”

**

30 November 2015
City of London Medical Centre
London, England
Monday morning
8:45 AM

“Thank you for coming with me,” Violet Smith told Mrs. Hudson again after she crookedly parked her old Volkswagen Golf next to the kerb.

“Well, you’ve had a rather exciting past couple of days,” Mrs. Hudson said cheerily, as if she hadn’t spent most of the weekend in John and Mary’s cramped spare bedroom. “You probably could do with a bit of moral support.”

Violet wasn’t sure if “exciting” was the correct description for her weekend. “Anxious boredom” might have been better.

After leaving Mitton in Victor Trevor’s old pied-à-terre, Violet had made a beeline back to 221B Baker Street, slipping in through Mrs. Hudson’s back door instead of taking the precarious fire escape back up. She spent the night gathering up all her research and evidence about Margaux Vos, Matthew Sherrinford Holmes and Marissa Anne Watson and placed it all in a much more secure hiding place in the building.

Then she spent the night perched in Sherlock’s chair, one eye on the telly, the other on the door as she waited for either Moriarty’s people or Mycroft’s to come barging in to ransack the place. She kept both her gun and mobile close by at all times. Her knives she kept stuck in her boots.

No one came.

Bleary-eyed, Violet returned to the Watsons’ before the sun rose. Mercifully both Mary and Mrs. Hudson left her alone after she collapsed on to the sofa. She didn’t move until nearly four o’clock in the afternoon. Probably still would have remained there, drooling on Mary’s nice pillows if Gladstone hadn’t nudged her face with his nose, desperate to go outside for his afternoon constitution.

Violet felt marginally better after sleeping all day. However she still had no appetite when Mary insisted she and Mrs. Hudson stay for dinner after John texted Mary to let Violet and Mrs. Hudson know it was safe for them to return to Baker Street.

Unfortunately, her lack of appetite only strengthened Mrs. Hudson’s resolve to join Violet at her doctor’s appointment on Monday. Violet still would have preferred to go alone, but Mrs. Hudson promptly knocked on 221B’s door at 7:00 on the dot, carrying two plates containing a proper English breakfast.

Violet had felt terrible that all the food presented to her utterly nauseated her. She had managed to choke down toast and a glass of orange juice. The acidity in the juice however only served to further upset her queasy stomach.
Her queasiness only increased when she realized what a terrible driver Mrs. Hudson was. She did not criticize Mrs. Hudson for her terrible parking job. She felt certain if the blaring car horns and the raised middle fingers did not clue Mrs. Hudson in on how haphazardly her Golf stuck out into the street, nothing Violet could say would make a difference. But she did wonder how much longer Mrs. Hudson was going to be able to hang onto her driver’s license.

*And I’m driving home after this. I don’t care if they find a brain tumor today. She’s not driving us back and furthermore, no more little errands like picking up Sherlock’s dry-cleaning or buying groceries. His Majesty will just have to realize his Not-a-Housekeeper is a menace on the roads.*

But all Violet said was, “Well, I do appreciate it,” before leaving the car. Once Mrs. Hudson joined her on the pavement, Violet added, “I just wish we could have found a better spot, this is quite a walk.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Hudson said briskly as she pulled her woolly hat further down over her ears. “Lovely morning for a stroll.”

“Right,” Violet Smith looked up at the morning sky, seeing billowing grey clouds roiling in, threatening more rain. She adjusted the hook of her umbrella on her arm and said, “Off we go then,” while trying to suppress a shiver.

As they walked toward the clinic, Violet asked, simply for the sake of making conversation, “Was it a bit of a shock? Moving from here to Florida?”

“Oh, my heavens, yes,” Mrs. Hudson pressed her hand to her chest. “I knew it was going to be warm down there, but I had no idea about the humidity. Like a warm, wet blanket thrown over you. My son, Scooter, oh the poor lad had asthma as a child. Summers were a nightmare for him. Thank God he outgrew it but still, there’d be nights where he couldn’t catch his breath, my poor boy…”

Violet listened politely until they were less than a half block away from the clinic. Then she paused, fingering the scarf wrapped around her throat, inexplicably nervous.

*What if they do find something?*

*What if they don’t?*

Then she felt Mrs. Hudson patting her arm. “No matter what the outcome is, dear, we’ll make our way through it.”

Violet turned to smile at Mrs. Hudson. But before she could speak, everything suddenly became very loud and very hot.

Violet felt her entire body thrown off the ground. While airborne, she felt sharp bits of debris hitting her, cutting her. Glass, concrete, bits of rubble and God only knew what else. She clawed at the air, reaching for something, anything to stabilize her, to stop her from falling…

(... *but why am I falling?*)

Then her body slammed to the ground. Her teeth rattled as her head made contact with the pavement. She rolled from her side to her back. Pain radiated from her chest throughout her entire body. Her head throbbed. Blood crawled down her face…

(... *my glasses, where are my glasses?*)

(... *wait, I don’t wear glasses… where am I?*)
She tried to take a breath and fire filled her lungs. She tried to sit up but immediately gave up as another scorching burst of agony rippled throughout her solar plexus down to her arms and legs. The pain in her torso and limbs did not even come close to the blinding pain in her head. Her ears rang with an awful clamor. She tried to open her eyes but immediately closed them again, letting a grey haze overcome her.

Time became a meaningless thing. She floated in the grey haze, preferring the dull, humming ache than the searing pain she had first experienced when the world turned upside down.

But a voice broke through the din of sirens and shouts and the awful ringing sensation in her ears. “Miss! Miss! Are you alright?”

(... why does he have a British accent?)

“What’s your name? Can you tell me your name?”

Her tongue felt thick, swollen, as if she had bitten it. She tasted blood.

“Vi… let.”

Violet wished he’d shut the hell up and let her descend back into the grey haze.

The ringing in her ears had increased, making her head throb even more.

“Can you tell me who the Pr….” A squalling siren interrupted the irritating British voice. “Is?”

“Barack Obama,” Violet Hunter mumbled. Then she allowed herself to slip into the grey, which immediately faded to black.
“Right,” Mary chewed her lip. “Where’s Violet then? What room is she in?”

“Violet?” Molly knit her auburn brows together. “Back at 221B, I suspect.”

“What?”

Molly nodded, “She was discharged before I got here. Her injuries were superficial, some cuts and bruising. They released her before I got here.”

Mary felt her core grow very, very cold. “Right,” she said in a strangled voice. “Right…”

Meanwhile, the Game continues in Paris... and the bad guys might be winning...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Seventeen: Crash Down and Fall Apart

30 November 2015
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Monday morning
11:51 AM

Her trainers squeaking on the linoleum, Mary sprinted down hospital corridor. Her heart jigged and her stomach roiled. With one hand on her burgeoning baby bump and the other clutching the straps of her handbag, she looked desperately at each room number before she found the one she sought.

Knowing she must look like a fright, Mary attempted to smooth down her fly-away hair. She jerked John’s oatmeal jumper down over her tummy and adjusted her scarf. After taking a deep breath, she poked her head through the half-opened door to see Molly Hooper-Lestrade holding a pink plastic cup up to Mrs. Hudson’s lips so she could drink from the matching straw.

“Molly?” Mary opened the door a bit wider. “What are you doing here?”

“I asked the same,” Mrs. Hudson quavered as Molly put the plastic cup back on the tray.

Mary felt her heart crumble at the sight of the old lady, so tiny and vulnerable, wearing an ugly hospital gown, lying on a hospital bed. Her wrinkled face was a mess of superficial cuts and bruises. But the injuries were the only color the woman had to her face; otherwise she was dreadfully pale, greyish almost. A cannula delivered oxygen to her nostrils. An IV catheter was taped to her hand, the delicate skin bruised from the needle.

“Sergeant Alex MacDonald heard about the bombing on her police scanner a minute or so after it occurred as she was driving to work,” Molly explained as she smoothed an errant curl back from Mrs. Hudson’s forehead. “She wasn’t far from… from, you know,” she gave Mrs. Hudson a stricken
look. “Where, um, it all happened, so she went there instead of NSY. She saw the medics loading Mrs. Hudson and Violet into an ambulance, so she called Greg. Then Greg called me when he found out they had taken them to here.”

“I’m alright, Molly, Mary, I really am,” Mrs. Hudson protested, her voice feeble and wheezing. “They’re making a fuss over nothing, treating me with kid gloves just because I’m old. I just need a cuppa, my dressing gown and a pouf to put my feet up on. I’ll be right as rain in a day or two.”

“Mrs. Hudson,” Molly said gently, “I read your charts. You have a broken rib.”

“Oh well,” Mrs. Hudson looked gently resigned, “Maybe a week then.”

Molly and Mary shared a smile and a silent conversation that only health-care professionals could have: *Stubborn old woman.*

“Just, don’t tell the boys,” Mrs. Hudson pleaded faintly, the strain wearing her out. “Not yet at any rate. They’re so busy with the case and all. I don’t want to worry them.”

Molly stood up and carefully kissed Mrs. Hudson’s forehead. “Have a little sleep, Mrs. Hudson.”

“Well, if it’s alright with you, I don’t mind resting my eyes a bit. Hate to be rude though…” Mrs. Hudson’s eyelids were already fluttering shut.

Mary beckoned Molly outside the hospital room with a slight jerk of her head. Once out of Mrs. Hudson’s hearing, Mary whispered frantically, “What in God’s name happened? And don’t bloody tell me it was a gas leak.”

Molly shook her head and pulled her rainbow-hued cardigan tightly around her, trying to hide a spit-up stain on her blouse. “It’s not a gas leak, but I don’t know what happened. I don’t,” she added emphatically when Mary’s cornflower blue eyes narrowed. “Greg can’t tell me everything that goes on with his job. He’s not allowed, not in an ongoing investigation.”

“But if they’re not calling it a gas leak…?”

Molly folded her lips together then shook her head. “I know as much as everyone else.”

“Right,” Mary chewed her lip. “Where’s Violet then? What room is she in?”

“Violet?” Molly knit her auburn brows together. “Back at 221B, I suspect.”

“What?”

Molly nodded, “She was discharged before I got here. Her injuries were superficial, some cuts and bruising. They released her before I got here.”

Mary felt her core grow very, very cold. “Right,” she said in a strangled voice. “Right… so, if you don’t mind, I’ll swing by Baker Street to check on her and let the dog out for her. Superficial or not, I bet she feels rotten right now. I can pick up some of Mrs. Hudson’s things for her as well. Proper pyjamas and her slippers.”

“That’s very kind of you. I know you and John are Mrs. Hudson’s emergency contacts after Sherlock and with both John and Sherlock out of the country… but maybe it would make more sense for me to go to Baker Street. From here, it’s a bit out of your way, plus you have to still drive back home and all.”
“Don’t be silly,” Mary gave Molly a reassuring smile. “You trying to wrangle that big old dog of Violet’s all on your own? Gladstone’s a good boy, but he can be a handful, especially if he gets it into his head he wants a bit of a run. Plus his previous owners were German, so you wouldn’t know the correct commands to give him anyway. John and I dog-sat for Violet and Sherlock loads of times before, so I know how to make him behave,” she lied effortlessly.

“That’s true,” Molly, the cat-lover, looked relieved. “And I do need to get home to Henry.”

“How is he doing?” Mary asked dutifully.

Molly brightened, “Oh, much better! I think he’s always going to be a handful but he slept four hours straight last night. That’s the first time he had done that ever.”

Mary felt that ever-present twinge of envy, listening to Molly prattle on happily about her baby boy while her own precious baby girl was missing. Instinctively, she put her hand over her swelling middle. “Bless him,” she said, trying to sound sincere. “Alright, I’m off then,” she leaned over to kiss Molly on her cheek. She smelt talc powder and baby lotion and jealousy knotted her stomach again. But she plastered a fake smile on her face and said, “Text me if you think of anything else Mrs. Hudson might need.”

Mary broke various traffic laws as she sped from St. Bart’s to Baker Street. She parked illegally in front of a fireplug and ran to the lacquered black door, fumbling with John’s spare set of keys to Sherlock’s. Cursing, she took off her mittens with her teeth so she could better hold the key.

She didn’t bother removing her heavy winter coat. She thumped up the stairs to 221B as quickly as possible, unlocking the second set of doors. “Violet?” she cried out, throwing the door open.

The only occupant of the flat was a very confused Alsatian.

“Gladstone, komm,” Mary murmured, pulling her sleek little Beretta out of her handbag. With the police dog’s assistance, she carefully prowled through the flat, searching for subtle signs of a break-in or struggle.

There was none.

There was also no sign of Violet either.

“Shit,” Mary flopped down onto John’s chair. As Gladstone rested his face in her lap, she did the only thing she could think to do. She dug into her coat pocket and pulled her mobile. She fired off a text to Violet:

Where are you? - MMW

**

30 November 2015
London, England
Monday evening
6:51 PM

Violet slowly opened her eyes.

Then she immediately closed them again when she realized everything hurt.

Experimentally she wiggled her toes, pathetically grateful that she could wiggle her toes and it did
not hurt to do so.

_OK, so not everything hurts._

She tried wiggling her fingers and found her right ring finger and pinkie wouldn’t move.

_What the hell…?_

She stretched out the fingers that would move and felt … _fur_?

_Where am I?

Violet forced her eyes open again. Little by little, she lifted herself up off from the enormous pillows she had been propped up on. Her head throbbed dully. Feeling that dreadful pins-and-needles sensation running through her arm as she did so, Violet reached up and touched the left side of her head, feeling a lump underneath the silky curls.

_Wait… who washed my hair?_ Violet grabbed one of her curls and sniffed. She always just used Sherlock’s shampoo, partially not to set off his olfactory hypersensitivity and partially to be a brat since he always whinged about her nicking his things. His shampoo smelt clean, like fresh laundry drying in the sunshine.

Now she smelt lavender and roses. Her stomach lurched.

She looked down at her arms and hands. Her hands were covered with scrapes and two of her neatly manicured nails had been broken all the way down to the quick. Her right ring finger and pinkie were neatly splinted together. She puffed out a breath of relief when she saw the diamond engagement ring still on her unbroken ring finger. But she saw she wore a crisp, clean linen nightgown.

Then she touched the left side of her face and felt plastic and cotton. Then she felt another bandage on her forehead.

_Where the fuck am I?_ Violet started to shake as she started looking around. The room she was in screamed _English_ and _Masculine_ and _Money_. In fact, all the furniture looked to be mahogany and expensive, an eclectic mix of modern and antique. Leather-bound books adorned a gigantic bookcase. Velvet curtains, relics of another era, completely covered the windows. Not a sliver of natural light shone in. A massive oil painting of some obscure general resplendent in a plumed hat and red coat hung over the fireplace. But the fire in the hearth that kept the room nice and toasty was obviously a gas fireplace, once Violet studied the logs and saw that they neither crumbled nor smoked.

Violet looked at the four-poster bed she lay in then ran her fingers over the linens. _Egyptian_, she mused, her mouth tasting like sawdust. She looked at the blankets she lay underneath: a creamy-white down duvet and a fur-lined throw blanket on top of that, rich and sumptuous, brown and soft like a mink.

Violet had a feeling that particular rug was not faux-fur either.

_I need to get out of here_, she threw the opulent blankets off of herself after she noticed there were two doors in the room. _One of them has to lead me out of here_. She swung her feet over the edge of the mattress and found that she could not touch the floor.

Just then, the door burst open. Violet froze for but a second then her eyes immediately started darting around, looking for a weapon. _A pen, a letter opener, a fucking paper clip…_ she thought desperately
as a middle-aged Indian man wearing a three-piece suit and a white laboratory coat strolled into the room.

“Ah, Miss Smith,” he spoke with no trace of an Indian accent. His voice was one-hundred-percent public school. He wore tortoise-shell glasses, had a neatly trimmed goatee and a receding widow’s peak. He had a stethoscope around his neck and carried an old fashioned black doctor’s bag. Violet leapt out of bed upon hearing her alias, her bare feet slapping slightly when she landed on the polished hard wood floor. Her head immediately swam when she stood upright and she leaned against the mattress. She reached out with her injured right hand to steady herself but warily eyed the stranger.

“Excellent. Good to see you up and about, but there is no need to rush,” he gave her a polite smile then pressed his free hand to his chest. “My name is Dr. Sankaran. How do you do?”

Violet nodded, not trusting herself to speak at the moment. He said Miss Smith. OK. The game is still on. British…. Be fucking British.

“Hello,” she whispered, focusing on keeping the consonants sharp and the vowels rounded, just like she had back when she was first teaching herself to master the accent. “Fine, thank you,” she rasped out, feeling her legs starting to shake.

“You’re probably parched,” Dr. Sankaran sounded congenial enough but Violet still kept her eyes trained on him, half-expecting him to pull a gun out of his bag.

“A bit, yes,” she did admit however.

Dr. Sankaran smiled affably then meandered to the unopened door, revealing a very modern bathroom. The chrome and white tile hurt Violet’s eyes a bit, after the gloom of this Ye Olde English bedchamber. Violet watched him set his medical case onto the closed toilet lid and turn a tap on, rinsing out then filling a tumbler. He brought his bag and the tumbler of water back into the bedroom and held it out to her.

“Thank you,” Violet murmured and sipped the water. It was lukewarm but she didn’t care. At the moment, it was the best thing she had ever drank in her life. But when the doctor took a step closer to her, she edged away from him, fully prepared to break the glass and use the jagged edges to slice up his face.

But he just smiled politely, “Miss Smith, let me reassure you that you are perfectly safe here.” He set his bag on the bed and opened the clasp. “As a show of goodwill,” he pulled out her Smartphone
and held it out to her. “Your handbag and your other things are in the lounge, although I doubt your coat and scarf are salvageable.”

He did sound truly regretful.

Violet all but snatched her mobile out of his outstretched hand. She grimaced when she saw the missed text from Mary. She’s probably either chewing her knuckles or polishing her gun, Violet groaned to herself. After shooting the doctor another cagey glance, she quickly thumbed a response to Mary.

Am OK for now.
But if you don’t hear from me every ten minutes, call the boys – VS

Violet had an inkling where she was, or at the very least, whose home she was in, but she did not want to jump to any conclusions. Not yet at least.

She studied the doctor, trying to focus. Her head still ached badly and her legs still felt unsteady, that awful prickly “fallen asleep” feeling. In spite of this, Violet stared at the physician, trying to gather as much information about him as her muddled brain would allow.

No wedding ring. Upper-crust accent. Oscar de la Renta suit. Silk necktie, not sure of the brand, Bremont watch. Soft hands, manicured nails, so not a surgeon, not an ordinary GP. Private physician, caters to the rich… and powerful.

“Where is my future brother-in-law?” Violet Smith asked as clearly and politely as possible.

“In his office, attending to some business,” Dr. Sankaran did not seem surprised she asked for Mycroft. “But he will see you at tea, assuming you are up for it. May I examine you?”

“Haven’t you been examining me all day?” Even though the linen nightgown was dreadfully priggish, neckline covering her collarbone, sleeves nearly to her wrists and the hem well below her knees, Violet felt more exposed than she would have if she had been starkers.

Then she shuddered, thinking about her inexplicably clean hair and white nightgown.

“I have been monitoring you,” the doctor gently corrected her, “Along with my nurse. Now when she arrives, and with your permission, of course, I would like to do a more thorough examination, then set up a follow-up appointment tomorrow for additional scans just to make certain everything is fine.”

“Why wasn’t I left at the hospital?” Suddenly Violet clapped her hand over her mouth. “Mrs. Hudson! Is she-”

“Resting comfortably at St. Bart’s,” Dr. Sankaran assured her, still with the insipid little smile on his goateed face. “Her injuries were a bit more severe but she is expected to make a full recovery.” Then he clasped his hands behind his back and continued to smile.

Realizing she was not going to get away without being poked and prodded, Violet frowned and heaved herself back up on the bed, feeling like a child trying to climb back up into an overlarge chair. “Very well,” she muttered as a blonde woman wearing traditional hospital scrubs entered, carrying some sort of tablet. Only after texting Mary again, she added, “Proceed.”

He did not make her remove the nightgown, although Violet felt ill as she wondered who got her out of her clothes and into this Puritanical garment in the first place. At first she hoped it was the nurse,
but after studying her grumpy expression, hoped it wasn’t.

The exam took longer than it should have because Violet kept insisting they stop so she could text Mary every ten minutes. The nurse’s face grew longer and sourer with each interruption but Dr. Sankaran took it all in stride. He also took her temperature, her pulse, listened to her heart and lungs and checked the colorful bruises on her hip and thigh while the nurse tapped in notes onto the tablet. Then Dr. Sankaran shone a tiny little penlight into her eyes, watching how the pupils reacted.

“Normal,” he grunted in satisfaction. As he straightened up, he explained, “There was some concern about the severity of your injuries. The first responders said you were disorientated, confused and then you lost consciousness.”

Violet gingerly touched the lump on the side of her head. Great, Sherlock and I now have matching bumps. How cute. “I remember waking up in St. Bart’s. I remember having an MRI and…” that son-of-a-bitch had me drugged so he could bring me here. Violet pushed up the sleeve of her nightgown and saw a bit of cotton wool covered with surgical tape in the crook of her elbow. Mycroft, you fucking bastard.

“Afterwards you were given a mild sedative since you were bit upset,” the blonde nurse said blandly, becoming very interested in taking out more cotton wool and a plastic tube of polysporin back into his bag.

Liar, Violet thought but she held her tongue. “But I’m OK?” she asked the doctor instead.

“Other than some bumps and bruises and two sprained fingers, perfectly fine,” Dr. Sankaran popped the tiny torch into his lab coat pocket. “You were very lucky you’re walking away with only a bump on your head, it could have been much worse.”

“I still have a bit of a headache,” Violet grudgingly admitted as the nurse changed the bandages on her face and hands.

“Do you feel nauseated?” Dr. Sankaran asked.

“No.”

“Dizzy?”

“No.”

“Not seeing double?”

“No.”

“Paracetamol and an ice-pack will help with the headache.” Dr. Sankaran assured her. But when she slid off the bed again and wobbled on her feet, he frowned. Then he gently ordered her, “Walk across the room if you could, please.”

Violet felt like she had been caught driving and drinking and asked to walk a straight line to prove her sobriety. On shaky legs, she walked from the bed to the loo, feeling the doctor and nurse’s eyes on her. I do not want to give any advantage to Mycroft.

“Her balance is off,” Grouchy Nurse observed, her hands on her hips.

She looked over her shoulder and lifted her eyebrows. Archly, she informed Grouchy Nurse, “My name is Violet Emilie Laura Smith. I was born in Charlington. I was an office manager and personal
assistant at an insurance agency. Now I assist Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson investigating criminal cases the police can’t solve. My date of birth is the fifth of August 1978. My parents are deceased. I have no siblings. I reside at 221B Baker Street. I am engaged to William Sherlock Scott Holmes, brother of Mycroft Holmes. And if I’m a bit unsteady on my feet it’s because I was in a bloody explosion!"

"My name is Violet Jane Hunter. I was an FBI agent. My birth date is January 6, 1976. I was born in the Kaiserslautern Military Community in Germany. I have been trapped in England for almost eight years now. My mother died in a car accident and my father and brother were murdered. My engagement to Sherlock is part of an elaborate cover story to keep me alive because my government wants me dead and this government wants to know why. Not to mention a certain cult of consulting criminals my ‘fiancé’ managed to piss off…"

“And could someone please fetch me a dressing gown,” Violet fully turned around now and gave the doctor and nurse her most haughty “Miss Smith” glare while crossing her arms.

Her recitation seemed to satisfy Dr. Sankaran so he nodded towards the nurse. She scowled, apparently not appreciating being treated like a maid, but she pivoted on her trainers (blue, to match her scrubs) and marched out to fulfill Violet’s request.

She returned with not only a woolly dressing gown but also a matching pair of slippers. She set them on the bed and said stiffly, “Your brother-in-law said he wants to see you in the lounge.”

"I would rather eat broken glass... “Thank you,” Violet replied, her voice just as rigid as her posture. Then her mobile buzzed.

Do I need to call the boys?
Or do I need to come find you? – MMW

Violet texted her back:

Sorry – got distracted at yelling at Myc’s minions.
Text SH and John anyway, let them know what’s going on.
SH will want to know about Mrs. H – VS

“If you could be so kind, please let Mr. Holmes know I will meet him momentarily. I wish to wash my face and clean my teeth first,” Violet inclined her head, letting the doctor and nurse know this was a dismissal.

Grouchy Nurse wasted no time. However Dr. Sankaran pulled a business card out of his pocket and held it out to her. “If you should start feeling worse, even when you go back home, please do not hesitate to contact me.”

"Yeah, I’m really going to call you when I’m back in the US, Violet Hunter thought spitefully. But Violet Smith demurely said, “Thank you.”

Violet waited until he left then hobbled towards the bathroom. Of course my balance is off, you fucking over-bred jackass, Violet thought viciously. I landed on my side, hard. I was talking to Mrs. Hudson then there was an explosion and I landed on my side and…

After that was a perfect blank. A big black hole of nothing.

As she splashed water on her face, she struggled to remember exactly what happened for the simple fact that Sherlock would interrogate her. She vaguely remembered slipping in and out of consciousness in the ambulance. She definitely remembered being in some sort of ER (A&E, she
warily reminded herself) then greying out again, overwhelmed by the din of doctors and nurses shouting and patients screaming and crying. Then she came to, briefly in an exam room. She vaguely recalled being prepped for the MRI, the nurse explaining it was all routine, just a precaution, make sure she hadn’t suffered any traumatic brain injuries.

She definitely remembered feeling a pinprick in her elbow... *Just something to help you relax, love, that’s a good girl...* yes, Violet definitely remembered hearing an East End accent trying to reassure her.

*Help me relax my left ass-cheek,* Violet studied her face in the beautiful mirror above the pristine white sink.

She looked terrible. Her face was chalk-white except for the flesh-coloured bandages on the left side of her face and forehead. *Oh good. More scars.* She touched the scar on the other side of her face, the one left by Jack Woodley.

Then she lifted her head and ran her hand down her neck, her fingers tracing where Jim Moriarty had cut her with a serrated steak knife.

“OK,” she told herself, realizing she couldn’t stall any longer.

She flipped her chestnut curls over her shoulder and trudged out of the bathroom. She pulled on the dressing gown awkwardly, her sprained fingers protesting. She belted it around her narrow waist the best she could then shoveled her feet into the slippers.

She padded out of the bedroom and crept along a narrow hallway. The hallway walls were covered by a heavy mahogany wainscoting from floor to ceiling.

She expected the rest of... wherever she was... to be as dark and gloomy. So she was surprised to find an utterly sleek and modern lounge at the end of the hall. Complete with gigantic windows looking over the dazzlingly bright city of London.

There was another electric fireplace at the end of the enormous lounge. Mycroft sat in one of the coal-black leather armchairs in front of it. Mycroft turned his head when he heard Violet’s slippers clapping on the tiled floor. “Ah, sister-in-law,” he drawled, standing up, ever the gentleman. “Please,” he gestured towards the empty chair then picked up a fur-lined rug that matched the one that had been on Violet’s bed.

Violet limped to the proffered chair and sank down.

“You are quite the idiot. You do realize that, don’t you?”

Violet cringed as Mycroft threw the rug over her legs as if she was some sort of invalid. She didn’t speak for fear of her American showing through.

“We are quite alone, Agent Hunter,” Mycroft added, turning to return to his chair. But instead of sitting down, he pushed out an old fashioned tea service trolley. Without even asking her, he filled a dainty cup then held it out to her. Violet took it with her left hand, praying to God it wouldn’t start trembling.

Violet stared at the contents of her cup. It looked creamy, almost like hot chocolate. She took a hesitant sip and discovered to her surprise, she liked it.

“*Royal Milk Tea,*” Mycroft explained as he continued “playing mother”, pouring himself a cup. “It’s mostly hot milk and sugar with a touch of tea. Mummy would make it for Sherlock and me when we
were ill or were just out of sorts that day. But Sherlock, in a fit of boredom, switched out white sugar for brown then added a dollop of honey. We’ve made it that way ever since.”

“It’s good,” Violet said grudgingly. “But you didn’t drug me and bring me here for a tea party.”

“No. I most certainly did not,” Mycroft elegantly sat himself back down into his chair without spilling a drop. He crossed his legs and started at Violet over the pretty blue-and-white china cup, his lizard eyes locked on her feline eyes. “You nearly gave yourself away.”

“Gave… what?”

“When the medic asked you who the prime minister of England was, you said Barack Obama.”

Violet nearly dropped her cup. “I… oh shit.”

“Mm,” Mycroft’s nose wrinkled at her vulgarity.

“My ears were ringing. I thought he said President, not…” The severity of her slip-up and the mercifulness of Mycroft’s interference sank in. “Thank you,” she whispered sheepishly.

“If that is what it takes to finally get it through your thick American skull that I am not your enemy, then the pleasure was all mine.”

“Can’t you just say ‘you’re welcome’ like a normal human being?”

Mycroft gave her a tight little smile. “You’re welcome.”

“So what happened?”

“No idea.”

“Bullshit,” Violet took another drink of her tea, wanting to enjoy it while it was hot. But Mycroft shook his head, “No one is taking responsibility.”

Violet bit her lip. “Do you think I was the target, or rather ‘Miss Smith’? Since Sherlock is out of the country, someone thought it would be a good idea to take his fiancée out?”

“It’s a possibility we’re entertaining, yes.” Mycroft took a dainty sip of his tea. “Why did you disappear for two days?”

“Sherlock discovered that our friends had obtained information that would have compromised the ‘Miss Smith’ cover story.”

“Mm,” Mycroft gave her another tight little smile. “That would be a tragedy if your comfortable little lie would be compromised.”

“For everyone, since I’ve been keeping Sherlock in line these past months, per your request,” Violet reminded him coldly. “Have you seen him in the news lately? Other than a brief byline about how he assisted The Met with one of their more… creative… cases.”

“For that I do sincerely thank you.”

Violet bit her lip, debating. Her plan to free Sherlock from Mycroft’s continual interference hinged
If her deceit was discovered, nothing, not even Sherlock could save her from Mycroft’s wrath. She’d be on the first plane back to the United States in handcuffs and leg-irons.

Studying Mycroft’s beady eyes, thin lips and narrow face, his tight composure, Violet knew control to him meant more than anything. Even more than it did to Sherlock. Based on the profile she had been building on Sherlock since she first heard his name nearly eight years ago, she knew Sherlock welcomed a little chaos in his life. Despite his lamentation for the lack of logic and order in the world, Violet knew he secretly believed a bit of a mess was fun. Sherlock was like a tectonic plate, content to lay dormant most of the time but happy to shake things up once in a while, just for kicks and giggles.

Mycroft was a volcano about to blow.

Violet decided to throw the dice. I’ve stayed alive this long… I like my odds.

“I also had a break-through on Margaux Vos,” she added idly, as if telling him she bought a pair of socks at a swap meet.

“Did you?” Mycroft sounded bored but there was the tiniest bit of light in those cold black eyes.

“She wasn’t working for Moriarty, she was working for Magnussen.”

There it is, Violet thought dispassionately. Magnussen’s name was like a match dropped in a pool of gasoline. Mycroft’s lips thinned until they nearly disappeared. “Are you certain?”

“Absolutely.” This was not a lie. Billy Wiggins and The Homeless Network had come up trumps.

“And I have the documentation to back it up. Your Agent Jensen was Magnussen’s bitch through and through. She was planted here as an MI-6 agent specifically to get dirt on you.”

“So you know how she got into MI-6 in the first place?”

“Yes, Eduardo Lucas,” Violet responded like a good little girl who knew the answer the schoolmaster asked. “He helped her create the fake “Agent Jensen” persona, complete with credentials and references. One of those references being…”

“Eduardo Lucas,” Mycroft muttered before taking another sip of his tea. “According to her C.V., she had originally trained at King’s College for nursing, but then dropped out of the program to move to Birmingham to become a police officer. Supposedly she moved up the ranks fairly quickly, working mostly undercover and surveillance. Her recommendations glowed.” Mycroft’s eyes hardened.

“That’s why I assigned her to monitor Molly Hopper after The Fall. I had confidence she could convince people she was an actual nurse and still keep Miss Hooper safe if something… untoward should have happened to her.”

“Margery Vos was an amazing actress,” Violet attempted to placate Mycroft. Stay on his good side…

“If she would have gone to Hollywood instead of to Magnussen, she’d probably be alive and winning Oscars now. Did… did she know exactly why you ordered her to watch Molly?”

“No,” Mycroft snapped. “Only an idiot would completely trust a spy. I ordered her to monitor Molly Hooper. She didn’t ask why. She just did what she was told. I seriously doubt she realized the role the pathologist played in The Fall.”

Violet wondered who Mycroft was trying to convince. She left it alone but made a mental note to tell Sherlock that Molly’s bit in The Fall may have been compromised.
“That may be,” Violet kept her tone neutral, “but it doesn’t really matter. It was you she had her eyes on the entire time starting from the Great Hiatus up until Sherlock killed Magnussen.”

Mycroft didn’t flinch at Violet’s bald statement about Sherlock murdering the cold-blooded Dane. “She stayed on after Magnussen’s death. What information could she have possibly given them that would have been useful after his demise?”

Violet lifted a finger. “She stayed on with MI-6. After Magnussen bit it, his league of blackmailers thought she sold them out to you to save her own ass.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows lifted. “Oh?” His lips trembled, as if trying to repress a smirk. “Dear me.”

Violet nodded. Her face remained solemn and grim and not just because of her injuries. “She knew she had a short shelf-life. In order to buy time, she sought the Consulting Criminals.”

A muscle in Mycroft’s cheek twitched. “Did she now?”

Violet mentally noted the spasm. She nodded then winced, her head still sore from the explosion. Instinctively she reached to rub the bump on the side of her head but stopped herself. “She tipped Moriarty’s people off about Mary going into premature labor after Sherlock’s exile was rescinded. Then she made an anonymous call MI-6 disclosing Maisie Watson’s location.”

Mycroft’s lips now turned firmly down. Violet knew his blood moved through his veins like magma right before the eruption. Easy… easy… she counseled herself. Do not point out how he missed a double-agent right underneath his nose. Especially with the MI-6 mole still lurking and Eduardo Lucas turning traitor. Remember his profile… not only is he a control-freak, he is prideful. Pride does go before a fall…but not today. You cannot embarrass him today.

“Did she work alone?” Mycroft’s voice was dangerously cool.

Violet started to shake her head and again, stopped herself. “No. I have reason to believe both Eduard Lucas and the MI-6 Mole assisted her. The MI-6 mole also gave Vos Anthea’s sign-on information. That’s how she was able to hack into your computer systems to give Anthea the termination order on Jennifer Boyle.”

“The nurse,” Mycroft murmured before finishing his tea. Violet took the opportunity to take another fortifying swallow as well. As delicious as the tea was, she heartily wished it was scotch.

“Yes,” she said as Mycroft put his cup and saucer on the in-table dividing the two armchairs. “Jennifer Boyle, the nurse who took care of Maisie Watson while she was in the NICU. Anthea was tricked into murdering her in order to cover up everyone’s tracks. But I’m getting ahead of myself.”

“Pray continue,” Mycroft leaned back into his chair, tenting his fingers exactly like Sherlock. He fixed his obsidian eyes on her face, watching for any indication of a lie.

“Here we go. Violet suppressed the urge to lick her lips, a sure sign of weakness in The British Government’s eyes. She took a breath, like she used before giving a report to her superior at the Bureau. Then in a completely detached and clinical voice, she repeated the information Wiggins and The Homeless Network had produced for her. “After the rescue team retrieved Maisie Watson, Margaux Vos honestly thought MI-6 would return the baby to the Watsons and she would be rewarded with immunity.”

“Immunity?” Mycroft sounded amused.

“It’s no joke. She knew it was only a matter of time before you deduced she was a fraud,” Violet
was not above flattery in order to achieve her objectives. And my how the Holmes Boys love to be praised for their brilliance, she internally sighed to herself. Noticing how Mycroft puffed his chest out just a bit and square his shoulders ever so slightly (… just like Baby Brother…) she continued: “But when Maisie continued to be “dead”, Vos became desperate. Magnussen’s people didn’t trust her and were about to turn on her.”

“Turn?”

“Sell her out to the highest bidder. MI-6. The Red-Headed League. The press,” Violet shrugged. “She was fucked and she knew it. She had also burned Moriarty’s people. Plus you had just put Sherlock on the case to find the MI-6 Mole. Vos was no criminal mastermind, just an extraordinarily good actress. Using her special skills set, she made it her mission in life to befriended Jennifer Boyle, who was also a friend of…”

“Molly Hooper,” Mycroft muttered, “That pathologist again. It seems that Jim Moriarty wasn’t the only one who underestimated that girl.”

“She used that poor girl as an excuse,” Violet said hastily, not wanting Molly to appear on Mycroft’s radar for longer than necessary. God help us all if he figures out who Henry Lestrade’s father really is, Violet quailed. “In order to get close to Mary Watson, at Greg Lestrade and Molly Hooper’s wedding.” Violet paused, making sure she had Mycroft’s complete attention.

She did but he didn’t speak. Just inclined his head, indicating she should go on.

But first she observed how his eyes narrowed and his nostrils flared. How his jaw tightened even more. Only then did Violet say, “She knew Molly was close to Sherlock and the Watsons. She wanted one of them to overhear Jennifer’s suspicions. She used Jennifer as a catalyst, to start this shit-storm between you and Mary. She thought Mary would tell John, John would tell Sherlock and you two would get into it.”

Mycroft sat up slightly. “The fool had no idea who Mary Watson was.”

“Not until it was too late.”

“Do you know why Mary murdered Margaux Vos?”

Violet blinked. “Are you screwing with me now Mycroft?”

Mycroft exhaled and rubbed his temples. “Why will no one believe me when I tell him I have no idea what happened to Marissa Watson or where she is?”

“Really?” Violet couldn’t help herself.

He glared at her as he said icily: “I signed off on the order to rescue her, of course. She’s a civilian and a child, but more importantly, she is John Watson’s child. We all owe John more than any of us will ever realize.”

For a split second, Mycroft looked human, his eyes no longer black and his thin lips trembled ever so slightly. Violet didn’t have to be a profiler to realize that he was thinking about how Sherlock would have bled out on Magnussen’s floor if John hadn’t been there. Not to mention all the other ways John had saved Sherlock all these years.

For a moment, Violet almost believed that Mycroft actually loved his little brother.

Then the humanity vanished from his face, the warmth dissipated from his eyes and he resumed
speaking in his cool, unctuous voice again: “But in order to protect the child, I have purposely removed myself from her case. All I know is that she is safe. I will not be given any information regarding the child so I can’t inadvertently disclose it if I should be abducted and tortured. People seem to think I’m a pressure point for Sherlock and everyone knows John Watson is a pressure point for Sherlock,” Mycroft sniffed then glared at Violet. “So, with all due respect, cease with the suspense and tell me what happened. Why did Mary Watson murder Margaux Vos?”

“Jesus Christ,” Violet said hoarsely. “You really don’t know.” After Mycroft gave her another filthy look, she whispered, “She was discovered at… an auction.”

“What?”

“ Moriarty’s people were in the process of selling the baby.”

“Selling?” Mycroft choked on the word. “To whom?”

“I… don’t know,” Violet lied. This is where it gets scary, she thought as she kept her eyes firmly on Mycroft’s face, keeping her posture as natural as she could with her injuries. But her heart pounded frantically as she thought, Mycroft can’t know that I know everything, including that I do know damn well who “bought” Maisie.

Sherlock would never forgive me.

Mycroft pinched the bridge of his nose. “It makes sense,” he finally said. “ La Ligue des Roux has gotten involved with human trafficking, as you well know from last spring. ”

“Yes,” Violet felt the tea sitting in her gut like lead. Dammit, she thought, clutching the half-full cup. “Mary, to put it bluntly, found out her baby was up for sale and lost her shit.”

“Elegant,” Mycroft made a moue of disdain.

“The hell with elegant! It’s accurate,” Violet snapped. “Ever since I’ve found out, no, ever since you told me who Mary really was, I’ve been working on a profile for her. Right now, she is the most dangerous woman in London, possibly England. She has nothing to lose. She would kill me, you, Sherlock, even John,” Violet narrowed her eyes at Mycroft, letting the last name sink in. “If that meant she could get her daughter back.”

“She loves John,” Mycroft said faintly, as if that sentimental connection was enough.

“She loves her children more,” Violet quoted Sherlock verbatim. Mycroft, in another stunning display of humanity, ran his hands down his face. “I cannot give her Marissa Watson back,” he leaned back and loosened his necktie. “You know I can’t.”

“I know,” Violet enjoyed how Mycroft’s eyes widened in surprise when she agreed with him. “Nor should you, like I said, she’s dangerous. She could fuck everything up for all of us. Me, you, Sherlock… If we don’t get her under control, it will all start to crash down and fall apart.”

“We?” Mycroft snorted.

“My neck is just as much on the line as yours,” Violet reminded him. “If she doesn’t kill us, she can screw all of us over, unless you choose to expose her as AGRA.”

“Oh, don’t you think I would have already if I had the evidence?” Mycroft grimaced. “Yes, I can threaten and intimidate her, use my reputation as ‘The British Government’ as my dear little brother
enjoys calling me. Alas, the man who gave Mary up to Magnussen was very inconveniently found with the same gunshot wound as my brother suffered, two days after Sherlock was shot. Magnussen is dead. Sherlock will not testify against her and John, as a spouse, cannot. You cannot provide evidence because that will compromise your ‘Miss Smith’ identity not to mention, put you back in the FBI and CIA’s sights should you go public as Agent Hunter. I doubt America would bother with an extradition order. They’d probably just send a sniper over and be done with it.” Mycroft stretched out his long legs and toed off his shoes. “And the good Doctor Watson destroyed the memory stick that connected Mary to all of Magnussen’s crimes. I am afraid that fear is the only leverage I have over Mrs. Watson. Fear and withholding her child and I don’t know how much longer I can keep Mrs. Watson afraid.”

There it is, my in. And Violet dove in, deep. “Sherlock made a copy,” she whispered.

“What?”

“Sherlock,” Violet spoke very slowly and carefully. “Made a copy…”

**

12 August 2015
221B Baker street
Wednesday morning
5:21 AM

“Forget it,” Sherlock’s face flushed as he realized how badly he had stuck his foot in his mouth. He turned down the hallway towards the master bathroom, head bowed, shoulders hunched.

“Shit,” Violet’s eyes fluttered shut. She padded down the hallway after him. She stood in the doorway as he ran a flannel under lukewarm water.

“Sit,” she gently ordered him. “Let me help you.”

“You’re exhausted, go to bed. I’m not that tired, actually.”

“Sit the fuck down, Sherlock Holmes.”

Sherlock dropped the flannel in the sink basin and sat down on the toilet.

Violet let a little smile of victory turn up her pale lips. She turned the tap off and picked up the damp flannel. She started dabbing at the angry wounds on his face, her touch feather-light. She cradled the back of his head with her free hand, her fingers entwined with his curls. To her surprise, Sherlock closed his eyes and allowed her to coddle him. He might have even fallen asleep if she hadn’t warned him “This is going to sting a bit.”

“Mm,” his head bobbed, making Violet wonder if he had dozed off. She went to retrieve the first aid kit. He stayed still as she continued to clean him up but jerked when he felt the bite of alcohol on the cuts on his cheek. He folded his lips tightly together. Then he winced as pain shot through his split lip and inhaled sharply through his nose.

“Sorry,” she breathed. As she dabbed polysporin over the cuts, she asked “Why didn’t you fight back when Greg started beating the hell out of you?”

“Same reason why I didn’t fight back with you when you started hitting and kicking me at the Copper Beaches,” he murmured. “You both needed an outlet for your anger.”
Her nimble fingers, pianist’s fingers, lightly but firmly apply the bandages on his cheek. Then she cupped his face with her hands, steady and strong hands, with calloused palms and scarred knuckles. Fighter’s hands caressing a mastermind’s face.

She tilted his face up just so and pressed her soft lips to his brow.

She ached to do more, to run her fingers across those prominent cheekbones then down his neck. To kneel before him so they could be eye-level. To drown in those brilliant eyes, currently the hue of an ocean at sunset. To meet his lips with hers, to discover what genius tasted like.

She wanted to rip off his ruined, blood-stained shirt, wanted to see and touch every single scar. Wanted his gorgeous, elegant fingers, musician’s fingers, to run through her hair then pulling it as he tilted her head back up for a kiss.

She wanted those magnificent hands on her, over her, in her…

Want, want, want… can’t, can’t, can’t…

He thought no one saw him nosing around Mrs. Rucastle’s bedroom during the aftermath of The Copper Beaches Massacre.

She let opportunity act on that strange, uncharacteristic impulse to cross a very serious line with Sherlock flitter away. Dammit…

When she had finished kissing his brow, she said softly, “Give me the drugs.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open. She had her hand outstretched. When he opened his mouth to protest, she said, “Please. Tristan Holloway’s bedroom in the London house was a damn pharmacy. I can only imagine what it was like at the Copper Beaches.” She beckoned with her fingers. “And you forgot to take your methadone yesterday.”

“Oh,” Sherlock put his fingers to his lips and then immediately pulled them away, wincing. “Actually, I haven’t taken them in over a week. Maybe longer. I think the last time I took my pills was when we confirmed Toller’s involvement in the Burned Girls case. Yes, the fifth of August. The last dose I took was on your faux birthday.”

“And you’re doing OK?”

“Apparently.”

“Awesome. Then give me the drugs you swiped from the Copper Beaches.”

Sherlock puffed out an angry, irritated breath. But he bent down and pulled one of the vials out of his sock. He placed it in Violet’s hand.

“Really? You just said my brain was above-average.”

Sherlock gave her the second vial.

“Stop treating me like I’m stupid, Sherlock.”

“There isn’t any more Violet,” he lifted the leg of his trousers to show her.

“Turn out your pockets,” Violet was unmoved.

Sherlock obeyed, with a black look clouding his face.
“There,” he snapped as he pulled his pockets out. “If you’re quite finished treating me like a junkie,” he tucked his pockets back in. “I need to think. I need quiet. Take my bed. I’m not tired after all. And I don’t need you to…” he abruptly stopped talking and flounced out of the bathroom in high dudgeon.

Violet knew he had seen the pity in her eyes when she had figured out what he had really meant when he had asked her to come to bed with him earlier.

*I don’t need you to stave off the nightmares.*

Violet shut the bathroom door quietly behind her and locked it. She turned the shower on. She cracked open the vials and poured the liquid down the sink drain. Then she got on her hands and knees and reached behind the toilet. She found the loose tile and pried open. One of Sherlock’s many little hidey-holes within the flat. She found the third vial and sighed as she sat back on her backside.

“Oh Sherlock, really?” she twirled the vial in her fingers. “I used to do this for a living.” Then, just to be certain, she dipped her fingers back down the hidey-hole to make sure there wasn’t a fourth vial stashed away… and brushed against something… plastic.

The hell? She frowned, grasping blindly for whatever she had touched. She got a good hold of the object and quickly took it out. “A jump drive… but…” Violet muttered as she flipped it over. And recognized Sherlock’s handwriting on the other side:

agra 2.0

Violet sucked in a breath then immediately put the jump-drive and, against her better judgment, the vial back into the hidey-hole. She slid the tile back in place and stood up so fast, her head swam. “Holy shit,” she whispered. “Holy shit, holy shit, holy shit…” She clasped her hands over her mouth, trying to breathe… but a burst of savage joy spread throughout her body, overriding the bumps and bruises she earned while riding around in the boot of Rucastle’s town car.

*I’ve got you Mary,* she thought with savage glee as she shed the clothes Mycroft’s people had provided her when they flew Sherlock and her out of Royal Naval Air Station Culdrose back to London. She drew back the shower curtain and sent up a brief prayer of thanksgiving that there were no koi fish or anything else weird floating around in the bath tub.

As the hot water washed the horrible day and night away from her, she reached for Sherlock’s shampoo. As she lathered up her hair, she wondered how she could use her newly acquired information to her best advantage.

**

30 November 2015
Mycroft Holmes’ “residence”
Monday evening
7:32 PM

Mycroft no longer lounged in his chair. He sat straight up and stared at the chestnut-haired woman in the chair opposite him. “We have her,” he breathed.

“Correction,” Violet lifted her eyebrows. “I have her.”

“Oh,” Mycroft purred. “Do you really think you’re in a position to bargain with me?”
“No,” Violet surprised Mycroft again. “Let’s just say I’ve come around to your way of thinking.”

“Indeed,” Scepticism colored Mycroft’s voice.

“Well, I’m not exactly happy about it,” Violet allowed her voice to grow peevish. “I still think you’re a piece of shit, but if I have to pick sides, I’d rather pick the side that’s going to keep me alive. You’ve kept your end of our deal so far. I’ve kept mine.”

“Except changing your last name,” Mycroft reminded her silkily.

Violet rolled her eyes. “The wedding has to be believable. That kind of planning takes time. The only thing Sherlock and I agree on with is that neither one of us would tolerate a church wedding. I’m still trying to get him to understand we have to do a little more than sign a piece of paper in front of a magistrate, we have to have some sort of celebration afterwards.” When Mycroft furrowed his brow in confusion, Violet rolled her eyes heavenward again. “So we can leak pictures to the press.”

“Oh, yes. That makes sense,” Mycroft nodded his approval. “Now, about AGRA…”

Violet shook her head and instantly regretted it. She felt exhaustion settling in her bones. She needed to go back to bed soon. Careful now, she counseled herself. When you get tired is when you make mistakes. Check yourself. “The timing is not right to take AGRA out,” Violet told him. “If Mary disappears now, then John will have nothing to lose. And you’ll be dead, John will be in prison or dead and there will be nothing I can do to stop Sherlock from spiraling out of control, which means the ‘Miss Smith’ cover will be blown and I’ll either be in prison or dead.”

“Slippery slope logic,” Mycroft sniffed.

Violet shook her head again, wincing as she did so. “Nothing slippery about it. Mary is pregnant. You can’t take her out until after she gives birth. The child will anchor John. He won’t seek retaliation if you take Mary out, as long as he has this baby as his.”

Mycroft leaned back into his chair again. “Why do people insist on breeding?” he griped.

“Not sure, I had my tubes tied.”

Mycroft gave her a half-smile. “Sherlock is always talking about your good sense. When he actually speaks to me, of course,” then he sighed. “Very well, we shall bide our time on Mrs. Watson, but when the time is right, you will provide me with the copy of the memory stick?”

“Yes,” Violet lied again. “But right now, I need something that only you, well, really, your people can obtain. Sherlock’s contacts are good, but I need someone with more juice.”

“Juice?” Mycroft scrunched his face up then rolled his eyes. “Oh. American slang.”

“Yeah… and how many slang words do Brits have for penis?” Violet deadpanned.

“How droll you are,” Mycroft sneered. “What do you need? Or rather, what does my brother need as I am assuming this pertains to the case at hand?”

“I need everything on Charles Augustus Magnussen and I mean everything,” Violet stared Mycroft down. “Nothing is insignificant. I want every piece of documentation from birth to death, official and unofficial.”

“Why?”
“I’m building a profile.”

“Of a dead man?”

“Dead men still have power; look at Jim Moriarty, or whoever stepped into his shoes when he blew his brains out on the roof in front of Sherlock,” there was no humor in Violet’s voice. “This is the other thing I learned while I took my two day vacation from you and your surveillance.”

“Do go on,” Mycroft actually sounded concerned instead of supercilious.

“Margaux Vos was brokering a merger between Magnussen and *La Ligue des Roux*, a super-cell of terrorism, violence and corruption. Magnussen was going to control the press, *La Ligue des Roux* everything else.”

Violet did not enjoy watching all the color drain from Mycroft’s face. “Moriarty was the only person Magnussen feared,” his voice was barely a whisper.

“But when he thought Moriarty was dead, he became very, very interested in merging with them,” Violet informed him. “Magnussen was a force to be reckoned with in London, but on a global scale, he was a small-time crook. Merging with the RHL, well, that would have been his coming out party. He dragged his feet about joining until two things happened. One,” Violet held up a finger, “Jim Moriarty was dead. And two,” she held up her second finger, “That you and Sherlock were either dead or contained somehow.”

“Because only then, did he felt safe, of course,” Mycroft muttered. “Because with Moriarty, my brother and me out of the way, Magnussen thought he could control Moriarty’s people.”

“Vos thought she could keep the deal alive after Magnussen’s death, but she wouldn’t be able to broker a deal like that by herself. There has to be someone in Magnussen’s life who could keep his empire going. A sibling, a significant other, someone… someone MI-6 is overlooking. But I don’t have enough information on Magnussen and I know Vos or Eduardo Lucas couldn’t keep his blackmailers in line.”

“You do know Lucas is dead?”

“Yes, Sherlock texted me.”

“Do you happen to know the whereabouts of a Met officer named Collins?” Mycroft asked idly.

“Safe,” was the only information Violet would volunteer.

Mycroft sighed theatrically, again reminding Violet of Sherlock. “Pity I can’t bring you onboard MI-6 in an official capacity,” he rose lithely to his feet. “I shall get the records you require in order for you to continue creating your... profile.”

“You’re… actually going to trust me?”

“No,” Mycroft walked over to Violet, hands behind his back. “I am choosing to work with you. I do not trust you and shall not ever trust you. I am certain the feeling is mutual?”

“Well… yeah.”

“You really are rather bright, for an American.”

“Golly, thanks, Mickey.”
Mycroft’s nostrils flared again, but he held his hand out, “Enough business. Come along. I’m not exactly a gourmet chef, but I am quite capable of heating up soup and buttering toast. You need to eat and then you need to go back to bed.”

Violet accepted Mycroft’s hand and let him help her up. She was about to say thank you but gasped instead as Mycroft encircled her wrist in a tight grip.

“Are you in love with my brother?”

“No!” Violet spat out automatically.

A cruel smile appeared on Mycroft’s lips, “Liar.” He pressed his mouth against her ear, “And that’s my leverage against you, my dear Agent Hunter.”

**

1 December 2015
Paris, France
Tuesday morning
4:55 AM Paris time

When not working, Sherlock did not stir from his bed until ten in the morning, if he could help it.

But working he was plus he desperately craved a bit of privacy at the moment.

Before slipping out of their hotel room, he had looked over at John, sleeping in the other hotel bed. After a long, unproductive day, John had succumbed to the pain in his shoulder and back and taken one of the pills Honoré’s intern friend had prescribed for him. He had passed out before learning about Mrs. Hudson and Violet’s “accident.”

Sherlock thought it might be… kinder… to let John sleep.

As for himself, he found himself aching to go home. He wanted to fuss over Mrs. Hudson himself, just like he did when she endured those awful chemotherapy treatments. He had just left his last rehabilitation clinic when he had moved into 221B. Her illness helped keep his mind off his cravings until Lestrade finally caved and started calling him on a regular basis as a consultant, of course. But by then, she had gone into remission and Sherlock had gone to Work.

He also desired to have a nice long chat with Mycroft about abducting Violet… and by chat, he meant beating him into senselessness, just like he did when he was a teenager and Mycroft a young man. The day Mycroft had realized that Sherlock was physically stronger than Mycroft was one of the best days of Sherlock’s life.

He also raged at missing the opportunity to inspect the crime scene himself. MI-6 wouldn’t do half the job he would. Those imbeciles were bound to miss something.

As he had quietly dressed then bundled himself up in his coat and scarf, he admitted to himself and himself alone he also felt miserably homesick. After The Great Hiatus, he vowed he would never leave London again. Many nights during his mission to destroy Moriarty’s network, he had dreamt of his shabby little flat with the mismatched wallpaper and dissimilar furniture, his books and his violin. A quiet abode to think and recharge before entering the fray with only his wits as his weapon… with John puttering around in the kitchen or typing away on his laptop, of course.

Sherlock had frowned as he pulled on his gloves. It was worrisome, how prominently John featured in his dreams.
Especially since John had lapsed into a troublesome silence beyond polite responses to questions.

He had looked over his shoulder at his best friend, sleeping on his back, one arm thrown over his head, the other across his chest. If he hadn’t been drugged, he’d eventually roll over to his belly. That was how John always slept, or at least, how he slept when he didn’t share a bed.

Sherlock frowned again as he moved to hover over John’s bed, watching his chest rise and fall with every breath. Something happened at Dupin’s, this Sherlock knew, but as to what exactly… well that was a new mystery to unravel.

But one Sherlock didn’t have time for at the moment. He needed to find the bloody Letter so he and John could finally leave the City of Lights, plus they needed to locate Julia Stoner to prove that John Mitton did not murder Eduardo Lucas.

But right now, his top priority was finding Irene Adler.

He twitched the duvet John had thrown off back over him and slipped out of the hotel room.

It had been extremely difficult, trying to deduce who may have taken Irene and where with Dupin watching every move he made. It had not been difficult to evade John, who had been reticent and temperamental for the past two days now.

Escaping Dupin’s rubbish-filled flat after sleeping most of the day away, Sherlock and John had met Dupin back at the shabby hostel where Lucas had died to search for additional clues. Dupin had idly asked John if everything was alright, and John only grunted that his shoulder hurt, then ducked into the bathroom, even though Dupin had just finished searching in there.

Sherlock had also noticed John barely said three words to him that day. He had also been extremely quiet all day yesterday as well.

That…hurt, for some odd reason.

Never mind, John’s not the one in mortal danger, Sherlock shook off his wounded feelings and redirected his thoughts towards Irene as he hailed a cab. When it pulled over, Sherlock hopped in and in flawless French, gave succinct instructions to take him back to the hotel where Irene had been staying. This would be the first opportunity for him to return to the scene of the crime, so to speak. Is it a crime to abduct a dead woman? He wondered as the cab merged into traffic, which was not nearly as terrifying as it was during daylight.

Sherlock closed his eyes and steepled his fingers, thinking, as usual. Then he felt his mobile buzzing. He unbuttoned the Belstaff and reached into his trouser pocket for his mobile. He let loose a long exhale of relief when he read the text message:

Let’s have breakfast.

He rang the number back instead.

“Where the bloody hell are you?”

“Well, good morning to you too, Mr. Holmes!” she laughed but it wasn’t her normal laugh.

Sherlock’s brows narrowed. “Your room had been ransacked.”

“Yes, well, I ran into a bit of difficulty, but I’m alright.” Now she sounded serious. “One of Moriarty’s people found me, but I managed to get away.”
“How?”

“I knew what he liked,” she purred.

“You weren’t alone in your hotel room.”

“No, I wasn’t.”

“That story you told me, about Mia and Missy Stroper, it was all an elaborate lie, wasn’t it?”

“Yes,” Irene admitted. “I wasn’t escaping trouble in Rome. Trouble had already found me. They found me and used me as bait. They were planning to ambush you at the cemetery. I’m so sorry, Sherlock. Please forgive me.”

“Of course I forgive you,” Sherlock said gruffly. “After all, I forgave you for manipulating me into revealing MI-6’s plans to thwart a terrorist attack. Why wouldn’t I forgive you for this?”

Irene laughed again, but now she sounded like herself. “So you found everything you were looking for then?”

“Not quite,” Sherlock smirked to himself. As fond as he was of The Woman (and there would always be a tiny bit of him that would care about her), he knew better than to show all his cards to her. “The game is still on.”

“Happy hunting then,” she said lightly, “Until next time, Mr. Holmes.”

“Miss Adler, good morning,” Sherlock rang off. Then, in French, he gave the cab driver different directions, leaning back as his smirk turned into a genuine smile.

I know where The Letter is…

Meanwhile, Irene Adler, still wearing the black cashmere jumper and jeans from three days ago, watched as Julia Stoner took the mobile off of speaker then tucked it into her trouser pocket. Julia had held the mobile up for Irene because Irene’s wrists were handcuffed behind her back.

Both women stood in a posh hotel room in front of a bespectacled old man with a kindly face and silvery leonine hair. He wore a plush dressing gown and slippers. He sat in a comfortable leather chair in front of a beautiful marble fireplace, the flames crackling merrily.

John knew this man as “Mr. Kincaid.”

“Well done, Miss Adler,” Mr. Kincaid told The Woman. He had the faintest trace of an Irish accent. “We appreciate your cooperation.”

When Julia had removed her blindfold and Irene had seen who she had been delivered to, she had started trembling. She continued to tremble.

“Oh, don’t be afraid, Miss Adler,” the old lion gave her a gentle smile. “We have no plans to eliminate you or disfigure you, despite what you might have been told.” He gave a stern look to Julia then turned his gaze back to Irene, his face once again kind, almost tender. “You’re a gift, you see. See, someone very dear to me is coming home and I want him to have the Very Best.”

Irene choked back a sob then started breathing rapidly, “Please…” her breath hitched.

“Oh dear, that won’t do,” the old lion tut-tutted as Irene’s knees began to buckle. “Julia?”
Julia grabbed Irene by the crook of her elbow and guided her to the sofa. She pushed her down. As Irene tumbled onto the sofa into an uncomfortable position for her handcuffed hands, Mr. Kincaid admonished Julia, “That’s not how we treat our guests.”

“Sorry,” Julia did not sound one bit sorry. But she arranged Irene into a more comfortable position. Then, from between the sofa cushions, she produced a syringe and jammed it into Irene’s throat. It took seconds for Irene’s eyes to roll back, flutter then fall shut. She slumped to her side, limp as a wet rag.

Julia snapped her fingers and a man slid out from the shadows. He scooped Irene easily up into his arms, as if she was his bride and this was their honeymoon.

“She can be… appropriately disciplined if she acts out,” Mr. Kincaid ordered the man. “Keep her comfortable, but not in the lap of luxury. Three square meals a day, water whenever she requests it, an appropriate loo and sink for her to use. But she is not to be marred in any… noticeable way. No visible bruises or cuts or amputations. No damage to her face or hair and for God’s sake, keep her alive, would you please?”

“Yes sir.”

“And no raping,” Mr. Kincaid added sternly. “I want her to be… a somewhat willing partner when the time comes for me to give her away.”

“Understood,” the man nodded then took Irene away. Her long black hair fluttered like a veil as she was carried off.

Once alone, Mr. Kincaid’s face became stern. “I’m disappointed in you, Julia.”

“This isn’t my fault,” Julia snapped. “No one told me Dupin came out of retirement for this one.”

“Nevertheless, our merchandise is gone,” Mr. Kincaid snapped. “We have no leverage to give Senator Woodhouse, which means he has no proof that Agent Violet Hunter is alive.”

“We can get proof of life easily enough. We can break into 221B an-”

“Do you have any idea what the level of surveillance is on 221B, especially now?”

“I can pose as my sister. Visit Baker Street and ask him for his help. He’d believe me, especially since my stupid twin already went to the Watsons seeking The Great Detective’s help.”

“You wildly underestimate your opposition,” Mr. Kincaid hissed. “If Mr. Holmes does not notice that you are not Lady Trelawney-Hope, then his fiancée would.”

“His fia-”

“Is a highly skilled profiler,” Mr. Kincaid reminded her. “Her job is to detect frauds.”

“We still have The Letter,” Julia protested feebly. “We can use that to get rid of her.”

“Yes, that’s better than nothing, although I guarantee Mr. Holmes and Monsieur Dupin will have deduced its location by the end of this week,” he sighed. “After the debacle at Appledore, Mr. Holmes will not attempt to retrieve it himself. He will call MI-6 like a good boy. Mycroft has his foot firmly on Sherlock’s neck.”

“Then what do we do?” Julia demanded. “Look, my people still want the merger to go through. We
can’t proceed with MI-6 and Interpol breathing down our necks!”

The old lion stroked his beard. “Have you found John Mitton yet?”

“No. But I got word he’s in London.”

The old lion did not state the obvious, which was to find him. What he did say was, “Proceed with the Third Wave. Immediately.”

Julia blinked. “Don’t we want to wait when they’re back in London?”

“No. It needs to happen now, while they’re away and powerless.”

“Isn’t it too soon after bombing the clinic?”

The old man took off his tortoise-shell spectacles. “Are you questioning my judgment?”

He spoke so softly, so gently, like a disappointed grandfather. But Julia turned stark-white and whispered, “No sir.”

“Then make the call. It happens today. Before lunch, their time,” He rose. “I’m going back to bed. I am not to be disturbed until at least ten o’clock, unless there is a genuine emergency.”

“Yes sir.”

Chapter End Notes

Yes, I subscribe to the theory that Sherlock made a copy of the memory stick. It would be very un-Sherlockian of him NOT to investigate!

Happy Sunday everyone :^)
Chapter Summary

“May neither of you experience this kind of a pain,” Dupin murmured so quietly, John almost didn’t hear him...."

Things continue to unravel in France as well as England.

Apologies for the late posting, so Happy Monday/Labor Day!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Eighteen: Outcasts Always Mourn

1 December 2015
Cimetière du Père-Lachaise
Paris, France
Tuesday morning
10:05 AM Paris time

John hated it when Sherlock made him wear a disguise.

At least this wasn’t an elaborate disguise, but still… “Did we really have to dress up like Americans”? John asked as he looked down at his outfit again. It wasn’t horrible what he was wearing, not really. He just felt so… sloppy.

Sherlock had burst into the hotel room two hours ago, bearing shopping bags and barking at him to “Get up.” He had dropped one of the bags on the foot of John’s bed then told him to “Get dressed.” John had peeked into the bag and found jeans, white socks, trainers, a T-shirt, a grey athletic sweatshirt, a ball-cap with some American team logo on it that John didn’t recognize and a navy blue coat that Sherlock described as a “windbreaker”, whatever that was. Everything except the hat and the shoes was one size too large. John thought his jeans were going to slide off his rump for sure.

“I mean,” John looked up at the stone pillars welcoming guests into the cemetery. “This is something I’d wear when mowing the lawn or pulling weeds out of the flowerbed in the back garden. Do Americans really dress like this or are you taking the piss out of me?”

“Shh,” Sherlock hissed, jamming his hands into his coat pockets. He had left the Belstaff as well as his scarf back at the hotel. He hadn’t shaved in the past three days so he had an impressive bit of black stubble going. He also wore jeans, but ridiculous skin-tight ones that made John wonder how Sherlock even pulled them on. He wore Converse trainers, a flannel shirt, a T-shirt with an American rock-band logo that John did not recognize, a black winter coat similar to John’s, sunglasses and a fedora. In short, he made himself look like one of those idiot hipsters from the States. John reckoned he’d blend in just fine somewhere like New York or LA.

“And my neck is cold,” John shot back but in a whisper.

“American men generally don’t wear scarves unless they live in a colder clime, like the upper East
Coast or the Midwest and usually only during the bitterest of temperatures,” Sherlock kept his voice low. “In certain parts of America, this weather would not be considered unbearably cold. And do keep your voice down.”

John snorted, but he also did not think today’s chill was quite so bad either. The sun even made an appearance, but it only served to light the sky, not warm the air. John’s breath still puffed out like steam as he asked Sherlock in a whisper, “Are you sure it’s here?”

“Oh yes,” Sherlock nodded. “My source was clever indeed.”

As they wove their way throughout the cemetery, John asked, “Did you tell Dupin?”

John couldn’t tell, but he was sure Sherlock had rolled his eyes behind the sunglasses. “Yes, of course. He said he’d text and tell us where to meet once we’ve confirmed the location.”

John only nodded, not trusting himself to speak as he and Sherlock meandered down the path. He followed mutely as Sherlock turned right and jogged up a short flight of moss-covered steps. Because it was winter, the number of tourists milling about was minimal but occasionally, as John and Sherlock walked down the pavement and up and down stairs, they’d pass people with their camera-phones out, chattering amongst themselves, usually in English, sometimes with British accents, sometimes with American.

John wasn’t sure why he expected doom and gloom when he and Sherlock arrived at Père-Lachaise. It was in fact, very peaceful and quite pretty, almost like a park. Although John didn’t fancy the idea of taking a picnic lunch and spending the day there, he found the knot of anxiety loosening in his chest as he took in all the unique grave markers and tiny little mausoleums crammed one right next to the other. From time to time, he found himself opening his mouth to ask Sherlock what he was observing, but then would snap it shut again, not trusting himself to speak.

Ever since that revelation in Dupin’s spare bedroom, John hadn’t trusted himself to speak at all. Fear paralyzed his tongue. What do I say? I’m sorry but I don’t feel that way? I’m not gay, but I wish I were? I’m married? Every answer seemed wrong so John elected to stay silent. When Dupin had prodded him the other day in the flat where Lucas had died, John mumbled an excuse about his shoulder hurting and had darted away.

Last night he had bitten Sherlock’s head off, telling him that he was tired and hurting so he was going to take another pain pill and don’t you dare bother me. Then he had immediately felt guilt-stricken for his rudeness and proceeded to apologize, but Sherlock shrugged him off and told him to get some rest. So John had swallowed the pill and crawled into bed. Mercifully the pharmaceuticals did their job and everything faded to black.

And what about Violet? John wondered as he wandered behind Sherlock as they meandered off the cobbled footpath, weaving in and out and around the elaborate tombstones and neat little crypts the size of telephone booths. Does she know how he feels about me? Of course she knows, she’s as bad as he is when it comes to deducing people, she just calls it profiling. But what does she think of it? Does she mind? Why should she mind? They are just play-acting boyfriend/girlfriend because she needed a cover story… although I’m not sure how well that story is holding up now. Did that bombing have anything to do with her? And if yes, was that clinic targeted because she’s Miss Smith, Sherlock’s fiancée, or Agent Hunter, a loose end the Red Headed League wants to tie up… either way, it’s just an act… right?

His gut twisted as he remembered: But she was in his bed the last time I was at 221B. Sleeping, wearing his shirt and he was holding her hand… that was quite… intimate. And none of my business… but still… God, I should have just left it alone, I should have woken him up instead of
“Oof!” John huffed as Sherlock’s hand shot out, hitting him in the chest. Then Sherlock grabbed John by the front of his navy blue windbreaker (hideous thing really, similar to what John had seen American presidents wearing during informal outdoor press releases on the telly) and yanked him behind a rain-stained marble mausoleum.

“Sherlock, what the fu-” John started but Sherlock clapped his hand over John’s mouth, shaking his head, his sunglasses nearly flying off.

John cottoned on immediately and nodded. When Sherlock released his hand, John unzipped the horrid windbreaker. The nice thing about baggy clothing was it made hiding his Army Browning so much easier. John had left the safety off when they had left the hotel so all he had to do was silently slide it out of its holster.

Sherlock crouched, took off the ridiculous sunglasses and peered around the corner of the mausoleum. John followed suit, pointing his gun to the ground, but ready at any moment to lift it and fire if necessary.

Peeking around the mausoleum, John could see another wall, heavily graffitied with Doors’ lyrics such as “Riders on the storm” and “Baby light my fire.” He could just make out Jim Morrison’s grave itself, awash with winter flowers. Loads of carnations and chrysanthemums plus one potted poinsettia sat where a bust of Jim Morrison used to be until someone stole it during the Eighties.

The tomb next to Morrison’s was black marble, with an effigy of a cross carved into it. On top of that tomb sat a young man with short black hair but an impressive black beard. He wore a grey knitted headband over his ears, like the ones serious runners wore when jogging during bitterly cold days. He smoked cigarettes while listening to music on his iPhone, nodding his head in time with whatever tune his device was playing. He wore a thick, woolen black coat and a bright red muffler around his neck, but he still clapped his hands then rubbed them together, trying to stay warm. Something caught his attention on the other side of Jim Morrison’s grave. The young man pulled an ear bud out of his ear and said, “Quoi?” Then he laughed and said something good-naturedly, waving his arm, indicating to someone that he (or she) should come to him.

John and Sherlock watched as another young man took a long-legged step over Morrison’s grave. This young man was as wide as he was tall. He looked like he belonged on a rugby pitch or an American football field. He wore a black puffy coat, dark blue jeans, black boots and a black knitted cap. He held out a flask to the bearded man.

When the bearded man stood up, John could see the butt of a gun jutting out of his jeans.

Neither John nor Sherlock stayed much longer. They watched the bearded man take a swig of something out of the flask then give the bigger man a cigarette. Only when the bigger man returned to his post, did Sherlock tug lightly on the back of John’s ugly windbreaker. John duck-walked backwards a few steps before rising and following Sherlock as quickly as possible.

“So,” John waited until they had passed the philosopher Auguste Comte’s grave (a strange thing that looked like an oversized baby’s cradle) before speaking. “It’s hidden there, the Letter?”

“Obviously,” Sherlock still kept his voice down. “Under continual guard, all of whom appear to be devotees of the deceased rock star. That’s how they rotate the guards out, of course. One tourist appears and stays until the next change of guard. Presumably there’s some sort of password in play so the current guards can tell the difference between the actual tourists and replacements.”
“I’m surprised you even know who Jim Morrison is,” John quipped.

“John, I pay attention to good music, not the crap on the radio these days,” Sherlock snipped back but then stopped in his tracks to dig his mobile out of his coat pocket. He read the message then told John, “Come along,” before darting off.

John had no choice but to run after him, back down the cobblestone path, up a very narrow flight of stairs sandwiched between two mausoleums, up another flight of stairs, this one lined with greenery that hit John in the face as he ran up the stairs. Then back onto the cobbled path, then up another hidden flight of stone stairs. John’s back and shoulder ached as he continued to jog after Sherlock. He wondered how Sherlock managed to keep moving, but then, Sherlock hadn’t been put through the physical wringer like John had been, other than a few bruises on his face and the one on his belly from the jet’s seatbelt digging into him.

No, he’s just been through the emotional wringer, John thought wryly as Sherlock finally stopped in front of Oscar Wilde’s tomb. As Sherlock looked left to right for Dupin, John took a moment to regard the marker. He had to admit, it was a strange thing to behold, more of a sculpture than a proper monument. A naked sphinx carved out of a block of stone. It wasn’t a traditional sphinx, not like the gigantic one in Egypt. This sphinx was solemn, severe even. He also had odd, square-like wings. The sphinx looked like an angry angel in flight, looking for a sinner to condemn. There was a glass barricade around the sculpture. John vaguely remembered there was some sort of tradition to kiss the grave marker for luck or something ridiculous like that. Apparently the caretakers had grown tired of wiping lipstick stains off the stone and had erected the barricade. That hadn’t deterred the kisses or any other graffiti. Now tourists kissed the glass instead of the stone.

“John,” Sherlock’s deep voice broke John’s reverie.

“Right,” John turned away from the sculpture and followed Sherlock.

They didn’t walk far. Roughly two metres away from Oscar Wilde’s plot Dupin stood with his head bowed and a bouquet of roses held loosely in his hands. He was dressed as himself, with his leather coat, his sunglasses and his skull-cap.

As they drew closer, John could see the humble marker Dupin stood in front of. Compared to Wilde’s and Morrison’s and all the other tombs at Père-Lachaise, this marker was positively tiny. Just a granite slab embedded in the ground with a cross carved into it, very similar to the one next to Morrison’s grave.

John and Sherlock flanked Dupin. John could now clearly see the name inscribed in the stone: Marie Arnaudine Rogêt. There were some other words, but they were all in French. The date of birth and date of death were covered up by a rather fat stray cat, sunning himself, purring.

Remembering what Honoré had said about how Dupin reacted whenever someone mentioned his lost partner (love?), John hoped Sherlock would refrain from making deductions.

“Holding onto inanimate objects will not bring her back,” Sherlock rumbled.

Fuck, John hung his head. “Sherlock,” he moaned, “Not good.”

“No,” Dupin sounded amenable enough. “Not good at all, but, ah,” he shrugged. “He is right. I thought I did not need my medication, but…” he shrugged again. “As soon as this case is closed, I will go back on them. Right now, I need my mind to be clear, to think, to ratiocinate. The medication they prescribed to me makes me feel slow, groggy. But, it controlled my impulse to hoard. Right now, the need to bring Eduardo Lucas’ killer to justice and to retrieve The Letter
outweighs my mental health needs.”

John deeply disagreed with this assessment. But before he could contradict Dupin’s self-diagnosis, the French detective dug into his pocket and made kissing noises. The cat’s head popped up as Dupin scattered kitty kibble next to Marie’s tomb. The cat leapt to the ground and began chowing down. As Sherlock and John first stared at the cat, then at Dupin, he shrugged again, “She liked cats.” He knelt in front of the marker and tenderly placed the roses over the dates, then pressed his hand to his lips, then his hand to the stone. “Je t’aime, Marie.”

John knew what that meant.

But Dupin did not rise. John could feel Sherlock positively vibrating from the inactivity. Seeing Sherlock opening his mouth, John immediately grabbed his thin wrist, sternly telling him, “No.”

Then he dropped his wrist as if it had suddenly burst into flames.

“May neither of you experience this kind of pain,” Dupin murmured so quietly, John almost didn’t hear him. Then Dupin rose to his full height and squared his shoulders. He turned around and said, “So we have confirmation of the package then?”

“Yes,” Sherlock watched enviously as Dupin lit up one of his Gauloise cigarettes. “And I have a plan, but…” his face turned mulish. His nostrils flared and his lips were pressed tightly together. “I need your help.”

“Gladly given, Monsieur Holmes,” Dupin took a puff on his cigarette. “My car is parked nearby. Come, before we’re discovered,” he started walking away, still smoking.

Sherlock caught up to him with three long-legged steps. John trotted behind them. He heard Dupin ask, “Am I the only one you need assistance from?”

“No,” Sherlock said crisply. “I need two of your best Montmartre Militia, preferably male, but if there’s a female that can pose as male or a transgender person making the transition to male, that will do as well. It’s for appearance’s sake. And, I need Noelie.”

“My pretty little thief?” Dupin chuckled, definitely amused now. “Well, this sounds very interesting, indeed. Anything else?”

“Yes,” Sherlock stopped dead in his tracks, taking out his iPhone. John nearly ran into him. “John, do try and keep up.” Sherlock scolded him as he scrolled through his pictures. Then said, “Ah, yes. I need this stationery, this color and design precisely. And I need pink ink.”

“Pink?”

“Must I translate?” Sherlock asked sweetly.

“No, but… pink?”

“The princess used pink ink to write The Letter,” Sherlock informed him sotto voce. “Stupid girl.”

“Princess?” John squawked.

“Do shut up, John,” Sherlock said serenely. “You have barely said more than three words to me for two days, why bother speaking now?”

John’s face flushed. Ah. So, he did notice and realized I wasn’t talking because of my shoulder.
Dupin chose to ignore Sherlock’s ratty remarks. He studied the picture on Sherlock’s mobile. “That shouldn’t be a problem, the stationery. I am most definitely intrigued however, as to what you have in mind.”

“All in good time,” Sherlock purred, in his element now. “I need tea.”

“And food,” John interjected.

“Again, you’re doing that talking-thing,” Sherlock strode off, as if he wore one of his elegant suits and his Belstaff.

“Everything alright?” Dupin asked John while watching Sherlock sailing out of the cemetery.

John ran his hand over his face. “Just a misunderstanding, it’ll wash out in the end.”

“Mm,” Dupin shifted his eyes from Sherlock to the monument behind John.

John turned and saw that they stood once again in front of Oscar Wilde’s plinth. “That’s, uh, really something,” John licked his lips. “I loved Oscar Wilde until… well, once I joined the military and started my medical training I didn’t have much time to read for pleasure.”

“Mm,” Dupin said again. “Did you know there are actually two people buried here,” he pointed at the sphinx.

“No. I didn’t. I assume it’s not his wife.”

“No, it is most emphatically not his wife,” Dupin chuckled. “Nor his feckless lover, Lord Alfred Douglas,” he paused to take off his sunglasses. Again, John was taken by how bright and green his eyes were. “But his best friend, Robbie Ross,” Dupin looked up at the monument. “Best friend and lover. Loyal to the end.”

John swallowed. “Uh… how romantic?”

“Not romantic,” Dupin scoffed. “Beautiful. My ashes will be interred with Marie’s as well.”

And like Sherlock, he swept away, leaving John utterly alone.

Yeah, thanks mates. Leave me in a cemetery crawling with Moriarty’s people. John tightened his lips, glaring after Dupin then glaring at the Sphinx.

He could barely make out the epitaph through the lip-stick stained glass:

And alien tears will fill for him
Pity's long-broken urn,
For his mourners will be outcast men,
And outcasts always mourn.

**

1 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Tuesday evening
6:57 PM London time
The fire crackled merrily in the hearth. Violet sat cross-legged, back to the fireplace, in between John and Sherlock’s chairs. Five manila folders lay in front of her, in a semi-circle. A glass of water and a bottle of ibuprofen sat next to her on the left and to her right lay her “official” Smartphone, her “unofficial” prepaid mobile and her Glock. With the safety off, naturally.

One of Mycroft’s minions had driven her home earlier that afternoon only after Mycroft’s personal physician, the extremely jovial Dr. Sankaran, gave her the all-clear.

Violet was more than happy to flee Mycroft’s flat. She hoped never to see it again.

Once back in the shabby security of 221B Baker Street, Violet made a beeline for the master bath, shedding clothes as she went along, not knowing where Mycroft’s people had gotten the gray trousers and periwinkle twin-set or black patent leather heels, just like she didn’t know where the prissy linen nightgown came from. She didn’t care either, except she didn’t want the strange cloth against her skin for one second longer than necessary.

Despite the doctor’s advice to take a hot bath to soothe her sore muscles, she opted for a shower instead, mostly because she was afraid she would not be able to get out of the bathtub by herself. Besides, she wanted to wash that horrid lavender-and-roses scent out of her hair.

Now, with clean, shiny hair that smelt like fresh laundry dried in the sunshine, she wore her favorite comfortable clothes: thick woolen socks, her yoga bottoms and an old Oxford sweatshirt she had found in the depths of Sherlock’s wardrobe.

After feeding Gladstone his supper then eating a meager dinner of chicken broth and toast, she had retrieved her files from their hiding spot downstairs and brought them back up to 221B.

She moved excruciatingly slowly. Halfway up the seventeen steps to 221B, Violet had to pause, her arms and legs trembling with the effort. Then she reminded herself that Mrs. Hudson had broken a rib in the explosion and told herself to stop being such a baby.

Still, she wished Dr. Sankaran had ordered her something a bit stronger than prescription-strength ibuprofen.

Her mind wandered towards the master bathroom, where a vial of morphine still lay hidden underneath a loose tile.

Gladstone padded over to her then, whining a little, nuzzling her as he did so. “Shoo,” Violet scratched his pointed black ears then gave him a gentle push against his withers. When he didn’t move, she gave him a gentle slap on the rump. “I said shoo, buddy.”

If anyone else would have touched him, Gladstone surely would have ripped them apart. But she was His Person, His Mistress so he licked her cheek and trotted towards the sofa.

“Gross,” Violet smiled as she wiped the slobber off her cheek then smeared her hand on her yoga bottoms. Looking down at the files again, the smile slid off her thin, freckled face. She flipped her long, chestnut curls over her shoulder then tented her fingers like Sherlock, completely on purpose.

Sometimes she imitated her mark’s mannerisms while attempting to get inside their head.

“Five little Holmes, all in a row,” she murmured as she rested her chin on her fingertips and her elbows on her knees.

Sherlock’s folder was the thickest, of course, and it kept growing. When she had been assigned to profile Mycroft Holmes and his family back in 2008, she had dismissed Sherlock as Mycroft’s
immature, junkie brother. No one of significance.

1. Half of her mouth crooked up.

Mycroft’s folder was also fairly fat but nowhere as large as Sherlock’s. Mr. and Mrs. Holmes’ were only a quarter of the thickness of their children’s files.

Matthew Sherrinford Holmes’ file was exactly two pages long.

MI-6 did a very thorough job erasing as much of Ford out of the world as possible.

But I’m missing something, Violet pushed up the sleeves of the heavy woolen jumper then steepled her fingers again. I feel it, I know it. If Sherlock were here, he’d deduce it immediately. But he wouldn’t tell me because God forbid he discuss his family with me. Still… I feel like I’m being… misdirected… somehow…

God, my head hurts… and arms… and legs.

Violet massaged her forehead. Then she leaned forward and pulled Mycroft’s folder towards her. She flipped it open and studied the picture of a very fat six-year-old boy in a typical British schoolboy’s uniform, cheesing it up for whoever was behind the camera. The date on the back of the photograph was September 2, 1975. His little brother wouldn’t be born for another four months. Mickey was still the pampered and adored baby of the family.

Middle Child Syndrome, hardcore, Violet chewed on her lip. Technically, he is the eldest Holmes brother, but when Mr. and Mrs. Holmes adopted Ford, that made Mycroft the baby. Probably was spoiled rotten too. Then along comes Sherlock, the new baby, literally. And a special needs child, based on what Mrs. Holmes alluded to at Molly’s. Mycroft feels very much…

“Left behind in the shadows,” she said aloud as she lifted the photograph up to her eyes. “And in the shadows, you remain, Mr. Holmes. The dark is where you are most comfortable.” She squinted at the picture, as if it could answer her as she interrogated it. “What have you done, Mycroft Holmes? What made you turn on both your brothers? Is power that important to you?”

One of her mobiles hummed.

Feeling its vibration, she looked down to see which mobile was going off. Upon seeing the New Email Notification on the screen of the prepaid, she snatched it up. She flipped the mobile open, scrolled to the email icon then hit a button on the keypad to open the email. I am spoiled by touch screens, she groused through the arduous process.

The email, of course, was from the mysterious sally@WASPent.hotmail.com

And who the hell are you anyway? Violet wondered before reading the message. Not Sally Donovan, no way in hell. Sherlock doesn’t hold grudges, but he doesn’t forget either. Her hatred of him blinded him to the obvious, which was that he would have never abducted those kids. Doesn’t fit his profile, to him, kids are a paradox. Their whining and their irrationalities irritate him, but their innocence and curiosity intrigue him. He despises spoiled little brats, like Edward Rucastle, but he completely adores Archie, even though he’ll never admit it out loud.

even if he hates a kid, he would never deliberately hurt one. When Molly told him she didn’t want him in their baby’s life beyond “Mummy’s Good Friend,” because of Moriarty and because of Sherlock’s drug history, Sherlock stepped aside. Claims he doesn’t care that another man is raising his child. And even though he swore to Molly he would not interfere with how she would raise their son, the second he believed Raffles was threatened, he contemplated… stealing the boy and defecting
to the US...

**OK, so maybe he IS capable of kidnapping, but only his own kid, never anyone else’s.**

“Because that makes it all better,” Violet grumbled, shaking again at her flatmate’s constant contradictions. “But at the end of the day, Sherlock wouldn’t have abducted the ambassador’s kids because it would have been *boring.*” She looked up at her dog, who watched her from the sofa, “Right, boy?”

Gladstone responded with a reassuring *woof.*

“That’s right,” Violet smiled then sighed, “Donovan on the other hand…” She rolled her eyes as she lapsed back into silent thought: *Donovan, however, does carry grudges. She knows she lost the battle, but she’ll always blame Sherlock for ruining her police career. As well as for the death of Philip Anderson, so she would never voluntarily work with Sherlock.*

“So, if you’re not Sally Donovan, who are you?” Violet asked her prepaid mobile before opening the email message:

Send details about job.
Then we can discuss fees.
Tell Holmes Wasp says Hi and
to have Bambi check his bloody
e-mail once in a while.

“Who the fuck is *Bambi*?” Violet squawked. Then, painstakingly slowly, she typed out an email on the prepaid, cursing her sprained fingers as she did so:

I need everything on
Operation Raven,
a botched MI-6 mission.
Sherlock’s brother,
Mycroft was involved.
Don’t have much more
than that to go on.
Name your price, the sky’s
the limit and Sherlock’s life
depends on what you find.

Violet hit Send, then logged out of her secret hotmail account and flipped the mobile shut. The sky really was the limit when it came to money. Violet still had millions and millions of pounds squirreled away in an off-shore account, funds once belonging to the clients of The Red-Headed League. In a clever and diabolical move, instead of laundering the dirty money Violet electronically transferred everything into her nemesis, Jack Woodley’s account. Then she changed the password so he couldn’t access the money. Every gangster and terrorist in London howled for Jack’s head.

Violet had long since funneled the money out of the now-deceased Jack’s account into various secure accounts across the world. Her years working at an insurance agency gave her insights into the finance world she never had as a federal agent. Her years laundering money in order to obtain evidence against Jack Woodley and his involvement with Moriarty’s people taught her how to hide money and how to convolute a digital paper trail, since the trail could never be completely eradicated.

Plus, Operation Raven was an audition for “Wasp”, really. “If she can get me intel on Operation
Raven,” Violet set the mobile down, “Then she can help get information on Ford Holmes.”

Then her other mobile, the Smartphone, hummed.

Violet looked down then lifted her eyebrows in surprise at the name on the Caller ID. “What the hell?” Violet Hunter snatched the mobile up, hitting the Answer button. “This is Violet Smith.”

“Miss Smith, this is DI Dimmock.” Dimmock sounded rattled, but then he always sounded a bit rattled. “Apologies for ringing at this hour, but I have been unable to reach Holmes.”

“He’s actually not ignoring you. He’s working a case out of town.”

“Ah. That’s, well, that’s nice to know he’s not ignoring me but… is Dr. Watson with him by chance? I have been unable to get in touch with him or Mrs. Watson.”

_Mary? Why the hell would Dimmock call Mary?_ Violet Hunter wondered as Violet Smith said, “Mrs. Watson is probably working a late shift at the hospital. But yes, Dr. Watson did accompany Mr. Holmes.”

“Bollocks,” Dimmock swore then immediately apologized. “Forgive me. That was so inappropriate, it’s just that, I’m in an extraordinary bind here, and…”

_Spit it out_, Violet chewed on her upper lip in utter exasperation.

“Mind you, I don’t have much of a choice and I’m very uncomfortable asking this, but,” he exhaled loudly. For a moment, Violet wondered if he was smoking a cigarette as he spoke to her. “I need your help.”

“Me?”

“I know, I know, it is an enormous imposition. But with Sherlock and Dr. Watson not in London and DI Lestrade technically still on paternity leave, I’m between a rock and a very hard place. I’ve seen you work a scene with Holmes before. You’re good, very good. In fact, I even wondered if you weren’t actually some sort of undercover cop,” he attempted levity. But when Violet didn’t immediately respond, he meekly added, “I’ll ensure that you receive double the rates Holmes and Dr. Watson receive.”

Except I actually don’t need the money, Violet thought again about the millions she stole last spring from the gangsters as her headache intensified. “It’s not about the money, DI Dimmock. I’m not feeling very well, actually.”

“Please, Miss Smith, this case, it’s of a very delicate and personal nature.”

“Personal? I don’t understand. What is it about?” Her skin prickled.


“Har-” Violet shook her head then winced, only then remembering the nice bump on the head she had earned from the explosion at the clinic. Gingerly touching the side of her head, she asked, “You mean, Harry Watson, as in John’s elder sister?”

“Yes. It’s… well, I’m afraid it’s bad news.”

“I gathered,” Violet sniped. Dimmock worked homicide cases; of course it was going to be bad news. “What happened?”
“She’s dead.”

Violet ran her hand down her face. “Oh my God,” she breathed, “How?”

Violet expected a response along the lines of: “alcohol poisoning” or “drunk driving.” Therefore Dimmock’s answer was all the more shocking: “She was murdered.”

“What?” Violet blinked as her throat tightened. This is not a coincidence. “Right,” her voice was faint with weariness and fear. “I can be ready in twenty minutes but I’ll need a ride.”

“I’ll have a panda car come for you,” and with that, Dimmock rang off.

**

1 December 2015
Mayfair, London
Tuesday evening
7:35 PM

Chaos reigned supreme in front of the block of flats where Clara had lived and Harry had died.

“Go around back, please,” Violet Smith quietly commanded the young uniformed officer driving the police car.

Violet sat up front with the officer, a young woman, barely out of her twenties. She looked too fresh-faced to possibly be an adult, much less a cop. Did I ever look like that? Violet wondered wryly as she reached for the hood of her coat, which was the horrible pink monstrosity Mrs. Hudson had given her last March, when Violet had just moved in with Sherlock. The coat she had been wearing last March had been ruined with Sherlock pushed her into the Thames. The coat she had been wearing yesterday had been ruined by the explosion at the clinic. So the puffy, pink horror with the faux-fur fringed hood came out of retirement.

Ugly as it was, Violet couldn’t deny that it kept her warm as toast. Plus, she needed the hood. As the panda car drove past the growing crowd of photographers, journalists and general busybodies, she pulled the hood over her telltale chestnut-hued hair.

It’s only a matter of time before the tabloids catch wind that Harry Watson is the sister of Sherlock Holmes’ blogger, Violet’s stomach dropped as she looked away from the window.

And God-dammit, where is Mary? Violet reached into her coat pocket, searching for her mobile then squeezed it tight when she found it. There was no point in checking for messages because it had not vibrated once since Violet had both called and texted Mary, at first requesting her to reply immediately, then demanding she get in touch with her at once.

It was never good when Mary vanished.

The panda car turned a corner then another as it drove slowly down an alley. Violet had wondered if the alley was going to be large enough for a vehicle to drive down. Some alleyways in London barely had room for a person to walk. But this was a newer, posher part of London, so a bit more planning had gone into the design of these block-of-flats. Violet saw as they got closer to the building were Clara and Harry had lived, that there were garage doors. A large vehicle couldn’t fit, of course. But a Mini-Cooper or a VW Bug could trundle down the alley and fit into the ground-level garage just fine.

Sergeant Alex MacDonald stood in front of a garage that had to belonged to Clara. Next to her was a
cop Violet didn’t recognize. He also wore full uniform for winter patrol. Alex was in plain clothes, jeans, Wellies, a pale grey quilted coat, a thick navy scarf and a terribly unbecoming hat. However, Alex looked like she’d rather be warm than fashionable. Milling around them were several officers from forensics. Everyone looked cold and miserable, except Alex, who bore the cold as stoically and quietly as she did most things.

Violet, meanwhile, couldn’t bear the idea of kitting up into the full “Miss Smith” gear. She plaited her hair and wound it into a bun at the nape of her neck. She put on foundation and powder to not only conceal the freckles and scar on her face, but also the fresh scrapes and cuts. She also put on her spare pair of fake eyeglasses. However she still wore the yoga bottoms and socks. But there was nothing she could do about the Elastoplast on her cheek and forehead.

She added a pair of cream-colored woolen leg warmers then slipped on a pair of black riding boots. She left on the oversized sweatshirt as well. But she added a heather-grey scarf she found in Sherlock’s wardrobe, partially because she was cold and partially to hide the scar on her throat.

In short, it was too damn cold and she was too damn sore to deal with eyeliner, tights and skirts. Not to mention pulling off the sweatshirt, then pulling on another top. Plus, since Dimmock called her out of the blue, she reasoned no one would question her casual get up.

Alex certainly didn’t question it. She did lift an eyebrow when the female officer who drove Violet opened the backdoor and Gladstone sat up then jumped out. Violet quickly snatched up the leash and tugged, signaling to Gladstone to stay close to her.

But as usual, she didn’t comment. She merely tilted her head and said to Violet, “Follow me.”

Violet nodded then said firmly to the dog, “Komm.”

There was no trace of the affectionate pet from before. Gladstone knew he was Working now. And he knew his priorities: Protect his Mistress. Obey his Mistress.

Once inside and in the lift, Violet pushed the hood off her head and asked Alex, “How bad?”

“Bad,” Alex never minced words and today was not the day she was about to start.

“Was there a struggle?”

“Yes.”

“Good girl,” Violet couldn’t help murmuring. Even though she had only met Harry once and it had been when she was at her worst, she couldn’t imagine Harry going down without a fight. “Hopefully we can retrieve some DNA.”

“Macpherson’s already swiped underneath her nails.”

Violet nodded then asked, “Who found her?”

“Her partner, roughly two hours ago,” Alex told her. “Kept it together enough to call 999 and wait for the cops. Fell to bits after that.”

“So interviewing her was pointless?”

“Completely.”

“Bloody shame. She might have seen something that would have been useful.”
“It’s how it goes, though,” Alex took off her ugly woolen hat and fluffed her hair.

“Too right,” Violet agreed.

Strangely once Violet and Alex had started talking shop, she had started to feel… better. Granted, her head still ached and her arms and legs still felt like they were going to fall off, but she felt like… myself. Straight up investigative work, not this cloak-and-dagger bullshit.

But when they reached the door leading to Clara and Harry’s flat, Violet found herself hesitating.

“You alright?”

“Of course,” Violet closed her eyes. “Just need a moment. It’s… John Watson’s sister after all.”

Alex nodded as she dug into her pockets. “Here,” she held out a pair of latex gloves. “Sherlock usually keeps gloves for you. Figured you might not have any.”

“Thank you,” Violet accepted the latex gloves then hesitated, looking at her right hand. “Um, although, I’m probably not going to be touching anything, probably need you to be my hands, apologies,” Violet held the gloves back out to Alex.

“Uh-huh,” Alex’s eyes lingered on Violet’s hand then almost lazily trailed up to Violet’s face.

Violet gave her a stony look in return, “Right. Off we go, then.”

Alex pursed her lips but as usual, said nothing. She knocked on the door. Dimmock opened it. “Thanks for coming,” he held up the police tape for them. “Oh… and you brought backup,” he added, warily eyeing Gladstone, not noticing Violet’s injuries at first.

“He’s a retired bomb-sniffer,” Violet explained.

“Great,” Dimmock sounded glum. “OK, this way.”

Dimmock lead Violet and Alex through a very tastefully (and expensively) decorated lounge. Violet’s eyes darted here and there as she trailed behind the cops, noting a knocked over lamp and a broken vase.

Gladstone made a whuffing sound that wasn’t a true bark as he padded over to a spatter of scarlet. “Wait,” Violet told Dimmock and Alex. “I need a minute.”

“I know this is difficu-” Dimmock started sympathetically but Violet sawed him off with a “Shush” and she closed her eyes for a moment, thinking.

Then she opened them, training them on the overturned bottle of wine, the swirling, purplish stain on the nice white carpet and the battered old, dog-eared paperback. Little plastic markers sat next to these and other items in the room, documenting them as Evidence.

Violet bent over, her head swimming a bit as she did so. She read the title embossed on the book cover: The Complete Letters of Oscar Wilde. There was wine spattered on the book jacket and the carpet. Then she slowly straightened, knowing there was something off about this crime scene and profoundly wishing Sherlock was with her. Surely he would see something that everyone else would miss.

Then Violet narrowed her eyes at the half-full glass of wine on the pretty little table next to one of the white lounge chairs. There were droplets of wine on the chair.
Her eyes dropped back down to the book, the wine bottle and the larger wine stains on the carpet. Then back to the glass of wine.

“It’s interesting that her wine glass is still on the end-table next to the chair,” Violet tilted her head as she studied the half-full glass of wine.

“Yeah, we can’t suss that one out,” Dimmock scratched the back of his head.

“Her blood alcohol levels will be high, but not so high she was incapacitated,” Violet’s voice sounded cool, business-like. Dimmock lifted his brows in surprise then gave a startled look to Alex. Alex merely shrugged then gave her full attention to Violet, who continued to speak:

“She was reading and drinking. She had just set the wine glass down. She slopped a bit as she did so, indicating her level of intoxication. You can see some droplets on the doily and the chair itself,” Violet pointed to the plum-coloured dots on the square bit of lace on the table then pointed at the same small dots on the chair. “She was pissed, but not annihilated. She felt good. She put the wine glass down to turn the page,” Violet mimed the action. “As she was doing so, she was surprised by the intruder. She didn’t know the intruder, which was why she jumped out of her chair, dropping her book. You can take the girl out of the East End but you can’t take the East End out of the girl. She grabbed the wine bottle, which was still at least half full, judging by the wine on the carpet. She used it as a weapon against the intruder. But she was intoxicated, easy to overpower. Her prints will be on the bottleneck,” she nodded. “If we’re lucky, maybe she broke skin when she hit him. Got a bit of blood on the bottle.”

Dimmock picked up on her cue and immediately snapped his fingers at a forensics analyst dusting for prints on the bookshelf by the fireplace. “Get that bottle at once.”

“Yes boss,” the analyst went to get an evidence bag from his kit.

Dimmock finally took a good look at Violet for the first time all evening. “Jesus. What happened to you?”

“I told you I didn’t feel well,” Violet reminded him with a bite in her voice. “I was in an accident yesterday. I’m fine,” when Dimmock opened his mouth to apologize. “Really, I’m just very sore and slow-moving but my eyes and mind are working just fine. Besides…” Violet’s hazel eyes roamed the room and locked on a picture she had seen before. The same photograph was in the upstairs bedroom at 221B Baker Street.

The much younger John Watson still had sandy blond hair but a bit of the silver had started creeping in when that photograph had been snapped. He was dressed to the nines in his new Captain’s uniform, flanked by his mother and sister in some sort of restaurant. The women both wore smart dresses and Harry had strings of pearls looped around her throat. John looked both pleased and embarrassed in the photograph as his mother and sister hugged him. It was in fact, a ridiculously endearing photo of him. It also clearly showed how much he favored his mother, except for the hair and eyes. Both John and Harry had deep blue, almost navy eyes. But everything else, nose, ears, lips, height were a nearly identical copy of his mother’s.

The picture also flattered Harry as well. She didn’t look horse-like at all in this snapshot. Harry was the one who had inherited her mother’s strawberry-blond hair and it curled prettily around her oval face. The drink hadn’t destroyed her body yet, and her face was years away from the alcoholic puffiness it now had... did have, Violet mentally corrected herself.

“Besides,” Violet softly finished her thought. “If John and Mary can’t be here nor Sherlock, it should be me.” She squared her shoulders and ordered, “Stone, komm.”
Gladstone sidled up next to Violet, his body tense, ready for action.

“This way,” Dimmock tilted his head towards a corridor. Violet and Alex mutely followed him.

Dimmock led the women and dog to the master bedroom. Violet kept an eye out for anything. She noted the crooked photographs along the right side of the hallway wall. “She fought him every step of the way.”

“Yeah, she did,” Dimmock said in that grim, awed voice law-enforcement officers around the world use out of respect for the victim who does not go passively down to their fate.

Just outside the door, Violet smelt the familiar tang of congealing, drying blood.

“Time of death?” she automatically asked.

“Estimated six to eight hours ago,” Dimmock reached out with his latex-clad hands and pushed the door open. “Lividity fixed, according to the coroner.”

Violet sucked in a breath and let out an involuntary, “Oh,” when she saw the body.

“You alright?” Alex asked.

Violet nodded even as her eyes filled with tears.

Harry had definitely not been on her best behaviour when Violet had met her. Drunk and vindictive not to mention wallowing in self-pity, Violet had felt intense dislike for her after that disastrous confrontation. She had hoped John meant what he had said, that he never wanted to see her ever again. Selfishly, she had hoped she would never see her again.

But no one deserves this, Violet blinked her eyes hard and fast and ordered herself to focus. But then her throat closed; Jesus Christ and I have to tell John about this, if we can’t find Mary.

“Miss Smith?” Dimmock whispered.

“I’m fine,” Violet’s voice conveyed a coolness and composure she did not actually feel. “Alex, if you could be so kind as to call the A&E at St. Bart’s, that’s where Mary works. She may not be answering her mobile if she’s working.”

“On it,” Alex pulled her mobile out.

“Thank you.”

“No worries,” Alex told Violet before turning and walking back down the hallway.

Violet took a step into the master bedroom, Gladstone stuck to her side.

The bottoms of Harry’s feet were dirty, like she had been walking around barefoot all morning and hadn’t showered yet. She wore a velour tracksuit. Her body was contorted into parody of the yoga position “Child’s Pose.” But her wrists were cruelly bound together with some sort of silk scarf.

Violet told Gladstone to stay and she entered the room. Macpherson was photographing the room and two other forensics analysts were milling about, dusting for prints after Macpherson took his pictures of that part of the room.

“Miss Smith,” he said, solemn for once. Macpherson had replaced Philip Anderson after he had died, or more accurately, when Anderson’s family had finally decided it was more merciful to pull the plug
instead of keeping him in a vegetative state.

Macpherson was a younger man, late twenties, early thirties at most. He did his job and did it well and more importantly, managed to get along with Sherlock. Or rather, did not annoy Sherlock nearly as much as the other Met officers did. That did not stop Sherlock from making digs at Macpherson’s ridiculous hipster clothes, borderline not compliant with the Met’s dress-code, not to mention the bushy beard. Sherlock won a minor victory when he pointed out that if one of Macpherson’s beard hairs got mixed in with evidence it could cost the police the case and him a job. Macpherson showed up at the next crime scene clean-shaven and had been ever since.

He still had those ridiculous gauges in his ears however. Also, if he ever rolled up his shirt sleeves, it would be obvious he was tattooed from shoulder to wrist, on both arms. Sherlock had once casually commented that Macpherson was tattooed “everywhere”… and had turned a deep-brick red when John teasingly asked him to define “everywhere.”

Tonight, all of Macpherson’s tattoos were covered up. He currently wore a blue jumpsuit and plastic booties over his Converse trainers. Normally jovial and quick with a joke, he remained grave. He knew whose sister this was, lying on the carpet, trussed up like a pig.

“Hello, Mr. Macpherson,” Violet also was hushed and formal. She walked around the body (the body… John’s sister was now The Body.) Once reaching the head, Violet knelt slowly, her aching body protesting as she did so.

Blood stained Harry’s long strawberry locks, creating ugly russet tips. The navy had left her irises long ago, replaced with a patina of death.

Violet looked into the black abyss of Harry’s dead eyes and felt another stab of pity for her. Violet always hated crime scenes like this, hating how frightened the victim must have felt in their last moments. Her last moments were nothing like how her day began today. Violet ruminated how Harry must have finally felt a bit of security this morning, when she woke up, back in the flat she had bought for her spouse. How good she must have felt, knowing that Clara had taken her back. So good, in fact, why not celebrate? Proclaim today a lazy day. Crack open a bottle of vino, then curl up in the armchair with a good book.

Then in matter of minutes, to end up like this, dragged from security into uncertainty then cruelly forced to realize that Today is the day I die.

“She must have been screaming, someone stuffed a sock into her mouth,” Violet pointed at the cloth hanging out of Harry’s mouth.

“Even if these walls weren’t so thickly insulated, not many people were home to hear her scream when the killer shot her,” one of the forensics analysts sneered.

Violet started to rise and Dimmock shot out to help her up as if she were his granny needing help getting out of her rocker. Still, Violet appreciated the assistance. “Thank you,” she nodded. Then she tilted her head, studying the body again. “Why did she stop fighting once he got her into the master bedroom?”

“Pardon?” the rude analyst asked.

“It doesn’t fit her pr-” Violet stopped herself before she said profile, “Personality. Remember, I met Miss Watson,” she drily reminded the rude analyst. “She’s not exactly the type to just lie down and give up. He threatened her, no. He either threatened Clara or John, most likely John. Little brother is her pressure point, despite their differences. He must have said something that convinced her to kneel
down and let him bind her. But even then, she kept screaming until he literally stuffed a sock in it.”
Violet pursed her lips, aware that all eyes were on her now. “Perhaps she thought he was kidnapping her and was going to hold her for ransom. Her brother doesn’t have much money, but his business partner does.”

“Yeah, we can tell,” Rude Analyst used his brush to point at Violet’s engagement ring.

“Jesus, Rudy, shut your gob,” Macpherson snapped.

Violet gave Rudy a look that would have sent Medusa the Gorgon running and screaming. “Your voice and face is putting me off, please leave at once.”

“What? Are you pulling my chain, lady?” Rude Analyst gawped. “You’re not even a cop and you’re sure as hell not Sherlock Bloody Holmes.”

“Since Mr. Holmes is unavailable, you should consider me his eyes and ears,” Violet did not raise her voice but she made it as cold as possible. “Plus I sincerely doubt Dr. Watson would appreciate the blatant disrespect displayed here right now. Please leave. All of you.”

“Wait, me too?” Macpherson looked stunned and sounded hurt.

“Yes, but not because you were rude,” Violet assured him. “I need to think. And if we cannot find Mrs. Watson soon, I need privacy to tell Dr. Watson.”

Everyone filed out of the room. Gladstone growled at Rudy as he skittered by.

Violet put Gladstone on guard duty and shut the door. She dug into her puffy pink coat’s pocket and pulled out her Smartphone. Hit a speed dial number.

“Miss me already, dear sister-in-law?”

“Harriet Watson has been murdered,” Violet wasted no time with pleasantries. She maintained her British accent however, just in case someone was still lurking.

Mycroft Holmes also did not waste time, “When, where and how?”

“About six to eight hours ago, body was discovered at her flat two hours ago by Harry’s domestic partner. Dragged, bound, shot in the temple, close range,” Violet stood as close to Harry as she could without getting blood on her shoes. In a lower voice, she asked, “After yesterday, do you think this is a coincidence?”

“No, I do not,” Mycroft sounded crisp, almost military. “Does anyone else know?”

Violet knew exactly what Mycroft was asking. “No. Mary’s not answering her mobile; she may be at work though,” she pointed out, not wanting Mycroft to leap to conclusions. “And I haven’t told Sherlock or John yet. But I saw paparazzi and journalists as I arrived. Harry and Clara live in a very posh area. It’s only a matter of time before the news gets out.”

There was a tap on the door then Alex called out from the other side, “Could you call off your dog, please?”

“Shit,” Violet raced to open the door. Gladstone hadn’t actually attacked, of course, but his ears were flat against his head and he was growling. Alex actually looked a bit ruffled for once. Violet gave the order to Gladstone to stand down then said, “Sorry. So sorry, he’s… protective. Do you have news about Mary?”
Alex kept her eyes on Gladstone and her hand on the baton in her police-issue utility belt. “Confirmed that Mrs. Watson is at the A&E. But there was a massive wreck. A lorry ran into a double-decker full of tourists. Reception said there’s no way she can take a call now, family emergency or not.”

“Right, thank you,” Violet told Alex. When Alex left her in peace again (walking backwards, her eyes never leaving Gladstone,) Violet hissed into her mobile, “Did you hear that?”

“Yes,” Mycroft said. “Unfortunately for you, it falls to you to give John the bad news.”

“Mycroft, this should come from his wife, not me.”

“Do you really think you are doing John Watson a kindness in delaying this news?” When Violet didn’t respond, Mycroft said, “I thought not. Call Sherlock and tell him John needs to come home. And,” Mycroft hesitated. “Tell John he has my deepest sympathies, for what it’s worth.”

He rang off.

Violet stared at the mobile in her hand, then back at the corpse in the bedroom.

*Shit,* she thought dismally as she hit the speed-dial button for Sherlock.

Chapter End Notes

The inscription on Oscar Wilde's tomb is from his poem "The Ballard of Reading Gaol" - http://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/ballad-reading-gaol

I don't have a TON of regrets, but I do regret not exploring Père-Lachaise more when I had the chance. But by the time my friend and I had reached Père-Lachaise, the sun was starting to set and I.... um.... kindasortachickenedoutandwantedtoleave.

We did see Jim Morrison’s grave before I turned into a gigantic fraidy cat, so that was kind of cool :^)
"While they bickered, Sherlock left his wrist in John’s hand, even when John stopped massaging it. Neither man broke eye contact as they hurled good-natured insults at each other.

From his vantage point on the sofa, Dupin observed and smiled..."

... but what will happen once John receives bad news from home?

Happy Sunday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

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Chapter Nineteen: Paracosm

1 December 2015
Jack Honoré’s residence
Tuesday night
9:32 PM Paris time

Sherlock didn’t fully explain his latest brilliant plan to John and Dupin until Dupin returned to their hotel with the requested stationery and pink ink pens. Once Sherlock enlightened Dupin and John, he threw John’s rucksack at him. As John puffed out a surprised “Oh!” when he caught the bag, Sherlock snatched up his laptop carry-on bag. The detective practically sang out “Come along, John,” as he breezed out the door.

“He’s happy,” Dupin had commented while John winced, trying to put the rucksack on, but he settled for looping the strap over his uninjured shoulder.

“Of course he is,” John puffed as he and Dupin had raced out the door to catch up with Sherlock. Jogging down the hotel hallway, John added, “He solved the case and is now going to show everyone how stupid they are. This is his favorite bit.”

John thought they would return to Dupin’s hovel and he had to repress a shudder. To his surprise, Sherlock instead commandeered young Jack Honoré’s flat in the Latin Quarter, near the Seine.

It was rather comical, really, how Honoré’s jaw had dropped when he opened the door to see the Great Detective standing there, in all his Belstaff glory, filling up the small doorway.

“Out,” Sherlock commanded everyone in the cramped flat.

Honoré hadn’t been joking, the flat was insanely small. It made London flats look large and luxurious in comparison. There was only one main room. The kitchen and lounge shared the same space. John had a feeling the boys were tidy not by nature but because they had to be; there wasn’t
room for clutter. There was barely room for the sofa, beanbags and television set. There was a
drafting table and a sagging bookshelf but no proper desk.

Later, John would learn there was only a tiny loo with a shower, no proper bath. And the boys all
shared one bedroom. Two bunk beds and a wardrobe were jammed into a bedroom slightly larger
than a gaol cell.

But John knew the boys selected this flat not for its size but because it was affordable and because of
its location. After all, with all the quirky cafés and riverside bookshops, what university student could
resist the Bohemian siren song of the Latin Quarter?

Honoré’s three flat-mates, all students at nearby universities, had started shouting at Sherlock in
French, but Sherlock was unimpressed and unmoving. Dupin managed to placate the flat-mates.
They had all gathered their things, their rucksacks and coats then departed, still grizzling under their
breaths while shooting dirty looks at Sherlock.

A clean-shaven Sherlock, wearing once again his Belstaff and posh suit, looked down his nose at the
exiting boys, his face closed and eyes cold. Once Honoré’s flat-mates had left, Sherlock flung off his
coat and snapped, “Tea,” at Honoré then looked around the small flat, looking for a place to work as
Honoré stammered that they didn’t have tea.

John ended up making coffee while Honoré made sandwiches, spooning poulet-crudités onto
baguettes while Dupin arranged macarons onto a paper plate. John, recalling his revolution regarding
Sherlock’s eating habits on the Métro, asked Honoré just to toast a bit of bread for Sherlock and
smear some jam or honey if there was any.

Sherlock ignored the chicken salad sandwiches, as John had predicted, but actually ate two pieces of
toasted baguette topped with raspberry jam. He even ate two macarons; otherwise he downed cup
after cup of heavily sugared coffee as he worked at Honoré’s desk.

John learned one of the many skills Sherlock had acquired during the Great Hiatus was forgery.

After Honoré was summarily banished from his own home and while Dupin made telephone call
after telephone call, rallying the troops, Sherlock took his laptop out of his bag, booted it up and
pulled the image of The Letter that had been on his mobile onto his computer.

Fascinated, John watched Sherlock work. There was nothing for him to do at this point. His role
would come later tonight, when he and Sherlock would accompany the naughty little pickpocket
Noelie to switch out the Letters from Jim Morrison’s grave. John was her backup. Dupin had initially
balked at putting Noelie in such a precarious position, citing John’s injured shoulder, questioning his
aim. Sherlock had airily assured him, “He’s fine. There is only one person who is a better shot than
John.”

John’s heart had dropped, knowing damn well who the One Person was that Sherlock was talking
about.

Guiltily, he realized he hadn’t called or texted her in two days.

Instead of texting his wife, however, he reminded Dupin that he was left-handed and it was his right
shoulder that had gotten bashed by the falling rocks in the Catacombs. Then he watched Sherlock
create a replica of the damn Letter that caused all the fuss in the first place.

It really wasn’t as boring as one might have thought it would be, watching someone create a forgery.
In a low voice, Sherlock explained the painstaking process while mimicking the Princess’
handwriting at an excruciatingly slow pace. From time to time, he would hold his document up to the computer screen, comparing and contrasting, asking John for his opinion.

John had hoped he could read what the actual Letter said but to his profound disappointment, the writing was in French.

“But France doesn’t have a monarchy,” John had said when Sherlock took a break to stretch his fingers and to get another cup of coffee.

“Depends on who you ask,” Dupin lit up another one of his fancy cigarettes then picked the plastic ash tray up off of the IKEA coffee table. Inhaling then flicking the ash, he explained, “Just as there are Britons who would like to see your monarchy dissolved, there are French who would like to see our former monarchy restored.”

“Is there anyone left from the French royal bloodline who could actually claim the throne?” John had asked while Sherlock stuffed two more cookies in his mouth when he thought John wasn’t paying attention.

Dupin had shrugged. “Oh yes. Descendants of Napoleon Bonaparte plus there are several pretenders as well. There are even those who claim they the rightful heirs to not only the French throne but also that of England, Scotland and Ireland.”

“Ambitious lot,” John had snorted as Sherlock returned to the drafting table Honoré shared with his flatmate and resumed his work.

Used to Sherlock’s lovely calligraphy (except when he was in a hurry, then his handwriting looked like the printings of a nursery school student), John had been impressed with how Sherlock was able to duplicate the “Princess’” round, bubbled script.

“Aw, look, she put little hearts instead of dots over the I’s,” John had cooed.

“Shush,” Sherlock’s nostrils had flared. Then he entertained both Dupin and John about handwriting analysis and what he had deduced about the personality of “this daft girl.”

But instead of being content with just one copy, Sherlock forged a second.

“Why?” John had asked.

“Just a precaution,” Sherlock had mumbled as he flexed his fingers again. “Turn the telly on, John. This will take a while. The noise won’t bother me.”

Dupin mercifully found an English speaking channel for John. So John found himself watching reruns of the American version of The Office. John promptly decided the American take on the sitcom was shit, but didn’t complain or change the channel. There was nothing else to do since Sherlock had lapsed into one of his broody silences and Dupin had left to buy food and alcohol as a conciliatory gesture to the boys for taking over their home.

It was a little after half-past-nine when Sherlock stood up, stretched his back and pronounced, “Done,” as he tossed the pink ink pen onto the drafting table.

John looked up, once again making sandwiches. This time it was just plain tomato and cheese on the leftover baguettes. But the cheese was a nice Brie Dupin had picked up. As his own stomach growled, John hoped he’d have the same luck getting Sherlock to eat these sandwiches as he did with the jam toast. “Great. Hungry?”
“No, just tea,” Sherlock rotated his head, stretching his neck as he absently rubbed his wrist.

“They don’t have a kettle, Sherlock,” John explained for the tenth time as he brought the new plate of sandwiches into the lounge section of the great room and placed them on the coffee table. “And no more coffee or any kind of caffeine, your blood pressure is probably through the roof… are you alright? You’re not left-handed.”

“Hm? Oh,” Sherlock looked down, seeing that he rubbed his left wrist instead of his right. “It’s… it aches sometimes when the weather gets damp. I believe it’s supposed to rain again tonight.”

“That’s new,” John immediately resumed the “Dr. Watson” role, walking over to Sherlock.

“Not really,” Sherlock confessed, turning away from John. “I’m fine. Just fine, great really.”

“Of course you are, now take your watch off and let me see your wrist.”

Sherlock sighed mightily, undid his wristwatch and stuffed it into his trousers pocket. Then dramatically, he flung his arm out so John could examine his wrist. “You’re over-reacting, ouch,” he whimpered when John started rotating Sherlock’s hand.

John started running his hand up and down Sherlock’s wrist now, carefully palpating it as he checked for swelling, bumps or anything else odd. “Did you ever break your wrist? When you were younger?”

“Yes,” Sherlock hedged. *Four years younger actually…*

“Rate the pain on a scale of one to ten.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake…negative two.”

“Sherlock…”

“Three, four… sometimes a five or six on a bad day, but it’s a more of an annoyance, like you.”

“Ha,” John said drily. “Is it a sharp pain? Do your fingers tingle?”

“No. Just feels a bit stiff now and again. You’re making mountains out of molehills,” but his face relaxed as John started gently massaging the wrist.

“Once we’re home, you’re going to see a colleague of mine, no complaints. Sometimes broken bones can lead to post-traumatic arthritis. And how are you going to think if you can’t play your bloody violin at all hours of the night?” John rubbed the pad of his thumb into Sherlock’s palm as the rest of his fingers gently squeezed Sherlock’s wrist.

“If that’s what it will take to shut you up, fine. I’ll see your colleague.”

“No. I’ll shut up when you gain another stone.”

“Then none of my clothes will fit.”

“I’ll buy you a new suit for Christmas.”

“You can’t afford the suits I like.”

“Yes I can. You just arranged it for the Paris police to give me a tidy little sum to keep me quiet about being falsely imprisoned.”
“Honestly John. Just because you packed on the pounds when you got married and Mary got pregnant, doesn’t mean I’m required to put on sympathy weight as well.”

“I’ve lost all that weight, thank you very much!”

“You’ve gained two pounds back.”

“Two pounds of muscle. I’m in better shape than you, mate.”

“If by shape, you mean round, then, yes of course you are.”

While they bickered, Sherlock left his wrist in John’s hand, even when John stopped massaging it. Neither man broke eye contact as they hurled good-natured insults at each other.

From his vantage point on the sofa, Dupin observed and smiled.

The moment was broken when Sherlock’s mobile pinged.

Sherlock slid his hand out of John’s grasp, reaching into his trousers pocket. His heavy brows beetled together when he read Violet’s message:

Call me. Now. – VS

Sherlock rolled his eyes and tucked the mobile back into his pocket then put his watch back on. “Right,” he put his hand on his bony hip after checking the time. “Dupin, your people are in position, yes?”

“Oui,” Dupin reached for a sandwich. “They are waiting on us. Noelie is particularly excited,” he added sourly, still unhappy about her role in this plot.

Sherlock’s mobile rang this time. He ignored it. “We must be at the cemetery at half-past midnight. That’s when the shift change will occur at Jim Morrison’s grave,” he muttered as he rolled his shirt sleeves back down. As he buttoned the cuffs, he added, “We must apprehend the new guards and substitute them with our people, your two Militia lads. Meanwhile, Noelie and the others go brazenly into the cemetery, while John and I,” he nodded at John. “Stay hidden in the background, in case things go awry. You will remain in our getaway car, if your Volvo doesn’t fall to bits while idling…”

“There’s nothing wrong with my car,” Dupin grumbled.

“Your lot acts like they’re pissed and planning to party at the rock star’s grave. When the guards are distracted,” Sherlock steepled his fingers and rested them against his lips. “Then Mademoiselle Noelie will make the switch.”

“Then they run like hell,” John added. “Don’t let them dick around at the cem-” he was cut off by his mobile ringing. “Hello?”

“Put Sherlock on, right now.”

The accent was very Miss Smith, but the words were very Agent Hunter.

John held the mobile out to Sherlock, “Doesn’t sound like she’s in a joking mood, mate.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes again, snatching John’s mobile from him. “This is not a good ti-”

“Harry Watson was murdered.”
Sherlock froze for a split second then swiftly turned from John while he asked, “When?”

“Sometime this morning, early afternoon,” Violet rubbed her temples, shifting in the uncomfortable plastic seat. “Shot in the temple, close range. It was an execution.”

“Who’s working the case? Surely not that buffoon Mason.”

“Dimmock called me, but I think MI-6 is going to take over.”

“Why? Wait, you called my brother?”

“Sherlock? What’s going on?” John hurried around the sofa to reach Sherlock, but Sherlock circled away from him, putting his fingers to his mouth, trying to get John to hush.

Dupin lifted his salt-and-pepper brows as he watched Sherlock. Sherlock scowled at Dupin and turned his back to him and John, staring out the windows overlooking the Latin Quarter. A light mist had started to fall and coat the city.

“Do the math,” Violet had been saying while Sherlock tried to avoid John’s question and Dupin’s gaze. “Sholto being murdered. You and John being separated then thrown into prison cells. The bombing yesterday when Mrs. Hudson and I were going to the clinic, now Harry?”

“This is no coincidence,” Sherlock closed his eyes while thinking, And she doesn't even know about our plane being shot at while we were over the English Channel. He opened his eyes and saw John staring at him, his round, earnest face an open book.

“Someone is picking people close to John off one by one,” Violet kept her voice down. She cupped her hand around the bottom of her mobile, her hazel eyes warily flickering around, studying this person and that, trusting no one in the A&E waiting room. “They want to trigger his post-traumatic stress disorder.”

“Clearly, but why?”

“Sherlock,” John hissed.

“Shut up,” Sherlock snapped at John. Then to Violet, he snapped, “Not you. Go on.”

“Because he’s your pressure point,” Violet reminded him. “If he falls, you fall. I don’t think I was supposed to survive that bombing, I think something went wrong. But they made sure they made no mistakes with Harry. And if they tagged Harry that means…”

“Mary,” Sherlock whispered, “The baby.”

John turned chalk-white. “Something’s happened to Mary? Is the baby OK?”

Sherlock shook his head and again made a shushing noise at John, who gripped the back of the sofa for support. Dupin looked from John to Sherlock then back to John again.

“You and John need to come home now,” Violet found herself reaching into her handbag, her fingers caressing the butt of her gun as a filthy man wobbled into the A&E, mumbling to himself and scratching his arms obsessively. “I’m waiting for Mary now at Bart’s but once you two are home, John must glue himself to Mary’s side until that kid is born.”

“The case is almost solved,” Sherlock assured her. “Once we retrieve The Lett-”

“Let MI-6 get The Fucking Letter,” Violet seethed as quietly as she could.
“Not an option. Not with the mole still intercepting every bit of intelligence that goes Mycroft’s way,” Sherlock started pacing. “Once we obtain the Letter, we can return it to the safe in Trelawney-Hope’s home. Then we let it leak that the Letter was never stolen in the first place. Panic-stricken, Julia Stoner makes another attempt to steal the document and we have her. Once we have Julia in custody, then Agent Mitton will be exonerated.”

“You cannot wait until after you get the Letter to tell John his sister is dead!”

“Delaying the news won’t make her less dead,” Sherlock barked then instantly regretted it as he turned around just in time to see John’s face turn from chalk-white to ashen.

“Who’s dead?”

“He will never forgive you if you don’t tell him now,” Violet unconsciously curled her free hand into a fist. She knew if she would have been having this discussion with Sherlock face-to-face, she would have been grabbing him by the lapels in an effort to shake some sense into him. “Besides, he obviously knows something is wrong now.”

Sherlock wrenched his eyes away from John, unable to look at his best friend in the face anymore. “You tell him,” he pleaded in German. “This sort of thing really isn’t my area of expertise.”

“He needs you,” Violet felt Gladstone rest his snout on her lap. She had put the fake orange service-dog vest on Gladstone before entering the hospital. With her knuckles, she grazed the top of Gladstone’s head, the soft part between his cropped ears. “You don’t have to be perfect. You just have to be there.”

“Where’s Mary, can’t Mary tell him?” Sherlock whined, still in German.

“Sherlock, she’s at work, there was a huge car accident and she’s up to her elbows in blood and guts right now. It has to be you.”

“But it should be Mary, she’s his wife,” Sherlock continued in German.

“But she’s not there. You are.”

Even though Sherlock spoke in German, John recognized the sound of his wife’s name when he heard it, even with a different accent. In a soft, angry voice, he said, “Sherlock.”

Sherlock turned and saw that vicious little smile on John’s face that only cropped up when he was inches from losing control.

“Mate,” John said, still using that softly dangerous voice. “Talk to me.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. In his Mind Palace, he watched the opportunity to seize The Letter and clear Mitton float away on the breeze.

“Stay with Mary,” he ordered Violet, in English now.

“I won’t leave her until you’re both home,” Violet said pointedly.

Sherlock hung up on her. He straightened himself, squared his shoulders and locked eyes on his best friend, who now looked positively murderous.

Lightning-fast, he ran through all the correct, banal phrases to use in giving regrettable news regarding the death of a loved one…
John, I’m so sorry but your sister has passed away. John, your sister is no longer with us. John, your sister was a homicide victim. John, your sister is in a better place now. My condolences and deepest sympathies about your loss...

“John, Harry is dead,” he said baldly.

John blinked. All the rage drained away as his face slackened from shock. “What?”

Sherlock closed his eyes again. Not Good.

“What is Harry?” Dupin asked, putting his uneaten sandwich down.

“My sister,” John now gripped the tattered old sofa again. He licked his lips. “I… what?” he repeated himself as he shook his head.

Dupin immediately bolted from his seat and marched into the kitchen portion of the abysmally small flat. He selected a square, glass bottle, cracked the seal and poured a hefty shot of rich, brown alcohol. He took two steps from the kitchen to John and shoved the glass into his hand. “Drink.”

“No, I can’t, the case, Noelie, I’m supposed protect her… Sherlock? What… what happened? Was,” John looked down at the glass. It looked like a glass of melted amber. It smelt like rich honey and smoke. Top shelf booze. “Was she drunk?” he clutched at the glass.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock confessed, hating to admit ignorance of any sort. “Violet didn’t provide many details.”

“Did she at least provide a summary of what happened?” A little edge crept back into John’s voice now. “Was she capable of that?”

Dupin took one look at Sherlock’s face then swiveled his head back towards John. “Drink,” he pointed at the glass again. “I think you will need that.”

“Sherlock?”

Upon hearing the wobble in John’s voice, Sherlock felt something dislodge in his chest, as if something inside him was crumbling to bits. “She was murdered, John,” Sherlock tried his best to soften his voice, but his words still came out clipped, staccato almost. “I’m…” he looked up at the ceiling, cursing Violet for putting him in his position. “Violet theorizes that in an effort to get to me, they’ve been going after people closest to you.”

“Get to you through me?”

“Yes.”

“You mean… Moriarty’s people.”

Sherlock nodded.

“How? Sherlock…” John clutched the glass with both hands now. “How did she die, my sister?”

“Dr. Watson, I don’t think details are necessary at this time,” Dupin pleaded. “Please, sit down.”

John ignored Dupin. “Sherlock?” he asked. When Sherlock didn’t reply, he said, “Please.”

“Violet said she was shot in the head close-range. She said it was an execution.”
John threw the drink down his throat. Blindly he handed the empty glass back to Dupin then gripped the nasty sofa for dear life.

“Dr. Watson,” Dupin carefully put his hand on John’s shoulder, mindful to place it on the left shoulder instead of the injured right.

John didn’t answer him. He screwed his eyes tightly shut. At first there was nothing but a horrible buzzing in his ears. Then a list of names flew through his head in a horrible round. Maisie. Sholto. Maisie. Violet. Maisie. Mrs. Hudson. Maisie. Now Harry. “Yes… it all makes sense now, doesn’t it?” John’s voice was a dark and harsh thing, almost unrecognizable.

Sherlock stayed very still and very quiet.

“Makes sense?” Dupin kept his hand on John’s shoulder, as if he was afraid John would bolt.

“’Course it does. I’m the weakest link,” John barked an angry little laugh.

“John,” Sherlock interrupted but John rolled right over him.

“Oh, come off it, of course I am.” He lifted his head up, eyes blazing. Sherlock recognized that look as well. It was the same one on his face that horrible night, that night he nearly died a second time, when he revealed to John who and what Mary really was…

Why... is... everything MY FAULT?

“I’m the invalided little solider with PTSD,” John bit his lip and shook his head. “I’m the one they can push over the edge, is that it? Kill his best friend from the Army. Try to blow up his surrogate mother and sister. Shoot his sister… take his…” now John’s voice cracked. “My daughter” he wiped his eyes with his pointer finger and thumb. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he asked Sherlock, “Violet with Mary then?”

“Yes,” Sherlock put his hands behind his back and studied the tips of his highly polished black shoes. “She won’t leave her side until you return to London.”

“Me? But… you’re coming with me?”

Sherlock shook his head as he suddenly became absorbed with unrolling his shirt sleeves. “The game is still on,” he whispered.

John’s eyes widened. He shrugged Dupin’s ringed hand off him and stalked around the sofa. “You bastard,” he snarled. “You drop a bomb like that on me then send me back to London while you continue to play the game?”

“John, a man’s life depends on us retrieving that Letter,” Sherlock fumbled with the buttons of his cuffs. “Agent Mitton has been accused of killing one of the Queen’s secret agents. He won’t go to prison if captured. He won’t even see the light of a court room.”

“Then nothing has changed for tonight,” John insisted, nearly nose to nose with Sherlock.

“Everything has changed,” Sherlock snapped back at him. “You are emotionally compromised.”

“I’m fine,” John made a sweeping gesture with his hands. “I can compartmentalize. Had to when I was in service. I can do it again.”

“You’re willing to risk the life of a young girl just to prove me,” Sherlock pressed his long fingers to
his chest. “Wrong? No. We cannot proceed tonight. It’s not logical. You’re traumatized therefo-”

“I am NOT traumatized!” John shouted while sticking his finger in Sherlock’s face.

Sherlock ignored the shouting and the finger. “Therefore you will be getting on the first plane out of Paris. End of discussion.”

“No,” John yelled. “Not the end of discussion! God, you can be so blind sometimes, you know that, don’t you?” He shook his head as the Fury built up again. “I’m not leaving you alone in Paris if Moriarty’s people are going on a murdering spree.”

“Then you should be home with your wife and unborn child!” Sherlock whirled away from John, “They are the next target, obviously.”

“Please,” John snorted, his cheeks starting to flush from the newly ignited wrath. “Mary would blow a hole through their foreheads before they would even time to click the gun safety off.”

“Mon dieu,” Dupin lifted his eyebrows up so high, they nearly disappeared into his skullcap.

“She’s a gun enthusiast,” Sherlock lamely covered.

“You’re the obvious target, Sherlock” John ignored Dupin and Sherlock’s exchange. “They want to separate us so they can kill you, can’t you see that?”

“They’re not after me. They want me alive. Broken, but alive and in order to achieve that goal, they are pursuing the people closest to you. Sholto was like a brother to you and Violet like a sister. Then they took your daughter and now have murdered Harry. Family, John, they’re going after your family. Mary is the closest to you now.”

“You are the closest to me!” John bawled him. “You’re my family too, you idiot.”

The room became as hushed as a forgotten graveyard.

“No more lies, Monsieur Holmes,” Dupin quietly told him. “Tell him the real reason why you can’t leave Paris.”

Sherlock opened then shut his mouth. Then lifted his brows, in his haughty manner, “I already said, the game is on, a man’s life is at stake, so I must remain. It is logical for me to do so.”

“Now hang on, hang on,” John held up both his hands as Dupin left his spot from behind sofa to join him and Sherlock. “He,” John pointed at Dupin, “said you can’t leave Paris.”

“Now you choose to observe instead of see,” Sherlock muttered at John while narrowing his eyes at Dupin. If looks could have killed, Dupin would have shriveled up then burst into flames.

But this was not the first Dupin had been on the receiving end of a dirty look. “Monsieur Holmes, tell Dr. Watson why you can’t leave Paris,” Dupin put his hands behind his back.

John heaved a big breath as Sherlock turned his back to John and Dupin again. “Sherlock,” John struggled to keep his voice calm as Sherlock drifted towards the window as if he were back at 221B Baker Street and he was about to take up his violin. “I know you think you’re protecting me by staying silent. But you’re not. You’re really not, so how about… how about we pretend it’s the way was before The Fall, when you used to trust me and tell me everything.”

“I trust you,” Sherlock fingered the ugly drapery framing the window. He tilted his head, still not
turning around. But when he started speaking, he sounded like he always did, aloof and stone-cold: “It wasn’t MI-6 who was behind Magnussen’s assassination, not initially. The minor girl Lord Smallwood had his dalliance with was in fact, royalty.”

“Bloody hell,” John tried to think of which royal the late Lord Smallwood would have gotten into bed with. But he was no better deducing that fact than he was trying to figure out who the minor royal Irene Adler had been playing with or the Princess who wrote the Stupid Letter. “So Magnussen was manipulating not just Parliament members, but the very monarchy itself.”

“Quite,” Sherlock sounded calm, almost serene. It was as if he spoke of someone else’s life instead of his own. “If he would have contented himself to blackmail Lord Smallwood, it is doubtful HRMSS would have gotten involved, but one can’t make personal threats on a royal without repercussions. It was decided it was in everyone’s best interest that Magnussen permanently disappear. HRMSS brought MI-6 onboard to assist. In hindsight, that was what my brother was trying to warn me about that day you brought me back to 221B after finding me in the drug den. Why he wanted me to leave the Magnussen case alone. Silly me, I thought it was because he cared,” he dragged the word out into five syllables. “I thought he wanted me to beg off from the case because it was dangerous. Oh no. He just didn’t want a repeat of the Bond Air fiasco. Of course, I was high at the time, so my lapse of judgment is not without good cause.”

“The Bond Air fiasco?” Dupin quirked an eyebrow.

“Sherlock accidentally cracked a secret code that tipped off Jim Moriarty MI-6 found out he was going to blow up a passenger jumbo jet.”

“It wasn’t a secret code,” Sherlock groused. “It was obviously the seating chart of the airplane. A child could have deduced that. Anyway, after the debacle at Appledore, my charming brother gave me a choice in the method of my demise, a firing squad or a suicide mission to Serbia. Can’t be too angry at him, he knew I would plan a spectacular escape from Serbia, which was why he suggested it. Moriarty returning put a kink in that little plan so MI-6, who had been planning a hit on Magnussen anyway, made a counteroffer. I would hunt Moriarty for them, providing that I stay in London, of course. The exception to that rule was of course if a valid lead took me out of London. Then Miss Smith came along and the rules changed again since she had intimate knowledge of Moriarty.”

“Ah,” Dupin nodded, rubbing his stubbly chin. “I had a feeling there was more to your fiancée than you let on. Her knowledge regarding Moriarty and his network must be extensive. And an ordinary woman would not hold your attention for long.”

His summer green eyes flicked over to John then locked onto the back of Sherlock’s head.

With his back turned to Dupin and John, Sherlock missed that minute motion. “Yes, that’s why she was allowed to accompany us when we went to Edinburgh last May.”

“Because there had been Moriarty sightings in Scotland,” John licked his lips.

“Precisely,” Sherlock still didn’t turn around. “Lucky for me, they need me alive to ferret Moriarty out. I convinced them (and rightly so) that it was only a matter of time before our good friend Jim gets bored and seeks me out. So in the meantime, I won’t mysteriously disappear if I violate the terms of my oh-so-generous ‘parole.’ However, my darling brother made it very clear to me that if I don’t keep my nose clean, I’ll be imprisoned for three months, most likely in a stimulus-free cell so I stay nice and bored, then be put on house-arrest for a year, only being allowed to leave the flat if Moriarty shows his face again, of course. Then after a year of house arrest, I can leave the flat but would have to wear a GPS tracking anklet for five years, the exception being supervised visits to approved
locations, such as my parents’ house. Mycroft delights in holding that over my head,” he ran his hand over his black curls. “Along with other very valid threats… death, incarceration and the like.” He linked his hands behind his back and risked a look over his shoulder at John. “Death is unlikely but can’t be ruled out as a possibility. Incarceration is far more likely and much more logical. I’m an asset, John. Makes more sense to lock me up than to snuff me out, don’t you think?”

“I won’t let Mycroft send you to prison,” John spoke through his teeth as he clenched his fists.

“Oh John,” Sherlock’s voice held a faint note of mockery. “Do you really think my brother would put me into a prison? Lock me up with the very criminals I put away? That would put his asset at risk. Think, John. What would be a more logical place to lock me up in?”

“He wouldn’t,” John’s jaw dropped. “He can’t.”

Sherlock finally turned fully around, his hands still behind his back. “Between my predilection toward illegal drugs and my eccentric personality, it would not be a challenge for him to have me committed to some sort of high security mental health facility. Load me up on psychotropic drugs to keep me docile.” Then, incredibly, he snorted with laughter. “Kitty Riley and Philip Anderson would have a good laugh at my expense should Mycroft make good with that threat. And Miss Sally Donovan would probably say it was about time someone put me away.”

John closed his eyes, guilt threatening to drown him in a sudden deluge. “Sherlock, I’m sorry,” he could barely get the words out.

“It’s not your fault, John.”

No, John felt a rush of renewed burning anger towards his wife. It’s Mary’s fault. If she hadn’t lied and lied… if she just hadn’t pulled the fucking trigger, none of this would be happening now.

In a thick voice, he said, “But Mycroft asked you to take this case, he didn’t force you.”

Sherlock gave John a small, sad smile. “Oh John, I never had a choice. Not with this case, not since it involves Moriarty and Magnussen. It simply… amused me to irritate Mycroft before telling him I’d take the case.”

A wave of nausea swept over John. He had no idea Sherlock had been so neatly trapped by Mycroft and MI-6. It was like seeing a beautiful fox with his paw crushed in a hunter’s snare. “Then let’s go get The Bloody Letter,” again he tried to sound calm but the tremor in his voice gave him away… … as well as the tremor in his left hand. Damn it not now, not now, not when I’m supposed to protect Noelie…

Of course, I couldn’t even protect my own daughter and sister, how am I supposed to protect a pickpocket?

John pressed his right hand to his eyes as he made a fist with his left. “I’m not leaving Paris without you,” he whispered to Sherlock.

“Nor should you,” Dupin, incredibly, still looked calm and mild. “Fortunately for you two, I despise Mycroft Holmes.”

John dropped his hand from his eyes, thunderstruck.

“Obviously,” Sherlock droned, unimpressed. “You still hold him responsible for the death of your partner, Marie Rogêt.”
“Absolument,” Dupin’s normally benign face transformed into something cold, almost lethal. John could imagine how he must have been in his prime, at the top of his game at Interpol, before grief and obsession tore his life asunder. Sherlock, meanwhile still looked utterly unsympathetic.

“Pointless, really, carrying grudges. Blaming my brother will not bring Marie back any more than collecting cats and hoarding empty tins and ancient newspapers.”

But John would not let Sherlock sidetrack Dupin with his insults. “Mycroft?” he asked weakly. Then he cleared his throat and asked “How?”

“Mycroft Holmes is a slave to the power he holds, a benevolent despot. He’s the lonely man behind the curtain, the king without a crown. He knows how to rule but not how to lead or inspire.” Dupin pulled off his black skull cap. “I had ulterior motives for requesting your assistance regarding the missing Letter, Monsieur Holmes. Yes, I wanted to work with you, wanted to… see you in action? I believe that’s the correct English, no?” When John nodded assent (while Sherlock rolled his eyes,) Dupin continued, “And I wanted to teach you fluidity, flexibility and why ratiocination is superior to deduction.”

“Ha,” Sherlock drawled, dry as dust.

“But mostly, I wanted to give you all the facts regarding your brother. Mycroft’s mantra is ‘Caring is not an advantage.’ I want to show you that he is wrong. It is the greatest advantage possible. To have people you care about, including your brother.”

“Why on earth would I care about Mycroft?” Sherlock’s nostrils flared.

“Not Mycroft,” Dupin shook his head, “The other one.”

Sherlock sucked in a breath, as if someone had sucker-punched him in the gut.

“The other one?” John felt himself teetering dangerously close to Information Overload.

“I knew Mathieu,” Dupin lowered his head, “He was a good friend of mine.”

“Matt-tay-u?’ John’s head spun now. “Who is that?”

“Matthew,” Sherlock translated in a broken voice John had never heard from him before. Even when he had been recuperating from the gunshot, he had never let pain color his voice like he did right now. “Matthew Sherrinford Holmes, my cousin my parents adopted.”

“Ford,” John closed his eyes, “Right, of course.”

“Ah, yes, Ford, the funny little nickname,” Dupin’s face relaxed. No longer twisted in malice, he merely looked sad, the light leaving his bright green eyes. “If I loathe Mycroft for sending Mathieu to his death, I can only imagine how you feel.”

“I don’t feel,” Ice replaced the agony in Sherlock’s voice. “I observe, I deduce. I don’t feel anything at all except profound irritation that the villains are about to get away if we don’t create a Plan B since John is incapacitated.”

John didn’t have the energy to argue with Sherlock on that point. “Who is the real villain, Sherlock?” He asked wearily instead. “Your bloody brother, that’s who, and we’ve all gotten fucked by him. He’s all but holding you and Violet hostage. He won’t tell me where my daughter is…” John ran his hands over his face then let his arms fall limply to his sides. “What did that bastard do?” he asked Dupin. “Or should I say, what else did he do?”
“Mycroft contacted Interpol, asking to loan him some of our agents. Had a routine surveillance job in Paris and wanted some local assistance. Both Marie and I were close to Mathieu, so we knew Mycroft as well. We didn’t like him, but we knew him, or so we thought. Anyway, I was in Germany at the time, interrogating a terrorist suspect, otherwise I would have been with Marie. But as we were both told it was a routine surveillance job, neither one of us worried.” Suddenly, Dupin’s face contorted again, but in pain this time. “It wasn’t a routine surveillance job. It was an ambush. And my Marie…” his eyes watered and his lip trembled. “My Marie was garroted and thrown into the Seine, like she was trash.” It took Dupin a moment to compose himself before continuing. “All the agents were killed, not just Marie. They had been compromised, they had been sold out.” He blinked his eyes, trying to regain control. “Mycroft claimed Mathieu was the one who turned traitor. I am telling you without a shred of doubt and without an ounce of proof, this is a lie.”

“Then why tell me at all?” Sherlock demanded all while keeping an eye on John. The flush of anger had left his face and now was dreadfully pale again. “And John, perhaps you should sit.”

“M’fine,” John mumbled. ”So Mycroft used Ford as a scapegoat. That’s hardly a surprise. We both know what Mycroft is capable of, so why tell us?”

“So he,” Dupin pointed a many ringed finger at Sherlock, “Can find out why. Clear Mathieu’s name and not only will you give my Marie justice,” he pressed his ringed hand to his chest, over his heart. “But you will finally slip Mycroft’s chains once and for all.” He then started twisting his hat in his hands. “I had hoped for more time, I wanted to teach you a new way to think. Mycroft seems to always be one step ahead of you because he molded you. As a child, you imprinted on your big brother like a gosling does a mother goose. You imitated him, you learned by his example. He anticipates your every move because it’s the same move he would have made in the same situation.”

“Be like the water,” Sherlock murmured.

“Yes,” Dupin nodded. “Adapt to your situation instead of trying to bend it to your will.”

“Well, that’s all very fine and good,” John’s voice dripped with sarcasm. “So how do we adapt to this situation, you know, the inconveniently dead sister and all.”

“Oh, Dr. Watson, my apologies,” Dupin pressed hands together as if in prayer, despite his hat still in his hands.

“Nothing to be sorry about at all,” John still sounded snide. “As Sherlock said, I’m all but useless at the moment, so what are you two geniuses going to do now? Neither one of you trust me to protect Noeline when she makes the big switch. We can’t ask for MI-6’s help because of the bleeding mole. If we wait any longer, someone is going to twig on we’ve actually figured out where the Letter is and move it. And I’m not leaving Paris without you. Harry’s not going anywhere, right?” John’s chuckle was strained and harsh. He pressed his shaking left fingers to his forehead. “Oh Christ,” he laughed bitterly again. “Jesus Christ.”

“John, I really think you should sit,” Sherlock tentatively put his fingers on John’s shoulder, studiously avoiding where he had been cut by the falling rocks.

But John swiftly moved away from Sherlock’s touch. “I’m fine, I’m fine. I don’t need to sit. But I do need air. This shoebox of a flat is suffocating me. I… I have to get out,” John pivoted away from Sherlock to snatch up his mobile, gun and coat.

“John, stay,” a hint of distress crept into Sherlock’s voice.

John checked the sights then took the safety off his weapon. “I’m fine, Sherlock,” he barked. “I’m
not Moriarty’s target. Everyone I love is. In fact,” the evil little smile was back on John’s face as he tucked the gun into the back of his jeans. “Right now, I hope I see him tonight, Moriarty. I’d make sure he wouldn’t get back up again after I put a second bullet in his head. So you two brainiacs let me know,” he yanked his parka on, “What’s to be done about the fucking Letter. Maybe tomorrow I won’t be so useless.”

“John, wait,” Sherlock tried again but John ignored him, marching straight out the door and slamming it behind him.

Dupin pulled his mobile out. “I sent Jacques to the café across the street. He’ll alert the Militia. I have eyes all over the city.”

As Dupin texted, Sherlock started to pace, “He doesn’t speak French. When he gets like… this, it is always best he has a bit of time to himself, clear his head. Back home, he’d go for a walk and come back calmer but we’re not home, we’re here and he doesn’t speak French.”

“No after him then,” Dupin murmured.


“I know,” Dupin nodded sympathetically. “Mathieu always worried about you. He hated leaving you behind, oh I know more about you than you wish I did,” he gave Sherlock a grave smile. “It pained him to leave you behind. He never visited or wrote because it wasn’t safe.”

“For him,” Sherlock muttered.

“For you,” Dupin corrected him. “You were only a little boy when Mathieu left. A frightened, traumatized boy burdened with a massive intellect without the maturity to wield it or the proper teachers to show you how to utilize it. Then you turned into a sullen young man with a penchant for narcotics and self-pity. You would have been an easy target if Mathieu’s enemies knew what a pressure point you were for him.”

“He… spoke of me?” Sherlock couldn’t help himself.

“Frequently,” Dupin reached out and grasped Sherlock’s upper arm. When Sherlock did not draw away, he added, “Oh how he adored you and it broke his heart to leave you behind. He enjoyed telling Marie and I stories about you, what a bright child you were and how imaginative and curious. Always off in some paracosm, daydreaming about pirates, longing for adventure, thirsty for knowledge of any kind. You delighted him, you worried him.”

“He was executed while I was still using,” Sherlock resolutely stared at the ceiling. “He never saw what I made of myself.”

“He knew you were destined for greatness. He knew the drug use, while started to curb the pain from your childhood ordeal, was caused mostly from boredom. He worried more about you becoming Mycroft’s puppet than the drug abuse.”

“I am his puppet, Mycroft’s. I know that now. I thought I was clever, that I could outwit him. I did have a plan, a way to slip his leash, but as time went on, I realized if I did execute it, more people could get hurt or die, people I actually care about.”

He stuck his hand in his trouser pocket. Fingered the memory stick he had gotten from his little Swedish hacker friend.

“So how is caring an advantage when it absolutely paralyzes me?”
“Oh but it doesn’t, Sherlock,” Dupin finally called Sherlock by the name he preferred. “My profile of you states you work best under pressure,” Dupin checked the time on his mobile. “You have five minutes to modify our plans for tonight. Go.”

Sherlock blinked. Then muttered, “Well, maybe I do have five other ideas,” and screwed his eyes shut, scouring his Memory Palace for an alternative scenario because he knew could not stay in Paris a second longer than necessary.

He had to get John home.

Chapter End Notes

So... a bit of bad news, not TERRIBLE news, but it's just that the dreaded REAL LIFE (dun-dun-dun...) is kicking both mine and my beta'er Cadogan's asses. I'm going on a tiny hiatus (not two years like Sherlock, more like two, three weeks!) I've got Chapter 20 and 21 written and have just started Chapter 22. I want to give Cadogan a change to catch up and myself a chance to get ahead chapter-wise again before posting again. But I can safely say... this is the beginning of the end.

I will say this though (just to tease) but Chapter Twenty will be worth the wait!

In the meantime, please comment! I will do better about replying! But I read every single one and if I could kudo comments, I totally would :^)

Happy Sunday!
Tell Me Your Sins

Chapter Summary

“Oh Sherlock,” she mocked him, aping Mrs. Hudson’s nagging. “Look at the mess you made…”

Chapter Notes

First of all, thank you sooooooooooooooo much for your patience! I hope this chapter was worth the wait. Second, I’m going to be posting Monday nights instead of Sundays because of changes to my Real Life schedule.

So... without further ado:

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Chapter Twenty: Tell Me Your Sins

1 December 2015
En route to Cathédrale Notre-Dame de Paris
Tuesday night
10:59 PM Paris time

“He got himself hopelessly turned around and he can’t speak French for shit,” Honoré told Sherlock as he navigated through the evening traffic in Dupin’s Volvo. The windscreen wipers whipped back and forth as the mist turned into drizzle. “We thought we had lost him when he got a cab, but you were right. He went exactly where you said he would.”

“Oh course I’m right,” Sherlock stared out the car window, watching the street lamps fly by.

“No. Religion has nothing to do with it. John got himself lost. He is familiar with six major tourist attractions in Paris: the Eiffel Tower, the Arc de Triomphe, the Louvre, Notre Dame, the Seine River and of course now the Catacombs. He wouldn’t go to the Eiffel Tower because of a dig Inspecteur général Gagnon made at our expense, that we should go have a romantic dinner at Les Ombres, which supposedly has a magnificent view of the tower. The Louvre and the Arc would be closed by now. He has no desire to visit the Catacombs again, so logic dictates he would come here, to Notre Dame, which overlooks the Seine.”

“My not go back to your hotel?”

“Because he can’t pronounce it,” Sherlock craned his head upon seeing the spectacular cathedral looming ahead.

From the backseat, Dupin quietly informed Sherlock, “My Militia has confirmed that Dr. Watson is
on the Pont au Double Bridge."

“What is he doing?” Sherlock turned around in his seat.

“Leaning on the railing, looking at the river,” Dupin replied.

“Oh,” Sherlock righted himself. “Honoré, let me out when the first opportunity presents itself. I want to have a private word with John.”

“Mr. Holmes, we are cutting it close,” Honoré argued as he did as he was told, pulling the car over to the kerb as the other cars and lorries zipped past, honking their horns as they did so. “We need to be at Père Lachaise at twelve-thi-”

“I know what time we need to be at Père Lachaise,” Sherlock snapped. “And it takes precisely fourteen minutes from here to Père Lachaise, regardless if you take Avenue de la République or Rue de la Roquette. Besides,” Sherlock opened his car door, preparing to step onto the pavement. “This won’t take long. Dupin?”

“Calling a cab now,” Dupin was already dialing. “It will be waiting for Dr. Watson at the Notre Dame main entrance. Honoré will accompany him back to the hotel. I also texted Mycroft, asking for some extra security at your hotel, but I didn’t tell him why,” Dupin put the mobile to his ear, listening to it ring. “I’m surprised no one has broken in, tried to steal your documents.”

“Oh I’m sure someone has tried,” Sherlock’s voice turned into sugary-sweet molasses. “That’s why I took the precaution of creating fake documentation. The only real files I have regarding this case are digital and they are all on my mobile and only my mobile.”

Honoré, thinking about the MacBook Air Sherlock had nicked from him, glowered at him. Sherlock winked at Honoré and sang out, “Toodles,” with wicked relish as he bounced out of the Volvo, slamming the car door with a dramatic flourish.

But the good humor drained from his face as he walked away from Honoré and Dupin. Shivering a little, he flipped his coat collar up to protect his bare neck from the cold, icy rain. He stuffed his hands into his pockets. His crystalline eyes were open wide and ever-vigilant as he made his way around the cathedral that inspired novels, revolutions and insipid Disney films.

John stood precisely where Dupin said he would be, right in the middle of the Pont au Double Bridge. He leaned on the wood railing, gloved hands laced together, staring at the blackened Seine flowing beneath him. The wind had picked up, ruffling his hair. His eyes stayed on the black river below. He was oblivious to everything else, the cathedral, the wind, the cold…

… his best friend standing at the foot of the bridge, his woolen coat whipping around him in the winter breeze.

Sherlock ran his eyes over John from head to toe and back again, trying to glean as much information as possible before opening his mouth. He had no desire to stick his foot in it again, so Sherlock took pains to approach slowly instead of stalking over to John with his normal long-legged stride.

The night was wet and cold and the wind was picking up. So it was no surprise the bridge was deserted. When Sherlock was within arm’s reach of his friend, only then did he dare to say, “John.”

John looked up at him. Even in the unflattering orangish streetlight, his eyes were deeply, darkly, impossibly blue. The tips of his ears were red from the cold and so were his cheeks and nose. But his
lips were slightly pale from the cold and becoming chapped.  

“Hey,” he muttered, sounding like he had a bad cold. Then he returned his gaze back to the black river.  

“We… have a new plan,” Sherlock immediately reverted to his comfort zone. “We found another way to switch the real Letter with the forgery while minimizing the risk to Noelie.”  

“Great. Good.”  

“If all goes well, we’ll be on the first plane back to London first thing in the morning.”  

“OK.”  

“Um… there’s a cab, there should be a cab. There better be a cab, anyway, a cab, yes. To take you back to the hotel. Honoré will accompany you.”  

“Fine, fine. OK,” John started peeling his gloves off.  

“I need to go with Dupin.”  

“I understand,” John stuffed his gloves in his parka pocket.  

“Everything will be alright,” Sherlock blurted out, at a complete loss and fully aware that once again he was making a dog’s dinner of things. Again.  

John laughed once, silently through his nose. “Sure,” he twisted his wedding band around his ring finger. “I texted Mary on my way here, asking her if she had heard about Harry. She called me immediately, but I didn’t answer. So she texted and told me she had been working all night. Turns out there was some horrible crash, a lorry ran a red light and ran into a double-decker. Five people were killed, a dozen more injured, dreadful, gruesome injuries. Stuff right up your alley,” John made that disturbing silent laugh again. “She said Violet had just told her the news. Apparently, she had gone straight from the crime scene to St. Bart’s to tell her.”  

“That was… good of her.”  

“Yeah, three cheers for Violet,” John said woodenly as he continued to twist his wedding band. “Mary also texted that Violet insisted on staying with her until I’m home, to protect her,” there was an uncharacteristic sneer in John’s voice now. “When, for all we know, it was Mary who put a bullet in my sister’s head.”  

“John,” Sherlock held his hand out, as if to grab him. “The shooter, it wasn’t her, Mary.”  

“Yeah, well, I’m not interested in hearing your deduction why it’s not Mary although I’m sure it’s brilliant,” John studied his left hand, spreading his fingers out wide. The streetlight glinted off his wedding ring. For a wild minute, Sherlock thought John was going to yank the ring off and toss it into the Seine. Instead, John squeezed his eyes tightly shut and balled his hands into fists. He hunched up his shoulders and pressed his knuckles into the top of the railing. As if pain was the only thing that could keep him upright.  

“John?”  

He shook his head. Then after taking a shuddering breath, said, “So. This is my life now. Dead army mate. Dead sister. Missing daughter. Wife’s up the duff again plus she’s an assassin who tried to kill my best friend… my best friend who solves crimes as an alternative to injecting cocaine and also just
happens to be currently engaged to an American hiding from her own country. And we are all suffering because of my best friend’s brother. Did I miss anything?"

Stung, Sherlock whispered, “John, please…”

“Please what?”

Sherlock felt a coldness spreading from his chest throughout his entire body that was not caused by the inclement weather. He also felt his heart rate speed up as his mouth and throat went completely dry. Annoying…

“Please tell me what to do, what to say. I’m not good at…” Sherlock helplessly waved his hands about. “At this. It’s obvious you’re upset. I can tell from your body language and tone of voice, those are elementary deductions. But unless you tell me what is required of me right now, I’m going to continue to say and do things that you believe are Not Good, like listing off reasons why it’s pointless to mourn your sister since she was such a spectacularly awful human being.”

“Jesus Christ, Sherlock,” John ran his hand down his face. “Yeah, that would be one of those Not Good things you don’t say out loud. Ever.”

“I’m sorry,” Sherlock felt like he had said those words to John more this year than he had said them to anyone in his entire life. “But that’s why I need your guidance in this area, with… emotions and whatever.” Hearing John huff an exasperated sigh, Sherlock knew he was only digging himself in even deeper. Still, he plowed on. “You keep me right, John. But when you’re not right, I’m utterly lost.”

“Sorry to inconvenience you,” John spat.

“That’s not what I meant, stop being deliberately obtuse,” Sherlock hissed back then clenched his teeth, reining in his temper. He blew out a low, slow breath and ordered himself to remain reasonable. “Even though I clearly observe how distressed you are, I cannot see what you want, what you need, other than to hurl insults at me because you’re desperate to take your pain out on somebody and I don’t mind, I really don’t,” he lied. “I know the vitriol you flung at me is not personal.” I hope… he thought frantically as he vividly recalled the heated argument they had last January, the one that drove him to find comfort in a seven-percent solution and Molly Hooper’s arms…

Why couldn’t you have just stayed bloody dead? I was fine without you!

Sherlock’s heart pounded harder. Now he tasted something metallic in his mouth.

Finally John looked at him again even though he kept his knuckles ground into the bridge railing. “Do you know what I need, really need?” he asked in a low, dangerous voice.

Sherlock scanned him again with his all-seeing eyes. “You want to…” he flapped his hand around. “Do the talking thing,” he mumbled.

“That’s right,” John’s voice remained quiet and frigid. “We’re going to do the Talking Thing. I’m going to ask you questions, you’re going to answer me. Honestly. With facts, not your usual codswallop you try to pass off as truth when you’re trying to protect me.”

Sherlock felt his stomach drop past his knees, past his shoes and all the way down into the Seine. Perhaps even into Hell itself. He’s going to ask me about The Fall… he’s going to ask me… No. Please, God no… “Now perhaps isn’t the best tim-” he tried to assert himself.
“Now is the perfect time,” John never raised his voice. “Why did you jump?”

“Oh for the love of… You damn well know why,” Sherlock flared up again, taking a step closer to John. “Molly Hooper blabbed to you about the snipers. What more do you want to know or need to know? The color of their uniforms, the type of guns?”

“No!” John pushed off the railing and marched up to Sherlock. ”You know damn well that’s not what I care about. We’ve been dancing around this for nearly two years now! Why didn’t you tell me what was happening? Why did you leave me behind?”

“I couldn’t tell you!” Sherlock shouted at him.

“Couldn’t or wouldn’t?”

“Couldn’t.”

“Mycroft?”

“No! My decision!” Sherlock pointed to himself. “Not everything is Mycroft’s fault, although it is greatly tempting to blame everything on him. The decision to keep you in the dark was mine alone but Mycroft supported it.”

“Why?”

“To protect you, of course! Look at what they are doing to you now!”

“I don’t need protection!” John yelled as he raised his hands, as if he was going to strangle Sherlock. Instead he balled them again into fists then unfurled his fingers. Flinging his hands out towards Sherlock, he bellowed, “It’s you they want to hurt, to kill. I’m overlooked. I’m… I’m,” he pressed his hands to his chest now. “Nobody. I’m the blogger, the sidekick, the afterthought.”

“Not to me,” Sherlock snapped then slammed his mouth tightly shut.

Both men stopped yelling. Their breath came out as puffs, like cigarette smoke in the cold air. Sherlock ached for a cigarette now… or something stronger… seven-percent stronger.

John wiped his face. The mist was now turning into snow now. “Why did you leave me behind?” he started again, his voice starting to shake again.

“John, please,” Sherlock closed his eyes, his shoulders falling. “You know why.”

“No. I don’t. And people I love are dying, Sherlock. This, this is the fallout from The Fall and Great Hiatus,” the sneer was back in his voice. “My sister is dead, can your giant brain wrap around that? Yeah, she was a drunken sot but she was the only sibling I had,” his voice strained as he struggled to maintain some sort of control. “She died because Moriarty’s people are eliminating my loved ones to get to me in order to get to you. They want me to crack up so I’m useless to you. If I can’t help you, then you’re on your own again, which is what they want!”

“And what made you leap to that overly-dramatic conclusion?” Sherlock opened his eyes. They flashed silvery-grey in the streetlights.

“Because you’re vulnerable when you’re alone, don’t you see that? Why can’t you see that?” John raised his voice again. “Alone doesn’t protect you!”

“Yes, it does,” Sherlock’s voice had some of its usual edge back. But his preternaturally pale face
stayed pinched and strained. “It’s what I had during the Great Hiatus, it protected me then.”

“Like hell it did,” John growled. “When we went back to Baker Street after you got out of hospital, I saw the scars on your back. I saw the scar on your belly that’s obviously a knife wound,” he pointed to Sherlock’s gut, then to his arm. “The scars on your upper arms are clearly cigarette burns. You weren’t protected, you were brutalized.”

“I survived.”

“ Barely,” John shook his head, tears starting to stand out in his eyes now. “Why did you leave me behind? I could have helped.”

“You could have been killed,” Sherlock sharply reminded him as he pushed his damp curly fringe out of his eyes. The precipitation had turned into proper snow flurries now.

“I was thrown into a bloody bonfire, remember? I’ve been shot. I’ve been bitten by a crazed abused dog. I’ve had Semtex strapped to my body! I sleep next to a woman who has killed people for money. Two days ago I nearly drowned in the Catacombs. I’m not afraid to die.”

“I am!” Sherlock shouted again. Then he swallowed hard. “I am, John. I’m afraid you’ll die. And I can’t…I couldn’t take the risk.” He closed his eyes again as he lowered his head, unable to look at John any longer. He clutched at his coat tightly shut. “I wanted to tell you, I wanted you to come with me. But I… I didn’t want to live in a world that you weren’t in… even if that meant I couldn’t be a part of your life any longer.”

Sherlock kept his eyes closed until he heard a strangled breath from John, “Oh.”

Once his eyes opened again, Sherlock saw John pinching the bridge of his nose in a vain effort to staunch tears. Sherlock suddenly remembered John had taken that same stance, in front of his brand new, gleaming gravestone, specially carved for him out of onyx.

One more miracle…

“John?”

“You’re an idiot sometimes, you know that?” John’s voice now sounded thicker and hoarser than ever. “Did it ever cross your mind that I didn’t want to live in a world without you?”

“No,” Sherlock admitted. “I had no reason to believe that. You said… when we first met, I thought… I didn’t… not until you asked me to be your best man that I realized that… err… I…” Sherlock faltered, cleared his voice then tried again. “My dear John, I owe you a thousand apologies. I had no idea you’d be so affected* *.”

“Affected? Oh God, you really are blind sometimes, aren’t you?” John tried to laugh, but failed miserably. “But, so I am. You tried to tell me. You tried… you said, It’s a magic trick, but I didn’t hear you, I didn’t understand.”

“John, it’s alright.”

“No, it’s not,” John choked out. “I ruined everything.”

“No,” Sherlock shook his shaggy head. “Moriarty did. But I’m going to catch him, John. He’ll pay for all his crimes, against us and the world.”

“We’re going to catch him,” John blinked his eyes very rapidly, like he did on his wedding day, after
Sherlock gave his Best Man Speech. “We’re going to make him pay. You and me against the world, yeah?”

Sherlock couldn’t speak, couldn’t breathe. So he only nodded while studying his shoes, watching fluffy snow covering his feet and sticking to the pavement.

So he was taken aback when he found himself engulfed in a fierce embrace. John had closed the space between them, grabbed the lapels of the Belstaff and pulled Sherlock to him. One hand still clung to the Belstaff but the other had snaked inside the coat, wrapping around Sherlock’s thin torso.

Unlike the hug he’d received from John at his wedding, Sherlock allowed himself to go limp, to rest his cheek against John’s hair. It was just as silky as he had imagined it. He could tell by John’s shaking shoulders he was still trying not to weep. *Stiff upper lip and all that rubbish…*

So he ran his gloved hand over the back of John’s head. He wrapped his other arm carefully around John’s back, careful to avoid where he had been hit by the falling rocks. “It will be alright, I promise,” he said, more into John’s hair than his ear. Sherlock screwed his eyes shut again, this more to protect them from the falling snow.

Instinctively, he opened his coat, (or at least, the right half, the half John was not clutching,) and wrapped it around John, to protect him from the elements.

John let go of Sherlock’s coat lapel and slid his hand up Sherlock’s throat to his face, cradling his cheek all the while keeping his own face still buried in Sherlock’s chest. Sherlock barely heard him say, “I know.”

But he definitely felt John rising up onto his toes then pressing his lips onto his throat. Sherlock jumped and his brain stuttered. *Wait, what?*

But John’s lips had left Sherlock’s throat. His hand had moved to the back of Sherlock’s head, guiding his head down while John found Sherlock’s mouth instead and…

*Ohhh… this is happening, it’s really happening.*

Sherlock immediately opened his mouth and was rewarded with John’s tongue darting inside, rolling around, exploring, tasting. Sherlock quickly recovered from the shock, cupped John’s face with both his hands and reciprocated, finally learning at last what John tasted like. Sight, sound and scent had all been fulfilled over the years, even touch, to a degree, although touches were mostly nervous and fleeting, a finger casually grazing over his as he passed him a mug of tea, for example or a shoulder pressed against an arm while walking through a small doorway together.

Or the touch was violent and cruel, like John tried strangling him after he announced: “Short version, not dead.”

But this… this was fulfillment of all five senses at once and this was better than any heroin high, any mystery solved. Sherlock let go of John’s face to wrap his arms tighter around him. He resented the olive-green parka separating them, resented all cloth barriers actually. But he could feel John’s calloused hands running through his own inky black hair. He could feel John’s body, despite being cocooned in a heavy parka, pressing against his own thin frame. Shocked, Sherlock then felt John pressing his thigh between his legs, causing Sherlock to make a small and incredibly undignified noise. The movement also caused his brain to short-circuit again as well as his traitorous hips to jut forward, to rub against John’s thigh. He heard John make an undignified whimper similar to his own and Sherlock clumsily searched for the zipper of the parka.
As their kisses became more frantic, wetter and deeper, Sherlock could smell John, his John. Pre-Fall John. Pre-Mary John. He wasn’t wearing the horrid Brut cologne Mary bought him anymore. Sherlock could smell AXE deodorant, plain old Ivory soap and that indelible John smell, a peculiar yet comforting combined scent of Earl Grey tea, old paperback novels, hand sanitizer and the grease and oils he used to clean his Army Browning.

He tasted Close-Up toothpaste, coffee and the good bourbon Dupin made John drink earlier. He finally managed to unzip John’s ugly old parka, finally able to eliminate one barrier. Then as he kissed John’s face and neck, he tasted melted snow and salt water, and was vaguely aware he stood on some sort of precipice, on the edge of another fall.

He dreamily realized he didn’t care, not really.

He tugged the collar of John’s jumper down then awkwardly bent over to plant kisses from his neck to his collarbone. He felt, rather than hear John’s gasp then moan, the sound vibrating in John’s throat, against Sherlock’s mouth.

Sherlock’s mind finally broke free of the self-inflicted discipline of logic and reason. The imagination Ford had boasted about to Dupin was in full flight now as Sherlock felt John rucking up his neatly-tucked in shirt then run his hands over the scars on his back while never ceasing with the kissing.

Sherlock really resented the all the clothes dividing them now. He seriously considered grabbing John by the front of that hated parka and dragging him all the way up to Notre Dame, breaking in and violating the sanctity of the cathedral’s confessional booths.

Tell me your sins and I’ll show you mine…

The fantasy broke and fell to bits when John held Sherlock’s face in his hands again…

…and Sherlock felt the cool, metal wedding band against his cheek as John found his lips again…

“John,” he gasped, breaking the kiss, feeling the cold seeping back into his bones again as he did so. “John, wait…”

“What is it?” John lifted his eyes, those impossibly blue eyes, up to Sherlock’s face. He licked his lips, slightly swollen from all the kissing. His hair stood up on end, like a startled hedgehog’s quills. He ghosted his fingertips across Sherlock’s cheekbone again as he slid his other hand down Sherlock’s arm until he reached his hand. He rested his fingers onto of Sherlock’s hand, not linking fingers, just lightly touching the leather of the gloves. “What is it?” he asked again, his voice hushed, almost reverent.

Nothing! Sherlock wildly thought, not completely mastering his emotion quite yet. Not a bloody thing. Sod the Letter and let’s just go. You said you wanted to come with me then come with me. Let’s forget this all of this. Forget everything. Forget London, forget Mycroft, forget Moriarty, forget Mary…

He closed his eyes and bowed his head, resting his forehead against John’s hair as a door inside his Mind Palace swung open, a black door with “AGRA” etched into it.

Mary stood on the other side of the door, dressed in her lovely vintage wedding gown with a crown of roses on top of her platinum hair, softly styled in waves for that special day. Her veil streamed behind her, sparkling in the light.

She pointed her Beretta at Sherlock’s head.
Her cornflower blue eyes were just as dead as the day she shot him in Magnussen’s office.

Behind, another door swung open, a door with no sign but painted purple.

Sherlock swiveled around, acutely aware of Mary still pointing her gun at his head. He turned to see Violet, leaning against the door jamb. Her chestnut curls hung loosely around her face. The curls were nearly past her elbows now. Obviously emaciated, she wore only knickers and his favorite T-shirt. But her hazel eyes still burned fiercely, a greeny-gold cat’s eye glow as she pointed her own gun at Mary.

But the gun shook in her hand, her right hand, and she leaned against the door jamb for support. Still she advanced, still kept the gun trained on Mary as she took a wobbly step forward.

Sherlock, knowing she wasn’t going to make it without him, swooped in and grabbed her before her legs gave way. She clung to him, her skinny arm wrapped around his narrow waist. She tried to stifle her cries of pain. But she kept her gun pointed at Mary while Mary never flinched, never lowered her gun.

“Oh Sherlock,” she mocked him, aping Mrs. Hudson’s nagging. “Look at the mess you made…”

Sherlock looked down and saw Harry Watson at his feet, just as Violet had described to him over the phone, forced into a kneeling position, her hands bound, her long hair soaking up all the blood seeping out of the holes in her head.

In the puddle of blood, lay a letter, the creamy stationery and pink ink turning maroon.

He picked Violet up, so the blood wouldn’t get on her bare feet.

She weighed next to nothing.

But still she kept her gun trained on Mary.

All the while Jim Moriarty cackled inside his head… and John will cry buckets and buckets. It’s him that I worry about the most. That wife!

And the entire time, somewhere in his mind, a baby wailed… but who? Who is crying?

Maisie? Or Henry?

Logic and reason reasserted itself once more. Time to be Sherlock Holmes.

Time to be alone.

“John,” he rasped, “Please…” He ran his hand down John’s face, wishing he hadn’t had his gloves on. But perhaps it was good he still had his gloves on. If he actually touched John’s face, felt the good, warm skin, he probably wouldn’t have the strength to do what he must. “Please don’t use me to cheat on your wife.”

John blinked then backed away. “No! No, no, Sherlock’s that not what this is… this…oh,” John happened to look down just as Sherlock unconsciously brought his hand to his chest, where Mary had shot him. “You… you need to stop that,” he pointed. “It’s a tell. You do that, touching your scar when you’re thinking about… when you’re agitated. Not that you have many, tells that is, but… yeah. And… you’re right, fuck you’re right.” John started scrubbing his mouth then his eyes widened, huge and horrified, “Violet. Oh Christ, you’re engaged, you’re supposed…” he looked around. “Do you think anyone saw us?”
Sherlock shrugged. “If they did, I’ll just say it was for a case.”

“Sounds legitimate,” John tried to sound flippant but only sounded broken. “Um, you… you better go. Save Western Civilization and all that.”

“You make it sound so dramatic,” Sherlock also struggled to sound light-hearted tone but his voice was as heavy as lead. He gave up and stuffed his hands into his coat pockets. “Come along, John.”

John walked side-by-side with Sherlock, making their way to Norte Dame. “I really don’t like it that you’re going by yourself,” John said gruffly after a snowy silence.

“I’m not alone,” Sherlock assured him but John wouldn’t look at him. As John stopped to stare up at Notre Dame, Sherlock reminded him as the snow continued to fall, “Dupin will be with me.”

“Yeah, he’s a good bloke after all,” John still wouldn’t look at Sherlock. He stood at ease, now returning to his comfort zone. Military pose, stiff upper lip and firmly ensconced back into the closet. “Now, if only we could convince him to have a jumble sale or something.”

Sherlock finally cracked a smile. “We could probably hide The Letter in there and no one would be the wiser.” He saw John attempt a smile, but he was starting to feel slightly irritated that John wouldn’t look at him. “This will all be over soon and then we’ll be on our way.”

“Back to our real lives,” John finished, sounding hopeless.

“John,” Sherlock grabbed John by his parka and spun him around, much like he did during one of their earliest cases; the one John dubbed *The Blind Banker*. In the shadow of the cathedral, he vowed, “It will be alright, I promise.”

He clung to the sleeves of John’s parka.

John nodded, finally looking at Sherlock. His Adam’s apple bobbed. He linked his hands around Sherlock’s wrists.

“I know.”

And like that, a secret code was created between them. A way to say what could not be spoken out loud.

Ever.

**

2 December 2015
*Cimetière du Père-Lachaise*
Paris, France
Wednesday morning
12:51 AM Paris time

The two men keeping watch over Jim Morrison’s grave were not the same as the ones from the morning.

The morning guards, the young man with short black hair and beard as well as the young, tall and wide man were ruffians in their own rights. They were well-known members of the French organized criminal group, Milieu, even rumored to be taking control of the declining Hornec gang. But they themselves actually were not affiliated with *La Ligue des Roux*. Not knowingly, anyway.
But that’s how Moriarty’s network operated. Layers upon layers upon layers. And, as Jim himself
told Sherlock and John at the pool that fateful night: *No one ever gets to me and no one ever will…*

So the two young gangsters thought they were just making easy money, keeping a lookout by Jim
Morrison’s grave. They were to report back to a gang known to be their allies anything suspicious.
The afternoon guards were of the same ilk and mind.

The evening and overnight guards minding the grave now were no amateurs.

These two men were children when they started their careers as Consulting Criminals, or *Petit
Rouges* as they were called. They were well and thoroughly indoctrinated. Nothing else mattered but
*The Work* and their current job was to keep the Letter safe until it could be transported undetected out
of Paris safely.

Both men, tall, heavily muscled and skilled in military combat, had received word that the Third
Wave had been executed and deemed a success. Sources stated that “Miss Smith” had been called to
consult on the crime scene (the Met was so delightfully easy to infiltrate.) Miss Smith had also been
seen at St. Bart’s, waiting for Mrs. Watson to finish her shift. She had been on her mobile most of the
time, presumably with Holmes. So in all likelihood, Dr. Watson had learned about his sister’s
demise. It was presumed that he and Holmes would be on the first flight out of Paris.

So these two veterans of crime were thoroughly surprised when a young black man came sprinting
towards them in the falling snow, waving his torch around like an amateur. He dressed like an utter
idiot. As if a casting call had gone out, looking for actors to portray stereotypical American
gangbangers. Low riding trousers, overpriced Nike trainers and lots of “bling”, including a very
large, gaudy gold cross.

“Don’t shoot, don’t shoot!” he cried out, his French weighed down by an *Afrikaans* accent.

Both *Rouge* guards flicked their eyes at each other then shined their own torches at the young man
with thick black cornrows and rich coffee-coloured skin. Perspiration shone on his face and his
pupils were blown.

“He’s either high or terrified,” the first guard said in Australian-accented English to his partner. Then
he effortlessly switched to French: “We’re not armed.”

“There’s no time for games,” the petrified interloper held his hands up in the air, showing he was not
armed. “I have a message from your boss. Holmes didn’t go back to London.”

“What?” the second guard said, in agonizingly slow French.

The Australian produced a small pistol and ordered the young man, in French: “Start talking.”

The young man started shivering and not from the cold and snow. “That’s all I know. My boss got
word from your boss that Holmes didn’t go back to London and he’s coming *here.*”

“Why wouldn’t our boss text us?” The Irish guard asked, in agonizingly slow French.

“Same reason my boss doesn’t text,” the young man told the Irish guard while keeping his eyes
locked on the gun in the Australian’s hand. “It’s not secure.”

In English, the Australian told the Irishman, “Get confirmation from our relief. We know Holmes
and Watson were snooping around this morning. Plus, they’re late.”

“Knew we should have moved the fucking merchandise now,” the Irishman swore as he produced a
prepaid mobile, calling the guards meant to replace them. “If you’re lying, you’re dead,” he pleasantly told the black man as the line rang on the other end.

“Oh hello,” Sherlock Holmes answered.

The Irishman’s mouth fell open and his eyes bugged out.

“I’m currently at Notre Dame, I’m sure your tiny brain can deduce how long it will take for me to reach you. Leave the cemetery now, leave the merchandise and I shall lose interest in pursuing you. If not, well, I’m not quite sure I’ll be able to convince MI-6 to stand down.”

“What do you want Holmes?” the Irishman barked. Now the Australian’s mouth fell open and the black man said “See, I told you!”

“The merchandise,” Sherlock said blandly, absolutely unconcerned about the chaos he had no caused. “I’m not interested in you lot, presuming you have an alibi for your whereabouts today. See, my best friend’s sister was murdered today and that makes me a bit cross. I’m twelve minutes and forty-five seconds away, by the way.”

The Irishman rang off. Then he pointed at the black man and asked him in French, “You like living?” When he nodded, the Irishman snarled, “Then start fucking running.”

Without another word, he was off like a shot, weaving his way around the cemetery, to the other side, where Dupin’s idling Volvo waited. But another member of Dupin’s Montmartre Milices, a young Sinté lady who’d left her Traveller family in order to obtain an education, was in the driver’s seat. Upon seeing him approach the Volvo at a dead-run, she threw open the passenger side door and merged into traffic the minute he dived in. Her bracelets jangled as she did so.

“Jesus Christ,” he gasped. Then he turned to the Sinté girl with an ear-to-ear grin. “What a bloody fucking rush!” he yelled joyously in a posh, British public-school accented voice.

The Sinté woman, who had just been awarded a hard-won a scholarship to L’École de droit de la Sorbonne and planned on fighting for the legal rights of the Romani in France, only shook her head. “Brill, Hollywood,” she said affectionately as she reached into the pocket of her leather jacket, producing a mobile. “Text Dupin. Let him know you didn’t get shot in the head.” She tossed the mobile at him while keeping her eyes on the busy Paris motorway.

“I’m going to marry you yet, Tsura,” he beamed at her as he deftly caught the mobile.

Dupin sat across from Sherlock and the captured La Ligue des Roux guards. He wasn’t looking at Sherlock or the captured guards, but rather at his tablet. The “bling” wasn’t just part of ‘Hollywood’s’ costume. A tiny camera, the size of a button, was embedded in the giant gold cross he wore. The entire time, Dupin had been watching a live-feed of what was happening at Jim Morrison’s final resting place. He had uttered “Mon Dieu” when the Australian had pointed a gun at Hollywood’s head and visibly sagged in relief when the picture starting jostling around, indicating that Hollywood was running for his life.
Feeling his mobile vibrating, he swiped his thumb across the screen and smiled. “The bait has been taken.”

“Idiots,” Sherlock grunted as he slid down the bench to peer out the back window of the van. Dupin’s van had been conveniently parked right outside of the cemetery’s main gates. “They honestly believed I was twelve minutes away. Try ten seconds,” He rolled his eyes, “Morons.”

“What if they do not come out of this gate?” Dupin quietly asked.

Before Sherlock would have flared up at this line of questioning and taken grave offense. Now he realized the method behind Dupin’s madness, to make him think, but not just in a linear, logical manner. But to utilize the powerful imagination Ford had bragged about as well and not just to fuel his flair for the dramatic.

“Then we send out a mass text alert to your Militia,” Sherlock murmured. “Include a screenshot of the video, so they can see what they look like, what they are wearing. Have them follow.” Then an evil little smile crossed his face, “But that won’t be necessary. Walking out the front door, they are. And people say I’m arrogant.”

Dupin hit a speed-dial number on his mobile, “Now?” a young voice chirped from the other end.

“No,” Dupin murmured. “Be careful, ma chérie.” He blew out another nervous breath as he ended the call.

“What are you going to do when your daughter leaves for America?” Sherlock asked idly as he continued to peer out the rear window of the van.

“Ah. What gave it away? She favors her mother.”

“You have the same shape of eyes, although not the same colour,” Sherlock’s voice was far away as he continued his watch. “Obviously she is not Marie’s child. You and Marie met when you both went to work at Interpol. Noelie is too old to be a product of your union with Marie.”

“Yes, you are correct. Although I imagine Marie would have liked her. She knew I did not live as a monk before I met her. Before Marie, I was a bit of a… mmm… the English word escapes me.”

“Man-whore?” Sherlock cheerfully supplied then devilishly added, “Dr. Watson has quite the vocabulary.”

He then immediately thought of snow, rough, salty kisses and the shadow of Notre Dame. He ordered himself to focus. “As does my fiancée, although one would not believe it to look at her,” he added lightly. “Always a lady in public but if she stubs her toe in private, she could make Ozzy Osbourne blush.”

Dupin chuckled. “Do you and Miss Smith plan on having children?”

“No,” Sherlock said shortly.

“No,” Sherlock said shortly.

“Neither did we, it didn’t’ suit our life-styles. I am ashamed to admit I did not know Noelie existed a few years ago, when she showed up on my doorstep, broke, homeless. Her mother died unexpectedly. Noelie had nowhere else to go.”

“Does she live with you?”
“No,” Dupin shifted in his seat. “She said she’d rather live in the street than my house.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Sherlock droned.

Both men knew they were distracting the other, Dupin from worrying about Noelie and Sherlock from worrying about John. But eventually both men fell silent. The bound and gagged guards remained silent, their eyes burrowing into Dupin and Sherlock.

“Oh, you think you’re going to share the confidential information we just shared to your boss?” Sherlock smiled at the guards. “Noelie’s parentage isn’t a secret, now is it, Dupin?”

“Nope,” Dupin tossed his mobile up and down. “At least, not in Montmartre.”

“And, well, the hole you lot are going to be dropped into will be very deep. No one will be interested in anything you have to say,” Sherlock shook his head, miming sympathy.

Dupin’s mobile hummed. Quickly he hit the Answer button. “Oui?” Then he nodded sharply and slid down his bench until he reached the metal divider. He slammed his hand on the metal as he barked, “Bien,” into the mobile.

A little panel slid open and another one of Dupin’s adoptees peered through the opening. “Oui?”

“Go,” Dupin said in English, “Hurry.”

The driver turned his attention back to the road, making an illegal U-turn. Ignoring the barrage of car horns and inappropriate finger gestures, the van trundled down the road.

It was easy to spot the petite brunette beauty, even at night, even in the falling snow. Her companion was a complete contrast to her curvy figure and long, shining hair. All legs and neck, with hair buzzed almost completely off and what remained dyed pink. Huge hoop earrings hung from her earlobes. Her stiletto boots gave her another two inches in height.

The van drove up next to Noelie and her partner in crime, then a bit ahead of them. Sherlock threw the back door of the van wide open. “Hurry,” he gestured to the girls as the van slowed down, almost rolling.

The tall girl, without missing a beat, took two running steps then leapt into the back of the van nimbly as a gazelle. But just as Noelie was about to hop in, there was a shout, “There is she, the thieving little bitch!”

“Noelie, give me your hands,” Sherlock leaned forward, stretched out his arms.

Noelie started running as the van started speeding up. Her leather handbag thumped against her hip as she ran. Her beautiful hair streamed behind her as she took a flying leap. Sherlock grasped her wrists just as the bullets started flying.

Noelie screamed and Sherlock dragged her roughly inside while shouting to the drive to: “Go, go, go!” The tyres squealed horribly as the van picked up speed. The van doors kept flapping open. Noelie’s companion grabbed Noelie by the armpits and hauled her away from the open door. Sherlock tried to grab the handles to shut the doors while Dupin took out his gun, making his way towards Sherlock to help him shut the flapping doors. More shots were fired and Dupin shot back, firing two rounds. Deafened by the gunfire, Sherlock managed to finally grasp one door handle and slam the door shut and Dupin got the other one shut afterwards. Then he locked the doors and leaned against them.
“I’m much too old for this,” Dupin took off his skullcap and wiped sweat from his brow.

But Sherlock duck-walked over to Noelia while she was hugged tightly by her partner-in-thievery, “Hello Raoul,” Sherlock said drily.

“I prefer Yvette but hello Monsieur Holmes,” the beautiful creature primly informed him in a husky tenor. “Also, I’m glad I got to dress as me instead how I used to be.”

“So glad our change of plans worked out for you,” Sherlock thoughtlessly huffed before turning his attention back to Noelia. “Are you hurt?” he tilted her face up with his fingertips.

She shook her head. “No, just… never had a mark shoot at me before. Usually they shout abuse and threaten to call the police,” she sniffled.

“But did you make the switch?” Sherlock demanded.

“Yes,” Noelia dug into her handbag and produced the Letter, the actual, bloody Letter that caused such a mess in the first place. “Here.”

Sherlock snatched the Letter out of her hands. “Did they know you made the switch? This won’t work if they realize they have a forgery.”

Noelia flushed. “They weren’t chasing me because of the Letter.” Sheepishly she dug into her handbag again and produced a man’s wallet.

Dupin groaned. “Noelia!”

“Well, it’s not like you have any money, Papa!” she shot back.

“I’m surrounded by idiots,” Sherlock grumbled. Then he rapped on the divider. “Take us to Saint-Cloud, there’s an Interpol office there. I’m sure they have a place to leave these two fools to rot in,” Sherlock snarled at the two guards chained to the floor of the van.

Suddenly, all the strength left his body. He slumped down on the bench next to Noelia and Yvette. The desire to sleep almost overrode everything. But his ears still hurt, still rang from being so close to Dupin when he fired his gun at their pursuers.

“Dupin,” he tucked the Actual Letter into the inner pocket of his suit jacket. “After these villains are disposed of and the girls are safety home, I wish to speak to you. I have an idea…”

So it was nearly four in the morning when Sherlock returned to the hotel room. Cold, tired, emotionally worn-out, he merely scowled at the two MI-6 officers Mycroft had so thoughtfully sent over to protect John on Dupin’s request.

And now he knows why, a thin smile appeared on Sherlock’s lips as he swiped the key card, letting himself in. It had been deeply satisfying to ring Mycroft, wake him from a dead sleep to inform him that he had retrieved The Letter and would require the earliest flight out of Paris, please and thank you.

Sherlock opened the door to find John, sitting on the floor, his back against the foot of the bed. There was only one light turned on, the small lamp on the nightstand between the two beds.

He immediately scanned the room, taking everything in at once. Even in the dim light, he could see that John had neatly packed up all their things. Their luggage was next to the door, ready to go at a moment’s notice. The television was off, but John’s iPhone was on, tinny music playing through the
tiny speakers, some generic alt-rock song, something for background noise.

John had showered, shaved and changed into fresh jeans and a clean jumper but was barefoot. His Oxfords and warm, woolly socks were on the foot of the bed, next to a fresh dress shirt and trousers he had laid out for Sherlock.

As Sherlock took off his Belstaff, he studied John. There was a tumbler and a bottle of scotch near his hip. Sherlock deduced he must have bought it on his way back to the hotel and had planned on drowning his sorrow. So it was puzzling to him that the bottle was still unopened. However, there was melted ice in the glass, so John must have helped himself to a fizzy drink or water. His gun was within close reach, but the safety was still on.

John lifted his big blue eyes up at Sherlock. He looked about twenty years younger. “Hey.”

“John,” Sherlock felt a lump swell in his throat when he noticed John was holding his blue-and-purple checkered scarf in his hands, the scarf marked with John’s blood.

“I’ll ask Mary to try and get this stain out for you,” John mumbled, twisting the scarf.

“That’s not necessary,” Sherlock rumbled, throwing the Belstaff onto the bed. “I’ll get another one for Christmas from Mycroft.”

“Everything go OK then?” John didn’t sound like himself. Or rather, he was trying too hard to sound like himself. “Did you get it, the Letter?”

Sherlock patted his jacket, where the inner pocket was, “Got it. We’re going home, John.”

“Good,” John nodded as he dropped his eyes, “I hate Paris.”

Sherlock smiled at John’s attempt at a joke but immediately felt at a loss again.

Then Violet’s words came back to him: *You don’t have to be perfect. You just have to be there.*

So Sherlock toed off his shoes and peeled off his socks. Then he quietly padded over to John and sat down next to him, cross-legged. As he tented his fingers, he asked, “Not drinking?”

“Didn’t seem like a good idea after all, under the circumstances,” John whispered. “When are we leaving? When’s our flight?”

“Dupin is fetching us. He’ll be here at five. Mycroft said the jet will be ready by quarter to six.”

“No point in trying to get any sleep.”

“Not really. No.”

John nodded. Then sucked in a breath, shaking his head as he said in a trembling voice, “If it hadn’t been for the baby… if she hadn’t been carrying Maisie, I would have left her, I would have left her the minute you told me she was the one who shot you, you know that, right?”

“I do.”

John twisted Sherlock’s scarf again, “And… and she’s… we’re expecting again. I can’t leave.”

“I know.”

“And you can’t abandon Violet.” John leaned his head against the bed. “She’s ill, isn’t she,
Sherlock? Like, really seriously ill.”

Sherlock nodded his head, his lips a tight line. “I’m afraid so.”

“Was it caused by the arsenic Mrs. Toller was slipping in her tea?”

“No. She’s been ill since before the Copper Beaches,” Sherlock laced his fingers together.

“Oh,” John furrowed his brows. Frowning at the ceiling, he asked, “Any ideas?”

“Three at the moment, but until she sees a proper doctor, it’s irresponsible to form a theory without concrete data.”

“Right,” John said weakly, still staring up at the ceiling, still blinking his eyes rapidly. “She wasn’t always bad, you know, Harry.”

“Obviously.”

“She just never knew when to shut her bloody mouth or how to hold her liquor.”

“Clearly.”

John bit his lip, apparently doing everything in his power not to cry. “The last thing, the last fucking thing I ever said to her, my own sister, was that she could sod off. I told her she could drink until she’d died. I told her I didn’t care… I told her… I said… I didn’t want anything to do with her…” his voice cracked and he lowered his head, sobbing in earnest now.

All the while, still clutching Sherlock’s blood-stained scarf.

Sherlock hesitated then ran his hand down the back of John’s head. When John didn’t push him away, he put his arm around John’s shaking shoulders and drew him closer.

He didn’t do anything else, didn’t dare do anything else. He felt John shifting then resting his sandy-silvery head on his shoulder. Sherlock closed his eyes, rested his cheek against John’s still-slightly damp hair.

“I’ll solve her murder, John. It’ll be my top priority,” Sherlock whispered.

John shook his head but didn’t respond, not immediately. Finally he whispered back, “No Sherlock,” he gulped, jerking his head up. “We know Moriarty’s people killed my sister. As far as I’m concerned, Moriarty pulled the trigger himself. My daughter, Sherlock,” he looked up at Sherlock, his eyes now very red. “Help me find my daughter,” he whispered. “I love my sister, but please help me find my daughter.”

“I will. I never stopped. Looking, that is.”

John nodded then his eyelids drooped. Sherlock ran his hand over John’s head again and whispered, “I don’t mind.” Only after saying that did John finally rest his head on Sherlock’s shoulder again.

It is enough, this, Sherlock firmly told himself as he looped his other long arm around John, holding him loosely, but close. Best friends, confidants, partners. It is enough… It has to be enough… Mary will never let him go. Even if he really does… care for me the same I him, there will always be something that binds him to her. Always.

Sherlock felt the phantom-pain of a bullet rip through him again.
But that hurt didn’t compare to what was happening to his heart.

**

2 December 2015
221B Baker street
Wednesday afternoon
4:35 PM

“Thank God,” Sherlock dropped his luggage at the foot of the stairs. “Home at last.”

“Yeah,” John couldn’t keep the envy out of his voice.

Sherlock flushed, “Apologies,” he mumbled as he shrugged out of the Belstaff.

“It’s fine, it’s all fine. I’m just…” John felt sand in his eyes and an ache in his bones. He wanted to go home, throw the duvet over his head and sleep for the next thousand years. “I didn’t expect the outgoing processing at MI-6 to take so bloody long.”

“Bureaucrats,” Sherlock huffed. Then in a tentative voice, asked, “Care for a cuppa?”

“Oh. Um. No, I just… Mary wanted to me stop and pick up some things for Mrs. Hudson while she’s in hospital,” John looked over his shoulder at Mrs. Hudson’s door.

“Ah, yes.” Sherlock draped his coat over his arm. Running his hand over the material, he added, “Of course. I’ll… I fetch the spare key,”

Neither man moved. They just stood at the foot of the stairs, staring at each other. John clutched his luggage and gripped the banister. Sherlock kept running his hand over his coat while furrowing his brow and frowning.

“Right,” John took a shuddering breath. “So, I’ll… let you know about the funeral arrangements.”

“Alright.”

“You don’t have to go, you know.”

“I want to.”

Silence again.

“What happens now?” John whispered the question he had needed to ask since yesterday.

“What happens now is I go upstairs to get the spare key to Mrs. Hudson’s flat,” Sherlock droned. “You pick up her personals then go to the hospital to visit Mrs. Hudson and to see your wife.”

“OK,” John closed his eyes. “We pretend Paris never happened.”

“It happened,” Sherlock’s voice was tiny. “John, I’m not deleting that.” John opened his eyes just in time to see Sherlock produce the smallest of smiles. “I couldn’t, even if I tried.” Then he cleared his throat, “But if you need to pretend it didn’t happen, that’s… understandable.”

John couldn’t stop himself. He wasn’t a cheater, he wasn’t. Still, he dropped his bags and closed the space between them again. He wrapped his arms around him again, as tight as he could. As he should have done when they stood on the tarmac before Sherlock’s exile began. Not that stiff, formal handshake. Should have held him as tightly as possible, yelled at Mycroft: You are not taking him,
take her. She’s the bloody assassin! She’s the killer, not him. Take her and give me my child after she gives birth...

John buried his face in the crook of Sherlock’s shoulder for a moment before reaching up for Sherlock’s face again.

“John…” but Sherlock’s protest was weak.

“Shut up, just shut up for once in your life,” John hissed then rose up on his toes again. “Just let me have this before I go back to my real life, alright?” And with that he sought Sherlock’s mouth again. There was no resistance this time either.

The Belstaff fell to the floor in an undignified pile as John felt Sherlock’s arms winding around him. John pushed him up against the wall, plumbing Sherlock’s mouth with his tongue again. Shivers ran up and down his spine again when Sherlock responded. John inhaled his scent, the lingering tobacco, the formaldehyde, the fancy cologne that smelt like sandalwood, cedar and cinnamon.

He felt Sherlock’s hands move, one up into his hair, the other sliding down his back. He pushed against Sherlock, acting more on instinct than expertise now. He slid his hand up Sherlock’s abdomen, feeling every single rib through the thin dress shirt. He moved his hand up over his chest, up his long throat. His other hand raked through Sherlock’s curls.

Abruptly Sherlock shoved him away, hard. “Sherlock, what tha-” but then John’s question died on his lips when he looked to where Sherlock was looking.

Up the seventeen steps, to the landing…

…where Violet stood outside the door to 221B, watching them.

[CMD1]The Empty House p485

Chapter End Notes

** Sherlock’s apology, the Infamous Apology, is of course paraphrased from here:

Chapter Summary

“Oh God,” John rubbed his face. “You told him he’s being stupid, yeah?”

“Even better, I told him it was illogical and impractical to think that way.”

“Wow, you really are inside his head, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Violet looked horrified.

“Terrifying?”

“You have no idea,” she drawled...."

Feels... lots and lots of feels...

Happy Monday!

Chapter Twenty-One: All Sharp Edges and Points

2 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday afternoon
4:35 PM

She held a rubbish bag in her left hand. With a twisting stomach, John saw her last two right fingers were in a small, plastic brace. Her make-up did not completely conceal the cuts and bruises on her face. Neither did her fake eyeglasses. She wore jeans that were a size too large for her and the old Oxford sweatshirt that was three sizes too large on her.

So even though she had her “Miss Smith” Look on, she obviously was not expecting company or for Sherlock and John to be back… and more to the point, she did not expect to see the pair of them snogging at the foot of the steps.

John watched as a gamut of emotions flickered across her face in less than thirty seconds. The expressions of bewilderment, confusion, shock did not surprise John. However, when her slender, chestnut brows furrowed and her mouth turned down, John realized she was more than surprised… she was angry. No, not just angry. Pissed right the fuck off, she was.

“Violet,” John lifted his hand up to her as he started going up the stairs. But by the time his foot was on the third step, she had already darted back inside 221B.

John turned to Sherlock, who had closed his eyes and was resting his head against the wallpaper. Then he pressed his hands to his face, not looking like Sherlock at all, but rather, like an ordinary man who had just royally fucked up.

“Sherlock? What’s going on?” John walked down a step.
Sherlock dropped his hands and opened his mouth. But before he said anything, the door to the flat swung open again. Violet, clad in the hideously ugly pink coat, came limping down the stairs. Her black leather messenger bag was slung across her chest.

Upon hearing the door open, Sherlock straightened up, looking like his imperial, haughty self again instead of like a mere mortal.

“Violet,” John grabbed her by the crook of her arm. “Wait.”

But whatever else John planned on saying died in his mouth. A fire burned in her hazel eyes that he had never seen before.

*Hell hath no fury…*

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, a cold, formal peck. Her lips barely grazed his skin. “My deepest sympathies for your loss,” she intoned in her coldest, loftiest ‘Miss Smith’ voice. Then she locked her eyes on his again, mouth firmly screwed down.

John got the hint right quick. He let her go and watched her hobble down the last three steps.

“Violet, stop this foolishness at once,” Sherlock demanded but Violet limped right past him.

“Take the rubbish out, please,” she ordered without turning around. She jerked the faux-fur fringed hood over her chestnut hair and pushed the door open.

“Violet,” Sherlock’s voice was a dark and dangerous thing, making the V, L and T of her name all sharp edges and points.

Violet’s silence was just as ominous. The only noise she made was to slam the door behind her as she half-stalked, half-limped out of the block of flats.

“Something you need to tell me?” John asked lightly as a coil of anger started spiraling within him. Images of Violet, sleeping in Sherlock’s bed in nothing but his T-shirt and her knickers sprang into his head. Softly he added, “Oh, goddamn it, Sherlock.”

“She’s afraid,” Sherlock immediately announced. “She’s afraid what this new development will do to her cover story and she’s overreacting. I will make her see reason.”

John studied Sherlock, tightlipped. He wanted to believe Sherlock but… “You’ve lied to me so many times before, Sherlock,” he forced himself to say.

“I know,” Sherlock quickly strode over to John. Standing at the bottom of the stairs, he was eye-level to John. “Nothing will atone for the all wrongs I have done to you.” He tilted his head to the side, “And yet you still endure me.”

John wasn’t to be assuaged, not immediately, “Sherlock, she looked really upset.”

“Oh. Right,” John mumbled.
“While I still maintain profiling should not be the sole tool used to solve a crime as it can be imprecise and unreliable, I have learned it does have its advantages. And Violet does know you, John. She knows you’re a good man. That you’re, errr,” he cleared his throat. “Not the type of man who leaves his wife and children.”

“How boring I must be,” John ran his hand up and down the banister again, “So predictable.”

“Shame on you, John Watson,” Sherlock scolded him mildly. “You’re anything but boring.”

“Ta, mate,” John managed to produce a smile. It was small and it was sad but it was still a smile. “Still, err, you better go after her.”

“Oh, I know where she went, she’s fine,” Sherlock dismissed Violet’s strop. “She’s like you in some ways. Needs a bit of air when she gets ratty.”

“I do not get ratty.”

Sherlock gave John a look that clearly communicated his thoughts: *Oh please*...

Before either one of them could say another word, John’s mobile rang, actually rang. He dug it out of his parka’s pocket then read the Caller ID. “Oh shit,” he sighed then answered, “Hello love,” his mouth said into the phone to Mary while his eyes said *I’m sorry* to Sherlock.

Sherlock’s face, to John’s enormous disappointment, had resumed its impassive mask.

“Yeah, just got to Baker Street, stopping by Mrs. Hud… what? Oh, OK. I’ll… I’ll come straight home. Oh, hey, Mary? Had my Aunt Cora rang you by chance? No… it’s just… I’ll explain when I get home. Love you too,” John squeezed his eyes tight as he lied to his wife.

“Aunt Cora?” Sherlock, smelling a mystery, couldn’t help himself.

“My father’s sister,” John tucked his mobile dback into his coat pocket. “Trying to track him down, to let him know about…” But he couldn’t finish the thought as he felt his eyes water again.

“You don’t want him there.”

It wasn’t a question, but John answered anyway. “No. I don’t. I really don’t.”

“Then stop torturing yourself, John.”

“Yeah,” John could barely get that small syllable out. Then he forced himself to say, “Look, the cab’s been waiting all this time, the fare’s going to be astronomical, and since I don’t need to get Mrs. Hudson her things and you need to go talk to Violet, I…”

“I know,” Sherlock rumbled. Then he leaned forward, pressing those wonderfully long and elegant fingers against his face, right before kissing him lightly, chastely on the lips. Then he kissed John on both sides of his face before stepping back, giving John room to walk down the stairs. He picked up John’s luggage and held it out for him.

John knew what kind of a kiss that was. He had given plenty of girls those kinds of kisses when he was young and still sowing his wild oats.

That was an It’s Over Kiss.

*Over before it even began,* John thought ruefully as he walked down the stairs towards the front door. He took his things from Sherlock with a nod. Hand on doorknob, John twisted around to look
at Sherlock then immediately regretted it as his back and shoulder sang out in pain again. So he slowly, fully turned around as Sherlock picked the Belstaff off the floor. “You’re still my best friend, though.”

“Oh, obviously,” Sherlock droned as he dusted his coat off. But as John opened the front door, he added, “Everything is going to be alright.”

“I know.”

**

5 December 2015
Christ Church Kensington
Saturday afternoon
3:47 PM

Everything was not alright, of course.

Harry’s funeral turned out to be even more depressing than Sholto’s funeral. At least Sholto received the dignity of a military burial.

The morning started with a grey drizzle that progressed into a gloomy winter rain as the day wore on. Cold enough to be miserable but not cold enough for a proper snow… not that it snowed much in London, but still it was utterly depressing all the same.

The vicar, a substitute called in after the regular minister succumbed to a stomach virus, forgot Harry’s proper first name. He kept calling her “Henrietta” instead of “Harriet” throughout the entire bloody service, even out at the gravesite.

John knew he was a Man of God and all, but it made him want to punch him in the throat.

Not that there were many people in attendance to notice the error. Clara was there, of course, in an expensive Chanel dress suit and an enormous, embellished black hat that even the Princesses Eugenie and Beatrice would have found ridiculous. She sobbed nearly nonstop. Posh, pampered Clara most definitely did not fit in with the few Watsons and McLarens who bothered to show up. They wore suits and dresses of various shades of navy and grey and the women wore sensible hats in deference to the weather. They also wore heavy winter coats and boots as the winter had turned most foul.

The cousin who did not like Mary made an appearance, much to John’s dismay. Apparently neither forgetting nor forgiving how she had wound up sitting near the bogs at the wedding reception, she kept shooting Mary filthy looks at every opportunity. Also to John’s consternation, he saw Sherlock opening his mouth when he saw the unhappy cousin but much to John’s infinite relief, Violet elbowed him in his bony torso and Sherlock snapped his big mouth shut.

But bless them, Lestrade and Molly had come to support John during this dreadful time. Molly, noticing how the cousin glared at Mary, distracted her when she could. She played the “I’m A New Mum” card, blathering on to John’s cousin about little Henry or “Raffles” as everyone was starting to call him. Whenever John’s cousin noticed Mary and made a move to “have a word with John’s wife,” Molly just happened to have another photograph on her mobile to show her.

John mouthed “thank you” to Molly and Lestrade. Molly gave him a watery smile and Lestrade a ghost of a wink.

Molly and Lestrade’s presence meant more to John then the ragtag collection of distant relatives who
came to gawp rather than to pay their respects to Harry.

It wasn’t just second cousins and spinster aunts who showed up at the church and, worse, the cemetery. The press and the paparazzi had shown up in full force as well. Harry’s murder was splashed out on every tabloid, despite the Met’s (and MI-6’s) best efforts to keep it quiet. But once word got out that the sister of Sherlock Holmes’ blogger was shot point-blank in the head in her fancy Mayfair flat, it spread like wildfire. The rags gleefully dug up all of Harry’s transgressions, her drinking, her gambling, her sex life and her ruined career.

As if that wasn’t bad enough, Siobhan, the little ginger-haired slut Harry had been shacking up with, had sold her story to the tabloids, including the poorly executed intervention. They door-stopped John, just as he and Mary were leaving their home for the funeral. And they were waiting for them outside the church as well. They all shouted variations of the same theme:

“John! John Watson, is it true you told your sister to sod off?”

“Did you tell her you really didn’t want to see her again?”

“John, can you confirm…?”

“Is it true that…?”

“Dr. Watson, did you really…?”

John ignored them the best he could. He stared stoically ahead, willing himself to see nothing.

“Never mind them, love,” Mary breathed in his ear as they got out of the car and stepped onto the kerb. She angled her umbrella, shielding John’s face from the intrusive camera lenses. “Don’t let them get to you,” she reminded him as camera flashes started going off.

“Yeah,” he huffed, taking her hand. He kept Mary’s hand in a death-grip from the moment they walked into the church for the service, until they went out to the cemetery to the burial, then back to the church for coffee and little cakes.

It was also the some of the few times he willingly touched her since returning from Paris.

From the minute he stepped foot into his own home to now, Mary had been a pillar of support. She hugged him and kissed him, of course, when he first got home. But she did not cling to him, sensing he needed his space. She encouraged him to talk, but did not press. She grew teary-eyed when she saw the bruises on his face from being punched in the face at the Paris prison, and then again when she saw the cut on his shoulder and the bruises on his back from the Catacombs, but she did not lose her composure. She fielded the telephone calls he did not want to take. She wrote a nice little entry for the blog, asking for privacy in this most painful time, but had first asked John for his permission to upload the post, after he read it, of course.

Instead of grand gestures, she made small, everyday signs of love and kindness. She made his favorite meal for his homecoming, which he mostly picked at. She brought him a packet of his favorite sweets when she came home from the grocery shopping. When she had returned some overdue books to the library, she selected a novel she thought he might like, to keep his mind off things. She brought him tea and biscuits and left him in peace when it was obvious all he wanted to do was sit, watch crap telly and scratch their dog’s ears. Later that night, she brought him a tumbler of scotch and she allowed herself one glass of red wine, turned on the fireplace and sat next to him, drinking companionably but not talking. Not making him talk.

Not making him go to bed with her either. Letting him fall asleep on the sofa. Then again the next
night. And the next.

He always woke up with his pillow under his head and a heavy quilt over him. A glass of water and a bottle of aspirin on the coffee table, even though he did not drink enough to have a hangover.

She was funny when he needed a laugh, somber when he needed to be serious. She didn’t force her affections on him, but was always available when he needed a kiss or a hug. Or rather, when she thought he needed a kiss or a hug.

She was loving. She was perfect.

John hated her for it.

He completely resented her for being Mary, his Mary. The Mary from before the Great Resurrection, Mary Morstan, the soft-spoken yet sassy nurse he met one night in a bar. Good-looking and good-natured. Big cornflower blue eyes, a huge, open smile and an enormous heart.

He only kissed her if it was unavoidable. But he hugged her and touched her growing baby bump every chance he got.

He needed the reminder why he stayed.

Last night, he finally slept in their bed, spooning her. His hand splayed across her belly.

For every kindness she made towards him, John spitefully wondered how long it was going to last, how long was Mary Morstan going to hang around.

He had loved Mary. He couldn’t reconcile with AGRA… he just couldn’t.

*Is Mary Watson good enough for you?*

Maybe it was good enough for her, but it wasn’t good enough for him anymore.

But all he had to do was open his wallet and look at the copy of the baby photo that bastard Rucastle had taunted Mary with last summer. Or look at Mary’s thickening waistline and he swallowed his bitter feelings down.

So he endured the church service. He did not punch the substitute vicar in the throat for calling his sister Henrietta. He braved the paparazzi while walking out of the church to travel to the cemetery.

He pretended to believe his old Aunt Cora as she gave him her excuses for his father, “He wanted to be here, Johnny, he did. But he couldn’t afford it. The airfare, from America, that is.”

John nodded then made himself watch his sister’s casket be lowered into the earth.

He buried Harry next to their mother. He didn’t care about where his father’s final resting place would be. That funeral wasn’t going to be his problem.

The windfall John received as compensation for the “inconvenience” caused by the Parisian police was already dwindling. The costs of Harry’s funeral and her debts were vast, greater than John had anticipated. The appointment with Harry’s solicitor was already promising to be grim.

There was also Harry’s gambling debts. Both John and Mary had started receiving ominous phone calls, threatening death and dismemberment if someone didn’t pay what Harry owed. Sherlock had deduced and tracked down one loan shark, hauling him to New Scotland Yard by the scruff of his neck like a mother cat dragging a recalcitrant kitten away.
But the menacing phone calls did not go away. Rather, they intensified, making threats on the new life growing inside Mary if Harry’s accounts weren’t settled in a fortnight.

If she wasn’t already dead, I’d kill her myself, John thought blackly then hated himself for the thought as he agreed on a time and place to pay the bastards off.

Plus John had also promised a sum to Honoré and he wasn’t going to go back on his word. But he had a feeling it was going to be significantly less than what he wanted to give the lad.

Not to mention John had his own debts to pay. Being out of work was no joke. The lack of cases from the Met had hurt John financially more than he cared to admit.

John stifled a sigh and squeezed Mary’s hand.

He wanted to go home.

Home to Baker Street, that was. To his chair, across from Sherlock, drinking whisky in front of a roaring fire in the hearth while Sherlock rattled around the kitchen conducting some sort of terrifying experiment that threatened to blow up the entire flat.

Or, better still, watching him play the violin, those long fingers plucking the strings…

Stop it, John made himself look at his best friend and “fiancée” standing across from him and Mary. Sherlock wore one of his usual dark suits, a charcoal grey dress shirt and the Belstaff. He wore the old grey scarf he had been wearing the first time John had met him at Baker Street.

He looked like… well, Sherlock. He stood tall, proud, his mercurial eyes soaking everything in while his face gave nothing away.

Violet either bought or borrowed a black peacoat. It didn’t fit her, it was too large. She had a creamy white scarf wound around her throat and a black, fedora style hat, brim tipped down to hide her face, of course. She also wore huge sunglasses, not as an affectation but to hide the cuts and bruises near her eyes. The “Jackie O” style sunglasses however made her face absolutely unreadable. She looked like a film star trying to go incognito.

Her poker face was as good as Sherlock’s, John wryly realized.

But ironically, Violet was the only highlight of a truly awful day. As John made an excuse to go to the Gents, (but really to just have a moment alone,) he encountered Violet in the doorway of the church fellowship hall. “Hey,” he mumbled.

“Hello John,” Miss Smith said warmly then leaned forward to kiss him. Formally, as she had on the stairs to 221B, but this time it was not nearly as frigid. And she breathed into his ear, as Violet Hunter, “I’m sorry I was such a bitch.”

“You weren’t,” John enfolded her into a proper hug.

Miss Smith gracefully ended the embrace. “I had been advised I should take you for a walk, to get some air.” She dropped her voice, “And by walk, I mean visit a pub.”

“Oh.” Suddenly, a drink sounded wonderful. “And who advised you?”

Violet leaned forward again to whisper, “Your hetero-life-mate and your homo one.”

“Funny,” John snipped.
A half-smile quirked up on her lips, “It’s a bit funny.”

John rolled his eyes. “I’ll fetch our coats and brollies.”

Leaving Mary to make their excuses and Sherlock to terrorize his relatives, John and Violet slipped out the backdoor of the church, avoiding the paps. They braved the wintery rain for two blocks before John perceived how Violet had started limping again. He then decided to hell with the damp weather and hailed a cab.

“You choose,” a whey-faced Violet Smith instructed John as she slid into the cab after him. “The pub, that is. I’m not familiar with this neighborhood.”

John ended up asking the cabbie for suggestions. The cabbie took full advantage of the situation, driving them to a pub, far, far away from the church.

Neither John nor Violet complained. John insisted on paying the inflated cab fare and together they ducked inside the pub.

Once inside, John realized this pub was well-worth the outrageous cab fare he had just forked over. The dimly-lit pub was small, cozy even. Tourists would have turned up their noses at the lack of frills and amenities. There was nothing fancy or modern about the light-fixtures or tables and chairs and the felt on the pool table was nearly worn-through. The carpet once may have been luxurious once but now was practically threadbare. However the chairs and barstools looked comfortable and the tables had been recently wiped down. Even better, it was mostly deserted, except for the bartender and a few blokes bellied up to the bar. They were all shouting abuse at a flat-screen telly mounted in the corner of the bar, shaking fists and groaning, ordering another round while shaking their heads about the fickleness of their favorite team.

John had no idea what game was playing or even what sport. He didn’t care. He just wanted a drink. Now.

“My shout, no I insist,” Violet Smith took sunglasses off. “You paid for the cab fare, even though I believe he took the long way around on purpose.”

John didn’t argue, mostly to cover his shock upon seeing Violet’s face. He knew she and Mrs. Hudson had been in an explosion less than six days ago. Poor Mrs. Hudson was still in hospital, chaffing at the bit, anxious to get home to Baker Street. Her sister was coming up from the country to help take care of her while she convalesced.

Still, the cuts and bruising had startled him. Violet could do miracles with cosmetics. John had asked her once how she became so good at applying make-up and she had told him it was a combination of working a cosmetics counter at Marks and Spencer when she had returned to London from Birmingham and by watching youtube cosmetic tutorials. Still, not even Violet could completely hide the cuts and scrapes. Plus the delicate tissue around her eyes was puffy and bluish while the rest of her face appeared waxen, despite the blush and bronzer she used to add a little life into her face.

So John selected a snug in the back and waited for Violet to return. He had taken his good winter coat, gloves and suit jacket off when Violet returned, carrying not just two bitters but a basket of pork scratchings.

John’s mouth watered as he realized he was very tired of coffee and tea and little cakes and other sweet things people brought over as gestures of concern and sympathy. *Forget cake, bring me booze and greasy food;* John loosened his tie as Violet set the drinks and basket down with the skill of an expert waitress.
“Um,” John noticed the men at the bar eyeing him with surly interest. “Did the barman ask you about…” he gestured to her cuts and scrapes with his pointer finger.

“Oh yes, they think you’re my abusive husband.” Violet slid into the snug.

“Perfect.”

“Oh, don’t worry, John,” Violet gave him a mischievous grim. “I told them that wasn’t the case at all. We just like it rough.” She fluttered her eyelashes at him, “Whips and chains and all that.”

“Charming,” John’s cheeks reddened, “Can’t wait to get the next round then.”

“Lay it on thick when you do,” Violet finally took her hat off. Her chestnut curls were slicked back into a sleek chignon. She pulled her fake spectacles out of her coat pocket before shrugging her coat off. “Tell them our safe word is ‘baby bunnies.’”

“Violet,” John moaned, utterly scandalized as Violet slipped her glasses on. John cleared his throat, “Um, seriously though. I have to say something. It’s important, so don’t interrupt, OK?”

“Alright.”

John cast a furtive glance at the men at the bar again. They had lost interest in John and Violet and had started watching sports on the telly again. Feeling a little more secure, John told Violet, in a very low, soft voice: “I just want you to know that I would never purposely do anything to endanger your safety or….” He hesitated, feeling a white-hot flash of pain searing up from his gut and spreading through his chest. “Hurt your chances for happiness…. So… yeah,” he studied his hands. His wedding band.

He felt rather than saw Violet studying him. “Have you spoken to Sherlock?”

“How much like Sherlock she was, John thought again. Sees everything, says nothing.

Maybe that’s why I like her so much.

“Not since… not recently,” John looked up at her. Her facial expression bespoke kindness and sympathy but beyond that, revealed nothing else.

Not since you’ve returned from Paris?” Violet’s brow crinkled.

“No.”

It hurt him to admit that out loud.

Violet rolled her eyes.

“What?” John asked.

“Nothing,” Violet sighed, “Just reminding myself to strangle Sherlock when I see him tonight.”

“Oh well, if that’s all…” John grinned as he took a sip of the bitter ale. It was good, better that good. Rich and earthy, with hints of honey and vanilla but the sweetness was cut by the hops. There was even a faint undertone of whisky. “Before you choke him, could you find out how the case is progressing and let me know?”

Violet shrugged, taking a lady-like sip of her drink. John knew that along with tea, she did not like most ales or lagers. John had razzed her about it once, asking if she preferred the piss most
Americans drink, that God-awful Budweiser shit. She had primly responded she was a Coors Light
girl, thankyouverymuch.

I could never talk to Harry like that, John realized, the weight of today settling on his shoulders
again. Could never just take the piss out of her without it turning into some sort of scene or row… of
course, it took precious little to wind her up, Harry… oh Harry, I’m so sorry…

He forced himself to listen to what Violet was saying.

“… hasn’t been any progress yet. The merchandise was re-deposited back into its proper place,”
meaning The Letter had been returned to the safe in Trelawney-Hope’s house. “And now we’re just
waiting for The Lady,” meaning Julia Stoner, not Lady Hilda, “to make an appearance.”

“Ah. So, Sherlock’s bored then,” John reached for a pork scratching but stopped himself when he
saw Violet’s facial expression. “What? He’s not bored?”

“No, he’s…” Violet grasped her drink with both hands, as if to steady them. Which she probably
was, John realized. Dammit, we need to get her to a hospital for a proper examination.

“Violet, what’s going on,” John fixed his sternest “Captain Watson” stare on her.

Violet didn’t flinch. She met his gaze head-on. Whenever she told someone she cared about the truth,
and wanted them to know it was the truth, she always looked them straight in the eye. “He blames
himself, John.” She kept her voice firm yet gentle as she continued,” For everything that has been
happening to you.”

“Oh for fuck’s… I told him. This…all of this, this is,” John glanced at the bar again then dropped his
voice to a whisper, “Moriarty, or whoever took over for Moriarty and not Sherlock’s fault. Did he
actually tell you he blamed himself?”

“Not directly, no,” Violet bit her lower lip in that completely unattractive manner of hers.

“Not… directly?”

“Oh John, I did not want to add to your burdens today,” Violet closed her eyes and smoothed a
strand of chestnut hair trying to escape from the chignon. “He’s not sleeping again. Last night, I
finally pried it out of him and he admitted he started having the PTSD dreams again.”

The ale sat heavily in John’s stomach, like sludge. “I know,” he confessed. “They started again while
we were in Paris.”

He couldn’t bring himself to confess why the dreams had started again.

“I thought as much,” Violet nodded. “He’ll never admit it if you asked him, of course. But, sometimes
he wonders if it would have been better if he never came back after The Fall.”

“Oh God,” John rubbed his face. “You told him he’s being stupid, yeah?”

“Even better, I told him it was illogical and impractical to think that way.”

“Wow, you really are inside his head, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” Violet looked horrified.

“Terrifying?”
“You have no idea,” she drawled. Then her eyes softened, looking like liquid amber in the dim bar light. “But today’s not about Sherlock, is it?”

John studied his drink. “I don’t feel like being interrogated, Violet.”

“Who’s interrogating?” she replied lightly. “Merely emphasizing. My brother was murdered by the same people, you know.”

John jerked his head up, worried he had offended her. But she didn’t look angry, just immeasurably sad. “We’re orphans,” he looked down again, etched his thumbnail into an already existing scratch on the table, “You and I.”

She reached over and squeezed his hand while whispering, “We’re going to make this right, somehow. For Michael and Harry.”

“Yeah,” John nodded, patting her hand then slipping his from out her grip. “And we’re going to find Maisie,” he added fervently. “Find her and bring her home. I don’t care if we have to break into the Diogenes Club and beat it out of Mycroft. I want my daughter back.”

“The problem is Mycroft honestly does not know where Maisie is,” Violet muttered, her expression darkening. “He did it on purpose, so he couldn’t reveal her location if he was interrogated, including by us.”

“But I bet he could figure it out if he forced him to,” John snarled. “He owes us, he owes me.”

“John…” Now Violet was the one looking at her ring finger. The diamond still managed to sparkle, albeit feebly, in the dim bar light. “Did Sherlock tell you about the deal I made with Mycroft last summer, during the Copper Beaches debacle?”

“In a roundabout way,” John reached for another pork scratching, more for something to do than because he was hungry. “It was after I had gotten bit up by that mad dog of Rucastle’s. I was pretending to sleep because, um…” I didn’t want to talk to Mary… “I didn’t want to talk to Mary… “I didn’t want to talk to anyone, so I heard Sherlock telling Mary, so… yeah, I know he’s got you trapped too. I learnt a bit more about Mycroft’s double-dealings as well while in Paris?”

“Oh?”

John disclosed Dupin’s revelations regarding Marie Rogêt’s death, how Ford Holmes had been blamed for it and how Mycroft held incarceration over Sherlock’s head if Sherlock didn’t bend to Mycroft’s will.

Despite the make-up, red, angry spots flared up on Violet’s cheeks. “One of the conditions of the deal Mycroft and I made,” Violet spoke slowly, obviously trying to control not just her temper but her British accent, “was that Sherlock had the right to decline if Mycroft asks him to consult on cases for MI-6.”

“Mycroft knows his brother,” John took a sip of his bitter. “Even if there was no deal in place, Sherlock would never say no to the opportunity to hunt Moriarty again. Mycroft knew he could lie to you about giving Sherlock the right to decline a case from MI-6 because he knew Sherlock wouldn’t say no for a chance to have another go at Moriarty, whoever this Moriarty is.”

Violet covered her faced, “But it’s so dangerous! Moriarty nearly killed him last time.”

“It’s his substitute for cocaine, Violet, you know that. He gets his kicks from the Game, from winning the Game.” John wanted to find whoever it was that gave Sherlock his first line of coke and
beat the ever-living shit out of him. “Mycroft knows this as well.”

“What about the other MI-6 cases, the ones that do not have a blasted thing to do with Moriarty or the RHL?” Violet demanded, still making herself speak slowly.

“Oh Sherlock is an asset to Mycroft and MI-6,” John laughed without mirth or warmth. “Mycroft wouldn’t waste Sherlock on a boring case. So you see, Violet, Mycroft felt confident making that deal with you because he knew Sherlock would never say no to him.”

“He’ll never say no because he can’t!” Violet cried out. She positively vibrated in anger. “God, this is so bloody unfair! Why are our siblings dead and that bastard still alive?”

“Violet,” John shushed her, looking around the bar again nervously.

“They’re not paying a bit of mind to us,” Violet waved her hand towards the bar. “Look at their body language, their clothes. They’re not spies and we weren’t followed.”

John only relaxed minimally. He had forgotten how vigilant Violet was. Had forgotten how every time she stepped outside of 221B, she put her life at risk. Of course, she would be paying attention if they had been followed or if someone was paying too much attention to them.

“I’m not condoning murder, mind you,” John whispered tersely. “But I would not be heartbroken if a lorry ran Mycroft over while he was crossing the street.” He paused. “And then reversed over him and ran him over again.”

“Exactly,” Violet produced a tight, sour little smile. “And you know he wouldn’t have to necessarily die from those injuries. Just be paralyzed from the nose down.”

“Cheers,” John raised his glass. After taking another drink, he admitted, “I could never talk like this to Harry. She never understood gallows humor, how it helped me and people like me, doctors, soldiers and the like, cope. She always took herself so seriously. I believe that’s why she took to drink so easily and so young. She thought it was the only way to loosen up.”

Violet didn’t interrupt, just leaned back in her seat and listened.

“She was brilliant though, amazing,” John studied the cracks in the cheap plaster ceiling. “Spot a loophole in an argument a mile away, she could. She not only had command of the British legal system, but other countries as well. She knew all these obscure laws in all these far-off places and how to get around them. I used to live in dread of the day she and Sherlock met. I imagined the rows,” he smiled ruefully, feeling the tears burning again. “Then I imagined them becoming the best of friends. I thought… I had hoped, if she could ever get sober, she could, I don’t know, help a bit. With cases and whatnot,” he looked down again, studying his nearly empty glass. Despite his best efforts, he had still consumed his pint too quickly and the drink went straight to his head. He wasn’t drunk per se, but definitely felt a bit lightheaded and (truth be told,) a bit queasy.

“A few years back, um, the last Christmas before The Fall, after a, um, somewhat uncomfortable Christmas party at Baker Street,” John’s gut heaved again as he remembered Molly’s utter humiliation then Sherlock’s desolation upon learning about Irene Adler’s “death.” He licked his lip nervously then continued: “I had Christmas dinner with Harry. I was supposed to bring over my new girlfriend, but uh,” John’s face flushed. “She broke up with me after meeting Sherlock.”

“Imagine that,” Violet said dryly.

John tried to smile and nearly said “That’s when I knew Mary was a keeper,” but stopped himself.
Instead, he said, “So after Harry took the piss out of me for losing yet another girlfriend, I broached the subject of her joining Sherlock and I on cases. It would be fun, I told her. It would help her keep her mind off the booze. Explained that her knowledge of the legal system would be an asset, a real help to us,” John smiled wanly. “What I failed to realize, or rather, Sherlock had deduced and I had ignored his deduction, was that Harry had fallen off the wagon. Again. So when I said that working cases would help keep her sober, she came unglued. Her response to my suggestion was that I needed to come out of the closet, shag Sherlock senseless, then get a real job, go practice medicine again instead of farting around on a stupid blog while chasing my boyfriend throughout London.” He snorted soundlessly. “Happy fucking Christmas.”

Violet still remained silent. Just flicked her eyes down toward her engagement ring, then lifted them up again, huge amber pools of despair in a colorless face. The rosy splotches of anger had faded away as John had talked. “John…”

He held his hand up, “I already told you, everything is fine. Nothing has changed, nothing will change. You’re safe, you’re, well, other than Mary and my children, of course, you and Sherlock are honestly the only family I really have left. So I won’t allow anything to happen to you, either of you. Do you understand?”

Violet’s eyes looked very bright and damp again. She nodded. Then gulped and covered her face with her hand, her shoulders shaking.

“Oh, Violet,” John slid out of his booth and rushed to Violet’s side. Sitting next to her now, he gave her a cuddle. “Hey, don’t…”

“I’m supposed to be comforting you,” she sniffled as John dug a crumpled tissue out of his trouser pocket and handed it to her.

“You’ve been great,” he assured her. “Really, I’m not just saying that. If you hadn’t gotten me out of there, I would have gone mad.”

Guilt gnawed at him as he recalled Harry’s lackluster responses to his previous emotional crises. How infrequently she had visited while he had been in hospital after being shipped back from Afghanistan to England. How they picked and ragged at each other when he tried to stay with her after The Fall. Her pathetic text after they had lost Maisie. Their mother’s funeral.

“She really wasn’t bad, you know, Harry,” John mumbled.

If Violet knew John was lying, mercifully, she didn’t let on.

**

13 May 2009
St. Thomas’ Hospital
London, England
Tuesday afternoon
1:30 PM

Their mother’s diagnosis wasn’t just grim, it was downright dismal.

Anna Watson had been admitted on Wednesday night, having spiked a dangerously high fever three days after receiving chemotherapy. She had no appetite, complaining about a stomachache then nearly collapsing when rising from the dinner table to go back to bed.
John, home from military service, called an ambulance since he never got around to learning how to drive. Then he called his sister, half-furious, half-terrified she had fallen off the bloody wagon again.

She had not. She just had been out on a date, to a concert and she couldn’t hear her mobile ringing in her handbag over the music. She did, however, call John the moment she saw all the missed calls, and she arrived at the hospital still wearing a black cocktail dress and strappy, silvery heels. Her eye shadow was smudged and her mascara had run, but she put on a brave face and didn’t weep in either their mother’s or John’s presence.

At first, the doctors thought Mrs. Watson had just developed a serious case of pneumonia. Serious, but treatable. But when she continued to complain about the pains in her belly, John demanded more tests.

Today, the penny fell. The cancer defied the chemotherapy and spread. What had started as ovarian cancer, which precipitated an oophorectomy, manically swept through her entire body, conquering one organ after another. Her uterus, her stomach lining and her lungs. And now, her pancreas.

It was as if her body were Europe, the cancer Nazi Germany and the chemotherapy Occupied France, completely overwhelmed by the enemy.

John stayed silent as the doctor tried to explain to a disbelieving and argumentative Harry that there was literally nothing left to do except make Mum comfortable.

“Comfortable?” Harry squawked. “What, like buy her a new pair of slippers? She’s on bloody morphine, how much more comfortable can she get? Isn’t there a surgery where you can cut the cancer out? Do you really need all your pancreas? Can’t you just cut out the cancerous bits?”

“Harry,” John finally spoke up, irritated with his sister all over again. While brilliant at law, she was utterly hopeless at anything medical. His mother’s attending physician shot him a grateful look as John explained. “The pancreas is not like the liver. Once the cancer’s in there, you’re done. We need to talk about final care arrangements.”

“Final care?” Reality finally sunk in. Tears stood out in Harry’s deep blue eyes. “You mean,” she sounded like a little girl. “Mum’s not going to get better.”

“No, Harry. Mum’s not going to get better.”

Often, John felt like he was the elder sibling.

Harry excused herself to go to the Ladies. John, knowing she was going to have a bit of a cry, took the opportunity to get some more information from the doctor. Recommended hospices, nurses who did in-home care.

How much time was left.

John shook the doctor’s hand and insisted he be the one to break the news to his mother.

_When is it my turn? _He wondered numbly before entering his mother’s hospital room. _When do I get to break down, fall to bits?_

He already knew the answer to that question. Never.

His mother, being his mother, took the news as stoically as she did most things. After her feckless husband had abandoned her, Anna’s shell had hardened even more. She never dated, never dared to let anyone close to her again. Her circle of friends was a small one and the people actually in the
circle were infrequently visited. She claimed she didn’t like wasting time in cafés gossiping over coffee, but in reality, she felt she couldn’t afford the small luxury. She also never visited any of her relations in Scotland, not even when they sent her train tickets. She always sent either John or Harry (or both) instead. John had always enjoyed those trips. Harry on the other hand, despised them.

Anna Watson’s pleasures were small and kept her chained to her dilapidated house. Television, tea, sweets and a good long soak in the bath. John sent money whenever he could, once he started earning in the military. For Christmas one year, he splurged and bought her a new television set and a VCR. This year, he had planned on surprising her with a DVD player, even though she insisted she didn’t want one, wouldn’t know how to operate it. After all, the time on the now ancient VCR still blinked 12:00.

A lump formed in John’s throat. Mum’s not going to make it to Christmas…

“Well,” she wheezed, the Scottish burr still faintly audible in her weak voice. “At least it’ll be quick. There’s that.” John felt his lower lip quiver and before he could hide it, his mother admonished him. “And there’ll be none of that. No tears. I won’t…” she closed her eyes, taking minute to catch her breath. “Waste what time God gave me on tears.” She reached up and patted her son on the cheek. “Do you hear me?” When John pressed his lips together and nodded, Anna smiled fondly at him, “That’s a good lad.” Her eyelids fluttered shut. The brief conversation had already worn her out. But she mumbled, “Go find your sister. I’m sure she’s carrying on like the bloody drama queen she is.”

“Have a bit of sleep,” John advised her, rising to kiss her forehead. “We’ll be back.”

He could smell death lingering on her. The sickly, sweetish scent was in her breath, her skin. A scent he was too familiar with, from the war and all.

He found Harry in the waiting room, dabbing her eyes. “Sorry,” she said in a husky voice. “I just needed a moment.”

“S’alright,” John lied. “Mum’s sleeping. Have you eaten?”

Harry shook her head. Her long, strawberry blond hair was tied back into a loose plait. She wore a white T-shirt, jeans and bright pink Sketchers trainers. If it wasn’t for the faint traces of an East End accent in her voice, she could almost be mistaken for an American. “Not hungry.”

“Me either, but it won’t do to pass out. Come on, I think there’s a fish and chips shop close by.”

Harry gathered her brown blazer, pink and brown striped scarf and handbag. Together, brother and sister walked out of the hospital, to the car park, where Harry’s sleek Audi waited for them.

“You’re doing well,” John said admiringly as Harry unlocked the car door. He felt shabby, almost grubby, in his old but clean jeans, scuffed-up brown lace-ups and a faded red button-up shirt. But then, he didn’t really have loads of civilian clothes either, a small rotation of jumpers, cardigans and jeans. As far as John was concerned, there really was no reason to stock up on civvies when he was either in fatigues, scrubs or uniform anyway.

Still, he felt like a bum compared to Harry. Every single article of clothing she wore, while simple, had an expensive designer label stitched into it.

“Can’t depend on the Tube when I need to rush to one court room from another,” Harry said airily, although John could tell she was secretly pleased by the praise.
“I miss drinking,” Harry stared longingly at a pub they drove past. “Oh, I’m not going to,” she spat, glaring at John out of the corner of her eye. “I’m not bollocking up six months of sobriety.”

“Could you watch the road instead of me?” John wondered if he really should learn how to drive. But there really wasn’t any point. There was no need for a car in London and he usually stayed on base.

John was afraid Harry would want to go somewhere posh and overpriced, but she expertly parallel parked her car (no small feat in London traffic) in front of a fish and chips shop with a shabby store front. John’s heart lifted a bit. He even felt the first pangs of hunger since his mother’s collapse.

“Who knows you, Johnny?” she winked and exited the car.

The place was a dump, Formica tables, plastic chairs from the Seventies, the lino on the floor peeling in some spots, taped together in others. One wall was covered with bank notes from all over the world, the other walls, ugly floral wallpaper. But the good smells of grease and fish and vinegar and salt hung heavy in the air.

John ordered fish and chips while Harry ordered prawn. She also ordered bread and butter and tea for two and then they sat down. Soon, the silence became suffocating. Thankfully, the tea and bread came first, so they could busy themselves with that for a bit, but once they had their mugs, they sat again in an uncomfortable silence, nibbling on bread, sipping tea.

“Clara and I are getting married,” Harry blurted out.

“What?” John nearly dropped his mug of tea.

“Yeah,” Harry beamed. “We were going have a dinner party, to celebrate our engagement, to let everyone know, but um,” her eyes welled up again. “We postponed, obviously. But I couldn’t keep it a secret anymore, are you happy for me?”

“Happy… how is it even legal?”

“Well, it’s not legal, of course,” Harry grumbled, annoyed that John hadn’t jumped out of his chair for joy at the news. “We’re having a commitment ceremony instead, of course. But it’ll be just as lovely as any proper legal wedding.”

“It’s not religious either,” John knew the Spanish-born Clara was still a practicing Catholic. “Clara’s church doesn’t recognize it and neither does the C of E.”

“Jesus Christ, Johnny,” Harry snapped, “I’m trying add a silver lining to this shitty day, alright? Besides, it doesn’t matter what any church says. We love each other. We don’t need a priest or vicar to make our vows real. And just because our idiot government doesn’t recognize it as a legal marriage, we’re still going to have a proper wedding, except there’ll be two wedding dresses instead of one. But there will be flowers, loads of flowers and good food and dancing. All of our friends and the family members we actually like will be there as well. So instead of being all po’faced, congratulate your sister on her future happiness.”

“Congratulations,” John said woodenly as he lifted his mug of tea in salute.

“Oh for fuck’s sake, Johnny, don’t get sanctimonious on me now.”

“I’m not,” John glared at his sister. “I’m happy for you, I really am. I hope you and Clara last forever and someday all the poofs and dykes can live in matrimonial misery just like Mum and Dad but right now, I’m a little more concerned about finding and paying for a suitable hospice for Mum than
As soon as the angry words were out, John regretted them. He regretted the cruelty and he regretted the retaliation from Harry.

Retaliation Harry delivered swiftly. Her deep-blue eyes narrowed. “You sounded just like Dad just then, did you know that?”


“Yeah, you are,” Harry did not sound mollified. “And a fucking hypocrite.”

Their food was delivered. John and Harry both mumbled thank you and the waitress nodded, told them if they needed anything else, just let her know. John stuffed chips into his mouth and they were perfect, crisp and greasy and loaded down with salt. He then doused vinegar on his fish and started cutting.

Icily, Harry asked, “I was curious, did you and your good friend, James Sholto enjoy Scotland?”

“Bloody hell, Harry,” John dropped the cutlery on the table. “Not this shit again. James is my friend. He had leave the same time I did. Auntie Meredith had sent Mum tickets again to come see her, only this time Mum didn’t go because… because…” John’s voice thickened then softened. “James likes to go hiking and mentioned a time or two that he’d never been to Glencoe. So I rang him up and invited him. Because he’s my friend and I enjoy his company.”

“Enjoy his company,” Harry shot him a nasty smile. “Is that what fags call sucking cock these days?”

“Harry, I swear to God,” John picked up his butter knife and pointed it at her. “If you can’t be civil at a time like this, I’ll-”

“What? Spear me with a butter knife? Smother me with butter? Put that down, you look stupid,” Harry tucked into her prawn. “I’m merely pointing out what a filthy hypocrite you are, little brother. You make sheep’s eyes at James the same you did Gary the Fairy.”

John willed himself not to rise to Harry’s bait. “Harry, I am not gay.”

“Yeah you are,” she said around a mouthful of prawn. “Want to try one?” she held one out to him. “Tastes fab. Might even taste like cock, not that I would know, since I’m a dyke and all.”

“No, I don’t want prawn, if I wanted prawn, I would have ordered prawn,” John reminded himself that Harry’s cruelty stemmed from that deep well of pain within her, had always existed within her. She wanted to hurt because she hurt. “I’m not doing this, Harry, OK? I’m not going to let you bully me, be rude to me because you’re upset about Mum. I’m sorry about not being excited about your wedding, alright? I’m really sorry I hurt your feelings. That was a shit thing of me to say, I didn’t mean it.”

“Just saying that you’d be loads happier if you were just yourself instead of trying to fit into this perfect box everyone else has made for you,” Harry said lightly, but the fire had gone out of her eyes. John knew he won this round. That didn’t mean the fight was over, though.

He decided to eat his fish before bringing up the next painful subject. He was glad he did, it was perfect, quite possibly the best piece of cod he had eaten in an age. Finally, he asked, “Do you… do you think we should tell Dad? About Mum?”
Harry had eaten all her prawns and most of her chips. She was pouring herself a second mug of tea. She set the pot down carefully. “Does he know that she’s sick?”

“I’ve kept Aunt Cora in the loop, with Mum’s surgeries and chemo and whatnot,” John toyed with a chip. “She said she emailed Dad but,” he shrugged. “Dunno if he knows. Or cares.”

Harry took a shuddery breath. “Then tell Auntie Cor,” Harry lapsed into the old childish nickname only she used for their father’s elder sister. “But… you let her know that he’s not to upset her and… and he’s not welcome at the funeral.”

“Do you really not want him at the funeral?”

“Do you want him there?”

“No,” John confessed. “I actually could live quite happily never seeing him again.”

“Then that’s settled,” Harry nodded. “I’ll go through Mum’s paperwork. Make sure she didn’t do anything stupid like keep the dickhead as the beneficiary of her life insurance. Make sure her will’s updated,” Her eyes grew wet again. “Jesus, Johnny. Are we really talking about planning Mum’s funeral?”

“Yeah,” John put the chip down on his plate. “We are. Feels surreal, don’t it?” A little bit of John’s old East End accent bled through now. It had mostly faded after being in the military.

“A bit,” Harry added milk to her tea. “We’ll have to figure out what to do with her house as well. It’s not in bad shape, structurally. Just ugly, that’s all. Might be a good rental property or we could sell it. Or do you want to keep living there? Sorry, I just assumed you’d want your own flat after Mum…” she ducked her head, unable to finish the thought.

John licked his lips. This was the other painful subject. Better just get it done, he resolutely told himself. “Harry, I’m on compassionate leave because of Mum’s illness,” he told her. “When Mum is… gone, I’m going back.”

“Going back? Going back where, no!” Harry goggled at him, her mouth dropped open in a perfect O. “You’re not fucking going back to Iraq!”

“Afghanistan,” John corrected her, his cheeks flushing as he felt the eyes of other diners and the wait staff starting at him.

“You told Mum you were going to retire from the service,” Harry’s eyes flashed angrily at him. “That you were going to open a surgery in the East End and practice medicine. Here. At home. Where towel-heads aren’t fucking shooting at you!” She slammed her palms against the greasy Formica table top. The salt shakers and teapot rattled.

John swiveled his head around to see the two Indian men, both of them wearing the traditional turbans, staring sad-eyed at John and his sister. John wanted to slide underneath the table until the shop closed and everyone had gone.

“I said no such thing,” John strove to keep a civil tone to his voice. “I did not retire from service. I’m on compassionate leave because of Mum’s illness. Opening a surgery in the East End is Mum’s dream, not mine.”

“You didn’t correct her though,” Harry pointed out.

“Are you?” John asked with raised eyebrows, “Especially now?” When Harry didn’t reply, he
continued, “Even when I retire from the military, I would not open a surgery or a clinic. I’m not a GP, I’m a surgeon,” he reminded her. “I’d get a job at a large hospital like Bart’s, with a proper operating theater. Anyway, I’ve notified my CO and when Mum is… well,” he cleared his throat and reached for the teapot. “I’ll be going back.”

“How long?” Harry continued to glare at her brother. “How long this time?”

“Two years,” John filled his mug with tea.

“This will be your third tour.”

“I’m aware of that,” John calmly poured milk into his tea.

Harry leaned back in her chair, arms crossed. “John Hamish Watson,” she proclaimed, knowing full well how much John loathed his middle name. “You are a fucking liar. You have no plans on retiring. You love the war. All of it. The blood, the trauma, the pain. Surrounded by uncertainty and death all the time, you love it. If booze is my drug of choice, then the war is yours.”

“That’s a terrible thing to say, Harry,” John bridled. “I do not love the war.”

“You don’t love the rush of trying to save a life?”

“Well, yes, of course. That’s why I became a surgeon, to save lives.”

“Then save lives here, in London!” Unexpectedly, Harry sobbed. “I’m already losing my mother. Do I have to lose you too?”

“Harry,” John closed his eyes, partially touched by Harry’s concern for him, partially exasperated. “Nothing is going to happen to me. Nothing ever happens to me.” He handed Harry a serviette. “Come on now, pull yourself together. We’re in this together, you and I. Besides, I’m not shipping off tomorrow. Mum’s got a few good months left. We’ll tell her about you and Clara, plan your wedding. Who knows, she might make it to Christmas yet.”

Their mother died exactly eight weeks later.

And Harry showed up dead drunk to the funeral, with the back of her skirt tucked into the back of her tights. With her nearly-naked arse on full display, she shouted abuse to everyone on the Watson side of the family, until Clara finally led her away.

That night, near midnight, John rang Sholto and asked him for a favor.

“Yeah, James? It’s me, John, did I wake you? Oh… yes, Mum’s service was lovely. Listen, do you know someone who can process my paperwork faster? Yeah, I want to get back into the game as soon as possible… fantastic, mate. Appreciate it, really do. Talk to you soon.”

He rang off and finished a bottle of brandy a well-meaning sympathizer brought him.

At least I’m going back to where I belong, he thought before passing out.
Chapter Summary

"Ten days after Harry Watson’s funeral, there still had not been any movement from Julia Stoner, the Red-Headed League or Magnussen’s old blackmailing syndicate..."

No news is good news... right???????

Happy Monday!

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Immortal Life

Ten days after Harry Watson’s funeral, there still had not been any movement from Julia Stoner, the Red-Headed League or Magnussen’s old blackmailing syndicate. Every single telephone in the Trelawney-Hopes’ home had been tapped, every room bugged. The CCTV cameras stayed fixed on their front door and back garden.

No one came back for The Letter. It lay safely in Trelawney-Hope’s vault.

Spooked, Special Agent John Mitton bolted from Victor Trevor’s old pied-à-terre. Where he had disappeared to, no one could say, or would. John, Mary and Violet all heavily suspected Sherlock had assisted Mitton out of London.

Naturally, so did Mycroft. But when he came unannounced to Baker Street and interrogated Sherlock at length, Sherlock merely lifted his black brows and his mouth quirked up in an amused smirk. Then he rosined up his bow and started playing *The Devil Went Down to Georgia* with gusto.

“Your repertoire grows by leaps and bounds,” Mycroft had said sourly before departing.

But he didn’t leave before Sherlock nicked his credit card and his Rolex.

Mycroft’s mood worsened daily. So did John’s but instead of letting his rage simmer as Mycroft did, his mood dived perilously close to depression instead. John had grudgingly started seeing Ella, his old therapist again, mostly to keep his wife off his back. He found it just as unbearable to talk to her as it had been in the beginning.

It didn’t help with the grief and the guilt he carried locked up tight in his chest and it sure as hell didn’t help with the dreams.

Not PTSD dreams, mind you. John would have welcomed those.

Instead, his body and mind regressed to age fourteen and John found himself waking up covered in a hot sweat, rock-hard and close to coming as he remembered fragments of dreams that… weren’t about his wife. And weren’t about women either.

He’d slink out of bed, careful not to wake his wife, still avoiding her touch. Not because she repelled him exactly, but because it felt too much like cheating. Shagging *her* while thinking about *him*…
Please don’t use me to cheat on your wife…

Feeling worse than he had in years, worse than even after The Fall, he’d slip into the bathroom, turn the shower on and finish the job his subconscious started. Then he’d sneak downstairs in his dressing robe and slippers and pretend that he had just naturally woken up at four AM and just simply could not fall back to sleep, so why not put the kettle on, have an early breakfast and update the blog?

Only he wasn’t working on the blog, he was playing Minesweeper while desperately trying not to think filthy thoughts about his former flatmate.

He was trying not to imagine what might have happened in Paris if he had allowed himself to let go when it was just the two of them alone in their hotel room on their last night. If he hadn’t sobbed on Sherlock’s shoulder like a little girl and had kissed him instead. Kissed him there in Paris, instead of at Baker Street like an idiot. Kissed him, pulled that suit jacket off, unbuttoned his shirt, pushed him down to the floor while kissing that gorgeous long white neck and running his fingers through the unruly mop of black curls and…

And then what…? Here is where John’s conscious mind stuttered, where his imagination failed. Clinically he knew how gay men achieved sexual satisfaction. In real life, he had no idea. Again, he felt like he had when he was fourteen years old. He knew what sex was, he just didn’t know how to achieve it, with someone else, that was.

The only difference between then and now was that the Someone Else was not female.

During the day, John stoutly told himself this, reminded himself He Was Not Gay. It was the trauma, it was the shock, it was fucked up, plus to pursue this line of action would cost him everything important. His relationship with his best friend. His relationship with Violet. His unborn child.

He doubted Mary would be merciful if he cheated on her. Especially if he cheated with…well.

Could very well lose his bloody own life, actually.

This is what John had told himself every day since he’d put Harry in the ground. Every night, his body betrayed his heart and mind.

Plus, with Sherlock’s history, his childhood trauma, John worried constantly he’d inadvertently triggered something, something worse than the PSTD dream Sherlock suffered at Dupin’s. Guiltily, he belatedly realized he should have never pounced on Sherlock like he had. Two times, two times John had made unsolicited physical advances.

He was lucky Sherlock had kissed him back instead of punching him in the face.

If Mary was aware something else was bothering her husband other than his sister’s murder, she did not reveal it. She returned to work early, tired of the inactivity of sitting at home once Harry’s legal (and not-so-legal matters) had been resolved. When she was home, she kept busy, kept out of John’s way. She baked massive quantities of gingerbread men to bring to her co-workers for Christmas. She surfed Pinterest, pinning cute ideas for nursery decorations. Or she worked on solving the “Sara Govmux” riddle Sherlock and Violet had asked her to look at what felt like eons ago.

“Probably a dead end, but keeps me occupied,” Mary had told Sherlock over the phone two nights ago when he had finally called, pretending to ask about the alias, but in reality, checking in on John.

Sherlock had hummed his approval then rang off.

The only person not surprised by the lethargy of their enemy, was Sherlock Holmes. He seemed
completely unperturbed. He passed the time by working on a new violin composition, reading *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and working on his maggot experiment since, sadly, Violet never got an opportunity to dispose of the glass case containing the horrible, wiggly things.

Violet, while concerned about the inaction, kept busy as well. “Wasp” had produced the intel on Operation Raven, but it was not good news. Instead of incriminating Mycroft, it created a motive for Sherlock for murdering Magnussen in cold blood.

The thoroughly detailed report Wasp had obtained contained a surveillance video of Sherlock, lying in his hospital bed, after The Shooting. He was whiter than snow, tubes in his arms, his chest and his nose. It showed Magnussen visiting him. Magnussen threatening him. Magnussen *licking* him.

Violet had nearly vomited and rushed to swipe her iPad screen to lock it so she could have a moment to collect herself.

What made it worse was she knew Magnussen had been fully aware of the abuse Sherlock had suffered at the hands of the sadistic Earl of Winchester. *That’s why he did it of course. He knew Sherlock’s pressure points. John Watson. And sex.* Violet fumed impotently while silently cursing John Mitton for being wrong, Mycroft did have leverage over Sherlock.

But when Violet forced herself to continue reviewing the report, she did notice an interesting fact: Operation Raven had been green-lit *after* Sherlock had been shot, not before.

*Oho, Mickey, did we slip up at last? Getting sentimental in your old age?* Violet thought as she compared her notes while Sherlock examined dead maggots under his microscope after feeding them chunks of ham he had injected with different types of poison.

Allowing herself to taste hope the same way a chronic dieter allows herself to eat a tiny sliver of pie, she wired Wasp the money she owed her for the job. Then Violet emailed her another request to hack into MI-6 again, this time to obtain the records for the mission that had directly ended the life of one Marie Rogêt and inadvertently, had caused the death of Ford Holmes.

That chore done, she had curled up in John’s chair, surrounded by the all documents she requested Mycroft to procure so she could build a more accurate profile of Charles Augustus Magnussen. One of his lackeys had delivered boxes and boxes containing paperwork documenting the Dane’s mean, petty life. The more she read, the more she hated him and she didn’t believe it was possible or logical to hate a dead man.

Sherlock, humming, drifted into the lounge. Violet didn’t even look up as he added more logs to the dwindling fire. If she had, she would have seen he still wore his safety goggles, his good aubergine dress shirt, the one the Internet had dubbed “The Purple Sex of Sex,” and his blue pyjamas bottoms.

Not that Violet’s attire was much better: black yoga bottoms, white woolly socks, a man’s long-sleeved thermal undershirt and Sherlock’s third-best dressing gown, the maroon one.

“If you were going to waste your time, why don’t you read a romance novel like a normal woman?” Sherlock prodded at the smoldering logs with a poker. “And will you cease and desist with wearing my clothes?”

Violet ignored his dig about profiling as well as his ongoing complaint about her raiding his wardrobe. She knew full well he thought her former profession was a joke. She also only nicked his clothes for the simple fact she knew it irritated him.

So instead of taking the bait, she asked dryly, “How are the worms?”
“Maggots and fifty percent of them are deceased now.”

“Oh, happy day.”

“No, only twenty percent should be dead. The cyanide is killing them much too quickly for my experiment. I’m going to have to acquire more.”

Now Violet looked up. “Acquire more? The hell you are and why do you have cyanide?”

Sherlock straightened up, his face mulish. Ignoring her second question, he reminded her, “This is my flat, if you recall. I can have what I want here.”

“I live here too, William Sherlock Scott Holmes.”

“Ah, you’ve been talking to Mother again,” Sherlock turned his back on her.

“Yes and she’s still bugging me about our Christmas plans.”

“Tell her we’re going to France to visit Dupin over the holidays,” Sherlock shouted as he stomped back to the kitchen, in a strop now.

“Are we really?” Violet brightened the same way a young girl would have if her parents had told her they were taking her to meet her favorite film star.

“No! Of course not. Neither one of us can leave London without Mycroft’s approval,” Sherlock snarled from the doorway. “Was your brain replaced with fluff while I was gone?”

“When was the last time you ate?” Violet idly asked, swinging her legs over the armrest of John’s chair.

“Oh,” Sherlock said after checking the clock in the kitchen. “Last night. Tea time.”

“Thought so, judging by how pissy you’re acting. I’m not cooking so what are we ordering?”

“Chinese?”

“God, no!” Violet gagged, thinking about rice and immediately comparing it to maggots. “How about-” she nearly said Indian then remembered John’s revelation about Sherlock’s food aversion and his sensitivity to smell. “Italian?”

“Fine. Ring Angelo. He’ll deliver for me,” Mollified, Sherlock returned to the kitchen. “My usual.”

“Oh, I’m ordering? OK, sure, no problem,” Violet rolled her eyes and pulled her mobile out of the dressing gown’s pocket, wincing as she did so. She had mostly recovered from the explosion. Once in a while, she’d feel a twinge or an ache if she moved too fast or unexpectedly. Sometimes she’d feel pins-and-needles in her arms and legs, like they had fallen asleep. Other than that, she felt fine… more or less.

She placed the food order then resumed her reading. Dull stuff, mostly pediatric records about a man she had never met but hated intensely. She struggled to focus as she perused the records. Routine check-ups. Vaccinations. Ear infections. Boring. Useless.

Until she got to 1980.

“Holy shit!” she cried out, bolting out of John’s chair.
Sherlock burst out of the kitchen, holding a lit blow-torch. “What is it?”

“Nothing, it’s just… WHAT THE ACTUAL HELL SHERLOCK?” Violet shrieked at the sight of the blue-white flame. It was fortunate indeed that the new neighbors had gone to Marjorca for the holidays and Mrs. Hudson was recuperating at her sister’s. They might have all wondered who the American woman was and why she was shouting.

“New experiment.”

“NO.”

Sherlock, sulky again, turned the blowtorch off.

“Take Gladstone out for a walk,” Violet advised Sherlock, desperate to have him out of the flat and out of her hair so she could make a telephone call, a very important private call.

“It’s raining outside.”

“What? Raining in London, no way,” Violet deadpanned. “Just… please put some pants on and take the dog out. You haven’t left the apartment in three days.”

Violet knew that when Sherlock started playing with his more dangerous tools, boredom was starting to seep in. She not only craved privacy for her phone call, but she also hoped that by going outside, it would blow away the gathering cobwebs in Sherlock’s massive brain and he’d find something out in the world that would interest him while they all waited for Julia’s next move.

“By pants, I’m assuming you are using American vernacular and really mean trousers?”

“Since I’m using my real accent instead of the Brit one, yeah, Captain Obvious, I do.”

“Your true accent, while grating, is far less annoying than your false British accent,” Sherlock jabbed at her but there was no venom in his voice. He left the small blowtorch on the coffee table and disappeared into his bedroom. Gladstone, having heard “Dog” and “Walk” and “Out”, leapt off the sofa and followed Sherlock down the hall towards the bedroom. Soon (but not soon enough for Violet,) Sherlock and Gladstone emerged. Sherlock’s shirt was buttoned up properly and in deference to the wet weather, he actually put a pair of jeans on, so dark blue they looked almost black. But he wore his usual shiny-black shoes and had his old grey scarf wrapped around his neck.

As he slung on the Belstaff and clipped Gladstone’s leash to his collar, he asked, “When will the food arrive?”

“Fifteen minutes. I charged it to Mycroft’s credit card.”

“Did you order extra for the new Network members who are currently residing in the alley behind the building?” Sherlock took Gladstone’s leash off its hook.

“Oh they’re not there anymore,” Violet informed him. “I rented rooms for those kids for the weekend.”

“Ah. The Romanos Hotel London, I presume?”

Violet hid her smile. For all his professed hardness and clinical detachment, Sherlock definitely had a soft spot when it came to London’s homeless. Violet wasn’t sure of the origins of his concern. She knew that he had “lived” in a variety of flophouses and drug dens in Hackney before he finally (mostly) sobered up. But she also knew that the grand majority of his “Homeless Network” members
were teenagers and young adults who had either fled their homes to escape horrific abuse or (worse yet) been kicked out. The ones that had been booted from their homes were usually members of the gay community, very young members.

During the time Violet had lived with Sherlock, she discovered it would not be uncommon to find a disheveled street-kid sleeping on the sofa. When she called John to compare notes, he snorted and said, “Yeah, it didn’t happen often when we were flat-mates, but about once every few months, there’d be a kid, either sick or beaten half-to-death, but always filthy, dead asleep on the sofa. Sherlock would order food from Speedy’s and I’d treat whatever was wrong with the kid. Poor things, they were usually half-dead. Malnourished, terrified. Then Sherlock would do his thing, you know, deduce the kid’s life story. After that, he’d decide whether or not to call the kid’s family or social services. I never understood at the time why someone who treated ordinary people like rubbish would bother with these ragamuffins but now…”

John hadn’t needed to finish. Violet understood why Sherlock bothered. While the Great Detective obstinately refused to sympathize with anyone, he certainly could empathize with an abuse victim.

So Violet happily enabled Sherlock’s habit of helping his team of street urchins, “Oh no, I put them up at Claridge’s, courtesy of Mycroft.”

“Excellent choice, my clever girl,” Sherlock purred. “Which room? Oh, do tell me you booked the Royal Suite for them.”

Violet regretfully shook her head, her chestnut curls rippling down her back as she did so. “It was already reserved, so the kids will have to make do with Davies Penthouse instead.”

“I’m sure they will find those rooms satisfactory,” Sherlock’s lips twitched in suppressed amusement, imagining Mycroft’s howl when he received next month’s credit card statement. Then he tugged on Gladstone’s leash. “Komm,” he intoned.

Once Sherlock and Gladstone had vacated the flat, Violet immediately fished her secret pre-paid mobile out of the other pocket of the dressing gown. She rang Mary.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” Violet said in her true voice. “Can you talk?”

“Yeah, no problem, John and I are just watching a DVD, what’s up?”

Ah, can’t talk, OK, Violet easily read between the lines of Mary’s greeting. “Listen, I need to talk to you, in private. I’ve got news, good news about Magnussen.”

There was a pause, the faintest intake of breath, then a very polite: “Oh?”

“Yeah, Mary, trust me, this,” Violet looked at the medical charts in her other hand again. “This is good, for everyone.”

“I just had the most marvelous idea,” Mary suddenly burst out, as if they really were best friends. “I have the afternoon off tomorrow. I’m meeting Molly and her mother to do a bit of Christmas shopping. Come join us, I’m sure Molly would love to see you.”

“I really need to talk to you alone,” Violet spoke quickly, not sure if Sherlock planned on taking a long walk or was going to just stay outside long enough for Gladstone to have a wee then come back inside.
“Oh, say you’ll come. You and I can have a nice long chat after Molly and her mum go home. Molly won’t stay out long with the baby, you know. I haven’t seen you in ages.”

Violet stifled a sigh of resignation. She would have to endure the tedium of Christmas shopping, probably in some horrible crowded shopping centre that was modeled after a horrible American shopping mall. Only after Molly and her mother went home could she have a private conversation with Mary.

She really did not relish spending time alone with Mary. Not with how she planned on pitting her against Mycroft so the two monsters could devour each other…

… and not after what she had witnessed in the foyer at Baker Street.

She tasted something bitter in her mouth as her throat tightened. She wished she could Delete memories as Sherlock claimed he could.

“Well, I suppose I could get some Christmas shopping out of the way,” she grumbled, even though a small ripple of delight shimmied through her, despite herself.

For the first time in years and years, she had people she needed to buy Christmas presents for, no, not needed. Wanted to buy them presents.

Violet allowed herself to smile.

“You’re smiling, aren’t you?” Mary said warmly.

Some of the good cheer dissipated, like carbonation in a can of fizzy drink that had been sitting unopened for too long. Violet knew not everything about “Mary Morstan” was fraudulent. The difficulty was discerning what was real and what was illusion.

The only thing that was definitely real about Mary was her love for John and her children.

Unbidden, the image of Sherlock shoved up against the wall in the foyer while John snogged him senseless popped right back into her brain.

Pressing her fingers against her forehead, as if she could squeeze that image out of her mind forever, she chirped, “Yeah, OK. It’ll be fun.” Wickedly she added, “You can help me pick out a gift for Mycroft.”

Mary snorted. “I’ll text you where and what time we’re meeting. We are unfortunately at the mercy of when Molly’s little monster wakes up.”

“See you tomorrow,” Violet rang off and flopped into John’s chair with a groan.

Then she shivered. She hefted herself up out of the plaid chair, rubbing her arms as she trundled towards Sherlock’s bedroom in search of a thicker jumper or fleece sweatshirt.

She always felt cold these days, as if her arms had been plunged into buckets of ice water.

**

18 December 2015
The Plaza, Oxford Street
West End, London
Friday afternoon
“Oh, I just don’t know,” Molly dithered, looking over her list. “I still can’t decide what to get Greg.”

They had spent most of the afternoon talking and window-shopping instead of actually purchasing gifts. This shopping centre was worse than Violet had feared. Despite its size, it reminded her more of the generic strip malls back home, but the location had been selected due to its proximity to Molly’s flat. With all the new equipment Molly needed to drag around, she wanted to spend as little time in cabs as possible. Plus, with her mother again visiting from Cheltenham, there was no way she was going to attempt to take the Tube, not with Mrs. Hooper being unfamiliar with London mass transportation and definitely not trying to drag along a pram, a diaper bag stuffed with all the essentials needed to care for a baby and oh yes, of course, the baby himself.

Despite the bright, sad florescent lights and the small selection of shops, it became apparent to both Violet and Mary that Molly was more excited about being out of the house than actually shopping. She also looked better than she had the last time Violet saw her. Molly still looked tired but not completely wiped out. She had recently cut several inches of her long auburn hair off and it suited her as well as giving her a more mature look. But she still wore her favorite cardigan, the one with cherries as well as pair of very baggy khaki slacks. “I’m not back to my pre-baby weight yet,” Molly had cheerfully explained. “And I finally don’t care.” She laughed, “I’m too tired to care that I can’t fit into my old jeans.”

“That’s right, dear,” Mrs. Hooper had nodded approvingly. “Besides, I thought you had gotten too thin when you moved to London. All that walking I suspect. A few extra pounds suit you.”

Other daughters might have gotten offended, perceived a remark like that from their mothers as a passive-aggressive dig. But Molly only gave her mother a fond look and said, “Ta, Mum.”

Now as Molly dilly-dallied over what to buy her husband for their first Christmas as husband and wife, Mrs. Hooper sing-songed: “Oh, just order the golf clubs I showed you on the computer last night.” Mrs. Hooper crooned because she was hovering over the baby pram, tickling little Henry’s belly. “Daddy would like the golf clubs, wouldn’t he, Raffles?”

Both Mary and Violet shared an amused grin as Molly gave her mother a pained look and muttered under her breath, “His name is Henry, Mum.” But even Molly knew that was a losing battle. The unfortunate nickname was beginning to stick.

In the short time since Violet had last seen the mite, he looked much better. Still small and underweight, but not scrawny, thank God. More importantly however, he was not yelling his head off. Wearing a fuzzy onesie that was striped like a candy cane, he stared dispassionately up at his grandmother with almond shaped eyes. The muddy grey of his irises were lightening, promising to turn into a cool crystalline blue. His wispy baby hair also was deepening into a particularly rich shade of reddish-brown, darker than Molly’s auburn hair, but not black.

Violet knew that Molly had internally breathed a sigh of relief when she realized her son had not inherited his father’s heterochromia or coal-black curls.

But what Molly didn’t see and what Violet observed was how the kid stared at everything with a laser-like focus, too much like a certain fair-skinned, dark-haired Consulting Detective. Violet was used to Sherlock’s penetrating stares but to have a baby look at her with the same intensity was fucking unnerving.

Violet did not realize a baby could be detached either, or at least, little Henry seemed to be. Even at six weeks, the child seemed to be an observer of the world instead of an active participant. But then,
aren’t most babies? Violet thought. She idly wondered if she was merely projecting the child’s natural father’s personality on him. As she observed the infant staring up at his grandmother, she almost expected him to proclaim, “Grandmother, if you would simply observe, you would realize that Lestrade would most certainly not like golf clubs as he does not have the patience for the game nor the leisure time, you daft, irritating woman.”

But, he was only a month and a half old so Raffles merely stared at Mrs. Hooper, wide-eyed and unblinking, as if he did not know what to make of this creature hovering over him. Violet crooked a smile as Mrs. Hooper continued to tickle Raffles and speak baby-talk. Violet had a feeling if the kid knew Morse code, he’d be blinking out “SOS” right now.

“Mum, I told you, Greg dislikes golf plus we couldn’t afford to play at any of the courses here in the city, it’s too expensive,” Molly sounded patient and annoyed at the same time. Obviously she had explained this fact of life to her mother multiple times.

“Did you?” Mrs. Hooper sounded genuinely puzzled. “Oh, I’m so sorry, love, truly. It’s just that I’ve been so distracted by this charming little man,” she hoisted Henry out of the pram. His big eyes grew even bigger. If he could have been able to speak, he probably would have demanded: “What are you doing, woman? Put. Me. Down.” Instead he just continued staring, probably fascinated and terrified by the stranger who not only Wasn’t Mum but continued to coo at him like a damn pigeon.

What is it, Violet wondered clinically, about babies that turns some women into dipshits?

“Could we duck in here for a mo’?” Mary pointed at The Perfume Shop. “I know I’m supposed to be shopping for others, but I’m out of scent,” she prattled on, looking and sounding like, well, Mary Morstan. Her hair had been freshly touched up, less platinum, more sunshine. Her big cornflower blue eyes were sparkling and alive, her smile sweet and genuine. She wore a loose heather-grey jumper, blue jeans and her white trainers. Her coat (along with everyone else’s coat) was stuffed into the convenient little shelf under the carriage part of the pram. But her long, striped scarf was still wound around her neck.

She also finally looked pregnant. Before, she had just looked a bit puffy, a bit tired. Now it was obvious her breasts were larger and her stomach pooched out. Molly and Mrs. Hooper had squealed with joy when Mary finally confirmed that yes, she and John were expecting, “How wonderful for you and John!” Molly had said as she had hugged Mary. “Such good news after… well, everything that’s happened.”

“Raffles will have friend to play with!” Mrs. Hooper had clasped her hands in delight.

Yes, how wonderful, Violet had thought wryly, a friend for Henry. After all, every Holmes needs his Watson, doesn’t he?

I wonder if Mary realizes just how much John and Sherlock need each other. Doubt it. She wouldn’t have let Sherlock live if she did. John is hers, as far as she’s concerned.

Violet of course hid these dark thoughts and had plastered a smile on her face while Molly flushed at Mrs. Hooper’s innocent comment.

“Mm, yes, of course,” Molly had mumbled, “That will be nice, wouldn’t it?” She gave Mary one of her famous “I’m Really Uncomfortable So I’m Going to Smile” smiles.

Then Violet remembered that Mary supposedly did not know about Henry’s parentage and so quickly changed the subject to how excited Mrs. Hudson was going to be to hear that news once she returned from her sister’s house in the country, where she had gone to recover from her injuries.
Molly had flashed Violet a grateful look.

But it had been impossible to speak to Mary privately. So when Mary pointed at The Perfume Shop, she leapt at the chance. “Mary, do you mind if I tag along? I’ve having a miserable time trying to pick something for Mrs. Holmes and of course, Sherlock is no help at all.”

Mary cottoned on right away, “Ooh, I bet we can find something for her.”

Molly’s face scrunched up, “Oh that’s a small space with the pram and everything. How about we meet you two near the Coffee & Muffins?”

“I could do with a coffee, I’ll join you,” Mrs. Hooper reluctantly put Raffles back in his pram and lovingly tucked his baby blanket around him.

Raffles closed his eyes, as if to say Finally.

The women split up. As she pretended to examine the perfumes, Violet was not unsurprised to feel Mary palm something into her hand, some sort of business card.

If Mary looked very Mary Morstan today, then Violet looked very Violet Smith. Skinny dark blue jeans, her flat-heeled black knee-boots, polished to a high gloss. Mauve cashmere jumper with a mauve, silver and ivory silk scarf wound around her throat and tied in a floppy bow. The chestnut curls flattened into a titian curtain. Her make-up was soft and pearly, all pinks and ivories and tawny-browns. She had her black pea coat looped over one arm and her shiny black Coach handbag over her shoulder. The only jewelry she wore was her engagement ring and her pretty gold wristwatch. And, of course, the final touch: the fake spectacles with thick, trendy black frames.

All freckles, all scars were neatly hidden away.

Inside the patent leather handbag was her Glock (safety on, of course,) as well as her wallet, a compact of pressed powder and lipstick and an obnoxious Bluetooth earpiece. Her Smartphone was in the back pocket of her jeans. Tucked inside her boots was an emergency Visa pre-paid cash card, a switch-blade knife and the prepaid mobile.

Violet didn’t know what was in Mary’s handbag or on her person and didn’t want to know.

As Violet smoothly put the business card into her jeans pocket without missing a beat, Mary began whispering in Russian. She spoke slowly for Violet’s benefit, conscious of the fact that Violet was familiar with the language but not fluent like she was with French, German and Spanish. “I needed to talk to you in private as well. I figured it out, what your fiancé asked me to research. It was an anagram.”

Violet lifted her eyebrows but didn’t speak. She was, however, dying to read what Mary gave her. She also wanted to give Mary the good news about Magnussen but Mary had drifted off, in search of a sales clerk. Turns out, she really was out of perfume after all.

“Well, I used wear Claire de la Lune, but my husband really doesn’t like it. Can you recommend something else?”

Violet rolled her eyes and went to wait for Mary outside the shop. After Mary made her purchase and met her, they walked towards the Plaza Coffee & Muffin shop. “This doesn’t solve what I’m going to get Mycroft for Christmas,” she grumbled.

“There’s a High and Mighty shop here,” Mary said in the King’s English, her eyes dancing mischievously. “The name alone suits him.”
“Mycroft? Wear a suit that wasn’t bespoke for him? Perish the thought,” Violet laughed and found herself wishing that she and Mary really could be friends.

But, as Mary herself had pointed out, women like them didn’t have friends. They had allies.

Still, one could be civil with their allies. “How’s John?” Violet asked, masking her discomfort. She knew she’d eventually need to ask about John. They were friends, she and John. It would be unnatural and therefore suspicious if she did not inquire after his welfare.

Mary’s face scrunched up then she shook her head. “Dunno, tell you the truth. He’s not the most communicative of men, not really. Hasn’t said much since the funeral, but at least the rotten photogs have finally gotten bored and moved off our doorstep.”

“Thank God,” Violet said sincerely then asked carefully, “Has Harry’s estate been resolved?”

Mary snorted in anger. “Oh, I think that’s why John’s not saying much. He’s blindingly angry at Harry for the financial mess she got herself in then feels guilty for feeling angry at his murdered sister. She pissed everything away on the ponies. We also learned that she had never bought the flat she and Clara shared in Mayfair, not outright like she led us all to believe. No, there was a mortgage, then she had double-mortgaged it. Then she had fallen behind on the payments. Clara had no idea.”

“Oh no.”

“Did you know,” Mary’s eyes blazed. “That Clara had the temerity to ask John to help her catch up on the lapsed payments?”

“I hope he told her to bugger off.”

Mary’s nostrils flared as she said in disgust. “He wasn’t rude, of course, but yeah, he told her he couldn’t help her, so Clara’s going to have to move out and live among the proletariat.”

“I can’t believe Clara wanted to continue living where Harry had… well,” Violet flashed back upon seeing how Harry’s life had ended, trussed up and butchered like a Christmas goose.

“Clara’s not thinking straight,” Mary admitted. “John said as much. He thinks she’ll go back to Barcelona to her family.” Then she sighed, “Even if we wanted to help Clara keep the flat, we can’t. The hush money the Parisian police paid John,” her lips thinned as the thought of John being falsely imprisoned, “Is almost all gone. Harry also did not have life insurance. She had no savings. She literally spent everything on drink and horses. So we had to pay for the funeral out of pocket, all of it. The church service, the coffin, the luncheon, the actual burial, the tombstone and that cost a pretty penny. Then there were all the loan sharks who wanted to be paid back what Harry owed them.”

“Yeah, I heard about that bit,” Violet’s mouth turned down as she remembered Sherlock stalking about the flat, railing about what an idiot Harry Watson had been and how moneylenders, while mundane and boring, were amongst the most vile of criminals.

“They’re like Hydra, really,” he had snapped while standing on top of the coffee table, fingers curled up in tight fists as he fumed at the injustice of the mess Harry had left her brother and how no one really could extricate John from it, not even the Great Sherlock Holmes. “Cut off one head and three more spring up in its place. I don’t have the time to locate all the loan sharks dogging John and Mary and the Met doesn’t have enough competent officers to do the job properly. And besides…” he had turned around, studied the picture of Jim Moriarty, still hanging on the wall after all this time, “I need time to think.”

Sherlock had then disappeared with Gladstone for a three-hour-walk as the situation regarding the
resurging Red-Headed-League was a “Three Hour Long Problem.”

But, as Violet reasoned, it was better than smoking three packs of cigarettes.

“Well, then you probably heard that we ended up just paying them off,” now Mary shook her head in utter disgust. “John gave in when they kept threatening me and the baby,” she ran her hand down her tummy, a firm little bump now. “I supposed it’s for the best, but it’s still galling.” She paused looking down at her little bag from The Perfume Shop. Then she smiled, but it was a humorless smile. Faintly, again speaking in Russian, she told Violet, “John thinks I did it, killed her, I know he does.” Then she switched back to English, “Or at least suspects.”

Violet didn’t know what to say. She also had suspected Mary at first. But she had changed her mind for two reasons, the first being the most logical: she had a solid alibi. She had an obstetrician’s appointment at the time of Harry’s death then she had picked up a late lunch at Wimpy’s (paying with her bank card.) Then she had gone to work and had been there until Violet came to St. Bart’s after visiting the crime scene.

The second (and more compelling) reason was Mary had absolutely nothing to gain from Harry’s death. Mary wouldn’t kill Harry just because she hurt John’s feelings. That wasn’t practical. Mary was a business woman first, an assassin second. She didn’t kill because she enjoyed killing. She killed because she enjoyed the pay-off, the reward. She would earn nothing from Harry’s death so she refrained.

Mary was a woman who kept her backside covered. Hence, the double-hit on Sherlock, ensuring that Mycroft or his minions couldn’t touch her. If she died at their hands, Sherlock died at someone else’s.

*Oh yeah, that’s why I hate her... selfish bitch.*

Violet thought very carefully before speaking. Even though Mary was a business woman first, that did not negate the fact she was still a master assassin. It wouldn’t do to piss off a woman who had been trained as a sniper. “Give him time,” she finally said. “A lot has happened to him in the past few weeks and it’s all been intentional, in hopes of pushing him over the edge. He’s been royally mind-gamed. He needs time to get his head right.”

“Yes, of course,” Mary started walking again. “I know. It’s maddening though.” She brightened a bit. “At least he’s finally getting out of the house. Sherlock rang him this morning. DI Dimmock finally has a case for them.”

“Hm, he must have rang him while I was in the shower,” Violet frowned, not remembering Sherlock talking on the phone to anyone this morning. Then she nodded, “But yes, this was probably the best thing for the pair of them, John and Sherlock. They both needed to get back to work as well as think about something other than Paris and Harry.”

But her stomach fluttered as she thought about John and Sherlock being in close proximity with each other. Sitting next to each other in a black cab, working side by side at a crime scene...

She glanced at Mary out of the corner of her hazel eyes. *How can she not know, how can she not see? Maybe she’s made herself willfully blind. I knew, I noticed... and I was stupid enough to... well...* Violet ruthlessly cut that thought off when she saw the glowing sign for The Plaza Coffee & Muffins.

Mary and Violet spotted Molly and her mother so they hurried to join them. While her mother sat and enjoyed her coffee as well as a blueberry muffin, Molly stood with Raffles in her arms. The baby
made fussy, mewling noises. “I’m not sure how much longer he’s going to last,” Molly said apologetically as she gently rocked Raffles in her arms. “We may need to leave soon.”

“Oh no, so soon?” Violet hoped she sounded sincere. She adored Molly and her mother seemed to be such a nice lady as well. But she really needed to talk to Mary alone, without the possibility of Molly or anyone they knew interrupting them.

“Sorry, but I’ve got a little tyrant on my hands,” Molly smiled down at her son.

Of course, Mrs. Hooper had a flash of inspiration. “Oh, go on Molly. Stay with your friends. I’ll take the little’un home.”

Raffles whimpered, as if to say Oh dear God, no.

“Oh Mum, I couldn’t ask you to do that,” Molly chimed immediately.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Hooper said firmly. “What are grannies for and besides, this granny will have to go back to Cheltenham soon. I want to spend as much time with my grandson as possible.”

“Well, alright, it would be nice to spend time with proper adults,” Molly beamed at Violet and Mary, “If that’s OK.”

“Of course it’s OK!” Mary gave her a warm smile. “Just, let me grab my coat before you leave with the pram.”

“Oh yes. Actually Mum, why don’t I walk with you to the front doors so we can get you and Raf-Henry,” Molly scowled at herself for her slip of the tongue, “Situated in the cab.”

As Molly tenderly put her boy back down in the pram, Mrs. Hooper collected her rubbish then binned her cup and muffin wrapper. Together they all started walking towards the exit.

But as they passed the High and Mighty shop, Violet spied an absolutely hideous necktie on the mannequin in the window. It was bright red, with actual working fairy lights. They twinkled maroon, gold and forest-green. It was of course some sort of gag gift. Violet thought about Sherlock’s face upon witnessing Mycroft’s reaction at receiving such a gaudy object and her decision was made. “I’ll catch up with you,” she told the other women. “I must simply have that tie, for Mycroft.”

As Mary snorted in glee, Mrs. Hooper flapped her hand at her, “We’ll wait.”

“Come on, let’s walk a bit ahead so we’re out of the other shoppers’ way,” Molly beckoned her mother, who pushed the pram, to follow her.

Violet dashed into the shop and argued a bit with the clerk. The tie wasn’t for sale actually. It was part of the window dressing. Violet batted her eyelashes, cajoled and pleaded. When flirting failed, she offered the sales clerk fifty pounds for the damned thing. She ended up paying seventy for it. Well worth it, she thought as she imagined Mycroft’s mouth dropping open in horror while Sherlock laughed.

She hoped Mrs. Holmes would make him wear the damn thing.

But as she exited the shop, her sharp hazel eyes caught something, or rather, Someone, in black jeans and a black hoodie, the hood over his head. This Someone trying too hard to look causal, but walking with a definite purpose.

Walking purposely towards Mary, Molly and Mrs. Hooper… no, to Mary. Just towards Mary.
Mary turned at the sound of Violet crying out her name just as the man in the black hoodie bumped into her. Mary scowled at him, about to tell him off, but the man hugged her. Mary’s face turned white as a sheet as her hands curled into claws, her knees buckling. Then the man let her go with a flourish, his arms spread wide. A bloody knife fell from his left hand, an ordinary butcher’s knife. The knife clattered to the ugly floor, dirty from snow melting from shoppers’ boots and shoes.

Meanwhile Mary clutched her belly, slumped to her knees then collapsed to her side, still pressing her hands over her belly.

But as she fell, Violet had seen the awful ruby-red stain spreading across her grey jumper.

“Oh my God!” Violet dropped her package in shock then shouted at the sales clerk. “Don’t just stand there! Call 999! A woman’s been stabbed!”

Then she whirled around upon hearing Molly’s high-pitched keening scream.

As Mary fell, Molly immediately dropped to her knees as well, “Mary, what is it, oh my God!” Upon seeing the blood, her medical instincts took over. She quickly rolled Mary into a supine position. Molly pulled Mary’s blood-soaked jumper to assess the damage. Moving efficiently and quickly, Molly yanked Mary’s scarf off and pressed it to Mary’s belly. The scarf turned maroon on contact. Molly then took Mary’s hands and pressed it over the bloody scarf. “Push down as hard as you can, Mary,” Molly told her breathlessly as she balled her own hand into a fist then clasped her other hand around it. She then applied firm pressure above the wound in hopes to cut off the blood supply to the injury. Her thin arms shook with the effort. The blood flow slowed but did not completely stop.

“Mum, call 999!” Molly yelled over her shoulder. “And bring me our coats,” she added, wanting to use one coat to keep Mary warm to prevent her from going into shock, the other to try to elevate the wound above the heart. “Mary, you’re going to be fine, OK?” Molly’s voice shook.

“Molly…” Mary croaked faintly, struggling to keep her eyes open. “Molly, run…”

“What?” Then she realized Mary’s attacker still stood there. He had stood there and watched her perform first aid on her friend the entire time. Her heart stalled. Molly forced herself to look up. Finally, he locked eyes on Violet.

Violet felt her legs threaten to give way. No… her brain wouldn’t accept what she saw right in front of her, standing there in the harsh, uncompromising florescent lights.

No… no… nonononononono…
Her skin erupted into gooseflesh. Her breath caught in her throat.

*No, it can’t be, it can’t… it’s not possible!*

But it was. It truly was. The impossible had been eliminated. What remained, no matter how improbable had to be the truth… and the truth was that Violet Hunter was staring in the dark brown eyes of Jim Moriarty.

Behind him, Mary Watson continued bleeding.
"Mycroft covered the mouthpiece of his phone, “Once they’re back up, I want all live CCTV feeds from Oxford to be routed to my computer at once.”

“Yes sir.”

As she turned to go, Mycroft called out, “Anthea?”

“Yes sir?”

Mycroft ran his hand down his face. “Call my brother. Get him up to speed…”

... and shit just got real.

Also, so sorry for not responding to comments! But I do read them and appreciate every one of them. After posting tonight, I will be undergoing the always terrifying process of Switching Internet Providers. So you'll know I'm back online when I start responding to comments :^)

Happy Monday!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Chapter Twenty-three: Come into My Parlor

He stood there before her, pale and unshaven with unkempt black hair, but still alive and well. The outfit was very similar to what he wore to when he broke in to sit upon the throne and wear the Crown, an unzipped navy blue hoodie, black jeans, black Converse sneakers and a Beatles T-shirt which may or may not have been vintage.

Mary’s blood stained his T-shirt.

For Violet, time screeched to a stop then reversed. It was 2011, three days before The Fall and Violet was back in the kitchen of her Soho flat she shared with her partner Steven Morgan. She stood frozen and useless as Jim Moriarty fried rashers while wearing a frilly pink apron. Terror had kept her paralyzed as she sold out Lestrade and Mrs. Hudson to Jim Moriarty in order to keep Molly Hooper safe, even as Moriarty pressed a serrated steak knife to her throat, making her bleed. He had swiped the cut with his fingers, had tasted her blood and still she had been powerless, afraid to even breathe.

She had watched helplessly as Moriarty had thrown boiling hot coffee on her partner then murdered him in cold blood. Only after that, had he come for her. Attacked her, grabbed her by her throat and slammed her against the wall twice, making sure she hit her head the second time. Pressed her against the wall, his hand pulling down then sliding into her yoga bottoms and…

The memory of the fiery pain and the burning shame of not being able to fight him off when he
shoved his fingers roughly inside her finally shook her out of her stupefaction. Just as she started to pull her gun out of her handbag, Moriarty had smirked and produced a gun of his own, a Sig Sauer P320, a gun very similar to the one she had carried while in the FBI. (The Glock she now possessed she had obtained through highly illegal methods, of course.) He gave her a lazy smile and pointed the gun… at Mrs. Hooper’s head.

“Come on, now Nana,” he drawled, the Irish accent heavy in his voice. He turned fully back around, facing Mrs. Hooper, who looked like she was about to faint. “Bring the boy to me.”

“No!” Molly screamed as the other shoppers continued to run. Some women dropped their handbags in their haste. Many others, male and female, dropped their shopping bags. Parents scooped up their children. Anyone with a grain of sense bolted for the nearest doors, running far away from the flesh-and-blood man that appeared on every screen in England nearly a year ago. The man that was supposed to be dead… but then, Sherlock Holmes was supposed to be dead too, wasn’t he?

Mrs. Hooper clutched to the handle of the pram, as if it was the only thing that was keeping her upright. As Henry continued to cry, the gallant lady managed to lift her head up and quaver out a frightened little “No.”

Jim swung his arm around, pointing the gun now at Molly instead of Mrs. Hooper. “We never were properly introduced, were we, Mrs. Hooper? I’m Jim from IT. Surely you’ve read Molly’s blogs? Molly and I had a bit of a fling a few years ago, back when her biggest worry was becoming a mad spinster with a cat. Fortunately for her, the noble DI Lestrade made an honest woman out of her. How is good old Toby, by the way?”

“Jim,” Tears streamed down Molly’s face. But she couldn’t wipe her face, couldn’t run to protect her mother or son. If she moved her hands, Mary would bleed out faster. “Please don’t do this.”

“Oh,” Jim looked affectionately at her. “That’s not what you said those nights we spent together.” He gave her a smile that could have been described as besotted, practically soppy. “I think about you sometimes, you know. About those nights I spent at your flat.” He turned to face Mrs. Hooper again while keeping the gun pointed at Molly’s head, straight between her lovely brown eyes, a most definite kill-shot. “Pity I couldn’t have met you properly, Mrs. Hooper. Had a cuppa and a nice chat but I’m on a tight schedule so bring me the boy NOW.”

He had spoken softly and gently until the final word. The last word he shrieked at Mrs. Hooper. It echoed throughout the shopping centre. As Mrs. Hooper blanched, Jim spoke softly again. “I will kill her, make no mistake. I won’t kill the boy, him I need alive.”

“Mum, he’s lying,” Molly sobbed but as Mrs. Hooper started pushing the pram towards Jim, Molly screamed, “No, Mum, stop, don’t! He’s lying! Jim, please, please, please!” Her keening turned into a wail as Jim grabbed the pram as soon as it was close enough. Keeping the gun trained on Molly, he peered down at the crying infant.

Meanwhile, Mary removed one of her hands from the deep puncture wound in her lower belly. In a weak voice, she rasped, “My handbag, my handbag…” and tried to reach for it. Her bloody fingertips left smears on the strap. My gun… if I could get my gun to Molly, she can shoot him. She knows how, Greg taught her how… I feel so strange, so light-headed… John, John, my love, I’m sorry. I lost another one of our children John… forgive me… the pain, the pain, Christ, why does everything have to hurt in this life?

Suddenly her arm became too heavy to lift. Someone had replaced all her bones and muscles with concrete. It took all of her strength and concentration to perform the simple action of breathing. Blood continued spilling out from the stab wound, soaking her jumper, her scarf, creating a puddle.
on the floor.

“Molly…” she croaked, wanting to say Molly, go… go get your son… but she didn’t even have the strength for that simple sentence.

Mary let her eyelids slide shut.

As Mary had tried to reach for her handbag, Jim admired the howling baby writhing unhappily in his pram. “Ohhhhhhhhhhh,” Jim breathed. Then he gave Molly the coldest, cruellest smile ever, a look of pure evil. “He does look like his da’, doesn’t he? Except his nose, he’s got your nose, doesn’t he? I always thought you had the cutest nose.” He tilted his head, as if really seeing her for the first time. His eyes dropped down to Molly’s bloody hands then languidly flicked back up to Molly’s tear-streaked face. “Oh, but I did underestimate you, didn’t I, Molly Hooper Lestrade.”

Molly’s face crumpled as she watched her mother put Henry in Jim Moriarty’s free arm. His left hand still pointed a gun at Molly. Molly’s sobs were horrible, wheezing and racking, the sound of a helpless animal trapped in a snare. She even started to get up, but then Jim tut-tutted, “Ah, ah, ah, Mrs. Lestrade. What would Dr. Watson say if you let his precious wife die?”

Molly dropped back down to her knees and resumed putting full pressure on Mary’s wound. Her tears spattered down on Mary’s chest, a chest that barely moved with each strenuous breath Mary took. Her color was horrible now, a ghostly pallor. Even so, she could not let Mary and the new life within her die either. So Molly bowed her head and prayed to a God she was never sure was there for a miracle while keeping pressure on Mary’s wound.

Violet meanwhile had stepped back into the store, her eyes never leaving the gory scene playing out in front of her. She ripped the fake spectacles off her face, letting them fall to the floor. She didn’t want anything obstructing her vision, even clear glass. Instead of the Glock, she pulled her Bluetooth earpiece out of her handbag instead. She clipped it to her ear, covering it with her long, straight chestnut hair. She whipped on her coat, assuming she would be outdoors very soon. She yanked her Smartphone out and hit the speed-dial button for Mycroft. When Anthea answered instead of Mycroft, she snapped, “Send everyone to The Plaza on Oxford Street. Moriarty is here.”

“What?” Anthea gasped into her ear as Violet pulled out her gun and let her handbag drop.

“Jesus Christ!” the High and Mighty shop clerk yelped.

“I’m a cop,” Violet hastily lied as she tucked the weapon into the back of her jeans, then let her coat flutter over it. She ducked out of the shop, leaving her handbag behind. Weaving around the panicking shoppers as they fled, she made her way towards Jim Moriarty. Just as Jim had asked Molly what would John think if she let Mary die, Violet called out as loudly as she could, in her coldest and haughtiest “Miss Smith” voice: “Jim Moriarty!”

Jim turned around, the boy cradled in one arm. He held the child naturally, as if he knew how to hold a baby, as if he had a child of his own.

That idea made Violet sick but she held onto her gorge. She held her hands up. “You know who I am,” she managed to maintain her frosty “Miss Smith” accent, all clipped consonants and pear-shaped vowels. “You know where I live and who I’m engaged to,” she locked her eyes onto his, steeling herself for the brooding insanity of his stare. However the madness that had always been there before was gone, replaced with a cool intelligence and a mocking amusement. What the hell? The profiler thought as she continued: “I’m far more valuable than a pathologist’s baby, don’t you think?”
She hoped Anthea was picking up on the message that she was sending her. *We have a hostage situation here…*

Violet felt her gut clench and unclench and her skin turn prickly and cold while Jim regarded her. “Miss Smith, the Other Woman,” he finally chuckled. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet Sherlock’s bird! I’ve heard a great deal about you.”

Violet furrowed her slender brows in confusion. *What?*

“But I’m feeling generous today, sure, why not?” He chuckled again. He pointed the gun at Henry, at his little belly. Molly screamed again and Mrs. Hooper dropped to her knees, her hands clasped together, begging Jim not to hurt her grandson. Mary continued to bleed. The ruby puddle grew, now soaking Molly’s baggy trousers.

Violet took a step closer, forcing herself to look at him and not the little boy in the crook of his arm. “Then put the child back in his buggy and I’ll go with you.”

“Oh no,” Jim started walking backwards. “We’ll go out together. The boy’s my insurance until we’re safely out the door. Just, let me know if there are any stairs or if I’m about to run into someone or something. Wouldn’t do to have a tumble with the little man in my arms, would it?”

Violet licked her lips. “Mrs. Hooper, I need you to be very brave now and come with me,” she said with false bravado. When Moriarty tilted his head in confusion, she dared to scowl at him. “What? Like I’m going to allow you to hand a detective-inspector’s child off to a stranger or one of your flunkies before you leave?” she added for the benefit of Anthea, hoping that the PA would string two and two together and realize it was DI and Dr. Lestrade’s son Moriarty held hostage. Anthea was brighter than she appeared to be. Then again she was still a rookie and had made some epic blunders due to her inexperience.

“You really think you have negotiating powers?” Jim chuckled. “Oh, now I understand what Holmes sees in you. Such cheek, but alright, love. I’ll play along. Nana, stay a pace behind *Miss Smith,*” he used her alias sardonically. “And I’ll give you your grandson back before I take my leave, assuming I’m allowed to take my leave?”

“Nobody touches him,” Violet called out as loud, hating the fact that her voice had started to shake. “Do you hear me? Jim Moriarty has the upper hand, he has a hostage, he’s holding an infant boy hostage,” she announced, not for Anthea this time but more for the few fools who lingered to watch, either too stupid to run or too scared, Violet wasn’t sure which. Anyway, she wanted to make sure no one tried to play the hero while Jim Moriarty held Henry in his arms while pointing a gun at him. “Let us pass.”

“*Violet! *Molly sobbed, still unable to move, unable to remove her hands from Mary’s bleeding belly. “*Violet, please!”

“It’s alright,” Violet lied bracingly as she and Jim started walking away, Jim walking backwards while keeping the gun pointed at Henry. Violet kept her hands up but thought about the gun tucked into her jeans waistband. *I will blow your fucking head off the first chance I get, make no mistake.* “It’s alright Molly, I promise.”

The walk towards the shopping centre’s doors felt like it took hours and hours but really only took a few minutes. Mrs. Hooper did as she was told. She kept a pace or two behind Violet, sniffling as she walked. Neither Violet nor Jim spoke to each other, although Jim continued to smile at her. Finally, when they were close to the entrance, he said, “He really is a sweet little thing, isn’t he? I actually like kids, want to have a few m’self. What about you, Miss Smith? Thinking about settling down?”
Start up the old baby factory? Oh that’s right, you shut the baby factory down, didn’t you? Well, people talk about how practical you are. They also talk about your brother. The snoopy jouno who got himself killed by a lot of Middle Eastern nutters.”

Violet felt her legs turn to rubber and her gut clench again. “I don’t have a brother.”

“Not anymore,” Jim sneered. “That’s a nice watch you have. Pretty.”

Violet pushed down on the fear and the rage building up within her. *He’s pushing on all your pressure points. Don’t let him get to you.* “Thank you,” was all she said. In the distance, she could hear the wailing of sirens, the unique sound only European police and ambulances made. “Better hurry,” she added conversationally, “Before a different car comes to fetch you.”

“Stall him,” Anthea suddenly commanded in her ear. “The Met time is five minutes away, MI-6, two. Do not leave with him.”

*I don’t have two fucking minutes!* Violet felt the fear rising up within her. Violet felt the hair on the back of her neck stand up as she realized she would be at Jim Moriarty’s mercy again. Jim’s back was up against the door leading out to the street. He still smiled at her.

“Aw, ta love for the head’s up. I had lost all track of time,” Jim tilted his head, still smiling, as if he felt sorry for her. “Poor Violet, you never did realize what you gotten yourself into, had you? Should have left your da’s murder alone instead of nosing around, you know.” He kissed the top of Henry’s fuzzy head then called out to Mrs. Hooper. “Nana? You’ve been a great sport. Go on and take him.”

“No. Let me,” Violet immediately held her hands out but Jim shook his head.

“Oh no,” he sneered in his whispery lilting voice. “Allow me, I insist.”

“Go on,” Violet whispered to Mrs. Hooper as she “casually” let her arms fall to her sides. Molly’s mother gave Violet a panicked look. Only after Violet nodded, then did she approach Jim, wide-eyed, pale-faced but bound and determined to retrieve her grandson. Violet watched with great trepidation as Jim eased the howling baby into Mrs. Hooper’s shaking hands. He even ran his hand over Henry’s fuzzy auburn head one last time, his gun pointed to the floor.

Violet reached into her coat and drew her weapon while Jim was distracted.

“Oh, yeah. He’s going to be a bonzo little thing, real gangbusters when he grows up,” he walked around so Mrs. Hooper stood between himself and Violet, like a shield. “He’s going to make his old man proud,” his brown eyes fixed on Violet again, twinkling in evil amusement. “Isn’t he?”

Then he bolted out of the front doors.

Violet blinked, stunned for a moment. Once it sank in that he did not take her as his hostage instead of the baby, she dropped all pretenses of “Miss Smith” and sprinted after him.

All pretense of mockery gone, Jim Moriarty ran down the pavement at a dead run, pushing people out of his way. He even pushed a middle-aged woman into the street, into incoming traffic. Fortunately the driver of the Honda Accord was able to swerve, missing her by inches. Unfortunately the Accord slammed right into a black cab.

Violet maneuvered through the foot traffic with a little more finesse than Moriarty. All the aches and pains and fatigue of the past few weeks evaporated as adrenaline flooded her body. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw an ambulance whizz past, the sirens at full volume, wailing. *Please God, let that be for Mary and John’s baby,* she thought as her heart pounded. She did not register the biting
December chill. Adrenaline continued pumping through her veins as she continued to run after the creator of so much chaos, a madman, a ghost.

“Move! Get out of the way!” Violet didn’t bother to be polite, but she didn’t push anyone into the street. Most people, spying her gun, were more than happy to get out of her way. Other people, having seen Jim’s face had already bolted. The 999 switchboards were lighting up like Christmas trees. The entire street descended into pandemonium.

“No direct communication from Hunter,” Anthea reported, keeping the receiver of Mycroft’s phone firmly between her ear and shoulder. “But I can hear her, she’s shouting at people to get out of her way.”

Mycroft nodded, his fingers tented and pressed over his mouth and nose. His enormous brain whirred, trying to think of what the next countermove should be. It felt like a set-up, a trap somehow… a game.

A man with a receding hairline worse than Mycroft’s and wearing a coal black suit burst in unannounced. “CCTV feeds just crashed so we can’t confirm, but the emergency switchboards have gone mad. All are saying it’s him,” he gasped.

“Do you have confirmation of the stabbing victim?” Mycroft barked.

“Yes sir. Mrs. Mary Watson, the doctor’s wife. Paramedics have arrived. She’s en route to St. Bart’s now.”

If Mycroft Holmes was the type of man who uttered profanities, he would have let loose a torrent of them now. Instead he stood with his lips clamped tightly shut together. He knew what he had to do, but it was the last thing he ever wanted to do.

*There has to be another option!* *Has to be…*

He had only wanted Sherlock to find Moriarty, not confront him. Not again. Not ever again.

Unfortunately, Sherlock was the only man who understood how Moriarty’s mind worked.

Anthea held up a finger to shush Mycroft and the balding MI-6 agent. “He’s in a cab, he’s…” Anthea grabbed a pen, started writing on a manila folder on Mycroft’s desk that contained this month’s expense reports. “Hold on, she’s giving me the plate numbers….”

Just as Anthea had given that critical information to her boss, Jim had slammed the cab door. “Drive,” he ordered, “But not so fast. Not yet. Is CCTV offline?”

“I just got confirmation that they are. The towers for the mobiles are causing a bit of a problem, but those should be down in a mo’,” The driver merged smoothly into traffic but she turned around for the briefest of seconds. She had seen in her wing mirror that he had been empty-handed and was thoroughly confused. “Where’s the kid?” Julia Stoner asked before turning her eyes back onto the road.

“Change of plans,” Jim peered out the back window, looking for Violet Hunter. “Somebody showed up who wasn’t supposed to be there. But,” a calculating smile quirked up his lips, “I do think we can use this to our advantage.”

“What about Lord Cullen-Culpepper?” Julia did her best to drive the speed limit. What she wanted to do was hit the gas and get the hell out of there. But she also had several questions niggling at her. “He’s going to throw a fit if he doesn’t get that kid. He’s still whinging about not receiving the
Watson girl like he was promised, wants his money back.”

“Heathcliff thinks that because he has loads of money and a fancy title he’s safe from repercussions. He’ll learn, they’ll all learn what happens when they trifle with me,” Jim purred, smiling as he saw a woman with chestnut hair running down the pavement. “Ah, there she is.” Now be a good, predictable girl and give the Iceman the plate numbers so he’ll send the Virgin to come fetch me… oh Sherlock, it will be so gooooooood to finally see you again.

“Here they are, the plate numbers,” Anthea frantically finished scrawling the information on the front of the manila folder. She held the folder up and waved it like a paper fan.

Mycroft snapped his fingers and pointed. Balding Agent didn’t have to ask for clarification. He rushed over to the huge mahogany desk and snatched the folder then scurried from the office, not even bothering to close the door behind him.

Mycroft then strode over to his desk and beckoned for the phone with his fingers. Anthea surrendered the receiver. “This is Mycroft,” he announced. “Where is he going?”

“East,” Violet gasped, trying to catch her breath after so much running. There was a stitch in her side now. You need to hurry, he’s getting aw-” Then she saw a helmeted man on a Kawasaki Ninja 300 coming towards her. Violet, starting to feel the cold and the damp, took a deep breath and stepped into the street, holding out her hand, much like her fiancé did over a year ago, when John Watson had been abducted.

Unlike her fiancé, she also pointed her gun. The bike screeched to a halt.

Violet took the man’s helmet, more to hide her red hair than to protect her head. What’s another head injury at this point? “I’m in pursuit,” she announced as she swung a leg over the motorcycle. “I’m eastbound on Oxford,” she told Mycroft as she safetied the gun and tucked it back into the waistband of her jeans. Then she was off like a shot, her black coat flapping behind her like a cape.

Comfortable in the backseat of the black cab, Jim Moriarty looked out the back window and saw Violet not that far behind him. “Good…” he crooned. “It’ll all be for nothing if she loses us. Julia?”

“Yes sir?”

“Stay ahead of her but do not lose her,” Jim commanded. “If we can’t use his son as leverage, then the fiancée will have to do.”

“Yes sir,” Julia chirped, like the good solider she was. But she couldn’t help asking, “We really sure the brat’s his? I mean… it’s not like… we know the story Janine sold the tabs was bunk and you yourself said he was…”

“Julia, darling, be a love and turn the radio on, hm?”

Julia tightened her lips, annoyed that he wasn’t going to answer her question. But she pressed a button on the console and Stayin’ Alive blared from the speakers.

“Julia, darling, be a love and turn the radio on, hm?”

Julia frowned. Criminal mastermind he may be, but the man did have terrible taste in music.

Back in his office, Mycroft covered the mouthpiece of his phone, “Once they’re back up, I want all live CCTV feeds from Oxford to be routed to my computer at once.”

“Yes sir.”
As she turned to go, Mycroft called out, “Anthea?”

“Yes sir?”

Mycroft ran his hand down his face. “Call my brother. Get him up to speed.”

Anthea nodded and slipped out the office to follow orders.

John and Sherlock had actually just returned to Baker Street when Anthea’s call came. They had just returned from visiting the Royal Suite at Claridge’s where Sherlock learned the Countess of Morcar (whoever that was) had booked it. She had specifically requested Sherlock’s assistance because one of her prized pieces of jewelry, a heavily jeweled tiara, had a carbuncle removed from it. It should have been a Four since it was a jewel heist, a crime that bored Sherlock silly. But since it was a locked room mystery, Sherlock’s second-favorite crime (after murder, of course,) it was (barely) upgraded to a Five.

After reducing both the Countess and her maid Catherine to puddles of tears for their stupidity, Sherlock had stormed out of the suite, announcing he couldn’t think when he was surrounded by a lot of imbeciles. His mercurial eyes then spied a battered old balaclava, lying by the lift, as if it had been forgotten. With his gloved hands, Sherlock snatched the knitted hat up, stuffed it into the pocket of his Belstaff. “Come along John,” he had said when the lift doors opened up.

Now Sherlock studied the dirty hat intensely, seemingly oblivious to how John stifled his yawns as he prepared tea. John and sleep still were not on speaking terms and one or two scotches before bed wasn’t cutting it anymore. Concerned about his alcohol intake, John had started taking the tranquilizers Honoré had gotten for him in Paris instead of having a drink before bed. Not the entire tablet, of course. Remembering how they knocked him out, John had been cutting them in half. But he didn’t feel rested, not really. The half-tablet only put him to sleep, it didn’t keep him asleep. He still woke up in the middle of the night by either a nightmare or a hard-on.

Both instances were utterly humiliating.

But he had perked up quite a bit when Sherlock had texted him. Pleased to hear from his... friend... John had felt quite bright-eyed and bushy-tailed until they had reached Baker Street and the thrill of the hunt had worn off.

Still, this was a more comfortable sort of tired. A “just put in good day’s work” sort of tired.

*Maybe I won’t have to take anything tonight after all...* John thought.

Meanwhile, Sherlock continued to grouse “They have the wrong man, of course,” as he turned the hat this way and that, much like he had when he had first appraised the now loathed deerstalker. “John Horner is no more of a thief than I am.”

“Even though you just stole evidence from a crime scene,” John reminded him as he brought out two mugs of strong, hot tea and a dog biscuit for Gladstone. “Plus an ashtray from Buckingham Palace, Lestrade’s badge and your brother’s credit cards.”

“As well as his Rolex,” Sherlock rumbled, looking inside the hat now.

John settled into His Chair and gave Gladstone his treat. Gladstone inhaled it then padded back to the sofa to resume his nap. John smiled at the dog then watched Sherlock pace. Other friends would have asked John how he was doing, how he was coping after his sister’s horrific death. Sherlock did no such thing and John was grateful.
It was also just a pleasure to watch him, look at him. Hear that wonderful thunderous voice.

“Besides, it’s not my responsibility to point out The Met’s deficiencies,” Sherlock murmured, sniffing the hat then wrinkling his nose.

“Is it one of the job perks, since you remind them of said deficiencies at every opportunity presented to you?” John quipped before sipping his tea.

Sherlock, naturally, ignored him. “We need to track down all the goose farmers within a ten mile radius of London. Bring me my computer.”

“Goose farmers? Is that a thing? And get your own damn computer.”

Sherlock’s mobile rang. Sherlock fished it out of his pocket, rolled his eyes but actually answered. “I’m working, Mycr-” Then his face changed, his eyes hardened, his lips becoming the thinnest of lines. His brows beetled together as he exhaled through his nose.


“We’re on our way,” Sherlock hung up without saying goodbye. “Are you carrying?”

“What? Well, yes, I always do now as a precaution. What’s going on?”

“Moriarty,” Sherlock said tightly as he scrolled through his mobile, looking for the app that turned on the GPS tracking device he had inserted into Violet’s watch last summer. “Jim Moriarty, to be precise, is in London. Leading the Met and MI-6 on a merry chase.”

“What? How?”

“And my idiot fiancée is pursuing him without any sort of back-up!” he shouted, more at the mobile than at John.

Every time he thumbed the little purple flower icon, the same error message popped up:

John, naturally, did not take Sherlock’s shouting personally. “Alone, she’s gone after Moriarty alone? Oh God,” John immediately bolted up and went to check his gun. “Right. Are they sending a car, the Met? Or MI-6?”

Sherlock shook his shaggy head. “No time. I have spare keys to Mrs. Hudson’s car.”

With that, both men threw their coats and scarves on and raced down the seventeen stairs, taking them two at a time. They rounded the building to where Mrs. Hudson’s car had been parked after Molly brought it back to Baker Street after the explosion at the clinic.

John felt a thrum of electricity vibrating through him. He wasn’t excited or nervous. He was ready. Ready to pay the bastard back for everything he’d done.

He hoped he could do for Sherlock what Sherlock had done for him: Kill a monster that had tormented him. If Magnussen had bedeviled John and Mary, what Jim Moriarty had done to Sherlock was inhumane.

As Sherlock broke several traffic laws, John asked Sherlock, “The Jim Moriarty? The one we saw at the pool and at Kitty Riley’s? Not the successor to the throne.”

“So Anthea says,” Sherlock muttered as he blazed through another red light. Car horns blared and
middle fingers were waved at them.

John didn’t notice. But he did feel his mobile vibrating. However, when he answered, the line went dead. John thumbed through his Caller ID and saw that it was Bart’s calling him. Did Mary get called in to work because of Moriarty? Preparing for the worst? But when John tried to ring back, all he heard was static. “Sherlock, my mobile isn’t working.”

Sherlock tossed John his Smartphone without even looking at him. But when John tried again, the same thing happened. “Sherlock, there’s no signal.”

Sherlock’s brows furrowed again. “Dammit.”

“What?” John felt his insides grow cold. If That Look meant bad news, then a curse word (even a tame one) actually falling from Sherlock’s lips was a dire tiding of woe and peril.

“Clearly the mobile towers have been sabotaged.”

“What? How? You mean we’re back in the Stone Age?” John scrubbed at his mouth, hoping Mary was just calling him to let him know she had picked up an extra shift at Bart’s. He shook his head, stoutly telling himself that Mary was fine...

Where did she say she and Molly were shopping today? I wasn’t listening… oh God… no. Don’t. She’s fine. She’s fine. Focus. You’re about to chase Moriarty in the metaphorical dark. Don’t go losing your head now, John… Mary’s fine. As she keeps reminding you, she can take care of herself.

“Jesus… how are we supposed to catch him if we can’t communicate with each other or the Met or…” He then blurted out what he had been obsessing over for nearly a year now: “Sherlock, how the fuck did Moriarty survive self-inflicted gunshots to the head?”

“Two ideas,” Sherlock muttered. “But I may have to live with never knowing for sure since I’m sure MI-6 has snipers positioned around the city to take him out.”

John heard the familiar sound of helicopter wings thumping above them. “We must be getting close,” he murmured, craning his head, trying to see the helicopters above him.

Sure enough, they arrived at a police barricade. A man in Army fatigues stopped them, told them to turn around but Sherlock barked at him, “I’m Sherlock Holmes and this is Captain John Watson. Let us through, they are waiting for us.”

The soldier pulled out an enormous old fashioned walkie-talkie to confirm. After an agonizing wait, confirmation was finally received. The soldier told the men guarding the barricade to let John and Sherlock through. John and Sherlock abandoned Mrs. Hudson’s dented, old Golf and hurried towards the hastily constructed command centre that had been erected right in the middle of Oxford Street.

“Keep your eyes open for Julia Stoner. She is our Number One Priority.” Sherlock muttered to John. “I do not know what game is being played yet, but this may all be an elaborate distraction to obtain The Letter again. Moriarty may evade us once more, but there is a strong possibility to nab Julia and clear John Mitton’s name.”

“Right,” John looked around, almost expecting to see the lady materialize right in front of him.

But all he saw was the battlefield. Literally, London had been transformed into a war zone. When Violet had told Anthea to send everyone, Mycroft must have issued the order to send everyone. MI-5, MI-6 and Her Royal Majesty’s Secret Service. The military, active and reserves.

Last (and quite
possibly the least,) The Met, from their special tactic forces to the desk jockeys like DI Dimmock and DI Mason. The latter two looked like little boys playing dress-up rather than proper police officers.

“All this fuss for one man,” John murmured.

He felt the weight of the suicide bomber vest on him again.

“Mm,” Sherlock said, spying a high-ranking MI-6 agent and striding towards him. “My name is Sherlock Holmes,” he introduced himself when they reached the man wearing riot gear. “This is Captain John Watson of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, retired. My brother sent us. Tell me everything and don’t waste my time on anything superfluous. We have no idea what the Spider is planning for our fair city.”

“Gregson,” the tall, burly man with an impressive ginger moustache indeed did not waste time with pleasantries. “Your fiancée is either has brain damage or bigger bollocks than most of the men in Special Forces.”

“I haven’t ruled out either possibility,” Sherlock droned.

“She was our eyes and ears before we lost contact. We’re trying to get the towers up and running again. They all failed at the same time.”

“Where was she before you lost contact?”

“John!” a feminine voice with a New Zealand accent called behind them.

All three men turned around to see Sergeant Alexis MacDonald running towards them. She wore a bulletproof vest and her gun was on her hip.

John was surprised to see her armed. “Alex?”

“John Watson, you come with me right now.” She grabbed him by the sleeve of his coat.


“He’s not going anywhere, I need him,” Sherlock spat at her.

But Alex shook her brunette head. “His wife needs him.”

“What?” John no longer felt electric. He felt very very cold, from head to toe, not just his insides.

“What happened?” Sherlock demanded.

“Oh fuck,” Gregson groaned. “You’re the husband.”

“I’m the… Alex?”

Alexis MacDonald was not a loquacious woman, but she was also not an unfeeling one either. However, time worked against them all so she opted to be brisk. “Moriarty,” she told him grimly, “Stabbed your wife in the belly. It’s bad, I’m afraid.”

“Stabbed my…” John swayed on his feet. Sherlock steadied him. “Oh God,” John instinctively grabbed a fistful of Sherlock’s coat sleeve. His teeth began to chatter as he asked: “The baby?”

“Dunno, she’s at Bart’s now. Lestrade told me to fetch you. We need to go, now.”
“Sherlock-”

“Go,” Sherlock released John’s shoulders reluctantly. What he truly wanted to do was pull him close but instead he said, “Go to Mary. Call me once the mobiles are working again.”

Alex, a mother and wife as well, put her arm around John’s shoulder and ushered him away.

“You OK, mate?” Gregson lifted a ginger brow at Sherlock.

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said faintly. “It’s just that…”

He looked around.

No John.

No Violet.

No Molly.

Dupin was in France.

Mycroft was up in his ivory tower, pulling the puppet strings.

Even Wiggins and the rest of the Homeless Network were unavailable.

And they had left the dog at the flat.

“I’m alone.”

“No, you’re not,” a familiar voice said behind him.

Sherlock turned around and saw Lestrade standing there, also wearing a Kevlar vest underneath his long black winter coat. Sherlock could tell he wore his shoulder holster underneath his coat, so he knew Lestrade was armed as well. “I’m no John Watson, but whatever you need, mate. I’m here.”

Sherlock attempted a smile. “Let’s get to work then.” He cleared his throat then shouted in his usual authoritative tones: “Do any of you morons possess a map? A paper map? An atlas, something?”

A map was produced. Sherlock unfolded it and placed it on the bonnet of a nearby panda car. Lestrade quickly got Sherlock up to speed. Sherlock paled when Lestrade told him how Henry had nearly been stolen from them all. “And you’re here, instead of with Molly and Henry?” he kept his voice matter-of-fact.

“Molly told me to get my arse down here and help you catch the bastard,” Lestrade didn’t meet Sherlock’s eyes. He cleared his throat and pointed at the map. “They were heading east on Oxford, then CCTV crashed. Then we lost contact with Violet fifteen minutes later.”

“Where precisely was Miss Smith when CCTV went down? Does anyone know? Also, has anyone thought of accessing the GPS tracking in the black cab?”

Gregson shook his head. “It’s not an official Black Cab. It was made up to look like a black cab, but we just got word back from the company that those plate numbers aren’t in their system. Thank God the landlines are still working as well as the computers.”

“Roadblocks are being set up. All black cabs are being stopped,” Lestrade told Sherlock.
“Moriarty would have anticipated that. If they had planned on evading roadblocks, they would have selected a nondescript vehicle rather than something recognizable. So their destination is nearby,” Sherlock studied the map as dread spread throughout him. *It’s a trap. Obviously. And my darling Violet is hurtling straight towards it.*

*If Jim doesn’t beat me to it, I am going to strangle her.*

“He wants us to find him,” Sherlock muttered, digging into his coat pocket. Producing a pen, he barked at Lestrade, “Mark the locations of the roadblocks, quickly.”

Lestrade caught the pen Sherlock tossed at him then complied. “Right, so that narrows down the search a bit,” Lestrade stepped back from the map. “You there, Gregson, was it? Do you know where Miss Smith was last seen before the CCTV feeds cut off?”

“Yeah, she was,” Gregson pressed his finger down on the map. “Here.”

Lestrade awkwardly drew and X by Gregson’s finger and asked Sherlock, “Does that help?”

Gregson removed his finger. Sherlock peered at the map again. Then, like a child playing Connect The Dots, he drew lines contacting where Lestrade had marked on the map where a roadblock was located. Then his mouth dropped open. “Immensely,” his eyes glittered as he snatched up the map. “Of course, of course! Obvious. Why didn’t I see it before?”

“See what?” Lestrade asked.

“*Pink,*” Sherlock gave Lestrade a significant look. Then he pointed to a specific address on the map, within the perimeter he just drew.

Lestrade cottoned on immediately. “Are you kidding me?”

“It’s not far from here,” Sherlock turned to go, but Lestrade grabbed him.

“Where’n the hell do you think you’re going?”

“To rescue my idiot fiancée from the Napoleon of Crime, of course.”

“Not without me and not without giving them,” he pointed at Gregson, “The coordinates.”

“Of course,” Sherlock rattled off the location then added, “It was the location of the first case I had worked with Dr. Watson. It was also the first case that involved Moriarty.” He gave Gregson a sharp look. “Expect the unexpected. If the building should burst into flames and Moriarty walks out of it with nary a burn, I would not be surprised.”

“We’re well aware of what kind of man we’re dealing with, Mr. Holmes,” Gregson said crisply. “You’re a civilian, so you stay put and don’t argue with me. I know who your brother is. He gave me express orders that you stay well away from Moriarty. As for you,” he gave Lestrade a pointed look, “Go help with crowd control.”

Lestrade’s silver eyebrows rose. “Not my division.”

“Yeah, your division and all the divisions, we don’t need a panic like we did on New Year’s. All of the Met’s in charge of crowd control.” With that, he turned his back on Lestrade and Sherlock and started barking orders.

“We can reach the building faster than they can mobilize,” Sherlock breathed into Lestrade’s ear. “I
“Of course you do,” A muscle in Lestrade’s cheek twitched. “Yeah, alright,” he conceded. “If anything happens to either one of us, Molly will never forgive us.”

“Then let us endeavor to return to her in one piece,” Sherlock droned. “Where’s your car?”

As Sherlock and Lestrade slipped from the impromptu command centre, Jim Moriarty stood in the window of the building where Jennifer Wilson died. He had combed his hair back in the cab. Once he had arrived at his destination, he and Julia ran up the twisting stairwell. In a room on the third story, he changed into a crisp white dress shirt and a pair of Westwood trousers, a dark charcoal grey. He was buttoning his cuffs when he saw Violet Hunter pulled up in front of the gloomy old building…

… and watched her nearly tumble from the motorcycle she had confiscated, as if she had lost her balance somehow.

“Well, well, well, what is this?” he hummed as he rubbed his chin. Then he ran his hand over his cheeks and above his lips. He wished he would have had time to shave, but alas, no time.

“Everything ready?” he asked Julia, who stood behind him, holding a sapphire blue necktie and his matching Westwood jacket.

“Yes sir,” she held up his tie and jacket, like an altar boy offering robes to a priest.

“Ah, no no no,” Jim wrinkled his nose. “I said the red tie, the power tie.”

“You soiled it yesterday, remember?”

“Ah yes, that’s right. I dribbled soy sauce all over it,” Jim sulked a bit but he took the blue tie anyway and tied a perfect Prince Albert knot. “Is it straight?”

“Perfect,” Julia held his coat open, helping him in it. “It’s not the clothes that indicate power you know,” she whispered, her breath tickling his ear.

Jim pecked her on the lips. “You know what to do.”

Julia slipped from the darkened room, as stealthily as any cat. Jim did not even watch her leave, he returned to the window. Looking down, he saw Violet still had not gone inside. She had taken off the helmet and had drawn her gun. But she was pacing back and forth, looking up and down at the building.

“Come on love,” Jim taunted her even though there was no way she could hear him. “’Come into my parlor, said the Spider to the Fly’” he jeered. When Violet appeared to make up her mind, he smirked, “That’s my girl,” and retreated into the darkness to wait.

Violet had started feeling the familiar aches and pinpricks as she neared her destination. Her legs felt so numb and her hands so cold, she nearly toppled over on the motorcycle when she brought it to a stop. The adrenaline had worn off so now she felt the all damp and chill December had to offer. After confirming that she still had no signal (What the hell is going on with that?) Violet paced, worrying at her lower lip, debating.

“Shit,” her heart pounded as she looked up. Then she looked at the black cab again, even though she had just confirmed it was empty. “Shit, shit, shit!”
I did not make it this far only to die stupidly, she fretted.

But a quiet voice, from the deepest, purest part of herself, made itself heard over the clamour caused by her shrieking fear: *If you let that monster get away, you will never be able to live with yourself. He killed your partner. He robbed Sherlock of two years of his life. He indirectly killed your brother. He is the reason why you have to be Violet Smith instead of Violet Hunter.*

*Kill him and Violet Hunter rises from the tomb.*

Violet took a deep cleansing breath from her nose, pulling the air deep into her chest. She exhaled slowly, again through her nose. She squared her shoulders, put her finger on the trigger and lifted her gun. Her hand did not shake.

She entered the building.

Her boots crunched bits of debris and rubble. The building had stood empty ever since *The Study in Pink* case and long before that. Violet, of course, did not know this was where Sherlock and John had examined their first murder victim together, so she did not realize the significance of the location. She could have wasted hours exploring the desolate building.

But the trail of pink rose petals leading to a winding staircase was a helpful clue.

“Great,” Violet couldn’t help grumbling. “He’s a romantic.”

She kept her back as close to the wall as possible as she wound her way up the twisting staircase, straining her ears to hear. Over and over, she told herself *Shoot to kill, shoot to kill, shoot to kill…* Eight years ago, Violet would have never dreamt of taking a life unless she absolutely had no choice.

The trail of rose petals led her to the room where Jennifer Wilson’s body had been found. But the room would have been unrecognizable to Sherlock, John and Lestrade. If Violet had looked down, she would have still been able to see faint scratch marks on the floor that spelt “RACHE.”

But Violet wasn’t looking down. She was staring, open-mouthed, at the walls. All the walls.

She spun around, gun still drawn, but now her hands did start to shake in earnest.

“What the hell…?”

All four walls had been papered with photographs taken during the last two years. Not an inch of wood or brick shown through the wallpaper of surveillance photographs. Sherlock wearing the deer-stalker while giving a press conference outside of Baker Street after officially returning from the dead. John and Mary all decked out in their wedding finery. Greg and Molly leaving a cinema, Molly’s arm looped through Greg’s while giving him a very besotted smile. Mycroft as he left Parliament. Mrs. Hudson giving the young man she bought her “herbal soothers” from a tin of biscuits. Sherlock shielding Violet Smith from the cameras as they got out of a town car. Violet groaned out loud, recognizing that picture because of the horrible electric blue dress she had been squeezed into. But her long hair and sunglasses had hidden most of her face.

There was even a picture of Gladstone, his ears flat, his hackles raised, his teeth bared. Snarling at a paparazzo, probably.

The pictures were endless. They all documented snippets of their lives. Mundane little events. Grocery shopping. Leaving the dentist. Picking up dry cleaning. Hailing a cab. Going to work.

There was one milestone event documented: Molly and Greg as they left the hospital with their
newborn son.

Next to that picture, was a black-and-white surveillance photograph of a disheveled Sherlock slinking out of someone’s flat. Violet didn’t realize the significance of that picture until she looked at the date stamp in the lower right hand corner: 10 January 2015.

Violet’s heart sank. They have pictures of Sherlock doing The Walk of Shame from Molly’s old apartment. That’s why Mr. Kincaid insinuated to John all those months ago he knew who Henry’s real father was… and if Moriarty is back, who the fuck is Kincaid?

Violet slowly circled the room again, trying to suss out what game Jim was playing. What, you’ve been watching us? No shit.

There weren’t that many pictures of Violet and her face had been hidden by something, a hat, sunglasses, sometimes her own hair. Violet licked her lips, afraid she’d see the picture of herself wearing the Belstaff and carrying two motorcycle helmets as she ran to St. Bart’s.

The next picture she locked eyes on was worse, much worse.

John and Sherlock entangled in a very heated embrace in the shadow of Notre Dame.

Violet reacted viscerally to the picture, actually recoiling. She had reconciled to what she had witnessed in the foyer of Baker Street, made her peace with it, or so she thought. Seeing the photograph dredged up the wild, angry jealousy again.

“Stop it,” she hissed at herself, her good sense taking control once more. She ripped that picture off the wall and stuffed it into her coat pocket.

Then something vibrated within her, a strong surge of what only could be called intuition, caused her to turn around. She gasped and put her back against the wall, crushing the pictures still hanging there as she pointed her gun at Julia Stoner.

Dammit, Violet clenched her teeth. The pictures were a distraction. Stupid! She berated herself, And you’re going to end up dead because of it.

Julia pointed the same Smith & Wesson 9MM she had trained on Irene Adler. She gave Violet a smug little smirk. “You sure you want that snap as a souvenir, Agent Hunter?”

“Guy-on-guy turns me on,” Violet droned, using her true American accent since the jig was apparently up. “Might even be able to talk the boys into a threesome now,” she then eyed Julia’s outfit: skintight leather trousers, knee-high shiny black boots and a fitted black jumper, stretching across a generous bust and a long black woolen trench-coat. Stalling, she added, “The Matrix look is so 1999, by the way. You plan on telling your sister you’re alive?”

The remark was a shot in the dark, but the look that had crossed Julia’s face was quite telling. “No need to upset Her Ladyship about my existence. She’s got charity balls to plan and young men’s balls to lick.”

“Wow, you are really hung up on sex, when was the last time you got laid?” Violet continued to prevaricate, wondering why Sherlock hadn’t shown up yet. Surely he had activated the GPS in her watch by now. “Where’s Jim Moriarty?”

“I’ll take you to him,” Julia purred.

“Yeah… no.” Violet took a step closer. Julia backed up, also telling. Ahhh she’s never had a victim
stand up to her before. She’s no better than a schoolyard bully, a bully with a gun, but still. She can be manipulated. “So once Magnussen was dead, instead of striking out on your own, you hitched your star to a nut-job? You’re not a stupid woman,” Shamelessly Violet buttered Julia up. “Much smarter than your snobby sister anyway,” she added, watching as a flush turned her porcelain skin a rosy hue. “Julia, he abandoned Irene Adler once she was no longer useful to him, you know. Sold her out to a bunch of terrorists who chopped her head off,” Violet emphasized the last four words.

Julia jutted her chin out. If her eyes had any warmth or light in them, she really could have been mistaken for the late Princess Diana. “Oh, he never abandoned Irene, not Jim. Would you like to meet her?”

“What?” Violet screwed her face up in utter confusion while thinking Does anybody stay dead? “OK, fine,” Violet held her hands up, making a big show of taking her finger off the trigger, pointing it at the ceiling. Agonizingly slow, Violet crouched down, putting the gun on the floor. “Your house, your rules, let’s go see Jim.”

Julia smirked triumphantly. “That’s a sensible girl.” She took long confident strides toward Violet as she kept her gun pointed at Violet’s forehead, “Knowing when to accept defeat.”

Violet huddled into herself, making herself seem as small and weak as possible. Not difficult with the recent weight loss. She also kept her eyes locked on Julia’s face.

She had placed her Glock very close to her feet. Julia kicked it away from Violet, as Violet predicted (hoped) she would. She also looked down while kicking it as well.

Only then did Violet make her move. She ducked underneath the gun, grasping Julia’s wrists with all her might. Julia yelped but it turned into a gasp and grunt of pain as Violet kneed her in the groin. Then, all while holding the gun above their heads, Violet pushed against Julia as hard as she could, kneed her again, this time in the gut instead of between her legs. It wasn’t pretty nor elegant, not a scene fit for a kung-fu film. But it was effective. Pain forced Julia to let go of the gun. It fell to the floor with a thud, fortunately not discharging.

Both women broke free of each other. Julia doubled over, groaned. Violet also wobbled on her feet, breathing hard and trying to regain her balance. Her head spun. Both women looked at the Smith & Wesson then at each other.

But Violet’s Glock was closer to her. She scooped it up and pointed it at Julia, “Hands on head and on the floor, now!”

Instead of following her orders, Julia stumbled towards her Smith & Wesson. Pain made her clumsy and slow. Just as Julia dove for her weapon Violet pulled the trigger of hers. Julia tumbled down, screaming, grabbing her thigh. Blood oozed between her fingers.

“You shot me! You bloody shot me!” Julia howled.

“Well, what did you expect?” Violet tugged on the mauve, silver and ivory silk scarf. The floppy bow came undone and slithered off her neck. She knotted the scarf into a hangman’s noose.

Julia still inched her way towards Violet’s gun. “To try and talk me out it, Moriarty said you were more inclined to mind-games than violence.”

Violet kicked her own weapon away from Julia’s reaching fingers. “Didn’t I just tell you listening to Moriarty is the worst thing anyone can do? Now, on your belly, oh, stop fucking whining, you’re not going to die.” Violet grabbed Julia by her beautiful blonde hair to subdue her then roughly rolled
Julia to her stomach. She dug a knee into Julia’s lower back and cruelly held Julia’s wrists together then twisted them up before looping her scarf around the wrists. After knotting and double-knotting the scarf to ensure Julia was not going to slip free, only then did Violet stand. She grabbed Julia by the shoulders, rolled her over then hauled her up against the wall. She undid the skinny little black belt she wore to keep her jeans from falling down. “Lucky for you, we need you alive,” she added as she used her belt as a tourniquet.

“Lucky for you,” Julia spat, “so do we.”

Violet scooped up the Smith & Wesson and tucked into the back of her jeans. She left Julia without a backwards glance.

She checked the hallway to make sure it was clear, her heart thudding as the adrenaline kicked in again. She took a shuddery breath, trying to think what to do next.

The roof, she realized as her throat and mouth filled with saliva while her stomach started churning again. He’ll be on the roof.

She wanted to run, run down the spiral stairs, away from Julia, away from Moriarty, run back to 221B and… then what? Wait for Mycroft to make another impossible request of her while sending Sherlock on another suicide mission?

Wait for Mary to either kill Sherlock or get him killed?

Her heart, pounding frantically before, now skipped a beat. What if Mary dies?

What if she had been lying about changing the terms of the double-hit? What if it was still if Mary died, Sherlock died?

Then there was John, oh God, John, how much more can he take?

“OK,” Violet whispered, still shaking like a terrified rabbit. She forced herself take a step forward, down the hallway, towards a door that surely must lead up to the roof. “OK, OK, OK…”

He’s just a criminal, she reminded herself. He’s a man, he’s not… what’s that smell? Wait, what’s that noise?

Violet turned to look at an old fashioned radiator next to her. It hissed, like snake uttering a warning before striking. Violet took a step closer, her slender chestnut brows furrowed together. The radiator seemed to be steaming. It also smelt odd, sickeningly-sweet.

Then her eyelids felt very heavy and her chest felt tight, as if someone had unexpectedly dumped a load of cinderblocks on top of her. Her head suddenly felt like it was a cinderblock balancing on a toothpick. Her mouth swiftly tasted strange as well, like iron.

“Oh fuck me,” she groaned before her legs gave way and her eyelids fluttered shut. The Glock slipped from her limp hand and skittered across the door.

As Violet lay unconscious on the dirty floor, the door leading up to the roof swung open. Jim Moriarty, wearing a gas mask strolled in. He had also put on his good winter coat as well. Not as sumptuous or flashy as a Belstaff, but still a respectable and warm outer garment.

Behind him, the man who carried an unconscious Irene away to her new prison followed. He also wore a gas mask.
“Goooooooood,” Jim singsonged, his voice muffled by the mask. He toed the Glock away from Violet’s splayed-out hand. “Very good. Thought we’d need the gas to subdue the coppers and the spooks, but this is working out nicely as well. Much better, actually,” he picked a bit of fluff of his fine coat. “Peters, bring her up to the roof and get her ready. The guest of honor will be here soon and I’m sure he’ll have company with him.”

“What about Julia?” the man called Peters asked. His voice was also muffled.

“Leave her,” Jim sneered.

Chapter End Notes

Gregson was inspired by ACD canon character Tobias Gregson:

Tobias Gregon
Chapter Summary

“Oh yes, Sherlock, I finally know what made you, who made you.”

“No one made me. Nothing made me,” Sherlock’s already low voice pitched down an octave. “I made me.” Then he smiled. The smile he gave Moriarty was ten times more chilling than the one Moriarty produced. So terrifying in fact that Lestrade and Violet forgot who they were supposed to be afraid of for a moment…"

The Final Problem turns out not to be so Final after all...

Happy Monday…. err... I mean Tuesday. :^o

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Four: Pink

Lestrade pulled the car up to the kerb. “This is madness, Sherlock,” he said again, but Sherlock had already bounded out of Lestrade’s vehicle. Lestrade watched for a moment as Sherlock ran to inspect the black cab then shook his head before barreling out of his car, following Sherlock. “Oi! Get back here!”

Sherlock ignored him, of course. He made a beeline to the Kawasaki Ninja 300, tipped over to its side. “They’re here,” he announced to Lestrade, frowning at the motorcycle. “She’s here, she’s… in peril.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Lestrade barked, regretting his decision to step into John’s shoes. “We’re all in trouble.” Lestrade had spent the entire drive trying to convince Sherlock that they should turn around, let someone qualified handle a situation like this. But he knew Sherlock would have gone off on his own if he hadn’t agreed to this insanity.

Plus his wife’s tremulous voice still rang in his ears:

_He knows, Jim. He knows about Henry, oh Greg, he tried to take him from me, from his, he p-p-pointed a gun at Mum and the b-b-baby. He was going to kill him, I know it. He stabbed Mary right in front of us and we might lose her yet. Oh, Henry’s not safe, Greg, we’re not safe until Jim’s in gaol or… or… or… you go with Sherlock and you get that bastard, do you hear me? Make sure he doesn’t get away. Make sure he never touches our son again…_

Then Molly had dissolved into incoherent sobs and Lestrade knew he had no other option but to join Sherlock in pursuing Moriarty. Not out of any sense of duty as a police officer but because as far as he was concerned, Henry belonged to _him_, not to Sherlock.

Any self-doubt Greg had carried within him about accepting Henry as his son evaporated when the nurse put him in his arms the first time. “Congratulations, Dad,” the nurse had cooed. “Fresh from God, he is.”
Dad… the word defined him and refined him and made him feel enormously proud and soberly humble all at once. A fierce protectiveness had flared through him. The only coherent thoughts that had run through his head while holding Henry for the first time were just how much he loved Molly and that this boy, this brand new-life squirming and crying in his arms was his. Biology be damned. You are mine…

The very idea of Jim Moriarty touching Henry, looking at him, breathing on him ignited an inferno of rage that would have put John Watson’s temper to shame.

As he watched Sherlock circle the motorcycle, Lestrade violently thought, Maybe he’s abdicated his responsibilities to the boy, but I haven’t. Struggling to control his voice, he asked Sherlock, “I’m assuming you have some sort of plan?”

“Mm,” Sherlock looked up at the rooftop of the building, the building where it all began, where they became a team: he, John and Lestrade. The three of them together, creating the unholy trinity of Scotland Yard. Sherlock tented his hands, lost in thought for a moment. Then he announced, “Going to have to improvise, I’m afraid.”

“What?” Lestrade squawked. “How’n the hell does John put up with you?”

“I think he drinks,” Sherlock said conversationally as he sauntered towards the front door.

Lestrade sent up a quiet prayer for salvation for his body and soul as well as thanksgiving that he had updated his will and life insurance after Henry was born.

He followed Sherlock into the spooky old building, drawing his weapon for the first time ever in his career. He had begun his police career as an AFO, with a macho aspiration to become an SFO and going all the way to SCO19. The first armed robbery he had responded to and the gruesome aftermath snuffed that ambition out quickly. But it had created a new one, investigative work which led him to his current position at The Met.

Still, he kept up with his licensing and credentials, which was why he still had a police-issued Sig Sauer P226. It was the same gun Molly had used to fend off her attacker in their flat last summer, a brute of a man who intended grievous harm to Molly and the unborn Henry.

He held that gun now, covering Sherlock as he prowled through the abandoned building, the same place they had found a dead woman in a violently pink suit lying face down.

At his feet was a carpet of shockingly bright pink rose petals. Most of them had been crushed by Violet’s boots.

“What the...?” Lestrade’s face crinkled in confusion.

“Moriarty’s put the dog on for us,” Sherlock droned, following the rose petal trail.

“How romantic,” Lestrade grumbled as he followed.

Up the twisting staircase they went, both men on full alert, ready for anything. Lestrade winced every time a step creaked but Sherlock seemed unruffled, his attention completely on the scattered rose petals. His busy brain cataloged all the colors of the petals… blush… coral… salmon… fuchsia… pink, pink, pink…

They followed the rose petals into the same room Violet had gone into and where Jennifer Wilson had taken the pill that ended her life. Instead of a dead body, there lay an unconscious Julia Stoner instead.
“Jesus Christ,” Lestrade started to holster his weapon then decided against it. He really wasn’t a political creature, but he recognized prominent British political figures and sometimes their spouses. “Is that Lady Trelawney-Hope?”

“No,” Sherlock crouched down beside her, placing his fingers on her throat to check her pulse. “It’s her sister and she’s wanted for murder.”

“She’s been shot,” Lestrade eyed the bloody hole in Julia’s thigh.

“Well spotted,” acid dripped from Sherlock’s tongue.

“Your ‘fiancée’s’ doing?”

“Most likely.”

“Then where is she?” Lestrade finally took stock of his surroundings. “What the… Sherlock, are you,” he put his finger on the trigger again, even though he kept the gun pointed to the floor. “Are you seeing this?”

“What was hanging there? Violet took it, obviously. What prompted her to do so? Something compromising, of course. But what?”

The picture of himself leaving the hospital with Molly and newborn Henry had caught Lestrade’s attention. “They’ve been watching us,” he whispered. “Ever since you came back from the dead, they’ve been watching.”

“Shut up and let me think,” Sherlock straightened up, running his hands through his unruly hair. Then he shook his head. “This room is a red herring, nothing more. A distraction via intimidation, they’re trying to scare us.”

“It’s working,” Lestrade took the black and white photograph of his new family off the wall. “Not,” Sherlock’s voice was clipped, “On me. Come, Lestrade.” He paused, placing his hand on the doorframe. “Actually, it may be better if you… you have Molly and, uh… well,” his eyes slid to the floor. “Henry shouldn’t have to grow up without a father so… you should go on down. Wait for the military and The Met to catch up.”

“I may have underestimated him,” Lestrade stuffed the grainy photograph into his coat pocket. “Maybe in his funny old way, he does care about Henry. Maybe there’s hope for him to become a good man yet.”

“He won’t,” Lestrade said firmly. “Grow up without a dad, that is. So that means you and me both better walk out of here in one piece, yeah?”

Sherlock turned ever so slightly and gave him a puzzled, side-glance, “You and me?”

Lestrade groaned, “We’ll figure out this mess of paternity later. Right now, let’s at least find Violet and get the hell out of here, OK?”

“There’s only one logical place Moriarty would take Violet,” Sherlock looked up.

“Oh God,” Lestrade also looked up. “If he tries to make you jump again…”

“I’ll do a back-flip this time,” Sherlock dryly promised.
“Well, as long as you put on a good show,” Lestrade tried to sound equally flippant but he just sounded good and scared. “Christ, Sherlock…”

“I know,” Sherlock breathed, his impervious mask cracking just a little.

“Right,” Lestrade squared his shoulders. “Let’s get this over with.”

“No, wait.” Sherlock looked at his wristwatch. “The military and MI-6 wasn’t that far behind us. Snipers will be in place in ten minutes while the military assembles a perimeter.”

The wait was agonizing. Lestrade examined as many photographs as he could, just for something to do. Sherlock stood still except for his fingers, drumming the notes for Bach’s *Partita No. 1* over and over on the doorframe. Finally Sherlock nodded and the two men walked out of the room. Since their mobiles still weren’t working, they couldn’t tell anyone to come fetch Julia. Neither man felt good about leaving her behind, but knew they didn’t have a choice either.

They made their way down the hallway. As they passed the rusty radiator, Sherlock’s nose twitched. “The air smells odd… some sort of… ahh… of course. That’s why Julia’s unconscious.”

“Some sort of knock-out gas?” Lestrade kept close to Sherlock. “So we can add chemical weapons to the list of horrors to look forward to?”

“Apparently, but this also means…” his voice trailed off.

*This also means Violet was incapacitated. Dammit. I had hoped she was hiding or still in pursuit.*

Sherlock took a breath. *Be like the water… adapt to the situation. A rushing stream cannot move a stone but it can wear it down.*

*Wear him down, Moriarty. Then when he’s at his weakest, break him, shatter him into a thousand pieces.*

*Fire cannot overpower water. So go on, Jim. Do your worst. Burn my heart out indeed.*

Still Sherlock hesitated when he reached the door that opened up to the actual roof.

Remnants of an old nightmare surfaced as he placed his long fingers on the doorknob. Last spring, he had dreamt Moriarty had held Molly in his arms, threatening her with a knife while repeating the speech he gave on top of St. Barts’ about Sherlock being ordinary:

“You are painfully ordinary, aren’t you? Here I thought you could distract me from the demons, but you are on the side of the angels, aren’t you?”

“‘I may be on the side of angels, but don’t think for one second that I am one of them.’”**

Only now it was the dead of winter instead of the first heat of summer.

He slowly opened the door that led to the rooftop. A whoosh of cold, wintery air blew down.

Flipping his coat collar up and jamming his hands into his coat pockets, Sherlock ascended the stairs. Lestrade covered him from behind. He wasn’t John of course, but he was a good friend, all the same, Lestrade.

The door at the top of the stairs yawned open.

Sherlock paused again, only this time it was not because of hesitate. “If you get a clear shot, take
“it,” he breathed to Lestrade.

“Don’t have to tell me twice,” Lestrade sounded tough but his face had lost its usually tan color.

Sherlock stepped out onto the roof.

He schooled his face to remain impassive as he first locked eyes on Violet. She looked pale, but mostly unhurt. Her white face made her hair all that more fiery, as if her head had actually caught fire. Her eyes widened when she saw Lestrade instead of John, but other than that, she remained mostly still. Her coat, buttoned up to her neck, fluttered around her in the wind.

Standing slightly behind her, was a dead man. Jim Moriarty had one hand behind his back, the other hand clasping Violet’s wrist. As if he was a child clinging to Mummy’s hand but she didn’t want to hold his.

John Watson could have made the shot. Mary Morstan Watson most definitely would have made the shot. But Lestrade, despite his training, knew he couldn’t make the shot. If he was off by a centimeter, the bullet would either go wide or go into Violet’s skull instead of into its intended target. Besides, there was something about the way he stood, just slightly behind Violet instead of using her entire body as a shield that made Lestrade very wary. At any rate, Moriarty was like a mad dog. One did not wound a mad dog. One put a mad dog down.

Lestrade refused to waste a bullet wounding Moriarty. “Let her go,” he said since both Sherlock and Moriarty stayed silent. Lestrade fell silent as well once he realized those two were content to only eye each other for the moment, each sizing the other up.

Moriarty regarded Sherlock from where he stood. He kept Violet close to him while blatantly ignoring Lestrade. Moriarty’s coffee brown eyes lit up and his lips quirked up into a genuine smile as he greedily appraised Sherlock from his expensive shoes up to his wind-tousled curls.

As Sherlock came face to face with his nemesis for the first time in four years, Moriarty did not talk about angels or the pain of living. Nor did he even say “Hi,” in that creepy, lyrical way of his. Instead, he quoted a poem as he kept a firm grip on Violet Hunter’s wrist:

“Roof-tops, roof-tops, what do you cover? Sad folk, bad folk, and many a glowing lover…” Jim Moriarty crooned softly, smirking as he observed Lestrade’s face turn to the color of cottage cheese. “What? No John? Oh yes, that wife of his…” he laughed under his breath. “I dare say it’s been a while since I’ve actually had to get my hands dirty. Forgot how much fun it is.”

Lestrade hid his abject terror as well as he could. He spoke to Moriarty as if he were just another street punk instead of the Napoleon of Crime. “You’re dirty alright, just another lowlife looking to score. Why don’t you tell us what you really want instead of playing games?”

Moriarty lifted his eyebrows. “Just to say hi,” and it came out lilting and eerie, just as it did the night at the pool. “And to let Sherlock know I’ve come out of retirement. I want to play.”

“Playtime’s over,” Lestrade snapped. “No more games. I can make sure you don’t survive a second time.” He bluffe as he pointed his gun right between Moriarty’s big doe eyes.

“Do you really think I survived that, the suicide?” Moriarty laughed, almost giggled really, like a gleeful schoolboy. He pressed his cheek next to Violet’s. Her entire face closed up, as if she was trying to stop herself from being sick.

“Sherlock, is this new pet of yours really that daft? You really need to stop trying to replace John Watson. He is one of a kind after all. Although this one,” he shook Violet’s wrist. Violet looked
stonily into the distance. “This one is at least pretty.” He gave Violet a smacking kiss on the cheek before turning his attention back to Lestrade again. Still keeping a hold on Violet’s wrist, he hid himself behind her again. Not completely behind her, but just enough so there wasn’t a clear shot. Moriarty tilted his head towards Sherlock and asked Lestrade, “What you should be asking is: how did he survive The Fall? At least, that’s what I’d love to know. Care to share?” he asked Sherlock. When Sherlock didn’t respond, just stood there with the wind ruffling his hair and fluttering his coat, Moriarty grinned, “Ohhh… Sir-Boast-a-lot did learn his lesson, didn’t he?” He squeezed Violet’s wrist. “You figured out how he survived The Fall though, you clever girl, you. You figured out loads of things you probably should have left alone.”

“You shoved a gun in your mouth and pulled the trigger,” Lestrade interrupted, taking a step closer. “Now, I don’t want to kill you,” he lied, thinking about Molly and Henry. “But I will.”

“No, you won’t,” Moriarty sang. “How is Molly, by the way? Speaking of the missus, who knew that sweet little Molly Hooper was such a filthy little slut? It sort of makes us brothers, doesn’t it, the three of us. Since we’ve all had her, ooh should we get T-shirts made up?”

Sherlock however was not paying a whit of attention to Moriarty’s theatrics. He focused solely on Violet. She looked completely miserable, defeated really. Her chestnut hair fluttered around her deadened face. While her hair appeared to burn, the fire had left her eyes completely. When they stepped foot on the roof, he had expected her to start yelling her head off. He had expected her to tell Lestrade to shoot Moriarty, not to stand as still and silent as a statue.

Something’s wrong, something’s very very wrong… think, Sherlock, think!

As Moriarty continued to insult Molly’s virtue in an effort to rattle Lestrade, Sherlock continued to scan Violet from head to toe. Then it hit him… her coat. It looked bulky on her when lately her clothes had been hanging loosely on her. It was also buttoned up to her throat, but the belt was not tied around her waist. Oh no… Oh God…

“Shut up,” Sherlock hissed at Lestrade just when Moriarty started to describe in graphic detail one of the nights he had spent with Molly, when she thought he was just “Jim from IT.” He took a step closer to Moriarty. “You’re stalling. Delay tactics are boring. What do you want?”

“I told you,” Moriarty looked wounded. “I miss you. I want to play. Come on Sherlock, all the little games we played. Those great games, don’t you miss them?”

“Not particularly.”

“I do,” Moriarty warbled, “I really do. By the way, Detective-Inspector, it wasn’t me on the rooftop that fateful day. This one,” he jostled Violet’s wrist again. “Still hasn’t figured it out either. But you have,” he smiled at Sherlock as if they were best friends. “Sherlock, Sherlock, don’t let me down. I know you’ve finally solved that particular mystery.”

“Twins,” Sherlock kept his face just as expressionless as Violet’s.

“Twins?” Lestrade’s mouth dropped open, “There’re two of you?”

A fleeting look of pain crossed Moriarty’s face. “Not anymore,” he muttered, tight-lipped. “I loved Richie but,” he shrugged. “He wasn’t very… stable. I do want to apologize to you, however, Agent Hunter,” Moriarty actually sounded sincere. Violet looked away from him, her face still pale except for two wind-burned spots on her cheeks. “I understand Richie was less than a gentleman towards you. That was never my intention, Agent Hunter. I merely instructed him to bring you into the fold. You would be such an asset to our happy little family.”
Violet clamped her mouth closed. *Probably really is trying not to be sick,* Lestrade thought as he took a step closer. “That’s enough, you bastard. You’re not taking her anywhere. You’re not going anywhere either. You’re coming with us.”

Moriarty sniggered, “Oh my God! He’s simply adorable, Sherlock! I see why you took a shine to him, but he really is no John Watson, is he? But marriage really doesn’t suit our Johnny, does it? Pity about his kids because I think he really would have taken to fatherhood like a duck to water. Not like you, you would be terrible. Most Holmes men are, are they not?” The smile he gave Sherlock now was chilling. “I told you I’d burn the heart out of you. I also told you. No one ever gets to me. And no one ever will.”

“Bollocks,” Lestrade snapped. “This place is crawling with cops and military. Snipers probably got a bead on you as we speak. So how do you plan on leaving here, exactly?”

“Easy, mate,” Moriarty turned his pitiless smile towards Lestrade. Lestrade actually took one step, then another one back. Moriarty’s grin widened. “He’s,” he tilted his head towards Sherlock again, “Going to let me walk right out of here. Free as a bird.”

“And why is he going to do that?” Lestrade asked.

“Three reasons. The first reason,” he finally showed everyone what he had been hiding behind his back: a long-stemmed red rose. Exactly like the one The Woman had sent Sherlock when he had been in hospital recovering from The Shooting.

*Irene… oh no.* Sherlock’s disquiet grew exponentially but his eyes only widened slightly.

“The second,” Moriarty reached over to Violet and started unbuttoning her coat. Violet flinched, squeezed her eyes tightly shut and rolled her head away from Moriarty. “Oh, shh, shh, love, it’s alright,” Moriarty paused to push Violet’s hair out of her face. Then he finally finished unbuttoning the trench coat to show off the suicide bomb vest strapped to Violet.

A digital clock was taped to the middle of the vest. Bright red numbers flashed as they counted down: 17:02… 17:01… 17:00… 16:59…

“Remember this Sherlock?” Moriarty gloated as he peeled Violet’s coat completely off her now. “Of course you do.”

Violet lifted her head again, fixing her gaze upon Sherlock’s face. Her face no longer lacked expression. Her hazel eyes were now twin pools of anguish and misery. Shivering from cold and fright, she finally spoke in a hoarse, despairing voice. Only one word though:

“Run.”

Moriarty laughed. “Couldn’t hold it in, could you?” He patted Violet on the back as if they were old chums. “Told her if she tipped you off in any way, speaking in a foreign language, blinking out SOS, I’d… ah… detonate prematurely,” he grinned again, that naughty schoolboy grin. The *I just said something dirty* grin. “But if she stayed nice and quiet, there’d be a chance she’d walk away from this all yet. Oh yes, Sherlock, there’s a way you can save all your pretty flowers. The Rose, The Violet,” he traced a gloved finger down Violet’s cheek. She shuddered but there was emotion in her eyes again. Pure, unadulterated hatred.

Moriarty pretended not to notice. “And all the pretty little flowers you haven’t met yet, or maybe you have, Sherlock. Maybe you’ve solved a case or two for a Lily or a Daisy or an Aster and they’re all on the same medication.”
Sherlock’s brow furrowed. “What?”

“I wonder whatever happened to that whistleblower, the lass who tattled on PharmaLogistics LTD, the company that mucked up the birth control drug, Trifexanor,” Moriarty said idly, as if discussing whether or not it would snow tonight. “Detective-Inspector, was Molly on Trifexanor? Wait, I really should be asking you that,” he lolled his head back towards Sherlock. “Either way, I’ve got a little secret for you boys. You too, madam,” he gave Violet’s wrist a little shake. “So listen up.” He lowered his voice to a stage whisper. “It wasn’t a muck-up. The placebos were placed in the middle of the cycle instead of the end on purpose. It was a dry run, a rehearsal, shall we say, for the big show!” He crowed at the end.

“What have you done?” Lestrade couldn’t hide his fear any longer.

“Oh I’m sure we’ll see that whistleblower again,” Moriarty sighed. “Here and there, in bits and pieces. Oh, but I’m getting distracted. After our network was so inconveniently interrupted, we’ve been researching new ways to keep the population under our control. The answer is so breathtakingly simple. You keep people under control by killing them. I enjoy asking the self-righteous: But what about all the good things Hitler did?”

“You’re mad,” Lestrade’s voice hitched. “You can’t kill everyone.”

“No. Of course not, that would be stupid. You kill just enough people to keep everyone else afraid. When people are afraid, people make stupid decisions. Then they come looking for us.”

“Please Jim, can you fix it?” Sherlock sneered, although mindful of the digital clock ticking down on Violet’s chest… 15:56… 15:55… 15:54… 15:53… “The law won’t protect me, can you?”

“And the answer is yes, it’s always yes,” Moriarty sneered back, “Why couldn’t you have left things alone Sherlock, why must you always poke your beak in where it’s not wanted?”

“What have you done?” Lestrade gasped again.

“Patience is a virtue, Detective-Inspector,” Moriarty stepped away from Violet, no need to guard her now. “And yeah, she’ll blow and take you with her if you shoot me, Mr. DI-Man. Anyway, a response to your question, we didn’t put the placebos in the wrong place. Sherlock, can you deduce what we did?”

“You poisoned them,” he said flatly, still watching the clock.

“Yeahhhhhhh, we did.”

“Joke’s on you, we’ll just do a recall,” Lestrade huffed.

“Joke’s on you, you don’t know what brand of pills we poisoned. Trifexanor was pulled out of the British market. PharmaLogistics LTD is an international company that manufactures all sorts of contraceptives under all different names. They’re not just in the UK. There’s a Pharma in France, Italy, America… and, just to make it more fun, only one shipment was tainted. That’s it. Just one lorry is carrying all the poisoned pills. Where in the world is the lorry going and when… ahh… there’s the mystery. Who knows, the poison may have been delivered a week ago and little plastic containers are lying on nightstand tables and the poison pills are scheduled to be taken the second week of the cycle, or maybe it was the third week, I can’t remember.” He then imitated Sherlock mocking him: “Please Mr. Holmes, can you solve it?” He shook his head, “In under fifteen minutes?”

“Or we can all just experience the big bang together,” Sherlock droned. “Violet’s obviously resigned
to her fate. If Lestrade stops acting like an idiot, he still has a chance to live another day if he leaves right now. That just leaves you and me and well,” he shrugged. “I’ve been dead twice now. Maybe third time’s the charm.”

“If I die, then all those poor women die because I’m the only one who knows where and when the poison was delivered. How many innocent women are you going to turn into unwitting martyrs just for the satisfaction of killing me?” Moriarty pressed his fingertips to his chest. “You know, young girls take birth control pills. To help with spots and cramps, that is. Some of those girls are as young as thirteen or fourteen, dead before having a chance to live? Dear me, Mr. Holmes, dear me,” Moriarty shook his head again. “And oh, it’s a particularly nasty poison we’ve put into those tablets. They won’t go quickly or painlessly. There’ll be blood.”

“How do we know you’re telling the truth?” Lestrade decided to continue acting like an idiot, apparently. “How do we know you’re not making this entire thing up?”

“Call Mycroft,” Moriarty said negligently to Sherlock. “He should have received an email explaining all of this. Oh, phones are working again,” he added as an afterthought.

Sherlock pulled out his Smartphone and rang his brother, “Did you receive an email?” he asked without saying hello. He listened intently to his brother then confirmed, “Yes, we’re on the rooftop with Jim Moriarty. Violet’s strapped into a suicide bomber’s vest.”

Back in his office, Mycroft rubbed his temple, “Do we have any leverage whatsoever?”

Sherlock thought fast, faster than he had ever in his life, “Afraid not, brother of mine. The twin has the advantage.”

Mycroft caught his double meaning. “You have Julia Stoner.”

“Yes.”

“Let him go.”

“You and you alone can leave,” Sherlock droned as he hit the End button on his iPhone.

“Fair enough. Julia has outlived her usefulness anyway, you can have her,” Moriarty strolled back to Violet. “This was quite the turn-up you know,” he caressed her cold cheek again before turning away. “We meant to take your boy, Sherlock. But Agent Hunter has a nasty habit of getting in the way.” He paused in front of Lestrade, who still pointed his Sig Sauer at him. “Do put that down, you look like a moron. You can’t kill me. If I die…” He mouthed the word “boom” and made an exploding gesture with his hands. Then he smiled serenely at Lestrade, “You and I will be meeting again though, someday.” He ambled towards the doorway. “See, your child was bought and paid for, Sherlock before he was even born. I was actually supposed to deliver him today but it may be prudent to wait a bit, let him grow up a little. I’m sure I can convince the buyer of that. Tell him to wait until the boy is… seven? Before taking possession, that is,” Moriarty let that sink in before added in his slithery, whispery voice, “Oh yes, Sherlock, I finally know what made you, who made you.”

“No one made me. Nothing made me,” Sherlock’s already low voice pitched down an octave. “I made me.” Then he smiled. The smile he gave Moriarty was ten times more chilling than the one Moriarty produced. So terrifying in fact that Lestrade and Violet forgot who they were supposed to be afraid of for a moment. “But now I know who. Made. You. Thank you for that.”

Moriarty looked disconcerted for a moment then shrugged. “We’re all dust in the end, Sherlock.
Clock’s winding down, tick-tock, tick-tock,” he pointed to the digital clock on Violet’s vest.

“No one is stopping you,” and Sherlock even pivoted away from the door in that graceful, elegant way of his. He risked a side-glance at Violet. She weaved back and forth on her feet. If the bomb didn’t kill her first, the stress from the situation as well as the last eight months would.

Moriarty smoothed down his coat, ran a hand over his head. Smirking, he sauntered towards the door, digging into his coat pocket for his sunglasses. As he walked past Lestrade, the detective-inspector growled at him, “I’ll see you in hell before you lay one finger on my son.”

“We’re all destined for hell, Detective-Inspector,” Moriarty sang. “It’s just a race to see who gets there first. Give my best to John, Sherlock,” he added. “Once I’m safely away, the clock will stop on the bomb and Mycroft will receive a text telling him which chemist shops or pharmacies received the poisoned shipments.” He turned to face Sherlock. “You should have backed off. You should have backed down. You should have left my people alone. You should have been satisfied with chasing jewel thieves and philandering husbands. You should have never asked Jefferson Hope who sent him. You should have been content to have just caught the puppet instead of investigating who pulled his strings.”

“You were the one who forced our paths to cross. I was more than content to merely run parallel with you,” Sherlock ached to run to Violet, who looked like she was about to fall over. He forced himself to stand his ground. “I only wanted to work. You wanted to play games.”

Moriarty gave Sherlock one more smile. It was an almost endearing smile. “All work and no play make Jim a dull boy. Consider yourself in zugzwang, Sherlock.”

“What about The Rose?” Sherlock examined his nails as Moriarty neared the doorway.

“Now, don’t get greedy, honey. The Rose was mine before she was ever yours.” With that parting shot, Moriarty ducked into the stairwell and disappeared.

As soon as Moriarty disappeared down the stairwell, the clock on Violet’s check stopped counting down and started flashing 10:21… 10:21… 10:21… Violet sank to her knees.

Sherlock’s and Lestrade’s mobile whirred at the same time. As Sherlock hurried to Violet, Lestrade read his text message aloud: “Consider this a show of good faith. I turned off the clock but I still hold the detonator, so don’t try anything cute. ‘Til next time boys. JM.”

Violet struggled to get out of her coat as Sherlock lifted her back up. “Get it off me, get it off me!” Violet’s voice came out unnaturally high and breathy. Sherlock shoved her coat off of her and started undoing the straps of the vest.

“Sherlock, we should wait for the bomb squ-” Lestrade started but Sherlock had already yanked the vest off and hurled it as far away from them as possible.

“Are you hurt?” he tilted Violet’s chin up, peering into her eyes.

“N-n-no,” Violet’s teeth chattered from the cold and from the delayed response from her ordeal. “I p-p-passed out in the hallway, some sort of gas, then I woke up here, wearing that.” She looked over her shoulder at the vest and shuddered. Then, almost beseechingly, she asked, “Did you really just let him walk away? Tell me Mycroft pulled one of his double-crosses.”

Sherlock read his mobile then shook his head. “MI-6 received confirmation that everything Moriarty said about the contraceptives from PharmaLogistics is true. Mycroft didn’t provide any further details beyond that, other than they haven’t received the when and where yet and that he’s sending a car for
Violet nodded, wrapping her arms round herself, shivering like mad. Then she buried her face into Sherlock’s chest. “Goddamn it, he got away.” Pressing her cheek instead of her face into his scratchy Belstaff, she gave Lestrade a forlorn look, “You should have taken the shot.”

“I’m sorry,” Lestrade finally holstered his gun. “I really am. I couldn’t risk it, taking the shot.”

“Regret is a useless emotion, Lestrade,” Sherlock unbuttoned his coat awkwardly with his left hand as he rubbed Violet’s arm and shoulders with his right, trying to keep her warm. “If the snipers couldn’t have made the shot (and there are four of them by the way) then what is the point of blaming yourself for not taking the shot? Best to use our mental faculties towards something productive, like determining Moriarty’s next move,” Sherlock drew Violet closer towards him. Bundling her close to him inside his coat, he muttered, “Let’s get you inside before you drop from hypothermia.”

As the three of them walked towards the stairwell, Violet stumbled. “Sorry. My legs still feel rubbery.”

“S’alright, you’ve just been through hell,” Lestrade mumbled then asked, “Think he really left that woman, Julia Stoner, behind like that?”

“Yes,” Violet and Sherlock said in unison. Sherlock then sniffed, “Obviously” and Violet added, “Fits the profile. To him, people are tools, but in his mind, men are recyclable, women, disposable. Once he’s done with a female, he has no further use for her. Molly Hooper and Irene Adler are prime examples of his misogyny. Twins though, I missed that. I thought maybe he had split-personality or something…”

Then behind them, there was an ominous little beep. Just one, as if a microwave oven had finished heating something up.

“You’ve got to be kidding me,” Violet closed her eyes.

Sherlock’s mobile hummed. He dug it out and read: “Sorry boys, I’m so changeable. JM.”

“What does that mean?” Lestrade moaned.

“It means run,” Sherlock jammed his mobile back into his coat pocket. Then brusquely he told Violet, “Please do not take this as offense for I know you’re perfectly capable of running, but we’re a bit short on time,” as he scooped her up into his arms. Not in a loving, romantic way, but more like a parent snatching up a child before the brat ran into a busy intersection.

“Hey!” Violet squawked.

“Mind your head,” Sherlock ducked down the best he could through the doorway. “Greg,” Sherlock shouted once they were all in the hallway, “Take her,” he clumsily deposited Violet into Greg’s arms. “Get yourselves out, do not argue,” he snapped as Lestrade opened his mouth to yell. “Henry is not growing up without a father. Go!”

“Sherlock!” Violet cried out over Lestrade’s shoulder as Lestrade obeyed Sherlock’s command.

“I’m getting Julia, you just get out!” he shouted back as he ducked back into the photography room to fetch the aforementioned lady.

Julia was just coming to when Sherlock entered. She shook her blonde head then looked up at the
detective. “Your bloody fiancée shot me!”

“Yes and in the leg too, how inconvenient at this very moment,” Sherlock grabbed her underneath her armpits and threw her over his shoulder like the proverbial sack of potatoes.

“Do you know who I am!” Julia roared imperiously. “I am the Lady Trelawney-Hope!”

“Oh please,” Sherlock puffed as he ran out of the room, carrying her over his shoulder. “You do know who I am, don’t you? Besides, I’m actually trying to save your worthless life so do me the profound favor of shutting up!”

He shouted this to Julia as he ran down the twisting staircase, nearly slipping on the remaining rose petals. With his long legs coupled with his natural athletic prowess, he caught up with Lestrade and Violet easily enough. They had just reached the door when Sherlock reached the bottom of the steps.

“Sherlock, Sherlock!” Violet cried out again, clinging to Lestrade. “Hurry!”

Lestrade awkwardly dug his badge out of his pocket as he ran while trying to keep his grip on Violet. He held his badge up high so the circle of police, military and special agents could see he was one of the good guys. “Bomb!” He yelled. “Moriarty detonated the bomb! Run, run!”

That was the last thing Sherlock remembered hearing before the explosion. He felt like a mouse that had just been hit in the back by a cat’s paw…a cat’s paw that was also on fire. He tumbled, losing his grip on Julia. He heard a woman’s scream but he wasn’t sure if it was Violet or Julia. He felt himself flying, then falling, then rolling, then finally, stopping, lying flat on his back. His ears rang and his head ached. Every inch of his body hurt. Not like it had after the actual Fall, but he most definitely did not feel good.

He felt someone grab him by the shoulders of his coat and drag him away from the building. Still, he felt heat and he smelt smoke. Then he felt someone else grab hold his ankles. Two people were carrying him. He wanted them to put him down and eventually they did. The mystery people carrying placed him onto some sort of bed. (... no, not bed. Gurney..?)

His eyes hurt so he kept them closed. He chest hurt worse than his eyes, he couldn’t breathe (... smoke...dust... debris...what’s the point of quitting smoking if one cannot breathe anyway... ah, sarcasm. Excellent. Means the Brain is fully operational...)

“’Malri’t,” he garbled out as he felt a plastic mask fitted over his mouth and nose. He then felt a hand on his head. A gnarled hand, calluses. Broad fingers. A man’s hand (... John? No, not John’s hand, John would card my hair, he likes touching my hair...) He opened his eyes and saw Lestrade hovering over him. Sherlock let his body go limp with relief at the sight of Lestrade’s brown eyes, soft brown eyes, gentle eyes, soothing, like chocolate, (... not mad, not hot and scalding like Moriarty’s, boiling like cheap bad coffee...)

Lestrade closed those warm chocolate eyes for just a second. When he reopened them, they were bright and damp. “Christ, mate,” he choked out, keeping his hand on Sherlock’s forehead, as if checking Sherlock for a fever.

Sherlock made himself sit up. Lestrade pulled his hand away as Sherlock rose. As he slowly took off the oxygen mask, Sherlock wheezed, speaking slowly in an effort to enunciate, “I’m. Alright. Greg.”

“OK,” Lestrade put his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. “OK,” he gave the shoulder a squeeze.

And like that, the ax was buried.

“Violet?” Sherlock swung his legs over the gurney and brushed the soot and grime off his coat.
“She’s in the ambulance,” Lestrade helped Sherlock off the gurney. Sherlock allowed Lestrade to guide him towards the ambulance. Truth be told, he did feel a bit wobbly. “Julia’s in the other ambulance. He looked grim as he added, “Properly secured and under armed guard.”

“Good,” Sherlock huffed as he peered into the ambulance. He could see Violet lying motionless on the gurney. “Violet?” he breathed as his heart faltered a bit.

For an agonizing second, there was no response, no movement. Then, at last, a groan as her arm moved slowly while she removed the oxygen mask over her face. Then, in a voice just as posh and arch as one could please, Miss Smith informed her fiancé, “This is the fourth explosion I’ve had to endure since meeting you, do you realize that?”

Sherlock turned to Lestrade with a shaky grin. “She’s fine.”

Chapter End Notes

In case I haven't mentioned it before, thank you for reading/commenting/kudoing/bookmarking. Sorry I'm shit at replying to comments on a timely basis, but I do read them as soon as I get notification from The Archive. I just have a very tiny phone and stumpy fingers so I REALLY hate emailing on my phone.

Also, it's five after midnight in my corner of the world and I HAVE to get to bed. Have a fantastic week everyone!
"So she’s your sister. Irrelevant. She’s a criminal, a murderer. What’s more, she’s working for Jim Moriarty. She helped create today’s pandemonium.” Sherlock gave the lady a cruel smile. “Now, you’re going to help me.”

“How?” Lady Trelawney-Hope visibly wilted under Sherlock’s glare.

“You’re going to make a telephone call for me,” Sherlock purred...

Shit starts getting real, y’all...

Happy Tuesday Eve!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Five: The Winning Ace

18 December 2015
An undisclosed, secure location
London, England
Friday evening
7:45 PM

“That woman is a machine,” breathed one of the MI-6 agents observing Julia Stoner through the two-way mirror.

“If you do not have anything useful to add to the conservation, please leave,” Mycroft murmured. His voice was barely audible but the effect was awe-inspiring. The agent actually appeared to shrink visibly inside his black suit.

Once it had been determined that Julia Stoner’s injuries were not life-threatening, MI-6 immediately took her to one of their off-the-grid facilities. Sherlock, Violet and Lestrade also were “invited” to “join” MI-6 at this location.

Lestrade was not asked to watch the interrogation of course. He was, however, debriefed by Anthea, who took copious notes and filmed the interview. She then led him to a locker room of sorts where he could wash the day off of him. A track suit, trainers and warm socks waited for him. Then a different young female agent led him to a sort of a waiting room, just as sterile and suffocating as the ones in hospital. There, Lestrade was left to pace and fret. But at least there was a landline that Lestrade was invited to use (his mobile and weapon were taken from him when they arrived at the facility, of course). The young female agent also brought him sandwiches, crisps and paper cups of steaming hot tea. Lestrade alternated from eating to worrying to calling Molly to get updates on Mary.

Mary’s situation was more than critical, it was downright dire, but that was all the information Molly could obtain. Once John arrived at St. Bart’s, Molly had resolutely refused to leave his side. She sent
her mother home, but she obstinately kept Henry with her. So she and John played Pass the Baby while they waited for news.

Molly had whispered to Greg that holding Henry seemed to be the only thing tethering John to this world. “And he hasn’t said more than three words since he’s arrived,” she paced back and forth in the Ladies’, the only room where she could get any privacy in St. Bart’s, other than her tiny office, all the way down in the morgue.

And this room wasn’t even private, with the dark-suited MI-6 agent standing in the loo with her. There were three more in the waiting room, another woman and two men. All four were assigned to guard Molly, the baby and John. An undercover agent had been dispatched to the Lestrades’ flat to keep an eye on Molly’s mother.

“I’m really scared, Greg,” Molly turned her back to the agent, juggling her mobile and the baby, who was beginning to make mewling little cries. Her breasts ached. Soon she’d have to feed Henry. She doubted she’d be given any privacy to nurse. *Sod them. I’m feeding him in the bloody waiting room, not a dirty loo.* “Not just for us, but for John. They did this on purpose, hurt Mary to hurt John, I know it.”

“Stay with him Moll,” Lestrade rubbed his tired eyes. “I’ll be there as soon as I can.”

But it would be a very long time before Greg would be allowed to leave the facility. Little did he realize MI-6 kept him detained mostly for his safety, not for information about today’s event.

Sherlock and Violet had been chivvied off to similar locker rooms. Mycroft knew better than to give his little brother a track suit so another beautiful suit with a rich royal blue dress shirt waited for him. Violet took the shower but not the change of clothes. Heartily sick and tired of Mycroft magically producing prissy outfits that fit her beautifully, Violet put her grubby jumper and dirty jeans back on, plus the lanyard with a Visitor badge clipped to it. She didn’t care. She’d change once she was back at 221B.

She was also irritated that while the prepaid mobile that she had tucked inside her boot had been returned to her, one of Mycroft’s minions had confiscated her emergency Visa pre-paid cash card and her switch-blade knife. The mobile had been returned to her because it was essentially useless. Someone had taken the battery out.

Ironically, it was annoyance, not fear she felt, being inside a MI-6 facility. Eight months ago, the idea of being detained had haunted her dreams.

Now however, she knew, *This Is my chance to be vindicated, to be resurrected. Helping MI-6 catch Moriarty will prove I am not a terrorist. MI-6 will help clear my name, I know they will. They will because Sherlock will force them to do so. Then, I’ll be free.*

*I can go home.*

She glanced at Sherlock briefly then back at the two-way mirror. *But where is home?*

She held in a sigh and massaged her hands, wincing as she did so. Her fingers had mostly healed, she didn’t really need the splint anymore, but her fingertips tingled still.

She shook the troublesome thoughts away. *Later. Worry about that later. But that agent was right, Julia is a machine. Shot, nearly blown up, minimal painkillers so she’ll be alert… and nothing. No signs of cracking. She really is a machine.*

Julia Stoner looked nothing like she had this afternoon. Stripped of her leather duds, she now wore a
pair of gym shorts, canvas shoes and some sort of prison smock. Instead of proper prison uniform bottoms, she wore shorts because of the gunshot wound in her thigh. She was connected to the same monitors she would have been if she had been in a proper hospital. An IV was inserted into her arm to prevent starvation in case she decided to go on a hunger strike.

Every hour on the dot, the smiling Dr. Sankaran would wander in, check on her, ask how she was feeling and ask her to rate the pain, ask her if she was hungry, if she wanted a sandwich and some crisps or maybe even some biscuits. She never responded.

At seven o’clock, she finally made a comment. She complained that the shackles were chaffing her skin and politely asked if they could be removed. “Not like I’m going to run off anywhere,” she smiled, pointing the best she could at her bandaged thigh.

But shackled she remained. She was strapped into a chair that looked more at home in a dentist’s office. She was reclined just enough so the bullet wound was elevated. Her ankles were shackled together, her wrists hand-cuffed to the armrests. Her long blonde hair had been messily plaited so it would stay out of her face. All her make-up had been scrubbed off.

_That could have been me_, Violet realized with a sick jolt. _If MI-6 would have detained me back in March… that night when John and Sherlock followed me back to my old apartment…_

She shook that thought away as well. While Mycroft spoke quietly to his minions, Violet whispered to Sherlock, “Anything?”

Sherlock pursed his lips. “I need to be _in_ there.”

Violet understood his frustration but Mycroft had said absolutely not. “You are to observe and deduce, nothing more!” Mycroft had snapped in his That Is Final tone of voice.

“I know, but do the best you can under the circumstances,” Violet hissed.

“The interrogators are all idiots.”

Violet rolled her eyes. Then her stomach rumbled. How odd, to be hungry after a day like today. “Do you have any cash on you? I left my purse at the mall.”

Without even looking at her, Sherlock slipped his hand into his pocket, withdrawing his wallet. He produced a few bank notes and pressed them into Violet’s hand, all while maintaining his gaze on Julia Stoner. “Coffee for me, if you can find any that is palatable.”

“Black, two sugars,” Violet murmured as she slipped out of the room. “I’ll pay you back later.”

As she started down the hallway, she heard an oily voice, “Just where do you think you’re going, _Miss Smith_?”

She turned slowly, facing Mycroft. She used the correct accent, the fake British one, “Coffee.”

“Mm,” Mycroft strolled towards her. “Do you really think you’d be permitted to wander a government facility unaccompanied?”

“Where am I going to go? Besides,” she held up the Visitor badge. “No one is going to permit to go anywhere interesting.”

Mycroft produced a little smile. “But you don’t know where you’re going. Allow me,” he made a magnificent sweeping gesture with his arm. Violet sighed and let him lead the way towards a row of
vending machines, including an automatic coffee dispenser.

“I didn’t know they had these anymore,” Violet examined her choices. “Is it safe to assume this coffee is terrible?”

“It’s dreadful, yes,” Mycroft confirmed. “But strong. You’ll stay awake for at least two days.”

“Oh, so you’ve replaced sugar with amphetamines?”

“You do realize that even if you assist with the apprehension of Jim Moriarty, you cannot return to America,” Mycroft purred.

Violet whirled around, her eyes blazing in rage. “Mycroft,” she snarled.

“We have a deal,” he reminded her. “You are to protect my brother, at all costs.”

“We had a deal, contingent on you were not to forcing Sherlock into any dangerous cases,” she hissed back at him. “You manipulated him into looking for this damn Letter for MI-6.”

Mycroft lifted his eyebrows. “One cannot force my brother to do anything, Miss Smith. You of all people know that.”

“You are full of shit,” Violet spat. “Threatening to section him is a very good way to make Sherlock dance to your tune.”

“Ah. So,” Mycroft had the grace to look uncomfortable. “Apparently my brother and you are closer than I believed, given that he’s confiding in you.”

Violet only assumed a haughty demeanor while thinking *No, John and I talk. A lot. We’re close,* she finally snipped. “It’s not love, like you think,” she spat out the word love the same way Mycroft or Sherlock would have, as if it was a disgusting swear word. “But we’re close.”

“I see,” Mycroft actually looked nervous. “May I ask what else he may have… disclosed?”

“No,” Violet finally saw Mycroft’s pressure point, his vulnerability. She read through the lines of his question clearly: *Did he tell you about his childhood, about how I failed him?* She softened, lying easily to him, “No, of course not. He’s still Sherlock, you know.” As Mycroft relaxed (only a bit, only someone like Sherlock or Violet would have noticed,) she added, “But I would like to add a codicil to our existing deal.”

“Oh, you think you’re in a position to negotiate?” Mycroft’s voice resumed its normally unctuous tones. “I could snap my fingers and you’d be shackled right next to Miss Stoner.”

“I know,” Violet agreed, keeping her voice cool and confident. “And I’ve had how many opportunities to kill your brother?” She paused for a beat, “Or you? I have trained formally in kickboxing. I do know how to crush a man’s windpipe. Yet,” she shrugged. “Here we are.”

“What do you want?” Mycroft’s lips thinned.

“If I have to stay in England and be with Sherlock, legally bound to him in marriage, as you demand,” she thinned her own lips. “I want a job.”

“What?”

“You are coercing me to defect from my country,” she pressed her hand to her chest. “To England,” she pointed to the floor. “So I want a job. Recruit me, or Miss Smith, or Mrs. Holmes or whatever
the hell name you want me to go by.”

“You want to work for MI-6?”

Violet wished she could have taken a photograph for Sherlock of Mycroft’s incredulous face. “I want Sherlock freed from his obligations from MI-6. All of them. Besides, better me than him to join, don’t you think? I’ve formally trained in law enforcement, I have a unique perspective of the criminal world and I’m… well,” Sorry Sherlock, she thought guiltily as she added, “Not emotionally unstable.”

“I cannot deny you have valid points,” Mycroft grizzled. “I need time to think about it.”

“You have until we catch Moriarty,” Violet turned her attention back to the vending machine. She dug into her jeans pocket for the money Sherlock gave her. “I know I have to produce the goods for you to even consider what I’m asking… what the hell?”

She pulled out the card Mary had given her.

“What is it?” Mycroft craned his head, trying to see what Violet held.

“I know I have to produce the goods for you to even consider what I’m asking,” she repeated. “Which may be very soon,” Violet re-read the card, making sure she wasn’t give seeing things. “Unfortunately, this means we may need to give Mary a stay of execution, providing she survives.”

Before Mycroft could say anything else, Violet ran off, back towards the interrogation room, forgetting she couldn’t get in without Mycroft swiping his identification badge.

“Shit,” she muttered under her breath, as herself. But as Violet Smith, she shouted, “Let me in!” as she pounded on the door.

“Stand aside, they can’t hear you,” Mycroft grumbled, as he swiped his card.

After a breathless, “Thank you,” Violet pushed past him, weaving around the startled agents, going straight to Sherlock. Without any sort of preamble, she held the card up to Sherlock’s face. He snatched it away from her as Violet Smith spoke in a rush, “Mary give it to me before everything went to hell. She figured it out, she figured it all out.”

“Brilliant,” an enormous smile spread across Sherlock’s face, “Absolutely brilliant.”

“Tell me you have good news, Brother Mine,” Mycroft drawled.

“Mycroft, produce the least irritating and most competent computer analyst MI-6 has. I have a name I need tracked down,” Sherlock demanded.

Mycroft nodded at one of his agents, “Get Jones.”

As the agent scurried out, Sherlock put his hands behind his back, and strolled right up to the two-way glass. Just then, Julia rolled her head over, facing him, as if she could see him instead of her own reflection.

“There’s too much stupid in this room, clear it out at once,” Sherlock droned.

Mycroft sighed then pointed at the door. All the other agents, looking annoyed and disgruntled, filed out. “You’re really not happy unless you are terrorizing someone, are you?” Mycroft took off his suit jacket and rolled up his shirt sleeves. “What else do you require, little brother? A foot massage? A cuppa?”
“I don’t like my feet touched but I’m still waiting for my coffee.”

“Sorry, I was too busy having an epiphany about this case,” Violet drawled.

“Have someone discreetly pick up the Lady Trelawney-Hope and bring her here. I need to question her,” Sherlock ignored Violet’s sarcasm.

“William Sherlock Scott Holmes, I simply cannot order a member of the peerage and the wife of the Secretary of State to be interrogated!”

“You can and you will,” Sherlock sneered. “Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be nice. Shut up,” he snapped at Violet when she audibly snorted in disbelief behind him.

“Who will question Julia, if you’re interviewing Lady Hilda?” Mycroft put his hands on his slim hips. “You threw out the best interrogators.”

Violet uncrossed her arms and waggled her fingers at Mycroft.

His black eyes widened and he snapped, “No. Absolutely not. I forbid it.”

“She knows how to make her crack.”

“So do you.”

“Not like her.”

Mycroft’s nose flared. “Fortunately, Sherlock I do not have the time or energy to argue, especially since Moriarty still hasn’t told us which shipment of pills he had poisoned.” He checked his watch. “I’m going to have to make a decision before the ten o’clock news whether or not to release a statement and have a recall of all contraceptives at once, further antagonizing the already precarious situation.”

“Because God forbid, you do it anyway, just to save a couple million lives.” Violet snapped.

“You have no idea the chaos London is in right now,” Mycroft hissed.

“Then send me in there,” Violet pointed at the two-way glass, at Julia. “I’ll get her to turn on Moriarty in less than fifteen minutes, you can time me. Consider it a job interview.”

“What?” Sherlock arched an eyebrow.

“I’ll explain later,” Violet did not break eye contact with Mycroft.

“Against my better judgment, go. Anthea will meet you,” Mycroft produced his mobile and started texting. “The guards are aware I’ve given you clearance. But first,” he eyed her dirty jumper and jeans. “Put on the clean clothes that were provided for you.”

Violet rolled her eyes but squared her thin shoulders and all but marched out of the room.

“Sherlock, I hope you know what you are doing,” Mycroft murmured as he texted.

Before Sherlock could answer, the door opened again. This time it was an older woman with squinting blue eyes and barely any hair, greying stubble really. She wore a black suit one size too large for her and sensible black ballet flats. “I’m Agent Althelney Jones,” she held out an almost skeletal hand to Sherlock. “How can I be of assistance?”
Sherlock made his usual lightning-fast deductions (… divorced, no children, two cats, a bird and a ferret. Recent survivor of cancer, not enough data to ascertain what kind. Grew up in Yorkshire, Leeds most likely. Very poor vision. State school educated, but discovered to be a computer prodigy. Mastered the use of the Internet when it was still in its infancy. Most likely was once a hacker, most likely a “white hat.” MI-6 offered her a job when she was young instead of incarceration due to her high moral principles and has been with the agency ever since. No weapons training, no combat training. Most definitely not a field agent…) 

“I have a name for you to track down. I need everything you can find. Preferably last known address,” Sherlock held out the card Violet had given him between two fingers. “Oh and you really should wear your glasses. Squinting is most unappealing. May need to invest in bifocals but as you are in remission from cancer, vanity should probably be the least of your concerns.”

Her mouth dropped open. “Flipping heck, they weren’t kidding about you.”

“They usually aren’t,” Sherlock droned.

“I’ll have your name back right away, Mr. Holmes,” Agent Jones said, a bit awestruck. She nodded at Mycroft. “Mr. Holmes,” she repeated, blushing a bit, obviously feeling a bit stupid repeating the same name for two different men. Two very different men.

“Oh and to answer your earlier question,” Sherlock said after Agent Jones had left. “Yes, I do know what I’m doing but I have a request to make of you, brother dearest.” He stretched out the last word.

“And?” Mycroft sounded bored, not looking up from his mobile screen.

“I want to know what happened to Ford, what really happened.”

Mycroft jerked his head up. “Sherlock, brother, don’t open that door.”

“Either you open it wide, or I will,” Sherlock spoke between his teeth.

“Sherlock, the last time I asked you to leave a case alone was Magnussen and look what happened,” Mycroft actually looked a bit panicky. “I’m asking, no. I’m begging you, please. Sherlock, don’t. Open. That. Door.”

“Too late,” Sherlock turned his back on his brother. “It’s already been cracked.”

“By whom?” Mycroft actually sounded angry, “Dupin?”

“No,” Sherlock did not turn around. He kept his eyes on the interview room, monitoring Julia Stoner. “Jim Moriarty.”

Before Mycroft could react, the door inside Julia’s interrogation room opened. Violet walked inside. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail at the nape of her neck. She wore the black trousers and deep forest green twin-set Mycroft’s people had produced for her. Sherlock smirked when he observed she wore matching forest green high heels. Violet did not like high heels. They were impractical.

She carried a folding chair, a legal pad and a pen. Behind her, an agent carried a small folding table, a TV tray, really. He helped her set up then slipped out silently after Violet thanked him.

She drummed the pad with her biro, pretending to read. She looked up at Julia benignly while Julia glowered at her. “Bad day?” Violet Hunter innocently asked then pointed at her bandaged leg. “Sorry about that, by the way, but I did ask you to help me.”
Julia balled her fists and resolutely looked up at the ceiling.

Violet looked up too. “How many times do you think you can count and re-count the dots in the ceiling tiles?” she asked blandly. “It’s not going to change anything. Moriarty dropped you like a bad habit. He left you behind on purpose. It’s true. Sherlock made a deal with him. He could go free as long as he left you behind.”

That wasn’t completely accurate but Julia didn’t need to know that.

“Look, as of right now, the only thing we can really tie you to is killing Eduardo Lucas then pinning it on Agent John Mitton. Lucas was murdered in France under his alias Monsieur Henri Fourange. We can extradite you back to France under your alias Madame Fourange, let you be tried there. I’m sure you can afford a decent lawyer who can spin a sob story about how Monsieur Fourange abused you in all sorts of sordid ways and you ran because you were afraid. You had no idea how you got an MI-6’s weapon. You bought it in a back-alley deal. We can tweak the records here at MI-6, saying that Mitton reported his gun stolen. You’ll probably get off. Maybe time served and probation. Of course, there’s the issue that somebody might notice your remarkable resemblance to the Lady Trelawney-Hope, but I doubt it. Trust me, darling,” Violet waved her hand elegantly around her head. “Hair dye can work miracles.”

Julia pointedly ignored Violet.

“So, Violet pretended to read her notes again. “Really, there’s nothing that ties you to Moriarty except… well. Your alias.”

“Oh, she’s good,” Sherlock purred.

“I’m not impressed yet,” Mycroft stood beside Sherlock now.

“Wait for it…”

Julia’s brow crinkled ever so slightly. Violet knew exactly what she was thinking. “Oh, not Madame Fourange. That identity hasn’t been burned… yet.” Violet smiled brightly, as if Julia was looking at her instead of the ceiling. “You know, I was engaged once, when I was younger. He was a NYC firefighter. He thought he was a real bad-ass but he could be such a dork. Do you know how he proposed to me?” Violet politely waited, as if Julia was going to answer. Then she continued. “Magic tricks. He took me to the Empire State Building, I know, cheesiest of cheese, but I was twenty-five. What the hell did I know? Anyway, here’s this big, bad Brooklyn-born-and-raised fireman, on his knees to me, holding out a ring box. One minute the ring was in the box, the next, on my finger and he said… I hope you’ll say yes because that ring might be stuck.” She laughed a truly genuine laugh then looked at the new diamond ring adorning her left ring finger. “Of course,” she murmured, admiring how the stone sparkled in the bright lights of the interrogation room. “Magicians never reveal their secrets”, she deepened her voice.

Julia finally rolled her head over, facing Violet, probably mentally willing her to shut up.

“Wait for it…” Sherlock hummed to his brother.

“But he did show me,” Suddenly a plain white business card appeared in her hand. “Sleight-of-hand tricks.” She flipped the card over. It read “Sara Govmux.”

She flipped it over again. Now it read, “Margaux Vos.”

“Anagrams, clever,” Violet said in a slightly awed voice as what little color had been in Julia’s face
drained away. “After Mary Watson, nee Morstan first confronted her about the whereabouts of her
daughter; Margaux knew she was in deep shit. She sought you out, because of your connections to
Magnussen. You promised her you would buy her protection but the price would be her book of
aliases in exchange for as much intel from MI-6 she could get before she could be extracted.
Desperate, she agreed,” Violet turned the card over and over in her hands. “Imagine her shock when
she opened the door, expecting the savior you promised her and instead, facing her executioner.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Julia finally spat out.

“You were paid to deliver a flash-drive and a letter to some really bad people,” Violet sailed on, as if
Julia hadn’t spoken. “For only three grand, but that was just the down-deposit, wasn’t it? At first it
was theorized that ‘Sara Govmux’ was going to use the money to run to a Central American
country where the American dollar was stronger, but that wasn’t right, was it? The Letter that you
stole from your own sister’s house was an act of good faith, to show that Magnussen’s people could
still run the blackmail organization without Magnussen’s leadership. The flash-drive, now somebody
wanted that, somebody high up in La Ligue des Roux. But you couldn’t deliver and now you’re
here.” Violet produced a mean little smile, “Oh, what will your sister say when she finds out. She
was always the Good Twin, wasn’t she? She was the one Mommy and Daddy liked best. Hell, your
stepfather even liked her better than you, didn’t he? Their rejection is why you faked your death and
ran away to Denmark, with the help of your aunt Honoria Westphail, who just happened to work
with a certain media mogul who moved to England about ten years ago to wreak havoc.”

“Alright, she’s good,” Mycroft gave in grudgingly. “How did you make the connection?”

“Shh, we’re getting to the good part,” Sherlock held his finger to his lips.

“Where is Auntie Honoria?” Violet asked. When Julia didn’t answer, Violet shrugged, “That’s OK.
We’re going to find her. We’re going to find Jim. We’re going to find all of them because you led us
straight to them.”

Julia tried to sit up. Struggling against her chains, she cried out, “OK, you are not Sherlock Bloody
Holmes. You did not deduce that from me!”

“You’re right, I didn’t,” Violet agreed amiably. “This was old fashioned detective work with a bit of
good luck sprinkled on top. I know you burned the “Sara Govmux” alias the night you ran from the
holiday flat in Montmartre, but,” Violet flipped the card over again. “You didn’t burn all of them, did
you?”

Julia’s eyes bugged out. Her mouth dropped open.

The card now read: Vara X. Mogs.

“There’s an MI-6 analyst looking that name up as we speak. It probably won’t take too long to find
the paper trail. Credit card transactions, last known addresses, basically a digital bread crumb trail
leading straight to Jim Moriarty,” Violet threw the card at Julia the same way a professional poker
player throws down the winning ace. “So… yeah, we’ll keep you here until we track Jim down.
After that, then we will send you back to Paris as Madame Fourange to be tried for murder. Then
you’ll be a dead woman, because La Ligue des Roux will get to you before the French police do.
And darling,” she slowly traced the scar on her throat, “I know what Jim Moriarty is capable of,
especially if he’s pissed off.”

“That was his brother, not Jim,” Julia finally cracked.

“So, you can confirm that Jim Moriarty had a twin brother?” Violet sat up, taking notes for real now.
The chatty, friendly tone evaporated immediately.

“I want protection,” tears started welling up in her eyes.

“You’ll have it if you answer my questions, all my questions. Mind you, your protection won’t be cozy. You probably won’t see the light of day again, but better than being skinned alive.”

“It’s not for me,” Julia whispered, two tears slid down her face. “My sister, they’ll kill her. She really is the good one.”

“Start talking,” Violet had no sympathy or warmth in her voice. She highly doubted Julia cared about her sister. *If you did, you would have never dragged her into this in the first place.*

“Yes, Jim had a twin, Richard. His stage name was Richard Brook, he really was an actor. But he was discouraged from continuing with his career when your boyfriend started meddling with the Red Headed League. Richie was also horribly unstable, mentally. Jim is cruel and calculating, but Richie was obsessed.”

“With Sherlock Holmes?”

“Yes. He thought they… *belonged* together. The Fall actually had nothing to do with RHL business. That was all Richie, wanting to be with Sherlock. Permanently.”

“So this started back in 2010, yes?” Violet continued to scratch out notes, hiding her revulsion and horror behind a clinical demeanor.

“Yes…” and Julia spilled her guts.

Sherlock turned away from the glass. “You had Jim… Richard in your custody, knowing he was obsessed with me,” he coolly confronted his brother.

“Sherlock, we’ve been over this. There was no other way we could get to Moriarty, *the* Moriarty, the one really in charge.”

“It was my life you gambled with,” Sherlock countered quietly.

“You would have had protection if you hadn’t run away from your handlers in Paris when you started your mission,” Mycroft pointed out.

“Those inept toadies of yours would have gotten me killed,” Sherlock still did not raise his voice.

“Do you not realize how many lives you have saved with your sacrifice?”

“And yet, you threaten to imprison me, drug me if I do not obey you,” Sherlock reminded him.

“Sherlock, you have an impulse-control issue,” Mycroft stonily reminded him. “Your impetuous nature is the reason you committed murder.” He also added, “I saw the surveillance video from when he visited you in hospital. I saw what Magnussen did to you; that’s motive for murder right there.”

“A murder already sanctioned by God and Country,” Sherlock refused to back down but he also knew he needed to confess. “And… my hand shook. I missed.”

“What?”

“I’m not a crack shot, like John or Mary or even Violet. I meant to frighten Magnussen, scare him into revealing something condemning, I knew he had a secret I could use against him, all men do.
But I was still weak, recovering from being shot. My hand shook. I missed.” Suddenly, he looked like he was seven years old again and terribly afraid and hurt. “It was an accident.”

Mycroft held his lips tightly together, “Oh Sherlock.”

He might have even embraced his little brother if the door hadn’t opened and Violet hadn’t walked in. “Everything OK?” Miss Smith asked as her sharp hazel eyes took in the scene.

“Perfectly fine,” Sherlock immediately composed himself.

“She needed a break,” Violet handed the legal pad to Mycroft. “Plus Dr. Sankaran will be making his rounds soon. But she’s as malleable as a marshmallow now. Any interrogator can take over at this point. She knows we’re the only thing that can keep her safe from Moriarty.”

“And it only took you ten minutes and thirty-five seconds,” Sherlock informed her.


Mycroft checked his mobile. “No.” His brows rose, “But the Lady Trelawney-Hope will be here in fifteen minutes.” His mobile pinged again. “Agent Jones just messaged me. She acquired all the information for one Vara X Mogs. Last known location,” he sighed. “Paris, France.”

“Have all the pertinent details forwarded to my mobile,” Sherlock smoothed his suit jacket down. “Violet, be ready to leave for Paris at a moment’s notice.”

“She’s not leaving London.”

“I need an assistant and John needs to be with Mary,” Sherlock spat back at Mycroft. “Hasn’t she proven herself by now?”

“You’re not going to Paris either!”

“Who else is going to pursue Moriarty? You? Now,” Sherlock ruffled his hair, as if he hadn’t just had a personal emotional crisis. “I have approximately fourteen and a half minutes before Lady Trelawney-Hope arrives and I still haven’t gotten my coffee.”

Violet held her hand out, “Come on, Sherlock. I’ll show you where the vending machines are.”

Sherlock Holmes was still sipping the horrible vending machine coffee when Lady Trelawney-Hope was escorted in. She obviously had been interrupted during some sort of dinner party. She wore an elegant grey dress with a snowy-white fur wrap pinned around her shoulders. Her shoes were also dove-grey with diamond embellishments.

Sherlock recognized the dress as one of Edward Rucastle’s haute couture designs. He repressed a shudder but did not hesitate to say, “You do realize the man who designed that frock was a deranged abuser of women, don’t you?”

“What do you want? This is absurd, wait until my husband hears about this!” Lady Trelawney-Hope refused to sit down.

“You wanted Dr. Watson and me to find out who was blackmailing you,” Sherlock said lazily. “It was your twin sister.”

“My sister is dead,” Lady Trelawney-Hope swayed on her feet, gripping the chair.
“She’s right next door, if you want to say hi,” Sherlock pointed toward the wall. “But, you already knew that Julia was still alive, didn’t you?”

“What?” Violet and Mycroft chimed in unison from behind the two-way mirror.

Violet shook her head, “Then why did she go to all the trouble asking us to find out who was blackmailing her?”

As if he could hear her, Sherlock answered, “You honestly believed someone else was manipulating you, manipulating you and Julia. Any moron with a grain of sense could have seen that it was Julia all along.”

Lady Trelawney-Hope sank down into the chair. She buried her face in her hands and started sobbing. “When I opened the door and saw her there…” she finally sniffled out. “I was so happy. My sister was alive. I started hugging her and crying. She told me,” she wiped her eyes, smearing her mascara. “She told me that she was in trouble with a bad lot and she needed something from me, something they wanted. If I gave it to her to give to them, they’d leave her alone. I believed her, why wouldn’t I believe her? It was Jules, it was my sister.” Lady Trelawney-Hope dissolved into noisy sobs again.

“Yes, yes, yes, the powerful bond of siblings and all that rubbish. The Letter was never stolen, you gave it to her.”

“Yes,” the lady snifflled. “I read it. I know French. It’s a silly love letter from a young girl to a boy.”

“It’s a cipher,” Sherlock droned. “It’s code. A stupid girl sent a coded letter to a rebel she thinks loves her. She gave him coordinates when and where to attack so she can claim her throne.”

“What,” Violet and Mycroft said together again. Then both said at the same time, “Stop that!”

“What? No, it can’t be…Kate Middleton would never dare dream of such a thing!”

“Oh for the love of…the world does not revolve around England. It’s not an English princess. It’s not even a legitimate princess. If her country still had a monarchy, yes, she might be considered a princess. But her country is a democracy and no longer has need for royals.”

“Oh,” Lady Trelawney-Hope looked at her hands. “I just can’t believe Jules would…”

“She did and you helped her,” Sherlock spared her no response. “You were afraid I was going to deduce you helped her. That’s why you threw the vase at the back of my head.”

“Err. Oh, right. Apologies.”

“Stuff your apologies,” Sherlock said crudely.

Mycroft covered his face with his hand. Violet sniggered.

“How dare you!” Lady Trelawney-Hope howled.

“How dare I? How dare you. People have died because of you, your ineptitude, and your sentimentality. So she’s your sister. Irrelevant. She’s a criminal, a murderer. What’s more, she’s working for Jim Moriarty. She helped create today’s pandemonium.” Sherlock gave the lady a cruel smile. “Now, you’re going to help me.”

“How?” Lady Trelawney-Hope visibly wilted under Sherlock’s glare.
“You’re going to make a telephone call for me,” Sherlock purred.

Chapter End Notes

Agent Jones was loooooooooooooooooooooooooooosely inspired by Inspector Althelney Jones from *The Sign of Four*. Loosely as in, I liked the name and did a gender-swap, like I did with Alec MacDonald from *Valley of Fear*.

The Elephant in the Room

Chapter Summary

"Maybe you’re not the real Sherlock Holmes after all."

“I’m for real.”

“One hundred percent?” John jeered.

“Trust me, the world can’t handle two Sherlock Holmeses,” Violet quickly interjected...

The Bad Night continues... bad enough to warrant a Trigger Warning for this chapter. I've also updated the tags, so proceed cautiously my friends... xxx

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-six:

18 December 2015
En route to The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Friday night
11:51 PM

Lestrade kept stealing looks at Sherlock and Violet out of the corner of his eye as one of Mycroft’s minions drove them to St. Bart’s.

Violet had her arms crossed tightly across her chest. She occasionally shook her head or rubbed her eyes, obviously trying to force herself to stay awake. She wore a black fleece parka and a black, white and pink scarf that Anthea had loaned her. Someone had also given Violet clean black trousers and deep forest green twin-set to change into. But she had put her black knee-boots back on, still dusty from the explosion. Lestrade had no idea she had binned the expensive and uncomfortable forest green heels before leaving the MI-6 facility. Other women would have wept for those fashionable shoes. Or killed.

Violet gave zero shits. They hurt her feet and she wouldn’t be able to run in them.

That Lestrade didn’t deduce. Only Sherlock Holmes would have been able to determine that.

Sherlock sat next to the heavily tinted window, texting furiously, lost in his little digital world. Despite this, he grunted, “Speak your mind, Lestrade.”

“Just wondering how you’re holding up mate,” he said gruffly as he leaned his head back against his seat. God, I’m knackered... he scrubbed at his eyes. “Don’t get your tights in a twist.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock sounded anything but fine however, that was to be expected. “It’s John and Mary you should be concerning yourself with now.” He looked out the tinted window, as if he could actually see out of it, “Especially Mary.”
While Sherlock had been interrogating Lady Trelawney-Hope, Lestrade had called Molly (again) for an update and it was not good news.

“The stress, the trauma, the sudden dip in blood pressure, it was too much,” Molly had sniffled into her mobile. “And Mary was only sixteen weeks along so there was no fetal viability.” She had then whispered the last bit, “It was a boy.”

It was a boy… those words haunted Lestrade as he rode along to the hospital with Sherlock and Violet.

It’s too much. First his daughter, then his sister now this, Lestrade couldn’t imagine what John felt right now. As for himself, all he wanted was to throw his arms around Molly and Henry, then take them to a secure location. A bomb shelter built in the Great Plains of America might do. He had recently watched a documentary about the Doomsday survivalists in Montana. Who needs electricity anyway? Or indoor plumbing? Lestrade thought wryly as the SUV came to a stop.

Violet flipped the hood of her borrowed parka over her head as Sherlock opened the car door. Once everyone was out, Sherlock tilted his head towards the hospital, not speaking for once.

But then, there really wasn’t much to say, was there?

Lestrade’s stomach started doing flip-flops as they neared the lift. He cudgeled his brain, desperate to know the right thing to say to someone who has lost a child… not even a child, not really. The promise of a child and all that could have been.

Lestrade thought again of Molly and Henry and his hands positively itched with the need to touch them, hold them.

The silence hung heavily as the lift took them to the floor where Mary was being kept. As the lift doors soundlessly opened, Sherlock finally mumbled, “I want to have a word with the physician in charge first.” Before either Lestrade or Violet could protest, Sherlock was off, his long coat flapping behind him.

Lestrade opened his mouth to call him, but Violet clasped his upper arm. “He doesn’t want things to be awkward,” she murmured, “Since both Molly and Henry are also here.”

“Oh,” Lestrade shut his mouth. As far as Lestrade knew, Sherlock hadn’t seen Henry since he had intervened, stopped Moriarty’s people from abducting him from the hospital nursery. “Right,” he added as they started towards the waiting room.

But then, halfway there, Lestrade stopped her. As Violet stared at him wide-eyed, he removed his hand from her shoulder and cleared his throat. “Look, I just, errr… I just want to say… I know what you did, for Molly and for Henry and… yeah… I…” His eyes grew wet as his cheeks reddened slightly.

Violet patted Lestrade’s upper arm and said softly “You’re welcome,” while thinking Ah, the emotionally constipated English.

Molly, however, did not live up to the stereotype of the British Stiff Upper Lip. She had nearly leapt out of her seat, all the while clutching Henry. Someone had mercifully given her a pair of hospital scrubs to change into so she wouldn’t have to sit in a jumper and trousers soaked in Mary’s blood. Still, as she ran to her husband, her auburn hair streaming behind her, Lestrade’s throat tightened as he saw flecks of blood still on Molly’s trainers. Stifling a sob, she hugged him as tightly as she could without squishing the fussy baby in her arms.
Lestrade pressed his face against her hair, murmuring soft reassurances and lies that everything was going to be OK, that he was OK. Molly gulped, nodded, then slid her hand up his face before rising on her toes to kiss him. Lestrade wound his arms around his family as he kissed his wife back. The MI-6 agents guarding Molly and Henry politely looked away. But Molly and Lestrade kissed for so long and so intensely, even Violet started feeling uncomfortable.

But just as Violet was about to retreat so they could have their moment in private (or as private as they could have with MI-6 agents milling about,) Molly deposited Henry into Lestrade’s arms. As Lestrade gave Henry a cuddle, Molly seized Violet, engulfing her in a bone-crushing hug while crying into her shoulder. Violet gasped in surprise. She honestly had no idea how strong the petite woman was, the muscles she had built over the years of pushing bodies in gurneys, pulling dead weight out of cold storage.

Guess I’m not immune to underestimating Molly Hooper Lestrade, Violet thought as she patted Molly on the back, hoping Molly would pick up the hint that she needed to stop strangling her.

“Thank you,” Molly sobbed, searching her pockets for a tissue. She found one, already streaked with mascara and still slightly damp. “Th-th-thank you for saving my son, my m-mum…” she dissolved into tears again.

Violet hesitated before hugging her again, wondering if it would be breaking the “Miss Smith” character. She decided it would not, but she gave her a brief, gentle “Miss Smith” sort of embrace as well as a prim peck on the cheek. “You would have done the same if roles had been reversed,” Miss Smith said, elegantly ending the embrace but keeping her hands on Molly’s shoulder. “Please don’t weep. Everything is going to be alr-

“We need to leave, now,” Sherlock barked, stepping all over the beautiful moment.

Molly turned ashen, her eyes automatically going towards her husband and son. Lestrade held the baby closer to him. Violet kept her hands on Molly’s shoulders to keep her steady. “Where are we going and more importantly, why?” Violet’s eyes flicked down and saw that Sherlock’s hands were balled into fists. *He’s angry… what the hell?*

“These idiots,” Sherlock snapped, pointed at the MI-6 agents, “let John leave.”

“What?” Lestrade started rocking back and forth on his heels, trying to soothe Henry, who had started to cry in earnest now.

“Mr. Holmes,” one of the agents started to say, to which Sherlock immediately cut off with a sharp, “Shut up.”

“No, he couldn’t have,” bewildered, Molly looked back and forth from Sherlock to the MI-6 agents. “After we learnt of the miscarriage, John said he was going to sit with Mary in the recovery room… he… wouldn’t just leave.”

“He could and he did,” Sherlock said with clenched teeth. “The inept agent guarding Mrs. Watson said that Dr. Watson rang for a taxi and left over two hours ago!”

“Oh God,” Violet breathed. “Go, take the little one home,” she said to Lestrade and Molly.

“Are you sure?” Lestrade asked while Molly demanded, “Who’s going to stay with Mary?”

“John,” Violet said firmly. “He probably just needed a private moment to process this. But he shouldn’t have gone off on his own.”
“You,” Sherlock pointed to the MI-6 nearest to him. “Fetch a car, at once.”

“Where are we going?” Violet asked as Sherlock started stalking out of the waiting room.

“John and Mary’s house, obviously,” Sherlock snapped.

It went unremarked that Sherlock had not looked at little Henry once the entire time.

**

19 December 2015
En route to John and Mary’s residence
Saturday morning
12:51 AM

The car ride to John and Mary’s was just as silent as the drive to the hospital had been. However a nervous energy crackled in the car, the tension nearly a tangible thing.

Sherlock’s leg jigged up in down in uncharacteristic apprehension. Violet placed her hand on his knee but held her tongue. She knew anything that came out of her mouth, no matter how true or consoling it was, would only serve to piss him off.

And pissed he was. His teeth were so tightly clenched, Violet worried he would actually file the enamel away. A muscle in his cheek twitched and when Violet removed her hand, his leg started jigging again.

“Drive faster!” he finally snapped at the driver.

“Sherlock,” Violet Smith softly admonished him. “We’re almost there.”

“Almost there isn’t there. Surely your limited intellect can grasp that.”

She lifted her brows then pressed a button that made the privacy screen slide up, dividing them from the driver. “I’m on your side, remember?” Violet Hunter reminded Sherlock. “I’m also the one with a Master’s degree in psychology; can your massive intellect grasp that?”

Sherlock didn’t deign to reply, not at first. Then in a stiff voice, as if forcing the words out of his mouth, he asked: “What do you know about PTSD?”

“Other than first-hand experience?” she dryly quipped. Then she grew serious, “My thesis paper was on the short and long-term effects of PTSD on federal agents. I interviewed several agents who were at Ground Zero on Nine-Eleven. I also did my internship at Walter Reed.”

“Walter who?”

“No. It’s a place not a person. A big military hospital in Bethesda,” Violet pressed her fingers against her lips as dark memories started spiraling up, ghosts of men and women who had come home from their first tours of war. “My proctor kept telling me I was supposed to listen to the patients, not interrogate them.” She laughed silently through her nose.

“Wasn’t there some sort of scandal with that hospital? I must confess I delete 90 percent of the news I hear about America as it either doesn’t pertain to me personally or it’s shockingly dull.”

“Oh yes,” Violet breathed, looking out the window now, even though there was nothing to see but tinted glass. “My brother broke the story, actually, in early 2007*. I had told him about the conditions
when I had interned there, which wasn’t great back then, but it had grown progressively worse as the years dragged on.” Then in a voice so hushed, Sherlock almost missed it, she added, “He was a contender for the Pulitzer for that story.”

“Was he?” Sherlock almost sounded polite.


“Awards are trivial and pointless.”

“Says the man who declined the knighthood,” Violet snorted. “Twice.”

“Thrice, actually,” Sherlock said wearily.

“Poor you,” Violet crooned as the car pulled up to the kerb in front of John and Mary’s terrace house. She pressed the button again and the privacy divider slide down with a soft whoosh. “Are you positive he’s there and he’s alone?” Miss Smith asked.

“Yes’m,” the driver, a MI-6 agent Sherlock had bullied into driving them. “The taxi drove him home with only one stop, at an off-license. Then he went straight home after that. After we had received confirmation it had been Mrs. Watson had been stabbed, we had immediately swept his house for listening devices and placed surveillance on his house.”

Just then, Sherlock’s mobile pinged. His brows lifted high. “Lady Hilda made the requested call. The trap has been baited and set.”

“What about the poisoned pills?” Violet’s stomach twisted as Sherlock opened the car door. She worried for all the innocent women out there, with possible time bombs sitting in their medicine cabinets. She also worried for John since Sherlock’s concern for him outweighed solving a tantalizing puzzle.

“Already solved, my dear Violet,” Sherlock kept his hand on the car handle. “I had been in communication with Mycroft during our drive to St. Bart’s. Moriarty did send an email with the supposed location of the poisoned pills but he lied, naturally. However, he did leave enough clues for Mycroft and me to know where the actual poisoned shipment really is. Agents are en route to confiscate them. We’re just allowing Moriarty to think we believed his email to buy time.” He slid out of the car and started stalking up the walkway to John and Mary’s house.

Violet, despite her irritation and exhaustion, smiled. Should have known better… She twitched the hood over her hair and face and followed Sherlock.

Sherlock, naturally, had a spare key to John’s house just as John had a key to 221B. Mary had resisted but as John pointed out, “Better he have a key than pick our locks.” Sherlock unlocked the door and met resistance when the chain lock halted the door from opening wider. “Damn.”

“Let me,” Violet took off first the fleece parka then the cardigan followed by the scarf, handing them to Sherlock. Shivering in her short-sleeved jumper, she squeezed her thin arm between the door frame and the actual door. She grunted and cursed, when she wasn’t biting her lower lip in frustration. Finally she said, “Yes!” She pulled her arm out and pushed the door open.

Impressed, Sherlock handed the coat and cardigan back to her. “Did you learn that at the FBI Academy?”

“No,” Violet only took the cardigan. As she pulled it on, she explained, “My brother was a shit who liked to lock me out of the house.”
“Oh, I used to do that to Mycroft as well,” Sherlock purred as he followed Violet inside.

“Must be a little brother thing,” Violet grumbled as she turned the lights on in the lounge.

Sherlock tossed Violet’s borrowed parka and scarf on the wingchair closest to the door. “John?”

“Go ‘way, Shur-lock,” slurred John’s voice from upstairs.

Sherlock started for the stairs but Violet pressed her hand to his chest. “Let me talk to him first, OK?” she breathed. “He sounds drunk.”

“Of course he’s drunk, why do you think he stopped at an off-license first?” Sherlock sneered but he let Violet lead the way.

Faint, bluish light from what would have been the nursery spilled into the hallway. Violet motioned to Sherlock to stay put then she slipped inside the room.

John sat in the white rocking chair, his legs stretched out in front of him. His button-up shirt was untucked and he wasn’t wearing one of his usual jumpers. His jeans were dirty, the turn-ups spattered with mud from running through the slushy streets of London. His feet were bare, his hair tousled. He held a tumbler in his right hand.

Violet’s eyes flicked down to the nearly empty bottle of wine next to the rocking chair then back up to John. “Hey,” she said, using her “real” voice.

“H’lo,” John slurred, apparently fascinated with the nightlight on the middle of the floor, a ceramic elephant emitting soft blue light as well as projecting little stars and crescent moons on the ceiling. “Look, the elephant in the room,” he pointed with the tumbler, sticky liquid sloshing over his hand. “Mary was going to do a circus theme,” he had trouble getting the word “Circus” out. “I told her that was a terrible idea, clowns are bloody terrifying, hadn’t she ever seen ‘Poltergeist’? So we compromised,” Again John struggled with the sibilant syllables. “No clowns. Just cuddly lions and tigers and bears…”

Violet patiently waited for John to add “Oh my” to that sentence. But he didn’t. He just pointed again to The Elephant in the Room, “And that. That was my contribution. When we found out we were expecting again. Saw it on eBay, thought it was cute.”

As John took a slug of the amethyst liquid in his glass, Violet advised him, “Maybe slow it down a little John? You’re going to have a hell of a hangover tomorrow.”

“Yeah, I might have a bit of a headache in the morning,” John barked out a short, harsh laugh. “Want one? A drink? There’s a bit left. I don’t want any more, actually. I’m finally getting sleepy.”

“Sure,” Violet’s brow furrowed as she walked around John. When she faced him, her brows unknitted and flew up towards her brow when she saw what was in his left hand. “Hey John,” Violet made her voice Oh-so-casual. “How about we have that drink without the gun?”

In a flash, Sherlock immediately appeared in the nursery.

John lolled his head towards Sherlock. “I told you,” he pointed with his glass, “To go ‘way.”

“Do I ever listen to you?” Sherlock leaned against the door jamb.

“No, I suppose you don’t, do you?” John drained his glass. “Oh Sherlock, I’m not going to blow my brains out, if that what you think,” he snorted. “Besides, even if I did, someone would find a way to
resur… resur… bring me back to life. Like Moriarty.”

“Jim Moriarty had a twin brother, called Richard. It was Richard on the rooftop, Richard at Kitty Riley’s, Richard the entire time,” Sherlock prattled, stalling for time as he observed John from tousled silvery-blond head to bare toes. “You only met the real Jim Moriarty twice, once at Bart’s, when he was posing as Molly’s boyfriend and once again at the pool. I may have met him a few more times. I’m not entirely sure however, I don’t have enough data. Plus identical twins mean identical fingerprints and identical DNA so even if I had samples from when he was in our flat, it wouldn’t prove anything.”

“A twin?” John giggled, an actual giggle. He sounded sweet and boyish, but only for a moment. “That’s rich. No, that’s really good. That’ll be one for the blog for sure.” Then as he looked up at Sherlock, a mean little smile crossed his face. “Maybe you had a twin too. Maybe you’re not the real Sherlock Holmes after all.”

“I’m for real.”

“One hundred percent?” John jeered.

“Trust me, the world can’t handle two Sherlock Holmeses,” Violet quickly interjected as John’s head bobbed down then jerked back up again.

Then John sighed heavily, “Go home, Shur’luck,” he slurred. “M’fine, jus’ tired and a bit drunk.”

Sherlock spun on his heel and took two long-legged steps to turn the lights on.

“OW!” Violet rubbed her eyes with the heel of her hand, “Little warning next time.”

“John,” Sherlock’s voice sounded tight, almost panicky. “What did you take and how many?”

“What?” Violet’s eyes widened, then she took a step closer to him to examine his pupils. But John pointed the gun at her. “Call 999,” Violet said needlessly to Sherlock, who was already digging his mobile out of his coat pocket. John swung his arm around and fired. Sherlock ducked and covered his head, dropping his Smartphone as he did so. Bits of wood, plaster and paint exploded above him.

Sherlock stayed crouched down, holding his hand out as if that alone could stop a bullet. “Alright, alright,” he panted as he scoured his brain for a solution.

Violet had also jumped and gasped when John fired the weapon, crying out, “Jesus Christ!”

John drunkenly swung his arm back towards her, “Go. Away.”

His finger was on the trigger.

Violet cowered and put her hands up, almost to the end of her tether. “John, you’ve pointed a gun at me before and didn’t shoot and you’re not going to shoot me now.” When he didn’t lower his arm, Violet added in a quaking voice, “John, please. Don’t make him watch your suicide.”

“When not? He made me watch his,” John’s ability to enunciate was getting worse and worse.

“But his was fake, yours would be for real and permanent, it would destroy him,” Violet pushed ruthlessly on John’s greatest pressure point. “He needs you, can’t you see that?” Her voice cracked as she added, “I’ll stand aside. I’ll get out of the way.”

John gave her a small, excruciatingly sad smile. “If I go, you won’t have to,” he slurred as he tried to
keep the gun pointed at her. His head bobbed again and he jerked it back up with great effort. “Now, jus’… get out.”

“Mycroft,” Sherlock shouted suddenly and loudly as he stood up, “I know you’ve bugged this house and you probably have your extremely incompetent agents lurking in the lounge and creeping up the stairs as I speak. I insist you send an ambulance now!”

“Wha’? Your damn bruv’ver…” John drunkenly rolled his head back over to Sherlock, letting his left hand drop. Violet lunged forward and easily disarmed the intoxicated (and apparently high as well) John by seizing his wrist and twisting it. Under normal circumstances, John would have been able to easily fend Violet off. But John’s coordination had all but disappeared at this point.

The Army Browning fell to the plush carpet with a dull thud. John took a swing at her when he realized what was happening. Violet blocked the sloppy punch easily. She pushed John back down into the rocking chair and backed quickly away from him, scooping up her prize in her hands as she did so.

As Violet removed the clip from the Browning as well as the bullet from the chamber, Sherlock rushed to John and examined his pupils. Then he reached for the lump he saw in John’s shirt pocket. “Dammit!” he cursed as he removed an empty prescription pill bottle.

“What is it?” Violet asked as she removed the bullet from the chamber.

“Tranquilizers,” Sherlock groaned as he read the label. “Honoré had obtained them for him when he was having difficulty sleeping when his PTSD flared up in Paris.”

“Fuck, how many did he take?” Violet tucked the clip and bullet into her jeans’ pocket and tucked the gun in her waistband. She pulled out her mobile and started dialing 999.

“I don’t know,” Sherlock fumed, furious with himself, with John, with the world. I should have taken the pills away from him when we learned of Harry’s death. Stupid, stupid, stupid…. He took John’s face in his large hands and gave his head a shake. “Whatever happened to ‘Dear God, let me live’?” Sherlock snarled. But John didn’t answer; his eyes had slid shut, his breathing shallow.

“Operator, hello, yes, please, we need help,” Violet Smith paced as she watched Sherlock haul John to his feet. “A man overdosed on prescription drugs, some sort of tranquilizer, mixed with alcohol. He’s semi-conscious, possibly unconscious, I don’t know but he has a history of PTSD…. Please, just hurry, the address is…” Violet stopped when she heard sirens wailing in the distance. “Sherlock, were you serious about the house being bugged?” she called out, her thumb over the mouthpiece of her mobile.

Sherlock had been, of course, but he didn’t waste time answering Violet’s question. He already had John on his feet and had dragged John out of the nursery. He managed to get John down the stairs when John became completely dead weight.

“John?” Sherlock eased him down to the floor as John’s legs turned into boiled noodles. He touched John’s cheek, shocked at how pale and clammy the skin felt. He searched for a pulse and sucked in a harsh breath when he couldn’t find one. When he observed how John’s chest didn’t move at all, not even in the slightest, he yelled over his shoulder, “Violet! Violet!” before he started compressions.

Hearing the pure panic in his voice, Violet took the stairs two, sometimes three at a time. “Oh God,” she said before racing over, kneeling by John’s head. Without having to be told, Violet tilted John’s head back, forced his mouth open then dipped her own head down to puff a rescue breath into his slack mouth, forcing air down his throat and into his lungs. Violet quickly checked for a pulse, shook
her head at Sherlock and ordering him, “Again.”

As Sherlock rammed the heel of his hand into John’s sternum, pushing hard and fast with ramrod stiff arms while counting to one hundred, Violet whispered, “John, please don’t do this, please, please, please,” as she ran a shaky hand over his silvery-blond hair. Then she dipped down again for another rescue breath.

Sherlock and Violet hadn’t performed CPR for very long before two MI-6 agents broke in, followed shortly by the paramedics. They were escorted by two more MI-6 agents.

“Brilliant job, boys,” Sherlock snapped at them as he continued performing chest compressions. Sweat rolled down his face as he added, “Protecting John Watson. Well done, indeed.”

The MI-6 agents ignored Sherlock’s snarls. “Come along, Mr. Holmes,” one of them even dared to command him. The look Sherlock gave him would have curdled the souls of kings and Gods but the agent endured it stoically. “Let the professionals handle this,” he said, hooking his hand under Sherlock’s arm, forcing him to stand. Another agent gently but firmly grasped Violet by her thin shoulders and lifted her to her feet. As soon as Sherlock and Violet were out of their way, the paramedics swiftly took their place.

Numbly, they let themselves be escorted away from John as the paramedics started working on him. There was no frenzied shouting or running around like maniacs like on television or films, the paramedics spoke calmly but seriously, intensely engaged in their task to keep their patient alive until he was delivered safely to the hospital where a team of doctors and nurses could take over. The paramedics worked in perfect tandem, oblivious to everyone else in the room.

Neither Sherlock nor Violet was used to being helpless bystanders. Violet held her hands over her mouth and nose, shaking from head to foot. Sherlock stood still as stone, utterly shell-shocked, finally bereft of words. But his mind raced, in hyperdrive now rather than its usual overdrive… No, this cannot be happening… I’m the unstable one, the transport… John is the grounded one, the conductor. This is a dream, a horrible, horrible dream, one of my PTSD dreams. I’ll wake up soon. Violet, tell me this isn’t real and I’ll wake up soon… please tell me I’ll wake up soon. Please tell me my very worst fear is not coming true…

Watching the paramedics work on John was worse than any pain or torture Sherlock had ever endured. He squeezed his eyes shut just as they started cutting John’s shirt and vest open so they could attach the AED pads to his chest. His treacherous memory recalled perfectly what he had shouted at John in the shadow of Norte Dame:

I am, John. I’m afraid you’ll die. And I can’t… I couldn’t take the risk. I wanted to tell you, I wanted you to come with me… I didn’t want to live in a world that you weren’t in… even if that meant I couldn’t be a part of your life any longer…

John Watson, if you leave me this way, I will never forgive you. Never.

He felt Violet’s fingers curling around his. He looked down and saw she sobbed openly now, what people referred to as “ugly-crying.” Her face had become mottled and splotchy, her eyes wet and bloodshot. She kept her mouth covered with her free hand. Her shoulders shook with every sob and gasp.

Her tears did not annoy him as much as the tears from other women had. Her grief for his friend was genuine.

He twined his long fingers through her smaller ones, clinging to her as tight as he could. Holding on
because she was the last solid thing left in his life at the moment…

And will I lose her as well? Sherlock clamped his own tremulous lips down as he watched as the paramedics haul John away on a gurney, with needles in his arms and a plastic mask over his nose and mouth while someone squeezed air into his deflated lungs. Oh brother mine, how it pains me to admit you were right…

Caring is not an advantage.

**

19 December 2015
Greg and Molly Lestrade’s residence
Saturday morning
7:39 AM

Greg instinctively reached out for his wife but only felt rumpled sheets and a cold pillow.

He opened his eyes, frowning. He didn’t recall hearing Henry cry, but often Molly got up to tend to the baby without telling him. But when she got out of bed, it usually roused him.

So she must not have gone to bed, Lestrade stifled a groan as he sat up and scratched his chest. He admitted to himself that it had been pointless to even try sleep. His night had been plagued by tossing and turning, drifting off into a light slumber only to startle himself awake at every little noise.

Now I understand why Henry wailed so, he yawned as he threw the duvet off him. Poor tyke, unable to fall asleep and stay asleep, jumping at every little sound…

Or maybe… somehow… he just instinctively knows there’s a very big target on his very little back… bloody hell, he doesn’t deserve this! He deserves to have a childhood, a happy one.

He swung his legs over the bed and rubbed his face, trying to scrub the memory of yesterday out of his brain. He recalled Moriarty’s promise to come back for Henry. Bought and paid for, my arse, you bastard, he silently fumed. Nobody owns my kid… but what the hell was he talking about, that he knows what made Sherlock.

Needing a pee as well as to brush his teeth, Lestrade got out of bed and pulled on his dressing gown. Normally, he wouldn’t have bothered, would have just sauntered out in his boxers. But as Mrs. Hooper was still visiting, Lestrade thought it would be just a bit rude to run about in naught but his pants.

He took care of morning business in the loo then poked his head into the nursery, expecting to find Molly. Instead, he found Mrs. Hooper, sleeping on a lilo she must have brought in there during the night. She slept in front of the baby cot, like a sentinel.

When Molly and Lestrade finally got home late last night (or early this morning, Lestrade wasn’t sure anymore,) Mrs. Hooper had flung herself at him, sobbing into his chest, begging his pardon. Lestrade had awkwardly patted her on the back, telling her there was nothing to forgive and she had been extraordinarily brave. He advised her to put the kettle on and they’d all have a cuppa before trying to get some sleep.

As he walked down the hallway, he smelt coffee. But upon seeing Molly, curled up on the sofa, nursing a mug of coffee while watching the sun rise over a cold and grey London, he went to her instead. As he came closer to her, he saw she also held her mobile in her other hand. Her eyes were very red. Her face stained with fresh tears.
“Moll,” he sat on the coffee table directly in front of her. “Love, what is it?”

“Bad news,” she croaked.

Immediately alarmed, Lestrade asked, “Mary?”

Molly shook her head. “John,” she whispered, her eyes welling again.

“John? Wh… I… what?”

“I’m still processing it, I just can’t… he mixed tranquilizers with alcohol and… well, Sherlock and Violet found him in time and he’s going to be OK, but…”

“What?” Dumbfounded, Lestrade could only stare at his wife. Then he whispered, “Are really you saying that he… that John, of all people, overdosed?”

“I’m afraid so,” Molly dropped her mobile in her lap so she could pull the quilt over her shoulders. Lestrade helped her, draping it over her like a cape as she continued, “He had been self-medicating. Was having a bit of trouble sleeping lately, little wonder,” Molly tried to smile but failed. “Apparently last night, he lost track how many tablets he took and he was drinking to boot so…” she trailed off, beyond tears now.

“Aw Christ,” Lestrade groaned, truly aching for his friend. He wasn’t sure about John at first when he first befriended Sherlock but it hadn’t taken long for him to see that he was the one who kept Sherlock grounded. It hadn’t taken long after that revelation for Lestrade to become friends with John as well. Still, he couldn’t help but ask, “Was it accidental or on purpose?”

“Violet said they’re telling everyone it was a mistake; he was sleep-deprived and emotionally overwrought so he miscalculated the dosage, but…”

“You’re joking. This is John Watson, it wouldn’t have been… he’s not… he’s not that guy.”

“I practically said the same to Violet,” Molly lifted her big brown eyes up to Lestrade. “But she told me he had been battling PTSD for quite some time now. From the war, you see. Now, with his sister being murdered and now this with Mary and the baby, it most likely pushed him over the edge.”

“Jesus Christ,” Lestrade said hollowly. “Not to mention his daughter being kidnapped and all. But God, I just never thought… it’s fucking John, he’s a bloody rock. You’d expect… well, I won’t say, it’s rude.”

“You expect a drama-queen and an ex-junkie like Sherlock to go try and off himself,” Molly said what Lestrade wouldn’t, but her sad smile and gentle voice tempered the harsh words. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? The people who need help the most are the least likely to look like they need it. Worse yet, even less likely to ask for it.”

“You expect a drama-queen and an ex-junkie like Sherlock to go try and off himself,” Molly said what Lestrade wouldn’t, but her sad smile and gentle voice tempered the harsh words. “That’s the problem, isn’t it? The people who need help the most are the least likely to look like they need it. Worse yet, even less likely to ask for it.”

Yeah,” Lestrade said bleakly then roused himself. “So we make sure he doesn’t have to ask.” He ran his hands down his face. “What about Mary? I’m guessing she doesn’t know yet?”

“Oh, no, she’s still in recovery. The doctors are keeping her sedated. She’s already been through so much. I’m going back to St. Bart’s this afternoon to check on her. And I called two of her nurse-friends that she works with; fortunately I caught one of them just as she had ended her shift. And bless her, she turned straight around and went back to Bart’s to sit with Mary.”

“Somebody needs to ring Mrs. Hudson,” Lestrade reached for Molly’s free hand.
“Would you?” Molly wrapped her fingers around Lestrade’s hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

“Mrs. H will insist on returning to London at once and I don’t have it in me to argue with her. You might get away with being a bit stern with her, being a cop and all. She needs to stay put at her sister’s and rest herself. She broke her bloody ribs in that explosion.”

“Yeah, I’ll ring her later this morning,” Lestrade promised. He brushed her cheek with his knuckles. “Love, are you OK?”

Molly folded her lips together tight and shook her head.

“You saved Mary’s life, you know.”

“But not the baby,” she whispered. “And we nearly lost our baby in the process.”

“Molly, do you think I’m upset that you stayed with Mary instead of going with Violet to get Henry?” Lestrade’s eyes widened. “I swear to you, I’m not. You were in an impossible predicament.”

“I know, I know, I’ve just… it’s just that… you see… oh Greg. I’ve been so naïve, so… so stupid. “

“Molly…”

We’ve been deluding ourselves. All of us,” she whispered now. Her own mother didn’t know the truth about Henry’s paternity. She, like almost everyone else, thought Lestrade and Molly had a bit of unprotected premarital sex that started a baby.

Lestrade wanted to say something comforting, but he also didn’t want to lie. “I know.”

“They know, he knows, Moriarty,” Molly shuddered. “It’s only a matter of time before other people we don’t want to know will start to figure it out.”

_Like Sherlock’s brother_, Lestrade thought but didn’t say aloud. But prior to getting into the SUV that took them to the MI-6 facility, Violet had pulled him aside and hissed into his ear, “Listen, Sherlock’s brother doesn’t know about Henry and trust me, you don’t want him to find out.”

And with that, a very nasty suspicion about the disappearance of John’s daughter took root in his head.

But Lestrade only murmured, “Not everyone is as observant as Sherlock.”

“His eyes are turning blue, Greg,” Molly leaned back against the sofa, staring at the ceiling while clutching her mug. Her coffee had become stone-cold by now.

“Yeah, blue, just plain old fashioned blue,” Lestrade got off the coffee table to sit next to Molly on the sofa. He took the mug of cold coffee out of her hands so he could hold both of them in his hands, “Not blue-green in this light or blue-gold in that light. Boring old blue and yeah, you and I both have brown eyes. But it is possible for two brown eyed people to produce a blue-eyed child if one or both of the parents have the recessive gene for blue-eyes. I didn’t sleep through all my biology classes in secondary school,” he grinned at her.

“And you Googled it when his eyes started changing,” Molly smiled back.

“Well… OK, you caught me out.”

“Greg, the odds of two brown-eyed parents producing a blue-eyed child are very high though,”
Molly somberly reminded him. “And it’s enough to make people start asking questions, start wondering, ohhh but it’s not the talk I’m worried about. Although I don’t fancy the bloody tabloids following him around, taking pictures and asking him questions.”

“I know, I know,” Lestrade put his arms around Molly, resting his silvery head against her auburn one. “Although the rags would have a good time with this juicy bit of gossip, wouldn’t they?”

“It would be a feeding frenzy. You saw how they treated John, at his own sister’s funeral for pity’s sake,” Molly shuddered again. “The talk is not what frightens me so. What terrifies me is that now we know for certain it’s not a matter of if Moriarty comes back, but when,” Molly curled into Lestrade’s arms, dipping her head down so she could press her cheek against his chest.

“Yeah,” Lestrade loosened his arms a bit when Molly started drawing her knees up to her chest. She wrapped her arms around her legs and he wrapped his arms around her.

“I think…” Molly mumbled into his chest. “I think we need to seriously start thinking about and discussing moving.”

“But… we just bought this place. We haven’t even unpacked everything yet.”

Molly sat up. “No. I mean leaving London, the country even.”

“Leave England?”

Solemnly, Molly nodded, “If that’s what it takes.”

“Jesus,” Lestrade ran his hand over his mouth. “Your job, my job, our friends and family…”

“Our son,” Molly added quietly.

“There’s someone else in the equation we need to factor in as well,” Lestrade reminded her.

“Oh,” Molly scoffed. “You said it yourself, a million times, he doesn’t care. It’s all a game to him, always the bloody game. He didn’t even look at Henry when we were in the waiting room, didn’t even ask if he was OK.”

At least I wasn’t being stupid about that, about Sherlock being an awful father, she thought spitefully to herself. Thank God I at least made one right decision about all of this…

“I think,” Lestrade felt his face flush slightly. “I was wrong. After yesterday and well… while I was stuck at that black-ops hellhole while Sherlock and Violet were doing God knows what for MI-6, I had plenty of time for a nice long think. And what I think… no. I know he cares about the baby, just not in the way we want him to care about the baby. He’s never going to love Henry as a dad, of course not. That’s my job,” Lestrade added a bit forcefully. “But he does care about his well-being. He kept telling me to get out of the building because he didn’t want Henry growing up without a dad. Would someone who doesn’t care say something like that?”

“No,” Molly muttered grudgingly after a very long, uncomfortable pause.

“As far as what happened in waiting room, he had just learned John disappeared and it was a bloody good thing he focused on finding John instead of on Henry otherwise…” Lestrade trailed off, not wanting to dwell on what could have happened, “At any rate, Sherlock’s Sherlock. He probably took one look at Raffles and deduced that he was right as rain.”

“Oh God, you’re calling him that too?” Molly moaned.
“Go on, you know it’s sweet, since it was your dad’s nickname and all.”

Molly sighed.

Lestrade chuckled and pressed a kiss to her brow, “But I’m not completely dismissing your idea about moving. I want the same things for Raffles, oh alright, Henry,” Lestrade corrected himself as Molly glowered at him. “I want the same things for Henry as you do. I want him to be happy. I want him to go to school and make friends. I want him to have brothers and sisters. I want him to grow up to be a good man. And he’s not going to be able to do that if he constantly looking over his shoulder, jumping at shadows because we all are. So if moving is the only way to do that, OK. But, let’s not make any decisions right now, not when we’re tired and we’re still absorbing what’s happened to Mary and now John.”

“But we are going to discuss it,” Molly said in that quiet, intense way of hers that brooked no argument. “And make a decision we can both live with that’s also in Henry’s best interest.”

Other men would have dismissed their wives’ demands for a future discussion. They would have just say “Yes dear,” then endeavored to forget their wives’ requests. Not Greg Lestrade, he knew better. He had never made the error so many others had. He never underestimated Molly. “Yes, we will. After we know for sure both John and Mary are out of the woods, then we’ll have a proper talk. But first,” Lestrade couldn’t stifle his yawn. “Come back to bed.”

Molly shook her head. “Henry will be up soon.”

“Henry’s Granny is the nursery with him, guarding him like a bloody watchdog. And last I checked Granny has raised four boys and a girl with mostly satisfactory results. I think she’s capable of changing a nappy and warming a bottle.” Lestrade stood up and held out his hand. “Come on. You’re going to be useless to everyone if you’re so tired you can’t see straight.”

Molly finally acquiesced, slipping her small pale hand into his. “You’re not joking about the watchdog bit,” Molly whispered as they passed the nursery. “Mum found my old cricket bat and had tucked it under her pillow last night.”

“Now I know where you get your moxie from,” Lestrade squeezed her hand.

“Stop,” Molly rolled her eyes.

Molly nearly dozed off once her head hit the pillow. But, something dark and sinister had been niggling at Lestrade ever since the rooftop confrontation with Moriarty yesterday. He had told himself over and over not to ask her until later, much later. Worry and sleep-deprivation made him blurt out, “Molly? I need to ask you something.”

“Hmmm?”

“You and Moriarty… when you thought he was Jim from IT?”

Molly rolled over and pushed her auburn fringe out of her eyes. “Yes?” her voice hesitant and nervous, sounding very much like the old Molly, the mousy Molly. Squeak, squeak…

“Did he… hurt you?”

“What?”

“What I mean to say is, whatever it was between you two, was it consensual?”
“Oh,” Molly breathed then blushed. “I wish I could say no. I wish it never happened. But it… was. I thought he liked me. I thought… oh I was so stupid. Even though I didn’t know he was using me to get closer to Sherlock, I should have seen how he led me on. I acted like a complete idiot. He told me everything I wanted to hear and I fell for it hook, line and sinker. Once he got what he wanted, he disappeared. So… well, he didn’t hurt me as in…” her blush deepened. “Forcing himself on me but… he hurt me by leading me on then leaving.” She blinked, “And, you know, the whole-criminal-mastermind-trying-to-kill-my-family-and-friends bit.”

“Yeah, I can see how that stings,” Lestrade kissed her nose then her mouth. He wished to God that he wasn’t so bone-tired. He desperately wanted to make love to Molly just then, not as an alpha-male wanting to mark his territory. But because there really are some emotions that words cannot properly convey. Saying I love you and I will always stay just was not enough, not in this circumstance.

Apparently, she felt the same way because she let the kissing evolve into snogging, hiking up her nightgown so he could slide his hands over her belly and up to her very full breasts. As he left love-bites along her neck, she arched against him, sighing little sighs of desire and frustration.

“So,” she snuggled against him as they both regretfully stopped something they knew they wouldn’t be to finish properly. “You said you wanted brothers and sisters for Henry, did you?” She wrapped her arms around his waist.

“Mm, not right this second,” Lestrade threaded his fingers through her hair, just for the pleasure of feeling its silky strands through his fingers and watching them fall to her pillow. “But yeah. Be nice for him. Don’t want him growing up an only child, you know.”

“Wouldn’t want that now, would we?” Molly planted a kiss against his chest. “Good thing I have an appointment with my obstetrician next week. I’ll ask if I’m ready for sex. I mean, it’s probably not the best time to start a sibling for Henry, but we can at least practice.”

“Practice does make perfect,” Lestrade agreed with another yawn.

“Well, don’t you sound enthusiastic,” Molly teased but then yawned hugely as well. “Sorry.”

“S’alright,” Lestrade mumbled, stroking her hair.

“No. It’s not, it’s really not.”

“Molly…”

“I hate this, how everything is such a mess. People are getting hurt, dying even. I probably shouldn’t have even bothered bringing up the idea of brothers and sisters for Hen-”

“Stop, just stop,” Lestrade gently admonished her. “We’re going to have the life we want, OK? Moriarty is not going to take that away from us? Even if we have to move to the Australian Outback to do so, we’re going to have a fantastic life, alright?”

Sniffling again, Molly nodded.

As she fell asleep in his arms, Lestrade entertained a pleasant fantasy of what he’d do to Jim Moriarty the next time he saw him.

**

19 December 2015
Somewhere in Paris, France
Saturday morning
8:39 AM Paris time

Meanwhile, the man John knew as Mr. Kincaid sipped tea, watching a magnificent sun rise over the City of Lights. For the first time in years, he felt almost as light and carefree as he did when he was but a boy roaming the lush moors of Ireland.

He had thought he had lost both of them.

He had loved Richard, in a fashion… but he still thanked both God and the Blessed Virgin that he had only lost the useless one, the broken one.

He wore his best suit and tie. He made sure his shoes had been shined to a high gloss. He had gotten a fresh haircut and his nails manicured. His silvery beard had also been neatly trimmed. One would have assumed he was tricking himself out for a hot date.

Hardly, he smirked. There was but only one woman for him, but she had left him, years ago for a higher calling and a lesser man. Her desertion had ceased to sting, but he knew, soon, she would seek him out, beg him to stop this.

Never, he thought with a self-satisfied smile as he continued to sip tea. The Work never ends.

There was a tap on the door, the man who had taken Irene Adler to her prison, the man Moriarty had called “Peters” opened the door. “Sir, he’s here.”

“Send him in,” the old silver lion rose to his full height, leaning on his cane. It pained him to admit it that he needed it now. But even giants and kings can succumb to arthritis, he supposed.

He felt suddenly nervous, almost giddy, like a child at Christmas wanting to believe in Santa Claus, but not daring to, afraid of disappointment. He smoothed his jacket down then straightened his shoulders as much as he could.

The door to his penthouse swung open. Then he came in.

The old lion could have wept. He had forgotten how beautiful his boy was with those dark, mysterious eyes, that impish smile.

His boy looked marvelous as well, wearing a heavy tweed coat, a russet muffler and a lovely, midnight black suit. His shoes had been polished to a shine as well.

He smiled, looking like the boy he once was. “Grandpa,” he said affectionately.

“My boy,” the old lion beamed. “Come here.”

Jim Moriarty shrugged out of his beautiful coat and slid the scarf off. “I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long, but you understand why now, don’t you?”

“Of course, of course, all is forgiven, lad,” his grandfather held his arms open after leaning his cane against his arm chair.

He cupped Jim’s face in his weather-beaten, liver-spotted hands, gazing in his eyes. “You’ve done brilliantly Jim. Everything has gone according to plan.”

“Small hiccup with Holmes’ brat, I’m afraid,” Jim admitted.

“Lord Cullen-Culpepper will just have to bide his time,” James Moriarty told his namesake. “He’ll
get what he deserves all in good time.” Tears sprang to James’ eyes. “Well done, Jimmy, well done. You did it, you saved us all.”

“We’ll have all our European cells operational by March, the Asian ones by June and America by end of 2016.” Jim couldn’t help but sound smug. “What took Holmes two years to dismantle, has taken me less than a year to rebuild.”

“Good boy,” James pressed his forehead against Jim’s. “Good boy.”

“’Twas trained by the best,” Jim said modestly.

“Flattery will get you everywhere, my boy,” and James finally embraced his grandson. “Good to have you home, Jimmy.”

“Getting sentimental in your old age, Grandpa?” Jim teased him as he fished a crisp, white linen handkerchief out of his breast pocket.

“Just relieved I’ll be able to retire soon,” James sat back down in his chair after taking the handkerchief from Jim. He dabbed his eyes then asked, “You ready to take over for me?”

“I was born ready,” Jim purred, sitting directly across from his beloved grandfather, the man who had stepped in when his own father failed him so utterly. Soberly, he asked, “Whatever happened to Richie’s body?”

James’ face hardened, “MI-6 took him. Incinerated him. He’s in a cardboard box somewhere.”

Jim’s face twisted in hate. “He deserves a proper burial.”

“Richie deserved a great many things we failed to give him,” James poured Jim tea into a delicate porcelain cup. “I should have shipped him off to California when we had the chance and let him become a film star in America like he wanted.”

“I am just as much to blame for that decision,” Jim accepted the cup. “I thought it would be better if he remained in London, remained close so we could keep an eye on him. I never dreamt he would obsess over Holmes the way he did.”

“Richie always felt like he was an outcast,” James added milk to his tea. “He latched onto Holmes because he thought they were kindred spirits.”

“There is no one like Holmes,” Jim’s face twisted up in a cruel smile. “Oh, he is fun to toy with, Grandpa. I can understand Richie’s attraction.”

“Don’t lose yourself in the game,” James shook his silver spoon at Jim in admonishment.

“I don’t lose. Full stop,” Jim reminded his grandfather. “But I am a man who enjoys his work.”

“Too right, lad,” James smiled. “Speaking of enjoyment, I have a welcome home gift.” He picked up his mobile and hit one of his programmed speed-dial numbers. “Bring her in.”

When Peters returned to the sumptuous lounge, he dragged Irene Adler with him. She wore a simple white dress and no shoes. She was sans make-up but her black hair was shiny and clean. Her nails were also neatly but plainly manicured. But Irene hardly acted like a demure lady. She fought Peters every step of the way, trying to claw at his face with her neatly manicured nails. Then she saw Jim Moriarty and all the fight drained from her. She sank to her knees, her sea-glass green eyes wide with horror.
“Oh, Granddad,” Jim purred. “You shouldn’t have.”

Chapter End Notes

First of all... thank you for sticking with me this far... especially after what I just put John through... but he does get a happy ending, I swear on the Death Frisbee.

Second, while I was going more for emotional resonance rather than medical accuracy, health care professionals self-medicating because "I practice medicine, I know what I'm doing" is A Thing. And it's sad. And scary. Without going into too much detail (because, you know, Internet, privacy, etc... etc...) I've been directly and indirectly affected by this. So, to paraphrase, be nice, especially to the doctors and nurses because you don't know what battles they are fighting... but at the same time, if something feels "off" when you're in the hospital or clinic or walk-in... say something. The life you save might be yours... or might be theirs.

Third, I swear I did not plan posting this today, on November 23, 2015... which is when Mycroft visits 221B to "convince" Sherlock into finding The Letter. The universe is rarely lazy, but sometimes it has a sense of humor.

Finally, I love you all (in a total platonic, non-creepy, non-stalkerish way.) The last few weeks, well, months have been really rough on me and sometimes posting and reading comments (even though I'm shit at responding) were the only things I was looking forward too... but there is finally a light at the end of the tunnel. I finally got some good news, great news actually and a 1000 pound weight has been lifted off my shoulders! So... yay and collective group hug.

OK - enough sentiment. If Sherlock was reading this, he'd probably gag then write a scathing comment. I swear the next chapter is more fun.

Happy Monday!
Did You Miss Me?

Chapter Summary

“The stage is set, the curtain rises. We are ready to begin...”

It's the deep breath before the plunge... some feels, some angst, maybe a little smut since the last chapter was a bit sad...

Will answer comments tomorrow! More notes at the end... happy Tuesday-eve!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Did You Miss Me?

20 December 2015
Saint Charles Hospital
London, England
Sunday morning
7:51 AM

John woke up without opening his eyes.

He felt terrible. His head throbbed and his body ached, as if he was suffering from a bad bout of flu. But while his throat was dry and scratchy, he did not feel nauseous, just incredibly tired. He could have easily fallen back asleep but he desperately wanted a glass of water.

He stirred, intending to rub the sleep out of his eyes and scratch underneath his nose; there was something pressing down between it and his upper lip. Plus something thin and plastic sat on both cheeks, causing an irritating, tickling sensation, but his hand would only rise so high and not high enough to reach his face.

John’s eyes flew wide open now.

He felt terrible. His head throbbed and his body ached, as if he was suffering from a bad bout of flu. But while his throat was dry and scratchy, he did not feel nauseous, just incredibly tired. He could have easily fallen back asleep but he desperately wanted a glass of water.

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John’s eyes flew wide open now.

In the dim light, he perceived he was in a tiny room with beige walls and no windows. There was a video camera in corner of the ceiling, pointed directly at him. He saw that he lay elevated in a hospital bed with a white fuzzy duvet pulled up to his hips.. He looked down and saw that while he wore some sort of nightshirt, it wasn’t properly buttoned all the way up. Wires snaked out of the gap of his unbuttoned nightshirt and led to the heart rate monitor machine to his right. He finally registered the soft beeps and gentle hums from the machine. He also saw an IV catheter stuck into the thin flesh of his right hand as well as a Pulse Oximeter on his right pointer finger. Around his right wrist, a soft restraining cuff, with a matching one encircling his left.

His breath starting to hitch in panic, John sat up the best he could and turned to his left. He sank back onto his pillows in relief when he saw Violet curled up in a chair next to his bed. Her eyes were closed, her face smashed against her fist as she dozed. Her hair looked wavy, as if she had hastily washed it and didn’t straighten it properly. Her burgundy dress was rumpled, like she had slept in it all night, which she probably had. Her Smartphone was next to a plastic jug and cups on hospital
tray near her. Her fake eyeglasses lay on top of a squat, cylindrical bowl that looked like an ice container of the type found in hotels.

She was the best thing John had seen since waking up. “Violet,” he rasped, wincing as he spoke. *Why does my throat hurt so badly?* “Violet?” he called again, not sure if he was going to get “Miss Smith” or “Agent Hunter.”

Her eyes flew open. Then she smiled as she smoothed her hair out of her face and brushed it off her shoulder. “Hi,” she said, as Violet Hunter, as herself, her voice cracking. “Welcome back.”

“How are we?” John winced as he spoke.

“Saint Charles Hospital,” Violet slowly rose to her feet, rubbing her stiff neck.

“Mary,” John croaked as Violet started pour water out of the jug and into one of the plastic cups.

“Still at Bart’s,” Violet found a straw and took it out of its paper wrapper. “She’s been downgraded from critical to stable. Molly gave a peek at her charts and has been keeping us updated.” She fumbled with the paper wrapper, cursing. Then she added in a mumble, “All we’ve told her is you had an accident, but you’re going to be fine. Shit,” she cried out, still unable to undo the paper wrapper.

John, upon seeing her shaking fingers, softly pleaded. “Violet, please,” he lifted his hands as high as they could go. “Take these off.” Foggy images wafted into his head. He vaguely recalled pointing his gun, Violet practically cringing in front of him, begging him not to shoot…

*John, please. Don’t make him watch your suicide… He needs you, can’t you see that? I’ll stand aside. I’ll get out of the way…*

*If I go, you won’t have to…*

“I won’t hurt you,” John promised her. “Violet, I would never hurt you. Please.”

“John,” her eyes grew teary. “You’re not wearing those because we’re afraid you’ll hurt us.”

“Oh,” John lowered his hands and rolled his head away from her. “God. What did I do?”

Violet finally got the paper off the straw and popped it into the cup. She pulled her chair closer to John and sat back down. Holding out the cup, she asked, “What do you remember?”

*Molly cradling Henry in the waiting room, her clothes covered with blood… Mary’s blood…*

No. I don’t want to think about that. I don’t want to think about the baby, my baby. I’m not ready…

“I… dunno,” John lied as he rolled his head back over to Violet. A fresh wave of humiliation washed over him, as she held the cup out to him. Like a child who needed Mummy’s help to get a drink. But his throat still burned so he leaned forward. He found the straw with his lips and sucked. The water was cool and sweet, soothing his raw throat. When he had drunk his fill, he asked, “Could you at least take the bloody cannula off,” he had finally deduced what was pressing up against his nose and tickling his cheeks. “It’s annoying and I don’t need it.”

“John,” Violet sounded very patient, more *Miss Smith* than *Agent Hunter*. “You stopped breathing. Your heart stopped, you stopped… you,” her hazel eyes glittered with dampness again. “You were technically dead for a minute and a half.”
“I…” John licked his lips and fixed his eyes on the ceiling. In a slow, steady voice, he said, “Tell whoever is in charge that it wasn’t intentional. I… fucked up. God,” he closed his eyes. “I could lose my medical license… Jesus.” He clutched the duvet with his fingertips, “Oh Jesus.”

He jumped a little when he felt Violet’s both hands grasp his left hand. It was only then he realized he was missing his wedding ring. “What do you remember?” she pressed gently. “Try.”

“Ahh… bits and pieces, everything’s a blur, really.”

“What’s your last clear memory?”

“The doctor, telling Molly and me that Mary lost the baby,” John promptly replied. Then all the hurt and sorrow from that moment crashed down upon him again. He closed his eyes and stayed silent for quite some time. Violet stubbornly refused to leave, wouldn’t even let go of his hand. Finally, he asked for more water. She helped him take another drink. Only then, was he able to continue:

“I remember asking the doctor if it was a boy or girl and he had said it was a boy. After that, I guess I was just in shock. I didn’t really feel anything. Just numb and tired. Molly asked me… something, dunno. I just brushed her off because… I think I went to see Mary. I do remember being in the recovery room, looking at her. She looked so small and defenseless, Mary. Whiter than a ghost too, with all the blood loss, think she might have had to have a transfusion. All I could think was that she doesn’t deserve this. Yeah, I know certain people think she’s a bad person, you think she’s a bad person, yeah, you do Violet,” John curled his fingers around Violet’s the best he could. “For what she did to Sherlock, but you weren’t there. You weren’t in her shoes. You didn’t know what she had endured, to get out of that life in order to have this life, the one she built with me.”

Violet’s eyes darted away from John, for a moment. She glanced at the camera, bit her lip then studied her small hands encircling John’s.

“I had an epiphany, I guess, at her hospital bed. If she wanted her old life, she would have never left. She’s not carrying on with her old life, except when extraordinary situations force her hand. She wants this dull, ordinary life out in the suburbs, house, kids, dog, the whole lot. She chose to stay. Struggle to make ends meet instead of making the kind of money she used to in her old life. And what do I bring to her? Infidelity. Pain. Disappointment. That’s what I bring to the table,” John swallowed, his brow crinkling with discomfort as his throat continued to ache.

“John…”

“Hush now, you asked what I remembered,” John clumsily squeezed her fingers again. “This is what I remember. I remember looking at Mary, hooked up to machines, tubes going in and out of her body, all I could think was that I have been a shit husband to her. That I broke every single vow I made to her on our wedding day. That I haven’t been able to give her what she needed, what she wanted, which was an ordinary life. Instead of celebrating another pregnancy, I would have to tell her we lost another child.

“So I bolted, like a coward. I don’t remember if I told Molly if I was leaving, but one of Mycroft’s spooks found me outside, trying to hail a cab. I told him to bugger off, but he offered me a ride home. I gave in but I made him stop at an off-license. I bought a bottle of scotch, planning on drowning my sorrows.”

Violet’s brows furrowed. “You weren’t drinking scotch when we got there.”

John laughed silently. “No. By the time I got home, I had,” he looked at his restraints and snorted another gust of silent, sarcastic laughter. “Come to my senses. I told myself that this was the slippery
slopes Harry had slid down using alcohol to cope. I knew I was very tired, but also wired. I … um… had started taking tranquilizers in Paris to help me sleep. I knew they were habit-forming. Once I got back to London, I would only take a half a tablet, just to take the edge off. I had already halved the remaining pills so I wouldn’t have to arse around with it. Is… is there any ice? My throat…”

Much to his relief, the container Violet’s glasses rested on was in fact filled with ice chips. Violet spooned a few out. Feeling another wave of embarrassment, John opened his mouth, like a helpless baby bird. However, the relief he felt once Violet spooned ice chips into his mouth was worth the mortification. The chill of the ice soothed his inflamed throat at once. Violet discreetly flicking moisture out of the corner of his eyes without comment or fuss quelled John’s queasy shame. *Who am I to judge?* the gesture seemed to say.

After a bit, Violet prompted him, “So you took a half a pill and you…?”

“Still felt keyed up, but so *so* tired all at the same time. My mind wouldn’t shut down so I took another half. When nothing happened, I took another half a tablet. That’s when the drug rebounded on me, instead of feeling sleepy, I started feeling really agitated, almost paranoid. Like there was someone outside watching, but that was stupid, of course someone was outside watching, it was Mycroft’s people.” John rolled his eyes at his own stupidity. “But I was pacing around my house, like a caged tiger, I just couldn’t settle down. So I decided to have a drink after all. There was an open bottle of wine in the fridge so I had that instead of the scotch I bought. The problem is…”

John’s fair silvery brows scrunched together as he struggled to recall. “The problem is I think I might have taken another half a tablet, but I can’t remember for certain.” He shook his head. “That’s when things started going tits up, whenever it was I took another half, I had forgotten I had already had one-and-a-half tablets already and those tranquilizers are *strong*. When I first started taking them, I was supposed to take two whole tablets, but I had only taken one and I was out like a light. I must have developed a tolerance to them.”

“So, you had a glass of wine, on top of the drugs you already took,” Violet gently steered him back on track. “And you had lost count of how many pills you had already taken.”

“Yeah, that’s the long and short of it. The wine was sickly sweet, the stuff Mary likes to drink, not me,” John pulled a face. “But the sweetness made it go down much too easily. Soon, I had lost track of how much I drank as well. I didn’t even taste it anymore, the wine. Not really, it was just something to wash the tablets down. I really don’t remember specifics, just wandering from room to room, waiting for the tranks to kick in, taking another half when it didn’t. Then I’d realize I was standing in front of a window and didn’t know who or what was outside. That made me feel worse, all panicky and whatnot. I do remember feeling sweaty and shaky. And that I had locked the front and back doors, I even put the chain-lock on. But I still felt unsafe and restless, like I used to in Afghanistan when we’d get word about a potential attack on the base. I…” John flushed, remembering very clearly now, “Thought I heard voices, outside the house. It may have been MI-agents prowling about or…” He very much wanted to disappear now, or at least pull the duvet over his head and not move for at least one hundred years. “Auditory hallucinations brought on by the PTSD and too much drink and drugs. So I… I went to get my gun.”

He swallowed hard, realizing what had happened. “I was drunk, high and in possession of an illegal weapon. I’m losing my medical license for sure.”

“Mycroft owes you, he won’t let that happen,” Violet promised him, holding out another spoonful of ice chips.

John silently snorted again before accepting the ice. “Because Mycroft keeps his word, right?” he sneered hoarsely then looked away from Violet. “I’m sorry,” he mumbled.
“It’s OK,” Violet had a wry, half-smile on her wan face. “We all know Mycroft’s a lying sack of shit. But he does owe you,” she held the spoonful of ice closer to John’s mouth.

Wearily, gratefully, John took the ice into his mouth. He let the chips melt again, savoring the coolness running down his raw throat. “Anyway,” he finally went on with his tale. “I crept around the house, checking every single room for… what, I don’t know. MI-6, Moriarty, the Taliban, al-Qaeda, they all were mashed together in my head. I didn’t start feeling tired until I was in the nursery. Because my circulatory system was starting to shut down from the overdose, of course,” he muttered. “Alcohol and tranquilizers are both depressants. Too much and the heart and lungs slow, even stop.” He took a quavering breath. “Where’s Sherlock?”

“In the waiting room, working,” Violet put the spoon back on the hospital tray. She started to rub John’s lower arm. “He’d be here instead of me if he hadn’t gotten a lead on Moriarty. Do you want me to go get him?”

“No!” John barked harshly, almost violently. Violet all but jumped out of her skin.

“John?”

“I don’t want him here. It was bad enough he saw me… like that last night. I don’t want him to see me like this,” he jerked uselessly at his restraints.

“Two nights ago,” Violet corrected him. “It’s Sunday morning now.”

“Really?” When Violet nodded, John shook his head in confusion, “That can’t be, I’d have far more, uh, things attached to me if I was unconscious that long.” John didn’t think Violet needed the details regarding the all things that would have been connected to him. “You were, at first.” Violet explained, “Once it was safe to do so, the doctors had you lightly sedated, to give your body and mind a break from everything. They started weaning you off of it yesterday. Last night, you were just asleep, not unconscious or drugged. All unnecessary equipment had been removed.” Her eyes twinkled micheviously, “Like the catheter attached to your junk.”

“Oh good,” John said dryly as his cheeks pinkened then he closed his eyes, “Fuck.” Then he opened them again, the blue of his irises dark and stormy. “But there’s a lead on Moriarty?” Violet nodded again and John immediately said, “Tell me. Tell me everything.”

“I don’t think I should.”

“My wife miscarried my baby because of him.” John fist the duvet as rage started rippling through his veins. “My daughter is missing because of him. My best friend is a walking time-bomb because of him and you are living in exile because of him. Tell me everything.”

Violet gave in. She did not embellish or euphemize. She gave it to him straight, as if presenting a report to one of her supervisors at the FBI.

“So you and Sherlock are going back to Paris?” John asked when Violet finished, his voice creaking, close to giving out after talking so much.

Violet nodded then asked, “Do you want more ice? Or do you want another drink?”

“Water, please.” After another long, good, cool draught of water, John croaked, “When?”

“Tonight, maybe this late afternoon, depends if how quickly Mycroft can finalize everything.”

“Do me one favor then, OK?”
“What?”

“Kill the bastard. Cut off his fucking head if you have to, I don’t care.”

John’s vehement speech was undermined by his belly rumbling.

Violet gave him a tender smile and bent down to kiss his temple. “I’ll have to get in line for that honor,” she told him. “But no more games, not for him. He will die, John, I promise.” She straightened up. “I’ll talk to the doctor. See if we can get some real food for you, some oatmeal at least. Maybe they’ll even take the drip out,” she pointed to the plastic bag hanging on a pole. “And I’ll ask about the straps. I know you don’t need them but…”

“That would be good, yeah, thanks.” John tried to get comfortable. He didn’t even bother to ask if she could pull some strings to get him out of the hospital altogether. He knew he’d have to endure the mandatory psychiatry evaluation period that happens after a suicide attempt, unintentional or otherwise. “Just… stop by once more before you leave for Paris, OK?”

“I will. I’ll let Molly and Greg know you’re awake. They’ll tell Mary,” She pulled the duvet decently up to his chest.

“Could I… um, get a phone so I could talk to Mary myself?” John pleaded.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Violet put on her fake eyeglasses then popped her mobile into her handbag. Looping the handbag over the crook of her elbow as she walked towards the door, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at John. “Get some rest, OK?”

Violet’s fingertips were on the doorknob when John rasped, “I mean it, Violet. I don’t want Sherlock seeing me like this. I don’t want…” awkwardly, he gestured towards himself the best he could with his bound hands. “This seared on that bloody memory of his plus I really don’t need him lecturing me on how idiotically I behaved. I’m very aware of the mess I’ve made of things.” Softly he added, “Of everything.”

Violet rested her hand on the doorknob. This time, she didn’t turn around. Her shoulders rose as she sighed heavily. “I’ll tell him.”

Fat lot of good that promise did. Not even two minutes after Violet departure, Sherlock had burst through the door and strode over to the foot of John’s hospital bed. He was sans dress jacket, and his dress shirt (the dark purple one his Internet fans swooned over) and trousers were rumpled from a long night’s work. His old, grey scarf hung around his neck, not trussed up in its usual elegant knot, but hanging like a priest’s stole over his shoulders and down his chest.

John braced himself for the inevitable deductions and torrent of verbal abuse for being so selfish and so so stupid.

But instead of the barrage of insults John expected for his carelessness, Sherlock only asked in a strangely guttural voice: “You’re alright, John?” When John only blinked and stared up at Sherlock confounded, Sherlock snapped, sounding more like himself: “For God's sake, say that you are alright! You were… dead… for exactly ninety-two seconds!”

John opened his mouth to snap Do I look bloody alright? But he closed it again upon observing Sherlock, realizing that his usual haughty façade was absent. Lines creased Sherlock’s normally smooth face. His lips trembled ever so slightly. The usual manic light had left his omniscient eyes, he wasn’t deducing, wasn’t observing… wasn’t thinking. Just… feeling for once and not making a secret of what was running through that incredible mind of his:
“Oh,” John’s breath caught in his throat, still sore from the intubation, he finally realized. Of course they did, I had stopped breathing. Then they pumped my stomach to make me sick up any undigested pills. Sherlock had witnessed all of this, of course he did...

And he’s still here. Despite everything.

For John, it was worth a wound -- it was worth many wounds -- to know the depth of loyalty and love which lay behind that cold mask. The clear, hard eyes stayed dimmed and the firm lips still shook. For this was the one and only time John clearly caught a glimpse of the great heart behind the great brain**. All his years of humble but single-minded service to Sherlock’s work culminated in that moment of revelation:

He loves me and I him...

But since this particular wound was self-administered, John immediately felt guilt-stricken. “Sherlock, I’m sorry,” he whispered, “I’m so, so sorry.”

Sherlock shushed him with an angry hiss as he whipped his scarf from his neck. Immediately he hung the scarf over the camera then spun around to lock the hospital room door.

Faster than John could have imagined, Sherlock all but ran to John’s bedside, lowering the rails so he could sit on the bed next to John. With deft fingers, he started undoing the restraints.

“Sherlock,” John whispered, “You mustn’t. You’ll get us in trouble.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock’s voice shook even worse than before. “Just shut up for once in your life and let me have this before I go back to my real life.”

As soon as John’s hands were free, Sherlock’s mouth crashed down upon John’s, his long, elegant hands cupping John’s face.

John didn’t push him away. Despite his earlier declaration to Violet about being a “shit husband,” he didn’t make even the smallest, token protest. He leaned into Sherlock, coiling one arm around Sherlock’s back while his other arm snaked up his chest and neck. He threaded his fingers through those black-as-sin curls as he groaned against Sherlock’s lips. He opened his mouth and huffed, “Oh God yes,” as Sherlock slid his cool hand up John’s flushed chest.

Meanwhile the heart monitor started beeping like mad. Plus John still had the IV catheter in his right hand and Pulse Oximeter on his right pointer finger. Ignoring the irritating beeping of the heart monitor for the moment, Sherlock dealt with the Oximeter first, unclipping it at once. Then to John’s astonishment, Sherlock prepared to remove the IV needle as well.

“Sherlock, what the hell are you doing?” John tried to jerk his hand away.

“Former junkie, remember,” Sherlock muttered, tightening his grip. “I know my way around a needle, now sit still.” True to his word, Sherlock expertly pulled the IV from John’s vein smoothly with very little pain. He quickly fished out a snowy white handkerchief out of his trouser pocket. He let the needle and tubing drop to the floor as he pressed his handkerchief to the tiny puncture wound in the thin skin of John’s hand. As John pressed the handkerchief to his palm, Sherlock located Elastoplast in the innocuous looking drawers that apparently held medical supplies. Before John could blink or utter another word, Sherlock had taken the handkerchief away and bandaged John’s hand as quick and neat as one could please.
But John was quicker, seizing Sherlock’s wrist before he could pull away. He ran the pad of his thumb over the soft, sensitive palm of Sherlock’s hand moving his own hand up so his rough, calloused fingers could twine with those long, elegant digits.

“Thanks,” he muttered hoarsely, looking at the duvet, feeling his cheeks heat up.

He felt Sherlock’s cool fingertips skimming his jaw-line. He felt self-conscious, realizing he needed a shave desperately.

“How about a drink?” Sherlock whispered, cupping John’s chin in his hand.

“John, what do you want?”

“I want to go home,” he whispered without hesitation.

“I know,” Sherlock pressed his lips to John’s knuckles. “I’m sorry.”

With that, John realized Sherlock knew John had meant 221B Baker Street and not the terrace house he shared with Mary. He felt a lump growing in his already pain-riddled throat.

“Oh please,” John squeezed his eyes and hung his head, not even sure what he was asking for as the heart monitor continued to beep and beep and beep.

In a graceful leap that would have made an Olympic gymnast jealous, Sherlock was on the bed now, straddling John, his knees pressed against John’s thighs. Before John could fully register what was happening, what was about to happen, Sherlock had thrown off the sheets and duvet then swiftly removed the heart monitor pads from John’s chest then switched off the heart monitor itself before the alarm sounded. John had flinched as Sherlock tugged the pads off of him but was glad the room was now mercifully silent. As John reached up to pull the cannula from his face, he croaked, “The doctors are going to think I’m having a heart attack, oh God.”

Sherlock had dipped his head down to kiss where the heart monitor pads had been stuck onto his chest, soothing the irritated patches of skin with his tongue; lapping and nipping fervently back up his throat towards his mouth. John abandoned his effort to remove the cannula. He simply lay back onto his pillow, closed his eyes and reached for Sherlock, clinging to purple dress shirt with one hand, threading his fingers through his hair with the other.

This was nothing like John had ever experienced in all of his forty-six years. Oh, in the past there had been heady, passionate moments to be sure. From first-time fumblings in a spare bedroom at a party to stolen moments in military tents to well-planned out holidays in New Zealand to that intensely dirty shag he and Mary had enjoyed in the Ladies’ at Greg and Molly’s wedding. Exquisitely erotic moments that (if and when he thought about it) still made John smile. More often than not, he had actually cared about the women he had been with, which just made the experience just that more intense and pleasurable.

This, however, wasn’t just about pleasure, the giving and partaking. Gender had nothing to do with it either, this wasn’t about being gay. Underneath the burning frenzy of lust and desire combined, there was a strong undercurrent of overwhelming fear and sadness, a riptide threatening to drown them both. Their only option was to hold on as tightly as possible until the inevitable occurred and they were ripped apart... again.

Sherlock locked his fingers with John’s right hand again then carefully stretched their arms out together then up and over John’s head, resting their twined fingers on the pillow. He awkwardly removed the cannula left-handed, never breaking his gaze with John until John smiled and closed his eyes. Sherlock took the hint and promptly began kissing him again. The second John’s lips parted, Sherlock’s tongue swept back inside, exploring, tasting as they lay chest-to-chest while John combed
Sherlock’s curls with his left hand.

Abruptly, Sherlock broke the embrace. “We only have fifteen minutes left,” he panted.

“OK,” John started to say in a ragged voice but Sherlock cut him off by beginning another kiss. John sat up again, eyes still closed. Blindly, he slid his free hand over Sherlock’s shirt, un-tucking then skillfully unbuttoned it. Thank God I’m left-handed, John thought as he peeled the shirt open. The silkiness of the expensive fabric was nothing compared to the marbled smoothness of his skin. Nike of Samothrace… John thought dreamily as he ran his hand from Sherlock’s ribs slowly, slowly up to Sherlock’s face, his thumb tracing those impossible cheekbones. As he felt Sherlock’s hips rock against his in a breathtakingly wicked way he hadn’t dreamt possible, he thought, Winged Victory…

I want more than fifteen minutes… John selfishly thought as he felt Sherlock’s fingers ghosting over his face before carding his silvery blond hair. I want a lifetime… I want forever…

John raked his hand through Sherlock’s curls again then lightly ran his thumb over the shell of his ear. He felt immensely gratified to feel Sherlock shiver from head to toe so he did it again. This time the shiver was accompanied by the softest moan. So John propped himself up on his left arm and started moving his head, planting kisses on Sherlock’s mouth, jaw and throat, pausing to suck at an extremely sensitive spot on his long, pale neck. As if a child playing Simons Says, Sherlock copied him, kiss for kiss. John, his arm wobbling, lowered himself back down onto the pillow.

He then arched his back, reaching for Sherlock with his left arm, pulling him to him again. He didn’t need a medical monitor to tell him how hard his heart was pounding as he canted his own hips to meet Sherlock’s, cursing their height difference as he did so. Now they were no longer face-to-face, but the sensation of his trouser-clad legs rubbing against his bare ones was much too good to resist. Not to mention the only barrier between the most intimate parts of their bodies was Sherlock’s expensive bespoke trousers and the paper-thin hospital gown. He skimmed his left hand over Sherlock’s back, palming the shoulder blade, every vertebrae of his spine, dipping down to his lower back. His hand almost continued the journey southward, but John had sense enough to stop himself. “Is it OK if I…” he panted, his hand resting lightly on the curve of Sherlock’s back.

Instead of a verbal response, he felt Sherlock vigorously nodding his head before he pressed a sloppy, wet kiss against his graying temple. So John, taking that as consent, let his hand roam down Sherlock’s lower back and over his backside, taking his time, marveling at the firm musculature on what appears to be a woefully underfed body. He heard Sherlock make the strangest sound, a combination of a whimper and a groan. Then conscious thought fled his mind as Sherlock hoisted himself up onto his forearm, kissing John wherever he could as he ground down on John, almost frantically. John tilted his head back, presenting his throat for Sherlock’s consumption. As Sherlock laved kisses on John’s throat, then sucked on his ear lobe, John still clasped Sherlock’s backside with his left hand, still clutching Sherlock’s hand with his right, his fingers almost hurting from how hard he clung to Sherlock and vice-versa.

With a shuddery inhalation, he finally allowed himself to just enjoy the ride. He hooked his leg over Sherlock’s thigh. Finding purchase, he arched his back up again and rolled his hips against Sherlock’s, feeling his groin growing hotter and harder as he did so.

Maybe I’m a bit gay… just a little…

“Stop,” Sherlock finally gasped out. “I’m going to… I can’t… we need to stop. I’m sorry.”

“It’s OK,” John whispered as Sherlock lifted himself off of him. But inside of getting out of the bed, he turned to his side instead. John curled his left arm around his thin shoulders as Sherlock nestled his head in the crook of John’s throat and shoulder. While they were no longer chest-to-chest, he still
kept his right arm slung across John’s chest, his fingers still intertwined with John’s. Their legs also stayed tangled together, one skinny pale ankle over one well-muscled calf. It was an extremely tight fit, the two of them in the hospital bed together, but not entirely unpleasant.

The only sound was the pair of them, breathing heavily.

John inhaled, pressing his face against those glossy, midnight-black curls. He smelt Sherlock’s usual smell, the delicious aroma of his exotic cologne, the faint, ever-present scent of formaldehyde and strangely enough, the fragrance of cigarette smoke, even though John knew for a fact Sherlock had not lit up since suffering an awful bout of bronchitis last summer. He also smelt something new, different, an earthy, salty scent. Pheromones, perhaps or, more likely, the rich clean smell of sweat after a hearty, vigorous physical exertion but whatever it was, John liked it. It was a humanizing scent. Warm and welcoming, much like the side of himself Sherlock had always kept tucked away from everyone.

Until now.

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“Why?”

“Why what? I require more data.”

“Why this? Why now?”

“You know why,” was the muffled answer as Sherlock kept his face buried in John’s shoulder and neck.

John sucked in a quavering breath as he finally let go of Sherlock’s right hand. He smoothed down Sherlock’s now unkempt hair then ran his hand down Sherlock’s arm.

“Yeah, I suppose I do. I’m sorry,” John still whispered, afraid if he spoke any louder, then this strange, heartrending spell would break.

But Sherlock shook his head, his hair tickling John’s cheek and nose. “No, it’s I who owe you the apology, John.” He lifted his head, studying John with his usual intensity but his voice held none of its usual arrogance. “I owe you a thousand apologies. I finally understand how I made you feel that day at Bart’s. I don’t know why I didn’t see how The Fall would hurt you.”

“That’s because you’re an idiot.”

“Well,” Sherlock huffed. “I wouldn’t go that far.”

“There you are,” John cradled Sherlock’s face. Smiling for the first time since he awoke, he added, “Was beginning to worry you getting sentimental on me.”

“Never,” Sherlock sneered before pressing a soft, practically chaste kiss on John’s lips.

“Thank God,” John ran his fingertips up and down Sherlock’s jaw. “This… this isn’t going to happen again, is it?”

Sherlock shook his head. “No,” his voice sounded strangled. “It was a momentary act of weakness on my part, but it can’t happen again, John.”
“I know,” John croaked. His lips now were kiss-burned and his throat still ached. “And it’s not just because of Mary, is it?”

Sherlock’s mouth dropped open in shock. “John, I…”

Before he could say more, the door knob rattled followed by a furious pounding on the door, “Mr. Holmes, we need you to open this door at once!”

“In a moment,” Sherlock barked. But the spell had indeed been broken. Sherlock got off the bed, buttoning his shirt as he did so. John pulled the sheets and duvet primly over him and smoothed his own hair down. He drew his knees up as well, the dull ache between his legs informing him he probably had more than just a decent erection by now. Tactfully, he suppressed a snigger as he caught Sherlock adjusting himself as well; his ivory cheeks flushed a light pink. Only after Sherlock tucked his shirttails in then he reached up for his scarf, pulling it off the camera. John noted, not without a bit of glee and smugness, that instead of putting the scarf on properly, he held strategically in front of his trousers.

Still, his unfulfilled arousal did not diminish his normal astringent personality. In fact, in this instance, it may have even fueled Sherlock’s natural inclination to verbal brutality. After Sherlock unlocked and flung open the door, he hissed at the intern without giving him an opportunity to speak: “The restraints stay off. Dr. Watson is not a danger to himself or anyone else. Who was the idiot who put them on him in the first place? You?” He shoved his face right into the intern’s.

The intern blanched and shook his head. “Erm, no, no, I… I’m just… observing.”

“They observe that he’s not going to do an injury to himself or anyone else. Also, he’s starving. Have someone bring a proper breakfast in, not just porridge or any other horrid mush you try and pass off as food here. But no toast, his throat still pains him from the intubation. Scrambled eggs and oatmeal and yoghurt, vanilla, if you have it and add a dollop of strawberry jam to it. Also, a cup of tea, caffeine free, no sugar and bring plenty of milk. Can your tiny mind contain all that information until you deliver the order to the kitchens?”

“Um, yes sir,” the intern quaked in his boots, or rather his comfortable trainers. “I’ll bring him a cuppa now while he waits for his food.”

“Excellent idea and I want a coffee, black, two sugars,” Sherlock snapped. The intern scuttled off. Once alone again, Sherlock exhaled, quietly shut the door and leaned against it, lowering his eyes to the ugly linoleum floor. “Oh John, it seems I can never do right by you. I must tack one more apology to the thousand I already owe you.” He lifted his eyes, “Did Violet tell you?”

“No. Some things I can deduce for myself.”

“Ah. That obvious?”

“No. Not obvious at all. And it’s alright, truly. It’s a good thing.” When Sherlock continued to furrow his brows as he studied John, he finally rolled his eyes and managed to sound like himself for the first time in ages: “You know me. Deduce me and tell me if I’m lying.” He shifted in his bed, realizing he was about to succumb to the worst case of epididymal hypertension since he was a young man denied after a heavy snog session.

Suddenly the events of the last forty-eight hours slammed back into him and he felt like complete and utter arsehole, the lowest of the low. The scum floating on top of the polluted Thames. Mary… Christ, Mary, she nearly died and here I went and… Oh my God, oh Jesus fucking Christ, what have I done…again?
Why does she love me? Why do either of them, Mary or Sherlock, love me?

Sherlock tilted his head, his face rearranging itself back into its normal unemotional mask. “There’s no use feeling guilty for what just happened,” he droned, “so do stop your tedious mental self-flagellation.” Then he screwed his eyes shut and shook his head, as if mental admonishing himself for being Not Good. In a softened voice, he added, “I’m not the most human of humans, John. You are. You always have been, always will and while you’ll always be my,” here he smirked. “Better half, you are entitled to make the same errors as everyone else. You are allowed to be less than perfect, John Watson.” He fixed his piercing gaze on John now. “What makes you different from the rest of the zombies masquerading as human beings is that you have the wisdom to actually learn from your errors. That, my dear John, is a very rare quality indeed.”

John gave Sherlock a wan smile. “Your pillow talk is terrible. But… thank you. And you didn’t answer my question.”

“You didn’t ask a question.”

“Semantics, Sherlock. Go on. Deduce me. Am I lying when I say everything is alright?”

“You’re a terrible liar. That’s why there’s no challenge in playing cards with you.”

“But am I lying now?”

A small smile crooked Sherlock’s mouth. “No.”

“Well. There you go. Things have a tendency to sort themselves out in the end,” John fiddled with the hem of the duvet. He cleared his throat, wincing. “I told Violet I wanted you to kill him, Moriarty. Cut off his head if needs be.”

“I’ll deliver his head on a silver platter in that case,” Sherlock droned.

“Good,” John continued to fidget with the blanket. His throat hurt and his testicles felt full to bursting. He hoped to convince the nurse to let him go to the loo or even better, to have a shower. If it hadn’t been for the particular way Sherlock held his scarf in front of his trousers, John would have felt irritated that he looked cool, calm and collected as always.

“Think about Mycroft having sex,” Sherlock suddenly drawled. “That usually does the trick for me should I find myself in a situation that I need to get my transport under control.”

“Oh God!” John yelped. “I just needed to cool off, Sherlock. Not be turned off from sex forever!”

Sherlock smirked.

Then John groaned, “Oh Christ. What a mess.”

“Indeed.” Sherlock sighed then softly added, “Everything is going to be alright.”

“I know.” Tears suddenly stung John’s eyes. “A request though?”

“Yes?”

“Come home,” his voice wobbled.

“I will.”

“Don’t make me wait two years either.”
“I won’t,” Sherlock vowed him, “I won’t hurt you like that again, I promise.”

“I’m holding you to that, mate.”

“As you should. Anything else?”

“Yeah, there is,” John nodded his head then whispered. “Make sure Violet comes back too.”

Sherlock hesitated then mumbled, “I’ll tell her.”

John didn’t like the sound of that.

Not one little bit.

**

20 December 2015
Aéroport de Paris-Charles-de-Gaulle
95700 Roissy-en-France, France
Sunday night
9:51 PM Paris time

They flew to Paris on a commercial flight.

Moriarty wouldn’t be looking for them on a commercial flight. He’d expect them to take another private jet across the English Channel.

Plus Sherlock Holmes was far too snooty to fly commercial.

However Neil Gibson** had no issue with flying commercial, business class, no less.

Neither did his paramour, Grace Dunbar**.

To the rest of the busy, mundane world, Neil was a tall, fair-skinned man with closely cropped auburn hair. He wore thick, black-rimmed glasses. It was hard to tell with the glasses but his eyes appeared to be a dark blue. When he spoke, his French was adequate but with a definite American accent. When forced to make small talk, he modestly told the interested party he was a State Senator for one of the states on the American West Coast. No, no, no… he didn’t work in Washington DC. He was merely a State Senator, not a US Senator. Yes, there is a difference because in America, there are two levels of government, the state level and then the federal level…

But by then, the interested party was no longer that interested and hastened to end the conversation quickly because the only thing worse than politics was *American* politics.

Grace on the other hand was pretty but forgettable. She was tall and slim with long tawny-brown hair, vapid green eyes and was freckled as a plover’s egg. There was a small scar on her cheek, but nothing worth mentioning. More than likely it was from a spill on her bicycle when she was a child.

Her French was atrocious but at least she tried.

No one had a clue she understood every word they said.

Or that she understood the few Spanish speakers and German speakers flittering in and out of the airport. She just smiled her high-wattage smile, the smile she privately called her “Molly Hooper Smile,” as she purposely butchered simple phrases like *Bon soir* and *Merci.*
Both “Americans” wore heavy winter coats, jeans, sneakers (his were black Nikes, hers mint-green and tan Skechers) and sweatshirts emblazoned with American sports team logos on the front (his was the Lakers, hers the Kings.) However they did not stick out as one would assume they might. They blended in with the dozens of other nationalities milling through the airport. They dissolved into the crowd in as easily as sugar does in a strong coffee. Grace wore a cute, slouchy hat that matched her russet-brown coat. Neil wore neither hat nor scarf.

After retrieving their luggage, they made their way towards the exit.

“Grace” could barely contain her excitement, completely thrilled to be somewhere new for the first time in nearly eight years. The average traveler would be forgiven for thinking this was just her first trip outside the Continental United States.

Also the average traveler would not realize how badly her scalp hurt from the hair extensions that had been threaded through her scalp or how her eyes were starting to burn from the green contact lenses.

Nor would they realize how badly her companion had suffered, as his gorgeous black curls had been clipped away, bleached then dyed auburn.

“It’s a good look for you,” Violet Hunter had teased him. “Really, you should keep it.”

“Shut up,” Sherlock had snapped, his vanity smarting from his New Look.

Now “Grace” paused to pull off her knitted hat to massage her head.

“Stop it,” “Neil” hissed at her with a non-descript Midwestern accent as he “lovingly” hooked her arm, pulling her towards the exit. “People will notice.”

“It hurts,” “Grace” snapped back, letting her natural Midwestern accent fly free. “The bitch threaded it too tight.”

“Serves you right, making fun of my hair.”

“I wasn’t making fun of your hair, I said it looked nice.”

“Liar,” “Neil” hefted the rucksack over his shoulder, then reminded himself that he was supposed to be an American and that they called them “backpacks.”

“Your accent is slipping,” Violet whispered as she let herself be pulled along. “You sounded Southern, not Midwestern just then.”

“What’s the difference?”

“Really?” The Midwestern girl snapped, heartily offended.

Once outside, Sherlock, as himself, whispered, “Southern accent is easier to master than Midwestern accent. Southerners have a similar drawl to vowels as certain English accents.”

“Just… think about Tom Brokaw and how he spoke and you’ll be fine.”

“Who?”

“REALLY?”

Both knew they were just picking on each other due to sheer nerves and not out of any real pique
with the other. Plus they really did not have much time to prepare their cover stories, but Sherlock covered his struggle with the Midwestern accent fairly well. He gambled on the fact that most Europeans would not discern the nuances of regional American accents anymore than an American would notice the difference between RP English and London RGB.

Violet also knew Sherlock was tetchier than usual because he had wanted to spend more time with John before leaving but… there was no help for that. The Work waited besides, John would have no peace until Moriarty was brought down for good.

“He’s going to keep targeting John until he breaks or you do,” Violet had advised him as she kept him company while they waited for the auburn color to set.

Sherlock had merely sighed, crossed his arms and ankles and resolutely stared at the ceiling while leaning back in the hair stylist’s chair. He looked like an oversized child having a monumental sulk.

Violet then had fired off a text to Mycroft to at least have John transferred to St. Bart’s so he could be closer to Mary. She couldn’t think what else she could do to help her friend. She knew he had to be clawing himself to ribbons with guilt by now. Not to mention the very real fear of losing his medical license because of his lapse in judgment. Being closer to Mary would help him, she knew John. He would feel needed once Mary woke up, once she started to grieve.

Plus, they needed to grieve, Mary and John. No matter how bad John’s state of mind had been in (and possibly was still in) or how wretched of a past Mary possessed, they needed to be together, to mourn together. They were parents who had lost yet another child. They needed each other, now more than ever.

After sending that text, she sadly forced John out of her mind. She had to; she was entering a very real life and death situation here. Quite possibly the most dangerous scenario she had ever been in since her exile in England began. She had to give all of her attention and focus to this extraordinarily dangerous mission.

*But if I can survive this, I can be free. Mycroft will be consumed with pursuing Mary for her crimes against Sherlock and once Moriarty is dead, well, nobody will need me for anything.*

She stole a quick glance at Sherlock as they trotted towards a good-looking young man with blond hair, holding up a sign that read: Gibson/Dunbar.

*Everyone gets to live happily ever after,* Violet thought with an aching heart.

Once they got closer, Violet noticed the young man had a striking resemblance to Victor Trevor. She felt dislike flare-up at first, but she told herself to give the chap a chance. After all, if not for him, then Sherlock and John would not have survived the Catacombs.

“Gibson? Dunbar?” the lad asked with a heavy Canadian accent. Violet immediately and correctly guessed the Ontario province. The kid looked nervous and kept glancing at Sherlock as if he felt like he should know who this red-headed man was, but wasn’t entirely sure.

“*Oui,*” Sherlock said as the blond boy popped the boot of a very battered Volvo. Together they put the luggage inside the boot, except for the Violet’s black messenger bag and faux Louis Vuitton handbag. Violet shook her head and continued playing Dumb Tourist when the boy politely asked if she would like her bags in the boot.

Then Sherlock said, out of nowhere: “*‘Un dessein si funeste. S’il n’est digne d’Atrée, est digne de Thyeste.’*”
Relief washed over the boy’s face. “Ah,” he said, still in English. “‘They are to be found in Crébillon’s ‘Atrée.’” The blond boy opened the backseat door for her, and Violet slid inside, scooting over to make room for Sherlock.

Once everyone was inside and seat-belted in, the young man said as he turned the ignition, “I totally didn’t recognize you, Mr. Holmes. Not going to lie, I really wasn’t sure it was you until you gave me the code phrase.”

“That’s why we have a code phrase,” Sherlock rolled his eyes then grimaced. Violet suppressed a smirk but privately was glad his contacts were starting to hurt him as well.

Honoré grinned as he merged into traffic. “You must be the fiancée,” he glanced at Violet in the wing mirror. “I’m Jack, Jack Honoré, at your service.”

“Pleasure,” Miss Smith replied, rubbing her head again. “Do you happen to know any stylists that can work discreetly, Monsieur Honoré?”

“Honestly? You’re still whinging about your damn hair?” Sherlock removed his fake eyeglasses and rubbed his own eyes. “And do you have eye-drops?”

“In my handbag and I cannot think if it feels like my scalp is being slowly ripped off my head,” she snipped back as Sherlock seized her handbag. As he rifled through her bag, looking for the saline drops, Violet continued to moan, “I swear to God, Anthea told that bint to make the hair extensions too tight on purpose.”

“Why would Anthea do that?” Sherlock innocently queried.

Thinking back to last summer when she had ruthlessly interrogated Anthea about the whereabouts of Maisie Watson, how Violet had slapped Anthea, backhanded her then threatened to cut her face up, Violet demurred, “No idea.”

Honoré violated a few traffic regulations as he drove them from the airport to Montmartre. Despite the late hour, Violet kept her eyes glued to the window, hungry to see something new, something other than London. Even though it was pitch-black, it was still night somewhere other than England. Regardless of the seriousness of the situation, Violet couldn’t help but feel absolutely giddy about being free of England and Big Brother… for the moment.

“Are we going to Monsieur Dupin’s flat?” Miss Smith asked as she watched nighttime Paris fly past her.

“Dear God, I hope not,” Sherlock muttered as he tilted his head back, opening his eyes wide as he squeezed saline into his burning eyes.

“Monsieur Dupin has a bolt-hole set up for you,” Honoré explained. “I’m taking you there now.”

Sherlock and Violet exchanged a look and had a silent conversation only detectives could have.

He’s adorable isn’t he?

Despite his usefulness and enthusiasm, Honoré simply wasn’t ready to be fully involved in an operation like this. But Honoré was not dim either and would have figured out that something was going on and would have insisted on being involved. Knowing this, Dupin had wisely omitted the fact they were hunting Jim Moriarty when he asked for Honoré’s assistance. He lied easily to the lad, telling him that Sherlock and his fiancée needed to go into hiding because of Moriarty’s gruesome reappearance in London. Honoré naturally believed whatever his hero told him. He was more than
happy to take “Neil Gibson” and “Grace Dunbar” to La Maison Rose so they could hide in the flat above it.

Once “Neil” and “Grace” were inside La Maison Rose, the pretty pickpocket and aspiring actress Noélie took them through the café and straight out back into the dark, narrow alley where a black Smart car waited for them, with the engine running.

“Are you joking?” the nearly two meters tall “Neil” looked at the tiny car and despaired. “How am I… how are we supposed to fit in here with all of our things?”

“Figure it out,” Noélie tossed the spare keys at him.

“Did you steal this?” Sherlock acidly demanded as he caught the keys. She gave him a coy smirk then turned her back on him and darted back inside the café, her plait swinging in time with her sashaying walk.

“She’s something else,” Violet muttered with an arched eyebrow.

Somehow, Sherlock and Violet managed to get their luggage and themselves into the “tin can on wheels” (as Sherlock had called it.)

“You sure you don’t want me to drive?” Violet eyed Sherlock as he vainly adjusted the seat so he could stretch his legs out somewhat. “You look like a human accordion.”

“I know where we’re going, you don’t.”

“I grew up knowing how to drive on the right side of the road, you didn’t.”

“I spent quite a bit of time in America during my Great Hiatus,” Sherlock put the car in gear. “We’ll be fine.”

“We’re going to die,” Violet groaned, covering her face with her hand.

They did not die, of course. Sherlock, while he did not have Paris memorized as he did London, knew his way around the massive city by now well enough to easily follow the coordinates Dupin had given him earlier.

Mycroft and MI-6 were going to howl once they realized Sherlock had slipped their leashes (again) but he’d be damned if he’d stay in one of their miserable “safehouses.”

“Wow,” Violet Hunter couldn’t help herself as they entered the Saint Germain-des-Prés neighborhood. Even at night, she could tell this was the Parisian version of London’s Belgravia or New York’s Upper East Side. “I thought you said Dupin was broke.”

“He is,” Sherlock eased off the gas, mindful of the decreased speed limit. “But his friends and clients are quite wealthy. Unfortunately every penny he receives he immediately spends on frivolous rubbish he doesn’t need.”

“Hopefully he’ll get a handle on his hoarding,” Violet mused as she admired the historical and upscale block of flats they passed as they trundled down the street in their ridiculously tiny car.

“Hm,” Sherlock hummed, unconcerned. Once he had solved what caused Dupin’s hoarding, he had, as usual, lost interest. “Here we are,” he pulled the miniature car in front of an opulent old building, the type usually seen in films.
Violet unbuckled her seatbelt, looked out the window then slowly got out of the car, ever vigilant now. The hair on the back of her neck stood on end as she warily walked around the car to retrieve the luggage. She felt especially vulnerable since she had lost her gun to Moriarty before he had strapped her to that horrid suicide bomber’s vest. Mycroft had oh-so-regretfully declined her request to get her a new one, citing England’s stringent anti-gun laws.

_Bastard_, she ground her teeth.

Quickly, she helped Sherlock unload the car and together they darted inside.

Dupin waited for them in the lobby, reading this week’s edition of _Charlie Hebdo_. “Ah!” his summer green eyes twinkled when Sherlock and Violet entered. “ _Monsieur_ Gibson and _Mademoiselle_ Dunbar, I presume?”

Sherlock rolled his eyes when he caught Violet gawping at Dupin. “Oh God,” he sighed in English before saying in French “ _Oui, oui, bonsoir, Monsieur_ Dupin.”

“Hello,” Violet Smith simpered, practically blushing.

“This way,” Dupin gestured for them to follow him.

As they trailed behind Dupin, Sherlock hissed at Violet in German, “You’re acting like a complete idiot!”

She responded, also in German, “You would act the same if you met one of your heroes, like Charles Darwin.” She paused then added in the King’s English, “Or Steve Jobs.”

“He’s not my hero,” Sherlock scowled. “I merely appreciate his brilliance and utter ruthlessness in the face of sentimentality. If I had met him, I wouldn’t behave like a… like a…”

“Fan-boy?” Violet smiled sweetly.

“No!”

“You made me see the film.”

“It was an enjoyable film.”

“Not enough to suffer through it twice.”

Ahead of them, Dupin mumbled, “ _Seigneur, vous vous comportez comme un vieux_”

“Well, we are engaged,” Violet said brightly as they stopped in front of the lift doors.

“Ahh,” Dupin turned and smiled, “ _Tu parle français_?”

“Yes. We’re both fluent. Would it be easier for you if we spoke in French instead?”

“I would appreciate that very much,” Dupin said in English as they stepped into the lift. But for the rest of the night and well into the morning, the three of them conversed in French.

The flat Dupin arranged for Sherlock and Violet to stay in was small, no luxurious penthouse suite, but it was tastefully decorated and equipped with high-tech security. The lounge was mostly decorated with various shades of white, ivory, cream, egg shell. But the decorator had used a rich, jewel-toned blue as an accent color. Sapphire colored pillows, vases and rugs were found here and there. It was a very relaxing room. More importantly, it was clean.
Violet and Sherlock sank down onto the sinfully soft white sofa. As Sherlock removed his fake eyeglasses and Violet toed off her Skechers, Dupin sat down in the comfortable looking wingchair kitty-corner from them. He picked up a remote control and pointed it at the fireplace. An electric fire clicked on at once. Soon the room became quite toasty.

“You were not followed?” Dupin asked, in French, as he pulled off his black skullcap and unbuttoned his black leather trench coat.

Sherlock shook his head, crossed his legs and steepled his finger tips, “Not by Moriarty’s people or MI-6.”

“Good,” Dupin nodded then his face collapsed into an expression of extreme sadness. “Oh and please extend my deepest condolences to Dr. Watson about the loss of his child as well as the injuries his wife suffered,” Dupin took out a pack of his Gauloise cigarettes out of his coat pocket as well as a silver Zippo. “I like Dr. Watson very much. He is a good man.”

“Yes, well, your sentiments will be appreciated by Dr. Watson but we are wasting time,” Sherlock said gruffly. “What have you heard?”

Dupin did not mince words, “Trouble,” he grunted as he reached for the crystal ashtray on the lovely silver coffee table. “Forgive me mademoiselle, but I am very anxious and this is the last vice I possess.”

Sherlock snorted. Both Violet and Dupin gave him dirty looks. Then Violet, en français, said kindly, “It’s alright. If I still smoked, I’d be lighting up as well. No,” she snapped at Sherlock when he opened his mouth to ask if he could light up too.

Sherlock scowled but then promptly forgot about his nicotine craving. “We must divert the trouble from Paris to somewhere else. Moriarty must not have an audience.”

“And we must not have a repeat of November 13th,” Dupin snarled darkly as smoke curled around his face. “We must not allow a repeat of that tragedy,” he added, in a more sorrowful voice as his face twisted.

“We won’t,” Violet promised as she shook her head vigorously, her face thin and pinched. “Have you notified the Police nationale?” she asked, “About what you have learned?”

Dupin scowled and shook his head. Exhaling a plume of smoke from his nostrils, he announced, “This is no time for amateurs. I did notify Interpol. I do have some friends there. I’ve also advised them, per your request Monsieur Holmes, to keep MI-6 out of the loop as much as humanly possible.”

“Good,” Sherlock stared at the ceiling, tapping his fingertips together over and over as the many wheels in his giant brain started turning. “Until I can determine who the mole in MI-6 is, we cannot risk passing any pertinent information to them.”

“You are both sure Moriarty fell for your trap?” Dupin pressed.

“Yes,” Violet nodded as she massaged her sore scalp. “We had Lady Hilda call, pretending to be Julia. She missed her calling in life. She really should have been an actress.”

“I’m sure her acting skills came in handy when she lied to her husband about her multiple infidelities,” Sherlock drawled.

He felt rather than saw Violet glaring at him. He wished he had been wearing his Belstaff instead of
this ridiculous puffed monstrosity, or at least had a scarf. He knew Violet stared at his long, pale throat, where a faint pink mark still remained, the size of a shilling. Unnoticed by mere mortals to be sure, but definitely noticed by someone as sharp and clever as Violet.

*Thanks John*… he sighed inwardly.

“Well,” Violet tore her eyes away from Sherlock’s neck. “Lady Hilda tricked Moriarty that she retrieved The Letter and is returning to Paris to give it to him.”

“You’re sure she spoke to Jim Moriarty?”

“Positive,” Violet nodded. “The conversation was recorded then compared to other audio recordings. The “Crime of the Century” trial, the infamous “Did You Miss Me?” broadcast and the like. Although in hindsight, the man at the Crime of the Century trial could have been Richard, Jim’s twin. But since they were identical twins, they sound exactly alike, as Sherlock can also confirm since he’s met with both Jim and Richard.”

“Good,” Dupin puffed on his cigarette. “So now we wait.”

“Now we wait,” Sherlock rose and crossed over to the window. Pulling back the heavy, sapphire blue drapes, he peered into the darkened street. As he checked again for any suspicious activity outside, he murmured in English, “The stage is set, the curtain rises. We are ready to begin.”

**Chapter End Notes**

John’s big “worth a wound” revelation is from “The Adventure of the Three Garridebs.”

Sherlock and Violet’s aliases “Neil Gibson” and “Grace Dunbar” comes from a very underrated ACD short story ”The Problem of Thor Bridge.” While excellent in it’s own right, it sadly has nothing to do with Thor Odinson.

Also, a small confession, another reason why this WIP is taking longer than the first two stories to finish is I’m in the process of re-writing a large section of it in light of the Paris attacks. Moriarty is still going to cause all kinds of trouble, just not in Paris. While I don’t shy away from dark subject material, my conscience was very uneasy about posting chapters about imaginary attacks less than three weeks after real ones had occurred. But I’m happy with the re-writes and hope you will enjoy reading them. And thank you for your patience and sticking with this story. I’m not sure what I’ll do once this is over either!


An Abominable Bride

Chapter Summary

“‘Seduce my mind and you can have my body, find my soul and I’m yours forever...’”

The trap has been baited...

First of all, so sorry about not posting last week! I started a new job last Monday (yay!) and was a bit... fried when I got home. Hopefully this chapter makes up for it.

Secondly, I just had a MAJOR heart attack. As I was in the process of typing up my chapter notes, I got the Blue Screen of Death and my computer crashed. Fortunately it started up right away and nothing was lost, but still... GAH.

Finally (just out of curiosity,) I can't help but wonder if the title of upcoming Christmas special has anything to do with a certain doctor's wife everyone loves to hate? (I'm a little excited for January 3, if you haven't noticed!)

Happy Monday!

Additional notes at the end... and thanks for reading! Will respond to comments tomorrow! So! Many! Exclamation! Points!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Eight: An Abominable Bride

21 December 2015
Les Deux Magots
Saint Germain-des-Prés, Paris, France
Monday afternoon
1:31 PM Paris time

Neil Gibson and Grace Dunbar appeared to be American tourists who had spent the day exploring book shops, boutiques and museums in the Saint Germain-des-Prés neighborhood and who were now were ready to enjoy a late lunch. The blonde woman’s arms were burdened with various shopping bags. He carried only one, but it was a long, heavy garment bag with the Ralph Lauren logo emblazed on it.

As the maître (a card-carrying member of Dupin’s Montmartre Milices) escorted them to their seats, Grace prattled on excitedly about her purchases and how “amazing” everything in Paris was and how she was having so much fun.

She also strategically placed the rather large bags on the table so her face wouldn’t be immediately seen from the entrance or the windows. After their drink orders had been taken (Viennese coffee for her, Dammann Darjeeling tea for him,) Grace hissed at Neil: “This is bullshit I have to carry everything.”
But the bags were empty except for the tissue paper stuffed inside to make them look full. Neil deduced that Grace was complaining simply for the sake of complaining.

“Shh,” Neil shushed “Grace,” his eyes darting around, observing everything. Not wanting anything to distract him, he opted to not put the colored contact lenses back in. He knew his tri-colored eyes were memorable, but he gambled on the general public being its usual unobservant entity. He also knew the spectacles he wore helped conceal his identity. He knew many scoffed at the “Clark Kent Disguise.” He also knew for a fact that when John Watson had met “Violet Smith” all those months ago, he did not notice her piercing green-gold eyes at first. He had noticed her eyeglasses, without even realizing the lenses were not corrective.

Grace also did not put in her contacts either, for the same reason. It did not matter however, because an ordinary person’s eye would not be drawn to her face at first, but to her long, flowing blonde hair.

Earlier that morning, just as the sun was rising, Dupin had brought breakfast: fresh baguettes, still piping hot from the ovens, a variety of jams, fresh honey, a variety of cheeses and a spinach and Brie quiche. He also brought two gifts for Violet. The first gift was a Beretta 84F Cheetah, a sleek, black, and compact weapon. Her mouth fell open at the sight of the semi-automatic pistol, a weapon that was no longer even imported to her gun-happy home country.

The Cheetah was locked and cocked in the concealed holster she wore around her waist. Her bulky jumper and winter coat hid it nicely.

The second gift was the arrival of an in-high-demand hair stylist, who also just happened to be a member of Dupin’s Montmartre Milices. “You never know what you’ll overhear at the salon,” the stylist, a svelte woman with mahogany skin and intricately plaited charcoal black hair, explained as she had Violet sit down so she could examine the too-tight hair extensions. “Ooo, somebody hates you,” the stylist had murmured after unpinning and removing the blond wig that hid Violet’s chestnut corn-rowed hair. Her actual hair had been cut to just below her shoulder blades then tightly plaited so the long blond locks could be sewn in. “Everything, the extensions, the braids, they are too tight.”

“Just get them off,” Violet had gritted her teeth and mentally vowed to push Anthea down a flight of stairs the next time she saw her.

While not as secure as the hair extensions, Violet opted for a wig instead. To be sure, the dozens of kirby pins digging into her hair were not exactly comfortable. But it was not nearly as painful as the wretched extensions.

Besides, Sherlock had insisted on a wig instead. He wanted Violet to be able to remove it.

“Why didn’t you say something in London?” she had snapped.

“I just thought of it now,” he had shrugged.

Whatever the reason, Violet was glad to be rid of the damn things and that she hadn’t been expected to bleach her hair as well. After years of dyeing her natural dishwater-blond hair red, she wasn’t sure how her hair would have handled going blonde only to be immediately re-dyed chestnut again. She had a feeling it would have turned into the texture of straw, assuming it wouldn’t have fallen out completely.

She peered at Sherlock over her steaming coffee cup, watching him add sugar and lemon to his tea. She knew his pride still smартed from being parted from his magnificent crop of curls. Plus the new auburn color of his hair washed out what little color he had in his face. But the auburn hair brought out the verdigris and turquoise in his kaleidoscopic eyes, which wasn’t completely unattractive.
Besides, the short, auburn hair served its purpose. He didn’t look like Sherlock Holmes. And she didn’t look like Violet Smith or Violet Hunter.

More importantly, she possessed a passable American passport for Grace Dunbar.

She supposed it would be alright if she dyed her hair blonde and left it blonde. Would probably have to crop it because the ends would be fried… but, it was possible.

_How long would it take Mycroft to call Interpol to have Grace Dunbar put on the Do Not Travel list,_ she mused. _If I run, I would have to go at once. I can’t hide in Paris like I did in London. I would have to be on the first train or flight to Germany. Or would it be better to cross over to Italy? Spanish is close to Italian, I could scrape by until I figured out where to go next…_ 

Violet gave herself a shake, remembering who she was with. Indeed, he studied her over his cup of tea. She marveled at his acting skills. He slouched ever so slightly, not as if he had bad posture, just like someone who was more used to a casual environment. He held the entire cup in his massive hand, not just by its dainty handle. He wore dark jeans, a nice red-and-blue flannel shirt underneath a navy blue jumper, or sweater as the Americans call them. The eyeglasses looked slightly hipsterish but they helped conceal his heterochromic eyes.

But his eyes were still _his eyes_ and they were locked on her. Observing her. Absorbing her. “Whatever course of action you are considering, abandon it,” he told her flatly, easily maintaining the false American accent now. It had improved quite a bit in an incredibly short period of time. But for Sherlock, it had been simple. He had simply listened to Violet speak in her native accent.

After Sherlock issued his edict, Violet rolled her eyes. She immediately decided to change the subject. “I can’t believe I’m helping you save a former girlfriend,” she sipped her coffee.

“Irene,” a faint blush bloomed on his pale cheeks. “Was never my girlfriend.”

“She’s a beautiful woman though,” Violet tilted her head, studying him now, profiling him.

“Irrelevant,” he kept his voice down. Always mindful of his surroundings, Sherlock knew the restaurant was nearly deserted and the waiter and maître’d were no threat. Still, one never knew who was about to walk in and interrupt a perfectly good conversation.

“Intelligent too,’ Violet mused, keeping her voice quiet as well. She leaned back in her chair, starting to enjoy herself now. She couldn’t help it. Just as John Watson would always be a soldier and Sherlock a scientist, she would always be a profiler. Human personality was just too fascinating not to study. “I profiled her too, when I was still working for Ciaran,” she grimaced as she recalled how she got tangled in Moriarty’s web in the first place.

“Why?”

She shrugged. “When I started creating my profile on you, I studied all the people of interest in your life, John, Mycroft, Mrs. Hudson, Lestrade, Molly and Irene. At first it was easy. All I had to do was follow her on Twitter.”

Sherlock laughed silently through his nose. “And what did you deduce?”

“She was an astute business woman who knew her customers but unfortunately got in over her head,” Violet found herself giving Sherlock her profile on Irene. “Her narcissism and arrogance did her in. She wildly underestimated both you and Jim.” She carefully avoided using Jim’s last name. “Irene thought she could play you both as she did other men.” Then she frowned, “Do you think she
was working for Jim or for Richard?”

“Jim,” Sherlock said without hesitation, “You heard him say so on the roof. ‘The Rose was mine before she was ever yours.’”

“Why do you think Jim hired Irene, but Richard didn’t?”

“Jim needed the information Irene possessed on her camera phone decoded. Jim’s objective was carrying out an act of terrorism. He was paid by terrorists to blow up that plane,” Sherlock muttered with distaste, as if he had bitten directly into the lemon slice instead of dunking it into his tea. “Richard’s objective was… me, to possess me one way or the other. He wouldn’t want me to have been… distracted… by The Woman’s… charms.” Sherlock flushed again, suddenly becoming very interested in his tea. “Richard wanted me all to himself.”

“Typical pathology of a stalker,” Violet nodded then shuddered. “Jesus. If Richard was a lunatic, is Jim one as well?”

“No. Jim is flamboyant, ruthless, infinitely clever as well as a complete psychopath but is still in complete control of his mental faculties, able to distinguish between fantasy and reality. Richard was completely insane, his obsessions completely out of hand.”

“Surely the RHL knew Richard was losing his mind then?” Violet started to ask but then the waiter came to take their food order. Violet pointed at her menu to order a Périgourdine salad. Sherlock requested at her menu to order a Périgourdine salad. Sherlock requested a tomato salad with mozzarella di bufala and fresh basil. Sherlock also ordered bread with Échiré butter as a starter in his fake, halting French. Violet profoundly hoped they would have a chance to eat before Moriarty made his move, or at least that Sherlock would. She had tucked in this morning, feeling hungry for the first time in ages. While she and Dupin had polished off the fabulous quiche, Sherlock only ate two slices of bread, liberally slathered with honey but it was still not enough food for a proper meal. He then consumed massive quantities of sugary coffee and hadn’t eaten or drunk anything since.

Once the waiter disappeared, Violet whispered, “If Richard lost his mind, why did they let him have free rein?”

“Because Richard tricked the London RHL cell into thinking he was Jim.”

Violet’s mouth dropped open. Then she clamped it shut as she nodded. “Makes sense and he got away with it too because like you said, he was… is flamboyant and ruthless. It would be easy for Richard to hide his crazy while pretending to be his twin brother.”

“Indeed,” Sherlock droned.

“Where do you think Jim was when Richard put his plans to…uh, acquire you in motion?”

Sherlock shrugged, “Where the real Jim was, only the real Jim knows. But when news hit about The Crime of the Century, the real Jim went to ground, as protocol dictates within their cult.”

“Because business comes before family,” Violet nodded.

“Precisely,” he brought the delicate cup to his lips and took a drink, closing his eyes as he savored the flavor of the expensive tea.

“Do you think it was Richard or Jim who ordered Irene to be killed?”

“Jim. He was still running the show at that time. Richard was busy filming The Storyteller series
then.” Sherlock apparently had been playing catch-up after learning about Jim’s twin.

“You found out Irene was going to die.”

“Of course, I have contacts all over the world. I have an international reputation.”

“No, you don’t,” Violet said serenely. As Sherlock pouted, Violet asked, “Did you tell one of your contacts to save her?”

Before he could answer, the waiter returned with their starters. “No, I rescued her myself,” Sherlock told her after the waiter was safely away. “While I was not pleased with Miss Adler’s antics, I had no wish for her to die. Besides,” his mouth quirked up in an almost-smile as he reached for the good, crusty bread. “The world would become a far duller place without her.”

“You liked her.”

“Yes. I did. I do. She’s quite brilliant. There are so few people I have come across with the same mental acuity as mine.” Sherlock slathered the smooth Échiré butter onto his bread. He really wasn’t hungry but he knew he needed the calories to fuel his transport. “She almost beat me, after all. How could I allow a light like that to be snuffed out?”

Violet had her elbows on the table, her hands clasped together and her chin resting on her knuckles. She looked like an inquisitive school girl. “You rescued her yourself.”

“Mm-hmm.”

“Dangerous?”

“Immensely.”

“Adrenaline was probably through the roof.”

“It was definitely exciting.”

“Irene was grateful?”

“Pathetically so.”

“Look me in the eye and tell me you didn’t fuck her after that.”

Sherlock nearly dropped his knife. “You can be so crude at times, you do realize that,” he whispered, dropping the Midwesterner accent.

Violet lifted her eyebrows. “Neil, your British is showing,” she whispered, her hazel eyes scanning the restaurant. But it was mostly deserted and no one acted odd or twitchy. She helped herself to bread now. “So correct me if I’m wrong…”

“I always do,” Sherlock fumed.

“You had a long-term relationship with the insanely good-looking Victor Trevor, who was intelligent but lazy. You hooked up with Irene Adler after saving her life. You knocked up Molly Hooper,” she ticked each one off with her fingers. “Then there was that thing with Magnussen’s personal slave…”

“I never slept with Janine.”

“Hey, you actually remembered her name. Gold star for you. Did you make out with her?”
“Make out? What the deuce does that mean?” he whispered again.

“American for snogging,” Violet whispered back. “Seriously, I thought you spent time in the US.”

“I was around adults, not adolescents in their first throes of passion,” he hissed back at her.

“You’re avoiding my question,” Violet lifted her brows, locking her eyes onto his.

“Oh. Uh, well…” Sherlock squirmed but knew it was pointless to lie to her. “A bit. I had to keep her… err… interested,” he mumbled.

“How far? Second base? Third?” She leaned forward in her seat as her eyes danced merrily. “I know you know what that American slang means.”

“It was for a case,” Sherlock grumbled, kicking himself for once again being on the other end of an interrogation. Violet had a knack for that, flipping the tables on him, forcing him into some sort of revelation about himself. It was far preferable to be the interrogator than the interrogated. But once again, he had to admit that even though he was far cleverer than she ever hoped to be, she was better at interviewing people, manipulating them into revealing their darkest secrets and most heinous sins. That took emotional intelligence, something he woefully knew he lacked.

He also knew if she brought up John in any way, he would become quite cross with her, something he did not wish to happen just at this moment.

So he spat out, “And I never made her wear the Death Frisbee during our time together, Janine. Despite what she told the tabloids,” his heart pounded, afraid of what she’d say about John.

Violet however was traveling down a completely different avenue. “You admitted you weren’t always faithful to Victor when you were still using, so despite your claims to the contrary, you do have a sex life. Actually, you’re kind of a man-whore,” she added cheerfully.

“Thanks,” Sherlock groused.

“But Richard called you The Virgin,” now Violet frowned, looking quite serious. Suddenly Sherlock realized what she was doing. Ah, she’s not just having a go at me nor is she trying to get into my head. She’s trying to create one of her profiles for Jim Moriarty, the real Jim Moriarty.

“Yes, that is correct. And it was Jim, not Richard who called me that, The Virgin.”

“Why?”

“My brother, of course,” Sherlock poured himself another cup of tea just as the waiter returned with their meals. Sherlock wrinkled his nose as the waiter set Violet’s plate down in front of her. He really wished Violet hadn’t ordered the Périgourdine salad. But to be fair, she had no idea how repellent foie gras and duck smelled to him. Fortunately the fresh basil in his tomato salad overpowered most of the foie gras and duck aroma. He was as pleased to see her tuck in as he had been at breakfast. Her appetite still was off most days… troubling…

She interrupted his musings when the waiter left. “That doesn’t fit the timeline.” She then whispered, “Your brother captured Jim, I mean Richard after the Scandal in Belgravia case.”

“Yes, but my brother has made disparaging remarks about my private life for ages.” He looked at his plate. The tomatoes were perfectly ripened, the mozzarella glistening with the appropriate moisture and the basil was curled prettily around the tomatoes and cheese. It looked and smelt delicious and Sherlock didn’t want it anymore. “Surely,” he reached for his fork, prepared to push the food around
on his plate as usual. “You can deduce why my brother claimed I was a virgin when the evidence points to the contrary. Our continued war is not merely fueled by simple sibling rivalry or what happened to me as a boy and how Mycroft covered it up instead of telling our parents or alerting the police.”

It was the closest he had ever come to volunteering information about that terrible summer when he was seven years old and young Master Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper made his acquaintance.

“Easy,” Violet stabbed a slice of duck, some lettuce and a few green beans. “Your brother is a homophobic piece of shit.”

“Exactly so,” Sherlock put his fork down, not even wanting to pretend to eat.

He wished Moriarty would make his move so they could get on with it. He despised conversations liked this, utterly loathed discussions about something as tedious as feelings.

Violet however seemed determined to enjoy her meal. “It was in my preliminary report, the profile I was building on your brother before… well, before everything happened. I know he backed any and all the anti-gay legislation presented to Parliament, behind the scenes, of course. He also was against updating the Sexual Offences Act 2003, as well as legalizing gay marriage in England.”

“My brother, for all his protestations, is a dreary prude,” Sherlock reached for his tea. “If he had his way, he’d chemically castrate me. In his mind, because he does not know about any of my female partners, I am a virgin because the loss of virginity involves a male and female.”

“The only thing I don’t understand is he’s not religious. Why does homosexuality bother him?”

“Because my dear Violet,” Sherlock gave her a sour smile. “It’s not logical.”

Violet put her fork down. A smile turned up on her lips, one of her genuine smiles, one that transformed her ordinary prettiness into something akin to beauty.

She reached across the table and placed her hand onto one of his, where it looked ridiculously small by comparison. She ran her thumb over his knuckles. She lifted her eyes up to his again, never wavering. Her voice, while soft, also did not waver:

“Love’s not meant to be logical.”

His mobile, tucked into the back pocket of his jeans, whirred just then. Violet withdrew her hand as Sherlock reached to retrieve it. “Speak of the devil,” he gave the mobile the same sour smile he gave Violet seconds ago. He answered, still using the American accent. “Hello?”

“Where were you last night?” Mycroft Holmes fumed from nearly 340 kilometers away.

“Yeah, we had to switch hotels, the one we originally booked was full of bugs,” Sherlock continued with his American accent.

“You stay in constant communication with me, brother mine,” Mycroft paced back and forth behind his desk, rubbing his forehead with his free hand, wishing for the millionth time that he could just get Sherlock to understand that all he needed was to follow procedure. Procedures, protocol, laws, rules, follow them and all will be well.

“Yeah, did you get my message?” Sherlock checked his watch.

“Yes, everyone is in position,” Mycroft assured him. “We are cooperating fully with Interpol. Where
“Are you?”

“In this charming bistro in the *Saint Germain-des-Prés,*” Sherlock mispronounced it on purpose. “Great food, it’s to die for.”

“Sherlock,” Mycroft pulled his chair out. Sinking down, he said, “Do not attempt to capture Moriarty on your own. Just find him then let the professionals handle the rest. Do you understand me? There will come a time when I will not be able to clean up your mess. If you botch this like you did Magnussen affair, there will be nothing I can do to extradite you.” When Sherlock did not immediately respond, Mycroft snarled, “Sherlock, do you hear me?”

“Loud and clear,” Sherlock still sounded casual, like a man on holiday, or *vacation* as the Americans called it.

“Also, you’re still responsible for Agent Hunter. She’s still a criminal, despite the good she had done for us all. If you allow her to escape, you won’t answer to me. You’ll answer to a judge. You may even be extradited to America.”

“That’s not going to happen,” a bite of anger was in Sherlock’s voice now.

Suddenly, Violet lightly slapped his free hand. The casual observer would have thought that the bored fiancée was playfully hinting he should get off his mobile. Sherlock knew better. “What?”

“Sweetie, come on, it’s almost time to go, get off the phone,” Violet whined, tilting her head towards the entrance.

Sherlock mimed rubbing his neck, swiveling his head towards the door.

A hulking beast of a man had just entered. True, he wore a respectable suit and a posh overcoat with a red cashmere scarf. But that didn’t hide the fact that not only was he taller than Sherlock, but he outweighed him as well. Despite being appropriated clothed for a restaurant like this, his attire was ill-fitting, almost one size too small for his heavily muscled body. But he moved with a grace that a man his size almost shouldn’t possess. Everything about him radiated menace and cruelty.

As the color drained from her face and her pupils constricted into pinpricks, Violet tapped out a text and superstitiously slid her mobile towards Sherlock to read:

*I know him.*

FBI’s Most Wanted List
Henry “Holy” Peters
Suspected RHL member/enforcer.

Sherlock felt his gut drop to his knees. He was glad he hadn’t touched his meal. He knew who “Holy” Peters was, at least by reputation. Sebastian Moran had been downright cuddly compared to this brute.

Sherlock hit Delete and slid the mobile back to Violet.

Her hands had started shaking. Her face now was the same color as the mozzarella in Sherlock’s uneaten salad and just as sweaty.

“Showtime,” he brusquely informed Mycroft before ringing off.

As he rose, Violet arched an eyebrow, “You’re sticking me with the bill, aren’t you?”
To Sherlock’s relief, she sounded like herself at least. “Meet me out back,” he rumbled and grabbed the Ralph Lauren wardrobe bag as he did so. He paused to lightly press his fingers to her shoulder blades. Bending down to kiss her cheek, he rumbled into her ear, “You can do this. You know you can. And remember, if you find yourself in doubt or danger, at any time, day or night, a text will bring me to your side, do you understand?”

She nodded, giving him a smile. Even though her pupils were still pinned with fear, her hazel eyes still shone with bright anticipation as adrenaline started flowing through her.

_Clever girl. Use the fear. Don’t let it use you._

He tapped her on the shoulder in an affectionate manner and slipped out of the restaurant. As he walked away, he thought _I ask too much of her…_

Violet, meanwhile, tucked two long blonde locks over her ears._Here we go_, she thought as she stood up. How she wished the scenario was different, ached for it actually. How she wished she had a badge, a FBI windbreaker, handcuffs and a legally obtained gun. How she wished she was bringing Holy Peters to justice.

How she wished for backup. Proper backup. _A SWAT team would be nice start. Or a few SEALs would be OK too…_ Violet thought as she pulled her coat back on.

“Oh,” she said to no one in particular as she pocketed her mobile and grabbed her handbag.

She sauntered over to the table where Holy Peters sat, perusing a menu.

Peters had expected to meet Julia Stoner here. He had seen a blonde woman sitting with an auburn-haired man but he didn’t get a good look at her face. He wasn’t overly concerned; he assumed they were civilians. Besides, he was told Julia would find him.

So his jaw dropped nearly to the floor when he realized who the blonde woman really was when she sat in front of him. “You know who I am, so I think we can dispense with the pleasantries,” Violet Hunter brusquely informed him.

Peters recovered quickly and appraised her with a quick eye. Violet knew what he was seeing. Female. Skinny. Weak.

_Fine, you think that. Asshole._

“How’d you slip the Iceman’s leash?” he leaned back, attempting to cross his arms over his massive chest. “Hang on,” he leaned forward instead. “Who was the ginger you were with?”

“Who do you think?” she sneered. “That’s how I slipped the Iceman’s leash. I have the Virgin wrapped around my little finger.”

“Oh do you? You accomplished what that Adler bitch couldn’t? That’s a laugh.”

Violet lifted her brows, very Miss Smith. “The Woman didn’t do her homework. Irene thought she could play Holmes and Moriarty both as she did other men,” she repeated herself to Peters. “She wildly underestimated both Holmes and Moriarty. Her narcissism and arrogance did her in. If she had studied her mark, she would have realized that Sherlock Holmes is practically asexual. She would need to seduce him in other ways.” Her mouth crooked up in a cruel little smile. “‘Seduce my mind and you can have my body, find my soul and I’m yours forever.’”

“And you’ve done that,” Peters snorted. “How?”
“Easy, pathetically so,” Violet found herself enjoying this role, the belle dame sans merci. “He’s lonely. He doesn’t want a lover, he wants a friend.”

“And you’re that friend?”

Violet shrugged. “Someone had to take John Watson’s place.”

“But you ain’t with your friend now,” Peters studied her, a bit bemused at this point. “Why’d he leave? Where’d he go?”

“I sent him off on a wild goose chase so I could talk to you in private.”


“Jim Moriarty said he wanted to bring me into the fold. I accept his offer.”

“What?”

“Shhh,” Violet looked around the deserted restaurant. Then she whispered. “I want in.”

“You’re joking.”

“I don’t have time to joke. You and I are both on the FBI’s radar. It’s only a matter of time before MI-6 decides I’m not worth protecting. You want me. You got me. I want in.”

“Why should I believe you? More importantly, why should the boss believe you?”

“Because I’ll deliver the two things he wants most right now. Tonight.”

“What’s that?”

“The Letter. And Sherlock Holmes.”

Peters rubbed his chin. “OK, say I believe you. How? And where?”

“Well, not here, not in Paris,” Violet looked around again. “That would be suicide, with security as tight as it is now. Eyes and ears are everywhere. But it has to be tonight. I’m scheduled to be on the next plane back to London tomorrow morning, the Iceman’s orders.” She produced a thin little smile. “He doesn’t trust me.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Peters deadpanned. “Where’re we meeting then?”

“Normandy,” Violet said promptly. “Mont Saint-Michel to be precise.”

“How are you going to get Holmes to Normandy?”

Violet shook her head. “Jim is. I’ll only give The Letter and Holmes to Jim.”

“Aw, you don’t trust me?” he leered at her.

“Not any more than you me,” Violet said coolly. “Use The Woman as bait. Set a trap for Holmes. Make it a game. A Great Game,” Violet emphasized the final two words. “Tell Jim I said that, tell Jim I said exactly that. He’ll understand. He’ll know what to do next.”

“OK, then what?”

“We meet Jim at Mont Saint-Michel. I give up The Letter and Holmes, the La Ligue des Roux gains a
“Thank fucking Christ you used the correct translation instead of the bastardized American one,” Peters groaned in relief. “What’s in it for you?”

“La Ligue stops the CIA, FBI and MI-6 from crawling up my ass,” Violet spat. “I want Senator Woodhouse and Mycroft Holmes off my back. Permanently.”

“Thought you had a deal with the Iceman?” he drawled.

This shocked Violet then she remembered, The fucking mole. She scowled, “Yeah, because he’s a man of his word.”

“Why don’t you just kill him? You killed Jack Woodley easy enough.”

“Please,” Violet scowled again, hiding her sudden nausea as she remembered a towel held over her face then freezing cold water poured over her, the terrifying sensation of drowning. “I’m supposed to sneak up and kill the brother of the Most Observant Man in the Goddamn World?”

Violet could tell Peters was interested. But he needed something though, something tangible he could bring back to his boss. So, she produced it. She slid a square piece of paper towards him, face down.

He didn’t touch it. “What’s that?”

“An ATM receipt. Showing the current balance in Jack Woodley’s offshore account, where all those millions of pounds that inconveniently disappeared last March are sitting. The interest rate kind of sucks but, what are you going to do?”

Now he was extremely interested. He snatched up the slip of paper. “There’s no account number.”

She lifted her brows. “Of course not. I’ve never seen an ATM receipt that has the full account number on it, have you? I’ll give the account number and the pass code to Jim once he guarantees my safety.”

“What happens if I say no? What happens if I decided to just bash your pretty little skull in?”

She smiled sweetly, “Maybe if we were in London, you’d get away with it. Like I said though, after November 13th, security has been tightened. If this was America, we’d be sitting at DEFCON 3 and you know it.” She forced herself to relax. “This is a good deal and you know that too. You get me, all my inside knowledge about the FBI and MI-6 and you neutralize the elder Holmes by holding the younger one. Who knows, you may even convince the Great Consulting Detective to join the winning team.”

“The balls on you,” he snorted and Violet knew she had him.

“Mont Saint-Michel, the abbey, to be precise,” she repeated after giving him the number to a prepaid mobile Sherlock currently carried. “Nine o’clock, tonight,” she added then produced a coy smile, “Don’t keep me waiting.”

Peters snorted silently and left without a word. Violet felt her legs turn to rubber. When her old boss, Section Chief Robert Carson, asked her to research the Cult of the Consulting Criminals, Holy Peters had been one of the thickest files and this was back in 2007. Violet could only speculate what he had accomplished since then and she knew it wasn’t good.

Once she felt steady enough to walk, Violet acted as if she was walking towards the Ladies. Her
heart pounded. She expected Peters to jump out and grab her. Instead, the maître’d approached her instead, “Would the lady like a tour of the kitchens?” he asked in French.

Violet nodded, feeling her knees threatening to give out as the enormity of what she had just done hit her. *I just stared in the face of one of the deadliest gangsters since Whitey Bulger and lied my ass off.* She seriously thought she was going to be sick right then and there.

When they had concocted this plan in the dark hours between midnight and dawn, no one anticipated Moriarty sending one of his deadliest enforcers.

Violet fought the urge to throw up as well as the urge to run. As she pulled her coat on, the maître, (a lanky man with the same wiry strength as Sherlock) led her through the restaurant and out the back door, where Sherlock waited, wearing his Belstaff now, which he had hidden in the Ralph Lauren garment bag. He was also pretending to smoke a cigarette while he kept a lookout for any of Moriarty’s people.

“Well?”

“He bought it,” Violet reported breathlessly as Sherlock dropped the smoldering cigarette. Her breath came out as puffs of steam in the chilly winter air as she told him, “He’s off to tell Moriarty as we speak.”

Sherlock dug his mobile out, his actual iPhone, not the prepaid mobile he purchased for this trip. He thumbed a text to Dupin, letting him know that the trap had been baited.

Dupin, along with several of his Montmartre Milices members, were already more than halfway to Normandy, having caught a train earlier that afternoon. So were several Interpol agents who still respected and trusted Dupin.

Because of the mole (as well as to tweak Mycroft’s nose just a little,) all the MI-6 agents were completely in the dark, doing surveillance on a hostel Sherlock swore Moriarty was hiding in.

Shivering, Violet pulled on her gloves as she followed Sherlock down the narrow, damp alley. She kept looking over her shoulder, half-expecting to see Holy Peters behind them. She also feared he’d be in front of them, cutting off their escape.

But Peters must have decided to be a good little errand boy and report to Moriarty instead of following her. The only thing in front of them was a lovely chrome and cherry-red Wakan 1640 motorcycle, leaning against a brick wall. Violet nearly started drooling then had to stifle a sigh of frustration when Sherlock tossed her a helmet then swung one of his long legs over the sleek leather seat.

*Because God forbid he ride in back,* Violet sulked as she pulled the black helmet over her fake blonde hair. Then, she noticed her left hand trembling as she pulled her gloves on. *Probably for the best,* she reasoned to herself.

She hopped on without delay and wrapped her arms around his waist. Neither Sherlock nor Violet spoke. There was no need. They both knew the clock had started ticking the minute Holy Peters left the restaurant. It was imperative that they reach Normandy well before Moriarty did.

The motorcycle roared to life. Soon, Sherlock, with Violet holding on for dear life, was weaving in and out of traffic, zooming towards the nearest train station that would take them to Normandy just as a winter rain started pelting down. Violet, not known for faintness of heart, ended up closing her eyes for the last twenty minutes of the harrowing journey as Sherlock manoeuvered around irate
drivers and rain-slick roads while careening around curves and corners of an unfamiliar city. There was one point where Violet honestly believed Sherlock was going to lose control as he rounded a corner, but he managed to keep the motorcycle upright. The Wakan 1640 wobbled slightly, then steadied, then was off again with another burst of speed.

Violet felt slightly nauseous. Then she remembered how she had run a red light on her old Triumph Tiger 800XC, with John Watson clinging to her so tightly she thought he was going to break her ribs. Then how he had shouted at her afterwards... *You drive like a bleeding maniac!*

She mentally apologized to John and decided that karma was a bitch.

However she knew that even though blowing through the red light hadn’t been the best idea in the world, she hadn’t been *reckless*. She also knew Sherlock wasn’t being careless either... and that he was probably getting a bit of a rush from this wild ride.

She, on the other hand, was not, for once. She felt cold, wet and queasy. She sincerely hoped Moriarty would leave Holy Peters behind. She had a feeling that her hopes would be dashed.

As she and Sherlock boarded the train leaving for Normandy by the skin of their teeth, Jim Moriarty paced the lounge of the sumptuous penthouse his grandfather had rented. His grandfather sat on the sofa, leaning on his cane, listening to Peters attentively.

“This’s a trap, of course,” the elder Moriarty leaned back into the sofa.

Jim stopped his pacing and examined the ATM slip again.

“This is a lot of money, Grandpa,” he said softly.

“We can always make more money, Jim,” James scoffed.

“But will we get a chance to take out Holmes and Hunter like this? In one fell swoop and just be done with it all?” Peters pointed out.

“What about Watson?” James asked.

Jim started to chuckle. “Oh, the good doctor had a slight break with reality, I’m afraid.”

“Oh?” James looked interested. “So he’s out of the game.”

“Completely,” a chilly, pitiless smile curled Jim’s lips. “Once he’s out of the psych ward, he’ll be at his wife’s side, playing the doting husband.”

“One down, two to go,” Peters sauntered over to the elegant tea service. He made a gesture towards the beautiful silver teapot. Jim shook his head but James nodded.

As Peters gave James a steaming cup of jasmine tea, the old lion said, “It’s actually two down, three to go. Don’t forget who Mary Elizabeth Morstan Watson really is and don’t forget Mycroft Holmes is still in the background, very much pulling the strings.”

“But that’s the problem, isn’t it?” Jim crossed his arms, staring out the window, watching the grey wintery rain fall. “Strings. *Loose* strings. They need to be... cut.” He over emphasized the T as he made a slashing gesture with his arm. He whirled around and glared at Peters, who had started stuffing his face with the pretty, pastel-colored macarons.

He chewed and swallowed hastily. “Sorry, my lunch was interrupted.”
“Leave.”

Peter’s eyes widened just a bit. But, used to curt orders, he merely popped another macaron into his mouth and popped a few of the dainty pastries into his pocket. He swaggered out, carrying a delicate china tea cup in his gigantic dustpan-sized hands.

Jim crossed the lounge to sit next to his grandfather. “It’s not about the money and it’s not about revenge,” Jim told the old lion quietly, urgently. “Richie did something stupid, so bloody stupid. He gave both Holmes and Hunter something he never should have.”

“What?” the old lion asked. When Jim told him, his wrinkled face paled. “Dear God,” he finally said when he recovered himself. He took a fortifying sip of tea then pulled a face. “See if there’s something stronger. Whisky, preferably.”

Jim couldn’t locate the whisky, but he did find cognac instead. He brought two snifters over. “Hennessey, hope that’s alright.”

“It’ll do,” the old lion sighed as he cupped the glass properly, letting his hand warm the glass so the amber liquid would reach room temperature. He inhaled softly, breathing in the rich aroma of the Hennessey. “Why on earth would Richie do such a thing?”

“Maybe as payback for not granting his request to go to America so he could pursue acting, who knows,” Jim glowered at his cognac. He did not engage in the niceties of drinking the rich alcohol. The warming of the glass, the smelling, the swirling, he had no use of that for now. He took a preemptive sip, not even waiting for the drink to reach room temperature. “Maybe he really was sicker in the head than we all thought. Or maybe he thought it would just be funny, a great big laugh. I honestly don’t know what he was thinking, Grandpa.”

“I know it’s a sin to curse the dead and I know he was your brother… but goddamn him.”

Jim gave his grandfather a thin smile. “I think God already has.”

“But if Holmes and Hunter both possess this information, why hasn’t either one of them used it?”

“Because Hunter has no idea of the power she possesses and Holmes is too clever,” Jim explained, his normally lilting voice dark and ominous. “Holmes is waiting for the just perfect opportunity to strike and when he finds it, we’re done.”

James rolled his head back then lowered it. Massaging his temples, he groaned, “This is bad news indeed.”

“So you see why they have to die, Holmes and Hunter.”

James sat up. “Yes. I do.” Then he frowned, “What about the army doctor? Will he look for vengeance against us?”

Jim snorted. “If he does, why… we’ll simply remind him that not only did we ensure it that he’s separated from his daughter, but that we now know who his wife really is and wouldn’t it be a crying shame if that was leaked to the press?” He paused. “How much longer do you think our mole will be able to obtain information for us?”

“Indefinitely,” James purred. “MI-6 is clueless and the Iceman is oblivious.”

“Excellent,” Jim nodded. “We needed some good news. So, how does this play out?”
James inhaled the rich, sweet scent of the cognac. “Take Miss Hunter’s suggestion. Make it a *Great Game.*” Then he gave his grandson a stern look, “And bring along a bodyguard.”

Jim rolled his eyes then gave his beloved grandfather a smile of heartbreakingly genuine affection. Then he pulled his mobile out of his jacket pocket and rang Peters. “Sorry your lunch was interrupted. Go down to the hotel restaurant and have a nice meal. Put it on our bill. Take your time, but when you come back, bring The Woman. She has work to do.”

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21 December 2015  
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew  
Monday afternoon  
2:31 PM London time  

At the same time Grace and Neil entered the posh Parisian restaurant, Mary Watson struggled to keep her eyes open.

Her fingertips gazed the button of the morphine pump but she did not press it to increase the dosage. In fact, she had it at the lowest setting possible, just enough to take the edge off the pain. The pain was still there, of course, but at the moment it was an unpleasant, burning sensation in her gut. Not exactly a comfortable feeling, but a vast improvement over the hot, ripping agony she had experienced when Jim Moriarty plunged his knife into her.

She ran her hand over her flabby, slack belly. She hadn’t needed Molly to tell her she lost the baby. She knew. Had already known in the shopping centre, had realized she was losing too much blood to sustain a pregnancy. That she would go into shock and…well.

It still hurt though. Knowing she was alone and empty. Again.

She was beyond tears now.

She couldn’t even weep yesterday when Molly finally told her about John’s “accident.” She covered her face and asked Molly for a moment of privacy. Molly acquiesced. But first she gave her a watery smile, squeezed Mary’s hand and slipped out of the hospital room so Mary could have a good cry.

Mary hadn’t wanted to cry. She had wanted to scream. She had wanted someone to die.

There was only one person she knew who could help her achieve that objective.

She had rang the on-call button and weakly asked the nurse for a telephone, a mobile, a laptop, a tablet, *something*. The nurse generously surrendered her own mobile to Mary. Thankfully, it was a Smartphone. Mary Googled “Diogenes Club” then had to rest for ten minutes. Every little move she made used up so much precious energy. Once she pulled the number up, she rang the club and asked for Mycroft Holmes. Of course, he wasn’t available. Very carefully, in a slow, pain-wrecked whisper, she explained that she was Mary Watson, Dr. Watson’s wife, she was in hospital and it was imperative he come see her. As soon as possible. Alone.

Once an appointment time and date had been fixed, Mary had ended the call then cranked up her morphine dosage as high as it would go. She slipped into blissful oblivion for the rest of the day and night.

But this morning, after the nurse roused her to see if she could tolerate a cup of weak tea and a bowl of chicken broth (she couldn’t,) Mary turned the dosage down. Her belly felt like a swarm of bees had lined up and had simultaneously stung her over and over in the same spot, but again, a massive
improvement from having a butcher knife buried to the hilt in her gut.

She knew it was a bloody miracle she was still alive… pun intended.

She was also glad that the damage to her intestinal tract was minimal. Really, it should have been far worse, but the surgeons had been first-rate. She found out later that one of them had been one of John’s mates when he did his training at Bart’s. She felt profoundly grateful he had taken extra special care of her. She hadn’t fancied the idea of poo’ing in a plastic bag for the rest of her life. *Look at me, the almighty, dangerous assassin, attached to a bag of shit. Forget stealth, the marks would smell me a mile away…* Mary sighed, shifted in her bed, winced, caressed the morphine pump again then shook her head. *I understand now how Sherlock got hooked on this, the morphine. Lovely stuff, morphine…*

Once her work was done, she fully planned on knocking herself out again for the rest of the day and night. Until then, she made herself watch some crap telly show John would have adored.

She felt tears prick her eyes as a curvy, older woman about Mrs. Hudson’s age modeled some horribly tacky diamante jewelry on QVC.

*Oh John, my heart, my love, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I lost another child and the loss was too great. I knew he was getting bad again, what with losing Sholto and Harry in such a short space and each in such a horrifying manner. I tried. Tried to give him space while keeping an eye on him, I even encouraged him to see Ella without being pushy. His “accident” is my fault…*

She squeezed her eyes tight, ignored the gnawing, itchy hot pain in the belly. She gripped the bedclothes, clenched her teeth and told herself to be patient.

*I will make it up to him. I will end this.*

At two o’clock on the dot, he opened her hospital door. Carrying his ruddy umbrella and resplendent in one of his ruddy bespoke suits.

Was it really only three days ago she and Violet were mocking him?

*There’s a High and Mighty shop here. The name alone suits him…*

*Mycroft? Wear a suit that wasn’t bespoke for him? Perish the thought…*

Then Violet had laughed and Mary found herself wishing that she and Violet really could be friends. But of course she and Violet couldn’t be friends, could never be friends. Women in their situation, as Violet pointed out once, didn’t have friends, they had allies.

Besides, if neither of them were living in hiding, if both had been living the lives they had been born into, they would have been natural enemies. Agent Hunter would have pursued the assassin AGRA ruthlessly. It was her nature, hell, it was her *name*. No matter what alias Violet used, she was a Hunter down to the very marrow of her bones.

And if Violet would have hunted her, then AGRA would have had to go on the offensive. Never defend. But rather, attack, fight back. Eliminate the threat.

Still, Mary wished they could have been friends. She wasn’t even sure if Violet was still her ally. As she eyed Mycroft, a niggling suspicion prickled her, one that had been prickling her more and more during these past few weeks.

*Would Violet sell me out to Mycroft to save herself?*
Probably not, but it couldn’t be ruled out. Violet, after all, was the consummate survivor. On the other hand, would she manoeuver events so Mary and Mycroft would tear each other apart in order to save someone else? Someone like her “fiancé…”

Yes, that makes more sense, with her manipulative and codependent personality and all...

Sherlock and Violet weren’t the only ones who could profile people and make deductions after all. Not only did Mary know how to read people, she knew how to hold her tongue. Knew how to not let on how much she observed.

However the one person she could not get a clear read on was the well-dressed, thin man with the receding hairline standing in her room. She doubted anyone could fully work him out, discover what made him tick. Churchill’s infamous quote about “A riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma,” was meant to describe Russia but it suited Mycroft Holmes much better.

“Mrs. Watson,” Mycroft gravely broke the silence, or rather, chose to be the one to begin the conversation since hospital rooms are rarely silent.

Mary left the television on for background noise, to deter anyone from listening in. “Thank you for seeing me,” she chose to be formal even though her voice still was faint. “Please, sit down.”

Mycroft arched an eyebrow. He circled the bed, unbuttoned his grey dress jacket and elegantly sat down in the uncomfortable plastic chair John should have been sitting in. “This is a bit of a surprise, Mrs. Watson. I was expecting a chastisement.” He rearranged his face into an appropriately somber expression. “Please let me express my deepest condolences. Despite our past differences, this is not something I would have wished upon you or John.”

Past differences? I shot your brother and you planned on having me murdered. Plus you’re keeping my daughter from me; why would you care that I miscarried my son? Mary had to fight from barking out a harsh laugh, mostly because laughing hurt. “You make it sound like I support Manchester United and you support Leeds.”

“Dear God, you don’t really?”

“I don’t follow football and I didn’t ask you here to chat about sports.”

“Clearly,” Mycroft leaned back in the chair as if it was just as lavish and comfortable as a posh leather office chair. “What can I do for you, Mrs. Watson?”

Mary’s cornflower blue eyes glittered with malice. “It’s what I can do for you, Mr. Holmes.”

“Oh?” Mycroft arched an eyebrow again. “What can you do from your sick bed?”

“Make telephone calls,” Mary’s eyes stayed hard and bright.

“I can make telephone calls from my office.”

“Not to the people I know.”

Now both Mycroft’s eyebrows shot up. “I see,” he steepled his fingertips in unconscious imitation of his younger brother. “And what, precisely, are you offering me?”

“A chance to even the score,” Mary told him. “As well as a chance for revenge.”

“Explain.”
Mary did.

She thought she would have to fight Mycroft every step of the way, to have to really sell her proposal. Threaten him even. But he merely inhaled deeply, leaned back in his chair and nodded his approval. “That could work, yes…”

Mary held her breath.

“Let’s get to work then, Mrs. Watson.”

Mary blinked. “Just like that?”

“Just like that,” Mycroft said silkily. “If you can deliver what you are promising, you and the good doctor get to live happily ever after and I’ll conveniently forget you put a bullet in my brother’s chest. Agreed?”

“My daughter, what about her?”

Mycroft rolled his eyes, “As I have explained countless times to you and John and Sherlock and Violet that is completely out of my hands. The decision to keep her in safekeeping instead of reuniting her with you and John was made by people above me. I don’t have the authority to have her returned to you. I don’t even know where the child is.”

“Can you at least… put a good word in for us, for John and me? That we’re cooperating?” Mary hated how she sounded, so weak and desperate. But if begging is what it took to get her Maisie back, then she would beg, she would grovel, she would lick the soles of his fucking Burberry leather wingtips if necessary.

Then, once her beloved baby was back in her arms, she would make one last kill. One last job.

Ironically, it was the job Charles Augustus Magnussen had wanted to hire her for.

The universe was rarely lazy, but it had a sense of humor. A sick, twisted sense of humor.

“Very well,” Mycroft said indifferently, as if he knew it wouldn’t do a lick of good. “Shall we begin then, Mrs. Watson?”

Mary nodded. “This is what I need from you…”

Later, when her task was done, Mary nearly collapsed from exhaustion and anxiety. Her face shone with perspiration and the heartache and physical pain became nearly too much to bear. The nurses scolded Mycroft for wearing her out. The doctor was called and consulted. He fussed over her then prescribed a round of antibiotics and upped her morphine dosage.

Mary gratefully took a hit of the maximum dosage and sank below the pain, below the worry, below the fear, deep, down into a dark, sweet, soft place. Morphine was the medical equivalent of throwing the duvet over one’s head in a cool, darkened bedroom on a rainy morning and sleeping soundly until the storm had ceased.

But before fully succumbing to the influence of the drug, Mary’s dreams were not altogether peaceful. In a twilight haze, she dreamt of Sherlock, wearing the ridiculous deerstalker, and John with his stupid moustache, chasing an abominable bride throughout foggy London streets.

The bride had Violet’s face.
Then the fog obscured everything and Mary surrendered to the morphine’s sweet oblivion.

Chapter End Notes

Henry "Holy" Peters makes his first appearance in ACD's "The Disappearance of Lady Carfax." He's kind of a dick in the canon story too.

Violet is quoting MD Waters:

http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/1305222-seduce-my-mind-and-you-can-have-my-body-find

I've never read the book but I've always liked that quote.
"Don’t die for a stupid girl, Sherlock..."

Sherlock and Jim are face-to-face once again and all Violet can do is watch...

Soooooooooo sorry for the delayed posting! Between work, the holidays and sooo many exciting things happening in my fandoms (especially a particular Christmas special that aired about three days ago...) I really appreciate that all of you hung in there for this long. Also, I must confess, the re-write took MUCH longer than I thought.

To avoid spoilers for anyone who hasn't seen the Christmas Special yet, I'll contain my squeeing in the notes at the end.

Happy New Year everyone!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Focus

21 December 2015
Abray du Mont-Saint-Michel
Le Mont-Saint-Michel, Lower Normandy
Monday night
6:00 PM

The last streaks of deep purple and fiery orange were just faded over the black flatland and the blacker sea when the detective and the profiler arrived at Mont-Saint-Michel. When Violet had first laid eyes on the village, the first word that popped into her head was fairytale. She truly felt transported to a different time, a different world even, surrounded by ancient bricks and rustic buildings. High seawalls encircled the village, defending the inhabitants from intruders and high tides longer than anyone could remember. All the homes, shops and cafés were all made from bricks and stone that appeared to be the color of the moon. Many of those buildings heralded from the fourteenth century. There were actual buttresses and arched entry ways. But twinkling white and blue fairy lights as well as traditional holiday garland was strung everywhere, giving everything a modern, festive radiance. Towering above them all was the gothic abbey, bathed in a soft golden light while a golden statue of St. Michael the Archangel stood precariously en pointe on top of the steeple promising protection from above for those down below. The abbey looked more like a castle, a home for the beautiful princess or a prison for the fearsome monster. Meanwhile the rain had transformed into snow, the fluffy kind almost always only seen on Christmas cards and in holiday films.

She had almost expected the villagers to start randomly singing and dancing.
They didn’t, of course, except for a group of carolers on one street corner. The carolers were dressed in Ye Old English costumes, apparently to invoke the spirit of Charles Dickens’ *A Christmas Carol*, which simultaneously amused and annoyed Violet. Cheerily the carolers warbled Christmas songs in Latin and in French as the rare Christmas snow continued to fall. Since the snow did not stick, it did not deter the merriment occurring in the streets. People chatted and met friends to make plans for the holidays. Children (and a few adults) stuck their tongues out to catch snowflakes. Everyone was out and about, all having a good time.

Intermingled with the merrymakers were various undercover Interpol agents and members of Dupin’s *Montmartre Milices*. If the locals noticed a more visible presence of their local police officers, they didn’t remark upon it.

Also, hiding in plain sight, were Violet Hunter and Sherlock Holmes.

Still in their “Grace and Neil” disguises, she and Sherlock wove through a seemingly endless Christmas Market. Wonderful smells of espresso, savory crepes and French pastries wafted through the air. Sherlock had stopped to buy them both coffees when his prepaid rang.

Handing the paper cups to Violet, he put the phone on speaker so Violet could hear. He knew the peons wandering though this charade of Goodwill towards All Men would not be paying a jot of attention to them.

“Hello?” he said into the mobile.

There were one, two, three, four pips.

“What the hell?” Violet wrinkled her nose, thoroughly confused.

“Shut up,” Sherlock hissed at her, wishing John were here. He would have known the significance of the pips. Then he said into the mobile again, “Hello, this is Sherlock Holmes.”

“Hello Mr. Holmes,” Irene Alder’s voice from the mobile. Her voice was inflectionless, emotionless, lifeless. “This is a turn-up, isn’t it?”

“Where are you?” Sherlock barked into the mobile.

“‘Get thee to a nunnery,’” Irene spoke in a monotone.

“What?” Sherlock screwed his eyes shut, diving quickly into his Mind Palace. Oh, he had heard that turn of phrase before, but where? In the library section of his Mind Palace, he rifled through leather-bound book after leather-bound book (no paperbacks in Sherlock’s Mind Palace). Mentally, he skimmed the title then threw each useless book over his shoulder as he continued to search. He pulled himself out of his Mind Palace when he realized Irene was still talking, or rather repeating what Jim was whispering in her ear…

“… I’ll give thee this plague for thy dowry: be thou as chaste as ice, as pure as snow, thou shalt not escape calumny. Get thee to a nunnery, go: farewell. Or, if thou wilt needs marry, marry a fool; for wise men know well enough what monsters you make of them. To a nunnery, go, and quickly too. Farewell.”

Then there was another pip, a hum, then silence. “Shakespeare,” Sherlock finally said, shaking his head, perplexed. He had just as much use for fictional literature as he did the solar system. “*Hamlet*, I believe…”

“Get thee to a nunnery…” Violet repeated to herself in a soft voice. Then she looked up, pointing at
the abbey with one of the cups of coffee, “The old cloisters.”

“Yes, of course. Well done,” Sherlock murmured as he fished out his iPhone. Quickly, he thumbed a text to Dupin to let him know where Moriarty planned to lay his trap.

“Except good old Jimmy didn’t tell us when he was coming,” Violet muttered as they started walking again.

“Yes he did, you weren’t paying attention,” Sherlock sighed. “Four pips. Four hours.”

Violet checked her watch. It was not her pretty gold wristwatch, the gift from her brother Michael. That watch was in the MI-6 sanctioned safe house in case Mycroft once again hacked into the GPS tracking device Sherlock had implanted in the watch. Now she wore a cheap watch she had purchased earlier that day while she and Sherlock had wandered the posh neighborhood of Saint Germain-des-Prés. “Ooh, that is cutting it close,” she breathed as they started to break away from the cheery crowd and to make their way up to the abbey. “Are we sure they aren’t already here?”

“Positive,” Sherlock nodded. “Dupin gave me his assurance. The abbey is still clear.”

Violet shot him a puzzled look. “You trust him?”

“Yes. Of course.”

Violet nodded, “Good.”

Now Sherlock was puzzled. “Good?”

“Yes. You’re making friends. It’s good.”

Sherlock’s nostrils flared but he merely muttered, “Come along. We need to be in position before Moriarty and his people get here.” As they meandered their way casually towards the abbey high on the towering hill, Sherlock said, “Although, you are quite correct about the time. We must retrieve Irene and take care of Moriarty before the nighttime tides come in, turning this town into an oubliette while the sea water is at its highest point. We cannot let Moriarty’s people terrorize the people of this village or worse yet, hold everyone hostage.”

“Why, Sherlock Holmes, do you actually care what happens to the people who live here?”

“No,” Sherlock said, a shade defensively. “You have no idea how tedious the paperwork can be when there is massive civilian collateral damage.”

“I was an FBI agent so yes I do know that government paperwork can be a bitch and I think you’re full of shit,” Violet said cheerfully. “Besides, we’ve got Dupin and his Militia here, plus some of his old Interpol buddies; the local police have been alerted. Plus, we didn’t give them enough time to come here to set up any fun surprises for us.” She sobered, “And we didn’t tell Mycroft so the MI-6 mole can’t leak anything to Moriarty’s people. We’re doing everything we can to minimize the risk to the civilians.”

Sherlock merely hummed. Violet shook her head and together they walked down the Grande-Rue in silence until Violet looked up at the abbey again. Then she groaned.

So did Sherlock. “Stairs,” they complained in unison as they stared up at the steep flight of stairs called Grands Degrés.

Unexpectedly, Sherlock whirled around to face her, his coat spanning out around him. Violet had
argued against him wearing His Coat. But Sherlock pointed out that with his current “Look” (the auburn hair, the jeans, the navy blue jumper and the eyeglasses,) unless someone was specifically looking for him, no one was going to realize who he was even while he was wearing his trademark Belstaff. He was not as famous in France as he was in England.

Of course, he was right. But for once he didn’t rub it in. Instead, he merely grabbed her shoulders and murmured, “Violet.”

“What?” Violet tilted her head to the side but as Sherlock opened his mouth again, she knew what he was going to say before the words left his mouth. “No! Oh hell no. No. You’re not pulling this chivalrous bullshit on me now. I’m not staying behind. Not now.”

“Who’s chivalrous?” he lifted his bushy (now auburn) brows. “It’s about practicality. If you’re not feeling well enough to contin-”

“I feel fine,” she sawed him off at the knees. “I would not jeopardize your safety if I didn’t feel one hundred percent fine.” With hazel eyes blazing, she added, “I’m not leaving you.”

He studied her intently, weighing her words. He brushed a long, blonde strand from her wig off her freckled cheek, his gloved fingertip barely touching her. Then he placed the same finger under her chin and tipped her head up. “Not even if it’s in your best interest to go?”

Her eyes never wavered. “It’s in my best interest to stay.”

“Very well,” abruptly he dropped his hand and turned away from her. “Come along then.”

Of course, there was not a staircase that led them straight up to the abbey either. The stairs wound around the island, up seawalls and towers. It would have been scenic, maybe even enjoyable, if they didn’t have to rush and if it the sun wasn’t fully set now. Fortunately the old street lights provided just enough lighting so they could see where they were going. After the arduous hike, they finally reached the front doors of the abbey, where Dupin waited for them.

“Ah, thank God,” Dupin beckoned to them. “Hurry, all the tourists are gone and the monks have been evacuated as well.”

Dupin wore practically the same outfit he had when Sherlock had first met him: the black knit skull-cap, the long, black leather coat, the heather grey scarf wrapped around his throat, black jeans and his old scuffed up motorcycle boots. He even kept his diamond stud in his left ear and of course, all of his rings, including Marie’s wedding band. In deference to the weather, he wore a thick-knitted black jumper. The only thing missing was his pair of expensive sunglasses.

But Sherlock took off his fake sunglasses and Violet started pulling kirby pins out of her wig as they hustled towards Dupin. Both tried to ignore the ache in their calves as they chased after Dupin, who had started walking very fast.

“Received your message, the old cloisters are no good. They’ll be trying to trap you.” Dupin shook his graying head.

“Obviously,” Sherlock huffed. “They didn’t select the cloisters for its view of the bay.”

“Well, we’re not doing this Meet and Greet in the crypts, that’s more of a death trap than the cloisters,” Violet pulled the blonde wig off and her actual hair, plaited into a French braid, tumbled down, the plait tumbling over her shoulder. “Pun intended.”

“We’ll try to drive them towards the actual cathedral where the nave,” Dupin’s boots clomped loudly
on the limestone floors and echoed off the granite walls. Sherlock caught up to him easily enough
with his long legs, but Violet had to trot to keep up.

“Do we know how many people Moriarty is bringing?” Miss Smith asked. Her feet, clad in the green
and tan Skechers again, made no sound at all as she walk-ran after two men. With her green-gold
eyes blazing with adrenaline and purpose, she looked more feline than ever.

“No, but we have eyes and ears all over the city. Besides, I have my friends from Interpol set up in
the choir loft and other prime locations. Numbers mean almost nothing when you have the high
ground.”

Violet puffed out a breath and pretended to be convinced. She hadn’t been paying attention to any of
the beautiful artwork or the fabulous architecture, but she just happened to look up to see another
statue of St. Michael the Archangel, bronze, not gold, however.

Her childhood catechism burst into her head:

St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our
protection against the wickedness and snare of the devil…

Of course, she couldn’t remember the rest.

Meanwhile, Dupin continued to talk, “… be up in the choir loft as well with the snipers. Also, I
called in a big favor and was able to get two helicopters on standby. I just need to send the text and
back-up will be here in ten minutes.”

“Violet, you’ll be the closest to Jim,” Sherlock murmured to her when she caught up. “First
opportunity you see…”

“Take the shot,” Violet felt her throat tightened and she nodded firmly to mask her discomfort. “I
will, don’t worry,” she added, making sure her voice sounded normal. She didn’t know why
Sherlock’s request bothered her. She had taken lives before, in both official and unofficial capacities.
But it had always been in self-defense, until Jack Woodley of course. She barely even remembered
pulling the trigger, her memory made hazy by trauma. She also had no problem with Jim Moriarty
dying either, had even promised John Watson to cut the bastard’s head off.

But to be ordered to kill… well, it was unsettling.

She knew though that Sherlock asked her to pull the trigger because he wasn’t sure if he could.

Violet didn’t blame him. He was a terrible shot, if the wall proved anything. She sometimes
wondered if maybe he had a slight astigmatism or something that hindered his otherwise remarkable
eyesight. His hyperacuity may enhance his eyesight, but he couldn’t center anything worth a damn.
All the pictures hanging on the walls in the flat listed just ever so slightly to the left. No one else
really noticed (except maybe Mycroft,) but it drove Violet nuts.

She was also the only person in the world who knew that Sherlock didn’t take the shot at the Earl on
that terrible night at the Copper Beaches because he wasn’t certain he’d get him. For someone like
Mary or John or her, it’d be an easy kill shot. But people like Mary or John or her were rare in the
UK. Most Britons didn’t own guns much less use them.

Then it hit her like a ton of bricks. Oh my God, what if he never intended to kill Magnussen? What if
it was an accident? Arrogant prick was probably trying to scare Magnussen into revealing
something compromising about himself, but then if he really has astigmatism or if his hand shook…
Oh, Sherlock, you… idiot.

Violet roughly shoved that revelation out of her head. Now was not the time to dwell on such
matters. Fortunately, Violet was extremely good at compartmentalizing. She had to be, with her old job and her current life.

Besides, she wasn’t there that night at Appledore. Pointless to speculate without facts.

Violet still had no idea that was one of the reasons why Sherlock liked her so much was due to her practical nature.

So, with the tail of her auburn plait swishing behind her as she power-walked to keep up with the two long-legged men, Violet mentally reviewed the plan over and over, searching for flaws, trying to think like Jim Moriarty, trying to think of what he might do… but going inside Moriarty’s head was more terrifying than the inside of Sherlock’s.

“He’ll focus on your humiliation and his superiority,” Violet Smith started rattling off her profile as they turned the corner and entered a long, narrow hallway.

“Also MI-6 must realize by now that you and Mademoiselle Smith are no longer in Paris,” Dupin added while taking out a small torch from his coat pocket. “It’s only a matter of time before Mycroft deduces where we all are.”

“If he hasn’t already,” Sherlock checked his watch, speeding up his pace to match Dupin, who had taken two long-legged steps ahead of him.

“Normandy is not MI-6’s jurisdiction,” Violet jogged a few steps to get to Sherlock’s side.

“Do you think that matters to Mycroft?” Sherlock snarled as Dupin clicked on his torch. As Dupin descended a narrow flight of stairs, Sherlock added, “You usually don’t make stupid statements, Miss Smith.”

“I don’t and I haven’t and mind your head,” Violet sniped back. As Sherlock ducked his head while entering the claustrophobic stairwell, she added, “Mycroft, believe it or not, is not all powerful. He still has supervisors to report to, which determines how much time we may have to operate independently.”

“Twenty-two minutes,” Sherlock informed her in a low rumble while he dug his small torch out of his own coat pocket and turned it on. “After Mycroft gets the green light from the Queen-”

“He does not report to the Queen, do quit embellishing,” Violet scolded him and Dupin chuckled.

“After he gets approval from his supervisor, it will take exactly twenty-two minutes for MI-6 agents to reach Mont Saint Michel.”

“The city?” Dupin queried.

“The abbey,” Sherlock corrected him in a flat voice. “For Moriarty, Mycroft will spare no expense. He’ll dispatch helicopters as well.”

“Then we better make sure Moriarty is in Interpol’s custody,” Dupin reached the bottom of the stairwell, then motioned with his torch for Violet and Sherlock to follow. Violet reached out and grabbed the cuff of Sherlock’s coat. Not because she was afraid, per se, but because it was so bloody dark. The two small torches barely penetrated the darkness.

She felt Sherlock twist his wrist awkwardly, his fingers straining to reach for hers. She slipped her small hand into his and let him lead her.
“Here,” Dupin pointed to a small cell towards the end of the corridor. Whether it was an old prison cell or an old monk’s cell, it was hard to tell. It was very cold, very small and very dark. The doorway was so low, even Violet had to duck, although she could stand upright once she was inside.

Sherlock immediately crouched into one of his Thinking Positions. Violet unbuttoned her coat and removed her gun from her concealed holster. Dupin hovered outside the cell, holding out a Bluetooth earpiece. “Already tested it, we can still get a signal down here, believe it or not. We’ll be in constant communication. I’ll tell you when we’ve got Moriarty by the altar. Do not move until you hear from me. Comprenez vous?”

“Oui,” Violet took the earpiece then handed it to Sherlock, who clipped it to his ear.

“Good,” Dupin said in English, then paused to look at her. “You look… familiar. It’s obvious you’re actually an American but…hmm, I can’t place you.” His salt-and-pepper brows beetled together. Violet, having to fight giddy butterflies in her stomach all day because she was working with one of her idols, now felt the butterflies flutter away. Now her stomach felt like it was filled with lead. But Dupin only shook his head. “Good luck,” he told him.

“Luck has nothing to do with this,” Sherlock intoned loftily.

“He means thank you,” Violet translated.

“No, I really don’t,” Sherlock grumbled. “Why do you and John insist I mean ‘Thank you’ when I clearly did not say thank you?”

Dupin chuckled, tapped on the stone archway of the doorway then departed. Violet pointed the gun to the floor and leaned flush against the stone wall, her head turned towards the doorway. Sherlock switched off the torch then they were both plunged into darkness.

For nearly forty-five minutes, in the pitch blackness, they stayed silent. Violet’s legs started to ache from climbing all those steep stairs then immediately not moving, but she didn’t complain. She closed her eyes, which was no different from keeping them open. She practiced calming breathing techniques while listening for anything suspicious. The sound of footsteps, someone else’s breathing, the cock of someone else’s gun.

Finally, Sherlock breathed, “He’s here. Dupin just confirmed it.”

“OK,” Violet Hunter took a deep breath through her nose, counted to seven, and then exhaled, counting to eight as she did so. “How many?” she asked, raising her voice to barely a whisper.

“Five,” Sherlock also kept his voice as low as possible, “Moriarty, Holy Peters, two others, a male and a female, identities unknown at this time, and Irene.”

“So they did bring her,” Violet couldn’t believe it.

“Shut up,” Sherlock hissed, trying to listen to Dupin over the earpiece. Then he blew out a long breath. “One of his Militia was disguised as a nun. She told them that the cloisters are under renovations.”

“Brave woman.”

“They’re en route to the sanctuary,” he turned his torch back on. “It’s time.”

“Sherlock,” Violet looked down at him. In the orangish-yellow light of the torch, he looked ghoulis,
the shadows making the rings under his eyes and his sharp cheekbones more prominent than usual, more like a skull than a face. “Let Interpol handle this. Let them make the collar. We don’t…. you don’t have to do this.”

“He’ll kill her,” he said simply. “Irene. He will kill her.”

“I know and I get it and I understand you two have a past and that’s fine. I have a past too but…. Sherlock, sometimes there’s collateral damage and it can’t be helped.”

“You sound like my brother,” Sherlock narrowed his eyes at her, black in the lack of light.

Violet almost said You look like your brother but refrained. “Sherlock, if Irene is really, truly your friend, like you said, she would not want you to risk your life for her a second time.”

“After Moriarty kills Irene, he will kill you and John and Mary and Molly and Greg and Mrs. Hudson. Then he will give my son to the Earl of Winchester and I simply cannot allow that to happen,” he explained in a flat, dispassionate voice.

If he had been emotional, if his voice had wavered in fear or risen in anger, Violet would have argued further. But she recognized that cool, rational tone of voice and knew there was nothing more she could say or do to dissuade him. “OK,” she gave in. “Just remember what I said during the train ride here.”

“About the profile you created for him?”

She shook her head. “About the mind games, how he’s going to try and screw with your head. He’s a classic narcissist. He’s using fear to control you. Don’t believe anything he says. We didn’t give them enough time to plan anything like The Fall or the Crime of the Century. We left MI-6 out of the loop on purpose so the mole couldn’t report back to him. Even Mycroft will understand that once he finishes being pissed off. John and Mary, Molly and the baby, even Mrs. Hudson, are under armed, undercover surveillance. And…” she hesitated then plowed on. “And he knows now what the Earl did to you as a child. He’s going to mix truth and lies in order to get you off-balance. Don’t let him,” she finished sternly. “Do not let him in.”

“You underestimate me, Agent Hunter.”

“You underestimate the damage PTSD can do,” she countered. “I hear your nightmares. I know what you went through during the Great Hiatus.” Then she pressed ruthlessly on his greatest pressure point, “Look at John. All it took was enough of a push to send him over.”

“What they did to Joh-”

“Will be the same thing they plan on doing to you,” Violet interrupted. She clumsily dug into her coat pocket with her left hand, having planned for this moment before they even left for France. “Give me your hand.”

Sherlock held out his hand, splaying his fingers wide. She placed a simple gold ring in the middle of his palm. He sniffed, “What? Will this turn me invisible?”

She cracked a smile. “It’s John’s wedding ring. When he was unconscious, I… borrowed it.”

Sherlock held the ring closer to his eyes now, shining the torch light on it. “Why?”

“To ground you, when Moriarty starts pressing you, pushing your buttons,” Violet explained. “Put that in your pocket. If you feel Jim getting inside your head, I want you to touch that ring and
imagine John’s here telling you that what Moriarty is saying is not real.”

Sherlock folded his fingers over the wedding band then very carefully tucked it into his jeans pocket. Then he leaned forward and kissed Violet on the cheek then the forehead then very, very lightly on the lips. “To battle then?” he whispered as he pushed a strand of auburn hair off her face with his fingertips.

“Let’s do this,” Violet raised her right hand, the one holding the gun. She inched along the wall carefully, muttering at Sherlock, “I need light.”

Sherlock crouch-walked to the entry and shined the light down the hallway. Then he surrendered the torch to Violet and let her lead. She crossed her wrists in perfect formation, while aiming her gun at whatever the beam of light touched. Sherlock stayed close behind her, letting her take the lead. Instead of the almost dead-run they made while going down to the cells, they inched their way painfully slowly up them. Finally, when they reached the top, Violet briefly gave the torch and gun to Sherlock. He turned the torch off and tucked it into his coat pocket while Violet shrugged off her coat, abandoning it at the top of the stairs. “I’ll get it later,” she explained. “My phone and wallet are in my pockets and my passport is inside my shoe.”

“Sensible,” he handed her weapon back to her.

“You know it,” Violet lowered her gun but kept her arms straightened, prepared to raise them back up at anytime. They inched towards the sanctuary, making as little noise as possible. Soon, they could hear voices, Irish voices. Violet shivered as they drew closer.

Then her childhood prayer came back to her in a rush…

St Michael the Archangel, defend us in battle; be our protection against the wickedness and snare of the devil… May God rebuke him, we humbly pray, and do thou, O Prince of the heavenly hosts, by the power of God, thrust into hell Satan, and all the evil spirits, who prowl about the world seeking the ruin of souls. Amen…

… he’s just a man. Jim Moriarty is just a man. He’s a brilliant man, an evil man, but just a man.

Then she thought a different Michael, another Michael was also just a man but a kind man, a fair man, a man who exposed frauds and liars. A man who had a family: a wife, a daughter and a sister who all loved him very much. The man had loved his sister too much; he had widowed his wife and orphaned his daughter in order to try and save his sister.

And the sister wished she could trade places with him.

It should have been me, but it wasn’t me. I can’t bring Michael back, but I can avenge him.

Suddenly, she didn’t feel so bad about Sherlock’s request for her to take the shot anymore.

“Ready,” she asked.

Sherlock folded his lips together, shook his head.

“What? What is it?”

“Does my hair really look bad? Be honest.”

“Does your… are you fucking kidding me?” she struggled to keep her voice down.
“He is aware of my vanity, this,” he pointed to the closely cropped cap of auburn curls, “Will be the first thing he targets.”

“It looks fine,” Violet hissed at him. “You can pull off red with your pasty skin. Happy?”

“Not particularly, but thanks,” Sherlock frowned.

“Oh my God,” Violet rolled her eyes. “OK, can you stop whining about your hair and put your hands on your head so you look like a hostage?”

“One more thing.”

“What?”

“Put your finger on the trigger.”

“What?”

“They’ll notice, he’ll notice, Jim,” Sherlock snapped at her. “If your finger is not on the trigger, he’ll know it’s a ruse.”

“But my… my hands, what if they start shaking?”

“Then make sure my death counts,” Sherlock locked his kaleidoscopic eyes on her feline ones. “Put your finger on the trigger or else this is all for nothing.” He put his hands on his head.

Violet’s hands had been steady since Les Deux Magots. She placed her finger on the trigger, sent a silent prayer to an archangel she hadn’t thought about since she was seven years old and pointed the gun at Sherlock’s head.

“Move,” she snarled, getting into character.

“Lay it on thick,” he advised her.

“Don’t tell me how to do my job!” she snapped.

“There you go. Perfect.”

“Shut up,” Violet allowed her voice to rise up into a shout, wanting the people inside the sanctuary to hear her.

Keeping her gun trained on his head, Violet followed Sherlock into the sanctuary.

As they progressed, Violet and Sherlock both took assessment of the situation. So far, Dupin had been correct. There were only five people present (excluding the Interpol sharpshooters hiding in the balconies and choir loft, of course,) and they all stood in front of the altar.

To the far left, stood a man neither Violet nor Sherlock recognized from any mug shots or wanted lists. He was young, maybe nineteen or twenty and desperately unattractive. Suppurating spots, buck-teeth and huge flakes of dandruff drifting from his scalp onto the shoulders of his snug black track suit. The lad should have been the poster child for “Awkward” if he hadn’t been holding a Kalashnikov AK-15 with relative ease. The tight track suit also showed off his physique, a similar build to Sherlock’s, slender but strong.

Dandruff Boy pointed the AK-15 at Irene Adler. Violet, firmly heterosexual and intensely focused on her task, felt her breath catch in her throat. The Woman really was exquisitely beautiful. Even in
this situation, wearing the black jumper, designer jeans and black boots Julia Stoner had forced her to put on before abducting her, she still looked stunning. Someone had styled her jet black hair into its signature chignon. Her face however was free of all cosmetics. Her skin looked as smooth and white as a lily. Her eyes were even more striking in person than in photographs, the palest of greens. But those eyes were pinned in fear. They had lit up with hope when she recognized Sherlock when he got close enough. But when she saw that he was being held by gunpoint, the hope died and she merely looked like an extremely lovely and absolutely terrified woman.

On the other side of Irene was the other body guard, a thirty-something year old woman that Sherlock and Violet also didn’t recognize. She looked mousy, plain brown hair, plain round face, plain black jumper, plain khaki trousers and sensible black shoes. She would have looked like a librarian if it wasn’t for the Sig Sauer in her hands. She didn’t point it at anyone however. She didn’t have to, didn’t have to show off like Dandruff Boy did.

To the far right, Holy Peters stood with his hands clasped in front of him, letting all of his ferocity show now. His tight black T-shirt showed off every ripple and line of every massive muscle he possessed. He looked like he didn’t have a neck. He wore loose black trousers and black military boots. He also wore a shoulder holster and it was unsnapped, ready for a quick draw. He had been cleaning his nails with a switchblade but clicked it shut and tucked it in his pocket when he saw Violet and Sherlock enter. Then he stood up even straighter, reminding everyone he was the tallest man in the room.

“Hey girlie,” Peters drawled at Violet with a leering smile.

Last but definitely not least, stood Jim Moriarty, apparently engrossed with something on his Smartphone. Underneath his heavy overcoat (similar to the one Richard Brook had worn on the rooftop of St Bart’s,) he wore a sleek oily black suit paired with a midnight blue dress shirt and black and blue tie. His shoes were shined to a high gloss. His hair was also carefully combed back and he was now clean-shaven. When he saw Sherlock and Violet enter, he cackled with glee and tucked his mobile into his trouser pocket.

Sherlock had been right, the first thing Jim attacked was Sherlock’s appearance, “Oh my God, I love it. I just love it, the ginger.” He crooned. “I mean, the black was so you but this red is so yooooouuuu!” he trilled.

“Personally, I’m not such a great fan of gingers myself,” Sherlock snarled, shooting Violet a dirty look as she circled him, the gun constantly trained on his head.

“I told you,” Violet made her voice sound resigned. “This is not personal.”

“Feels a bit personal.”

“Hey, I was very clear, Sherlock. I need to get out of England, away from your fucking brother. You promised you could help me escape, but you didn’t. Jim said he could.”

“‘Dear Jim, please will you fix it for me?’” Sherlock quoted himself in a sneer.

“Keeping her gun fixed on Sherlock’s head, she turned her head towards Jim. “Well, can you?”

“You offered me three things, Miss Violet,” Jim held up three fingers. “I only see one,” and he pointed at Sherlock.

“I’m not giving you the account number and PIN to the offshore accounts until my safety is guaranteed,” Violet reminded him. “And I’m not giving all the money back either. I’m taking a
percentage, as compensation for what you did to my brother.”

Jim nodded. “Yeah, OK, that’s fair. It was a shite thing to do to the journalist. We’ll talk about your cut after we get everything buttoned up. But…” he lifted his perfect eyebrows as he put his hands in his coat pockets.

“The Letter, Sherlock,” Violet faced Sherlock again. When Sherlock didn’t move, she took a step closer to him, the gun fixed to his chest now. “A head shot would be a quick kill, a chest shot would not, as you know. There’s no John here to save you now and if I shoot you, it wouldn’t be personal, but it wouldn’t surgery either.” Violet glowered at him. “You don’t even care about the girl who wrote this love letter to the boy, and any insurrection the boy tries to instigate to reinstate her to her throne will come to nothing. The girl will still be just a stupid girl instead of a princess and the boy will be hanged for treason. Don’t die for a stupid girl, Sherlock.”

The entire time, she prayed, *Dear God and St. Michael, please don’t let my hands shake, please oh please oh please…*

“I don’t plan on dying for anyone,” Sherlock drawled.

“Not even for Johnny-boy?” Jim taunted him.

Her back to Jim and his crew and his hostage, Violet lifted her brows high and fixed her eyes on his. Sherlock received her message loud and clear: *Don’t let him in.*

“Not even him. As you must have finally deduced since I’m alive and not dead after the Fall,” Sherlock made himself sound utterly bored. “Dying is so 2012. And 2014 come to think of it.”

“Then give me The Letter. *Slowly,*” she added, lifting the gun back up to his face again.

“I always knew you were a liar,” Sherlock snarled as he reached into the Belstaff for The Letter.

“You’re not in a position to bargain, Sherlock!” Violet interrupted in a bellow. Mulishly, Sherlock held out The Letter as if it were contaminated with anthrax. Violet snatched it away from him. “I’m sorry,” she whispered as she backed away from him. “I really am. I wanted to be friends. I wanted the cover story to be real.”


Hiding her relief, Violet lowered her arm. Granted, Mousy Girl still pointed her gun at Sherlock, but her hands seemed nice and steady.

Violet turned from Sherlock and started to approach Jim but he wagged his right finger at her. “Ah-ah-ah,” he cooed. “Give it to him, the gun,” he tilted his head towards Peters.

Violet shrugged nonchalantly while she desperately tried to think what Moriarty’s next move would be. She knew Moriarty wasn’t going to escape, not while surrounded by Interpol agents. But Sherlock insisted that not only did they have to save Irene from Moriarty, but they had to keep her out of Interpol’s clutches as well.

She was, after all, supposed to be dead.
Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Sherlock frowning, that special frown, that extremely displeased frown that elongated his already narrow face when he just made a particularly critical deduction that he couldn’t share out loud. *Great. What do you see, Sherlock?*

“Fat chance,” Violet responded coolly. She eyed Peters, “Not with him around.”

“Aw, you don’t trust me?” he repeated himself from lunch, leering at her.

“About as much as you trust me,” Violet reminded him. “And you forget, I’ve read your FBI jacket. I am fully aware of what you like to do to women and little children. Lose the gun and the knife,” she commanded.

“Fine,” Peters grinned good-naturedly. He took his gun out, held it and the knife up for her to see, then placed them carefully on the altar as if they were the chalice and the ciborium.

“Turn around,” Violet kept her finger on the trigger finger. She had no problem “accidentally” shooting him.

“Jesus God,” he complained. “You know, we’re going to have to work together now, right?”

“Doesn’t mean I have to like it.”

Peters rolled his eyes and slowly twirled. “Happy?”

“Ecstatic,” Violet deadpanned.

“Super. Now give me your fucking gun.”

Violet gave him one of her infamous bitchy little smiles, hiked up her bulky jumper, revealing the concealed holster. Smoothly, she holstered the Beretta 84F Cheetah instead.

Jim cackled. “Oh, I like her! I really do. She’s much more fun than you,” he informed Irene. “This one didn’t go all soft in the presence of the Great Detective.” He stretched out “Detective” into six melodic syllables. Then he snorted, “I Am Sherlocked. Seriously?”

Even in the midst of her terror, Irene still managed to shoot Jim a filthy look. Then Dandruff Boy poked her not-so-gently in the side with the barrel of his assault rifle. Irene blanched, shuddered, crossed her arms and looked at the floor.

Meanwhile, hands still on his head, Sherlock frantically tried to think of a way to warn Violet of Jim’s next play. He had deduced it when Jim put his hands in his pockets. But to warn Violet would be to give away the Game, to tip Jim off that Violet was still firmly on Sherlock’s side.

“Wait!” he called out, desperate to stall them.

“Shh,” Jim held his finger to his lips, “Daddy’s talking.” Then he calmly, pleasantly commanded Violet, “Give the Letter to Mr. Peters now.” Violet complied without batting an eye. After Violet handed the Letter over to Peters, Jim gave her a gentle smile, a hospitable smile. “Welcome to the winning team, Miss Hunter,” he cooed, holding out his right hand.

Too late, Sherlock realized, *He already knows Violet’s still on my side. She gave herself away.*

“Violet, don’t,” he cried before he could help himself. But Violet had already taken Jim’s hand…her right hand in his. Violet was right-handed, she wouldn’t be able to reach the hidden holster with her left hand before Jim played his underhanded trick.
Sherlock saw this, deduced this all seconds before it happened. With the Sig Sauer still trained on him, there was nothing he could do. Helplessly, he watched Jim reach inside his coat and smoothly pull out a taser. Before Violet had a chance to react, Moriarty pressed the prongs of the taser to her exposed throat and there was a loud crack followed by a harsh buzz. Violet convulsed, made a strange sound, a combination of a shriek and a grunt. Then she collapsed at Moriarty’s feet in a heap.

Her fingers twitched then stilled. Her chestnut plait looked bright and fiery against the ancient granite floor.

All of this took perhaps five, six seconds.

Sherlock could smell something hot and electric in the air. He struggled to remain unmoved.

Jim fixed his dark eyes onto Sherlock’s as Peters handed The Letter over. Jim smiled as he tore the envelope in half then in quarters without even looking at it. He threw the pieces up in the air, like confetti. “Is this the best you can do?”

“Not quite,” Sherlock said in a clipped voice.

There was the audible sound of several guns being racked at once. The Interpol agents showed themselves, all of them dressed in black, all of their guns pointed at Moriarty. Mousy Girl’s russet eyes widened but she did not lower her gun. Neither did Dandruff Boy. Irene swayed on her feet, close to her breaking point.

“Put your weapons down.”

Even though he couldn’t see him, Sherlock recognized Dupin’s voice. Softly, he informed Jim, “No more games now. It’s over, Jim.”

“Oh no, you caught me and I would have gotten away with it too if it hadn’t been for those pesky kids,” Jim said in a flat monotone.

Then the song *Stayin’ Alive* reverberated throughout the sanctuary.

Jim rolled his eyes. “Do you mind if I get that?”

“Oh, by all means,” Sherlock spat, sensing another one of Jim’s games about to begin.

“Déjà vu all over again, eh Sherlock?” Moriarty slowly reached into his trouser pockets. Then he shouted, “I’m just getting my mobile, boys. I’m not reaching for a weapon.”

He took out his mobile, swiped the screen to unlock then said, “This is Jim Moriarty, how may I help you?” just as pleasantly as one could please. Then his face stretched out into the biggest smile imaginable. “Oh… you’re going to want to listen to this. Listen closely.” He shouted up to the Interpol agents. “I’ve got the volume turned up as loud as it will go.”

He put his mobile on Speaker. “Go ahead love. Tell Sherlock what you just told me.”

There was a frightened sob, then unintelligible mumbling.

“Louder honey, don’t be shy,” Moriarty sang into his mobile.


Sherlock closed his eyes. The name had never been released to the media, for her protection, but
Sherlock knew who she was before she identified herself.

“I-I-I used to work for PharmaLogistics. I was the one wh-who blew the whistle about how they messed up the Trifexanor packages.”

“Tell everyone where you are, love,” Jim coaxed her.

“Th-they tell me I’m in France?” Clarissa sounded like she couldn’t believe it. “Um, I’m in a town somewhere in Normandy… um… Mont-Saint… Mont-Saint-Michel?”

“Now,” Jim stepped over Violet’s unmoving body to stand closer to Sherlock. “Tell me what you’re wearing, sexy girl.”

Clarissa sobbed. “A v-vest, like… like what the suicide bombers wear.” Her voice shook like mad now. “I’ve got a bomb strapped to me.”

Sherlock strained his ears, listening for a clue, any clue for the woman’s whereabouts.

Moriarty strolled closer to Sherlock. “How much time is left on the clock, dearest girl?”

“An hour and forty-five minutes,” she wept.

“Bless you doll.”

Before Jim rang off, Sherlock clearly heard the rattle of pans, then a crash, then a muffled “Merde!”

He suppressed a smirk.

Jim pocketed the mobile in his coat then took yet another step closer to Sherlock. He didn’t suppress his smirk. “Can you solve it, Mr. Holmes?”

“I can, already did, obvious really. But you won’t let me announce it, will you? If I explain where the unfortunate Clarissa Sutton is, you’ll kill her,” he tilted his head towards Irene, “Then me, then you’ll detonate the bomb strapped to Miss Sutton, making quite a mess as I’m assuming that with denotation there will be massive causalities?”

“Too right there will,” Jim’s eyes glowed with triumphant malice. “What are you going to do about it?”

Knowing Dupin hid amongst them, he called up to the Interpol agents, “Go. Find her and defuse the bomb.” He tilted his head at Jim, “In the spirit of fair play, since we know those nitwits do not possess the same mental acumen as you and me, may I give them a hint?”

“I don’t know…”

“Oh, come on Jim,” Sherlock all but fluttered his eyelashes at him. “It’s almost Christmas.”

“Oh why not,” Jim crowed. “Not like it’s going to help them anyway. It takes about an hour to get from here down to the village anyway.”

*But it will help Dupin,* Sherlock thought. *He’ll only need thirty minutes, tops.* “’She sells seashells by the seashore,’” he rattled off the damnable tongue-twister with ease.

He knew Dupin would *ratiocinate* that the unfortunate Clarissa Sutton was in the back room of a seafood restaurant. The only problem was there were several seafood restaurants in Mont-Saint-Michel. It would be up to Dupin to determine which one was the correct one.
“You heard him, move along,” Jim yelled. “Else the entire village goes up in flames.”

Jim made a shooing motion with his hand. One by one, the agents filed out, off to contain the immediate threat. “That’s one bit of housekeeping done,” Jim rotated his head then rubbed his neck. “I need a massage”

“Oh, is the stress of the job getting to you then?” Sherlock put his hands behind his back, looking innocently inquisitive.

“You have no idea,” Jim groaned. “Right, so,” he looked first at Violet, lying in a crumpled heap on the floor then at Irene, still weaving on her feet. “Peters, clean that up,” Jim waved his hand at Violet like she was dog excrement. “And get rid of it.”

“How boss?” Peters’ eyes shone with eager malice.

Jim shrugged. “Get creative. Just don’t leave any DNA behind. Not like last time.”

Peters flushed, but he holstered his gun and put his knife back in its sheath. “Should I get the offshore account information from her first?”

“No. That would involve waiting for her to wake up. We don’t have that kind of time.”

“You sure? That’s a lot of money you’re leaving on the table, boss.”

Jim rolled his eyes. “As was discussed in our meeting, we can make money elsewhere. For example, next year is an election year in America. I just had two presidential candidates ring me up, wanting me to rig the elections next November. Trust me, what they offered to give me more than makes up for what Hunter stole from us.” He pointed down at Violet’s motionless body. “Get. Rid. Of. Her.”

On that note, Peters picked Violet up as easily as a child does a doll. “Take one last look at your girl, Holmes.” He held Violet in his arms in a bizarre parody of a groom carrying the bride over the threshold. Violet’s head flopped backwards, her lips parted. She looked dead.

But her right arm suddenly jerked, as if its own volition.

“Look,” Jim chortled. “She’s waving good-bye.”

“Yeah, Holmes, say good-bye.” Peters smiled at Sherlock, “Heard that she stepped into your shoes quite nicely during Harry Watson’s murder investigation while you and the good doctor were poncing around Paris. Shame that she never figured out it was me who took the drunken barrister out.”

Sherlock sniffed. “I’ll be sure to let John know then.”

“Somehow, I have the feeling you’re not going to get the chance.” He nodded congenially to Jim, turned and walked away, carrying the limp Violet. Sherlock involuntarily took a step forward, but Mousy Girl cocked her weapon and Sherlock froze. Feeling an icy sensation spread throughout his body, he watched Peters carry her out.

“I’ve sent her to her grave… but she’s got one foot in it already. Two possibilities now…”

Once Peters and Violet were gone, Jim sauntered over to Irene. “God, you got so boring, you know that?” he leaned forward, his face close enough to hers for a kiss. “Weak. Pathetic, just another woman in love,” he whispered the last word. Then he straightened and started removing his winter
coat. “She’s yours,” he told Dandruff Boy. “Once you’ve finished with her, finish her.”

“Sherlock,” Irene gasped as Dandruff Boy grabbed her roughly by the crook of her arm.

“Irene,” Sherlock called her tranquilly. As usual, his thinking was its best when the situation was at its worst. “Do not... misbehave, as you do to make your way in the world. Do not dominate, just fall to your knees and submit to your fate.”

Irene’s eyes glinted and a ghost of a smile appeared on her lips. “Good-bye Mr. Holmes,” she started to say, but Dandruff Boy grew impatient. He grabbed Irene by her obsidian hair and yanked hard. Irene whimpered instead as Dandruff Boy pulled her out of the room.

Some of the tension loosened within Sherlock. Irene, he knew, still had a fighting chance. I have to get out of here. I must to locate Peters before... before...

Violet’s own words echoed in his head, I’ve read your FBI jacket. I am fully aware of what you like to do to women and little children.

He ached for John, not wanting to face Moriarty by himself... again.

But he was alone and there was nothing that could be done about that. To battle then...

He tucked his hands in his jeans’ pockets. Felt the cool metal of John’s wedding ring against his skin. Remembered how that ring had felt against his cheek when the two of them stood in the shadows of Notre Dame.

After Dandruff Boy had dragged Irene out, Jim turned to Sherlock. “I told you I’d burn the heart out of you, didn’t I?” He ticked them off on his fingers. “John, The Woman, The Other Woman. I’ve decided that Mrs. Hudson is rather useless so I’ll leave her be for now, but I might hook her up with some acid-laced weed. Just for a laugh, really. After that, I’ll leak to the press who Mrs. Watson really is. I don’t need Magnussen’s old connections to do that. Then, there’s the Lestrades to contend with. Mmm, I really do have some catching up to do with Molly Hooper. But first, I want to play a game, one last game, Sherlock.”

“I’ve lost my taste for games.”

“Lies,” Jim purred. “You live for them. You’re alive because of them. If I hadn’t sent out that broadcast on New Year’s Day, you wouldn’t be here.”

“Here is not exactly a wonderful place to be at the moment.”

Jim dug into his jacket pocket and produced a pair of shiny handcuffs. He tossed them at Sherlock. Sherlock didn’t flinch, didn’t budge. He let the cuffs hit him in the chest then watched them fall to the stone floor. The clatter of steel on stone reverberated throughout the church.

“Put them on, Sherlock,” Jim stopped smiling.

“Nope,” Sherlock searched again for John’s ring. When he felt the small gold band again, he asked, “What’s the game, Jim?”

“Eighteen Questions.”

“Don’t you mean Twenty-One Questions?”

“No,” Jim tilted his head, surveying Sherlock. There was actual pity in Jim’s eyes. “Eighteen. We’re
playing for your son’s life, Sherlock.”

Sherlock wrapped his fingers around John’s ring. “He’s. Not. Mine.”

Jim shook his head. “Denial ain’t just a river in Egypt, Sherlock.”

“Puns aren’t your forte, Jim.”

“OK,” Jim threw his hands up. “I’ll play along and pretend the brat belongs to Lestrade. He’s still Molly Hooper’s son, though, isn’t he? He’s still going to the Earl of Winchester, a man you know… intimately.”

Sherlock forced himself not to react to Jim’s words. Pretended to find Jim’s statement banal beyond response while in his Mind Palace, he summoned the voices of the people he actually cared about to keep him right, keep him steady.

Immediately, Molly sternly told him to Focus.

Following that, was John assuring him that he believed in him… I know you’re for real.

Finally, Violet firmly instructing him Don’t let him in.

“How do we play?” Sherlock made himself sound intrigued.

“I ask you a series of eighteen questions. For every question you get right, is a year reprieve little Henry gets from the Earl. For example, if you get fifteen out of eighteen questions correct, we won’t send Henry off until he’s fifteen years old.”

“We?”

“Oh, we’re going to kill the Lestrades, make no mistake. And Henry’s not going with you. Everyone knows you’re terrible with kids. So the boy will stay with us, until he’s ready… unless you get all eighteen questions correct.”

“I’m assuming these questions compromise British national security?”

“Of course.”

“Therefore implicating my brother?”

“Yeah. Do you care?”

“Nope. Shall we begin?”

Moriarty turned to the Mousy Woman. He held out his hand for the Sig Sauer. “I’ll take that, turtle-dove. I no longer require your presence.”

The Mousy Woman regarded Jim for a moment. Then, just as quickly as Jim had tased Violet, she trained her gun on his forehead and pulled the trigger.

Jim Moriarty had been wrong. Sherlock did not cherish the look of surprise on Jim’s face as the bullet ripped through his brain.

Chapter End Notes
I absolutely loved it. It exceeded my expectations and my expectations were high. It didn't feel weird at all to have the "modern" Sherlock set in Victorian times. The one liners were fantastic. I still giggle when I think about "I like your potato." and "Why don't you elope already?" And Fatcroft and Molly's stache FTW.

I had a feeling that Moffat and Gatiss were lying about it being a one-off (what? The showrunners lie? NO WAY, you say.) I just remembered seeing Setlock pictures of the Christmas special: Martin Freeman and Amanda Abbington were standing in a graveyard, MF was wearing his John Watson's Black Coat of BAMFness and AA wearing Mary's long red coat. Then the "official" pictures were released and I thought maybe the pictures I saw were unused promos from Series 3. I wasn't surprised that it all took place inside Sherlock's head, but it worked and to paraphrase Dumbledore "Of course it's happening inside your head. Doesn't mean that it's not real." Or something like that.

The ONLY thing that bugged me was modern Mary in the Xmas special did not look as pregnant as she did in HLV. Other than that, I thought it was perfection. I can't wait to watch the encore this Sunday and I'm sooo glad I pre-ordered the blu-Ray.

I'm sure some of the special will bleed into the final chapters of this story, but nothing huge is going to change plot-wise. Comments and crit are always welcome!

Have a fabulous week, everyone! :^)
"Well, the Great Detective stared down at the body of the Napoleon of Crime with his lips pressed tightly together. That was anticlimactic..."

Jim Moriarty is dead, but Violet, Irene, Clarissa Sutton and the entire population of Sant-Mont-Michel are still in trouble...

TRIGGER WARNING: there's a scene with Irene that might be upsetting... but (mild spoiler) the payoff is worth it, a bad guy definitely gets his comeuppance.

Happy Almost Tuesday!

Chapter Thirty: Sliver of a Silver Lining

Well, the Great Detective stared down at the body of the Napoleon of Crime with his lips pressed tightly together. That was anticlimactic.

Sherlock watched the pool of blood create a ruby halo around Jim’s head, similar to the one that had flowed around Eduardo Lucas’ head.

Déjà vu all over again, eh Sherlock?

For half-a-second, Sherlock was on the roof of St. Bart’s again, looking down in horror at the man he thought was Jim Moriarty but who he now knew was Richard, Jim’s twin lying in a puddle of his own blood. Knowing now he’d have to jump, have to die...

He could even feel the summer breeze ruffling his curls.

Then he shook himself. Looked up at the woman who beat Jim Moriarty.

Only... she wasn’t the one who actually beat Moriarty, was she?

Sherlock felt a smile spread on his face as he watched her rifle through Jim’s pockets, taking and pocketing his Taser. Then she removed his wallet and started removing the cash, stuffing the bills in her back trouser pocket.

“You’re very good,” Sherlock complimented the assassin with the plain brown hair, plain round face, plain black jumper, plain khaki trousers and sensible black shoes.

Lightning-quick, he reviewed the initial deductions he’d made of her when he had stepped into the sanctuary: Killer, armed. Two guns (one in her hand, one in a secret holster on her ankle) and a knife (in a sheath on her other ankle.) Orphan. Younger Sister. Divorced. Childless. Grew up in

He knew she was lethal upon sight, but had no clue her sights were set on Moriarty, not him.

Sherlock’s smile broadened, but it was not friendly. It was downright feral. But he felt no animosity towards her. How delicious it was, after all this time, to still be surprised. How fun.

*A sliver of a silver lining in this gruesome evening, he thought. And the night is still not over, however; I may be able to use this delightful woman to my advantage. “What do they call you?”*

“Marie Devine**, Mousy Woman finally spoke as she stood up. She spoke The King’s English but with a very faint Russian accent. The unobservant would barely register it.

“Pleasure to make your acquaintance, Miss Devine,” Sherlock ignored the fact that the name she gave him obviously was a lie.

“Likewise,” she gave him a curt nod as she stepped over Jim’s body.

Jim’s body… Jim was just a body now… or again, depending on one’s point of view.

“Why?” Sherlock gestured down towards the body with a flap of his hand. “Your feelings towards me are ambivalent at best, obviously. What’s in it for you?”

“I was well-paid and I owed a good friend a favor.”

“Ah. I see. Do I know this… friend?”

“Yes. She has a message for you, in fact.”

“Pray, continue.”

“She says to tell you that you and her are quits. The bullet in his skull makes up for the bullet in your chest.”

“Fair enough. Anything else?”

“Yeah. Never touch her husband again.”

“Hm,” Sherlock loosened his fingers around John’s wedding ring. “Of course. But I’m curious. Arent’ you afraid of the repercussions caused by this act? And do be quick with your explanation why or why not as I have a friend and a fiancée to save.”

(Of course I’m fucking afraid of retaliation,” Marie said flatly. “But if I didn’t do it, somebody else would have. At least I had brains enough to get paid for it.”

“Explain, briefly.”

“Jim coming back from the dead was the worst thing to happen to La Ligue des Roux. Between him and Richard, it was a race to see which one would run our organization into the ground first.” She pursed her lips and narrowed her eyes in disgust. Now she looked less like a mouse and more like a rat. “After all, we’re supposed to be a secret society. Hard to stay secret with those two idiots appearing in court rooms and on television and great big screens in Piccadilly. I lost a lot of work because of those two.” Her russet eyes appraised Sherlock, “Lost a lot of work because of you as well.”
“Apologies,” Sherlock did not sound even the tiniest bit contrite. “However, it was Jim’s flamboyance and Richard’s instability that undermined the Cult of the Consulting Criminal. I merely finished the job the twins began with their games. That was why a merger between Moriarty’s people and Magnussen’s people was being seriously entertained.”

“We’re going broke,” Marie confirmed. “Magnussen had money.”

“Had,” Sherlock purred. “He also had no heirs. Currently Denmark and England are squabbling over the legacy. Apparently Magnussen didn’t like to pay taxes to either country.”

“He was a greedy pig,” Marie confirmed with a nod. “Glad he’s dead. He got my brother killed and hurt my friend. He would have been bad for business, bad for us.”

“Who’s in charge now, may I ask?”

“Who’s always been in charge, you mean. The old lion. Professor James Moriarty Senior.”

“Father?”

“Grandpa.”

Sherlock tucked that fact away in his Mind Palace. “What was your compensation for this job?”


Sherlock whistled. He couldn’t help himself. “Impressive. I cannot compete with that sort of fee, but I do have a job for you if you’re interested.” He tilted his head, his eyes a silvery-blue in the dim light of the church. “Consider it compensation for any lost work I may have caused you,” he added silkily, his resonant voice echoing throughout the sanctuary.

“Depends,” Marie tilted her head. “What’s the pay and what’s the gig?”

“Fee is negotiable, but not nearly as high as what you’ve just earned.”

“Understandable. Fee is determined by risk.”

“Also understandable. With this job, there is no killing involved, unless in self-defense.”

“Help you save your fiancée and your… friend?”

“Precisely.”

Marie considered his proposal then shook her head. “Ten thousand Euros for rescuing Adler,” Her face twisted again, making her look rat-like once more. “I’m cutting you a deal because I detest that little shit that has her right now. We’re really scraping the bottom of the barrel when it comes to new recruits,” she sighed. Then she recovered, perhaps recalling she had just murdered one of its most prominent members. She scowled at Sherlock while saying in a stern, firm voice, “But I’m afraid you’re on your own with your fiancée. I will not confront Peters.” She shook her head. “I’ve got enough heat to worry about since… you know…”

She waved her hand at Moriarty’s body.

“I see,” Sherlock felt his gut and chest tighten. “Where will he have taken her, Peters?”

“Slow and painful?” Marie scratched her cheek, thinking. “What time is it?”
Sherlock checked his watch “10:03.”

Marie nodded, “The car park, outside the village. You know which one I’m talking about?”

Sherlock sucked in a breath. “Yes, of course,” he muttered as he checked his wristwatch. “We must part ways very soon. Will ten be adequate enough compensation for rescuing Irene?”

“Yeah, it’ll cover my travel and lodging expenses. Every bit helps.”

“Do you need assistance in your escape?” Sherlock asked politely.

“Ja,” she safetied the Sig and tossed it at Sherlock. When he caught it, she grinned, “Congratulations, you killed Jim Moriarty.”

“I’m wearing gloves,” he tartly reminded her.

“Then take them off,” she advised him as she rounded the altar. She pulled out a black duffel bag either Jim or Peters had stashed behind there. “And put the handcuffs on.” She spoke quickly now, time being of the essence. “Jim had no intention of letting you win, or live. He was going to send your little boy to the Earl the minute you were dead.”

“He’s not mine,” Sherlock lied again, feeling a strange, sharp flicker of pain as he did so.

Marie ignored him as she dumped the contents of the bag onto the floor. Several knives, razors and other tools used for cutting cluttered to the stone floor. As Marie selected a scalpel, she explained. “Jim conveniently forgot to tell you the part that for every answer you got wrong, he was going to cut you. The grand finale was going to be to cut out your heart and mail it to your brother.”

“Who would have just sautéed it and ate it,” Sherlock sighed. “Did Jim lose his taste for fire? He always told me he was going to burn my heart out.” As he spoke, Sherlock started peeling his gloves off. He had deduced Marie’s proposition and had decided it was a sound plan.

Mycroft, of course, would see right through this ruse, but that didn’t matter since Jim’s death occurred in France and therefore not in MI-6’s jurisdiction. This scene was for Interpol, not for MI-6.

Besides, he really did not need another premeditated murder charge on his record.

“Jim got a couple of cuts in, but then you managed to surprise him. You figure out the details how you managed that. You two tussled. You managed to get the gun away from him. He came after you with this,” she waved the scalpel. “You defended yourself. Game. Set. Match.”

This game never ends, Sherlock thought as he clicked the cuffs over his wrists. The cubs are dead. The lion lives. I may have stopped a villain but in the process, created a monster.

“Right, let’s get this over with,” Sherlock bent down to present his face but straightened up again when she drew close. “Not too deep, I don’t want scars.”

“Jesus, you really are vain, aren’t you?”

“Not really. Just don’t see the need to add more to my collection.”

“I’m sure there’s a fascinating story behind that comment,” Marie rolled her eyes then beckoned him with the scalpel. Sherlock lowered himself to her again and she deftly swiped at Sherlock’s face. A thin, red slash immediately appeared on his cheekbone. Sherlock winced and swore. She sliced a few other places, creating superficial but painful cuts on his other cheek, forehead and knuckles. Great
big red droplets of blood streaked his ashen face. He truly looked like a victim of some horrific torture.

Marie tightened the handcuffs, because Jim would have made sure Sherlock was as uncomfortable as possible. The metal bit into the delicate skin around his wrists. His fingers immediately started tingling due to constricted blood circulation.

Marie picked up the gun Sherlock had put down when he was putting the handcuffs on and took the safety off. She placed it in Sherlock’s hands.

“Stand back.” Sherlock told her as he pointed the gun at Moriarty’s body. He squeezed off three more rounds, placing one in Moriarty’s shoulder, the other two into the air. When Marie looked at him quizzically, Sherlock shrugged. “I’m a terrible shot.”

“Word is you got Magnussen in one shot.”

“That was dumb luck,” Sherlock mumbled then cleared his throat. “At any rate, no one will believe that I killed Jim on the first go. Not with my hands cuffed.”

Marie didn’t care. She was thinking big picture. “How do I find you to get my money?”

“You don’t find me, I find you,” Sherlock told her sweetly. “Rest assured I always pay my debts.”

Marie considered this, nodded then padded towards the door, in silent pursuit of Irene and her abductor.

Before she slipped away, Sherlock asked, “Who was your brother?”

She paused, her gloved hand on the stone archway. “He was a forger.” She looked over her shoulder, her eyes finally blazing with some emotion. “He helped my friend and others like her get out of the business and become civilians again.”

“I’m sorry for your loss,” this time Sherlock was sincere.

Marie nodded then hesitated, drumming her nails on the stone wall. “Listen, I don’t know if your fiancée was in on all of this, helping you trap Jim Moriarty or if she really was trying to sell you out. But I’d let Interpol go get your fiancée. You don’t want to get into Holy Peters’ crosshairs. He’s dangerous.”

“How do you know?”

“He used to be my husband.”

As she turned to leave, Sherlock called out, “Is the tattoo on your lower back a blue butterfly?”

Marie froze. Then, she reached around herself and rucked up her black jumper, showing off a delicate butterfly with sapphire and periwinkle wings.

“Thank you,” Sherlock breathed.

She nodded and let go of her jumper. With that, she disappeared into the shadows.

“Fascinating,” Sherlock hummed then looked down. As the blood dripped down his ghostly pale face, Sherlock looked like one of the demons the archangels would have done battle against… until they realized he was on their side. Meanwhile, the blood from Jim Moriarty’s head flowed viscously towards the scraps of paper, the sad remains of The Letter that started all this trouble.
“Idiot,” he told Jim’s corpse. “You tore The Letter up because you thought it was another forgery.” He leaned forward and whispered, “It was the original. I gave the forgery to Mr. Trelawney-Hope. I had hidden the original in Dupin’s flat. You never would have found it.”

Jim Moriarty just stared unseeingly up at Sherlock, at the ceiling, at nothing.

“I would have won, you know,” Sherlock sneered at the body. “I could have beaten you without assistance. But you have been defeated and I conquered your brother and I’ll crush your grandfather as well.”

Then he realized he was being ridiculous and childish, wasting time by speaking to a corpse.

Violet needed him.

He spun around and stalked out of the sanctuary, a vicar in the field of valor. Once outside the church, he would of course, assume the role of the victim. It wouldn’t be difficult, the cuts really did hurt. But for Interpol and any other witnesses, he had barely escaped with his life.

But for now, he was the winner…. Obviously.

And as the obvious winner got into character, bowing down, staggering as he walked so the Interpol agents left behind to guard the abbey would think he really was traumatized, Irene Adler had sank down to her knees.

She had heard Sherlock’s veiled instructions loud and clear. As distasteful (practically misogynistic) as his recommendation was, Irene knew she really had no other recourse. Besides, it wouldn’t be the first time she had relied on her… feminine charms… to extricate herself from a grim predicament.

“Please,” she sobbed, putting on a BAFTA award winning performance that would have impressed even Sherlock Holmes. Actual tears rolled down her lovely face.

“Please, don’t do this,” she begged in a quivering voice as she clasped her hands together, pretending to appeal to her guard’s humanity.

She knew better. She knew this little shit had no humanity. She could deduce just as well as Sherlock. She knew the boy had been bullied, emasculated and beaten down. He was a perfect recruit for Moriarty and his kind. Like the way a blacksmith takes a broken plow and hammers it into a sword, they took his inferiority complex and reshaped it into a superiority complex instead.

She knew he would feed off of her fear, her pleas. He would feel even more powerful as he forced himself upon her. Get off on it.

Irene pushed back against the waves of revulsion as she continued her act. She had no desire to have any part of him touch any part of her. However, Sherlock was right, it was better to be on her knees instead of her back. On her back, she would be powerless. On her knees, she still had options. Such as biting.

So when he roughly shoved her into an abandoned cell and started to tell her all the filthy things he was going to do to her before he murdered her, Irene began her manipulations, acting hysterical while dropping to her knees, putting herself in the position she wanted to be in instead of the other way around. She started talking, started crying so he’d focus on her face, her mouth. She wished she would have had time to put lipstick on in order to draw more attention to her lips, but it couldn’t be helped.

Fortunately, she was quite an actress. She had gone to a famous performing arts school in America
when she was a young girl. Some of her school friends and many of her rivals had called her “Triple Threat” because she could act, dance and sing.

She had wanted to be an opera star. Life’s funny sometimes, she thought in that detached way of hers that Sherlock had found endlessly fascinating.

Already, the little megalomaniac was falling for her tricks. He had safetied his AK-15 and set it in the corner of the room. He approached her with a swagger, his hand on his belt buckle.

“So, you’re going to do what a man tells you to do instead of the other way around for once,” he sneered, “Never fancied dominatrices much. Don’t like bitches telling me what to do.”

“Please, just let me go, let me go,” Irene moaned, “I’ll keep my mouth shut, I promise. I won’t say anything, I won’t talk.”

“Yeah, you won’t talk alright,” the horrid young man with the pustules and dandruff started lowering his zip, “Cause your mouth will be full of my cock.”

*What. An. Idiot*, Irene thought with scorn. Jim Moriarty wouldn’t have fallen for her act, hadn’t fallen for her act, actually. While she had been his prisoner, his abuse of her had been non-sexual… but her new scars that matched the ones Sherlock had on his back. Jim had promised he would skin her… he just left out the bit that he was going to use a riding crop to flay her instead of a knife or razor.

Oh, that Jim… what a joker, he was.

Irene lifted her eyes up to the disgusting youth hovering over her now. He was reaching into his trousers to take himself out for her. She knew he would next grab her face and force himself inside her mouth.

Irene knew while she wouldn’t exactly enjoy biting his member, she wouldn’t regret it either.

Only, she didn’t have to bite anything… just as Dandruff Boy had roughly seized her chin there was a loud *pop*. Irene felt something warm, wet and spongy splatter her face and hair. Suddenly, as if he were drunk, her attacker’s legs gave way and he nearly collapsed on top of her. Irene shrieked, a genuine screech of surprise, and pushed him away from her. He flopped to the floor beside her and rolled to his back.

Irene recoiled with a shout when she saw a rather large hole in the boy’s forehead.

Then it hit her that what had sprayed her was splashes of blood, flakes of bone and gobbets of brain. Irene nearly vomited. She covered her mouth and sternly told herself *don’t be sick, don’t be sick, don’t be sick*. Once she had her breathing under control and her stomach had stopped churning, she forced herself to look up, expecting to see Sherlock, or perhaps even Violet.

Instead she saw Sherlock’s new friend, the assassin Marie Devine.

“Come on,” Marie lowered her gun, a no-frills Ruger LC9, the weapon Sherlock had observed was hidden in her concealed ankle holster. “You got to get out of here,” she extended her hand.

Irene took it and let herself be helped up. “Thanks.” She tried to wipe the blood and bits of brain off of her face. “Where’s Jim? Are he and Sher-“

“Jim Moriarty is dead, for real this time,” Marie started grinding the rumor mill in earnest. “He tried to kill Holmes but Holmes got to him first. Self-defense.”
“Oh God,” Irene wiped her bloody hands on her filthy jeans. “What about his fiancée?”

“He went to get help for her but…” she hesitated. “Look, I’m sure you’ve made Peters’ acquaintance while you’ve been detained.

Now a genuine shudder ran up and down Irene’s spine. James Moriarty Senior had forbidden Peters to touch her, true. But that sadist had found other ways to torture her. Irene knew in her heart of hearts that if Sherlock hadn’t put this *Great Game* in motion today, she would have gone around the bend.

“We’ve met,” Irene said shortly. “He showed me photos on his camera phone of his favorite... projects.” She pressed her fingers against her lips again, feeling nauseous again.

“Oh, the coffins?” Marie rolled her eyes. “Yeah, that’s his trademark. He likes to hide bodies of his victims inside of coffins. So there are two corpses at the funeral and two corpses at the burial. The guest of honor and the unknown stowaway. No one is the wiser.”

“Mm,” Irene nodded, saying nothing. The last photo had been of an empty coffin, where Peters had assured her she’d be spending eternity.

“’Cept, you’re not going to be dead when we stick you in the box,” he had chortled.

Irene shook herself, told herself to stay in the moment just a little bit more. “But what?” she asked Marie.

“But Peters will be expecting MI-6 or Interpol to show up while he’s working. He might have even prepared for Holmes to escape from Moriarty.” She twirled the gun around in her hand, as if she were some American cowboy. Then she held the Ruger out to Irene, holding the muzzle so the grip was facing Irene. “He wouldn’t be expecting *you.*”

Gingerly, Irene took the gun. She checked the sights and the clip. She licked her lips. “I…”

“Or you can run. Save your own arse,” Marie shrugged. “Up to you. But really... you don’t have to confront him. You’ll just have to untie her after he leaves and he will leave since Interpol is here and MI-6 is probably en route.” She pulled out an old flip phone to check the time. “You’ll need to hurry though.”

“Where is she?”

“The car park and Peters has at least a twenty minute lead on us, maybe more. Fortunately,” Marie smiled. “I know a short-cut. Or you can just come with me. I’m getting off this rock and the hell out of Europe.”

Irene stared at the gun, debating. What little strength she had left after her initial abduction by Julia Stoner was ebbing. Her nerves were completely shot, what mental strength she had maintained had been spent on manipulating the vile bastard now lying dead on the floor.

She nearly said Yes to Marie. *Yes, darling, let’s go, let’s run away from all of this. Let’s flee to somewhere sunny, somewhere where no one speaks a word of English. Let’s get tan and drink fruity cocktails with paper umbrellas and forget who and what we are.*

“Oh bloody hell,” she sighed. “I can’t go. With you, that is. I owe Sherlock a debt. He’s put his life in jeopardy twice to save mine.” She took the safety off the Ruger. “The least I can do is attempt to save his fiancée.”
Marie was no fool. “Not to mention the fact that you’re supposed to be dead, but one word from Holmes can make you very un-dead?”

“Yes, yes, that as well,” Irene snipped. “Now, where is this short-cut?”

“Follow me,” Marie crooked a finger. Irene summoned up the very last bit of strength she had left and followed her.

**

21 December 2015
Abbaye du Mont-Saint-Michel
Le Mont-Saint-Michel, Lower Normandy
Monday night
10:56 PM

The snow had stopped but the air was heavy with damp and cold.

The wintry chill helped rouse Violet from unconsciousness, but not completely. She felt foggy, disjointed. Completely unable to string a coherent thought together, the only things she could clearly perceive was that she was outside in the cold and everything hurt… again.

Her hands tingled and throbbed, especially the fingers she had sprained earlier during the bombing that had leveled her doctor’s clinic. Every single muscle burned and throbbed much like a charley horse, only it was her entire body, not just a leg or an arm. Her head ached dully but the roaring in her ears wasn’t quite unpleasant.

Vaguely she wondered why her arms were over her head and why her jeans felt damp.

Did I piss myself when Jim Tased me… she thought dimly as she tried to sit up.

Then realized she couldn’t sit up.

Then it dawned on her what the roaring sound was.

The tide!

“Fuck!” Violet’s eyes flew open. All her synapses were firing now.

Violet twisted her head left to right then left to right again, trying to gain her bearings as the tide rolled in. Despite the meager lighting, it didn’t take her very long to figure out she was in the car park that tended to flood when the tides came in. “Fuck!” she cried out again as she futilely jerked on her handcuffed hands.

Meanwhile, the tidewaters lapped over her feet then receded, then returned.

“Shit, shit, shit!” Violet panted, feeling ocean water soaking the back of her legs.

Holy Peters had carried her all the way down from the abbey and somehow got her through the town unnoticed. He had taken her to the car park that was notorious for becoming flooded when the tides came in. He had laid her flat on her back then put her hands over her head and around a lamp post, then handcuffed her wrists together and left her fate in the hands of nature.

Violet’s feet scrambled, trying to find purchase but the rising water made the pavement slick.

Memories of being water-boarded flashed in her head and Violet sucked in a breath, just as the water
rolled over her shoes and soaked her ankles and socks. “Fuck, fuck, fuck,” she cursed, trying to stave off the panic building within her.

Meanwhile the tide water continued to rise.

Violet took a deep, whooping breath and clumsily grasped the pole with her hands. She spread her legs in a position that would have been vulgar in any other situation. Using her thighs and abs, she attempted to lift herself into some semblance of setu bandha sarvangasa, better known as the yoga move simply called bridge pose.

Her shoulders and wrists protested violently against the unnatural position she contorted them into. She didn’t hold back the guttural cry of pain as she tried to lift herself up into a standing position as the water continued to rise. Her thighs and calves quivered madly with the effort. Her back bowed into an arch.

Then her feet slipped and she landed back down with a splash. The tide rushed in again, covering her feet, ankles and knees with frigid seawater. Continuing to swear, Violet awkwardly twisted her hips to the side, as if she were stretching her back and abs out after a strenuous workout. Then she rolled onto her shoulder while simultaneously drawing her knees to her chest. Cold water rolled in again, even higher this time. Violet spit out a mouthful of sea water as well as a hank of her own hair as she awkwardly propped herself up on her elbow. Then she hoisted her hip up in the air as she straightened her arm. With her arms painfully crisscrossed now, Violet managed to stand up inelegantly.

And nearly fell over again as the tide roared in, coming up to mid-calf. Somehow, Violet managed to stay on her feet as the rushing water rocked her. But instead of completely receding, the water covered her feet.

“Shit,” Violet straightened up the best she could. Shivering from the cold air and the cold water as well as her own shattered nerves, Violet looked around the darkened car park vainly as the cold water buffeted her legs again, coming up to her knees this time. When it receded, the water level remained just about at ankle level.

Violet did not waste time tugging on the handcuffs. She knew better. She knew Peters would make sure they were clasped properly. Her hair had fallen out of its braid and besides, she had no kirby pins to use to pick the lock. At any rate, the cold had numbed her fingers so she wouldn’t have been able to pick the lock anyway. She didn’t have her mobile or her gun or even her coat. If she managed not to drown, she could still succumb to hyperthermia.

Her throat tightened as she remembered arriving for the first time as an invited guest to 221B Baker Street. Sherlock had pushed her into the Thames so MI-6 couldn’t detain her then had jumped in after her. They had arrived, wet, dirty and hating each other. John Watson had fussed over them, had treated their hypothermia, insisting that they sit closely next to each other on the sofa for the body heat.

Then she cried out as another wave rocked her. She lost her footing, slipped and fell again, making a bigger splash than before.

She felt something tearing in her shoulder and she didn’t hold back the cry of pain. Despite this new agony, she struggled to sit up, spitting out water and gagging. As the tide receded, she scooted back on her behind and managed to shimmy up into a sitting position. Her shoulders screamed bloody murder. Her arms burned with the effort of keeping them over her head and her hands began to tingle and throb. However it felt a hell of lot better than when she had been standing with her arms all twisted up.
The tide came in again, coming up to Violet’s chest. When it rolled out, the water level remained at
her waist. Violet tried to stand again, but her legs had gone as numb as her fingers. Her entire body
started shivering, in a last ditch effort to stay warm.

Violet still had not figured out why Sherlock liked her. According to her original profile, it was
because he found her intriguing or more specifically, found her problems intriguing. Once he solved
her case (clearing her name and sending her back to America,) he would lose interest in her. The
more she got to know him, really know him, that first assessment didn’t feel right.

If Violet would have done a little more introspection, she would have realized that it was because she
shared several personality traits with John Watson. One of those traits was having nerves of steel.

But like John, like anyone human, Violet was not invincible. As the water crept up on her, as her
body started yielding to the chill, she had reached her breaking point. Having endured the sensation
of drowning once, she knew how she was going to die, how horrible it was going to be. “Oh God
no, please. Not like this,” she groaned weakly as the water continued its merciless ascent, splashing
her face as it rose to her shoulders then receded only to her chest.

“Help,” she tried to cry out, her voice shaking as badly as her body. Her rotator cuffs burned and she
couldn’t feel her feet anymore. Her wet hair clung uncomfortably to her neck and face. “Somebody,
please…”

“Hold on!” a woman’s voice called from the distance. “Where are you?”

“Here! I’m here!” Violet tried to shout but a great rush of water splashed her face, covering her chin.
As the tide drew back to prepare for its next assault, Violet summoned up what little strength and
power she had left. She stretched out her neck and hollered, “I’m here, I’m here!”

She nearly sobbed when a powerfully bright beam of light hit her in the eyes.

There was a great splashing as Irene clumsily waded towards her. “Shit, handcuffs,” she snarled,
appraising the situation. From behind the lamp post, she told Violet, “Try to hold still, darling. I don’t
want to shoot your thumbs off.”

“What?” but Violet instinctively balled her fists and spread her arms as far as she could.

“I’m joking, darling. Honestly…and hold this” Irene shoved the torch in Violet’s hand, the beam
pointed at Violet’s manacled wrists. She then plucked a kirby pin out of her chignon. In two shakes
of a lamb’s tail, the cuffs popped open. Violet then nearly face-planted into the rising water but Irene
grasped her by the upper arm. “Come on, none of that nonsense. On your feet,” she ordered her
firmly, always the dominatrix.

Violet let Irene help her stand, but then they both had to clutch the lamp post as another powerful
wave rolled in. Irene cried out as it were a wave of fire instead of sea water, but she clung to the post
and Violet as tightly as possible. “Not your first time on the pole, is it?” Violet asked her with
chattering teeth and smiling blue lips.

“Aren’t you droll,” Irene muttered. “Come on, I’m not in much better shape than you, dear.”

Together, they staggered towards higher and drier ground, supporting each other. When they reached
the incline that would lead them to safety, they both collapsed to their hands and knees. Inch by
agonizing inch, they crawled their way up away from the treacherous sea. Once safe, Violet rolled
onto her back and Irene lay on her stomach. Both women shivered and panted, trying to catch their
breath.
Finally, Violet rolled her head over, “Did you see Peters?”

“No, thank God. He must have done a bunk and good riddance.”

“Thank God,” Violet agreed with her eyes closed. When she opened them, she impishly asked, “Aren’t you supposed to dead?”

“Aren’t you?” A smile quirked up on Irene’s ashen face.

Violet returned the smile. She stretched out a tremulous hand, “Violet Hunter.”

Irene accepted it, her own hand just as shaky. “Irene Adler. Pleasure.” Wincing, she pushed herself off the ground. “Come on. We can’t stay, we’ll freeze to death. We need to warm up and we need to find the boys.”

“Sherlock?” Violet immediately sat up and felt her head swim.

“I don’t know, darling,” Irene straightened up and held out her hand. “Let’s go find out.”

But it was slow-going and painful. Violet didn’t know if the muscle cramps were from the cold or from the Taser. Her strained shoulder pulsed with every beat of her heart. Every step she lurched forward felt like she trod on razor blades. Hazily she remembered how she drank in her mother reading her bedtime stories. Remembered how she drank in her mother’s dulcet voice as she read out loud the story of *The Little Mermaid*, the original Hans Christian Andersen fairy tale. Violet had been horrified and fascinated by the grim cautionary tale about how you shouldn’t change yourself for someone you love. How the little mermaid had traded her tail in for legs in order to win the heart of the prince, but every step caused her pain, as if knives pierced her flesh over and over. And the prince had left her for another anyway.

She saw the sanitized Disney movie version of the fairy tale in the theater when she was thirteen years old. The happy ending had pissed her off.

_But isn’t that what I’m doing? Changing who I am to win over someone else? Someone who’s destined to leave me anyway?_ Violet numbly thought as she tucked her cold hands underneath her armpits to warm them. _And all I have left is pain with every step I take._

Irene threw her arms around Violet. Holding her close, she ran her hands up and down Violet’s arms. “Come on,” Irene prodded her gently, helping Violet walk. “We’re not far from the city,” she added briskly, as if they were on a pleasant stroll. “Let’s keep going and while we walk, I’ll tell you what really happened the day I first met Mr. Holmes. I first noticed Sherlock in the papers, wrapped in naught but a bed-sheet. Needless to say, I was intrigued…”

But Irene and Violet didn’t get very far when they saw a stream of people leaving the city on foot, on bikes and on scooters. “What the hell?” Violet asked thickly.

“Oh God, the bomb,” Irene froze.

“Bomb, what bomb?”

“Peters had taken you by then.” Irene quickly explained how Moriarty had managed to smuggle in the unfortunate pharmaceutical whistleblower and strapped a suicide bomber’s vest to her.

“They’re evacuating the city,” Violet gasped then took an unsteady step forward. “Sherlock… Dupin, we have to… we have to go…”
“Yes, but we’re not going into the city. We’re going to stay with the evacuees until we know for sure where the boys are,” Irene pulled Violet back. “Look at us. We’re both useless. You’re completely spent and I’m nearly so. We’re both going to drop from shock if we don’t get warm somehow.”

Anguished, Violet lifted her eyes up to the beautiful cathedral high on the hill. *Saint Michael the Archangel... defend us this day in battle...* She shook her head, nearly in tears now. “But Sherlock’s with Jim Moriarty, I can’t, not again…”

“What?”

“I knew about the F-f-fall, I... figured out what Jim, I mean Richard, fuck. *Moriarty*. I figured out what Moriarty had planned for Sherlock but I was too late to stop it.” Tears welled in Violet’s eyes as she choked out, “I’m going back. I’m stopping Jim. I c-can’t... I w-won’t…”

“You can. You will,” Irene snapped, again wresting control, as was her nature.

“D-don’t f-fucking tell me what to do!” Violet’s teeth chattered worse than before.

“My darling girl, don’t you know when you’ve been beaten?” She traced a finger over Violet’s frigid cheek. “Mm. I bet you’re fun in bed, when you’re not as cold as an iced lolly that is.”

“Y-y-you’re hitting on me at a time like this?”

“Yes. I’d prefer you stay angry and alive than sentimental and then wind up dead. I rather thought I’d despise you, but I actually like you. Your pigheadedness is positively adorable.”

“R-r-really,” Violet shivered violently now. “M-m-most people compliment my ass.”

With a smirk, Irene stripped off her black jumper, “Well, it is a sweet bum, I’ll give you that.”

“What the hell!” Violet took a stumbling step back.

Standing there in nothing but a dirty white camisole, soaking wet jeans and scuffed-up boots with a gun tucked into her waistband, Irene laughed. She tossed the jumper at Violet, “Here, you need it more than I do. Go on, take your wet shirt off and put mine on at once. It’s not as soggy as your things and people are coming towards us. I’m sure we can sweet-talk someone into surrendering a coat or a blanket.” Irene turned to point out the wave of people flooding the one road leading out to Saint-Mont-Michel, the road that could flood if the tides rose high enough. “Plus, I’m sure there’s at least one doctor or nurse in that crowd.”

Violet could only stare numbly at the raw, red gashes visible above the lacy trim as well as a few brownish-red stripes on the camisole where her wounds had bled through. “Oh my God, Irene, what happened?”

“Hm, oh.” Irene craned her head, as if she really could see her own back. “That. Yes. That was... unpleasant. But it was better than the branding irons he had originally planned on using.”

Violet snorted as she pulled her soaking wet jumper over her head, “Unpleasant.” Violet then yanked Irene’s cashmere jumper over her head. The cashmere wasn’t much for warmth, but it was mostly dry other than the hem and cuffs plus the material itself was a decadent balm against her abused skin. “How are you even w-w-walking?”

“Percocet, loads of it,” Irene replied promptly as she sauntered over to Violet. Wrapping her arms around Violet once more to try to keep both of them warm, she explained as they both started staggering towards the influx of evacuating tourists and natives. “Jim wanted me alert for tonight. I
strongly suspect once the drugs wear off, I’ll collapse from the pain and possible infection. Peters
didn’t believe in cleaning the wheals after administering them. I may even be running a fever, which
could explain why the cold actually feels good.”

“S-s-so y-y-you’re saying w-we should hurry.”

“That would probably be in our best interest, darling,” Irene purred and together The Woman and the
Other Woman limped forward to join the throng of frightened people.

The evacuees weren’t the only ones who were terrified. In the kitchen of Le Relais du Roy, Clarissa
Sutton sat wide-eyed on an office chair. Her hands were duct-taped together but her feet were free.
However, she remained seated and un-moving because wired to the suicide vest was a pressure
detonator. If she stood up, the bomb would explode.

Heroically, she staved off tears but she couldn’t stop her lower lip from trembling.

All the while the clock ticked down, beeping with every second lost… 19:39… 19:38… 19:37…

In front of her, C. Auguste Dupin sat on the dirty floor, boots off. He sat in Baddha Konasana, or
what Violet would have recognized as “Butterfly pose.” His breathing was relaxed and even.

Lying on his belly, with his hands cuffed behind him, was one of Moriarty’s people. He was the one
who had called Jim and held the prepaid mobile while Clarissa had answered Jim’s questions. He
had also killed the waiter who had dropped the pot. The clatter of the pot hitting the floor was what
tipped Sherlock off where Clarissa might be.

The body of the unfortunate waiter lay next to the fuming criminal.

“All you have to do is tell me which wire to cut,” Dupin reminded told Moriarty’s ruffian. “Then this
is all over.”

“It’s over either way,” the ruffian said, or tried to say. Dupin had overpowered him by breaking his
nose. “I ain’t afraid to die.”

Clarissa sniffled. A pleasantly plump married woman of 43 with two children, she had been
convinced by her husband that going forward with the information about Pharmalogistics was the
Right Thing to Do.

“All will be well, Mrs. Sutton,” Dupin assured her without opening his eyes. “You will be home
before Christmas.”

“In a box,” the ruffian chortled, “In a tiny box.”

Dupin sighed. “You are ruining my Zen,” he reached for his boots as if he had all the time in the
world. But he slipped them on and stood up faster than anyone had anticipated. Then he kicked the
ruffian soundly in the face, breaking his jaw.

Clarissa sucked in a shuddery breath. “You should go,” she whispered, unable to stop the tears now.
“Just please, tell my husband and my boys I loved them with all my heart.”

“Chéri, you will tell them that yourself,” he gave her a little pat on her wet cheek, albeit it a light one,
so not to add weight to the detonator beneath her seat. “It will be alright.”

An Interpol agent burst in, “Just got word from Agent D’Aramitz,” he spoke in English to give
Clarissa hope. “Moriarty is dead.”
“Monsieur Holmes?” Dupin demanded as Clarissa started sobbing in earnest.

“Alive. A mess, but alive,” the agent told him. “He’s on his way. He insisted.”

“Of course he would,” Dupin mumbled then asked, “Any word on the women?”

“Oui, they were just found. One of yours from the Montmartre Millices caught up with them before anyone… errr… official intercepted them,” the agent sounded robustly confident but kept his dark blue eyes fixed on the digital clock pinned to the heavy vest Clarissa wore over her Christmas jumper and black trousers. She had been on her way over to a neighbor’s holiday party when she was grabbed.

Dupin, observing Clarissa’s increasing distress, asked his old colleague in French: “When is the bomb squad arriving?”

“Fifteen minutes.”

Dupin puffed out his cheeks and glanced at the clock. 16:49… 16:48… 16:47…

Still in French, he told his once friend and colleague, “Remy, you should go. Find Sherlock and tell him to go.”

“Why would Sherlock want to go?” Sherlock demanded in English as he swaggered into the kitchen. “Looks like all the fun is here.”

“Mon dieu,” Dupin’s face widened at the sight of Sherlock’s bloody face, wrists and knuckles. Makeshift bandages had been hastily wrapped around Sherlock’s hands, but he continued to bleed through the cotton wool. “What happened mon ami?”

“I improvised,” Sherlock droned. “I’m pleased you located the correct restaurant.”

“Thank you,” Dupin knelt in front of Clarissa. “When there is more time, you will need to explain how you deduced she was hidden in a seafood restaurant but right now…” he pointed to the base of the chair. As Sherlock knelt next to Dupin, he explained, “Spring-loaded, even if she rises a millimeter…”

“Boom,” Sherlock craned his head this way and that. “Were you able to determine which wire to cut to stop the clock?” he asked as he rose to his feet.

“Oh, yes that was easy, it’s the red wire,” Dupin also rose. “However, the problem is that there’s a double denotation set on top of this detonator,” he pointed to the large digital clock pinned to Clarissa’s chest. “As well as the pressure detonator underneath her so if we cut the red wire…”

“A second clock begins with a shorter countdown. Sherlock folded his mouth into a thin line that should have been impossible to achieve with his Cupid’s bow lips. And if Clarissa gets up…”

“Exactly. That’s what I cannot figure out.”

“Fortunately, I know a subject matter expert,” Sherlock fished his mobile out of his coat pocket, wincing. He dialed a number from memory and without even saying hello, asked, “Enjoying your exile?”

“Not really,” John Mitton replied from Rome, pacing in Irene Adler’s old flat. “Tell me you have good news for me, Sherlock.”
“Yes and no. Yes, we have Julia Stoner in custody and she confessed to everything. No because I’m in a room with a bomb that has a countdown clock, a double detonation clock and a pressure detonation.”

Mitton whistled. “Whew, you don’t fuck around, do you Holmes? How much time on the clock?”

“Fourteen minutes, twenty-five seconds and counting.”

Mitton didn’t waste time cursing. “Facetime me.”

Sherlock hit the icon then handed the iPhone to Dupin. “Show him.”

Holding the iPhone, Dupin circled Clarissa, stopping right in front of her again.

“OK, this is going to be tricky because of the pressure detonator but it’s doable. Which of you chaps got the steadiest hands?”

“Normally that would have been me, but,” Sherlock held up his hands, showing Mitton. “I daren’t risk it.”

“Then it’s me,” Dupin handed the iPhone back to Sherlock. “Remy, I really insist you leave,” he murmured as he pulled a pocketknife out of his coat pocket.

“I did not abandon you when Marie died. I am not leaving now,” Remy stood at parade rest but a bead of sweat trickled down the side of his face.

“How touching,” Sherlock grizzled as he flitted around the kitchen. “Here,” he held up a filet knife he had located. “Use this instead. It will cut anything and you, Remy? If you’re staying, be useful and hold the mobile.”

As Sherlock handed off the knife to Dupin, Mitton demanded, “OK, have you lot located the second clock’s exact location?”

“Oui, it is inside the vest. I can see the lump and Madame Sutton said she can feel it vibrating against her skin. Remy, show him,” Dupin handed the iPhone and his pocketknife to Mitton.

“Right, this makes it more complicated,” Mitton groaned from the iPhone.

“Wouldn’t want it any other way,” Sherlock purred. “We will have to defuse the first clock in order to open the vest then immediately cut the wires to the second clock.”

Clarissa whimpered.

“Show me the first clock again,” Mitton demanded. Remy held the screen up again. “Hello, love, you’re going to be aces in a mo’, just hang on a bit more. Can you do that for me?” Mitton crooned to Clarissa, who nodded, then froze, afraid of setting off the bomb. “OK, mate,” Mitton said to Dupin since no one had been formally introduced. “This looks pretty basic, but that’s to throw you off, lead you into a sense of false security…”

“Explosives 101 later, perhaps,” Sherlock growled, eying the clock.

“Cut the middle blue wire,” Mitton got straight to the point. “Then as smoothly as possible, open that vest, locate the second clock. There should only be two wires, but if there are three, cut the red wire and the blue wire. Got it?”

“Oui,” Dupin confirmed then turned around. “Remy,” he jerked his head. “Sherlock,” he jerked his
head to the other direction.

Sherlock, of course cottoned on faster than Remy. “We each open our side of the vest simultaneously. Do not touch her until Dupin tells you to and use a light, swift touch.”

Clarissa whimpered again as Remy and Sherlock flanked her. “It’s alright, ma’am,” Remy attempted to console her.

“No, it’s not,” Sherlock scrunched up his face. “Why lie to her, it’s hardly comforting.”

“Alright, cutting the first wire on three…” Dupin announced loudly. Remy placed the iPhone on the nearest countertop as Sherlock readied himself, hands hovering over his side of the vest. Remy mirrored him. Meanwhile the first clock continued its countdown... 11:01... 11:00... 10:59...

“Three…two… one!” and with that, Dupin slid the knife under the middle red wire and sliced cleanly through it. The clock immediately started flashing 10:58 over and over. But another beep signaled that the second clock picked up where the first clock left off.

“Now!” Dupin cried. Sherlock and Remy reached down, unbuckled the vest then peeled it open then let go. The chair squeaked, Clarissa gasped and squeezed her eyes shut but the bomb didn’t detonate.

“Relax,” Sherlock scowled. “The pressure detonator will only go off if there is less weight on it, not the other way around.” But as he spoke, his sharp eyes surveyed the situation. Saw the second clock, now counting down 4:45... 4:44... 4:43... Saw how a tangle of red, blue and green wires wrapped around her body.

Just as Dupin was about to start cutting again, Sherlock seized his wrist. “No. Cut the blue and green wires, look,” he pointed at the snarl of wires. “The red wire was never attached to any of the explosions, but the blue and green wires are. The red wire is another red herring, pardon the redundancy.”

“So, the first clock could have counted down and not set off the bombs?” Remy fumed.

“There’s really no time to point out your stupidity,” Sherlock spat. “Dupin, if you truly trust me, cut the blue and green wires, do it now!”

Dupin sucked in a breath, shook off Sherlock’s hand. He seized the blue and green wires, sawed through them, then recoiled from the chair.

The second clock started flashing 4:35 over and over.

Everyone exhaled a long sigh of relief. Even Sherlock.

“At the moment, the only thing Mitton could see was the kitchen ceiling since Sherlock put the mobile on the counter. He asked, “Everyone still whole?” “Did you hear an explosion?” Sherlock called over his shoulder to his iPhone on the counter.

“No.”

“Then why are you asking asinine questions?”

“Not much longer, Madame Sutton,” Remy knelt beside her. “Bomb squad is on their way to deal with this last little problem.”

“I was told just prior to coming here,” Sherlock muttered in Dupin’s ear, “That your people located
Miss Smith and Miss Adler?”

“Yes, thank God.”

“Then once the bomb squad arrives, let us go make sure the ladies remain with your people and not with my brother’s people.”

“Agreed,” Dupin snarled while Remy knelt in front of Clarissa, consoling her, letting her know the end was in sight. His back to Remy, he whispered to Sherlock, “Mycroft does not get this win.”

“Play your cards right, you may regain your post in Interpol,” Sherlock told him.

Dupin smiled and rubbed his salt-and-peppered stubble thoughtfully. “Actually, I was thinking that the private sector might be the way to go after all.”

“Oh?”

“Oui. Work my own hours, charge my own rates.” His summer green eyes twinkled. “Is the world big enough for two consulting detectives?”

Sherlock scowled for a minute, his pride wounded at the thought of no longer being the only consulting detective. Then he shrugged. “Even I can’t be everywhere at once.” As the bomb squad made their noisy entrance, Sherlock murmured, “We’re redundant. Let’s go find Miss Smith and Miss Adler.”

Remy trotted after them into the cold winter night, “Don’t you want to stay and watch the grand finale?”

“No. Boring,” Sherlock sniffed like a mortally offended prince. His hands and face really hurt. He wanted to change his bandages, have a cup of tea then go to bed.

“I’m sure they can handle it,” Dupin turned and patted his friend on the shoulder. “You take it from here, old friend.”

“If you’re looking to head back to Paris tonight, I just heard,” Remy touched his earpiece, “That Interpol has a helicopter five minutes out. I’m sure they’d give you and your friends a lift back.”

“That would be greatly appreciated,” Dupin smiled. “Sherlock, is your presence required by Interpol any further?”

“Irrelevant, I’ll send my statement to Interpol and MI-6 tomorrow afternoon.”

“Your brother will be furious,” Dupin’s voice was silky as they walked through the silent city.

“I don’t care.”

Chapter End Notes

**Marie Devine is a character from the ACD original story "The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax."

Doyle, A. C., & Morley, C. (1930). The Disappearance of Lady Frances Carfax. The
Chapter Summary

“If you hadn’t allowed emotion to blind you, you would have come to that logical realization yourself. ‘The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning...’”

“You’re really not helping,” Violet rubbed the bridge of her nose...

The gang is all back together and Mary decides to come clean. Feels and angst ensue...

TRIGGER WARNINGS - to quote my beta reader cadoganwest: "For non/con as well as extreme grossness."

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-One: Shavasana.

22 December 2015
La Tour Eiffel
Paris, France
Tuesday evening
6:55 PM Paris time

Violet’s eyes fluttered open. For a moment all she saw were bright colors, reds and blues in an old-fashioned Victorian pattern. Her head ached so she closed her eyes again.

Then she gasped, waking up fully. Where the fuck am I?

Dazed, heart pounding, she sat up slowly. She swiveled her head around, taking in the faded velvet chairs and strange looking pieces of equipment, ancient scientific gear from the looks of it. The tables, bookshelves and chairs were all made from wood and all covered with dust. The bright reds and blues that had disoriented Violet came from the wallpaper. It was so gaudy, it made the garish wallpaper in 221B Baker Street look positively plain. Heavy chintz drapes covered the windows. In juxtaposition with the wooden furniture, thick metallic beams jutted out here and there from floor to ceiling, like support beams of a very old skyscraper.

She blinked then saw Sherlock sitting in a wooden chair next to an antique phonograph, trying to re-wrap his cut-up knuckles. His black brows were furrowed in fierce concentration.

In this environment, she half-expected him to be wearing a frock coat and spats. However he wore a grey T-shirt (inside out) and fleece pyjamas bottoms. He also needed a shave, desperately. She wore the navy sweater he had been wearing yesterday. She also wore a pair of men’s socks and boxers.

As she wrapped the wonderfully soft chenille duvet around her, it all came back to her now. She had
fallen asleep (or passed out, she wasn’t really sure) in the backseat of a tourist’s Audi only to be woken by Dupin, telling her their ride had arrived.

She had expected a government car or van, perhaps even an ambulance. She had frozen in her tracks when she saw the black helicopter, the propeller turning lazily. Her heart had stopped, her mouth had gone dry. Fear and pain had completely immobilized her. Dupin and Sherlock had wasted several precious minutes convincing her she was not being arrested nor detained. They were all going back to Paris, together.

“But we need to leave now,” there had been more than a bite of impatience in Sherlock’s voice, “Before Mycroft’s creatures arrive,”

Clutching the shock blanket a medic had provided her, Violet had whispered, “What about those snipers? They heard me use my real accent. They know that I’m—”

“Sherlock Holmes’ fiancée,” Dupin had finished for her. “Those men, they don’t ask questions.”

Violet hadn’t been fully convinced by that statement. But she had finally agreed to get on the helicopter only because Irene Adler had been looking less and less steady on her feet. Plus, she couldn’t be taken by MI-6 either. Mycroft would have a field day with The Woman.

They had touched down in Paris just as Mycroft’s people touched down in Mont-Saint-Michel. Sherlock’s mobile had started vibrating immediately then incessantly. Sherlock merely switched it off without a word. But he had idly rubbed his bullet-hole scar while his brows knitted in consternation until it was time to take off the seatbelts and disembark.

Violet hadn’t been certain exactly where they had landed. She only knew it wasn’t Charles de Gaulle Airport. But there had been two taxi cabs idling on the tarmac, waiting for them.

Violet had let Sherlock support her as he said his farewells to Dupin and Irene.

“It’s not often I find someone that is an actual pleasure to work with,” Sherlock extended his hand to shake. “You came very close.”

“Merci,” Dupin said dryly as he shook Sherlock’s hand, then he smiled warmly at Violet “Mademoiselle Violet, pleasure making your acquaintance. His eyes twinkled as he said, “So... américaine, no?” He rubbed his goatee in thought. “I used to tour universities to lecture students studying for their masters. When I lectured at the University of Virginia, there was a young lady with hazel eyes like a cat. Bright girl, asked very intelligent questions, said she was planning on a career with the FBI.” Then he shrugged theatrically. “But, she had blonde hair and you are a redhead, so there is no way you’re the same girl, right?”

“Right,” Violet’s voice had been faint. She hadn’t been sure whether to be pleased that an idol of hers had not only remembered her, but had also praised her, or to be afraid because he had remembered her. “I’m not that girl... obviously.”

Not anymore... she had thought, feeling the weight of depression making itself at home on her shoulders and in her chest again.

“Miss Adler,” Sherlock had rumbled when he leaned down to peck the Woman’s cheek. “Stay out of trouble, would you please?”

“But that’s so boring,” Irene had tried to smile but her face shining with fever.

“Come with us,” Violet had said before she could help herself. “Back to London, you’re burning up
from infection. John can treat your back. He’ll keep his mouth shut.”

“John doesn’t quite know that Irene is alive,” Sherlock had mumbled.

“Do you tell John anything?” Violet had sniped at him.

“Only when I can’t avoid it.”

But Dupin had carefully placed his hand on Irene’s shoulder and told them, “I will make sure Miss Adler discreetly receives the necessary medical care she requires.”

“Where will you take her? Not that hovel you call a flat!” Sherlock had snapped.

“Like 221B is a fucking palace?” Violet had snapped back at him. Warm and comfortable, she had lightly dozed during the flight and had started to feel like herself again.

“You should probably not opine on topics you have no knowledge about,” Sherlock had shuddered, thinking about the clowder of cats running rampant in Dupin’s flat amongst the mouldy newspapers and food-encrusted tins.

“I do not wish to inconvenience you,” Irene, ever the coquette, had looked up at Dupin through lowered lashes.

“On the contrary,” Dupin had hooked his arm out, “It would be an honor and a pleasure to have you as my guest. I am actually a big fan. I used to follow you Twitter. “TheWhipHand” was your handle, was it not?”

“Oh,” Irene had sounded genuinely flattered. She placed her hand in the crook of Dupin’s elbow. “You’ll have to forgive me if I’m not up to entertaining, Monsieur Dupin.” Her voice had cracked, the pain medication finally wearing off by then.

“No, no, no, it is I who shall entertain you, you are my guest,” Dupin patted her hand. “But once you are well, I would enjoy to listening to some of your adventures, I’m sure you have a tale or two to share.”

“A lady does not kiss and tell, Monsieur Dupin.”

Sherlock had snorted audibly but Dupin had chuckled. But when Irene, no longer playacting, pressed her hand to her forehead and started sinking towards the ground, he carefully lifted her back up, trying to touch her injured back as little as possible. “I think you’ve been on your own too long, cher.”

Irene had fixed her piercing sea glass eyes into his gentle summer green ones. “I think you have been too,” she told him as he guided her towards the cab.

Dupin had smiled, entranced, falling for her wicked ways. But this particular spell seemed to be working both ways because Irene smiled back at him, just as besotted.

As the cab drove off, both Sherlock and Violet had stared at the fading taillights incredulously.

“What just happened?” Violet had finally blurted out.

“I… I… don’t know,” Sherlock had sounded astonished, as well as he should. As usual, his deduction skills had failed him regarding The Woman. As he had watched Irene and Dupin, all he saw was a cluster of ?????????????? surrounding them.
“I thought she was a lesbian? I mean… that in her personal life she prefers women and, well, except for you, she’s only with men for… uh, work?”

“I… that’s what she told John. She… had a girlfriend when I first met her.” Then the lights had flicked on in his eyes. “Ah. Of course. Stupid me. She’s a sapiosexual.”

“Oh. Like you.”

“Well… yes. I suppose. If labels must be affixed,” Sherlock had started leading Violet, still bundled up in a shock blanket, towards the remaining cab. “Hope she likes cats,” he added in a grumble. Violet, a die-hard Dog Person, made a face and grudgingly let Sherlock help her into the cab. She hated feeling so feeble, but knew she had to allow it. Warmth and rest were the only things that were going to help her bounce back from tonight.

Before she had known it, they were back in the City of Lights, the Eiffel Tower looming over them. “We’ll take the elevator as high up as we can go,” he told her before leaving the cab. “But there will be stairs, I apologize. We’ll go as slowly as you need to go.”

“Where are we going?”

Sherlock had pointed up.

“You’re kidding.”

He wasn’t.

Slowly and painfully, she had crept into one of Sherlock’s Parisian bolt-holes he had used during his Great Hiatus: Gustave Eiffel’s secret apartment at the top of the Eiffel Tower. She didn’t ask questions, didn’t ask him how he got access to the apartment on such short notice, now that it was open to the public. She didn’t ask him if there was a kitchen or a lavatory. She didn’t even notice the creepy wax mannequins of Gustave Eiffel and Thomas Edison. She just locked eyes on a padded bench covered with throw pillows. Disregarding the age of the pillows, she threw them off the bench except for one then curled up into a ball. She felt a sinfully soft blanket being thrown over her and she had fallen soundly asleep.

As she watched Sherlock struggling to take care of his cuts, she vaguely remembered him waking her up to drink a bottle of water and to eat something. She wasn’t even sure what she ate. Could have been an apple, could have been a potato. She had numbly followed his orders and dropped back off into sleep again.

While she had slept, she deduced he must have gone out. He had dyed his hair back to black, for starters. It actually didn’t look too bad. There were also two Monoprix bags by his feet. She saw a loaf of French bread sticking out of one of the bags. There were two large plastic bottles of water next to the bag, one full, one three-quarters empty.

“There’s an electric kettle,” he rumbled, still fumbling with the bandages. “I can make coffee but it will be instant I’m afraid. Or boil water for a Pot of Noodles or soup in a cup.”

“I’m OK, I mean, I’m not hungry,” Violet said truthfully. The idea of eating made her feel slightly queasy. Fortunately her memory was coming back in bits and pieces. She now remembered him taking her shoes off after she had curled up on the padded bench. She then remembered him asking her if she had wanted to change clothes; he still had some things he had left here from his Great Hiatus if she did.

She rubbed her nose against the shoulder of the woolly sweater she wore. It smelled like him.
“How long do we have to stay here?” she sat back down on the padded bench, wrapping the duvet back around her.

“Until tomorrow. We’ll be back in London early afternoon.”

“I see,” Violet tried to run her fingers through her hair but stopped when she encountered a giant snarl. Then something soft hit her in the chest. She looked down at her lap and smiled when she saw the black hair-tie, a “scrunchy”, no less. She had no idea where Sherlock could have even found one of those or how he even knew what it was. As she tied her tangled chestnut hair back, she asked, “Have you talked to Mycroft?”

“I sent my account of what transpired last night via proper secure channels to both MI-6 and Interpol this morning,” Sherlock resumed his attempts to stick Elastoplast to his knuckles but they wouldn’t stick. “I will speak to my brother in person, in private regarding what really happened. I will not send anything in writing, digitally or otherwise because of that bloody mole.”

“Is Mycroft in the glue?” When Sherlock gave her a puzzled look, she shook her head. “Sorry, that’s really old FBI slang, not even sure if it’s used anymore. I meant, is he in trouble with his superiors, because of the continued security breaches?”

“I don’t care if he’s in trouble or not. That’s not my problem. If he would give me the files I requested back in August, I could have solved this issue ages ago,” Sherlock muttered darkly. “I asked him for the files of all MI-6 employees. I told him to just tell me. I would remember them. He’s only given me a portion of the personnel names. He hasn’t told me about the agents under deep cover nor personnel who would be considered insignificant. Janitors, reception, so on and so forth. Blast!” he burst out as another flesh-colored bandage refused to stick to his knuckles.

“Come here,” Violet beckoned him. “You’re going to need to bind those with an ACE bandage or something.” Sherlock picked up one of the Monoprix bags then picked up the wooden chair he had been sitting in. He carried both over, plunked the chair down in front of Violet and handed her the bag. As she dug into the bag and pulled out the cotton wool and antiseptic cream, she asked, “Why hasn’t he given you what you need to solve the case?”

“Because of you.”

Violet looked up, wide-eyed.

Sherlock ran a long finger down the side of her face then presented his hands to her. “He still doesn’t trust you, Mycroft.”

Violet slathered the cream on his knuckles. “Haven’t I proven myself?”

“Not to him, but he doesn’t know about your role last night yet, I haven’t told him.”

“What? Why not?”

Sherlock lowered his eyes. Violet clenched her teeth, counted to ten and finished applying the cream to his hands. As she started wrapping up his right hand, he murmured, “There’s still time, you know.”

“Time for what?” she couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice. *My plans depend on Sherlock telling Mycroft how I helped bring Moriarty down...*
“For you to disappear.”

Violet stopped wrapping up his hand. She lifted her head to find him studying her intently again. But his face wasn’t molded into its usual implacable mask. He looked sad. He looked human.

“I can help you disappear,” he whispered, his long fingers curling around her hands. “I can help you fake your death so you can permanently leave England and live safely somewhere else, anywhere else. You have the means to do so. I know you still have the funds you stole from the gangsters Jack Woodley was laundering money for. You can be free.” He hesitated but didn’t break eye contact. “You can leave, if you want.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

The small room became even smaller, tighter, as if all the oxygen was being sucked out of the room while the walls closed in. Sherlock opened his mouth, thought better of it. He looked away from her, studying their hands.

“Sherlock,” Violet, already deducing that he was dreaming up some falsehood, let go of his hand to cup his chin. Gently, she tipped his face up, making him look at her. “I thought we agreed it was pointless for either of us to lie to the other.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” he admitted.

“Then I’m not leaving.”

“I will still endeavor to clear your name,” he whispered to her.

“OK. But even then, I’m still not leaving.”

“OK,” his voice was barely a whisper.

She smiled. “OK.”

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23 December 2015
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Wednesday afternoon
4:51 PM

Since Mary was not a fan of crap telly, John had decided to read out loud to her instead to pass the time.

Unbeknownst to John, Mycroft had decided to honor Violet’s request to move John from his solitary room at Saint Charles Hospital to Mary’s room at St Bart’s. An hour before Sherlock and Violet had entered Les Deux Magots and before his appointment with Mary, Mycroft had come to visit John to give him the good news.

If The British Government had been expecting a warm reception or even polite gratitude, he was sadly mistaken.

John, free of the restraints, had switched off the repeat of EastEnders he had been watching. He had slid off the bed and pulled on the thin, ugly powder blue dressing gown to go with his thin, ugly white hospital gown and the thin, ugly white socks. Despite the dressing gown, pyjamas and socks, John had still managed to look threatening. He had stood at parade rest, listening to Mycroft while
wearing the facial expression that Mary, Violet and Sherlock had privately named his “I’m Listening but Don’t Bloody Expect Me to Believe You” Look.

“Question for you,” John had asked lightly. “Everything you do, it’s all for the good of the United Kingdom, for her subjects, is that right?”

“Yes John,” Mycroft had warily eyed John, feeling as if he was about to be set up for a trap. Like his brother, he found John Watson unpredictable. Unlike his brother, he did not feel any particular fondness towards the doctor.

John Watson was one of the few people Mycroft Holmes actually feared.

“Your job is to protect British citizens, yeah?”

“Yes,” Mycroft had tried to sound bored.

“Your brother is a British citizen, is he not? Or was he born in Timbuktu to different parents?”

“Actually, that would explain so much if he really was born to different parents.”

John ignored the jab. “My daughter is a British citizen.” When Mycroft didn’t answer, John narrowed his eyes. “And my son would have been a British citizen.”

“John,” Mycroft huffed impatiently but John held up his pointer finger.

“We are not friends, Mr. Holmes,” he informed The British Government. “You will refer to me either as Dr. Watson or Captain Watson, are we clear?”

“Crystal,” Mycroft’s lips were paper-thin.

“Good. Now, as far as I’m concerned, your incompetence killed my son.”

Mycroft had sighed even louder, “As a physician, surely you do not indulge in the sentimental belief that life begins befor-

“Don’t you dare presume to know what my personal beliefs are,” John then gave Mycroft that murderous little smile that chilled even Sherlock’s unsentimental soul at times. “You observe, but you don’t always see. So obsessed, you are about the details you can’t see the big picture right in front of you.” John took a step forward. “If you want to punish Mary for shooting Sherlock, have her charged and tried in open court instead of this cloak and dagger bullshit. If you won’t have her properly arrested, indicted and tried, then leave her alone.”

“I can’t have her tried because someone won’t name her as his shooter.”

“Then that’s that. Sherlock’s decided he doesn’t want to prosecute her. It’s his choice, not yours. So you need to leave. My. Wife. Alone.” Every word of John’s had been clipped and cold.

“And why should I do that?” Mycroft had drawled every syllable, sounding frighteningly similar to Sherlock at his haughtiest.

John’s homicidal smile had widened. “I’ve been told I’ve a fairly good writer. I’ve also heard that a story doesn’t have to be true. It just has to be published. I’ve kept out the good bits, the interesting bits from my blog due to national security but… I could write a story. Fiction maybe, historical fiction, set it in 1895 perhaps. Put in just enough fabrication,” He had squeezed his pointer and thumb together. “To obscure the truth but just enough details so readers question what inspired the
story. Picasso has this great quote, goes something like…”

“‘Art is a lie that makes us realize the truth,’” Mycroft had quoted with a grey face. His lizard black eyes shone with malevolence.

“Yeah. Exactly,” John’s blue eyes were as dark as midnight and equally vindictive.

“I’ve arranged a taxi to come fetch you to take to your wife,” Mycroft had snapped. “Be ready in thirty minutes.”

“Makes you uncomfortable, doesn’t it?” John had not been able to resist one more dig. “Being in this situation, the aftermath of an overdose? Not the first time for you, is it?”

“Still bitter about The Fall, I see.”

“I’m not talking about The Fall,” John had played his trump card. “Or all the times he overdosed. How old was he when he was diagnosed with anorexia? Twenty-three? Twenty-four? Horrible way to try and die, anorexia. Slow, deliberate starvation. Dreadful and he chose to do that to himself. Wonder if there was something you could have done to prevent that?” He had paused. “Is that’s what driving you to persecute my wife for shooting Sherlock? Could it be… guilt?”

Mycroft had snatched up his coat and umbrella and stalked out of the room. Sixty minutes later, John had been reunited with his wife.

Tears had been shed, of course. Mary had endured her ordeal stoically until John had tapped on her door and slipped into her room. Only seeing his pale face and hearing him whisper, “Oh Mary, I’m so sorry,” could have made her fall completely apart. The tears, the pain she had been holding in were unleashed by the relief she felt for seeing that her husband was still alive and by the grief for the son and daughter they had lost.

But she needed to fall apart and so did he.

“I want a funeral,” she had finally choked out when he had knelt next to her hospital bed, cupping her wet face as tears streamed down his own cheeks. “I want to name him and I want a proper funeral.”

“Yeah, OK.” John’s voice shook as he clutched her hands. Kissing her fingers, he had whispered, “So do I. I want a chance to say goodbye too.”

After that, they didn’t say much, just held hands, John occasionally stroking her blonde hair, kissing her brow. At night, he slept in the hospital bed next to hers. Technically he was a patient as well, but he was given free run of the hospital, not that he wandered off very far. Mostly he left to get a cup of coffee and to make private telephone calls to the Lestrades and Mrs. Hudson. Molly had sobbed then reassured him that not only did she and Greg find a very nice boarding kennel for their dog but Molly visited him every day. “I bring him treats too, hope that’s OK, don’t want to make him stout,” Molly had snuffled. John told her it was fine.

Mrs. Hudson just sobbed uncontrollably. The only intelligible thing John could hear was “I knew England would fall if I left Baker Street.” Then there was more wailing.

At least it had been bearable to talk to Greg, but not by much. They stuck to safe subjects like sports and the weather, but eventually Greg hemmed and hawed, cleared his throat and had spit out lightning fast that he was grateful John was alive, he considered John one of his closest friends and if he or Mary ever needed anything, all he had to do was ask. Then Greg had rung off before the situation got sloppy, claiming the baby was crying.
John had felt his heart twist again when Greg said the word “baby.”

John knew he needed a distraction, knew that he mustn’t dwell solely on the lost baby or on the fact that he had no idea whether or not he’d lose his medical license. John had rang Molly again. He asked if she could bring some of his books from the terrace house, maybe his old iPod as well so he and Mary could listen to music when they got sick of the television.

So now John read aloud from a book of poetry by Edgar Allan Poe. He had forgotten he had owned a copy:

“… As it pass’d me flying by—

From the thunder, and the storm—

And the cloud that took the form

(When the rest of Heaven was blue)

Of a demon in my view.”

“Well, that’s not very cheerful,” Mary joked weakly.

“Shall I switch to Shel Silverstein?” John asked, his silvery-blond brows crinkling in concern. “Or Roald Dahl?”

“No, I’m only teasing. I love listening to you read,” Mary reached over and squeezed his wrist. She was progressing nicely. It would be a long hard road to recovery for her, but now she was starting to take clear fluids, mostly chicken broth. She also claimed the pain was beginning to abate a little, even though the heavy shadows under her eyes claimed otherwise.

The physical pain maybe was diminishing. The emotional pain, John feared, was just beginning for both of them. Still he smiled at her compliment, not sure if she was humoring him or if she really meant it. Either way, he felt flattered. He squeezed her hand back.

Again, he wondered what in the hell happened to his wedding ring.

Annoyed by greedy, thieving orderlies, he turned the page and started reading the next poem:

“Thou wast that all to me, love,

For which my soul did pine—

A green isle in the sea, love,

A fountain and a shrine,

All wreathed with fairy fruits and flowers,

And all the flowers were mine.

Ah, dream too bright to last!

Ah, starry Hope! that didst arise
But to be overcast!

A voice from out the Future cries,

“On! on!”—but o’er the Past

(Dim gulf!) my spirit hovering lies

Mute, motionless, aghast!

For, alas! alas! with me
The light of Life is o’er!

No more—no more—”

A flicker of motion caught his eye. John looked up and saw Sherlock’s face in the small window in the door.

“No more,” John whispered but quickly composed himself as they walked in. They both looked like hell, Sherlock and Violet. Despite this, John could see they had both taken pains to look like themselves, or rather, the image of themselves they presented to the public. Sherlock wore his precious Belstaff and his expensive suit paired with a slender-cut dress shirt, an emerald green one John had never seen before (but no scarf). Violet was in her full “Miss Smith” kit, hair neatly styled, face perfectly made up, every flaw and freckle concealed. She wore an elegant white pea-coat, a burnt umber jumper and dark brown skirt paired with matching tights and knee-high leather boots.

But John had never seen Violet so haggard before. The make-up didn’t match her current skin tones at all. While every flaw and freckle was hidden, it also looked like she had too much foundation on. Despite this, the lavender circles were still apparent under her eyes.

More disturbing however were the thin little cuts all over Sherlock’s face. John wondered if someone had taken a scalpel to his face, the cuts were that fine. He also wondered why Sherlock’s hair was now cropped short not to mention it looked blacker than usual, as if he had dyed it even darker.

John fought the urge to race to Sherlock, to cradle his injured face in his hands. To demand to know what had happened and then to reassure him that no one would ever hurt him again and he was taking him home to Baker Street right now.

He swallowed and flicked his eyes from Sherlock to Violet.

Violet’s hair looked shorter as well, but it was stick straight as always. Then John observed that Sherlock was not only wasn’t wearing a scarf, but he wasn’t wearing his black leather gloves either. John sucked in a shocked breath when he saw the bandages wound around Sherlock’s wrists. Then John noticed Violet wasn’t wearing her fake spectacles, although she held a floppy brown hat in her hand with a huge brim as well as a giant pair of black sunglasses.

They both looked utterly spent, as if they hadn’t had a proper sleep in ages

“What happened? Are you alright?” John stood up, the book falling to the floor with a thud.

“Jim Moriarty is dead,” Sherlock proclaimed.
“No offense, but… are you sure?”

Only John could have gotten away with that remark.

“He’s sure,” Violet Smith smiled wanly as she crossed over to give John a hug.

“It’s over then?” John found himself hesitating when Violet put her arms around his neck and shoulders. After all, she had seen him and Sherlock snogging at Baker Street. He felt a flush creeping up his neck to his cheeks, thinking about Sherlock bursting into his room at Saint Charles and locking the door…

*John, what do you want?*

*I want to go home…*

He buried his face in Violet’s shoulder to hide his blush. “It’s really over?” he asked again.

“It’s over. Finally,” Violet Hunter whispered in his ear, then took a step back, pecked him on the cheek and smiled. There was no anger or jealousy in her eyes. She simply gazed at him the same way a little sister may fawn over a beloved big brother.

“And we know who murdered your sister; in a fit of arrogance, he confessed it to me. Henry Peters, known as Holy Peters,” Sherlock announced as Violet crossed the room to sit down in the chair next to Mary’s bed.

“I know him,” Mary’s eyes grew huge and her heart monitor started beeping faster. Violet, instinctively, reached for Mary’s hand. Mary found herself squeezing Violet’s hand in a death-grip. “Did you catch him as well?” When Sherlock shook his head, Mary shrank into her pillows as her lips paled. “Sherlock, he’s dangerous. He holds grudges. He’s… please ask Mycroft for extra surveillance, OK?”

Sherlock arched an eyebrow and put his hands behind his back. “If you insist,” he demurred.

“I’m glad you’re both alright and that everyone’s here. I have… something I want to talk to you about, yes, you too Violet,” she turned her head towards Violet, who had pried her hand out of Mary’s and started to get out of the chair to leave the room. “In fact, you know part of the story and I may need you to tell that part of the story. Because I don’t know if I’m strong enough to tell it myself but it needs to be told.”

“Mary?” John circled the bed, stood directly opposite of Violet and took Mary’s other hand.

Sherlock didn’t move from his spot but he fixed his mercurial eyes on Mary, “Whenever you’re ready, please proceed.” He deliberately softened his voice, having deduced what she was about to confess.

He made himself fix his eyes on Mary, and willed himself to let her speak.

Mary pressed her free hand to her eyes and folded her lips tightly together. Violet, feeling the heaviness of her double-cross sitting uneasily on her conscience, leaned forward. As “Miss Smith”, she quietly told Mary, “You can do this. You’ve been through so much already. It’s time Mary. No more lies.”

“No more lies?” John looked at Violet, then Sherlock then Mary. “What’s going on?”

Mary lifted her big cornflower blue eyes up at John. She drank in the comforting sight of him, in his
well-worn jeans and one of his favorite shirts, a black and white striped jumper that Mary always teased him about, telling him it looked like an old-fashioned prisoner’s uniform. He needed a haircut, or rather he thought he needed a haircut, it was too long for his military standards. His hair also looked more and more silver than blond with each passing day. She longed to reach up and touch it, run her fingers through it.

Then she looked into those dark blue eyes, saw the worry, saw the mistrust.

The almost compulsive urge to deceive swelled up within her, threatening to burst. A thousand concoctions very nearly exploded out of her mouth just then, all plausible, all palatable. But with the detective and the profiler unabashedly staring at her, she didn’t dare.

No more lies.

“The morning after your stag party,“ she said to John without any preface. “I received a package. A shoebox of photographs, much like the one Lady Hilda Trelawney-Hope received from whomever it was blackmailing her.”

“Who we now know was her own twin, Julia Stoner,” Sherlock couldn’t help himself.

“Shut up, Sherlock,” John snapped. “Go on love.”

Immediately John cursed himself for calling Mary “love” in front of Sherlock. But, as usual, Sherlock looked impassive.

“What were the photographs of, Mary?” Violet, like a good interrogator, prompted her.

“The pictures were of the man who forged my papers, who created Mary Morstan.” Mary took a deep breath, “The pictures showed him being tortured.”

“Oh God,” John gripped her hand and licked his lips. “Why didn’t you tell us or show us the pictures or bring them to Lestrade-”

“Shut up, John,” Violet and Sherlock said in unison.

If the circumstances had been different, it would have been funny.

“Right, sorry,” John muttered.

“Well, you and Sherlock were in gaol, drying out and Lestrade had gone to post your bail so no one was around that I could talk to, really,” Mary reminded everyone gently. “There was a note in the box as well. It was in skip code and I knew it was from the same person who had taken John and put him in that bonfire the November before our wedding.” She looked up at the ceiling. “I cracked the code and it was an invitation to his office. Even though I knew who he was, I had no idea why he possibly wanted to see me. Why would a media magnate want to meet with someone like me? The only thing I could think of was that he wanted to do a story, interview me.” She snorted at her own foolishness.

“You didn’t go, did you?” John couldn’t help asking even though he already knew the answer. His stomach began to roll and he tasted bile.

She started blinking her eyes rapidly. “You know I did. I felt secure enough. You and Sherlock were between cases at the time. I knew you were at the clinic and Sherlock was at Baker Street. Lestrade was at The Yard. I had my mobile. I could call anyone if I felt uncomfortable. I was going during daylight hours. Janine was there, for Christ’s sake. I…” She shook her head. “Was so stupid. I had
gotten soft, complacent. I had gotten comfortable as Mary Morstan.” She squeezed John’s hand. “That’s not your fault, John. It’s mine. After living like a normal woman for over ten years, I had forgotten how… bad people can be.”

“What happened, Mary?”

Mary kept her eyes fixed on the ceiling. “I went to his office at two o’clock; Janine wasn’t there. I should have turned and bolted right then and there. I had done my own little investigation after the bonfire incident. I wanted to find out who wanted to hurt my fiancé. After I solved that mystery, I had gotten closer to Janine, befriended her to get to him. I wanted to find out his game, but he was two steps ahead of me. He was always two steps ahead of me.”

“Then why…?” John trailed off, shaking his silvery-blond head. “Why didn’t you leave it alone?”

“Because he was her Moriarty,” Sherlock hummed, “Just as Jack Woodley was Violet’s.”

Mary nodded her head as Violet pulled the cuffs of her jumper down over her wrists, to hide the raw red marks where the handcuffs had dug into her. I think I have a new Moriarty, she thought.

Meanwhile, Mary dove back into her story, struggling to keep her voice steady: “I let myself into his office. I asked where his PA was. He said he had sent her on an errand but she’d be back shortly and would I close the door? That was my second mistake. I shouldn’t have gone in… well. At any rate, he got to the point right quick. He told me he knew who I really was, who my parents were and what I used to do before I became Mary Morstan. He said he had files about me, about what I’ve done,” she laughed bitterly then moaned weakly, placing her hand over her abdomen. But she waved John off as he reached down and prepared to examine her belly. She mumbled, “I’m fine, I’m…” she pursed her lips, battling her pain.

“Take your time,” Violet advised Mary with an encouraging nod.

Minutes stretched out agonizingly long. Mary longingly stroked the morphine pump with her pointer finger before she realized Sherlock was watching her intensely. So she blurted out, again without any preamble, “He said he’d be happy to keep my secret if I agreed to do a job for him. One last job,” she swallowed hard. “He wanted me to kill Mycroft.”

“Oh, is that all? I would have doubled his fee for that,” Sherlock sniffed.

“Sherlock! Timing!” John half-shouted.

“What? It’s not as if Mickey is your BFF or BAE or whatever the cool kids say these days,” Violet pointed out.

“Yes, well… anyway, obviously you didn’t agree to kill Mycroft.”

“Obviously,” Mary gave John a faint smile. “But imagine all the trouble I would have saved everyone if I had.” She closed her eyes, the smile disappearing. “I told him no. I told him to sod off. I made all sorts of threats. I’m sure I sounded ridiculous. I stood up to leave. He didn’t stop me. He let me walk as far as the door. It was locked.”

“It was locked?” John scrunched up his fair silvery brows. “How?”

“Smartphone,” Mary laughed sardonically again then moaned again.

“Mary, go on, take the edge off,” John nodded towards her morphine pump. Leaning over her, he ran his hand over her hair then her face, all the while feeling like a traitor with Sherlock watching,
observing. But still, even after everything, he found he couldn’t stand it to see Mary in pain. She
was, after all, still his wife.

“I don’t want to be all muddled as I tell this,” Mary whispered when she caught her breath. “He had
a Smartphone. He could control everything, not just in his room, but in the entire penthouse. He told
me. He could adjust the thermostat. He could turn on and off the lights. He could lock the doors.
After he told me, he pressed a button on his mobile and the blinds rolled down. Not as if anyone
could look in, his office was in the penthouse suite, of course. Then he started making threats. He
didn’t sound ridiculous. He confessed about abducting you and putting you in the bonfire. He told
me he knew all sorts of secrets about Sherlock, but he wouldn’t let on what they were. But he
insinuated that they were very private and very humiliating.”

Only for a second, did Sherlock’s eyes slip away from Mary’s face as he felt the rough scrape of
Magnussen’s tongue against his cheek. The nausea welling up as he thought helplessly
Not again…
and not now, not when I’m an adult and I should be able to defend myself…

But no one caught that miniscule moment, not even Violet. She was too busy watching Mary.

“He threatened to do all sorts of things to you, John. He knew about Harry, about her drinking
problems. He rattled off a list of all your old girlfriends. I recognized some of the names, Sarah.
Jeannette. He had somehow gotten a hold of your medical records, your therapy sessions. He knew
about your injuries, your PTSD and how depressed you were after you thought you saw Sherlock
fall. He threatened to leak it, all of it. He also implied that you and Sherlock were…” Mary looked
down, unable to face either man, “More than just flat-mates and friends. He started asking me wildly
inappropriate questions about our sex life then he told me to…he told me to…well, I refused to
budge. He wanted me to go to him but I ordered him to unlock the doors. I told him I didn’t need a
gun to kill him. He reached into the desk and pulled out this little snub-nosed thing and said, ‘Well, I
do.’ It was a joke of a weapon, really. It looked like a water-pistol, but it was still a gun and I was
alone and unarmed and… he told me to come to him… and… and to… get undressed.”

Mary froze after spitting out the last two words. She screwed her eyes shut now as her hands twisted
the bed linens into tight knots.

“Mary…” John breathed, “Mary, what… oh God.”

“Violet…” Mary’s voice shook horribly. “Please. I can’t…”

While Mary had spoken, Violet had been biting her lip in that way Sherlock hated. Now that Mary
couldn’t go on, Violet sat up in her chair and faced John, as if she were about to give a report to a
superior.

“I don’t think we have to spell out what Magnussen did next,” Sherlock intoned before Violet
opened her mouth.

“No, we don’t,” John’s voice was a half-sob, “Oh, Mary. I’m sorry, I’m so sorry…”

But Mary was shaking her head violently, “Violet, please…” her voice cracked.

Violet stood up. Gripping the bed-rail for support, she waited until John looked at her. Violet felt her
heart break the minute she saw his midnight blue eyes, huge with bewilderment and anguish.
“Before you ask, John, the reason why Mary didn’t tell you or Sherlock is because she knows both
of you. She knew you’d go off the deep end and do something incredibly stupid, like storm
Magnussen’s penthouse office with your Army Browning, threatening to blow his head off. And she
knew Sherlock would go to Mycroft. If Mycroft got involved, he might dig too deep and learn who
Mary really was.”

“It would have been a pleasure to blow his brains out,” John snarled.  

“It was a pleasure to blow his brains out,” Sherlock drawled. “Never been on that side of murder before but I can understand the appeal now.” When three pairs of shocked eyes locked on him, he hastily added, “But murder is quite Not Good and once was enough for me, much like the one and only time I did crystal meth. Entertaining but no need for a repeat experience.”

“Christ Almighty,” John had what Violet called his “The Lord is Testing Me” Look on his face. Meanwhile Violet squared her shoulders and gave herself a moment to mentally prepare for the unpleasant role she was about to play. She also refused to look at Sherlock while she began to speak. Keeping her eyes solely on John, she said an even, clear voice, her “Miss Smith” voice: “Clinically speaking, Magnussen was a psychopath with narcissistic tendencies as well as a penchant for sexual deviance. I read his childhood medical records and they were very disturbing. How he fell through the cracks, I have no idea. They documented his lack of empathy and inability to connect to children his own age all the way back to age three and no, Sherlock.” She closed her eyes. “There is absolutely nothing about you showing psychopathic or sociopathic tendencies in your childhood records, not even in the records that aren’t supposed to exist,” she added, referring to his secret sessions with Dr. Gloria Scott after he had stood up to the evil Earl of Winchester by setting the little monster on fire.

“I didn’t say a word,” Sherlock muttered.

“You were thinking it,” John and Violet said in unison. Then gruffly, John said, “Go on Violet,” as he squeezed Mary’s hand.

Violet sobered, “After he was finished with Mary.” She made herself continue looking at John as he visibly flinched at her words. “He forced her into his en suite to shower. To get rid of the evidence, so even if you two could have controlled yourselves after she told you, there was no physical evidence to prove the rape.” Here John covered his eyes with his hand and Mary bowed her head. Violet soldiered on, still refusing to look at Sherlock. “She went home, lied to you, said she had a headache and went to bed. A few days later…”

“You said it would be romantic if we waited for our wedding night before we had sex again,” John kept his eyes covered. “Oh my God…” then he dropped his hand. “Oh my God… Maisie.” Everything slammed together for John all at once. “You didn’t know if I was Maisie’s father… or if he was. You didn’t even know you were pregnant until our wedding, until,” John swung his head around towards Sherlock. “Until you deduced it and blurted it out at our wedding dance.” John let go of Mary’s hand and started pacing the hospital room.

“John,” Violet started.

“Shut up,” he snapped, still pacing. “Magnussen didn’t know either, not right away. He was still pressuring you to murder Mycroft, he threatened to have me killed and Sherlock humiliated if you didn’t. Then Magnussen threatened to blackmail Lady Smallwood’s husband and Sherlock took the case. You panicked. You didn’t want Sherlock getting close to Magnussen. So you took matters into your own hands. You didn’t know we were going to the penthouse that night. Sherlock and I split up. Sherlock found you threatening Magnussen and…” John whirled around. “You deduced it, didn’t you? Didn’t you? You fucking knew what he did to her.”

“I didn’t know until the precise moment Mary turned around and I saw her face. Before she did that, I thought she was Lady Smallwood at first. They wear the same perfume and are the same height.
But yes, I deduced why Mary was going to kill Magnussen when she turned around. I asked Mary to please let me help her, but apparently I wasn’t convincing enough.”

“I thought he’d use it against me, to get rid of me so things could go back the way it was back before The Fall,” Mary whispered, her eyes shining with tears. “You’re right, I panicked. I saw my life crumbling, the life I worked so hard for, the life I had longed for, falling to bits. I pulled the trigger.” She started blinking very rapidly now. “I ran. I never called 999. I don’t know why Sherlock lied for me about that.”

“You intended for him to die.” John balled his fists.

Sherlock shook his head. “No, John. I lied about the 999 call so you would be less angry with her when you found out she was the shooter. She knew, I knew you’d come for me, that you’d save me. You know how to keep a man with a grievous bullet wound alive until you could get him to a hospital.”

“That’s no guarantee I can keep a man alive until then,” John clenched his jaw, unable to look at either one of the two people he loved most in the world, John glared daggers at Violet, “Is that all then?”

Violet opened her mouth to say yes, but Mary broke in, “Oh John, it’s worse, it’s so much worse than you can imagine. I tried to tell you, to warn you that you wouldn’t love me anymore. You know Mycroft figured it out that it was me who shot Sherlock. He planned on retaliation. So… when Sherlock went missing last spring, before Molly Hooper and I were sent to that safe-house while you and Violet went looking for Sherlock, I reached out to an old colleague. I was terrified Mycroft would have me killed while I was in his custody. I… put out a double-hit.”

“A what? What is that?” John tore his eyes away from Violet to stare at his wife.

“If an MI-6 operative kills me, a hit automatically goes out on Sherlock.”

“What?”

“It was the only way I could ensure that Mycroft wouldn’t have me killed, John! You know what kind of man he is!” Mary tried to sit up but winced and gingerly lay back down.

“But I clearly don’t know what kind of a woman you are,” John started pacing again.

“You really should have just killed Mycroft and saved us all some misery,” Sherlock sighed.

“Not helping, Sherlock,” Violet muttered as Mary’s heart monitor started beeping faster.

“Did you know?” John demanded Violet. Before she could answer, he wheeled around on Sherlock, “Did you know? Oh God, you both knew. And poor feeble PTSD’ed John gets left in the dark again because he’s too fragile to handle bad news.”

“That’s not why we didn’t say anything,” Violet snapped. When John turned around and gave her a positively murderous look, she amended her previous statement. “That’s not the only reason why we didn’t say anything. Besides, it was all for nothing anyway, Mary’s lies.”

“What? I don’t understand.”

Violet steadied herself against the bedrails again, feeling quite shaky. “When I asked Mycroft for everything on Magnussen, I got everything. School transcripts. Medical records, including pediatric. He had the mumps as a teenager, Mary.”
“What?” Mary’s heart monitor started beeping even faster.

Violet sank back down into the chair. Her legs felt rubbery and her head spun. The sleep deprivation and the strain her body had been through in the past few weeks were catching up to her. “Mary, he had the mumps.” Exhaustion made her drop the “Miss Smith” accent. “That’s what I wanted to tell you that day we met at The Plaza. He could get it up but he was shooting blanks. It’s part of the reason why he evolved into a psychopath. The impotency drove him to seek power in other ways. Besides you heard Sherlock when he looked at that baby picture Rucastle gave you at The Copper Beaches: John’s nose and mouth, your eyes. Taken when she was three months of age.” She finally turned to face Sherlock. “You knew that wasn’t a picture of a random baby girl. You knew it was Maisie.”

“Is she?” Mary pleaded with Sherlock. “Is she really? The time frame was so close, the time John and I were last together before Magnussen…” she lowered her head, unable to go on.

“Marissa belongs to John, Mary,” Sherlock confirmed. “If you hadn’t allowed emotion to blind you, you would have come to that logical realization yourself. ‘The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning**.’"

“You’re really not helping,” Violet rubbed the bridge of her nose as Mary started to tremble uncontrollably.

“Are you surprised?” John hissed. “I need air, I need a walk.”

“Oh, sit down. You’re in worse shape than I am,” he scowled at her then at Sherlock and Mary. “The nerve of you, the lot of you. Keeping that, all of that from me.” He licked his lips, shaking his head as he glared at Mary then Sherlock then Violet. “Stop. Treating. Me. Like. I’m. Broken. I’m not. I’m not broken. I’m beat up a bit, yeah. My head’s not right at the moment. But I’m alright here,” he pressed his hand against his chest. “OK? I’m alright here,” he pressed his fingers against his chest hard, over his heart. “I can handle bad news but I just need a moment to breathe. That’s how the RHL got to me. They just kept piling the shit on and on without giving me a chance to process the latest horror. That’s all I need, just a moment to catch my breath. That’s all I need, so please. Just let me go get some air, I’m not going to leave the bloody hospital, not that I could because between Mycroft and Lestrade, there’s no way I could leave this damn place unsupervised anyway.”

“Of course,” unexpectedly, Sherlock demurred, even stepping away from the door so John could have a clear path.

As John marched out of the hospital room, Violet handed Mary a tissue. An oppressive silence pressed down on the remaining three people until Sherlock burst out, “Twenty seconds is long enough to be considered a moment, isn’t it?”

“Yes,” Mary agreed before wiping her nose. “It is.”

“Violet,” Sherlock gestured towards the door.

“On it,” Violet lifted herself out of the chair and slipped out of the hospital room, shutting the door quietly behind her.

John, naturally, had no idea Violet had been sent to follow him. He however was in no hurry to return to Mary either. So he blindly stalked around the hospital. Because he wore his regular clothes
instead of hospital garb, nobody knew he was technically a patient. Only the itchy plastic wristband he wore relayed that fact.

John was not so blinded by rage that he tried to leave. As he had stated, he knew Mycroft’s spooks and Lestrade’s colleagues were lurking, keeping an eye out on him. Eventually, he found his way down to the morgue, the only place he could think that was quiet.

He first tried Molly’s office, but of course it was locked up since she was still out on maternity leave. So he went to the autopsy bay and sat on an empty slab, kicking his heels like a child, since his feet didn’t reach the floor.

John lost all track of time and jumped when the door opened, half-expecting Sherlock. He flicked his eyes down to the ugly linoleum floor when he saw it was Violet instead.

Unperturbed, she entered the bay, carrying two paper cups. “Here, hold these,” she said, as herself, as Violet Hunter. John huffed, sounding more like an impatient Sherlock than himself but he did take the cups. He saw that one was tea and the other was coffee. Violet attempted to hoist herself up on the slab next to John. His brow crinkled when it took her three tries to hop on up. “You OK?” he couldn’t help asking.

“Just tired,” she took the coffee from him. They sipped their hot drinks in a not unpleasant silence for a bit. When their cups were empty, Violet asked, “So on a scale from one to nuclear, how pissed off are you at all of us?”

“No, not quite nuclear holocaust but I’m really not pleased with any of you lot right now.”

“John, I’m really sorry. Mary literally told me about what Magnussen did to her the night before you and Sherlock left for Paris. I had no idea Sherlock had deduced all of that and with everything that happened with Harry, I didn’t know when was the right time to tell you.”

“I know,” John studied the dregs of his tea. “I just… I don’t understand what happened. We were happy, all of us. After I got over myself, after I stopped being pissed off about Sherlock lying about being dead, everything was right with the universe. I had everything, everything I wanted. I had my best friend and my best girl, then a baby on top of it. I literally cannot remember a time I was happier. Then Lady Smallwood came to Sherlock, asking him to take her case and…” he scrubbed his eyes then his nose. “Right now, I don’t know what pisses me off more, knowing what that fucking monster did to my wife and my best friend or that my wife tried to kill my best friend to hide the fact she didn’t know if Maisie was mine or not.”

“What do you know for sure, John?”

“That I wish I had been the one to kill Magnussen, not Sherlock.”

“You’d be in prison.”

“Better me in prison than Sherlock being Mycroft’s puppet, don’t you think?” John crushed his empty cup then stared at the crumpled remains. “Sorry, I’m sorry, it’s just that… fuck.”

“Yeah, I think that sums up the situation perfectly.”

“What happened in Paris? Sherlock said Moriarty’s dead, but his face and his hands are all cut up, the cuts look superficial but they also have the mark of surgical precision.”

Violet gave him a succinct run-down of what really happened, or at least, the parts she knew. She left out the part regarding Irene Adler however. She hated lying to him, even by omission. But he
was already infuriated. She didn’t want to fuel his fire by telling him there was something else kept hidden from him.

“Has he been changing the bandages? Putting antibiotic ointment on?” John immediately asked when Violet finished. When she nodded, he said in his sternest “Captain Watson” voice: “And you will make a doctor’s appointment straight away and keep it.”

“In my defense, I did go to my appointment,” Violet deadpanned. “Is it really my fault the clinic blew up?”

“Try to go to a surgery that’s not rigged with explosives then.”

“Yes Dad.”

John chuckled but then asked gravely, “Is he OK? Sherlock? After confronting Moriarty again?”

“I’m not sure. I think it was cathartic, that it was good for him that this bullshit with Jim Moriarty and Richard Brook is finally over. But then again, he’s not sleeping so...”

“Are you OK?”

Violet gave him an exhausted smile. “I’m not sleeping much either.”

John felt his anger at her drain away. He put his arm over her shoulders to give her a cuddle and Violet rested her head against him. “And to think,” he said lightly. “Nine months ago, I pointed a gun at you.”

Violet laughed, “Yeah, you really need to work on your trust issues, bud.”

“Are you both going back to Baker Street tonight?”

“Just to pack some things and to pick up Gladstone,” Violet said gloomily. “Mycroft is sending us to a safehouse, no ifs, ands or buts. We’ll have to stay put until at least Boxing Day. Mycroft wants to do a thorough search of the apartment and a sweep through the neighborhood. The man who killed your sister, Holy Peters? He’s no joke. Mary’s right, he’s dangerous.”

She felt the chill of the rising tidewaters again and she shivered involuntarily.

John put his crushed cup next to him then wrapped his other arm around her, giving her a proper hug. “Poor girl,” he patted her on the back. “I’m sorry you went through that alone. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there for you and Sherlock.”

“You needed to take care of yourself and your family,” Violet’s voice was muffled.

John released his hold on her but kept his hands gently on Violet’s shoulders. “Violet, I’m about to pry shamelessly but I’m curious. I mean, I need to know something even though it’s really none of my business at all.”

Violet gave him another tired smile. “Go ahead and ask.”

“Do you love him? Sherlock?”

Violet faced him but she wasn’t looking at him, not at first. She was looking at something else, perhaps within her own Mind Palace, John wasn’t sure. But then the haze cleared from her eyes and she inhaled in that strange way of hers, a long inhalation through her nose followed by an even longer exhalation. John knew it was some sort of calming technique, possibly having to do with yoga
“Spanish is my favorite foreign language,” she threw John for a loop. But he cottoned on where she was going with this topic as she explained, “Not only is it a very romantic language, but it also has very specific words to explain different types of love. Te amo, for example, is different from te quiero. Both mean, ‘I love you’, even though literally, te quiero means ‘I want you’. So, you see, te amo is more romantic and te quiero is more,” she smirked, “Bow-chicka-bow-bow.”

“Yeah, OK, OK,” John sniggered.

“Once I realized I was trapped in England, I avoided romantic entanglements like the plague. It was a complication I did not need. I have no intentions of getting involved with him, with anyone.”

Violet started turning her pretty gold watch around her wrist. Sherlock had managed to get it back for her after she had left it in the Parisian safe-house. “I do care about him.” She purposely fixed her hazel eyes onto his dark blue eyes, her gaze steady and unblinking. “John, I will never hurt him if I can help it, I promise you. But I’m not in love with him. I’m not at te amo level and it’s not just te quiero. I’m at… me encantas.” She laughed a little at John’s puzzled expression as he shook his head in bemusement. “It means, ‘you enchant me.’”

“Oh. That sounds… very pretty.”

“Don’t be fooled by the sentimentality of the literal translation. There are all different kinds of love. The Spanish language just does a better job labeling the different types. There is familial love, friendship love,” she bumped John with her shoulder and he chuckled again. “Marital love, obsessive love, unrequited love, infatuations, lust, your first love, your last love…”

Seeing her eyes flick down to her engagement ring, John quietly asked, “Violet, that dig Mycroft made when he came to ask Sherlock to find the Letter, that you had experience planning a wedding… had you been engaged before you came here?”

Violet looked up to him, tried to smile, “Long time ago.”

“Sorry, I’m being a Nosy Parker.”

“It’s OK. I just hadn’t talked about it in a long time, a little over fifteen years ago. God, I was young, we were young. Anyway, we met in New York. I was in college, undergrad. He had just completed training to be a firefighter. We met at a bar, his dad’s bar. I had just turned twenty-one and I was white-girl wasted. He drove me home when it was obvious I couldn’t drive. He was a complete gentleman. I paid him back by throwing up in his Camaro.”

“Sounds romantic,” John said dryly.

“I was pretty sure I’d never see him again, but he showed up a few days later. I had left my coat in his car. Somehow he remembered where I had lived. It was this shithole in Hell’s Kitchen, back in the Nineties before gentrification hit the neighborhood, so it was… charming. Me and three girls squished into this disgusting one-bedroom apartment above a Laundromat that was never open with unreliable plumbing and cockroaches bigger than Golden Retrievers to boot.”

“Remember me to tell you about my first flat before I joined the Army,” John quipped. “I’m pretty sure there was a drug den below me and my flat-mates.”

“Oh, just think, you could have met Sherlock sooner.”

“Funny.”
“It’s a little funny. OK, OK, it’s not,” Violet rolled her eyes then continued, “Anyway, this really tall, really good-looking guy was buzzing my door and when realized who he was, I wanted to die on the spot. But I let him in and apologized for blowing my groceries all over his nice upholstery. I told him I’d pay to have his car detailed and asked him if I could take him out to lunch since he went to all the trouble of driving from Brooklyn to the Kitchen, twice now.”

Her face lit up and John could see the young woman she had been fifteen years ago. Her clear, freckled face unmarred by scars and wrinkles. Her hazel eyes filled with laughter rather than caution and vigilance.

Still smiling, Violet said, “He started flirting with me, asking me if it was a date. Turned out, it was. We had pizza and beer that night at this dive and… we clicked. He wasn’t just my boyfriend, he was my best friend. We disagreed on enough trivial things so we wouldn’t get bored with each other, but we agreed on the same things that were important to us…”

“We were together for four years. I knew this was the real deal when we not only survived long-distance dating while I was doing grad school at the University of Virginia, but he completely supported my decision to join the FBI afterwards. When I got my acceptance letter from Quantico, he planned this elaborate celebration when I came back to New York, dinner, a Broadway and then a trip to the Empire State Building.” Her eyes misted. “He proposed on top of the goddamn Empire State Building. He was such a fucking dork. He liked chick-flicks. His favorite movie was Sleepless in Seattle. His favorite author was, no joke, Jane Fucking Austen. I don’t even like Jane Fucking Austen.”

“Oh. I didn’t know that Fucking was Jane’s middle name.”

Violet mocked punched John in the arm. “My point is you wouldn’t think he was such a softy when you first saw him. He was a Big Guy,” Violet spread her arms out. “Big. Huge. And tall. And very athletic. He liked weight-lifting and martial arts. He was the one who got me into kickboxing. He always said if this firefighting thing didn’t work out, he was going to go into bodybuilding, assuming he hadn’t been burned to crisp. He was very handsome but he also looked like he was the type to eat a baby for breakfast and kick a puppy for fun. But he was so sweet, just a big old teddy bear. He’d do anything for anyone.”

The smile faded her face. She looked as she had the past few weeks, a tired, ill woman who had endured too much for too long. Suddenly John had a very, very bad feeling. This story did not sound like a break up story.

“He proposed in August. I was scheduled to start at Quantico in October, so I had a nice long break. I was going to use that time to start planning the wedding. We had already completed one Wedding Chore, picking out a photographer. We had just taken our engagement photos over Labor Day Weekend, in Central Park, by the Alice in Wonderland statue. I was staying with my brother. His parents were very nice people but they were also Italian-Catholics. Good people, but kind of old-school when it came to dating and sleepovers, if you catch my drift. It was easier to just stay with Michael than with Jordan.” Her eyes clouded over. “That’s the first time I’ve said his name since I’ve been in England.”

“What happened?” John’s voice was hushed. “Was there an accident?”

Violet shook her head slowly. “He was a firefighter,” she reminded him in a tight voice. “He was on-duty on September 11th.”

“He was… oh God.”
Suddenly John remembered an earlier conversation he and Violet had several months ago, while Sherlock slept off whatever combination of hallucinogenic drugs and narcotics Jack Woodley had given him. He had asked her *Where were you when the Twin Towers fell?* Her eyes had become distant, as if she looked at something else, somewhere far far away. Then in a soft voice, she had replied *New York.*

She peered into her empty coffee cup, “I got the proofs of our engagement pictures back a few weeks later and I wanted to die.” She exhaled, looked up at John and gave him a tiny smile. “But I didn’t die. I buried myself into training then into my work. I had a lot of dead-end relationships. Some guys were nice. Some were assholes, especially the last one I left in New Mexico, but that’s a whole other story for another time,” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. “I just… never met anyone who clicked with me the way Jordan did. Not even Sherlock, although, I do have to admit… he comes close. Just not close enough.”

A fresh rush of hatred for Mycroft surged through John when he fully realized the utter cruelty of his remarks to Violet about her first engagement.

“People thought I joined the FBI because of what I lost on Nine-Eleven but I had planned on joining before…” She shook her head then cleared her throat. “I tried to stay in touch with his family, but…it was too painful, for all of us. My relationship with his parents and his brothers and sisters deteriorated to exchanging Christmas cards, until I came here, of course.” She frowned, “Except his youngest sister, Chelsea, we didn’t exchange cards. We didn’t get along. She hated me, thought I had a stick up my ass. I thought she was a spoiled brat and a rotten bitch. She probably laughed when she heard about my fiery death above the Atlantic.”

“Violet, I…” but he could only shake his head, bereft for words.

“It was a long time ago,” Violet’s voice was clear and steady now. “And yeah, Mycroft was being an ass that night when he was saying all that shit about me knowing how to plan a wedding. He just wanted to hurt me, to remind me that he was in charge, not me.”

“Is there any way we can get him to stop trying to run our lives?” John groaned.

“I’m working on it,” Violet said darkly, although now, as Sherlock had predicted, she felt exceptionally guilty about selling Mary out to Mycroft. “The question now is: what are you going to do?”

“Me?”

“About Mary.”

“Oh, Violet, here I thought you were supposed to be this superbly talented profiler.” When Violet was the one furrowing her brows in confusion, John said, “Who are we kidding here? We both know I’m not going to leave her, no matter how much I want to. I’ve got daddy issues, I’ve got abandonment issues, I’ve got trust issues,” he listed off sardonically.

“John…”

“And we still have one child together, don’t we? Especially now we have confirmation that she is really mine. Although,” he gripped the slab with his hands, preparing to get down. “I would have accepted the child as mine even if she wasn’t. Mary should have *known* that.”

“Maisie is not a good enough reason to stay with her, even if she wasn’t missing.”

“And then there’s you, isn’t there?” John slid off the slab.
“Me?”

“Yeah, you. I really think you and Sherlock have a chance, a real chance to be something more than a fake couple. More than just enchantment. After all, you said he comes close, right?”

“Wait, what? No! I—”

“Will probably have to work on convincing him, sure,” John nodded. “But, I think you have a good shot. He doesn’t hate you as much as he hates most people. That’s saying something.”

John turned to leave. Violet cried out after him, “John, don’t stay with her because of me.”

But John had already closed the door behind him.

Violet laid down on the slab, her hand pressed to her forehead.

“Shit.”

She stretched out on the cool, metal slab in shavasana.

Dead man’s pose.

Chapter End Notes

So...yeah... I read that fan theory on the "real reason" why Mary planned on killing Magnussen and why she ended up shooting Sherlock instead and it just stuck with me. I wish I would have remembered to bookmark it so I could give credit who actually came up with it. To me, that makes more sense than the "It was surgery"/"Protect John Watson" reason, which is REALLY hard to swallow, despite how much I love HLV. However, I'm not sure a non/con story line would make it past the BBC censors, so "It was surgery"/"Protect John Watson" reason is canon.

On the other side, scholars have debated that "The Solitary Cyclist" has a non/con element to it: Violet Smith was routinely bullied and harassed by Mr. Woodley, or to quote: "He was a dreadful person - a bully to everyone else, but to me something infinitely worse... " and (far more disturbing) "... when I would have nothing to do with him, he seized me in his arms one day after dinner - he was hideously strong - swore that he would not let me go until I had kissed him..."

So it wouldn't really be deviating from canon to introduce a non/con storyline in canon BBC SH... but I highly the fans could tolerate it or the BBC censors let them get away with it, especially since they may have pushed their luck with the "F-", "*cough*" in TEH.

**Sherlock's asshat comment comes from "The Sign of Four":**

Chapter Summary

“Your family is so fucked up.”

“At least we’re not boring.”

Violet wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, but she kept that thought to herself...

Holmes’ family revelations, John obtuseness and feels... warning for possible triggers, but it’s not graphic, just really sad.

Will answer comments tomorrow, I need to get to bed (adulting is stupid....)

Happy Tuesday Eve! :^)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-two: Genesis 4:9

23 December 2015
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Wednesday afternoon
5:51 PM

After Violet took off to find John, Sherlock looked down his nose at the grievously injured woman. “He’ll be back,” he assured her as he returned to his spot by the foot of the bed.

“Of course he’ll be back,” Mary sniffled, “For you.”

“No. For you, remember? He chose you.” He clasped his hand behind his back again, “Six million pounds for me, but ten million American dollars for Moriarty? Even though, after the exchange, there’s only an 888,001 pound difference (give or take the random penny); I must confess, I’m a little insulted,” he sighed dramatically.

“Moriarty is a bigger pain in the arse than you are.”

“Where did you get the money for the hit?”

“Your brother,” Mary watched nervously as Sherlock left his post and started snooping around her hospital room. As he located a drawer full of flannels and selected one, she continued to explain: “He called in some favors and got the money.”

“Marie Devine has a tattoo of a butterfly. I assume you do as well? On your lower back?”

“We got them together when we got out of the KGB. We had emerged from our chrysalises.”

“How poetic,” Heavy sarcasm laced those two words. Sherlock disappeared into the small loo and returned with the flannel slightly dampened. He sat down next to Mary and dabbed her flushed
cheeks, surreptitiously wiping away her tears. “Marie also had a message for me, an extremely specific message for me. *Never touch her husband again.*” He arched an eyebrow, “Very precise verbiage indeed,” he murmured as he pressed the cool cloth against her brow.

Despite Sherlock’s gentleness, she glowered at him. “You and John must think I’m blind. I’m not, you know. I’m also not stupid. I know if I tried to keep you two apart, it would ultimately drive you two closer together.” She batted his hand holding the flannel away and fixed her eyes on the ceiling again. “I didn’t want to believe Magnussen. I didn’t want to believe the tabloids, except for the ones Janine sold her story to, the whole ‘Shag-a-lot Holmes’ bit. I even wanted to believe there was something going on between you and Violet, for real and not just for show, for the cover story.” She turned her head and gave him a mirthless smile. “Violet’s in for a rude awakening when she realizes her feelings aren’t going to ever be reciprocated.”

Sherlock did not respond.

Mary looked away from him again, at the slightly rumpled hospital bed John had been sleeping in. “I knew I couldn’t keep you two apart, I know I can’t keep you two apart. But… I know something happened in Paris, between you two. A man as… passionate as John doesn’t just become a cold fish in bed unless there is someone else.”

Sherlock, prudently, held his tongue.

“When he returned from Paris, he was distant, untouchable. Emotionally and physically. I expected the emotional distance, but the physical… I thought it was the grief at first, from Harry, but they weren’t close, Harry and John. I think he’d be more upset if something happened to Violet than over what happened to Harry. But… I’m getting off track.” She rolled her head back over to face Sherlock. “For whatever time I have left as John’s wife, I would appreciate it greatly if you kept your hands off of him.”

“He’s my friend, nothing more,” Sherlock somberly informed her, as he turned his back, acting like he was taking off his coat, but actually, he was hiding the spasm of pain contorting his face. He faced Mary once he got himself under control. “Our relationship is strictly platonic. I have no intention of enticing John to return to Baker Street.”

“Until he leaves me.”

Sherlock shook his head, draping his coat over his arm. “Before I met Violet, I thought profiling was silly, a waste of brain power. But now I see it does have its merits. Study John’s profile, his past. He’s had a string of lovers since he was a young man. He earned the moniker ‘Three Continents Watson.’ But he’s never broken up with a single one. It was always the girlfriend who ended things, not him. Obviously, if your marriage is to end, you are the one who will have to deliver the deathblow, because it won’t be him. He’s too stubborn and too loyal.”

“We’re going to tear him apart, you and I.” Mary whispered. She smiled again at Sherlock, this time with genuine affection. “You do realize that you’re the only one who isn’t upset with me for shooting you, don’t you?”

“Yes. It’s annoying, how everyone else is allowing emotion to rot their good sense.”

“They really don’t understand, do they? How you were able to let it go. Let what I did go.”

Sherlock huffed then shrugged. “Grudges are a waste of time. I have far more important things to do than to dwell on past hurts. As I told John once, I cannot let the sins of the past interfere with solving the crimes of the present. What was done cannot be undone. Forward, Mary. We must move.
“How, do we move forward when everything I’ve done pulls us backwards? No one is going to let me forget what I’ve done.”

“Forget? No,” Sherlock tossed the flannel onto the hospital tray. The cloth plopped inelegantly next to a mug of tea, now stone-cold. “Not when I have a permanent reminder,” he rubbed his chest, on purpose this time. Then he inclined his head, “Forgive, yes. I knew it wasn’t personal, you shooting me. Even more importantly, I know you’re not going to try again. You’ve had ample opportunity to try again, but you didn’t. At any rate, if they don’t understand why I forgave you and why we’re friends,” he dropped his voice. “Who cares? We understand, don’t we?”

Mary’s eyes grew damp again. “Yes, we do. We really do understand each other, don’t we?” She daubed her eyes again with the soggy tissue. “I really didn’t want to like you, you know, but I did. I do, I really do.”

“As do I. Not only because you’re John’s wife, but because you’re a fascinating person in your own right.”

“Am I?”

“Of course. You’re murderous, devious and intelligent. John couldn’t have picked a bride who was more fun than you.”

“Speaking of devious,” Mary sighed. “I think Violet is working with Mycroft so he can go after me for your attempted murder.”

“Oh, she most likely is,” Sherlock stretched out his long legs. “But she’s also probably feeling the pangs of guilt and is most likely trying to think how to get out of hole she dug herself into.”

“She’s clever, she’ll think of something.”

“She is rather bright, isn’t she? Even for an American.”

“You… won’t give it a go, will you Sherlock? With Violet? I mean, yes, I have selfish ulterior motives, but you two really do click. She’s good for you, Sherlock.”

He hesitated then carefully chose his words. “I really do not foresee a long-term relationship with Violet in my future.”

“You’re going to break her heart Sherlock.”

“Mm,” Sherlock hummed after another pause. “She’d be in good company. Maybe she can start a support group with Janine and Molly.”

Mary unexpectedly giggled then moaned pressing her hands on her belly.

“Take the morphine, Mary, the full dosage. You’ve been brave enough for today.”

Before she hit the button on the pump that would bring her blessed relief, she stretched her hand out to Sherlock. “I’m sorry I hurt you, for all the ways I hurt you.”

Sherlock curled his long fingers around her small hand. “My condolences for the unlawful termination of your pregnancy. I regret deeply that Jim Moriarty went after you to damage me and John,” he told her in a low, gentle voice only John and Violet knew he possessed.
“That’s not your fault, Sherlock,” Mary gripped his hand as tightly as she could. In a hoarse, quavering voice, she told him, “I don’t blame you. I’m glad he’s dead. I just wish…”

“I won’t give up on finding your daughter if you won’t.” When Mary nodded, agreeing not to give up hope, he smiled. “Good. As far as that is concerned, finding Marissa and bringing her home is my most important case, my number-one-priority. Now take your medicine and go to sleep. Morphine is a lovely drug, is it not?”

“I could get used to this,” Mary slurred after the drug started working its magic. “Why did you give it up?”

“The drugs?”

“The posh life. The big estate, the life of a country squire…” Mary’s eyelids drooped then fluttered open again. “It’s lovely out there, your big fancy castle.”

“It’s not a castle.”

“Looked like one to me. You could have lived like a prince, yet you stay here, in London, in a tiny overpriced flat.”

“I like my flat,” Sherlock gritted his teeth and reminded himself that Mary was well on her way to becoming stoned out of her mind.

“I know dear, I’m sorry. I’m just… jealous. With both of us out of work now and John possibly losing his medical license, I don’t know how we’re going to pay our bills, our mortgage. The last bit of money I had left from my old life went towards changing the terms of the double-hit.”

“I understand. I’m not angry. I can help you and John. Financially, I mean.”

“John will murder me if I ask you for a loan.”

“I won’t let him. If he kills you then I get killed. I’ve been dead twice now. It’s getting tedious.”

Mary sniffled, “They wouldn’t let me completely undo it, but it only goes into effect if MI-6 kills me. That’s what I was talking about, the changing of the terms.” Her eyes were glassy from the effects of the morphine. “Mycroft uses the big house as his own personal fortress, doesn’t he?”

“Yes, even though he shouldn’t. Technically, it still belongs to our parents, the estate.”

“When we were there last summer, Violet and me, I found a locked metal box in a desk drawer, in the library. I thought maybe there might be a clue as to where Maisie is, but it only had pictures and documents for your family.”

“Oh really?” Sherlock felt his interest twitch, like a bloodhound catching a scent.

“Why would your father keep pictures of you and brothers locked up in a metal box?”

Brothers? Sherlock found himself adapting the pose he took while talking to clients. Leaned back in his chair, steepled his fingers, watched Mary intently. “Oh?” he asked artlessly. Mary was a very good liar, but Sherlock was better, especially when he was stone-cold sober.

“Yeah, I didn’t know you had another older brother. Adopted him, your parents did? His birth certificate was in there, but I know your parents’ names aren’t Randolph Holmes and Sherrin Ford Holmes. Your mum and dad are Lettie and Sig.”
Sherlock felt his breath caught in his throat. “Where is this box now?” he continued playing innocently ignorant.

“Oh, I gave it to Violet,” she started drifting away now.

“Really,” Sherlock’s voice went flat. Annoyance pricked at him that Violet had been hiding something from him. He felt doubly annoyed that she had gotten away with it as well.

“It was like finding a hidden treasure. All that was missing a giant X to mark the spot…” Mary garbled as her eyelids dropped down. “It’s not true, y’know… John never leaving me. All you have to is crook your little finger and he’d come running… he needs you, doesn’t need me…” Her eyes closed, her breathing evened out.

Sherlock watched Mary sleep for a bit while he pressed his fingers tightly against his lips. Then he dug into his coat pocket for his mobile, wincing as his cut knuckles grazed the fabric. He thumbed a text to Mycroft:

Instead of the traditional MI6 Safehouse, I’d like to propose An alternative location that Will make almost everyone happy And our lives easier for a bit - SH

He pocketed the mobile, took his coat off and crossed his arms tightly across his chest as he lowered his head.

Quietly he prepared himself for the ghosts he would have to face.

But Mary’s words reverberated throughout his head:

All you have to is crook your little finger and he’d come running…
He needs you, doesn’t need me…

***

24 December 2015
Winterbourne-on-Avon, England
Thursday night
11:41 PM

The fire crackled merrily in the old stone fireplace. Violet sat in an overstuffed powder blue armchair closest to the fire, wrapped in an old patchwork quilt, sipping a mug of the Royal Milk Tea she had made when everyone else had retired to their rooms. She had gotten addicted to it after her unexpected stay with Mycroft. She even made it the way he did, hot milk, brown sugar, a dollop of honey and only the tiniest bit of tea. In front of the hearth, Gladstone and Sweetie slept next to each other. On either side of the retired police dog and the rescued bait dog were two snoozing Pomeranians.

Sweetie had been pathetically grateful when Sherlock and Violet came for him. An animal loving MI-6 agent had the presence of mind to locate the frightened, ugly dog, cringing and whimpering under John and Mary’s bed while John was being whisked away on a stretcher. Sweetie was brought to a kennel. He was cared for properly, but upon smelling Sherlock and Violet, began whining and pawing his cage door.
Violet surveyed the room, stuffed with comfortable furniture, old books, mismatched area rugs, cheerful floral wallpaper and a decrepit, crooked Christmas tree she had helped decorate with garlands of popcorn and a chain made out of coloured paper. Sherlock’s violin case sat next to stacks of old books piled high on the well-worn coffee table. However, the hopes of playing Christmas carols had been premature; the cuts on Sherlock’s knuckles had broken open and bled anew when he tried to play, further souring his already rotten mood. In the corner of the room stood an old piano that had seen better days and which was, to Violet’s sorrow, sadly out of tune. Fortunately, on top of the piano sat a decent albeit old CD player and Mr. Holmes had a most impressive music collection.

Not bad for a safe-house, she thought, her eyes taking in the empty tea cups and bits of Christmas wrapping paper nobody could be arsed to pick up before retiring for the night.

She had thought she had misheard Sherlock when he told her they were going to his parents’ house. She didn’t know exactly where his parents lived. All she knew was that it was a gorgeous red brick house with a nice garden, according to John and Mary. She had thought the driver was taking the scenic route, maybe to make sure no one was following them.

When they left the London city limits and were zooming up M40, only then did she realize they were going to Sherlock’s childhood home. “I don’t have anything appropriate to wear at a big fancy house,” she had hissed at Sherlock as ‘Miss Smith’ since she didn’t know the driver.

Sherlock hadn’t looked up from his mobile. “You won’t need it,” he mumbled and with that, he didn’t speak the rest of the drive.

Winterbourne-on-Avon was just as pretty in the winter as it was in the summer. Picturesque and quaint, it still screamed “Quintessential English Village.” Only now, it was covered with a spun-sugar snow that London didn’t get. Some of the stone cottages had strung fairy lights on their fences and porches. Christmas trees were visible in the front windows.

But Violet felt a twitch of unease when she saw that instead of the For Sale signs in front of two of the cottages she had seen last summer, there were Foreclosure signs instead. She also saw a Going Out of Business sign taped on the big window of the butcher’s shop.

The tiny town was indeed dying.

She had expected for the drive to keep going, to go all the way towards the estates. Instead, the driver had turned into the driveway of a house on the very edge of the village. It was slightly larger than the other cottages, but not by much. It was strangely shaped as well, like a bread loaf. Lights streamed from the windows and smoke wafted lazily from one of its chimneys.

Mrs. Holmes had burst out of the house by then, talking a mile a minute. She hugged and kissed Violet then hugged and kissed Sherlock (who looked like he was enduring some horrible torture rather than a maternal embrace) while she simultaneously praised his new hair-cut and bemoaned his injured hands and face. As Mr. Holmes shuffled out to help with the dogs and the luggage, Mrs. Holmes ushered Sherlock and Violet inside the cosy cottage, explaining that this actually had been two smaller cottages, but Mycroft had cleverly found a way to merge the two tiny cottages together to make a much larger house. (“Wasn’t that clever of him, William?” “Three cheers for Fatso…”)

“We like to come out here during the summers, but it’s lovely in the winters too,” Mrs. Holmes had patently ignored Sherlock insulting Mycroft. “The big house, the estates, they’re just too much for two old pensioners like Siggie and I. So Mycroft helped us create this little getaway.”

“But help, she means he made a few telephone calls and hired contractors and housekeepers,” Sherlock had groused. Violet had mouthed Be nice at him but he ignored her.
“So, dear,” Mrs. Holmes had patted Violet on the arm. “It’s like you and William will have your own house all to yourself. A bit of privacy for the two of you.”

Violet knew better. There would be no privacy.

Still, she couldn’t help but be touched by Mrs. Holmes’ pure joy of being able to spoil her truculent youngest son.

Mr. Holmes, she had found, was a soft-spoken, well-mannered man who loved music, books, his wife and his sons and not necessarily in that order. He would quietly intervene when Mrs. Holmes became a bit too overbearing and Sherlock a bit too rude.

Violet found that she adored him, Mr. Holmes.

She could tell, by catching the looks Sherlock stole at him, that he adored his father as well.

“Be kind to your mother,” Mr. Holmes would rumble, squeezing Sherlock’s thin shoulder after they had rowed over the proper way to build a proper gingerbread house. Sherlock would huff and puff, but he did temper his astringent tongue after that.

Made sleepy by the warm fire, Violet fished her mobile out of her jeans pocket.

John’s voice filled her ear. “Hey.”

“Just checking in,” Violet still used her ‘Miss Smith’ voice. “Everything OK?”

“Yeah. Well, Mary did confess to one more lie.”

“Oh?”

“She’s only thirty-five, not forty.”

“Clever. Most women say they’re younger. I did. No one would question a woman lying about being older than they really are.”

“Yeah, well. Makes me feel like a dirty old man. Being with someone eleven years younger.”

“So… you’re staying. With her.”

There was silence on the other line. “You know I am,” he finally said. “And don’t “Oh John” me. We had a talk this morning, a long talk. She knows this is her last chance, that I can’t take any more deceit. That I won’t take any more deceit, even if it’s for a surprise birthday party.”

Violet severely doubted John could stick to his guns but decided not to press him at the moment.

“OK. Any news about your medical license?”

John hesitated, “Three-month suspension, pending review, mandatory therapy.”

“Jesus.”

“Could have been worse, Violet.”

She flashed back to John lying motionless on the floor, Sherlock performing chest compressions.

“Yes, it could have been.”

“Are you surviving in the middle of nowhere?”
Violet pulled the quilt around her. “Better than I thought.” She lowered her voice, “This is the first time I’ve celebrated a proper English Christmas. With crackers and everything. It was fun.”

“Did Mycroft show up?”

“No. Thank God. Although,” a wicked smile crossed her face. “I wish I would have had my camera phone out when Mrs. Holmes called Sherlock ‘poppet.’”

John hooted with laughter. “Oh. My God. Poppet?”

“It was priceless. He blushed all the way up to his ears.”

“That’s brilliant. Can’t wait to take the piss out of him for that.”

Violet heard floorboards creaking. “It’s late. I should let you go.”

John looked over at Mary, under morphine’s spell again. But today, they had started lowering her dosage. She was recovering nicely. No infection, no permanent damage. Today, she not only took clear liquids but plain yoghurt as well. Later on, the tiniest bit of mashed potato. She was still incredibly sore but again, she claimed the pain was lessening. True, she still felt uncomfortable and would for quite some time, but it was better than the sheer agony she had first experienced when she came to after surgery.

There had been talk about her going home soon if she continued to make progress.

Molly and Greg had offered to stop by with a bit of Christmas dinner for the Watsons. On Mary’s request, John begged off, saying they wanted to be alone. But in reality, neither he nor Mary didn’t want to see little Henry. They didn’t want to be reminded of what they had lost.

Part of their talk that morning had been about John getting a vasectomy. They both agreed they couldn’t stand it, the horror of losing another child.

“Thanks for taking the dog,” he finally said. “Hated how he’s been cooped up in a kennel.”

“He and Gladstone had a marvelous time terrorizing Mrs. Holmes’ Poms in the snow today. But now they are all conked out in front of the fire, lazy little furballs.”

“Where’s Sherlock?”

“He had enough family togetherness and said he’s going to bed. I assume he’s playing on his mobile or reading some scientific tome.”

“Right. Take care of him, please.”

Violet closed her eyes. John’s request was a loaded one. “Take care of yourself.”

Violet had rung off when Mrs. Holmes entered, wearing a brand new scarlet dressing gown that had been a gift from Mycroft. Violet had an inkling that Anthea may have picked it out. Mrs. Holmes wore matching slippers and carried two wine glasses filled with warm, honeyed liquid. An orange slice and a cinnamon stick were floating in the mulled wine.

“Figured you might like something a bit stronger,” Mrs. Holmes held the wine glass out to her.

“Thank you,” Miss Smith took the glass and inhaled the rich aroma of citrus, cinnamon, cloves and nutmeg. She sipped and her taste buds rejoiced. It was the perfect combination of sweet, spicy and boozy. “Thank you for everything, truly. This has been such a welcome treat.”
One of the Pomeranians had woken up when Mrs. Holmes entered the room. She had leapt to her tiny feet and wagged her curlicue tail, begging to be picked up. “Millie, you naughty girl, you should be asleep,” Mrs. Holmes scooped the fluffy little dog up and settled her on her lap as she sat down in the comfortable chair across from Violet.

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself, my dear,” Mrs. Holmes scratched Millie’s perky ears. “But I think it’s time we have an honest chat, girl to girl.” She looked up from her dog as she reached for her wine glass again. Her mouth in a firm, straight line, her eyes unblinking. She looked unnervingly like her youngest son just then.

“Err… alright.” Violet smiled on the outside while she squirmed on the inside. She was almost immune to Sherlock’s “Under the Microscope” stare. It was unsettling to receive it from someone else, especially when that someone else looked like someone’s kindly old granny. “Is this the ‘What are Your Intentions with My Son’ talk?” Violet attempted to joke.

“Something like that yes,” Mrs. Holmes gazed at Violet coolly over her wine glass. Before she took another drink, she said, “We’re quite alone, so do drop the false accent, please.”

Violet felt the blood drain from her face. “What…?”

“Oh please,” Mrs. Holmes no longer looked like someone’s sweet grandmother. She looked like she could take Margaret Thatcher on in a battle of wits while the doughty old PM had been in her prime. She looked like she could take on Winston Churchill in a fistfight. “I know a fake accent when I hear one, although yours is very good. I commend you. I know you’ve fooled everyone else, but it’s obvious to me that you’re an American. The straight teeth, how there is this slight nasally tone in your voice that you haven’t quite been able to eradicate. Plus, little mannerisms that give you away, like when I complimented your pretty scarf this afternoon and you told me where you got it from and how it had been on sale. Only Americans do that, brag about a bargain.”

“Oh, I see now,” Violet Hunter took a giant slug of wine then took off her fake spectacles. “He gets it from you.”

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“Oh, I see now,” Violet Hunter took a giant slug of wine then took off her fake spectacles. “He gets it from you.”

“Of course! Both boys got their brains from me. Mickey was always a proper little stoic. He’d almost be Spartan, except for his sweet tooth and his love for the fine things. I do hope he likes the linens I got him for Christmas, a thousand-thread count Egyptian cotton, very nice bed sheets indeed.” Mrs. Holmes looked away from Violet, studied the fire. “William was such a tenderhearted little thing when he small. I don’t know how many times I had to tell Mickey off for teasing his little brother. Mickey’d keep having a go at William until the poor little tyke was in tears. William had inherited his heart from his father, but he’s buried it so deeply inside him, I don’t know if he could ever find it now.”

“I wonder whose fault that is,” Violet couldn’t help herself.

Mrs. Holmes’ white brows lifted. Her almond-shaped sky-blue eyes became just as glacial and unreadable as her youngest son’s. “Oh, I see. You think you know everything.”

“I do know everything. Dr. Gloria Scott videotaped the therapy sessions.”

Now it was Mrs. Holmes’ turn to pale. “Where are those recordings? Who has them?”

“Sherlock, so good luck finding them.”

Millie leapt off Mrs. Holmes’ lap. Her brother had woken up and followed Millie to the kitchen at a run, his little claws clicking on the floors as he scampered after Millie. Sweetie and Gladstone had
been roused by the row as well. Sweetie whimpered and found the first thing he could squeeze under, an overstuffed loveseat upholstered with a hideous periwinkle fabric. Gladstone, however, trotted immediately over to Violet and sat right in front of her. Violet put her hand on the Alsatian’s head.

“I love my son,” Mrs. Holmes pressed her hand to her breast.

“You have a hell of a way of showing it,” Violet leaned forward, gripping the wine glass so tightly she wondered if it might break. Then her hand unexpectedly spasmed and the glass tumbled from her hand, shattering on the wooden floor. “Shit.” Violet slid off the chair and onto her knees after telling Gladstone to stay put so he wouldn’t cut his paws.

She had started picking up pieces of glass when Mrs. Holmes appeared with a small dustbin and a damp rag. “Careful, don’t cut yourself,” Mrs. Holmes held the bin out for the remains of the glass. Violet deposited the large shards of glass then tossed in the wine glass stem, the cinnamon stick and orange slice. Mrs. Holmes wiped up the spilt wine and the glass dust. Then she binned the rag as well. She shifted to her side, resting on her hip, propping herself up on her hand. Her throat worked as she stared again into the fire. Violet sat cross-legged, next to her dog as the old woman began to speak:

“I love my son. When I found out what that monster did to my child, I wanted to do more than just go to the police. I wanted him dead, murdered and buried in the ground. When I see that fiend on the news, talking politics, talking about education, about helping children,” her eyes blazed. “I am torn between wanting to switch the telly off then chuck it out the window or being proud of my boy for standing up for himself, for setting that disgusting creature on fire.”

“The Earl is still abusing little boys, to this day. He buys them from human traffickers. Sherlock wasn’t the only child he hurt. He was just one of the first.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” Mrs. Holmes pressed her knuckles over her eyes then her mouth. Her shoulders shook. She reached into the sleeve of her woolly dressing gown and plucked out a tissue. “Don’t you think I know that?” she lowered her voice. She swiped at her eyes then blew her nose. Binning the used tissue, she told Violet, “Let me tell you the last piece of the puzzle, the part you don’t understand, the reason why we didn’t do The Right Thing. After hearing me out, then you can judge me…”

***

3 January 1984
The Holmes Estates, England
Tuesday night
11:41 PM

“You did what?”

Siger Holmes reached for his wife. She was just as pretty and slender as the day he met her at that coffee bar in London. But she was not as pleased with him now as she had been that lovely spring day almost twenty years ago. She jerked her arms out of his slender pianist’s hands.

“I made a deal with Alistair,” Siger rubbed the back of his neck then raked his fingers through his jet-black curls, pushing the fringe out of his eyes. “He said he won’t prosecute us for what William did to Heathcliff—”

“What William did to Heathcliff?” Lettie shrieked, her blonde hair spun out in tandem with the skirt
of her pretty blue dress that matched her eyes perfectly. “For what William did to Heathcliff, are you mad? No, no!” she shook her head and started stalking in circles in the library’s massive fireplace, the one that was actually a priest-hole back the days when the Virgin Queen had enough of religious dissent. “No. No more deals. That’s how we got into this fix in the first place. It’s not too late. I have copies of the medical records after the pediatrician examined Willi-” she choked, covered her face, trying to get herself under control. Siger rose, a thin, wiry man who was much stronger than he looked. His own long face was contorted in pain as he tried to embrace his wife again, to comfort her. But she pushed him away with a hard shove. “No. We are going to the police. That’s final. We’re going, first thing in the morning.”

“Lettie, please listen to me.”

“No! I’m through listening to you! We should have let this,” she waved her arms around, indicating all of the estate. “Go. Just let the bloody place go, let the government have the lot, I don’t care, I’ve never cared. I’m a bloody commoner, Sig. Always have been. I don’t need this or loads of money. I can work, we can both work. I’d rather have a grotty little cottage in the stews of London to call my own instead of all of this rubbish. I can get a university job teaching. I’ll ring Jamie, he’s teaching at Oxford these days. He can get me an interview.” After Siger groaned in disgust, she added coldly, “You can get a job too, a proper job. No more playing the country squire. It’s time to grow up, admit we failed to run this estate and get away from all of this.”

“It’s not that simple.”

“It is that simple. I refuse to allow Lord Alistair Almighty Bloody Cullen-Culpepper to buy us off so he can protect his evil little devil spawn. They can all go to bloody hell. I’ve been poor before. I can be poor again and you can either be poor with me and your children or you can leave.”

“I’m not leaving you or our children,” Siger approached his wife again, growing angry now. “It’s not about the money.”

“Of course it’s about the money! Why else did you make a deal with that bastard! I’m not staying here while my children are in jeopardy!”

“Lettie, just calm down for a moment and let m-”

“Calm down!” Lettie’s voice pitched up into a shriek. “Don’t you bloody tell me to calm down!”

“VIOLET.”

Siger rarely used her first name. She was always called “Lettie.” He never shouted at her either. She sank into the first chair she could find.

Instead of going to her, Siger crossed over to the bar. Poured two fingers of whisky for both of them and returned to her. Handing her the glass, he told her in a terse voice, “He knows. About you. Working for MI-6 as a code-breaker.”

Lettie nearly dropped the tumbler. “That’s classified information. How did he find ou-”

“I don’t know! I certainly didn’t tell him,” Siger threw back his drink and put the empty glass on the mantle. “But I bet I can deduce who did.”

“Jamie would never say anything,” Lettie said hotly. “He’s my friend.”

“Well, somebody said something. Alistair knew about your role in the Wilson Plot, back in ’74!”
“I was following orders,” she replied faintly. “All I did was collect information. I was doing my job. I didn’t do anything wrong.”

“You wiretapped the telephones belonging to Members of the House of Commons and House of Lords! That’s been illegal since 1966!”

“It wasn’t as if I was working for Lord Mountbatten, was I?” Lettie sniffed. “Besides, all I heard was a bunch of dirty talk between those randy old goats and their little prozzies.”

“Christ, Lettie, that doesn’t matter. The world believes you’re a mathematics professor who retired to take care of her children. The press would have a field day to learn a schoolteacher was really a code-breaker and spy. What if they find out what really happened to Heathcliff, what would they say about William then?”

“Why, I’d tell them why William did it!”

“And they’ll ask why wasn’t Mummy home minding the baby,” Siger shook his head. He turned his back to Lettie and gripped the mantle with both hands now. Feeling the fire’s heat roasting his face, he said in a low, guttural voice, “Alistair said he’ll keep silent about your work for MI-6 and what William did to Heathcliff, if we keep silent about what Heathcliff did to William. He wants the land, all of it, except for the home estate, of course. But he’s offering far more than market value. We’d be more than comfortably well off. We can afford a nice house with a proper garden in London. We can educate the boys, send them to good schools and still have a little left over for university. I’ll… find someone with more brains than me to manage the money this time,” he mumbled. Then in a louder voice, he added, “I told Alistair I needed to think about it, but… I think we should do it. Take his deal.”

“No,” Lettie said weakly. Then louder, she repeated herself. “No! How could we take such a deal? That’s not a deal, that’s blackmail! Our family is being ripped apart. William hasn’t spoken a word in three days and he’s not eating either. Mickey still can’t move, not after the beating Ford gave him and we still don’t know where Ford ran off to!” She shook her head, her blonde hair fanning out around her pretty face. “No. Alistair’s not covering up what his horrid son did to my boy. I’m going to the police.”

“Please, my love, don’t make me choose between my wife and my son,” his voice shook.

“You don’t have to, I made that decision for you,” Lettie’s voice quavered as well.

“Lettie, he will get you killed!” Siger pivoted to face his wife. “He will have you killed!”

“I don’t care!” she shouted back, pounding the arms of the chair with her fists.

“William needs you. They need you, the boys, all three of them,” Siger pleaded. Then in a whisper, he added, “I need you.”

“I need to do this!” Lettie bolted to her feet. “I don’t care what happens to me!”

Then there was the tiniest little sob from behind the heavy drapes.

Both Lettie and Siger fell silent at once. Stricken, they had a silent conversation only parents could have:

_I thought you put him to bed?_  

Lettie hurried after her husband as Siger crossed the enormous library to his desk, which was in front
of the drapes. He pulled out the desk chair so Lettie could sit down. He crouched down to a child’s level and peeled back the velvet drape slowly.

William, always small for his age, looked positively tiny now. His plaid pyjamas were far too large for him. His curls stuck up riotously, he needed a haircut but wouldn’t let anyone near enough to cut his hair. He hiccoughed and shrank away from his father, clutching a blue teddy bear and a sheet of creamy paper closer to him. It was a ridiculous toy, the teddy bear. It was meant to be a joke since it was called “Grumpy Bear” and had a giant thundercloud on its tummy. William’s nanny Rose had bought it for him as a laugh since she called him “Stormcrow” and “Grumpy Boy.” But he had clung to it the way a much younger child would hold onto a cuddly toy he was afraid would be taken away from him.

His eyes were huge in his thin, pinched face. They were almond-shaped like his mother’s but the color was his own. A strange swirl of dark blue, light green and honey gold. Tears stood in those huge, extraordinary eyes but stubbornly, he continued to stuff his feelings down.


William’s eyes darted away from Siger, flicking down towards the crumpled paper he held.

“William, is that my good stationary? Have you been nosing in my study again?” Lettie struggled to keep her voice firm but it wobbled all the same.

“You’re not in trouble, son,” Siger held out his hand. “Give it over.”

William held the paper out and Siger plucked the wrinkled paper out of his small hand. “Ah, just as I thought,” Siger boomed with fake good cheer as he handed the paper over to his wife. “Somebody was impatient and started his birthday treasure hunt early, Mummy.”

It was so hard, pretending to be normal.

But William wasn’t pretending, not anymore. “Please,” his little voice rasped from disuse. “Please don’t let Mummy die.”

“No one is going to die, Will,” Siger reached out to touch William’s face but he recoiled even further, pressing himself flush against the wall.

That frightened gesture didn’t just break Siger’s heart, it shattered it.

“If you go to the police, Mummy will die. Stop trying to trick me, it doesn’t work, I heard you shouting.” William gulped, trembled then added, “Heath said that would happen, if I tattled. He said he’d have Mummy and you and Mickey all murdered and I’d have to live with him.”

“You’ll never live with him, with Heath,” Siger said more fiercely than he intended. Seeing his son’s face pale whiten even more, he gentled his voice, “And Mummy isn’t going to die.”

“Promise?” William’s little birdlike voice was still unusually croaky. “You won’t tell the police?”

“No,” Lettie surprised Siger with her answer, “Of course not. Mummy and Daddy will handle it without the police. No one is ever going to hurt you again, poppet. OK?”

William solemnly studied his mother in that disconcerting, intense way of his. Eventually he nodded his assent, apparently done speaking. He let his father help him to his feet but scurried away as fast as he could. As he darted past his mother, Lettie asked, her voice shaking, “Will? Could I have a kiss
goodnight?"

William kept walking, increasing his pace until it was a run. Then he was gone.

Lettie couldn’t keep her composure any longer. She buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

Still on his knees, Siger turned to Lettie, reaching for her. This time she didn’t push him away. She grabbed fistfuls of his dress shirt as she cradled him in her arms. At the same time, he wrapped his arms around her waist. Holding on. That was all either one of them could do at that point, really, just hold on to what they had left.

In a fierce voice, Lettie said, “Call Alistair, but tell him he’s paying for William’s counseling sessions as well, for as long as it takes to heal him from this nightmare. And we didn’t find the therapist through the NHS either.”

Three days later, the little boy with hair as black as a raven’s wing and kaleidoscopic eyes that saw everything spent his eighth birthday in the office of one Dr. Gloria Scott. A woman he had immediately deduced owned a guinea pig, who wore jeans instead of a smart suit so her young clients would trust her and who was a stress-eater because she had just left her abusive husband.

William was on his way to becoming Sherlock.

***

25 December 2015
Winterbourne-on-Avon, England
Friday morning
12:22 PM

Mrs. Holmes fell silent and for a moment, both women just watched the crackling fire.

Violet idly stroked Gladstone’s head. Once he realized there was no real threat, the Alsatian had rested his head in Violet’s lap. She had absolutely no words at the moment.

Finally, Mrs. Holmes spoke again, although she addressed the fire instead of Violet, “If we were to have ever divorced, it would have been then. We came dangerously close during that time. I still regret it, even after all these years, not going to the police. Maybe we would have been poor. Maybe the boys would have been taken from us, stuck in foster care, maybe a sniper might have taken me out, but at least the world would have known the sick pervert Lord Heathcliff Cullen-Culpepper really was. But we didn’t go forward. We sold out our son to protect my sordid past. We moved to London. I refused to send Sherlock to school. I taught him myself. I tried to make up for my failure as a mother, for not protecting him when he needed me to, but, instead, I smothered him. He was as innocent as a baby bird when we sent him to university. Met that twat Trevor, oh I did not like that boy. He was handsome, yes. But lazy. And greedy.”

“I didn’t like him either,” Violet confided in her. “Too pretty for my taste.”

Mrs. Holmes laughed silently then teared up again. “Then there were the drugs, of course. So many nights, when the telephone rang, I’d think, ‘This is it. This is the night I lose my baby.’ It is my greatest fear I will outlive my youngest child.” Her lower lip quivered. “But he got himself cleaned up. Met that nice detective-inspector fellow with the grey hair and French last name.”

“Lestrade.”

“Oh yes, that’s right. George Lestrade.”
Violet didn’t correct her.

“Then he met Dr. Watson and he changed. He became more than just a proper genius. He became as bright as all the stars in the firmament.” She then reached out and cupped Violet’s face in her hands. Her hands were soft, wrinkled like crepe paper. “Then he met you. One more star in his universe,” she patted Violet’s cheek. “I don’t know if he’s in love with you, dear. But he’s fond of you.”

“I know, he’s... he’s important to me, I care about him, but,” Violet twisted the engagement ring. “This, this is a lie,” she held up her left hand. “He’s protecting me from men who want to kill me.”

“So,” Mrs. Holmes smiled wryly. “History repeats itself. I’m sure you realize that you have the same first name as me.”

“Yeah, I wondered if he had an Oedipus complex.”

“Then there’s that nice Molly Hooper. Mickey told me she was a great help during Operation Lazarus. Lovely girl.” She hummed and smoothed a tuft of white hair back. “So was anyone planning on telling me I have a grandson?”

“Ah... well, you see,” Violet blundered, then just said, “Shit.”

“Thought I’d be too stupid to see the truth right underneath my nose?” Mrs. Holmes was arch. “If it’s meant to be a secret, why on earth did you bring me to him?”

“Because Greg and Molly were desperate,” Violet opted for honesty. “And you surprised me. I didn’t know what to do with you when you stopped by 221B that day. And I had recently talked to Greg earlier. He said he felt like something was wrong with the baby but their pediatrician was ignoring him and Molly. I was... trying to kill two birds with one stone.”

“Does Mycroft know?”

“Oh hell no,” Violet forgot herself then gasped, covering her mouth with her hand. “Oh, I am sorry, Mrs. Holmes, I didn’t mean to be rude.”

“Call me Lettie, dear and I understand. Mycroft often forgets that he’s playing with actual human lives instead just chess pawns. I won’t tell him about little Henry.”

“What if he deduces it from you?”

Lettie gave Violet a sharp look. “Please. My boys are my life. But do you really think those two are any match for me? Those two twits think I’m just a daft old lady who talks too much.”

Violet grinned. “Maybe now that Jim Moriarty is dead, we can let the cat out of the bag? You can be Grandma Holmes?”

Instead of looking pleased, Lettie’s eyes dimmed. But she quickly smiled. “Yes, of course, that would be splendid.” Her face softened and she tilted her head, lost in thought. Violet recognized the expression; it was the same one Sherlock wore when he was in his Mind Palace. “Oh, but Henry is the spitting image of William,” she finally crooned. “I know everyone else sees the red hair and dark eyes and thinks he looks like his mum, but he’s William all over again. It’d be nice, being Granny Holmes. Be lovely, really. But... we’ll cross that bridge when we reach it, won’t we?” she started to get up. Violet leapt to her feet and helped her stand. “I need to get these old bones to bed. Lovely chatting with you dear. Apologies for catching you unawares tonight and when I visited you in London, but I had to see what kind of a woman you were. That reminds me, are Dr. Watson and Mrs. Watson still together? They were separated last Christmas.”
“They’re together,” Violet didn’t provide any further details.

To Violet’s astonishment, Lettie’s face twisted in distaste. “Oh sweet Fanny May, are they really? I just really didn’t like her at all. She was pleasant enough but so secretive. Shady. Hmm, well, none of my business, I suppose, even though if she thinks she can hide the fact that she shot my son from me, she’s got another think coming. I plan on giving her a piece of my mind the next time I clap eyes on her. But at any rate, I’m off to Bedfordshire. Good-night and Happy Christmas,” she pecked Violet on the cheek and trundled out of the lounge.

Violet felt like she just got run over by a double-decker bus.

“Wow,” she whispered to herself. She put out the fire then softly whistled for Gladstone and Sweetie. The poor disfigured bulldog refused to budge from his hiding spot, but Gladstone came obediently enough.

Violet collected her mug and the surviving wine glass and padded from the lounge to the very cluttered by very homey kitchen. Guided by the dim lights streaming from the streetlamps from outside, Violet made her way to the sink. She had just put the mug and wine glass in the sink when a deep baritone queried from behind her: “Have a nice chat with my mother?”

Violet jumped about a foot and whirled around, gripping the counter behind her. She saw the outline of Sherlock sitting at the scrubbed kitchen table, his feet on the table top.

“No,” she informed him. “It was terrifying.”

“Conversations with my mother usually are. Do you have anything you’d like to discuss with me?” Sherlock’s voice was a trifle too innocent to be innocent, “Anything on your mind, anything troubling your conscience, perhaps?”

“I poured bleach over your maggots experiment.”

“Wait, you did what? That was three months of work down the drain… never mind, never mind, we’ll discuss that later,” Sherlock fumed. “Anything else you wish to confess to me?”

“You know there’s a ton of shit on my conscience, so why don’t you give me a clue as to what you want to ask me about?”

Sherlock reached down then causally tossed a metal box on the kitchen table. The lid sprung open. Even in the darkened room, Violet could see clearly what it was.

“Oh, that,” she said lamely.

“I told you not to snoop around Ford’s murder.”

“Since when do I listen to you,” Violet crossed her arms, feeling defensive now.

“What did you deduce from studying the photographs? Don’t bore me either. It’s the only way to get back into my good graces at this moment.”

“Your good graces? Are you kidding me? There were horse hooves in the fridge before you and John left for Paris. And if I have to tell you to put the goddamn toilet seat down one more ti-”

“I told you,” Sherlock cut her off as he swung his feet down, “To leave the matter of Ford alone. Not only did you disregard my wishes but you hid this from me. Tell me what you learned from your… investigation.” He put his elbow on the table and tented his fingers.
Gladstone whined. Violet shushed him. “I thought it was strange,” Violet told him in a cool, clipped voice, her Official Federal Agent Voice. “If Sherrinford Holmes wasn’t supposed to exist anymore, why would there still be photographs of him, papers for him? Mycroft’s too careful. He would have been sure to destroy them. Then I realized you took them. Hid them in plain sight in your father’s office even though Mycroft uses the estates as his bolt-hole; he’s too arrogant to think you’ve hidden evidence of Ford’s existence in such an obvious place.”

“How would I do that?”

“Fits your profile,” Violet walked to the kitchen table and sat down. “Tweaking Mycroft’s nose and hiding evidence of a crime so you can examine it later. Whatever Mycroft told you and your parents about Ford’s death, you didn’t buy it for one second, the official version. You deduced enough that Ford had been killed and Mycroft had a hand in it.”

“Clever girl,” Sherlock purred. “Now let me show you how very wrong you are.”

“Oh goodie gumdrops,” Violet plunked her elbows on the scrubbed table and propped her chin on her hands. “Please enlighten me, Mr. Holmes,” she batted her eyelashes.

Sherlock ignored her sarcasm. “I didn’t know the pictures existed, otherwise I would have confronted Mycroft ages ago. No, the person who hid these pictures and documents,” he paused dramatically, “was my mother.”

Violet blinked, genuinely startled this time, “Your mom? You said Mycroft bullied her into surrendering all the paperwork and photographs she had of Ford?”

“You just learned five minutes ago that my mother is far cleverer than she allows people to believe. Mycroft has a great blind spot for Mother whereas I most certainly do not. I was the one homeschooled by her, not Mycroft. I know she’s more than just an old lady who talks too much… although she really does natter on and on.”

“OK, so your mom gave the pictures to Mycroft, then stole them back, or gave him copies and kept the originals, fine, I can see that. But why would she leave them locked up in your dad’s desk at the estates, especially when Mycroft uses the estates as his hideout?”

“Treasure hunt.”

“Treasure hunt,” Violet titled her head, feeling a step behind, as usual. “I don’t follow.”

“When we were small, Mother would plan these elaborate treasure hunts for our birthdays,” Sherlock tented his hands, remembering. “We would have to figure out the clues that would lead us to our birthday present. You see, my dear Violet, she meant for me to find this.”

“Why?”

“To solve the case, of course,” Sherlock’s nostrils flared, growing impatient with Violet’s obtuseness. “She’s directing me to the clues that would solve the case of what really happened to Ford. Mother wants closure.”

“You said it was Mycroft that signed off on the execution order. That’s pretty much closure.”

“But why did he sign off on it, especially if Ford was innocent of the treasonous crimes he was accused of committing, which my mother strongly suspects he was.”

“Do you believe he was innocent?”
“I have no verifiable data to confirm or deny Ford’s innocence,” Sherlock said smoothly. “That is what my mother is driving me towards, hard data to confirm or refute why Ford was killed. Yet, therein lies another question, actually the most important question. Did Mycroft sign off on that order of his own free will or under duress? That’s the real case, Violet. Mycroft does not do anything capriciously. My mother, as you also just learned, also worked for MI-6. We have a polite fiction going on between us, Mother and I,” he smiled grimly. “I pretend I have no idea that she was a code-breaker and a spy and she pretends to believe me.”

“Your family is so fucked up.”

“At least we’re not boring.”

Violet wasn’t sure if that was a good thing, but she kept that thought to herself. Instead, she said, “The pictures aren’t in order your mother put them in. Mary looked at them first. She gave them to me only after she realized there was nothing in there that could help her find Maisie. I’m not sure if she kept everything in order when she flipped through them.”

“Mary is too precise. She would have kept everything as she found it.”

“Well, I know I’ve shuffled them out of order…”

Every time the photograph of Sherlock with Victor Trevor in Prague popped up, Violet immediately put it in the bottom of the stack.

“That’s why you’re going to help me,” Sherlock started taking the old photographs and the folded up documents out of the box. “Knowing you, you documented every item that was in this box. Old habits die hard, do they not, Agent Hunter?” He held out his hand, “Your iPhone.”

Violet reluctantly dug her Smartphone out of her jeans pocket. She thumbed in the pass-code and opened the camera roll for Sherlock. “I took pictures of the pictures in the order I saw them in,” she confirmed as she handed the mobile over to him.

“Obviously,” Sherlock strode over to the light-switch. As he flicked the lights on, he asked, “How is John? Your mobile is warm and there are recent smudges on the screen from your ear and cheek. John would be the only one you would call at this late hour.”

“Fine, well, no. Not fine, but getting better.” Violet debated for a moment. “His medical license did get suspended. Three months.”

Sherlock hummed but made no other response as he started laying out the pictures and documents in the order they appeared on the camera roll. Once everything was neatly laid out, Sherlock took a step back, drumming his fingertips against each other lightly.

Arms crossed again, Violet walked around the kitchen table and stood next to Sherlock.

“Stop biting your lip,” Sherlock ordered without even looking at her.

Violet gave him an unkind look then her attention reverted back to the photographs. “The order is random,” she observed. “That makes me think that the order is not random at all.”

“Well-spotted,” Sherlock ruffled his cropped hair in frustration. “And Mother couldn’t understand why it took Mycroft and me days to find our birthday presents. I used to cheat dreadfully. I would sneak into her study days before my birthday and steal the list of clues.”

Violet’s eyes darted over the pictures again. “What if we’re looking at this all wrong?” she suddenly
burst out. “What if the answers are on the back?”

“The dates!” Sherlock crowed. “You really do have moments of near-brilliance, you know that?”

“Thanks,” Violet suppressed an eye-roll. As Sherlock flipped over the photographs, she asked, “What would the cipher be?”

“Something that Mycroft would overlook in his arrogance,” Sherlock murmured, eyeing the pictures again. “Something he would never consider…oh!” his mouth formed a perfect O. “Back in a tick!” he nearly sprinted out of the kitchen.

“Didn’t know people actually said, ‘Back in a tick,’” Violet teased him upon his return.

Sherlock ignored her flippancy once again. He was busy flipping through a gigantic leather-bound book. It took a moment for Violet to realize what it was. “Is that a Bible?” she asked.

“Mm-hm, obviously,” Sherlock thumbed through the pages, “Mycroft pays as much attention to religious texts as I do the solar system. Shaking his head in frustration, he groused, “Of course my mother would choose a book that has over twelve thousand bloody pages in it.” He flipped through it again, “Although random passages had been highlighted, however it will be tedious, dull and extremely time-consuming to determine which highlighted passage is the cipher.”

Violet however, disappeared inside her own mind. As she reviewed her original profile on Mrs. Holmes while adding the new information to her files, she tilted her head to the side and pursed her lips in unconscious imitation of Violet Vernet Holmes. *If I was a former code-breaker and spy who had given birth to two geniuses, where would I hide a cipher? Where would I hide information about one brother killing the other…*

“Genesis,” she burst out. When Sherlock looked down his hawkish nose at her, she explained, “The story of Cain and Abel.”

“The first murder,” Sherlock’s eyes gleamed.

“Well, I was thinking about the first case of extreme sibling rivalry, but OK.”

Sherlock had no patience for Violet’s wit. He flipped to the beginning of the Bible. “Here,” he stabbed the Bible with his finger. “Look,” he lowered the Bible so Violet could see a passage highlighted.

Violet read aloud: “‘And the Lord said unto Cain, Where is Abel thy brother? And he said, I know not: Am I my brother's keeper?’” She peered closer at the page then cried out, “Sherlock, look. All the A’s in that passage are underlined, do you see?”

“Yes, of course I see, I see everything,” Sherlock shoved the Bible into Violet’s hands. “Genesis 4:9… Four-nine equals A…” his mercurial eyes scanned the backs of the photographs, until he plucked one out seemingly at random. He held it up to Violet.

Violet read out loud, “Nine, April, 1977,” then frowned. “But the Bible verse is…."

“4:9, yes, of course, it’s an inverse code, my mother invented it. I need a pen, paper and silence,” Sherlock ordered her, putting the photograph back without even showing Violet the front of the photograph. Then he took the Bible from her again.

Violet was neither a code-breaker nor a genius so she was content to let Sherlock work. After fetching him a pen and a pad of paper, she pulled out a chair and sat down. As she scratched
Gladstone’s ears, she watched him work, fascinated at the speed of how his mind absorbed and processed information. His nimble fingers flew as he scribbled letters on the notepad in chicken scratch rather than his usual lovely handwriting.

When he finished, he fell utterly still. His face completely closed up.

“Sherlock?”

He shook himself. “Get your coat and boots. The game is on.” He dropped the paper, pen and Bible on the table and stalked out the kitchen.

Violet reached over and picked up the notepad. This time she read to herself:

* microfiche estate tree house grove *

Her entire face crinkled in confusion. Then she sucked in a breath.

“Oh shit.”

Chapter End Notes

Here’s some more information about The Wilson Plot.... because you know that wikipedia is TOTALLY accurate (*cough* tool of the lazy fic writer looking for a British conspiracy to fit her evil needs *cough*)

"The deduction came unbidden and was clinical and unsentimental as always.

Despite everything, despite all that he had been through and the trials he knew he had yet to endure, he was still Sherlock Holmes..."

Feels, action, some more feels, then action again... minor trigger warning for mention of child abuse.

Apologies for not posting last Monday but real life caught up with me plus my awesome beta'er caught A GIGANTIC CONTINUITY ERROR that would have messed everything up (thank you cadogan! XO)

I really do have the best readers and beta'ers ever! As usual, I'll respond to comments tomorrow.

Enjoy!

Chapter Thirty-Three: Fire and Paraselene

25 December 2015
The Holmes Estates, England
Friday morning
2:02 AM

Was it the garden or the library?

Pardon?

She had repeated herself exceedingly slowly: Was it the garden or the library?

I'm afraid I require you to elaborate.

You sure?

When Sherlock had hesitated, she had pounced on his pause. That's what I thought. I would offer to just declare me the winner of this round right now but since you basically eviscerated me over what I have done to my brother and to you, I'm not feeling very merciful right now. So was it the garden or the library where the current Earl of Winchester... first made his acquaintance with you?

The flat had become so silent the drip from the kitchen faucet had been audible. Sherlock had taken a breath, tried to speak but his powers of speech had completely deserted him.

I told you, she had continued to push on ruthlessly. Back then, she had still been unsure if he was her friend or her undoing. If I had given Moriarty everything I knew about you, you would have killed yourself for real. He would have made your life a living hell. He would have prolonged the torture, not giving you the satisfaction of death, even if you begged for it. But you're not answering my
Nine months later, she stood on the edge of a grove encircling the pretty estate Sherlock had called home as a child.

The grove loomed black against the snow and the grey skies as flurries continue falling.

The Great, Dark Outside.

Violet shivered, despite wearing the hideous puffy pink coat she loathed. But it was warm and it had a hood. She also had put on an extra pair of socks and proper Wellingtons. She looked up at Sherlock, standing tall, quiet and imperious next to her. He had nearly dashed out the door wearing his usual garb of dress clothes and shoes, but Violet bullied him until he sulked back upstairs to change into clothes more suited for the winter weather.

She had never met someone more allergic to jeans before in her life.

But the stubborn man had left his dress jacket and shirt on. Considering that she had managed to convince him to at least change into jeans and hiking boots, Violet considered it a win.

His coat was buttoned all the way up to his throat but a bit of his new cobalt blue scarf (an early gift from Mycroft,) peeked out. His head was bare. Snow dusted what remained of his black curls. The tips of his ears and nose were pink.

On the other side of her, Gladstone whined as snowflakes sparkled on his fur in the moonlight.

Of course Mycroft would hide evidence here, Violet thought, staring at the trees, defrocked of their green finery during the winter. This place is a trigger for Sherlock. Mycroft assumed his little brother would never come here.

Their mother knew that he would, provided he was given enough of a push.

“Sherlock, we don’t have to do this,” Violet clutched the two Mag-lite torches she had grabbed before following Sherlock to the garage. It had been dubious if his father’s Ford Fiesta could make the drive on the slick roads, but Sherlock had driven slowly and steadily. “Let’s go back before we get stuck here. We’ll come back another day.” Her breath was frozen puffs of air.

Sherlock snatched a torch from her and stalked off, shoulders squared, heading straight for the grove. He flipped his coat collar up as he stomped through the snow.

“Or we can do this tonight,” Violet sighed. When Gladstone whined again, she gave him a little scratch behind his black, pointy ear. “Komm zu mir,” she ordered the dog. Obediently, the loyal Alsatian padded along next to her as she followed Sherlock into the grove.

“Sherlock, wait,” Violet panted, resting a hand on a nearby tree once inside the man-made miniature forest. “Where are you?” she shone her torch around, her heart starting to thump. She flinched when a beam of light hit her in the face.

“I’m here.”

“Slow down a little, OK? I’m still beaten up from Normandy,” Violet leaned against the tree, feeling the strain already on her muscles.
“Apologies,” he stretched out his hand, unfurling his leather clad fingers.

Violet sharply recalled the night they first met, first truly met. He had met “Miss Smith” earlier that day, but he met “Agent Hunter” that night. After they had escaped her flat right before it exploded, they had walked, seemingly towards her old office. But some of Jack Woodley’s men had found them and started following them. Sherlock had abruptly grabbed her hand, as if they were a happy couple taking a nice walk through the City after a date.

_When I say run, run. Do not let go._

She hadn’t liked the way his leather glove had felt on her bare hand.

Now she wore gloves. She didn’t hate the way his fingers curled around hers when she took his proffered hand.

“Do not let go,” she told him.

It was too dark to see his face. “Never,” he said from the depth of the gloom. “Come along, Violet. Gladstone,” he called in a firmer voice. “_Komm._”

Gladstone, confused, cocked his head. “_Zum Sherlock, Stone,_” Violet told the dog.

It was not easy going. Violet didn’t know where she was going, blindly trusting that Sherlock did. Her shoulders and legs still ached badly from her ordeal at Normandy. There were also roots, logs, rocks, snow and patches of ice to contend with as well. When they came across a creek, frozen solid, Sherlock murmured “We’re close.”

As they followed the frozen creek south, Sherlock started to speak. His baritone sounded muffled as the snow continued to fall softly. “I was not permitted to play out here alone because my parents were afraid I’d fall into the stream. It’s not quite a river, but it has a proper current and it is deep enough that small child could drown in it. I used to beg my brothers to take me out here. I liked making paper boats and watching them float away down the stream, pretending they were pirate ships. Or Mycroft and Ford would fish and I’d help. Bait their hooks or assist in reeling the fish in, which really was no accomplishment, but great fun to a little boy, I suppose. The fish weren’t worth eating. We’d throw them back. Or we’d catch frogs and salamanders. We’d throw them back as well, although Mycroft had always promised me he’d show me how to dissect a frog. He never did though.”

Violet felt his hand starting to shake in hers.

“But, boys grow, as they do and they start finding their little brothers babyish and tedious. Ford went off to university, Mycroft to boarding school. Left behind, I resorted to my own devices, which was to disobey my parents and come here on my own.” For a while, the only sound was the crunching of the snow under their boots. Finally, he said, “He used that against me as well, Heathcliff. He had found me alone, here, when I wasn’t supposed to be. He said he wouldn’t tattle on me, that it could be our secret. I was seven; I had no idea he was… _grooming me._”

Violet decided right then and there to have a very serious talk with Mycroft about pulling Mary out of retirement for One Last Job once she was physically able. She doubted Mary would have to be coerced into it once she learned the whole story. _But that would be showing my hand to Mycroft that I know about the Earl,_ she sighed. _And why should Mary have to do Mycroft’s dirty work? Has that man ever gotten his hands actually bloody?_

“I can feel your pity practically oozing out every one of your pores,” Sherlock suddenly huffed.
“Stop it. It’s annoying and I need to think.”

Violet shut down her thoughts. Shining the torch around, she asked, “Are we close?”

Sherlock reached down and lightly encircled her wrist with his fingers. He guided her hand so she pointed her torch upwards. “We’re here.”

Violet looked up at a wreck of a tree-house, left to suffer the torments of the elements for years and years. It was more of a shack than a house. A remnant of a swing dangled desolately from a thick branch. “That doesn’t look very sturdy.” She furrowed her brow as she looked at the boards that had been nailed into the trunk of the tree to create a ladder. “Are you sure the microfiche is up there? Sherlock wait!” she snapped as Sherlock skipped up the ladder. “God, I hope you’ve had your tetanus shots,” she added when she thought about how rusty those nails had to be after all this time.

She heard the boards above her creak and groan under Sherlock’s weight. She waited for the weather-beaten boards to collapse and Sherlock to tumble to the frozen earth. John would be rightly pissed off if Sherlock had fallen again, but it would only be a seven foot drop rather than nine storeys off a hospital roof.

Through the square opening in the floor of the tree-house, Sherlock’s hand reached through, beckoning her.

Violet gritted her teeth, put the torch in her coat pocket and told Gladstone to stay. She then started slowly climbing up the make-shift ladder. Still sore from trying to stand up while handcuffed to a lamppost, her rotator cuffs and wrists protested mightily. When she was halfway up, Sherlock reached down, gripping her underneath her armpits as carefully as possible. He helped her climb the rest of the way.

She scooted away from the entrance and took the torch out of her coat pocket. Pushing the faux-fur-lined hood down, she shone the light around. Looking up, she saw sections of the roof were missing. Looking around, she saw remains of a child’s treasures lightly dusted with snow, the colors faded with age. Wooden toy swords. The sad, tattered remains of a ridiculously large kite. A butterfly net, the netting nothing more than wisps. A milk crate filled with boyhood treasures like interesting looking rocks, empty fizzy drink bottles, action men missing their heads, comic books and hardback novels left to moulder.

Sherlock scrambled around, leaving nothing unexamined. Violet stayed put, still unsure if the floor of the tree-house could hold both of their weight.

“My father built this for us, Mycroft and me,” Sherlock informed her, flipping open a lid of a shoebox he had found. “All of the Holmes boys, even torpid Mycroft could sit up here, safe and sound. You did not observe the stay rods my father had installed to secure the house to the tree. He’s quite mechanically inclined, my father. Enjoys building things. He may subject you to looking at the things he had made in his spare time, for which I apologize for in advance, for it is quite dull. For a while he was obsessed with building ships-in-the-bottle. Then there was the painting miniature cars phase. He also likes to build model houses, built a few for charity for the church here in town, before we moved to London. Always said he wished he had a daughter so he could have built her a dollhou—”

“Sherlock.”

He looked up from the box of bottle-caps he had been rifling through. While he had been talking, Violet had crawled to the milk crate. She held open an old book, or what was meant to look like a box. “Did your father used to make hollow books as well?”
Sherlock’s face tightened; Violet could see it constrict even in the limited light from their torches.
“Yes, he liked taking cheap books so he could create secret compartments within them to hide valuables. Mother likes using them to hide her good jewellery since we moved to London.”

He fixed his eyes on what lay inside the illustrated copy of *Treasure Island* that he had thought had been lost when he and his family had moved to London.

An envelope, wrapped in a plastic sandwich bag, rested inside the book. Except for a layer of dust, it looked practically new.

“Of course the documents would have been put on microfiche instead of a memory stick,” Sherlock murmured as he crawled over to Violet. The ceiling on the tree-house was not very high. He would have certainly banged his head had he stood up to his full height. Sitting next to Violet, he slowly reached into the book and pulled out the envelope. As he took the envelope out of the plastic bag, he added, “Computers and the Internet were in their infancy when Ford was killed. No one at MI-6 would have trusted extremely sensitive information to anything digital, not even a CD-ROM or floppy disk.” He held it to his nose, inhaling, “Acid-free paper, ensuring the integrity of the film.” He tugged off a glove with his teeth and easily slit the top of the envelope open with his thumbnail.

“Who even has a microfiche reader anymore?” Violet suddenly remembered cussing out the cumbersome enormous metal contraptions as she tried to find old news stories she needed for her term papers. She then immediately felt very old and very tired.

“These can be digitized,” Sherlock hummed as he ran his finger over the tops of the glossy film cards. “I know someone, Bill Wiggins, actually. He’s good with computers as well as chemistry. He’ll be able to transfer this information to… to… a digital format… and…” his voice started to waver. “And then… I’ll have… I’ll have the clues, the data to err…” his breath hitched. “Solve the mystery behind Ford’s untimely death. Um… yes, that… that would…” he lowered the envelope to his lap, squeezing his eyes shut. “That would be good, I suppose. Maybe, I could even locate his body… to have a proper funeral. Mother would like that,” his voice dropped to a whisper.

It was only then he realized he was crying for the loving brother who had abandoned him. And for the cold-hearted brother who stayed.

Even now, he could hear Mycroft’s unctuous voice in his head, *Caring is not an advantage*…

He lowered his head, trying to hide his face in the collar of his great coat. He wished Violet would look away or climb down to give him a moment of privacy.

She did no such thing, of course. Before he could tell her to go away, she sat next to him, one arm slung behind his back, the other draped around his middle, her fingers linked together, loosely holding him to her. She rested her face against his shoulder. Before he could help himself, he rested his face against her chestnut curls.

Only when he perceived how badly she shivered did he pull himself together. He used his glove to hastily mop his eyes then tugged it back onto his freezing bare hand. “Let’s go,” he told Violet gruffly as he tucked the envelope into his coat pocket.

Gladstone paced and whined until both Sherlock and Violet were safely on the ground again. They fought their way through the grove once more, the cold more invasive now as the winds had picked up. The flurries had increased, threatening to turn back into a proper snow.

The wind kept blowing Violet’s hood down. As they neared the car, she gave up and left the hood down, her red hair streaming behind her as she walked against the brisk winter breeze.
Sherlock stopped a few steps behind her then softly called out, “Violet.”

She turned. Her ears and nose were pink like his from the cold. In the dim glow of the security lights, the pink color of her coat looked more pearl-like and less lurid. Snow glistened like diamond dust on her chestnut tresses.

“What?”

Sherlock put his hands behind his back and observed her from the top of her chestnut head to her pale, freckled face down to her unattractive olive green Wellies. Saw how she was fire and paraselene throughout her entire being.

A word from the library section of his Mind Library section drifted lazily up to his consciousness… basorexia.

Then his eyes drifted down, saw her left hand, not shaking, not shivering, but twitching.

Clonic spasm.

The deduction came unbidden and was clinical and unsentimental as always.

Despite everything, despite all that he had been through and the trials he knew he had yet to endure, he was still Sherlock Holmes.

Definitely two ideas now. Both horrible and life-threatening…. One absolutely fatal.

Please let it be the other one…

He walked towards her, didn’t stop until they were nearly nose to nose. He could see her eyes now, gold and tawny, ever feline, ever brilliant. Her eyes asked the question before it came out of her lips.

“Are you OK?”

“I’m fine,” he lied. “I just want to remember this.”

He bent down and pressed his lips gently against the crescent-shaped scar on her cheek.

**

30 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday evening
5:45 PM

After their adventures in the grove coupled with extreme sleep deprivation, it was little surprise that both Violet and Sherlock woke up the next morning with the sniffles. By mid-afternoon, the sniffles had deteriorated to wretched head-colds. Mrs. Holmes immediately went into full “Mummy” mode and fed both of them loads of chicken broth and Royal Milk Tea. She also made them drink this horribly fizzy drink that was supposed to lessen the duration of the cold. Sherlock kept snapping at her that the horrible drink wasn’t going to work, it was little better than snake oil. With his stuffed-up nose, however, his snipes lacked their usual bite.

Mrs. Holmes ignored her ill-tempered son. She cheerfully and constantly checked their temperature and piled blankets on top of them until they were sweltering. She meant well, but all Violet and Sherlock wanted to do was sleep. Also, Violet was heartily sick of chicken broth.
By the end of Boxing Day, Sherlock had lost his temper and announced he wanted to go home.

Normally Violet would have scolded him for being so rude, but she wanted to go back to Baker Street as well. She did not like being coddled when she was ill. Whenever she had a cold, she preferred to crawl into her bed and not move until she was either dead or her nose stopped producing enough mucus to fill an ocean, whichever came first.

After a discreet call to Mycroft to make sure the coast was clear, Mr. Holmes agreed it would be best to drive “the kids” (as he continually referred to Violet and Sherlock,) back to London on Sunday.

When they got home though, both Sherlock and Violet were surprised to see John, sitting on the steps leading up to 221B, placidly reading a library’s copy of The Girl on the Train. There was a brown paper sack of groceries and an old military rucksack by his feet.

“Hey,” John smiled at them both while dog-earring the page he had been on. “And hey you, come here, boy,” he whistled for his dog. Sweetie galloped towards him and John enthusiastically rubbed his head and belly.

“When did they release you?” Sherlock wove on his feet. He had taken a large dose of Day Nurse before leaving Winterbourne-on-Avon and another one right before the car hit the London city limits. He now heartily regretted it. He had remembered codeine being a lot more fun. But now, it only made him feel foggy plus a little sick to his stomach, if truth be told.

“This morning,” John picked up the grocery bag and his rucksack. “Err, I hope I’m not imposing, but your dad rang me. Said you’re both under the weather and… well,” he looked uncomfortable. “I’m not ready to go back to the house tonight, not with Mary still in hospital. Was wondering if you two wouldn’t be opposed to having a doctor in the house? At least for tonight? I brought tea and biscuits,” he had added, looking so boyishly endearing, Violet couldn’t help but crack a smile. “And a hot chocolate mix for you, Violet.”

“We’re not going to be the best company,” she had warned him through a plugged up nose.

“Since when has either one of you been good company?” John had teased her, sounding like himself for the first time in ages.

“You’re always,” Sherlock wrinkled his face, dug into his coat pocket for his handkerchief, sneezed, blew his nose then tucked the handkerchief back into his pocket. “Welcome here, John. But you’re in charge of taking the dogs out for a wee. I’m collapsing into bed and not moving for twenty-four hours.”

Having John stay had been a God-send for the infirm flat-mates. He didn’t hover like Mrs. Holmes had. He let them sleep. He let them eat whatever they wanted, not just broth and tea, even though he gently insisted they drink extra amounts of water and orange juice. He even tidied up the messy flat while they slept and considerately waited until they were awake to give the carpets a much-needed Hoovering.

Sherlock bounced back first. Two days later, he declared he felt fit as a fiddle. As if to prove it, he lovingly took out his violin, plucking at the strings. He even managed to play a song or two without the cuts on his knuckles bursting open again. John examined his wounds, applied more antibacterial ointment on his face and hands then bound Sherlock’s knuckles up again, declaring him on the mend before heading off to St Bart’s to see Mary.

While John was gone, Sherlock attempted to reconstruct his maggot experiment. However, upon observing how pale and haggard his flatmate still looked, he realized it would not be in his best
interest to do so. So, after only the tiniest bit of a strop, he discarded his experiment in favor of binge-watching *Making A Murderer* on Netflix with Violet. They sat on the sofa, Sherlock wearing one of his suits but barefoot and Violet wearing a grey track suit, cocooned in the duvet she stole from Sherlock’s bed.

“Well, it’s so *obvious* who really did it!” he couldn’t help but bellow at the television screen as Violet rested her head on his shoulder. “Is every American working in law enforcement truly that incompetent? Are they all morons?”

“Excuse you?” the federal agent sitting next to him wheezed as she wiped her runny nose with a tissue.

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “Present company excluded.”

“Damn right,” Violet coughed as John opened the door.

“Oh God, no, please, turn that off, Mary’s obsessed. Been watching it for the past few days now,” John groaned as he hung up his parka.

“Dinner?” Sherlock asked.

“What? Oh, yeah, um,” John shook his head as if distracted. “Good, fine. You should eat, both of you. I’m going to wash up.”

“John? You OK?” Violet asked through her stuffed-up nose.

“Mm, yeah,” John grunted as he disappeared down the hallway towards the master bath.

Both Sherlock and Violet looked at each other. “Can’t he catch a break?” Violet rasped.

“Order dinner. Chinese, from Panda Oriental, you can order online,” Sherlock rose. “He likes the crispy duck pancake things. I’ll have the prawn won-ton soup and get one of those Chinese appetizer platters for everyone to share.”

“I’m the one who’s still sick, why I am ordering?” Violet reminded him but Sherlock had drifted off towards the window and his violin. “Jackass,” she muttered as she reached for his laptop.

Violet ordered an early supper of Chinese take-away, technically for the three of them. But the meal turned into the five of them since Sherlock kept feeding the dogs bits of his supper. After Violet scolded him for feeding Sweetie and Gladstone people food, Sherlock lamented about the lack of cases during supper.

“You just had a case!” John wearily reminded him, but the protest was a token one. In fact, both Sherlock and Violet observed how extremely downcast John had been during supper. After watching him pick at his duck pancakes, Sherlock and Violet exchanged concerned looks. In the end, Violet decided with John that it would be best for him to talk to Sherlock instead of her. After helping John clear the table, she claimed she still had a sinus headache. She archly informed Sherlock she was commandeering his bedroom tonight because she wanted to continue to “Netflix and chill.”

“Do not watch anymore episodes of *Making A Murderer* without me,” Sherlock had pretended to be put out while he gave Sweetie another dumpling instead of helping with the dishes. But he had shot Violet a grateful look as she took his laptop and called both dogs to follow her.

Of course, Violet didn’t intend on binge-watching anything. Wrapping herself up in Sherlock’s duvet
again, she sat on the floor, next to the bedroom door she had left cracked open. She strained her ears, shamelessly eavesdropping. However, between her plugged up-ears and the men’s low voices, Violet only caught snippets of their conversation, to her profound irritation.

She nearly dozed off in fact, but Gladstone, ever vigilant, nosed her. Her eyes fluttered open when she heard John say quite clearly and distinctly: “It’s really not fair to Violet, leaving her in limbo like this, is it?”

“Limbo? What the deuce are you talking about?”

“Come off it. We… I’m…”

“Staying with Mary, like an idiot, I am aware.”

*Finally, he said out loud what we’re all thinking*, Violet smiled bitterly while her heart constricted and twisted because she knew what that statement meant for her.

“I don’t want to stay with Mary. You know *that*, you already knew that!” John sounded harsh. He must have realized it as well because there was quite a lengthy pause before he said in a tense, controlled voice, “We’ll get into that bit in a moment. Right now, I want to talk to you, man to man-”

“Please don’t.”

“About her, about your ‘clever girl’,” John soldiered on. “That’s what you call her, don’t deny it, I’ve heard you call her that, many times. It’s your pet name for her.”

“Do you have your gun? I have a sudden urge to use it.”

“Why are you fighting it? You fancy her, you have from the start and she’s bloody gone on you.”

Violet covered her face with her hand, suddenly willing John to shut the goddamn hell up.

“Why are you fighting for it, John?”

“Because I don’t want you to be fucking alone, OK? And if it can’t… since I can’t… I can’t leave Mary, so since it can’t be me, I want it to be her.”

Violet, feeling tears burning in her eyes, leaned her head against the wall. *Way to make a girl feel like shit, John Watson.*

“You do realize she’s eavesdropping, don’t you, John?” Sherlock drawled. “She never shut the bedroom door and sounds carries from here to there.”

Like a naughty little girl caught out of bed, Violet leapt to her feet. Despite her pounding head, she flew across the room, jumped into the bed and threw the duvet over herself. Gladstone hopped into bed next to her. She grabbed her iPad and closed her eyes, acting like she had fallen asleep while watching Netflix.

She knew if Sherlock came to check on her, she’d be busted. Gladstone instinctively curled up next to her. The door creaked open wider. Violet purposely inhaled and exhaled slowly. She didn’t dare open her eyes.

Then the door shut and she heard John’s muffled voice, “She’s dead asleep, Sher…” then his voice faded away.

“Dammit,” Violet reached over and scratched her dog’s ears.
Then she let herself drift off to sleep, wondering what fresh hell her heart had to endure tomorrow.

**

31 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Friday evening
11:21 PM

Violet jerked herself awake.

Dazed, she looked around, wondering why she was in John’s chair. She stared owlishly at the television set before sluggishly locating the remote control and switching it off.

She fumbled for her mobile on the in-table next to John’s chair but it slipped out of her hand. Cursing, she crawled on her hands and knees to retrieve it. Then she swore again after reading the time, realizing she had slept most of the day and evening away.

She hadn’t meant to doze off again. She had slept in late and even taken a short nap on the sofa in the afternoon. But she had still felt so run down, she couldn’t help it. She was just glad her nose no longer dripped like a leaky faucet. She knew Sherlock and John had talked long into the night after she had fallen asleep. Perhaps even into the dawn, she wasn’t sure. All she knew for certain that both men were dead asleep when she tiptoed into the lounge, wearing yoga pants, one of Sherlock’s ratty old T-shirts as well as his second-best dressing gown and a pair of electric blue socks.

She couldn’t help smiling affectionately at John curled up on the sofa with an afghan draped over him, his hair sticking up like hedgehog quills. Then again at Sherlock, who was stretched out in his chair as he had fallen asleep in one of his “Thinking Poses.” Violet had shrugged off the dressing gown and draped it over him like a quilt. Then, as her stomach growled, she padded into the kitchen to start cooking breakfast.

The smell of coffee perking and eggs sizzling had woken both men up. They had blearily stumbled into the kitchen, both acting that nothing extraordinary had happened last night. Sherlock buried himself into the morning paper and John asked Violet if she was finally feeling better.

After everyone had finished their coffee, fried eggs and toast (or rather, John and Violet finished their food while Sherlock fed his breakfast to Gladstone and Sweetie,) John shyly asked if Sherlock and Violet could come with him tomorrow to help him pack up the nursery. “I don’t want Mary to see that when she comes home,” his Adam’s apple had bobbed as he studied his egg-yolk encrusted fork as if it were the most fascinating thing in the world.

“Oh, of course,” Sherlock had rumbled from behind his newspaper. “You need not ask.” Then, for some reason inexplicable to Violet, Sherlock had added in a softer voice, “Everything is going to be alright, John.”

And John had responded gutturally, “I know.”

Some code had flown between the two men; Violet knew this. She had decided to leave it alone. For the moment, at least, she trusted Sherlock or John would confide in her what had upset John so deeply when the time was right.

So John wasn’t coming back tonight, or tomorrow. Tonight, he was spending in the hospital with Mary. Tomorrow he was coming for Sweetie and heading back to the house. Sherlock, Violet and Gladstone would join him tomorrow to assist with his heartbreaking task.
At least Mary continued to progress splendidly. The doctors predicted she’d be home in a fortnight, possibly even sooner. Yesterday she had even managed to get out of bed and walk a few steps from the bed to the loo. Turned out, she had also been the one pushing John back out into the real world, but he steadfastly insisted on ringing in the New Year with her in his typical stubborn-mule fashion.

Still, Violet couldn’t help but ponder John’s words from last night: \textit{I can’t leave Mary…}

\textit{Why the hell not?} Violet fumed as she examined a hangnail. \textit{Dammit, John… if he’s being noble so Sherlock and I can live happily ever after, I’ll wring his neck…}

As she chewed on the hangnail, Violet felt immense gratitude she didn’t have to be anywhere tonight. Sherlock and Violet had been invited to no fewer than three New Year’s Eve parties. Henry Knight, one of Sherlock’s former clients, was in London for the weekend and asked them to join him and loads of his friends at a giant spread he was throwing at a posh hotel. “I want everyone to meet the man who saved my sanity,” Henry explained to Sherlock unabashedly.

Molly and Greg invited them to their flat for a small to-do. “Probably won’t be a big thing, only people from the Yard we invited are Alex and her family plus Macpherson and whoever he’s shagging at the moment. Molly invited a few friends from Bart’s but they all have small kids too. If we make it to ten o’clock it’ll be a miracle,” Greg had told Violet over the phone. “Nothing fancy, some drinks and nibbles, play some cards. Say you’ll come, it’ll be fun.”

Violet and Sherlock had both used their colds as excuses to turn Henry Knight and the Lestrades down.

Lord Trelawney-Hope had personally called Sherlock to thank him for his service to his country and invited him to a New Year’s party the prime minister was hosting. “Lord Bellinger also would like to thank you personally as well,” he regally informed Sherlock. “There’s been discussion about the knighthood .”

Sherlock hung up on him at that point.

Violet glanced at the two dogs snoozing in front of the fire place and smiled at them fondly. She picked up her dirty plate and cutlery as well as the matching set plus an empty tea cup on the table next to John’s chair and brought them all to the kitchen. She merely deposited them in the sink, not bothering to wash them. \textit{They’ll be there tomorrow}, she decided as she drifted towards the bathroom, dreaming of the long, hot shower she would take.

She wasn’t sure where Sherlock was, but wasn’t worried. His Belstaff still hung on its usual peg, so she knew he hadn’t gone out. \textit{However, if he snuck off to have a cigarette on the roof, I’ll choke him}, she thought as she turned the shower taps on.

The hot water felt wonderful as it washed the day’s lethargy away. She felt her shoulder muscles loosening in the steam-filled shower. Once clean and dry, she pulled on the ratty old Oxford sweatshirt she had grown fond of and a pair of black leggings that were much too faded to wear in public. She pulled on bright pink fuzzy socks then cleaned her teeth and washed her face with witch-hazel. She then applied a generous amount of coconut oil to moisturize the delicate skin, steadfastly ignoring the scar but noting her eyebrows needed plucking.

She walked back into the lounge, towel-drying her hair. She felt alert and well for the first time in weeks. Wondering what to do with this sudden burst of energy, she nearly jumped out of her skin when a loud \textit{clunk} followed by an odd \textit{clatter} sounded above her. Then there was the muffled sound of cursing.
Frowning in puzzlement, Violet dropped the damp towel on the sofa and went up the narrow staircase to John’s room.

Only it wasn’t John’s room anymore, it was just a room.

The bed was stripped, the walls bare. A neat stack of boxes lined the wall, except for a box of CDs that had tipped over. Sherlock, wearing his slender-cut black trousers and white dress shirt with the shirtsleeves rolled up, crouched down, picking up the CDs, mumbling his usual mild expletives as he did so.

“Hey,” Violet leaned again the doorjamb. “What’s happening to The Shrine?”

“Oh,” Sherlock straightened up, scratching the back of his head. “It’s time. I’ve put this chore off for much too long, boxing John’s things up. We’ll bring it with us tomorrow when we go to his house. He’ll have the room now, now they don’t need their second bedroom as a nursery so…” he trailed off then cleared his throat, “Thought maybe I could turn it into a laboratory, although it really wouldn’t be a proper laboratory since there’s no plumbing or drainage. Or I can tell Mrs. Hudson we no longer need the second bedroom and it let it out to someone else, a uni student who just needs a room.” He put his hands on his hips, looking around. “Although I really couldn’t abide anyone else in 221B, could you?”

“Not really,” Violet looked down at his bare feet. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Helps me think.”

“Not after you just got over a head cold,” she scolded him. “Come on, it’s almost midnight.”

“So?”

“It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“So?”

Violet rolled her eyes and held out her hand. “Humor me. Come down and put on some socks.”

“The things I do for you,” he sighed melodramatically as he put the box of CDs back in its proper place. Violet watched while her eyes crinkled in amusement. He closed the box lid then crossed over to her, switching off the lights as he did so.

Neither one moved from the doorway.

“Maybe we could watch the fireworks from here, from the skylight,” Violet suggested, still leaning again the doorjamb, but facing him.

“Ugh. Dull. Fireworks.”

“Fine,” she sighed, turning to go. “Fun-hater,” but she gasped when he caught her by the crook of her arm.

He spun her around and swiftly wrapped his left arm around her waist while cradling her face in his right hand.

“The things I do for you,” he breathed, dipping his head down, his lips millimeters from hers. He watched her pupils dilate. “Very well,” he purred as he ran the pad of his thumb over her lips. “Fireworks it is...”
Meanwhile, across the city, while most people rang in 2016 by drinking cheap champagne and trying to remember the lyrics to Auld Lang Syne, Mycroft Holmes sat alone in front of a roaring fire in the safety of one of his many luxurious safe-houses. He wore a sinfully rich dressing gown that would have made his little brother drool in envy. He drank a glass of very good Pinot Noir, reviewing intelligence he had just received about the latest terrorist attacks in Europe with his socked feet propped up on a pouf.

His mobile rang.

He glanced at the Caller ID then his brows lifted, not recognizing the number. Only a very select few knew the number to this particular mobile. Out of curiosity, he answered, “Whoever this is calling me, must either be very special, very stupid or both.”

“It’s me,” a feminine voice with a thick American Southern drawl informed him.

“Hello my dear Annie,” he purred, “Happy New Year and to what do I owe the pleasure?”

“Myc, are you at a secure location? Can we talk openly?” Section Chief Adrienne Melrose’s syrupy Georgia drawl often undermined the seriousness of her intentions. This time, it did not.

Mycroft sat up. “Yes, of course. Annie, what is it?”

“Trouble, big trouble,” she sounded extremely tense, which was unusual for this “Steel Magnolia.” Even under fire, she always managed to sound cool as a mountain stream and as sweet as molasses. “Senator Woodhouse is raising hell on Capitol Hill,” she looked over her shoulder as her high heeled boots clicked rapidly on the pavement.

“Still? I thought he was contained?”

“It’s officially an election year here,” Adrienne wrapped her coat tighter around her, navigating the busy streets of Washington DC. The New Year wouldn’t arrive on America’s shores for another five hours. People were still out and about buying their champagne and party hats. “You know how nutty it gets during election time, especially during a Presidential election. And Woodhouse is making terrorism his platform.”

“Jim Moriarty is dead, officially dead. We’re releasing that information to the press tomorrow.”

“Not good enough, Myc,” Adrienne looked over her shoulder, feeling that crawling sensation of someone watching her. “Did you extract the intel we need from Hunter?”

“No. My brother is being obstructive as usual.”

“Tell your brother to stop fucking around,” Adrienne spat out, harsher than usual. “Get that information from Hunter then send her happy ass back to the US.”

“Agent Hunter may strenuously object to being sent back to America. And by object, I mean disappear, go back into the black. Right now, we have her contained at 221B.”

“She’s no longer a person of interest regarding how the Pentagon was hacked in 2008 or any involvement she may have had with the True IRA or the Rouge Dirigé Liguecase.”

Mycroft rolled his eyes at the incorrect translation.

Meanwhile, Adrienne clutched at her coat, holding it shut with her gloved hand as she continued to look over her shoulder. As the wind blew her perfectly dyed hair around her almost preternaturally
youthful-looking face, she explained in a low, rushed voice: “There are enough people at the Bureau who now know she’s no traitor and that she was set up. We can get her into Witness Protection, no questions asked. We’ll protect her but we need that goddamned information Moriarty gave her and she needs to agree to testify against Woodhouse.”

“Testify?”

“Yeah,” Adrienne dared another glance over her shoulder. Her eyes looked out of place in her face, old and wary, like a hunted fox. “In front of Congress, if you can believe it.”

“Surely they’re joking? She’ll be dead before she’s allowed to step foot on Capitol Hill.”

“No joke, Myc. The Attorney General won’t budge without her agreeing to those terms.”

“Why the change of heart?” Mycroft tried to sound glib but unease fluttered in his chest.

He heard Adrienne start to say “Becau-” but instead there was a grunt followed by a terrible gurgle. Then there was an awful clatter, the sound of plastic hitting concrete.

Then all Mycroft could hear was distant screaming.

“Annie?” he whispered. Then, in a louder voice, as if that could do anything, “Annie!”

Three thousand miles to the West where it was still December 31, 2015, Section Chief Adrienne Melrose’s body lay twisted on the sidewalk. Her cell phone inches from her splayed out hand. The screen had shattered when it hit the pavement. Blood pooled around bronze-colored hair. Her big blue eyes stared up, wide and unblinking. Her mouth formed an O. Her face was frozen forever in an expression of shock.

When Mycroft heard sirens, that unique wail of despair that only American police and ambulance sirens emitted, he pressed the End button with a shaking hand.

He tried to steeple his fingers, tried to think but the only thing going through his head was I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I’m sorry… Annie, Annie, Annie…

Pragmatism immediately took over. He picked up his mobile and dropped it into the glass of Pinot Noir. He stood, pinched his eyes for just a moment and flicked the tears away. Allowed himself a small moment to privately grieve for an old friend. Then he crossed over to his desk, sat down, pulled out his laptop and another mobile, an old Blackberry and got to work.

Only when the sun crested in the East, the first dawn of a New Year, did the Blackberry ring.

“Yes,” Mycroft scrubbed his face, tucking the Smartphone between his shoulder and ear as he reached for his pen and notepad.


“What do we know?” Mycroft purposely kept his voice soft and controlled.

“Annie was also supposed to testify in front of Congress. She picked up where Agent Hunter seemingly left off after she and her team were burned in England,” Marshall sat in his office at the J. Edgar Hoover Building. His blinds were shut, the overhead lights off. His door was also locked. His Glock Model 23 lay right next to a cup of forgotten coffee, the artificial creamer congealing on top of the cold beverage. “Annie’s investigation led all the way up to Woodhouse and when Hunter re-
surfaced, led her across the pond to the Earl of Winchester.”

“So this hit was to silence her,” Mycroft lowered his head and rubbed his temples.

“Silence her and everyone else involved. Annie had a small task force working on this undercover, I managed to locate them and get them into protective custody. I don’t think any of them had been made, but I can’t take any risks. I can’t afford another team to be sacrificed the way Robert Carson’s team was decimated back in ’08.”

“Understandable,” Mycroft sat up.

“You have got to get Hunter back to the United States,” Marshall stood up but stayed well away from the window, even though the blinds were closed. “Holmes, I advised you that nine months ago, when she and Carson re-emerged on the world’s stage.”

“She thought you were going to throw you into a hole at Gitmo and forget about her,” Mycroft reminded Marshall. “I’ve gotten to know the lady over these past few months. She has a few trust issues with her former employer.”

“She doesn’t have a choice now. Annie’s murder wasn’t just a hit, it was a distraction. Her house and her office were ransacked while we were scrambling to figure out what the hell happened. All of her research plus her computers were taken.”

“All of it?” Mycroft’s gut plummeted to his feet.

“Yes, including the copies of the evidence and documentation Hunter had been compiling on Jack Woodley and Senator Woodhouse that she had surrendered to you after your brother went missing last spring. That means whoever went through Annie’s house and office now has tangible evidence that Agent Violet Hunter is alive and well and living with your little brother at 221B Baker Street, Westminster, London, England.”

“How is that proof?”

“Because it’s a paper trail that leads from Jack Woodley to Violet Emilie Laura Smith, the office manager in charge of Billing and Accounts at Carruthers Brokerage Firm, which was where the dirty money for Moriarty’s clients was washed then hidden,” Marshall explained. “It wouldn’t take a genius to start putting two and two together and figure out that Violet Smith is the same person as Violet Hunter. All it would take really is a persistent rookie wanting to make their mark or a persistent reporter in pursuit of a Pulitzer.”

“But that would take time, money and other resources,” Mycroft pointed out. “That leads me to believe you have more bad news for me.”

“Yeah, I do. There’s a reason why C. Auguste Dupin was asked to leave Interpol.”

“I heard rumors,” Mycroft ground his teeth upon hearing Dupin’s name.

“Here are some facts, then,” Marshall reached for his gun before he started pacing. He wanted his weapon close to him at all times now. “He was always on the edge of insanity when he was at Interpol. But after his partner Marie Rogêt was killed, he didn’t just have a breakdown, he snapped. His judgment is severely impaired, even when he takes his medication, which he doesn’t half the time. He wasn’t on his meds when he helped your brother plan that neat little trap for Jim Moriarty. Dupin hand-selected the Interpol agents for the assist.”

Mycroft didn’t know who to be angrier at, Sherlock for trusting Dupin or himself for introducing
Dupin in the first place. *Little Brother, all you were supposed to do was find The Letter*, he seethed as he asked coolly, “One of Dupin’s ‘friends’ sold us out, I presume?”

“Yeah, one of the tactical agents he asked to provide backup at the cathedral at Normandy. Apparently, Dupin is also flat-broke but that didn’t stop him from making certain monetary promises. He thought he could cover it from what Interpol owed him for consulting except now Dupin and Interpol are arguing over what is owed because Dupin feels like he deserves more since he helped not only take down Moriarty but saved Mont-Sant-Michel from blowing to bits.”

Mycroft shook his head, remembering Dupin’s avarice very well. *At least Sherlock consults because he truly loves The Work*, Mycroft sighed to himself. “So he can’t pay the men he asked to help him and one man went off looking for a paycheck. How was he caught?”

“He told a colleague that he had a family emergency in Canada, but it must have sent up some sort of red flag because the colleague notified the supervisory director of their division. Dupin’s “friend” was detained by US Customs because he had the balls to use his own passport, which of course, had been put on the No-Fly List by Interpol and Homeland Security once the red flag was raised. Customs able to keep him long enough to obtain probable cause to search his vehicle and belongings. We found a prepaid phone. The last call he had made was to another prepaid, but it had a DC area code. The last text he had received was from the same prepaid, it had coordinates, longitude and latitude and also a number, 42. One of Annie’s techs ran the numbers and it correlated to a Washington DC YMCA. We sent two of our agents to investigate and checked Locker Number 42. The lock was cracked open and we found a black duffel bag with half a million dollars and a fake American driver’s license and passport.” Marshall leaned against his drab office wall, “We called the New York field office and he cracked after about an hour of interrogation. He confessed to contacting what’s left of Moriarty’s organization and confirming that Violet Hunter was at the church the night Jim Moriarty died and she had survived Peters’ assassination attempt. After that, Annie started making calls the minute she found out, her last call was to you.”

“Please tell me Annie at least had backups of her investigation.”

“She did and… Jesus Christ, Holmes. Are you made of stone? Annie was more than just a colleague. She was my friend.”

“And she was family to me,” Mycroft coolly reminded him. “Do I need to remind you that it will be me who has to tell her daughter that her mother was murdered?” When Marshall didn’t reply, Mycroft asked, “Does any of that investigation lead to Woodhouse?”

“Yes, but it has be backed up by Violet Hunter’s testimony. Without her, all the documentation and research doesn’t mean shit. There has to be a living, breathing witness.” There was an uncomfortable beat then Marshall said, “You need to send her back here. She may be more willing to cooperate with us, turn over what Moriarty gave her than with you.”

“She won’t go without reassurances, without protection.”

“Already got Legal drafting documents.”

“There’s another potential complication…”

“Spin their break-up anyway you need to,” Marshall advised. “Your brother has a reputation for being a jack-ass and treating women like they’re beneath him. It wouldn’t be a stretch to let people believe that she dumped him.”

“Not that complication, although that is another complication I need to contend with,” Mycroft felt
his head throb with sleep-deprivation and anxiety, “The Watson girl.”

“You know I can’t tell you where she is.”

“I realize that,” Mycroft spat back, nearly losing control. Then he took a deep, calming breath. “We will need to speed up the time-table in light of this situation. We have to move her. Now.”

“Agreed,” Marshall started to say then froze, hearing something squeaking outside the hallway. He put his finger on the trigger, heart pondering as he heard the door knob jiggle as someone tried to open it. His mouth went dry as he lifted his arm.

“Marshall?” he heard Mycroft in his ear.

Then he heard someone cuss in Spanish and the squeaking continue, the wheels of a cleaning crew’s cart. He slumped against the wall, allowing himself only a minute to relax. He didn’t know for certain if that really was a janitor or not. He tucked his un-safetied gun into his shoulder holster and strode across the room to retrieve his coat. “Will she be up to the challenge, in light of what has just happened?”

“I personally trained her so she damn well better be,” Mycroft hissed. “She’ll be on the first flight to Atlanta this afternoon. Have everything in place.”

Mycroft rang off and tossed the Blackberry listlessly on his desk. He ran his hands over his face then got up, stretching his back. As he rubbed his sore neck, he plodded towards the bathroom for a shower and a shave. Before he did so, he dug into his dressing gown for his personal mobile and hit a speed-dial number. “I need you to come into the office,” he said after making the usual polite good-mornings. “Eleven o’clock and don’t be late. You’ll need your field bag.”

He did not give her any information beyond that. It would not do, to upset her now. Plus protocol as well as good manners dictates that bad news is to be given in person, not over the telephone or email.

He retreated to the bedroom to change into a proper suit. As he selected a tie to match the somber black suit and crisp white shirt, he reflected that no matter how long he had been at this job, this bit was never easy, would never be easy.

Telling someone her mother had died.

**

7 January 2016
London, England
Thursday afternoon
2:21 PM

Mrs. Hudson insisted on throwing Sherlock a birthday party.

Everyone, including the birthday boy, had groaned. But no one dared to tell her no.

She had returned to Baker Street on the second of January in a right state of indignation. “So many dreadful things have happened, all during the Christmas holidays,” she had moaned when she asked (ordered) John, Violet and Molly to her flat. Lestrade had begged off due to “work,” Molly could have killed him.

“But everything is alright now Mrs. Hudson,” Molly had tried to soothe her as she juggled a fussy Henry in her arms.
“I want to celebrate something,” Mrs. Hudson jutted her chin up. “We need something to celebrate. Mary’s supposed to be out of hospital by the end of the week, is she not?”

“Well, yeah,” John had fumbled while shooting _Help Me_ Looks at Violet and Molly. “Maybe, dunno. But she might not be up for socializing. Besides those stairs to Sherlock’s flat will be agony for her. She’s still quite sore, not very mobile.”

“That settles it then. We’ll have the party here at my place. No stairs,” Mrs. Hudson had sounded quite pleased with herself. “John, Violet, I have a list as long as my arm for things I need and I’m not very mobile myself yet either. Molly, could you be a dear and help me clean the flat and ask that tall, strong, handsome husband of yours to come help move furniture? Oh, John, you too, and you’re very strong and handsome yourself, of course.”

“But not tall,” Violet Smith had quipped with an impish grin.

She immediately received a scathing “Shut up,” from John.

“Oh, you two,” Mrs. Hudson had scolded them. “I will be in charge of inviting Sherlock’s friends and family-” (at this, Molly, John and Violet all exchanged panicked looks,) “-since I’m not much use for anything at the moment, these silly ribs and rotten hip of mine. Now, Molly, you hand over Mr. Raffles so I can give him proper snuggles.”

John could have sworn that little Henry made a very Sherlockian facial expression of minor irritation as Molly placed him in Mrs. Hudson’s outstretched arms. Then he shook himself. _Two month old babies are incapable of being mildly annoyed_, he reminded himself. Then he did a double-take when he thought Henry now had the quintessential Sherlockian _I Hate You All_ Look on his tiny face as Mrs. Hudson cuddled him and cooed at him in baby talk.

Then John stoutly told himself Henry probably just had gas. _Babies don’t get annoyed._

John however was capable of being mildly annoyed as well as being extremely aggravated. He hated to admit it, but being made Mrs. Hudson’s errand boy for a party he knew Sherlock didn’t want did irk him quite a bit.

However, misery loves company so he knew he wasn’t alone.

“He’s going to murder us, you know,” Violet Smith advised him as they navigated the icy pavements of Westminster as a light snow dusted the entire city. Both of them wore their heaviest coats, John the olive green parka and Violet the loathed pink puffy coat. John wore jeans and hiking boots. “Miss Smith” wore skinny black jeans and the ugly Wellies. Both of them had their arms weighed down with various shopping bags.

As the flurries fell, Violet continued to rant: “He’s plotting our demise as we speak. Especially when he discovers that Mrs. Hudson invited his parents.”

“At least Molly talked her out of inviting Mycroft.”

“Like that was a difficult argument,” Violet sighed. “Oh, we should just allow Sherlock to have a blazer of a temper tantrum and scare Mrs. Hudson out of holding this stupid party.”

“I doubt that would even work in this case. Her heart is dead set on it,” John’s nose itched but his gloved hands were too burdened to scratch. As he contorted his face, trying to alleviate the irritating itch, he was hit by a sudden inspiration. “Hey, maybe Lestrade will dig up a case to get him out of it. Hell, a Two would do in a pinch.”
“We just had a case, yesterday, on his actual birthday,” Violet groused, using her shoulder to awkwardly push her fake glasses back up on her face with limited success. “I doubt we’ll get so lucky as to have two weird murders in one week. Especially since Sherlock solved the one yesterday so quickly.”

“Hmm, yes, I heard about that when Greg dropped by,” John’s voice took on a teasing tone.

“Oh? I didn’t know he stopped by your place. Nice of him,” Violet kept her eyes focused straight ahead. “You know what, this is stupid, walking. I’m hailing a taxi.”

As Violet shifted her bags all to one arm, John rocked back and forth on his heels, “Yes, Greg said Sherlock solved the case very quickly. With almost indecent haste, he said.”

“Did he now?” Violet’s cheeks started to pink up as she managed to get all the bags onto an arm then lifted the newly freed arm to attract a cab driver’s attention.

“Mm-hmm,” John had a wicked glint in his eyes now. “According to Greg, Sherlock seemed stumped, not on his “A” Game, then you sidled up to him, whispered something into his ear and he solved the case in three seconds flat and all but dragged you out of the crime scene.”

“I merely pointed out something he had missed,” Violet determinedly refused to look at John.

“Sherlock doesn’t miss things, he sees everything,” John sweetly reminded her. “Greg theorizes you may have given him some incentive to hurry up. It was his birthday after all.” Then he cleared his throat, “At least, that’s what the Yarders are saying, anyway.”

“The Yarders are worse than a group of schoolgirls,” Violet scowled as a black cab ignored her proffered hand.

“Mrs. Hudson is no schoolgirl but she said something about a broken coffee table…”

Violet’s face turned a deep shade of red, “I warned him she wouldn’t keep quiet…”

“So, I take it you two are beyond the Me Entantas stage?”

“Oh my God,” Violet closed her eyes and waved her hand even more desperately. “I’m really not comfortable having this conversation with you.”

“Why not? I don’t want a blow-by-blow playback, in fact, please don’t. Go into that much detail about you and him. Ever,” John felt the familiar yet annoying burning pang that he had felt when he saw Sherlock sitting in front of a naked Irene, when he had witnessed him locking lips with Janine and when he watched as Sherlock lightly traced his fingertips down her back when Violet slid off his chair arm.

Except now, he knew that this unique kind of pain had a name: jealousy.

“All I care about is if you two are happy.”

Violet finally turned her head, her hazel eyes narrowed in suspicion. John now felt another familiar sensation, what he called the “Under the Microscope” Feeling. Whenever Sherlock deduced him or Violet profiled him and was seconds away from delivering a painful home truth based on their observations, he always felt as tiny as the smallest cell sample on a glass slide.

“Because as long as we’re happy then you don’t have to feel guilty about staying with Mary, isn’t that right?”
“That’s not true,” John hotly countered. “What are you doing, Violet? Trying to start a row?”

“What are you doing, John? Staying with her?”

“It’s complicated.”

“That’s a Facebook status, that’s not real life,” Violet turned fully around, nearly losing her balance in the process. John took a clumsy step forward to catch her, but Violet steadied herself. “It’s icy. I’m fine,” Violet hefted the bags up again. “John, I get it. You don’t want to be the bad guy. You got crucified in the press when you stayed with Sherlock after he got shot; I saw those stories in the tabloids.”

“Christ, I don’t give a shit about being the bad guy or the bloody tabloids,” John groaned. “Listen to me, I meant every word I said to you at the pub after Harry’s funeral. I would never purposely do anything to endanger your safety or hurt your chances for happiness. You deserve, no you both deserve a shot to be happy. So fucking take it, Violet, OK? He’s fancied you since he first met you. One of his observations about you was that you had pretty eyes. He never comments on a woman’s physical appearance; he thinks looks are irrelevant.”

“What about you, John?” Violet whispered, tears filling her eyes. But her mouth formed a tight frown. Anger, not sadness fueled her tears. “What about your chance to be happy?”

“I had it,” John swallowed. “I blew it.”

Violet’s lips stayed tightly shut as she shook her head, the hood falling off her chestnut head. “That’s not true,” her whisper was strangled. “All you have to do is say the word and he’d have you back in 221B in a New York minute.”

“So, what am I supposed to do? Just tell Mary to hit the bricks, pack my things and ask Sherlock for my old room back since you’re not going anywhere? Just pretend the last five years didn’t happen? Forget about my missing child while destroying your chances for happiness, and not to mention safety, and pick up where we left off. Yeah, that’s one for the blog: ‘The Adventure of the Selfish Prick.’”

“Do stop playing the martyr, it’s unbecoming.”

John barked a sharp laugh, “Like it’s attractive when you act like a coward.”

Her eyes blazed, “I am not a coward!”

“No,” he agreed. “You’re not. You’re one of the bravest people I’ve ever met, except when it comes to this,” he pointed to his heart. “One of the ways you and Sherlock are alike is that you’ve both been alone for so long, you don’t know what to do with yourselves now you’ve found each other.”

“You really are fond of purple prose, aren’t you?” Violet tried to joke but it fell flat. She turned, tried to unsuccessfully hail another cab. When another one refused to stop, she turned back to John, more slowly this time, mindful of the ice. “I’m not a coward,” her eyes still blazed but the tears had returned. “But I am afraid, all the time now. It’s not just what’s left of Moriarty’s cells or Holy Peters or being extradited back to America or even Mycroft that scare me, it’s…”

“It’s what?” John licked his lips, the old nervous tic. “Tell me.”

“This,” she held up her free hand, showed John how it trembled. “This, John, there’s something wrong with me, I can feel it. But I don’t know what it is. Sherlock has ideas, of course. But he won’t tell me what he thinks, said it’s pointless to scare me with unfounded theories. I have a doctor’s
appointment next week Friday, that’s the soonest anyone could see me. So that’s another week I have to wait to be examined then God knows how long I have to wait for results.” She blew out a nervous breath and helplessly shrugged her shoulders. “What if it’s something terrible? What if…”

“What if everything is fine and you’re just overtired and over-stressed?” John pointed out.

“John, I ingested a very dangerous amount of arsenic during the Copper Beaches case,” she reminded him. “We both know arsenic is a carcinogen as well as a toxin.”

“Then,” John gave her a reassuring smile. “We’ll take care of you, of course. Both of us.”

“I really don’t fancy becoming one of Sherlock’s experiments.”

“You already are, Violet.”

“Mm, well,” Violet lowered her head, pressing a knuckle under her eye to staunch the threat of tears. “I can’t ask that of you two, to take care of me if I am seriously ill. Just like I can’t let you stay with Mary. I meant what I said That Night,” she looked up at John without lifting up her head. “I would step aside. I would get out of the way, John.”

John squared his shoulders and adapted his “Captain Watson” voice. “You’re not going anywhere. Sherlock and I actually had a long talk about this very topic the other night. We both agreed that right now, it’s in everyone’s best interest I stay with Mary.”

“What?” Violet’s head now jerked up as her jaw dropped in utter shock. “Why?” she pointed a finger at him, “You need to stop being a bloody martyr!” her voice shook from impotent fury, not from cold.

“No,” John let his shoulders droop. “I’m not being a martyr. At least not like the way you’re thinking. I’m actually not staying with Mary out of self-pity or guilt. Listen, listen,” John clumsily held up his hands, the handles of the plastic bags digging into his elbows. “Let’s drop off this crap at Mrs. H’s and get a coffee at Speedy’s, OK? We can talk more, plus the weather is really going to shit. I’ll explain everything, I promise.”

“Fine,” Violet jerked the hood back over her head and lifted her hand to hail a cab again. Instead of a black cab, a black government SVU pulled up instead.

“Violet,” John murmured, standing in front of her as he let the all bags drop. There was a sound of breaking glass as one of the bags hit the pavement. John ignored it. He unzipped his parka so he could reach the gun he still wore in a concealed holster.

The tinted passenger side window rolled down, revealing Agent John Mitton. “You need to come with me, now,” he told Violet, “Per Mycroft’s orders.”

Violet’s face turned as white as the falling snow.

“No without me,” John refused to move.

“John, it’s alright,” Violet put her hand on his shoulder.

“No. It’s not,” John stared Mitton down. “She’s not going anywhere without me. And if we both disappear,” he pointed to himself and Violet, “Then you’re going to have a certain Consulting Detective crawling up your arsehole. I’ve been informed it’s not a pleasant experience.”
Mitton sighed as he got out of the car. He opened the door to the back seat. “Get in, hurry,” he whispered to them as the driver rushed out to pick up the bags John had dropped. “It’s not safe out here. We have to move, now.”

“It’s not safe anywhere,” John snapped at Mitton while still blocking Violet, “Who are you?”

“He’s OK,” Violet’s fingers dug into John’s shoulder.

“He may be, but Mycroft is most decidedly not,” John kept his eyes locked on Mitton as that terrifying little smile appeared on his otherwise gentle face. “Where are we going?”

“Dr. Watson, please, the longer you delay, the greater the risk to Agent Hunter grows.”

John blinked at Mitton’s use of Violet’s real surname as well as job title. Still giving Mitton a murderous glare, he climbed into the SUV.

Once everyone else was inside and the vehicle merged back into traffic, John asked, “Where’s Anthea?”

“On a job,” Mitton told him and didn’t say a word the rest of the trip.
Demythologizers

Chapter Summary

“How far has it spread? What’s the exposure?”

“The FBI, CIA and Homeland Security are very aware that you are alive and well. Regrettably, so does what’s left of the Red-Headed League…”

Feels, reveals and regrettably, John is a bit Not Good...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-four: Demythologizers

7 January 2016
Hartsfield-Jackson Atlanta International Airport
Atlanta, Georgia
Thursday morning
9:21 AM Eastern Standard Time

“Shame you can’t stay longer, Maud,”

Anthea inwardly cringed at the sound of her actual first name as her stepfather, Dr. Lawrence Melrose, pulled his rental car into short-term parking.

But she knew better than to show any outside indication of irritation. She had been trained too well. So she plastered a weary smile on her face, hiding how she positively itched to leave Atlanta. The city itself was alright, but she knew she would go stark-raving mad if she had to be around her maternal family a minute longer than necessary.

“I know, Larry,” she used her old accent, a Georgian accent just as thick and syrupy as her mother’s had been. “It’s just that I have to get back to school so…”

Anthea had told her family that she had received a scholarship at Oxford for physics. That wasn’t a complete lie. She did study physics, but more as a hobby than for serious work.

She was smart, she knew that, had always known that. When she had started kindergarten, she knew she was brighter than the other kids in her class. But Mama and Daddy had said it wasn’t nice to brag about how fast she got her work done while the other kids struggled with the alphabet. Other than that, she had a perfectly ordinary childhood with perfectly ordinary parents. She lived in a nice suburb in Atlanta in an ordinary house with swing-set in the backyard and a magnolia tree out front.

Until the night strangers came and shot up that ordinary house.

She still vividly remembered the sound of glass shattering, the continual thwack-thwack-thwack of machine gunfire. She remembered sitting up in bed screaming and her daddy came, jerked her out of bed, threw her on the carpet and shielded her with his own body, curling his huge frame around her until the gunfire stopped. Then he had scooped her up and carried her out, calling her mama’s name
over and over, “Annie? Annie?”

Her daddy talked differently from the other daddies. His words always sounded, round. He called her mother “Ahh-nee,” instead of “Ann-ee.”

She remembered how she started shaking when they reached the kitchen. Her mother had a bloody gash on her forehead, but it was the gun in her hand that scared her.

“Think I got one of the bastards,” her mother had puffed, mopping blood out of her eyes.

They left that night, her daddy driving the mini-van while she and her mother lay on the floor, hidden from view. Anthea never saw that ordinary house again. They drove straight to Daddy and Mama’s office. Anthea remembered being so confused; whenever Mama and Daddy talked about work, they talked about the “field office.” So Anthea, with the literal mind of a child, thought their office was in a field, like a cornfield or wheat-field. She had felt utterly bewildered when they drove into the parking garage of a boring grey building in downtown Atlanta. But they didn’t stay long. Field agents for the Georgia Bureau of Investigation shuttled Anthea and her parents to a safe-house. A few days later, Daddy’s friends from France, Dupin and Marie showed up. Anthea refused to leave her parents, so her Mama let her stay as the grown-ups talked, curled up in her Mama’s arms, her eyes fixed on her Daddy the entire time.

“It was supposed to look like a drive-by, Ford,” Dupin rumbled as he had watched Sherrinford Holmes pace. Dupin had been on top of his game back then, so he was clean-shaven, wore a sleek black suit but no other jewelry other than a nice wristwatch and a wedding ring. "But a shooting victim had showed up at Emory Hospital that morning, burning up with fever. The bullet that had been removed from his shoulder matched the one from Annie’s gun. I don’t think gangbangers are usually Caucasian males from Bristol.”

Anthea remembered her father cursing soundly but her mother didn’t make her usual admonishment of “Little Ears.” She had only smoothed Anthea’s hair over and over as she rocked her back and forth. “They’re never going to leave you alone,” Special Agent Annie Bellamy had despaired. “They’re never going to leave us alone.”

“Maybe la petite shouldn’t hear this, non?” Marie Rogêt had gently suggested. Anthea remembered that Marie’s accent was thicker than Dupin’s. She also remembered that Marie had been breathtakingly beautiful, gimlet eyes, lightly-tanned skin and thick mahogany hair hanging in loose waves over her shoulders. She also wore a black suit, just as sleek and well-cut as Dupin’s, and a pair of simply gorgeous onyx-black snakeskin stiletto heels.

Anthea knew that is when her shoe fetish had been born.

She also remembered her mother shaking her head, ignoring Marie’s suggestion. “Ford,” she had lifted her head towards her husband as she had clutched her daughter closer. “What do we do? What are we going to do?”

“What we discussed,” her father had sounded so forlorn, so lost. “I have to go back to England.”

“Then we’re coming with you,” Annie had whispered intensely.

“No, cher,” Dupin had been about to take a drink, but he put the Styrofoam cup down on the table instead. The cup had squeaked against the particle board wood. “Not at this time, it’s too dangerous for you and La Petite.”

Annie had sighed and rested her head against Anthea’s head. “OK,” her voice had shaken. “OK.”
Anthea then remembered a tap against the door and another man wearing a drab grey FBI approved suit had murmured that there was a telephone call for Ford. Once Ford had left the room, Dupin knelt in front of Annie and Anthea, smiling the big fake smile grown-ups often gave children during bad times. “Bonjour chérie,” he boomed as he took out a Milky Way bar out of his jacket pocket. “You like chocolate?”

Anthea had nodded and taken the candy. She had made herself sick by rapidly eating the entire candy bar. To this day, as an adult, she could not abide milk chocolate.

“Auggie, you know the minute Ford leaves, they’re gonna come for me and Baby Girl, here,” Annie had hissed as Dupin helped Anthea unwrap the candy bar. “I don’t give a shit what happens to me, but she’s not even five years old yet.”

“Do you have any relatives she can stay with until things settle down enough for you and your daughter to join Ford in England?”

Annie had snorted, “After Mama passed, there’s no one left in my family but rednecks, Bible-thumpers and a few junkies. Even if they could keep her safe, they wouldn’t raise her the way Ford and I want her brought up.”

“I do not like suggesting this but what about Ford’s family?” Marie delicately asked.

Annie snorted again, “Only as the last fucking resort. My family’s a bunch of losers. His family is a complete hot mess.” She then muttered under her breath, “There’s part of the reason why we’re in this damn mess.”

“Mama, you said two bad words!”

“Sorry, honey,” Annie absently apologized as she kissed the back of Anthea’s head.

Anthea had thought this was a good time to whine, “I wanna stay with you and Daddy, Mama.”

“Sugar, don’t worry, Mama’s working on it,” Annie had lied then handed Anthea off to Marie. “You’re right, she shouldn’t hear this. Go with the nice lady, Maud, be a good girl.”

The solution had ending up being Annie’s immediate transfer to Washington D.C. and Anthea placed in a Witness Security Program specifically designed for children targeted by criminals as retaliation for their parents’ betrayal. It was essentially a boarding school for the kids who could not be with their parents for safety reasons. It wasn’t terrible; the classes were mildly interesting, the food was passable and none of the kids seemed interested in making friends. By some unspoken code, nobody gave last names. Maud started telling people her name was Andrea instead, but with her Southern drawl, it sounded like she was saying Anthea.

She decided she liked it and when she became an adult, she would be called Anthea.

For over three years, she had existed in that drab, forgotten institution. She learned to stop asking her mother during her infrequent visits when Daddy was coming home and she could leave this dull and tiresome place. She buried herself in books, but stopped raising her hand in class. She dutifully played insipid games like hopscotch or dodge-ball at recess, but without any real enthusiasm. She wasn’t wilting but she wasn’t thriving either.

Then, shortly before her eighth birthday, she was called out of class because she had a visitor. She had frowned in confusion because she only had one uncle and he was in jail for drugs. That was all she could remember of her Uncle Pete. It wasn’t Uncle Pete but instead, there stood a tall, slender man with sleek dark brown hair and soulless black eyes. He wore an expensive suit and had an
umbrella hooked in the crook of his elbow. He then had unctuously informed her he was her Uncle Mycroft and her mother was working deep undercover so she would no longer be able to care for her. She was to go with him to England; she was his ward now.

He had the same accent as her father.

“’You ain’t Mama’s brother, though,” Anthea had said suspiciously, worrying a hole in the thin grey cardigan that was part of her school uniform. “Who’re you?”

“Dear God, the first thing we are going to do is give you proper elocution lessons. We must exorcise that ghastly hillbilly accent from your tongue,” Mycroft had shuddered. “In response to your question, I am your father’s brother.”

“Where’s my daddy?” she had demanded.

She remembered Mycroft hesitating, then demurring. “We’ll discuss that on the plane. Come along Maud, your meager belongings have already been packed. We’re leaving now.”

“I like Anthea, not Maud.”

Mycroft’s lip had crooked up in a parody of a smile. “So Anthea you shall be…”

A polite fiction had been created, that Adrienne and Sherrinford had divorced and sadly Ford had gotten full custody of Maud so she would live in England with him. The rest was history.

All of her official identification documents read “Anthea A. Bellamy,” with the exception of her birth certificate. Somewhere, in an MI-6 vault, was the piece of paper that had the name “Maud Andrea S. Bellamy Holmes” embossed on it.

She devoutly hoped the “S” didn’t stand for what she feared it did.

She had been told her father had been very close to his youngest brother.

She also wondered if “S” had figured out who her father was.

She had started wondering last summer, after she had picked him up to meet Mycroft. She had been playing Scrabble on her mobile, ignoring how he stared at her in that creepy way of his. Then the ponce told her to play the word “Demythologizers” for 1682 points then pranced out of the car like the Drama Queen he was.

More worrisome, last November he had deliberately called her “Andrea” when she picked him and Dr. Watson up at Baker Street.

The inevitable twinge of annoyance and mild disgust rippled through her the minute she thought about the doctor/blogger. She understood Dr. Watson much better now, after Paris. But still, she could not scrub out of her head their first meeting, how he flirted with her. He’s old enough to be my father…

“I’m glad Mama met you,” Anthea blurted out to her stepfather as the rental car idled. “I worried she wouldn’t find anyone after things with Daddy ended.”

Keep up the polite fiction, she reminded herself.

“Yeah, well, your mom was a good person,” Larry said gruffly. He was a veteran of the First Gulf War and ran a successful private practice in Falls Church, Virginia. He also lobbied tirelessly for
more government assistance for the injured veterans of the current war. “I’m sorry I never got to know you better. She was so damn proud of you, you know,” his voice cracked.

It flashed through Anthea’s quick mind that Dr. Watson probably would like her stepfather.

Thinking of John Watson again put her priorities in perspective. “Thanks,” she struggled to keep her voice from trembling. “I’m sorry too. But… I don’t know how often I’m going to get back to the States, especially now so…” she flicked tears out of her eyes.

“Well, drop an old man a line now and again. Would like to hear from you time to time.”

“OK,” Anthea lied. She knew she would never call him. Her mother’s death severed her last tie to America. “How long are you going to stay in Atlanta?”

“Couple more days, I guess. Take care of some paperwork, order a headstone.”

“’K,” Anthea’s throat was very tight and dry. She gathered up her handbag (purse, she reminded herself. You’re in America now…) and choked out, “I have to go.”

“Maud, I mean Andrea, Andrea!” Larry tried to call out to her but Anthea slammed the door in his face. She opened the door to the backseat, keeping her head down as she grabbed her rucksack (backpack…) and suitcase. He didn’t turn around, didn’t utter a word. So she closed the door softly but she still walked away without saying goodbye.

There was nothing to say, really.

She had grieved, said her goodbyes at the funeral. She would grieve again later, when the time was appropriate but now was not that time. She had a job to do.

She endured the tedious security check without rolling her eyes while thinking honestly, how stupid is it that I still have to remove my shoes at the airport? But she smiled, said thank you to the TSA agent then took the ridiculously fast shuttle-train from one airport wing to another. Once she found the correct gate, she sat down and took out the prepaid mobile (track-phone…) she had purchased at Walgreens the day before. She dialed a number she had memorized before leaving London for Atlanta.

“Hello?”

“It’s me,” she whispered in her true voice, “Everything ready?”

“Just waiting on you,” drawled a woman’s voice, deceptively laconic.

“My flight’s on time, thank God. I should be there in a few hours, give or take.”

“Text if anything changes,” was all she said before hanging up. Then she stretched her arms as she stared out the window, admiring the desert view, the piercing blue sky contrasting against the terracotta sands.

A happy baby’s gurgle behind her distracted her. Smiling, she crossed over from her desk to the Pack-and-Play mobile crib that had been set up in her office when the shit hit the fan with Moriarty making his physical reappearance in London a few weeks ago.

The roly-poly one-year old held onto the padded railing with her chubby hands and giggled. She had blonde wisps of hair and enormous cornflower blue eyes. She could stand, but not unassisted. She was eager to take her first steps soon though. She bounced enthusiastically and giggled again when
Anthea’s CIA contact swept her up into her arms. The agent couldn’t help but smile as she held the girl up high, making zooming noises as she did so to make her laugh. As the blonde child giggled again, the agent held her close.

“That’s right, little girl,” the CIA agent tickled Marissa Watson’s belly. “Everything is going to be alright now, you’ll see.”

The agent had no idea why this little girl was in protective custody. It wasn’t her job to ask questions though. Plus it didn’t take a genius to realize that if Someone was out to hurt a baby, that Someone was a real sick puppy. The agent knew what her responsibilities were in situations like this.

“No one is ever going to hurt you,” she cooed. “OK Lucy? You’re safe now.”

Maisie laughed and clapped her plump little hands.

**

7 January 2016
An undisclosed location in the City
London, England
Thursday afternoon
3:39 AM Eastern Standard Time

Once Mitton opened the car door, John and Violet could clearly see they were in some sort of abandoned warehouse. Everything was covered with dust and spider-webs. Empty crates, barrels and pallets were scattered haphazardly throughout the dimly-lit space.

“Such a fucking drama queen,” John groused as he slid out. He held out his hand to help Violet down. He also stubbornly kept his arm around her as they walked together towards Mycroft.

Mycroft, as usual, leaned on his infernal umbrella. He stood below one of the few overhead lights that still worked. He wore a heavy coat with a maroon scarf knotted around his skinny neck. “Well, two for one, how unexpected,” he drawled. “Agent Hunter, Doctor Watson.” He lifted his head imperiously at Mitton, “That will be all.”

As Mitton retreated, John sneered, “Why can’t you just pick up a phone and make an appointment like an ordinary person?”

“Because these are extraordinary times, Dr. Watson,” he fixed his beady eyes on Violet. “You have been exposed, I’m afraid.”

“Jesus Christ,” John whispered, “No.”

Violet, already pale, turned a sickly greenish-grey color. “My sister-in-law and niece?”

“Surveillance has been put in place on Julia and Vivian Hunter.”

“That’s it? That’s all that’s been done?” But then she closed her eyes, held her hands up, more as a gesture to calm herself than anything else. Then she nodded. “OK. What do we know so far and what’s the fallout from my cover being blown?”

“One of the Interpol agents that Dupin selected to assist with the apprehension of Jim Moriarty at Mont-Saint-Michel was an informant. He confirmed that Violet Hunter is very much alive.”

“No,” John shook his head in bewilderment. He could feel Violet positively vibrating with fear and
“No. That’s not possible. Dupin hand-selected those men, they were his friends.”

“That was his first mistake,” Mycroft rolled his eyes, then muttered, “Friends.”

“Shit,” Violet peeled off her gloves and wiped the light sheen of perspiration on her pallid face, “How far has it spread? What’s the exposure?”

“The FBI, CIA and Homeland Security are very aware that you are alive and well. Regrettably, so does what’s left of the Red-Headed League.”

Violet inhaled sharply, struggling to calm down. “OK,” she licked her lips, then bit the lower lip for a moment in that way Sherlock hated. “Obviously there’s some deal on the table otherwise you wouldn’t be wasting time talking to me.”

“There is,” Mycroft leaned slightly forward. “The FBI is offering Witness Protection if you testify in front of Congress the transgressions of Senator Josiah Woodhouse.”

“What about Julia? What about Vivian? If I testify, they’re in danger and there will be retaliation.”

“I’m sure your colleagues are aware of that.”

“And using that leverage so she does testify,” John snapped. “There has to be a better way.”

Violet now looked more pea-green than grey but she said in a wobbling voice, “If they agree to protect Julia and Vivian, I’ll do it.”

“Violet, don’t.”

“John, what choice do I have?” Violet’s shoulders slumped. John tightened his hold on her. “Everything I’ve done was to keep them safe. I owe Michael that, after he…” she covered her face with her hands.

“But I don’t understand!” John wrapped his other arm around her, as if that would be enough to shield her from Mycroft, from MI-6, the FBI, the world. “I thought her government believed she was a traitor? That they wanted to arrest her?”

“New evidence has come to light that she’s innocent, but I’m afraid there’s still a very large target on her back,” Mycroft coolly explained as he explained his perfectly manicured nails. “There’s a catch, of course.”

“Oh, of course there is,” John spat, his silvery-blond brows draw down into an angry line. “What is it? The catch …?”

Mycroft ignored John. “Violet, they want the information Moriarty gave you.”

Violet blinked. “What are you talking about?”

“Violet, the time for playing games is over.”

“I’m not playing games,” Violet sounded more like herself. She shrugged out of John’s embrace and took a step closer to Mycroft. “What are you talking about?”

“The Moriarty Code, of course,” Mycroft glared at her.

“The what?” John looked from Violet to Mycroft.
“Are you…?” Violet pushed a lock of chestnut hair off her forehead. “You’re kidding, right?”

“Do I look like I’m in a joking mood?” Mycroft’s glare intensified.

“I can’t give you or anyone else something that doesn’t exist, Mycroft!”

“What the blazing hell is The Moriarty Code!” John burst out. “Dear God, I thought Moriarty was dead and buried; the both of them. Are you telling me they are still haunting us?”

“The Moriarty Code is a hacking program Richard Brook designed, the hacking program,” Mycroft informed John loftily. “It’s a master key, designed to unlock any security program.”

“Except it doesn’t exist!” Violet’s voice was almost shrill. “Richard Brook made it up, made it all up. He didn’t hack into the bank or the palace or the prison. He paid people off to open those gates. It was all part of his plan to mind-fuck Sherlock, to make him believe this master key existed. But it wasn’t real, none of it was real!”

“In those circumstances, you are correct. He did not use the Moriarty Code to break into those security systems. But,” Mycroft held up a finger. “It does exist. Richard Brook gave the binary code to precisely two other people,” he now held up two fingers. “My brother… and you.”

“He didn’t give me anything,” Violet squawked. “If I had a hacking program that let me break into any security system, why wouldn’t I have used it for myself? Deleted the records about my so-called “betrayal” to my country? Or hack into my US bank accounts when the feds froze them? Or hack into my British bank accounts when you froze them?”

“Because you had no idea what was given to you,” Mycroft purred. “When you were still working for Richard Brook, when you thought he was an IRA operative, you routinely changed the angle of the CCTV camera outside of Baker Street. How did you accomplish that?”

“I…” Violet started but the words died on her lips. She shook her head as she fumbled, “He… Ciaran, I mean Jim… Richard… fuck, whatever. Moriarty. He gave me an iPad that had an app built into it. That’s exactly what he said to me. When I asked him how do I avoid the CCTV camera, he said quote, “There’s an app for that,” unquote. When I activated the app, I could control the CCTV cameras, I could change the angle of the camera, I could even turn them off if I wanted to. But it was the app I used, not a code. I was never a tech, I was a field agent.”

“And how do you think that app was created?” Mycroft’s voice was silk. “How was the information needed to create that app was obtained?”

“I gave you that iPad,” Violet pointed her finger at Mycroft as if it was a dagger she would like to plunge into his cold, black heart. “When Sherlock was kidnapped last spring,” Violet now pointed at herself. “I don’t have the code, there is no code.”

“She said she doesn’t have the code,” John growled. “So what happens now?”

“The United States withdraws its offer of protection. MI-6 also has nothing to offer her.”

“Nothing?” John shouted. “She helped take down Moriarty!”

“Oh really?” Mycroft sounded bored as Violet walked away from them, taking off her fake glasses to rub her eyes. “My information states that she got herself Tasered and nearly executed by Holy Peters.”

“What about my sister-in-law?” Violet asked hollowly, “My niece?” When Mycroft shrugged his
thin shoulder, Violet bridled. “She’s not even eight years old yet, Mycroft. She’s just a little girl. Don’t tell me there is nothing that be done to protect her.”

“How can you do this?” John cried. “Violet has done everything you asked her to do and more. More importantly, she has protected your brother all this time. Are you really going to just turn your back on her and let her and her family just swing in the breeze?” When Mycroft merely lifted his eyebrows, John snarled, “You unbelievable bastard.”

Violet’s mind, however, had been racing, trying to get ahead of the situation and, more importantly, Mycroft. “What happens if I say no? If I tell you to fuck off?”

“Then you have two options,” Mycroft’s eyes gleamed and a smile threatened. “MI-6 agents drop by Baker Street unannounced and they drag you out in handcuffs. Or, Holy Peters gets to have another shot at you. Because you see, the Red-Headed League wants the Moriarty Code as well. Apparently neither Jim nor Richard had the code written down anyway. If the Red-Headed League can’t get it from you, then Holy Peters will ensure that nobody gets it from you,” Mycroft paused, his finger on his lips. “Or Sherlock,” he added lightly as he held his umbrella in front of him now, as if he was a knight resting on his sword before the next attack.

Ah… Violet suppressed a smile as she watched the subtlest changes in Mycroft’s face. Gotcha.

John meanwhile only saw red. “I wish my wife would have shot you instead of Sherlock.”

“Yes, I’m sure you’d enjoy being married to someone permanently on Magnussen’s payroll,” Mycroft sneered. “He would have never let her go, you know that.”

“You said Richard gave the code to two people.” Violet interrupted, facing the two men now while fiddling with her gloves, “Me and Sherlock.”

“Yes, but do you really see Sherlock voluntarily giving it to me?” Mycroft actually chuckled, his eyebrows lifting high as he did so. Then he stretched his lips in a parody of a smile. “Don’t think so highly of yourself, my dear Agent Hunter. He’s fond of you, yes. The way he was fond of Redbeard when he was puppy. You’re just his latest pet.” Mycroft pointed his umbrella at her then let it rested against his shoulder, as if it were a club ready to smash down on an enemy’s head if he came too close. “Sherlock Holmes is a highly logical and extremely unsentimental man. If he is made to see that it’s in everyone’s best interest to have his pet put down,” he gave her a cruel smile. “He’ll understand. You see, Miss Hunter,” he purposely dropped the “Agent” as a sign of disrespect. “I know my brother.”

But a cool little smile quirked up on her lips as she stayed in the shadows, “But you don’t have a Masters in psychology. I do. I also know how to get inside someone’s head as well as under his skin. While your brother has severe mental health issues, he’s not a sociopath. However he’s incredibly easy to manipulate once you find the pressure points. Loneliness. Boredom,” she gave John a pointed glare, “Rejection.”

John and Mycroft’s mouths fell open.

“What?” both men spluttered. But while Mycroft looked incredulous, John looked murderous.

Violet ignored John. She crossed her arms tightly across her body and approached Mycroft again. “I have him eating out of my hand now,” she snapped at him as she stood in the unflattering orange-yellow light now. “After all this time I’ve been working for you, spying on Sherlock for you, a little head’s up about the fucking Moriarty Code would have been nice.”
“What?” John bellowed.

“I asked you to protect Sherlock,” Mycroft brandished his umbrella again like a rapier, but he looked as if he would really like to run the brolly through her as if it were indeed an actual sword.

“Protect, spy, synonyms in your world,” Violet gave him a sweet smile. “I don’t have the code but I can get it from Sherlock. But, as you know, I don’t work for free. I have conditions.”

“Oh of course you have conditions,” Mycroft condescended. “When will you obtain the code?”

“Saturday night. We’re having a birthday party for him at Baker Street. You’re not invited.”

“Thank God.”

“There’ll be alcohol. He’ll imbibe, so his guard will be down. I can get it from him then.”

“You two-faced little bitch,” John couldn’t help himself.

Mycroft again emitted a dry chuckle. “Dr. Watson, you sound surprised. How many honest women do you actually know?”

John nearly blurted out, “Molly Hooper,” but then remembered she lied about Sherlock’s “death” for two years and was currently lying about the paternity of her son. So he merely balled his fists and vowed to tell Sherlock the first chance he got about this latest development.

“I highly recommend you keep this conversation to yourself, John,” Mycroft swung his umbrella around in a circle. “Or things could go very badly for Anzhela, pardon, I meant Mary.”

“I’ll text you,” Violet pivoted neatly and strolled back towards the SUV.

“So help me God,” John got right into Mycroft’s face. “That is the last time you threaten my family, do you understand?”

“Oh and I had heard rumors that you and Mary were having domestic issues?”

“I wasn’t talking about Mary,” John gave Mycroft that deadly little smile of his. Then he punched him soundly in the gut, a firm upper cut to the solar plexus. As Mycroft keeled over, gasping, John reminded him, “I believe I told you that you either call me Doctor or Captain Watson. Do you hear me, Mr. Holmes?”

Mycroft only wheezed in pain. John stomped off after Violet. Mitton held the door open for both of them. As before, they both got into the back seat. Only now, John sat as far away from her as possible.

“John…”

“Shut up. Don’t talk to me right now.”

Violet fell silent and turned her face away from him as Mitton turned the ignition on.

During the ride back to Westminster, John fumed silently, *How could I have been so stupid? Should have listened to my initial instincts, she played me. She played Sherlock, she played all of us. Maybe she really isn’t even innocent of betraying her country. Maybe it was all codswallop, her murdered father and brother, her hero fiancé… that she cared about Sherlock… pretended to be my friend… hell, maybe she really isn’t even ill, she’s faking the tremors…*
Goddammit, I am so bloody tired of everyone lying to me…

“Stop the car,” John snapped at the driver when they were two blocks away from the flat. “I'll walk. Take her back to Baker Street.”

The SUV pulled into the first available parking spot. John clambered out. Violet, swallowed hard, her face puckered in fear again as she slid out after him.

“Violet, don’t!” Mitton called out over his shoulder. “It’s not safe for you to be out and about!”

Violet ignored him. “Take the packages back to Baker Street, please!” she hastily instructed before slamming the car door shut.

The snow fell heavier now, a rarity in London. The city usually only experienced a dusting or drizzle. “John,” Violet called after him as he stormed ahead. “John, wait, please…”

John forced himself to keep walking as he loosened his scarf and unzipped his parka. His chest and throat had started tightening and his breathing had turned shallow. His head spun as adrenaline flooded his system, fueling the fight-or-flight sensation.

Panic attack, he realized. The realization propelled another gush of pure, visceral terror though his already overloaded and stressed system.

“Violet, you need to stay away right now…” he warned her as he tried to flee… to fly…

Fight or flight, fight or flight, fight or flight… his vision blurred. He squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his palms against his sweaty forehead. He forced himself to keep walking, keep walking away from her, to ignore her calling out for him: “Please, wait!”

“Sod off!” he shouted at her over his shoulder as he felt his heart start to race. He tried to slow his breathing down as he sped up his pace, all the while Fight or flight, fight or flight, fight or flight… ran incessantly through his head.

Violet ignored him, of course. She trotted after him, calling his name. When she reached him, she grabbed the back of his parka. “John, goddamn it, it's not what you think!”

“It’s never what I think!” John whipped roughly grabbed her by her upper arm and dragged her into an alley. Faster than she anticipated, he grabbed her other arm and slammed her into the brick wall. “You lying bitch!” he shouted at her, his voice half-enraged, half-anguished, “You promised me, you fucking promised me!” He tightened his grip on her arms and furiously slammed her against the wall again. “You promised me you wouldn’t hurt him!”

“Let go of me!”

He ignored her, feeling the rush of being angry, being good and properly pissed off. Fight it is then, good. Fuck flight.

All he saw was the battlefield and she was the enemy.

“Is there anything about you that’s real? How could you do this? To me, to him! Tell me why,” he demanded as Violet managed to clasp her hands together, linking her fingers as if to pray for salvation or plead for mercy. “Just tell me why,” he slammed her against the wall again. Then he cried out and gagged as she jabbed her clasped hands upwards into the tender flesh between his chin and throat, right below the ear. He heard his teeth scrape together. He tasted blood. But before he had a chance to register that particular pain, he felt lightning bolts of sheer, unadulterated agony
radiating from his crotch as her bony knee met his defenseless groin.

John dropped to his hands and knees, sucking in deep whooping breaths before rolling to his side, drawing his knees up to belatedly protect the most vulnerable part of his body. Violet staggered away but only a few steps. Then she slid down the wall, burying her face in her hands, sobbing as if the world had ended.

When John caught his breath and the blinding pain between his legs turning into a bearable throbbing ache, he realized Violet was repeating herself, her voice raw with sobbing, “… not real, it’s not real, it’s not real, it’s not real!”

“What’s not real,” he moaned, still seeing stars.


John slowly sat up, still dazed. He resisted the urge to reach down to check if his meat and two veg were still intact or if they had been completely smashed into bits. He took a long, deep breath before asking, “What?”

Violet scrubbed at her eyes. “It’s not real, it’s an urban myth. A criminal’s fairy tale,” she searched her coat pockets for a tissue. “It’s a magical computer code allowing anyone to hack into any system, break through any firewall. It’s bullshit, complete bullshit. It was dreamed up by incarcerated felons and crooks on the run, imagining ways to make their criminal records disappear. The FBI and MI-6 apparently received some bad intel but because of that stupid CCTV app that the Moriarty twin gave me, the feds, the spooks and the bad guys now think that there really is some master hacking program out there.” She laughed bitterly, “And that Sherlock and I know what the codes to that program are.”

John felt something warm and wet under his chin trickling down his neck. He dabbed at it with his fingers, saw the blood. He realized Violet’s engagement ring, which had been Janine’s engagement ring, had scraped off a chunk of his flesh when she jabbed him. “Then… why did you lie? God, Violet, I really thought… Jesus.” Shame replaced the fear and the anger. “What the bloody hell were you thinking?”

Now he tasted blood again, his teeth tingling uncomfortably, as a reminder how they had scraped together when she jabbed him on the right side of his neck, just below the mandible.

“I needed to buy time,” she leaned up against the alley wall, drawing her arms and legs closer to her. “I need time to figure out what to do… but,” she laughed again, bitterly this time. “I can’t deliver something that doesn’t exist.”

John felt sick, could actually feel the bile crawling up from his stomach to his mouth. He had never been so disgusted with himself in his entire life. Even Dad managed to go through life without hitting a woman. You are real piece of shit, John Watson, he berated himself as he gradually stood up. “Oh, Violet, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry,” he leaned against the other wall. “I guess I still don’t know how to listen. I really thought…” He scrubbed his mouth as his own words came back to torment him…

I won’t hurt you. Violet, I would never hurt you. Please…

“I was trying to fight off a panic attack,” he wiped snow off his face and blood off his throat. “Everything you were saying to Mycroft just sounded so real, I… God, I…” John wiped his mouth while holding his free arm against his stomach, still unsure if he was going to be sick or not. “You were really convincing,” he muttered.
“Do you think I would have made it this far if I wasn’t a good actress?” Violet still sounded bitter. “I should have realized that if Mycroft believed that I’d screw Sherlock over, then you would too.” But when John approached her to help her to her feet, she gave him a cold smile, “John, I know you’re sorry, but I really don’t want you touching me right now.”

“OK, OK,” John slowly backpedalled, holding his hands up in surrender. “If it makes you feel better, I really don’t think I’ll need a vasectomy now, thanks to you.”

“You deserved it.”

“Yes, I did,” John watched Violet slowly get to her feet. “Where’s Sherlock? The flat?”

“No. Bart’s. A cancer victim willed his body to Sherlock. For science.”

“His… body?”

“Yeah.”

“Science?”

“Research,” Violet rubbed her left bicep where John had first grabbed her.

“I supposed he was thrilled.”

“Said it was the best birthday present he’s ever received.”

“Then, we better go tell him,” John nodded, wincing as he started to walk. “Jesus Christ, you may have actually crushed my balls.”

“Good,” Violet snapped, but there was a hint of a smile on her lips.

They limped out of the alley, careful not to touch each other. Violet managed to flag down a taxi this time and they rode mostly in silence towards the historical hospital. Only when they were less than a block away, did John quietly ask her: “How did you trick Mycroft? I thought he was supposed to be cleverer than Sherlock?”

“Only by one IQ point,” Violet tried to smooth her hair down, but static electricity made the fly-away strands worse. “In some ways, he is smarter than Sherlock but he’s blind to things Sherlock sees with perfect clarity.”

John finally noticed she no longer bothered to use her faux British accent. “What is he blind to then, Mycroft?”

“Progress,” Violet looked out the window instead of John. “He’s a product of Cold War parents, a child raised to love Queen and Country and defend them both from all evil, real and imaginary. He’s also neo-conservative, practically Victorian in his beliefs.” She laughed silently through her nose. “I tricked him because he really believes that all women are naturally manipulative. That we’re not capable of anything else.” She rested her forehead on the window, closing her eyes in relief as the glass cooled her flushed brow. “He also believes everyone is out to get Sherlock. That people only come into his life to take something from him. The pattern has been pretty consistent, until you came along. Victor Trevor wanted his money, Molly Hooper wanted happily ever after. Greg Lestrade and all of NSY want him to solve the unsolvable cases. Irene Adler wanted to beat him, Jim Moriarty wanted to recruit him and Richard Brook wanted to be him.” She gave John a side-glance, “Why wouldn’t I be any different? I mean, yeah, I had ulterior motives when I met Sherlock but…” she sighed as she looked down at her bloodied engagement ring. “Mycroft genuinely believes he’s the
only one who has Sherlock’s best interests at heart, but because of Sherlock’s... idiosyncrasies, he also believes Sherlock needs to be controlled. He thinks Sherlock is a wild dog that can be domesticated."

"Why can’t he just leave him alone?"

Violet rolled her head over to John, her eyes sparkling the way Sherlock’s did when he just made a brilliant deduction, “Because he finally tipped his hand. I know his little secret, finally figured it out,” she whispered as the black cab came to a stop. “He thought he could use Sherlock as leverage against me, but maybe I can use it against him…” she chewed on her lip as she stared out the window again, watching the snow starting to fall at a slant as the winds began to increase.

“What? What did you see?"

“The truth,” Violet turned back to John and smiled at his quizzical expression. “He loves him.”

“What? No… I can’t believe it, not after everything he’s done to Sherlock.”

“Everything he’s done has been for Sherlock. If something ever happened to Sherlock, Mycroft would not be long for this world. He would actually die of a broken heart.”

“How could you tell? He seemed like the same cold bastard as always.”

“It was all micro-expressions on his face and subtext in his speech. The only other person who would have noticed would have been Sherlock. But his fucking umbrella gave him completely away. Men will subconsciously protect their torso and their crotch when they are afraid. Every time he mentioned Sherlock, he had that goddamned umbrella positioned as if it was a weapon, as if he was ready to fight anyone who dared hurt his little brother.”

John heartily wished he had consciously protected his groin before Violet kneed him as it still radiated with a thudding ache. “So the whole Disapproving Frosty Older Brother bit is an act?”

“Oh don’t get the two mixed up, John. Mycroft definitely does not approve of certain aspects of Sherlock’s life, his job as a consulting detective, his addictions, his sexuality, his utter disregard for conformity but that disapproval is borne from worry. Mycroft doesn’t give a shit about me, my safety. He’s concerned about how my cover being blown will affect Sherlock He’s worried.”

“I worry about him, constantly,” John murmured, remembering another secret meeting, the first of many secret meetings. “That’s what Mycroft told me when he and I first met, but… I don’t know, Violet. I didn’t believe him then and I don’t believe him now. You know he planned on sending his little brother to his certain death in Serbia. That doesn’t seem to be an act of brotherly love.”

Violet snorted silently. “Twenty bucks says there was no suicide mission to Serbia.”

“Hang on. You think Mycroft created the whole suicide mission as a cover story? You think Mycroft was actually sending Sherlock away so he couldn’t be prosecuted for….” John cut himself off, remembering that he was in a cab and one never really knew who the cab driver could be. “You know,” he muttered lamely instead.

She nodded as she tried to wipe the blood off the ring with the hem of her coat. “Mycroft is plagued with guilt for not saving him from the Earl and he has spent his entire life trying to make up for it. The irony is, Sherlock won’t let him in, won’t allow him to get close like they had been as children.” When John’s eyebrows lifted in disbelief, Violet said, “There’s proof, I’ve seen it. Pictures of the two of them when they were young boys, it’s obvious from their body language in those pictures that they had been close, the same way my brother and I were close,” she licked her finger then tried
rubbing the blood off the diamond ring again. “The Earl had groomed Sherlock as a child, made him believe that he was his friend,” Violet’s face twisted in disgust. “That he cared about him, that Sherlock could trust him. So, in order to keep Sherlock from ever being hurt like that ever again, Mycroft taught Sherlock to be cold, to avoid sentimental entanglements. The irony is Sherlock uses those very teachings against Mycroft.”

John puffed out a breath as the cab pulled up next to the kerb in front of Bart’s.

They found Sherlock in the morgue, humming a happy little ditty under his breath as he cut samples from a cancerous pancreas to study under the microscope. His coat, scarf and dress jacket were all neatly draped over a stool. He refused to wear scrubs so little flecks of blood and tissue stained his lovely mint-green shirt. “Seriously, if anyone truly cared to make me happy, actually, sincerely, deliriously happy, everyone would give me a corpse for my birthday. I may even think about sending his family a thank you card…” his words died away when he looked up. He removed his safety goggles and took a long, hard look at John then Violet. “What happened, and don’t leave a single detail out, even if you think it’s irrelevant,” he ripped off his safety goggles and started peeling off his blue latex gloves.

In a flat voice, Violet told him. Sherlock listened intently but his eyes kept flicking back and forth between Violet and John, noting the distance between the normally affectionate friends, how Violet kept rubbing her upper arms and how John winced with every movement he made plus…

“Did you cut yourself shaving John?” Sherlock laconically interrupted Violet’s spiel, his eyes darting down towards the diamond ring on Violet’s left hand back up to John’s chin.

“What, oh,” John touched underneath his chin again, saw blood on his finger-pads, “Yeah.”

“Oh, I didn’t know you shaved with diamond rings now,” Sherlock drew himself up to his full height, his face closed and his voice at his haughtiest.

John felt something vital, something important shrivel and die in his soul as Sherlock glared at him with the same disdain he gave to people like Anderson or Donovan.

“Sherlock, it was an accident,” Violet immediately jumped in. “Mycroft’s bullshit and my lies triggered a PTSD episode. I didn’t realize he was having a panic attack and I grabbed him from behind. I fucked up, he tried to tell me to leave him alone, but I—”

“I think you need to leave now John,” Sherlock cut Violet off and turned his back on John, resuming his attention back on the sad, bluish-white corpse on the table.

John’s mouth dropped open again for the second time that day. “Sherlock, I…” but he knew there was nothing he could say that would justify how horribly he had behaved.

“Mary would probably like to see you,” there was ice in every single syllable of Sherlock’s sentence as he unrolled his shirt-sleeves. “I popped in on her before coming down here. She’s anxious to go home. The doctors are thinking about discharging her tomorrow.”

John licked his lips. “Yeah, OK,” he said lamely. “OK,” he turned away and started walking towards the door, but he paused at Violet. He opened his mouth but was only able to produce a quavering breath.

She gave him a watery smile. “We’re OK,” she whispered. “I promise.”

John nodded, tried to smile at her then turned to give Sherlock one more stricken glance. But Sherlock kept his back to them both, still studying the corpse as he buttoned his cuffs. “You could
probably ask the nurse for an ice-pack and paracetamol,” Sherlock added in a clipped voice. “Dull the discomfort that you are currently experiencing.”

Suddenly, John recalled the mediocre hotel room in Paris. How Sherlock had prepared him an ice-pack for his cut lip and also had set out paracetamol for him in the bath.

Now, he sounded like he couldn’t care less for John’s well-being.

“Right,” John slunk out of the autopsy bay.

“Sherlock, please call him and tell him you’re not mad at him,” Violet begged the minute John was out of earshot. “He is going to tear himself apart.”

“No,” Sherlock finally turned. “He’s not. He said to stop treating him like he’s broken. I didn’t treat him like he’s broken. I treated him like a man who made a very serious mistake.”

“He didn’t hurt me,” Violet snapped. “Just scared me how fast he lost control. Besides John’s not really the immediate problem right now!”

Sherlock stormed over, all but yanked off her coat then pushed up her jumper sleeve. Already, pale greenish-blue bands, looking too much like finger-marks, striped her arm. His nostrils flared and his mouth tightened.

“I bruise like a peach these days,” Violet slapped his hand away then jerked her sleeve down. “I still have marks on my wrists from Holy Peters handcuffing me. Not to mention you didn’t get mad at John for pointing a loaded gun at me!”

“Well, I didn’t like you back then!”

“Oh my God,” Violet covered her face. “Maybe I should just go to the American embassy and turn myself in.”

“We both know that’s not going to happen,” Sherlock drawled then rolled his eyes. “Do calm down. I’m truly not angry with John. Disappointed? Yes, of course. In both of you, actually,” he fixed his piercing eyes on hers now.

“What? Why?”

“John should not have believed your lies and you completely misjudged the severity of his PTSD. Seeing how you so enjoy telling people about your expertise in reading people, you really should have known better than to approach him from behind. That was quite idiotic.”

Violet ignored his scathing criticism of her profiling skills. “Then why were you so cold to John?”

“I had to get rid of him. We need to discuss this privately, you and I. John… has been through enough and needs to focus on getting well. Clearly, he’s not out of the woods yet, emotionally.”

“He is going to be pissed when he finds out we’re leaving him in the dark again.”

“Wrong. You will meet him for lunch tomorrow, before Mary is discharged. Tell him what you can and explain why you can’t tell him everything.”

“Why can’t I tell him tonight? Or even better, right now?”

“Because we’re honoring his request,” Sherlock silkily reminded her. “We are giving him a minute to breathe.”
Violet exhaled a long, shuddery breath, as if she had just remembered she too needed to breathe. “Have you been able to start decoding the microfiche yet?”

Sherlock shook his head. Wiggins had dropped off the digitized version of the microfiche last Tuesday. Apologetically, he had told Sherlock, “It’s all gibberish and gobbledygook, Shezza, unless it’s some kind of secret code.” Then a light had flicked on for him. “It is some kind of secret code, innit?”

“Go away,” Sherlock had ordered him as he took the memory stick from Wiggins. When Wiggins offered to help decode it, Sherlock merely shut the door in his face before dashing into the lounge in search of his laptop.

“Spent most of last night trying to deduce what the cipher could be,” Sherlock told her as she started to pace. “I needed a break so I came here to clear my head.” He put his hands in his trouser pockets, clearly searching for something.

“We’re not going to find out what happened to Ford in time to use that as leverage against Mycroft,” Violet shook her head back and forth as she kept pacing. The soles of her Wellies squeaked against the linoleum floor. “Since John insists on staying with Mary like a fucking idiot, I can’t pit her against Mycroft anymore because that puts John at risk as collateral damage.” She abruptly stopped her pacing, pressing her fingertips to her forehead. “I don’t know what to do,” she said behind her hands. “I mean… Mycroft blinked, he showed his hand. He does care about you, he loves you as much as I loved my brother, but I don’t know how to use that against him. I don’t… I don’t… and it’s not just me at risk and it’s not just you. It’s my sister-in-law and my niece. She’s just a kid,” her voice cracked in despair. “She’s a little girl, she’s my brother’s little girl, she’s all that’s left of him and I have nothing to protect her with, I don’t have the fucking code. I don’t have the code and you don’t have the code because it doesn’t fucking exist!”

She lowered her hands and balled them into fists at her final outburst. Then her mouth dropped into an O as her arms fell to her sides as she watched Sherlock lazily toss a memory stick she had never seen before up and down.

“What is that?” she narrowed her eyes.

“This?” Sherlock tossed the memory stick and caught it deftly, “The Moriarty Code, of course.” Violet’s eyes grew bigger, “What?”

“You know I detest repeating myself when I know you heard me quite clearly.”

“You better start talking,” Violet’s eyes burned as she crossed her arms and clenched her jaw.

Chapter End Notes

So… I’ve been teasing the mystery memory stick and Sherlock’s "Swedish hacker" friend since the beginning… any theories?

0:^)

Thank you again for all your comments, feedback, kudos and for reading. You all make
my day :^D
Chapter Summary

"You are so attuned to human emotion, sometimes you even experience the same sensations they are... but you didn’t fight it. You didn’t run from it. You just let it overtake you. You allowed yourself to drown in it. You aren’t like me and my brother, you aren’t afraid of emotion. The only fear you truly have is that the people you love could get hurt by your actions. But you must not let that fear cloud your mind now..."

Feels... mostly feels. OK, nothing but feels. #sorrynotsorry

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Five: Wasp

7January 2016
The Royal Hospital of St Bartholomew
Thursday evening
6:51 PM

Sherlock continued to fiddle with the memory stick as if it were as meaningless as a cheap biro. “My brother and the rest of those idiots at MI-6 plus the morons at the CIA and FBI are wrong, as usual. The Moriarty Code is not a “master key.” It was not designed to hack into any security systems or tear down any firewalls.”

Violet’s eyes followed the black memory stick as he continued to toss it up and down in his hand. “What is it then? If it came from Moriarty, it can’t be good.”

“Think of it more like a Rosetta Stone for the Internet, specifically, the Dark Net.” He caught the memory stick this time and held it between his forefinger and thumb. He examined it as if he expected it to burst into flames or grow wings and fly off, “A place that even someone as infinitely curious and immensely intelligent as myself hesitates before entering.”

”’A wretched hive of scum and villainy,’” Violet couldn’t help herself. She expected the quote to fly over Sherlock’s head.

“I wouldn’t compare the Dark Net to Mos Eisley, my dear Violet.”

“Hold on. You don’t know who Angelina Jolie is, you just learned about Harry Potter last summer but you know about Star Wars?”

“Of course I know about Star Wars, everyone knows about Star Wars. In fact, I very specifically told you how Ford took Mycroft and me to see Return of the Jedi without our parents’ permission.”

“Sorry, the fact that you actually caught a pop culture reference threw me off. Go on.”

“As I was saying, the Dark Net is not for the faint of heart. I wouldn’t even venture into it, not without a proper guide.” He held up the memory stick again, “This is the Sherpa of the Dark Net and
Violet was starting to put the pieces together, “The Moriarty Code tells you how to enter and navigate the Dark Net, where to go, what to post, how to cause maximum chaos and mayhem and how to find people to help cause the chaos and mayhem.”

“Most importantly, how not to get caught,” Sherlock pocketed the memory stick, “The ideal tool in the Consulting Criminal’s toolbox. It won’t erase criminal records or override MI-6’s security system, of course. But it will direct you to either the website or the people who can accomplish those tasks. Find people who work at a prison or the Bank of England or Buckingham, someone who could be coerced or bribed into opening the gates. Or, on a smaller scale, say a criminal wanted to create a climate of terror in London. What’s more traumatic than murder? Suicide obviously, but what is worse than suicide?”

Violet opened her mouth to answer but Sherlock steamrolled over her, in full force now, “Being coerced into suicide, of course. An outbreak of serial suicides breaking out in London would do the trick, terrify the populace into submission, because what can be more frightening than to be talked into killing yourself? I should know,” his face darkened for a moment. Then he blinked and carried on in his usual detached manner. “But who could carry out such a task? Not Moriarty, he wouldn’t put his neck out there. So he goes and does his research and finds Jeff Hope, a desperate man, a dying man. A man who wants to ensure the financial security of his children before the aneurysm snuffs him out like a candle. That is a man willing do to anything.”

“And you believe Moriarty found Hope through the Dark Net?”

“I don’t believe. I don’t assume. You know better than that. I observe, I deduce, then I know.”

“How? More importantly, how does this help us?”

Sherlock leaned against the metal slab, “The last time I went through rehab, I made the acquaintance of a man who had the same predilection as I did. He also had a most interesting hobby.” He crossed his arms and lifted his bushy black brows at Violet, “Surely you can deduce what his pastime was.”

“He was a hacker,” Violet looked around the autopsy bay for a stool or a chair. Her legs felt rubbery and her head throbbed. Plus, the obnoxious pins-and-needles sensation was back, in both her arms and hands this time. Spying a stool, she plodded towards it. “I take it he joined the Homeless Network after he got out of rehab?”

“Yes, even though technically he’s not homeless. He was one of the few people I had confided in regarding Operation Lazarus. He also helped me slip Mycroft’s leash once I got out of England.” Sherlock watched Violet with unblinking eyes as she pulled out a stool, hoisted herself up then massaged her hands as if they had fallen asleep. He kept his observations to himself while thinking no no no no no… not that… anything but that, please…

“You need to keep your doctor’s appointment,” he sternly told her.

“Fine, yeah, OK,” Violet waved his demand off, more annoyed than confused at his non sequitur. She pushed an errant chestnut wisps off her forehead. “So your hacker buddy-”

“Trinity.”

“Seriously? Like The Matrix?”

“The what?”
“Never mind,” Violet rolled her eyes. “Trinity helped you make your grand escape from Mycroft so you could hunt down Moriarty and destroy the Cult of the Consulting Criminal unhindered. Then what?”

“Then six months prior to my planned return to London and life, I received communication from Trinity. A colleague of his inadvertently stumbled across an incomplete version of the code floating around the Dark Net while she was doing research for a journalism friend of hers. She had found a digital trail for Moriarty. She asked Trinity if he knew an expert regarding the Red-Headed League and if yes, would that expert be willing to discreetly meet her in Stockholm to see what she had found? Ironically, I had unknowingly helped her in the past with that, but that’s an entirely different story.” To himself, he muttered, “I still think it would have been amusing to digitally reverse her country’s tax-payment systems…”

As Sherlock started to go off on his tangent, everything clicked for Violet. “Her name wouldn’t happen to be Sally, would it? As in…” she fumbled in her coat pocket for her prepaid mobile. She flipped it open and read from her list of contacts: “sally@WASPent.hotmail.com?”

Half of Sherlock’s mouth quirked up in amusement. “Her journalism friend does call her that as a nickname, yes. She prefers her handle, Wasp.”

“Oh my God,” Violet ran her fingers through her hair, damp and disheveled from melted snow. “You’re Bambi,” she shook her head, annoyed with herself for her own stupidity. “I should have realized that when she told me to have you ask Bambi to check his emails.”

“I should be angry that you had asked her to dig into Operation Raven,” Sherlock smoothly informed her. “Circumstances as they are, it may be fortuitous that you did.”

“She never got back to me.”

“Of course she didn’t. She doesn’t know you. She knows me. She got back to me. Besides, she can’t hack into something that’s not online.”

“The microfiche,” Violet groaned. “The microfiche has the intel on Operation Raven.”

“There are certain files that are not allowed to be digitalized, for security reasons.”

“I’d love to hear the story on how your mom got her mitts on that microfiche,” Violet grumbled.

“I’m sure it’s highly entertaining, but let’s stay with the current course for the moment.”

“Wasp doesn’t know me, yet you had me send those pictures Kitty Riley took of me to her?”

“Yes, of course. I trust her.”

“Why did you send them to her in the first place?”

Sherlock tilted his head, “This is part of the story where you might get a little upset with me.”

“Oh, God,” Violet braced herself. “What did you do?”

“Kept my promise to clear your name of wrong-doing,” he rumbled. He paused then muttered in a rush, “I’vebeenworkingwiththeFBI.”

“YOU’VE BEEN WHAT?”

He cleared his throat. “I have been working with Section Chief Adrienne Melrose of the FBI,
anonymously, of course. Unfortunately, I believe that may have backfired.”

“You think?” she squawked. “Did you send her those pictures of me?”

“She had been pressing me for ‘proof of life’, said that it was necessary for her to positively identify you before she could proceed with crafting a deal that would save your life, provided that you gave them what they wanted first.”

“You should have told me,” Violet could barely control her rage. “My family, my seven-year-old niece, is in danger now.”

“Rest assured, madam, I took every precaution,” Sherlock drew himself up to his full height. “The security breach did not come from my end, but from hers. Also, I did not send her the pictures. I told Wasp to hold off until I was certain that you would be cleared.

“Melrose,” Violet frowned. “I know who that is, but I didn’t know her personally when I was at the Bureau. How can you be sure she can be trusted?”

“I asked Wasp to vet her for me. Ironically the only skeleton Wasp was able to uncover is that Melrose turned out to be an old friend of my family.” His face darkened again, his eyes mostly grey and dark blue in their fury. “Closer than anyone ever imagined, ironically enough.” He paused for a beat then added in his usual sonorous yet clinical voice, “I had asked Wasp to do periodic sweeps of the Internet, the public Net that everyone uses as well as the Dark Net, to make sure your pictures didn’t crop up anywhere. Meanwhile, Melrose continued asking for proof of life. So far, I had resisted taken your photograph. I didn’t want your picture on my computer or my mobile, in case those items were compromised somehow. Plus, I never sent Melrose anything directly. I always sent everything to Wasp first then she worked her magic, created a convoluted digital trail so nothing gets traced back to me. Or you.”

“Until now,” Violet gritted her teeth. “Mycroft didn’t tell me how my cover was blown, so I gather it’s because of the security breach on her end. How was Melrose compromised?”

“She’s dead. Murdered by a sniper on the streets of Washington D.C.”

Violet’s eyes widened then closed. “That will do it.” She pressed her tingling hand to her forehead. “Everything you gave her about me was probably stolen when she died.”

“The probability of that is high, yes.”

“Goddammit,” Violet fumed. “If it was just me, I would just weather it out, or disappear. But my sister-in-law, my niece, I can’t risk their safety.” She pointed at his pocket, “Can we use the Moriarty Code to find the cipher so we can decode Operation Raven?”

“As I said, I haven’t cracked the code, not yet. I haven’t cracked it, because I have an expert working on it.”

“Please tell me it’s not your mother,” Violet groaned.

“Bite your tongue, I asked Wasp to decipher it. She is also an exceptional mathematician.”

As he started composing his message to Wasp, asking for a status update, Violet told him, “Mycroth believes that Moriarty himself gave us that code.”

“He did,” Sherlock hit Send and tucked the mobile back into his trouser pocket.
“No... he didn’t give me shit.”

“He did, you just weren’t observing.” Sherlock pushed himself off the slab and walked towards her. “The reason why Wasp asked me to visit her in Stockholm was she found the Moriarty code on the Dark Net, but it was incomplete. It was missing a section. Without it, the code wouldn’t launch.” He stood in front of Violet now. She tilted her head up to look at him. He ran his long fingers through her tangled hair then held her head in his hands. “Think. Think about the last time you met with the man you called Ciaran. Think about what you told John that night he pulled a gun on you after he thought he had drugged me into unconsciousness.”

“Uhhh...” Violet squeezed her eyes shut and bit her lip, even though she knew he hated it when she did that. “He said... he needed me to spy on you one last time. He said he needed to get as much intel on you as possible, he wanted to get to know you...” she shuddered. “Intimately.”

“Something about him frightened you that day, not just normal unease. You were properly scared of him that day you met him in the café, Violet,” Sherlock massaged her temples with his thumbs. “‘Something deep inside of me screamed that without a doubt and without a shred of evidence... there was something seriously wrong with this young man.’ That is precisely what you told John Watson. What did you see, Violet? You know I don’t believe in gut instinct or sixth sense or any of that claptrap. You may think you just have ‘funny feelings’ about bad situations, but that’s not because of any psychic phenomenon. It is simply because you have a higher emotional intelligence than most people, including me and my brother. You feel things, Violet. Strongly, deeply, that is one of the reasons you excelled as a profiler. The other reason is that you understand why people react the way they do when they are thrust into various situations. You are so attuned to human emotion, sometimes you even experience the same sensations they are. You feel what they are feeling. You knew how to crack Julia Stoner because you knew she feared retribution from the Red-Headed League. You knew how to get Mary back on your side because you know her downfall is John Watson. You were able to break through John Watson’s considerable defenses because you empathized with his PTSD but you never pitied him. You fainted the day Moriarty’s face was on every screen in England because you were feeding off the emotion of everyone in the street. Coupled with your own intense terror, it all overwhelmed you, but you didn’t fight it. You didn’t run from it. You just let it overtake you. You allowed yourself to drown in it. You aren’t like me and my brother, you aren’t afraid of emotion. The only fear you truly have is that the people you love could get hurt by your actions. But you must not let that fear cloud your mind now. You must push aside your concern for your sister-in-law and your niece now.”

“But...” she opened her eyes.

“No,” he leaned into her, as if to kiss her. “Worrying about them won’t help them. Dupin advised me the best way to protect yourself and the ones you love, is to be as fluid as water, able to change and adapt to the circumstances as needed. You must focus your skills to save yourself, for if you fall, who will be there to pick them up?” He softened his voice. “Now, think back on that day, in the café, with the man you thought was called Ciaran. What did you see, Violet? What did you observe that led you to the conclusion that he was mentally unstable? Think!”

“He was playing the piano!” she burst out. Then she mimed the action, “On the table-top.”

“What song was he playing?” he asked. “You would have recognized the keystrokes.”

“Partita No. 1, Bach.”

Sherlock released her head. Mimed the same song while saying, “He played the same song in my flat, when he paid a call on me after winning his court case. When I translated that bit of Partita No. 1 into binary, it says ‘There is no key.’”
“Because it isn’t a key, it’s a digital tour guide, showing you how to get around the darkest, scariest parts of the Internet.” Violet slid off the stool. “This code would do more harm than good in the hands of someone like your brother or what’s left of Moriarty and Magnussen’s organizations.”

“Correct.”

“You and I aren’t the only ones who know the code. So does Wasp, she’s using that code to surf the Dark Net to find the cipher so we can decode Operation Raven.”

“Exactly so.”

“You said you trust her?”

“Without a doubt,” he said. “She’s like me, in a way. She likes detective work. She…”

He thought about the pierced and dark-haired, doll-like woman he met all those years ago. Back when he was mostly unscarred and still somewhat whole.

He couldn’t help but smile as he recalled the girl with the dragon tattoo. “Doesn’t exactly conform to societal norms,” he finished simply.

“She’s willing to help us.”

“Absolutely. She is… not a fan of government interference.”

“We finally have leverage on Mycroft, or we will, soon.”

“Yes.”

“You have a plan.”

“I do. The minute I found out Adrienne had been murdered, I have been formulating one. I thought we had more time, but apparently not.” He suddenly dropped his eyes to the floor. “You will have to return to America.”

Violet blinked back the sudden rush of tears as she crossed her arms tight against her waist. “I figured,” her voice wobbled. “Will my family be safe?”

“Completely.”

“Will you? Be safe?”

“Oh my dear Violet, I always survive a fall, you know that.”

“It’s not the fall, it’s the landing that’s a bitch,” she gave him a watery smile.

Sherlock raised his head, tried to smile back. “You seem to me to have acted all through this like a very brave and sensible girl, Miss Hunter. Do you think that you could perform one more feat? I should not ask it of you if I did not think you a quite exceptional woman.”

“I will try. What is it?”

Sherlock held out his hand, “Could be dangerous.”

Once upon a time, Violet would have hesitated. This time, she did not. She slipped her hand into his.
“Could be fun,” a ghost of a smile appeared on her lips.

“Oh,” he curled his fingers around hers. “I shall miss you, my clever girl.”

**

9 January 2016
221B Baker Street
Saturday evening
6:55 PM

John paid the cabbie then slipped out, walked around the idling black cab then opened the other door. “Ready?” he asked Mary.

She smiled, nodded her head and held out the brightly coloured gift bag. He placed it by his feet on the pavement. Then he reached back down for his wife and carefully, he eased her out of the cab, helping her straighten up. She winced and sucked in a pained breath, but when John asked if she was alright, she smiled, “Yes, of course I am, I’m just a bit sore, that’s all. Nothing to worry about, it’ll pass.”

“We don’t have to go,” John said quickly as he reached for the present before the cab drove off.

“Yes, we do and I don’t mind, John,” Mary rested her mittened hand on his coat sleeve. “Mrs. Hudson is right, we need something to celebrate.” She gave him one of her impish smiles, the little grin of hers that he had found so adorable the first night they had met. “Also, I needed a reason to put on proper clothes instead of wearing pyjamas all day.”

“Oi! The meter’s running, mate,” the cabbie shouted at them, ruining the light-hearted mood.

“Right, sorry, sorry,” John pulled out his wallet and paid the driver, “Thanks.”

As the black cab puttered off, John turned to Mary, all seriousness now, “If you get tired, just say the word and we’ll go home at once.”

“Nonsense,” Mary scoffed as she leaned on John. Together they walked towards the familiar, glossy black door. “Don’t be silly. I’ll be fine.”

“Just don’t overdo it,” John fussed as he opened the door. Once in the foyer, he could hear laughter and music.

“John,” Mary gripped his hand. “It’s just a birthday party.”

John looked into those guileless cornflower blue eyes. Wished for the millionth time that he didn’t know about the other side of her, the side of her that could kill for money, the side of her that had pulled the trigger instead of trusting Sherlock to help her.

That side of her that took matters into her own deadly hands instead of coming to him, her husband, for support and aid.

*I loved you before. I wanted to love you after... what now, Mary? What happens next?*

With a lying smile, he bent down to give her a husbandly peck on her lips. “Nothing is just anything with Sherlock involved,” he reminded her. “He did, after all, deduce that our wedding photographer was a murderer.”
“Oh and it was so nice of him to make sure the photographer finished taking pictures of us before having him arrested.”

“Not to mention that we didn’t have to pay for the damn prints, that saved us a small fortune.”

“Stop, don’t make me laugh,” Mary giggled as she put her hand on her abdomen.

John felt sadness cut into him. A month ago, she had put her hand on her belly because there had been a baby growing in there. Now, scar tissue and sutures. He forced another deceitful smile, “Right, well just remember, if you hear ‘Vatican cameos’ being shouted, someone is probably going to die.”

John raised his hand to knock on the door, but it opened on its own accord. “Hello John,” Mr. Holmes rumbled, holding a cup of punch in one hand while reaching out to shake John’s with the other. His sky-blue eyes twinkled with genuine friendliness.

“Oh, hi, nice to see you again,” John accepted Mr. Holmes’ handshake. “And you remember my wife, Mary?”

“Of course,” Mr. Holmes handed his punch off to John and took Mary’s small hand into both of his. John noticed that the old man’s hands were elegant and slender, musician’s hands, like his son’s. Unlike either one of his sons, Mr. Holmes’ personality was warm and tranquil. “My condolences,” he murmured as he kissed Mary on the cheek. “To the both of you,” he added, looking at John while patting Mary’s hand with his.

“Thank you,” Mary’s eyes watered for a moment. Briskly, she forced herself to ask cheerfully, “Now, who’s all here?”

To John’s surprise, it was actually quite the spread. Macpherson and his latest girlfriend (a frightful looking creature with shockingly bright pink hair and just as many tattoos as him,) were both animatedly chatting with Henry Knight. Alex MacDonald was nodding in her quiet, unassuming way as Bill Wiggins nattered on about something or other. Meanwhile, Alex’s wife kept Mrs. Hudson company. She sat next to her on a pouf while Mrs. Hudson instructed Angelo where to put the platter of canapés and bruschetta.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Holmes berated the guest of honor, holding out a paper party hat with the words “Over The Hill” emblazoned on it. “Just put it on for the picture, sweetheart.”

“No.”

Just then, the kitchen door swung open. John’s mouth dropped open in shock, as Violet entered the lounge, carrying a tray of cannolis.

Her hair hung in loose ringlets. She also didn’t wear the usual layers and layers of cosmetics so every freckle and scar was noticeable. She didn’t wear her eyeglasses either. She wore a black jumper and dark blue jeans.

She didn’t look like “Miss Smith.” But she still sounded like “Miss Smith” when she said, “John, Mary, hello, so glad you could make it. Give me a moment and I’ll take your coats. Billy? Could you get John and Mary a drink?”

“I know, right?” Macpherson boomed seeing John’s shock while Bill excused himself from Alex to fetch John and Mary cups of punch. “I didn’t recognize her at first either.”

“The hair and make-up is all to fool the press, that’s all,” Violet murmured, returning for John and
Mary’s coats. As she carried John and Mary’s coats to Mrs. Hudson’s bedroom, she stopped to breathe into Mrs. Holmes’ ear, “Not tonight, do you understand?”

Mrs. Holmes’ risked a side-glance at Mary then smiled, “Don’t be silly. I’m not going to ruin my son’s birthday party by being rude.” In a louder, more boisterous voice, she asked, “John? Mary? Could I fix you up a plate? Mary, are you still on a restricted diet, you poor dear? Would you rather have a cup of tea? I can make chamomile or…”

*Oh, so you’ll just drive her crazy instead. Good plan,* Violet rolled her eyes and returned to the kitchen to fetch more plates and cutlery.

As Mrs. Holmes fixed her smothering attention on Mary, John stood next to Sherlock. “How are you holding up?”

“Kill me,” came the swift and immediate answer.

“Only if I get to push you off of Bart’s roof.”

“John, that’s in terribly poor taste, even for you.”

“Well, think it through the next time you fake your death.” Both men sniggered, then John said warmly, “Happy birthday, mate.”

“Thank you. Did you get me the sheet music to Ernst’s Variations on The Last Rose of Summer, like I wanted?”

“How did you know that I got you… oh never mind. Yes, of course I did.” John sighed. “I even sprung for a new tin of rosin for your bow as well.”

“And that’s why you’re my best friend.”

“Cheers.”

“What’s with Violet?” John risked a whisper but Sherlock shook his head, his quicksilver eyes darting all over the room. John picked up on the meaning at once. *Too many people listening.*

*Right,* he thought. As John struggled for a safe, banal topic to discuss but was saved by Mr. Holmes opening the door once more, admitting Lestrade and Molly… and Henry.

John felt Sherlock stiffen next to him.

“I… hi,” Molly started blushing immediately. “I hope this is OK. I mean, I know this really isn’t a baby-friendly sort of party. But Mum cancelled at last minute, her car broke down so she can’t drive to London and doesn’t like taking the trains and Greg’s mum has the flu so… well, we don’t know any babysitters, trustworthy ones at any rate. Oh dear, I… we can go, we should go.”

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Holmes cut off Molly’s embarrassed babbling. “Come in, come in,” she made a beeline for the baby carrier Lestrade held with both hands.

“Oh thank you, God,” Mary, already worn out after five minutes of Mrs. Holmes’ fussing, whispered to herself as she massaged her temple.

“Nonsense,” Mrs. Holmes cut off Molly’s embarrassed babbling. “Come in, come in,” she made a beeline for the baby carrier Lestrade held with both hands.

“Oh thank you, God,” Mary, already worn out after five minutes of Mrs. Holmes’ fussing, whispered to herself as she massaged her temple.

“Molly dear, I already told you it was fine when you rang and tried to cancel the first time,” Mrs. Hudson added as Lestrade surrendered the carrier to Mrs. Holmes.

Mrs. Holmes took the carrier over to the sofa and took a bemused Henry out. As she took the little
snowsuit off of him, Molly insisted she leave his hat on, a blue knitted thing with earflaps.

“Won’t he get hot?” Macpherson’s girlfriend asked as Henry stared at her bright pink hair in fascination. “With those flaps tied over his ears and all?”

“You want that left tied on, the hat,” Molly assured her as Greg left to get a plate of nibbles for him and Molly to share. “He has very sensitive ears and they don’t make earmuffs that small.” When Macpherson’s girlfriend continued to look puzzled, Molly explained further, “He doesn’t do well in noisy situations, yells his head off.”

“Oh, sure, I get it,” Pink Hair nodded dubiously then brightened. “Can I hold him?”

“Uh… OK,” Molly produced her nervous smile as Mrs. Holmes handed Henry over, but Pink Hair handled him like a pro. “Used to nanny before I decided to go to uni,” she explained. “I’m an art major, hope to open my own gallery someday. I’m Emma, by the way, since this rude lump,” she good-naturedly grinned at Macpherson, “Didn’t do intros. And you are?”

After that, it became a bit more of a party. Bill figured out how to work Mrs. Hudson’s ancient radio and found a station that played cheerful yet inoffensive music. At Mrs. Hudson’s request, Henry Knight lit the fireplace. Once Angelo finished setting all the food and wine out, almost everyone rotated between snacks and drinks, swapping stories (mostly embarrassing ones about Sherlock) and passing Henry around. Mary and Mrs. Hudson stayed stationary, of course, but everyone made certain to visit with them so they didn’t feel left out. John stayed by Mary’s side but gave Sherlock supportive smiles whenever he could. Mrs. Hudson preened over them all, like a benevolent queen smiling upon her happy little court.

Sherlock, meanwhile, had retired to the sofa. He actually chatted amicably with Henry Knight, pleased to hear about his progress since the Hounds of Baskerville case. When their drink glasses were empty, the young man rose to replenish them. However he was detained by Billy when they both discovered they were New Mills fans and started bemoaning the deplorable season they had. This did not dismay Sherlock in the least. He was beginning to find the crush suffocating. Relieved that everyone seemed to be occupied, Sherlock tented his fingers and watched his own birthday party proceed without him. This was completely fine with him. In fact, if his father hadn’t been standing sentry by the door, he would have attempted to slip out go back up to his flat. He strongly suspected that was his father’s plan all along. So, his escape plans thwarted, he entertained himself in his favorite way, observing then making deductions…

_Macpherson is utterly infatuated, obvious by the dilated pupils. Shame really that he is so preoccupied with his own lust that he fails observe how Emma is utterly unfaithful to him. Should have realized it when he saw her brand new wrist-watch, the idiot, but he means well. At least he’s not as insipid as Anderson was._

_Alex and her wife had a massive row before coming over, again. They are pretending everything is fine, but clearly it is not. Alex will never complain, but it’s wearing her down. She’s losing sleep and weight. Her wife on the other hand, has put on a stone but Beatrix has always been a stress-eater. The issue? They want another child, but neither one of them want to be the one inseminated and gravid. Alex wants to adopt, Beatrix does not. That will be interesting to see how that plays out between the two of them. This will be the marital crisis that either cleaves them together or renders them irreparably apart. It’s painfully obvious how angry they are with each other every time they take a turn holding Henry… the baby not my former client. Ugh, two Henrys. I will have to refer to the infant as “Raffles” tonight in order to keep them straight. Raffles… bloody stupid nickname, the poor mite._

_On the other hand, Mrs. Hudson should have not manipulated Molly and Greg into bringing Raffles_
tonight just because she is lonely. Sequestering her at her sister’s to convalesce was a terrible idea. Seeing her sister enjoying time with her husband, children and grandchildren only intensified Mrs. Hudson’s loneliness. She would like to be married again; apparent by the way she keeps glancing at her left ring finger. However, marriage or even a boyfriend is not a priority, more of a daydream. She glances at her naked ring finger, but she stares at the baby as if to eat him then ogles at the photographs of her family on the mantelpiece. She desperately misses her children and grandchildren. But they will never leave Florida and she will never go back. Tonight, we are her surrogate family, which is alright. There are worse things she could have done than throw a party for me, I suppose.

But Molly should have been firmer with her declination. She has relapsed into her stuttering and stammering, something she has not done in years. My poor Molly Hooper, fear has sunk its claws into her now. Her posture is rigid, stiff. She is ready to snatch Raffles (ugh, that stupid name again...) out of someone’s arms if necessary. Even though both Jim and Richard are dead, she still is afraid. Her pupils are pinpricks and she is smiling her nervous smile, too wide, too many teeth showing. Hyper-vigilance, anxious, the way she fidgets with her serviette betrays how little she wants to be here.

Why did she come then, she knows my feelings would not have been hurt if they were unable to attend? Greg, naturally, he still regrets our falling-out. He feels like it’s necessary to be here, to show that all fences are mended. He also picked out the gift, spent an inordinate amount of money on a cufflinks out of guilt. Waste of money. He should have observed that I don’t wear cufflinks. But John will say that it would be Not Good for me to say that out loud, so I’ll simply say Thank You like a good boy when I go through the pretence of opening gifts, even though I have already deduced what everyone gave me.

Greg also wanted to come to the party to show his support to John. It’s actually rather endearing how he’s been dominating the conversation with John most of the evening, his body language giving away how he wants to shield John from further harm. He’s also touching John more than usual. Manly touches, the strong clap on the back after a two second hug, the squeeze of the shoulder, the good-natured shake. Subconsciously he wants John to realize that he’s not alone, he’ll never be alone. Good of him, Greg. I really ought to call him by his correct first name.

John might actually be having a good time. Greg’s making him laugh, I strongly suspect he’s telling tales about me. Maybe I shan’t call him by his first name after all.

John is playing the part of the Dutiful Husband, a role he normally plays well, but he hasn’t touched Mary since they’ve arrived. He’s distracted by Violet. He strongly suspects she is up to something as I knew he would once he saw her. I told her not to dress American. She needed to wear her Miss Smith disguise. She doesn’t see the point anymore. I can’t blame her. I know how relieved I felt when I put a good suit and my coat on again.

Her hands are trembling but not from nerves; it’s clonic spasms again. John has also noticed. His brow furrows every time he looks down. Her balance is also worsening, not perceptible to anyone but me, of course. John sees her shaking hands but I observed how she favors her right leg because her left foot feels like it has fallen asleep. I will not allow her to take her motorcycle tonight to meet Mycroft. I doubt it will be a difficult fight. She knows she’s ill. We both know it.

One last feat, Violet... One last request, my clever girl then you can go home...

Sherlock felt his throat close up, felt a sudden sting in his eyes. He willed the sentiment to go away. He tore his eyes away from Violet, who now chatted with Henry Knight and Bill Wiggins. Instead he fixed his quicksilver eyes on John’s wife.
Mary, my lovely, terrible, brilliant, deceitful, contrary Mary, lying as usual. She’s not too weak to hold Raffles. She obviously doesn’t want to hold him. It hurts her to see a living child when both of hers have been ripped away from her. I do pity her, for her wants and desires are simple and ordinary. It’s hard to hate her, Mary. She loves John so much and she has suffered greatly.

Before Sherlock could finish his deduction, Mary’s big blue eyes fixed on his. He gave her an affable smile. She gamely smiled back, distrust flickering in those pretty eyes of hers.

They broke off their staring contest as Molly came to replenish Mary’s tea cup. And therein lies the problem. Mary and I do not trust each other. Mary believes John will leave her.

I believe I will help John leave her, when the time is right. That time will be when we locate Marissa and reunite her with her father. Only then, John will feel safe to leave Mary and I quite agree with him. Violet does not but...

Sherlock abandoned that train of thought, his eyes resting on his mother, swaying back and forth on her feet as she tickled her grandson’s tummy.

Mother can’t take her eyes off of Raffles. She’d drown him with affection as she did with me if she could. I am still irritated that Violet put my mother and my son in the same room, but Mother can keep a secret, oh that she does exceptionally well… oh, she’s looking my way. Now she’s coming over, with the baby… oh… bloody hell.

“Aren’t you having a good time, dearie?” Mrs. Holmes sat down on the sofa next to her son while cradling her grandson. “Why are you sitting here all on your own, at your own party?”

It was on his tip of his tongue to tartly remind her that this most certainly was not his idea of a Good Time plus he had more pressing matters, such as trying to keep everyone he loved alive while his meddling, interfering brother threatened those plans. John however must have managed to read his mind because he shot Sherlock a dark look that was obviously some sort of warning. Instead, Sherlock murmured, “Just tired, Mother.” Inspiration struck just then and the lie rolled off his tongue easily, “Still a bit worn out from that miserable cold Violet and I had over Christmas. I worked a case this week and I think I overexerted myself.”

“Oh, my poor boy,” Mrs. Holmes tut-tutted. If her hands weren’t full, Sherlock knew she would have pressed her hand to his brow. “You work too hard,” she scolded him.

“You worry too much,” Sherlock felt an unexpected surge of affection of her.

Mrs. Holmes’ eyes misted. In a low voice that no one save Sherlock could hear over the music and laughter, she told him, “You know how much I love you, don’t you, William?” Fiercely she added, “You know I would do anything for you. You’re my heart, my entire world.”

Sherlock hung his head, feeling four years old instead of forty. He knew what he was supposed to say, what she wanted him to say and more importantly, wanted him to mean it when he said it: I love you too, Mummy. Then follow up those words with a hug and a kiss.

But the words and kisses that had come so easily to him when he actually was four stuck in his throat now like dry bread. The best he could do was utter “I know.”

Before the conservation could continue, his father called out, “Lettie, come here a moment, won’t you?”

“Just a mo’, Sig,” she brightly called back as she thrust Raffles into Sherlock’s unsuspecting arms. “Take him, won’t you?”
“Wait, I-” Sherlock barely remembered to support the baby’s floppy head before Mrs. Holmes stood up. He could feel Molly’s eyes boring into him so he stammered, “Maybe Molly should...”

“Enjoy herself a bit? Yes, I think that is a very good idea,” Mrs. Holmes gave her son a too-sweet-to-be-sweet smile. “Everyone else has had a turn now. It’s your turn to responsible for him now, for just a bit anyway.”

The affection Sherlock had felt rapidly disintegrated and was immediately replaced by the usual seething hostility. That bloody manipulative woman, he fumed. Violet if I wasn’t afraid for you down to the very marrow of my bones, I would throttle you...

I’m not supposed to hold him. I’m not supposed to get attached... caring is not an advantage… and Jesus Christ, he is not staying still, why isn’t he staying still? What if I drop him?

Raffles squirmed like a normal ten-week old baby, kicking, waving and blowing spit bubbles. Sherlock held the child in a death-grip, convinced the baby was going to unexpectedly jerk then flop out of his hands, landing on his still unclosed fontanel, his unprotected brain smashed into jelly in front of all the party guests.

He waited in agony for Molly to come charging towards him, in full mother-bear mode intent on saving her cub. No one came. He wanted to glare at everyone, wanted to yell Somebody Take Him, but he didn’t dare take his eyes off the baby, didn’t dare move.

John took Mary’s hand, touching her again for the first time since helping her out of the cab. Mary pressed her lips to John’s knuckles. Despite their differences, their chasm-wide differences, grief would always drive them back together.

Molly felt her heart melt as she dug in her pockets for her mobile. Greg would be Raffles’ dad but Sherlock was still his father. We will find a way to be a family, all of us, together, Molly finally started feeling the dread and the tension lifting from her chest at last. Jim is dead. We’re safe, we’re all safe. We won’t have to leave London now. We won’t keep this a secret for much longer. All three of us will have a proper talk about co-parenting later, expectations, responsibilities and visitation. His drug addiction is still a worry, but maybe... maybe he’ll want to stay clean now he has someone to stay clean for? Plus, I need to apologize, properly apologize. That was such a horrible thing of me to say to him when I broke the news to him that I was expecting. I never should have told him that he would be an awful father. I never gave him a chance, never asked what he wanted. I can’t blame pregnancy hormones for that either. I was scared and stupid and I made terrible decisions. But it’s alright now, it’s finally alright now...

Molly looked up and smiled at her husband, who just put his arm over her shoulders. She beamed at him, stood up on her very tiptoes and kissed his cheek.

“What’s that for?” his brown eyes crinkled at her as he grinned.

“For being an amazing, accepting, supportive husband,” she gave him a genuine smile, the one that lit up not just her face but her entire body.

It had been ages since Greg had seen that particular smile. He had been afraid he’d never see it again. He also had been afraid he’d be jealous or feel threatened if he ever saw Sherlock hold Raffles. Instead, he felt a rush of gratitude for his sacrifice as well as a bit of pity, remembering the very same waves of panic flood him as the nurse had put the newborn boy in his arms.

You’re not going to break him, mate, he wanted to say. However, it was amusing to see the Great Consulting Detective petrified by a wriggling infant. So he held his tongue and also took out his
Smartphone so he could take a picture of Sherlock’s abject terror.

Almost everyone thought it also was highly entertaining to see Sherlock Holmes paralyzed by a tiny baby. “Don’t drop him!” Macpherson chortled and Emma playfully slapped his bicep, the one with the variety of skulls tattooed on it in many different colors.

Finally, Violet rescued him, somewhat. “For shame,” she shushed Macpherson as she put her cup of punch on the mantle. She crossed over to Sherlock and sat next to him, “You’re not going to drop him,” she murmured to him, knowing what a huge moment this really was.

“He’s moving,” Sherlock hissed between his teeth.

“Babies do that,” Violet leaned against him as she rested her hand on his shoulder. She reached out with her other hand, to stroke the baby’s chubby cheek with her forefinger. “Sweet boy,” she whispered.

Once Sherlock realized he wasn’t going to drop him, he couldn’t stop studying him. His mind, his busy, brilliant, razor-sharp mind immediately started making lightning-fast deductions, Ten weeks old. Motor skills are age-appropriate, his hands and eyes are starting to work together instead of separately. Neck muscles are strengthening as well, but not quite strong enough to hold up his head yet. Almost four kilograms, still a bit underweight but that’s alright, now that Greg and Molly are able to get him to sleep more than ten minutes a night, they have been making excellent progress on getting him to nurse regularly. Sixty-six-point-four centimeters, oh, he’s going to be tall like me…

Sherlock’s brain stuttered then shut-down completely. He blinked hard as his system rebooted. As he slowly came back online, he started down at a pair of dark blue eyes staring back up at him. The dark blue eyes blinked then continued to stare up at him, as if saying: Oh… it’s you…

_Dark blue, not like mine, but almond-shaped, like mine… hair, auburn like his mother, but curly, like mine… mouth, like mine…_ Sherlock tentatively held out his finger and Raffles immediately clasped it in his little hand and tried to bring it to his mouth. _Long fingers, like mine…_ he watched the baby slobber over his finger, permitting him to gum at it.

“You OK?” Violet breathed into his ear.

“Mm,” Sherlock felt his heart hammering in his chest like he never had before. “Fine, I’m fine.”

His vision blurred for the second time that night. _Perfect. He’s perfect, unhurt, unspoilt, hasn’t been ruined by this world yet,_ he nervously ran his hand over the wispy auburn baby curls.

Suddenly he wanted everyone to leave, wanted to kick everyone out, except for three. _John, Violet and little Henry, these three, these three are the only ones who truly matter to me. Everyone else can go straight to—_

Sherlock’s selfish internal diatribe stopped when he realized people were taking pictures of him holding the baby… and of Violet sitting next to him.

Startled, so lost in his greedy appraisal of the baby (_… my son, mine…_), his powers of observation had deserted him. Looking up, he saw tears of pure joy in Molly’s eyes. Quickly deduced she had no intentions of cutting him out any longer. She actually wanted him to be a part of the gigantic responsibility he held in his hands.

An unfamiliar sentiment started nibbling on his brain. _Guilt? Why on earth am I feeling… oh. Well, of course the others mean something to me, especially Molly, always Molly, she counts. It’s just that John, Violet and Henry mean a bit more… that’s alright, isn’t it?_
He desperately wished he could ask John if that was OK or Not Good.

Then he remembered that Moriarty Senior and the Earl of Winchester were out there somewhere and he felt ice water running through his veins. *It’s not over yet... but best not to ruin the moment.* He twisted his head to face Violet. *Let us all have a happy moment, as John would say, it would be kinder.*

“The pictures,” he breathed to Violet as Molly, Greg and Mrs. Hudson took snap after snap.

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” she pressed her forehead against his.

So they awkwardly twisted around to face everyone. Those pictures actually turned out to be horrible. Violet’s smile was forced and unnatural. Thinking about the people who wanted to hurt the baby for the crime of being his son, Sherlock did not smile at all. Raffles had started to fuss.

It would be the candid photographs, the ones of Violet and Sherlock looking at the baby instead of the camera phones that would get printed and framed.

Violet would never see those pictures framed.

She rose, ran her hand over Sherlock’s dark curls and explained she needed to go fetch the birthday cake from 221B. “There was so much food in Mrs. Hudson’s kitchen, there wasn’t any room for the cake!” she faked joviality as Sherlock surrendered Henry to Molly.

“No need, Miss Smith?” Angelo asked.

“Oh no, thank you, that’s so kind,” Violet gushed as she was half-way out the door. “It’s not a cumbersome tiered cake, just a sponge I picked up from Tesco. Be back in a moment.”

Violet fled. She was on the ninth step to 221B when she heard John quietly say her name.

She turned to see him standing at the foot of the stairs. She opened to speak, then shook her head. She crooked her finger, signaling him to follow her up.

Once safely inside 221B with the door firmly shut, Violet led him into the kitchen. John flicked his eyes to the side, noting that the coffee table was normally in front of the sofa, in fact was conspicuously absent. His gut rippled uncomfortably as amusement and envy twisted around each other. Ordinarily, he would have taken the piss out of Sherlock. Teased him unmercifully until he barked “Shut up, John!” while his ears turned pink.

John also acknowledged that he only would have teased Sherlock to hide his own jealousy. He quickly looked away from the empty space in front of the sofa and fixed his eyes on the back of Violet’s chestnut head, dutifully following her. As he entered the kitchen, he saw the Granny Victoria’s sponge on the countertop, candles already in place. Gladstone had been snoozing on the rug in front of the sink but his big furry head lifted up when Violet and John entered. His tail thumped amiably on the floor.

“Want something stronger than the Two Buck Chuck Mrs. H was serving?” Violet Hunter asked John, already opening the cupboard that served as a sad liquor cabinet.

“God yes,” John found two fairly clean tumblers. “Many happy returns to you too, birthday girl.”

“Thanks for reminding me,” she snorted. “But I’d rather continue the fiction that I’m thirty-seven rather than dealing with the reality that I actually turned forty.” Violet pulled out a bottle of Macallan 12 Year Old Single Malt Scotch
“Now I know it’s serious,” John quipped as she poured them both two fingers. Then he sobered, “Violet, what’s going on?”

“I’m meeting Mycroft tonight, after everyone leaves.”

“Why?”

“I have agreed to provide State’s evidence against Senator Josiah Woodhouse for his involvement in seditious and treasonous acts against the United States of America. In exchange for my testimony, I will be given immunity for the money laundering crimes I committed here in England. I also get put into the Witness Protection program and my sister-in-law and niece will receive the same level of protection that former Presidents get when they leave office.”

“You’re leaving?”

“We knew this day was coming, John,” Violet took a sip, grimaced. “I thought this expensive shit was supposed to be good.” She carefully put the glass down, aware of her shaking hand.

John didn’t want a drink anymore. “Right,” he put the tumbler on the table. “What’s the play, Violet? What are you really up to?”

“Nothing,” Violet studied the tips of her black boots. “There are no more plays.”

“Bollocks, you’re looking at the floor instead of me. You can never look someone you care about in the face when you lie to them. And you’re rubbing her hands like you’re guilty.”

“I’m not guilty. My hands are cold, my hands are always cold.”

John wasn’t having it, “Eyes up here, Violet.”

Violet snatched up her tumbler again as she glowered at John, “You can’t be involved, John.”

“No. You’re not. Not because I think you can’t handle yourself, but once again I’m diving into very dirty waters, John.” Her eyes welled up again. “I’m going somewhere that you can’t follow, I’m going somewhere that you can’t follow,” she mumbled before draining half her drink. She then grimaced and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand.

“I won’t let you,” John’s voice thickened.

“Yes, you will,” she snapped. “You will because I can’t do what I need to do if I think Sherlock will be alone and I can’t live with that.” She looked up at the ceiling, took two shuddering breaths to compose herself. “Please, promise me, you’ll stay. He needs you. He will need you after I’m gone,” her voice cracked.

John wanted another drink. He reminded himself that kind of thinking is what got both him and Harry into trouble. “Will you be safe, in Witness Protection? What if the Red-Headed League finds you, pays someone to reveal your location?”

She laughed dryly. “You’ve been watching too many movies. Hollywood has it wrong, as usual. There are over 8,000 people in WitPro and exactly zero people,” she made an O with her free hand “have been found by the bad guys. I’ll be safe, I’ll be OK.” She laughed again as she put her untouched drink back on the countertop. “And I’ll be cyber-stalking your blog so write some good stories, OK? That way I’ll know he’s OK, that you’re both OK.”
“Well,” John struggled for levity. “At least say good-bye before you leave, OK?”

Violet nodded as she folded her lips tight and blinked her eyes unnaturally fast.

“Good-bye,” she whispered as the tears spilled over. She pressed her palm to her eyes as her shoulders started shaking.

John squeezed his eyes shut, not wanting to cry either. His usual defenses rose up. It was on the tip of his tongue to tell a terrible joke, make her laugh so they could stuff all this emotion down, carry on and stiff upper lip and all that rubbish so they could get the job done.

He even opened his mouth to crack a joke but he shut it as his breath hitched instead. *Don’t, John. Don’t repeat mistakes. You never got a chance to apologize to Harry for the terrible things you said to her. You never told Sholto what a good friend he had been and that you appreciated everything he had done for you after Mum died. You didn’t realize how much Sherlock meant to you until you saw him on the roof at Bart’s. You might not even get to tell your daughter how much you love her. So don’t muck this up, John. You might not ever see her again. She was more of a sister to you than Harry ever was and, more importantly, she loved Sherlock when you chose Mary over him.*

“Oh bloody hell,” John sobbed, taking the two steps from his side of the kitchen to hers. He engulfed her in the biggest, tightest hug he could. He felt her crumple in his arms, her entire body convulsing as she wept.

The words he wanted to say, needed to say, stayed locked up inside. But he buried his face in her shoulder and ran his hand down her chestnut hair as she clutched the back of his oatmeal jumper with both hands. He hoped she could somehow sense how much he cared about her and how he was going to miss her, that she could *profile* how he felt somehow.

She must have because when she finally pulled herself together, she pecked his wet cheek and whispered, “Thank you.”

“Yeah, you too, for everything,” John released her from the embrace but took her hands. “For saving my life, for looking for my daughter, for Sherlock… just,” he gave her hands a squeeze then a shake, “Everything.”

Violet smiled tremulously then slipped her hands out of John’s to wipe her eyes. “We’re a mess,” she sniffed. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingers and frowned at the mascara she smudged off. “Do you mind taking the cake down while I touch up my make-up?”

“Yeah, ’course,” John said gruffly as Violet reached for her drink.

But when Violet reached for the tumbler, it slipped out of her hand and crashed to the floor.

“Shit!” she cried out, reaching for Gladstone’s collar. “No, *komm*, Stone, I don’t want you to cut your paws. *Komm zu mir!*” she commanded as Gladstone started sniffing the broken glass.

John frowned as she watched her fumble for Gladstone’s collar then nearly stumbling, “Violet?”

“I’m fine, my foot fell asleep. I’ll mop that up in a second.”

“It’s OK, go fix your face, I’ll take care of this,” John knelt down and started picking up the glass shards. When he realized Violet hadn’t left, he sat back on his heels and cocked his head, unknowingly looking like an inquisitive sheepdog, “Violet?”

“Promise me something? After I’m gone?”
“Violet…”

“Please.”

John didn’t trust himself to speak so he only nodded.

“For God’s sake, leave her.”

John’s mouth opened in astonishment. “Violet, I ca-”

“I don’t care,” Violet rolled over him. “I don’t want to hear any more excuses, any more bullshit. She’s dangerous, you’re miserable. Leave her.”

Then she bolted before he could argue further.

John fixed his mouth in a firm line as he resumed picking up the jagged pieces of glass. *If it was that easy, Violet, don’t you think I would have left her ages ago?*

He paused to look at the bits of the broken tumbler he held in hands. Unconsciously, he licked his lower lip then he mouthed to himself, “Cold hands… foot fell asleep…”

Chapter End Notes

** Sherlock and Violet's exchange is from ACD's "The Copper Beaches."

While "The Swedish Hacker" was inspired by "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo", the Bambi reference can actually be found in "The Girl who Kicked the Hornet's Nest"... and maaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaybe an acknowledgement that Fawnlock is A Thing. :^D


"Out of the corner of her eye, she detected motion. He’s coming… She forced herself to keep looking forward, keep looking west..."

Violet unleashes her BAMFness. Sherlock has feels and doesn't like it...

Chapter Thirty-Six: *Sacré Coeur*

10 January 2016
London Millennium Footbridge
Sunday morning
12:59 AM

The lights from St. Paul’s Cathedral and the gently cascading snow turned the sky into an eerie orangish-grey colour. Violet cradled a Styrofoam cup in her gloved hands. She took slow, careful sips as she looked over the railing and down at the Thames, the water blacker than the actual nocturnal sky. The coffee was quite terrible, but Violet ordered it for the heat and for the caffeine. She stomped her feet, uncomfortable pins-and-needles sensation surging through her feet and calves again, but chalked it up to the cold.

Out of the corner of her eye, she detected motion.

*He’s coming…*

She forced herself to keep looking forward, keep looking west.

Next to her, Gladstone nuzzled her and whined.

“There are leash laws, you know,” an unctuous voice dripped into her ear.

Gladstone immediately growled. Violet muttered a command in German and Gladstone plopped into a sitting position, but his hackles remained raised.

“Also, I believe I said no weapons,” Mycroft eyed the dog warily.

“You said no guns, you didn’t say anything about former police dogs.”

“I stand corrected,” Mycroft loftily conceded. He and Violet were dressed head-to-toe in black. Mycroft had the good sense not only to bring his umbrella, but actually to use it for what it was made, but Violet had purchased a sensible black winter parka with a hood yesterday. “Were you followed?”
“Were you?”

Violet held out her coffee cup. Puzzled, Mycroft took it then his face relaxed in understanding as she produced her Smartphone. She tugged off her glove with her teeth then swiped the screen. She hit an app then showed Mycroft the screen. “I made him put in webcams so I could make sure I could see that he stays in the apartment,” Violet told Mycroft as he watched Sherlock stretched out on the sofa, fingers steepled. “I did my part,” Violet lifted her brows as she dropped her mobile back into her coat pocket.

“I have my best people watching Two-Hundred-Twenty-One Baker Street,” Mycroft intoned. “How was the party?” he courteously asked as Violet pulled her glove back on.

“Boring,” Violet instinctively lied as a gust of wind threatened to blow the hood off her head. As she pulled it down more securely, she added, “Your mother saved you a slice of cake.”

“How considerate of her,” Mycroft handed the cup back to her.

“Don’t get too excited. Sherlock fed it to Gladstone before she could leave with it.”

“You shouldn’t let Sherlock feed Gladstone people-food,” Mycroft mildly scolded her. “When the veterinary did the autopsy to figure out what killed Redbeard, his arteries were so clogged, it was a miracle he lasted as long as he did.”

“Really? I thought Redbeard died because the next door neighbor fed him meat laced with rat-poison,” Violet leaned back on the railing, as if enjoying the view.

“Yes, yes, yes, that was the actual cause of death,” Mycroft sighed. “But if that lunatic hadn’t poisoned Redbeard, the fact remains that Sherlock had been feeding him table-scrap—”

“The fact is that Sherlock was trying to tell you that the neighbor was a psychopath and everyone ignored him until it was too late,” Violet took another sip of coffee. “I’ve noticed that’s been a running theme. Sherlock sees the devil hiding in plain sight but no one will look where he’s pointing to see that the true evil is Right. There.” She tilted her head just enough so Mycroft could see the contempt in her hazel eyes, “Standing in front of you.”

“As scintillating as this conversation is,” Mycroft managed to look elegant as he balanced his umbrella while pushing up his sleeve of his heavy black long-coat to glance at his Rolex. “It’s cold, it’s late and I have things to do. The code, Violet, if you please.”

“Victor Trevor took Sherlock skydiving for his thirtieth birthday, is that right?”

“Wait? Yes, I believe so,” Mycroft sounded nonplussed, as he should have been. “I suppose I should thank you for scaring him off once and for all. Never understood what Sherlock saw in that vainglorious, materialistic deviant. Also, I should thank you for not giving him an extravagant and dangerous present for his fortieth birthday, although I’m not sure he’ll honestly appreciate a new coffee table.”

“He does,” Violet drawled. “Trust me.”

Mycroft studied her for a moment then stiffly said, “Then in an even more rigid voice, he added, “Many happy returns to you as well. Belated, of course.”


“Yes, I’m sure. The code, Violet.”
“You know, I never believed the Official Version of how Sherlock survived The Fall,” Violet acted like she enjoyed drinking her terribly bitter coffee. “It just reeked of bullshit. Molly and a bunch of orderlies pushing a body out the window while a giant air mattress was inflated on the street where anybody walking past could see and then deflated in time for Sherlock to act like a corpse and John to get up after a bike messenger conveniently knocked him over?” She laughed silently. “No wonder Anderson had a mental breakdown.”

“Well minds break easily,” Mycroft stov for patience, “Now, the code, please.”

“My grandfather took a nosedive off the roof of a barn when I was a kid,” Violet bounced to another seemingly unrelated topic.

“How unfortunate,” Mycroft frowned mightily, studying her. Anyone else would have assumed that she had been drinking or had finally gone around the bend. Mycroft knew better. He had witnessed her work. These were no random non sequiturs. Violet was leaping from topic to topic as if they were playing verbal checkers.

He also saw Sherlock’s hand in this, but to what end? That Mycroft couldn’t deduce. So he did what he did best. He shut up and listened patiently.

“Grandpa was replacing the shingles on the roof. Stubborn old man, he shouldn’t have been up there anyway. He lost his balance and fell head-over-heels to the ground. My dad was granted compassionate leave and we all spent the summer on the farm while Grandpa recovered.”

“Three cheers for the military,” Mycroft hoped the sarcasm would unnerve her.

It didn’t. “The barn was about the same height as Bart’s, well, same height as the building Sherlock jumped off of. My grandpa lived. Of course, he broke every single bone in his body and the accident probably shaved ten years off his life, but he did live.”

“Good for him,” Mycroft whispered.

“Victor didn’t just buy Sherlock sky-diving lessons,” Violet leapt back to her earlier topic. “He took Sherlock to Skydive Spain, in Seville so they could be trained in the AFF style of sky-diving. That’s Accelerated Freefall,” she helpfully explained.

“I know what AFF is,” Mycroft’s face closed up, knowing what she was driving this conversation towards now, but he didn’t understand why.

“So not only were Victor and Sherlock trained in how to sky-dive, but also how to react appropriately in an emergency, like, for example, if the chute doesn’t open. That’s a handy skill to have, to know how to position your body during freefall so you minimize damage on impact. Of course, by-standers said they heard bones crunching. Everyone assumed it was his face and neck, but it was probably his pelvis and wrist breaking they heard. He still has problems with his left wrist from time to time, did you know that?”

“No,” a muscle twitched in Mycroft’s cheek.

“Thought not,” Violet idly scratched Gladstone’s head. “The other thing that didn’t make sense to me was why Sherlock was wearing the Belstaff and his scarf. I’ve worn it. It’s 100 percent wool and it’s hot as hell. He fell in June. Now I know summers don’t get as hot as the ones I lived through as a teenager in Indiana or when I worked in the New Mexico field office, but it does get warm here in June. Plus, I never saw him wear the Belstaff this summer. So why was Sherlock bundled up like it was the dead of winter when he met Moriarty on the roof during the beginning of summer? My
guess is he had some protective gear underneath his clothes. A neck brace, shins splints, maybe even some padding to protect his ribs.”

“That would be a very educated guess. I’m assuming there’s a point to this?”

“So, Sherlock knew how to freefall in case the parachute doesn’t open and he wore protective gear under his coat,” Violet ignored Mycroft’s snipe. “He knew Moriarty was going to goad him into suicide, he had always known. There weren’t thirteen options available to him, there was only one. No matter how it ended… he was always going to jump, wasn’t he?” She held up a finger just as Mycroft was about to speak, “But it wasn’t Moriarty who forced him to jump, was it? It was you who forced him to go through with it.”

That Mycroft didn’t expect. “How could I have forced him to go through with it?”

“You needed him to infiltrate Moriarty’s organization. You lied to him, you told him it was an exciting adventure, lots of crimes to solve and he’d only be gone for a few months. You promised to keep John close and keep him safe. But once again, you underestimated the Moriarty twins’ level of crazy-genius. You never factored in the three snipers. You never factored in the actual injuries Sherlock would sustain by actually falling. He could have been killed Mycroft, before Operation Lazarus even began.”

“He was the best man for the job,” Mycroft jutted his chin up. “My brother obviously forgot to mention that there was supposed to be an air mattress. It was supposed to be staged, for the onlookers and for the CCTV cameras.”

“You didn’t factor in the snipers Moriarty hired,” Violet reminded him.

Mycroft blanched, “We only apprehended one of the snipers, the one trained on Mrs. Hudson. The one trained on John Watson was believed to be Sebastian Moran who mysteriously turned up dead in a garden only a few houses away from the Watson residence. You wouldn’t know anything about that, would you?” he inquired sweetly.

“Are you complaining?”

“Not one bit.”

“You’re welcome. And the other sniper… the one trained on Lestrade?”

“That one got away.”

“Kudos to you for using gender-neutral terminology,” Violet gave him a disparaging look. “It was theorized that the third assassin was a woman, correct?”

“It was a distinct possibility we had considered, yes.”

“Wouldn’t you love to take Mary Morstan Watson down, make her pay for attempted murder on not just your brother but on a respected DI as well? She’d never see the light of day again. She’d rot in prison forever.”

“Here I thought you and Mrs. Watson are friends.”

“I like her,” Violet nodded. “I really do. I also feel sorry for her, she’s been through hell, more than even you realize. All she wanted was a nice quiet life surrounded by children with the man she loved by her side. Modest ambitions, but…” she shrugged. “I can’t ignore the fact that she’s a criminal. She killed people for money, and they weren’t all bad people either. If I were still an active agent, I’d be
pursuing her." She lifted her face upwards, closing her eyes as she felt the powdery snow dust her
face, cooling it, “No matter what name I take or what color my hair becomes, I will always be a cop.
That won’t ever change. I want justice done,” She opened her eyes, irises alight with a greenish-gold
fire. “I want Mary Watson in prison, to pay her debts to society.”

“How quixotic,” Mycroft smiled patronizingly at her, “Now, speaking of justice, the code, Violet.”

“I don’t have it,” Violet lowered her head. “And it’s Agent Hunter, Mr. Holmes.” She gave him a sly
smile. “Dr. Watson’s not the only one willing to punch your lights out.”

“So you were unable to procure the Moriarty Code from Sherlock,” Mycroft’s lips thinned.

“Oh, I didn’t even try.” Violet calmly drank her terrible coffee.

“What?”

“Yeah, I lied about that. As the kids say these days,” Violet sing-songed, “Sorry, not sorry.”

Despite her blasé manner, Violet’s heart started to race. She clutched the Styrofoam cup so her
traitorous tremulous hands wouldn’t betray her.

“You. Didn’t. Even. Try.” Every word Mycroft repeated back was sharp and clipped. He leaned
forward and whispered, “The consequences of your incredibly stupid decision will be grim.”

“Consequences,” Violet elongated the word out as if she were stretching taffy. “You enjoy throwing
that word around, using it as a threat, but what about the consequences of your incredibly stupid
decisions?”

“Ha,” Mycroft straightened and stared down his nose at her, every inch the English Aristocrat. “I
don’t make stupid decisions.”

“You’re right,” Violet pivoted, nodding while frowning in exaggerated agreement. “It was a brilliant
idea to let your brother face-plant it on the sidewalk after falling five stories. Lie to him about only
being gone a few months when it turned into years. Oh and it was also a super idea to hide the sex
crimes committed against your brother instead of telling your parents. Great idea,” she set the cup on
the railing. “Good fucking job.” Violet slow-clapped, the effect spoilt somewhat by her leather
gloves.

Mycroft’s eyes widened. “How… Sherlock told you?”

“Actually no,” Violet purred. “I mean, he confirmed it when I confronted him, but…” she pointed to
herself with both forefingers, “Profiler.” She shrugged. “That’s what I do. Strip me of my badge, my
title, my nationality, call me a traitor, fine, whatever. That doesn’t change who I am or what I do. I
observe. I research. I create predictive models based off of behavior. Based on my research,
Sherlock’s behavior is consistent for someone who suffered severe trauma as a child. His willful
alienation from his family and near-inability to form close relationships points to profound trust
issues. His drug addictions coupled with his unhealthy sex life, which vacillates from being wildly
promiscuous to living like a monk,” Violet took a breath. She could not rattle off a profile as
seamlessly as Sherlock could one of his deductions. “Those unsafe behaviors, while they are not in
themselves conclusive, are consistent with adult survivors of childhood rape.”

“Enough.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry, should I pretty up the truth with a comfortable euphemism?” Violet found
Mycroft’s pressure point and pushed. “Is molestation or unlawful carnal knowledge of a minor easier
on your delicate ears?” Before Mycroft could recover, Violet found his other pressure point and pushed, as if she stepped on a bullet-wound while the victim bled out. “If I found out your family’s dirty little secret on my own, I wonder who else knows. Dear me, Mr. Holmes, what on earth would happen to your career if this got out?”

“You would never allow Sherlock’s name to be sullied in a scandal like this. You’re too fond of him,” Mycroft found Violet’s pressure point and pushed back, just as hard.

She batted her eyes. “True. I wouldn’t. Sherlock on the other hand…”

“Sherlock wouldn’t breathe a word…”

“You wildly underestimate your brother,” Violet picked up her coffee cup again, glad for a prop. “He hates the media.”

“He does. But he loves John,” Violet took a sip, watching Mycroft’s thin black brows furrow in confusion. She allowed herself a moment to enjoy Mycroft’s befuddlement before blandly continuing, “And he loves John’s blog. Correct me if I’m wrong, but before you shipped him off to that bullshit assignment in Serbia, he was reading John’s blog.” Violet pressed a finger to her lips, pretending to think. “Was that before or after he injected that Molotov cocktail of coke and morphine? His tolerance must be amazing if he was still functional after that high of a dosage, if John and Mary are to be believed, of course.”

Mycroft’s nostrils flared. “He would never allow John to put that on the blog. He would never allow John to know about that. He needs to be perfect in John’s eyes.”

“You’re so fucking blind,” Violet couldn’t help herself. “He doesn’t have to be perfect for John to accept him. Oh, John knows too, by the way. I would assume that means Mary does too. Anyway,” Violet got herself back on track, knowing she couldn’t allow Mycroft time to digest this new horrifying revelation. “Yeah, he would. At this point in his life, he would have no problem letting John upload that on the blog at all, along with all your other dirty secrets, national security be damned.” Her lips curved into a truly terrifying smile. “Where’s Andrea tonight?”

“Am I supposed to know who Andrea is?” Mycroft sounded bored.

“Cut the crap, Mycroft. As you clearly said the other night, the time for playing games is over. Sherlock knows all about Ford as well as Operation Raven.”

Violet struggled not to let her glee show as she watched Mycroft’s mouth drop open and his eyes all but bug out. He quickly composed himself. “He does, does he?”

“Yeah. He’s pissed. You’ll be lucky if he ever speaks to you again.”

“There is a perfectly sound and logical reason why I made the decision to-”

Violet cut him off again, “He is so beyond your reasons, your logic. He’s just… done.”

“I see.”

“No, you don’t. That’s the problem,” Violet whirled around, engaging in psychological warfare like she never had before. Every instinct, every single fiber of her being vibrated with horror as the refrain This is wrong, this is wrong, reverberated in her head. But like a fighter pilot in a dog fight, like the men on the front lines, she didn’t let morals interfere with winning the end game, the greater good.
The greater good, what a joke…

Mycroft actually backpedalled when Violet started advancing on him, invading his space. “You observed, but you never saw. You were so fucking wrapped up the details that you completely forgot that the sum of the whole is greater than the parts. You were so obsessed with his drug use, his boyfriends, his lack of peers his age, his genius,” she spat out the last word as if it tasted foul. Then she purposely softened her voice, knowing this part of the attack would wound him more if it was delivered gently, “You were so focused protecting him from his worst parts of himself, you forgot to encourage the best parts. The curiosity, the loyalty, the ability to cut through the bullshit and to call a spade, a spade and the music, how could you deny the brilliance in his music, the artistry in his bowing when he plays? The compositions he’s written? There’s a great heart that beats beneath that cold exterior.” Violet herself became frigid again. “A cold exterior you crafted, out of guilt. You failed him. You hurt him with your complacency against Cullen-Culpep-”

“I was never complacent!” Mycroft hissed, the muscle in his cheek twitching again.

Glad to see fissures showing in Mycroft’s hard outer shell at last, Violet continued to push. “You betrayed him, you wounded him in a way that can never be forgiven. You encouraged the bullshit “high-functioning sociopath” thing, which, by the way, Worst. Coping. Mechanism. Ever,” She dragged the last word out. Then she repeated it at a shout, “Ever! The sickest part is you’d rather have him be a sociopath because sociopaths don’t register emotion. If Sherlock’s a sociopath, he can’t feel pain. If he can’t feel pain, then what he endured as a child didn’t hurt him that much. If it didn’t hurt him then that absolves you of culpability. God,” Violet made a face. “You’re such a coward.”

“You have never been more wrong in your life, Violet.”

“Are you fucking kidding me? You honestly think you did him a favor by covering up that fucking sick twist’s crimes? How? He’s still doing it, Mycroft! Only now the piece of shit buys kids off the black market. Do you remember those kidnapped immigrant kids from last spring? The brother and sister, Alvar and Beatriu? His Lordship hand-selected Alvar, as if he was the prize pup out of a litter of purebreds.” Violet deliberately paused before delivering the first of her deathblows. “Alvar had black curly hair.”

Mycroft closed his eyes and visibly shuddered. “I was a child myself, when all that unpleasantness began.”

“Don’t feed me that tired story. You were fourteen. Old enough to know better.”

“I did everything I could.”

“You sold him out,” Violet crossed her arms tightly against her body as Gladstone padded up next to her, his paws crunching in the snow. “You sold him out as a child and you have been selling him out ever since. You sold him out to Moriarty, twice. You robbed him of two years of his life.”

“He was the one who ran away,” An angry flush coloured Mycroft’s cheeks now. “If he would have just stayed with his handlers, he would have been safe. He wouldn’t have had to endure such a rough existence. He-”

“Would have been gone for five years instead of two,” Violet sawed him off.

“It would have been better if he hadn’t rushed the mission,” Mycroft muttered.

“It would have been better if he hadn’t gone at all, but you didn’t care. You didn’t give one shit.
England named a price and you sold him out to her. Then you sold him out to Magnussen.”

“I most certainly did not. He chose to take that case from Lady Smallwood! I tried to stop him!”

Mycroft was unraveling and it was delicious. Violet allowed herself to savor the moment before continuing, “You threw him into solitary confinement for two weeks, knowing what that would do to him, knowing he would start self-destructing.”

“He murdered a man.”

“A man MI-6 had already condemned to death, without a trial.”

Those final three words cut through the wintery chill. “We learned from our mistakes with Moriarty,” Mycroft stuffed his free hand in his coat, when he realized he had been clenching and unclenching it over and over. “Moriarty bribed the jurors and got off scot-free. We could not risk that happening again with Magnussen.”

“So you set up a hit on Magnussen under the pretense that he wasn’t…oh, what do you Brits call it…? “Not under the Queen’s peace” or something archaic like that.”

“Yes, that is the correct terminology.”

“Did Sherlock tell you that the CIA tried to recruit me as well as the FBI? I told them to fuck off. I like rules.”

“Yet you asked me for a job at MI-6,” Mycroft spoke through tightly pursed lips. “That doesn’t change the fact that Sherlock committed murder.”

“Premeditated?” Violet politely queried. “Funny, John always told me what a terrible shot Sherlock was. I mean… you’ve seen the bullet holes in the walls, right? Uneven? Random? When Mycroft didn’t answer, Violet prattled on. “Anyway, John told me this story about how they were hunting down an assassin, the Golem, I think he was called? Anyway John said Sherlock had a clear shot and missed. Twice,” Apropos of nothing, she added, “Ever notice how every single picture in 221B lists just a bit to the left?

“Yes,” Mycroft muttered. “It’s irritating but he adamantly refuses to admit that he has astigmatism. He’s had it since he was a teenager. Has refused to wear corrective lenses, but then he’s always been rather vain.”

“So a good lawyer would have been able to argue that it was a crime of passion, provoked by Magnussen, who was threatening Dr. Watson’s pregnant wife?” Violet dramatically rubbed her chin as she added, “You know John is Sherlock’s pressure point. You knew how unstable Sherlock was after the Great Hiatus. You knew he was tortured during the Great Hiatus. You knew he had started using again. Hell, a shitty lawyer could have gotten him off on an insanity plea or at least plea-bargain down to manslaughter.”

“He didn’t just commit murder, he committed treason.”

“Oh, yes. Your stupid fucking laptop that Sherlock stole to give to Magnussen, how could I have forgotten?” Violet theatrically clapped her hand to her forehead. “Please,” she let her arm fall. “As far as your laptop goes, look me in the eye and tell me that there was really anything top secret on it.” she crossed her arms again and stared Mycroft down, watching for any micro-expression, looking for any tell. When she saw his nostril flare ever so slightly, she snorted silently and rolled her eyes again. “I knew it.”
“Knew what?”

“You’re a careful man, a clever man, an observant man. You knew Sherlock would use you and your secrets to bait Magnussen. You also never spend the holidays with your family, but there you were, at Mom and Dad’s with your work computer.” Violet dropped her genial disposition. “Magnussen had been a canker sore on English society for a while now, but by 2014, he had been upgraded from a pain in the ass to a real viable threat. Because Magnussen had a stranglehold on the press, nobody knew that his legal residency had been revoked and he was being threatened with deportation, which was another reason why he was squeezing the Smallwoods. He wanted them to use their influence to get his residency reinstated. He wasn’t going to leave until he got his way, which was to have the NHS dismantled and an American-style of private insurance installed in the U.K, which was why he was blackmailing you.”

“How did you acquire this information?” Mycroft gripped the handle of his umbrella tighter.

“A girl has her ways,” Violet batted her eyes. “Anyway, Magnussen owned a significant number of shares in a private American insurance company that wanted to expand internationally. Magnussen wasn’t going to leave England until he got his way. Well…. That. And he also had nowhere to go if he was deported. Until he paid the massive tax bill he skipped out on when he immigrated to England, Denmark didn’t want him back. They washed their hands of the affair. Once you received confirmation that Denmark really wouldn’t give a shit if Magnussen stopped breathing, you green-lit Operation von Blücher.”

Mycroft’s jaw dropped to his knees. He actually reached for the railing to support himself. “How in the hell do you know about that?”

Oh God, this is way too much fun, watching the Ice Man melt down like this; Violet didn’t bother suppress her evil delight. “I thought it was clever, naming a mission after the German lieutenant general who helped the Duke of Wellington defeat Napoleon, seeing how Sherlock always called Magnussen “The Napoleon of Blackmail.” Oh, of course, von Blücher’s proper title is Fürst von Wahlstatt.” She smirked, “My German was always stronger than my French so when I came across Operation von Blücher in my research, I knew exactly what that meant.”

“You hacked into MI-6,” Mycroft’s whisper slithered like a cobra.

“Sure, we can pretend I’m smart enough to hack into a secure government system, if that makes you feel better,” Violet crooned. “But we both know that I’m not that clever. If I was, I won’t be making this recitation. I need you to confirm the data I had… acquired is accurate.”

“Continue,” Mycroft could barely get the word out.

“Thank you,” Violet said brightly. “Once Magnussen’s residency status had been taken away, MI-6 classed him as an alien enemy. Under that pretense, MI-6 had issued a hit on Magnussen because he was a terrorist and therefore “Not Under the Queen’s Peace,” she made the obnoxious air quotes with her fingers. Violet also made sure she spoke nice and slowly, as if she had acquired this information all on her own, instead of parroting back what Sherlock had deduced. “You know… if it wasn’t for the ‘A Study in Pink’ case, suicide caused by duress wouldn’t be considered a crime, not really. But that’s what exactly Magnussen did. He pushed Lord Smallwood into killing himself just as Jeff Hope conned those people into taking poisoned pills so they’d kill themselves.”

“Were you aware that Magnussen also wanted to incorporate what was left of Moriarty’s organization? He was not just a canker sore, he was a clear and present danger.”

“Oh I’m not condemning the action. The Napoleon of Blackmail commanding the Cult of the
Consulting Criminals? England would have experienced a reign of terror it hasn’t experienced since Henry VIII couldn’t decide which wife or religion he liked best.” Violet stomped her feet again, to get the blood flowing. The snow was tapering off but the temperature continued dropping. “The manner of execution, however… you made the call on Christmas. Brought a fake laptop, knowing Sherlock would find a way to steal it. You scrambled the choppers the minute Sherlock left your mom and dad’s house. Your mom loves me, by the way.” Violet couldn’t resist the petty dig. “But then, isn’t that how it always goes? You save the country from one of the biggest megalomaniacs in modern history, but your mother wonders why you can’t settle down, find a nice girl and make her a grandmother? Oh, yes, you may be the clever one, but Sherlock will always be her favorite.” Her smile was small, tight and bitchy, “Hurts, doesn’t it?”

“No,” Mycroft scowled. “I am above such childish rivalries.”

Violet however ignored Mycroft’s denial as a new thought blossomed. She bit her lower lip as she considered it. Let it flower from the seeds Sherlock had sown when he finally described exactly what had happened at Magnusen’s that dreadful Christmas night.

“You knew John still carried the Army Browning, even though he should have turned that in when he left the military.” She lifted her eyes up to him, as a fresh horror chilled her more than the stinging snow. “You knew Sherlock was not stable,” she added in a low voice. “You let him go to Appledore anyway.”

“I did not send Sherlock there as a loaded gun, if that is what you are insinuating,” Mycroft’s voice was as silky as ever but Violet observed how he clutched his umbrella again. “I made the mistake of believing that after six months of living with John Watson again, he had found an even keel again, regained equilibrium. I…” he closed his eyes and shook his head ever so slightly. Then stopped, lifted his head and cocked it to the side, “Oh… I see. Clever girl, clever, clever girl,” the usual snide smile was back on his thin lips. “Attempting to play mind-games, Agent Hunter, against me?” he chuckled. “I commend you, you’re quite good. I can see how you’re a worthy adversary for the average criminal but I am neither average nor a criminal.” He drew himself up. “I agree, the time for games is over and you lost. Shame about your sister-in-law and little niece… unless you feel like cooperating?”

Violet also had a smirk on her face. “Who’s playing mind-games?” She strode back to the railing. Gladstone chased after her, still whining, unsure what was going on but determined to protect his Mistress.

“Where are you going?”

Ignoring the ache in her shoulders, she scrambled up the tension wires like a monkey. She hoisted herself up on the railing and straddled it.

Behind her, Mycroft loudly commanded, “What on earth are you doing? Get down at once!”

“You just showed your hand, Mr. Holmes,” Violet clung to the railing as she found a toe-hold with her right foot. She swung her other leg over before Mycroft could reach her. “You already told MI-6 and the FBI that I had the code and was going to hand it over to you, didn’t you?”

“I told them you would get the code, will you get down, this is most undignified!” Mycroft folded up his umbrella.

“Liar,” Violet grabbed a tension wire with her left hand as she clung to the railing with her right. All the while her heart slammed against her chest as she prayed for her body to cooperate. The Thames below looked just as black and ominous as it had all those months ago when she was in the exact
same position.

Only this time there was no Sherlock to steady her.

“Sherlock will never give you the code. He’ll tell John to publish his story on the blog. You’ll be ostracized, probably drummed out of MI-6. People will cry for your head on a platter,” Violet had to shout now to be heard. Her hood fell again and the wind ruffled her chestnut curls.

“You didn’t perish when Sherlock pushed you into the Thames.”

“We both had hypothermia. We could have died if John hadn’t treated us. Maybe this time, I don’t swim to safety, I just let the tide take me…”

Her heart seized in pure panic at the very idea of drowning. She could feel the foul rag covering her face before Jack Woodley started pouring the water. She could hear the rush of the ocean as the tide came in at Normandy. Quickly, if only to keep herself calm, she added, “Or I could land wrong and break my neck.”

“What is the point to these theatrics?” Mycroft demanded but there was a definite note of panic in his normally urbane voice. Meanwhile, Gladstone paced back and forth in front of railing, whining and snuffling yet still growling when Mycroft came to close to him.

“How will the FBI, CIA and MI-6 react when they found out the only person willing to give up the code took a nosedive into Thames?” Violet shouted after yelling at Gladstone to shut up in German.

Then she focused on holding on to the wires as tightly as she could.

I don’t want to fall… I don’t want to fall… she gritted her teeth and held on, glad she wore gloves. The leather gloves helped her cling to the wet, snowy wires.

“You’re not suicidal,” Mycroft lowered his umbrella and folded it up.

“I’ve been sick, I’ve been depressed, blah blah blah, spin it any way you want to, Mycroft.”

“It’s apparent by the way you’re holding on to the tension wires, you don’t want to die.”

“No! Of course, I don’t want to die! If I did, I would have let Jack Woodley kill me the way he killed the rest of my team! But I have always been willing to die for my country.” Violet’s eyes blazed.

“I’m not a coward like you! When I was an agent, I never hid behind a desk or a computer screen. I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States against all enemies, foreign and domestic,” She shouted over the wind and the thrumming rush of the massive river beneath her.

“And it is not in the best interest of the United States for you to have the Moriarty Code, Mr. Holmes.”

“Why ever not, your country and mine are allies!” Mycroft shouted, “You daft cow!”

“Because, you’ve been compromised, you fucking idiot!” Violet bellowed back. “Not just because of the MI-6 mole or Magnussen. You covered up the crimes of a pedophile, a pedophile who’s not only a lord but a lord sitting in Parliament.” Violet then delivered her second emotional deathblow, “As well as a lord who has rumored ties to Moriarty. And. You. Did. Nothing. Just like how you did nothing when he destroyed Sherlock’s innocence.”

“I should let you fall,” Mycroft sneered as he approached the railing. “Call off your bloody dog!” he shouted as Gladstone snapped at his heels.

Violet gave the appropriate German command and Gladstone sat on his haunches. Violet already
started climbing up the tension wires again but she let Mycroft help pull her over.

“This… this,” Mycroft spread his arms wide. “This all reeks of Sherlock, his dramatics.”

“It doesn’t mean I’m wrong,” Violet puffed, leaning against the railing. She felt shivery all over and a bit nauseous, but she told herself *Get your shit together, Hunter. You’re not done. Not by a long shot.* “You’re compromised, emotionally as well as professionally.”

Mycroft dropped his arms. “What do you want?”


“Who?”

“The young man they think is an Interpol agent who turned traitor,” Violet explained as she pulled her hood over her head again. “Sherlock and I couldn’t believe that any of Dupin’s friends would turn on him, so we did a little research. Honoré is Canadian and he did have a family emergency. But his flight was conveniently diverted from Nova Scotia to New York and for some strange reason his name was flagged on the No-Fly List. He’s no bad-ass Special-Ops agent. He’s a twenty-something year old med student with a blog who’s probably shitting himself and crying for his mother right now. He was set up to be the patsy.”

“By whom?”

“The MI-6 mole, only now the mole has infiltrated Interpol as well.”

“Ah, it all makes sense now,” Mycroft nodded as he leaned on his umbrella, as if it was a cane he needed for support. “Why you insisted on meeting here, in the open. During foul weather so that if I was wired, which I am not as agreed, the wind would interfere with the recording. You really are a clever girl, as my brother calls you.”

“Sherlock has not forgotten his commitment to find the mole, but you have to stop holding out on him. You have to give him access to *everything* he demands or else he’s not going to be able to solve it… but,” she held up a finger then pointed it at him. “He’s not going to lift a finger until Maisie Watson is located and given back to her father.”

“I cannot do that,” Mycroft slammed the tip of the umbrella into the bridge as if it was a sword he was plunging into the ground to stake a claim. “Marissa Watson is out of my hands. How many times do I have to explain that?”

Violet gave him a negligent shrug. “That’s Demand Number Two.”

“I presume there’s more?”

“Oh yeah, lots more,” Violet patted her thigh and Gladstone sat next to her. “I’m just getting warmed up. Demand Number Three, my family. Julia and Vivian get the Secret Service Protection that was promised and you still give Vivian the college fund we talked about back when you still wanted me to marry Sherlock.”

“Yes, of course, but what if Vivian turns out to be a dullard?”

“Not my problem. She can go to clown school for all I care. I just want her education paid for,” Violet snapped. “Demand Number Four, you tell the FBI and MI-6 that Sherlock never knew about the code and I had it all along. Meanwhile, have your spooks put the word on the streets that I was the *only one* who had the Moriarty Code. That way, when I leave England to go back to the US and
“The underworld believes the code went with you thus diverting the target from Sherlock to you,” Mycroft nodded in approval, seeing the good sense of this move. “Anything else?”

“Oh yes,” Violet suddenly produced the bitterest of smiles. *Sorry, Sherlock, this is where I go off script...* “There’s more.”

“Pray, continue.”

She did. It was nearly two hours later before she returned to Baker Street. She would have been back sooner, but she made the MI-6 driver stop at an off-license first. After doing her deadly little dance with Mycroft during the witching hours, her nerves were shot.

She didn’t care it was nearly dawn. She craved a drink. Badly.

Gladstone snored, his head in her lap. Violet cradled the paper sack with one hand while stroking Gladstone’s big furry head with her other.

The rest of the trip had been mercifully silent until the black SUV rolled up in front of 221 Baker Street. Out of habit, she looked up as she and the dog exited the cab and… yes, there were still lights on in 221B.

She smiled despite herself. Then she sucked in another sobbing breath, pressing her fingertips to her forehead. Gladstone whined and nosed her free hand. She wiped her face and said, “Alright, alright, I know. You’re probably freezing, despite your fur coat.” She reached down to give him an affectionate little scratch behind his ear then made a kissing noise as she started walking slowly towards the glossy black door.

Sherlock had just added another log to the fire when he heard the click of the lock turning. He brushed bits of bark and dust off his hands and stood up as Violet and Gladstone entered.

“Is it done?” he unrolled his shirtsleeves.

“It’s done,” she shrugged off her coat while Gladstone made a beeline for his favorite spot: the sofa. As she hung up her coat one-handed, she said, “Mycroft said it would be best if I left sooner than later, but he doesn’t have a date set yet.”

“I’m profoundly glad that my Homeless Network did not have to fish you out of the Thames;”

“I’m profoundly glad I didn’t have to jump,” Violet gave him a tired smile before drifting to the kitchen, carrying the brown paper sack.

Sherlock frowned as he walked towards the sofa, noting that it was more convenient to reach the sofa without having to step on the coffee table. As a blush brightened his pale cheeks when he recalled *why* the coffee table was broken, he shooed Gladstone off the sofa. The dog emitted a sulky whimper and slunk off only to jump into Sherlock’s chair instead, as if to say: “So there.”

He elegantly sat down and crossed his leg, ankle on knee as Violet came back out, carefully carrying two tumblers and a bottle of Glenmorangie, “Isn’t it a *little* early? “

“I want to get drunk,” Violet handed him the glasses. She flopped down on the sofa. “I haven’t gotten out-of-my-mind, shitfaced drunk since I set foot on this island.” She started fiddling with the seal, “And I’m not drinking alone.”
Sherlock opened his mouth to berate her about the idiocy of getting intoxicated right now. Their enemies were still out there, there was a very dangerous hit man pursuing her, she was back on the FBI and CIA’s radar plus drinking just made him miserable. He hated how alcohol left him feeling muddled and slow. Besides, honestly it was closer to dawn than midnight.

But the dark, foreboding look in her eyes made him clamp his mouth shut. He then observed the way her jaw was set, the way her small hand clutched the neck of the bottle then deduced why she wanted to get stupidly, blindingly drunk.

*I don’t want to think, I don’t want to feel anything. Not right now…*

The addict in him could appreciate that sentiment.

“Very well,” Sherlock set the tumblers down and gently plucked the bottle out of her hands. He dispensed with the seal, removed the cap then deftly poured them both two fingers. He held the glass up to her in a toast, “To the very best of times, my dear Violet.”

“To the best of times, Mr. Holmes,” Violet tapped her glass against his.

They finished the bottle. Then they passed out.

Sherlock woke first, winking and blinking in the bright sunlight. His head felt cloudy and his mouth fuzzy, as if a good brushing wasn’t going to be enough to get his teeth clean. *This is why I detest drinking, bloody hangovers,* he thought and even that though was enough to make his head begin pounding.

He lifted his head, wincing as his neck audibly popped. He felt slightly queasy and his arms were numb.

*Oh right,* he looked down. His arms were numb because Violet was in them.

She had curled up into his lap at some point and passed out and he must have followed suit. Her face was pressed into his chest and one arm was draped across his midsection, as if she had been embracing him before passing out.

*Oh, wait…* Sherlock blinked and looked blearily down his shirt. Several buttons were undone. *That’s not what she was doing…* he sighed and wished the dog could bring him the bottle of ibuprofen and a glass of water. *How am I supposed to think with this blinder of a headache?*

“I know you’re up to something,” he told her as he smoothed a curl back from her forehead. “That’s easy to deduce. You’re trying to distract me.” He leaned forward and whispered, “It’s not going to work, Violet, whatever you’re planning, it’s not going to work.” He kissed her brow. “You and I had promised to never lie to each other, since it was pointless.”

Violet stirred, only to settle more comfortably in the crook of his arm.

Sherlock continued to idly stroke her cheek, running his thumb over the scar on her cheek. He vividly remembered that terrible day when she received that odd, crescent-shaped scar. Before John and Sherlock had reached her, that villain Jack Woodley had tortured her. Mind-games. Waterboarding. He had also resorted to plain old abuse, hitting her in the face several times, over and over on the same sensitive spot on her cheekbone. Woodley had worn an old Army ring and it had torn and ripped at the tender flesh on her cheeks just as effectively as a set of brass knuckles. The gash had been ragged and it had refused to clot, so unfortunately sutures were necessary. John had done his best to minimize the scarring. Sherlock had been truly impressed by his suturing skills. But despite John’s best efforts, the small, crescent-shaped scar on her face was created that day.
Sherlock tried to imagine John in a sterile operating theater and failed. He then imagined John in the middle of a war zone, trying to stop a wounded soldier from bleeding out while surrounded by sniper fire and that was easier to envision.

John had given her a powerful sedative after he had stitched her up and they had brought her back to Baker Street. Sherlock had carried her up the stairs. Later, he had held her, much like this, trying to chase away the bad dreams that plagued her even in her drug-induced slumber.

No nightmares plagued her drunken sleep now. She even snored a little.

Sherlock studied her, comparing and contrasting the sleeping woman with the messy curls, scarred face, black jumper and mud-splattered jeans to the cold, well-groomed female he had met last March. In his Mind Palace, the lift doors opened and Miss Violet Smith walked out.

Boring… Sherlock had initially thought.

Then he noticed the dog whistle she wore on a silver chain around her neck and thought, Intriguing… As he listened to her speak, he had found her accent curious, had wondered how she had learned how to fake an English accent so well and more importantly, why. But when he saw her artificially straightened teeth, he had thought, Fascinating.

He hadn’t liked Miss Smith. Not one bit.

But he definitely liked Agent Hunter.

As of this moment, you are my top priority. I assure you that your little problem promises to be the most interesting which has come my way for months… If you find yourself in doubt or danger… if I am not nearby, at any time, day or night, a text will bring me to your side, do you understand?**

Would she? Would she still seek me out if she is still in danger? Sherlock felt the smallest thrill of panic crawl up his spine. Or will she push me away… to protect me.

“Don’t,” he whispered to her. “Whatever it is that you are planning, just… don’t. Please.”

But she was dead asleep and the room devoid of any human witnesses so no one heard his heartfelt plea. Realizing he was acting like a moron and that he also needed the loo, he hooked an arm under her knees. He groaned as he stood up, hearing his knees crack as he did so. He groaned again when he felt the floor dip and rise beneath him. He counted to ten then to twenty then to thirty. When the flat evened back out again, he slowly plodded towards the bedroom, with Violet curled up in his arms…. Forty… honestly never thought I’d live long enough to see forty but then, neither did she...

I will never drink Glenmorangie again… his gut hitched at the very idea of consuming Scotch.

Once in the bedroom, he stripped off her soiled jeans, jumper and socks clinically, as if he were a doctor removing clothes from a patient. But when her eyes fluttered open slightly, he softly told her to go back to sleep as he spread his duvet over her. Then he pulled on a suit jacket and a pair of shoes so he could take Gladstone out for a brief walk after he had relieved himself. His bladder felt near to bursting and he knew the dog had to be suffering a similar condition.

Sherlock didn’t even bother to clean his teeth, wash his face or shave. He didn’t bother looking in the mirror either. He didn’t need to see his bloodshot eyes or the slightly greenish pallor of his face. He knew he looked exactly how he felt: properly, badly hungover. Possibly still intoxicated even, he couldn’t rule that possibility out… especially since the room still spun a little.

He closed his eyes, willed for the loo to stop whirling. When it did, he staggered back to the lounge,
pulled on his coat, tied his new scarf around his neck and took the leash off the peg. “Stone,” he commanded.

The dog raced to him, nearly dancing on his hind legs to indicate his desperation to Go Out. Sherlock thought the Alsatian was going to yank his arm out of his socket as he darted down the stairs towards the main door. His head throbbed with every footstep he made on the stairs.

Mrs. Hudson opened her door, “Oh, Sherlock, I thought I heard you rattling around up there. Would you like me to cook you and Violet up a little lunch?”

“No, thank you, Mrs. Hudson, um…. We both may have… overindulged last night. Violet’s having a lie-in. Tea later tonight, perhaps?” Sherlock suggested as Gladstone pawed at the door and whined. “Ginger ale as well, if you have any. My stomach is a bit off, ate more than usual last night, too much rich food…” Drank far more than usual as well, Sherlock grimaced as acid swirled in his empty belly. “Also, my head is killing me.”

“Yes, of course, maybe some soup and cheese sarnies would be nice as well plus there is so much leftover food from the party, but I might need you to help me carry up the picnic basket, I’m not supposed to strain myself, with these ribs and my hip. Oh Sherlock! Don’t let him scratch up my finish! I just had the doors re-varnished last week.”

Sherlock hummed an apology as he fumbled for the doorknob. Mrs. Hudson chuckled as Sherlock pushed the door open with his shoulder, “Oh dear, was it another late one for you two love birds?” Sweetly she added, “I hope there isn’t any more broken furniture.”

“It was an experiment,” Sherlock’s fair cheeks pinked as he let himself and the dog out.

As Gladstone gratefully watered a lamp post, Sherlock fished his mobile out of his trousers’ pocket. He hit a speed-dial number.

“An actual telephone call instead of a text,” Mycroft drawled. “My, but I do feel special.”

“Saturday.”

“Pardon?”

“Saturday, her date of departure needs to be this coming Saturday,” Sherlock tucked his mobile between his ear and shoulder so he could rub his aching temple while still holding onto the leash. “That will give us enough time to tie up any loose ends plus to have enough public quarrels so that it will be plausible that she left me.”


“Violet gave you my terms, did she not?” Sherlock struggled to stay calm, as he always did when battling Mycroft.

“Yes, she did,” Mycroft’s voice was tinged with light contempt. “I had no idea you and she had gotten so… cozy.”

“I’ve been telling you from the beginning, she’s my friend. I trust her.”

“Trust her with your darkest secrets?”

“My darkest secrets?” Sherlock’s honeyed voice and placid face was a complete contrast to magma-like rage building within in. Magma, not lava, I will not explode, I will be like the water, I will go
with the flow, I will not force Mycroft to my will, but guide him towards it. He’s the unmoving rock. I’m the stream wearing him down. “Not my secret, big brother, not my shame. I was the victim. I did what my big brother told me to do because I trusted him.” Sherlock tugged on Gladstone’s leash. As they started walking back to the block of flats, he added, just to plunge the dagger in a little deeper, “Mother liked Violet by the way. She’s going to be so disappointed to be cheated out of a wedding. Say, you know… the Widow Smallwood is still unattached…”

“Change the subject,” Mycroft ordered him, “Now.”

“Gladly. Did you go to Adrienne Holmes’ funeral or did you just send Andrea?”

Sherlock heard Mycroft suck in a sharp breath. Did that hurt, brother dearest? Oh, I hope it did.

“Sherlock, what happened with Ford was classified plus you were a child when that happened.”

“Ford getting married to an American and producing a daughter was classified?”

“I don’t know how to make you understand the decisions I had to make,” Mycroft sounded old and defeated. “But, brother, believe me, I’m doing what I can now.”

Sherlock knew that was the closest to an apology he would ever get. He discovered that he didn’t care. “Violet gave you our list of demands?”

“Yes.”

“So, other than tedious family gatherings Mother will foist upon us, I trust that after Violet is safely in America, you will no longer contact me?”

“Yes. I will not ask you to consult on future MI-6 cases. I do expect you to finish your current assignment with MI-6.”

“Only if you return Marissa to John then I’ll be happy to comply.”

“I can’t.”

“Then piss off. Find the mole yourself,” Sherlock tugged on Gladstone’s leash. Together they started walking back to the block of flats. “After all, you’re the clever one. I’m just a junkie and an idiot, isn’t that right?”

There was a pause, a long pause, pregnant with all the things unsaid between the brothers. “I never thought you were an idiot,” Mycroft finally admitted. “I’m sorry you felt you had to turn to drugs instead of your family when things became unbearable.”

“Don’t make me laugh,” Sherlock’s voice lacked any venom, only a heavy sadness. “Things were unbearable because of my family.”

“I will never use your role in Magnussen’s death as leverage again,” Mycroft promised in a voice just as low and anguished as Sherlock’s. “You have my word.”

“Only because Violet is currently blackmailing you,” Sherlock reminded him. “See you at Easter. Try not to start a war before then, you know how that upsets Mother.”

Sherlock rang off and stood in the foyer for a moment, unsure what to do next.

He thought finally telling Mycroft off would make him feel better.
Instead, he felt worse.

So he trudged up the seventeen steps to his flat where Violet waited.

He toed off his shoes, took off his great coat and padded to the kitchen to feed the dog. He also drank two glasses of water and swallowed four ibuprofen tablets. Paracetamol wasn’t going to cut it. After that mundane chore, he wandered back towards the bedroom and sat on the bed as he stripped off his shirt, vest and socks then he shimmied out of his trousers. He slipped underneath the duvet, curling his long limbs around her. Even in her drunken sleep, her hands sought his and soon their fingers were entwined.

Despite the ibuprofen, his headache interfered with his thinking. Again and again he tried to slip into his Mind Palace so he could search for a solution to his latest conundrums. But the gigantic timpani drums and copper gongs bashing on in his skull continued to distract him. Overriding even those instruments, were the bells of *Sacré Coeur* Basilica, ringing over and over, *mistake, mistake, mistake, mistake*...

He had let her get too close. To be perfectly honest, letting her get too close only compounded the original mistake.

He had let John get too close.

But the bells couldn’t be un-rung and now the two people he held in the highest of esteem and closest to his heart were in mortal peril. Violet forced to leave his side, his life while John shared a bed with a killer.

*If this is feeling, if this is emotion, I don’t want it*, Sherlock buried his face in her hair. *I don’t want it any more. The emotional qualities are antagonistic to clear reasoning.*

For the first time in months, he felt *that itch* in the crooks in his elbows. The need, the want…

*I don’t want to think, I don’t want to feel anything. Not right now*...

The addict in him started whispering sibilant promises of relief, of silence, of peace.

But the bells continued to ring and ring.

Chapter End Notes

** Sherlock’s promise to make Violet his "top priority" is paraphrased from "The Copper Beaches."

** Sherlock's internal complaint about "emotional qualities" is found in "The Sign of Four."

Comments make me happy, even if I'm shit at replying in a timely manner. XXX :^D


Chapter Summary

"A fool’s errand, that’s all this was, she realized as she turned to go..."

So sorry for not posting last Monday! Life caught up with me. Hopefully this post makes up for it.

Have a lovely week! :^)

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Blind Mice

10 January 2016
King’s College, London
Sunday afternoon
1:45 PM

Mrs. Holmes watched through the cab window as the university drew closer and closer. The heavy grey January rain washed away last night’s unusual snow.

She fidgeted with the straps of her second-best handbag and shifted in her seat.

She had rarely lied to her husband. Actually, she could count the number of lies she had told him in their nearly fifty years together on one hand. Today, she had lied. She had charged out of the kitchen and crossly announced that she had planned on making apple charlotte with Earl Grey créme anglaise for tonight’s pudding but was clean out of butter. So, unless he wanted stale biscuits, she would have to run to the grocery store.

Her husband hadn’t even flinched. He hadn’t even lifted his head out of the latest issue of The English Garden he had been perusing. He had merely questioned whether or not tea would be late tonight then asked her to pick up a packet of Pink Wafers since she was heading out anyway, if that wasn’t too inconvenient.

His trust made her feel light and warm. Now she felt heavy. She felt tired, exhausted even.

She felt old.

“We’re here, marm,” the cabbie, a spotty youth with a thick Cockney accent, informed her.

“Oh, yes, of course,” she shook herself then secured her headscarf more securely over her white hair.

“Thank you,” she told the boy, digging in her handbag for her money. “Could you be a dear and keep the meter running? It might be a bit, but when I leave, I want to leave immediately. I do not wish to flag down another taxi.”

“You in Barney, marm?”
“No, of course not,” she gave the young man an extra tenner, “For your trouble.”

“Wow, sandshoe, err, I mean, thank you,” the boy flushed. Mrs. Holmes correctly deduced that the young man had been told off repeatedly for not “speaking properly” on the job. However, she also deduced that he would be told off many times in the future when he called after her as she exited the cab: “Oh, hey mind the blind, pavement’s slippery, turtle dove.”

Mrs. Holmes knew that the cabbie meant Blind Mice, which meant ice. She always had a soft spot for Cockneys and their coded ways of speaking. She acknowledged his warning with a nod and shut the cab door gently.

She opened the umbrella to shield herself from the streaming rain. As she trudged towards the mathematics building, she continued her ruminations on her husband. She recalled that she had thought he had been mad as well to pursue her. He had known she got off on adrenaline highs, that she needed the rush of **being smarter than everyone in the room**.

He had accepted it, accepted her, and had never once tried to change her, cage her. She repaid him the favor, never asked him to be a daredevil, to be something he wasn’t. She knew all he needed was his family and friends, his music, his books and his homely little hobbies. Building ships in glass bottles. Pottering around in the garden. Playing the piano. Reading, watching telly, inviting friends over for a cuppa or something stronger if it was past five o’clock.

His sons thought he was boring. She thought he was lovely and delightful.

The only demand she had ever made of him, was to leave the wretched estates after all the unpleasantness with William happened.

A sour smile twisted Mrs. Holmes’ face as she climbed the stone stairs up to the entrance. She did not need to look up to know that there was light shining out of one solitary office window. She gripped the railing tightly, the stairs were quite “blind” as well.

As she climbed the stairs and ducked inside the building, she was reminded how her husband’s family had despised her, except for Rudy, of course. He thought she was great fun. Her friends and colleagues thought she was an idiot, getting involved with a civilian.

Most of those people were dead now.

The few people still alive who had thought he was mad to pursue her now had forgotten how wild she had once been. They had also forgotten the rumors, the whispers of what she really did for a living, that she was no ordinary scholar.

Even Ford and Mycroft had bought into the lies, that she was a slightly dotty, but brilliant mathematician who had hung it all up to raise her children. That she had refused the Fields Medal to be a mum. Poor Mycroft, he nearly had a heart attack when he gained enough clearance to read his mother’s dossiers.

“You never told me!” he had squawked at her, looking very much like a little boy who had just been told that Father Christmas doesn’t exist.

Mrs. Holmes took pity on him and told him he was a good boy for trying to protect her from the scary bits of his job. When that hadn’t worked, she made him his favorite pudding instead. Mycroft had still sulked, but he also tucked in two giant helpings of spotted dick.

*Some things never change*, she thought fondly.
Mrs. Holmes spied the lift and trundled towards it, feeling the familiar arthritic ache in her knees. Again, she wondered what had happened, when did this happen? When did she become a white-haired old woman? When did her youngest son, her baby, turn forty? With a baby of his own, that he didn’t seem inclined to take responsibility for… (But we’ll sort that out later…) But still… how is it that she was now old enough to be a bloody grandmother? Her mind, her wonderful vibrant mind (I think, therefore I am…) was still as sharp as the deadliest knife, but her body, her transport was falling into disrepair.

*Getting old really is for the birds.*

She gripped her handbag and tightened her lips as the lift slowly churned its way up.

*Old, yes. Dead? Not quite… and as long as I have my wits and breath in my body, I can still fight.* She swallowed hard as doubt pecked her.

She closed her eyes. Saw her youngest son with his first son. Saw that moment when fatherhood was no longer an abstract concept to him, but a living, breathing reality.

“Right, then,” she told herself and with a stiff nod, as if someone was watching. She soldiered on towards the classroom.

Silently, she stood in the doorframe, watching him work.

She had seen the newspaper stories and television interviews about him that had come out after the Crime of the Century trial and after her son’s “suicide.” How he had laughed and gently shook his head, “No, no. No relation. Not that interesting, I’m afraid. Just a maths professor.”

She knew better.

She studied him, watching him bent over in front of the white board. He was scribbling something with a black erasable marker on the board, the marker tip squeaking as he wrote.

Mrs. Holmes suddenly missed the smell of *chalk.*

Watching him only intensified her dread. *He hasn’t changed a bit… he’s still… a lion. The only difference is he’s gone as grey as the rest of us.*

“Jamie,” she finally called to him.

Professor James Moriarty rose, pivoted gracefully and faced her, “Violet.”

Siger hardly ever called her Violet because Jamie always had.

“You look well,” he put the cap on the marker. “But, knowing you, this isn’t a social visit, is it?”

Mrs. Holmes shook her head. “Whatever you are planning,” she threatened as coldly as she could in her old-woman’s voice, “Don’t.”
“I’m sure I don’t know what you are talking about,” the man John Watson knew as Mr. Kincaid took off his tortoise-shell eyeglasses and started polishing them with the end of his cardigan.

“I’m quite sure you do. Do you want me to beg?” Mrs. Holmes clasped the straps of her handbag as if it were a lifeline. “Fine, I’ll beg, I’ll crawl on my hands and knees, if I must.”

“I always knew sentiment would get you at last,” a cruel smile turned up his lips as he put his spectacles back on. “I knew that you would be… reduced when you married that weakling.”

Mrs. Holmes bridled at the insult towards her husband. “He’s not weak and neither are you. It’s also not a sign of weakness if you halt whatever you have planned next. I know you can stop it. I know you. You were my friend. I know you never really bought into that cult’s rubbish. I know you’re a good man.” When Professor Moriarty sighed and turned back to his calculations, she cried out, “Jamie, please, he’s my son, my boy.”

“And Richard and Jim were my boys,” he whirled around, gripping the Dry-Erase pen so tight, his knuckles were white. “I was their father when theirs abandoned them.” He lowered his head, as if ashamed. “I do not enjoy causing you pain, Violet. I still consider you a trusted colleague and a great lady. It was your sons, all of your sons, who have brought this pain upon you.” He took his spectacles off again and pinched at his eyes. “Go home. Go home to your husband.”

Mrs. Holmes opened her mouth to protest, but felt tears stinging instead. A fool’s errand, that’s all this was, she realized as she turned to go, feeling light-headed and ill.

As she started walking away, she heard the Professor say softly, “You should have told me about the Earl and what he had done to Sherlock.” In an even softer voice, he added, “I would have made him pay. I would have made him suffer, unlike your cowardly husband, who had sold out his innocence for a small fortune instead.” In a whisper, he finished, “I would have burned the heart out of him.”

Mrs. Holmes all but fled.

Professor Moriarty stared at the empty doorway, and at the wet footprints her shoes had left. He actually put a foot forward, actually considered running after her. Then he set his mouth in a firm line. No…

No… I chased after you for years and years. Begged you to join me, help me with my work. You refused. You made the sentimental choice instead of the logical choice. You chose him…

“Besides my dear Violet,” he breathed as he turned his attention back to the Birch and Swinnerton-Dyer conjecture he had written out on the white board, “Even if I had wanted to make it stop, I cannot. Even for you.”

**

13 January 2016
Medical Library Royal Free Hospital
Rowland Hill Street
Hampstead, London
Wednesday afternoon
1:45 PM

With his medical license suspended and Sherlock and Violet more or less under house arrest, John Watson had a lot of time on his hands.

John thought handling the chores Mary usually took care of would keep him occupied. But by
Monday night, he had mopped all the floors, Hoovered all the rugs and curtains, wiped down the counters, given the master bath and the tiny half-bath a good scrub and finished the laundry.

He had even given Sweetie a bath. The dog had loved it. So much that the poor beastie tried to crawl in with John later when he decided a good long soak would be marvelous.

He had offered to do the cooking and shopping but Mary said no. She had found a grocery store that delivered and gently reminded him that his cooking was, well, shit.

“There was a reason why you and Sherlock ate so much take-away when you were flat-mates,” she hesitantly reminded him. John had to agree. John couldn’t cook and Sherlock… wouldn’t.

On Tuesday, he had a nine o’clock therapy session with Ella, which was mostly useless, as usual. She meant well, had good advice. After all, it was her idea of a blog that had inadvertently brought him and Sherlock together. The problem was that the things John actually needed to talk about, he couldn’t. National security and all that rubbish, of course.

He couldn’t talk about how a woman he had come to like and respect very much was being sent away for her own safety. A woman who had made his best friend very happy and, oh yes, he had fallen inexplicably in love with that same best friend. His best friend, the same the infamous ‘Not Dead’ Consulting Detective who was not only mad as a hatter but also was a man. Undeniably, unapologetically a man and John Watson was not gay…

Well, mostly not gay…

Standing in the shadow of Notre Dame as the snow fluttered down, to his shock, he had been the one to close the space between them. He just simply could not stand the distance between them any longer. So he grabbed the lapels of that pretentious Belstaff and pulled Sherlock to him. One hand still clung to the Belstaff but his other hand had snaked inside the coat, wrapping around Sherlock’s thin torso. Held him close, held him tight. Felt every single rib underneath the shirt’s silky material. Felt Sherlock go limp in his arms and rest his head against his hair as he opened up his coat to let John in, to shelter him from the storm…. It will be alright, I promise, he had said, more into John’s hair than his ear and John had responded I know…

It felt so bloody right… all of it, so it had felt right to rise up onto his toes then press his lips onto that long, tantalizing throat, to reach up for the back of Sherlock’s head, to touch those sinfully soft curls as he guided his head down so John could finally give him a proper kiss…

Ohhh… this is happening, it’s really happening…

Poor Sherlock hadn’t realized he had whispered out loud and John’s heart nearly burst. Before Sherlock could say anything more, John slipped his tongue inside Sherlock’s open lips and finally learned what brilliance and amazement and madness tasted like…

John surprised himself again by pressing his thigh between Sherlock’s legs, causing the tall, elegant man to make a small and incredibly undignified noise. But only seconds later, John made the same undignified whimper as Sherlock’s slender hips canted forward, rubbing against John’s thigh. He gasped against Sherlock’s mouth as Sherlock clumsily searched for the zipper of his parka, while their kisses became more frantic, wetter and deeper…

John had to cut that memory sharply off. If he allowed it to continue, or if he thought about their embrace in the foyer of 221B Baker Street or their near-shag at the hospital, his body would betray his thoughts.
But the fact remained… *he wanted me too. Still does, despite Violet. Despite everything.*

He had to push that thought away as well. He had his chance and… well…

*You chose her…*

John had indeed chosen Mary so Sherlock had chosen Violet. Except now, Violet was being ripped away from him and it just… wasn’t … bloody *fair*.

*For God’s sake, leave her… I don’t care. I don’t want to hear any more excuses, any more bullshit. She’s dangerous, you’re miserable. Leave her.*

Yes, he was miserable. He did speak at length with Ella about that, his unhappy marriage, his lost children. He just couldn’t say why, not all the details anyway. However, he did tell Ella that he knew Mary was aces at lying. She had made a note but didn’t press for particulars.

He was miserable. He wanted to leave. She was dangerous. That’s why he stayed.

He hoped Sherlock got a chance to explain to Violet why he stayed. He also hoped that maybe Sherlock’s birthday party wasn’t the last time he’d see her. That maybe Sherlock could produce one more rabbit out of the hat. *One more miracle…*

He knew his reasons to save Violet were not altogether altruistic. He loved Violet like a sister, of course. He wanted her to be safe and secure. He also worried he would not be able to endure staying with Mary if Sherlock was unattached. *But until Maisie is found, I must stay, play my part and do my bit,* he had thought while making a cheese toastie and heating up a tin of tomato soup for an early lunch after his disappointing appointment with Ella.

*I have become just a good of a liar as Sherlock…* he smiled bitterly as he flipped the toastie over with Mary’s pink spatula.

He then realized he needed to take another page out of Sherlock’s book. He needed to bury himself in *work.*

The house was clean, the laundry done, the shopping handled and the cupboards and refrigerator filled with cassolets and puddings from well-meaning friends and neighbors. John knew he couldn’t stay home with Mary, he’d go mad. Fortunately, Mary still wearied easily. She had settled into a routine of breakfast, light physiotherapy (mostly stretches or slow laps around the lounge), nap in front of the telly, a bland lunch, then off to Bart’s for her actual PT (one of her nursing friends had kindly volunteered to fetch her and bring her back after her appointments.) Home again, tea and chat with John. Watch an insipid film, some silly romantic comedy, cuddle the dog, give John a kiss then trundle slowly up to bed. Lather, rinse, repeat.

So it was easy for John to slip out of the house the following day. Because of his bulky messenger bag, he damned the cost and hailed a cab. Sooner than he expected, he arrived at the disappointingly modern looking Medical Library of Royal Free Hospital. Really, it looked more like a block of reasonably priced flats than a proper library.

But John was here to do research, not make commentary about the architecture or décor. Fortunately he did not need his medical license to utilize its many services. He claimed a table far away from other scholars, students and other medical professionals. He wished a private enclave was available, but alas, those had to be reserved three weeks in advance. No matter, he had found a nice spot and most everyone else was absorbed in their work. He unpacked his laptop, his little black notebook, pens, highlighters and mobile.
“Right,” John reached for his notebook. “Let’s get to it then.”

While he didn’t love research, John never minded it either. He had been a bright pupil as a boy. While he didn’t graduate magna cum laude from medical school, his marks were nothing to look down upon either. Plus, Sherlock taught him the value of doing your research.

More importantly, he taught John how to observe.

“OK,” John rubbed his mouth, wishing that he could have brought a cup of coffee into the library. While Sherlock claimed cigarettes were good for brainwork, John always preferred a hot drink when he had to do some serious thinking. “OK, Watson,” he flipped open his notebook. “What did you miss, what didn’t you see?”

Waste of time, Sherlock droned in his head. John almost rolled his eyes, which was his automatic, almost Pavlovian response to Sherlock’s biting criticisms, real or imaginary. Berating yourself for your past failures, so do stop being a martyr. Tell me what you have already observed and don’t be boring…

Don’t be boring. Sherlockian code for Be Detail-Orientated.

Instead of notes to Sherlock’s cases, his little black notebook contained a laundry list of Violet’s symptoms. In his stereotypically awful doctor’s handwriting, he had written down:

- Muscle weakness
- Problems with coordination
- Muscle spasms
- Fatigue/feeling faint
- Severe unintentional weight loss
- Difficulty walking, tripping
- Weakness in foot (“foot fell asleep”)
- Cold hands (‘pins and needles’)
- Lack of restraint? (very short-tempered… but could be due to present circumstances… and living with SH…)
- Mild cognitive impairment? (Poor decision-making, due to fatigue or…?)

As if he were truly there, Sherlock interrupted his train of thoughts again… Lists. Dull. What have you observed? Also why would Living with SH be a cause for lack of restraint? She is an American. Lack of restraint is one of their trademarks….

“Fine, you whiny git,” John crossed that bit off his list. Then leaned back in his chair, looked out the window and thought. Remembered….

The lift doors opened and Miss Violet Smith walked out. “Mr. Holmes, Dr. Watson,” she said, approaching them. John noticed how her welcoming smile did not reach her eyes. Brrr… he thought. Chilly, this one…
“My name is Violet Smith. Welcome. This way please...”

John closed his eyes. Tried to remember that disastrous first meeting at with Robert Carruthers and Miss Violet Smith...

“Miss Smith, show the Consulting Detective and his fan club out,” Robert snapped, striding out of the room, slamming the door.

Miss Smith unfolded her hands. They were shaking. She stood up, a tall lady, taller than John but not as tall as Sherlock. She faced him, for the first time, dead on, eye to eye. Sherlock finally was able to see she had what people would consider “hazel” eyes, a throwaway word used to describe the unique hue of green and gold fused together by amber.

Although her hands trembled, her voice did not. “Please do not go to the police,” she said lowly. “You don’t understand... you have no idea...”

John didn’t have a Mind Palace like Sherlock or neat rows of file cabinets like Violet. His mind worked the way most people’s brains did. His memories meandered, flowed and intermingled.

He remembered her looking at his bookshelf after his terrace house had been burgled…

...Violet closed her eyes and with a shaking left hand, grabbed the other two books one after the other and hastily put them in the bag. “I think we’ll let the Expert take a look at these,” she turned to look at John and Mary, her face calm. If John hadn’t noticed her trembling hand, he would have thought she was perfectly fine...

“He hands…. Her bloody hands...” John wrote in big block letters SHAKING HANDS and his internal Sherlock purred Now we’re getting somewhere...

“Shut up Sherlock, I’m thinking,” John muttered under his breath.

Now you know how I feel, the Internal Sherlock gleefully informed him. But is it just her hands?

John shook his head, remembering watching Violet try to get into Downward Facing Dog pose, but she kept complaining about her arm being stiff. He had thought it was because of the motorcycle crash she had caused to get away from Mycroft’s spooks.

He also remembered her complaining once or twice about stiff muscles when they had gone to Edinburgh for a case but everyone chalked that up to the long train journey.

John added “Stiff muscles” to his growing list. Then he added, “Muscle cramps and twitching in her arms.”

Sharply, he remembered Sherlock berating her for knocking all his books off his shelf because she had been climbing to reach a book on the top shelf. He then vividly remembered her ramrod posture, her elegant, almost queenly walk when she was posing as “Miss Smith.” He also knew she was a fitness fanatic. She ran, she practiced yoga and loved kickboxing.

He flashed back to how she had nearly stumbled in Sherlock’s kitchen, trying to grab hold of Gladstone’s collar so he wouldn’t accidentally cut his paw on the broken glass.
He added “Loss of balance/equilibrium.”

He waited for his Internal Sherlock to make a comment. When none came, he started to read. As he scoured his texts, he guiltily remembered being so angry at her because she hadn’t told him that Maisie may still be alive. He remembered hearing her slip into his house one night and he was going to tell her off. Instead, he found her sitting on his sofa, utterly terrified…

Once he was at the foot of the stairs, he said sharply, “Violet I need to talk…” but the words died on John’s lips when he saw Violet.

She sat on his sofa, looking slightly green. Gladstone sat next to her, his furry body pressed close to hers, as if he were either protecting her or comforting her. Or both.

She had been staring at her hands but when John said her name, her head snapped up. Her hazel eyes were huge, full of panic. “John…” her voice cracked piteously as she held both her hands out to him as if in supplication.

Both hands shook now.

“They won’t stop,” she whispered as real tears filled her eyes.

He circled SHAKING HANDS twice in red pen then resumed his reading. But his Internal Sherlock decided to chime in again… her hands, focus on her hands… John shook his head, determined to keep reading. But Imaginary Sherlock refused to be ignored, similar to how the Real Sherlock refused to be ignored. Are her hands really just shaking…?

“Sherlock, what’s the matter with her?” John breathed out loud again.

Five ideas… need more conclusive data. The symptoms are intermittent and contradictory, not to mention vague.…

And so it went for hours, John reading, making notes and arguing with an imaginary Sherlock. Eventually, he had to use the loo and get a drink of water. After completing these chores, John rubbed his aching neck as he plodded back to his table, his laptop tucked under his arm, his mobile in his jeans pocket (he did have trust issues, after all…. But John thought taking his devices with him was practical, not untrusting.)

To his irritation, he felt his own left hand starting to shake. Goddamn it, not now…

He stopped dead in his tracks, halfway to his table. He shifted his laptop to his right hand so he could study his tremor. It was odd, to be able to finally clinically detach himself from his psychosomatic tremor, odd and somewhat satisfying…

Nonsense, Imaginary Sherlock scolded him. Your body is trying to tell you something that is locked in your subconscious. Stop being boring and THINK. What is the difference between your hand tremor and hers?

“Mine’s psychosomatic,” John whispered. “Hers… isn’t. We thought it was at first, but it’s not. It’s intermittent. There’s no rhyme or reason for her hand shaking.”
Very good. What else? THINK. What did you observe? Don’t be dull. The devil is in the details.

Standing in the middle of the library, John closed his eyes…

Violet smiled tremulously then slipped her hands out of John’s to wipe her eyes. “We’re a mess,” she sniffled. She dabbed at her eyes with her fingers and frowned at the mascara she smudged off. “Do you mind taking the cake down while I touch up my make-up?”

“Yeah, ‘course,” John said gruffly as Violet reached for her drink.

But when Violet reached for the tumbler, it slipped out of her hand and crashed to the floor…

WRONG Sherlock boomed again. You’re seeing, not observing. What happened, John, what really happened when she reached for the glass?

“Goddamn it,” John said through clenched teeth, not caring if he made a spectacle of himself. He also knew he’d tell off the first person who disturbed his train of thought.

As if watching a slow-motion replay, he forced himself to remember… she was upset, he was upset, they had just said goodbye… “Do you mind taking the cake down while I touch up my make-up?”

“Yeah, ‘course,” John said gruffly as Violet reached for her drink.

But when Violet reached for the tumbler, it slipped out of her hand and crashed to the floor…

Dammit. That’s all I see. What am I missing Sherlock?

Imaginary Sherlock was nicer than Real Sherlock. Why did the tumbler slip from her fingers? She wasn’t intoxicated. She didn’t knock the glass over…

John replayed the scene again. This time he saw her fingers wrap around the glass and the glass slipping from her hand as if…

“She wasn’t holding on to the glass tightly enough,” John’s eyes flew open. A few people were staring at him, but he didn’t give a toss. A light had flicked on for him. “Because she didn’t have the strength to hold onto the glass…” he marched towards his table now, his mind racing… Think Watson, pathological conditions involving muscles…. Muscular dystrophy… no… that’s not right, there’s a neurological aspect to it… Huntington’s chorea? No, she’s moody, but that’s plain old depression, she’s not showing signs of dementia… think, Watson, think!

He wrote “Hand weakness or clumsiness” on his list then grabbed one of the books. He knew some of the younger patrons stared at him openly now, wondering why he used such ancient techniques such as Reading A Book, instead of Googling.

Because I trust documented and verified research, not WebMD, he bitterly thought because one of her symptoms just popped in his head. One of her most troubling and disquieting symptoms cropped up again… My hands are cold… my foot fell asleep…

“Pins and needles sensation,” John muttered as he feverishly flipped through pages, knowing he was getting closer to an answer. Now he was afraid of what the answer would be. “Always cold… like… ice… or…” His heart all but stopped. “Ice water.”

Suddenly a thousand humorous Internet videos played in his head. Thousands and thousands of celebrities as well as ordinary people pouring buckets of ice water over their head for charity… the challenge selected because the afflicted often said that their illness made them feel like they were
being submerged into ice water.

John turned the page.

And there it was. Three hateful words. One horrible acronym.

“Fuck,” John said without thinking. The swear word echoed through the library. Normally John would have been embarrassed but he didn’t have time to care about the opinion of others. He powered down his computer, scooped up his notes and pens and shoveled everything into his messenger bag. He put his coat and scarf on and rushed out.

He left the books on the table. He left the last book he had been reading open. The pages fluttered slightly then were still.

He did not care about the extra work he had created for the librarian by not putting his books back. He only cared about getting in touch with Sherlock. Now.

He dialed and got voice mail. He rang off and texted.

Where are you?
Call me. Now. Important – JW

Normally Sherlock answered immediately. When there was no response, John began to feel the familiar and hateful fluttery beginnings of panic. Steady on, he told himself as he thumbed another text as he exited the library.

He fired off another text.

Please, don’t ignore me now – JW

When he still received no response, he tried ringing again. When he got voice mail again, he knew he had no choice but to leave a voice mail.

“Sherlock, please call me back right away. Whatever you and your brother and Violet are planning, you need to stop it. You need to stop it right now and get Violet to hospital immediately. She’s seriously ill,” John rubbed his eyes. “Fuck, I don’t want to leave this on your bloody voice mail… Sherlock, she’s showing symptoms of ALS. It’s almost text-book. We all missed it because of the Copper Beaches and everything… call me, OK?

John was about to say something else, but ran out of time. So he tried Violet, in hopes she was with him and would pass her mobile to Sherlock as she’d done in the past.

“The mobile number you are trying to reach is no longer in service—”

“Dammit!”

In desperation, John started dialing Mycroft’s number but then a hulking beast of a man bumped into him. John’s mobile flew out of his hand and crashed to the pavement.

“You twat!” John muttered to himself as he bent down to pick up his mobile. When he saw that the screen was shattered, he groaned, “Bleeding hell.”

“Name-calling and cursing doesn’t suit you, Dr. Watson,” the hulking beast-man informed him.

John jerked his head up. He suddenly realized his panic wasn’t unfounded. “And you are?” he casually asked as he lowered his hand to his ankle, where the leg of his jeans nicely covered his
ankle-holster and the slim Beretta he still (illegally) carried.

“Don’t bother reaching for your piece, doc,” the beast hovered over him. “I’m unarmed and it’s broad daylight. Don’t be stupid.”

John stood up. “Who are you?”

“Old friend of your mate’s… also knew your wife, back in the day,” he gave John a roguish wink. “We’re going to take a walk, you and me.”

“I don’t want to take a walk,” John squared his shoulders while his heart pounded.

“What? You don’t want to meet the man who sent your sister and your best friend to their Makers?” Holy Peters laughed when John paled. “Oh, no, not your boyfriend, nah, he’s alive. Can’t touch him at the moment, not with MI-6 babysitting him and the Yankee bitch,” he gave John an evil little smile. “Sholto. Not that he was a challenge. He seemed to welcome death.”

“You cocksucker,” John breathed, his scary-smile turning up his lips. “I will kill you.”


John still smiled. “Not only will I kill you, but I’ll kill you slow.”

Holy Peters held up his Smartphone. “No point in threatening your wife, she’s out of commission. Nobody can find your kid, so no point in threatening her. So we’ll just threaten the other kid,” he pressed play. John struggled to keep his face composed as he watched Molly and Greg Lestrade walking down the steps of their church, with Molly carrying the baby carrier while Greg held an umbrella over them all.

“You think, after a few of my guys tried to take them out last summer, they’d be a bit more cautious, don’t you? Especially since we know it wasn’t Detective-Inspector Gramps that got that ginger slag up the duff, don’t we?”

John swallowed hard. “Don’t be ridiculous,” he managed. “If you’re insinuating that Sherlock Holmes… rubbish, pure rubbish,” John managed to snort. “Please, I lived with the man for two years and known him over five. He’s… not capable.” He cleared his throat, “Thinks sex is beneath him, only for common, ordinary people, like us so you’re just threatening a DI’s kid.”

“But the DI and the ginger are your friends, aren’t they? And you’d never want them to suffer as you have; the loss of a child and all.”

John’s heart seized. There was nothing he could say or do.

Fuck. I am in trouble. I am in serious trouble…

“Where are we walking to then?” John made himself sound mildly polite.

“To your old surgery,” Peters tilted his head. “My boss is waiting for you there.”

“Why?”

“He admires you.”

John’s mouth went completely dry. Oh God… His heart started to race as he remembered receiving a text from a Blocked Number last spring:
You can’t keep him safe forever…
But I admire you for trying – JM

He remembered the older gentleman sitting in his surgery for a routine appointment, a jovial man in his mid to late sixties with the face and hair of an old lion and a kindly smile… and a heart made of ice and a will made of iron.

You see… I admire you…

John’s fear must have shown plainly on his face because Peters smiled. “Ahh… so you’ve already met him, haven’t you?” His smile widened, “Come on doc, let’s go. Or else this time your friends won’t find a dead cat in the baby’s cot, will they?”

John sent a desperate prayer up to a God he wasn’t sure existed.

Then he started walking with Peters to meet Professor Moriarty.

***

13 January 2016
221B Baker Street
Wednesday afternoon
4:45 PM

“Violet.”

She sat on the edge of his bed, wearing a black jumper, jeans and sensible black boots. Her luggage was on one side of her, her dog on the other. She had been petting her dog when he called her name as he stood in the doorway. She didn’t look up, so he said, “It’s time.”

She nodded, pressing her brow against Gladstone’s furry head. The Alsatian whined and tried to lick her face as she wrapped her arms around him for one last cuddle, one last ear scratch. “Be a good boy, OK?” she whispered to the dog, cupping his big, soft face in her hands. She stood up, kissed him between his ears. Her lips trembled as she scooped up her rucksack and messenger bag. As she started to walk towards Sherlock, Gladstone jumped off the bed, intent to follow her. “No, Stone, no, sitzen. Halten.”

Because he was a Good Boy, Gladstone obeyed. He sat. He stayed. But he cocked his head, waiting for his Mistress to give the right command… Komm.

He whined when she walked away with the Tall One without saying Komm

“No more people-food,” she reminded Sherlock as they walked down the narrow hallway.

Sherlock only hummed but when she shot him a filthy look, he sighed, “Very well.”

He had harassed Mycroft on her behalf to allow her to take the dog, at least for her protection. Then he had shouted then quietly threatened. Again and again, Mycroft told him it was the FBI saying no, not him. The dog was simply too recognizable as “Miss Smith’s” hound. His presence actually compromised Violet’s safety.

Finally, Violet had told Sherlock to drop it. She saw the good sense of the FBI’s decision but it still shattered her anyway. Her eyes were bright with tears as she pulled on the new black-trench coat. It had magically appeared this moment. When Violet opened the parcel and asked Sherlock why, he had shrugged and mumbled that everyone needed a good coat.
Sherlock hefted his own coat on. “Ready?” he asked softly as he reached for his scarf.

She nodded, belting the coat around her waist.

He stood in front of her, tilting her chin up with his fingertip. “We talked about this,” he lightly ran his thumb along her chin. “No sentiment. Don’t give my brother the pleasure of your pain.”

“Never,” she managed to crack a smile.

“Good girl,” he looped his scarf around her throat.

As he knotted it, she asked, “I thought you said no sentiment?”

“This is practical. I owe you a scarf since I destroyed yours on the first night we met and I hate this one. Everyone wins.”

“Mycroft does have good taste,” Violet ran her hand down the cobalt cashmere.

“His good taste is why he put on a stone last year.” Sherlock looped her messenger bag over her shoulder. He heaved the rucksack over his thin shoulder. “Come along, Violet.”

Violet took one last look at the lounge, drinking it in, the hideous wallpaper, the mismatched furniture, the books, the fireplace and her piano. She paused to press her hand against Sherlock’s face. Then she pulled on her gloves and walked out of the flat without looking back.

Sherlock then felt his mobile vibrate with the special pattern he had customized for John. He automatically reached for his pocket then stopped himself. John would want to talk. If Sherlock told him he couldn’t, John would ask why. John was learning how to tell when Sherlock was lying or not. If John managed to deduce Sherlock couldn’t talk because of Violet…

John would have to wait.

John however was determined not to be ignored. As Sherlock reached the bottom step, his mobile continued to vibrate. So while the MI-6 agent put Violet’s bags in the boot, Sherlock took his mobile out, saw two texts message and one voice mail. Sherlock frowned. John never called, he knew Sherlock preferred texts.

He thumbed a text:

Can’t talk now.
Text more details – SH

He tucked the mobile in his coat pocket, climbed into the backseat of the sleek black car after Violet and shut the car door.

The car ride was silent. The driver was good enough to put the privacy divider up. Violet stayed quiet. She seemed intent on absorbing all the sights that had become everyday to her that were now about to become nothing but memories. Sherlock folded his hands in his lap, remembering how he had acted very much the same after the MI-6 doctors had declared he was well enough to begin his undercover mission. He had hungrily gazed at Big Ben, Westminster, London Bridge, all of it, as if he was never going to see London again.

She actually wasn’t ever going to see London again. The FBI and Witness Protection wouldn’t be stupid enough to place her back in England. Sherlock would find her if they did.
An hour into the drive, his mobile thrummed again. He frowned. It wasn’t John’s vibration. He decided to ignore this particular text but wondered why John hadn’t responded yet. To distract himself, he decided to focus on her, to memorize every single detail so he could visit her in his Mind Palace. Her fair face scarred and freckled like a plover’s egg. Lovely hazel eyes sparkled with intelligence and wit. Her luxurious chestnut hair…

His mobile vibrated again.

He clenched his teeth. *This is getting tedious…*

The third time his mobile vibrated, he was already composing insults to text back to the moron who dared disturb him at this hour.

But the messages stopped him cold:

*We have the doctor.*
*We have the doctor.*
*We have the doctor.*

The sender of the message must have gotten notification that Sherlock finally read his texts because a youtube link was immediately sent.

He first made sure his phone was on silent. Then he thumbed the play button.

After only a few minutes, Sherlock quickly hit the stop button, as bile crawled up from his gut while tears pricked his eyes. He locked the screen. Still holding the mobile, he pressed his knuckles to his mouth. He tried to control his breathing. He willed himself to hold onto his gorge.

“Sherlock?”

He jumped a little. Turned and saw Violet staring at him. Her brows crinkled in concern, her sharp eyes flicking to his mobile, then back to him.

“Are you alright?”

“Perfectly,” he lied as he unlocked the screen and forwarded the text and youtube link to Wasp, Trinity and Bill Wiggins asking them to help him, to triangulate a location, price was no object but time was critical. After composing the message, he slipped the mobile back into his coat pocket, “Just an annoying client.”

Her eyes narrowed.

*And, well, since I can profile you and you can deduce me, there’s no point in either one of us lying to the other, is there?*

He reached for her hand and carefully twined his long fingers with her small ones.

“I’m just going to miss you,” he whispered as *John John John*… raced through his head.
PS: Still TECHNICALLY a WIP... but I'm writing the second to the last chapter now and know that there will be definitely one more after that. Thank you for reading and commenting and kudo'ing! XXX :^D
Chapter Summary

"Without turning around, she asked lightly, “Who was texting you earlier, Sherlock?”

“An irritating client, nothing to interest you,” he lied smoothly.

She nodded then she turned her head around and furrowed her brow. “John?” she called out, very loudly and clearly...."

Chapter Notes

I didn't post last Monday because I'm an idiot. I sent my long suffering beta an email saying "Look, two chapters!" and I didn't attach any of the chapters. So, thank you for bearing with me!

Hope everyone had a happy Easter weekend, if you celebrate that sort of thing. If you don't, I hope you had a happy weekend anyway.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Two Twitter-Pated Idiots, Redux

13 January 2016
An undisclosed military airfield outside of London
Wednesday evening
7:45 PM

“Dr. Watson, this is Mycroft Ho.... John?”

Mycroft Holmes frowned at his mobile when he realized he was listening to John Watson’s voice mail message and not to the man himself.

Where on earth was he? Normally he glued himself to his brother’s side. Embarrassing, really, how he trailed after Sherlock. Like a moonstruck school boy. Like a loyal yet slightly brain-damaged lap dog, panting after his master, eager for praise.

People talked. Thought the doctor and the Great Detective were in love.

Now the one blasted time he actually needed John to be here, at Sherlock’s side, he vanished.

He was last seen outside the pathetic surgery he volunteered at but after that, no trace of the good doctor with a flair for purple prose and an addiction to adrenaline rushes.

The CCTV couldn’t even locate him.

Anthea couldn’t even find him.
But John didn’t like Mycroft. Possibly could be avoiding him out of spite.

Or fear.

There was that murderous wife of his that Mycroft still needed to deal with… somehow…

“It’s me again,” Mycroft put a lot of frost into his voice. “Since you are not responding to my texts please do me the courtesy of returning my call. It’s urgent. I need…” he found himself faltering.

*I need you to catch Sherlock as he falls again.*

Only this time, he doubted his little brother could rise from this fall.

This fall, was the final fall.

“You. I need you. Call me back,” he rang off abruptly when he saw Agent Mitton walking towards him.

He tucked his mobile into the pocket of his impeccably creased trousers and lifted his eyebrows authoritatively at Mitton, silently asking him what he wanted.

“They’re here,” the handsome dark-skinned man said simply.

Mycroft closed his eyes, feeling a headache coming on. Since John Watson couldn’t be here physically, he had hoped at least to have him on speaker phone.

Hearing his voice would have comforted Sherlock.

But maybe it was better John didn’t witness… this.

In an uncharacteristic display of nerves, Mycroft smoothed the lapel of his jacket down and adjusted the hook of his umbrella as it hung off the crook of his arm. He looked around the airplane hangar, vividly remembering the Bond Air disaster.

This promised to be a million times worse than Bond Air and that double-crossing tart Woman.

The metal doors swung open behind him. He turned around, back ramrod straight, and kept his face immobile as he regarded his baby brother as he searched for… something. Anything. A clue to what he was thinking. Or feeling.

But Mycroft had taught him too well. The Belstaff coat their father had bought him as a Christmas present years and years ago concealed his body language. His face was a porcelain mask. His eyes could have been made of glass for all the emotion they emitted.

His companion, on the other hand, made no attempt to conceal her feelings. In fact, she projected them. She wanted Mycroft to know exactly how she felt.

Her eyes blazed with unrelenting fury. If her hazel eyes could kill, Mycroft would have died three times over.

*Look what you have done,* she silently raged at Mycroft. *Look what you have done to your only brother, your last living brother.*

Mycroft Holmes also noticed Violet Hunter was not hiding who she really was any longer. No fake spectacles, no layers upon layers of cosmetics. Every freckle popped out on her pale face. A strange, small crescent-shaped scar could be clearly seen on her cheek.
Her chestnut hair, normally straightened or tied back in an uncompromising bun, hung loose and waving over her shoulders. She wore jeans, sensible black boots and a black trench coat belted around her waist and Sherlock’s scarf around her throat. A black messenger bag was looped over her shoulder and across her body.

Her hands were balled into fists. Her mouth was held in a tight, thin line.

Her alter-ego, the prim and proper “Miss Smith” was definitely dead and buried.

The trio stood there silently as the tension mounted. While brother gazed at brother coolly the woman continued glaring at Mycroft. Every muscle in her body was tensed, fueled with adrenaline, as if she readied herself for the precise moment when she could leap forward and kill Mycroft with her bare hands.

“Well,” Sherlock burst out, as he was prone to do. “No sense in delaying. A moment of privacy, please, brother dearest,” He laced the last two words with as much poison as he could as he cupped his massive hand underneath Violet’s elbow. Completely wired, she jumped at his touch. But she never broke her angry stare-down with Mycroft.

Mycroft moved aside, pointing with his umbrella toward where they were to stand, far enough away where they could converse quietly, say their final words to each other, but close enough so that Mycroft could watch them.

Violet let Sherlock walk a few steps ahead of her. She paused near Mycroft to hiss into his ear, her American accent nasal and grating, “Keep your promises, Mickey.”

“I shall,” he hissed at her.

“You better,” she snapped then walked quickly to catch up to his brother.

She and Sherlock turned their backs so Mycroft couldn’t read their lips. “So, this is it, then,” Sherlock stuffed his hands in his coat pockets. “You have my list of American contacts?”

“In my burner phone and also written on a slip of paper that’s tucked inside my boot,” she murmured. “I also memorized Wasp’s email.”

“If you run into any trouble, they will help you. Tell him you’re my… friend.”

Her lips curled up, “Right, OK.” Then she sighed. “I don’t want to leave,” she crossed her arms, looking at the small jet plane that would take her to Ireland, to the larger plane that would take her back to New York. After being debriefed in the New York field office, she would disappear until the Congressional hearings. Then she would disappear again, permanently.

Without turning around, she asked lightly, “Who was texting you earlier, Sherlock?”

“An irritating client, nothing to interest you,” he lied smoothly.

She nodded then she turned her head around and furrowed her brow. “John?” she called out, very loudly and clearly.

Startled Sherlock whipped around. So did Mycroft. The minute Sherlock looked away, Violet lunged, grabbing his Belstaff and stuffing her hand into his coat pocket.

Sherlock seized one of her wrists while trying to restrain her with the other, “Don’t!”
But she found her prize and skipped away from Sherlock, thumbing in his pass code. Sherlock grabbed her slight shoulders but she shrugged him off as she started scrolled through apps. He tried to grab her again, but she pushed him in the chest, hard enough to make him stagger. She backed away from Sherlock but stopped when she saw… something on the mobile. Something that made her entire body recoil in horror. She covered her mouth with her hand while exclaiming “Oh my God!”

Without a second glance at Sherlock, she ran towards Mycroft. “Call it off! Call it off! Call it off!” Her voice pitched up uncharacteristically high, utterly panicked.

Mycroft swiftly turned his head towards his brother just in time to see the porcelain mask crumble into bits. Defeat and sheer exhaustion darkened Sherlock’s face.

Suddenly, he didn’t see the austere six-foot tall man in front of him.

He saw a small, dark-haired little boy, bleeding and bruised, limping towards him.

_Mickey, please, make him stop… make this stop… please… help me._

Violet now stood in front him, shoving the mobile in front of his face, “It’s John, they have him. We have to go find him, now.” Her voice shook violently, “We can’t, I can’t abandon John. Not now, not after everything. Please please please, call this off. I can leave another day…”

Mycroft felt his stomach knot as he watched John Watson being beaten within an inch of his life by masked assailants. He had never felt so heartsick in his entire life.

This was far, far worse than when he had to tell Anthea her mother was dead.

But he couldn’t call this off. He couldn’t stop this.

She _had_ to go to America.

Apparently, she didn’t seem to care. Violet now fist the lapel of his suit jacket while she beseeched him to call it off.

Mycroft closed his eyes, refusing to look at Sherlock’s mobile screen.

_Dear God, what have I done? How have I not seen, not observed the exquisite hell my brother has created for himself…to be in love with two people at the same time... how did I allow this to happen? _

_Sherlock, I told you and told you, caring is not an advantage…_  

***

12 August 2015  
221B Baker Street  
Wednesday morning  
4:21 AM  

“…Whoever Moriarty is, make no mistake, he is the puppet-master. Even though the Earl is unfortunately a very powerful man, when he went to the _Rouge_ to cover up his many prurient and licentious indiscretions, they now control him. And he’s more useful to them as a respectable member of the House of Lords than as a disgraced and imprisoned child defiler.”

“Then who are we chasing after?”
“A shadow.”

Violet slid off the chair arm. She reached down and took Sherlock by the hand. “Your back will be screaming bloody murder if you fall asleep in that chair again.”

But he shook his head, “I can’t… I need to think.”

“You need to stop thinking. Just for a few hours, get some rest.”

“That’s what the morphine was for, I can’t turn my thoughts on and off like a light switch.”

“That’s not sleep. That’s passing out. And all your problems will still be there in the morning.”

“What, pray tell, is the difference?”

“You wake up with a wicked hangover and a monkey on your back.”

“I always did want a pet monkey,” Sherlock said wistfully.

“We’re not getting a monkey.”

“Be quite useful around the flat, a monkey. Four pairs of hands. Be great for the clearing up.”

“We’re not getting a monkey. We have a dog.”

“We could bring him to crime scenes. A monkey would be more far more intelligent than the half-wits employed at the Met.”

“We ARE NOT getting a monkey!” Violet snapped. “The koi in the bathtub was bad enough.”

“Sleep-deprivation leads to mood swings,” Sherlock said sweetly. “I think you should practice what you preach my dear Violet and go to bed.”

He then realized she still held his hand, her fingers were entwined with his.

“Sleep-deprivation also leads to memory loss,” Violet primly informed him. “Let that sink in for a minute.” She gave him a small, sleepy voice as he pondered the ramifications of that fact and his disdain for sleep. She tugged on his hand. “Come on. Humor me. At least lie awake next to me. Normally I have Gladstone sleeping next to me when I’m feeling...” she swallowed hard and her eyes grew watery as she thought about her poor, loyal dog. “Maybe I need you to wake me up from the nightmares this time.”

Sherlock stood up and slipped his hand from hers. “Very well,” he murmured. He let her walk ahead towards the bedroom as he shut lights off and drew the drapes.

“You know, if we had a monkey, we could train him to turn off the lights.”

“WE’RE NOT GETTING A MONKEY!”

Sherlock grinned. It was great fun winding her up, like this. As he carefully made his way from the darkened lounge towards his bedroom, he idly wondered if he could in fact procure a monkey. Not permanently, of course. He knew he didn’t have the have the time nor patience to properly care for a simian full-time. But it would be a highly entertaining experiment to gauge her reaction if she came home and saw a spider-monkey dangling from the light fixture.

Then he stopped dead in his tracks, rewinding and reviewing his thoughts.
If she came home…

Yes, I suppose she’s home now, that this is her home now…with me. She considers 221B her home and… I’m OK with that… what does that possibly mean?

He heard water running in the en suite. He deduced she must be cleaning her teeth since she had already showered and changed into his T-shirt and her yoga bottoms. *Curiouser and curioser…It doesn’t annoy me like it used to when she wears my T-shirts… my bespoke dress shirts on the other hand…*

So he started unbuttoning his bespoke dress shirt and stripped off his vest. He sat on the edge of bed, meaning to take off his socks. Instead he stepped into his Mind Palace. He took two left turns and into the garden. Only it wasn’t his garden, it was the garden court-yard at the hotel where Greg and Molly held their wedding. He watched himself try to teach Violet how to tango. She had failed spectacularly…

*The first go-around was abominable. The second… merely appalling…*

*You say the sweetest things, you know that?*

*I merely observe…*

Like he observed how she hadn’t moved out of his arms.

Or how her pupils were dilated.

Or how her face was flushed.

Or how her heartbeat raced.

Or how she let him touch her hair.

Or how she shivered at his touch but it was not cold outside.

Or how she looked into his eyes unflinchingly, without a shred of self-consciousness.

Or how she smiled… at him… nobody smiles at him like that.

That smile was burned into his memory for infinity.

He also remembered how his waist pressed tightly against hers. She hadn’t been as thin as she was now, her ribs weren’t visible. Her still-muscled thighs had brushed against his as he twirled her around the darkened courtyard. The only light came from the security lights from the hotel and whatever moonlight that could pierce through London’s polluted skies…

Her breath against his face, his cheek, his ear…her small hand in his, a hand composed of juxtapositions, her nails were perfectly manicured but the palms and knuckles were callused from jabbing punching bags and handling guns. Her breasts grazed his chest when he leaned into her… how they still stood close together, close enough that if he lowered his head just enough and if she tilted hers up ever so slightly…

*Oh…*

She had genuinely enjoyed spending time with him, until his old flame Victor Trevor came along and… well, to completely crude, cock-blocked him… *but never mind him…* Sherlock deleted Victor with a vengeance.
What had shocked him even more than her enjoying being with him was that he enjoyed spending
time with her as well, and it hadn’t involved corpses or blowtorches or chemicals or crime scenes or
anything interesting.

They were just… dancing… *oh but I love to dance…*

He jumped when he felt a cool fingertip run down the back of his spine.

Returning to the real world, he twisted around to face Violet. She knelt on the bed behind him. “Ever
going to tell me the story about what happened here?”

He felt his face flush. He had always been so careful to keep a shirt or vest on ever since she had
moved in. Bad enough that John had hounded him incessantly about the scars; he didn’t need her
chiming as well. “No,” he said shortly as he bolted up, to find a shirt.

Those are whip marks,” she kept her palms on her thighs. His shoulders lowered but he didn’t turn
around. “Someone wasn’t fucking around when they got their hands on you.”

“They usually don’t,” he muttered, wondering what she’d say if she saw his chest and abdomen. The
knife scar in his gut, the various cigarette burn marks and of course, Mary’s bullet inches from his
heart.

“Scars aren’t shameful. They’re a story about how you survived something hellish.” She didn’t speak
again until Sherlock turned his head. When he did, when he finally looked at her, she tilted her head
up, “I wasn’t able to stop Moriarty from doing this any more than you could have stopped whoever
tore up your back.”

Sherlock studied the odd, shiny scar on her throat, made with a serrated steak knife pressed to her
vulnerable, tender flesh. Then he turned fully, facing her bare-chested for the first time since she had
intruded into his life.

She sucked in a breath, but she didn’t linger on the scars. She slid off the bed and crossed over to
him. She stood toe-to-toe with him, biting her lip in that dreadfully unattractive way of hers. He stood
ramrod straight and still, expecting her to do something stupidly sentimental, like press her palm
against the bullet-hole, or worse (*or better??*) her lips.

Instead, she reached for his hand instead, twining her fingers with his. His heart started racing as his
felt his transport responding to her stimulus.

“Not all stories have visible scars though, do they?” she tilted her head up.

He shook his head. He knew the logical response would be to shut this down before it progressed
into something unsustainable. A thousand fabrications sprung up in his fertile, inventive mind then
they all wilted and died when he looked into her eyes.

 Since I can profile you and you can deduce me, there’s no point in either one of us lying to the other, is there?

“*I am exhausted,”* he admitted.

She nodded, never taking her eyes off his. Waited.

He knew what she waited for so he decided to just get it out in the open. As they had both agreed,
there was absolutely no point in lying to the other. The Copper Beaches case had just proved how
disastrous it was for the pair of them to try to keep secrets from each other.
“I must confess to having decidedly more than platonic feelings for you,” he rumbled, so softly she could barely hear him. “I have also observed and deduced that you have been attracted to me for quite some time now.”

Anyone else would have mistaken his words for arrogance. Violet merely crooked her lips up in a self-conscious smile. “I was wondering when the Most Observant Man in the Entire Goddamn World was going to say something about that.”

“You never acted on it.”

She shook her head. “I’m not a star-struck fan-girl,” she quietly reminded him. “I know what the stakes are, what John Watson means to you plus with what happened to you as a boy…”

“As well as what Moriarty did to you,” he interrupted her.

“That’s not the same thing.”

“It is.” He reached for her other hand. “It was against your will. Therefore, it is the same thing.”

Her eyes watered for a moment then cleared. “Anyway,” she cleared her throat. “It didn’t seem… practical, to pursue anything.”

“Quite right,” Sherlock’s entire world shrank down to the woman holding both of his hands as she stood millimeters from him. “Idiotic, really, to pursue any relationship beyond platonic friendship seeing that it is unsure how long you will remain in England not to mention the fact that neither one of us are in a rush to engage in anything in the physical realm.” He tightened his grip on her fingers and pulled her gently towards him. His mind rebelled while his body rejoiced as he felt her soft curves against his bare flesh. To regain mastery over his transport, he added, “Plus, I have been informed on several occasions that I am a selfish bastard, a machine incapable of being considerate and feeling empathy for others so it would be a dreadful idea for you to…” his mind apparently decided to take a stroll just then because he had started dipping his head down just as she had started rising on her toes. He let go of her fingers to drag his fingers through her wonderful, luxurious hair as she splayed her hands on his slender hips. He closed his eyes in anticipation of her lips on his…

“OW!” Sherlock jerked away, clapping his hand over the mouth that had been recently punched by Greg Lestrade.

“Oh shit! I’m sorry, I wasn’t thinking,” Violet reached for his face to examine the damage. “Did the cuts break back open?”


“Do you want another ice-pack?”

“No. I wanted morphine and you denied me.”

“Oh, well excuse me all the way to hell for not wanting to enable your drug addiction!” Violet put her fists on her hips.

“Since you won’t let me have morphine, you should really re-think your stance about getting a monkey for the flat. It’s the least you could do.”

“OH MY GOD. WE ARE NOT GETTING A MONKEY!”

They glared at each other for a few seconds. Then they started giggling like schoolchildren.
“So, we’re idiots?” Violet wore a hopeful smile on her face.

“Complete idiots,” Sherlock held out his hand again. Violet slipped hers into his and let him pull her close to him once more. She rested her cheek against his chest, listening to his heart beat as he rested his cheek against her curls. He marveled at the unfamiliar sensation of her arms looped loosely around his waist, “Complete and utter idiots moving at the speed of a glacier.”

“Mm, message sent and received,” Violet murmured as he started running his hand over her hair over and over.

“I’m not joking Violet,” his voice was deep and heavy with regret and warning. “I’m not very good at physicality.” He hesitated. “Unless intoxicated or high or… no. There’s no other. Usually when I’m intoxicated or high.”

“We’ll figure it out,” she hummed sleepily against his chest. Abruptly she looked up at him. “We can’t let your brother know.”

“Obviously.”

“What about John?”

“What about him?”

She shot him an irritated glare.

He huffed an aggrieved sigh. “John is married. He and Mary are taking action to repair the damage done to their marriage. You saw them at the Animal Hospital at Falmouth.”

She continued glaring at him, her eyebrow cocked.

“John will always be special to me. He’s my best friend. Can you live with that?”

“Platonic best friend?” Violet lifted her other eyebrow.

“Oh please, can you possibly imagine John’s reaction if I tried to kiss him?”

“Mr. I’m-Not-Actually-Gay?” Violet snickered. “No. The only way out of the closet for him would be for him to make the first move and I don’t see that happening.”

“Well, there you are,” Sherlock tilted her head back and ran his thumbs over her jaw. “And remind me to pickpocket Lestrade for ruining our first kiss.”

“Not if I punch him in his mouth first,” Violet stood on her tip-toes again, kissing his cheek while cupping his other one with her hand. “Come on, we’re both about delirious with exhaustion.” She ended the embrace and started drifting towards the bed.

“You’re not going to change your mind are you? In the morning, after a good night’s sleep?”

He hated how unsure he sounded, but he had been let down before. After all, the two men he had sincerely loved before her had thrown him over for others.

Victor choosing Patricia, while hurtful, was also understandable. He needed her to hide his homosexuality from his family and to pay for his extravagant lifestyle. Not exactly noble motives… but understandable.

John’s desertion was far, far more painful. He actually loved Mary. He chose her, not him.
Even though the fearful question had only slipped out because the sleep-deprivation had eroded his normally massive control over his emotions, he was glad it was out. He didn’t know if he could stand to attempt to care about one more person only to be let down again.

Then he told himself to stop being stupid and to observe her. His mind wasn’t moving as fast as it normally did, but it still moved plenty fast. He saw the way she gripped the duvet, how her tender smile didn’t quite reach her eyes. How her eyes had dimmed a bit by his question. How she bit her lip again then shook her head.

She wouldn’t regret it in the morning but she was afraid.

Sherlock felt himself relax. They were on the same page. She was just as afraid as he was.

Of course she was. The love of his life had merely deserted him. Hers had been killed.

“Will you?” She twisted the duvet. “Change your mind?”

“No,” he said decisively. “I will not change my mind. I will not regret this change in our status quo in the morning.”

“You really say the sweetest things,” she drawled as she slipped under the covers.

He was acutely aware of Violet watching him as he started undoing his belt and zip. “Roll over and face the wall while I change into my pyjamas.”

“Absolutely not,” she wore a wicked smile now. “Just because we’re moving slow doesn’t mean I’m not going to enjoy the show.” When he shot her a baleful glare, she shrugged, “I’m traumatized. I’m not dead and you have a nice ass.”

“Yes, that’s precisely what I want to be recognized for, not for my work or accomplishments or my dedication to solving crimes but my arse.”

He didn’t protest further though. Deep deep down though, he had to admit, he was flattered.

And nervous as hell.

But all they did was sleep curled up in each other’s arms.

**

5 September 2015
221B Baker Street
Saturday evening
9:30 PM

His gift of the Steinway & Sons Essex piano to been Violet had been a rousing success but with a worrisome drawback.

John Watson had not only been undeniably jealous, but hurt.

Stretched out on his bed, listening to strands of Beethoven’s Moonlight Sonata drift in from the living room, Sherlock steepled his fingers and closed his eyes, trying to ignore his latest personal conundrum. He had a simply delicious case he wished to devour. The last thing he wanted to do was waste valuable brainpower on why John had behaved so oddly earlier today...

There was no logical reason for John to act so strangely, as if he was uncomfortable in his and
Violet’s presence, as if it pained him to see Sherlock and Violet interacting. Sherlock had observed how John’s Adam’s apple bobbed and his brow furrowed after Sherlock had run his fingers down Violet’s back… and he wasn’t really sure why he had made such a demonstrative gesture other than it gave him a nice natural rush of serotonin and oxytocin to touch her.

*Never mind that*, he scolded himself. *The case, the case! A locked room and an alleged vampire…. Perfect, simply perfect… Christmas has come early… but why on earth would John succumb to a silly and childish sentiment such as jealousy? Especially since he practically foisted Violet upon me, invented the ridiculous cover story that she was my new live-in girlfriend in the first place?*

Sherlock ground his teeth and exhaled noisily through his nose. He craved a cigarette.

John was solid and practical, not inclined to juvenile pettiness…

(John kept track of how many times Irene Adler had texted him…)

John respected his privacy, said that his personal life was none of his business…

(John probed him about his sex life the first night they had gone out on a case, at Angelo’s…)

John didn’t want him to be alone…

(John’s face when he was kissing Janine…)

John said repeatedly he was Not Gay…

(Of course he wasn’t gay. Bisexual, not homosexual and he overcompensated for that fact by hiding behind a gaggle of girlfriends to due to the discord between his father and sister about her sexuality not to mention the hyper-masculinity of the military culture…)

John was married…

(John was married to a woman who tried to kill him…)

Sherlock sighed again as his irritation increased. *John has no right to be jealous or hurt…*

As if Violet sensed his mood, she had started playing *Presto Agitato*.

He smirked, admiring her ambition. *Presto Agitato* was a devilishly difficult piece. She didn’t play because she was a genius or a prodigy. She played for the sake of playing. She loved music.

His smirk turned into a frown when she was half-way through the piece. She was fumbling notes, more than she had when she had played it for him at Greg and Molly’s wedding. Then, she had missed a note here and there because she had been playing it the best she could from memory. She missed notes now because… Sherlock strained his ears.

Like she doesn’t quite have control over her hands…

Sherlock rubbed his temples. Her continual poor health was yet another conundrum to contemplate. Sherlock knew poisons. Sherlock knew the effects of arsenic. Violet was not still suffering from the aftereffects of arsenic poisoning. He had come up with six possibilities but he had no way of confirming them until her next appointment with her doctor.

*Plus Violet was getting annoyed with him randomly checking her pulse.*

Fibromyalgia, myasthenia gravis, lupus, Huntington’s disease and multiple sclerosis were all
contenders. He had ruled out Huntington’s immediately since her mental abilities remained as sharp as ever. He contemplated eliminating myasthenia gravis from the equation as well since she did not have the trademark “blank expression” nor muscle weakness in her neck, causing a bobbing head.

So…Three possibilities… no… four…

Then there was still the worst of the worst.

Against his will, he conjured an image of Stephen Hawkins then tried to imagine Violet in the same condition…

Despite his massive intellect and clinical nature, Sherlock shrank away from that possibility. He positively fled towards the security of denial.

He realized the flat had gone silent. He opened his eyes and reached for his mobile to check the time. It was nearly ten o’clock now.

He supposed he should get up and actually get some work done instead of lazing about. He did have a case to prepare for after all.

“John was jealous.”

Sherlock swiveled his head to look at the chestnut-haired woman leaning against the doorjamb.

“You perceived that as well.”

“Perceived? I’m surprised his face didn’t actually turn green with envy.”

Violet padded into his room and crawled into bed. “Violet…” Sherlock started as she nestled her head onto his chest, “Violet, I have work to do.”

“You have sleep to do,” Violet mumbled as she ran her hand up and down, grazing his flat belly with the pads of her fingers, a pleasant, not-quite-ticklish sensation. “You and John aren’t scheduled to interview Ayda Heidari** at the nut-house until three tomorrow.”

“I need to go to Scotland Yard to speak to Macpherson and Alex, since he processed the scene and Alex arrested Ayda Heidari for child endangerment,” Sherlock tried very hard not become distracted by her stroking his stomach but… it felt nice. Really, really nice…

If he was a cat, he would have started purring in earnest.

“I’ll go to the Yard tomorrow and talk to Macpherson and Alex. I don’t think it’s a good idea for you show up there while you and Lestrade are fighting.”

“We’re not fighting. We’re not speaking.” Sherlock started playing with her hair. For some silly reason, it delighted him to gently pick up a lock of her hair, stretch it out then let go, watching it spring back into a curl.

“Will you and John go to Sussex with Robert Ferguson to see his house?”

“ Might not be necessary if I can solve the crime here in London since that is where the crime originated, although the house might provide additional clues,” Sherlock droned. “Fascinating case, though, the mother accused of biting her child… I can’t wait to sink my teeth in.”

“No pun intended?”
“What pun?” Sherlock let go of another lock of hair, watching it coil back into a curl.

“Never mind,” she sighed then she blurted out, “Should I be worried that John was jealous?”

“Oh for the love of… Is this why you’re interrupting my thoughts?” Sherlock snapped. “We discussed this. Sentiment does not interrupt the Work.”

“No, we didn’t discuss this,” Violet sat up, hovering over him as if she was to kiss him. But her face was black as night when she said, “We didn’t discuss John Watson, yes, I get it. He’s important to you. But we never talked about what would happen if he reciproca-”

“He doesn’t,” Sherlock sat up on his elbows. “Even if he did, he’d never show it so there’s nothing to discuss.”

“Have you told John yet? About us?”

Sherlock opened his mouth then shut it, looking cross.

“Why not?”

“Why haven’t you told him? You two are the ones who have marathon telephone conversations, usually about me,” he added peevishly. “You have just as much right to tell him as me.”

“Something this huge should come from you.”

“Why.” It was a flat statement, not a question. Sherlock found his irritation flaring up again.

“Because he’s your best friend and business partner,” Violet reminded him. “So…?”

“Because I’m not ready to deal with his reaction,” he snapped again. “I never expected him to be so bluntly jealous that I gave you a gift. John and I, err… for a very long time, he and I weren’t right. It was quite awkward when I came back from the Great Hiatus, then again after he helped me recuperate when his own wife shot me. Now, finally he and I are right again and I do not wish for it to be awkward again between us.”

“You think that if he knows that we got together, like he kept saying he wanted us to, it would get weird between you two?”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“You are being deliberately obtuse. You’re the profiler, sort it out for yourself.” Sherlock plaited his fingers together across his chest and stared up at the ceiling, preparing for a good long sulk.

“You’re afraid that if John actually has feelings for you, you would be put into the position of having to choose between him and me. That makes you feel hypocritical since you inadvertently put John in a position to choose between you and Mary.”

“Not me! Profile John, not me!”

“Am I wrong?”

“No. Yes, arggh!” Sherlock turned away from her and curled up in a ball. “I have a case, Violet. I need to utilize my brain for more important tasks.”
Violet hopped off the bed, grabbed a pillow and chucked it at his head.

Without moving, Sherlock mumbled from underneath the pillow, “That was unnecessary.”

Then he heard the bedroom door slam. He flung himself out of bed seconds before his framed poster of the periodic table fell onto the bed where he had been lying.

“An upset female is infinitely more dangerous than Moriarty and Magnussen combined,” he groaned. He ruffled his hair, trying to decide on what the correct course of action would be.

“Right,” he fumed to himself. “I’ll have no peace if I don’t make peace with her. Without peace, I cannot work, plus she won’t assist me if she’s angry with me. Or worse, she’ll rearrange my books again, isn’t that right, Billy?”

Billy the Skull, who had been moved to the bedroom because Mrs. Hudson kept complaining that it stared at her as she dusted, only gave Sherlock his skeletal grin.

“Thanks, Billy, you’re a terrific listener,” Sherlock patted the skull then went out to the lounge.

He paused before actually entering lounge, listening intently for Violet’s movement. Violet was a stress-cleaner and a stress-eater. If she was cleaning, there was a risk of Violet throwing something else at him. Since her time thus far at Baker Street, she had thrown books, pillows, wads of paper, his dirty socks when he didn’t properly throw them in the hamper and once (during a particularly spectacular row after Gladstone ate one of his koi,) a tea cup and a vase.

But she never threw food. She was sensible. She wouldn’t waste a tasty snack on throwing it at him. When Sherlock didn’t hear the sounds of cleaning, the whir of the Hoover, the spray of furniture polish, the swish of the feather duster, only then did he dare to enter the lounge.

She sat pensively in his chair, flipping through the channels, with a bag of crisps in her lap.

Sherlock sat down in John’s chair. “Oh, no wonder he preferred this chair, it’s far more comfortable than mine…”

The bag of crisps hit him in the face. Crisps littered the floor.

Apparently I miscalculated…

“You’re acting like an idiot!” he shouted after her as she started to stomp off.

She flung the remote control at him. He caught it easily as she snapped, “You’re being a dick.”

“Of course, I am, that’s who I am,” he clicked the television off and set the remote on the little end-table next to John’s chair. Then he crossed his legs and tented his fingers, assuming a calm façade while inside he sternly told himself not to let her get under his skin, as she was wont to do. And do well. “Let us start over, please. Before we end up calling each names and ruin what otherwise was a rather pleasant day.”

Violet folded her arms tightly against her body, but at least she didn’t dart away. Meanwhile, Gladstone feebly climbed down the steps Sherlock made so he could get up and down onto the sofa. He was getting stronger, but he still limped dreadfully, the poor thing. Still, he padded slowly towards his mistress, determined to protect her. Violet reached down to give Gladstone a reassuring scratch behind his ear before saying, “Fine.”

“Excellent,” Sherlock nodded then found himself at a loss. He scanned her, gleaning as much
information as he could from her. *Her arms were crossed tightly across her chest, her shoulders were hunched up and forward, as if to shield her chest, no not chest, heart...*

*She’s unconsciously protecting her heart. She’s trying not to let it rule her but... oh.*

“John’s jealousy upsets you because you don’t trust me,” he said flatly.

“Well deduced,” she said acidly.

He wondered if he’d get a full refund if he returned the piano. “For heaven’s sake, *I chose* you.”

“As a consolation prize,” she blurted out before she could help herself.

“Oh...” Sherlock allowed his posture to relax. “I’m not just making do with you because John and I cannot be anything more than just good friends.”

“But what if...”

“What if... what? “ Sherlock spread his arms out. “He decides the closet is no fun anymore and comes crawling back? Professing his undying devotion to me and proposes that he and I run off into the sunset together leaving you and Mary to wail and gnash your teeth in our dust? My dear Violet, that only happens in romantic comedies and fairytales.”

“Victor Trevor came crawling back.”

“For my money,” Sherlock reminded her, his voice only slightly bitter.

“I could see John whoring himself out for a couple of million.”

“Could you really?” Sherlock’s face crinkled in confusion.

“No, just trying to lighten the mood,” Violet gave Gladstone another scratch then shooed him away. She padded over to Sherlock and before he could stop her, she sat on the armrest. “Sorry,” she finally breathed as she studied the ugly rug while her cheeks turned pink. “I’m sorry, I mean that. You’re trying, you’re actually trying to make this work, which is weirding me out...”

“Apology accepted,” Sherlock said sourly.

Violet fussed with the hem of her jumper instead acknowledging his peevish retort. “And I’m just so fucking insecure right now.”

“Can’t imagine why,” Sherlock drawled. “You only have MI-6, FBI and CIA hunting you not to mention all the gangsters whom you stole millions of pounds from plus what’s left of Moriarty’s organization and oh yes, you chose of your own free will and sound mind, to get involved with the likes of me, a bisexual high-functioning sociopath.” He all but batted his eyelashes at her, “Why, you should feel as secure as the Bank of England.”

“You’re not a sociopath,” she scolded him mildly, finally looking at him. “Don’t get me wrong, you’re really, really fucked up, but you’re not a sociopath.”

“You truly know how to warm a man’s heart.”

“Oh,” Violet feigned surprise, pressing her fingertips to her sternum. “I had been advised you didn’t have a heart.”

“You were ill-advised.”
“I’m not sure, the one who advised me claimed to be a subject expert,” she leaned forward and kissed his brow. “Am I forgiven for being a grumpy, insecure bitch?”

“Only if you could do me the favor of trusting me,” but when he saw the apprehension in her eyes, he tacked on an amended codicil, “At least try. Review your profile of me. You’ll then remember that I am loyal to the ones I care about.”

“Go play the violin,” she sidestepped his request. “Kill two birds with one stone. Serenade me with your music and you’ll be able to think about the Sussex Vampire case.”

Sherlock let her evasion go... for now. “Somehow you always manage to surprise me with your practicality, my clever girl.”

“Good. I’d hate to be boring,” Violet smiled then leaned in to give him a chaste peck on his lips.

“You call that a kiss?” Sherlock purred. “After you claimed you hate being boring…”

“Challenge accepted,” Violet lightly traced his jaw line before tilting his head up for a proper kiss. Sherlock knew he shouldn’t allow himself to be distracted like this, especially since there were so many things unsaid and unresolved between the two of them, not to mention the case. However, he found that her kisses and caresses were just as addictive as heroin. Plus he enjoyed the novelty of being with someone while sober… and that Someone was female.

If one held a loaded gun to Sherlock Holmes’ head and demanded to know if he preferred men or women, he would only own up to preferring men if it that admission was the only way to save his life. Like the stars, like the sun, he found physical attractiveness as useful as a teddy bear in a garden, but that didn’t mean he didn’t appreciate it. His preference for men really wasn’t a mystery. He merely found the clean lines of a well-built and maintained man’s body more aesthetically pleasing than a woman’s curves. It really was simple as that. He appreciated broad shoulders that tapered to a neat, trim torso then split off again to two strong legs… not to mention he also appreciated how men had an extremely obvious tattle-tale built into their very gender. It was no real mystery to determine when one held a man’s interest sexually. When he was still using, he found he really didn’t feel like deducing whether or not a man swung his way and he only really cared if the man in his sights had coke or morphine to share… or trade.

When he decided to become and remain (mostly) celibate in order to focus on his Work, he would only acknowledge a handsome man if the man’s looks were relevant to the case at hand…

Until John had come along… and until Victor had come slithering back…

He had also been attracted to girls when he was a young man, of course, but never acted on it. Classmates thought he was either shy or weird, or both. His parents fretted because they believed his childhood trauma hindered his ability to form romantic relationships (which was partially correct.) Mycroft hectored him because he thought his lack of involvement pointed towards homosexuality (which was not quite accurate.)

All of those reasons factored into Sherlock’s disinclination towards dating. However, no one ever realized that the main reason the teenaged Sherlock never pursued girls was pretty much the same reason other gangly, socially-awkward but ridiculously brilliant young men didn’t date: girls baffled him.

Their faces were pleasing to the eye, most of them smelled good, but they were terrifying, especially when they travelled in packs. At uni, Sherlock would see a horde of giggling young ladies and immediately think of wolves on the prowl.
However, once he had gotten involved with Victor, a pretty face and an hour-glass figure did nothing for him. The fairer sex didn’t even inspire fear in him anymore. Ironically, once he overcame his confusion regarding his sexuality, he found most women rather dull. He began haughtily and loudly disdainning all things traditionally feminine, bemoaning its triviality. He had no time for frivolous gossip and little patience for all the sentiments stereotypically allocated to a woman. Not just because he was a man, but because he was a genius, thus beginning his strict discipline of his mind overriding his transport.

Sherlock also didn’t give a toss how a woman looked in a dress or high heels or lingerie (unless they were clues to a case, naturally.) Her body was also only appraised if relevant to a deduction, or to deliver a stinging insult, such as the state of Donavan’s knees after she called Sherlock a freak one too many times…

In fact, Sherlock had not been aroused by Irene’s nudity or even interested. He was more intrigued by the brazen display of power she wanted to show him by baring her body. This was a woman who literally and figuratively has to be On Top… he had belated realized after he had cracked The Woman’s pass-code to her camera phone.

He did not intentionally act misogynistic. To him, most of the women that he met were simply… dull and petty. Most of those same women found him heartless and cold.

He had thought he had lost all interest in the fairer sex… until Molly… and Irene… now Violet.

He had hooked his arm around Violet’s waist and pulled her into his lap. She laughed a proper laugh. No girlish, kittenish titter from her, she was a grown woman and she laughed as such. Loudly. Joyfully.

He flicked his mercurial eyes over her freckled face, locking in on her sharp, bright eyes, observing her dilated pupils. He slid his fingers up her throat, pausing briefly to take her pulse. Quick, but steady. He bent over her as his tilted her chin up for another kiss, and another and another… long, indolent and drawn out… breathing is boring… as she lay wantonly in his lap, her wrists loosely crossed behind his neck as he cradled her in his arms, taking his time, cataloging every new bit of information he gained with every kiss.

When air became an actual necessity rather than a tolerated inconvenience, they broke apart. He ran his pad of his thumb over her lower lip. “They’re getting chapped, apologies,” he ran his thumb again over her kiss-burned lips.

“I don’t mind, that’s what Chapstick is for,” her eyes were hooded and her voice raspy with desire as she skimmed her hand up his throat to his face, ghosting her fingertips over his cheekbones. A delightful shiver coursed up his spine.

But then he felt a splash of cold water when he felt her hand tremble against his face as she pressed her palm against his face. Out of habit, he seized her hand to study the spasm.

“Sherlock?”

“Mm?” he tried to cover by kissing her palm.

“I’m OK, you know that. The doctors said there isn’t any more arsenic in my system.”

“Of course,” he lied, kissing her knuckle. “Obvious. I should really get to work anyway…”

“And, um,” Violet blushed. “Maybe we shouldn’t make out in John’s chair?”
“Right…” Sherlock suddenly became cognizant of where they were sitting. For some strange reason, sitting in John’s chair with a woman in his lap seemed Not Good.

He felt Violet’s eyes on him. “What’s the slang word for someone a heartbroken person dates immediately after their last relationship ended simply to fill the void that one’s former partner had inhabited previously?”

“A rebound?” Violet sat up now, the ugly nervousness and fear back in her eyes.

“Thank you,” Sherlock said sincerely. “Rest assured, you are not a rebound or a consolation prize or anything silly like that. Understood?”

Before Violet could reply, there was a very distinct whine behind John’s chair. Both Sherlock and Violet craned their heads to look behind them.

Gladstone had gotten his head stuck in the crisps bag.

“Aw, buddy,” Violet crooned as she slid off Sherlock’s lap to assist Gladstone.

Sherlock frowned as he elegantly rose from John’s chair… or as elegantly he could with the beginning swell of an erection. Feeling his cheeks start to flame, he kept his back to Violet as he made his way across the lounge to his music stand and violin case.

He felt like he had dodged a bullet. He had worried what would happen if Violet had started pressing to escalate the snogging to shagging. Humiliation and annoyance battled within him. Annoyance because he had allowed himself to become distracted, to choose kissing over working… humiliation because he really couldn’t keep his transport under control after all, that he was just as mortal and banal as any other man.

Plus there was the old familiar stab of shame piercing his gut…

You liked it… I know you liked it… you little know-all brat, you little tease…

He clutched the tin of rosin for the briefest of moments, waited for his stomach to unknot.

As he rosined his bow, he wondered if by dodging one bullet, he had been hit by another.

Violet never gave a firm answer to his request to trust him, to believe him…

He’s my friend, nothing more… He moved on and so did I…

Sherlock placed the violin on his shoulder. Facing the window, he started playing Melodie from Fritz Kreisler’s Orpheus and Euridice.

**

23 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Tuesday night
9:40 PM

… Violet said again, in a low, fierce tone, “I don’t want you to go to France.”

“This is getting tedious,” he threatened her. “You will be perfectly fine on your own.”

“I’m not thinking about myself and you know it,” Violet growled right back to him.
Sherlock leaned over, twisting his body so he could press his forehead against hers.

“I know.”

Violet stopped massaging his aching wrist and reached up to cup his face in her hand. He lowered his head, letting her card her fingers through his hair, still damp from his bath. Her other hand sought out his and once found, she linked her fingers through his.

He knew he was behaving like a complete idiot, a gigantic soppy prat indeed. But he reasoned with himself that it calmed her to touch him. Normally level-headed and matter-of-fact, she had not been acting like herself lately. She had been tetchy and fatigued for about a fortnight now. And if a little hair-ruffling and handholding soothed her, it seemed logical to let her continue.

This… this had nothing to do with the fact that when she touched him, his own body became infused with pleasure as well. This had nothing to do with the fact that the transport actually required regular maintenance, food, water, affection… yes, affection.

And when she started nuzzling her face against his, silently asking for a kiss, he accommodated her request. Not because he liked the pressure of her soft lips on his, the flicking of her tongue inside his mouth. Not because he enjoyed experimenting a bit with her, the kissing. He reciprocated because as he could actually feel the tension leaving her body as he kissed her. Her contracted muscles loosened as her body relaxed. As if her bones had melted clean away.

Allowing her to continue running her fingers through his hair, to press her body closer to his had also absolutely nothing to do with the fact that it simply felt good to him as well…

This… was about her. Calming her, assuaging her, distracting her from her ever-present fear, for just a little while… this was merely a practical, short-term solution.

Or so he told himself.

Of course the delightful release of serotonin reminded him faintly of a cocaine-high, so that was nice, he had to admit.

And the soft moan he emitted when she had started tracing her clever little tongue up and down the tendons of his neck was completely involuntary.

He wanted… he wanted… but… always… she wanted more and it was always what he could not give her.

He wasn’t ready. He knew she understood that he wasn’t and he appreciated her patience.

At the same time, while she was ready to be more physical, she still held back emotionally. She seemed to be waiting for something awful to happen, something that would deprive her of him. Understandable, of course, since her situation was precarious, she remained with him at the whim of Mycroft, of course.

But he was taking that risk. She knew his entire life. He let her know his entire life, all of it. All of his scars, all of his sins so why did she insist on making him deduce hers?

It had taken ages to get her to confirm that yes, she had been engaged once and her fiancé had died tragically and horribly. He still knew little to nothing about her last boyfriend in New Mexico. Only that it had ended badly, very very badly.

He tried not to resent the walls she put up whenever he emotionally cringed towards her, silently
pleading with her to make their relationship a true partnership. More than just flat-mates who were fond of each other and found each other interesting and attractive.

Still, it was infuriating. He wondered at times if this relationship silliness was worth the bother.

Moments of weakness like that made him ache for John. Made him realize that’s what he longed for, craved for, a true partnership. Same beliefs, emotions and libido working together.

Well, he and John didn’t have an equal sex drive, of course. But two out of three wasn’t bad.

Nothing was equal between him and Violet, but he was still terribly fond of her.

And yet, she still didn’t let him in. Not completely. And he knew why, he knew exactly why.

What do I have to do to prove that I am not going to throw you over for John Watson?

Fortunately neither one of them had said the Three Dreaded Words to the other yet. So at least they didn’t have to deal with that awkwardness yet.

Thank God for small mercies.

His hands were in her hair now, his fingers twisted her curls, seeking her mouth again, which she gladly gave him. His entire body shivered as she dragged her nails up and down his back, then she reached and dragged her fingertips down his leg and up again, then down again then up towards…

No…

“Don’t,” he mumbled against her mouth when her hand grazed the front of his pyjamas bottoms.

I want…he ached for her touch, to feel her hand there again…to feel more than just her hand.

I can’t… shame immediately replaced pleasure when she lightly palmed him again.

He broke the embrace. “I can’t,” he burst out, holding her away from him at arm’s length.

“I’m sorry,” she jerked her hands away and held them tight against her chest. “Did you say something before? I couldn’t… I… oh God,” now she covered her mouth with her hand. She looked like she was about to weep. “I can’t believe… Jesus, I’m an idiot,” and (to his abject horror) an actual tear slid down her flushed cheeks.

Women, Sherlock stifled a sigh, so bloody emotional.

Sometimes he really missed being with men.

“There is nothing to cry over,” he informed her, a bit peeved at her sloppy behavior, because really, what did she have to be upset about? Other than not getting her way, that was.

Annoying.

“You don’t see me sniveling,” he grizzled when she sniffled instead of responding like an adult.

She pressed her palms to her eyes and held them there for a second. “I know,” her voice was thickened by suppressed tears. “But it’s still not OK. You told me to stop, and I didn’t.”

Oh… oh.
She wasn’t upset because of denied gratification or because she felt foolish.

She was upset because she thought she hurt him.

“It was merely a miscommunication,” he softened his voice. “It’s hardly the end of the world.” He pulled her hands away from her eyes, her very red and very wet eyes. “If you would just make a simple observation, you would clearly see that I am perfectly fine, Violet.”

She gave him a watery smile. “I still feel like shit though.”

“Guilt is one of the most useless sentiments, as I know I have explained to you more than once.”

“I was raised Catholic,” she reminded him. “Guilt is one of the Blessed Sacraments.”

“Is it really?”

“No, but it might as well be.”

“And another reason why religion should just be abolished altogether. Completely irrational not to mention a waste of time, listening to a vicar insist everything good and logical is a sin and that this world was created in six days. Rubbish, absolute rubbish,” Sherlock rose from the piano bench. He lightly pressed a kiss to Violet’s forehead. “I insist you cease with this tiresome weeping. You did nothing wrong, so there is nothing for you to fret over.”

“OK,” she said in a tremulous voice, then immediately added, “But I still don’t want you to go to France.”

“Oh for heaven’s sake!” he cried out, “Really?”

But she gave him one of her sly grins as she stood up. “I didn’t say I was going to stop you, did I?” She stood on her tiptoes to kiss his cheek. “I’m going to let the dog out.” She called to Gladstone, who trotted out of the kitchen, his tail wagging.

Sherlock observed her with an almost smile as she put her feet into boots and pulled her coat on. But when she left the flat with Gladstone, the half-smile slipped from his face.

What on earth was he to do when she did insist on more than he could give her?

He rolled his eyes and shook his head.

_How do ordinary people manage this relationship rubbish anyway?_

_Being alone was far easier…_

_Easier, but not exactly blissful either. Not much fun being left out of everything, is it?_

He closed his eyes and saw Oscar Wilde’s epitaph as clearly as if he stood in front of it.

_And alien tears will fill for him_
_Pity’s long-broken urn,_
_For his mourners will be outcast men,_
_And outcasts always mourn._

Chapter End Notes
Ayda Heidari is a character from "The Adventure of the Sussex Vampire." This ACD SH short story is in my top five list of stories I hope get made into canon BBC episodes.

PS: I just wrote the first draft of the final chapter today.... !!!
Responses to comments tomorrow. Back to work/reality in the morning!
Chapter Summary

“‘You promised...’"

Not going to lie... this one is going to hurt... #feels

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Hearts Tell Tales

25 November 2015
221B Baker Street
Thursday morning
8:03 AM

“John, is that your case, down there?” Mrs. Hudson pointed to the bag at the bottom of the stairs as they all clattered down the steps.

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that, felt a bit lazy,” John admitted. “Didn’t want to carry it upstairs, then carry it back do-oof!”

Sherlock had stopped dead in his tracks, causing Mrs. Hudson and John to collide into him.

Anthea actually looked up from her texting.

“Jesus, Sherlock,” John snapped.

“Forgot something, be back momentarily,” Sherlock shoved his bags into John’s arms then wove his way around the landlady and doctor. He rushed back up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

He heard John call him a git, but ignored him as he fumbled with the lock. Once the door opened, he bolted back into the flat, rushed down the hallway and into his bedroom.

Violet had gotten out of bed. Despite what John had believed, she had on yoga bottoms as well as Sherlock’s t-shirt. She was in the process of pulling her wild hair back into some sort of ponytail when Sherlock burst into the room. “Did you forget something?” she asked.

“Yes,” Sherlock took two brisk steps, had her in his arms and kissed her.

Stunned, Violet froze for a moment, but then snaked her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

“Oh,” she said breathlessly, running her fingers through his hair.

“That’s... right? Isn’t it? When two people are in a relationship, a proper relationship, you’re supposed to kiss the other one goodbye if you’re leaving on a trip, right?”

Violet stood on her tiptoes, kissed his cheek and hugged him. “Yeah, that’s right, you are,” she rested her face against his chest. “You really are shit at this dating thing, aren’t you?”
“It’s not my area of expertise, no.”

“Good thing you’re a fast learner,” Violet looked up at him. “You are going to tell John? About us?”

“Yes,” he nodded. “I think the time is right. He and Mary are in a good place right now. You have begun patching things up with Mary as well, so yes, I will tell John. I think he’ll be pleased, although I’ll have to endure a month of ‘I told you so’s’. He’s been accusing me of fancying you for ages now.”

“Good,” Violet smiled. “I’m tired of sneaking around him.”

“We’ll still have to be discreet around Mycroft.”

“No shit, Sherlock,” Violet’s smile turned into a frown. She stroked his cheek. “You better hurry.”

His nostrils flared. “They won’t leave without me,” he announced, his arrogance in full bloom.

But he kissed her again before whirling around and striding out of the room, his coat swinging around him like a cape as he did so.

Violet looked at her dog, who cocked his head in confusion.

“Yeah, I know,” she shook her head ruefully. “He’s a Drama Queen.”

**

2 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday afternoon
4:35 PM

She held a rubbish bag in her left hand. Her last two right fingers were in a small, plastic brace. Her make-up did not completely conceal the cuts and bruises on her face. Neither did her fake eyeglasses. She wore jeans that were a size too large for her and the old Oxford sweatshirt that was three sizes too large on her.

She knew her mouth still hung open like an idiot. She slammed it shut when Sherlock elegantly pivoted away from John, as if they had been doing nothing more than having a nice chat. Bewilderment, confusion and shock blunted her reaction time to what she had just witnessed.

Then the anger, the rage flooded her system and her slender, chestnut brows furrowed and her mouth turned down.

She wanted to chuck the bag of rubbish at John’s head. She wanted to unleash Gladstone on Sherlock… Rache, rache, rache!

*I have to get out of here…* her heart started pounding and her eyes itched with unshed tears. *I have to get out of here, now.*

“Violet,” John sounded as guilty as he looked. He lifted his hand up to her as he started going up the stairs, as if to stop her. But by the time his foot was on the third step, she had already darted back inside 221B.

She grabbed one of her coats off the pegs, not even looking to see which one she had chosen. She stalked over to John’s chair (*John’s fucking chair… John’s chair, John’s room… the only goddamn*
She snatched up her iPad, stuffed it into her black messenger bag, which had been lying next to Prince John’s chair. Then she stormed out of the flat as Gladstone padded out of the kitchen, whining in confusion.

Clad in the hideously ugly pink coat, Violet slammed the flat door behind her and limped down the stairs. She had her black leather messenger bag slung across her chest.

Sherlock straightened up as she made her way down the stairs, looking like his imperial, haughty self again instead of like a mere mortal. He fixed his mercurial eyes upon her but she ignored him as she hobbled down the stairs.

“Violet,” John grabbed her by the crook of her arm. “Wait.”

Violet wanted to fling his hand off of her. She wanted to punch him in his earnest, sincere face. She saw a flicker of fear in his midnight blue eyes. His fear made her feel good.

*Hell hath no fury…*

She leaned forward and kissed his cheek, a cold, formal peck. Her lips barely grazed his skin. “My deepest sympathies for your loss,” she intoned in her coldest, loftiest ‘Miss Smith’ voice. Then she locked her eyes on his again, mouth firmly screwed down.

John got the hint right quick. He let her go and watched her hobble down the last three steps.

“Violet, stop this foolishness at once,” Sherlock demanded but Violet limped right past him.

“Take the rubbish out, please,” she ordered without turning around. She jerked the faux-fur fringed hood over her chestnut hair and pushed the door open.

“Violet,” Sherlock’s voice was a dark and dangerous thing, making the V, L and T of her name all sharp edges and points.

Violet’s silence was just as ominous. The only noise she made was to slam the door behind her as she half-stalked, half-limped out of the block of flats.

The anger broke when she had rounded the building, to the alley, where Mrs. Hudson kept her skip and where Violet hid her motorcycle.

*I knew, I fucking knew it, God, I am so so stupid…* she leaned against the sticky side of the bin, her hand cupped over her mouth as tears splashed down her face.

Sucking in great, big whooping gulps of air, she ripped the fake glasses off her face and shoved them in her coat pocket. She then wiped her wet face on her coat sleeve like a child. Despite the throbbing ache in her fingers and arms and legs and abs (all repercussions from the explosion at her clinic) she pulled her Triumph out from behind its hiding place. She pressed her lips together as she swung a sore and aching leg over the saddle of the bike. She ripped the plastic brace off her fingers so they could be mobile. She sobbed again, this time from pain as she squeezed the throttle, her sprained fingers protesting. But the pain was bearable, so she switched the ignition on, revved the throttle, knocked the kickstand up with the heel of her boot and backed up the bike.

Then she was zooming out of the alley and onto Baker Street, weaving in and out of traffic.

Like the rest of the Baker Street Irregulars, Violet Hunter was an adrenaline junkie. Mary enjoyed
thwarting laws of man and God while John had a hero’s complex. Sherlock loved the thrill of the
chase and the rush of cheating death by millimeters.

Violet’s drug of choice was speed. Motorcycles, fast cars, galloping horses, jet skis, if it went fast,
she adored it.

She knew she’d pay for this ride tonight, but right now, adrenaline chased the hate and heartbreak
from her consciousness. The screaming pain in her fingers only sharpened her focus as she zipped in
and out around cars, lorries and buses. Her hair streamed out behind her, a streak of flame, helmet
laws be damned.

Her route, however, was not random. Eventually, she slowed down as she turned onto Euston Road.
Soon, she drove her motorcycle in front of the train station made famous by the Harry Potter books
and films.

She drove next door to King’s Cross station and paid the five pounds for motorbike parking at the St.
Pancras car park. Then she trudged back towards King’s Cross, already feeling the aches and pains
of her impromptu flight.

Out of habit, she tugged the hood of her coat back over her head, wearily remembering that Mycroft
probably witnessed her wild ride from Baker Street to King’s Cross.

She didn’t care. Not as if she was actually going anywhere.

Veering far away from the tourists heading towards Platform 9 ¾ , Violet found a kiosk that sold hot
drinks and purchased a small coffee. Then she plodded to the terminus she always visited whenever
she required a retreat from her double-life, when she just needed to sit and think. Or (to be more
accurate) to dream about actually leaving London.

She found “her” bench in Terminal 5 and sat slowly down as if she were a decrepit old woman. Her
eyes flicked up to the Piccadilly sign, the Tube carriage that would take her to Harrods, Hyde
Park, Buckingham Palace, Piccadilly Circus, Leicester Square and Covent Garden. She didn’t care
about any of those locations. She only cared about the end of the line for Piccadilly: London
Heathrow Airport.

How wonderful it would be, she sipped her bitter coffee, to just grab your passport, buy a ticket and
go. She thought longingly of all the towns and cities she had called home. Wanderlust surged
through her as she fantasized about following the commuters and travelers onto the Piccadilly train.
Riding all the way to the airport then buying a one-way-ticket back to the United States, land of the
free, home of the Big Mac. She allowed her daydream to expand, dared to imagine stepping off the
plane at La Guardia then taking a taxi to her sister-in-law’s. Finally meet her niece, to tell her stories
about her daddy and what a wonderful man he had been. Then she would rent a car, an old muscle
car. American metal, a Camaro or a Mustang or hell, maybe even a Cadillac, she was dreaming, after
all, so who cared about gas mileage?

Then she would just drive. Get out of the East Coast, cruise down to the Midwest, maybe even stop
in Indiana and visit some of her remaining cousins. But after that, get back on the interstate and keep
going west until the Pacific Ocean was in her sights. Keep chasing the sunset.

She could almost feel the sand between her toes. She found herself craving a steak, not an English
roast beef smothered in some heavy sauce or gravy. But a steak from a corn-fed steer, grilled to
perfection with a light dash of A-1 sauce, washed down by a crisp light beer that was ice-cold, not a
room-temperature ale.
She thought about her grandmother’s farm, the robin’s egg blue skies and the wide, never-ending corn and wheat fields interrupted by a smattering of prairie. She remembered the sharp contrast of the treacherous, sandy deserts and the violently blue sky as the hot sun shone down in New Mexico.

Wearily, she looked around, jerking herself reluctantly out of her fantasy and watched the very British men, women and children dashing to and fro, trying to catch their trains. Her throat and chest tightened, as if all the air had been sucked out of King’s Cross.

She felt like a trapped animal. A fox in a snare.

Her coffee had gone cold. She deliberated about getting a hotel room when she detected motion out of the corner of her eyes. She ground her teeth and clutched her cold coffee as she continued to watch the trains. Her shoulders stiffened and suddenly she felt every single ache and pain in her body.

Of course he fucking followed her.

Violet held herself as rigid as possible while he gracefully sat down next to her, his Belstaff buttoned up to his throat. She noticed his scarf was missing then decided she didn’t care.

He didn’t say anything, simply crossed his long legs, the hems of his bespoke trousers slightly damp from the wet pavement. Then he linked his long fingers around his raised knee and placidly watched the trains next to her.

Violet knew what he was doing. Hell, it was an old interrogation technique she used.

She fell for it anyway. She spoke first.

“You promised.”

“You promised…”

“You promised,” her voice shook despite her best efforts. She used her real voice, the noise from the commuters as well as the trains screeching to a halt then shrieking to a start again acting as a cover. She felt her eyes pricking with tears again. “You promised me…”

“I know.” To his credit, he sounded regretful. “It was never my intention to hurt you.”

Violet risked a glance at him out of the corner of her eye. His face, as always, was impassive, closed and cold. “How far did it go and don’t lie to me that the foyer was the only time that you two…” she shuddered then muttered, “You know.”

“We snogged, twice,” Sherlock told her clinically, as if describing a crime scene or an interesting forensics article. “Once in Paris, the second time was the foyer, as you witnessed. That was as far as it went.”

Violet, whey-faced, nodded, wishing he would have lied. “So… what now?”

“The only certainty,” Sherlock said after carefully checking that no one was eavesdropping. “Is that for your safety, we continue with the outer illusion that you are my fiancée. John returns to Mary. Beyond that… I suppose is up to you.”

“He surprised me.”

“You don’t get surprised.”

“John Watson always surprises me.”

Violet snorted. “At last, the reason for the attraction, he’s not boring.”

“Neither are you.”

“I’m the wrong gender.”

“You are being petty. Your gender has nothing to do with what we have and you know that.”

“What do we have?”

“An extremely intense friendship with heavy sexual undertones that could evolve into a proper relationship if…” he trailed off, realizing he had just painted himself into a corner.

“If what? If I trusted you?” she sneered.

“Yes,” he didn’t move his lips or teeth as he pushed that word out.

“I’m supposed to trust you but you pounce on John the first chance you g-”

“He made the first move.”

“Oh bullshit!” Violet burst out.

“He most certainly did, madam. Look at me, profile me and tell me if I’m lying.”

Violet didn’t want to look at him. She wanted to throw her cold coffee on him and flounce out of King’s Cross in high dudgeon. She wanted push him in front of a moving train.

She looked at him out of the corner of her eye. There was nothing in his face to indicate dishonesty. The corners of his lips were turned down, the inner corners of his bushy black eyebrows were drawn in or up and his lower lip stuck out in the tiniest pout.

No, Violet realized. If he was lying, the micro-expressions would indicate anger, not sadness.

“Did you tell him about us?”

“I never got the chance.”

“You never got the… Are you fucking kidding me? You said you would! You should have told him! You should have stopped him before he even made a move.”

“As I am trying to explain to you, he surprised me and I did end it.”

“But how long did you let it go on for before you stopped it?” When Sherlock didn’t immediately reply, Violet held her lips tight and shook her head. “I should have fucking seen this coming. The only experiences you have with relationships are fucked up experiences, so I should have goddamn well known that getting involved with you was a terrible idea. I assumed John was too repressed to act on his feelings for you. But you’ve admitted to cheating on Victor so why wouldn’t you cheat on me when opportunity arose?”
“I was high whenever I cheated on Victor. High and hurt because he cheated on me first.”

“Were you high when you and John….” She shook her head, unable to complete the thought.

“No.”

“No? Or Not Yet?” Violet demanded in her bitchiest voice.

“You have every reason to be angry but you are dangerously close to carrying it too far,” Sherlock’s voice dropped to that dangerous lower register, the one he employed when he struggled to retain his temper. “I am aware of the magnitude of my error but I will not allow you to verbally assault me either nor dredge up the mistakes I have made in the past. But since you opened the doors to the past, imagine if your precious Jordan hadn’t died. What if he had walked through the doors of Baker Street whilst I was gone? What would you have done? Would you have told the love of your life, ‘Oh, I’m seeing someone else now, sorry but thank you for dropping by.’?”

“That’s not fair!” she snapped, finally swiveling her head to look at him properly.

“Life isn’t fair, Violet,” he snapped back. “If life was fair, you’d be in Washington DC enjoying a brilliant career with the FBI while your husband bravely battled fires and in-between fires and cases, you two would be visiting your brother and his family up in New York on holiday,” he ruthlessly ignored the tears standing in her eyes as he rolled on: “And I would have never had to fling myself off of St. Bart’s, John would have never met Mary and he’d be living in my flat instead of you. You want to throw my transgressions with Victor at me then am I allowed to remind you of your dismal track record regarding relationships? Shall I point out how you have been unable to maintain a long-term relationship after Jordan’s death? The exception being the verbally abusive boyfriend you endured an on-again, off-again relationship with when you lived in New Mexico? He was the one you drew your weapon on because he tried to upgrade the abuse from verbal to physical, yes?” His eyes flashed, “Your exact description of him was: ‘an asshole who broke my heart but I kept running back to him, time and time again,’ was it not?” As he watched her face flush in anger he added, “And you also said that you only stopped running back to him because he thinks you are dead. Perhaps Jordan was not the example I should have used,” he finished nastily.

“Dominic was a mistake.” Her cheeks were now rosy with fury, “Work always interfered with my other relationships. I never found anyone who made me feel the same as Jordan did.”

“Victor was a mistake.” Sherlock said evenly. “The Work overshadowed all my personal relationships. I never met anyone else who made me feel the same as John did… until you.” When Violet swallowed hard and turned to study the trains again, he demanded softly, “Look me in the eye and tell me if Jordan had walked back into your life right now, could you say no?”

“There’s a difference,” she lifted her eyes back up at him. “Jordan is dead. John is alive.”

“Quite so,” Sherlock agreed amicably enough as he tented his fingers, tapping them together. “You don’t have a daily reminder that Jordan didn’t choose to abandon you and before you remind me that John thought I was dead, well… he hadn’t wed Mary yet when I returned from the Great Hiatus. Only when it’s too late, when I made the conscious choice to stop behaving like a complete moron and start living my life instead of existing in some sort of suspended animation, then he decides to come out of the closet.” Spying her shoulders starting to droop, he cautiously pressed his hand over her knee as she continued to hold her paper coffee cup in a death grip. “During your extensive research and during the months that you have lived with me, do I strike you as a man who is weak-willed and easily swayed?”

“No.” The word fell from her mouth like the last stubborn apple on a mostly bare tree.
“Then you should know that I am pursuing this, us,” he screwed up his face, hating every single second of this conversation. “I want to, despite my own profound reservations regarding sentimental involvements,” he reached up and plucked the paper cup out of her hand so he could carefully cradle both of her hands, mindful of her swollen right ring finger and pinkie. “I chose you. I am choosing you.”

“What if John…” she started, desperately.

“Would you consider un ménage à trios?”

Lesser men would have disintegrated under Violet’s glare.

“No.”

“Right now, John needs our support,” Sherlock said hastily. “Moriarty is having John’s loved ones murdered to trigger his PTSD. The deaths of Sholto and Harry were meant to destabilize him. I have also deduced that the closure of the surgery that he moonlighted at and you worked part-time at as an office clerk was also meant to undermine him further, to disrupt his routine.”

“You want me to stick to Mary,” Violet said flatly. “This day just keeps getting better and better.”

“She’s the next obvious target plus her pregnancy makes her vulnerable.” When Violet wouldn’t answer, he ordered her in a severe yet soft voice, “I will not have you vent your anger on John.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll be nice to your little boyfriend.”

Sherlock gritted his teeth. “He is not my boyfriend and I am not joking, Violet. Rage at me all you like as you have every right to do so. Do not take your umbrage out on John. We’re the only family he has left.” Sherlock played his trump card. “And he loves you, dearly. His levels of guilt will skyrocket once he realizes how deeply his actions have hurt you.”

“What about you?”

His face finally softened, “It was never my intention to hurt you. It will not happen again.”

“If for whatever reason, Mary is out of the picture, will you leave me to be with John?”

He answered her honestly, “Only if you keep pushing me away.” He furrowed his brow, “I am acutely aware of my deficiencies regarding interpersonal relationships. Not just,” he pulled a face and spat out “Romantically, but also platonically. What I do know is that one person cannot carry the relationship. It must be reciprocal. I have believed so long that love was a hazardous deficiency, a chemical defect, really. I am not the only one who has to abandon comfort zones. I cannot do this,” he gesticulated wildly with his large hands, “With you doubting me.”

“So, I’m supposed to trust you when you tell me you won’t hook up with John again?”

He opened his mouth to spit out an angry Yes then closed it. Studied her then reached up to lightly touch the side of her face, his fingers lightly grazing the scar on her cheekbone.

“Please?” he whispered instead.

“I’ll try,” she finally muttered. “I’ll try, OK? This… what you and John did… it’s…” Against her will, tears spilled over. “It’s going to take time for me to forget… how betrayed I felt.”
He flicked the tears away. Normally women’s tears bored him as most women he had met used tears as some form of manipulation. Her tears however disturbed him. “I will never cause you this kind of pain again, I promise.” He looked down at her hands. Her right ring finger and pinkie were dreadfully puffy now.

Her left hand twitched; the left ring finger and pinkie curling and uncurling without her realizing it.

“We need to ice and tape your fingers,” he rumbled as he stood up. “Now, if you’re finished with your temper tantrum, shall we go home?”

She leaned back in her seat and arched an eyebrow. “Oh, we’re going home. But my temper tantrum is far from over, asshole. You have serious penance to do.”

“Is the fact that I am actively trying to clear your name with the FBI not penance enough?”

“No, you were doing that before all of this philandering horseshit.”

He flinched. Philandering? That was undoubtedly harsh.

Despite her harsh words, she allowed him to help her to her feet, clearly exhausted, past fighting. She even accepted his crooked elbow and let him walk her to the car park. Once there, after shooting a nervous, surreptitious glance at her twitching left hand, he offered, “Shall I…?” as he gestured towards the Triumph.

She fished the keys out of her ugly pink coat without even a token argument. As she handed the keys over to him, he held them in her hand for just a moment.

“I am sorry, truly,” he finally got the necessary apology out properly. “You and John both deserve better than me, you both deserve to be… loved properly.” He let her go and swung himself up on the motorcycle before she could retort.

She clambered onto the motorcycle slowly. The day’s events had finally caught up to her. He would order her to take a hot bath when they got home, but for now, he remained silent since she seemed no longer inclined to argue.

After she had straddled the motorcycle, she wrapped her arms around his waist. He felt her rise up on her legs then felt her press a close-mouthed kiss to his cool cheek. He twisted his head around as she sat properly down again. “Am I forgiven then?”

“No,” a wry smile played on her lips. “But you’re wrong, about John and I deserving better.” She bit her lower lip. Before Sherlock admonished her for that irritating tic of hers, she asked, “Is John OK or is he…?”

Sherlock shook his head. “How bad was it, the crime scene at Clara’s flat?”

“Bad.” Her practical nature starting to reassert itself over her emotions, she suggested, “Let’s go home and start over tomorrow. Let’s focus on finding the bastard who murdered Harry.”

“That’s the first sensible thing you’ve said since I’ve returned to England,” Sherlock started up the Triumph. Soon, they were trundling back to Baker Street, Sherlock observing the speed limits, mindful of her exhaustion and weakness.

He wanted to carry her up the stairs but she shook her head in protest. However she leaned on him heavily. She nearly stumbled and clung to his coat for a bit, but still managed to climb up the stairs mostly under her own steam. He guided her towards the en suite, ignoring her protests that she was
fine, just tired and yes, I’m still pissed off at you…

Bus she didn’t argue when he insisted on drawing a bath for her. He added Epsom salts to the steaming water to help with the muscle aches then made up an ice pack for her sprained fingers. He fetched a glass of water and the bottle of ibuprofen and left them for her on the lid of the toilet so she could reach them from the bathtub.

Leaving her to soak, he retreated to his computer in the lounge.

He flipped his laptop open. His fingers hovered over the keyboard.

Then he forced himself to type in *amyotrophic lateral sclerosis* in the search engine.

**

20 December 2015Saint Charles Hospital
London, England
Sunday morning
8:21 AM

“Could I… um, get a phone so I could talk to Mary myself?” John pleaded.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Violet put on her fake eyeglasses then popped her mobile into her handbag. Looping the handbag over the crook of her elbow as she walked towards the door, she looked over her shoulder and smiled at John. “Get some rest, OK?”

Violet’s fingertips were on the doorknob when John rasped, “I mean it, Violet. I don’t want Sherlock seeing me like this. I don’t want...” awkwardly, he gestured towards himself the best he could with his bound hands. “*This* seared on that bloody memory of his plus I really don’t need him lecturing me on how idiotically I behaved. I’m very aware of the mess I’ve made of things.” Softly he added, “Of everything.”

Violet rested her hand on the doorknob. This time, she didn’t turn around. Her shoulders rose as she sighed heavily. “I’ll tell him.”

She slipped out of the hospital room and plodded down the hallway towards the waiting room. She found Sherlock pacing like a caged tiger in front of windows, the blinds closed and dusty. A paper cup of forgotten tea sat cooling on a plastic table. Some tabloid program flashed from the flat screen television, the sound blessedly muted.

“How is he? Is he awake, will he see me, is he alright?” he babbled when he saw her.

Violet felt as if she carried five cinder blocks and two more were added to the stack.

She started to tell him that John didn’t want to see him then stopped.

“What is it?” Sherlock’s throat worked. He looked like he might actually succumb to tears.

*Since you opened the doors to the past, imagine if Jordan hadn’t died, had walked through the doors of Baker Street whilst I was gone? What would you have done?*

Violet knew damn well what she would have done if a miracle had occurred, that Jordan had survived the collapse of the World Trade Center and had found her in London. Two years or fourteen, it really wouldn’t have mattered to her. Not one bit. Granted, she’d punch him in the throat for abandoning her for over fourteen years, but then... but then... oh, then there would be a future
again, something bright and unpredictable and exciting around the corner. Something to look forward to, something tangible to hold on to, something more than just a voice mail…

*Hey babe, listen... don’t freak out, but my ladder’s going to the Towers. It’ll be fine, just keep your butt at home, you ain’t FBI yet. Love ya, talk to you later.*

She knew she would happily sign her soul over to the Devil Himself for just one more... one more kiss, one more hug, one more miracle, one more *Something*... something more than one last goddamned voice mail.

John *did* die. Technically, he had been dead for over a minute.

This was Sherlock’s *One More*. This was his miracle. *So, let him have it, Hunter... let him have his miracle. Then, we can see where to go from here... if he’ll stay or leave*...

“You have a hall pass,” she croaked out, barely able to enunciate like a proper Briton. She squeezed her eyes tight, feeling her stomach churn.

“What?”

“Thirty minutes. A hall pass and I do not require details,” she turned to leave.

“What... What’s a hall pass?”

He sounded so lost, so childlike, Violet couldn’t suppress a smile.

“Google it.”

He blinked, utterly bewildered. But he recovered quickly as he dug into his trousers for his mobile. She pivoted like a queen, holding her head up and keeping her shoulders square as she exited the waiting room. Her face betrayed no emotion. She looked composed, regal even.

Only when she reached the tiny, non-denominational chapel did she break. Thankful to be alone, she slumped into a pew, covered her face with her hand and sobbed. Torn between being relieved that John had survived and fear that she would be abandoned by Sherlock, she allowed herself the luxury of releasing the all hurt she had bottled up for weeks.

She didn’t even know if she and Sherlock were still even... whatever it was they had been.

*Maybe it was just a stupid social experiment that blew up in my face...*

By and by, she pulled herself together. By the dim light of the chapel, she managed to repair her make-up. Peering at herself in her tiny compact mirror, she frowned at the red in her sclera and the puffiness under the eyes itself. Sherlock would notice, may even be foolish enough to comment on it.

She shut the mirror with a click and put it back in her handbag. She had pulled out her mobile to text Mycroft for details about the Paris mission when the chapel doors open. Sherlock slipped in.

He looked... like himself. But Violet eyed him suspiciously, wondering why he wore the Belstaff inside the hospital. His collar was also flipped up and his scarf was wound around his throat, as if he was trying to hide... a wave of nausea slammed into her as she simultaneously reminded herself, *You gave him a free pass, you don’t get to be jealous*...

“Are we leaving then?” Violet Smith asked.

“Mycroft wants us to report at MI-6 at once. Apparently they want to alter our appearance before we
depart for Paris. Nothing drastic, I’m sure. Hair dye, different clothes.” He took a deep breath, held it, as if he inhaled an invisible cigarette. “John knows. About us. He had suspected for a while, actually.”

“Oh?” And John still… oh, if he hadn’t just accidentally OD’ed, I’d kill him…

“Mm, yes,” Sherlock acted like he wore an itchy hair-coat instead of a lavish great coat. “He won’t… there won’t be a repeat of Paris. He said that before I could even bring it up.”

“He did?” Violet Hunter asked.

“Mm,” Sherlock seemed to prefer humming than using his words.

“You OK with that?” Violet didn’t mean to sound bitchy, but she couldn’t help it.

He lifted his eyes up at her. “Yes.”

“OK,” Violet stood up. “Let’s go meet Mickey.”


“Closure,” she locked her eyes on his, her face unsmiling.

He nodded, also not smiling. “Thank you,” he whispered.

She brushed past him without saying a word.

They never spoke of it again.

Chapter End Notes

Again, thank you for being patient with me! In case you didn’t see my comment on the previous chapter, I royally jacked up my back last weekend and sitting up to proofread and post wasn’t happening yesterday. Thank God for ibuprofen and heating pads! And seriously, lift with the legs, not the back, that’s no joke!

Only two chapters left... :^0
Sacred Heart

Chapter Summary

“You can leave, if you want.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

Smut, feels, revelations, more smut and feels.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty: Sacred Heart

22 December 2015
La Tour Eiffel
Paris, France
Tuesday evening
7:15 PM Paris time

“There’s still time, you know.”

“Time for what?” she couldn’t keep the edge out of her voice. My plans depend on Sherlock telling Mycroft how I helped bring Moriarty down...

“For you to disappear.”

Violet stopped wrapping up his hand. She lifted her head to find him studying her intently again. But his face wasn’t molded into its usual implacable mask. He looked sad. He looked human.

“I can help you disappear,” he whispered, his long fingers curling around her hands. “I can help you fake your death so you can permanently leave England and live safely somewhere else, anywhere else. You have the means to do so. I know you still have the funds you stole from the gangsters Jack Woodley was laundering money for. You can be free.” He hesitated but didn’t break eye contact.

“You can leave, if you want.”

“Do you want me to leave?”

The small room became even smaller, tighter, as if all the oxygen was being sucked out of the room while the walls closed in. Sherlock opened his mouth, thought better of it. He looked away from her, studying their hands.

“Sherlock,” Violet, already deducing that he was dreaming up some falsehood, let go of his hand to cup his chin. Gently, she tipped his face up, making him look at her. “I thought we agreed it was pointless for either of us to lie to the other.”

“I don’t want you to leave,” he admitted.

“Then I’m not leaving.”
“I will still endeavor to clear your name,” he whispered to her.

“OK. But even then, I'm still not leaving.”

“OK,” his voice was barely a whisper.

She smiled. “OK.”

“OK,” he echoed again, closing his eyes as she resumed wrapping his hands. He couldn’t look at her any longer. Her eyes had become suddenly over-bright and wet, betraying her thoughts. He deduced she had thought about him facing Jim Moriarty alone in the sanctuary of the Abbaye du Mont-Saint-Michel. They had both had their share of extremely close shaves during their brief time together, starting from the very first night they had met, from bombs to being pursued by Moriarty’s thugs to being pursued by Mycroft and MI-6 to near drowning in the Thames to suffering from hypothermia afterwards.

None of that compared to Jim Moriarty and it had finally hit her how perilously close Sherlock had come to defeat. That was why she turned down Sherlock’s offer to help her disappear. She couldn’t bear it, wouldn’t bear it to be parted from him.

Sherlock discovered he couldn’t bear it to be separated from her either.

He wasn’t surprised when he felt her lips on his. What surprised him was how eagerly he accepted her touch, anticipated it even. After his transgressions with John, her kisses and caresses had stopped, naturally. There had been a few uncomfortable nights on the sofa instead of in his bed. He thought that had been incredibly unfair (it’s my bed, I purchased it…) but her barbed remarks prevented him from arguing that point any further.

Her catty remarks and sullen looks hadn’t lasted long. Nor did his exile from his own bed but she stayed on her side and he on his. The everyday caresses and kisses hadn’t resumed. Sherlock found himself torn between relief and disappointment. Relief because his intimacy issues could be postponed just a little bit longer and disappointment because… well. Her kisses really were as addictive as heroin.

Now he was finally getting his fix.

He leaned forward, cupping her face in his hands as his tongue sought hers. Her hands raked through his hair as he now thought about how close he had come to nearly losing her tonight…

(I’m going to lose her anyway…)

He reached around the back of her head and tugged on the cloth hair-tie until it came loose and all her messy, tangled chestnut hair tumbled down. He continued leaning forward, almost predatory, one hand running down her back as he guided her back down onto the padded bench. His other hand continued to cradle her face. Meanwhile she had hooked a leg over his hip and ran her hands down his spine then over his backside as she lay back down.

It was not warm in the secret apartment. Sherlock tugged the chenille duvet over them as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders and neck, arching her slight body against his own thin frame, both her legs coiled around his waist, ankles crossed behind his back.

This was more than a fix. This was the equivalent to a speedball.

As she ran her hands up and down his body, he reached up and threaded his fingers through her hair. Tilted her head back and lavished kisses up and down her throat, nipped her earlobe before tracing
the delicate shell of her ear with the very tip of his tongue. As she inhaled sharply and writhed beneath him, he smiled. Then he found her lips again, greedily kissing her as he began to rock his hips in rhythm with hers. One of her legs slipped off his back, but she kept the other one hooked solidly around his waist. She clung to him, gripping his inside out grey T-shirt as tightly as she could with both hands, like she had no intention of ever letting him go…

*(I’m going to lose her …)*

He slowed down a bit, taking a moment to breathe, taking the time to ask, “Are you alright, is… is this alright?”

She nodded, reaching up to touch his cheek. “You need a shave, Blackbeard” she teased him but soberly switched moods. “Jesus Christ, your face…” Her fingers floated over one of the cuts Marie Devine had sliced into him to create his cover story.

“They don’t hurt,” he reassured her as he rested on his forearms, hovering over her. Lying on her, but not putting his full weight on her.

“You wouldn’t lie to me would you, Mr. Holmes?” She smiled That Smile of hers, the one specifically bespoke only for him. She reached up to smooth back one of his newly dyed black curls from his forehead.

Only Sherlock noticed the tremor.

*(I’m going to lose her …)*

“No more than you would to me,” he purred as he pecked her on the nose. Then he kissed her chastely on the lips, then again until she smiled widely, parting her lips so he could taste her once more. He felt her chest brush against his and she sighed with pleasure as their tongues grazed each other. He lifted himself a little bit off her, just enough to slide his hand down the front of her neck, trace her collarbone with his thumb, then skim the palm of his hand over her breast, down her belly until he reached the hem of the navy jumper that she wore. Then his slipped his hand under the jumper. He ghosted his hand over her smooth, warm skin, reversing the previous journey until he found her breast again.

“Oh God,” she groaned against his ear as he teased her nipple with his thumb, having deduced a long time ago what would arouse her.

He smirked against her throat as he pushed the jumper up now, but not completely off over her head. The flat was chilly and getting colder by the minute as the temperatures outside continued to plummet. She helped hold the jumper up as he dipped his head down to tease her breasts with his tongue, swirling first the right, then the left. Her breathing grew quicker as she started running her fingernails lightly up and down his back. The sensation trailing up and down his back through the soft, thin cloth of his T-shirt sent shivers up his spine and down again then radiating throughout his entire body.

Sherlock also felt the blood supply to his precious brain sharply diverting southward as she did that. He found he did not care. He had crossed the threshold where he was no longer The Great Consulting Detective but simply a man in bed with a woman, and he behaved accordingly with great results.

It was the furthest thing possible from a Hollywood love scene. They stayed snuggled underneath the chenille blanket, clinging as closely together as possible. He left his T-shirt on, she the jumper. They even committed the sex faux pas of leaving their socks on. There was no central heating in the secret
flattened and sex only generates so much heat. But he pulled her boxer shorts down as she pushed his fleece pyjamas bottoms off his bony hips, both of them trying to awkwardly kick off the inconvenient garments while staying underneath the warm, soft blanket.

As with most truly momentous occasions, neither of them made a big to-do about it. There were no flowery speeches about overcoming trauma, no grandiose proclamations of perfect romance. Violet didn’t confess that he was the first man she had been with after being assaulted by Moriarty and Sherlock didn’t breathe a word that she was the first woman he had been with completely sober. They didn’t have to, they both knew.

She hooked her legs over his thighs, grounding her heels against the padded bench for purchase. She also slid her arms up and under his, grasping his shoulders for support. He teased her a bit, pushing against her then withdrawing, making her simultaneously moan and curse at him a little. It took every bit of self-control he had left not to just plunge inside her and start pumping, the wet heat of her driving him to distraction. Only when she dug her nails into his shoulders enough to hurt did he grant her mercy. As he slowly thrust into her, she arched her back and let go one of his shoulders to grab at his hair instead, pulling at it, not that there was much left to grab after the haircut he was forced to get for the mission. Still, the hair-pulling added another delicious sensual element to the already heady experience. So he found her mouth and kissed her again, hard, as she pulled his hair and met his hips with her thighs with every pulse and thrust.

Seconds felt like eons and hours felt like nanoseconds. Sherlock blissfully lost track of time and logic as he and Violet moved together, both of them panting and sweating and kissing and fucking. Suddenly he felt everything inside his body transition from being pleasantly warm and liquid, to exquisitely fiery and explosive. Every single one of his muscles contracted then he let go, experiencing the intense, blinding pleasure only a man in the midst of an orgasm can know. He saw stars, then whiteness then nothing as an involuntary groan slipped out of him.

When his vision and breath returned, he could feel her still shuddering underneath him so he deduced she had achieved her climax as well.

His systems quickly came back online, detachment and logic already beginning to override lust and sentiment. There was no blissful post-coital haze for him, unfortunately. His first observation was they were both quite sticky and damp and this was unacceptable as well as uncomfortable. He gave her a perfunctory kiss on the lips and slipped out from underneath the tangled blanket, now drenched with sweat and sex. He also fished out his fleece pyjamas bottoms and bit back a curse as the chill of the secret flat hit him, his bare lower half breaking out in gooseflesh.

He crouched down in front of one of the Monoprix shopping bags and produced a packet of wet wipes, intended for infants, but they would do in a pinch for a quick clean-up in their circumstances. He also grabbed two bottles of water and carried them back over to the bench. They both tidied themselves up the best they could then drank their fill of water. He put his bottoms back on and she the boxer shorts. Then he located another blanket, actually a mildewed old sleeping bag, one he had left behind before departing for Rome during his Great Hiatus. But it was warmer than the chenille blanket (not to mention dry.) He then dug out two of his undershirts he usually wore under his posh dress shirts. He tossed one at Violet so she wouldn’t have to sleep in a damp jumper. He then shamelessly watched her pull off the jumper. “What?” she asked before pulling on the white T-shirt.

“Just enjoying the show,” he said lightly as he unzipped the musty sleeping bag.

She reached for a pillow and threw it at him, which he ducked easily. It bounced harmlessly off the creepy mannequin of Gustave Eiffel.
Sherlock scooped up the pillow and gave it back to Violet. He curled up around her as he arranged the sleeping bag over them. Even though it smelt like damp and mothballs, it was heavy and downy, the perfect shield against the biting chill of the flat.

After kissing her on the throat, he hummed into her ear, “Was that satisfactory then?”

“You’re the most observant man in the entire goddamn world,” her voice was almost a growl. “You tell me.”

“It wasn’t too much then? After all the pain and discomfort you’ve experienced yesterday?”

“Oh, I’ll pay for it tomorrow,” she yawned. She found his hand, splayed across her belly. She linked her fingers through his. “But that’s tomorrow.”

Sherlock listened to her breathing start to even out. He knew she wasn’t quite asleep yet, but he hadn’t expected her to speak again.

“But next time, I’m on top.”

He snorted. “We’ll see.”

“Control-freak.”

“Exactly so,” He kissed her temple. “Go to sleep.”

Soon, her breathing did become deeper and more regular. Sherlock, meanwhile, was wide awake, his busy brain whirling away as usual.

He felt glad she had chosen to stay, of course. He just wasn’t sure if that was the correct decision. Then there was her illness, and it was an illness, there was no denying that now. Even John had observed that her health was declining although he hadn’t quite pieced together the puzzle yet. John’s usual lack of observation perturbed Sherlock but at the same time, he understood that John had a lot on his plate at the moment. Also, there were value reasons why doctors were normally not allowed to treat friends or family. One reason being how objectivity and clinical detachment flies straight out the window upon seeing a loved one suffering. And then there was John…

Sherlock knew that he could never return to Notre Dame, or even look at it in a photograph without thinking about how John had finally let his guard down during a snowstorm on that horrible night he had learned that his sister had died…

… and it was too late. For both of them.

Sherlock picked up one of Violet’s curls just for the pleasure of touching it. Her hair endlessly fascinated him, but not for the chestnut colour. He knew that came from a bottle. But he had never observed naturally curly hair such as hers in an adult before. He had observed that most curly-haired children lost the ringlets as they aged, and their hair became either wavy or frizzy. Even his mop of riotous curls was not nearly as coiled as they had been when he was a boy. His own childhood ebony curls were nearly impossible to get a brush through and many plastic combs had been broken as his mother and countless nannies tried to comb out the tangles. Eventually his mother had given up and insisted on short hair-cuts, which he had hated. He thought the short hair made him look like a bloody otter.

As he grew up, the pretty boyhood curls eventually turned into the shaggy mop he had grown out of rebellion. At least now, he could run his fingers through his hair, but that was about it.
Violet’s hair, when she didn’t straighten it for her “Miss Smith” persona, was just as wavy and springy as it had been when she was a girl, or so she claimed. Sherlock gently pulled a lock of hair out then let go, just for the pleasure of watching it coil back into a curl.

He mused how he had been trying to figure out the proper title for their unorthodox relationship for ages. She was not his girlfriend or fiancée. She was not his better half or soul mate. Despite his fondness of and devotion to her, she was not his best friend or partner and never would be. No matter what happened, John would always be his best friend and partner.

Technically, they were finally proper lovers now but that word just seemed so silly to him.

*Lovers… pah. Insipid… revolting…*

As he played with her hair, it dawned on him he was limiting himself. Their relationship could not be defined by a simplistic title. Rather, what they had could be best explained by a phrase.

They were old friends who have come home.

*(But I’m going to lose her…)*

**

30 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Wednesday evening
9:45 PM

“It’s really not fair to Violet, leaving her in limbo like this, is it?”

“Limbo?” Sherlock’s nostrils flared. He had been plucking the violin strings idly, letting John talk, waiting for him to confess what had upset him earlier that day.

After Violet disappeared to the master bedroom to “Netflix and chill” *(whatever that meant…)* Sherlock poured John and himself a stiff drink and invited John to come sit in front of the fireplace and have a drink. John had dithered. Sherlock had insisted.

The chat started innocently enough, both of them sticking to safe and banal topics. Then they started reminiscing on old cases and the utterly insane adventures they had experienced together. Then they started discussing the events of 2015, touching lightly on the more sensitive topics, such as Greg and Molly’s wedding and the birth of Henry Lestrade. But John veered away from topics sensitive to him, mainly his dwindling family. Sherlock allowed that deviation for now. He allowed John to digress to the topic of Violet Hunter, or as he had called her in his blog “a beautiful intruder.” Sherlock had rolled his eyes and berated John about his love for purple prose.

Then John delivered a brutal home truth to Sherlock about Violet. Sherlock reacted accordingly. He became snappish and cold.

“What the deuce are you talking about?”

“Come off it. We… I’m…”

“Staying with Mary, like an idiot, I am aware.”

“I don’t want to stay with Mary. You know that, you already knew that!” John dug his nails into the arms of his comfortable old plaid chair. He realized how harsh he had sounded so he took several
deep breaths, thinking carefully about what he was about to say. In a tense, controlled voice, he told Sherlock, “We’ll get into that bit in a moment. Right now, I want to talk to you, man to man.”

“Please don’t.”

“About her, about your ‘clever girl’,” John soldiered on. “That’s what you call her, don’t deny it, I’ve heard you call her that, many times. It’s your pet name for her.”

“Do you have your gun? I have a sudden urge to use it.”

“Why are you fighting it? You fancy her, you have from the start and she’s bloody gone on you.”

“Why are you fighting for it, John?” Sherlock shouted for the simple fact because he wanted to, he needed to let out the anger starting to build within him. *Leave it alone John…* 

“Because I don’t want you to be fucking alone, OK? And if it can’t… since I can’t… I can’t leave Mary, so since it can’t be me, I want it to be her.”

“You do realize she’s eavesdropping, don’t you, John?” Sherlock drawled. “She never shut the bedroom door and sounds carries from here to there.”

“Shit,” John swore under his breath. “This really needs to be a conversation between you and me,” he added as he rose from his seat. He marched down towards the master bedroom.

Sherlock huffed an irritated noise that was between a sigh and a groan. He smoothed his fringe back, again hating his short hair. He found a curly crop far more difficult to manage than his usual shaggy style. He forced himself to adopt a relaxed pose, his ankle resting on his knee, leaning back in his chair, his fingers tented.

No one else would think that was *relaxed*, but it was for him.

Sherlock heard John firmly shut the bedroom door and pad back towards the lounge. “She’s dead asleep, Sherlock.”

*To quote the lady in question herself: Bullshit…* Sherlock thought as he reached for his drink glass. There was only a swallow left.

“Let me replenish that,” John held his hand out for the glass after Sherlock drained it.

“I dislike being intoxicated.”

“I hate drinking alone. And I need liquid courage now,” John’s throat worked.

Sherlock’s brow furrowed but he didn’t push. He simply held the empty glass out to John.

Soon John returned from the kitchen, carrying the drinks. Sherlock observed that while his glass only barely had a finger of scotch, John’s had two. Sherlock’s murmured *thank you* was more than just common courtesy. He always appreciated how John rarely pushed him into doing things he truly disliked, except for the silliness of eating right and sleeping enough, of course.

He waited, letting John sip at his drink, cataloging everything he observed about his best friend. He was aware he was treating John like a potential client now. He didn’t mean to, it was simply force of habit.

“After…” John faltered, rubbing his forehead, as if massaging his brain into functioning.
“Take your time,” Sherlock instructed with uncharacteristic patience.

John nodded. He took another sip, a good sign in Sherlock’s eyes. A gulp meant John wanted to get drunk, to wipe away his pain. A sip meant he just needed something to take the edge off his pain, dull it just enough so he could think. Not that that was particularly good either, but it was the lesser of two evils. Especially after the overdose…

An image of John unconscious on the floor, his face turning greyish-blue flashed in Sherlock’s mind. He banished that memory as quickly as it had sprung up.

“After you and Violet came to hospital and we had all learned how much of a sick fuck Magnussen was and also the depths of Mary’s deceit,” John started again. “I made myself calm down and cool off, so I could think instead of just… you know, blundering through everything, feeding off of adrenaline and panic and rage and… anyway. Violet had caught up with me and we had a good chat then when I was nice and calm, I returned to Mary’s room.” He picked at a nub on the chair’s arm. “I asked her point blank if she still loved me and without missing a beat, she said yes. That everything she had done, the good and the bad was because she loved me.”

Sherlock tented his fingers and started tapping his forefingers together, “And?”

“I told her if she loved me, she needed to tell me everything, the good and the bad.”

“The good bits will be dull, so you can skip over that,” Sherlock said with his usual lack of tact. “Start with the bad, far more interesting.”

“It’s not interesting, it’s terrible,” John said flatly. “I made her tell me what was on the AGRA drive. She fought me at first, saying I should have read it when I had the chance, threw back in my face what I said to her about whether or not ‘Mary Watson’ was good enough for her. I…” John stared at the ceiling for a moment, “I told her it wasn’t good enough anymore. I told her reading the memory stick wouldn’t be good enough either, I needed to hear her confess it.”

Sherlock blew out a breath. He had read the files on the memory stick, of course then made a copy. “So now you know exactly who you vowed to spend the rest of your life with.”

“She killed kids, Sherlock,” John said, his voice still dead. “Women and children, not directly but she helped mastermind a bombing that wiped out an entire crime family. It was a christening. There were no survivors.”

Sherlock lowered his gaze. There was nothing that could be said about that.

“She said those bombings and the others like it was what drove her to get out of the game, but I don’t know Sherlock, she still took the payment for those jobs. Then there’s the whole double-hit thing she set up on you…” John licked his lips. “She lied to Violet when she confronted her.”

“Obviously,” Sherlock kept his eyes down while thinking: Why am I the only one who knew Mary lied about that? That payment is only issued if MI-6 kills Mary, what a farce. Oh Mary, you are a clever one though, aren’t you? You actually outmaneuvered Agent Violet Hunter. Well done.

“I told her I didn’t know how I could stay with her anymore. I told her I would never wish what Magnussen did to her on anybody, and that I hated what Moriarty did to her and our unborn baby, but I didn’t know if there could be an us anymore.” John licked his lips again as his left hand started to shake. “Then she asked me, what about Maisie?”

“Guilt trip,” Sherlock immediately piped up.
“I know, I know,” John reached his drink, took another careful sip. “I said, we can still work together to find her, but just not be together anymore. Then… oh Christ, Sherlock it was just fucking… chilling what happened next. Her face got all funny, just went completely slack. I honestly thought she was having a stroke at first. Then her eyes just became… dead.”

Sherlock suppressed a shudder. He knew exactly what Look John was describing.

“She then said: ‘It’s all or nothing, John,’” then reached for the remote to the telly as if that settled everything. Well, I snatched the remote right from her hand. I nearly chucked it across the room. I asked her what in the hell did she mean by that? She proceeded to tell me she worked too hard to build the life she wanted, the life she deserved. She said she earned her redemption every day. She was an A & E nurse now so she saves lives, instead of taking them. Becoming a nurse is her penance. Every life she saves in the A & E is atonement for a life she had taken as AGRA. She told me that I married Mary Morstan, not Anzhela Anasenko. “Anya is dead,” were her exact words. She said that she hadn’t killed anyone since she left The Life until the Copper Beach Massacre, and that was self defense. She said I knew all the reasons why she was going to kill Magnussen and that,” John gave Sherlock a pointed look. “You should have gotten out of her way when she told you to,” John squeezed his left hand over and over, trying to get the tremors to stop. “She said she hasn’t forgiven herself for hurting you but if she perceives someone as a threat, she’ll treat them as such and you should have stood down.”

“You of course, predictably, exploded.”

“Yeah, I lost my temper again,” John admitted, rubbing his left hand now. “I told her that I was the only thing standing between her and Mycroft and she fucking better believe me.”

“That was a mistake.”

“Yeah, I know that now!” John snapped then rubbed his eyes. “Sorry, I’m sorry.”

“Already forgotten, do go on.”

“She was so quiet, I barely heard her, but what she said was…” John squeezed his eyes tight. “She said, ‘And I’m the only thing standing between Sherlock and a bullet.’”

“I see.”

“I was stunned, just… I did slam the remote down, think I broke it. I’ve… I’ve never wanted to hit a woman before, I’d never hurt a woman, but… if she wasn’t in that hospital bed, I think…”

“You might have done something ungentlemanly. Go on.”

“Right… I slammed the remote down on the table and started cursing at her, just really…” John’s cheeks pinked. “Really laid into her, called her a selfish bitch and… other things.”

“Dull, get to the point,” requested the detective but a soft, regretful smile undermined the order.

“She let me behave like a complete arsehole for a few minutes. Then, cool as ice, she told me I could either help her find Maisie or she was going to look for her by herself. Then she said again, ‘It’s all or nothing, John. You made vows to me, I made vows to you. But I also made vows to myself: that I was never going to be AGRA again. I will not have you continuing to throw my past in my face. If you want a divorce, understand that it will be final. I will disappear completely and if I find Maisie once we’ve separated, she stays with me.’”

“So obviously we need to find Marissa before Mary does.”
“And obviously, I need to stay with Mary until we do and we may never find her.”

“Joh-”

“We don’t have any leads!” John burst out. “Every lead we thought we dug up has been wrong. Mycroft said he doesn’t know where she is and I believe him, I really do. Maisie may not even be in England for all we know!”

“She would have been placed in an English speaking country.”

“Oh, so ruling out all the non-speaking English countries that only leaves Ireland, Canada, New Zealand, Australia and America,” John said bitterly. “Great. No problem.”

“Probably a lot of little island countries as well. Belize, Malta, Peneng…”

“Not helpful, mate.”

“I did not claim that it would be easy.”

John ignored him. He pressed his hand to his chest, as if that could hold the pieces of his shattered heart together. “My child is turning one in two days and I won’t be with her.”

“Tell me what you need,” Sherlock immediately spat out, unconsciously echoing Molly Hooper the night before The Fall.

“For you to listen, to listen to me right now,” John leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. He fixed his Captain Watson stare on Sherlock. “Stop pressing me to leave Mary, both of you, you and Violet. I can’t leave her, I won’t.”

“John, I will not allow you to continue existing in this intolerable situation.”

“No. Living in a world in a world that you are not in… even if that meant I couldn’t be a part of your life any longer, that’s intolerable.”

Sherlock slumped back into his chair. “Oh John…”

“She’ll kill you,” John whispered. “If you get in her way again, she’ll kill you. That’s why you’re kind to her, that’s why you’re friends with her, to stay on her good side, isn’t it?”

“Well-deduced,” Sherlock’s lips had turned white.

“Sherlock, there are only two people in this bleeding world that I love unreservedly and unconditionally. My daughter and you,” he linked his fingers tightly together, his knuckles turning white. “I am going on blind faith that Maisie is alive and safe and loved. If I allow myself to imagine anything else, I’ll… I’ll go barking mad, I may even be close to going round the bend anyway. I’ve lost my oldest friend and my sister, I can’t… not you too, I can’t bear it, I couldn’t bear it, I nearly didn’t bear it during your Great Hiatus. If Greg hadn’t stuck to me like glue during those first few months…” John shook his head, looking at the floor now. Sherlock opened his mouth to apologize yet again, but John held up his hand instinctively. “I know you’re sorry, I know. Now I understand why you lied, why you faked your death, I really do, truly. You saved me.” John lifted his head up. “Let me return the favor.”

“You are risking your own life. I won’t have it. I will not have it.”

“Why? Got that market cornered, then, yeah?” John quipped. Then he smiled, “She won’t hurt me,
Sherlock. Despite everything, she still loves me, can you imagine?"

He spread his fingers out wide, studying his hands.

Knowing that John still pondered over where his wedding ring had disappeared to, Sherlock murmured, “She loves the idea of you.”

“I loved the idea of her once too, I suppose,” John lowered his hands.

Both men fell silent, the fire crackling merrily in the hearth.

“Well,” Sherlock reached for his untouched drink. “I suppose I should get cracking. The sooner Marissa is found and reunited with you, the faster you can escape Mary’s delusional beliefs about what constitutes a happy family.”

“I still want to work with you on cases,” John watched Sherlock take a tiny sip of scotch. “If I just cut ties all together, Mary would know something is up.”

“Indeed. In fact, she told me she knew she could never forbid you to stay away from me.”

“So she did threaten you. I wondered.”

“Mm.”

“Also,” John produced a sheepish smile. “It’s also our only source of income right now anyway, the cases and the blogging. And again, no, I will not accept a loan from you.”

“If you insist on being stupid, I can’t very well stop you then. At any rate, I’d be lost without my blogger, so there you have it then,” Sherlock responded with a clenched jaw.

He felt the first sparks of genuine dislike for Mary kindling in his miniscule heart. He really had liked her, actually liked her for her, not just because she was John’s bride. He had even still liked her after she shot him, although, admittedly, not as much as he had before.

He hadn’t enjoyed being shot, but he alone understood why.

After all, violations of profoundly personal and private space can make one aggressive and unpredictable. Yet another way he and Mary were kindred spirits.

But the shine had finally come off Mary for Sherlock, now that he witnessed firsthand how very miserable John was with her. *Mary, Mary, quite contrary…*

“So,” John said slowly, “That’s why it’s important to me that you and Violet-”

“Stop.”

“Sherlock, you have a chance at real happiness with her. It could be years before I’m free of Mary. I may never be free of her. We both know that is a very realistic possibility.”

“John, just because you feel guilty because you didn’t wait for me during the Great Hiat-”

“It’s not that,” John softly interrupted. “It’s not only guilt prompting me to push you towards Violet. Your happiness is important to me.”

“What about your…” Sherlock sought a better word than *happiness*, that sentimental myth, “Your mental well-being? Staying with Mary cannot be helping with your PTSD.”
“I can make do with Mary until we find Maisie as long as I know you’re happy and safe.”

“You shouldn’t have to make do, John.”

“Except, it’s not about me, is it?” John ran his finger around the rim of his tumbler. “You willingly gave up two years of your life, enduring… I don’t even know what, for me, so I could live. You saved my life. A lifetime with Mary is not enough to pay you back for that sacrifice.”

“Oh.”

Another silence stretched out as Sherlock pretended an eyelash had fallen in his eyes while John acted like a bit of dust had gotten into his.

Eventually, they pulled themselves together, as proper Englishmen did. “So, then,” John cleared his throat, “Violet.”

“She’s fine. We’re fine. Everyone’s fine.”

“Sherlock…”

In a thick voice, Sherlock admitted, “I’ve been trying, but I fear I’m not doing a very good job.”

“What happened in Paris and downstairs, that’s on me,” John immediately burst out but Sherlock waved him away.

“I have no point of reference other than Victor Trevor and he is not exactly a shining example of what a proper significant other should be like, is he?”

“No. I thought he was a twat.”

“You only met him once, at the lido last summer.”

“And he seemed like a cunt.”

“Your observational skills have improved,” Sherlock gave him a weak smile.

“Learned from the best.”

“Relationships really aren’t my area,” Sherlock started at his socked feet. “The fair sex is more your department, I believe.”

“Well… I mean… you can be somewhat reserved, Sherlock,” John made the Understatement of the Year. “You do need to let your guard down just a bit.”

Sherlock gave John one of his patently disgruntled glowers. “She’s a profiler, John. She is nearly as skilled at reading people as I am. I do not have my guard up around her because there is no point.” Sherlock hesitated, then pretended to pick a bit of fluff of his trousers. “Violet is a highly intelligent woman of rare perception. She can see worlds where no one else can see anything of value whatsoever.”

“Ah,” John leaned back in his own chair. “I see. It’s not you being obstructive, it’s her. Isn’t it?” Sherlock’s response was to turn and stare into the fire.

“She’s holding back,” John mused to himself then asked, “Is it because of her fiancé, the one who died in the World Trade Center attacks?”
“Amongst other reasons,” Sherlock stretched out his long legs. “The main one being that she’s a fugitive and therefore constantly in mortal peril.”

“Right, that too,” John mumbled, feeling stupid. “So, I wouldn’t go the usual route of flowers and chocolates then.”

“Why would I buy flowers and chocolates? Even if I did something that ludicrous, she doesn’t like British chocolates.”

“Wait, she doesn’t like our chocolate? Cadbury’s, any of it?”

“No. She only likes American sweets.”

“And you allow her to continue living here?”

“My point exactly. Clearly there is something wrong with her.”

“Yeah, she’s completely defective.”

Both men grinned then sniggered, the awful tension finally breaking.

“And you did buy her flowers once,” John reminded him with a smirk.

“It was for a case.”

“Her favorite flowers?”

“I had to be convincing.”

“Go for the Grand Gesture.”

“What?”

“The Grand Gesture,” John explained. “Do something huge to show her that you’re not just faffing around with her feelings, you’re in it for the long haul.”

“I’m trying to clear her name with the FBI, is that not grand enough?”

“That’s not a Grand Gesture, that’s a case.”

“Same thing.”

“No. No, it really isn’t.”

“What was your Grand Gesture to Mary?”

“I, uh, proposed.”

“I don’t think we are ready for that grand of a gesture, Violet and I. At least, not for real.”

He wondered if he should share his suspicions regarding Violet’s health with John now. He decided to wait. The poor man had enough on his plate at the moment.

“Yeah, that is a bit extreme,” John tried to stifle a yawn. “You’ll think of something.”

“I always do. Go to bed. You’re exhausted.”
“Do you mind if I watch a bit of telly before turning in? Unless you need to work and the noise will disturb you, of course.”

“Do stop acting like a guest. It’s irritating,” Sherlock stood up to fetch a quilt from the cupboard. “I know the noise from a television show or film distracts you from your own thoughts enough so you can fall asleep. I remember how you used to watch streaming programs on your laptop at night in your bedroom before you grew bold enough to just come down here and watch something bland and vapid on the television until you fell asleep. Take the sofa.”

“Thanks,” John took the quilt, an afghan Mrs. Hudson had knitted for Sherlock while he had been recuperating from being shot.

Their fingers grazed as Sherlock handed the quilt to John.

“Oh, I should… probably return this then,” Sherlock dug into his pocket then produced John’s wedding ring.

John’s mouth fell open. “How in the hell…”

“Violet stole it from you when you were in hospital. She gave it to me before I confronted Moriarty, said that a token belonging to you would keep me grounded when Moriarty started playing his mind games.” Looking at the ring instead of John, he said in a gritty voice, “So you see, I wasn’t alone when I confronted Moriarty for the last time. You helped me solve the Final Problem.”

“I see,” John said hoarsely. “Well… then… I suppose I should…” He reached for the ring.

Their fingertips touched again.

“Everything will be alright, John.”

“I know,” John’s eyes brimmed with tears as he drew his hand away from Sherlock’s, taking his wedding ring with him.

“So,” Sherlock spit out, desperate to break the dark, oppressive mood. “Will you turn invisible when you put that ring back on?”

“Oh piss off,” John snapped, his scowl really making him look like an unhappy hobbit. “Wanker.”

Sherlock smirked.

After John had fallen asleep on the sofa, Sherlock switched off the television. Instead of retiring to his bedroom, he sat back down in His Chair, settling in for a good long think about his least favorite subject: himself.

One of the reasons why he was such a marvelous actor and a world-class liar was because he was brutally honest with himself. As long as he kept the truth organized in his head, he could weave fact and fiction with ease and sell it convincingly. True, he did suppress and repress a lot of sentiment as well as important, necessary emotions. But when he had to navel-gaze, it was just as remorseless and objective as if he was deducing a brazen criminal instead of searching his own soul.

He knew that even if tragedy hadn’t befallen him at such a young age, even if he hadn’t had to struggle with his sexual identity, if he had been a healthy, well-adjusted bisexual male, he still would still be fairly indifferent towards sex.

For him, flirting simply wasn’t fun. How could it be? Not when one could deduce in less than three
seconds if someone was married or a gold-digger or was still in the closet but still secretly wanted to throw a leg over a bloke or had truly disturbing sexual fetishes or would just be a lousy lay.

He thought the reason for his minimal interest in sex should be glaringly obvious. But most people simply didn’t get it until he spelled it out, if he chose to spell it out, that is. Usually he didn’t. When cornered, he’d either make a withering comment based on the Nosy Parker’s personal flaws or he’d just stalk off, wishing people would mind their own business and again wondering why people placed such power in coitus and reproduction in the first place.

He did rather enjoy being hugged and kissed, of course. Sex could be quite entertaining too, in the right circumstances. But he enjoyed cocaine and morphine too. If he could abstain from the drugs for The Work, then he could abstain from physical affection too if it was necessary to do so. Actually, it would be easier for him to be celibate than sober because Sherlock knew that when it was all said and done, he had a relatively low libido.

What he missed was companionship, partnership.

And really, if sex must be a factor, he actually craved monogamy.

Oh…

A light had turned on in a forgotten room of his Mind Palace.

I don’t have friends, I just have one…

He had turned to gaze affectionately at John, curled up on the sofa and snoring slightly. Sweetie had managed to hoist up onto the sofa as well and now was drooling on John’s socks.

Quality over quantity. Logic trumps sentiment once again.

But he would never admit this, out loud, to anyone.

He wasn’t proud of his coke-fueled one-night stand with Molly, despite it having produced Henry.

He hadn’t exactly felt good carrying on with John when he had decided to be with Violet either.

So why does it feel like I’m unfaithful to John when I’m with her?

Because you feel the same about John as you do about her and vice-versa…

And there lay the rub.

He knew he had only a small heart, but it did exist. He thought in order to love one; he’d have to force the other out. Somehow, John and Violet managed to co-exist in that very cramped space.

Occasionally he daydreamed about John returning to Baker Street and the three of them (five, including the dogs) would live together, solving crimes, working cases together….

(… taking care of Violet when…)

Ruthlessly, he stopped that train of thought before it could progress any further then re-routed himself back on track he needed to be on…

Sherlock knew neither John nor Violet would be content with a celibate relationship, even though he would.
That and he had a horrible feeling that if they all lived at Baker Street, John and Violet would gang up on him and force him to eat healthily, monitor his caffeine intake and sleep at least five to six hours. Being force-fed a disgusting vomit green smoothie all because he hadn’t eaten in a few days still irked him.

Still, like the noble moron he was, John had insisted on staying with Mary to protect Sherlock and That was That. He also insisted that Sherlock not put his life on hold for him either.

Sherlock knew what his Grand Gesture needed to be and it would kill two birds with one stone.

**

31 December 2015
221B Baker Street
Friday evening
11:41 PM

Sherlock paced back and forth in John’s room.

No, he corrected himself. Just a room now.

He had heard the rattle of pipes earlier and had deduced Violet had finally woken up and decided to take a shower. But when the plumbing stopped rattling and the flat fell silent, Sherlock started to pace again, the cool hardwood floors soothing to his bare feet.

What was taking her so long? Why wasn’t she looking for him?

“Blast,” he muttered, his eyes darting around the nearly empty room. He then spied a box of old CDs (honestly, John has terrible taste in music…) Like a cat, he batted the box over. The box landed with a loud clunk. CDs spilled out, clattering on the floor, making an enormous racket.

Perfect.

It only took a few moments then Sherlock heard her footfalls on the steps. He crouched down, beginning to pick up the CDs. He mentally apologized to John since some of the plastic CD cases had cracked and splintered.

“Hey,” Violet leaned again the doorjamb. “What’s happening to The Shrine?”

“Oh,” Sherlock straightened up, scratching the back of his head. “It’s time. I’ve put this chore off for much too long, boxing John’s things up. We’ll bring it with us tomorrow when we go to his house. He’ll have the room now, now they don’t need their second bedroom as a nursery so…” he trailed off then cleared his throat, “Thought maybe I could turn it into a laboratory, although it really wouldn’t be a proper laboratory since there’s no plumbing or drainage. Or I can tell Mrs. Hudson we no longer need the second bedroom and it let it out to someone else, a uni student who just needs a room.” He put his hands on his hips, looking around. “Although I really couldn’t abide anyone else in 221B, could you?”

“Not really,” Violet looked down at his bare feet. “Aren’t you cold?”

“Helps me think.”

“Not after you just got over a head cold,” she scolded him. “Come on, it’s almost midnight.”

“So?”
“It’s New Year’s Eve.”

“So?”

Violet rolled her eyes and held out her hand. “Humor me. Come down and put on some socks.”

“The things I do for you,” he sighed melodramatically as he put the box of CDs back in its proper place. Violet watched while her eyes crinkled in amusement. He closed the box lid then crossed over to her, switching off the lights as he did so.

Neither one moved from the doorway.

“Maybe we could watch the fireworks from here, from the skylight,” Violet suggested, still leaning again the doorjamb, but facing him.

“Ugh. Dull. Fireworks.”

“Fine,” she sighed, turning to go. “Fun-hater,” but she gasped when he caught her by the crook of her arm.

He spun her around and swiftly wrapped his left arm around her waist while cradling her face in his right hand.

“The things I do for you,” he breathed, dipping his head down, his lips millimeters from hers. He watched her pupils dilate. “Very well,” he purred as he ran the pad of his thumb over her lips. “Fireworks it is.”

Sherlock watched something hard and dark dissolve in her hazel eyes to be replaced with a softness and light he had never witnessed before.

Then she smiled, small crinkles fanning out around those bright, intelligent eyes. She nipped at his thumb, her eyes sparkling with wicked delight now.

Blissfully unaware of what was happening across the pond, how his best hope to clear Violet’s name was about to be gunned down in Washington DC, Sherlock laughed silently as he cupped Violet’s face with both his hands. He closed the space between them and tilted her head up for a kiss just as Violet rose on her toes to meet him. He threaded his fingers through her fiery hair, still damp from her shower earlier. Meanwhile, she started blindly unbuttoning his shirt, keeping her eyes closed and lips parted.

He shivered with anticipation as he felt his shirt fall open and her hands sliding up his belly and chest, the pads of her fingers lingering on his pectorals then his collarbone. She clasped her hands behind his neck and slid her fuzzy-socked foot up along his long leg, stopping only when she had her leg hooked over his hip. Without missing a beat or a kiss, he reached down and scooped her up. She wrapped both legs tightly around him, her arms encircling him, one hand clinging to his shirt, the other in his hair. Still kissing her, he pressed her right up against the door jamb now, cupping her backside with his hands so she wouldn’t fall.

Eventually, this position became uncomfortable... and Violet, despite her recent weight loss, was still heavier than she looked. Sherlock could feel his arms and legs going numb. He also doubted Violet would tolerate being pressed up against a door jamb for much longer.

Before he could say anything, she suggested, “Downstairs?”

Relief washed over him when she made the suggestion. Even though it was just an empty room now,
it still felt wrong to Sherlock to take Violet to bed in here, just as it felt wrong to snog her while sitting in John’s chair.

Violet kissed him again, a sweet kiss, almost chaste. Then she hugged him, her cheek pressed against his, her legs still wrapped up around his waist. “I know what you’re trying to do, but it’s still John’s room, no matter what,” she whispered in his ear before pressing a kiss to his impossibly sharp cheekbones. “And it’s cold as fuck up here.”

“Your choice in words worries me at times, you do realize that?”

“Oh, I do apologize then, Mr. Holmes,” Violet busted out her “Miss Smith” voice. “I would hate to worry you.”

“Your fake British accent still irritates me.”

“Why? Do you know how long it took me to perfect this voice?” Miss Smith carded her fingers through her hair. “Did you ever deduce who I modeled my Miss Smith voice after?”

“Some actress, obviously,” Sherlock hummed, planting kisses here and there on her face and throat. “A television series you could watch the entire series in one sitting… but this places me at a disadvantage as I don’t watch as much crap television as you.”

“When one cannot go out, one must make do. Libraries and Netflix became my best friends.”

“You really do need to cease and desist with the fake accent or else I shall lose interest.”

“Why?”

“Because I don’t care about Miss Smith,” Sherlock explained. “And I don’t want to be with Miss Smith, you idiot.”

“I think,” Violet Hunter pressed her forehead against his. “That is the sweetest thing you’ve ever said to me.”

“I’m really going to lose interest in any nocturnal activities that are customary to ringing in a New Year if you get sentimental on me. Do pull yourself together, my dear Violet.”

“So sorry,” Violet’s voice became husky and seductive instead. “Your Majesty,” she crooned as she unwound her legs and slid down his body. “I would hate to inconvenience you,” she trailed her fingers up the outside of his thighs. “With feelings,” her clever fingers found the snap and zip of his trousers.

For one panicky minute, Sherlock thought she was going to drop onto her knees and go down on him. He grabbed her shoulders to tell her to stop, because kneeling was one of his triggers and he just didn’t like anyone in that particular submissive position. But then she pressed the palm of her hand to his cheek and he relaxed, deducing that she already knew. She rose on her toes instead to kiss him as her hand slipped inside his trousers.

Oh… this was alright… no, better than alright… Sherlock closed his eyes, stumbling blindly until it was his back hitting the door jamb now. His arched his neck back, starting to pant while Violet nibbled and kissed his throat, lapped at his earlobes, first the left then the right, then finding his mouth again, her tongue meeting his this time, all the while massaging him through his pants, her hand stroking him in the most toe-curling, delightful ways in no predictable pattern, only slowing down just when he thought he was about to go over the edge.

“As you wish,” she looked and sounded insufferably smug.

He didn’t care.

If he could have carried her down the narrow flight of stairs, he would have. But the staircase leading up to John’s room was little better than a ladder. So he grabbed her hand and led her down as fast as he dared. His trousers, after all, were undone. Probably would kill the mood if they slipped further down his narrow hips and ended up around his ankles.

Once they both safely reached the lounge, the first thing he did was shrug out of his dress shirt while simultaneously trying to pull off her ratty Oxford sweatshirt. They stumbled down their way down the hall while kissing and fondling each other in the most lascivious ways imaginable. During the journey to the bedroom, other garments came flying off, leaving a trail of bespoke trousers, faded black leggings, bright pink fuzzy socks, a Beautiful Bottoms bra, and a Brooks Brothers vest. By the time they reached the bedroom, they were both only clad in pants, she in basic, boring white knickers and he grey boxer-briefs.

Those two final barriers disappeared quickly. Sherlock kicked the bedroom door shut with his heel so Gladstone wouldn’t come bounding into the bedroom to interrupt. Then together, they tumbled into bed, he on top of her as she spread her legs brazenly out for him. He grasped her head again, tilting it up for a kiss as her hands wandered all over his body. He palmed her small breasts, sucking in a breath as he marveled at the difference in texture between the smooth, soft breast and the hard, pebbled nipple. Then he dipped his head down to nip and suck at her nipples as his hand ran down her sweat-slicked belly, never stopping until he reached the trimmed thatch of brownish curls between her legs.

“As if I needed confirmation you really weren’t a ginger,” he purred as he started to kiss his way down her body while lazily stroking her clitoris with his finger.

“Ass,” she half-groaned, half-gasped, writhing under his touch. She was half-sitting up, half-reclined on his pillows. “Oh my God,” she added moments later as he lay on his belly between her legs, leisurely running his tongue up between her legs, pausing to press and swirl against her clitoris, then lap down to her entrance, darting in and out. As she positively vibrated with pleasure and frustration, his tongue would resume its unhurried journey upwards again.

Violet grabbed a pillow, pressed it over her face and bit into it, sure that if she didn’t, she would scream and wake the dog. And Mrs. Hudson. And the neighbors. And everyone in Westminster.

Suddenly the pillow was torn from her. Sherlock hovered over her again, kissing her and kissing her and kissing her. This time there was no hesitation as he entered her with one powerful thrust, her face in his hands. Violet bowed her back as he started moving in her. She wrapped her arms around his shoulders and neck and she let herself drown in pleasure…

Well… almost.

She really wasn’t a fan of missionary.

He must have sensed (deduced?) that as well because in an acrobatic feat she hadn’t thought possible, he maneuvered them both in a sitting position. She was positive she was going to have cramps in her thighs tomorrow because of that move. At any rate, she now sat in his lap, riding him, grabbing the headboard for support while he sat upright against the piles of pillows, watching her face while caressing her breasts, sweeping his thumbs over her nipples. Then he leaned his head
back against the headboard, his eyes fluttering shut as his hands drifted down her back, pulling her closer to him.

When she started rasping that she was close to coming, he somehow managed to wriggle a finger between her legs again, a tight fit now with him inside her. Still, he managed and he found her clitoris again and started curling his finger, as if beckoning her to come here while wrapping his free arm around her thin shoulders to support her. Violet came so hard, she actually bit Sherlock on the shoulder to keep from screaming. He paid her back by nearly crushing her in his embrace as he convulsively jerked and pulsed inside her.

They clung together, sticky and shivering. Eventually, mindful how sensitive his spent cock would be at the moment, Violet slowly rose off of him and lay next to him, her arm over her eyes, her chest heaving as she tried to catch her breath, her hair fanned out around her head. Sherlock lay down next to her, studying her, specifically her hands.

The clonic spasm had returned to her left hand.

He let his head flop back down. Dammit…

“Sherlock?”

“Hm?”

“I have to pee.”

“Ooooonnnnnnnnnnnnnokay…. Sherlock wondering if he missed a vital deduction regarding any strange (and disgusting) fetishes Violet may entertain.

“You’re on my hair.”

“Oh!” Sherlock immediately sat up. Violet sat up as well, smoothing her wild hair back.

She laughed softly and reassured him, “I’m not into water sports,” before sashaying into the master bathroom.

Sherlock flopped back down on the bed, both his arms crossed behind his head. He stared at the ceiling, contemplating this latest development in his life.

He decided it was acceptable.

He decided that no matter what Violet was diagnosed with, he would be there for, as John put it, The Long Haul, for the simple fact that she would for him if roles were reversed.

And… he could be wrong. He’s been wrong before. Not often, but it happened.

This would be the one occasion that I would be perfectly content to be wrong, he thought as he heard the toilet flush then the taps running. The water then shut off and Violet returned to the bedroom, her hair bundled up in a messy bun.

“Thank you,” he accepted the outstretched glass and flannel.

After drinking his fill and having a cursory clean-up, he set the empty glass on the night table. He felt her eyes on his naked body as he got up to put the flannel in the hamper. He turned to repay the favor, to study her figure with the same unabashed admiration she often gave him when he was in some state of undress. But Violet had already gotten beneath the covers so he slipped under the
sheets and duvet and stretched out an arm. Violet curled up next to him, her head nestled on his shoulder.

As he wrapped his arms around her, she said, “It won’t be much longer before my name is cleared. Mycroft has more than enough to convince the FBI that I’m innocent, that I’m not traitor. Besides, he owes me.”

“Quite right,” Sherlock demurred, not wanting to think ahead, to attempt to forecast the future.

“I asked him for a job with MI-6.”

His chest constricted in sudden fear but he masterfully hid his concern. “You would do well there. Mycroft would be a fool not to have you.”

She draped an arm over his chest. “When my name is finally cleared and I can finally be me again, I… I want to go back to the States.”

“Oh.”

“Just for a little while,” she quickly added then explained: “I want to see my sister-in-law and meet my niece. I want to spend some time with them, to tell Vivian about her dad, what he was like as a kid, what a good man he was.”

“As you should.”

She ran her hand up and down his chest, not in an attempt to turn him on but just for the sheer pleasure of feeling his firm, cool flesh against her soft, warm hand. “I want to take a road trip. I want to rent a ridiculously expensive and fast car, maybe a convertible and drive coast-to-coast. Stop in Indiana first to visit what family I have left. Then drive down to New Mexico to see some of my old friends at the Bureau there. After that, I want to go to California. I’ve never been to California,” her voice grew sleepy. “I’ve never seen the Pacific Ocean, isn’t that funny?”

“Mm,” Sherlock smoothed a chestnut curl away from her forehead, aware she was dreaming aloud. “Am I expected to accompany you on this road trip?”

“To New York, yes,” she yawned. “The rest of it….” she shook her head against his chest. “I want to do that part by myself. And you’d be bored during the trip.” Besides,” she yawned again. “You hate spending a minute out of London longer than necessary.

“How well you know me.”

She dropped a kiss on his chest, near his heart, near the bullet wound. He wasn’t sure if that was intentional or not. “But,” she slid her hand up his chest, over his shoulder, slowly over his arm, savoring the rock-hard bicep in such a deceptively thin arm. Then she found his hand and linked her fingers in his. “When I’m finished with my trip, I want to come back here, to Baker Street, permanently.” She sat up suddenly, facing him, her face solemn and pale in the street light streaming through the curtains. “Is that OK?”

“Yes,” he breathed, “Of course. This is your home.”

She smiled and opened her mouth but the door hinges creaked unexpectedly. They both turned their head and watched Gladstone nose the door completely open. Whining only a little, the Alsatian leapt into the bed with them.

“Oh God,” Sherlock grumbled as Gladstone flopped his big furry head on his belly.
“Get used it,” Violet snickered as she reached down to scratch Gladstone’s ears.

“If I must,” Sherlock sighed with mock-exaggeration. He tilted his head down at her, “Happy New Year, Agent Hunter.”

“Happy New Year, Mr. Holmes.”

As she fell asleep, Sherlock heard, of all people, Mary Watson in his head:

_You’re going to break her heart Sherlock…_

No, he thought. _She’s going to break mine._

_In fact, she already has._

Chapter End Notes

** Sherlock’s description of Violet is shamelessly paraphrased from "The Abominable Bride."

One. Chapter. Left.... :^O
Let Her Go

Chapter Summary

There has been a change in plans...

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Chapter Forty-One: Let Her Go

13 January 2016
Salt Lake City, Utah
Wednesday afternoon
1:01 PM

“John, relax.”

Dr. John Ferrier, PhD, looked up from his iPad and beamed at his pretty wife. “As if you have any room to talk,” he squeezed her wrist, his Welsh accent just as strong as it had been over twenty years ago when he had first met her.

He had met his future bride, Hope Jefferson, in Australia of all places. They had both been eighteen. He had been hitchhiking through Australia for his Gap Year. She was doing missionary work for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, handing out tracts in Sydney. She had appraised his dark brown hair and deeper brown eyes and alabaster skin and had smiled. Her smile had broadened when she’d heard his Welsh accent. He’d taken one look at her shiny blonde hair and big sky-blue eyes and tanned skin and was a goner.

He had asked her and her missionary companion out for lunch on the pretence of learning more about their faith. In reality, he had just wanted Hope’s telephone number. But he respected her faith and the rules of her mission work. He stayed an arm’s length from her, as the rules of her mission dictated. He didn’t invite her to bars or night clubs. He did discover that she was a little bit of a rebel, that she didn’t believe wholeheartedly in the Mormon Church just as he only half-heartedly attended services at his Anglican church back home in Gwenydd.

He had met his future bride, Hope Jefferson, in Australia of all places. They had both been eighteen. He had been hitchhiking through Australia for his Gap Year. She was doing missionary work for the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints, handing out tracts in Sydney. She had appraised his dark brown hair and deeper brown eyes and alabaster skin and had smiled. Her smile had broadened when she’d heard his Welsh accent. He’d taken one look at her shiny blonde hair and big sky-blue eyes and tanned skin and was a goner.

He had asked her and her missionary companion out for lunch on the pretence of learning more about their faith. In reality, he had just wanted Hope’s telephone number. But he respected her faith and the rules of her mission work. He stayed an arm’s length from her, as the rules of her mission dictated. He didn’t invite her to bars or night clubs. He did discover that she was a little bit of a rebel, that she didn’t believe wholeheartedly in the Mormon Church just as he only half-heartedly attended services at his Anglican church back home in Gwenydd.

He also learned that she was just as passionate about science as he was.

He never got her telephone number, but he got her email address instead, a dubious victory as the internet was still in its infancy back then. But for nearly two years, they conducted their romance via email and AOL Instant Messenger until he decided he was being an idiot. Back then, in the Nineties, it hadn’t been too difficult to acquire a student visa. He transferred to the College of Science at the University of Utah, where Hope was also studying.

Only then, did they finally share their first kiss.

He had been a bit terrified to meet her family, but he discovered that they were warm, lovely people. Her mother was a librarian and her father a pediatrician, her brothers all worked in the scientific field in some capacity, and her only sister was an editor at Random House in New York. His
preconceptions about the Mormon faith were obliterated, especially the bit his friends had teased him about, the polygamy.

Her parents were disappointed that he wouldn’t convert, of course, but were respectful enough not to push it. As Dr. Jefferson explained, while it was part of their faith to redirect nonbelievers towards the Mormon Church, he also felt that some church-members took evangelism too far. “There is such a thing as beating a dead horse,” he had stated.

Her parents had been more upset when they both applied for and accepted scholarships to Oxford after they both graduated from the University of Utah. But Hope was ready for a new adventure and John was ready to go home, so off to England they went. She studied biochemistry, and he double-majored in chemistry and physics, but he ended up dropping physics as it had become too overwhelming.

They married quietly, at a registry office in London after they graduated from Oxford. Neither of them wanted to deal with a church wedding, or to argue with their families which church they should be wed in.

Then their first jobs took them even further away from their families, all the way to China, as lab chemists at BP’s facility in Taicang. Living in China had been exciting but the work itself was not very fulfilling for the young, married couple. Besides, working for the gigantic oil company had sparked a passion for the young Mr. and Mrs. Ferrier.

What if we could create a clean, renewable energy source?

So they got jobs at UK Energy Research Centre, which brought them back to the hustle and bustle at London, but they only spent a year there. A fantastic opportunity sprang up for Hope at REDstack BV, a Dutch research firm studying Blue Energy, the creation of electricity from salt water. Hope accepted their offer and so they found themselves in the Netherlands. While Hope researched the process of Reverse Electro Dialysis, John proceeded to work on his doctorate.

They had been happy in the Netherlands. They took to the Dutch culture like ducks to water. Eventually they had decided to try for a child. Happily, they made the business of creating a baby with great enthusiasm.

No baby ever came.

Then they had gotten the telephone call from Hope’s mother. Her father was ill, seriously ill. Early on-set Alzheimer’s.

After a long discussion, Hope and John Ferrier decided to return to the United States. John was an only child and his parents had passed away years ago. Hope’s brothers and sister had scattered all across the United States and they were all married with children of their own.

It only made sense that Hope and John return to help her mother with her father. “Besides,” Hope had added, “I can continue with my work.”

“Yes are you sure?” her husband had quipped. “Where are you going to find a large body of salt water in Salt Lake City?”

She had swatted at him and a month later, they had returned to Utah.

That had been nearly five years ago. John now had dual citizenship, just as Hope did. They lived in Hope’s childhood home. After her father had passed, her mother started to decline physically. It had been frail Mrs. Jefferson’s idea to move into an assisted care home. Once that was settled, she gifted
the humble, old Victorian house in the Avenues to John and Hope. John taught biology and chemistry at Salt Lake Community College and genuinely enjoyed it. He liked inspiring young people to take an interest in science, especially those who did not have the funds to go to a posh, expensive school. Hope continued her work into Reverse Electro Dialysis.

And still, no babies.

They tried everything, even took out a loan to pay for expensive IVF treatments, John complaining about America’s crappy health care system the entire time. They considered surrogacy but their savings had almost been wiped out by the IVF treatments.

After another serious late-night talk with too much coffee and a few tears, they agreed on adoption. They also agreed that once Mrs. Jefferson passed away, they would move from Salt Lake City, maybe even from America itself.

“I love my job, but I need something that pays more than a community college and I’m not going to find one here,” John explained. “We’re going to go broke if we stay here and your work is too important to give up. I’ll be the breadwinner, you save the world.”

Adoption had been just about as heartbreaking as IVF. One young mother had miscarried. Two others got cold feet about giving their babies up. After the second mother had changed her mind, Hope had sobbed, “Maybe we should just get a dog.”

But then... but then... a miracle.

A social worker named Josephine Stangerson called them, not the usual one they worked with. There was a crisis situation, an infant girl had been abandoned, both her parents died and they had been unable to locate any other living relatives. Would they be interested in fostering with the possibility of adopting?

“She’s not technically an infant, she’s about a year old,” Josephine explained.

The Ferriers immediately agreed.

John had been re-reading the same sentence twice on his iPad as his foot jiggled. Meanwhile, Hope had fluttered around the kitchen, her girlhood kitchen where her mother had prepared massive meals for her enormous, boisterous family. Coffee brewed, a Bundt cake baked the oven and Hope whipped together powdered sugar, artificial almond flavoring and butter for the icing. In the Crockpot, beef tips, carrots, potatoes, peas and corn simmered in beef gravy for the evening’s meal.

“I am relaxed,” Hope chided her husband as she returned to her cooking.

“Liar, you don’t bake when you’re relaxed. You bake when you’re nervous.”

“No.”

“Do so. That’s why I’ve always gained a stone before you have a job interview or a final exam back when we were in uni.”

She gave him a pointed look over her nose as the timer of the ancient Amana oven pinged.

Just as she took the cake out of the oven and drizzled the icing over it, the doorbell rang.

John and Hope exchanged looks. Tears sprang to Hope’s eyes. “This is it.”
“Yes,” John rose from his seat. “It is, truly.” He kissed her brow and took her hand, as if they were twenty-one year old lovebirds instead of forty-two year old scientists. “Let’s go meet our daughter, shall we?”

“Oh my God,” Hope pressed her hand to her lips, trying to compose herself.

Hand-in-hand, they went to the living room. Hope to the window, John to the front door. Hope peeled a curtain back as she watched Miss Stangerson walk around to the back of the car, presumably to get the baby out of the car seat.

Baby… her heart skipped a beat.

Meanwhile her husband had darted out of the house without a coat or gloves, despite it only being a brisk 34 degrees out. Still he trotted down the driveway, his hand extended. Miss Stangerson shook it then pointed to the front seat. Hope watched him open the passenger side door and retrieve Miss Stangerson’s messenger bag, a pink suitcase and a diaper bag.

Then she watched Miss Stangerson gently take a little pink snow-suited bundle out of the back seat. Hope had to bite her lip to staunch the happy tears.

She threw the door open the minute her husband and social worker were on the front step. “Come in, come in,” she babbled, ushering them in, her eyes never leaving the little girl in the social worker’s arms. “Hi Jo, so good to see you again.”

“Great to see you too, Hope,” Anthea said in a perfectly bland American accent. She took off the pink knitted cap off of the roly-poly girl’s head and fluffed the wispy blond curls. “Here she is.”

She had vetted this particular couple very carefully, very thoroughly. They had been so nice, so wholesome, they hardly seemed real.

Both Ferriers now drowned in the toddler’s enormous cornflower blue eyes. “She’s perfect,” breathed John, not once realizing he had the same Christian name as the little’s girl’s natural father. “She’s…” he reached out and stroked the child’s chubby cheek. She allowed it and studied John placidly while sucking on her pacifier. “She’s so beautiful.”

“May I?” Hope held out her hands.

“Of course,” Anthea said then added as she placed the child in her arms, “Mom.”

Hope sniffled then kissed the girl on her forehead. “Welcome home, Lucy,” she sobbed as she held Marissa Watson close to her heart.

Meanwhile, as she watched the heartwarming scene, Anthea worried.

She worried about what had happened to the child’s biological father. She hadn’t even been able to find him, no matter how many surveillance systems she had viewed before her appointment to bring Marissa to her new family.

But if he was taken, then maybe he’ll finally understand that it really was for the best to keep the child away from all the madness, Anthea thought as she watched the Ferriers kiss and cuddle their new daughter.

**

13 January 2016
An undisclosed military airfield outside of London
Wednesday evening
8:01 PM

“Mycroft, please… just put it off for a week, a day… a fucking day, please…”

He opened his eyes and looked over the American woman’s shoulder at Sherlock.

Brother, forgive me for what I must do…

“I can’t.”

“Yes you can, you’re the goddammed fucking British government!” Violet exploded. “It’s obviously a trap for Sherlock. Are you just going to let him walk into it by himself?”

“No,” Mycroft snapped. “Sherlock will stay put.”

“I will most certainly not stay put,” Sherlock drew himself up to his full height.

“If you value your life, you will. As she said, it’s obviously a trap.”

“He won’t stay here, you know that. Let me go with him,” Violet pleaded, her hand squeezing Sherlock’s mobile.

“You’re endangering your own life if you leave to search for John rather than returning to America,” Mycroft wondered how he’d lost control of the situation so quickly.

“I don’t care.”

“He does,” Mycroft pointed at Sherlock with his umbrella. “Not to mention it is your duty to testify against Senator Woodhouse. He cannot be prosecuted without your testimony.”

“It can wait one fucking day.”

“I could use an assistant, Mycroft,” Sherlock muttered.

“There are snipers right now, opposite of Baker Street, waiting for you.” Mycroft informed Violet.

“Then arrest them!”

“They’ll just be replaced with other assassins. Whatever is left of Moriarty’s organization, they all believe you are the only one who has the Moriarty Code. They have been ordered to shoot to kill. If they learn than Sherlock actually does know the code, then he won’t be safe either.”

“What?” Sherlock spun around, his coat fanning out around him. “Violet, what have you done?”

“Agent Hunter,” Mycroft gritted his teeth as he strove to override Violet. “Everything we had discussed and agreed upon depends on you leaving tonight, as planned and on schedule. I cannot keep my word if you stay.”

Violet turned away from Mycroft, covering her face with her hands, then sliding her hands up her face to claw at her hair, obviously trying to think. Then she shook her head, tears still spilling from her eyes, hot and angry. “We’re wasting time; we need to go find John. Now.”

Mycroft turned his head, “Mitton?”
“Already on it, boss,” Agent Mitton came forward from the shadows, holding his own mobile. “Sent an alert out to our best agents, we’ll find him. We’ll bring him home.”


“Sherlock, are you really that stupid?” Mycroft shouted at his brother, his voice echoing throughout the hanger. “She. Will. Die. If she leaves here, can you not grasp that concept?” Ruthlessly, he played his trump card, played on his brother’s weakness, preyed upon his love.

“Do you really want to lose the two people you are fondest of in the same night?”

“I won’t,” Sherlock said in a pained voice as his face tightened.

“You will,” Mycroft struggled to sound calm. “If not today, then tomorrow or the next day, there is a price on her head now. The only way we can guarantee her safety is to send her back to America and place her in the Witness Protection program. But she must leave tonight before our enemies have figured out what has transpired.”

“Mr. Holmes,” Mitton took another step forward and locked his eyes with Sherlock’s. “I have been assigned to be her MI-6 handler until the trial in America is over. You have my word no harm will come to her, I swear it on my own life.”

“That’s not reassuring at all,” Sherlock snarled. “Seeing how you were bamboozled by Julia Stoner as she used you as a pawn in her plans to murder Eduardo Lucas.”

“And I am forever in yours and Monsieur Dupin’s debt for clearing my name,” Mitton said evenly. “Let me pay you back by protecting her.” In a softer voice, he added, “Please.”

“He’s right,” Violet finally spoke again, her voice cracking. She shook her head and covered her face with her hand, unable to look at Sherlock.

Sherlock curled and uncurled his fists, for the first time in ages, completely unsure of what to do. He hated that two of his greatest vulnerabilities had been exposed to Mycroft. But not Henry, he doesn’t know about Henry yet…

That secret had to be protected at all costs.

He looked the private jet behind him then back at Violet. “What have you done?” he demanded again as he crossed over to her. “What plans have you and Mycroft concocted together?”

“I’m sorry,” she kept her face covered. “I just wanted to keep you safe,” her shoulders shuddered as she folded into herself. As he came closer, she added in a whisper, “And I thought if I was out of the picture, John would finally come to his senses and leave Mary.”

Sherlock felt his lip tremble and was glad his back was to Mycroft. Then he thought The hell with it and pulled off his glove. He cupped her wet cheek and gently forced her to look up at him. He traced her cheekbone with his thumb, touching her scar one last time.

“My clever girl,” he slipped his mobile out of her hand.

She wrenched her face out of his grasp, pressing her palm to her eyes again, sobbing.

He drew her back to him and steadfastly ignored Mycroft and Mitton as he tilted her face up for one last kiss. She clutched the lapels of his Belstaff as tears continued to stream down her face.
Blindly, Sherlock rummaged around in his coat pocket until he found a handkerchief. “Enough now, no more of this sentimental rubbish,” he chided her in a soft voice as he dried her tears. “We discussed this.” His breath hitched as he cradled her face again and kissed her brow, all the while she still clung to the lapels of his coat. “You have been quite courageous and sensible from the moment we first met. Are you able to perform one last feat of bravery? I should not ask it of you if I did not think you a quite exceptional woman.**”

She lifted her face up to him, nodding. She rose on her tiptoes to place one last kiss on his lips. She ran her hand down his face then pressed both hands on his chest. Then she patted him on the chest, whispering, “Go. Go find John. Go be Sherlock Holmes now.” She looked at the concrete floor as she gently pushed herself away from him. She noticed for the first time how her left hand trembled. She clenched it into a fist, pivoted and started walking away from Sherlock.

Her back straight, her shoulders square, her eyes straight ahead, she marched towards Mycroft.

“I’m glad you finally saw reason, Agent Hu-ummmmphhh!” Mycroft did not see the right hook coming. He staggered away from Violet, clutching his chin and jaw. He tasted blood.

Sherlock chuckled as he strolled over to Mycroft. “Problem?” he asked mildly as Mycroft spat a tooth into his hand.

“Nothing that a good dentist cannot repair,” Mycroft grumbled as he and his brother watched Violet walk away with her chestnut head held up high.

But when Violet stumbled and leaned against Mitton for support, Sherlock took a step forward. Mycroft swiftly placed one hand on his sternum and grabbed him by the crook of his elbow to stop him. “Don’t,” he said softly. “Let her go, Sherlock.”

“She is an extraordinary woman and deserves a life,” Sherlock jerked his arm out of Mycroft’s grip while willing Violet to turn around, or stop at the doors, to look at him one last time. **Violet, I need to tell you something…**

“She will have a life.”

“But not her name.”

“What’s in a name, brother mine? You were christened William yet you chose to go by Sherlock yet your… **unique** personality remains intact. ‘A rose by any other name would smell as sweet’.” Mycroft quoted Shakespeare then tentatively placed his hand on Sherlock’s shoulder. As he had predicted, Sherlock shrugged him off. “We must go. They need to ready the plane for take-off. Come, we’ll watch her leave. Then we’ll both go find John. I’ll be your assistant.”

“Will you really?”

“Yes, really,” Mycroft almost sounded submissive. “I am yours to command.”

Sherlock considered this then allowed Mycroft to lead him out of the hangar. “She needs to see a doctor, immediately when she gets to America, can you arrange that?” Sherlock asked Mycroft as they walked towards his sleek, black government car that idled on the tarmac.

“Yes, of course, but why?”

“Side effects from arsenic poisoning,” Sherlock lied out of habit. “The Americans wouldn’t want
their star witness to drop dead of cancer before the trial starts, now would they?”

“I shall relay the message,” Mycroft hooked his umbrella over the crook of his elbow.

Sherlock stuffed his hands in his pockets and looked up, regarding the stars.

*Beautiful, isn't it?*

*I thought you didn't care about things like that…*

*Doesn't mean I can't appreciate it…*

The ear-splitting screech of jet engines broke his reverie. He snuck a glance at his brother. Mycroft always meant well but would also always insist on taking the most twisted path when a straight road would do. *He was just as crooked now as he was when he was fourteen, Mycroft…* Sherlock mused as he turned his attention back to the jet.

Mycroft wasn’t watching the jet plane taxiing on the runway. He was typing out a text instead. “I’ll need your mobile, Sherlock,” he muttered as the jet plane started to speed up. “Althelney Jones is my top computer analyst. She thinks she can pinpoint a location where John may have been when that video was recorded.”

“Fine, good, yes,” Sherlock kept his eyes on the jet plane as it roared past them while it rose from the earth, the wheels tucking themselves inside the belly of the plane.

Then the plane exploded.

^v^v^v^v

*…You see her when you close your eyes*

*Maybe one day you'll understand why*

*Everything you touch surely dies*

*But you only need the light when it's burning low*

*Only miss the sun when it starts to snow*

*Only know you love her when you let her go*

*Only know you've been high when you're feeling low*

*Only hate the road when you're missing home*

*Only know you love her when you let her go*

*Staring at the ceiling in the dark*

*Same old empty feeling in your heart*

*Cause love comes slow and it goes so fast*

*Well you see her when you fall asleep*

*But never to touch and never to keep*

*Cause you loved her too much and you dived too deep*

*Well you only need the light when it's burning low*

*Only miss the sun when it starts to snow*

*Only know you love her when you let her go…*

From *Let Her Go*, Passenger
To be continued in *Hiraeth*…

References and “Easter Eggs”:

ACD Canon Characters and Quotes


Other Source Material:


Chapter End Notes

So... I have a confession to make... I'm not ready to "kill my darling" yet. If you all have stuck with me this long ESPECIALLY after this monster of a fic (which was actually only supposed to be 25 chapters long and finished in four months... ha...) I hope you'll hang in there a little while longer!

HUGE thank you to my lovely and long-suffering beta'er cadogan west who has yet to mock me for my awful grammar and gently get the story back on track when the plot-bunnies threatened to take over or when our imaginary friends start going out of character.

And many thanks and virtual hugs to all of you for reading and commenting and leaving kudos. Not going to lie, last year was an ugly year for me and sometimes this fic was the only thing I had to look forward to. Happy to report that 2016 is going MUCH better and I can't wait to post the next installment of this series. :^)

The names 'Hope Jefferson' and 'Josephine Stangerson' Jefferson Hope and Joseph Stangerson from "A Study in Scarlet." John Ferrier and Lucy Ferrier are also characters from "A Study in Scarlet." Ferrier does adopt a little girl named Lucy and he converted to Mormonism in the novel. Also the way ACD portrayed Mormonism in the original book is... well... really shitty IMHO. Any errors or incorrect assumptions I may have made regarding the Mormon faith is due to ignorance and not malice!

I DID start writing the first chapter of "Hiraeth"... if anyone is interested in a preview... 0:^)

Thank you again for all the comments and kudos and hits! Every time I get a notification from The Archive, my heart sings :^)

** EDITED to add: that I am a gigantic jerk. In my sleep deprivation, I completely forgot to thank LucanaelDelSayan for helping me with the French translations! So merci beaucoup Lucanael ... or something like that! :^)
“John?”

Sherlock’s voice again, sounding more anguished and desperate than ever.

John licked his lips, on purpose for once. He did his best to call out but only managed to rasp, “Here, I’m here, down here…” as he closed his eye. Even keeping one eye open was too much effort. “I’m here… please…”

Sick with pain and fatigue, John had forgotten Sherlock’s eerie wolf-like hearing. Before he knew it, a pair of leather-clad hands carefully cradled his bruised and battered face. “John?”

“Sherlock,” John wheezed as he opened his good eye.

The combined look of relief and panic on Sherlock’s shadowed face made John wonder if this possibly was a hallucination after all. A comforting dream his fevered brain concocted before certain death. Dream or not, he watched Sherlock shout over his shoulder for medics and a stretcher and to hurry the bloody hell up because Dr. Watson obviously has a splenic ruptured.

“I knew you’d find me,” John’s voice was little better than a strangled whisper.

“Shh, shh, shh, don’t speak, it’s too taxing…” Sherlock used his teeth to tug off the glove off his right hand then started carding John’s filthy hair that now looked completely grey instead of the usual silvery-blond. “Just… keep your eyes on me, can do that?” He continued to cup John’s cheek with his gloved, left hand.

But John couldn’t, not even for Sherlock. His eyelid drooped shut again. God, I’m so tired…

“No, no, no, don’t. John, don’t. Stop this. Stay with me, please.”

John idly wondered why he felt little drips of water splashing on his face.

He started rambling, whispering hoarsely again that he knew Sherlock would find him and it was OK, really, everything was OK now, maybe it was meant to end up like this, that the universe was sorting itself out and he didn’t have to worry about Sherlock being alone because he had Violet now and she loved him as much as he did… because I do, you’re my best friend, the best man, the best everything… the best thing to ever happen to me…

“Stop it, you’re talking nonsense, you’re being stupid.” The words were harsh, but the voice, That Voice, that resonant, authoritative baritone trembled.
“Just… promise…” John felt his strength ebbing. Awkwardly, he reached up with his right hand, wanting to touch Sherlock’s face. Instead he weakly clutched at lapel of the Belstaff.

“John, you’re going to be fine, you’re going to be alright…”

“Promise me you’ll find her, find Maisie before Mary does… find her and raise her…”

“John?”

“… as your own child.”

“What?”

“You and Violet, together, be her parents. Her mum and dad,” John finished before passing out.

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!