Semper Fidelis

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Summary

Written for a prompt. Moriarty frames John and "Anthea" of betrayals which cause both of the Holmes brothers to cut them off. Cue BAMF!John and BAMF!"Anthea" doing their best to clear their names.

Notes

See the end of the work for notes
Chapter 1

Mycroft Holmes wouldn't believe it. He couldn't believe it. His assistant was a plant? A spy?

But the evidence was right in front of him. The photographs of her on her phone late at night, at times that coincided suspiciously with leaks of important information. A coded communication sent from her personal computer, detailing his schedule, such as it was, with suggestions for assassination timing and methods.

His first, visceral instinct was to reject it. No, not her. Not the woman he...

But he swiftly corrected himself: such methods were common. It had been the downfall of many great leaders in the past – emotional attachments. Send someone who is at first so devoted they can't help themselves from confiding in them, can't help themselves from spinning their plans with them, can't help themselves from keeping them close...

Can't help imagining themselves in love with them...

And then the spy begins to do their work, and by this time the target is so enamoured of them that any evidence against them is dismissed out of hand. Suspicions are brushed aside, rumours of betrayal are scoffed at, and eventually the target is right where the plant wants them.

Since they'd commenced an intimate relationship, how often had Mycroft wondered at his luck? After all, the various necessities of running governments didn't make him the most attentive of partners, and though his affection might have biased his judgement Mycroft was certain she wouldn't lack for suitors. He was well aware there were many better options available to her, and it had been a puzzle as to why she'd chosen him.

It was horrifying how plausible this made her motives.

In the instant he registered that horror, that aching sense of loss and the screaming pain of betrayal, Mycroft shut it down. He closed his eyes, breathed deeply and evenly, and didn't open them until he'd pushed that complicated tangle of love and fury and pain into the bottom of his stomach. Until he felt nothing for contempt for himself for falling into her plot.

Strangely, it wasn't the fact that they'd had sex that made her betrayal seethe like acid in his chest, but the intimacy surrounding the act. The quiet dinners that were a unspoken prelude to more, the breakfasts eaten together in the early hours after a sated sleep, sometimes consumed in the bed itself if they were feeling especially decadent that morning...and all that time, she was plotting to kill him.

And if he'd died, she would have had everything. Mycroft's contacts would have become hers, his protection hers as well...

He tried to be thankful that the message had been intercepted by one of his spies. It had been pure chance the man had found it, as it had been quite deliberately routed so that it wouldn't come into contact with him. Which, really only made it all the more damning – only he and his assistant knew the identity of that particular plant, so only she could have plotted so neatly to avoid him.

Mycroft took another deep breath, struggling to compose himself. In ten minutes, she – and it would be 'she' from now on, he wouldn't let himself think of her name – would come in, and he had to be ready.

For a moment, he wondered if he should have one of his many bodyguards actually present in the
room in case she attempted to kill him when she realised her carefully planned assassination was going to fail. But in the end he decided against it; she wasn't expecting her cover to have been blown, and was unlikely to be carrying any weapon he couldn't defend himself against.

And his bodyguards might object to what he was about to do.

Mycroft didn't waste any time – it would have to be quick and clean, like amputating a gangrenous limb. He started speaking as soon as she opened the door.

“You employment is now terminated, and I suggest for your own sake that you leave the country.”

Where someone else might have started, might have rocked back on their heels, she simply blinked. “I-”

“It's no use protesting,” Mycroft interrupted. He couldn't let her plead her case – he didn't trust his resolve to go that far. “We know where your true loyalties lie.”

Before, she had been nothing but confused. Now he saw the slight shift in her expression – the tilt of her mouth, the way she held her head – that told him she'd realised he was serious.

“However, while you haven't been loyal, you have been helpful,” he mused, trying to justify what he was about to do. “And I feel some kind of payment is owed for...services rendered...”

Mycroft's smile felt like the edge of a knife, rigid and cold. But this was good, this was right – he would reduce what had been between them to nothing but a distasteful transaction.

He steeled himself against her expression, telling himself it was all part of the act. Of course she would look shocked and devastated, of course she would look at him like he was the one who had betrayed her, so that he might take her back and proclaim it all a horrible mistake, so she might continue her work...

“You have one day's head start,” he finished.

Mycroft knew this was foolish. He was allowing her an opportunity to return to her employer with whatever information she'd gathered on him...but at least this way, they had a chance of tracking her back to whatever nest she'd emerged from.

And no, it most certainly had nothing to do with the fact that he didn't think he could bear to see her dragged out of his office.

She stared at him for several moments in seemingly-dumbstruck silence, then proved that for all her treachery, she'd never been a stupid woman.

She ran.

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“I'm sorry,” Lestrade said.

“Why?” Sherlock asked, pleased that his voice sounded almost normal. “Unless you, too, are working for Moriarty.”

“Well, I know you were...fond of him,” the inspector said awkwardly.

Sherlock had the sudden, irrational urge to laugh. 'Fond' of John? He supposed he was 'fond' of John in the same sense that an oil fire was 'lukewarm'.
He stared down at the evidence Lestrade had brought, the CCTV stills and phone records scattered across the coffee table, and felt suddenly ill. He wondered if the strange wrenching sensation in his chest was a symptom of a heart-attack, and all at once hoped that it was, and that it would kill him. Because if he dropped dead on the living room floor, then he wouldn't have to keep sitting here, staring at...at that.

Phone records, photographs, times and dates of meetings...a vast collection of evidence that all demonstrated one thing – John was working for Moriarty. Had been working for Moriarty since the beginning.

Sherlock didn't want to believe it...but the evidence was undeniable.

It also explained some points that Sherlock was been curious about. It explained why Moriarty had come into the picture so soon after meeting John – he'd waited until his spy was in Baker Street to make himself known. It explained why the bomb at the pool was fake, why Moriarty had simply laughed and walked away afterwards, saying something about it being a test. Apparently it had been a test to see if John had successfully infiltrated.

And more than that, it explained why, when Sherlock had dragged him off those chlorine-stained tiles and kissed him, John had kissed back.

He'd never understood why until now. Sherlock knew what he was – a narcissistic genius on the borderline of a personality disorder – and he'd no idea why John – who, in spite of his sometimes-hot temper, was probably the most open, accepting and generous person Sherlock had ever met – would want to engage in a relationship with him. But he'd wanted to; indeed, he'd seemed almost eager to.

They'd been engaging in sexual intercourse for three weeks and five days, and John had yet to lose the almost reverent expression that flitted across his face when they shed their clothes, as if he couldn't quite credit what was happening. He'd looked like a man who could never truly believe he was this lucky, this fortunate, and it had always seemed bizarre to Sherlock – if one of them was going to be counting their blessings, shouldn't it be him?

But now...now he knew that expression had been John wondering at his luck that his target trusted him so implicitly, that he'd advanced so far into Sherlock's inner circle.

It was just like what had happened with Sebastian. They were always out to get something from him, and he'd been confused when John didn't seem to want anything...but now, it all made sense.

“We've got some units looking for him,” Lestrade went on. “Do you know where he is?”

“No.”

“Sherlock, this is serious-”

“So I see,” Sherlock snapped, indicating the evidence Lestrade had presented with a broad sweep of his arm.

Lestrade frowned. “Don't think you can protect him.”

“Why would I want to protect him?” Sherlock asked, pleased when his voice remained steady. “If he's working for Moriarty, then I want him in prison just as much as you do.”

The look Lestrade sent him was overflowing with doubt, but there was no reason for him to remain and he knew it.
“I'll leave a watch on the flat,” he said as he left. “He doesn't know he's been sprung, so he's bound to come back sometime.”

Sherlock nodded absently, staring fixedly into the kitchen and trying not to remember the fact that John had wanted a cup of coffee after they'd had sex that morning, and had made it while he was still naked. At the time Sherlock had been strangely enchanted by it, by how comfortable John was with him (though the view might have had something to do with his appreciation as well), and now...now he just felt ill.

He allowed for ten minutes to ensure that Lestrade was truly gone, and then he acted.

Sherlock took John's gun and three magazines of bullets and stuffed them into a tattered bag Sherlock suspected John had carried to Afghanistan, along with every piece of clothing the doctor owned. Then he left the flat – it was child's play to shake the policeman who'd been tailing him – and made his way to Tesco's.

Sure enough, there was John, just stepping out of the shop with a plastic bag filled with perishables. The sight sent a strange feeling juddering through Sherlock's chest, as though someone were twisting at the sinews and ligaments that supported his heart and lungs.

He walked straight up to John, ignoring the cheerful greeting that made bile rise in his throat, and ripped the plastic bag out of his hands, shoving the tattered duffel into them instead.

“Run.”

John blinked. “What?”

“You've been found out,” Sherlock gritted out. “Run.”

“Found out?” John echoed. “Sherlock, what are you-”

“I know you're working for Moriarty!” Sherlock spat, shoving his hands into his pockets before John (if that was even his name) could see them shaking.

John gaped at him. “Working for...have you gone mental?”

Sherlock had to give him credit – that was truly a flawless imitation of bewilderment and hurt.

“The evidence is undeniable – you can't bluff your way out of this one,” he hissed. “I've just given you your gun and all your clothes, and if I ever see you again, I won't hesitate to turn you in.”

With that, Sherlock spun around and all-but ran away.

Sherlock knew he should have turned him in, should have told Lestrade he was at Tesco's and let the police do the one thing they were good for and arrest him. But he couldn't bear to think of John in prison, and if he gave the man a head start and everything he needed...there was a chance he'd never have to see him again.

And like that old saying went – out of sight, out of mind. If he never saw John again, perhaps he'd someday be lucky enough to stop thinking of John.

To stop seeing the moment before he turned away, when John stared at him with hurt and betrayal written across his features as though Sherlock was the one who'd turned on him.
John had never quite understood the term 'pole-axed' until now. He watched Sherlock sweep out of sight with a numb feeling of unreality – this was a joke, right? It had to be one of Sherlock's weird experiments.

'All right, calm down,' John told himself. 'Just go right on back to the flat and explain to Sherlock that there are some things you don't experiment with. Everything will be all right, just go back home.'

But as soon as he stepped out on the pavement, a black car pulled up beside him. It was smaller than Mycroft's usual, and it was the passenger door the opened for him rather than one of the back ones, but John wasn't in a mood to be choosy. Maybe Mycroft could explain why Sherlock had done...that.

Except there was no generic, perfectly professional driver waiting for him. It was the woman whose name wasn't Anthea, and she was looking a bit...well, frazzled.

“Hello...erm, Anthea?” John hazarded.

There was a small pause, and Anthea seemed saddened, as though she'd just had a particularly depressing thought.

“That will do,” she said eventually, and something in her tone made the back of John's neck prickle.

He opened his mouth to ask what this was about, but Anthea spoke before he could, pulling away from the curb.

“I've collected you, Dr. Watson, because I feel we may be in the same boat, so to speak.”

“Mycroft's done some crazy experiment about loyalty, too? And please – call me John.”

Anthea glanced at him from the corner of her eye as she negotiated the traffic, and the expression on her face looked uncomfortably like pity. “John...that wasn't an experiment.”

Something deep and vital in John froze as though it had been plunged into liquid nitrogen.

“I believe both of us have been framed,” Anthea went on. “And the coincidental timing suggests we were framed by the same person.”

John barely heard her. Her voice was muffled by the shrieking denial ripping through his brain.

“No! NO! Sherlock trusts me, he wouldn't-”

“He did, John!” Anthea snapped. “Just as Mycroft did!”

Her following silence was heavy with grief and fury, and John saw some of his own heart-shattering pain glimmer in her eyes as she stopped at a traffic light.

In spite of the fact that she was obviously finding this as difficult and agonising as he was, John couldn't help himself asking, “Sherlock really believed that? Without even giving me a chance?”

A sigh that felt dangerously close to a sob shuddered in his chest. “He didn't even talk to me...”

There was no appreciable change in Anthea's expression, but her voice was gentler when she spoke again. “I hacked the police records, John – the evidence is quite overwhelming.”

John absorbed that information the way he would have absorbed a sudden blow to the gut – with
pain and incredulity.

Sherlock hadn't even given him the benefit of the doubt. Instead, he'd believed what he'd been handed, and hadn't even given John a chance to defend himself. And here John had thought he'd actually meant something to Sherlock, that the other man had cared about him...

John swallowed harshly, stifling the grief and betrayal and fury that had risen in his throat. He took a deep breath and let it gust from his lips, feeling the strange calm that always descended on him in crisis situations rise to the fore. He closed his eyes and embraced it, only opening them again when he was certain he was in control of himself.

“So,” he said quietly, his voice carefully blank. “What now?”

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She'd struggled not to react when Dr. Watson – John, she reminded herself – had called her 'Anthea'. He hadn't intended it as a deliberate slight, but it had rubbed salt into a raw, still-bleeding wound. Only one man still living knew her real name, knew her...but here, to John, she would be Anthea. She would be Anthea until she'd dragged herself out of this.

Originally, she'd only hacked the police records in an effort to determine if any one of the numerous people she and Mycroft had put away for corruption had been released recently. She hadn't thought it likely, but had been trying to determine who might have a motive to frame her for betrayal. And she'd discovered that she wasn't the only one being falsely accused.

Anthea knew it was possible that the evidence against John was completely sound and he truly was working for Moriarty...but it all seemed a bit too coincidental for her tastes. She hadn't been sure about going to pick him up – he didn't seem the cloak and dagger type, and was more likely to be a dead weight than not...but they might as well stick together and he had good reports from the army, so he'd be at least semi-useful in this situation.

Though it looked like he wouldn't be useful for a while yet. John still looked dazed and...well, broken, as though every particle of his being was struggling to reject what he'd just been told and what Sherlock had just done.

Anthea couldn't deny she felt a reluctant stirring of sympathy. Two hours ago, that had been her. Standing in the office she'd worked in for years, staring at the man she'd thought she'd known while he banished her from his life...

She jerked her head roughly from side to side, keeping her eyes fixed on the road and trying to drown out the memories. She wouldn't think of that, not now...

“So, what now?” John asked, his voice surprisingly composed.

Anthea glanced at him as she idled in traffic. John's face was perfectly flat and almost expressionless, only the lines around his mouth and at the corner of his eyes betraying his tension.

She was actually impressed – John had been betrayed not five minutes ago, and he'd already moved past his initial emotional response to action. He might be useful, after all.

“Now, we plan,” she said shortly.

Mycroft had promised her a day's head start, and she was going to take full advantage of that.
John did his best to stay absolutely silent and motionless; Anthea was using one of those tiny make-up pencils to tweak the shape of his eyebrows, a minor alteration that produced a major change in appearance. It wouldn't be enough to fool, say, Sherlock or Mycroft, but it would keep the general public from recognising him at a glance.

They hadn't seen his face on any televisions yet, but they weren't taking chances.

Anthea had parked the car in a CCTV blind spot (apparently she knew the location of each and every blind spot in the city, which might have surprised John if she'd been anyone else), and now they were both crammed awkwardly into the back seat while Anthea did her best to make John unrecognisable.

Anthea left his eyebrows to do...something...to his cheeks. She'd told him she was going to make his cheekbones seem higher and thinner, another small change that would alter his face quite drastically. Having never had to go undercover for any reason, John was going to trust her experience.

He became aware Anthea was snapping her portable make-up case closed.

“Done,” she whispered.

John nodded, trying not to wipe at his face.

“How about switching number plates?” John suggested. “Harry and I did that once when we were kids.”

“No!” John spluttered. “We had a neighbour with a car almost identical to our own, and one night Harry mentioned that the number plates were probably the only way you could tell them apart, so we decided to...test that.”

Harry had been able to drive at that point, so they'd switched the cars in the driveways and swapped the licence plates. It had taken three days for their parents to figure it out.

“Everyone expects us to leave the country,” Anthea pointed out. “So that's exactly what we won't do. I'm sure every airport, ferry and train station will have copies of our photographs by tomorrow at the very latest, so to err on the safe side we'll avoid public transport as much as we can. Oh, and we'll have to do something about this car...”

“How about switching number plates?” John suggested. “Harry and I did that once when we were kids.”

“...you stole a car and switched the number plates?”

“What? No!” John spluttered. “We had a neighbour with a car almost identical to our own, and one night Harry mentioned that the number plates were probably the only way you could tell them apart, so we decided to...test that.”

John's stomach contracted uncomfortably at the mention of Mycroft. Thoughts of Mycroft inevitably led to thoughts of Sherlock, and the last time John had seen him. When Sherlock just walked away
from him, like he wasn't even a blip on the radar, like John was nothing to him.

Apparently Mycroft had given Anthea a day's head start...Sherlock couldn't even do that.

John had wondered exactly what was happening between him and Sherlock – after all, Sherlock had never seemed the romantic type, and if he'd wanted some easy sex, there were surely better options than John. He hadn't dared to hope that Sherlock might be in love with him...and it looked like his fears were justified. Sherlock had been fond of John, but in the same way people were fond of their microwave or blender – he was convenient and useful, but when it came down to it, Sherlock could do without him quite easily.

“We have to stay off busy streets,” Anthea continued, dragging John out of his increasingly depressing thoughts. “Trying to avoid CCTV in London is rather hopeless, but we should make an effort. And I need to buy some things.”

“What kinds of things?” John asked, honestly curious.

“Wigs, make-up – we'll need to be able to disguise ourselves, and to change those disguises when we need to.”

“Right,” John nodded, trying to ignore the misgivings settling in his gut.

He'd been to war, but this, this was very different. And really, a whole lot more unnerving. Combat he understood – your life depended upon your reflexes, your training and your own skills. But with this, your life depended on your skills at camouflaging yourself, at deception, your ability to out-strategise your opponent...and John wasn't quite sure he was up to the task.

The one time Sherlock had coaxed him into a game of chess the other man had absolutely thrashed him, and John was going to stop thinking about Sherlock right now.

“What are our assets?” he blurted out.

Anthea shot him a puzzled glance from the corner of her eyes, perhaps hearing the desperation in his voice, but to John's relief, she didn't argue.

“This car, for one,” she began. “Though we may have to abandon it at some point in the future. I managed to collect some things from my house before I left so I've got plenty of changes of clothes. I have a Glock M26 with 10 bullets, though it's only for self-defence and I've never had to use it. I took along my make-up, a sewing kit, several lock-picking tools, a cigarette lighter and one of those multi-purpose tools. Your basic equipment for passport alteration-”

“What?”

“Basic equipment for passport alteration,” Anthea repeated, sounding slightly frustrated. “With some blank identifications that we can slip our pictures into, of course.”

“Of course,” John echoed, feeling dangerously out of his depth.

“I also have a GPS tracking device I was working on.”

“Sorry – that you were working on?”

“There's been a need for a tracking device to help monitor our...his...agents,” Anthea said eventually, and John had no doubt that the 'his' referred to Mycroft. “I was working on a plastic and ceramic GPS that could be implanted within the body. I doubt it will be particularly useful to us, but it could
prove valuable if, for some reason, we're forced to split up. The wires and tools I was using to build it will be more useful, provided we have to dismantle a computer or something similar."

“That something you're expecting to do then?”

“You never know,” Anthea said darkly. “I also have this.”

She gestured briefly at her legs, and John realised the Blackberry Anthea had been using when he'd first met her on was resting on her lap.

“Wait a second, didn't you tell me to chuck my phone in case they tracked the GPS?” John asked.

Even before Anthea had altered his face, she'd made him get rid of his phone – John had tossed it in a bin with a pang of regret. Harry had given it to him, and even though she had only given it to him to get rid of it, in that moment, it had seemed important. As though by throwing his phone away, he was surrendering his former life and embracing existence as a fugitive.

“This isn't a regular Blackberry,” Anthea explained, sounding slightly scornful, as though she'd never be caught dead with an ordinary Blackberry. “Among other...extra features, it's untraceable. Have you checked your bag?”

“Er, not as such,” John said, realising that he'd simply thrown the bag at his feet and hadn't glanced at it once.

He hunched down awkwardly and unzipped it, blinking in surprise when he found his gun and three magazines of bullets resting on top of his clothes. There was also one of those plastic money belts that, when John opened it, turned out to contain close to a thousand pounds.

“Oh, money's not object,” Anthea said when she noticed the way John was boggling at the cash in his hands. “I have tens of thousands on me.”

John decided he didn't want to know how she'd managed to withdraw all that money so quickly. Encounters with Mycroft and Anthea always left him worrying that the Big Brother concept was closer to the mark than anyone had ever suspected.

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Anthea had never been holding out much hope of finding a completely identical car, and in the end wasn't truly surprised when they had to settle for one that was only vaguely similar. She kept a lookout for overly-curious bystanders (and jammed the CCTV signal with her Blackberry) while John used her multi-purpose tool to unscrew the license plate.

She wished idly that she could jam every camera they came across, but a trail of scrambled CCTV was as good as a trail of neon paint in detailing her movements.

“If we get some good paint from a hardware store, we could alter this even further,” John mused as he affixed the last screw. “This three could quite easily become an eight, and we could change the J into an I.”

“Later,” was all Anthea said. “We still might have to discard the car, find another one...”

“But stealing one would attract far too much attention,” John pointed out. “And even if we bought one, isn't someone paying in cash for a car likely to be remembered?”

“Not if we check the classifieds in the paper and buy a cheap one second-hand.”
“Oh, good idea.” John gave a final twist to the screw, then stood up. “Okay, I think that's got it – where to now?”

Anthea had managed to pick up the various tools of disguises before they’d found the car, which meant there was nothing they needed from London now. Staying in the city (with its ever-present CCTV cameras and the Holmes' looming presence) would only hinder them.

Except they needed to figure out what had happened, and why their respective partners had been convinced by fabricated evidence. Anthea didn't know where to start to unravel John's dilemma, but she thought she had a lead on her own.

She'd caught a glimpse of photographs on Mycroft's desk before he'd thrown her out and photographs were most likely to have been taken by her security retinue. It wasn't exactly a solid lead, but there was one relatively new member (like all of her security detail, he was referred to only by a number, Number 5) who had seemed to dislike her for some unknown reason. It wasn't exactly uncommon – people tended to regard Mycroft as an almost god-like being, and some seemed to resent her for being living proof that he was human – but it was something to start with.

Except she had no idea where Number 5 would be. Her security detail would all have been reassigned, and could be scattered over the world by this point.

But fortunately, there was another option – a man known as Spencer, who'd occasionally assisted her in the basic organisations of Mycroft's daily life.

Anthea had usually only resorted to Spencer when she was busy tweaking the latest gadget, but he'd still had some knowledge of Mycroft's movements. Which meant that Spencer should have some idea of who could receive enough detailed information about Mycroft to frame her. It was true that he'd have his own security assigned to him, but she was counting on Mycroft's 24 hour leeway.

They had to go incognito first, though, so Anthea found another CCTV blind spot for them to alter themselves in. When they emerged, Anthea was a blonde woman in her late twenties and John was a silver-haired man with glasses in the twilight years of his life. John even obligingly faked the hunched back and shuffling walk of someone in the later stages of osteoporosis.

“So, what's the cover story?” John asked as Anthea drove to Spencer's location.

“You're Eugene Carter, my grandfather, retired from the military ten years ago.”

John chuckled a little, and Anthea shrugged. “The easiest deceptions to maintain are those that have some truth to them. I'm Jenny Lowell, a computer technician, and my mother is your only child.”


“Don't worry about it too much – I have a feeling we'll need to discard these identities as soon as we've seen Spencer,” Anthea mused, pulling up in the street.

She wasn't about to park right outside a heavily-guarded house – if worst came to worst, she wanted a getaway vehicle they couldn't immediately riddle with bullets.

“Well, into the breach, then?” John asked, sounding far too cheerful.

“In the breach,” she agreed.

They approached the rather innocuous-looking beige house. Anthea's gun was in her purse (for all the good it would do her), and she knew John's was tucked in the waistband of his pants. She made a
mental note to have Mycroft get him a hidden holster before she remembered that she couldn’t do that – her connection to Mycroft was severed.

Her throat closed for a moment, before she forced the emotion down. She couldn't afford to get distracted, not now – she needed to keep a look out for the discreetly hidden bodyguards.

But there didn't seem to be any. She checked all the usual places, but nowhere did Anthea see even a glimmer of binoculars, let alone a face or silhouette.

“What's wrong?” John asked, voice so quiet she had difficulty hearing him.

A little surprised he'd been able to pick up on her tension, Anthea made a conscious effort to relax. “I can’t see any sentries. Which means either they've vastly improved in the last day or so, or...”

“Or we're wandering into a trap,” John finished. “So...forge ahead, or run for it?”

They were still walking at the exact same pace they’d started at – even if this was a trap, there was no reason to let them know John and Anthea were on their guard.

Anthea considered the merits of escape. But even if they turned around and walked away, what then? If they wanted to talk to Spencer it had be now, before her grace period was up. The only other options would take days of research, with the full might of Mycroft’s organisation on their tail. This was their only opportunity to get ahead of the game and they couldn't afford not to take it.

“Keep going,” she replied, her voice low.

The door was shut, but unlocked. Her feelings of misgiving only increasing, Anthea pushed it open.

The entry hall looked deserted, but Anthea knew better than to trust that impression. Yet the house seemed ominously still, and she couldn't help reaching into her purse and wrapping her hand around her gun. A swift glance behind her confirmed John's pistol was drawn and ready.

Police sirens wailed in the distance, and though she knew it probably had nothing to do with them, the sound ratcheted her anxiety up another notch.

Anthea glanced down and froze. Her hand shot out to seize John's wrist. The muscles beneath her fingers tensed in surprise as he realised what she'd seen.

It was difficult to see against the deep purple carpet, but there was a dark, rust-coloured streak as wide as Anthea’s palm that started in the middle of the entryway, then led up the stairs and curved off behind the corner. Anthea was far from an expert in these things, but she strongly suspected it was blood.

The sensible reaction would have been to leave the house as quickly as possible. But Anthea didn't move – this was their best chance, and she wasn't going to let it slip through their fingers. After all, they'd only seen one trail of blood, so it was entirely possible Spencer was still alive.

John stepped in front of her, and Anthea let him. If they were going to run into trouble, it was probably best to have the military man in the front.

So she let John creep ahead, flattening himself against the wall as he climbed the stairs before swinging around and bringing his weapon to bear at the same time. But there was no explosion of gunfire, just the doctor hissing a curse from between his teeth.

When Anthea leaned around the corner, she saw why. What had apparently served as a living room
would now be more aptly described as a slaughterhouse – eight bodies lay on the carpet in pools of coagulated blood.

John was moving through them, checking their pulses, rolling them over to survey the wounds. Most had been brought down by gunshots – some to the heart, some to the back of the head – but one had clearly had her throat slit by some kind of knife, and another seemed to have been garotted.

Anthea only recognised two of them; Number 5 and Spencer.

For one brief, bewildered moment, she wondered why Number 5 had been assigned to Spencer's security detail.

“Judging by the look on your face, I'm going to assume the person we needed to see is among these,” John said, rising from the last body.

The tips of his index and middle fingers were damp with blood from where he'd been checking pulses, and as Anthea watched he made to wipe it off on his jacket, then remembered they had no way to wash it off again and began to cast about for something else. Tissues, might work, or some sort of damp cloth, and she wondered where the bathroom was.

Was it just her imagination, or were the sirens getting louder?

It suddenly hit her that she and John seemed to be alone in a house in which a massacre had taken place not too long ago, and the police were approaching. This seemed very much like a trap.

“John, the sirens...”

“I hear them,” John muttered, now relieving the bodies of their weapons.

Anthea risked a glance out of the heavy curtains – sure enough, a police car was pulling up outside. This was definitely a trap, but set by who? And was it for them, or had it been intended for someone else?

Their route to the car was blocked, so Anthea's plan (still in its formative stage), was to go out the back before the house was surrounded. But as she watched, only two policemen got out of the car, neither of them armed with guns.

Obviously, this hadn't been reported as a murder. Probably a 'concerned neighbour' had phoned in a disturbance or something along those lines...but why? What was this working towards?

“Anthea, I think we've got a problem here,” John said grimly.

He was at the opposite end of the expansive dining/living room that made up the first floor of the house and had peeled back the curtains there, little smears of blood from his fingers streaking the fabric.

Anthea joined him, and felt her heart rate jump several notches as she saw the figures creeping over the back fence one by one. These people weren't official; she knew that immediately. It was in their clothes – all casual, informal, nothing even resembling a uniform – but more than that, it was in their behaviour, the way they edged furtively along the fence instead of striding boldly up to the door, the way they didn't have radios but instead spoke to each other in whispers...these weren't the police, or the Secret Service, or anything of the kind.

Then, in a lightning flash of insight, Anthea understood.
“Those people aren't the police,” she hissed to John.

“I figured that,” John said placidly.

A trap was being sprung, but what kind of trap? Why have two policemen called to the scene if at least six of their own people would be arriving?

“Moriarty's goons?” John asked.

“Let's assume so,” Anthea said. Then, explaining as rapidly as she dared, “They're going to kill the policemen, and I'm sure they're going to engineer it to make it seem as though we killed everyone here and the police as well.”

“Shit!”

John was rather ignorant of life on this side of law, but Anthea was certain even he knew the fervour with which police went after 'cop killers'.

They were hemmed in at both the front and back – one way or the other, they'd have to fight their way out of this. And frankly, Anthea wasn't good at these sort of combat situations, if only because with her...previous employer, there'd never been any need for combat.

“Stay here and keep watch,” John ordered, already moving swiftly down the stairs (but not running, as that could create too much noise). “Shout if they look like they're getting in the house – I'll lock the doors, that should buy us a few minutes.”

Anthea spared a moment to catalogue the progress of the six people approaching from the back – still furtive and cautious, and they wouldn't reach the house itself for at least two minutes at that rate – then ran to the opposite window to look down into the street and see how the police were faring.

To her shock, they walked right up to the door and knocked. She could hear it swing open downstairs, could hear their hesitant progress...had John not been able to reach the front door in time?

Anthea moved silently to the edge of the staircase, both hands holding her gun.

So she had a perfect view of John approaching the policemen, his arms held aloft in the traditional pose of surrender.

“Thank god you're here,” he said, and she noted that he was careful to keep his voice low as he approached.

“What's the problem, sir?” the more senior-looking partner asked.

John never answered. Both hands shot out and seized their communicators, tearing them from the vests and hurling them to the floor. One arm then twisted upwards and struck the older man across the throat, then dropped to drive a clenched fist into his solar plexus.

The older man collapsed, making weak choking noises, and Anthea thought she heard John whispering 'sorry, sorry' as he intercepted the younger man's attempt to grab the taser attached to his belt. John plucked the taser free himself and tossed it aside, blocking the policeman's punch seemingly as an afterthought. Still gripping the man's wrist, John used the arm as leverage to twist the man in front of him and loop an arm around his neck.

“Listen, I don't want to kill you,” she could hear John saying. “If you don't fight, I'll just put you in a
hold that'll knock you out. But if you struggle...well, I'll try not to hurt you, but I can't really promise anything.”

Anthea wanted to shout at him. She might not know much about hand to hand combat, but she knew you didn't give your opponent that kind of chance – they'd just play along, and then when you relaxed your grip, they'd turn on you!

But to her surprise, the man slumped into John's grip, completely unconscious. The doctor lowered him slowly to the floor, and used his handcuffs to chain the still-gasping policeman to the banister.

“I really am sorry about this,” John offered. “You'll recover your voice in a few hours.”

He jogged up the stairs and, correctly interpreting Anthea's startled expression, explained, “Most people don't struggle in your grip when you're talking to them – almost like they're waiting for you to have your say or something – but they fight after you're finished. So it's best to put them in the hold, and then start talking, because it takes ten seconds or so to knock them out.”

Anthea reflected that papers and records only told you so much about a person. She'd known that John had a good record in combat, but she'd had no idea how eerily calm he was in a crisis. She'd known that he'd received a top ranking in unarmed combat, but she hadn't known he could bring down two fully-trained policemen in under three minutes.

“How are we?” John asked, nodding towards the window as he picked up one of the guns he'd appropriated from the dead bodies.

Anthea approached the window and leaned to one side to peer through a gap in the curtains...

A long knife came through the fabric, and sliced into her collarbone.

Automatically, Anthea lunged backwards, belatedly realising someone had clambered up the wall somehow as the next attack caught her right arm. The second cut was deeper, and Anthea bit her tongue against a cry of pain as she felt muscles and tendons part beneath the blade.

She hit the ground on her side and tried to roll away from the woman coming through the window, when two gunshots thundered through the room, momentarily deafening her.

Two bloody holes appeared over the woman's heart, so close together they formed a misshapen figure eight, and she toppled forwards to thump heavily against the floor.

“All right?” John asked, dropping to his knees (and Anthea noticed he carefully kept himself from throwing a profile against the window).

Her blouse was soaked in blood, the gashes were stinging the way all open wounds did and her right arm couldn't move properly...but the blood wasn't spurt ing out the way it would if an artery had been hit, and she didn't think her injuries were life-threatening.

So Anthea gritted her teeth, and spat, “I'm fine!”

“As a doctor, I officially disagree with you on that,” John said mildly. “Think you can still pull that trigger?”

Anthea hadn't even realised her right hand still had a death-grip on her gun. Experimentally, she tried to raise it, but the stabbing pain in her arm stopped her.

John took hold of her gun, trying to tug it out of her grip. Anthea tightened her hold on it – she might
be injured, but she refused to be discounted!

John gave her a look that was both a reassurance that he knew what she was thinking, and an admonition to trust him. Anthea’s grip slackened, and John dragged the gun from her hand then simply transferred it to her left.

“Keep an eye on the back,” John told her. “Sit to the side so they can’t see you, and look through the gap between the curtain and the window.”

Anthea leaned against the sill, her throbbing arm cradled in her lap as she peered out the window. She could see two people outside, apparently standing watch on the back door – they probably still expected the police to be coming in the front. There was a telling click as the lock on the back door was picked, and she heard John descend the stairs.

The odds were three against one. Ten minutes earlier, she would have been worried about him.

There were some telling thumps, muffled cries and three or four gunshots. The two outside were starting to look wary and uncomfortable, and when they began to approach the house Anthea fired.

She couldn't aim well – people didn't shoot with their non-dominant hands for a reason – but she sent three bullets in their general direction, enough to make them dive for whatever cover they could find.

But they returned fire, and Anthea tried to merge with the wallpaper as bullets tore through the curtains and shattered the open window, spraying her with shards of glass. She shook her head in an effort to dislodge them from her hair, and plucked the largest from her clothes before she tried to glance out again.

The curtain must have shielded her to a certain extent, because although she was ready to throw herself backwards at the first sign that they'd seen her, they didn't seem to be aware she was looking at them. One was almost directly underneath the window, trying to use a tiny crab apple tree as cover, while the other seemed to have retreated to the very edge of the backyard, hunkering down behind the compost heap as though trusting in distance to keep himself safe.

Footsteps sounded on the stairs, and Anthea had brought her gun to bear automatically before she realised it was John coming up.

“How are you doing?” he whispered, crouching down beside her and glancing at her injuries.

“They don't hurt as much any more,” Anthea admitted.

“That's adrenaline for you,” John said with a tight smile. “Still, we should wrap this up pretty quickly – you're still bleeding, after all.”

Anthea wondered if he used that jovial, 'everything is under control' tone to reassure all his patients.

“They still out there?” John asked, and Anthea nodded.

“One behind the crab apple, one behind the compost.”

John frowned, and seemed to be thinking quickly. “I can't get the one behind the tree while I'm crouching – the angle's wrong.”

Anthea was about to ask him if he had any suggestions for a possible plan of action, when John stood up.
Anthea's hand shot out and seized hold of his trouser leg. “What the hell do you think you're doing? Get back down!”

“It's all right – I'm to the side of the window, out of their direct line of sight.”

“But-!”

That was all Anthea managed to say. John had abruptly stepped right up to the window, sweeping the curtain aside and raising his gun.

Two shots roared out, so close together they were almost the same sound.

Anthea could admit she'd been expecting John to stagger, for blood to bloom on his shirt and for him to fall...but instead he simply flicked the safety on his pistol and tucked it into his belt again.

“We should get moving,” he said, bending down to help her up. “There's no way that wouldn't have attracted attention.”

Anthea glanced out the window. A man was slumped beside the compost heap, and a woman was bleeding out onto the grass beneath the crab apple tree.

It seemed ludicrous. John had been using a **pistol**, and he'd had perhaps a quarter of a second to aim. Anthea knew professional snipers who wouldn't have been able to make those shots.

“You know, if I was the kind of person who believed in those things, I'd say you were a dark wizard,” she mused.

John grinned a little shyly, as though she'd complimented him on his haircut and not on how well he killed people. Then he blinked and his 'all business' expression returned.

“Come on – you need medical attention.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to ginbitch, who beta-d this chapter and improved it greatly!
Chapter 3

Anthea managed to persuade John to remain in the house instead of leaving immediately, but only if she consented to letting him apply some hasty bandages.

John had torn strips from their attacker’s clothes and had bound her arm – the more serious injury – and had told her to use her other hand to apply pressure to the wound on her collarbone. Anthea did so, and had been given leave to investigate the rest of the house.

In the meantime, John raided the bodies for weapons – taking a collection of guns and several dozen rounds of bullets along with the policeman’s taser – and in general was as coldly efficient as a high-price hitman.

Anthea tried to find some fragment of useful information they could take away, and went about checking the house for safes and hidden compartments as rapidly as she could. It would have been easier to listen for hollow-sounding floorboards and patches of wall if her ears hadn’t been ringing like two cymbals just after they’d been clashed.

John had assured her that was to be expected when guns were fired and you lacked hearing protection. She’d have to look into getting him a silencer off the black market.

The bedroom had been completely stripped of electronic equipment, likely by whoever had instigated the slaughter, and there was a spray of arterial blood on one wall and a small patch on the floor, near the bed.

Except, tallying the number of bodies and the various injuries they’d sustained, Anthea was almost certain that patch of blood shouldn’t be there. On impulse, she knelt awkwardly beside it – careful not to touch it – and looked under the bed.

A twelve centimetre knife with a black handle rested there, dried blood flaking off the blade.

Anthea immediately quelled the urge to grab hold of it. The knife wasn’t the kind usually carried by security detail – they were issued fifteen centimetre ones – so either someone had brought a weapon from home…or this had belonged to one of the attackers. The patch of blood on the floor made it seem likely that one of the invaders had been clipped by a bullet or another blade, and had fallen to the floor where they lost their knife.

Anthea spared a moment to wonder why they hadn’t then picked it up again, but the size of the patch of blood raised doubts as to whether they’d survived, and if they’d been conscious when their confederates had removed them from the house.

She left the blade where it was. With any luck, the police would get some fingerprints from it, and she could hack their database to find any matches.

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John set the police radios down, out of reach of the man in handcuffs, but practically in the hands of his unconscious partner.

“I really am sorry,” he said, hoping the policeman wouldn’t bear a grudge for John having kicked
“I tried not to cause permanent damage.”

He knew he and Anthea couldn’t linger; if the policeman didn’t check in soon, the dispatch would assume they were in trouble and send another patrol car to help them out. He’d slung most of the weapons into what had probably been a laptop bag – if they were going to be involved in more shoot-outs, he wanted some more guns – and John hoped Anthea had been blessed with similar luck in her search for electronics.

He also needed to take a proper look at her injuries as soon as possible. They certainly weren’t fatal, but the wound on her arm could be debilitating if it didn’t heal correctly.

And that was what concerned John the most. The knife had been aimed specifically at Anthea’s arm – the goal had been to disable, not kill – and they’d only started shooting when he and Anthea shot first. But why? Why try to subdue them, instead of kill them?

He ascended the stairs to find Anthea, and met her in the corridor.

“This house has been completely stripped of electronics,” she said, remarkably calm for a woman whose arm was still bleeding sluggishly.

John was impressed – he knew first-hand how many nerve endings were located in the shoulder area, but there was nothing on Anthea’s face to indicate she was in pain.

“Well, I’ve got everything I need,” he said, hefting the laptop bag pointedly. “Let’s get out of here and get you treated.”

Before they left the house, John made sure to wrap Anthea’s arm again so that it didn’t seem obvious that she was bleeding over her sleeve.

“There was a knife upstairs,” Anthea said as John started the car – her injured arm meant that he’d have to be driving for the foreseeable future. “Probably dropped by one of the intruders, and there’s a likely looking patch of blood there as well. I left it for the police to find, so I’ll have to hack their system later-”

“You can do that?” John blurted. “Just… get into police computers like that?”

(Of course,” Anthea said absently, now examining the makeshift bandage on her arm. “It’s easy enough if you know how.”

John chose not to examine how unnerving that statement was in lieu of focusing on purely practical requirements. “Will you be needing a computer then?”

“Oh, no – this is more than capable.” Anthea held up her Blackberry, and John privately wondered if he could even call it a Blackberry anymore – with all the modifications and enhancements that had apparently been made to it, he doubted there was anything of the original model left.

“We can’t stay in London,” she continued. “It would be best to go up to Scotland-”

“I need to properly treat that arm as soon as possible,” John interrupted. “We’ll leave London if we must, but it’s got to be close by, and somewhere we can lay low for a while. Unless you fancy running around with a disabled arm…?”

Anthea seemed to digest that. “What do you think about Sussex?”

John’s answer was interrupted by a shrill ringtone from Anthea’s Blackberry. In itself, that might not
be so unusual, but John had a good view of the screen from the driver’s seat, and felt a chill ripple through him when he saw the ID listed on the screen.

*John Watson*

Someone was calling Anthea’s Blackberry from his discarded phone.

Sharing a wary glance with John, she moved to accept the call, tapping a few buttons that John assumed put it on speakerphone as a voice rang through the car in the next instant.

“Hello?”

It sounded like a woman, and she was definitely posh. Public school education and then Cambridge or Oxford; John would have bet every bit of his now-inaccessible bank account on it.

“Hello?” Anthea repeated cautiously, her eyes flicking rapidly over the screen, but John couldn’t determine what – if anything – she was seeing. “And who do I have the pleasure of addressing?”

“Someone who is sympathetic to your plight.”

Anthea’s eyes narrowed, and John snapped his back to the road, the tension in his arms so extreme he was slightly worried he’d run something over unless he was paying attention.

“How sympathetic?” Anthea asked, and John could hear the many layers of suspicion in her voice.

He might not be an expert at this super-spy thing, no matter how many times he’d watched Bond movies, but John still had a good idea of exactly how unsettling this was. Whoever this woman was, she seemed to know what had happened to them. She’d rung Anthea from John’s phone, which suggested she’d been watching them for long enough to see them cast John’s phone away and then pick it up herself. And then she would’ve had to know Anthea’s number to make the call in the first place.

“Sympathetic enough to offer whatever assistance I can,” the person on the other end of the phone replied, her voice guarded.

“And what kind of assistance might that be?” Anthea inquired, obviously trying to probe this strange woman’s motives.

Even though it was on speaker phone, John felt it was best to leave the talking to Anthea and remained silent.

“Anything you need,” came the reply. “You provide me a list of whatever you want and a collection point, and I will arrange everything else.”

Anthea’s brow furrowed, and she seemed to be thinking very hard. Then, abruptly, she disconnected the call.

John’s puzzled frown prompted her to explain, “Think about it, John. We’re known fugitives – or at least, you are – and a strange woman calls us offering help, and all we need to do is give her a location where we’ll wander in to pick up whatever she’s left for us.”

John grimaced. “Okay, I see your point on that one. So then, what was that about? I’m pretty sure police can’t really do that kind of stuff, even assuming they could find my phone...so you think it’s some strange twist in Moriarty’s plan?”
“Possibly,” Anthea mused. “But then how would they have acquired my number?”

John rolled that information around in his brain, hoping some great insight would rattle loose. But the only thing he could come up with was…

“Mycroft?”

He was reluctant to even mention the possibility – Anthea had done him the courtesy of not rubbing Sherlock’s betrayal in his face, so the least he could do was do the same for her with Mycroft – but John just couldn’t think of anyone else. Who else would be capable of plucking John’s phone out of whichever bin it had been relegated to, and also have Anthea’s phone number?

And he’d heard of software programs that could alter your voice, make it deeper or softer…or even make you sound like the opposite sex.

“Maybe,” Anthea said softly, and John wondered if she even realised she was gnawing on her bottom lip. “He said he’d give me twenty-four hours, but he’d need to inform some others…”

“And they might not be inclined to give you that head-start,” John finished.

“Exactly.”

“Should we be worried they’ll trace the call?” John asked, before he remembered what Anthea had said earlier about her Blackberry. “Oh, right – untraceable.”

She nodded absently, glancing down at her bandaged arm.

John purposefully hadn’t been mentioning her injury – it wouldn’t do to let her know he was worried – but he felt compelled to ask, “How are you feeling?”

She didn’t say anything, but gave him the kind of look that implied he’d just asked a very stupid question.

“You can tell me it hurts, you know – that’s pretty much to be expected in this kind of situation.”

“Then yes, it hurts like fuck.”

“I’ve never understood why people say that,” John mused as he guided the car around a sharp corner. “Because really, if fucking hurts, then you’re not doing it right.”

There was a moment of surprised silence, before Anthea began to laugh. It was tight and stuttering, as though she was trying not to but couldn’t really help it, and John smiled to himself, pleased at having managed to cheer his ally up.

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Mycroft knew the box of chocolates was breaking his diet, and he didn’t care – he was on holiday. For the first time in twenty-five years, he was taking time off from work and not for the Holmes’ annual Christmas dinner.

He’d left everything in the hands of the two semi-competent people there, and had given them strict instructions that he was only to be contacted if the collapse of the government seemed imminent. And he certainly didn’t want to hear anything about…her.

Mycroft had given himself a week. A week to sequester himself away from the world, to completely purge her from his life. And when he returned to work, he would be calm, clear-headed, and above
all, in control of himself.

Or so he hoped. Because really, he was beginning to doubt a week would be long enough to entirely erase her. He doubted even a year would be long enough.

He (and indeed, his brother) took after their mother in that respect, and Mummy had often said that it was people of their nature – reserved and almost cold, sometimes even cruel – that fell the hardest, and the deepest. And in her case, that was certainly true; even though Father had been dead for almost ten years, Mycroft had never seen her so much as glance at another man.

Pessimistically, Mycroft suspected it would be much the same with him. Some people could move on after a death or a betrayal, could heal enough to eventually let someone else in and love again…but not them.

The Holmes’ hearts were small and hard and viciously dark, and there was only room for one in there.

And look at that – not even a day after he’d discovered her betrayal, and already Mycroft was getting maudlin.

For a moment, he wondered if he should call in on Sherlock and John. Verbal sparring with Sherlock was usually guaranteed to bring him out of a sulk, but in the end Mycroft decided against it. He was in no mood to get a dose of his brother’s domestic bliss, not today.

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Sherlock was not going to take drugs. He refused to let John drive him to them, refused to acknowledge the sucking black hole John’s absence had opened in the flat, in his life.

He was, however, smoking again. Very heavily.

Maybe if he smoked in every room in the flat, the smell of cigarettes would erase the John’s scent.

Everything previously belonging to John had now been removed to Scotland Yard, and Sherlock was glad of it (Lestrade hadn’t been pleased about Sherlock’s unsupervised excursion, but as there was no proof Sherlock had contacted John he couldn’t arrest him). But the rooms, the couch, and towels, the sheets…they still smelled of John, something Sherlock was endeavouring to correct as soon as possible.

Maybe then, when there no reminders of John anywhere, Sherlock would finally manage to delete the man.

He tried before, of course – tried to eliminate their relationship and friendship so he was left with nothing but the abstract concept of John as one of Moriarty’s henchmen who’d infiltrated Baker Street – but it hadn’t worked. Perhaps because deleting something required that it be shut up and boxed away, and with John he just…couldn’t do it. It didn’t work; John had always defied Sherlock’s attempts to measure and classify him from the first, and he wasn’t having any more success now that John…wasn’t there.

Sherlock exhaled smoke slowly where he lay on the sofa, taking care to turn his head and breathe it over the cushions.

He needed to be able to delete John-the-friend and John-the-lover. He needed to remember nothing but John-the-betrayer because if he didn’t…
If he didn’t, Sherlock didn’t think he’d ever be able to bring himself to go after Moriarty again.

“This would be a nice place to retire to,” John mused as he drove through Sussex.

Anthea didn’t reply, and a glance to the side showed that she was staring out the window. More specifically, she was staring at the sun, which was beginning to dip below the horizon.

John suspected she was thinking of Mycroft, and that the grace period he’d given her was fast running out.

“Could you turn on the radio?” he asked, hoping to distract her. If nothing else, Anthea might find a nice music station that would cheer her up for a little while.

It worked better than John had expected, probably because Anthea had been just as desperate for something to take her mind off Mycroft. For the next fifteen minutes or so, she fiddled with her car’s radio, skipping between news stations and various music channels, listening to a few songs before ads prompted her to change the frequency again.

In the end, they booked a room in the first motel they could find with a vacancy, Anthea taking care of the transaction so John wouldn’t have to show his face to anyone. John put her arm in a sling to make it look as though she had some kind of muscle-strain injury, and once they were in the room he finally got his opportunity to have a proper look at her injury.

The trouble was, it certainly required stitches, and they weren’t exactly something John had on him.

“That feels rather tight,” Anthea said as he stepped back after yanking the bandage around her arm as firmly as he dared.

“You need stitches,” John said bluntly. “This’ll have to do for now. I might be able to kit myself up a bit and check out some chemists for some first-aid—”

Anthea shook her head. “Not now – if we just check in and then leave immediately in search of a chemist it will encourage speculation.”

John glared. Anthea had told him to avoid strange behaviour at all costs, because strange behaviour made you memorable, but there came a bloody limit!

“Do you know what that knife was meant to do to your arm?” he hissed. “It was supposed to sever the deltoid muscle and completely disable your arm. You’re lucky it only grazed your bicep instead! I may not be some kind of super-intelligent spy like you, but trust me when I say you need stitches or you risk permanently limiting mobility in your arm.”

His voice had taken on the severe tone he used with recalcitrant patients, and Anthea’s eyebrows had climbed her forehead as his tone got progressively lower and more intent.

“What?” John asked eventually, not sure what to make of her expression.

“I think I understand how you got Sherlock to submit to your medical treatment.”

The mind was a funny thing, John reflected. It was strange how the mere mention of Sherlock’s name felt like a slap in the face, those simple syllables bringing back the memory of shattered trust and heartbreak as though it had only happened seconds ago.
Anthea seemed to realise what had happened as her expression changed in an instant from ‘reluctantly impressed’ to ‘contrite’, but John turned away before she could say anything.

“I doubt I could find stitches in a chemist’s anyway,” he muttered, half to himself. Then, his voice louder but still not quite looking at her, “Get some rest – I’ll go see if there’s a walk-in clinic about.”

“Use this,” Anthea said, pressing her Blackberry into John’s hand.

John supposed it had an internet connection or something, and nodded absently as she walked into the bedroom and shut the door behind her.

Leaving John with the Blackberry in his hand. A Blackberry someone had called them on barely an hour ago, offering whatever kind of assistance they needed.

He knew Anthea’s reasons for hanging up were perfectly valid – it could very well be a trap. But… they were pretty thoroughly trapped anyway, and would anyone coming after them risk exposing themselves in such a way? If they’d seen them ditch John’s phone (and obviously recently enough to have picked it out of the trash and call with it within a few hours) why not just take them in right there? If they’d been keeping track of them that early, John didn’t imagine they’d have problems following their movements. Sure, they’d disguised themselves and switched the licence plate, but if someone had been monitoring them that closely that early on…

John knew he shouldn’t do it. But Anthea desperately needed medical supplies – hospital or clinic-grade medical supplies, at that – and John simply wouldn’t find what she needed in a chemist. If the wound wasn’t stitched, the heavy build-up of scar tissue that would follow could restrict movement in her arm for years before it began to soften.

And if they sought out a clinic…that was just one more opportunity to be seen, to be recognised and brought into custody.

John lifted Anthea’s Blackberry, and dialled the number of his own mobile.

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Avra Holmes might be getting on the years, but she wasn’t old enough to let something of this magnitude slip past her.

When her sons finally settled down, she’d been so happy for them – and with such perfect partners, too. Partners who understood and helped them in their work, but who took care of them at the same time and really, she couldn’t have asked for her sons to be in better hands.

Mycroft’s partner, the woman with the ever-shifting name, Avra had met already, of course. She’d been looking forward to formally making the acquaintance of John Watson, but it seemed that happy event would have to be postponed.

Her surveillance (on both her sons) had caught the whole debacle, of course. Avra always found it interesting that most people assumed Sherlock and Mycroft inherited their strange tendencies from their father, and while her dear George had been the artist in the family, she knew they took after her far more than they did him. For instance, most of Mycroft’s little tricks were things she’d taught him and of the two, Mycroft was the one who was the most like her, with his calculated manipulations and the long strings he pulled. Sherlock was a little more like his father – impulsive and daring and not bothering to act ‘normal’.

At times though, she couldn’t help but think it was unfortunate that they had more of her hyper-observant calculation than her husband’s cheerful warmth. It had made them great men, yes, and
frighteningly intelligent…but sometimes she thought they would have been far happier if they’d had more of George’s nature than her own.

And it left them prone to slip-ups like this. Her sons had never really trusted themselves when it came to the emotional side of things – Avra had been just the same, before George taught her to have faith in herself – which was why they’d fallen into that trap.

For it was definitely a trap. Both Sherlock’s and Mycroft’s partners exposed as traitors within the same day was too much to be a coincidence. Frankly, she was surprised her sons hadn't realised this…but they had such difficulty communicating (far too alike for their own good, she suspected), and some wisdom only came with age it seemed.

Avra might have technically been retired, but that didn't mean she was dead – she still maintained a skeleton of her old network, just in case her boys ever needed help. They'd proven invaluable when Sherlock tangled with that Moriarty character at that swimming pool, and when she'd heard the news about her sons' partners, she'd made sure to monitor them as much as she could.

She'd had one of her network pick up John's phone when they cast it away, and called them with an offer of help. Avra hadn't been surprised when she'd been promptly disconnected – that was a sceptical girl her Mycroft had chosen – but she was content to bide her time. She doubted the true reality of their situation had sunk in yet, and the doctor fellow seemed much more trusting...soon enough, desperation would drive one of them to phone back with a request.

When the mobile trilled, she answered on the first ring.

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Sebastian Moran had a strong stomach – he was professional sniper, he had to. Seeing people killed (or indeed, tortured) had never come close to putting him off his lunch.

But he did hate waste, which was why he felt compelled to interrupt Moriarty's preparations.

“Are you sure you should be doing this?”

Jim looked up with a frown. “What's the matter?”

Sebastian glanced pointedly at the man strung up in the centre of the room. His wrists were handcuffed, the short chain connecting them pulled tight over a large meat-hook, hoisted so high Gustav Rainer's toes only just touched the cement floor.

Only two day's ago, Sebastian had been giving this man instructions and acting as protection, but it wasn't sentiment that drove him to intervene. Gustav was John Watson's doppelganger, and Sebastian thought Jim should at least consider other uses for him before he disposed of the man entirely.

It had been difficult, to find someone resembling Dr. Watson who Jim could reel in. It had been months of work to slowly deplete his bank accounts, to get him fired, to ensure he wouldn't be hired anywhere else, to watch him dig himself deeply into debt in an attempt to support his wife and child, until he was so desperate he'd have agreed to prostitute himself as long as Jim promised him his family would be looked after.

When they first recruited Gustav, he was the same height and weight as Dr. Watson, but bore only a passing resemblance. After Jim's favourite plastic surgeon had finished with him, Gustav could have been the doctor's identical twin.
Then Jim had made sure he'd be seen talking to Gustav, dining with him, passing him money, and the wheels of Jim's plan had been set into motion.

Sebastian still wasn't entirely clear on what that plan was, though. Jim was rarely in a mood to confide, and often Sebastian only learned the reasons behind his orders when they were already carried out and Jim was gloating to him. Framing John Watson (and the government lady, whatever-her-name-was) had been the first stage, Sebastian knew, but he was still unclear as to what came next.

Only that it apparently involved Jim torturing eight (at last count) men to death. While it was true Jim did have moods in which people could – and did – die, it was unusual for him to be so methodical about the whole thing. It was also unusual for him to be so discerning in his choice of victims; all the people he'd killed were men in their mid- to late thirties, a shade below average height, and quite fit.

And they all died via a different method. The first one had been strangled and revived repeatedly until his body just gave out. The second was burned by everything from cigarette butts to a flamethrower. The third had died via amputation, Jim taking off first his fingers, then his toes, then his arms and legs. And after that...

After that, Jim got creative.

“We put a lot of work into him,” Sebastian said, nodding at Gustav. “Are you sure you want it all to go to waste?”

Jim grinned. “Sweet of you to look out for my interests, Seb, but at this stage of the plan, Gustav here is nothing more than a liability.”

Sebastian shrugged affably, ignoring the strangled pleas and whimpers Gustav was trying to eke out from behind his gag. “If you say so. But can I ask...what is the plan here?”

This, right here, was why Sebastian's place in the pecking order of Moriarty's organisation could never be usurped. Because no one else dared to ask Jim 'why', perhaps afraid Jim would snap and chop them up into dog food or something. But Sebastian had never been afraid to ask 'why'.

Sometimes Jim didn't answer, of course. Sometimes he just said 'because I want you to' or 'because I'm telling you to' and that was that. But sometimes...sometimes he let Sebastian in on whatever crazy, brilliant plan was spiralling through that amazing mind.

“I told Sherlock I'd burn his heart out,” Moriarty said, with a smile that reminded Sebastian of a shark – bloodless and cold yet somehow smug and pleased at the same time. “And I keep my promises.”

“So you make him think his pet doctor turned traitor?” Sebastian hazarded. It would certainly be effective, but it seemed to be lacking something, that extra streak of viciousness that Jim employed so beautifully.

“Wеееell, that's the first part,” Jim sang out, blithe cheer coating his voice.

“What's the second?”

“We bring Johnny-boy here...and I destroy him,” Moriarty pronounced, relish in every syllable. “And I don't mean kill him – oh, no, that's much too easy. I'll break him apart mentally, physically, emotionally, until he's nothing but a gibbering wreck, only capable of screaming or crying or begging for mercy. Until he's fit for nothing but a mental institution and twenty-four hour sedation.”

A slight thrill of pleasure was beginning to inch its way up Sebastian's spine. “And then?”
Jim's grin stretched wider, like one of those snakes that could dislocate their jaws. “Did you know I've kept every speck of evidence that we framed John? Everything that shows the charges against him are false are still on the computer.”

Sebastian nodded. He'd been aware that Jim had documented their take down of the doctor in obsessive detail, but had never been inclined to ask him why.

“Well, when poor little Johnny-boy is more animal than human, I'll leave him on Sherlock's doorstep with a big package of documents that show he was on Sherlock's side the whole time.”

Sebastian smiled. Like all Jim's plans, it was sheer genius. Sebastian couldn't think of a better way to 'burn the heart out of someone' than to torture their lover into insanity – and knowing how thorough Jim was, it would be the screaming, raving, never-come-back-to-reality-ever-again kind of insanity.

And with everyone believing John was on their side, no one would come looking for him if he disappeared.

Well, they would look, but they'd be looking for John as a perpetrator, a man who still had his freedom, not for a victim being locked away and tortured.

Something occurred to Sebastian, “What about the government bird – what do we want with her?”

Jim waved his hand dismissively. “Smokescreen. Enough to keep big brother busy and keep that large nose out of our business. He's not the type to deal well with this kind of thing – emotional upheaval is so messy!” Jim giggled maniacally. “By now, he'll be on holiday, trying to lock everything down and become that cold, hard government calculator once more.”

Sebastian absorbed that with a nod. “And now you need to kill him-” he gestured to Gustav, “So no one knows there's a John Watson doppelganger running around.”

“Exactly,” Jim beamed. “I knew you'd see it my way.”

“So what were the others for?”

“The others?” Jim frowned for a moment, then comprehension smoothed his face again. “Oh, the others. Practice makes perfect, and I can't run the risk of killing Johnny when we have him, after all. So I'm running some experiments.”

Sebastian understood. Jim was taking men about Dr. Watson's age, height and weight and determining at what point various methods of torture went over the line and became lethal. So when they actually had the doctor in their grasp, Jim would know just how far he could push it.

Well, that explained the flogger resting on the floor – Sebastian had been wondering about that. It was relatively short, not much longer than a riding crop, with a thick, solid handle and a long, flexible strap that tapered to a point. It would draw blood, and it would do it quickly.

“Well, enjoy yourself,” he said, turning away and beginning to leave the room.

From the corner of his eye, Sebastian saw Jim pick up the flogger and address Gustav.

“Believe me, it's nothing personal – you did an exemplary job – but you see, I can't risk letting you live, and I need to see at what point flogging a man of your approximate height, weight and age becomes fatal.”

Sebastian shook his head and left Jim to his work, his soft voice echoing through the concrete room
over Gustav's muffled whines and sobs.

“I need some practice before the main event, you see...”

The whip lashed out with a snap like a firecracker, and Sebastian closed the door on Gustav's scream.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks goes to ginbitch, my fabulous beta!
To say that Anthea had been angry was an understatement. Words like ‘foolish’ and ‘reckless’ and ‘naïve’ and other such barbs were thrown haphazardly around, but in the end she couldn't deny that John had obtained surgical thread, gauze, analgesics and everything he needed to treat her arm.

“It could have been a trap!” she hissed. “Did we not discuss that? Didn't we agree that it was probably a trap and it was best to-”

“That's why I went alone,” John interrupted smoothly as he examined the tools he'd been given for defects. “That way, if it was a trap, they'd only get one of us.”

Anthea was still looking displeased. “You do realise she could just be leading you on, don't you? Establishing a rapport so we trust her and then she can grab us both.”

“It's not like I'm ever going to tell her our exact location,” John pointed out, preparing the local anaesthetic. “And only one of us needs to make the pick-up, so there'll never be a need for both of us to be there.”

He didn't mention that he'd also learned a thing or two while working with Sherlock, among them a few handy tricks for spotting surveillance or shaking a tail.

“Now,” he said at last, satisfied he was ready. “Sit down and let me stitch you up.”

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It felt strange – her arm was numb, so there was no pain, but there still a vague feeling of pressure and release each time John drove the surgical needle through her skin.

Anthea had watched, at first, but it was a little unsettling to see the thread being drawn through her flesh without actually feeling it, and had soon switched on the television to distract herself. But there was nothing of any interest, so she left it on the news while working one-handed to hack into the police system.

Unfortunately, the crime scene only made them look all the more guilty. Or at least, it made John look all the more guilty – the bloody fingerprint on the curtain, the marks he'd left when he'd checked the bodies...

“You know, it's very unnerving to see you hacking police computers one-handed while watching telly,” John commented. “Brilliant, yes, but unnerving.”

“As unnerving as your shooting ?” Anthea shot back. “You do realise you could easily qualify for the Olympics with that kind of accuracy, don't you?”

“Yeah, but any idiot can do that,” John protested. “All you need is decent eyesight, a good gun, and a lot of practise.”

Anthea resisted the temptation to roll her eyes. “The same could be said about what I'm doing – all you need is some computer skills and good hardware.”
“Something tells me not every hacker is capable of cracking the police computer system on that little thing.”

“It helps that I've modified this somewhat,” Anthea conceded.

“Just 'somewhat’?”

“Oh, hush,” she huffed, amused almost in spite of herself. “I'm busy.”

John had finished stitching her arm and was putting it in a sling by the time Anthea found what she was looking for. The fingerprints on the knife belonged to a man named Thomas Abbot who had been arrested in England, Switzerland and France and spent several years in prison for essentially minor crimes. Anthea was surprised the police had got those results so quickly, but supposed a multiple homicide like that would have definitely constituted putting a rush on it.

Interestingly, the bodies of the people who'd attacked them had yet to be identified. She wasn't sure what that meant.

“You remember the knife I told you about?” Anthea said, attracting John's attention.

“Yeah, I remember.”

“They've found who it belongs to. A man named Thomas Abbot and the location of his last arrest was France.”

“France?”

Anthea nodded. “I'm trying to get some more information on him, known associates and all that. Hopefully he'll have some here – we don't want to leave the country unless it's strictly necessary...”

John shook his head, looking bemused as he stared down at her Blackberry, obviously trying to comprehend the data that was flying across the screen.

“You're penetrating that system so smoothly it feels vaguely like watching pornography,” he quipped, startling a laugh from Anthea.

The more time she spent with John Watson, the more she could see why Sherlock had taken a liking to him. He was free with his praise yet rather modest about his own accomplishments, amiable without being simpering, and he had a way of making you laugh at just about anything.

She was skimming through the details of the official report, when the body count suddenly arrested her attention. She did some quick maths...but no, that couldn't be right. She paged rapidly through it, seeking the description and photographs of the scene and stiffened when she finally found them.

‘Poor John.’ The thought flashed through her mind before she made herself speak, not bothering to cushion the blow because John wouldn't appreciate it.

“The policemen are dead.”

John blinked, clearly startled. “What?”

“The policemen you subdued – they're dead.”

“What? But...I was so careful,” John muttered, half to himself, clearly bewildered. “I made sure-”

“They were shot,” Anthea said succinctly. “After we left, someone came back and shot the
policemen.”

John paled, and Anthea knew he was thinking of the state he'd left those officers in. One unconscious, the other handcuffed and unable to cry out – he'd practically gift wrapped them for the murderer.

“Don't look like that!” she snapped, the guilt on his face making something in her chest twinge painfully. “It wasn't your fault.”

John's face seemed to crumple. “I know, I know. It's just...”

He trailed off and shook his head, looking down at the carpet.

It was probably callous of her, and cold and heartless and every other epithet she'd been accused of, but Anthea was less concerned about the dead policemen than what their deaths meant. It meant someone had come to that house after they'd left, someone who didn't want the policemen's account of the situation to get out. But if there had been a 'clean-up crew', so to speak, why hadn't the incriminating knife been removed?

All she could think of was that there'd been some kind of breakdown in communications, but that seemed somehow flimsy.

Anthea shook her head and privately resolved to look into it when she was better rested.

They slept in shifts that night – Anthea insisting on going first and that John get the lion's share of sleep as she could always doze in the car. She tapped away on her Blackberry in the early hours of the morning, curled in an armchair while John slumbered in the bed, trying to find out everything she could about Thomas Abbot and the crime scene his fingerprints had been discovered at.

The more she learned, the less sense it made. If Moriarty's communication or surveillance had been extensive enough to send someone to kill the policemen, it should have been extensive enough to realise that one of the murder weapons had been left behind. Someone had very methodically stripped that house of all electronics equipment after the murders – surely they would have at least glanced under the bed?

The more Anthea thought about it, the more it seemed that leaving the knife there had been deliberate. But why? Had Thomas Abbot displeased them somehow, enough to warrant being framed?

She discussed the possibilities with John over some breakfast.

“So what do you think we should do?” John asked eventually.

“You're asking me?”

“I'm not the super-spy here.”

“Will you stop calling me that?”

“Why?” John grinned, clearly unrepentant. “It's true, isn't it?”

The smiling, teasing man sitting across from her bore little resemblance to the one that had looked sick at the report of the policemen's deaths, but Anthea suspected John used humour as a defence mechanism. He made people laugh to take the attention off his own pain.
He did seem the better for the night's sleep, though, and Anthea felt pleased. It had taken work to persuade John to take the shorter watch, as he'd been insistent that her injury necessitated as much rest as possible. Only when she'd promised to nap in the car had he finally acquiesced.

"Leaving the knife there was obviously deliberate," Anthea mused. "We were meant to follow it up...but I don't see what else we can do."

It wasn't as though they had a surfeit of leads to choose from – Spencer and Number 5 had been their best options. Now that they were dead, Anthea and John had to take what they could get. They'd be extremely cautious, of course, just in case it was a trap. And if it wasn't, and Thomas Abbot was just a patsy, then if they found him they might understand why he'd been framed or duped or whatever that was, which had a chance at leading them further into Moriarty's organisation.

They had to go.

"So, into the breach then?" John asked, apparently reading the resolve on her face.

"Into the breach," Anthea agreed. "But first, I'm going to ring up our 'benefactor'."

She made sure John could hear the sarcastic emphasis on the last word.

John frowned. "What for?"

"I'm going to ask for the necessary tools to alter passports."

"Don't you have them already?"

"Yes, but I want to see how far she'll go," Anthea explained. "If her objective is to bring us in – if she's working in any kind of official capacity – she'll baulk at helping us leave the country. Speaking of which, do you speak French?"

"Had a couple of years of it in school," John said. "Which basically means I can introduce myself and ask where the train station is. My Farsi's pretty good, though, and I can get by with my Pashto, but they probably won't be of any use to us."

Anthea made a mental note of it anyway. "Are you fluent in any other languages?"

"It's been a while, but I do well with German. Oh, and I can curse people out in Spanish and Italian."

Anthea considered that, and couldn't help but ask, "Why did you learn how to insult people in Spanish and Italian?"

John shrugged. "Seemed like the thing to do at the time. What about you – what languages do you speak?"

"Arabic, French, Italian, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Korean, Japanese-"

"Okay, I get it, you speak a lot of languages," John interrupted. Then, with a grin, "You'll just to be my Rosetta stone – hey, that's an idea! Ever thought of calling yourself 'Rosy'?"

"No," Anthea said emphatically. "You can't call me that."

"Why not? You admitted that 'Anthea' is fake, so why can't I call you Rosy?"

"Because I choose my names. And Rosy is a name for dogs and grandmothers."
“Whatever you say, Rosy.”

John's broad, cheeky grin instilled a strong desire in her to reach across the table and strangle him. But Anthea was a grown woman – she would not rise to his bait.

“So, where are we going then, Rosy?”

“France, obviously. And if you keep calling me that, you'll be crossing the Channel in a cargo crate.”

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John had to admit – he was impressed. Anthea had booked them tickets on the Eurostar, but of course, as there was a warrant out for John's arrest (and probably Anthea's, too, by now), they had to go in disguise.

John's hair had been dyed, he hadn't shaved so that the faint beard growth would camouflage the shape of his chin and with some glue, plasticine and liberal application of makeup, Anthea had created an ugly, misshapen growth on the side of his nose. That way, people would avoid looking at him so they wouldn't be taken as staring, and if they did look their attention would be captured by the 'growth', not his actual features.

But that wasn't what had John so impressed – it was Anthea's disguise. She'd dressed herself as a man, and it was so convincing John had actually performed a double-take. Her feminine, vaguely hourglass shape was gone, replaced by the distinctively masculine upside-down triangle of broad shoulders tapering to a curve-less waist. She'd cut her hair, and even used some kind of pencil to draw a spot of stubble at the corner of her jaw, as though she'd missed a bit shaving.

“That's amazing,” John marvelled. “How did you do that?”

Anthea opened her mouth to explain, but John raised a hand and forestalled her. “Actually, on second thoughts, don't answer. I'm sure the explanation will involve make-up and aesthetics and lines of sight and I won't understand a single word of it.”

She smirked, obviously satisfied with herself.

“But I'm surprised you didn't want me to dress up as a woman,” John mused as they climbed into the car. “If you're this good, you could certainly have made me look the part.”

Anthea shook her head. “Your shoulders are too broad for any of my dresses, and we want to avoid buying new ones if possible.”

John nodded. It was true that neither of them exactly lacked for cash at the moment, but though tens of thousands of pounds might seem a surplus of funds it was all they had, and they didn't know how long it needed to last.

Unfortunately, travel on the Eurostar meant that John's collection of weapons had to be left behind – there was a limit to the number of guns you could smuggle across borders when you only had two people. In the end, John took his own gun, the taser, and the best two pistols of those he'd appropriated from the house. Anthea had promised him she could get them through the scanners, and John wasn't sure he wanted to know how; he wanted to retain at least some faith in border security.

Logically, he knew that was more than enough, but there was some part of him – the survivalist that insisted every resource was precious – that had urged him to hold onto his arsenal, regardless. It had felt strange to just dump them inside the foyer of a hotel (a hotel because eventually someone would investigate the bag, the police would be called, and the weapons would end up in good hands).
Anthea had consoled him by pointing out that if they ever needed more weapons, their benefactor could provide them. She'd warmed to the mysterious woman ever since the passport alteration tools had been dropped off as she requested. Only slightly, of course – just because she wasn't operating in an official capacity didn't mean she was on their side, and the fact that they didn't know her motivations or how she'd learned of their situation was unsettling – but it was there.

At the very least, she'd stopped berating John for asking for medical supplies.

Actually getting to France was much easier than John had thought it would be, though extremely nerve-wracking. He'd been frankly petrified when he'd handed over his passport to the officials, certain he was about to be recognised...but they'd simply glanced at it, glanced at him, then waved him onwards.

John wasn't sure whether to be relieved they'd got through, or frightened at how easy it was for wanted criminals to get out of the country.

“I'll get a French phrasebook and a map,” Anthea mused when they emerged from the station in Paris, deliberately deepening her voice so she'd sound vaguely masculine to anyone passing. “Make us look like any other tourists.”

“So what kind of vibe are we going for?” John wondered. “Are we relatives? Friends? Gay couple?”

The corner of Anthea's mouth twitched. “Let's go with friends for now. Since university – you're a physiotherapist, I'm a biologist, and we had some courses in common.”

“Right,” John said, committing that to memory. “And do we stick with the names on our passports?”

“Probably best – avoid confusion and all.”

Which made John 'Lucas Eldon' and Anthea 'Stephen Grant'.

John nodded. “So...what now?”

“We need to get a hotel,” Anthea mused. “Preferably cheap, but still nice – a tourist hotel, the type with guided tours.”

“Any particular reason?”

“Always guaranteed to be crowded – as long as we've got a map and phrasebook we'll look like just another couple of English sightseers, and no one will give us a second glance.”

John nodded again, trying not to look as alert and on-edge as he actually was. He knew it was silly, but the fact that they'd left the country was making him feel very alone. Like it was just him and Anthea against the world, with no help but a strange woman on the end of a phone line.

He knew it had been this way from the beginning, but this was the first time he'd really felt it.

Some people would probably say it was similar to Afghanistan, but John didn't think so. In Afghanistan, he'd had the rest of the army behind him, the assurance that the people in his unit had his back, but not here.

“This looks promising,” Anthea announced, dragging him out of his thoughts as she prodded him through a doorway.

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Anthea's search for 'Thomas Abbot' had been running for an hour already, and they still didn't have anything. But in many ways Anthea wasn't surprised – her Blackberry might be powerful, but there was still only so much data it could process at a time, and she had it trolling through every arrest record on the database. She'd count herself lucky if she saw results by the end of the day.

They'd procured a twin room, with a nicely furnished bathroom and a television, and John had tried to amuse himself by flicking through the channels. Of course, the fact that he couldn't comprehend anything being said meant he'd quickly tired of that, and had resorted to flicking through the phrasebook in an effort to understand the magazines that had been left on the coffee table.

However, in the past ten minutes, he seemed to have abandoned that in favour of sprawling out on his bed and staring listlessly up at the ceiling.

“Are you all right?” she asked, feeling a little concerned. God forbid John should get food poisoning or something – what would she do then? She didn't have any decent medical training, couldn't take him to hospital...

“I'm fine,” John replied, lifting his head to look at her – probably picking up on the worry in her voice. “I was just thinking that...well, this is happening pretty quickly. I mean, just yesterday we were...”

He trailed off and shrugged, but Anthea knew what he meant. People talked about their lives changing in the blink of an eye, but she'd venture to say that she and John were one of the few people who'd truly experienced it. A little over twenty-four hours ago she'd been going into work, with no idea that she was about to become a wanted fugitive. Things had been moving so fast there'd been little time to sit down and really think about what had happened. But now, sitting in a hotel and waiting for an electronic search to run to completion, there was nothing else to do.

And Anthea had the horrible feeling that she'd think herself into depression if she dwelled on the look on Mycroft's face as he thanked her for 'services rendered'. Services rendered, as if she'd been little better than a prostitute...

“This would usually be the point at which we attempt to drown our sorrows,” John mused, still staring at the ceiling with dead eyes. “But I don't think it's a good idea for either of us to impair our faculties right now.”

Barely a day ago Anthea had been thinking John would drag her down. Now she was nothing but grateful she'd decided to bring him along – she wouldn't have lasted this long if he hadn't been with her.

And while she'd known about every detail of his life that could be gleaned from electronic records, she hadn't really known him. Anthea had been largely indifferent to John before, and now she found herself feeling something dangerously close to friendship for the man. But she supposed it was hard not to like someone who killed people to keep you safe and doctored your wounds and tried to make you smile when you were unhappy.

“What do you think, Rosy?” John asked, his tired grin saying he was using that name purely to tease her. “Feeling an urge to raid the mini-fridge?”

“Jane.”

John frowned. “I'm sorry – what?”
“Jane,” Anthea said softly. “My name's Jane.”

John sat up on the bed, and she could tell by the solemn expression on his face that he knew this was her real name, and he had some idea of the trust she was placing in him.

Then his serious expression was tempered by a gentle smile, and he shrugged. “I can see why you'd prefer something flashier.”

Anthea hesitated, then asked carefully, “Will you be calling me by that name now?”

“I don't think so.” Another shrug from John. “You were introduced as Anthea to me, and that's how I think of you. Well, that and Rosy.”

The corner of Anthea's mouth twitched, but she wasn't sure if her lips were trying to smile or grimace.

She couldn't help but wonder how she'd betrayed herself. There was something about John's face, some flavour of the gentle sympathy there which told her he knew that name had been reserved for Mycroft. That he knew she was trying to shut herself off from the pain and sever their ties by giving her name to him, but that he wouldn't use it until she was sure that was what she wanted.

“When this is over,’ Anthea couldn't help but think. 'I'll isolate the gene or chemical or brain defect that makes John Watson so bloody understanding, implement it on a world-wide scale, and global peace will reign forever after.’

“And really, geniuses deserve flashy names,” John went on, then laughed suddenly. “You're a genius and you put up with Mycroft – shouldn't that qualify you for the single greatest human being on Earth award?”

“I wasn't aware we held competitions like that,” Anthea mused jokingly.

“I'm sure you could create it, if you wanted to.”

Anthea snorted, then sobered abruptly. “Maybe so, but John...geniuses are two a penny.”

John looked sceptical.

“Okay, maybe not of our calibre, true,” Anthea allowed, referring to both herself and the Holmes' brothers. “But a lot of people are a genius at something. The world's full of great people, but good people?”

She shook her head and chewed her lip, not really knowing why she was saying this, yet feeling compelled to because John didn't seem to understand that he was just as extraordinary as her.

“That's why you're far more unusual than I am, John,” she finished quietly. “Because you're good.”

“Some people would disagree with that.” John said mildly, but there was a definite overtone of self-deprecation. “I've killed people, after all.”

Anthea didn't see what bearing that had on their discussion.

“Not to mention I haven't seen any decision or moral high ground that would make me better than you,” John point out.

Apparently, he just didn't get it. Anthea knew what she was talking about, though – John was better than she was because he was the kind of person who loved without conditions or limits or
boundaries. She'd spent almost two days in his company and already she knew that he'd die for someone he cared about without a second thought. In some ways she envied him that, but in other ways...well, she could only imagine how often people had taken advantage of John's nature.

And really, they could argue back and forth about their worth until dinnertime, because behind this whole conversation was the fact that both of them had fallen in love with two brothers who apparently hadn't recognised their value and had stabbed them in the back the moment they could.

She remembered John asking her for a drink and couldn't help but sigh, “You know, our lives would have been so much easier if we'd fallen in love with each other.”

John smiled weakly, but Anthea could see the quick flicker of speculation in his eyes.

And just like that, the moment became statically charged, energy building and preparing to go off.

'Why not?' Anthea found herself wondering. 'Why not John? He's good man, with a quirky sense of a humour and a frankly dangerous ability to kill people – all excellent qualities, really.'

Why not John?

She was never entirely clear on who moved first – she bent down, John tilted his head up – but in the next instant they were kissing.

Anthea had no real idea what they were doing. Maybe they wanted to forget about the men they'd last kissed, maybe they wanted to feel something other than the strange numbness of betrayal, maybe they wanted to connect with the one person who trusted them who believed in them. Maybe they even wanted to betray the men they loved in some fraction of the way they'd been betrayed.

It was...strange. John was a good kisser – a perfect 10.0 on technical proficiency – and he was being careful not to jostle the arm that was still in a sling. It should have been wonderful, but instead it felt cold, absent, and vaguely wrong.

Anthea didn't have any siblings, but she couldn't help but think that this was what kissing her brother would feel like. It was nothing like what it felt to kiss Mycroft, and she was furious that was all she could think of.

John was drawing away, and judging by his furrowed brow and the contemplative expression on his face, he was feeling the same thing she was.

“No,” Anthea announced decisively.

“Oh, thank god,” John sighed.

Part of Anthea was irrationally annoyed that he hadn't been able to make her stop thinking of Mycroft. The man had cast her aside like yesterday's leftovers – if there was any justice in the world, she would have been able to stop loving him the instant he did that.

John smiled gently at her, and Anthea hated the understanding on his face. She even resented the way he softly kissed her cheek – dry and chaste, like a brother to his sister – and went back to his phrasebook.

She couldn't help but think that this was why such a nice, understanding and empathic guy like John was single before he met Sherlock. Because he was a little too empathic – he knew what you needed almost before you did, which made you feel at a disadvantage. Anthea could imagine John buying beautifully thoughtful anniversary and birthday presents, the kind that made your own seem like
throwaway trinkets in comparison.

John needed someone who could read the details like he could read people, someone who wouldn't be intimidated by his ease. Even Mycroft might be unsettled by John, because while he deduced people, John...just knew.

“Anthea, how do you pronounce this?” John's voice drew her out of her reverie, to find him squinting down at the phrasebook.

He still called her Anthea, and she realised that she felt like Anthea here. She had been Jane with Mycroft only, and now...now, with John, she was Anthea.

“Come on, Rosy, help me out here – I need your expertise.”

Reluctantly amused by John's pet name, Anthea moved to where he sat by the window, and told him to point out the word that was giving him trouble.

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John could admit the kiss hadn't been bad – quite the opposite, really – but it just didn't feel right. There was no spark, no passion, no desire in it. He might as well have been kissing a brick wall.

He couldn't help but think of Sherlock, and he'd known she was thinking of Mycroft.

The more he got to know Anthea, the more he understood that Mycroft had really been her perfect match. Partly because of that razor intellect, which made their minds work on a level he'd never truly understand. But mostly it was because Anthea seemed to have her emotions practically mastered, or at least her response to them. Her reactions were only given free reign when she decided they would be, and she needed someone who would understand that, who wouldn't automatically think her cold or unfeeling.

Even Sherlock might be uncomfortable with that level of control – because for all that he went on about objective investigation and not letting himself get emotionally involved in cases, he had his impulses and sulks.

John knew some people would think two days was too soon to consider someone a friend, but that was how he thought of Anthea. He supposed being on the run together was an experience that bonded people quickly.

“It still would have been easier,” Anthea muttered as she tried to help him with his pronunciation.

“Yeah, probably,” John sighed. “Want to go order something delicious and way too expensive from room service?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to ginbitch, for cleaning up this chapter for me
Their dinner was indeed expensive and lavish, and Anthea couldn't deny she felt better after eating it. Her second indulgence of the evening was a long soak in the bath with deliciously-scented soaps before collapsing into bed.

John had insisted on her sleeping for longer this time around, and nothing she could say would dissuade him.

“Have you ever been to France?” Anthea asked in the morning as they cleared away the remnants of their breakfast.

John shook his head. “Went on a school trip to Germany once, but apart from that the only time I left England was when I was shipped out.”

It seemed strange to Anthea – her life necessitated global travel at least once a month (or at least, it had), and all at once she felt herself gripped with a strange sense of mischief. After all, they didn't have to stay in the hotel room the entire time she was running the search, did they?

“Why don't we go and explore?”

John glanced up from the plates he was stacking. “I beg your pardon?”

Anthea grinned, strangely elated at the idea of taking John on a tour around Paris. “What would you like to see? This search is going to take ages – no reason we can't have fun at the same time.”

“Are you suggesting that you and me – two wanted fugitives – go out and play tourist?” John asked, but Anthea wasn't fooled by his incredulous tone – a cheeky smile was spreading across his face.

“That's exactly what I'm suggesting...are you up for it?”

“Oh, god yes!” John enthused, and Anthea smiled at the way he practically ran into the other room to pick up his phrasebook and the map.

Hiding in disguise because you were being hunted by the police (and government operatives, in Anthea's case) didn't exactly seem conducive to having a good time, but John was happy to be proved wrong.

“No one's ever taken me on holiday before,” John commented as they stood in line for the lift that would take them to the top of the Eiffel tower.

If he was on his own, John would have been tempted to just walk up to the top, but he didn't think Anthea's injured shoulder would appreciate the jarring it was certainly going to get on the stairs. So they stood in line for the lift and, nearly an hour later, finally got to enjoy the view. John had an impulse to send Harry a postcard from the top of the Eiffel tower with the message 'have been declared a fugitive, will be holidaying in Paris until further notice' but resisted it.

Anthea navigated the city like a native, taking him to Les Invalides to see Napolean's tomb and then
ferrying him to the Saxe-Breteuil market. It was market day, and for lunch John bought them both apples from one of the stalls.

He knew he'd stumbled dreadfully through the purchase (the vendor had been grinning tolerantly since the first syllable), but he'd refused to let Anthea buy for him. After all, John wasn't ever going to pick up French unless he made himself practice it, and it was kind of amusing to know he was probably butchering all attempts at communication in the meanwhile.

“At least you got the 'please' right,” Anthea commented, obviously noticing the way John was thumbing through his phrasebook one-handed.

“I remembered that from school,” John explained. Well, that and 'merci'. I may be making a complete cock-up of this, but at least I'm polite about it.”

After lunch, Anthea insisted on taking him to Montmartre. Then, because it was getting late, they wandered around tacky souvenir stands and John bought himself a bag of candy floss.

“If this takes another day, I'll take you to the Louvre,” Anthea said, gesturing to her whirring Blackberry.

“Do I want to know how that thing maintained its internet connection while we were wandering all over Paris?” John wondered aloud.

“...you do know what WiFi does, don't you?”

“Not really,” John admitted. And then, as Anthea seemed to be on the verge of bursting into laughter, “Hey, I'm a simple guy, all right? I was far too busy learning to kick arse and save people's lives.”

“That's a professional description, is it?” Anthea smirked.

“Absolutely.” John nodded solemnly. “That's what being an army doctor is all about; kicking arse and saving lives.”

“I'm sure,” Anthea drawled, and promptly attempted to steal some of John's candy floss.

But the army had left John with fantastic reflexes, and he managed to yank the bag out of reach before she could get to it.

Anthea pretended to scowl. “You bought me apples, now be a good army doctor and share your candy floss.”

But John was feeling playful. The last few days hadn't had many light-hearted moments, so he was taking them where he found them. And it was strangely thrilling to see Anthea – usually the picture of professionalism – being playful right along with him.

“A man's candy floss is sacred,” he declared loftily. “But you can have the yellow bit – I don't like that flavour.”

Anthea shot a dubious gaze at the three layers of candy floss – blue, yellow and pink, with John only halfway through the blue. “It's processed sugar, how can it have any flavour beyond 'nauseatingly sweet'?”

“Your education in the ways of the candy floss in sorely lacking,” John sighed, then offered her the bag. “Go on then – edify yourself!”
After sampling all of the 'flavours' on offer, Anthea was forced to admit that the blue was indeed subtly different from the pink, but said she still couldn't taste anything in the yellow beyond 'sugar'.

“Your tastes just aren't refined enough,” John huffed.

Anthea smiled as they turned down a new street, then abruptly looked disquieted.

“What's wrong?” John asked.

Anthea smiled again (though it looked forced) and leaned in. “I think we're being followed.”

John made sure his expression didn't give away his alarm, and instead laughed as though Anthea had just told him a joke.

They walked on, trying to look natural and unconcerned as Anthea went on in a low voice, “I noticed him at the Eiffel Tower and Montmartre but I didn't think anything of it then – they're popular with tourists, after all. But he followed us from the Arc and sat down to have coffee when you were buying candy floss. And he got up the second we started to move on.”

John didn't nod, but caught her gaze to ensure she knew he understood.

They made their way down the street, trying not to look like they were rushing. Occasionally, when they rounded corners or changed direction, John thought he caught a glimpse of the person Anthea was referring to – the man with the novelty shirt and camera in his hand.

He didn't look like a paid assassin, but John supposed that was the point.

John and Anthea tried to look as though they were still oblivious to their follower. They glanced in shop windows, chatted about nonsensical subjects that flew out of John's head as soon as they'd stopped talking, and in general made every effort to look like tourists having a good time.

In the end, it was Anthea who came up with the plan to turn the tables. They walked into a McDonalds and got themselves cheap ice cream – they needed the receipt for the code to the restroom. They ensured they looked subtly shifty as they approached the bathroom together, implying they might be aware of their tail and were intending to go out the window or some such to ensure the man followed them into the restroom instead of simply waiting for them to come out.

It was fortunate Anthea had been forced to keep her male disguise in place, and that John had brought the taser along.

Still, John couldn't help but wince when he had to subdue the innocent bystander who'd been in the process of washing his hands when they entered. It was the same hold he'd used to render the policeman unconscious back in England, and guilt writhed in his belly when he remembered the way that had turned out.

He tasered their stalker as soon as the man entered the restroom and put him in the hold before he'd recovered. The man passed out without ever managing to say a word or strike a blow, which either meant they'd been lucky, or their pursuer wasn't as competent as he could be.

Anthea searched him, tossing the contents of his coat onto the bathroom floor, and John winced when he spotted the handcuffs and the police ID.

“Tell me that isn't what I think it is.”

“It's not what you think it is,” Anthea parroted obediently as she rummaged through the man's wallet.
“Anthea...” he warned.

“Given that the ID is in a different name to the one displayed on his driver's license, I highly doubt you've just taken down a member of Paris' finest,” she pointed out.

That sent a shiver of apprehension down John's spine. Paid assassins he could deal with, but paid assassins pretending to have police authority would make things much more difficult.

“Look at this!” Anthea exclaimed, producing a room key that looked suspiciously familiar. Just to be sure, John pulled their own room key out to compare. Sure enough, they belonged to the same hotel, but while his and Anthea's was marked 301, the one they'd just appropriated read 303.

“He's got the room next to us,” Anthea muttered, tucking the key into the pocket of her jacket.

John knew it could just be lucky coincidence – that the room next to theirs had just happened to be vacant as well – and he was rather hoping it was. Because the idea that this man might have arranged for the room beside theirs to be unoccupied implied the kind of far-reaching network Moriarty specialised in.

Anthea was pulling apart the bag the man had been carrying (the kind tourists usually put their lunch, waterbottles and various maps in), unloading a second pair of handcuffs, a length of tightly coiled rope and a roll of duct tape. John wondered if he was a callous bastard to be hoping one of Anthea's colleagues had commissioned the league of assassins, as opposed to Moriarty. Because the more they saw of his people, the more John thought Moriarty wanted them alive.

He had no idea why that would be, but he felt very strongly that it didn't bode well for them.

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Anthea had been gratified to discover their stalker had a laptop in his room. More specifically, a laptop with emails still on it – she'd opened it up and checked, just to make sure it wasn't a dummy.

The emails were in code which, frankly, she didn't have time to break right now, but she was more interested in tracing the IP address. Unfortunately, there were so many layers of security trying to deter her it was going to take at least fifteen minutes.

“We should probably just take the laptop,” she admitted, unplugging it and tucking it under her arm. “He already knows we're onto him, so leaving it here isn't going to cover our tracks.”

John nodded, then suddenly froze, his head swinging towards the door like a fox alarmed by the howl of the hounds.

“Get down!” he yelled, shoving Anthea to the floor behind the coffee table and collapsing on top of her.

Just in time, too. Anthea barely had enough time to register John's weight on top of her before the door was kicked inwards and a man charged into the room armed with a pistol.

Still struggling to catch her breath, Anthea barely saw John move. He grabbed the leg of the coffee table and threw it towards their attacker at the same time that he launched himself from the floor. Bullets ripped through the air, but they mostly embedded themselves in the ceiling, the man having thrown his arms up automatically to protect himself from the table hurtling towards his face.
John followed, bursting into a motion that had to be seen to be believed. He launched himself from the floor, both feet impacting against the table and slamming it into the gunman's chest. The wood split in half with a piercing crack that had a strange crunching sound as a coda, and the man dropped like a corpse.

John fell to the floor his legs tucked underneath him, knees folding so that he landed neatly on his hands and the balls of his feet.

For a moment, Anthea was quite literally struck dumb.

Then the tableau was broken when John rocked onto his knees and rubbed at the backs of thighs, grimacing. “Christ, it's been a while since I've done that!”

“Are...are you all right?” Anthea asked, still feeling a bit stunned.

“I feel like I've just torn every single muscle along the back of my legs,” John groaned.

Now that the adrenaline was beginning to die, Anthea's arm was reminding her she'd had a knife in it recently and it didn't appreciate being shaken around. But she ignored that – their biggest problem was getting out of the hotel.

“Come on!” she urged, pulling John to his feet and trying not to feel guilty when he winced. “The shots should keep people in their rooms for another few minutes – while they're busy calling emergency services, we'll pick up our stuff and go out the fire exit.”

John nodded, and within thirty seconds they were hurrying down the stairs, intent on escaping the building before the police roped it off, the clandestine laptop secreted in Anthea's bag.

As soon as they were free and clear, Anthea couldn't help asking John, “Are you sure you're not ex-SAS?”

John looked embarrassed. “Well...”

Anthea could feel her eyes widening, but then he grinned and chuckled. “Got you, Rosy.”

“Very funny,” she muttered. “Now this may seem like an overreaction, but I suggest we get out of here and go to Germany for a while.”

“A country where I actually have a chance at understanding what people are saying? I'm all for it – let's go.”

They were on the train within the hour – if there was one thing Anthea liked about Europe, it was that the countries were all in such easy distance of each other.

She glanced over at John, and felt her lips flatten. He was massaging his thighs again, something he'd been doing ever since they'd left the hotel whenever he thought she wasn't looking. Anthea had the feeling he was trying not to worry her, which was somehow both frustrating and strangely endearing.

“Are you all right?” she asked, glancing pointedly at John's legs.

Caught, John froze, then grinned ruefully. “I'm just not as flexible as I used to be. And right now my muscles are reminding me I tried to make them assume a position they haven't touched in over five years.”

“That was pretty amazing, though,” Anthea commented. “Do you think you killed him?”
“It's likely,” John admitted. “I broke his sternum – that often stops your heart.”

“It was a different man to the one following us,” Anthea mused. “Probably a contact – if a call isn't made at a specific time or some such, he assumes the worst and comes in guns blazing.”

John made a noise of assent and nodded towards the laptop open on Anthea's knees. “How are you going with that?”

“Not good,” Anthea admitted. “It's like the email came from a computer that's only sporadically connected to a network, which means I either have to catch it when it is online or physically hack it.”

“Physically' meaning...?”

“Meaning sitting down at the actual computer rather than just tracing it and trying to hack it remotely.”

John nodded absently, and leaned back in his seat, resuming the massage of the muscles in his thighs.

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Sebastian had expected Jim to be displeased that the latest attempt to acquire John Watson had failed, but instead he seemed almost nonchalant about the outcome.

“And now they're heading to Germany,” Jim sighed. “You just can't get good help these days.”

Sebastian didn't comment, waiting for whatever order Jim decided to give.

“Of course, I should have realised Johnny would be a slippery customer,” he went on, chuckling to himself. “You saw him when we were getting that bomb on him; a stoic soldier to the end.”

Jim smirked, his eyes glittering with anticipated pleasure. “I'll enjoy breaking him.”

He was silent for a few moments. And then, with a broad smile, “Seb? Be a dear and fetch the good doctor for me?”

“How do you want him?” Sebastian asked.

“As unspoiled as possible, but I'll understand if there's some packaging problems.”

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John knew the high kick was a bad idea the very instant after he'd done it. But he hadn't been able to stop himself – he'd seen an avenue of attack, and he'd just reacted.

His right leg was the worst of the two. While his left leg certainly hurt whenever he tried to extend it, his right leg barely supported his weight. John wasn't entirely sure if it was because he'd extended it further than his left or if it was the psychosomatic limp making a reappearance.

At least now they were in Berlin. And in a nice hotel.

“Well, I'm going to have a nice, hot soak, then maybe dinner, and then I'm going to bed,” John groaned.

“I hope you feel better,” Anthea said, frowning as John winced all across the room.

“I'll be right,” John assured her. “As long as I don't try to jump-kick anyone else.”
He ran a warm bath and spent perhaps longer than was strictly necessary in it. He only emerged when Anthea called out that she was ordering dinner from room service and what did he want?

The only highlight of the evening was just before John went to bed, when Anthea's constantly-running search turned up a match – Thomas Abbot's fingerprints matched those from a body that had been discovered a day ago, almost right on the border between Germany and Switzerland.

Of course, that raised the question of why he'd been killed.

“It just seems unnecessary,” Anthea muttered, tapping at her Blackberry. “If he'd been framed, surely he'd be left alive to suffer for at least a little while?”

“I don't think Moriarty tolerates failure,” John commented, settling himself on the bed. “And leaving your DNA and weapon of choice at the crime scene is probably a pretty big failure in his book.”

“Well, if it's failure, that puts a whole different spin on things. That means Moriarty didn't want us to know about his connection to Abbot, which instantly makes it much more profitable to look into Abbot's life.” She grimaced. “I mean, assuming Moriarty hasn't already erased any evidence of his contact with the man.”

John made an agreeable murmur.

“I'll look into what the police have found on him so far, and then—”

“Sleep first,” John said. “Outwit evil mastermind later.”

Right. Yes. I'll be quiet now.”

John had a nonsensical dream about going shopping but being unable to buy the right things because the containers were all switched around and the labels were just gibberish. Anthea woke him to take his turn 'on watch' at about two in the morning, and John amused himself for a little while by playing solitaire on the stolen laptop. But at four-thirty he found himself yawning and rubbing at his eyes, so he went into the bathroom to splash some water on his face.

John stared at his silhouette in the mirror, appreciating the fact that it was his own face looking back to him – with all the disguises Anthea had them wearing, it was becoming rather unsettling to glance into a reflective surface.

He could see the reflection of the bedroom, streetlights glimmering through the open window and illuminating the huddle of blankets rising and falling almost imperceptibly as Anthea breathed.

A shadow flickered across that square of light.

Someone was climbing through the window.

John automatically dropped to a crouch, putting himself out of their direct line of sight. The bathroom was darker than the bedroom – he hadn't turned on the light for fear of waking Anthea – so it was possible he hadn't been noticed yet. He'd left a gun on top of the bedside table closest to the bathroom; if he could just get to it...

The intruder slid silently to the floor, their head turning to glance at the occupant of the bed. John slowly slid around the bathroom door, his heart throbbing painfully against his ribs – Anthea was in a very vulnerable position. John couldn't shout to her; she'd need time to wake up fully, and it just might alarm their enemy into killing her.
John hadn't missed the gleam of a knife tucked unobtrusively into a palm.

The intruder moved closer, as though he was trying to get a glimpse of Anthea's face, and John knew he had to move. They were getting too close to her – in a moment he wouldn't be able to stop them if they tried to stab her, so there was nothing to do but charge in and hope for the best.

With a bellow designed to both wake Anthea and surprise the intruder, John lunged across the room, making a grab for the right arm – the one that held the knife.

But the intruder moved swiftly, and they were clearly well-trained. A fist drove unerringly towards John's sternum, and the doctor was forced to block it with one arm and twist to the side, losing precious momentum. He managed to seize the right wrist, but now didn't have enough force to twist the blade free with one hand; the most he could do was shove it downwards, keeping it away from his chest and abdomen.

A fist swung towards his face and John's arm rose to block it, smashing into his attacker's elbow. But they simply folded around the blow, seizing hold of John's shoulder and pushing him down even as John felt a heel hooking around his leg to trip him.

John felt himself start to go down and his free hand wrapped around the intruder's neck, determined to bring them to the ground with him.

His hissed the air out of his lungs as he went down, minimising the chances of being winded by the impact. Pain flared along his back as he hit the floor, but John was more concerned about the sudden burn that had sliced along his left thigh, just above his knee.

That his legs were in pain was nothing new – they'd been complaining ever since he'd foolishly kicked that man in the chest – but this was different. This wasn't the dull burn of abused muscles, this was weeping sting of opened flesh.

The knife must have caught him.

With a sense of desperation, John's hand left his attacker's neck and seized their hair, dragging them to the side with all the strength he could muster – he couldn't allow them to remain on top of him. Not with him already injured.

But the man (the impact had at least told him that the intruder was male) didn't move, somehow withstanding the brutal yanking on his scalp in favour of leaning down and wrapping a large hand around John's neck.

The sudden, crushing pressure on his windpipe was stunning. But John didn't allow himself to panic – all he needed to do was jab his fingers into the tender spot on the man's neck just above where the clavicles joined...

But he never got a chance to. There was movement behind John's attacker, a muted crack of metal on flesh, and the man collapsed on top of him.

Anthea stood over them, the gun from the bedside table clutched in her hands.

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Anthea had jerked awake at the sound of someone yelling. For a moment, she was disoriented, not entirely sure where she was or what was going on, but then her eyes focused in the darkness – John was struggling with someone.
She scrambled out of the bed, glancing wildly around for a weapon. John's pistol was resting on the bedside table, and she snatched it up. But she didn't dare shoot it – she didn't trust her aim enough to not hit John. So she reversed her grip on the gun, holding it by the barrel and preparing to use the heavy grip like a club.

John and the other man went down on the floor, the intruder uppermost, and Anthea took her chance. Wrapping both her hands around the pistol she swung it like a golf club, bringing it down on the man's head.

She caught him in the temple, and his skull seemed to fold around the corner of the grip. The impact made a wet, cracking sound, and Anthea felt a moment of resistance followed by a sickening kind of softness, as though she'd cracked open an egg.

His whole body seemed to crumple in on itself and he slumped on top of John. His complete, unnatural stillness coupled with the nauseating dip in the side of his head told Anthea he was dead.

For a moment, she was too stunned to move. Then she bent to haul the body off John.

Her arm throbbed painfully, and Anthea glanced down at it automatically. It was hard to tell in the darkness, but she didn't think she'd popped any stitches.

She turned to ask John, and suddenly realised John hadn't picked himself up off the floor. In fact, he was partially curled up, as though in pain, and both of his hands were clamped around his left leg.

Between his fingers, dark liquid glistened in the dim light.


“He had a knife,” John panted, nodding towards a dull gleam of metal on the floor. “Got me in the leg when we went down.”

A frission of fear shivered through Anthea's chest. She wasn't exactly a doctor, but that looked like quite a lot of blood on John's leg. She rose, thinking that she should at least turn on the light so they could get an accurate idea of the damage, but John's hand seized onto her wrist and held her in place.

Anthea tried not to think about how slick John's palm was.

“Don't turn on the light,” John hissed. “We don't know if he came alone.”

“Well we need a good look at your leg,” Anthea said firmly. “Come on – put your arm over my shoulder, I'll try to get you out into the hallway.”

She spared a moment to hope there were no staff or visitors wandering the hall at this hour, then bent down and tried to heave John to his feet.

It didn't work. John's right leg shook incessantly whenever he tried to put weight on it, and his bleeding left leg just folded beneath him like wet paper. And any attempt to let Anthea support his weight was a disaster – her injured arm meant she couldn't hold him as firmly as he needed to be, and she ended up dragging him out of the room and into the fire exit down the hall.

“This is embarrassing,” she heard John mutter as he clamped his balled-up shirt against his leg in an effort not to leave a blood trail.

“Is it bad?” were the first words out of Anthea's mouth when she set John against the wall in the
“I'm not in danger of bleeding to death,” John said. He sounded calm, but the corners of his eyes were tight with pain. “It didn't get the artery and I think the major veins are unscathed. But it can't take my weight, which means the muscle's probably buggered.”

A clatter echoed up the stairwell, and Anthea glanced over the railing, hoping whoever it was wasn't going to come to their level.

She jerked her head back just as quickly.

“About five people are climbing the stairs, wearing balaclavas,” she reported.

“I guess he wasn't alone then,” John muttered. He then proved his army roots by swearing vociferously.

“I'll have to get you back into the room,” she said, grabbing hold of John's shoulders and dragging him back into the hallway.

She practically dropped John against the wall and fumbled with the keys. Piercing pain shot through her injured arm whenever she moved it, but she ignored that in favour of shoving the door open.

After a quick glance into the room – it appeared the dead body was still the only occupant – Anthea grabbed onto John's shoulders once more, intending to pull him into the room, but was stopped by one red-tinted hand over her own.

“Let's be realistic,” John said softly. “There's no way you can get me out before they come up here.”

“There's the lift!” Anthea snapped, irritated at John for wasting time with needless pessimism.

“Even if you manage to get me to the lobby, what then? It's not like we have a car.”

“I'll think of something!”

“You know what you need to do.” John's voice was eerily calm. “You need to get whatever you need from the room, and then you need to run. And you need to leave me here.”

“No!” Anthea snarled. “Absolutely not!”

“You have to,” John said, his expression set and his voice still so serene it was horrifying. “And it's unlikely they'll kill me, anyway. Judging by our skirmishes thus far, they're under orders to bring us in alive.”

Anthea wanted to scream at him. But the look in John's eyes told her arguing with him would do no good – John was one of the most affable people she'd ever met, but when he was determined, truly determined, on a course of action, nothing could be done to prevent or dissuade him.

And though it made Anthea's throat and eyes burn to think of it, he was right – she couldn't get him out of this hotel. Not injured the way he was.

She couldn't get John out. But she could ensure she would find him again.
Determined not to waste any time, Anthea darted into the room and grabbed up her bag, taking along John's guns and the laptop, and trying to ignore the constriction in her chest.

When she came out, John was still leaning against the wall, staring at the door to the fire exit with an appalling blankness on his face, a kind of grim acceptance.

She shoved the small bundle of plastic and wiring at him. “Swallow this!”

John blinked, staring down at the small cylindrical object on her palm. It was much larger than the average pill, but Anthea supposed there was nothing she could do about that now– besides, the throat was more flexible than many people thought it was.

“It's the GPS I was working on,” she explained hastily. “The one I showed you, remember?”

“The one that was designed to be implanted under the skin,” John said, realisation lighting his face. “And you were trying to make it undetectable.”

“That aspect hasn't been tested yet, and I don't know if it can stand up to the acid in your stomach, but…” Anthea swallowed hard, and told herself the pressure in her sinuses was just her imagination. “But I'll find you John, I promise.”

John's smile was heartbreaking. “Look on the bright side – at least I'll be able to find out whether it really was Moriarty who landed us in this mess.”

Anthea didn't trust herself to reply to that.

John threw the capsule back and swallowed with difficulty, then looked up at her. “Go on, run for it.”

And still she hesitated, some part of her unable to condone just leaving John to the enemy.

“Go on,” John urged. “It'll be all right...Rosy.”

With a weak giggle that turned into a sob, Anthea made herself turn away. She told herself her blurry vision was just her eyes struggling to adjust to the light, and that the moisture on her cheeks was sweat, certainly not tears.

She heard the distinctive sound of the metal fire door opening just as she reached the carpeted stairs, and put on a burst of speed to take herself around the corner and out of their line of sight.

She ran, and she didn't let herself look back.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks to my marvellous beta, ginbitch!
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

John knew antagonising your captors was never a good idea, but he couldn't resist a wry smile at the trouble he and Anthea had caused.

They seemed to be speaking a mix of languages, but he'd heard the word 'Moran' mentioned repeatedly, and he thought that might be the name of the man Anthea had killed. Or they could be referring to something in another language – it wasn't as though he'd know the difference. He'd definitely recognised the word 'Moriarty', though.

As soon as they'd emerged from the fire exit, John had known he was going to Moriarty. But he'd made it as difficult for them as possible, just on principle, with the result that the group as a collective had suffered a fractured wrist, a broken nose, and three black eyes. But eventually, they'd managed to hustle him outside into the little nook where the hotel dumped their rubbish, and he'd been shoved into an ambulance and strapped to a gurney.

John grudgingly supposed it was rather clever to use an ambulance – they'd picked the one vehicle that no one would stop or interfere with. Hospitals were supposed to register ambulance departures and arrivals, but it wasn't unknown for some to slip through the cracks in large emergencies, which also made it virtually untraceable.

Not to mention, there were plenty of supplies on hand to ensure John didn't die en route – his leg had been securely bandaged and taped with gauze.

John was thankful Anthea had told him to swallow the capsule rather than shove it into the wound. These people might not be the best paramedics around, but if they'd felt any foreign bodies under his skin they'd probably at least have a look.

Even though he'd been expecting to be drugged up, John couldn't help but stiffen when he spotted one of his captors preparing an IV. Not that there was anything he could have done to stop them; thick leather straps pressed his wrists and ankles down, and larger ones ran across his chest and waist.

He just hoped that whatever they gave him wouldn't make him vomit – he was terrified of bringing up Anthea's tracker.

There was a familiar prick in the back of his hand and the feel of tape being pressed to the skin to hold the needle in place. John swallowed dryly, trying not to show the terror that was creeping through his brain. This was it – he'd be drugged for transportation to Moriarty, and then...

Well, John was doing his level best not to think about what came next.

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Anthea made it to a train station bathroom, where she calibrated her Blackberry to track the device John had swallowed and changed her disguise with all the efficiency she could muster.

'There is nothing to worry about,' she kept telling herself. 'Absolutely nothing. I'll find John and get him back within the day – everything will be fine.'
But she'd have to wait until a rental car service opened. Public transport was far too restrictive to be of use now – if this was truly Moriarty who'd taken John, he'd take him somewhere isolated, somewhere they weren't going to be interrupted.

At least, assuming he really did want John alive...

Anthea shook the thought away and dialled the number for John's phone. She was still reluctant to trust their 'benefactor', but with John captured, she'd take what help she could get.

Considering how early in the morning it was, she was surprised when the phone was picked up on only the third ring.

“John's been taken,” she said immediately, forgoing any kind of greeting. “Assuming that it really is Moriarty behind it all, I think he's finally got what he wanted, given that no one even attempted to follow me from the hotel.”

It was rather insulting, as though they thought she couldn't possibly be of interest now. It was also rather terrifying – if John had been the target all along, what did Moriarty want with him?

“Before he was captured, John swallowed a GPS locating device that I'm now tracking. Moriarty seems to want him alive, so I'll attempt to free him as soon as I can. I don't require anything yet, but I thought you should be aware of the situation.”

“I see.” There was a subtle tension in the woman's voice that hadn't been there before. “If you find you have to break him out, I have several contacts that could be of assistance.”

“I'll call when I have his location,” Anthea said, and hung up on the spot.

She spent the rest of the early morning wandering the streets and staring at her Blackberry, tracing John's progression through the country. There was some doubling-back, as though they were taking precautions against being tailed, which led Anthea to hope they hadn't detected the tracking device, if they were assuming they were being followed.

Of course, they could have found it, removed it, and were laying a false trail while they took John somewhere else, but Anthea was doing her best not to think about that possibility.

She managed to rent a car just as John passed the city of Jena, and Anthea immediately set out to follow him, all the time telling herself that there was nothing to worry about.

She was going to get John back, or die trying.

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As soon as the dial tone reached Avra's ears, she sprang into action. Usually she would have given her boys time to work off the worst of their sulk before she pointed out their errors to them, but John and Jane needed help now.

So she called both her sons and announced they were going on a family vacation to the house in Switzerland – the plan would actually land in Berlin, and Avra planned to collect Jane before they went after John. They'd protested about work (Mycroft) and whined that they didn't want to go (Sherlock), but being their mother came with a not-inconsiderable amount of leverage, and soon enough they were both at the airport, waiting for Avra's aeroplane to be fuelled and prepared for take-off.

“I always enjoy these family gatherings, Mummy,” Mycroft drawled, grief making his voice sharp.
“But is there a particular reason you called us here so early?”

“Sometimes an early start is needed,” Avra replied, checking her pocket watch for the fifth time. If that plane was even five minutes late...

She was acutely aware that they didn't have much time. Unless John's captors planned to transport him back to England, it was likely he was soon to be delivered to whoever had orchestrated this (Moriarty most likely, but that wasn't exactly certain).

“I'm surprised Jane isn't coming along,” Sherlock said nastily, putting particular emphasis on her name. “Given that you usually behave as though attached to her by an umbilical cord.”

Mycroft's flinch was almost imperceptible. “One might say the same about you and your doctor.”

Sherlock's face contorted into a truly ugly scowl. “Don't play that game with me, Mycroft – you know what happened!”

Avra narrowed her eyes, silently admonishing her youngest son, and trying to ensure he didn't see the confused look that had drifted through Mycroft's eyes. She wanted to wait until they were in the plane before she explained what had happened; that way, neither of them could run out before she was finished.

As soon as the plane arrived, she hustled them onto it. Avra had given up many of more ostentatious signs of her power, but she'd always held onto her plane – it was just too useful not to.

She waited until they were settled in the spacious armchairs and the plane was taxiing down the runway to speak her mind. “Now boys, you know that I love you both, but sometimes...” Avra shook her head. “Sometimes, you're very stupid.”

They bristled at that, as she'd known they would, and she opened her bag to pull out the files she'd been carrying and spread them across the table.

“I'm going to explain some things to you,” she went on, ensuring her evidence was at hand to be demonstrated at appropriate points in her narrative. “And both of you are going to sit there and listen.”

--

By the time Moriarty's people crossed the border into Switzerland, Anthea knew she was over-anxious, sleep-deprived, and probably a danger to everyone on the road but she didn't dare pull over for a nap and let them get too far ahead.

She'd rung their benefactor to inform the woman she was now in Switzerland, but that was the only time she'd pulled over (and then because she couldn't risk being stopped by police).

She couldn't stop. She wouldn't stop.

She'd get John back.

--

Sherlock listened to Mycroft and Mummy discussing train schedules to Switzerland only dimly, feeling strangely numb.

And horrified. Very horrified.
In the aeroplane, Mummy had spread out the evidence Lestrade had collected against John and slowly, calmly deconstructed it until Sherlock realised what should have been obvious to him from the first.

John had been framed.

Oh, the evidence was enough to convince the police, but there were a hundred little discrepancies, a hundred little ways it couldn't have been John, things that would have been invisible to anyone else but things that Sherlock, of all people, should have seen. But he hadn't, because he'd been so convinced that this explained why John was...with him. Why he tolerated things that would have sent other people screaming, why he agreed to their sexual relationship and let Sherlock take over even more of his life...

But he'd been wrong. He'd been **wrong**, and had abandoned John to stand alone against both the police and Moriarty.

Well, not precisely alone – Jane had been with him. At least Sherlock wasn't the only one to be fooled, though that was scant comfort now.

Because Jane wasn't with John any more. John was in Moriarty's hands – _again_ – and Sherlock was doing his best not to think about the myriad of ways John could be irreparably harmed before they found him.

Sherlock wasn't familiar with guilt, but the burning in his chest and the desperate, irrational desire to somehow undo everything he'd done in the past week matched its description.

--

In the shadow of the Alps, Anthea finally pulled over.

The small tracking device monitoring John's progress had stopped moving, close to a tourist spot known as Reichenbach Falls. Anthea had used her Blackberry to scout for any mysterious bunkers or holiday homes – anything that might serve as a front for a place that could hold someone like John.

She'd found several likely locations, but more importantly, when she'd used the purloined laptop to try to trace the IP address again, she found the mysterious computer online. Working as quickly as she could, Anthea broke through the many layers of security that protected it and began to explore the database. She managed to find out which holiday house seemed to be Moriarty's prison of choice (at least, she hoped it was a prison – there was no reason to think John was dead but she didn't know), and disabled some of the computerised security into the bargain. She'd have preferred to obtain blueprints and perhaps guard schedules, but Anthea supposed you couldn't have everything.

Despite the now-lax security and alarm system, Anthea knew she couldn't storm the house by herself. She called their benefactor and gave her the coordinates, and was told it would be at least three hours before the operatives could muster and reach her.

Three hours. Anything could happened to John in three hours.

Anthea was tempted to risk breaching the lowered security alone, but knew that was just her anxiety talking. If she was detected, John would be taken elsewhere, possibly somewhere she couldn't find him – the tracker wouldn't stay inside him forever.

She left the laptop in the car and walked along one of the trails – she needed to do **something** with
this nervous energy before it became too much and she decided to storm the castle all by herself just because she couldn't take waiting anymore.

Anthea spent perhaps half an hour walking, eyeing the house when she could see it through the trees, and attempting to force her brain to think about likely lines of attack instead of what Moriarty was doing to John.

In the end, she blamed her anxiety and sleep-deprivation for the way they managed to sneak up on her.

--

When John woke, he felt so sluggish and exhausted he was tempted to fall right back into unconsciousness. But it was bad enough to be at the mercy of a psychopath without being insensible into the bargain, so he forced his eyes to stay open and tried to kickstart his brain into making some sense of his surroundings.

He was expecting steel and concrete, but the room he was in looked like some kind of posh rehabilitation centre. The plaster walls were painted in a soothing, tasteful shade of light green, and the door was dark, beautifully polished wood, though there seemed to be no handle.

Somehow, the innocuousness of the whole scene just made it even more frightening. John had been expecting a dungeon, not this cheerful little room. It was almost as though Moriarty was making a statement, saying that he didn't need chains or bars to keep John prisoner.

His legs didn't hurt anymore, but judging by how fuzzy his mind was, John suspected that was more to do with drugs than any miraculous recovery. He took a glance down, and, sure enough, he was still hooked up to an IV, along with a variety of machines to monitor his condition. He was lying on a basic hospital bed, but the sheets felt as smooth as those fancy shirts Sherlock wore, and were probably equally as expensive.

The restraints were still present, though – leather padded with lambswool, across his wrists, ankles, knees, waist and chest.

The heart monitor's rhythm began to climb as John's anxiety spiked, and he forced himself to take deep, even breaths until it settled somewhat, hoping the noise hadn't alerted anyone to his return to consciousness.

Of course, with the way John's luck had been running lately, that was when Moriarty walked in.

John tensed, hating the way the ECG was squealing his dread to the whole room. Bad enough that Moriarty was perfectly capable of seeing through whatever facade of courage John constructed, but couldn't he have at least had the illusion that Moriarty believed him?

The pain was returning, but it wasn't as bad as before – judging by the way the skin felt strangely tight, his knife wound had been stitched up while he was out. And however many hours of unconsciousness he'd gone through in drugged lassitude would have been good for his torn muscles.

Whereas before he'd been in no condition to make a run for it, it was comforting to know that he could at least make an effort now.

“Hello, Johnny-boy,” Moriarty beamed. “Feeling better?”

John wasn't going to think about why Moriarty had bothered patching him up – whatever the answer was, he knew he wouldn't like it. Still, there was some part of him that was...well, not pleased, but
more like grimly satisfied that it had indeed been Moriarty sending those people after them.

“Can't talk, Johnny-boy? Want a glass of water?”

John did, but he wasn't about to admit to that.

“Isn't this the part where you gloat?” he asked wearily.

Moriarty grinned again. “Oh, I'm sure I can wait until our party is complete to give the secret away.”

John tried not to let his expression flicker in the slightest, but the increased beeping from the heart monitor was broadcasting his distress like a siren. “What do you mean?”

“Oh, come now, Johnny-boy, did you really think we wouldn't find it?”

“It?” John echoed, trying to focus on his irritation at the constant repetition of that stupid nickname, instead of the sinking feeling in his gut.

“The GPS tracker that is now making its way through your small intestine, of course.” Moriarty's smile reminded John of a shark – fixed and absent of true enjoyment, just there. “Your friend should be joining us in...oh, ten minutes?”

The ECG blared as John's heart nose-dived for his toes.

Anthea was tough, he knew – he told himself that Moriarty was only bluffing, that Anthea would be able to slip any net he cast. But she was also injured, and she sure as hell hadn't been expecting them to find the tracker.

Distantly, John wondered what kind of scan his body had been put through to pull that up. Not an X-ray...maybe something along the lines of a metal detector?

“I just have one little question for you.” The grin suddenly vanished as Moriarty's face twisted in real, honest hate. “Who killed Moran?”

John assumed 'Moran' referred to the man whose head Anthea had bashed in, and felt a kind of savage pride on her behalf that she'd managed to do something that actually upset Moriarty. In the next instant, John realised how dangerous that was for her, and replied in the only way he could.

“I did.”

Moriarty's eyes narrowed, and John stared back impassively. It was easy to put the defiance in his face, the satisfaction along with the dread that he'd removed one of the criminal's key players. If he could just get Moriarty to believe him...

Except he didn't, because he suddenly burst into laughter. “Oh, very good Johnny-boy – you almost had me convinced! But don't quit your day job.”

Something in John broke with a near-audible snap. He might be the prisoner of a madman, but damned if he was just going to sit here and play the nice house guest while Moriarty taunted him.

“Go to hell and chew broken glass along the way, you psychotic little fuck!”

Moriarty smiled again, as though the whole situation was irresistibly amusing. John was gearing up for another flurried insult (he was in trouble either way, so he might as well get in some verbal abuse while he could) when there was movement in the open doorway and Anthea was dragged into the room.
Something in John's chest constricted with what felt very close to despair.

She was being held between two of the thugs Moriarty seemed to have in endless supply, one lackey to each arm. And they weren't being careful of her injury, if the tight grimace on her face and the smear of blood on her sleeve were anything to go by.

Anthea certainly hadn't come quietly, judging by the dirt-streaked clothes and bruises that were liberally distributed between her and the people who held her. John looked her up and down, trying to determine if there were any serious injuries beside her burst stitches, and the look she sent him in return told him she was fine. At least, as fine as someone could be when they were in Moriarty's hands.

“You're early!” Moriarty chirped. “I would have thought she'd give you a bit more trouble than that. Late night, dear?”

Anthea glared.

“We found these on her,” one of the minions told Moriarty, handing over Anthea's pistol, the taser, and her Blackberry.

As John had half-expected, Moriarty completely dismissed the weapons in favour of examining the Blackberry.

“This is a handy little gadget, isn't it?” he mused as he slipped it into a pocket of his jacket. “I'm going to hold onto it.”

Moriarty clapped his hands, like a CEO bringing a meeting to order. “Now, down to business – I'm sure we all know why we're here?”

“Enlighten us,” Anthea snapped.

Before meeting Moriarty, John never thought real criminals actually explained their motives and operations to their opponents. But Sherlock had been right about genius needing an audience; Moriarty needed people to know what he'd done, needed people to acknowledge him even if it was only with hatred.

“Johnny-boy here is what this was really all about,” Moriarty said, his eyes glittering as he stared at Anthea. “You were just collateral, something to keep Big Brother's large nose out of the affair.”

“So you've kidnapped us, bravo,” John sneered, trying to get Moriarty's attention back on him. “Why go to the bother of framing us, though?”

“Oh, don't you see?” Moriarty trilled. “No, of course you don't – guess you really are as thick as you seem, Johnny-boy. But this way, no one is going to come looking for you.”

The niggling feeling of despair sitting on John's chest suddenly became a whole lot heavier as he acknowledged that Moriarty was right. People were looking for Anthea and himself as fugitives, not as kidnap victims – if they failed to turn up, people would simply assume they'd gone to ground somehow.

Moriarty hadn't stopped talking. “It's nothing personal of course, Johnny-boy, but you did make yourself the heart of a previously uncaring brain, and there are consequences for that sort of thing. By the time I'm finished with you, you'll only be fit for a mental institution – and I have months, years, however long it takes. And when I'm done...”
Moriarty grinned, looking more self-satisfied than John had ever seen him. “I'll drop you on dear little Sherlock's doorstep, along with every scrap of evidence that proves you were framed. Should do a nice job of burning the heart out of him, don't you think?”

John dimly thought that his heart monitor sounded like one of those old fire alarms, the ones with the beeps so high-pitched and close together they sounded more like one continuous noise.

He was going to be tortured into insanity. That was what Moriarty was promising.

With anyone else, John would have thought it an empty threat. But not from Moriarty – the set expression on his face and the excited look in his eyes told John that here was a man capable of delivering on what he'd promised.

“And as for you...” Moriarty rounded on Anthea, face twisting. “Do you regret killing Sebastian?”

Anthea's lip curled. “No.”

Moriarty smiled. “You will.”

It was obvious what he intended – he was going to torture them both. John thought fast; his torture had been planned from the start and was pretty much a given, but was there some way he could protect Anthea? At least long enough for her to escape?

Strangely, John didn't doubt that she would escape, eventually. She was a technological genius and could do things with computers and security he didn't even know were possible. The only question was when she'd get away, not if.

And if he could buy her enough time...

“Leave her alone,” he said, trying to keep his voice as calm and collected as he could.

Moriarty raised an inquisitive eyebrow. “Are you actually trying to tell me what to do while you're flat on your back and restrained? Really, Johnny-boy, there's bravado and then there's outright stupidity.”

Anthea, on the other hand, was staring directly at him and shaking her head ever-so slightly. Almost as though she knew exactly what John was planning and was trying to tell him to shut up.

“After all,” Moriarty went on. “I have both of you, there's no cavalry on the way – there's nothing you can bargain with, Johnny-boy.”

“Isn't there?” It was John's turn to smirk even as his gut chilled with fear. “If you leave her alone...”

A deep breath. And then, injured and drugged, strapped to a hospital bed, John played the only card he had.

“If no one hurts her, I'll do what you say, when you say, how you say. I'll submit to whatever you have planned for me.”

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Mycroft had never been nervous enough to fidget before. He decided he didn't like it.

“We'll rendezvous at the coordinates I've given you,” Mummy was saying into her phone, the one that tapped into communication satellites and technically did not exist. “Remember, there are to be no direct assaults on the building – there is at least one hostage inside, and I cannot overestimate his
importance.”

The express train flew along at hundreds of kilometres an hour, yet judging by the agitation on Sherlock’s bloodless face, it wasn’t nearly fast enough for Mycroft’s brother.

He could sympathise – he at least had the assurance that though Jane was injured and undoubtedly harried from these past days of unwarranted persecution, she wasn’t at the mercy of a psychopath.

Mycroft wished he could find that comforting. But it wasn’t. There was nothing to mitigate the horror of how blind, how stupid he’d been.

He’d complicity accepted that Jane betrayed him, because it had suddenly made sense of the one aspect of his life that he’d never truly understood. If Jane had seduced him with the intent to betray him, then that...that was logical, that followed the rules of the world that Mycroft understood.

But if Jane had loved him? Then that was...

Well, Mycroft suspected it didn't matter now – she'd certainly want nothing to do with him after this, and he deserved no less.

There were many other things Mycroft thought he deserved, but he wouldn't allow himself the release of self-flagellation. He just let himself feel the guilt and regret churning inside him like bile.

He wondered if he'd feel it for the rest of his life. It seemed likely.

--

Anthea went limp and compliant as soon as she saw the syringe. She'd be taken either way, she knew, and it was better to go conscious and aware of her surroundings than drugged and helpless.

The fact that they didn't blindfold her was unsettling on more than one level. Either they didn't think the security could ever be breached in an escape...or they knew she was going to die.

Something told Anthea it was the latter, which sent icy tendrils of fear skittering along her ribs. But not on her own behalf – if they were planning to kill her, what had happened to John?

The house looked normal, but Anthea's trained eyes spotted the security cameras, the pressure sensors that would trigger an alarm, and the electronic keypads that locked and opened the doors rather than any kind of knob.

Anthea pretended to be docile and looking elsewhere whenever they came to a door, even as she noted the code that was being fed into it. They made only token attempts to hide it from her sight, which she was both glad of and unnerved by.

The final door was already open for them, its hinges on the outside and, from what she could see, no keypad on the inside – when it was shut, it would only open from the outside.

But Anthea was more concerned with what was inside the room – John, strapped to a bed, with Jim Moriarty (whose appearance she knew from security camera footage taken from St Bart's Hospital). She was hustled into the room and relieved of her Blackberry as Moriarty revealed that their frame-up had just been another step in his obsessive war with Sherlock. Anthea was still seething over the fact that she'd been called 'collateral' when John's face adopted a set, focused expression she'd only seen once – when he'd told her to run and leave him behind.

She'd tried to stop him, of course, but he either didn't understand or (more likely) wasn't listening.
“I'll do what you say, when you say, how you say. I'll submit to whatever you have planned for me.”

Moriarty scoffed, but Anthea could see a sickening light of interest in his eyes. “You won't be able to keep it up – you'll break eventually.”

“I have no doubt,” John said, voice as eerily calm as it had been in that hallway. “But you'll have my cooperation for as long as I'm capable of giving it.”

Moriarty looked at her, and for an instant Anthea glimpsed the naked longing on his face – he wanted to bruise her, bleed her, tear her apart.

John continued, his voice now low and persuasive, almost seductive. “Moran's already dead, and hurting her won't bring him back. Isn't it better to continue with the plan he died for?”

Moriarty smiled slowly, and Anthea tensed. He wasn't going to go through with it – she could see it written all over his face. Even if he agreed here and now, he'd never honour the bargain, couldn't John see that?

“I must admit,” Moriarty drawled. “I'm intrigued at the difference a willing victim will make. Will you find it easier to bear because it was your choice, or will it be worse because you can't fight me?”

“Well, you'll find out, won't you?” John quipped, face expressionless even as the ECG told the whole room just how frightened he was.

Only years of discipline prevented Anthea from screaming at him. Only the knowledge that their benefactor's 'assistance' was on its way kept her from descending into panic.

Moriarty smiled and gestured, and one of his lackeys left the room while the other walked over to the bed and began to release John from the straps and medical equipment.

“You're an idiot, John!” Anthea hissed, unable to hold it in.

Slowly sitting up on the mattress and testing the mobility of his limbs, John smiled wearily. “Been told that before.”

She bit her tongue against the tirade that was bubbling up in her throat, and instead turned to the man she was fantasising about killing. “Where are you going to put me, then?”

“Oh, I think you can stay here,” Moriarty mused, and Anthea could tell she'd already lost his interest – he was drinking in the way John winced as the doctor's stiff and painful legs protested the mobilising. “Johnny-boy and I are the ones who are moving – I've got a room below that's much more suited for what I've got in mind.”

John's eyelids flickered, but that was the only reaction he displayed. With the ECG unhooked, there was nothing else that said he'd even heard Moriarty.

“Up you go!” Moriarty chided him. “Let's move it!”

John didn't budge from where he was sitting on the bed. “Can I say goodbye?”

Moriarty rolled his eyes. “Oh, very well, have your dramatic parting if you must.”

John opened his arms, and Anthea practically tumbled into them. His face was pressed against her collarbone, and she bent her head to tell him not to give up, that their mysterious benefactor was on her way with reinforcements, when she became aware that he was speaking. The movement of his
lips were hidden against her skin, and it was barely audible over their breathing.

“How long do you need?”

At once, Anthea understood. John knew Moriarty wouldn't honour their deal; he hadn't made it in the hopes of sparing her entirely, but of sparing her long enough to allow her to escape. She remembered the thickness of the walls and door, the complexity of the electronic lock...

She twisted her face so that her lips pressed close to his ear, and pretended to be stifling back a sob as she breathed, “Two hours.”

“Don't come back for me,” John murmured against her skin. “You hear? Don't come back for me!”

“That's enough!” Moriarty snapped, yanking cruelly on her injured arm to drag her away.

Anthea stumbled, yelping as pain jangled across her nerves, and for one horrible moment she was certain he'd realised they were communicating. But then she saw the anticipation on his face, and realised he was simply eager to begin his torture of John.

“Watch it!” John snarled. “If she's hurt, my cooperation is forfeit, remember?”

Anthea swallowed. She hadn't had a chance to tell the doctor about the people coming for them, and she didn't dare give some sort of signal now, for fear of Moriarty seeing and understanding it.

Moriarty smirked and dropped her arm, holding out his hand to take a package from the minion who had just returned.

“I remember, Johnny-boy, but I think I'll need a test of your willingness,” he smirked, pulling two shoes out of the bag and handing them over. “Put these on.”

At first, Anthea was confused. John was dressed in those thin plastic-paper shirts and trousers used in hospitals when the nurses were about to do something very filthy and wanted disposable clothes – in the current situation, it was an outfit that spoke of vulnerability, and Anthea thought that cause would have better served by keeping John barefoot.

Then she got a good look at the shoes. They were leather dress shoes with open laces, and the inside...

The inside sole had razorblades embedded into it.

They were tilted at a sharp angle, almost but not quite horizontal to the sole. John could probably put the shoes on without pain, but standing up and walking on them would cut up his feet. Shallowly, yes (Moriarty probably didn't want risk permanent damage at this early stage), but Anthea had no doubt it would be agonising.

“John...” she said, hating the slight tremble in her voice as it petered out.

John offered her a pained smile and then – with only a hard swallow to show his dread – put his feet into the shoes without hesitation.

“Now stand up, and come with me,” Moriarty ordered, practically trembling with excitement.

A deep inhale to steady himself, and then John stood.

His lips going white at the edges and the barest of grimaces flickering across his face were the only signs of the pain he must be in. His shoulders were back in a tight, tense line, but he didn't wince or
limp as he crossed the room, even as Anthea grimaced at the thought of what the razors must be doing to the tender soles of his feet.

Moriarty gestured the doctor in front of him, but John hesitated in the doorway.

“If'll be all right,” he said, his voice shockingly calm. “Don't worry...Rosy.”

Anthea bit her tongue against the urge to go to him, to promise him that help was coming, that he wouldn't have to endure this for long.

Moriarty snickered. “Oh no, Johnny-boy – this will be as far from 'all right' as it gets.”

He shoved John roughly out of the room, his minions trailing him.

The door closed behind them, and Anthea heard the click of the electronic lock engaging.

Chapter End Notes

And once again, thanks so much to my lovely beta, ginbitch.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

'This is more like it,' John thought grimly, surveying the room Moriarty had brought him to.

Metal walls and concrete floor, hooks in the ceiling and a chain bolted to a corner, with a large drain in the centre for easy clean-up. A metal table covered with an array of restraints, beside a standing tray with...

John jerked his eyes away, but not before his brain had noted a pair of pliers, a cauterising tool and a scalpel. There had been other instruments, but he wasn't going to look at them and risk losing his nerve.

John had been through training to resist interrogation. Not much, granted, but long enough to learn some tricks, and for his instructor to impart the universal truth: that in the end, everyone gave into torture. Everyone had a point at which they broke, at which their will crumbled and they did or said whatever would get the pain to stop. Some people's breaking points were further along the line than others, true, but they were there. And the only way to avoid breaking was to hang on long enough to be rescued...or for the torturer to slip up and either kill you or get bored and assume you don't know whatever it is they wanted.

John had an advantage in that he doubted Moriarty was going to be asking questions – this was just inflicting pain for the sake of it. And he didn't need to bear it for long.

Two hours, Anthea had said. He just had to survive for two hours.

"In you go, Johnny-boy!" Moriarty chirped, but there was a hard edge to his voice.

John was careful not to wince or flinch when he walked forward and the razors chewed into his feet again. The cuts were shallow, he could feel that, and probably wouldn't even scar, but that didn't make them any less agonising.

A goon with a taser followed Moriarty into the room, likely just to ensure John wouldn't turn on the criminal mastermind as soon as the door closed.

"Over to the table," Moriarty ordered. "Hands flat, legs spread. Oh, and take your shirt and trousers off first."

John shed his clothing and leaned over the table, almost glad to be able to put some weight on his hands and take some of the hideous pressure off his bleeding feet.

He wasn't completely naked – they'd let him keep his underwear, thank god – but there was a distinct air of vulnerability when ninety percent of your body was exposed (and five percent of what was covered was covered by what was essentially a torture device).

John tried to breathe deeply and evenly, staring blankly at the wall as he fought to distance his mind from what was going to happen to him. He'd empty his mind, he wouldn't think of anything – nothing would hurt him, nothing would touch him...

There was a clink of metal, and John looked over to find Moriarty picking up the scalpel.
“You know, I’m really quite interested to see how long you hold out before I have to tie you down,” he reflected, slowly turning the blade in his fingers.

“Thought you didn’t like getting your hands dirty,” John quipped, trying to keep his voice level.

“In your case I'll make an exception. Now hold still, Johnny-boy, I'd hate to slip up so early.”

John tensed as he felt the blade pass over the back of his knee. It was so sharp he didn't even realise he was cut until it began to sting.

Another identical cut followed on his opposite knee and in the creases where his legs joined his buttocks. Then his underarms, the crooks of his elbows and beneath his shoulderblades. Just under his pectorals and the line where his ribcage ended. Thin, shallow cuts in the places where sweat would collect – and given that John had broken into a cold sweat of fear from about the moment he saw Moriarty, they were already stinging.

“Very good, Johnny-boy – you didn't so much as whimper!” Moriarty congratulated, now hefting something that looked like black rubber tubing. “But if we're going to continue, I'll have to insist on some feedback.”

“You want to hear me scream?” John surmised, his voice as flat and dead as he could possibly make it.

“Exactly. Just hold still and scream.”

Moriarty swung the rubber through the air as if in practice, and John noted absently that the curved structure and bouncy material of the weapon made it unlikely his skin would be cut. But it would certainly bruise him.

“Any questions?” the madman asked, grinning.

“Just one,” John said. “I have to ask...what went wrong in your childhood?”

He knew he'd pay for that comment, but he'd do whatever it took to keep Moriarty's attention on him, rather than Anthea. He wasn't at all surprised when the tubing cracked against his side like a heavy whip.

John obeyed Moriarty's order, and screamed.

--

Anthea might not be able to see any cameras, but she knew the room was monitored – Moriarty would be a fool not to – and so as soon as Moriarty had departed with John, she'd pretended to throw a temper tantrum. She'd torn the hospital bed apart, ripped the machines out of the walls and smashed them to pieces.

She'd needed to get at the metal within them – the rigid pieces of casing, now with a few sharp edges – so she could begin drilling through the wall. She knew she'd torn even more stitches in her arm, but she didn't care.

It was a simple enough operation. She knew what she'd done to the alarm systems would be difficult to fix, even if they'd noticed it already, so it was likely she could open the door without triggering anything. Of course, if anyone was watching her, they'd know when she escaped, so she'd have to rely on speed.
Anthea slumped against the wall as though exhausted and despairing, her forehead resting just above her crossed wrists, concealing the thin strip of steel. Remembering the location of the keypad on the other side of the door, she began scraping at the plaster, twisting the metal to bore through the wall and access it from the other side.

It would take a while, she knew. She just hoped there wasn't any reinforcing between her and keypad.

--

Jim supposed he should give Johnny some food and water at some point to ensure he didn't pass out...but later. He was having too much fun right now.

Jim leaned back and took a moment to admire the black and blue bruises (and red marks that would become bruises) that littered Johnny's body. The rubber tubing had done exactly what it needed to do; tenderising the man's flesh without the risk of breaking bones or causing potentially fatal internal bleeding.

The only damper on his enjoyment was that he'd had to check himself. He'd left Johnny's injured leg largely untouched – it was rather amusing to watch him take whatever Jim dished out while standing like a guardsman on parade, and he didn't want to spoil that by breaking open the stitches.

And the genitals were so deliciously sensitive, simply hitting them with a piece of piping was completely uninspired – while Jim was considering castrating Johnny as a finishing touch, he didn't want to damage that myriad of nerve endings too early. So he'd let Johnny keep his underwear on, as a sort of visual marker of where to avoid.

He hadn't expected the man to hold out so long though. But at ninety minutes, fifty-three seconds and counting, Johnny still hadn't done anything aside from exactly what Jim had asked of him.

And Jim had taken his time. Half of torture was anticipation, so he'd made sure Johnny had plenty of that. He'd described exactly what he was planning to do, the experiments he'd already done to ensure he knew not to go too far, and though Johnny had been a bit free with the snippy remarks in the beginning, Jim had felt an almost physical pleasure at listening to the man's rejoinders slowly degenerate until the only response his abuse garnered were cries of pain.

Jim noted the way Johnny was shivering ever-so slightly, still partially bent over the table, as though he was starting to go into shock, and considered raping him. Sexual torture was a necessary component of the process, and Jim suspected it would be more potent if Johnny was forced to cooperate in his own violation, only for Jim to kill that woman anyway.

But after his experiments flogging Gustav, Jim wanted to see the real John Watson twisting and screaming beneath the whip.

Jim's hand closed around the handle of the flogger, contemplating the naked expanse of Johnny's back with relish. He decided not to let Johnny in on what he was about to do – just this once, he wanted the element of surprise.

The whip snapped sharply through the air, leaving a diagonal white line across Johnny's right shoulder blade, that immediately flushed into a red welt. The shocked scream of pain and the way Johnny half-turned in surprise was everything Jim could have wanted.

“Don't move,” he reminded. “Wouldn't want to go back on your promise, now would you?”

Johnny's eyes went dark and hard, and he turned away, visibly bracing himself for the next blow.
Just to mix things up, Jim flicked the back of his left calf, directly over a purple bruise and hard enough to open the skin. It earned him a stuttering cry of pain, as though Johnny was trying to keep himself silent even as his vocal chords contracted.

There was a very hard, very steely core to John Watson. Jim looked forward to smashing it apart.

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Anthea had come up against what she hoped was the back of the electronic lock – at least, it certainly felt different as she poked cautiously at it. She tried to summon a mental picture of the device, trying to extrapolate where everything would be...and yes, there was the wiring for the back of the pad.

She'd seen the code, and it was a matter of only moments to manipulate the device from behind, the lock releasing with a soft click.

Bringing her hands in front of her for the first time since she'd begun that work, Anthea checked her watch. Two hours, forty-three seconds – dammit, her estimate had been off!

Anthea didn't know if whatever monitoring device assigned to this room was sensitive enough to pick up on the sound of the lock opening, and she wasn't about to wait around to find out. From the wreckage littering the floor, she extracted a long piece of metal that was once part of John's IV stand – it wasn't much, but as makeshift weapons went, she could have done worse – and slipped out into the corridor.

She was surprised to find it deserted. No matter how confident they were in their security, she would have expected at least one guard. Well, at least it made her chances of escaping that much higher. But of course, she had no intention of obeying John's instruction to leave him behind.

In a situation like this, Anthea would usually methodically search the rooms, but she was conscious of the press of time in each tick of her wristwatch. She might have been able to get out of the room without much difficulty, but she was surely minutes away from some kind of alert that would put the entire place on lockdown as Moriarty's henchmen searched for her.

Moriarty had said something about having a room more suited for...for what he was doing to John. And though this was a fairly remote spot, there was still the problem of curious tourists – such a room would have to be soundproofed. And while she knew a decent engineer was capable of soundproofing any room they wanted to, something told her she'd be more likely to find that room in the basement.

Just this once, Anthea would go with her instincts.

--

John waited for the next lash, trying not to think about...well, about anything. The beating had left his skin exquisitely tender and painfully sensitive, ensuring that the whipping had been far more agonising than John ever thought possible.

And considering that he was a doctor, he'd gone into this expecting a lot of pain.

“Over two hours, Johnny!” Moriarty chirped, stroking the whip over his shoulder, seeming to delight in the way John couldn't contain a shiver. “I won't lie – I'm impressed.”

Over two hours. Anthea's deadline had passed – she was away and safe, so John was finally free to
put his plan into action. Thank god he'd managed to keep himself under control, so Moriarty hadn't felt the need to restrain him.

As Moriarty was pulling back for the next blow, John moved. He pivoted on one foot, turning himself around to face his captor as his arms came up, one hand wrapping around the base of Moriarty's neck as the other wrapped around his jaw, gripping it firmly.

A sharp twist, and Moriarty's neck broke with a loud snap.

John didn't even watch the body hit the floor. He crouched, spun back, and flipped the metal table in front of him, letting it take the shot from the lackey's taser. From there it was child's play to kick it forward, forcing the minion to dive out of the way or be pinned against the wall, and use the moments of distraction to close the distance between them.

He smashed the heel of his hand upwards into the base of the man's nose, feeling cartilage crunch and splinter beneath his palm, then John grabbed hold of the man's head and brought it down on the edge of the table as hard as he could.

The man went limp, and it was only after John was certain he wouldn't rise again that he became aware of just how much pain he was in. Adrenaline, and the narrowed focus of actually being able to do something after his hours of forced submission had pushed the discomfort to the back of his mind, and now it was returning with a vengeance.

John allowed himself to practically collapse on the spot, dropping into a sitting position with an inelegant thud.

Almost every inch of his skin hurt – most of it with the deep-tissue ache of forming bruises, but the whip had left hot, prickly welts that pulled at his skin with each breath. His feet were in agony, and John couldn't help hissing in pain as he unlaced the hideous shoes and pulled them off.

The soles of his feet were tacky with blood and looked like they'd been put through a paper shredder. But the wounds weren't deep, and now that he'd removed the source of the constant trauma most were already clotting.

The main problem was that the stitches in his leg had split at one end. Blood was welling in the tear, and John moved to apply pressure automatically, even though he knew there was no real point.

John knew he couldn't escape a whole house full of Moriarty's soldiers, not in his condition. He'd never planned on it – he'd just wanted to bring Moriarty down with him.

That was why he'd had to wait until Anthea was away and safe. John held no illusions about what would happen now; this house had been filled with people loyal to Moriarty, people who would have no compunction about killing him to avenge their dead employer.

John had known he was a dead man the moment he offered Moriarty his bargain.

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Anthea peered around the corner, feeling a prickle of apprehension when she saw no one guarding the staircase that led into the basement.

She hadn't met a single person in her hurried progression through the house, which seemed somehow ominous. She kept expecting a trap laid around every corner, and it was beginning to strain her nerves. Outright fighting her way through the corridors was what she'd expected, but this silence was just eerie.
Where had everyone gone?

At the base of the stairs was a door that seemed to be made out of steel, the holiday home facade apparently abandoned.

Anthea pressed her ear to the door, but couldn't hear anything from inside. Knowing that even if it was a trap, there was likely no way for her to prepare to defend herself, she opened the door as quickly as she could, hefting her makeshift weapon in the opposite hand...

John was sitting on the floor in his underwear, his skin streaked with bruises, one arm bracing himself against the floor. A table was overturned, and Moriarty and one of his men lay dead a few feet away.

Anthea only cared about one of those things.

“John!” she exclaimed

There was undisguised surprise on John's face as he looked at her, mixed with a sort of weary bewilderment. “I thought I told you not to come back for me.”

Anthea gave that the contemptuous snort it deserved as she rushed into the room and dropped to her knees at his side. “Are...”

She was planning to ask him if he was all right, but it died in her throat as she truly took in his injuries. The bruises were only part of it; from what she could see of John's back, it was covered with raw, oozing welts, there were lines of blood at his elbows and across his chest, and his feet...

“I'm okay,” John panted. “It...it looks worse than it is.”

Anthea very much doubted that, but decided not to comment on it. She touched the side of John's face in a gesture she hoped he'd interpret as comforting and supportive, then went to raid Moriarty's pockets for her Blackberry.

When she finally got a good look at the body, she was surprised – it was much harder to break necks than people assumed. Thick layers of muscle and ligaments were needed to support the skull, and it took a lot of force to work against them. But she supposed if anyone would know how to break necks, it would be a doctor.

“Can you walk?” she asked, her voice purposefully brusque.

Anthea had a feeling John didn't want comfort or sympathy right now – he wanted her to be curt, business-like, to act as if she wasn't horrified by the clear evidence of what he'd endured.

John slowly shifted into a crouch, then stood, and Anthea had to work hard to keep from flinching as he winced and groaned.

“Not far,” he said flatly, rocking back and forth as though trying to somehow keep his weight off both feet.

Anthea wanted to offer her shoulder, but thought it would be prudent to crack open the door and check there was no one coming towards the room before they just blithely walked out into the corridor. So she leaned out and checked.

And ducked back into the room when she spotted movement on the staircase – black-clad figures descending slowly, warily, as though prepared for resistance.
“Incoming,” she said in a low voice.

“How close?”

John was pulling on his clothes as quickly as he could – Anthea inwardly cringed at the thought of material rubbing against those welts on his back, but she suspected John needed the concealment and the illusion of protection right now.

“On the stairs.”

John nodded. Then, ignoring his bleeding leg, he limped to a tray of what could only be called torture devices, picked up a scalpel, leaned out the door, and threw it down the hall.

“You're a knife-thrower now?” Anthea blurted as he ducked back inside.

“Not at all – I probably missed them by a mile. But that will at least tell them that we're here and willing to fight, which should buy us a few minutes while they come up with a plan. Do you have anything on you besides that?” he nodded at the long piece of metal that she'd dropped to the floor.

Anthea shook her head. “I didn't meet anyone on the way here.”

John frowned, obviously puzzled. “Really? No one at all?”

“Several times along the way, I wondered if they were setting some kind of trap,” she admitted.

“Looks like you were right. Do you have a plan?”

“Not as such, no.”

Even through the adrenaline-soaked haze of denial (this couldn't be the end, it couldn't), Anthea realised John was looking very accepting for a man about to die. Almost as though he'd been expecting this outcome...

It was just an idle thought, but suddenly everything was very, very clear to Anthea. “This was your plan, wasn't it?”

John looked up from where he was rifling through the torture instruments, obviously looking for something he could use as a weapon. “Excuse me?”

“This was your plan,” Anthea repeated, feeling very close to absolutely furious. “That's why you told me not to come back for you – you planned to wait long enough for me to get away, then you'd kill Moriarty, and in turn be killed by his guards.”

John didn't reply.

“I'm right, aren't I?”

Eventually, he nodded, carefully not meeting her eyes. “You heard him – I was the one he was really after. If you escaped, he might not be fussed enough to send everything he had after you, but me...I knew I wasn't going to get away. The best I could hope for was to bring him down with me.”

Anthea wondered what that had been like – submitting to two hours of torture and expecting only death at the end of it. She wanted to say or do something to help, but the set expression on John's face as he lifted a cattle prod told her he didn't want anything resembling sympathy right now.

“There's nothing on the bodies,” he said, gesturing to the corpses on the floor and very deliberately
changing the subject. “I checked. This and your bit of metal will have to do us.”

Anthea nodded. She’d seen a taser on the floor, but it was the type that fired metal probes and needed to be reloaded between each shot. And having already been fired, it was essentially useless to them.

She wasn’t stupid – she knew there was no way they could get out of this. She didn’t know exactly how many people were coming down the stairs outside, but her quick glimpse had assured her it was far more than they could handle.

John wasn’t looking for a weapon because he thought they could fight their way out of this, but because he wanted to take as many of them with him as he could.

Perhaps Anthea should be frightened, and she was, but more than that she just felt a horrible sense of resignation. She’d always known the odds were against them proving their innocence – she couldn’t say that, deep down, she hadn't considered this scenario as an end to their crusade.

She and John had started this together…and perhaps it was fitting that they finish it together.

John was smiling wearily at her, and Anthea knew he'd seen what she was thinking.

“Look on the bright side,” he encouraged. “We'll always have Paris.”

She laughed, and thought ruefully that only John would try to cheer her up when they were minutes away from death.

Anthea watched him toss the cattle prod from hand to hand, spinning it and testing its weight to get a feel for the device, and she bent down to pick up her own weapon. With her injured arm and a lack of formal training in combat with a large metal pole, she wasn't certain how effective she'd be, but she was willing to try.

Anthea was trying to steel herself to face her death with relatively calm when the sudden ringing of her Blackberry made them both jump.

She was set to ignore it, but the caller ID was listed as John's number, which meant it was their mysterious benefactor. Calling too late to really help, but Anthea answered anyway.

“I know you've had a difficult day,” came the soft, cultured voice containing just a hint of tension. “But I'd appreciate it if you stopped throwing sharp things at my friends.”

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Avra had good friends – special forces retirees who'd agreed to this raid as a special favour for her – and she'd given them permission to storm the building as soon as they'd realised Jane wasn't waiting for them. Given the circumstances, Avra thought it reasonable to assume she’d either been killed or captured.

For her eldest son's sake, she hoped it was the latter.

From what Avra had been hearing from her radio (tuned into her friends’ frequency), there was precious little working security in the place. Almost as though Jane had got to it before them – they were finding it surprisingly easy to attract the guards to the fringes and disable them in small groups.

And when they'd radioed about two people holed up in a small room in the basement, one a short-haired woman and the other a battered-looking man who'd thrown a scalpel at them, Avra knew the objective had been achieved.
By that point, her poor boys had been practically going to pieces. Oh, she was sure they looked they were calm and in control of themselves to anyone else, but she was their mother – she'd always been able to see through them.

And she could see how pale Mycroft was, the way he was twisting his fingers, lacing and un-lacing them over and over again as if he was physically unable to keep them still. She could see how Sherlock was rocking back and forth, as if it was an effort to keep himself in place, and he'd worried several nails on his fingers down to bloody cuticles (she'd tried to stop him, but he just started chewing his lip as though determined to bite it off, and at least the nails would grow back).

She lifted John's phone and dialled Jane's number, hoping the much-altered Blackberry was still in their custody. It would be best if they could extract them from the house without the injuries that would surely result were John to put up a serious fight.

Avra asked them to please desist in throwing sharp objects in her friends' direction, and hung up before one of her sons could wrest the phone from her and alarm their paramours by blurting apologies or inquiries about their welfare. John and Jane had already endured far more than they should have – the shock of her identity and her children's presence could at least wait until they were free.

When her friends radioed in to say they were escorting John and Jane out, but they thought it would be wise to procure an ambulance, both Sherlock and Mycroft practically leapt out of their seats.

Avra sent them a quelling glance, even as she held the 'talk' button down. “What is their condition?”

“Your friend with the Blackberry has a sliced arm, but it should be all right – looks like it's been partially treated already,” came the response.

Mycroft was dialling, obviously requesting an ambulance, but Avra knew his full attention was on the radio she held. As soon as they’d been told Jane seemed unharmed, aside from her previous injury, the tense hunch of Mycroft's shoulders eased so quickly he might have been sedated.

But the report wasn't finished. “The doctor's in bad shape, though. I wouldn't be surprised if we need a stretcher to take him out.”

At that, Sherlock made a sound as if he were in pain; a soft hiss of breath through gritted teeth.

Avra found herself thankful they were only two minutes away.

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John was still reeling from the revelation that the people storming through the house were on their side as he and Anthea were hustled out. Teams split off from the main group to look for safes, computers, filing cabinets – any evidence of Moriarty's operations. Apparently an ambulance was on its way as well, which was good, because John wasn't sure how far he could make it.

His feet stung sharply whenever he so much as shifted, and his leg throbbed in rebellion every time it took his weight. He was feeling uncomfortably raw and tender as an after-effect of the beating, as though he'd been partially skinned, and he was probably going into shock.

But John wasn't going to wait for a stretcher. It was stupid, but he felt a desperate need to walk out of the place on his own two feet.

With Anthea's support, of course. He'd slung his left arm around her neck, using her as an impromptu crutch for his injured leg, and her arms were wrapped lightly around his waist to help
balance him.

John would have objected if any of their armed helpers had tried to assist him, but with Anthea, he found he didn't mind. Perhaps because she felt like a sister in arms, and there was no shame in leaning on your comrades when you needed to.

It was only when he saw the cloudy sky above him that John truly realised they were free. Something bubbled beneath his numb bewilderment, something like relief and triumph and joy mixed together...

And then he noticed the three figures standing on the path in front of them. There was Mycroft, looking unusually pale beside an older woman who reminded John of Judi Dench from Casino Royale.

But he didn't look closer, because the third figure was Sherlock. John's attention went to the man like iron to a magnet.

Sherlock looked like...well, he looked like he had the night of the pool – confused and frightened and panicked and trying desperately to hold himself together.

Anthea gasped, having obviously seen Mycroft, and John welcomed the distraction, yanking his gaze away from Sherlock's to land on her.

She was clearly shocked, and certainly wary, and yet in that moment John wanted to laugh. Because they were out – Moriarty was dead, and they were free of him. He didn't even care if Sherlock and Mycroft were about to haul them off to jail because frankly, it was still a far better option than being held by Moriarty.

“We made it,” he breathed, grinning like a lunatic at Anthea.

Then he did laugh, hugging her to him, ignoring the pain as her body pressed against his various bruises and welts.

“We did, didn't we?” Anthea laughed with him, sounding incredulous.

She gripped his face and planted a loud, smacking kiss of celebration on his lips, which only made them both laugh harder. John heard the tinges of hysteria in their wild giggles but couldn't seem to curb himself – it was either laugh about it or cry about it, and he knew which one he preferred.

“I'm afraid I must enquire as to the source of your amusement.”

The voice was feminine, distinctly upper-class, and somehow familiar. John couldn't place it, but as he and Anthea turned, their giggles tapering off, Anthea suddenly stiffened.

“Mrs. Holmes!” she blurted.

John had the feeling that only the fact that Anthea was helping to support him stopped her from snapping to attention like a soldier on parade.

Then he registered what she'd said and had to fight the urge to snap to attention himself. *Mrs. Holmes?* Had they really been rescued by Sherlock's Mum?

Though now that he was looking for it, he could see the resemblance. She looked more like Sherlock than like Mycroft, with her sharp cheekbones and her curly hair, thought it was more silver than black.
John felt his elation retreating under another wave of confusion as the woman smiled.

“Come now, Jane – how many times have I told you to call me Avra?”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to the wonderful ginbitch, who betas even when she's busy.
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

John stared numbly at 'Avra Holmes'. He was finding it difficult to take anything in, as though he were somehow removed from what was happening. He remembered vaguely that he was angry with Sherlock, and now that he had managed to rip his gaze away, he focused on not looking back at him.

The adrenaline partly blocked the constant pain radiating from his mangled feet, but when he shifted his weight in an effort to take some of the strain off Anthea's shoulders, an unexpected rock or twig (he wasn't sure, only that it felt sharp and hard) dug into one of his open wounds. John clenched his teeth and managed to turn a scream of pain into the kind of hiss a startled cat might make. And although it was quiet, it cut into the silent tension like a chainsaw. Everyone focused on him, and Sherlock actually stepped forward with his hand outstretched, with a look on his face that was the most raw John had ever seen it (aside from the pool, of course).

But John didn't want to be anywhere near Sherlock right now. The fact that he and Anthea weren't being clapped in handcuffs suggested the Holmes brothers realised they'd been duped, but there was still a hard core of resentment in John's gut. Part of him would have been perfectly happy to walk away from Sherlock and never look back.

Well, all right, maybe not perfectly happy, but certainly viciously satisfied.

“Don't touch me!” John snarled, pulling back automatically and bumping sharply against Anthea.

Which he regretted instantly as the impact caused the bruises and welts along his side to flare up, and this time he was unable to hold in his groan of pain.

“John...” Sherlock began, sounding nervous and unsteady.

“Don't!” John hissed, squeezing his eyes closed. “Just...don't.”

Apparently Mycroft had approached them as well, because John heard his voice, ever-so slightly strained at the edges.

“Jane?”

“Do not talk to me,” Anthea barked.

Clearly she was of the same opinion as John regarding their former lovers.

John took a deep, steadying breath, automatically tried to stand straighter, and then held in another sound of pain as the movement pulled at the scalpel cuts across his chest.

“The ambulance should be here within five minutes,” Avra broke in, her voice cool and steady.

John opened his eyes at that, feeling dazed and faintly grateful. An ambulance would be good, yes – he could feel himself trembling, and though the mountain air was chilly, he was probably going into the beginning stages of shock.

“Do you want to sit down?” Anthea asked, her face tight with anxiety.

“That'd be nice,” John sighed. “Fucker left my arse alone for the most part, so it should be all right.”
It was only when everyone stared at him that he realised he'd mumbled the last part aloud. Which, really, was a sure sign he needed the ambulance if ever there was one.

Anthea helped him to the ground, and John couldn't quite hold in a moan of relief as his weight was finally, finally taken off his abused feet.

Sherlock made a small, choked noise that somehow made John furious. He hadn't even given John a chance to defend himself, had just dumped him out on the streets with some clothes and money without even taking two minutes to explain himself or to listen. He had forfeited the right to care.

“Are you all right, John?” Anthea asked, her voice soft. “Did he...do anything else to you?”

“In my peripheral vision, he was aware of Sherlock flinching, his body tightening as though in anticipation of a blow.

“No. I think he was saving that for later.” A bitter chuckle twisted out of John's throat. “Sick bastard probably needed to me to get all bloody before he even started getting interested...”

His rambling tangent was cut off by a shudder so violent his teeth actually chattered. He was definitely going into shock – pity there wasn't a blanket around. Anthea made to wrap her arms around him, then hesitated, and the way her eyes skimmed him told John she was remembering the damage Moriarty had done and was wondering if it was safe to touch him.

There was a rustle of cloth, and John glanced up to see Sherlock holding out his coat, the expression on his face so foreign it took John two full seconds to identify it as 'timid'.

Because that expression was doing funny things to his gut, John dropped his gaze and carefully did not look at Sherlock as he took the coat. He suspected he was bleeding through the paper-thin material Moriarty had considered clothes. He found he couldn't care less if he got blood on Sherlock's precious coat.

“I assume you've finally realised we were framed?” Anthea said, in the perfectly level tone of someone who was controlling themselves with great effort.

John risked a glance upwards, to see both Sherlock and Mycroft looking truly, honestly guilty. At first, he was shocked, but then he just felt a kind of triumph.

'Good,' he thought savagely, allowing himself the indulgence of glaring at Sherlock. 'Feel guilty, you bastard! You left me on the street with no home and no explanation – you didn't even stop to hear my side of it!'

And there it was: Sherlock's great betrayal. He could almost understand the man believing he was Moriarty's lackey – after all, he could imagine that Moriarty faked up some pretty hefty proofs. Besides, in a strictly linear sense, he and Sherlock hadn't know each other very long.

But he hadn't even spoken to John – he hadn't taken the time to just talk to him, to hear his side of the story, to extend to John just a little of the faith he'd had in Sherlock. He'd just made his decisions and handed down his judgements; he'd hadn't given John the benefit of the doubt for even one minute.

All in all, the howl of the approaching ambulance's sirens was a welcome relief.
Anthea wasn't in any mood to let John out of her sight. As soon as John had been loaded into the ambulance, she'd climbed in with him in a manner that brooked no opposition. She'd barged her way into John's hospital room in the same fashion, brandishing enough of their collective cash funds to make sure John would be given a private suite.

Mycroft had tried to pay for it, but she'd simply developed selective deafness in regards to his offers. Unfortunately for both him and Sherlock, she also wasn't in any mood to pander to the Holmes brothers' moods. The only reason she wasn't demanding hospital security throw them out on the street was because a) she was grateful to Mrs. Holmes and the help she'd provided and b) she didn't trust Mycroft not to do something underhanded to get back in.

Once, she would have had faith that he'd trust her judgement. But not now.

Fortunately, John was on some rather heavy painkillers and was completely oblivious to the tension in the room, and actually seemed to be hovering in that drowsy, blurred world between sleep and full consciousness. He wasn't talking much, but his eyes would blink open and appear to focus on something before they slipped shut again.

Avra's phone beeped, and she glanced at it before announcing, "Moriarty's computers have been raided for information, and there is more than enough documentation to conclusively prove your innocence to any court in the world."

"Was there anything on someone called Thomas Abbott?" Anthea asked, feeling a stir of curiosity in spite of herself.

Avra's mouth went thin and flat. "It appears his knife was left there deliberately in an effort to lure you and John into Europe, and his body was an attempt to get you closer to Switzerland."

'Of course,' Anthea thought bitterly. 'Why waste manpower dragging us across the continent when Moriarty could get us to do most of the work for him?'

She supposed now that they'd escaped and were in the clear, so to speak, and John was getting treatment, that she should be relieved. But she didn't feel relieved, instead she felt almost numb. Well, except for simmering resentment directed at Mycroft – she was feeling a lot of that.

And if, underneath that resentment, was a tight knot of hurt, she certainly wasn't going to dig deep enough to find out.

"In fact, it's almost disturbing how much information they found on those computers," Avra went on. "Enough to make one wonder why he he recorded evidence of so many obviously criminal acts-"

"Because that was his plan," Anthea interrupted, her voice flat. "He was going to torture John into insanity, then drop him back in England with all the proof that he'd been framed."

Both Sherlock and Mycroft had been quiet up until now – Sherlock because Anthea had the feeling he wasn't going to speak until John did, and Mycroft because he probably knew she was just waiting for an excuse to verbally tear into him – but at that pronouncement, Sherlock grimaced, and reached for John's hand. Anthea slapped it away.

The startled, wounded look Sherlock turned on her was too much, though; he had no right to be acting like the injured party.

"He asked you not to touch him!" she snapped. "The least you can do is respect that until he's conscious again!"
There were another few moments of tension-laden silence as Anthea pointedly took John's hand instead, rubbing gently at his wrists. It still unnerved her that, for all the damage Moriarty had done, John’s wrists were unmarked – he hadn't been restrained in any way.

“It will be all right, dear,” Avra said bracingly. “The doctor said his feet were the worst of it, and even they’ll heal up just fine.”

“That wasn’t the worst of it,” Anthea muttered darkly, almost to herself.

More silence. Then Mycroft approached the chair she was sitting in, his voice tentative. “Jane?”

Anthea wanted to hold it in, she really did. She didn't want these people privy to her anguish – the only one of them who'd ever had the right had lost it a week ago.

But it bubbled from her lips without her permission, and she couldn't stop it. “He did it to protect me. Moriarty came in and made vague threats about how I’d regret killing his lackey, and John agreed to submit to whatever torture Moriarty devised if he left me alone.” Her laughter had more than a tinge of hysteria to it. “He endured that, all of that, because he wanted to protect me.”

Humiliatingly, her voice actually broke on the last word. She was about to devise some excuse to rush into the bathroom to collect herself, when John's fingers squeezed hers lightly. Anthea startled, and raised her eyes to find that John was conscious and grinning weakly.

“Don't discount spite and sheer bloodymindedness,” he slurred. “There was a lot of that as well.”

Anthea knew her choked-off laughter sounded more like a sob, which was why she stifled it so quickly. “John...”

“It's all right,” he whispered, his eyes losing focus as he once more slid back into the grip of the drugs. “My plan, remember? Not your fault.”

Anthea reflected that the fact that John could so easily strike to the heart of what was upsetting her even while strung out on analgesics was a little eerie.

On impulse, she raised her hand to his face and kissed his forehead the way mothers did for their children.

“Go to sleep, John,” she murmured against his skin.

He mumbled something that might have been an acquiescence, and drowsed once more.

And then Anthea really did move to the bathroom, and splashed her face in an effort to take away the hot burning under her eyelids and to get herself under control – she never just blurted things out like that, never.

In some ways, John's behaviour would almost make sense if he was her brother, or if he was in love with her. But now, she was his friend, probably not even his best friend, yet he'd still protected her like that...

Frankly, it boggled Anthea's mind.

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Mycroft knew Jane wouldn't welcome his company, but she’d been so distressed...he had to make sure she was all right.
He found her in front of the bathroom mirror, staring at her reflection as though it had personally offended her. It made something in Mycroft's chest squeeze painfully, and he automatically put a hand on the back of her neck to comfort her – touching the nape of her neck always soothed her. When she'd had a difficult day, he'd ensure he stroked her neck when they went to bed together, and it always put her right to sleep.

But today, she went rigid. “A hundred pounds.”

For once, Mycroft didn't understand her. “I beg your pardon?”

“For my 'services', remember?” she spat, shoving his hand away. “One hundred pounds or you get nothing.”

Comprehension dawned, and with it, a wave of shame. “Jane, I know there is no apology that can be made-”

“Glad you understand, then,” she snarled, sliding past as she made to leave the bathroom.

“Jane-”

“Do not call me that,” she hissed, each word very pronounced, and very cold. “You don't get to call me that. Not anymore!”

It was strange how she could flinch from his touch, could tell him not to talk to her, yet that rejection – her insistence that he not use her real name – was the one that sent almost physical pain through him.

He was left alone in the bathroom, forced to contemplate what he'd been trying very hard not to think about: what life would be like if Jane never came back to him. But it was as if his mind couldn't actually process it. When he thought of being without Jane, he didn't see any specific scenario marked by her absence, just an emptiness.

He remembered the way she'd kissed John when they'd emerged from their prison, and again just moments ago in the hospital bed. He'd dismissed the first instance as impulse because they didn't have the casual ease with each other's personal space that lovers had, but had he been wrong? It certainly wasn't unheard of for relationships to begin in adversity. Betrayed by their respective lovers and with both official and unofficial forces against them, had John and Jane turned to each other? Was it just that they'd been run so ragged there hadn't been an opportunity to consummate their new relationship?

Still, even if it was too late, even if Jane never wanted to set eyes on him again...he had to at least try to make it up to her. Somehow.

--

Sherlock had always disparaged that 'quest for redemption' storyline that John seemed so fond of. He'd asked him why, once, and John had mumbled that he often saw some parallels to his own life. Sherlock had laughed, because the idea that John needed redeeming for something came close to being the most ridiculous thing he'd ever heard.

As for himself, he'd never really cared about redemption before. Putting that much effort into getting someone to forgive you had just seemed boring and stupid. Sherlock rarely felt regret for his actions, at least not enough to make such a lengthy business of apologising for them.

But now...now he could see why people would be tempted to devote their entire lives to earning
forgiveness.

“I will burn the heart out of you...”

He'd known what that meant the moment Moriarty had said it – with John strapped to explosives mere feet away, it was painfully obvious. He'd known Moriarty intended violence towards John, known that he wasn't the type to make idle threats. He'd known...and he'd still made such a enormous, irreparable, stupid mistake. He'd fallen right into Moriarty's trap.

But it wasn't him who'd paid the price. It was John.

John who was now only half-concious at best, heavily drugged to mute the pain of his abused body. He was lying on his right side, likely the only comfortable position available to him – Sherlock had eavesdropped on the doctors and received the edited version of John's injuries. All painful, yes, but unlikely to be debilitating. Most wouldn't even scar.

It was actually rather horrifying; how very much the wounds smacked of 'prelude'. Moriarty obviously hadn't felt rushed in the slightest, had been fully prepared to have months, even years with John, up in those mountains...

He shut down that train of thought with vicious distaste. He should be happy, pleased that John's captivity hadn't left him with any debilitating injuries, that this disaster wasn't any worse.

Except that knowing that it could be worse didn't make it any better. John had suffered because of him. The thought was almost unbearable.

When they'd first reached the hospital, Jane had been furious enough and vocal enough to hiss that if John had died in Moriarty's stronghold, she would have made the rest of Sherlock's life a living hell. Sherlock had refrained from stating the obvious; that she wouldn't have had to try very hard.

He wanted to hold John's hand. But Jane's scathing rebuke held him back. With anyone else, he would have ignored it. But if John really didn't want it...

Sherlock had never quite understood that saying about letting something go if you loved it. After all, if you loved something, then wouldn't you want to keep it with you, where you could be sure it was (relatively) safe and sheltered and getting the proper amount of nutrients? But now, he thought he understood – if John was happier away from Sherlock, he'd let him go.

--

Avra had expected one of them to put the pieces together – and given John's current state of half-lucidity, she'd thought it would be Jane.

But she hadn't expected Sherlock to turn to her and say, without preamble, “You knew.”

Jane had returned from the bathroom and taken John's hand as he began to come out of his haze, both of them apparently doing their best to ignore the other occupants of the room, but at that pronouncement, their heads turned. Even Mycroft, emerging from the bathroom with a rather rattled look on his face, went still.

“I knew,” Avra agreed – she'd never prevaricated with her children, and she wasn't about to start now.

“Was there a...particular reason you waited, Mummy?” Mycroft asked, and she could hear in his voice how hard he'd struggled to make that question come out calmly.
Avra cocked her head, a gesture she knew her youngest often imitated. “Would you have listened? Before the anger had passed and both of you were sinking into depressive lethargy? Or would you have insisted that I didn't know what I was talking about, and sunk deeper into denial and shored your defences for the next time I tried to convinced you? I may love you boys beyond reason, but you can be quite stubborn at times.”

“We were on the run,” John said hoarsely, his words still slightly slurred but the restrained fury in them coming across clearly. “We were fighting off Moriarty's people, worrying about the police or governments agents getting hold of us...and you didn’t do anything until it was convenient for you? Couldn't have sent some of your 'friends' to help us, or maybe directed us to some kind of handy safehouse?”

“Would you have trusted that?” Avra asked, honestly curious. 

“It would have been nice to know it was out there!” Jane snapped. 

Her hands were clenched, the knuckles turning bone-white even as Avra watched, and John was taking deep, unsteady breaths, clearly struggling to control himself. 

“I want you to leave the room,” John said eventually, with all the thought and consideration of a judge delivering a sentence. “Now, please.”

Avra couldn't say she hadn't been expecting that reaction, and rose without complaint. Though she couldn't deny that she was slightly charmed by the fact that even under duress, John had been polite enough to tack on a 'please'.

“John...” Sherlock murmured, reaching out for John's hand. 

John pulled his hand back against his chest and turned his face away. “When I said leave, I meant all of you.”

Sherlock jerked, looking for a moment as though John had slapped him, and his outstretched hand folded defensively against his chest. Jane, looking hurt, began to rise, but John's hand shot out grabbed at her wrist. He missed, his coordination still impaired, but the flat impact of his hand on top of hers at least halted her movement. 

“Not you,” he said, looking as though it took a great effort to articulate himself. “Just...everyone else...”

Avra felt a stab of sympathetic pain for her son as Sherlock winced and backed away. She and Mycroft followed, just catching a glimpse of Anthea's hand stroking across John's forehead, smoothing the lines there, before the door shut behind them.

Both her sons were looking quietly devastated, gazing forlornly at the closed door as though trying to figure what they had to do to get back on the other side. In more ways than one. 

She made them sit down in the hard plastic chairs that lined the waiting room and fetched them whatever passed for coffee here. They might have been out of her home for over two decades and less than pleased with her, but they were still her sons, and right now, they needed looking after.

“I feel boneless,” John confided to Anthea, who did her best to ignore the way his 's' dragged on a second too long.
At least he could talk coherently, which was an improvement on ten minutes ago, and certainly reason enough to smile. “That’s good, right? Means you’re relaxing.”

“Actually, it's kind of creepy.”

Anthea's lips twitched, and she probably would have smiled if she hadn't been remembering exactly why they were alone in the room.

“So what happens now?” John asked.

“I don't know,” Anthea admitted. “You need to get better, and then...I just don't know. I don't think I can bear to go back.”

“That's good, right? Means you're relaxing.”

“Actually, it's kind of creepy.”

Anthea’s lips twitched, and she probably would have smiled if she hadn't been remembering exactly why they were alone in the room.

“So what happens now?” John asked.

“I don't know,” Anthea admitted. “You need to get better, and then...I just don't know. I don't think I can bear to go back.”

“To England or Mycroft? Because I'm definitely going back to England and I'm not a rich man, and I hate to think I'll only see you once a year or whenever I can get the money to-”

“Mycroft, obviously. England I'm less sure about. And what was that, by the way? Trying to guilt-trip me into going back?”

Anthea didn't mention that given what John had done for her not six hours ago, there was probably very little he could ask for right now that she wouldn't give him. She knew that she wasn't responsible for Moriarty's psychosis or John's need to protect everyone around him at the expense of himself, but she still felt guilty.

John grinned weakly. “Not really, Rosy. I'm hoping you'll choose to settle down in a nice holiday destination, and that little spiel would have got you to pay for my travel expenses whenever I visit.”

“Has anyone ever said you have an inappropriate sense of humour?”

“Strangely, no. I guess most people don't see me after I've just killed a man, and Sherlock-”

He broke off, looking away from her as his face twisted into a grimace, then set his jaw and finished in a much softer tone. “He...I don't think he ever saw anything unusual about it.”

Anthea put her hand over his again, wishing she could say something comforting. But she suspected any attempt to relate to John's issues with Sherlock would swiftly degenerate into a ranting about her own issues with Mycroft, so she stayed quiet.

It was almost funny – she was angry enough to be toying with the idea taking out a contract on her former lover's life, but John just seemed resigned. Anthea knew the man seemed to have a problem with his self-esteem, but the way he was acting...it was almost as though he'd expected Sherlock to cast him aside.

“Are you all right?” she asked, then wanted to hit herself for asking such a stupid question.

But she couldn’t shake the idea that John was a bit too adjusted for a man who'd just been tortured. Sure, he was difficult to intimidate and under pressure seemed to slip into some 'superhuman assassin and tactician' persona, like a meditative state, but Anthea's instincts were still telling her John should be having some kind of reaction to being beaten and whipped for over two hours.

“Not really,” John said, still not meeting her eyes. “I feel...numb. And I'm not just talking about the painkillers. Like some part of my brain can't quite process what's going on.”

Anthea nodded – she couldn't say she didn't feel the same way, though evidently not as keenly as John. “Like you can't believe that this actually happened, that we're safe.”
John's laugh had no humour in it. “I can't believe any of this happened. I keep expecting to wake up and I'll be back at Baker Street, with Sherlock shouting something about a new case from downstairs, and I...I want that, and then feel guilty for wanting it, because we've become friends and killed Moriarty, and that should be worth something, but I just-”

“Want it to be like this never happened,” Anthea finished. “I know, John. Believe me, I know.”

Another weak smile from John. “We're a pretty sad pair, aren't we?”

“Oh, I don't know,” Anthea said, trying to inject some brightness into her tone. “We stood alone against the combined forces of Moriarty and the police and did quite well for ourselves – as it stands, we could probably break into the covert operations business on reputation alone.”

“That a possible career path for you, then?”

Anthea's smile was starting to feel more real and less frozen. “For both of us, I should think.”

“Well, I'll keep it in mind.”

They fell quiet for a few moments, Anthea wondering just how feasible the jobs in covert operations (they'd do very well, she was sure, and the basic calculations she was doing in her head promised it would be very lucrative), while John attempted to find a more comfortable position in the bed.

“I wonder if we can find out their names,” John said, in the absent tone of someone vocalising an internal train of thought.

Anthea blinked. “Whose names?”

“The policemen. You know, that I...”

Even knowing that she should have expected something like this didn't dampen the wave of fury that crested within her.

“It wasn't your fault,” she hissed, perhaps just a decibel or so louder than was necessary. “You didn't know what Moriarty was going to do, you were defending yourself – you were defending both of us-”

“I know!” John interrupted. “I know. Well, sort of, anyway – when you think you're going to die, you come to terms with a lot of things.”

Anthea winced at the disconnection in his voice, some of that numbness he was feeling obviously seeping into his tone, and gripped his hand tighter.

“But I'd still like to know their names,” he finished quietly.

“Right.” Anthea took a deep breath, and prepared to step outside the little room they'd claimed as their sanctuary. “I'll find out for you. And about the...rest of it. How long your hospital stay will be, and then...then we can start dealing with things. Into the breach, right?”

John gave her a crooked grin. “That's kind of becoming our motto.”

Chapter End Notes
Thanks so much to my beta, ginbitch, for helping me perfect this chapter!
“You can probably leave within the day,” Anthea announced when she arrived back in John’s room. “Though the police will want to talk to you.” John nodded wearily. “I was expecting that. Do you think it’ll take long?”

“Hopefully not more than a day.” There was the slight issue of John having killed Moriarty, but given how clear it was that the man had been torturing him, Anthea thought that could be worked around.

Mycroft and Avra could probably circumvent the legal proceedings effortlessly, but Anthea wasn’t going to ask them for help except as an absolute last resort, and she suspected John felt the same.

Anthea hesitated for a moment, wondering if there was a more delicate way of doing this, before she decided John wasn’t going to appreciate sugar-coating. “And their names were Joseph Pearse and Thomas Selkirk.”

John knew what she meant of course, and his expression closed off, eyes going opaque and glass-like before they closed tightly.

He took deep breath. “Which-?”

“Pearse was the younger.”

John sighed deeply, then grimaced as the bandages on his ribs pulled. “Thanks for...for finding that out.”

Anthea nodded, and for a few moments the only sound in the room was the soft whirr of John’s heart monitor. At least it was one of those silent machines that only started beeping when something was wrong.

“You all right, Rosy?” John suddenly asked. “You look tired – when was the last time you ate?”

Anthea opened her mouth, closed it, then shook her head in exasperation and opened it again. “You’re lying in a hospital bed, swathed in yards worth of bandaging, filled with so much drugs you could probably open a pharmacy...and you’re asking me if I’m all right?”

“Of course,” John said, guilelessly, blinking up at her. Anthea reflected that it was expressions like this that would convince people he was the gentlest man on earth, even if he was holding a bloodstained knife.

Honestly, that was the only reason Anthea could think of to explain why he'd gone undiscovered for so long. Someone would have noticed that a doctor was freakish good at target practice or unarmed combat, but if they had asked John he would have looked at them with the innocent blue eyes and blank, uncomprehending face of 'nothing-to-see-here', and they would have dismissed him, never realising the kind-natured doctor was likely the most dangerous man they’d ever meet.
And really, his behaviour now was only deepening that impression – John seemed too adjusted for a man who'd been tortured. It was true it was difficult to intimidate him, but surely John should be showing some mental after-effects?

“Are you okay?” Anthea asked.

John's mouth twisted ruefully. “I'm still feeling rather numb. When I was shot, it was all so quick – just a whole lot of pain, the realisation of 'oh, I've been hit', and the next thing I know, I'm waking up in the hospital. Not much time for brooding or philosophical reflections. But this time...for two hours, I was honestly expecting to die, and it's hard for anything to make an impression when you're convinced it's all about to end. And part of me seems to still be stuck thinking that, like I'm constantly waiting for the sword to fall.”

Anthea nodded, and laid her hand over his in what she hoped was a comforting manner.

John smiled, then broke into a yawn. “Do you mind if I go to sleep again?”

A weak chuckle bubbled up in her throat. “Go right ahead.”

“Also, don't think I didn't notice you didn't answer my question about when you last ate, Rosy. If you haven't had at least a muffin by the time I wake up, be prepared for my best lecture on the ill-effects of starving yourself.”

--

Sherlock couldn't sit still. Mycroft and Mummy were drinking the horrible excuse for coffee the hospital distributed, but he just couldn't bear to – he hadn't drunk anything except for water in over a fortnight.

John had always made the coffee and the tea back home. Largely because he was the one who wanted it so frequently, and if he thought Sherlock had gone too long without drinking he'd set a mug down in front of him and lecture about dehydration and how it affected memory and concentration.

Sherlock desperately wanted a cigarette, but there was no smoking in the hospital, and he wasn't going to set a foot outside the building until John did.

He knew he'd been rather unceremoniously kicked out of John's room, but Sherlock couldn't resist the urge to retrace his steps. He'd just take a glance, just to make sure John was all right...

John was lying motionless in the bed, curled on his side, and Anthea was nowhere to be seen.

Sherlock knew the small dart of unease was illogical. John was fine – Sherlock could see the monitor registering each heartbeat, the pace steady and peaceful – he was asleep, not dead, he was fine.

But John's death was exactly what Sherlock had feared for almost an entire day. Ever since Mummy showed how ignorant, how blind, he'd been, John's death had been both something Sherlock tried desperately not to think about and couldn't stop thinking about. John – wonderful, brave, good John – dead because Sherlock was an idiot. He hadn't believed in John and that had nearly killed him – because obviously, it made so much more sense for John to be an agent of Moriarty than to believe that someone like him truly existed.
He'd just check John's pulse. Just for a moment, just so he could feel John's heartbeat and know that the monitor wasn't lying...

But before Sherlock's fingers could touch John's neck, he found his wrist seized in a grip so tight the circulation in his hand was immediately cut off as another hand rose to his neck, fingers wrapping around the trachea as John’s eyes flew open.

John blinked, then cursed and let go as if Sherlock’s skin had burned him. “What the hell do you think you were doing?”

Sherlock couldn’t even muster a reply. He knew John was a soldier – he saw almost daily proof of it, after all, but those reflexes…

They were the reflexes of a man under threat, who didn’t allow himself to sleep too deeply for fear of what might happen if he were caught unaware. Sherlock had seen John like this before, when he had first moved in and again, during those few horrible weeks after the pool. But it had faded, worn away by the safety and constancy of his surroundings.

But now it was back, and something in Sherlock’s chest shrivelled painfully.

“Well, Sherlock?” John’s voice was sharp and clipped. “What were you doing?”

His shoulders were tense, his tone wary. The idea that he thought of Sherlock as something he had to guard himself against sent Sherlock into a hideously stammering explanation, desperate to reassure him.

“I-I was just…just checking…”

John snorted, but relaxed slightly. “Yeah, you might want to remember that lately, someone looming over me like that meant Anthea and I had been found and were about to be attacked.”

For all that his voice was unaffected, there was a deliberate savagery to the words, and Sherlock couldn’t help the flinch that rippled across his skin.

His fault. His fault that John had been hunted, that once again, his first impulse was to attack when brought out of sleep. His fault that John was been hurt, first stabbed by some stupid thug of Moriarty’s and then tortured in that cold basement for hours. His fault, all of it.

And though John might, quite rightly, want nothing to do with him, Sherlock had to at least try to explain.

“I’m sorry,” he said, and almost cringed at those words coming out of his mouth – this was why he never apologised, because it was pathetic and empty and changed nothing. “I’m sorry, John, I really am, but it…it never made sense. I’m…the way I am, and you’re, you’re…”

Humiliatingly, he stumbled off into silence again – he could speak four languages fluently and ten passably, yet he’d never found a word to adequately describe John Watson.

“It never made sense,” he repeated. “But then-”

“Don’t,” John said, and the pained rasp in his voice made Sherlock’s explanation evaporate in his
throat. “I can’t hear it now – just don’t. Please.”

John had asked favours of Sherlock before – he’d yelled and ranted and sighed and compromised, but this was the first time he’d even come close to begging anything of Sherlock.

It was sickening. The idea that after bombs and kidnaps and murderers, he was the one to reduce John Watson to pleading made Sherlock’s chest feel small and tight, as though his ribs were trying to collapse inwards and merge with his spine.

“Just go, Sherlock,” John said wearily.

Sherlock went.

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Anthea didn’t feel particularly comfortable leaving John alone in the hospital room, but she knew he’d be asking if she’d eaten as soon as he woke up and right now he needed to focus on his own recovery, not on her.

So she’d gone down to the coffee shops that always populated hospitals, and got a coffee and some kind of breakfast roll. She didn’t know if it was good or not – she wasn’t really tasting it, just chewing and swallowing mechanically, aware that she had to at least get some sustenance into her body.

Footsteps behind her – painfully familiar footsteps – made her tense, sitting straighter in her chair. She didn’t turn around though, didn’t even glance at Mycroft before he sat down opposite her at the tiny table.

She was almost disappointed he hadn’t done that looming-from-behind thing he liked to do. It had never worked on her true, but it would have been a wonderful opportunity to punch him in the crotch.

“There will be no problems with the police,” he said quietly. “You and John may leave whenever you deem it necessary.”

It was what Anthea had wanted, but she couldn’t help but be furious at his interference, at his need to control, at his need to understand every single facet of someone as opposed to taking something on faith now and again.

But she wasn’t about to let her own spite and issues ruin things for John, so she simply nodded. “Thank you.”

She made sure her voice was as distant and icily polite as possible.

She watched Mycroft’s throat work as he swallowed, obviously uncomfortable, and for a moment vicious satisfaction replaced the dull ache in her chest. If she was suffering, he could damn well suffer with her!

“Jane-” he began, but trailed off at the savage glare Anthea sent him.

He glanced down at her hand, resting on the table, and she curled it into a fist, silently warning him against trying to touch her.
“I’m sorry,” he said quietly.

There was such sincerity in it Anthea wanted to punch him because how dare he? How dare he think that could suddenly make it all better?

“I have no excuses,” Mycroft continued, and Anthea realised one of his hands was clenched so tightly in the material of his trousers the knuckles had gone white. “The only explanation I can offer is that…it made sense.”

“Made sense that I was traitor willing to whore myself out for the sake of whatever plans I was supposed to be concocting?” Anthea spat.

Mycroft flinched. “No! No, it…it was never logical for you to choose me. I could never explain it, and when they showed me…” He closed his eyes as if in pain. “It made sense.”

Anthea absorbed that quietly. “Well, your self-esteem issues aside, that still says you never really trusted me. So thanks ever so much for the explanation, now fuck off!”

It would have been better if he looked stunned or hurt, but he only nodded, as if he’d been expecting this all along.

“I am sorry,” he said as he stood up. “Which means nothing, I know, but I just wanted you to know that…I love you.”

Anthea stared at her cup of coffee, and didn’t watch him leave.

--

When John next awoke, vaguely aware that there was someone in the room with him, it was to find Mycroft sitting in a chair besides his bed.

“I pretty sure I told you to leave,” John pointed out. “Did both you and your damn brother develop selective deafness in the past week or something?”

That was probably much more aggressive than Mycroft’s lost expression deserved, but John just didn’t care. He was feeling very angry and hostile towards anything Holmes at the moment, and he thought he had a damn good reason to be.

“I was only…” Mycroft actually trailed off, and John couldn’t help staring.

He’d never seen Mycroft be anything but perfectly calm and articulate, even when Sherlock was in one of his foul moods. To see him at a loss for words was simply unheard of.

“I just wanted to…check up on you,” he finished, not meeting John’s eyes.

“Right.” John layered that word with all the sarcasm and disbelief that claim deserved. “You might want to do that at a distance from now on. I believe in fair warning, so I’m obliged to tell you that as soon as I can get out of this bed, I’m punching you.”

Mycroft actually looked startled, which only made John angrier. “What, don’t think I have it in me? You broke Rosy’s heart – I want to bash your head in!”
“That’s not actually her name,” Mycroft pointed out – and it must have been John’s imagination, but he could have sworn he heard a tinge of jealousy beneath the bitterness.

“I know, but it’s my name for her and she likes it so you can just piss off out of our business.”

Then Mycroft just looked hurt and resigned, as though had confirmed some kind of disappointing rumour he really hadn’t wanted to believe. “I know. And I won’t…I won’t make trouble for the two of you, I promise, just…she is happy with you, isn’t she? Truly happy?”

John blinked. Mycroft couldn’t be suggesting what he seemed to be suggesting, could he? Maybe it was the painkillers…

But no, Mycroft’s expression hadn’t flickered in the slightest – still that kicked puppy look that was frankly ridiculous on a man who basically ran the British government. He honestly thought John and Anthea had hooked up at some point during their week on the run.

Maybe John should have let him suffer under the misapprehension for a while longer – it was only what the bastard deserved for treating Anthea like that! – but he’d never been one for lying.

“We’re not like that,” he said, remembering similar protestations he’d made about himself and Sherlock (before the assumptions were true) with a tinge of pain.

Mycroft blinked, just once, but John could see him mentally re-evaluating everything he’d seen and assumed.

“But don’t think that makes you safe or anything,” John added, just so everything was clear. “She’s my friend, and I take it badly when people hurt my friends.”

--

Sherlock was in the café, not because he was hungry but because the smell of warm bread reminded him of John making toast in the morning.

He had intended to just curl up quietly in a corner somewhere and see if it was scientifically possible for someone to die of heartbreak, but unfortunately, Jane was there.

“You went to see John, didn’t you?” she hissed.

“Yes.” There was no point pretending otherwise.

Jane’s hands curled into fists, clearly wrestling the impulse to punch Sherlock in the face. Sherlock rather wished she’d give into it – he’d gladly take physical pain over…this.

“Mycroft gave me some bullshit explanation about me being a traitor ‘making sense’, and I suppose your explanation is equally ridiculous, am I correct?”

“Yes.” Perhaps Sherlock should have denied it, but right now he just didn’t care – the only thing he cared about was two floors above them, lying in a hospital bed and doped on painkillers.

Jane took a deep breath, trying to steady herself. “Look, I’m trying to give you a nice, rational argument about why you should stay away from him, because god knows anything with emotions in
it would be wasted on you…”

It was strange how many people believed Sherlock’s claim to be a sociopath. He’d only started saying it to stop people irritating him with criticisms about his social skills.

John had never believed it, though. Even when Sherlock had tentatively mentioned that he did indeed fit several of the criteria for sociopathic behaviour, John’s response had been a derisive snort and a ‘pull the other one’.

He’d always had such bright, bewildering faith in Sherlock. And look where it got him.

“He needs to get better without worrying about you,” Jane continued. “Why do you think I’m down here eating? Because this irritating habit of concentrating on what other people need rather than what he needs. So if you ever cared for him at all, you’ll leave him alone until he wants to see you.”

Jane was intelligent; Sherlock had to give her that. She’d hit upon the one argument that he might actually listen to.

The one argument he had to listen to, no matter how much he hated it.

--

Avra suspected John Watson was the type of person who was usually polite to the bitter end, but when he opened his eyes and saw her, he actually groaned aloud.

“Aren’t I meant to be resting? Can’t you people sod off?”

Still, he was certainly entitled to his resentment, and she couldn’t begrudge him it.

“I’m sorry,” she said – and she was, the poor man certainly deserved his privacy after what he’d been through. “But I think it’s best if someone else is in the room at all times. Just to be on the safe side.”

After all, just because Moriarty was dead didn’t mean his organisation was gone. And there would likely be plenty of people who resented John taking away their meal ticket.

But she didn’t want him thinking about that while he was still recovering, so she went on quickly. “And since this is really the first time we’ve met, I wanted to thank you in person for saving my son. In more ways than the obvious.”

“What the hell are you doing here?”

Avra prided herself on being unflappable, but the shout honestly startled her. She turned to find Jane standing in the doorway, her face thunderous.

“Apparently, she’s thanking me for all the times I saved Sherlock’s life,” John said glibly, before his expression abruptly sobered. “And on the subject of thanks, I suppose I have to admit that if you had told us who you were, we probably would have assumed you took Sherlock and Mycroft’s side of things and run in the opposite direction. So thank you for the help you did provide.”

Jane was still scowling, but she refrained from trying to throw Avra out of the room as she moved to John’s side.
“I have to admit, I still resent you a bit though,” John continued, his voice quite deliberately flat. “And if you think you’re going to guilt me into taking Sherlock back…”

“By no means.” It had crossed Avra’s mind, but she knew any manipulation at this point would do more harm than good.

She looked at them, taking in Jane’s stony expression, the way John was trying to hide his pain, and sighed.

“The problem with my sons is that they’re too much like me,” she said quietly. “They’re not good people, and they know it, so they can’t believe why anyone good would want anything to do with them.”

She wouldn’t have thought it possible, but Jane’s expression closed up even further, and John closed his eyes and turned his face away, as if he was just too weary to even pretend to listen to her.

“I know I don’t have the right,” she went on, a sliver of urgency trying to work itself into her tone. “But if you decide to sever ties with my sons…please, do it gently.”

“I’m not sure I can promise that,” John admitted, and Avra couldn’t help but admire his honesty.

She’d known Jane was perfectly suited for Mycroft since she’d met her, and it seemed John Watson was equally well suited for Sherlock.

She just hoped this realisation hadn’t come too late for them.

--

Sherlock had been fully prepared to wait days, weeks if he had to, for John to agree to see him.

He hadn’t expected Jane to find him within four hours, grim-faced and saying that John wanted to talk to him.

He wasn’t sure what he’d been expecting when he opened the door to John’s room – he often had trouble predicting John, because he never behaved like an ordinary person – but he was surprised by the question John blurted out as soon as the door closed.

“Why did you do it?”

Caught flat-footed, for a moment Sherlock honestly couldn’t think of anything to say.

“Call me a masochist,” John went on, carefully studying the plastic clip that attached the heart monitor to his finger. “But I’d like to know. You clearly weren’t entirely prepared to hand me over to the police, so why…why didn’t you just talk to me?”

There was something raw and almost pleading in John’s voice. He was looking at Sherlock again, his face very calm, very set, but his eyes burning with the desperate need to know. It would have been so much easier if John had just screamed at him.

Sherlock would have liked to prevaricate, to tell John something that might have made him seem better, stronger…but he’d never been able to outright lie to John.
“Because I was afraid that if you tried to persuade me to go with you, I’d say yes.”

At least it got John to look at him. “What is that supposed to mean?”

Before John came along, it had been years since Sherlock was honestly frightened. Now, he felt a little disgusted that something as mundane as talking could scare him.

“I’m sure you realised Moriarty’s opening gambit was all about getting me interested,” he said quietly. “All about persuading me-”

“To come play consulting criminal with him,” John finished, completing Sherlock’s train of thought effortlessly in a way that would never cease to be astounding. “And you thought I’d try to persuade you of the same. And that I’d succeed.”

Sherlock nodded. Because he would have succeeded – never mind that he hadn’t been what Sherlock thought he was, if John had stood there and asked Sherlock to come with him to Moriarty, Sherlock would have gone.

John’s eyes were narrow, clearly turning the problem over and over in his mind. “And why would you be afraid of that?”

“Because you wouldn’t have wanted that,” Sherlock said simply, staring at the stark white floor. “At the time, I thought you’d never really existed, but I still… I still wanted you to be… proud of me.”

He chanced a look at John, and was surprised by how startled, how devastated John looked. He’d thought John had wanted to know, thought he was helping him by telling him, not hurting him.

“I can understand that,” John said at last, his voice hoarse. “But that doesn’t mean I forgive it.”

He looked so small in the hospital bed, so small yet so strong, and Sherlock found himself remembering the last time John had been in the hospital.

_I’ll burn the heart out of you…_

Wouldn’t Moriarty be pleased to know he’d succeeded?

--

Anthea thought she was feeling some of that numbness John had talked about, the sense of being adrift and not really knowing what happened next.

She’d hovered outside the door while John and Sherlock were having their little discussion. She hadn’t been pleased about it, but John had said he wanted to know why Sherlock hadn’t even bothered to talk to him – that he needed to know – and Anthea had trouble denying John anything right now. She come in as soon as Sherlock had left, and right now they were both just staring at the tiny television suspended above his bed, watching some kind of foreign sitcom she wasn’t bothering to pay attention to and she knew John couldn’t actually translate.

“What do you want to do?” she asked eventually. “I think the doctors will be happy to let you go at this point – there’s not really a whole lot they can for you, anyway – so… what do you want to do?”
John sighed, closing his eyes. “To be honest, I just want to relax and get better somewhere nice and sunny and really, really far away from anything to do with Holmes.”

His eyes opened, and he cracked a small smile. “And I’d like some company, if you can manage. Do you think we can do that, Rosy?”

Anthea thought of all the money she now had access to again, of all the languages she could speak, of the fact that John had told her he’d never had someone take him on holiday…and answered his smile with a tremulous one of her own, resting her hand on top of his.

“Sure,” she whispered. “We can do that.”

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much to my wonderful beta, ginbitch.
Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There were very few problems that two weeks of sun and sand couldn’t – if not help – then at least bring a measure of perspective to.

It also helped that Anthea had been very focused on John’s recovery, and trying not to think about anything else. But now, with the last of John’s bruises vanished and his gashes knitted into the vivid pink of new skin, it was getting difficult to maintain that focus.

Not that they were healed, of course, not entirely – Anthea sometimes wondered if this was something they could get over, or if the fear and relentless paranoia that lurked in the back of their minds was something they just had to adjust to.

John still had nightmares – silent horrors that would keep him up for the rest of the night, starting at every little sound – but he seemed almost resigned to them, as though bad dreams were an old habit he was simply re-learning. They were new to Anthea, though – she’d never been the kind of person who had nightmares, and now almost every second night she was dreaming of running, of being pursued and not being able to find John and knowing that she was dead as soon as she was caught but she couldn’t run fast enough…

John stiffened when dark-haired men in well-cut suits moved close to him, especially the light happens to glint off a watch or a ring. Anthea knew she was displaying something similar to separation anxiety in regards to John, reluctant to let him out of her sight for even a moment. And she couldn’t stop herself from automatically evaluating the threat level of anyone they saw, which okay, yes, she’d done that beforehand, but never with this level of desperation to it.

Right now, they were on the beach, sitting on a picnic blanket and enjoying sandwiches and soft drinks, and Anthea was considering going to the couple at the other end of the beach and just punching them both in the face. At first glance they appeared to be a businessman and his much-younger wife, but considering she’d seen them every day, and those very distinctive mannerisms that just kept bleeding through, likely only visible to her…

She should probably tell John. “You know that couple over there-”

“Are Sherlock and Mycroft,” John finished, taking an appreciative slurp of his lemonade. “I know.”

“You do?”

John nodded. “I suspected, but it wasn’t until this morning that I knew for certain. Only Sherlock can sweep out of a restaurant like that.”

Anthea didn’t glance at the Holmes’ – there was no need to alert them to the fact that they’d been discovered after all – and instead fixed her gaze on the waves. “Do you think we should go over there?”

“Definitely,” John said, with a surprising amount of conviction on his voice. “There’s something I promised Mycroft I’d do.”

That sounded a little ominous, but Anthea had been nursing a secret desire to do Sherlock some serious physical harm on John’s behalf for a while, so she simply nodded in agreement. They
packed up their lunch, John tossing the blanket over his shoulder, and set off down the beach with every appearance of two friends going for a nice stroll. They even maintained a conversation for appearances’ sake, though Anthea doubted it was the kind of conversation people usually had on a beach.

“So what were you saying about fighting with a knife?” she asked.

“Well, with a knife, you can really make your first blow count, so a lot of people tend to give into the temptation to go for the neck or chest, thinking they can kill the person straight off,” John said, his tone bland. “But your chances of getting a seriously damaging wound aren’t good – they’ll bring their hands up automatically to protect themselves, and the neck is such a small area you’re likely to get their hands rather than what you want. The chest is even worse because although you might draw blood, the blade’s more likely to skitter off a rib than do any serious harm. Your best bet is to aim just about here,” John tapped the middle of his abdomen. “Just below the sternum, and angle upwards. With a bit of luck, you’ll puncture the diaphragm, and even if you don’t you’ve still hit a lot of blood vessels and a heap of nerve endings. And if you hit the digestive system, that really ruins their day.”

“And how do you know these things?” Anthea couldn’t help asking. “Not that I’m doubting you, mind, but you seem very well informed in ways to kill people for some who supposedly didn’t see much front line action.”

John shrugged. “I’m a doctor; it’s my job to know the weak points of the human body. And I accompanied a few Secret Service missions now and then – unofficially, of course, so it was never in any records. You pick things up.”

Anthea shook her head in amazement (because attending SS mission unofficially wasn’t the sort of thing offered to an army medic, and there had to be more to that story), unable to resist teasing him a little. “And to think, all this from a part-time GP.”

John grinned good-naturedly. “I must admit, you’ve inspired me to try my hand at something a bit more exciting than part-time GP. I’m a good doctor, and it helped get me back on my feet when I was still shaky and worried I’d kill someone if I had to operate on them…but I think I’m ready for something more suited to my tastes. Like working in an emergency room.”

They’d drawn level with Sherlock and Mycroft now, and Anthea could reluctantly admit she was almost impressed; Mycroft’s face looked very different with a beard, and Sherlock was a rather convincing woman. Not good enough to fool either herself or John, but a commendable effort nonetheless.

“Do you have the time?” she asked, deliberately turning to John.

John picked up on what she was doing of course, and shook his head. “Didn’t bring my watch.”

“Excuse me, but do you have the time?” she addressed to Mycroft and Sherlock, smiling the polite smile she always used when dealing with strangers.

Mycroft glanced down at his watch, clearly not suspecting he’d been recognised, and John moved. In one moment, he’d stepped around Anthea and punched Mycroft straight in the face.

Anthea could tell he’d pulled the punch because Mycroft merely staggered instead of dropping to the ground. Perhaps doing the same to Sherlock was uninspired, but there was a pleasing symmetry to it, and she certainly felt satisfied when he rocked back on his heels and clapped a hand to the blood running from his nose.
“It appears you are not a man for idle promises,” Mycroft commented, his words addressed to John even as his gaze remained on Anthea.

“What the hell are you two doing here?” John snapped, sounding so very military that Anthea felt an instinctive urge to straighten her posture.

She expected some kind of snappy comeback, but instead both brothers looked away and came very close to shuffling their feet.

“We just…wanted to watch over you,” Mycroft said quietly.

Anthea despised the way those words made something lurch in her chest. Because while most people had difficulty determining when Mycroft was just telling them what they wanted to hear, she knew that right now, he was completely in earnest. They hadn’t come expecting forgiveness or to salve their consciences, but because they were genuinely worried about them.

She also hated the way time had dulled the sting of betrayal, so that now beneath the hurt and resentment she was remembering. Remembering the way he was the only person who’d never been intimidated by her intellect, who’d never made her feel as though she had to consciously dumb down her own talents for fear of scaring him off. Remembering that in spite of his own staggering intelligence, he’d never made her feel as if she were foolish or stupid when she couldn’t follow his train of thought. Remembering the way he’d never smothered her with overprotection, never thought she was somehow less capable or dangerous just because she was a woman. Remembering that he was the first person she’d ever been herself with, instead of what she thought the other person wanted.


“I don’t have nearly enough alcohol in my system for this,” she muttered.

“Well, I fulfilled my promise, so I’m up for a nice drink at that swanky restaurant we passed on the way here,” John declared, but she noticed it took effort for him to look away from Sherlock.

He turned to her, and held out his arm like a turn of the century gentleman. “Shall we, Rosy?”

Anthea laughed, the nickname grounding her as nothing else could have, and she put her arm through John’s. She took his hand, intending only a brief squeeze to convey her gratitude, but John held on just shy of too-tightly, the only sign that he wasn’t as unaffected as he seemed.

The soft scuff of feet on sand told her Sherlock and Mycroft were following them, and she was torn between whirling around and shouting at them or whirling around and (god help her) hugging Mycroft. She settled for completely ignoring both brothers.

“Tell me more about the ‘things you pick up’ with the SS,” she prodded.

“Well, I already told you it was off the records so I couldn’t have any formal training,” John said, his voice picking up the ‘storyteller’ vibe it sometimes slipped into. “But there was this one guy on the team, I can’t tell you his name – I mean, you’ll probably figure it out yourself but it’s the principle of the thing – and he kind of took me under his wing, so to speak-”

Anthea closed her eyes, letting John guide her through the crowd, and hating herself for the fact that the footsteps behind them sounded louder than his voice.
“So, exactly what kind of alcohol do you want?” John asked, thumbing open the wine list.
“Something a bit posh? Or just something that’ll get you drunk?”

Anthea took a few moments to take in the restaurant before answering. It was the sort of place designed to fleece tourists with safe options at ridiculous prices, but Anthea didn’t mind. She might have dined at some of the world’s best restaurants but at times tacky and convenient hit the spot nicely. Besides, she knew that fussing over her like this helped take John’s mind off his own problems – he was a caretaker at heart – so she simply smiled at him.

“Surprise me.”

He smiled back weakly, darting a quick glance towards the table behind her. Anthea didn’t bother turning around – she knew that Mycroft and Sherlock were sitting there. They’d changed their clothes and tried to cover their bruised and swollen noses, but it was them.

Later, she was never precisely sure what had alerted her. Perhaps it was the hyper-vigilance she’d felt the need to maintain ever since they’d escaped that meant she saw the glint of metal in the waitress’s hand, perhaps it was the paranoia that had dogged her that made her think the woman’s expression was entirely too calm and still for someone dealing with a lunchtime rush, perhaps it was her need to protect John that made her assume the woman intended him harm. All Anthea knew was that she saw the woman, and realised something wasn’t right.

“John!”

John’s head, already half-turning towards the waitress, snapped around at her cry, and his arm shot out just as the waitress stabbed a long, slightly curved knife towards his neck. His hand caught her wrist and twisted – probably breaking something judging by the snapping sound – and his foot swept out from under the table to hook her knee and force her down, giving John enough time to get out of his chair.

Anthea had already moved. She grabbed the woman’s other arm and twisted it up behind her back, planning on holding her immobile for questioning (never mind that the police were probably going to be there within ten minutes, judging by the way the other customers were screaming).

“Down!” Mycroft shouted.

Anthea obeyed automatically, a relic from back when that voice never said anything that wasn’t in her best interest.

Even before she was entirely behind the table, there was the tinkle of breaking glass and the high whistle of a bullet, ending in a sharp crack as it was embedded in the floorboards.

John was on the floor beside her, having already put their attacker in that fancy sleeper hold of his (and Anthea really wanted to learn that).

She could hear Sherlock muttering acerbically at his brother, something about ‘if he had any bright ideas’, but she was more concerned about John.

And she might have flicked a quick glance over her shoulder to check that Mycroft was unharmed, but they’d never be able to prove it.

“Are you all right?” she hissed, trying to be heard over commotion.

People were screaming, glasses and dishes shattering as employees and customers alike stampeded towards the exits, overturning tables and chairs as they went. She was tempted to rise and join the
desperate rush to the door, hoping that the sniper wouldn’t be able to pick them out of the crowd, but she knew better than to suggest it to John. He wouldn’t agree to any plan that had the slightest chance of innocent bystanders getting shot.

“Fine,” John grunted, relaxing his hold and letting their ‘waitress’ slump to the floor. “You?”

“Likewise. Any thoughts?”

“They attacked me first, and only started shooting when we’d overpowered their assassin,” John summarised.

“Which suggests that you are the main target,” Mycroft interrupted.

Anthea was severely tempted to tell him they’d already realised that, but Sherlock was quicker.

“As no one here has a brain the size of a lemming’s, I think we’ve all deduced that,” Sherlock snapped, but his eyes were white-rimmed when they fixed on John. “The sniper has also refrained from indiscriminately shooting at the tables, so we can assume they don’t have a substantial supply of bullets – they need to make each shot count.”

“But if they were confident enough to bring so little bullets, it’s unlikely they’ll miss once they are presented with a target,” Mycroft interjected smoothly. “And all our routes to the exit necessitate breaking cover. I can call for backup, but I doubt they will arrive before the sniper decides to switch their vantage point to one better suited for killing us.”

John sighed. “I don’t suppose there’s any point to mentioning that I could try to draw his fire while the rest of you escaped?”

Anthea scoffed, and Sherlock looked disgusted.

“I’m not leaving you!” he snapped.

Anthea wanted to laugh at his scandalised tone, and couldn’t help but think that he’d have given a very different reply three weeks ago. Judging by John’s bitter smile, he was thinking the same.

Of course, she didn’t trust John not to perform heroic sacrifices, so she laid a hand on his arm to keep him where he was.

“Bad things happen when we split up,” she reminded him a level voice. “It’s not happening again.”

John grinned wearily. “Still, I figured the option should be on the table.”

“Well, no one’s going to be taking it up, so take it off the sodding table.”

John giggled, and Anthea couldn’t help but giggle along with him – John had a dangerously infectious laugh.

Sherlock and Mycroft were still muttering from her other side, forming and discarding plans at lightning speed, but Anthea’s eyes were drawn to the bullet hole in the floor. It was impossible to tell the gunman’s exact position just from one bullet, but she could at least take a vague guess. She raised her eyes to meet John’s, and knew by the hard glint in them that he was thinking the same thing she was.

“Shut up, both of you,” she barked, turning to Sherlock and Mycroft. “We’re going to get out of this.”
“And just how are we going to manage that?” Sherlock snarled.

Anthea gave him a scathing look, then smiled conspiratorially at John. “John’s a dark wizard.”

“Excuse me?” Mycroft’s expression of disbelief was cut short by John’s cry of triumph when his search of their ‘waitress’ produced a pistol.

“Nice heft,” he observed, checking the clip. “Fully loaded – certainly serviceable. Cover your ears.”

Anthea obeyed instantly, but both Holmes brothers delayed to ask ‘why’, and as a result cringed and flinched when John fired into one of the chairs the other diners had overturned in their rush towards the exit.

“Pulls a little to the left,” John observed, studying the small hole he’d made in the wood. “I’ll have to watch that, but I don’t think it’s going to be a problem.”

“Into the breach?” Anthea smirked.

“Since we never seem to do anything else,” John quipped. “Into the bloody breach, then.”

With that, Anthea grabbed the collar of the ‘waitress’s’ shirt and hoisted the top of her head above the table. She let it drop just as quickly, and sure enough, a bullet smashed into the floor, followed by the echoing bang of a gunshot.

Apparently the sniper wasn’t fussed about checking the identity of his targets.

Anthea stared at the bullet holes, calculating distance and angles, remembering the layout of the street opposite them…

“Blue house, second story, right window.”

John nodded, readjusting his grip on the gun.

Mycroft looked alarmed. “You can’t possibly be thinking of-”

John rose the way he’d done in that house all those weeks ago – smooth and fluid, without the slightest flinch as he brought the gun to bear and fired. One shot, just one.

And there was no answering bullet.

“Right, that’s sorted, but there might be more of them,” John said, bending his arm back and holding the gun pointed at the ceiling. “I’ll check out the exit – the three of you, stay here!”

Then he was gone, and Anthea was left to enjoy the flabbergasted expressions on the Holmes’ brothers’ faces. They recovered quickly, of course, but she couldn’t resist rubbing their noses in it a little.

“John Watson; death from above,” she snickered. “And also below and the side and really, wherever he happens to be at the time.”

“There was nothing in his papers,” Mycroft said, strangely insistent. “There was nothing in his papers about that kind of…”

He trailed into silence, which only happened when he was truly shaken.

“I knew he was a good marksman,” Sherlock said hoarsely. “The way he handled the gun, the way
he sighted along it – it was all there. But I never-

“We’re clear!” John called. “Come through the kitchen.”

Anthea set her shoulder against the unconscious woman’s belly and dragged her into a fireman’s carry. It was difficult – people were always so much heavier than they seemed – but she snarled at Mycroft when he moved to help her.

Sherlock, of course, was paying absolutely no attention to them and already sprinting after John. The fact that he was doing it in a dress made her want to laugh.

John was waiting outside, next to the restaurant’s pick-up truck.

“This is more your area,” he offered, gesturing to the vehicle and holding out his arms. “I’ll take that off your hands for you.”

Anthea handed over her burden silently and went to work on hotwiring the car.

--

Mycroft was rarely surprised, and almost never to this degree. He’d seen John’s record – above average, perhaps, but certainly nothing extraordinary. The only area he’d truly distinguished himself was marksmanship, but he’d never actually done anything with it…or at least, nothing that made it to any kind of record.

It took a certain kind of man to break cover when a sniper was firing and calmly eliminate the threat the way John had just done. And that kind of man wasn’t made in the RAMC.

They were trundling down the road in a restaurant’s pick-up with an unconscious woman who was clearly one of the remnants of Moriarty’s organisation, and Mycroft was staring at John and wondering what else he’d missed.

It also helped that staring at John kept his eyes off Jane. She’d refused to speak directly to him, barely glanced at him, refused his help…

It was true he hadn’t expected anything less, but it still hurt.

“May I suggest we depart the country with all haste?” he offered, and he would never have thought ‘tentatively’ could ever be applied to any of his communications, but there was no other word for it.

Jane’s jaw clenched, and her eyes didn’t move from the road.

“Good idea,” John agreed. “Any suggestions, Rosy?”

It made no sense for that familiar, obviously fond nickname to sear Mycroft’s gut the way it did, and yet…

“It would be easy if you came back to England,” Sherlock burst out, then promptly pressed his lips together, as if even he knew that wasn’t the right thing to say.

“What if we don’t want to go back to England?” Jane snapped. “Suppose John and I have decided we want to stay in Italy?”

Three weeks ago, Mycroft would have been able to tell whether she meant that comment in spite or in truth. Now, he honestly had no idea, but that wasn’t what was frightening him – it was the fact that whatever Jane decided, he had no say in it. She could decide to immigrate to Thailand, and he
couldn’t even expect a courtesy call to inform him of that – he’d lost that right the moment he decided to believe his informants over her.

“Rosy,” John said quietly, and they shared a glance full of unspoken communication that made Mycroft clench his jaw, not in juvenile jealousy, but in regret.

“We can always come back here afterwards,” John pointed out, the words sounding like a tag to a much deeper conversation. “Or go to Germany or France or wherever you want. But not Switzerland – I think I’ve gone off Switzerland for a while.”

Sherlock’s eyes were dark and pained even if the rest of his face was motionless, and Mycroft didn’t think he was the only one experiencing jealousy.

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They ditched the truck close by the hotel he and Anthea were staying at, and packed as quickly as they could. John twisted his belt into a makeshift holster and tucked the gun into his waistband, ensuring it was at an angle where it wouldn’t blow off part of his leg if it discharged. He slung his suitcase partway over his back, so he could draw the weapon quickly if he needed to.

Sherlock and Mycroft had changed out of their ridiculous disguises, and were trying to find the most expedient means of transport. John still wasn’t sure what to think of the fact that Sherlock had followed him all the way out here simply to watch over him. On the one hand, he was quite irritated at having his nice holiday/recovery period interrupted, but on the other hand, the idea that Sherlock had merely wanted to keep him safe without any kind of ulterior motive made him feel…well, made him feel the way he’d felt three weeks ago, before any of this had ever happened.

It felt strange to contemplate going back to London. Like he and Anthea had built their own world over here in Italy, and now they had to return to the real one.

He wondered if the woman they’d picked up had any more ammunition.

John strode into the little sitting room/kitchen area, giving it a last glance to make sure he’d taken everything, to find their captive unconscious on the sofa, Anthea standing over her. He didn’t know what made him pause – perhaps it was the set, rigid expression on her face, or how still she was standing, despite the fact that her slightly bent posture couldn’t be comfortable.

“What’s going on?” John asked, his free hand easing towards his gun as he carefully set his suitcase on the floor.

Anthea raised her head, and in the light from the window John could see her face was quite pale. “We need to know if there are any others coming after us.”

Before…everything…John might have wondered what she meant, but now he understood only too well. “Are you saying…?”

“I don’t have time for anything you’d call torture,” Anthea said (and John noticed her use of ‘I’ rather than ‘we’). “But people give away a lot without realising it – if she’s expecting rescue, I’ll be able to spot it.”

“What about Sherlock and Mycroft?” John asked. It felt somehow disloyal for him to be mentioning them, as though he was disparaging Anthea’s talents, but it had to be said. “Wouldn’t they be better at that sort of thing?”

Anthea shrugged. “If I can’t tell, they can give it a try. But I don’t think she’ll be particularly
difficult – I don’t think she’s particularly skilled or exceptional. I don’t think the sniper was, either. They’re professional, of course, and competent, but…”

Anthea trailed off, but John thought he understood what she was trying to say. These people were dangerous, yes, but they lacked that particularly vicious edge that Moran and the others pursuing them had possessed. If this had been an organised attempt on their lives, it was a pretty poor one – it was more likely that any high-ranking people in Moriarty’s organisation had either joined someone else or struck out on their own, and these two were just middle rankers that had been left adrift when he died. Enough so that pointless vengeance had begun to appeal to them.

“I won’t ask you to get involved,” Anthea said quietly.

John shook his head, even though he felt a bit queasy. “We stick together, remember? I’m pretty sure we made some kind of promise about that.”

Anthea smiled weakly. “It was certainly implied, but I can’t recall ever actually saying the words.”

“Then we’ll say them now – we promise to stick together, right?”

“I promise,” Anthea nodded. Then she giggled, and held out her little finger. “Pinky swear?”

John laughed, and linked his finger with hers. “Pinky swear.”

They pumped their hands once, then let them drop, both of them giggling so hard that the unconscious woman began to stir.

Anthea cursed. “Keep her here for a minute, I just need to find something to tie her up with.”

John drew his gun and kept it pointed at their captive, absently stilling his hands when he noticed they were shaking.

The woman – who John decided on the spot to call ‘Amy’ because she looked a bit like that character from Doctor Who – opened her eyes, and he made sure the gun was the first thing she saw.

“Move, and I’ll fill you full of so many holes you can double as a sieve,” he growled as Anthea returned with what looked like the length of plastic wire they’d used to hang their clothes on.

It was kind of a rubbish threat, but it worked – Amy kept still and silent while Anthea bound her to one of the kitchen chairs.

John holstered the gun as soon as he was out of her sight, then found he had to go and sit in the bedroom doorway for a few minutes.

Anthea made certain Amy was secure before hurrying over to him. He could tell she knew what was upsetting him, but grateful she didn’t comment, instead forcing a smile.

“You can double as a sieve?” she whispered. “You can use people as sieves?”

To his own surprise, John found himself chuckling. “Best I could come up with at the time – my threats tend to be kind of medical, and hard to understand, like; ‘I’ll hit you so hard you’ll display haematemesis, that kind of thing.”

“Haematemesis?”

“Vomiting up blood.”
“Oh.” Anthea nodded, patted him tentatively on the shoulder, then went back to Amy.

She positioned herself in front of their captive, speaking so low that John couldn’t make out her words, for which he was rather grateful. He didn’t want to hear what she was saying, didn’t want to look at the woman tied helpless in the chair, didn’t want to remember Moriarty, didn’t want to think about high laughter and chill hands…

He started when Anthea laid a hand on his knee. A quick glance at Amy showed she was now gagged with something that looked suspiciously like their clean tea towel.

“It’s fine,” she said in a low, steady voice as though trying to calm him, which John might have resented if it hadn’t worked so well. “It’s over – it was just the two of them.”

“But there might be more,” John pointed out, and by Anthea’s grim nod he knew she’d already thought of that.

“But given that these two seem to be the first to have found us…” Anthea took a deep breath. “We don’t have to go back to England. We can send Sherlock and Mycroft away, and we can go somewhere else, if you like.”

John absorbed that for a moment. Amy would be easy enough to get rid of – a little anonymous tip to the police when they left – and given that he and Anthea didn’t know any locals, it would take a long time for the authorities to realise they’d been involved in the shooting in the restaurant. And Mycroft could probably exercise some of that bloody omniscience of his to get that taken care of… somehow. John was quite certain Anthea knew how Mycroft did what he did, but he was equally certain he didn’t want to know.

They didn’t have to go back to England, not unless they wanted to.

The trouble was, John wasn’t really sure what he wanted anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so very, very much to my beta, ginbitch, who saved me from falling into the trap of assuming my readers can also read my mind.
“Any idea what you want to do now?” Anthea asked as she and John sat down on a bench at the train station – the meeting place they’d agreed upon with Mycroft and Sherlock.

“I think…” John sighed, wondering how to put this. The decision didn’t seem particularly momentous, even though he knew it was – it was as though it had been slowly coalescing inside him for the past two weeks, and seeing Sherlock had just brought it into perspective.

In many ways, John suspected they’d both been using his recuperation period as an excuse to put off making any kind of decision about their respective Holmes’, and now that it was over, it was time to bite the bullet and decide whether they were going to walk away or if they had it in them to try again.

John was almost sure he was going to try again. After he made sure Sherlock understood that he had to trust him, at least a little, that they had to talk about these things and if this ever happened again John was going to kick his arse across London. But still, he was willing to try and put it behind him.

Even now, he was wondering if he could exploit Sherlock’s guilt to get him to do the shopping or make tea occasionally. Which was probably a little mean, but John felt entitled to some compensation.

“I think I’m going to go back,” he said slowly, testing the idea. “To Sherlock, I mean. I’ll lecture him until his ears ring, enjoy him grovelling for a bit longer, and then I think we’ll try again.”

“You can really do that? Forgive him, I mean?”

“I think so,” John said honestly. “Maybe it’s because we were in a relatively new relationship – you’re always testing the boundaries at that stage. It usually doesn’t happen in quite that fashion, but still…”

“You’re going to give him another chance.”

It wasn’t a question, but John nodded anyway. “It’s all about risk versus reward, right? How about you?”

“I don’t know.” Anthea’s voice was subdued.

John nodded again. They hadn’t exactly discussed their respective relationships but from some of Anthea’s comments, he gathered that her relationship with Mycroft had been going on for years, and that kind of betrayal, after you thought you knew your partner inside and out and they knew you equally…John couldn’t really imagine it.

“What do you want me to punch Mycroft again?” he offered.

Anthea smiled, just a little. “If there’s any further punching going on, I’ll be doing it myself.”

“Thought so. Still, I felt I should offer – that’s what friends are for, right?”

“I don’t know,” Anthea admitted. “I’ve never really had a friend like you.”

“Me neither, Rosy,” John grinned. Then, taking her hand, “Listen, no matter what happens, don’t be a stranger, okay? Don’t vanish into the ether and make me track you down – I’d be absolute rubbish at it.”
“I don’t know,” Anthea laughed. “I think you’d succeed eventually, if only by virtue of sheer
determination.”

John chuckled a little at that, and put an arm around her. She leaned into him with a sigh, resting her
head on his shoulder and closing her eyes.

And that was how Sherlock and Mycroft found them.

“Hello,” John said cheerfully, just for the pleasure of disconcerting them.

His arm around Anthea tightened reflexively, because for all that he’d chosen to forgive Sherlock
(because it was a choice, John believed it was always a choice), he didn’t know if he’d ever manage
to forgive Mycroft. If Anthea did, then he’d make an effort for her, but for now he simply hated the
man.

Or maybe not hated, exactly – John was sparring with his hatred. But he really, really
resented him.

“We have a plane waiting,” Mycroft said, in the tone of voice a man would use to give a report to his
superiors.

John hoped his face wasn’t showing how surprised he was. He never liked being surprised in front
of Mycroft – he always felt like the man was taking notes on his moments of vulnerability to use later
– but really; a plane?

Sherlock was quiet, but then he’d been unusually silent since they’d walked up to them on the beach
– a sure sign he was honestly upset. When Sherlock was truly distressed, he either stammered and
babbled (as John had witnessed at the pool) or just pressed his lips together and refused to so much
as cough.

“Shall we, Rosy?” John asked, honestly curious. His decision about Sherlock aside, if Anthea
decided she didn’t want to go back to England just yet, then John would stay with her.

She sighed, and stood up. “Let’s go.”

She put out her hand to help John to his feet, and John took it.

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Sherlock knew it was neurotic and useless and idiotic and everything he’d promised himself he’d
never be, but he couldn’t stop staring at John.

John had fallen asleep on the plane, barely fifteen minutes into their journey – the kind of restless
sleep that meant he was stressed, but didn’t know when he’d next get a chance to rest, so was
essentially forcing himself to sleep.

Sherlock had never known people could do that before he met John.

And if Mycroft thought he was being subtle about the glances he kept sending his former assistant,
Sherlock had woefully overestimated him. Though perhaps that was the point, to let her see how
distressed he was – she was certainly looking at him often enough to detect it.

Under other circumstances, Sherlock would have given in to the urge to taunt Mycroft about it, but
that would irk Jane, and she’d probably tell John, and then John would be unhappy with him. Well,
more unhappy with him.
And of course, it would give Mycroft ample opportunity to point out Sherlock had been doing the same thing with John.

At least he could stare as much as liked without fear of discovery – John was fast asleep, and would probably remain so until the plane landed again.

So Sherlock watched. John usually murmured and shifted in his sleep, flexing muscles every now and then like his subconscious was ensuring they all remained functional, but now he was completely still. The only movement was the expansion of his chest with each inhalation, and the flicker of his eyelids as his body entered the REM stage of sleep.

John suddenly grunted and twitched, arching his back as though straining away from something, and Sherlock barely had time to become concerned before John was opening his eyes on a choked gasp. For a moment, he stared directly into Sherlock’s face, and Sherlock recognised the wide eyes and white lips of utter terror before John shut his eyes, shook his head and ran for the tiny bathroom.

He left a very pointed silence in his wake.

“He has nightmares,” Jane said quietly, as if she needed to explain anything about John to Sherlock, as if Sherlock didn’t already know.

“Yes, thank you!” he snapped, already rising to follow and ignoring Mycroft’s admonishing glare.

The sounds emanating from within the bathroom suggested John was splashing water on his face, the way he did after a particularly harrowing nightmare had woken him in a cold sweat. How many times had Sherlock seen John come down from his bedroom late at night, face carefully blank and shoulders straight? Since they’d been sleeping together, he’d been woken twice by the sudden, almost full-body jerk that seemed to signal John waking from one of the nastier dreams.

Seemed to, because Sherlock hadn’t possessed enough data to corroborate the hypothesis, and now it seemed he never would – John certainly wouldn’t be sharing a flat with him again, let alone a bed. With anyone else, he would have argued, manipulated, explored every avenue to get them to return to the status quo, but now…now he just wanted to know John was happy and safe, even if he was happy and safe away from Sherlock.

At least John hadn’t locked the door – that indicated he felt safe, at least, even if he wasn’t happy right now.

The latch clicked as Sherlock slid it back, and the first thing John said when the door opened was, “Rosy?”

It was clearly instinctive to ask for Jane after a nightmare, not Sherlock, and that made his throat burn like he’d aspirated something.

John’s eyes looked distant, unfocused, but he seemed to realise it wasn’t Jane who’d followed him into the bathroom, and he blinked sharply.

“You can’t come in,” he said, freezing Sherlock at the doorway. “There’s not enough room.”

Sherlock knew there was enough room if they pushed it, but he also knew what John had really meant by that comment; there wasn’t enough room for Sherlock to enter the bathroom and give John the space he needed to feel comfortable.

Before this, John had been comfortable with Sherlock crowding him – more than comfortable, he’d actually seemed to enjoy it. But before was the key word wasn’t it? Before Sherlock chose to
believe Moriarty’s doctored evidence over him, before John logically decided that Sherlock was not to be trusted, not again.

John splashed some more water on his face, and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes, swearing quietly under his breath.

It was unpleasantly reminiscent of the first time Sherlock had seen him awake from a nightmare, and though John’s order to stay out kept him where he was, he couldn’t help asking, “Is there anything I can do?”

John made a strange sound that resembled laughter, but there was no humour or joy in it. “Nothing anyone can do – just got to wait for my brain to wake up properly and realise I’m not actually being tortured.”

Sherlock swallowed, and quelled the urge to put his hand on John’s shoulder – John wouldn’t want Sherlock to touch him, not now.

“You can have the flat,” he blurted.

“What?” John blinked at him, looking completely bewildered.

“You can have Baker Street,” Sherlock clarified. “I can pay the rent for a few months while you find another flatmate.”

“But you love it there,” John said, and he was even developing the little fold between his eyebrows that appeared when he was confused and Sherlock had to look away before he leaned in and ran his fingers over it.

“You seemed happy there,” Sherlock shrugged. “I’m willing to move out, and you shouldn’t have any difficulty finding another flatmate.

John snorted. “You do remember I tend to have screaming nightmares, and they’re probably going to be much worse for the next few months?”

That made Sherlock scoff. “Yes, but you make tea so regularly people could set their watches by you, you have an almost compulsive urge to clean and tidy everything, you’re refreshingly non-judgemental about everything and you smile at people like they’re wonderful and…”

The surprised look on John’s face made Sherlock realise his assurance had perhaps run on over-long. “…you’ll have no trouble finding a flatmate,” he finished.

“Right,” John sighed.

He closed his eyes again, looking pained.

“Are you alright?” Sherlock asked, and that was stupid, idiotic – any moron could see John wasn’t alright.

“Not really,” John said absently, staring at his reflection in the tiny mirror. “The nightmare…well, that one’s always the worst. The one where all of this – killing him, the hospital, the holiday – was the real dream. That I hallucinated the whole thing, that I’m still there and he’s still got me.”

Sherlock managed not to wince, but for a moment it felt very much like someone had punched him in the sternum. John was clearly trying so very hard to be stoic, to appear unaffected, but he was
breathing just a shade harder than he should have been, and his fingers were trembling almost imperceptibly.

John dropped his head, letting it loll against his chest like he just didn’t have the strength to hold himself upright anymore, and Sherlock’s hand was covering the back of John’s neck before he realised he’d moved.

John tensed, the muscles and tendons beneath Sherlock’s fingers tightening reflexively, and Sherlock was about to step away when John sighed and leaned back into the pressure. Slowly, ready to stop as soon as John indicated he didn’t want Sherlock touching him, Sherlock moved his hand in a cautious caress, rubbing across the prickly hair at the nape of John’s neck, feeling the ridge of a small, pink scar where the tip of the whip had caught him.

It was useless to apologise, but he couldn’t seem to stop. “I’m sorry, I—”

“Here’s the thing,” John interrupted, turning around and shaking Sherlock’s hand off his neck, his expression determined and almost harsh. “It’s no good to say sorry unless you actually try not to do it again. So you need to trust me for this to work.”

Sherlock could have sworn he felt his heart lurch painfully. Could John actually mean…?

“I do trust you,” he said hastily. ‘Of course I do, it’s just—”

“No, you don’t trust me to make my own decisions,” John went on, voice calm and implacable. “To be with you because I want to be with you. And I understand you have a bucket of self-worth issues – I’m not exactly light in that department myself – but if something like this ever happens again Sherlock—”

John trailed off and shook his head. “Then it’s over. I can’t be with someone who doesn’t trust me. And this is not a threat or an ultimatum, this is me telling you how it’s going to work, because it can’t go any other way.”

Sherlock knew he was staring – probably gaping with his mouth wide open like an idiot, but he couldn’t help it. He couldn’t help staring at John, who looked so normal and unremarkable but was really most extraordinary person who’d ever breathed. John, who laughed when he should have run in the opposite direction, who forgave when he should have hated Sherlock for the rest of his life…

“I love you.” The words were out of his mouth before Sherlock even realised what he saying, which was very disconcerting.

John smiled, slow and content, the smile that said everything was well with the world. “Thought so. I love you too, by the way – you think I’d go through this much trouble for just anyone?”

And maybe they needed to discuss boundaries or going slow or something, but Sherlock had to kiss him after that.

It was like coming home.

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Anthea knew she was glaring at Sherlock when he and John stepped out of the bathroom, but felt she had good reason to be. She knew what had happened – the cubicle wasn’t exactly soundproof, and even if she hadn’t heard them she would have been able to tell from the way they held themselves, as if they wanted to lean close to each other but didn’t quite feel comfortable enough.
Sherlock noticed her glare, of course, and she did her very best to communicate non-verbally that if he hurt John like that again, she’d make it her life’s mission to make his as miserable as possible.

John followed the direction of Sherlock’s stare, and for a moment Anthea wondered if he’d be irritated. But he only grinned at her and winked, and she remembered the way he’d punched Mycroft – of course he understood.

She’d half-expected him to sit with Sherlock, but at the same time she wasn’t truly surprised when he sat down next to her. He even took her hand and smiled at her, gentle and understanding in a way that would never cease to be slightly eerie. It was like he was seeing straight into her brain, seeing her wariness about Sherlock and the way some small, selfish part of her resented him for forgiving his Holmes, when she still couldn’t even bring herself to consider it.

Mycroft was still glancing at her every twenty seconds – Anthea had timed it – and she wished she actually had the guts to do something about the simmering resentment percolating in her veins. Maybe if she did something about it, then she’d feel better. After all, John had punched Mycroft (his nose was sporting a magnificent bruise, and it didn’t make Anthea want to fuss over him, it didn’t), and he’d found himself forgiving Sherlock only a few hours later.

People might say that time healed all wounds, but Anthea felt that a punch or two in the faces of those who had wronged you probably helped as well.

John squeezed her hand as though he’d felt her tensing and Anthea squeezed back almost reflexively, a silent indication that she was alright, just keen to be on the ground, off the plane, and away from Mycroft. At the very least, she was sure some distance would stop her from feeling as though her intestines were about to climb up her ribs.

When the plane landed, she’d go straight to her apartment. Which was fairly empty, granted, but it was large and spacious and better than checking into some hotel. It had really been held for appearance’s sake only, so enemies wouldn’t know at first glance what she and Mycroft were to each other.

Had been to each other. Had been – past tense, past tense…

John squeezed her hand again, smiling at her in a way that had probably put hundreds of frightened patients at ease, and Anthea suddenly realised that they were going to go their separate ways in an hour or so. She’d had the vague idea that they’d be splitting up once they returned to England, but now she knew that John was going back to Sherlock, while she was going to her own apartment, and it didn’t sit well with her.

She knew she was being irrational – she and John had been separate before now, for Christ’s sake. But that had been for little things; to go to the hotel bar for a meal or a drink, or the shops for some sunscreen, never for more than two hours since they’d escaped from Moriarty. They’d stayed close, any holiday activity one of them wanted to do the other came along for, they’d left the doors to the bedrooms in their suite open at night so they’d hear if the other was in trouble…

Anthea took a deep breath, and told herself she was being foolish. She realised her free hand was fiddling with her phone and forced it to still, focusing on selecting some stupid movie on the screen in front of her, trying to be nonchalant.

Given the fact that John didn’t let go of her hand, she didn’t think she succeeded.

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John couldn’t deny he’d felt…lighter, since he and Sherlock had sorted things out. Much happier, too, though the kiss might have had something to do with that.

Still, he wouldn’t be going home with Sherlock quite yet. He thought he needed another day to get used to being back in London and not on the run before he tackled going back to Baker Street.

“If we pick up some pasta and sauce on the way, I’ll make spaghetti bolognese when we get to your place,” John offered to Anthea, because if she was going to put him up, then he would make the dinner – wasn’t that some kind of rule?

Anthea looked surprised, and for a moment John thought he’d made a mistake, that she didn’t want him coming home with her.

“I thought you were going with Sherlock,” Anthea said quietly.

Truth be told, even if John had miraculously felt secure enough with Sherlock again to go back to Baker Street, he probably still would have attached himself to Anthea. He just didn’t like the idea of them spending the night separately, though that was probably the paranoia talking.

Still, they’d been shot at only a few hours ago – he thought he had a right to be paranoid!

“I’m with you,” he grinned. “At least for tonight.”

He felt relieved when she smiled back at him, apparently not at all irritated that he’d essentially invited himself to her house.

“I should have known – he looks rather irritated,” she commented, nodding to where Sherlock was watching them.

“I don’t see how you could have figured it out from that – he’s always irritated.”

He waved jauntily at Sherlock, almost teasing, and for a moment, Anthea was so furious she actually trembled. It just didn’t seem fair that this was the relationship Moriarty wanted to tear apart yet was the first to sew back together, while the devastation he’d wrecked with her and Mycroft was just ‘collateral damage’.

“Do you think I’m being unreasonable?” she asked quietly.

John turned to look at her, seeming puzzled but, as ever, he knew what she was talking about. “I don’t think I’m the right person to ask about that – you do remember that I punched him, don’t you?”

Anthea shrugged. “Yes, but you and Sherlock…do you think I should forgive Mycroft?”

“I think you should do exactly what you want to do. Me and Sherlock…well, there are always hiccups in the beginning of any relationship, while you’re feeling each other out. Ours was just more dramatic and bloody than the norm, which is actually a fair approximation of our relationship in general, I suppose. But you and Mycroft…that was different. You’d been together for years, and he…well, it was different.”

Anthea nodded. “Now, I suppose we should go tell them that we’re most certainly not going home with them, and if they follow us, they’ll be in trouble.”

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Anthea had never cooked anything more complicated than a toasted sandwich in years – she simply
hadn’t had the time, and Mycroft’s house came with a cook. So the smell of cooking mince and pasta sauce drifting through her kitchen was a new experience.

“What kind of salary would tempt you into becoming a part-time cook?” Anthea asked, glancing over John’s shoulder at the pot the pasta was boiling in.

“You do not want me as your cook,” John laughed. “Trust me on this one. I can make spaghetti and stir-fry’s, but anything more complicated than that and I’m in trouble.”

Anthea chuckled along with him, glancing out the window. Anyone else wouldn’t have seen anything amiss, but Anthea had worked with Mycroft for years, and she knew his surveillance teams at a glance.

“We have company,” she muttered.

John sighed. “To be expected, I guess – neither of them looked happy when we left.”

Anthea grimaced, remembering the way Sherlock had looked petulant and faintly hurt until John had said ‘remember what I told you about trusting me? This is where it can start’. Mycroft had only looked resigned, which had only fuelled Anthea’s resentment – he did not get to play the guilt-trip card!

He’d started to say something about the risk of retaliation, but she and John hadn’t wanted to hear it. They’d got this far on their own, it was unlikely anyone else would try to kill them, and she didn’t want the Holmes’ brothers sticking their noses in her business anymore.

So she yanked out her Blackberry and dialled the number she’d memorised but could never actually enter into her contacts list.

Mycroft answered on the first ring.

“Jane-”

Anthea spoke over whatever he’d been going to say. “Get them away from my house.”

There was a pause, and when Mycroft resumed speaking, his voice was carefully atonal. “We need to take necessary precautions-”

“These people spent over a week hunting me down,” she snapped. “I don’t want them around me!”

She could hear him inhale slightly harder than usual, a sign he was preparing to argue his case, but Anthea had worked with him (loved him) for years, and she knew exactly what he was about to say.

“If you think Moriarty’s people are still out for our heads, you can assign one of your oh-so trusted people to watch the CCTV of the street outside my house, but if I see any of your people outside in fifteen minutes, then John and I will start kneecapping them. And he’s an excellent shot.”

She hung up without waiting for a reply, and resisted the urge to throw the phone across the room.

She’d thought she was better, that she could handle it, that a plane ride consisting of boredom and frosty silence was proof that she’d managed to bring her anger at Mycroft under control. Apparently it was much easier to be furious at him when she couldn’t see the kicked-puppy look he was affecting (it was subtle, she didn’t think even Sherlock had seen it, but it was there).

And that was exactly what she didn’t want to be – it wasn’t that she didn’t want to be angry, because
she was and did and felt she was damn entitled to it, but she didn’t want to let Mycroft see how he affected her. It felt too much like admitting weakness, showing vulnerability to the enemy.

She hadn’t meant to put that emphasis on ‘trusted’, she hadn’t even realised she was doing it until it was out of her mouth. But she couldn’t deny that it still rankled – that Mycroft had trusted… whoever had brought him the information over her. Granted, it had been expertly set up by Moriarty, but didn’t he consider the possibility of planted evidence?

And she’d made sure to say ‘your people’, because they certainly weren’t ‘our people’. Not anymore. Maybe not ever again.

The caveat of ‘maybe’ was automatic, because some part of her was quietly bewildered at the idea of walking away from this, from Mycroft. They’d had years together, years, and whatever she could say about trust, she knew he loved her.

But that sounded frighteningly like a battered wife, and Anthea refused to be the sort of person who returned for more abuse just because it was familiar.

“What’s the matter?” John asked, turning around from the stove to frown at her. “Is he refusing to remove them?”

“He’d better remove them,” Anthea muttered darkly, digging into her cutlery drawer.

John grinned. “Yeah, I heard that bit about kneecapping them.”

With anyone else, Anthea might have felt embarrassed at that melodramatic threat, but with John – whose eyes were crinkled in a way that seemed to say he understood exactly why ridiculous threats were sometimes necessary – she only laughed.

“What do you want to watch anything while we eat?” she asked, setting out two bowls on the kitchen counter.

“Don’t laugh, but I could really go for some Doctor Who right now.”

Anthea bit her lip to hide her smile; tea, jumpers, Doctor Who…sometimes John was very much the living embodiment of the frumpy Englishman stereotype.

“I see you smiling,” John said, mock-glaring at her.

“But I wasn’t laughing.”

“Still counts.”

John was tired, but unwilling to go to sleep. They’d watched three episodes of Doctor Who (which Anthea had on DVD – John wasn’t the only one who liked it!) and John had found himself missing long stretches of the final episode between blinks. He belatedly realised his head had listed over to rest on Anthea’s shoulder, and he hoped he hadn’t drooled on her. But he wasn’t concerned enough about it to move – if he was drooling, surely she’d shove him off?

“John, I do actually have a spare bed, you know,” Anthea said quietly. “You don’t have to sleep on the couch.”

John heard himself give a vague, affirmative mutter.
He felt Anthea’s hand in his hair, smoothing it like he was a sleepy child. She was one of maybe a handful of people who could touch him when he was like this and not send him rocketing back into wakefulness, tense and alert.

“I know,” Anthea sighed, as if he’d answered her. “I kind of don’t want to go to sleep either. Not when you’re leaving in the morning.”

John mumbled again, slowly easing into a coherent state – this conversation probably required participation from both parties. Anthea stroked his hair again, and he sighed.

“Have you thought about what you’re going to do?” he asked eventually, assured that Anthea would know he was only inquiring out of curiosity, not out of a desire to pressure her.

“Not really,” she admitted. “I keep thinking I need to go back to work – to do something – but my work…”

‘Was with Mycroft,’ John silently finished. He nodded to show he understood.

Anthea shrugged the shoulder he wasn’t resting on. “What about you?”

“Well, me and Sherlock are going to take it slow,” John huffed. “Not sure about anything beyond that. And I’ll call you.”

“What about your number?”

John paused to consider that. “Actually, I don’t think I do.”

He glanced up at Anthea, and in the next moment they were both laughing helplessly. It just seemed utterly absurd that, after all they’d gone through, they still didn’t have each other’s numbers. John felt his head rocking with the vibrations of Anthea’s laughter, but he felt no need to move.

Their giggles trailed away into silence, and John sighed again. “I’ll admit, I don’t like the idea of leaving, but…”

“But it’s what we have to do,” Anthea finished. “This…isn’t healthy.”

John nodded against her. “Co-dependent and all that psychological stuff.”

“We’re used to leaving each other for a few hours at a time,” Anthea pointed out. “Right now, we could probably get away with frequent meetings and phone calls – we’re not breaking out in a cold sweat as soon as the other leaves our line of sight. If we attach ourselves at the hip, this will only get worse.”

“I know,” John said quietly. “But…we don’t have to separate right now.”

In the end, they slept on Anthea’s couches, which were uncomfortable and not at all good for their backs or necks, but neither felt like going to separate bedrooms.

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AN: Thanks so much to my beta, ginbitch!
Anthea woke to the smell of frying fat. She blinked as she sat up, taking note of the position of the sun through a slit in her curtains—she’d slept late, though considering what time she’d fallen asleep, that wasn’t much of a surprise.

She stretched, finger-combed her hair into something approximating an orderly state, and ambled into the kitchen. John was at the stove, bent over a frying pan, and looked up as she entered.

“Figured you’d be waking up soon,” he grinned. “You had eggs, and your bacon was still in date, so…”

“It smells wonderful,” Anthea said. “I’ll get out the plates.”

They ate at the small table, and Anthea wondered if she was the only one chewing slowly in an effort to prolong John’s stay. She didn’t think so, because even after he’d finished eating, John made no move to put his plate away, just crossed his cutlery and drummed his fingers on the edge of the table.

“You know you need to leave at some point,” Anthea said, just because she thought they were both in danger of forgetting, of making excuses for John to stay just one more night. Which would become another day, then another week, and before they knew it they’d be unable to function without each other.

“I know,” John sighed. “I need to see Harry, and that’s just for starters.”

Anthea nodded. John had called Harry after they’d been released from the hospital—a very short conversation that had consisted of him telling her that they weren’t fugitives any longer, that he was okay, and he’d explain everything when he got back to London.

Anthea didn’t envy him the visit.

“And then it’s back to…” John trailed off and shrugged, letting the gesture indicate Baker Street, Sherlock, and everything that involved.

“Do you think your stuff’s still there?” Anthea asked—not to be spiteful, but because she was genuinely curious.

“If he’s thrown any of my clothes out, he can buy me new ones,” John huffed. “God knows he must be wealthy enough, if he can hand over a thousand pounds with no notice.”

He sounded rather bitter, and even though she knew he hadn’t meant it as a slight, Anthea felt the sting of his words. Sherlock had given John money from his own pocket, while Mycroft hadn’t even bothered to give her a gun.

Granted, she had her own funds and her own weapons, but it still rankled.

“I’m surprised he didn’t show up on the doorstep this morning to drag you back,” she made herself quip. “He did know you were only planning on staying one night, didn’t he? Or did he turn up while I was asleep and you chased him away?”

John shook his head. “Sherlock didn’t come—he hasn’t even texted. It means he’s definitely feeling guilty, because the only time he gives me space like this is when he knows he’s done something
wrong.”

“I would have thought he’d be the type to pester you until you forgave him.”

“Actually he’s pretty good about giving me time to calm down. Probably because he knows I’m not going to listen to any apology otherwise.”

Anthea laughed, but it sounded forced even to her own ears. On the table, John’s hand curled into a light fist.

“I should probably get my things,” he muttered.

“Yeah,” Anthea sighed. “I’ll help you.”

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John did his very best not to think of anything on the cab ride home – he didn’t usually approve of cabs when the tube would work just as well, but the thought of all those people around him, crowding him, pressing against him was just…no. Not happening.

He wondered idly how long it would be before he felt comfortable in a crowd again, before he wouldn’t feel the prickling need to look over his shoulder and ensure no one was following him.

He was reaching into his pocket automatically before it occurred to him that he didn’t have keys. He hoped the police hadn’t taken them, or if they had, that they’d be willing to give them back – it would be a bit of a bother to get new ones made.

Then John told himself to stop procrastinating and knocked on the door.

It opened so quickly John wondered if Sherlock had been lurking in the stairway, waiting for his knock.

“I don’t have keys,” John blurted. “Anymore. I don’t have keys anymore.”

Sherlock blinked, looking slightly bewildered, as if he’d been expecting John to say something very different. And just like that, everything suddenly teetered on the brink of becoming horribly awkward.

“John!” came a loud, utterly joyous explanation.

Sherlock was shoved to one side and then John found himself with an armful of Mrs Hudson and trying to quell the urge to shove her backwards.

Granted, he’d let Sherlock touch him, and he and Anthea had been practically draped over each other just last night…but he’d often initiated that contact, and when he hadn’t he’d at least been expecting it. This – sudden physical contact without invitation or signal – was making his spine stiffen like it was being torqued.

And it was Mrs Hudson, one of the few people he could pretty much guarantee wouldn’t hurt him. John breathed deeply and evenly, and made himself hug her back – at least that way he’d have some kind of control over it, and it did seem to dull the wild panic clawing at the back of his skull.

“I’m so glad you got that mess sorted out,” she said, drawing back and making a little fluttery motion with her hand that suggested she wanted to smooth John’s hair but was restraining herself. “And it’s good to see you’re not too badly off. Now maybe he’ll stop smoking.”
John was fighting the urge to grin – Mrs Hudson was taking it in stride, but then as long as it didn’t involve damage to her flat, the coming of the apocalypse probably wouldn’t make her turn a hair – until that last word.

“Smoking?” he echoed, glancing at Sherlock, who suddenly seemed very keen to avoid looking John in the eye.

“Oh yes, the whole flat stank of it, it was just awful,” Mrs Hudson nodded, with a certain gleam in her eyes that reminded John of Harry when she was deliberately getting him trouble. “But I’ll leave you to settle back in – have you got all your things back, yet?”

John knew that the police would probably have taken some of his belongings as evidence, maybe all of them, but he preferred not to think of their inevitable retrieval. It wasn’t that he bore Lestrade or any of them a grudge, not really – if the evidence had been good enough to fool Sherlock then it must have been masterfully done – but still, the thought of having to walk into New Scotland Yard to get his laptop and clothes back…

“They’re upstairs,” Sherlock said quietly. “I brought them back when…when it became clear they weren’t evidence of any crime.”

“Right.” That was one less thing to worry about, at least. “Um, thanks.”

Sherlock still wasn’t looking at him.

“I’m going to go upstairs,” John said at last.


“Sherlock…you’re standing in front of the stairs.”

Sherlock blinked, as though he honestly hadn’t realised that, and John heard Mrs Hudson giggle. Sherlock didn’t actually move, of course, just turned so John could slide past him and followed him up to the flat.

The flat looked…well, it looked hideous, but it was home, and there had been a time when John wasn’t sure he’d ever seen it again. Just crossing the threshold made something in him relax, and he took a moment to soak in all in. Even the lingering smell of cigarettes (which Sherlock seemed to have tried to cover by opening all the windows).

John rarely lay on the sofa – that was Sherlock’s ‘thing’, and John just didn’t have it in him to sprawl all over furniture like some prima donna – but this time, he wanted to indulge. To immerse himself in being back in England, in London, being home, after days of wondering if he’d live the rest of his life as a fugitive and then hours of thinking he wouldn’t have a ‘rest of his life’ and then two weeks of trying not to think about it at all. The leather sighed as he collapsed into it, the ceiling was still sporting that brown stain from some failed experiment Sherlock refused to tell him about and just for a moment, John could convince himself that all was right with the world.

He toed off his shoes and socks – he’d never been the kind of person who threw off their shoes as soon as they were through the doorway, but now he found he didn’t like wearing them, not when he didn’t have to. But then, razorblades in shoes were probably enough to put anyone off footwear for a while.

“You were tense,” Sherlock said quietly. “When she hugged you.”

He made his way to the window and stared down at the street, as though he suspected some horrible
crime was taking place in the sandwich shop below.

“The brain’s not designed to forget pain,” John sighed. “He might have had me for only two hours—” he thought he saw Sherlock’s hand twitch at the word ‘only’, but he couldn’t be sure “-but trust me, I’ll be having nightmares about it for a long time yet.”

He shrugged, hearing the leather sofa squeak slightly against his shirt. Sherlock turned around, as though he was about to say something but then went suddenly still, the way he sometimes did when he had a revelation. John didn’t speak, wondering what stumbling block Sherlock’s mind had just leapt – he seemed to be staring at the end of the sofa, and John propped himself up on one elbow to try to see what had caught Sherlock’s attention.

Then he realised that Sherlock wasn’t staring at the sofa – he was staring at John’s feet and the prominent pink scars that crossed their soles.

Sherlock’s hand stretched out, like he wanted to touch John, but was waiting for some kind of permission.

“It could have been worse,” John said quietly. “If there’d been a sharper angle on the blades, they could have cut deep enough to damage my tendons, which would have meant lots of complicated surgery and months of recovery time.”

Sherlock swallowed, and the expression he was wearing was quite close to the lost, almost-hurt look he’d been wearing back when John was in the Swiss hospital. “John, I-”

“Oh god, stop being so apologetic,” John groaned. “It’s giving me the willies.”

It was also making resentment prickle along his spine. He refused to be pitied or treated with kid gloves – he was…well, he wasn’t fine, but he was getting better, Moriarty hadn’t destroyed him. John had killed Moriarty before the consulting criminal had even had him for a full day – if this was a game, he’d won – so there was no reason for Sherlock to look at him like that.

“Just…come here,” John muttered, leaning forward to grab Sherlock’s still-outstretched hand and tug him towards the sofa.

“What are you doing?” Sherlock asked as John leaned up and pushed Sherlock into a sitting position behind him.

“If you’re going to brood, you might as well be useful,” John muttered, settling his head on Sherlock’s lap.

He guided Sherlock’s hand up to his head and left it there, stroking his fingers down the tendons in Sherlock’s wrist before pulling away. John closed his eyes, breathing deeply to take in the scent of leather and Sherlock (and more than a hint of smoke, but he was doing his best to ignore that), content to luxuriate in the feeling of finally being home.

He wasn’t really expecting Sherlock to keep sitting with him – maybe for a minute or two before he remembered some crucial experiment and rushed off to the kitchen – but just as John was beginning to doze, he felt long fingers carding through his hair, stroking lightly.

John smiled.

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After two days of lying around eating far too many sweets and watching far too many brainless
action movies (and spending the entire movie thinking she and John would have solved the storyline’s main crisis much more efficiently), Jane was starting to feel up to going outside again.

And starting to feel like she wanted to be Jane again.

She’d called John, of course, and been called by him at almost all hours. Which wasn’t entirely healthy, but Jane told herself it wasn’t as bad as it could have been. She’d resisted the urge to storm Baker Street, and John had confessed he’d had to stop himself from coming over to her place as well, but that they could resist the impulse was a good sign.

She was thinking about going to the bakery a few streets down and getting something warm and sugary, then maybe going for a walk. She was confident it was going to be a good day…

Right up until she opened the door to find Mycroft on her front steps.

He was carrying a briefcase and dressed in his usual suit, and to anyone else he would have looked perfectly composed, but Anthea knew better. His tie was off-centre – just a little, but it showed he’d been fiddling with it – and he was holding the briefcase in front of him with both hands, like a shield.

Jane resisted the urge to smooth her skirt or check that her hair was in place, adopting a brusque, irritated tone.

“What do you want?”

Mycroft cleared his throat. “I want you to know you are under no obligation to return—”

For a moment, Jane considered slamming the door in his face – he was here to talk about work?

“—and if you choose to resign your position, I’ve ensured your severance package is…generous.”

Jane blinked. This was…well, it wasn’t entirely unexpected, but it was certainly unlikely. Where was Mycroft going with this?

“Generous?” Jane repeated, trying to buy time to think.

“You will never have to work again,” Mycroft said quietly.

Jane shook her head, more in confusion than any true rejection of the offer. She’d promised herself that she’d come to some resolution regarding Mycroft, but she’d planned on a formal, distant meeting or perhaps phone call, one she could anticipate and control, not for Mycroft to show up in person on doorstep, obviously nervous. She needed more time to think, dammit!

She genuinely didn’t know whether she wanted to take his offer or not, and that was what most unsettled her. Jane had always known what she wanted, always, and to not to know was disconcerting.

But there was something she did want to know. “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

Before he’d made her a fugitive. With anyone else, she might have needed to clarify that, but not with Mycroft.

“Because you would have convinced me,” Mycroft replied immediately. “I knew that if I let you explain…it wouldn’t matter how much evidence I had, or how comprehensive it was.”

Jane knew how much it meant that she could have persuaded Mycroft to ignore evidence. In some ways, she could also understand why he’d been so reluctant to dismiss it – how many powerful
people had fallen into the trap of ignoring suspicious behaviour from the person they were sleeping with? But she didn’t know if it was enough to even attempt reconciliation, let alone carry them through it.

“I’ll think about it,” Jane said, with more composure than she was feeling.

She held out her hand for the briefcase, making sure her fingers didn’t touch his as he passed it over.

Mycroft didn’t swallow or shift, but Jane knew he was searching for something to say, some way to prolong their interaction. It must have been difficult – he knew she’d see through all the usual ploys.

“What do you want some coffee?” Jane asked.

A slight flicker of Mycroft’s eyelids was the only signal that she’d surprised him. She’d surprised herself, really; Jane had felt an impulse to invite him in, but she hadn’t expected it to be strong enough for her to actually do it.

She stood back to let him step over the threshold, wondering if she was making a mistake. Still, she could always throw him out.

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Jane had made coffee then sat down at the table to read through the documents Mycroft had brought. She’d wondered if she’d feel comfortable paging through the papers with him in front of her, but he’d been very quiet, only speaking to thank her for the coffee.

She could say that in his favour – at least he knew when to shut up.

And he hadn’t been kidding; she really wouldn’t have to work again. In addition to the kind of retirement package usually given to CEOs of multinational companies, there was a note stating that if she ever wanted to return to her previous job, the position would always be available (along with several others on offer that had a similar role but no direct contact with Mycroft).

The language was all very carefully couched to induce no sense of pressure or expectation. It was just a range of choices, offered without any hint of coercion, and exactly what Jane needed.

Sometimes she really hated it when Mycroft did that. Other times she loved it, and Jane wasn’t quite sure what this one was.

She glanced up at him, trying to catch his gaze, but he was staring into his coffee cup like it was the latest report on Sherlock.

Some part of Jane was ready to walk away, to take the retirement package and be done with Mycroft and everything to do with him. Another part remembered everything they’d been to each other and was reluctant to give up on it...but was she willing to do that for a man who didn’t trust her?

No. Absolutely, unequivocally, no.

“I do trust you,” Mycroft said abruptly, and Jane very nearly gave into the temptation to swear – having her thoughts read like that could be charming (it meant he was paying a lot of attention to her) or irritating and right now, it was definitely the latter.

“No, you didn’t,” she snapped. “Yes, I know you have your own insecurities, and the self-worth issues of you and your brother alone could send a dozen psychiatrists into early retirement, but the reflection of that is you not trusting me or respecting me enough to think that I know my own mind.”
Jane broke off and set her teeth, breathing deeply through her nose to collect herself. This was why she’d never fallen in love with anyone before Mycroft – because it made you irrational and impulsive and took away all ability to control yourself.

And that was her sticking point – that years of loyalty and love could be overturned in an instant. She simply couldn’t afford for that to happened again; there was only so much she could take.

Mycroft’s hand had tightened on his cup. “I take it this is…goodbye?”

It was tempting. To call it all off, to throw Mycroft out of her house and go back to the way she’d lived before…

But – almost against her will – Jane remembered the way it felt to wake up in the morning with someone beside her. She remembered the way Mycroft would look at her when he thought she wasn’t looking, like she was everything he’d ever wanted but had never dared to wish for. She remembered that it seemed she was the only one Mycroft relaxed around – she’d never heard him swear except when they were alone – and how it felt to have someone love her that much, the deeply.

It hadn’t been the first blush of love, they were well past that, to the point where it had calmed into something like, well…normality. Her name was Jane, she did the kind of work that you couldn’t talk about at parties, and she loved Mycroft and he loved her.

And god help her, she still did. Enough to try again.

“Do you want to get some lunch?” she asked.

Mycroft actually started, a visible near-flinch before his eyes snapped up to her face.

Jane knew he could read everything on her face – she wasn’t making any effort to hide it. Mycroft blinked, as if he wasn’t quite convinced of what he was seeing, and the tight line of his shoulders slowly relaxed.

His smile was so wide it looked almost unnatural on his face. “I would love to.”

At least the face-reading thing went both ways – she could see how much it meant to him that she was willing to try again. And maybe somewhere down the line Jane would decide it wasn’t worth it, but really, wasn’t that true of every relationship? Here and now…it might not be good, precisely, but it was getting better.

She was happy. And for now, that was enough.

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*AN: As usual, thanks to my fabulous beta, ginvitch!*
Epilogue

“Queen to E9.”

“Rook to A5.”

There were few things in the world that could make Avra want to laugh out loud, but her sons playing chess were one of them. They always did it so intensely, as if the fate of the world depended on their game – when he was eight, Sherlock had slammed one of the pawns down so savagely he’d actually split both the soapstone piece and the board itself.

Of course, they’d stopped using actual pieces when Sherlock was twelve and old enough to hold the board in his head without getting distracted by…everything else. Even now, Sherlock remained the most distractible of her sons – he was glancing towards her phone every minute, as precise and regimented as a digital watch. Mycroft was better at compartmentalising; he only glanced her way every five minutes.

The evening of tense waiting had begun with a single message; ‘Jack and Jill are up the hill’, meaning that the missions had begun in earnest. The target had been another splinter of Moriarty’s previous organisation, one that had gathered itself under a leader of both intelligence and skill. They wouldn’t have been another Moriarty, but they had been causing enough trouble to warrant the intervention of Jack and Jill.

Three hours later the message had been followed by ‘Fetched the pail of water’, indicating that everything had gone well and Jack and Jill were on their way home.

In fact, Avra suspected the laughter that was beginning to drift up the staircase was theirs.

“And when she opened the door-”

“I thought she was going to end up apologising to us, by the end! Good job with switching those knives, Rosy.”

“It wasn’t quite as amusing as his face when you pulled out your gun. Why is that that everyone, everyone, thinks you’re harmless the first time they meet you?”

“Years of practice.”

Yes, that was them; John and Jane. Or – as they were known in the covert operations business – Jack and Jill, the pair who, within six months, had developed a reputation for completing jobs others deemed impossible.

Sherlock and Mycroft had crossed to the door before it even opened. John entered first, and nearly ran straight into her youngest son.

“You know, Sherlock, one of these days I’m going to open the door too fast and you’ll end up with a broken nose,” John warned.

Sherlock ignored his remark. “You were supposed to be back two hours ago.”

While Sherlock didn’t embrace John, he was running his eyes up and down John’s body over and over again, trying to detect any injuries.
John frowned in exasperation, but there was fondness lingering in his eyes. “I was not *supposed* to be back, I said if we were very lucky, we *might* be back. *Might*, being the operative word there.”

The annoyance in his voice would be more convincing if he wasn’t leaning so close to Sherlock. Jane and Mycroft were much less demonstrative, but they were gazing at each other in the fashion of a romantic movie just before the credits rolled, and the fingers of her left hand were entwined with the fingers of his right.

Avra smiled, and for a moment she allowed herself in the feeling of everything going completely right. Just for a moment.

**End**

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*AN: A big round of applause for my beta, ginbitch, who helped me out enormously with this story!*

**End Notes**

Thanks so much to my beta, ginbitch, who helped me clean up this chapter!

Also, the title 'Semper Fidelis' means 'Always Faithful', which I thought was appropriate.

**Works inspired by this one**

[Cover for Semper Fidelis](#) by [moonblossom graphics (moonblossom)](#)

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