Summary

Think only of the past as its remembrance gives you pleasure.

Notes

This story exists entirely in its own universe--it has absolutely no connection to any of my previous ones. That being said, the idea for this grew out of a discussion in the comments of an earlier fic which made me wonder what a PTSD story in which John was wholly devoted to Sherlock would look like. But this story is, again, completely separate.

I'm trying something new this time, Dear Reader. Because of the way this story unfolds it's a better experience if you don't know a lot up front, so I've kept the tags to a minimum. However, it is the highest priority for me to avoid causing anyone distress. If you need to know if a particular plot point or trigger is going to arise, please drop me a line at askchryse@gmail.com and I will prioritize getting back to you. Really! Any question at all! Any time! That way it's just between me and you (and there aren't any spoilers in the comments).

In this universe, the last two minutes of HLV and all of TAB never happened. There was no Moriarty video. The plane went on to Eastern Europe, and this is what came after.

Finally, as always:
Fully completed, not a WIP; updates will post twice a week
I absolutely promise you an unambiguously happy ending.

Beautiful cover by Hamstermoon...
CHRYSE

THE GROUND
BENEATH YOUR
FEET

...and fiorinda_chancellor:
Chapter 1

"You must learn some of my philosophy. Think only of the past as its remembrance brings you pleasure."

Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice*

November

John was just writing up a prescription for antihypertensives when he felt his phone buzz in his pocket: a text alert. There had been a time when he would have excused himself to glance at the text immediately, but things had been stable lately, so he was able to make himself wait until he had politely shown his patient to the door with instructions to return in a month.

*If you are available, I would appreciate the opportunity to meet with you tonight. Mycroft Holmes*

John couldn’t help smiling, even as the muscles of his neck tensed automatically. Mycroft had come a long way since the days of kidnapping John in black cars and sending him cryptic messages over bank machines, he thought. Even as he reached for it, his phone vibrated again.

*There is no cause for concern. Mycroft Holmes*

No cause for concern. John took a deep breath and blew it out, forcing himself to relax. Stand down, soldier; Sherlock was not—not in hospital again, not worse, not—no cause for concern.

*My turn to pay, right?*

*Unfortunately. Mycroft Holmes*

*I’ll see you at the pub at 7 then.*

Mycroft was already perched at a table when John arrived at the pub, completely out of place in his three-piece suit and gazing meditatively at the food options as though hoping a *sole meuniere* might magically appear. John gave him a wave before he went to the bar, where he collected pints for them both and carried them both to the table. “How’s the commonwealth faring?”

Mycroft clinked his glass with John’s—still a bit awkwardly, but he was making progress—and took a dainty sip. “Trade negotiations with the Chinese. Not my area, thankfully, but a certain amount of soothing ruffled feathers on the part of other parties is involved.”

“Oh.” John considered that, drinking from his own pint. “Do you really like doing this? Or have you just been doing it so long you can’t imagine doing anything else?”

“Hmmm.” Mycroft actually seemed to ponder the question, setting down his glass and steepling his fingers under his chin in a gesture that reminded John piercingly of his brother. “The rather more salient point is that no one else could do it as well.”
“Yeah, but…” John realized that this line of conversation was going to take them into dangerously choppy waters. “Do you enjoy it?”

Mycroft gave him his usual flat thin line of a smile. “Of course I do.”

“Well then.” John took a long drink of his beer. “Hungry?”

They ate without hurry, half watching the telly over the bar, John grinning at Mycroft’s dry commentary on the news. John knew there was no rushing Mycroft; he would get around to the purpose for this meeting in his own good time.

Mycroft finally pushed away his plate (completely clean, despite his usual complaints) and said, “Sherlock has expressed a desire to meet with you.”

John looked up immediately, hope flaring wildly in his chest. He had been waiting for this so long that he had almost forgotten he was waiting, that his state of suspended animation was not meant to be permanent. “Here? He’s in London?”

“No. He is still in Yorkshire. I believe it will be some time still before he is able to return to London. I’m afraid you will have to go to him, but I can arrange for a car and driver—”

“No, that’s—that’s not necessary. I can take the train to Harrogate; I looked at the timetables before, and there’s a bus to the village.”

Mycroft nodded. “There is a tea shop. Sherlock has now managed to venture into the village and take tea on two occasions, and is sufficiently confident of his equanimity to request that you meet him there.”

“Oh.” John could not stop smiling; even as he tried to focus on the details his mind was soaring joyfully, he wants to see me, he wants to see me. “I can go Saturday if that works—I’m supposed to be at the care centre this weekend but I can get someone to cover, they all owe me—”

“No,” Mycroft said seriously. “Please bear in mind. Sherlock has come a very long way, but he is not back to normal, if such a term has any meaning where my brother is concerned.”

“I know.” That did sober John, a little, but he could still feel the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “But it’s progress. And progress is good, isn’t it?”

And then Mycroft smiled, his real smile that was almost as rare as Sherlock’s, the one that crinkled his eyes and nose. “It is.”

“Let me get this straight,” Sarah said. “You’re doing what?”

“I’ll go up Friday night on the train and spend the night in Harrogate, then take the bus out to the village Saturday, then take the bus back in the afternoon in time to catch the last train back. So I can still do Sunday, it’s just Saturday I need covered.”

“No, I’ll do it, no problem, I could do the whole weekend if you want. It’s just—you’re travelling three hours north just to have tea?”

Not counting the bus. “No,” John said. “I’m travelling three hours to have tea with Sherlock Homes.”
“This must feel very momentous to you,” Ella said. “When was the last time you saw him?”

“At the hospital in Germany.” John swallowed, forced himself to hold her gaze. He did not want to think about Germany, about Sherlock, unrecognizable, skeletal fingers clutching at his shorn scalp. “Four, five months ago now.”

Ella’s eyebrows went up. “Has he been in hospital all this time?”

“No, just the first month or so—seven or eight weeks counting Germany, I suppose. He’s been taking some time off, recovering.”

“So how are you feeling about seeing him again?”

“Pleased.” John felt the smile again, the bubble of happiness tugging at his heart like a balloon. “A little worried. You know. I want it to go well, I want Sherlock to be doing well. Whatever he needs, I want to give it to him.”

“Hmmm.” Ella scribbled something on her pad and looked back up at him. “When he left, last winter, you had some conflicted feelings about the situation. Do you think we need to talk about any of that?”

Last winter seemed a thousand years ago to John, a lifetime away. “No,” he answered. “I’ve sorted all that now.”

**January**

10 months earlier

“It’s just that he’s gone off again, on some other bloody exciting adventure, and at least this time I know he’s not dead, but he doesn’t answer calls or emails or texts and—I know he did it for me, for my marriage, but maybe—he made that choice for me, do you understand? And maybe I would have made, I don’t know, a different…”

“John,” Ella interrupted gently.

“Yeah?”

“When you came in today, you told me that you wanted to work on resolving your anger toward your wife. That you wanted to be able to move past your feelings of betrayal and mistrust before your child was born.”

“That’s what I want to do, right.”

“You haven’t mentioned your wife in the last half hour.”

John blinked. Hadn’t he? The whole situation was so intertwined, Sherlock and Mary and Magnussen—but of course Ella didn’t know that, she couldn’t know that. John had told her only that Mary had lied about her past.

“If you feel that this issue with Sherlock…”

“No,” John said quickly, straightening in his seat. “You’re right. I want to talk about Mary. I want
to get on with forgiving her.”

He was successful, for the most part. It helped that Mary was obviously trying very, very hard herself, and that on a day-by-day basis, she was still the person he had fallen in love with. If he no longer felt quite the same way… well, she had lied to him and shot his best friend; surely it was natural that he was no longer in love in the way that he had been. But that was normal for couples, wasn’t it? They were adults. They were going to be parents. Marriage was work, everyone said so, and John Watson was determined to make his succeed.

It was easier, too, than it had been whilst Sherlock was still at home, his injury a visible reminder of what Mary had done. Maybe it was for the best that he’d managed to swing this Eastern Europe lark instead of prison—well, obviously it was for the best, but better for John too. Six months, he’d said. By the time he came back the baby would be, what, five months old? Sleeping through the night, hopefully, and maybe John could meet up with Sherlock regularly, like other blokes had snooker. It made things easier, having that to look forward to.

The baby was born on a frigid day at the end of January. Mary had been having intermittent contractions for days, but she’d been to the midwife the day before and was told her cervix was still closed. “I’m nearly a week overdue already,” she groaned to John that night. “I’m going to just keep carrying on with no bloody progress and I’ll have to have an induction which won’t work and I’ll end up with a Caesarian and then I’ll have a scar and great bloody hemorrhoids.”

“As long as you’re both okay,” John said, which got him a glare so he beat a quick tactical retreat. “Horlicks?”

As it turned out, Mary was wrong. When John woke up in the morning her side of the bed was already deserted. “You okay?” he called at the door of the bathroom.

“I’m in the bath,” Mary shouted back. “I woke up because my back was hurting, so I got in the bath, and now the contractions are getting more regular. Battle dress, Captain.”

No induction and no Caesarian—John knew better than to ask about the hemorrhoids—and that afternoon John, ridiculously sweaty and exhausted for having done nothing more strenuous all day than have his fingers squeezed off, was handed a red-faced, squalling bundle with an astonishing shock of silver blonde hair. “Oh my God,” he said in amazement. “I’m a dad. Will you look at her, she’s beautiful…she looks like you, she looks like my mum, she looks…”

“She looks like a prawn,” Mary said, levering herself up to beam at their furious daughter. “And she’s got your temper, that’s certain. Hand her over and let’s give this nursing thing a go.”

John called Harry and the clinic, feeling a twinge of sadness at the smallness of their family; his parents were dead and Mary’s were as good as, although Harry sounded keen to jump into her new role as aunty. He called all their friends—well, Mary’s friends really—next, and dutifully passed on their squealed congratulations and promises of visits. Then he called Mrs. Hudson and Molly (more squealing, demands for pictures) and Lestrade, who skipped the squealing and told him he’d stand him a drink. A nurse had come in to check Mary, so he stepped out into the corridor and impulsively rang a number he had never thought he would call.

“John.” Mycroft’s voice came impassively over the phone.
“Mycroft, hey. Listen, I haven’t been able to get in touch with Sherlock since he left—I assume he’s undercover and not, ah, ignoring me, ha ha, so I was hoping—our daughter was born today, Emmeline, six pounds fourteen ounces, and I thought, maybe, if you’re in touch with Sherlock, you could pass that along?”

The silence that followed was so complete that John took the phone away from his ear and checked the screen to be sure he hadn’t been disconnected.

“Hello? Mycroft?”

“I am not in communication with Sherlock at present.” Mycroft’s voice was clipped and icy in a way John had never heard; he realized with a prickle of unease that he sounded the way Sherlock did when he was very, very angry. “I am sure he would be delighted to hear of your news, but I am afraid I cannot say the same for myself. I do wish you every happiness. Congratulations.”

And he hung up.

John was so taken aback that for a moment he could only stand there and stare at the phone in his hand. What the hell had that been about? Mycroft had always been exquisitely courteous to John—more so than Sherlock, truth be told. And what had he meant about…

“Sir?” The nurse was leaning out the door, beckoning. “We’re ready for you to come back in now. Your wife would like you to have the honor of the first diaper.”

“Ta for that,” John said, pocketing his phone, but the prickle of unease did not go away.

The uneasy feeling lingered, although he pushed it to the back of his mind until several hours later when he found himself kicked out.

“Go home and get a good night’s sleep, and bring me some decent coffee in the morning,” Mary told him. “And take a shower. How did you get so sweaty anyway? It’s not as though you were doing anything.”

“Sympathy labor,” John said. He kissed her cheek, avoiding the swat Mary aimed at his arse, and blew a kiss at the tightly wrapped bundle that was his sleeping daughter. “Okay, decent coffee, any other requests?”

“Something good. A great buttery pastry,” Mary said dreamily, and John felt a sudden twist of his heart—Sherlock, Sherlock had always loved pastries, his sweet tooth was the stuff of legend. The uneasiness returned full force. “See you tomorrow, love.”

In the lift John took out his phone, turning it over as he considered his options. He was too keyed up to sleep anytime soon anyway, and now he felt as though he would be unable to rest until he understood what had Mycroft’s knickers in such a twist. The lift doors opened and he stepped out, still frowning down at his phone. If he rang, Mycroft would likely just ignore him, but if he texted…everyone read their texts, didn’t they? Even if they didn’t answer.

*Could I talk to you? Please?*

John looked at the time on his phone, gave it three minutes, and wandered over to peer through the darkened windows of the gift shop. No answer.

*I don’t know what’s going on, but I have the feeling there’s something Sherlock didn’t tell me,*
AGAIN. I really want to know what’s happening.

Three minutes. Nothing. John started moving toward the doors and the taxi stand, texting as he went.

Okay. I’m going to the Diogenes Club. I’m guessing they can reach you.

The vision of himself striding through the Diogenes Club shouting “MYCROFT HOLMES!” at the top of his lungs was so grimly satisfying—wait until I tell Sherlock, he caught himself thinking, and his heart gave that twist again—that he was almost disappointed when his phone buzzed before he could even tuck it back into his pocket.

Stay where you are. A car is on the way. Mycroft Holmes

Mycroft turned out to be not at the Diogenes Club or even his weird subterranean office but at home, which astonished John. He hadn’t thought Mycroft had one. An immaculately dressed and silent man—did Mycroft seriously have a butler?—took John’s coat, led him to an elegantly paneled study, and wordlessly withdrew.

John looked around, curious in spite of himself. He had vaguely expected some sort of high-tech command center out of a Bond film, but the study was surprisingly cozy given its size, with a pair of armchairs drawn up before a crackling fire. Mycroft had just risen to his feet from one of them.

“John.” Mycroft gestured to the other armchair, his voice betraying no hint of the anger that had laced it earlier. “Please. Sit down.” He reached for a decanter that stood on a low table and poured John two fingers of whisky. “I apologize for my unseemly behavior earlier. My sincere felicitations.” He raised his own glass in a toast to John and John, somewhat taken aback, raised his in return. “If I may.” He offered John a small, elegantly wrapped parcel.

John, now completely disconcerted, took the package and set down his drink to open it. The box contained an elegant silver rattle, already monogrammed. With his daughter’s initials. Which he and Mary had finally decided only an hour earlier. How the hell…

“John, what did Sherlock tell you about his assignment?”

John blinked, feeling more wrong-footed than ever, and set the box down on the floor. He took a sip of whisky and tried to focus. “He…said he was doing a job for you. Said it would take about six months. He made it sound like the sort of thing he did before, you know, when he was dead. Larking about playing secret agent.”

“Mmmm.” Mycroft looked pensively into the fire. “Did Sherlock ever tell you that he was captured whilst he was ‘playing secret agent’?”

John blinked. “No.” They had never really talked about what Sherlock had got up to whilst he’d been away. Sherlock had dropped a few casual asides here and there, but certainly nothing about being captured, and John hadn’t asked. At first he’d been too resentful and later…it just never seemed to come up.

“Twice.” Mycroft was still looking into the fire. “The second time I had to extract him. There were some permanent sequelae, though no functional damage.” He took a sip of his drink. “Hardly a lark,” he added, almost absently.

Permanent sequelae? John remembered, almost unwillingly, the marks he’d seen on Sherlock’s
back last autumn, when he’d been recovering from the gunshot wound that almost killed him. They’d been fading though, and Sherlock seemed to regard a certain amount of rough-and-tumble as part of the game. Captured?

“I…” John swallowed, feeling the weight of resentment he’d carried so long—diminished but not gone altogether—growing heavier as it morphed into guilt. “I never asked him.”

Mycroft’s mouth twisted slightly at the corner, not a smile, but John had the odd feeling that his admission had somehow redeemed him slightly in Mycroft’s eyes. He sat back, exhaled, and looked directly at John. “Sherlock has disappeared.”

“Disappeared? What? From where? Can’t you, I don’t know, track him somehow?” Mycroft had known his daughter’s initials apparently before John did, how could he lose his own brother?

“It’s not as though he’s microchipped,” Mycroft said, a little irritably. “And I’m not omniscient, in spite of what Sherlock would have you believe.”

Missing. Shit. John’s mind was spinning, his initial impulse—to demand Mycroft get him a helicopter and a gun and send him to the last place Sherlock had been seen—warring with all of the other events of this day: his responsibilities, his wife, his child. Missing. Sherlock could not be missing. He was supposed to be swanning about somewhere with his great swirly coat, dispatching baddies with dramatic savoir-faire, turning up back up glowing with his own cleverness so John could be enviously, resentfully admiring. Not captured, not hurt, and God no not missing.

John took a long, long drink of his whisky and then a second, efficiently draining it, and Mycroft wordlessly refilled it. John took another sip, then he drew a deep breath and set the glass down decisively. “All right. Tell me.”

Mycroft looked at him pityingly. "John. Your ineptitude at dissembling is the reason you were not apprised of Sherlock’s presence among the living previously. Please be assured that I regard this as a marker of your integrity and not as a—“

“Okay, black out whatever you think might be a state secret, I don’t care about the details. I just want to know what’s going on.”

“The situation is an extremely sensitive—“

“Oh, come on, Mycroft, if someone wanted to interrogate me about what Sherlock’s been up to—besides the tabloids—don’t you think they’d already have done?”

Mycroft regarded John with narrowed eyes, but John had had plenty of practice at dealing with Mycroft’s stare-off technique over the years. He stared back, utterly implacable. Mycroft finally broke, twisting his mouth again, and took another sip of his drink.

“There is a nation in the Caucasus, valuable both for its strategic position and for its natural resources. Please do not trouble yourself with the name; it would be better for everyone if you never knew it. The current regime consists of a Russian-backed government, extremely authoritarian, with very limited support among the general population. Resistance is centered around the largest opposition party, which is strongly Western-leaning, and the country’s sizeable Muslim majority. This group has traditionally been highly secular but in recent years has seen the rise of more radical and fundamentalist influences.”

“Okay,” John said, who thought he was following the essentials although he wasn’t entirely clear where the Caucasus was. Near Ukraine?
“The situation is highly volatile and elections loom later this year. There are three possible outcomes. First, the current regime retains power, oppressing the citizenry and violating their human rights but maintaining stability in the region. Second, the Western-friendly party takes power, although it would necessitate forming a coalition government, likely with the Muslims, who are less well organized. I should mention that our allies who are providing support for this mission are most favorably disposed to this outcome, but the possibility of retaliatory Russian military action should not be taken lightly. Third, the Muslims take power, introducing the possibility of a fundamentalist Islamic state on the threshold of Europe. Our allies are not favorably disposed to this outcome.”

“Wait a minute,” John said. “Let me get this straight. You sent Sherlock off to Eastern Europe to micromanage your revolution?”

“Or to prevent it. As I said, the situation is highly volatile, and not all outcomes of regime change are considered desirable.”

“How the hell did you expect him to carry this off?”

“His cover identity…” Mycroft hesitated in a way that made John think he was editing his words for more sensitive information not to be entrusted to hopelessly honest John Watson “…remained intact from a previous operation in another part of Eastern Europe. The one from which I was forced to extract him, as it happens. That event would actually have enhanced his credibility in this situation.”

“Okay,” John said, still trying to get his head around all this. “So he went to this country, undercover—can I call it Dalmatia?”

Mycroft looked pained. “Dalmatia is not in the Caucasus.”

“Exactly.” Actually John had thought it was, but so much the better if Mycroft believed he was capable of that much subterfuge at least. “And then what? Were you in contact with him?”

“There was a handler in Georgia. We had contacts in the opposition party, as well, and we know he initially made contact and things seemed to be going according to plan, but then eleven days ago he simply vanished. We don’t know what actions he had been planning at the time and our contacts have no information.”

“Didn’t you have some kind of emergency back-up plan in place?”

“Impossible.”

“You can’t seriously—“

“John.” Mycroft’s voice was steely, the coldness John had heard earlier back in it now. “Sherlock knew that there was no possibility of intervention in this case. We calculated the likelihood of his survival at around thirty percent. He murdered a man in cold blood, a man who had, as you may recall, committed no actual crime—he could hardly be expected to be allowed to remain free in order to, as you put it, lark about.”

John flushed, now feeling ashamed and angry at himself at his own willful ignorance. “That was the deal? He puts his life at risk so you and, what, the Americans can get the government you want in some little country I probably can’t find on a map?”

“He put his life at risk to avoid spending the rest of his life in prison.”
“And if he survives? What then? Do you keep sending him someplace else until he doesn’t come back?”

“Of course not.” Mycroft was back to smooth now, his bland voice giving nothing away. “Give me some credit as a negotiator. If he achieved a successful outcome, he would be pardoned—that was the official agreement.”

“And what was the unofficial agreement.”

Mycroft’s eyebrows went up, which gave John a tiny measure of bitter satisfaction. “That if he took the job, I would continue to exert my considerable influence to ensure that you suffered no adverse effects from your poor choice of spouse. Which was his reason for committing this crime in the first place, if you recall.”

“No.” John shook his head adamantly. “He wanted to protect us, yeah, but that wasn’t the whole reason—he hates to lose, you know he hated Magnussen, he just couldn’t bear to let that smug bastard—”

“You really believe that?” Mycroft’s voice had hardened again. “Really?”

John flung up his hands. “Of course I do. It wasn’t just for me, it couldn’t have been. Sherlock would never put himself at risk like that for someone, not even me, he doesn’t care about people like that. You were always telling him not to, weren’t you?”

Mycroft stared at him a long, long moment. “Are you truly so blind.”

John stared back. He found himself at a loss for words, all the things he had thought so certain suddenly crumbling beneath him.

“Of course I warned him. You were never going to return his feelings, even he could see it.” Mycroft’s face was impassive, but his voice was coldly disdainful. “All my brother’s gifts, his brilliant mind, his heart. All thrown away so that you can have your happy little family with your beloved and no doubt deserving wife. Sherlock viewed that as a worthy bargain. You will forgive me if I do not.”

John let out a breath he hadn’t realized he had been holding and put his head into his hands. He understood, distantly, that he had just been insulted, but he couldn’t bring himself to care. His mind was spinning. His whole life shifted, the realization that it was built on a lie, again—but this time he was the one who had lied to himself. All this time the signs had been there, and he had never let himself see. Sherlock’s machinations, his lies and deceptions and shamming and tricks, had been born not of manipulation but of self-protection, because he couldn’t bear for John to know the truth. John saw Sherlock on the tarmac, on the roof of Bart’s, in the railway carriage. Saw the naked vulnerability that Sherlock always swiftly covered. Saw the moment that he turned away from John and knelt on the cold stone of Appledore in a gesture not of maximum drama, as John had assumed, but in the purest act of selfless love John would ever know.

John became aware of his own harsh breathing and thought longingly of his unfinished drink, but he had to clear his head and start trying to make sense of all this. He sat up slowly and looked over at Mycroft. “I’m sorry,” he said, hearing the roughness of his own voice. He swallowed noisily. “For when I phoned earlier. I didn’t…I’m sorry.”

Mycroft nodded distantly. He no longer appeared angry. Upright in his three-piece suit, Mycroft appeared impeccable as ever, but for the first time he looked as drained as John felt himself. He did not look at John. “He’s almost certainly dead,” Mycroft said, very softly.
John flinched. “No.” He reached out and gripped Mycroft’s hand, startling both of them. “No. He is absolutely not dead. He’s Sherlock Holmes, for one thing, and for another, I’m not believing it until I see a body. Not this time.”

That got a startled half-laugh from Mycroft, who glanced up at John’s face and almost, almost smiled. His eyes crinkled in a way that John had never seen before and that almost broke his heart, the ghost of Sherlock’s rare, real smile almost visible for an instant. “Well.” He straightened briskly, pulling his hand gently from John’s. “I hope you are correct, if for no other reason than the amount of histrionics we shall enjoy if he returns and finds that we have formed an alliance in his absence.”

November

John had checked the train schedule and realized he’d probably need to leave directly from work on Friday, so Thursday night he pulled out his small bag to get himself packed. It didn’t take long; he was only staying overnight, after all. He went into the bathroom to collect his shaving kit and shampoo and then, on impulse, he opened the door to Sherlock’s room.

The room was just as John remembered: dim, a little musty, its immaculate order in stark contrast to the cheerful disarray of the rest of the flat. He had come in here when he first moved back to Baker Street months ago, trying to catch some sense of Sherlock’s presence—a memory, a fading scent, something—but he might as well have stood at Sherlock’s empty grave again. Now, though…it seemed to him as though the air did not feel quite so stale as he remembered; the room did not have that feeling of being shut up and un-lived-in, somehow. Perhaps Mrs. Hudson had aired it out recently, or maybe it was just John’s renewed sense of optimism.

“Yoo hoo! John?”

“Back here,” John said, closing the door behind him as he went out. Mrs. Hudson was in the lounge, peering down at his small case with dismay.

“You’ve already packed! I thought you weren’t leaving until tomorrow night?”

“I’m not, but I’m to go to the station from work—might not make the train else. So I’ll take my bag along with me tomorrow.”

“But I was going to send some baking! You’ll come by in the morning on your way out, won’t you? I’ll have it all ready for you, and a bit of a treat for you to have on the train too.”

“Of course,” John said, smiling, and Mrs. Hudson patted his arm and fluttered off. He glanced up the stairs, wondering whether or not to take his phone charger; no, he would charge it overnight tonight, it should be fine for a day and a half. It wasn’t as though he called anyone much these days anyway. He’d use the time on the train to catch up on his journals, he thought virtuously, not play games.

John was up early, unable to fall back asleep once the thought tomorrow, tomorrow I’m going to see him popped into his head. He collected his things and tapped on Mrs. Hudson’s door: no answer. She must be at Speedy’s; he would pop round for a coffee and a bacon sandwich.

Mrs. Hudson had a sort of unofficial job as baker at Speedy’s, at least during the periods that her
on-again, off-again relationship with the owner was in an “on” phase. John ducked inside and
nodded at the handful of regulars he recognized: a couple of pensioners, the thin girl with a nose
ring always scowling down at her laptop, the bloke in the green jacket who leisurely read the
papers. Green Jacket and one of the pensioners nodded back. John collected his sandwich and
coffee and Vijay behind the counter said, “Mrs. Hudson says for you to wait just a tick—you can
go on back if you want.”

“Thanks, I’ll wait here,” John said. The kitchen was a little mad in the mornings. He had just time
to eat half his sandwich when Mrs. Hudson bustled out carrying a takeaway box and a paper bag.

“There you are, dear, his two favorites, and some for you to have on the train. Oh…” Mrs. Hudson
clapsed her hands under her chin, beaming at John. “I’m so happy, you can’t imagine. We’ve
waited a long time for this, haven’t we?”

John couldn’t help smiling back. He felt as though he’d been grinning all week, as obvious as a boy
with his first crush, and the more he tried to rein in his excitement the more transparent he felt.
“Yes, we have,” he answered. “A very long time.”
Chapter 2

February

Nine months earlier

It was the worst month of John’s life.

That February was mostly a blur, afterwards; he was never able to remember anything clearly but exhaustion and gut-clenching worry. He’d never been so sleep-deprived, even in training—at least in training he was only required to stay up all night every third night, but it seemed infants had no such limits. He slept for only brief stretches, broken fragments from which he woke red-eyed and sluggish. The knowledge that Sherlock was out there somewhere—he hoped—alone, maybe hurt, maybe suffering, burned in his stomach like acid. Mary barely seemed to notice his distraction. She was just as exhausted as he was, in addition to being hormonal and, as she said miserably, “leaky”: oozing tears, breast milk, God-knew-what-horrifying-female-effluvia on those giant sanitary pads he kept being sent out to replenish.

One grim night John stumbled out into the sleet only to be immediately picked up by one of Mycroft’s sleek cars.

“You’ve heard something,” John said, instantly wide awake. His heart was crashing in his ears.

“Yes.” Mycroft looked no different than usual in the pallid light of the street lamps, but his voice was tight. “The Americans have a recording of a conversation that took place among members of a radical Islamic group in Chechnya. The gist of the discussion is that members of their brotherhood in the location we were discussing previously have captured a spy matching Sherlock’s description.”

“Okay,” John said, trying desperately to parse the implications of this in his fogged and sleepless mind. “Captured, not killed then, that’s something…”

“John. The usual pattern for these groups is to keep the captive alive only as long as it takes to break him down to the point that he denounces his masters on video. He is then likely to be decapitated.”

John flinched. The words seemed to echo dully around his skull: break down, captive, decapitated. No. No. No. Mycroft was now looking out the opposite window, his fingers knotted tightly around his umbrella handle. John found himself staring at his hands, the white tapered fingers that reminded him piercingly of Sherlock’s. Then do something, he thought furiously, find him, save him, get whoever James Bond’s real-life counterpart is—but he knew that if Mycroft could have done anything it would already have been done. He blinked his rough, burning eyes and took a deep breath. “It will never happen,” he said, distantly surprised by the firmness in his voice. “Never. You know Sherlock, he’ll—he’ll deduce all their secrets in no time, have them either at each other’s throats or convinced he’s some kind of holy prophet before he has time to grow a proper beard. You know it. He’s going to be fine.”
Mycroft sniffed, but his grip on the umbrella handle eased slightly. “You haven’t had the misfortune of experiencing Sherlock’s previous encounters with religious indoctrination. The vicar ended by leaving the church. Mummy was most upset—she didn’t care for his replacement.”

John snorted a laugh. “And he’s had, what, thirty years to refine his technique? Those jihadists won’t know what hit them.”

Mycroft gave him his tight, dry smile. “Well.” He reached down and retrieved a carrier bag, which he passed to John. “I’ll keep you apprised if I receive additional information. Your shopping.”

“Thanks,” John said, too knackered to really pay attention. He opened the door to climb out.

“No,” Mycroft said, almost inaudibly. “Thank you.”

John blinked at him, but then the door slammed and the car pulled smoothly away. He stumbled back inside, where Mary intercepted him and took the bag from his hands. “Oh,” he said suddenly. “I don’t—“

“Oh good, you got the right brand this time,” Mary said in relief. She pulled out the package of sanitary pads and kissed his cheek swiftly, leaving John staring blankly after her as she trudged off up the stairs.

The most bizarre aspect of the whole situation was the way the rest of the world just carried on, seemingly unaware that John Watson’s life had been turned completely upside down. Even Mary noticed nothing, although to be fair she was having trouble keeping the days of the week straight at that point. Most people simply attributed John’s dazed distraction to the strains of new fatherhood.

“Young and dumb and in love,” Lestrade said, and John had a moment of realizing he’d just blurted the whole thing out. “No. Takes it out of you, doesn’t it?” Lestrade asked, on the night he came round with takeaway curry and beer in lieu of the promised pint. Mary and the baby had gone up for a feed. “Everyone says how great being a father is, and it is, don’t get me wrong, but the first few months? Bloody hell. I wouldn’t do that again for any money.”

“Uh…right.” State secrets aside, what could John say? Well, I am knackered, but the truth is I’ve just learnt that Sherlock’s been in love with me all this time and might have given up his life for me and I don’t know what to do about it and I’m scared shitless I’ll never see him again? …No.

“Rough,” Lestrade was saying sympathetically, nodding, and John had a horrible moment of thinking he’d just blurted the whole thing out. “And there’s never a break! Like you’re on rota all the time with no night off.”

“Yeah,” John said, hoping it was the appropriate response, and Lestrade clapped him on the shoulder and opened another beer.

Gradually things settled down at home. They were finally forced to give up on the breastfeeding, which resulted in several days of increased weepiness from Mary, but at least after that Em started gaining weight and began to sleep more than forty-five minutes at a go. John went back to work, which meant that for several hours a day he was too distracted to agonize about Sherlock. Mycroft texted him here and there, but mostly to tell him that some hoped-for lead or other had turned out to be a dead end. Nights were the worst: he would fall into a dead sleep as soon as his head hit the pillow, but after he woke to take his turn feeding the baby he inevitably lay sleepless the rest of the night, mind churning with worry.
Wait until you get that first smile, the fathers at work assured John. Wait until she sleeps through the night. Til she says “dada”. It’s all worth it then.

But John was no longer sure. He loved Em with a fierce, primal passion that was unlike anything he’d ever felt for anyone, and yet… he had the unsettling sensation that he was living the wrong life: that some fundamental mistake had been made, stranding him in this featureless suburban existence of work and nappies, instead of back in Baker Street where he belonged.

*Just tired, mate.* Only John knew that wasn’t it. The upheaval of his life that had occurred on 29 January was due not to the birth of his daughter but to Mycroft’s words. Up until then John had always assumed that Sherlock cared for him as much as he was capable of caring for anyone—which was more than most people would believe—but still nothing to build a life around. But now he spent hours staring into the dark, wondering. What if. What if. What if.

On the forty-seventh day after Sherlock had last been seen alive, John’s nurse stuck her head round his door and said in a worried voice, “Dr. Watson, there’s someone here from the government—“

“Excuse me,” Mycroft said, striding past her with his polite pained smile, and John felt his heart freeze in his chest.

“What—“ he tried to say but his voice had deserted him; he could only sit with his mouth open, helpless to stop whatever Mycroft said next. Strangely in that instant he realized for the first time that he was terrified for Mycroft as much as for himself. Please not the video, he thought, icy sweat breaking out on his face, please don’t let him have had to see that—

“Sherlock is alive,” Mycroft said, and John felt all the air rush out of his lungs. He leaned forward over his knees and tried to breathe, but he felt as though he had been punched in the solar plexus. He heard Mycroft sit down rather hard across from him and after a moment he was able to raise his head.

“Are you sure? How did you find out?”

“He’s been arrested. There was a demonstration in the capitol—a political prisoner sentenced to death—so the government reacted with the usual authoritarian show of force. In the ensuing crackdown multiple dissident groups were arrested *en masse*, including whole villages in the mountains, and he was caught up in the sweep. I don’t know more details than that; my contact was able to ascertain only that his name—well, that of his alter identity—was among those arrested.”

“Oh Christ,” John said, “Alive, he’s alive—“ and suddenly he found himself laughing, helplessly and a little hysterically, and without thinking he reached out and hugged Mycroft hard around the neck.

Mycroft patted his back gingerly and disentangled himself, but John had the impression he was not displeased. “It has been surprisingly…helpful,” he said with his usual formality, “to have had you in the loop. So to speak. I confess that I apprised you of the situation more out of a sense of indignation at your ignorance than anything else, but your support has been…” his smile seemed even more like a grimace than usual. “…not unwelcome.”

John smiled at him a little shakily, surprised but pleased. “Thanks,” he said. “You’re going to keep me up to date, yeah? I mean, he’s not out of the woods yet, is he?”
“Well, strictly speaking, yes,” Mycroft said. It took John an instant to realize that Mycroft was actually making a joke. “Or at least out of the mountains. But out of danger…no.”

“But at least now you’ve got a line on things,” John said. “And we know he’s okay.”

November

John climbed out of the bus in the little village, overnight bag slung over one shoulder, and looked around curiously. The village was tiny and suitably picturesque, the bus having let him off at a street of shops with the tea shop that was John’s destination at the far end. The day was unexpectedly lovely, bright and crisp, and John had spent the morning wandering around Harrogate before boarding his bus. He was still a bit early. John felt suddenly nervous, the fizzy anticipation mixing with unease: what if this didn’t go well? How long would it be before Sherlock felt willing to try again? What if John did something wrong?

John sucked in a breath through his nose, squared his shoulders, and decided to take the long way round the back of the shops to settle his nerves. It didn’t really help. He reached the end of the narrow street and turned the corner, heart still thudding loudly, and there was Sherlock on the other side of the window.

For a minute John simply stared. Sherlock didn’t see him; he was tucked into the back corner of the tearoom, facing the door, and at the moment he was intent on whatever he was writing on the piece of paper in front of him. John realized he had been half-unconsciously dreading seeing the sight of Sherlock’s head shaved as it had been in Germany—he had seemed so naked like that, so vulnerable—but Sherlock’s curls had grown out and his fringe was longer than John ever remembered seeing it. Even as John watched Sherlock raked his fingers through his hair in frustration, picking up an eraser to scrub out whatever he’d just written.

John felt a huge, ridiculous grin spreading across his face. Quickly, before he could get nervous again, he strode around the corner of the tearoom and opened the door.

At the sound of the bell Sherlock looked up instantly, stiffening, his eyes wary before they widened at the sight of John. John was still grinning—he couldn’t help it—and he felt as though everyone in the room was staring at him as he made his way to Sherlock’s table in the back. It seemed to take forever to cross the floor. Sherlock’s eyes never left his face.

Finally, finally, John came to a halt at the small table and stopped, still beaming like a fool. “Hey,” he said ridiculously.

“John,” Sherlock said very softly. He was still staring.

“You look great,” John said. His chair scraped loudly as he pulled it out. It was true: up close Sherlock was still far too thin, but even rigid with tension he somehow looked softer than John remembered, possibly because he was wearing a blue-grey jumper instead of his usual sharp-edged suit. The color brought out the blue of his eyes, the same shade as the winter-pale sky. The scar over his right eye had faded since John had last seen it. John wondered briefly if Sherlock had grown out his hair to hide it, or if he just couldn’t bear to go to a barber. John slid into his chair carefully, making sure not to jostle the table, and scooted forward a little. Sherlock was still frozen in his hyperalert posture and John found himself moving slowly, cautious not to spook him, as though any sudden movement would make Sherlock explode into flight like a started bird.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed, his expression finally shifting from that wide-eyed stare into something
more familiar. “And you’ve been exercising. Quite a bit, and you’re drinking much less alcohol, and you’ve started drinking…green tea?” His face scrunched in disgust.

John laughed out loud. “Only some of the time. I’m not a fanatic.” He pulled the box out of his bag and passed it over. “Speaking of which, Mrs. Hudson sent these. So. What’s good here?”

Sherlock finally looked away, peering around the tearoom as though seeing it for the first time. “Well, I’ve only ever had tea, but they’re known for their sandwiches and their scones are quite popular.”

John had no idea how Sherlock had worked that out—there were only a handful of other patrons—but Sherlock’s deductions about restaurants had always been mystifying to John; he half suspected Sherlock of making them up. He was usually right though. “Afternoon tea it is.”

Sherlock’s taut watchfulness began to ease slightly. He kept glancing around the tearoom in what John could see was a pattern: door, kitchen, windows, the patrons, door again; but the tightness of his shoulders relaxed infinitesimally and John could no longer see his pulse jumping in his throat. Sherlock had to gather his papers up to make room for the tea things and John saw that he had been working on ruled music composition paper. “Oh, are you composing?”

Sherlock’s eyebrows went up. “It’s part of the job. Mycroft did tell you what I was doing here?”

“Eventually. After the smelling salts and the bucket of water brought me back around. It took him at least five minutes to admit that you weren’t actually going to become a monk.”

Sherlock rolled his eyes. “There aren’t any monks. The abbey hasn’t been an active monastery for four hundred years. It’s a ‘retreat centre’.” His tone implied this was not much of a step up.

“But you’re not, uh, part of that?”

“I’m a composer in residence, John, hence the composing.” Sherlock lifted the heavy teapot to pour, steadying it with his left hand, and John caught himself before he winced at the sight of his fingers. “Not that they had much of a body of work to approve me on,” Sherlock continued, oblivious. “Mycroft probably endowed the position. There is at least one poet in residence and I believe a few writers, but I’ve managed to avoid them.”

John snorted. “Lucky for them. So what are you working on then?”

“Oh.” Sherlock looked slightly disgruntled. “A commission. Part of the job, I’m afraid—Mycroft likely made it a condition of the endowment so I wouldn’t have time on my hands. It’s a piece for a church in Bridlington.”

“Oh.” John felt confused; he had only ever known Sherlock to compose for his own violin. “A violin thing?”

Sherlock’s mouth twitched wryly. “A Christmas piece for a children’s choir, if you must know. I’ve never written choral music before, so it’s an interesting challenge, especially as I’m told small children are incapable of singing harmony. “ John was staring at Sherlock with his mouth half open, a finger sandwich forgotten in his hand, but Sherlock went on blithely, “Fortunately I hit on the idea of using plainsong. There’s precedent; many of the lessons and carols programmes use a chant from the ninth century, ‘Creator of the stars of night’—“

“You’re writing a Christmas carol?” John blurted.

“Of course not,” Sherlock said, clearly affronted. “I’m using a poem about the winter solstice. And
“Oh thank God,” John said in relief. Sherlock frowned at him and suddenly they were both giggling, John a little harder than the situation really merited and Sherlock’s deep chuckle sounding rusty and unused. When he could get his breath John managed, “Please tell me they aren’t asking you to, you know, interact with actual children.”

“Oh God no. Nobody wants that,” Sherlock said and that set them both off again.

“So,” John managed, wiping his eyes, when the giggles had finally tapered off. “Is it going well then. your Christmas carol? Can you tell me about it?” Sherlock rarely talked much about his music, at least to John, but this was the most relaxed he’d been since John arrived. He had even absently taken a few bites of scone.

“Mmm.” Sherlock swallowed a mouthful and pushed his plate aside so he could pull papers out of his bag. “Here are some of the plainsong pieces I was looking at, here, and here—that probably won’t mean much to you, the notation’s medieval…”

None of it meant much to John, but it didn’t matter. This is his work now, he thought, looking at Sherlock’s illuminated face as he went on about some sixteenth-century composer John had never heard of. It wasn’t a life he could have imagined for Sherlock back when they lived together, but it was something that engaged him, something he could do. For now at least, John thought, stubbornly optimistic. Sherlock was obviously making progress: he was out in a tearoom—in a corner with his back to the wall, true, and he jolted and lost his train of thought a few times when something was dropped in the back or a deaf old man shouted at his wife, but he was able to recover. He was too skinny and his eyes were too shadowed and he stiffened when the waitress leaned over him, but he could work and he could laugh and he could be with John, at least for now.

John suddenly became aware that Sherlock had stopped talking to watch him, focusing his attention on John’s face in a way that was achingly, poignantly familiar. “What?” he asked.

Sherlock’s gaze stayed fixed on John. “You’re not angry.”

John blinked. “Why on earth would I be angry?”

Now Sherlock looked away. “Ever since I came back—the last time I came back—you were angry. Well. You had cause. And then everything else happened.” His mouth twisted ruefully. “Not all of it due to me, but I didn’t help.”

John looked away a moment himself, thinking. He had let go the anger so long ago he had almost forgotten how it felt to carry it, the bitter relish he had taken in its weight. He remembered the night he’d begun to let go, though: the night Mycroft had shown him the file he’d received from the CIA. The night John stopped being a pawn in everyone else’s game, and made his own decision.

He looked back at Sherlock, who was watching him almost covertly. “No,” he said. “I’m not angry. Not anymore.”

Sherlock smiled, and for just an instant it felt as though nothing at all had changed: the two of them grinning at each other in the midst of all the madness of the world, the way it had been that very first night. Then the door banged open and a woman came in scolding at her daughter, and Sherlock jerked and sent his teaspoon flying.

“Whoops,” John said, catching it neatly in midair.

“Excellent reflexes,” Sherlock said. He’d gone white and taut again, but he said it almost normally,
and John shrugged modestly as he handed it back.

“So this poem you’re going to use,” he prompted and Sherlock, with obvious relief, picked up where he’d left off.

John listened and nibbled at his plate, asking the occasional hopefully-not-too-stupid question and refilling their cups as they drank down the tea, and was genuinely surprised to find the pot empty and the two hours nearly done. “You’ll have to make sure one of the proud parents sends you a recording when they sing it,” he remarked.

Sherlock scowled. “Absolutely not. What if they sing it badly?” He licked jam off a spoon and leaned over to replace papers in his satchel. When he straightened back up, his face had gone serious. “I should have said earlier. I’m very sorry about your loss. Your wife and daughter.”


“I’m glad…” Sherlock hesitated, looking away. “I’m glad you didn’t go with them. In the car that day, I mean.”

John knew exactly what he meant. “I had a reason to stay behind.”

Now Sherlock’s eyes dropped. His mouth twisted. “Not much of a reason anymore.”

When John had imagined this conversation before Sherlock’s return—which he had, a thousand times on the long lonely nights—he had always pictured himself taking Sherlock’s hand, but he didn’t dare risk it now. He hesitated, trying to think of the right thing to say, and Sherlock went on with that same bitter twist to his mouth: “I’m sorry, I know this wasn’t what you pictured when—“

“No,” John said, very sharply, very quietly. “No. Don’t ever, ever apologize for what happened to you. Not to me.”

Sherlock did look up then. His eyes were searching and unguarded, a tiny line between his brows. John hesitated, his heart in his throat, and then he carefully held his hand out toward where Sherlock’s lay on the table, not touching it. Sherlock looked at him a long moment, swallowed, and nodded. John laid his square hand very lightly over Sherlock’s long thin one. Sherlock’s hand was very cold and trembling under John’s, but it warmed quickly, and after a moment he turned it over so their hands clasped.

They sat there a long moment, Sherlock with his head bowed as though he were staring at their joined hands. John felt as though he were holding a butterfly. He sat very still, hardly daring to breathe. Sherlock sighed and lifted his head to look at John, a more direct look this time. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to come back,” he said.

John raised his chin a little to show Sherlock he did not care. “Then I’ll come here.”

Sherlock smiled very slightly and John gave his hand a tentative squeeze. Sherlock returned the gentle pressure and then carefully withdrew his hand. “Thank you. For coming.”

“I wanted to come,” John said. He took a deep breath and said in a rush, “Can I see you again?”

Anyone else might have thought him indifferent, but John saw the brightness in Sherlock’s eyes. “I’d like that,” he said formally.

“Next week then?”
“Yes. If that suits.”

“That would be—great. That would be great.” John could feel himself grinning again; God, he was hopeless, this conversation was so stilted and formal and fantastic and—“Shit, I have to get going. You know, bus.”

“Yes.” The old Sherlock would have already swirled toward the door in a blaze of motion—or ignored John completely to bury himself back in his work—but this Sherlock just sat still, looking after John as though not wanting to miss a single glimpse.

Chapter End Notes

"Creator of the Stars of Night" (Conditor Alme Siderum): As mangled by children As sung properly
Chapter 3

November

John seemed to spend the whole of that week beaming, mostly at people who stared at him in mystification.

“Well, I’m glad the visit went well,” Mycroft finally got in after John had burbled happily for ten minutes. They were at Mycroft’s restaurant this week, Mycroft sipping at a “crisp Sancerre” as John talked.

“Yeah, I wanted to call you on the train, but my phone had died—should’ve taken the charger—and then I had to work the next day. Sorry.”

“I’ve managed,” Mycroft said. “Tell me what he was wearing.”

This was the kind of request John had long since ceased to find weird, so he dutifully described Sherlock’s clothing as best he could remember and then, on further questioning, how much he ate, the type of pencil he was using, and the tea they’d drunk.

“He looked good,” John said, maybe a bit too firmly. “His eyes were…” he hesitated, searching for the right word. Not steady; Sherlock’s eyes had been constantly scanning the tearoom, but then they’d never been steady, always skittering about after his thoughts. Not clear, not bright; those words belonged to the old Sherlock. Not always in a good way. “…there,” he said finally. “He was there.”

“Smoking?”

“I don’t think so. I couldn’t smell it, anyway.”

“Hmm.” Mycroft nibbled meditatively at a bit of truffle.

“When did you tell him? About Mary and Emmeline?”

“A month ago. That was when he finally asked. I thought if he was asking, he might be ready to ‘reconnect’. Oh, don’t look at me like that; I did read those booklets they gave us. Some of us don’t require fifty readings to memorize something.”

“Did I tell you he’s writing a Christmas carol for a children’s choir?” John asked brightly.

Mycroft choked on his wine. “Dear Lord,” he said, and John felt his smile spreading impossibly wider.

John had picked up the weekend care centre coverage when he took the new job—it had kept the weekends from dragging at any rate. The irony was that for once in his life he didn’t need the money. He had plenty from Mary’s life insurance and the sale of the house, and Mrs. Hudson wouldn’t let him pay any rent since Mycroft was still covering the whole thing. (He’d tried to bring this up once with Mycroft, who merely said “Don’t be absurd” and changed the subject.) Now, however, he wanted his weekends free to visit Sherlock.

“I’m scheduled through the end of December, and I’ll still do those Sundays and Christmas, but
after that I’m out,” he told Sarah.

“Oh well. I knew you’d get a life sometime,” Sarah said. “Will you leave off smiling like that? You’re making me ill.”

“Everything makes you ill,” John said without rancor. Sarah was fourteen weeks pregnant.

“True.” She took a sip of the ginger tea she kept in a travel mug all the time now, looked at him, and shook her head. “Fine, I’ll get the Saturdays taken care of. Now go away. Don’t you see the rain out there? You’ve no business smiling like that.”

“You seem to have very positive feelings about the situation,” Ella said. Christ, he was even smiling at Ella.

“Yeah, I do. I tried so hard not to get my hopes up, but then it went so well, so that’s a huge relief. And I’m looking forward to seeing him again on Saturday, obviously.”

“What are your expectations?”

John shrugged. “We’ll just have tea again. I’m not going to push anything; I know it’s going to be a slow process. Two steps forward, one step back, like that.”

Ella nodded. “You have firsthand experience with PTSD yourself.”

“Sure. It’s different for everybody though, and there are other issues—I don’t know what he’s going to need from me going forward, but whatever it is, I’ll make sure he gets it.”

Mrs. Hudson was the only person who seemed as wholeheartedly delighted as John himself. “I knew that fresh country air would set him right,” she told John, handing over another box and bag. Mrs. Hudson knew only the little John had told her, and seemed to have concluded that Sherlock had had some sort of Victorian breakdown and had been packed off to a sanitarium. “I made some with sultanas this time. And I’ve signed up for a class in January to learn to make macarons!”

“Oh yeah, he loves those,” John said. “Thanks. I’ll see you Sunday, all right?”

Mrs. Hudson beamed at him and scurried back to the kitchen and Green Jacket said with undisguised envy, “She never gives me boxes of scones.”

John laughed. “She’s my landlady. And they aren’t really for me, it’s a present for an old tenant.”

Green Jacket’s accent was American, and presumably he hadn’t been around long enough to recognize John from the tabloids or know of Mrs. Hudson’s most famous lodger. John gathered up the box and gave the man a half wave: “Got to run. Have a good weekend.”

The week had been as relentlessly gloomy and dreary as a week in November could be, but the weather forecast had called for clear skies again Saturday. John had decided to take an earlier bus out and hike around the dales a bit, so he’d packed a rucksack instead of his overnight bag and threw in his boots.

After half an hour John was sick of hiking the dales. Why on earth did people enjoy this? It was
boring as hell. Every curve and dip of path just revealed…more dales. No wonder he lived in London: staring at the monotony of the beautiful scenery would drive him to drink. Well, back to drink. How did Sherlock stand it out here? In addition, he was freezing: he hadn’t taken into account how cold it was, and the wind kept whipping straight into his face. Enough of this, John decided; he was going on to the village and getting a hot drink, even if he was at least an hour early.

When he got to the tea shop, though, Sherlock was already tucked into his corner, working away. His startle at the bell turned into a brilliant smile when he saw John—almost as enormous as John’s had been, before the damn wind froze it right off his face.

“John! You’re early! Excellent, I need your help.” Sherlock frowned at him. “Your nose is running. What have you been doing?”

“Freezing my bollocks off,” John said, dropping into a chair.

“You’ve been hiking. Why on earth would you do that? And you’ve stepped in some sort of dung.”

“Shit,” John said, peering at his boot. His nose had been running too much to notice the smell. “Be right back.” He went to the loo and cleaned off his boot as best he could, coming back to find a steaming mug already at his place and Sherlock waiting impatiently with a stack of papers.

“What do you need help with? Is it the Christmas carol?” John couldn’t imagine what use he could possibly be, but was willing to give it a shot.

Sherlock waved a hand impatiently. “Of course not, that’s finished. No, there’s to be a memorial in Regent’s Park, for the war, they’re building it now. You’ve seen it? It’s to be dedicated next autumn. The ceremony will include an orchestral performance, a new work commissioned specially for the event. They’re accepting proposals now, with a representative bit of music, to make a selection.”

John had heard about the memorial; Harry had made a donation in his name last Christmas. “So you’re hoping to write the new piece? That’s brilliant!”

“Well, I wouldn’t have much of a chance ordinarily, but the field’s rather narrow—they’re giving preference to veterans, and the person who brought this to my attention had already made inquiries and been told that field work for the intelligence service would be considered acceptable.” Sherlock was fidgeting a bit now, not meeting John’s eye.

“Of course it is,” John said forcefully. He was under no illusions that his own deployment had been in the service of any aim nobler than Sherlock’s mission in the country John still thought of as Dalmatia. “You absolutely deserve to be considered for that.”

“Well.” The tension in Sherlock’s tight shoulders eased a little. “I may qualify as a veteran, but that doesn’t mean I can extrapolate from my own homecoming experiences. I was hoping you could help me with that.”

“Sure,” John said, not really clear on what Sherlock was asking. “What do you need?”

“Tell me what it feels like to come back from a war,” Sherlock said, picking up a pencil and looking expectantly at John as though waiting to be dictated a grocery list.

“Um,” John said, mind going completely blank. “I don’t—can I think about this and get back to you next week? Then I could ask around some of my mates a bit too.”
“Of course,” Sherlock said quickly. “More tea? Or are you hungry?”

“No, I’m fine, I had a big breakfast. We’ll get the afternoon tea spread in a bit. I’ll take some more tea though…” John thought about it a bit, drinking his tea. Sherlock looked at his papers and then away to perform the now-familiar sweep of the room, reassuring himself he was safe.

John wanted to help, to get Sherlock’s mind back on the music, but he knew it would take some time to organize those particular thoughts so they could be shared. At least he could finally feel his fingers again. If Sherlock was asking questions like this, maybe he was willing to talk a bit himself? “I think,” he said slowly, “that a lot of what it feels like, coming back, might depend on the circumstances. I didn’t want to return. I thought I had nothing here, and I was leaving behind people I cared about that I wanted to help.” Sherlock was watching him intently, his pencil loose in his fingers; his maimed left hand was curled out of sight in his lap. “But even—the blokes I know who were desperate to come back, even they had trouble, you know, adjusting. Like, everyone I know had trouble sleeping. Even I did, in London, because it seemed too quiet.” He looked straight at Sherlock. “Did that happen with you?”

“Mmm.” Sherlock’s gaze turned abstract, but he didn’t look away. “I had trouble sleeping in a bed.”

“Too soft?”

“Too big.”

John tilted his head, not following, and Sherlock elaborated, “In solitary we were kept in cells which I think were meant to measure six feet square. Mine was actually 181 centimeters by 180.5. There was no furniture.” His eyes refocused on John’s, his voice still level as though he were talking about something that had happened to someone else. “I thought I longed to sleep in a bed again, but of course I couldn’t. I slept in the wardrobe in Glasgow.”

John willed his face to stay calm, his eyes steady on Sherlock’s. “And now?”

“It’s better now,” Sherlock said flatly. He blinked and looked away, almost visibly withdrawing. Back off. “Good,” John said very gently. “I’m going to go tell them we’re about ready for our tea, okay? I’ll ask about that cake you liked last week.”

John went and asked about the cake, and the salmon they used on the sandwiches, and where they’d got those delicious cucumbers they’d had at this time of the year; and by the time he got back Sherlock was sitting up straight again and buzzing with impatience to see what John thought about other music he thought might be relevant. “Aaron Copland, sure,” John said agreeably, nodding along with no idea of what he was talking about.

April

Seven months earlier

John was just showing a patient out when his phone rang. He tensed automatically, adrenaline kicking up: no one phoned him at work, if Mary wanted to talk to him she would text Call when you’re between patients. Em—he pulled out the phone and saw Mycroft’s name on the screen, which made his heart rate skyrocket even higher.
“John,” Mycroft said in his usual bland tones. “A situation has arisen which involves you. It is imperative that we meet to discuss it as soon as possible. Tonight.”


“Sherlock’s situation is unchanged as far as I am aware. I have no new intelligence on that front. I have considerable other matters currently occupying my attention, but have cleared my schedule to meet with you. How soon can you be available?”

“Er—” the nurse stuck her head round the door, evidently wondering why John wasn’t calling for his next patient, and John held up a finger in a one minute gesture. “I’m scheduled through the end of the afternoon, but I’ll come round after that. Where shall I meet you?”

“I’ll send a car,” Mycroft said and disconnected.

John shook his head, befuddled, and texted Mary quickly. Mary knew about Sherlock’s capture and subsequent imprisonment, of course, though not in as much detail as John, and John had never brought up the issue of Sherlock’s feelings. He knew she would not object. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and turned to the computer to look at his next patient, putting the whole situation firmly out of his head for the moment.

“So,” Mycroft said. They were in Mycroft’s weird and slightly dungeon-esque office in Whitehall this time. “A subordinate of mine has received an unofficial request from an American counterpart. As a matter of policy, all such inquiries are vetted by me, of course.” He gave John his insincere, tight-lipped smile. “It seems that six years ago, a CIA agent named Kristin Amburgey disappeared during an operation in Pakistan. She was assumed dead. For reasons that were not disclosed, our American comrade now suspects that she did not die but instead assumed a new identity and is presently living in the UK. He requests that we locate her, if possible.”

John stared at Mycroft blankly. What could this possibly have to do with Sherlock?

Mycroft looked at John, sighed, and pushed a folder in front of him. He flipped it open.

John looked down at the picture clipped to the front and felt a jolt of shock so powerful he physically jerked in his chair. Mary. This had nothing to do with Sherlock at all, it had to do with Mary—or Kristin Amburgey, he supposed. He couldn’t seem to stop staring at the picture. The official story had been that Mary’s parents and younger sister had died in a house fire whilst Mary was at university, leaving her orphaned and without any childhood photos. He had never seen a photo of Mary this young, and never with such long hair. Brunette suited her, he thought distantly.

“You understand,” Mycroft was saying, “that under normal circumstances we would proceed with identifying and extraditing this woman, discreetly of course to avoid any further embarrassment to our allies.”

Extraditing. Mary would be arrested. She would be—would there even be a trial, or would it be some sort of secret tribunal, in America? Would John be able to visit her in prison? Em—oh God, it would kill Mary, to have her daughter grow up without her, and how would John manage, on his own with a small child and a wife in prison half a world away…

“John,” Mycroft said rather sharply, and John realized that Mycroft had already said his name several times. He tore his eyes away from the photo and looked up, feeling as though a great wind had knocked him loose from his moorings.
“Yeah?”

Mycroft’s eyes softened fractionally. “I was asking whether Mary Morstan Watson had fingerprints on file anywhere.”

“No. No, she doesn’t, we talked about it once, that’s why she didn’t…”

“Good.” Mycroft was leaning forward intently, disregarding the fact that John had just trailed off talking to stare blankly into space. “Good. That buys us some time.”

“Time for what?” John said, bewildered.

Mycroft raised his eyebrows, apparently surprised by the question. “To keep my promise to my brother, of course.”

John arrived home after midnight. He had eventually texted Mary with some lie about meeting up with Lestrade since he was nearby, and she had replied back cheerily enough, having seemingly not suspected a thing. Maybe he was a competent liar after all. John had gone to a pub, though not to meet Lestrade; he’d downed three drinks in numb solitude and then gone for a long, long walk in the park. It had been drizzling, a typical wet chilly night in spring, but he had not even noticed the icy droplets trickling down his neck.

Finally, hours later, he had made his way back here, to his street, to this tiny house that held everything he had ever thought he wanted. His beautiful wife, his precious child. Home. He stared at the house dully. Had it ever been home, really? Had he ever felt about this place as he had the flat in Baker Street? Maybe on some level he had always known it was just a dream. Just a magic trick, he thought, and felt a tightness in his throat.

Inside he slipped upstairs quietly, careful not to wake Mary, and settled into the rocker in the nursery. Emmeline slept peacefully in her cot, arms outstretched, her little mouth working around an invisible dummy for a few minutes before settling back into sleep. His daughter. How could he do this? How could he even contemplate it?

When Em stirred for her feeding hours later, John scooped her up carefully and warmed her bottle with quick, practiced movements. He carried her back to the rocker and fed her there, watching her placid face as she made short work of the formula and drifted back to sleep, a trickle of milk running out of her slack, sated mouth. The rain had stopped, but a soft dripping came from the leaves outside, loud in the stillness of the suburban night. He set the bottle aside and wiped her face clean. Then he held her close to his chest, rubbing his cheek against the soft furze of her hair and smelling her sweet baby-shampoo scent, and wept for the first time since he had stood by Sherlock’s grave.

In the morning John slid Em back into her cot, careful not to wake her, and slipped off to shower and dress as silently as he could. When he was ready he leaned over to kiss Mary, who was just stirring.

“Oh, are you leaving already? What time is it?”

“The usual—I fed Em, she should sleep a while longer if you’d like to have a bit of a lie-in.”

“Thanks.” She squinted up at him, still half asleep. “You look done in. Big night out with the
John tried to smile. “I suppose I’m a bit out of practice.” Mary was frowning up at him now, he needed to get away before she noticed just how off he was this morning. “You going out later?”

“Just round to the shops, yeah.” Mary took Em out in the pram most days; she said she got cabin fever otherwise.

“Bit damp out, be careful.” He kissed her cheek again and stood. “Something’s come up we need to talk over, tonight. Haven’t time now.”

“Oh, what is it? Has something happened with Sherlock?” She pushed herself up on her elbows, concerned.

“Something like that, yeah. I’ll tell you later.”

It was a long, long day.

John could see when he got home that night that Mary had been worrying, but she smiled at him brightly and didn’t press until after dinner, when Em had been bathed and fed and settled into her cot. Then she joined John in the kitchen, where the kettle had just boiled, took her cup of tea, and said levelly, “Tell me.”

John told her. He felt oddly proud that both of them were being so calm, although Mary went chalk white when he said the name ‘Kristin Amburgey’. She interrupted only once, early on, to say urgently, “We shouldn’t be talking here, there might be—”

“It’s safe,” John said. “Mycroft had it swept this morning whilst you were out. He texted me.”

Mary’s mouth opened slightly in dismay. “I didn’t notice.” She gave a small, humorless laugh and looked around, shaking her head. “They tossed my house, and I didn’t notice a thing. My God.” She shook her head again. “What’s happened to me.”

“They’re the best,” John said, quietly.

Mary was silent after that. He told her the situation, the fact that Mycroft would give the file back to his underling with permission to carry out the search for Kristen Amburgey, but that given the lack of fingerprints the process could take quite a while. He told her Mycroft’s offer.

“He can provide new identities, anywhere in the world. He can’t access state funds though so he won’t be able to—”

“That’s not a problem,” Mary said. Her expression had shifted, from shock to focused concentration. “I’ve money in reserve from before. Numbered account, everything memorized. I can take care of all that later. The priority right now is getting out.”

John nodded. “Mycroft’s working on it. A car crash, probably. He’s, er, rather good at it, planning fake deaths. Lots of experience.”

Mary looked up at him, eyes crinkling in the start of a smile, but almost immediately it faded. She looked at John a long moment and John saw the sadness in her eyes before her face hardened into
resolve once more. “You’re not coming, are you.”

John shook his head slowly, not trusting his voice.

Mary’s eyes glistened. “I couldn’t ask it of you, I know.” She looked at the stairs suddenly, tension in every line of her body. “Em—”

“Em stays with you. I couldn’t—“ Now his voice broke and he had to look away a moment, swallowing hard. “I couldn’t do that to you. Or to her.”

For a long moment they just sat there, silent, Mary with her hands gripping her cooling mug and John’s clasped on the table. After a while Mary reached over and folded her hand over John’s and John squeezed hers tightly.

They made love that night for the first time since the baby had been born. It was slow and gentle, a valediction, a last embrace for the sake of what they had once been to each other. Neither of them slept much. In the morning John said, “You’ll phone Mycroft this morning, then?”

“Yes. I know you said there’s plenty of time, but I want to get things moving—no sense taking any chances.”

“Right. I’ll see you tonight?” They looked at each other, feeling a strange awkwardness in this new limbo of their life together, Mary bouncing the baby a little on her shoulder, and then John stepped forward and hugged her swiftly, dropping a kiss on Em’s downy head before he went.

Three hours later John had finally got one of his elderly patients reassured that she was not, in fact, suffering from Lyme disease—Lyme disease!—when his nurse appeared, looking nervous. “Sir, there’s a policeman here, he needs to speak to you.”

John stood up in confusion, wondering if he’d been in such a daze he’d left his bike someplace this morning, and there was Lestrade.

“Greg! I haven’t seen you in ages! Is everything all right?” John had a crazy moment of wondering if Lestrade had somehow heard about John’s lie about spending the evening with him two nights previous. But no, that wouldn’t matter now, Mary knew where he had been…

“John,” Lestrade was saying, in a careful, gentle voice that made John instinctively want to back away; he had heard that voice before, with victims. “John, I’m so sorry, there’s been an accident.”

John stared at him in blank disbelief. There could not have been an accident yet, not so soon, surely? Mary was going to meet with Mycroft that morning and they were going to plan this. It would take days, loads and loads of planning, at least the weekend, he was going to get to see them again, he would get to say good bye, he would see his daughter before they parted forever, this could not be happening. “No,” he said, shaking his head. “No.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“No.” But it was. Your ineptitude at dissembling. It was the rooftop all over again, Mycroft using John’s genuine shock and grief to sell his lie. “No.” He could not seem to focus his eyes, he had gone entirely numb. He was not even sure his lips were forming sounds. Vaguely he sensed a crowd of people now, his nurse, the office manager, other doctors, Lestrade trying to urge him down into a chair, but they were all spinning colors and meaningless noise. “No, no. No. No.”
May

Six months earlier

John stepped out into the cool fresh evening, settling his satchel more firmly as he swung a leg over his bike. He had barely reached the corner when a black car pulled up alongside. “Dr. Watson,” the driver said politely.

John sighed, but he got in. He had not spoken to Mycroft since the funeral. He had been angry and half-blinded by grief at that point, but in the intervening weeks his fury had burned itself out, and he had made his peace with the situation. He had spent a last night cherishing his infant daughter, and a last night with his wife: no upside in prolonging the inevitable.

Mycroft was not in the car. John assume he was being ferried to the Diogenes Club or one of Mycroft’s other lairs, and was surprised when they pulled up in front of the type of restaurant John tended to frequent only when asking someone to marry him. He hoped Mycroft had no such designs. “I don’t know if I’m—“

The driver reached over to the passenger seat and passed back a tie. It matched John’s work shirt exactly. John sighed and reached for his satchel—good thing the car had such dark windows—and then put on the tie, craning a little to try to see his reflection in the rear-view mirror. The driver turned around to give him a once-over, nodding his approval. “Thanks,” John told him. He took a deep breath, his usual anxiety whenever Mycroft turned up tempered by the certainty that Mycroft would not choose a fancy restaurant to deliver bad news, and went in.

Mycroft was sitting in a discreet corner, discussing the wine list with a sommelier in what John assumed was French. “Bien,” Mycroft said decisively, folding the list, and the sommelier bowed and slipped away.

“Well, this is a change of pace,” John said, sliding into his seat. “What are we doing here?”

Mycroft raised an eyebrow. “You’ve grown tired of beans.”

This was true. John had a reasonable repertoire of dishes he could manage cooking, but there hadn’t seemed much point on his own, so he’d been subsisting on takeaway and, as Mycroft had noted, beans on toast. “Yeah, but…” They had once shared a plate of sandwiches at the Diogenes Club, and surely Mycroft had a cook? Or his butler could cook?

“I have my reasons,” Mycroft said enigmatically. He did not elaborate.

He does love being dramatic. The memory made John smile a little. The waiter arrived and presented them with menus. “I recommend the fish,” Mycroft informed John, sweeping his gaze down the page.

“Does it come with chips?”

Mycroft gave him a disapproving look and John stared blandly back. He realized with a small shock of surprise that he had missed Mycroft. They weren’t friends, exactly, but he was John’s link
to Sherlock, and there was no longer anyone else in John’s life who knew his secrets as Mycroft did. The waiter returned for their orders and Mycroft added, “and a truffled fonduta, to come with the wine,” and then turned to John. “I have some news,” he said more seriously. “But first, I wish to offer my sincere condolences. I hope you have not felt my recent silence to be insensitive. I thought you might prefer some…time.”

“Thanks. I’m doing all right.” The first week or so had been dreadful, a nightmare of guilt and exhaustion and people, and John had been desperate for them all to go away and just let him breathe. Things were better now. He wanted to change the subject, and he was completely focused on the word news. “We’re good; don’t worry about it. What have you got?”

Mycroft took a sip of water, which made John wonder about the wine—shouldn’t it be out by now? —and folded his hands in his lap. “Sherlock has managed to send a communication to his handler in Georgia. The crackdown by the…Dalmatian government which resulted in the incarceration of opposition leaders in their most punitive facility has predictably resulted in bringing those leaders into closer proximity than they would have managed themselves had they remained at liberty. As a result, Sherlock reports that he has been able to negotiate an alliance. The leaders of the Western-leaning and Islamic parties have arrived at a tentative power-sharing agreement and a plan for new government. Some diplomacy may be required with our American allies and Russian intervention is still a concern, but if elections proceed as planned next month, I have every hope for a favorable outcome.”

“And if that happens…you’ll get him out? That’s the deal, right?”

“If that happens I will not need to ‘get him out’. The political prisoners will be released immediately. Sherlock will be free to get on a plane and come home.”

“Wow. That’s…” John felt stunned. He was almost afraid to hope. “You’re sure it’s him? He’s okay?”

“Beyond a shadow of a doubt. The message was encoded and could only have come from him.”

John knew Mycroft would not joke about this, but the prospect of Sherlock actually returning, of an end to the last few months’ terror and worry and grief, seemed too precious to believe. “You’re sure, you’re really, really sure? This deal will hold up? Sherlock can come home?”

“Well, I am fairly confident of my ability to sway the Americans and not at all confident of my ability to sway the Russians. That being said, yes. As far as Her Majesty’s government is concerned, Sherlock will have done his part.”

Right on cue, the waiter appeared with the truffled fonduta, accompanied by the sommelier bearing a bottle of champagne. “Ah, excellent,” Mycroft said, accepting his flute and raising it to John’s. “About time we had something to celebrate, don’t you think?”

John felt happiness burbling up in him like the bubbles in the champagne. Everything was going to be all right. Sherlock was coming home—as early as next month, if Mycroft’s assessment was correct. He swallowed his champagne and felt a warm glow spread throughout his whole body, feeling suddenly immensely fond of everything, even Mycroft in his three-piece suit. He also felt ravenously hungry for the first time in months. What was truffled fonduta anyway? Who the hell cared, it looked amazing.

They ate in a companionable silence until Mycroft lay down his fork halfway through his fish and said, “Now that things are moving forward, I thought it might be a good time to discuss arrangements.”
“What arrangements?”

“What arrangements, of course. Why are you still in the suburbs?”

“Well, I live there, Mycroft. And my job is there.”

“It needn’t be,” Mycroft pointed out.

John chewed a minute, thinking. It was true. There was no real reason for him to stay in the house he had shared with Mary, although the thought of leaving the site of all his memories of Em gave him a sad ache in his heart. He liked his job quite a lot, but if he planned to pick back up his old life of running around with Sherlock…did he want that, his old life back? What did he want? He had known the moment Mycroft laid out his offer what his decision would be. If going with Mary and Em meant never seeing Sherlock again, then he could not do it. The guilt over giving up Emmeline was tempered by the certainty that if he went, his and Mary’s relationship would not survive the strain; he’d be gone in a year anyway. Even the thought of Mary marrying again, of Em having a new father, had brought surprisingly little pain: Mary would choose well—someone like David, maybe, devoted and steady and a little dull. A good dad. Deep down, John knew now that he’d never really wanted to be a father. But what did he want?

“Sherlock’s rooms in Baker Street are being maintained in his absence, just as they were before,” Mycroft was saying. “I know Mrs. Hudson would be delighted to have you back in residence, and I am sure employment could be arranged.”

That got John’s attention. “Hey, no. You are not ‘arranging’ a job for me. I can get my own job if I want one, thanks very much.”

“Certainly,” Mycroft said, eyeing a pot de crème as it sailed past him on its way to a nearby table.

“And I don’t know if I want a new job. I do have my own life now, you know. I’m not totally sure I’m ready to give all that up to go chasing around after Sherlock again.”

“I never understood why you did so in the first place.” Mycroft seemed magnificently uninterested in the topic now that John was getting worked up. “And since you have finally obtained some peace and quiet…”

“Exactly,” John said firmly, knowing perfectly well that he hated peace and quiet.

“We needn’t speak of it again,” Mycroft said airily, looking about for their waiter.

“Right.” John sat back in his seat, wondering why Mycroft looked as though he’d gotten exactly what he wanted. “Dessert?”

John arrived home later that night, feeling pleasantly stuffed and slightly fuzzy from the wine. He settled his bike, took off the tie, wondering if he should carry it around with him for the next time Mycroft grabbed him off the street or just keep it, and padded into the nursery.

The first several days after the “accident” John had sat in here for hours, holding Em’s sleeper that still retained a faint fragrance of baby shampoo and warm milk. The scent had inevitably faded, and John, unable to bear its loss, had retrieved the bottle of shampoo from the bath and dabbed it on the little white sleeper. He picked up the small garment and held it to his cheek, conjuring up the memory of Em’s silky hair against his face.
Emmeline was gone. He had made his peace with that. She would be nearly four months now, maybe rolling over; she would not even fit in this sleeper anymore. He had been given—again—a chance for a new life. What did he want?

For the first time since Mycroft had broken his news that awful night in January, John let himself really think about what he now knew. John was no longer a married man, not really a grieving widower. He had chosen to stay in London in large part because he hoped Sherlock would return. In spite of all his bluster to Mycroft, he realized now, sitting in the empty nursery, that of course he wanted his old life back. More than that: he wanted Sherlock. He had since the moment Mycroft told him all those months ago. He wanted his life to be with Sherlock, in every possible way.

The realization made John feel suddenly, startlingly light, the way he had when he’d taken off his pack during training. He sat still a moment, letting the sensation seep through his mind. It took him a moment to understand that for the first time in years he was no longer angry. In making his decisions, he had forgiven Mycroft, forgiven Mary, and—finally, completely—forgiven Sherlock.

John got up. He took the sleeper and the bottle of shampoo and closed the door quietly behind him. In his bedroom, he lifted the tray and all of the jewelry out of Mary’s jewelry box, leaving only her wedding ring, which had been returned to him after the supposed cremation. Then impulsively he opened the drawer where Mary had kept her scarves and pulled out the blue silk she had worn on their first date. He folded it into the bottom of the box, placed the ring on top, tucked the sleeper and the bottle into the jewelry box and closed the lid. It was time to move on.

Things fell into place with astonishing ease. The day after his conversation with Mycroft, John called Sarah to see if she could put a word out for him in central London, and Sarah practically burst into tears of delighted gratitude.

“Juliet—I don’t know if you remember, you covered her first maternity leave—well, she had twins this time, and she’d been saying she’d be coming back, but then she actually got home with them, and she just called me this morning and said she just can’t manage with three. And everyone hates the locum we have now, we’d never ask him to stay on even if he wanted the job, which he doesn’t…”

John would have suspected Mycroft, but even Mycroft could not have had the foresight to arrange for an opening at John’s old workplace so fortuitously…could he? Surely not. John’s current practice was disappointed but understanding—Mary had worked there too, after all. He sold his bike on craigslist and the house to a lovely young couple, taking their first, lowball offer because he liked the idea of them in the house, cleansing the place of the ghost of John and Mary’s doomed romance. He packed his clothes, his gun, a few things from the kitchen, and the wooden jewelry box. Some of Mary’s friends came round on a Saturday and went through her things, boxing up her clothes and all the baby things for a charity that helped domestic violence victims and binning the rest. He made them take the jewelry he had removed from the box. “Please, she’d want you to have it,” he told Janine, knowing it was true.

In the end, the pile of his possessions was not much bigger than it had been when he had moved to Baker Street the first time, five years ago. He was able to fit it all in the back of a cab.

John’s first night back at Baker Street was strange, nostalgic with a bit of melancholy, like his first leave back from Afghanistan. He puttered around the flat, taking stock of what had changed and making a list of things he needed to pick up from the shops. He could get breakfast at Speedy’s in
the morning. Back when he’d lived with Sherlock this was not something John did regularly, but he wasn’t usually going off to work then, and he’d generally had breakfast with Sherlock. He rather liked the idea of establishing a new routine, something to differentiate this chapter of his life: John In Baker Street, Waiting For Sherlock. He rummaged around in the box he’d deposited on the table until he found the whisky and poured himself a drink.

Out in the lounge John settled into the familiar comfort of his chair and found himself confronted by the gaping absence of Sherlock across from him. He looked at the empty seat, the bare music stand, the violin case and unnaturally tidy desk. Shit. No wonder Sherlock had moved his armchair. John got up abruptly and went to Sherlock’s room.

The bedroom was immaculate to the point of sterility, no half-read books on the nightstand or socks kicked under the bed. The room felt forlorn and abandoned. John sighed and looked at the bed, reaching out with one finger to touch a pillowcase, but he knew it was no good; the sheets would smell stale and musty, no trace of Sherlock left. On impulse John went into the bathroom, where Sherlock’s bottles still lined the top shelf in the shower.

Sherlock’s actual scent had been complex: poncy shaving soap and coffee and clean cotton, wool and tobacco if he had on his coat, but the smell of the shampoo alone still brought everything back to John: damp nights and danger and excitement. It also went straight to his groin. Well, that was a pleasant surprise. John honestly couldn’t remember the last time he’d been genuinely turned on—not since the night Sherlock was shot, probably. It felt good. John closed his eyes, summoning up the sense memories: Sherlock crowding John behind a door to hide, all cold air and wool and adrenaline; the clean scent of his damp curls as John leaned over his shoulder to refill his coffee; the silky brush of his dressing gown. John hadn’t really let himself think about this before, to fantasize about Sherlock, and suddenly he desperately wanted to, and yet…it seemed wrong, somehow. To think about Sherlock like that, without him knowing. And also a bit too much like counting his chickens. John firmly replaced the cap on the shampoo bottle, consoling himself with the thought that at least he could enjoy a decent wank in this shower for once without the hot water running out or Sherlock barging in.

December

“Here you go,” John said, pulling out a notebook and passing it across the table. He’d almost tossed it, but caught himself in time. “I wish I could have come up last Saturday, but you know, with Sarah in hospital for the hyperemesis—at least it gave me two weeks to talk to my mates.”

Sherlock was already scanning the notebook eagerly. “I’m glad you came early again. I thought you might give the trekking another go.”

John laughed. “I think I’ve done enough of that for one life. And it looks as though it might rain anyway.”

“Hm.” Sherlock was uninterested in the weather. “Samuel Barber. What’s this?”

“Mate of mine from the Army,” John said, deadpan. Sherlock blinked at him. “Sorry, bit of a joke—never mind. I asked around: if you were making a movie about your homecoming, or if you were standing at that memorial and thinking about your friends, what would the soundtrack be? Most of them said contemporary stuff, so I wrote it down if you want to You Tube. But a couple of guys mentioned Samuel Barber—well, they said ‘that sad bit from Platoon’, but I looked it up.”

“So more elegiac than celebratory then,” Sherlock muttered, adding some notes of his own in a
quick slashing hand. “Grab that notebook there, would you? I’ve a whole list of questions for you.”

John, emboldened by the way Sherlock’s face had lit up when he walked in and the steadiness of his fingers, screwed up his courage and said, “You know, you could always text me if you wanted to ask something. Or phone. The number’s the same as it was.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said. He looked up at John through his fringe, which was getting ridiculously long. “I suppose I could.” He looked back down at the notebook, but not before John caught the pleased tilt of his mouth. “Who’s Amy Winehouse?”

“Oh, you’re not serious…”

It was a good day. John found some of the songs he’d listed and passed his earbuds to Sherlock, who listened with varying expressions of horror or curiosity, and in his turn pulled up bits of music for John. He would then lean forward and stare intently at John whilst John listened, demanding, “First impression. What emotion?” until John threatened to stuff a cress-and-egg mayonnaise sandwich in his mouth to shut him up. Sherlock loathed egg mayonnaise.

“You want this last meringue?” John asked, surveying the wreckage of the cake stand. Sherlock was beginning to eat more of his share of their tea, a fact which gave John no small amount of pride, but he might need to buy a sandwich on the train instead of foregoing dinner as he had the last few times. He thought Sherlock might have put on a bit of weight, but that might just be wishful thinking. Sherlock was wearing an extraordinarily thick jumper this week, in a very pale shade of grey, which made him look like a Siberian husky.

“No, I’m fine.” Sherlock frowned down at his page. “Why has the light got so--oh.” The sky outside had darkened significantly, and now a loud rushing sound heralded the onset of a driving rain.

“Oh, bloody hell,” John said, peering out. “My bus will be along in ten minutes, and this would be the weekend I brought my laptop so I could catch up on work this morning.”

Sherlock tensed visibly, shoulders drawing together and biting on his lip, and then said rather stiffly, “I’ll give you a lift. To the train station in Harrogate; that way you needn’t worry about getting wet.”

“You have a car?” John said in astonishment.

“Oh, course I do. The abbey is five miles away; how else would I get here?”

John knew the bus continued on to the abbey, but now he thought about it, of course it was out of the question. Sherlock had barely tolerated the Tube back when he was healthy—too much sensory input, he’d once said dismissively when John asked—of course he couldn’t bear to be cooped up on a bus. “Well, sure, thanks. That would be great,” he said, trying not to show how his heart leaped at the thought of the extra time with Sherlock. “I’ll just…” he gathered his overnight bag and laptop case and headed for the door, getting halfway there before he registered that Sherlock was not with him. He turned back.

Sherlock’s limp was a horrible thing to see, not a mild little catch in the stride as John’s had been but a lurching, dragging struggle. John’s heart clenched. So this was why Sherlock always came early and left late: not only to be sure of the corner table as John had assumed, but to ensure John would not see him limp. John felt sick. He had known about the injury, of course, but now he realized for the first time that he had not seen Sherlock on his feet since they had said good-bye on the tarmac almost a year ago. He turned quickly, not wanting Sherlock to catch him staring, and
made his way slowly to the door.  

Sherlock caught him up a few minutes later, a bit breathless but with his head high. “Which one’s yours?” John asked. The downpour had slackened a bit but seemed to be thickening into sleet, and it was difficult to make out individual cars through the rain.

“Right there,” Sherlock answered, jerking his chin at the car nearest the door with a Blue Badge prominently displayed. “Advantages to being a cripple, you see? Won’t get wet.”

John smiled up at him, mostly in relief at his wry tone. “Want me to take your satchel? That way you can get the doors open.”

When they had got in the car John took both their wet coats and tossed them into the back, as Sherlock cranked up the heat so that the little car’s windows quickly clouded with steam. John noticed that Sherlock moved with difficulty, wincing when he had to apply pressure to the pedals, and that there were cushions tucked into his seat. “This is awful for you, isn’t it,” he said bluntly.

Sherlock stiffened but then sighed, peering out into the gathering dusk. “It’s difficult,” he admitted. “But I don’t have to do it often. Once a week or so to Harrogate and once to the tea shop. When I get back, I have muscle relaxants if I need them, and ice packs, or heat pads. It’s fine, John. Don’t fuss.”

John wanted very much to fuss. Conservative management had sounded reasonable back in Germany when Sherlock had refused surgery, but seeing Sherlock barely able to walk, in pain—he was surprised Mycroft hadn’t simply drugged him and given the go-ahead for surgery on his own. At least he wanted to demand that Sherlock stay at the abbey and let John visit him there as Mycroft did, but if Sherlock did not feel ready to extend the invitation John did not want to press.

They rode in silence to Harrogate. Sherlock’s whole body was rigid, though whether with tension or pain John was not sure. He felt guilty for being the reason for Sherlock’s driving, and worried about him, and depressed, because he’d thought things had been going so well. When they reached the railway station Sherlock pulled up as close as possible to the door, though the sleet had lessened to a thin miserable drizzle.

“Thanks,” John said, struggling awkwardly into his coat. “You sure you’re okay?”

“I’m fine, John.” Sherlock was looking fixedly out the front of the car.

“Well, okay. Be careful. I mean, because it’s wet on the roads and dark. And, ah, text me if you have more questions, yeah?’

Sherlock didn’t answer. John let himself out and scurried for the shelter of the station, turning around when he reached the doors, but Sherlock had already pulled away.

John’s phone had died again when he checked it in the train—maybe he needed a new battery?—but when he plugged it in that night a text was already waiting from an unfamiliar number.

Thank you for your assistance. SH

John exhaled and typed back: I would do anything for you. Anywhere, anytime.

There was a long pause. John pictured Sherlock considering possible replies, turning the phone over in his hand, maybe typing and erasing.

You shouldn’t. I’m a bad investment. You know that better than anyone. SH
Two steps forward, one step back, John told himself, but at the same time his heart was racing, alarms going off, shit, shit, shit. Sherlock had been re-hospitalized twice in the first month he’d been at the abbey, the second time because he had felt, as Mycroft put it, unsafe. This could not happen. John could not be the cause of Sherlock losing his hard-won ground.

John stared at his phone, mind racing but hands rock steady as he went through possible options. If this had been one of his friends from the Army he would have tried reassurance, empathy; but these were useless with Sherlock. Straight-up truth then.

Too bad, because you’re all I’ve got now. All my eggs in one basket. You jump off a building this time, I go too. So tell me what you need.

The pause this time was shorter, but it felt a million years long to John.

You could learn to drive.SH

John let out a breath of pure relief. Bit old for that. I’m sure Mycroft would get you a driver though. Probably a butler too.

I thought you were meant to be HELPING. SH

Is it working?

Yes. SH

Tell me the truth.

Yes. SH

I’m OK. SH

John considered the screen again. So many things he wanted to say, but even though in some ways this was easier—clearly much easier for Sherlock—they needed to be said in person. But there was one thing he could say.

I don’t care if you never come back to London. I don’t care if you never solve crimes again. If you stay in the country writing music for the rest of your life, that would be fine. You, right now, just as you are, you are the same person to me as you ever were.

Pause.

Thank you. SH

I’m not good at this. SH

You know that. But thank you. SH

Me either. OK?

OK. SH

Chapter End Notes
Samuel Barber Adagio for strings (the sad bit from Platoon)
Chapter 5

June

Six months earlier

The Dalmatian elections were cancelled two days later.

“How the hell can they just cancel them?” John said furiously. He was pacing around Mycroft’s office, not sure at whom he was most angry: the Dalmatian government, himself for getting his hopes up, or Mycroft for being unable to fix things. “Can’t the UN force them or, I don’t know, impose sanctions or something?”

“Sanctions have already been in place for years,” Mycroft said. “And the official pretext for cancelling was concern about outside interference, which is why the government ‘requested’ the Russian troops currently stationed along the border. Any action at this point would play directly into their hands.”

“Sherlock’s done all that he can—”

“Sherlock has not accomplished his mission, so I have no ability to attempt an extraction even if it would not increase his danger tenfold along with jeopardizing everything we have worked to accomplish.”

John glared. “So you’re just going to do nothing while Sherlock rots in that prison.”

“On the contrary,” Mycroft said. He opened a desk drawer and pulled out a bottle of whisky. “I’m going to get drunk. I assume you’ll be joining me?”

Eight long days later, the handler in Georgia received a coded message from Sherlock. The alliance was holding. Most of the Dalmatian army’s top brass were loyal to the pro-Russian government, but not all, and the rank and file were largely nationalist. Sherlock’s coalition leadership had contact with a general who was planning to stage a coup and hold new elections as soon as the Russian troops withdrew.

“So how are you getting the Russians out of there?”

Mycroft smiled his thin tight smile. “I’m going to delegate. It’s time our allies put some chips on the table.”

Two weeks later, a natural gas pipeline blew up near Krasnodar. Several organizations immediately claimed responsibility, including the Chechens, ISIS, and a Russian ecoterrorist group.

“The Russians have ecoterrorists?” John asked.

Mycroft shrugged. “They do now.”

The Russian troops pulled out from the Dalmatian border and moved north, hoping to find an uprising that needed to be quashed.

A week passed. Where the hell was the coup? John by now knew Dalmatia’s actual name—the cancelled elections had made the international news—and one night he gave in to his curiosity and opened Google.

His phone rang three minutes later. “John,” Mycroft said wearily.

“Shit, I’m sorry. I didn’t really think about it…”

“Meet me for dinner tomorrow, and I will show you on a secure computer after.”

John was beginning to suspect that Mycroft was coming to need his company as much as John needed his, but he was still surprised and a little grateful that Mycroft was taking the time. “Fine. But I’m paying this time, and I’m picking the place.”

Mycroft in a pub was almost entertaining enough to be worth an evening out in itself. He turned up his nose at first, but eventually he found some obscure beer that he deemed nearly tolerable, cleaned his plate, and beat several comers at darts. It was almost fun. John wouldn’t have been able to enjoy himself if he’d been out with Lestrade—the guilt and fear weighed too heavily on his heart—but it was different with Mycroft, who was as worried as John was.

When they finally left Mycroft didn’t even bother to replace his tie; he just rolled it up and stuffed it into his pocket. Back at his house he took off his jacket too, so he was in his shirt sleeves and waistcoat when he brought several satellite images up on his computer screen.

“This is the capital, here, and the presidential palace. Parliament meets here. We assume that these would be the natural targets of a coup. Here are some photos of the military compound…”

“Are those recent?”

“We’ve moved several operatives into the country posing as journalists. We’ve also encouraged the incursion of quite a few legitimate journalists. The best way to help a revolution is to focus the world’s attention on it, since that will make it harder for the Russians to interfere.” Mycroft sighed. “Things were easier when Magnussen was around. Only one media magnate to deal with.”

“Please tell me you aren’t serious.”

“Here is where Sherlock is being held,” Mycroft said, not answering.

John was expecting a Soviet-style gulag, but the prison looked more like a medieval fortress: all dark stone and looming walls, built right up into the mountainside. “Christ. It looks like something out of a Dracula movie.”

“Dracula was in the Carpathians, John, not the Caucasus. Would you prefer to call it ‘Transylvania’ now?”

“I don’t want to call it anything,” John said. Picturing Sherlock in that gloomy dungeon-like prison had left him depressed and a little hopeless. “I just want Sherlock back home where he belongs so I never have to think about it again.”

John was on his way to bed when Mycroft’s minions came round to fetch him. John immediately knew something was up—Mycroft hadn’t even texted first. He hurried back into his clothing and
into the car. John knew the driver by now, but the slender fair-haired woman in the passenger seat was new to him. “I’m taking you to Mr. Holmes. Security is rather tight at the moment,” she told John, and then buried her nose in her phone for the rest of the trip.

John checked the news on his own phone, covertly, but there was no breaking news about a coup. Still, this had to be it, right? Why else would Mycroft snatch him from his flat at nearly midnight? He tried to quell the anticipatory butterflies fluttering in his chest, but his traitorous imagination kept picturing Sherlock striding off the plane on that same tarmac, coat swirling and head high in triumph.

Fair-Hair led John through an unfamiliar warren of deserted corridors and finally deposited him at an unmarked door, where a dark man in an earpiece stared at him impassively and said, “One minute.”

Mycroft came through the door then and in an instant John knew that something had gone terribly, dreadfully wrong.

“John,” Mycroft said, his voice impassive. He tilted his head and John followed him a few feet away. He could feel his heart thudding noisily in his ears, as though to drown out whatever Mycroft was planning to say next. “We have received word that Sherlock is to be executed in the morning.”

John went still, the words echoing around in his suddenly empty brain. He understood them, they just didn’t make sense: it was as though Mycroft had told him that Mrs. Hudson had been named Prime Minister. He heard himself take a long breath through his nose and clenched his hands into fists to stop their trembling.

“So how are you going to get him out?” John asked, distantly surprised at the calm in his voice.

Mycroft raised his eyebrows and tipped his head toward the door of the conference room. “By jumpstarting the revolution. Should you care to listen in?”

Mycroft led John to where a knot of people were gathered around a large computer, a woman about John’s age in the centre. “John Watson, Amy Malinowski,” he said. “Ms. Malinowski is lending us a SEAL team.”

“Nice to meet you,” Amy Malinowski said, reaching to shake John’s hand. Her accent was American. She let go to reach for her earpiece, gaze turning abstracted. “Yes. Uh-huh….about twenty minutes ago. Yes.”

Mycroft tilted his chin and John followed him toward a small table holding tea and biscuits. “I want to go with them,” he said, knowing perfectly well it was hopeless, but he had to try.

“Impossible. The team is already en route.” Mycroft filled a teacup, which John noted distantly was an actual cup: no paper cups in Mycroft’s shop. “The plan is for them to fly in under the radar, contain the guards, and release the prisoners, with top priority being rapid identification and liberation of the opposition leaders. Our agents will aid the opposition leaders in making contact with their allies in the military and the resistance fighters, presenting the alleged prison uprising as a natural flashpoint for the revolution: a second Bastille, one might say. Our team will then depart as quickly as possible, taking Sherlock with them.”

“That’s pretty good,” John said. “But there’s no way you pulled that together in one night. How
long have you known?"

“Two hours,” Mycroft said and then at John’s disbelieving glare, “I didn’t become the British
government by failing to make contingency plans.”

That silenced John. He watched as Mycroft stirred artificial sweetener into his tea, tasted, and
added a bit more. “How long until they get there?”

“A few hours,” Mycroft answered. He glanced longingly at the biscuits, then turned away and
pulled a deck of cards out of his jacket. “Shall we?”

The hours crawled by. John drank several cups of tea and ate a few biscuits, mostly to annoy
Mycroft, who won almost every hand in spite of being interrupted continually by aides muttering
into his ear. John was staring at his cards, trying to force his mind to focus, when he became aware
of a new intensity in the low buzz behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw everyone
clustering around the Americans’ computer.

“What are they looking at?”

“They are tracking the SEALs on GPS.” Mycroft was studying his own cards with apparent
interest. “I’ve requested to be informed when they’re actually on the ground…there is a small
chance they may be forced to abort.”

John stared at him an instant and then gave up, dropping his cards to the table. “I quit.”

Mycroft glanced over at John’s cards pityingly. “Well. Good thing we weren’t playing for real
stakes.”

“Are you joking?” John said, thinking of what was at stake that night. “I’m just glad you’re on our
side.”

That got a real smile out of Mycroft, shy and almost surprised, and then Fair-Hair came up and
said, “Sir.”

The computer screen showed what looked to John like a Google Earth image of the prison, now
covered with scattered bright icons like a friend-finder app. “We’ve secured the perimeter and the
guards’ dormitory,” Malinowski said as they came up. “We’ll go to speaker now.” She nodded at
the stone-faced man next to her—military, John noted automatically—who nodded back and
touched a switch. “All right, Captain, you’re on speaker.”

“Ma’am,” A flat voice acknowledged. John could immediately picture the man from his own time
in Afghanistan: big, rock-hard, and stolid. “We’re leaving four men to guard the perimeter and the
guardhouse and proceeding to the main prison now.”

“Have you encountered resistance?” Mycroft said to the computer.

If the man was surprised by the new questioner, there was no sound of it in his voice. “No, sir.
Some of the guys in the guardhouse even cheered once they realized we weren’t Russian.”

Mycroft nodded, and they all watched the screen in silence. John could hear static on the other
side, punctuated by distant mutterings as the team leader talked to his men on the radio. The bright
icons moved, clustered, spread out. John imagined Sherlock, somewhere in the compound’s vast
dark bulk. Did he know about the execution? Had he been lying awake, thinking it was his last
night alive? Could he hear the soldiers now?

“Okay, we have secured two of the cell blocks,” the SEAL leader’s voice came over the speaker, almost startlingly clear. “We have identified Jupiter and moved him to the command post, repeat, we have Jupiter.”

John glanced at Mycroft quickly and got a quick negative shake: not Sherlock. “Can he contact Mars?” Malinowski asked.

“Negative, Jupiter reports that only Venus knows his identity. Wait.” A moment’s silence and distant staticky muttering, then: “Jupiter is requesting that he be allowed to contact the resistance groups still hiding in the mountains.”

Mars must be the general, John thought, and resistance groups in the mountains: surely those were the Islamic militants? Malinowski did not hesitate. “Jupiter may proceed.”

“Yes ma’am. We’ve moved into the other cell blocks now…no resistance in the other cell blocks. It looks as though the guards have fled, but there’s no place for them to go except deeper into the compound.”

Silence. Minutes ticked by. John realized that he was digging his nails into his palms hard enough to draw blood. He was almost afraid to breathe, afraid he might miss hearing something.

The captain’s voice came again. “We have Venus and Saturn. Venus is proceeding to the command center to contact Mars now. Saturn reports that both Neptune and Mercury were removed from the general population some weeks ago and believes they were moved to solitary confinement. However, one of the guards who surrendered early on is saying that he believes Neptune is in the infirmary.”

“Advise,” Malinowski said.

“We’ve located the infirmary and doubt we’ll encounter much resistance. Solitary is in the least accessible part of the compound and we believe some of the guards may be barricading themselves there. Recommend we proceed to the infirmary first.”

Shit, John thought. Mercury just had to be Sherlock. His hunch was confirmed by the tightness of Mycroft’s mouth when Malinowski glanced up. “Neptune may need medical attention,” Mycroft said. “Agreed.”

John clenched his jaw but stayed quiet. They were all motionless, staring tensely at the screen, where a small knot of icons moved slowly, then quickly, then went still. If John were there he could have helped, could have taken care of this Neptune so that the others could get on with finding Sherlock—

“Ma’am, Neptune is not in the infirmary,” the leader’s voice said calmly. “We have intelligence from the other prisoners that he died a few days ago. Leaving Davis with the guard to check records and proceeding to solitary.”

There was a collective exhalation and an outbreak of muttering among some of the aides. John gathered that Neptune’s death could have serious implications, but he couldn’t be arsed to care at the moment.

The speaker crackled to life. “Remaining leadership has contacted Mars and the other opposition leaders. All parties proceeding to capitol. Venus, Jupiter and Saturn are requesting to be allowed to join them.”
“Transportation?”

“Prison trucks, ma’am. Also we have confirmed Neptune’s death secondary to injuries received while in custody.”

And now the revolution had a martyr, John thought, as Malinowski said, “Proceed.”

John’s eyes were glued to the screen, where a cluster of icons had stopped and not gone any further for the past few minutes. There was an abrupt burst of what sounded like distant fireworks from the radio. John’s teeth were ground together so tightly his face was aching.

“We have secured access to solitary,” the leader announced. “Several of the guards were prepared to offer resistance but have been subdued. Lieutenant Sanchez advises that this part of the prison is old and lighting is poor. Cells have solid doors that have to be unlocked manually, so it might take some time.”

Five minutes. Ten. John suddenly became aware that he needed a piss, but he would stay at that computer until they found Sherlock if it meant pissing his trousers in front of all Whitehall.

“Ma’am, requesting identifying marks for Mercury,” the voice said suddenly.

John felt his guts turn to water as Mycroft inquired calmly, “Have you found a body?”

“No sir. The prisoners are nude. They appear traumatized and are slow to respond to requests for identification. We are hoping to expedite the process.”

Jesus, John thought, as Mycroft answered, “He has a healed bullet scar in the middle of his chest.”

“Lower third of the sternum,” John blurted abruptly. His voice sounded too loud in the quiet room. “Near the xiphoid.”

“Bullet scar lower sternum, confirm.”

They waited. John’s brain tumbled the phrases around: poor lighting, solid doors, detained nude, traumatized, trying and failing to make sense out of them until a single sentence crystallized: the love of my life is in a fucking dungeon.

“Ma’am,” the leader said and John’s heart leaped into his throat, but then he went on, “Opposition leaders have left the prison compound along with several of the other prisoners. Temporary leadership has been established among those remaining and they will be assuming control of the prison.”

“Understood,” Malinowski said. “Prepare to withdraw as soon as Mercury is located.”

John distracted himself for a few moments watching the movement of the little icons. He forced himself to breathe, trying to force down the icy numbness creeping into his body. The men would find Sherlock alive, they had to. He willed it to happen, saw it in his mind’s eye: the door opening and Sherlock standing there, as indifferent to his undress as he had been at Buckingham Palace. “You took your time,” he’d drawl, sweeping his gaze over the soldier, and then, just to underscore that he hadn’t been worried at all, something like, “Well, you’re a long way from Tennessee.”

John was so caught up in the fantasy that he jumped when the voice came: “We have Mercury, repeat, we have Mercury and are preparing to withdraw.”

John stood rigid, afraid to believe it, and Mycroft asked with a tightness in his voice for the first
time, “You are certain of the identification?”

There was a crackle of static and then a new voice said, “Six feet, light eyes, scar from gunshot wound on the chest, able to identify himself in British English, asked what he was looking forward to when he got home and replied ‘a proper cup of tea’.”

“That’s him,” Mycroft said and John felt all the air rush from his body in an enormous exhale. They had him, Sherlock was safe, all of those American soldiers were carrying him along as their little icons rushed toward the end of the screen where their helicopters must be, they were bringing Sherlock home. Everyone was suddenly talking and laughing at the same time, the tension in the air draining away in the noise. John looked around at Mycroft, who was grinning in a way John had never seen before, and tried to reach out to slap his back; his muscles were so stiff from standing rigid that he practically fell into him and they ended up in an awkward hug instead.

“Jesus Christ,” John said, finally getting his balance back and wiping tears from his eyes, laughing shakily. “Mycroft, for Christ’s sake, please tell me where the loo is.”

John was astonished to see that it was daylight outside. The night seemed to have gone on forever, and the realization made him even more exhausted than he had been up until that moment. He’d vaguely assumed that they would all pack up and disperse, but realized when he got back to the conference room that everyone else’s day was just getting started: they now had to monitor the revolution.

“What happens to Sherlock?” John asked Mycroft. “You’ll let him go home, right?”

“No immediately. He’ll need to come back here for debriefing.”

“Can’t he have a bit of a break first? He’s been in prison! Let him at least have a kip and a shower. And a decent cup of tea; you know he said he was gagging for it.”

Mycroft looked at John as though astonished he could find his way back from the loo without help. “That was a countersign.”

“Still,” John said mulishly, refusing to back down.

Mycroft sighed. “We need to have the information about this alliance he’s negotiated—who’s involved, who can’t be trusted, whether things are likely to change with Neptune out of the picture. It will just be a few hours, and then you can take him back to Baker Street and Mrs. Hudson can make a great flap and feed him up.”

John considered going back to Baker Street himself, but Sherlock’s plane would arrive in a few hours and it hardly seemed worth it. Besides, he felt invested in events in Dalmatia now, and reluctant to leave the buzzing hive of the conference room for the emptiness at home. A few aides arrived at that moment to set up a large breakfast spread. That settled that, John decided.

John filled a heaping plate and collected a large cup of coffee. He was shortly joined by Mycroft, who had filled a rather large plate himself. John looked at the pile of bacon and pastries and decided not to tease him—Mycroft deserved a celebratory breakfast.

He didn’t get it. They had taken only a few bites when Amy Malinowski came over, an expression on her face that made John stop chewing immediately.

“I’m afraid your brother’s condition has deteriorated,” she said quietly to Mycroft. “They’re
requesting permission to divert to Germany.”

John’s food turned to ash in his mouth.

Mycroft frowned. “Why? The difference is only an hour or so, things can’t be that serious.”

“I think it is. He’s had a seizure.”

John tried to swallow the dry lump in his mouth, failed, and took a huge swig of water to force it down. Mycroft said, “All right,” slowly, and Malinowski turned to give a quick nod to the man at the computer screen before returning her attention to Mycroft. “What happened?”

Malinowski shook her head. “They don’t know. Sanchez said he was shaky and agitated when they got to the helicopter, but they thought that he was just cold or his blood sugar was low, or that he was upset about Neptune. After they transferred to the plane he started vomiting and got very pale and sweaty. They assumed that it was motion sickness, but then he started seizing.”

There was a brief silence. John’s mind was already racing, trying to think of plausible reasons, causes, but he could do nothing here, he had to—John stood up so abruptly his chair squealed, and for a moment the buzzing room fell silent.

John turned to Mycroft and said, “Get me to Germany.”
December

John did not put up any Christmas decorations. No one expected him to: people had begun to tiptoe around him as they had the first few months after the accident. As much as he tried to push it to the back of his mind, part of John was a bit heartbroken, knowing that his daughter was having her first Christmas without him.

John always pictured Mary and Em as living in New Zealand. He’d never been there, but he liked the thought of the beautiful hobbit-y scenery, exotic and familiar at once, and Mary would pick up the accent quickly. Em would be crawling now, maybe working her way along the edge of the coffee table, perhaps a few teeth. Her fair hair would be longer. She might have a bow in it, a red bow for Christmas, and a red dress, although it was summer there, wasn’t it? Not a velvet dress then. Did they have Christmas trees in New Zealand? John didn’t know, and he didn’t dare look it up in case he was actually right and Mycroft shut down his internet again.

Speedy’s, on the other hand, had Christmas cheer to spare. Someone—probably Mrs. Hudson—had draped fairy lights and tinsel over every available surface, and there were cheerfully annoying Christmas carols playing. Sherlock would have hated it, John thought, smiling as he drank his coffee. The usual morning rush was sparser than usual, and some of the regulars were missing; gone to visit family, probably. The skinny girl with the pierced nose was there, but she had a companion today, a startlingly professional young woman in a crisp jacket. They were sitting next to each other and holding hands under the table. Girlfriend back in town, maybe. John looked at them affectionately and caught Green Jacket’s eye, and they grinned knowingly.

“Here you are,” Mrs. Hudson said, appearing with a box and a small bag. “This is the Christmas cake. I don’t have my mince pies done yet, but you can take them up next week, can’t you?”

“Hope so,” John said. He tucked the box into his overnight bag.

“You’ll give him my love, and tell him I expect him back here next Christmas,” Mrs. Hudson said firmly. “Oh…” she looked at John sadly, and John knew she was feeling desperately sorry for him: family gone, best friend…well. “I know the country air’s meant to be helping him, but it’s not right, him being away from Baker Street.”

John, who had just been thinking that at least this couldn’t be as bad as last Christmas, gave her a one-armed hug. “He’ll be back next Christmas,” he said firmly. “And if not, well, we’ll just go to him.”

If Speedy’s had thinned out, Lucy’s Tea Room had filled up. Families visiting from out of town, John assumed, as he made his way to where Sherlock was looking trapped and edgy in his corner table. “Hey,” he said by way of greeting. “Did you see the sign on the door? They’re going to be closed between Christmas and New Year’s.”

“Yes. The bus won’t be running its regular schedule either.”

“So, I suppose we won’t be able to meet here next weekend,” John said slowly.
Sherlock fiddled with his pencil. “I was thinking,” he said to the table. “Perhaps you’d like to have tea at my rooms at the abbey. The bus runs in the morning—I could pick you up here at the bus stop and then take you back to Harrogate for the evening train. Unless you’ve other plans, obviously.”

“Of course I don’t have other plans. And I’d love to see your rooms.” John did not try to hide his smile, which felt as huge as the Christmas wreath on the shop door. “And that way I can bring you your mince pies, because Mrs. Hudson said they aren’t finished yet.”

“Oh well in that case,” Sherlock said with a feigned nonchalance that fooled neither of them.

“How’s the research?” Sherlock had apparently undertaken to listen to every piece of music written about, for, or against every war in human history, and he had demanded John’s opinion on many of them; in one night John had been sent links to both the “1812 Overture” and “War Pigs”. That had been his favorite so far. “I listened to that Vaughn Williams thing…”

July

Five months earlier

Even Mycroft Holmes couldn’t immediately produce a private jet that could take off on a moment’s notice in some of the world’s most crowded airspace, so the fair-haired woman—whose name turned out to be Phoebe, or so she said—took John back to Baker Street to change and pack. It was noon before they finally left.

“Any word?” John asked Mycroft, who was sitting opposite frowning at his phone.

Mycroft shook his head. “He’s been taken to the hospital at the air force base and they’re evaluating him. That’s all I know.”

John nodded and looked out the window, feeling drained now that he no longer had anything to do. “How’s the revolution going?”

“Quite well. The government leaders have been placed under house arrest, and the opposition has dissolved parliament and called for new elections. People are starting to come out of their homes and there are signs that there will shortly be celebrating in the streets. The remainder of the military brass has apparently seen the writing on the wall and publicly declared their support for the will of the people. Not a shot has been fired.”

“Well,” John said. A few hours ago he would have been genuinely pleased, but now he could muster only a dull gladness that whatever Sherlock had gone through hadn’t been for nothing. “That’s good, I guess.”

After all of the waiting and hoping and agonizing, six months of constantly thinking about him, John didn’t even recognize Sherlock. He walked right past his bed.

“John,” Mycroft said softly.

John came back slowly, staring. The figure on the bed was curled into the tightest possible ball, with his back to them, all the bones of his spine showing through the gap in his gown. His hands were clenched over his head, as though to block the world out further. John glanced up at the drip automatically: normal saline, a bolus, he must be dehydrated. His hands. Sherlock had beautiful hands, long and elegant, but these fingers were so gaunt they looked like twigs. The nails on his
right hand were filthy and broken; Sherlock would hate for his nails to be like that, they had dug tiny bloody crescents into his bare scalp. His head was shaved. He must look so strange without his curls, his exotic eyes and cheekbones unbalanced by their softness. Was he trying to clench his fingers in hair that was no longer there? John looked at his hands again, those familiar-unfamiliar fingers, and felt a surge of nausea: three of the fingernails on his left hand were gone.

John must have swayed because he was abruptly aware of Mycroft gripping his arm. He closed his eyes for a minute, bracing himself, then he firmly shoved down the wave of sickness and moved slowly around the bed. Sherlock’s skin was the colour of old parchment and he was shivering. “Sherlock?” John said softly. His voice cracked. “Sherlock, it’s me. It’s John.”

Sherlock made a low desperate sound deep in his throat, moaning, but then he lifted his head. His eyes were unfocused and watering, and there was a livid scar running along one eyebrow. “No,” he said. “You aren’t real, none of you are real, get away.” He was not even looking at John. He gasped and clutched at his abdomen, face screwing up in pain. His whole body shuddered.

“Sherlock…” the thin sheet had slipped down from Sherlock’s shoulder and John reached for it, thinking to pull it up over his shivering body. “Are you cold?”

At the touch of John’s hand Sherlock cried out and jerked away as though he had been burned, unfocused eyes wild and terrified. John leaped back, terrified he had somehow hurt him, and then Sherlock rolled abruptly into a crouch and began retching violently. John grabbed a kidney basin and shoved it in place but it appeared Sherlock had already vomited himself empty; the repeated spasms of dry heaves produced only a thin string of bile. John watched helplessly. After a minute Mycroft appeared at his side, holding a damp flannel.

John realized Mycroft was holding out the flannel to him. “Thanks,” he muttered. Sherlock had stopped retching and was now folded over himself, back heaving as he gasped for breath. Finally he rolled gracelessly to his side and lay curled as he had been when they arrived. John clenched his teeth and pushed the flannel carefully into his hand and Sherlock reflexively took it, then reached shakily to wipe the tears and mucus from his face.

John was not sure what exactly was going on, though he was beginning to have an idea. Sherlock’s dilated pupils, the cramping and sweating and vomiting, his tearing eyes and nose: he had seen those symptoms before, in Afghanistan and earlier. But Sherlock looked like a fucking concentration camp victim and his nails were gone and there were marks on his arms and back and where was that fucking doctor anyway? The nurse who brought them back had promised to page him.

Sherlock’s bloodshot eyes focused and this time he seemed to be seeing John’s face. “John?” he said, sounding almost like his usual self for an instant.

“Yeah,” John said. He made himself smile.

“Oh,” Sherlock said on a long breath. He closed his eyes for a minute as though overwhelmed by John’s presence and shivered, hard, then opened them again. “Oh.”

“Do you want me to pull your sheet back up?” John lifted his hand but did not move it closer, not yet; he did not want to make Sherlock flinch away again.

Sherlock’s brows drew together and John realized that Sherlock was staring at his outstretched left hand—no, not his hand, at his bare ring finger. “No,” Sherlock said in a voice of broken misery. “You aren’t real, after all. You’re John Before. John Before isn’t here anymore, there’s only John and Mary, you aren’t real…” The tears were running down his face again and he shuddered harder,
screwing up his face in pain and despair.

“No, Sherlock, it’s me,” John said desperately. “Please, Sherlock, I’m real, will you let me touch your shoulder? Can I pull the sheet up at least?” He looked at Mycroft but Mycroft stood on the other side of the bed, rubbing one hand over his eyes.

Sherlock’s whole body abruptly went rigid. His irises rolled up under his half-closed lids, so far John saw only white, and then the jerking started, harder and harder. He was seizing. John swore and grabbed for the oxygen on the wall. “Hit the code button! The blue button!” he said sharply to Mycroft, who was staring at Sherlock with an expression of frozen horror. Mycroft blinked and turned toward the wall and John saw the lights begin flashing out of the corner of his eye as he attached the tubing and turned the valve up as high as it would go. He slid the mask over Sherlock’s face and held it in place, his other hand cradling the bare vulnerable curve of Sherlock’s skull as though he could somehow soothe the fragile brain within.

John sat unmoving by Sherlock’s darkened bedside. Mycroft and the doctor had stepped outside to talk, but John had not wanted to leave Sherlock. He already understood the essence of the situation and had no desire to hear any more details, not yet. He wished he could somehow turn down the volume on the doctor’s voice as they had turned down the lights, but the unwanted words drifted through.

*Status epilepticus*

*Withdrawal*

*Fosphenytoin loading*

A day ago John had still believed Sherlock would come swaggering home, but all along Sherlock had been wasting away into the ruined skeleton lying limp and still on the bed, face slack behind the oxygen mask. John could not look at him. He stared instead at the reassuring steadiness of the cardiac monitor.

*Refeeding syndrome*

*Arrhythmia*

Sherlock’s gown had slipped off his shoulder. There was a knot on his clavicle John had never seen before, distorting the smooth line of the bone. At least the rest of him was covered: his arms and back, his brutalized hand.

*Inflicted injuries*

*Burns*

*Fractures*

Sherlock would have pulled the gown back into place. Or ordered John to do it. He would have hated to be exposed like that, to have been seen so disheveled. John remembered how violently he had shivered; it was cool in the room. John wanted to pull up the gown. He wanted to pile blankets on the bed so that Sherlock would feel warm and safe.

He did none of those things. He did not dare. Perhaps if John did not disturb him Sherlock could rest: the post-ictal unconsciousness would slide into sleep, and when Sherlock woke he would be
himself again. Maybe.

Dissociative reaction

Damage

Guarded

No.

“Before we get started,” the attending physician said, “I’d like to make sure everyone’s aware that we would have preferred to have had Mr. Holmes with us, but he’s made it clear that he is not up to being in a group of people yet, or to discussing the circumstances that brought him here. So. I’m just going to take a minute to run through what we know…”

Sherlock had been tortured on several occasions, the last just over a month prior to his extraction. He had been in terrible pain, and oxycodone had been easily obtainable in prison. After the last time he had been transferred to solitary confinement and at that point had also begun taking high-dose alprazolam.

“Opioid withdrawal is nasty but not life-threatening,” another doctor explained. “Benzodiazepines, on the other hand, can cause serious problems if discontinued abruptly at high doses, and that’s what we’ve been dealing with here: seizures, psychosis, hallucinations.”

“Mr. Holmes was also admitted in a severely compromised nutritional state, which compounded the difficulty in treatment,” the attending added.

John knew all this, and he knew that Mycroft understood it about as well as he did by now, but he could tell that they were winding up to get to the point so he let it go.

“However, we feel we’ve made a great deal of progress,” the attending continued. “As of this morning Mr. Holmes’ electrolytes have been stable for two days and he’s able to tolerate oral feedings. There have been no seizures since the day after admission and while still exhibiting considerable confusion, he’s much more oriented than previously. We feel he no longer needs to be on a high acuity monitoring unit.”

Well, that was progress. This was apparently the psychiatrist’s cue. “At this point, I think the best thing would be to transfer Mr. Holmes to a med/psych bed on our floor and continue the clonidine and benzodiazepine taper, oh, probably another seven or ten days or so. At that point he’ll be stable enough to move to an inpatient program closer to home.”

Mycroft frowned. “Is that necessary? You just said he’d be medically stable.”

The psychiatrist was kind but firm. “It’s become increasingly clear that Mr. Holmes has fairly severe post-traumatic stress disorder, although obviously the withdrawal is exacerbating his symptoms—irritability, hypersensitivity, anxiety and so on. He’s going to need a full 28-day program to address both the PTSD and the substance abuse.”

Mycroft looked at John. John sighed. “She’s right,” he said as gently as he could. “Sherlock’s at extremely high risk of relapse or…of relapse or worse. He needs serious help.” Much as John wanted to whisk Sherlock back home to Baker Street and protect him, that was not the best thing for him at the moment.
Mycroft gave him a brief you-traitor look and turned back to the psychiatrist. “Do you have any recommendations? I would appreciate your unvarnished opinion; money and location are not a concern.”

“I would recommend Glasgow. They have a highly respected unit for working with victims of torture…and while it’s not exactly next door to London, it’s not so far as to make the transition to outpatient care difficult.”

Victims of torture. John had to swallow, but Mycroft was as impassive as ever: “Then I will make arrangements. What about the physical injuries?”

“Well, that’s a bit more complicated,” the attending said, taking charge again. “For the most part the fractures and burns are healed or healing and there isn’t much that can be done.” He turned the computer screen to face the rest of the table, tapping on the keyboard to bring up the films he wanted. “You can see these are nearly healed, this is the callous formation here, on the ribs, and obviously this is the clavicle fracture…here’s the real problem: this sacroiliac damage, here, and these vertebral fractures. As you can see the transverse processes were displaced and angulated and they’ve healed badly, putting pressure on the nerves. Our neurosurgical colleagues are unable to make it today”—John had to look away to hide his smile; apparently surgeons were the same the world over—“but they assure us this would be likely to improve with surgery. However, Mr. Holmes refuses to consider surgery, so we’re going to have the pain team meet with him when he’s a bit more coherent to go over his options for pain management. Probably gabapentin is the best option for the time being as that would help with the neuropathy…”

John tuned out at that point—the neurologist he’d rung back home had said the same. Twenty-eight days. Before all this happened he would have laughed his head off at the idea of encouraging Mycroft to pack Sherlock off for four weeks in an inpatient psych unit, but as Sherlock’s physical condition stabilized, his psychological fragility had become alarmingly apparent. John could hardly take care of him in London when Sherlock would not even look at him. If the best way to help Sherlock was to let him go, then John would let him go.

“I suppose I’ll go back to London,” Mycroft said. They were sitting over coffee staring out at the offensively beautiful late summer afternoon. “There’s no point hanging about if he’s going to refuse to see us. The hospital in Glasgow should be sorted, but I need to be sure his pardon is arranged.”

“That’s not going to be a problem, is it?”

“No, absolutely not. The Dalmation elections came off without a hitch. They’re establishing a model democracy: tolerance and inclusion for everyone, including the Russian minority. It’s a honeymoon, of course, but at the moment I’m more worried that my superiors will want to ship Sherlock off to Ukraine.” John glanced up in alarm and Mycroft, reading his face without even looking at him, said. “Of course not.”

“Okay,” John said. He had been given a stack of booklets by the social worker at the med/psych unit and now he spread them across the table in a fan, like a hand of cards. *Understanding PTSD. Al-Anon. Survivors of torture: a guide for families.* “I’m going to stay. Read up on these, do some research online, show up at visiting hours every day whether he sees me or not. Be here.”

“Maybe he’ll see you if I’m not here,” Mycroft said. He pulled the Al-Anon booklet toward himself with one finger, mouth twisting slightly; it was stapled to a list of meeting times and locations. “He wouldn’t speak to me the last time either.”
John frowned. “When he came back from being dead?”

“When he went to rehab.” Mycroft pushed the brochure back into place.

“No,” John said. He felt suddenly, unexpectedly angry, and he seized on the anger with relief—it felt so much better than anxiety and misery. “No bloody way. I know what you’re doing, and I can’t say I wouldn’t do it too, but I won’t let you. You want this to be all about the drugs, you want the story to be that your junkie little brother couldn’t handle the temptation, but that’s not what happened. Forget about what happened before. Sherlock took those drugs because he was in too much bloody pain to do his job. You’ve never been in pain, have you? Real pain? You have no idea what it does to you. And then they took him and put him in solitary, told him he was going to the firing squad, that he’d failed; they put him in the dark alone—” John could hear his voice beginning to shake; he had seen the pictures in the SEALs report—“with nothing, nothing to observe, nothing to deduce, nothing for his brain to do and you know that’s the one thing he—” he had to stop then, turning back to the window and clamping his jaw tightly.

There was a long silence and then Mycroft sighed. “You’re right,” he said softly. “You’re right. I apologize.”

John flicked a quick glance at him and Mycroft said, “And for the record, I had a kidney stone once. I cried like a baby and demanded every drug in the house.”

John laughed before he could stop himself. “You wouldn’t be the first,” he said. He blew out a breath, gathered his brochures, and stood up. “Come on.”

“Where are we going?”

“Back to the hotel to change. If it’s your last night in Germany, we’re going to a proper beer garden tonight.”

John read the Survivors of torture booklet so often it fell apart. He read everything he could find online. He bought textbooks on Amazon. He went to support groups for family members and joined message boards. He was in a new chapter of his life now, what he thought of as John In London, Waiting For Sherlock, Part 2, and he was determined to make the most of it. He went back to Ella. Once, after going to a support group meeting at a church that ended just as a service was starting, he even went to church, having the vague notion that praying for Sherlock surely couldn’t hurt; but as soon as he sat down he got back up again, feeling an utter hypocrite. John didn’t need Ella to tell him that he was falling back on the classic overachiever habits that had carried him through his medical and military training, as though by going to enough meetings, reading enough books, he could make Sherlock well. He knew he couldn’t. But John could damn well be certain that he would be ready to be there for him in every possible way.

John learned that treatment of torture victims generally proceeded through three stages. The first goal was to establish a place or a feeling of safety; the second to remember and process traumatic events. Only then could Sherlock move on to the third stage, reconnection. John had thought he understood from his own PTSD experience, but realized quickly that Sherlock’s adjustment to his old life was going to be a long, long process. Learning that Sherlock would not be returning to Baker Street after he finished his inpatient treatment was a blow, but John understood, and he was undeterred. John was waiting for Sherlock. He would wait as long as it took.

Chapter End Notes
The Ralph Vaughn Williams thing is *The Lark Ascending*.

It is commonly associated with WWI, although the most famous story about it—that Vaughn Williams began composing it while watching troops depart from Margate, and was arrested because he was assumed to be a spy making notes on troop numbers—is probably apocryphal.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Thanks so much to Khorazir who made beautiful perfect art for this chapter! See link at the end.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

December

The following Saturday John climbed off the bus and straight into a blast of air so frigid it seemed to have come straight from the North Pole. “Fucking country air,” he muttered, pulling up his coat collar and thinking resentfully of Mrs. Hudson. He looked around and spotted Sherlock over by his little car, overlong hair whipping around his face.

“How is it always so much colder here?” John demanded, buckling himself in with relief.

Sherlock shrugged. “Farther north, lack of buildings to block the wind. The weather patterns are actually quite fascinating.”

“Oh Christ,” John groaned, looking at the desolate countryside sweeping past him. “You like it. You actually like it.”

“Well, not the cold so much,” Sherlock admitted. “But I like the wind. And the storms. I’m quite looking forward to spring.”

John considered that. Maybe it would be pleasant with daffodils and wildflowers in bloom, at least if the fucking wind ever let up. “I suppose. Hey, how did your Christmas carol go over?”

“Haven’t heard yet. But no one from the Church has shown up to revoke my residency, so I suppose it didn’t offend anyone at any rate.”

They rode along in a companionable silence until Sherlock turned off the main road onto a long drive, with a small plaque reading “Reigate Abbey Retreat Centre” on the ubiquitous dry-stone wall. The car climbed steeply up a long hill and turned, and there was the abbey: a sweeping Gothic church, surrounded by an architectural jumble of buildings from a whole range of time periods, all built of stone the same grey as the sky. It was a bit forbidding.

“How old is this place anyway?” John asked, craning his neck to peer up at the stained-glass windows as they passed.

“There’s been a monastery on this site for at least a thousand years,” Sherlock said, pulling into a nearly-deserted car park. “But none of the current structures are that old. The monks would pull down a building and re-use the stone.”

“Please tell me they put in heating at some point.”

Sherlock smiled. “Doubtful, but fortunately the current management has done.” They got out—at least the buildings cut the wind a little—and Sherlock led John to a huge wooden door set into a long building with a tower at one end. “This used to be workrooms, but they’ve all been turned into
flats for the staff. Mine is this way. You might want to go first, or give me a head start—you’ll be stuck behind me else.”

“You can go first; I wouldn’t know where we were going,” John said, looking up the staircase and wondering why on earth Sherlock had an upstairs flat. Sherlock dragged himself up two flights of stairs—almost literally, he was hauling his way up the banister apparently by sheer force of will—and when they came out on the corridor John asked, “Why don’t you have a flat on the ground floor?”

Sherlock had been leaning against a wall catching his breath. Unexpectedly, he smiled, his old familiar I-know-something-you-don’t smile. “You’ll see,” he said, and led John through an arched doorway which led to yet another staircase, this one much narrower. Up another flight of stairs, to a landing with a single door (“That one’s empty, the floor’s rotting”), and another, and finally the staircase dead-ended at another single door.

“Phew,” John said, now rather winded himself.

Sherlock unlocked the door and stood back to let John go in first. “Oh, wow,” John said, stepping in. The flat was a single large room, with enormous recessed windows on all sides. They were at the top of the tower, John realized. “Look at that view!” The whole of the dales seemed spread beneath them, undulating gently off into a hazy horizon. He turned around to take in the room: tiny kitchen in the corner, ancient radiators tucked under the windows, furniture crammed in between: table, desk, music stand, sofa, linen press, invitingly saggy armchair, and what looked to John’s uneducated eye like a miniature pipe organ. A suicidally narrow staircase snaked up the wall behind him. “This is amazing. I can see why you put up with the stairs.”

“Best place for a composer,” Sherlock said, indicating the little organ. “A whole empty storey between me and the rest of the building, and with walls this thick I could bring in a heavy metal band and no one would hear it.”

“Good point.” John looked up the narrow staircase. “Is that your bedroom up there? Can I see?”

“Oh, of course.”

John climbed up carefully—there was no outer railing, and he had no desire to fall off onto his host’s head—and came out into a low-ceiléd garret with a single large window. An ancient four-poster bed had been built right into the alcove, making it look like a cross between a ship’s bunk and an eyrie. John, who had vaguely pictured something like his own old bedsit, couldn’t help grinning at it: it was the most fantastic bed he’d ever seen. He understood now why Sherlock had said he was sleeping better in the contained cozy space. “Your bed is amazing!” he shouted down the stairs.

“It is, isn’t it?” Sherlock said, appearing at the bottom of the stairs holding a tea towel. “I had the draperies taken down because I like to see out, but I might have to put some of them back up once summer comes or I’ll have no sleep at all. Tea’s almost ready.”

John climbed back down to find Sherlock had brought a teapot and dishes over to the tiny table set into the one alcove without a radiator. He looked out the windows and saw they were overlooking the rest of the abbey; a cloistered quadrangle sat directly beneath them.

“Sorry I can’t offer as much variety as Lucy’s,” Sherlock said drily, bringing over a large platter.

John burst out laughing. The platter held at least five different Christmas cakes, none of them Mrs. Hudson’s. Apparently his transformation into a reclusive composer had not lessened Sherlock’s
enigmatic appeal. “You’ve quite a following,” he said.

Sherlock dismissed this with a shrug. “I’m sure Christian charity plays a large role. It’s far more palatable when it comes with cake.”

“Most things are…where’s Mrs. Hudson’s?”

“Oh, I ate hers already. It’s far better than the others.”

“I’ll be sure to tell her, she’ll be thrilled. Which is second best?”

Sherlock immediately looked interested. “I haven’t tried to find out. We should do a comparison! Don’t eat yet…” He limped to the desk and returned with paper and pens for them both, labeling the cakes by number and saying sternly to John, “No commenting until we’re finished. You’ll bias the results.”

“So how do you manage with those stairs?” John asked.

“Mostly I don’t. I have my shopping brought in, and a woman comes once a week to clean and do the washing and take away the rubbish. So I rarely go out at all except when I’m going to Harrogate or the village to see you, and the driving is far worse than the stairs. It actually helps a bit to walk up them after I’ve driven to Harrogate; it helps with the spasms. Have you tasted all the cakes? Now you must give each a rating and then rank them. Should we rate them on multiple factors or just taste?”

It was the best tea yet. Admittedly by the time he had finished John was ready to avoid Christmas cake for the next twelve months, but seeing Sherlock relaxed in a place he felt safe made John realize how tense he had always been at Lucy’s. They wrangled cheerfully over their selections—Sherlock liked his icing far too sweet for John’s taste—but agreed loyally that none were a patch on Mrs. Hudson’s.

“How’s your composition coming?” John asked. Sherlock had been essentially finished the previous week.

“Rather well. I need to record myself playing the melodies, but I’m still practicing to get it perfect, so I keep making tweaks. The music is written though.”

“Is it? Will you play it for me?”

Sherlock hesitated, his face going pinched for the first time. “I have to see the door when I play,” he said slowly. “And bolt it.”

John understood immediately. “Right. What if I pull that chair over and sit in front of the door? That way you know I’ve got it blocked and you can see where I am.” Of course Sherlock would be wary of losing himself in his music. John realized for the first time that the tower room served another purpose: Sherlock felt secure here, safe on top of his world with his metre-thick stone walls and heavy bolted door.

“All right,” Sherlock said slowly, still looking uncertain.

John dragged the battered old armchair over to the door and ostentatiously checked it, even though he’d seen Sherlock lock the door when they came in. There really was a bolt, a heavy iron thing so old and ornate it might have repelled Vikings, and the door itself was massive—it was probably thicker than Sherlock. “Nobody’s getting through this thing without a bomb,” John said, secretly hoping the building never caught fire. He settled back into the armchair—which was extremely
comfortable—and looked at Sherlock.

Sherlock was fiddling around with his bow, clearly stalling, but when he met John’s eye he took a deep breath and straightened. “There are three parts. The first movement is meant to be one of anticipation, of the soldier’s departure. There’s just the violin for now but I plan for there to be a lot of trumpets—well, when I learn how to write for brass.” John laughed and Sherlock, looking slightly reassured, went on, “The second movement is the war itself. It’s meant to have percussion, very low, to sound like distant gunfire or thunder, so just imagine that bit. I do have composition software, but I mostly use it to see how the different bits sound layered—it doesn’t sound like real music, at least not to me. The third movement is mostly strings.” He took a breath and fixed his eyes on the door above John’s head.

Even with only the violin, John could tell that the first movement was bright and almost happy. He remembered himself as a young officer, brave and patriotic, and suddenly he knew as surely as he knew his own reflection that Sherlock had written this part with John in mind. He had taken his knowledge of John and deduced this shining young soldier, and made him into music.

The music trailed off and Sherlock abruptly went to the desk and scribbled something on a sheet of paper. “That’s still not right,” he muttered. He straightened up and frowned at John for a moment—who kept still, afraid to say anything—and then abruptly his face cleared and he crossed out what he had just written, writing in a new string of notes. Then he raised the violin and played a triumphant little flourish. John clapped.

“No, don’t clap, that’s only the first movement,” Sherlock admonished. “Now comes the second. Remember, there are supposed to be drums.”

Even without the drums, the sense of dread and foreboding came through clearly in the second movement. John shifted uneasily in the sagging seat, feeling a creep of unease on the back of his neck: the memory of long, long stretches of anxiety-filled boredom. Jesus, Sherlock was good at this. John really hoped there were veterans on the committee that would hear his music.

Sherlock paused briefly at the end of the movement but then went straight into the third without comment. This time the music was dreamy and muted, with faint echoes of the melodies from the first two sections woven in, and John understood: the third movement mourned not just the loss of the idealist who had left for war, but the loss of the war itself.

The music ended and Sherlock lowered his violin, glancing at John and then away, biting at his kip.

“God, Sherlock, that’s…” John said, at a loss for words. “That’s incredible. It’s like you took all the things I couldn’t say—that none of us could say—and you made them come alive. I can’t believe anyone could write a better piece than that. They just couldn’t.”

Sherlock’s smile could still illuminate the darkest winter day. “Do you think so?”

“Of course I do. Oh, come on, since when are you modest? You have to know that’s fantastic!”

“Well, maybe a bit,” Sherlock admitted. He looked immensely pleased. “Would you mind if I just made a few notes on the first movement? I think I know what it needs now.”

“No, go ahead. This is nice,” John said. He leaned back in the squishy chair and made himself comfortable, basking in the heat from the radiator and the familiar sound of Sherlock’s violin. He felt perfectly content. Sherlock played a passage, then again, then again slightly differently; it was oddly soothing, and John closed his eyes and drifted off.
When he woke the room was dark and Sherlock was plucking something, a melancholy fall of notes that repeated over and over like a music box, hypnotic and oddly sweet. “That’s pretty,” John said, smiling. He opened his eyes and blinked. “It’s really dark. How long did I sleep?”

Sherlock frowned down at his watch. “Not that long, we’ve plenty of—oh.”

John followed his gaze and stood up to see better. “Bloody hell. Look at that! When did it start snowing?”

“I don’t know,” Sherlock said. He was gazing wide-eyed out the window, apparently fascinated by the serendipitous appearance of a blizzard to study. “It’s blowing almost horizontally, look! It’s already drifting on the north side of—John. I’m not going to be able to drive you back to Harrogate.” He ran his hands through his hair, looking almost comically distressed. “We can’t even see the drive now and I’m sure no one’s clearing the roads; perhaps in the morning—“

“Sherlock, it’s fine. Don’t worry. I’m not working tomorrow; my last day at the care centre was Christmas. They have guest rooms here, right?”

“Yes, but the staff are mostly gone for the holidays. Although I could certainly pick a lock, but they might have turned off the heat to the guest rooms.” Sherlock pulled at his too-long hair again, making himself look like a tragic Regency hero, to John’s amusement. “You can take my bed. I don’t sleep much anyway, and I can always sleep on the sofa. I’m told it folds out into a bed, though I’ve never tested it.”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I’m not taking your bed,” John said. “I’m fine sleeping on the sofa.”

“I’m sure the mattress is horrible,” Sherlock muttered, frowning at the sofa.

“I was a soldier, Sherlock, I can sleep anywhere. I’ll be fine on the sofa, if you don’t mind me staying here, I mean.”

Sherlock stilled in his agitated fluttering to stare at John. “Of course I don’t mind.”

“Well, that’s settled then,” John said cheerfully. “Can I move that lamp over here? Think I’ll make myself at home since I’ll be staying a bit.”

That evening John was poking around in the refrigerator whilst Sherlock heated beans on the stove when John heard a distant trilling. “I think your phone’s ringing,” he said.

“No, it’s just an alarm.” Sherlock retrieved the phone and silenced it, dropping the phone on the table.

“An alarm? What for? Do you need to take some medication?”

“No, it’s to remind me to eat.”

“Oh.” John was unable to decide if he found this sad or reassuring.

Sherlock glanced at him and said, “Here, take a look.”

John took the phone and looked at it. Sherlock was using an app of the sort favored by bodybuilders and serious fitness freaks, on which he tracked his total daily calories. The app showed a graph monitoring how well the user was meeting his goals; John scrolled back through
the previous month and was pleased to see that almost all the days since they had started meeting were green, with an occasional yellow thrown in. Curious, he then scrolled back to where the entries started in September. Very little green here; mostly yellow, quite a few reds. Some of the red days listed only a few hundred calories. Probably tea, John thought, pained at the idea of Sherlock turning away from the scolding alarm, unable to bear the thought of eating.

“I used it before when I was away,” Sherlock said. His back was to John, stirring the beans. “Not this time, I mean, the time before, when I was dead. I didn’t have the app then though. I pretended it was you. I had a recording on that phone from a message you had left once saying, ‘You need to eat’, so I set it up so that the phone would call me, and when I answered your voice would tell me ‘You need to eat’. I thought it would make you happy, that I remembered to eat. But I never had a chance to tell you in the end.”

John swallowed and set the phone down carefully. “It does make me happy,” he said quietly.

Sherlock quirked a half smile at him over his shoulder. “I’m sorry I haven’t any alcohol. But then you rarely drink it now anyway, do you?”

“I stopped drinking alone,” John said, feeling it was his turn to make a confession. “It got—a bit out of hand, when you were gone before; even after Mary came I was still drinking rather too much. And then, after the accident, it would have been far too easy to fall down that hole again, so after I moved back to Baker Street—“

“You moved back to Baker Street?” Sherlock said in surprise.

“Well, yeah. Didn’t Mycroft tell you?”

“Mycroft tells me nothing unless I ask. He seems to think I’m not ready for information if I don’t request it, but how am I to know what to request?”

“And you didn’t deduce it?” John said, grinning now.

“Well, of course I deduced that you’d moved house,” Sherlock said impatiently. “Shaving in different light; no more cycling to work, you’re using the stationary bike or the treadmill now; the decrease in alcohol consumption was a confounder but your dietary habits also changed…still, how was I to know you’d moved to Baker Street?”

“Well, now you do,” John said cheerfully. “Here, I found some satsumas. Dish up those beans and you can deduce what’s going on back home and I’ll tell you if you’re right.”

In the middle of the night, John woke abruptly to the sensation that something was wrong. He knew where he was—the sofa bed in Sherlock’s rooms—and nothing seemed off, but something had definitely woken him. The room was dark and utterly quiet. The quality of the silence was so absolute as to have almost physical force, as though he could actually feel it pressing on his ears…wait a minute. It hadn’t been this quiet when he went to sleep. He’d been listening nostalgically to the knocking of the ancient heater, thinking how it reminded him of the one his gran had had when he was a kid.

John sat up and squinted toward where he thought the kitchen was and sure enough, the little numbers on the stove were out. Now that he was sitting up he also realized that the room was freezing. Shit, weren’t these thick walls meant to retain heat? John leaned over and fumbled in his open case until he’d retrieved the jumper he’d been wearing the day before, which he put on over
his pyjamas, and his socks. Then he got his clean socks too and put them on over the old ones. He remembered seeing a heavy woolen blanket in the linen press, so he got up and fumbled his way to where he thought it was. He bumped into the edge of the staircase. Shit, John thought again irritably, rubbing his bruised knee.

A faint sound from upstairs caught his attention. “Sherlock?”

Silence. But this time it was not the absolute quiet that had pressed on him in bed. He could hear the sound of Sherlock’s breathing, shallow and irregular: he was not asleep.

John stood indecisively at the bottom of the stairs for a moment. Had it distressed Sherlock, to wake to darkness and silence? Surely it must have done, John thought, thinking of what he knew about the solitary confinement where Sherlock had been held. He hesitated for a moment, irresolute, but then he heard that faint choked sound again and that decided him.

John climbed the stairs cautiously, although his eyes had adjusted to the gloom by now, and squinted over at the bed. “Sherlock?” He could just make him out, a dark form huddled in the farthest corner of the bed. John took another step and saw he had his face pressed into his knees and his hands over his head. The sight of those white fingers clutched in the dark curls gave John a sickened jolt of recognition.

Okay. John made himself think back to his own first days back, when the thing he hated worst was people making a fuss over his limp or worse, his tremor. Everything fine it was, then. John raised his voice a little, keeping his tone as matter-of-fact as possible. “Hey, Sherlock, I think the power’s gone out. Do you have any candles or anything?”

Sherlock lifted his head. His pupils were huge in the dim light, eyes glassy and unseeing. “John?”

“Yeah. I’m right here. Do you want me to see if I can find anything for a light?”

“I don’t mind the dark,” Sherlock said. His voice was very calm and distant, at odds with his pale face and trembling hands. “I like the dark. I don’t mind the quiet either. It’s the cold. I don’t like the cold.”

“Well, let’s get you warmed up then,” John said, relieved at having something practical to do. He crossed to the chest of drawers and found the Siberian Husky jumper by its heft in the second drawer. He ran his fingers over the socks to find the warmest pair, careful not to disorder them, and pulled out a thick wad of wool. It was very soft. Did Sherlock actually have cashmere socks? He took a second pair that felt more ordinary, just in case the first turned out to be a scarf or something.

“Here you go,” John announced briskly, setting the clothes on the bed. “I’ll be right back. I’m just going to pop down and bring up the extra blankets.” He retrieved the woolen blanket and the duvet from his sofa bed and carried it all back up the stairs. Sherlock had the jumper on and was struggling laboriously into the socks, a difficult task on his weak side.

“We’d be warmest if we just pile these up and get under them together,” John said, “but if you aren’t comfortable with that or you’d rather sit up—”

“Under the covers is fine,” Sherlock said. His voice was very quiet and he wasn’t meeting John’s eye, but the unfocused glassiness seemed to have gone. John spread the extra covers over the four-poster bed and Sherlock slid underneath them and curled up tightly facing the door. He was shaking so violently John could hear his teeth chattering.
John was plenty cold himself at this point, but he wasn’t sure of the best way to do this. Should they lie back-to-back? Surely spooning was not an option, but that was the fastest way to warm up. In the end he compromised, climbing carefully behind Sherlock and curling himself parallel as close as he could get without actually touching.

After a long time Sherlock’s shivers gradually slowed and then stilled, and John sensed the tautness of his body relaxing. “Better?” he said softly.

“Better,” Sherlock answered. His back was to John, but the room was so quiet that John could hear him clearly.

“Maybe Mycroft could find you a warmer monastery,” John suggested. “In the Mediterranean, perhaps.”

“Mm. Or I could get captured in a hotter country—that might be simpler.”

John felt his senses shift to full alert. Sherlock never talked about his captivity. “Was it very cold there?” he asked, hoping he sounded casual. He really was curious—they had rescued Sherlock in July, after all.

“Not the regular part of the prison.” Sherlock’s voice had taken on that flat, distant quality again. “But in solitary…they have a name for it. Not the Hole, the phrase doesn’t translate exactly, but the exact meaning is ‘the nothing that has no end’. The Abyss, I suppose, or the Void. I prefer Abyss.” He was quiet a minute. John lay perfectly still, afraid even to breathe. “It was in the oldest section of the prison, carved right into the mountain itself. More cavern than building. The cells…the cells were very small, as I told you, and made entirely of stone. In one wall there was a metal door and in the door was a sort of hatch, like a cat flap but higher, that bolted from the outside. In the floor was a drain. Those were the only features of the cell, the only things that distinguished wall from floor or one wall from another. The darkness was absolute. The silence was absolute.”

Pause. A breath. “I didn’t mind the dark. It was safe. They’d shone lights in my eyes, during the interrogations. I liked the dark. I tried to train my other senses to compensate, at least at first. I thought I could learn echolocation, but there was very little to practice on. I tried to enhance my sense of touch, but I had only cold wet stone, and metal. I listened. I didn’t mind the quiet either; the main prison had been so loud, so many people, all the time. But the cold.” Another, longer pause. “We had no clothing. Twice a day, the guard would open the hatch in the door and shine in a light to be sure I was still alive. In the morning, he then shoved in some food—bread, or potatoes. In the evening, he put a hose through the hatch and sprayed down the cell and the prisoner so that any waste went down the drain. I tried to appreciate that I wasn’t left to rot in my own filth, but … it was so cold. Everything was cold, and so wet, it never dried. I would crouch in the corner, hoping to conserve my own heat that way, but I couldn’t bear to lean against the cold wet wall or to sit on the cold wet floor and I would become so disoriented, balancing there, I would lose the sense of the ground beneath my feet.” Sherlock had begun to shiver again and now he stopped talking, curling more tightly around himself. John scooted closer, desperate to give him his own warmth.

“Is this—Sherlock, is this all right? Can I touch you?” Sherlock did not answer, so John closed the gap between them and reached tentatively to touch Sherlock’s arm. Sherlock stiffened briefly, but then John felt him shift and his cold fingers brushed John’s. Slowly, carefully, John slid his arm around Sherlock’s waist and pulled him into the curve of his body. After a long moment, Sherlock’s long thin fingers clasped John’s and laced them together. He sighed, and John felt him relax again.

John lifted his face from where he had pressed it between Sherlock’s shoulder blades. “I am so, so sorry,” he said as steadily as he could. “I am so sorry this happened to you. I can’t make it not have
happened, but I can promise you this: I will do everything in my power to be sure you are never
cold and alone again.”

“Don’t say that,” Sherlock said wearily. “You don’t mean it. You feel guilty, and you’re a healer.
You want to fix me.”

“Of course I want to fix you. Of course I feel guilty. But that’s not why I stayed behind and let my
wife and child leave without me, and it’s not why I’m here now. I’m here because you matter more
to me than anything in the world.”

“Don’t,” Sherlock said, almost angrily. “If you didn’t want me before when I was fantastic and
amazing, then why would you want me now I’m broken?”

“Because I was a blind arse and I thought you didn’t want me and none of that matters anymore,”
John said bluntly. “And anyway, you wanted me when I was broken.”

“You weren’t broken. You only thought you were.”

“And neither are you,” John retorted. “Not in any way that matters to me. You see? It’s just like I
told you before. If you try to send me away I won’t go. If you try to leave I’ll follow. Now that
I’ve finally got my head out of my arse, I’m never letting you go again.”

“I don’t understand,” Sherlock said. His voice was simultaneously harsh and desperate, an
undercurrent of bewilderment running beneath. “Why? Why didn’t you go? You had everything
you ever wanted. That was why—”

“Sherlock.” John squeezed his eyes shut, as though even the sight of Sherlock would make him
lose his nerve. “Mary and I were done. Or we would have been, if I’d gone. I didn’t see it until I
had to make the choice. Yes, it broke my heart to lose my daughter. But I can live with a broken
heart. I can’t live without you.”

“But you aren’t—you don’t—you don’t—”

Sherlock sounded as though he were struggling to get
the words out.

“I do,” John said gently. “I really, really do. But that’s the least important thing. We can take all the
time you want on that, or it can be never. We can work all that out later.”

Sherlock took a harsh, brittle breath, and then another, and another. Then he let go John’s hand and
turned over, so that he was looking straight into John’s eyes. John held still and prayed everything
he felt showed in his face, that Sherlock would search his eyes and believe, and it must have
worked, because Sherlock closed his eyes and let out a long breath. He opened his eyes and looked
at John, the silvery irises melting into darkness as his pupils expanded.

“I don’t want to do anything you don’t want,” John whispered.

Sherlock took another breath, then reached one hand very slowly and settled it lightly along John’s
cheek. It felt almost unbearably intimate, but Sherlock’s eyes were still on John’s, wide and dark
and hopeful.

“Can I?” John whispered.

Sherlock’s lashes fluttered closed again and John took that as a yes. He raised his own hand and
slid it into Sherlock’s soft hair. Sherlock sighed and tilted his face up so that John’s hand cupped
the back of his head. The movement brought them even closer, and Sherlock opened his eyes
again. John could feel his breath on his cheek as Sherlock’s lips parted.
“Can I,” John whispered again and felt the tiny nod beneath his hand as he brought them together. Sherlock’s mouth was so soft against his, so tentative. He felt infinitely fragile and precious in John’s hand, but now he was warm, and alive, and his tongue was sliding against John’s in the sweetest kiss John had ever known. It seemed as though they had been kissing for ages when John became aware of a sudden brightening beyond his eyelids. He pulled back a bit and opened his eyes, looking back over his shoulder.

“Oh, look,” he breathed. “Sherlock, look at that.”

The snow had stopped, and now the wind had blown away the last of the low scudding clouds to reveal a three-quarter moon, lighting everything with the crisp precision of a black-and-white photograph. John raised himself up on one elbow to look out. Everything was so bright—John had no idea snow could reflect so much light. Maybe Sherlock had a point about this country thing. John looked back down at Sherlock, who was still lying on his side, and saw that Sherlock was gazing not at the moon but at John. The expression on his face was one of utter wonder. John thought he might have looked a bit wonderstruck himself: Sherlock, with the planes of his face sharpened and hollowed by the moonlight, his wide darkened eyes and tumbled curls and kiss-swollen lips, was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. “You are fantastic,” he whispered, bringing one finger to brush along Sherlock’s cheekbones and over his lips. “You’re amazing.” He kissed him again. And again, and again. They kissed for what seemed like hours, lost in each other’s touch, gradually drifting into sleepiness as the night wound down.

A gust of wind rattled the window behind him and Sherlock startled in his arms. “It’s okay, it’s just the wind,” John murmured.

“Do you mind…”

“No, course not.” John climbed clumsily over Sherlock so that Sherlock could face the door again and held out his arms, and Sherlock settled his head into the hollow of John’s shoulder as though it had always belonged there.

John lay watching the moon out the window, feeling inexpressibly happy. He expected Sherlock to be wakeful, but to his surprise Sherlock actually fell asleep almost at once, nestled into John’s chest. Somehow that made him even happier. The melody Sherlock had been plucking earlier was running through his mind, its light delicacy a perfect echo of their tender kisses, as John lay with Sherlock’s silky curls against his cheek and watched the moon sink out of sight below the windowsill. He was still lying like that when the hum of the power came back on, and when the sun came up, when Sherlock finally woke hours later, warm and heavy in his arms.

Chapter End Notes

Many thanks to NoStraightLine, who graciously allowed me to borrow her war memorial from her brilliant "Trying to Find The In-Between" series. Read the story that features the memorial here.

Khorazir's wonderful illustration
January

One step forward, two steps back.

I’m sorry. I don’t think I can do this. SH

What’s going on? Sherlock? What are you talking about?

Sherlock, answer me.

What’s wrong? Please tell me why you are saying this. Has something happened?

I’m calling you.

ANSWER YOUR FUCKING PHONE DAMNIT

Sherlock. If you don’t answer this question within 30 seconds I’m calling the Yorkshire Constabulary, the Retreat Centre, and your brother. Do you have a safety plan?

....

Yes. SH

Do you think you need to use it?

I don’t know. Possibly. SH

What are you supposed to do?

Phone my therapist and my contact here. SH

I want you to do that and then I want you to text me back.

...

Sherlock?

The service is paging my therapist. My contact is on his way. SH

Will you have him phone me when he arrives?

A few minutes later John’s phone rang. “Sherlock?”

“Dr. Watson, this is Simon Fallows. Sherlock asked that I called you?” The voice on the phone was crisp and calm, exactly the voice, John thought, that you wanted to hear when you were terrified out of your wits.

“Is he okay?”

“He’s fine. He did precisely the right thing. He’s talking with his therapist and I’m going to drive him over to the crisis stabilization centre in Harrogate. He’ll likely be back in a few days.”

“Yes. Of course. Of course he did the right thing. Tell him—tell him I’m glad he did that, will
you? That he texted me?” John realized distantly that he was rather babbling, but his heart was still pounding and the need to run right out and get on a train to Yorkshire, now, was making him a bit frantic.

“I will.” There was a muffled exchange--Simon Fallows taking the phone away to ask Sherlock if he wanted to talk to John, maybe—and then his voice returned: “I’ll make certain the hospital has your number, all right? We’re going to go now.”

“Yes, thank you, thank you very much.” John hesitated, wanting to say something meaningful to Sherlock, something to allay his fears, but he had no idea of what would help, and then Simon Fallows said simply, “Good night,” and disconnected.

Ordinarily John would have immediately phoned Mycroft, but Mycroft was actually out of the country—a diplomatic crisis, according to Mycroft; avoiding their parents for the holidays, according to Sherlock—and he hadn’t yet told Mycroft about the new development in their relationship. It sounded as though the crisis had passed for tonight, anyway. Sherlock was safely on his way to hospital, and John would call first thing in the morning, if he didn’t hear from them first. For now there was nothing to do but wait.

John felt a sudden surge of his old anger and frustration and abruptly struck his own thigh, hard, with his fist. He felt a dull surge of pain through the thick cloth and raised his clenched fist again, but then he caught sight of Sherlock’s skull in its familiar place on the mantle.

“I can’t,” John said, not sure himself what he meant. He made himself take a deep breath, in the nose, out the mouth. Another. Eight. Seven. Six. By the time he got to one, his hand had unclenched.

“I’m sorry,” John told the skull. He felt drained and helpless. “I’m not a patient person, am I?” He’d been patient so long. Waited so long. And now that he’d finally had Sherlock in his arms—I can’t control this, he reminded himself. But I can certainly make it worse if I don’t keep my shit together. “Maybe I could quit my job, stay with him full-time,” John tried, then shook his head. “You’re right. It’s lovely for weekends, but I’d go mad in a month.” He sighed. “Nothing for it but to keep waiting then, is there?” He gave the skull a brief pat and turned to the kitchen to put on the kettle, wishing very much that he hadn’t made that resolution about drinking alone.

“My therapist thinks this doesn’t even qualify as a gesture,” Sherlock said in a disgruntled tone. He was in the en suite collecting his things. “She says I just wanted you to save me. She says testing someone is self-defeating, because I’ll just keep raising the stakes until you inevitably fail.”

“Huh,” John said. “What do you think?”

Sherlock limped out into the hospital room, scowling. “She says if I do it again she’ll label me as having a borderline personality disorder.”

John couldn’t help laughing. “Well, you are a drama queen.”

“So are you,” Sherlock countered, and John felt the knot in his chest ease for the first time in days.

When they were back at the abbey John asked, “Do you want to talk about it?” and Sherlock threw him a look strikingly reminiscent of Mycroft’s I can’t believe you manage to dress yourself every morning expression.
“Suppose not. Okay. Just, are we still…” he waved his hand between himself and Sherlock.

“Yesssss?” Sherlock said, a little questioningly.

“Okay,” John said. He could feel the smile trying to inch its way back onto his face. “Good. That’s good. What happens now, then?”

Sherlock considered this question seriously. “We kiss?”

“Fantastic,” John said, and they spent the rest of the afternoon on Sherlock’s bed doing exactly that.

Mycroft had finally resolved whatever crisis had taken him out of the country, so the next Tuesday he and John met at the pub. Mycroft arrived first, as he always did, and when John walked in Mycroft took one look at him and said, “No.”

John thought happily that he was very likely the only person alive ever to have seen Mycroft Holmes flabbergasted. It was immensely satisfying. “Yep.”

“But this isn’t—but you’re not—“

“Are you serious? I thought you had a file on every sexual partner I’ve ever had, including the men.”

“All in the military, almost all single encounters,” Mycroft said, recovering his powers of speech quickly. “Nothing to indicate any interest in a long-term—“

“Well, your analysis is a little weak then, isn’t it?” John clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll buy you a pint.”

When John returned with the beer Mycroft had evidently managed to process this development and moved directly to counter it. “I’m not sure this is wise,” he said, after lifting his glass to John in thanks.

John took a long drink of his own pint—God, he’d been looking forward to this drink. He’d been expecting this, and decided to let Mycroft have his say, at least tonight. He felt a large measure of sympathy for Mycroft. Aside from everything else, he and John had been Team Sherlock for nearly a year now, with Mycroft the undisputed leader of that team; this change in circumstance had to be disconcerting. “Why’s that then?”

“Sherlock is in an extremely fragile state at the moment, as you know very well. It seems foolish for him to embark on a relationship, especially with someone whose track record—“

“Oh no, stop right there,” John said, holding up one hand. “I’m not disagreeing with you that Sherlock is fragile, but you’ve already proven that you don’t have a clue about me. My whole heart wasn’t in my previous relationships, because my whole heart belongs to Sherlock. Just because it took me five bloody years to realize that doesn’t make it not true.” Mycroft still looked unconvinced, so John leaned forward and said in a low voice, “Mycroft. Did you really think I made the choice I did just for the sake of my very deep friendship?“

“Still,” Mycroft said, rallying, “Sherlock isn’t in any position to engage in…this.”

“I’d agree with you, but I’m not some bloke he just met. He loved me before any of this shit
happened. You know that, Mycroft, you’re the one that showed it to me.” Mycroft sniffed, looking annoyed, and John went on, “Mycroft. I promise you. I’m not going to hurt Sherlock. I’m going to take care of him like he’s the most precious thing in the world, because he is. You know I can do that.”

Mycroft sighed and took a long draw of his pint. He worried the glass between his hands for a minute, looking at it. “John. There’s something you should know—“

“No,” John said quickly, cutting him off. “No. If there’s something I should know, then it’s something for Sherlock to tell me himself.” He locked eyes with Mycroft, implacable, and eventually Mycroft nodded and dropped his gaze.

“Congratulations, I suppose,” he said gloomily. “We should set a date to celebrate.”

“We are celebrating.” John clapped his shoulder again. “Cheer up. You thought I was the best thing that ever happened to your brother before, you know you did. Just imagine what I can do with him now.”

Mycroft gave him a sour little smile. “I am faint with anticipation.”

John drained the last of his pint. “I’ll buy you another beer and some crisps. And then I’ll let you beat me at darts. Yeah?”

“I always beat you at darts,” Mycroft said, but he sounded back to normal again, and John thought that all things considered this could have gone worse. He was still alive, after all.

Now that John had the weekends free and was staying at the abbey he decided to carry on taking the early Saturday train, as he had done the day Sherlock had left hospital. He and Sherlock argued about this at length.

“If you take the bus it’s twice as slow. We could be back at the abbey much more quickly if I meet you at the train,” Sherlock said mulishly.

“And then you’ll spend the rest of the weekend flat on the sofa in pain or sleeping off the muscle relaxants. What’s the point of that? And you’re already driving me back Sunday. Twice in a weekend is too much.” The bus only ran twice a day on Sunday.

In the end they compromised: John would take the bus to the village and Sherlock would meet him there. This had the considerable advantage that they could then take tea at Lucy’s Tea Room, which they had both come to like. “Not that your tea wasn’t delicious, but I can’t see the ladies keeping you in cake forever,” John said.

“I usually only have biscuits,” Sherlock admitted.

It was only John’s third time at the abbey, but Sherlock’s cozy little tower had already begun to feel like home.

“So what are you working on now?” John asked. He was in the kitchen putting away the shopping. It had transpired over tea that Sherlock had given no thought to their dinner, so they had gone to the village’s tiny shop and bought ingredients for what John called “my famous spag bol” and Sherlock called “the thing with the sauce”. 
Sherlock’s mouth twitched. “Apparently my Christmas piece was quite well received. Word got out, and now I’ve three new commissions…two for children’s choirs again, unfortunately.”

John laughed. “You’ve got a niche. Anything specific?”

“One wants something for Ash Wednesday—that should be easy enough, especially now I’ve had a bit of practice. The other just wants a piece in a similar style, no particular occasion.”

“That’s good.” John had considered getting a bottle of wine, but in the end he decided against, given that he didn’t know what medications Sherlock might have in the flat. John didn’t need to remind himself that Sherlock was still a walking land mine—well, a limping land mine—and leaving even half a bottle of leftover wine seemed a bad idea if he had any sort of sedatives. “What about the third?”

“Oh, that one has promise. It’s for Easter, which will be difficult, but it’s for an actual cathedral choir, men and boys both, so presumably they can manage harmony.”

“I know you’re happy about that,” John said. He opened a cupboard to put up the loaf of bread he’d bought and there were the pill bottles, neatly clustered to one side. Fortunately the door blocked him from Sherlock’s view. “Which one will you work on first?”

“I want to make this one more melismatic…there are eight left of the hydrocodone. I’ve taken two. Since September. Nothing else.”

“Sorry,” John said, looking over at him. Sherlock hadn’t sounded annoyed, just resigned. Of course he knew what John was up to. John closed the cupboard and went to what he was already thinking of as his armchair, now shoved haphazardly near the bolted door, and dragged it into place. “Show me?”

“Of course.” Sherlock limped to the little organ. “I apologize, I’m not very proficient at the organ yet, but it approximates plainsong better than the violin.” He settled himself painfully on the stool and began to pick out a mournful little melody. “This isn’t mine, it’s a twelfth century piece by Hildegard of Bingen, but it will give you an idea…”

Sherlock was supposed to be washing lettuce for salad, but halfway through he got a familiar glaze to his eyes and wandered off to his desk with a towel draped over one arm. Just like old times, John thought fondly, as he finished the salad himself and served it onto plates with spaghetti and bread. He set Sherlock’s onto the desk next to him and carried his to the table, where he opened his own book. He was finishing the washing-up in the kitchen when Sherlock came limping back, looking slightly disconcerted. “I was meant to be doing something…”

“The salad?” John said, grinning.

“Right! The salad!”
“It’s finished, Sherlock. We ate it already.”

Sherlock frowned at John in perplexity and then peered around as though expecting to see his plate still on the desk. His face cleared. “The thing with the sauce! It was delicious. So was the salad.”

“You didn’t eat your salad. You just ate the spag bol.”

“Oh. Well…I can help with the washing up, anyway.”

“Nice try, you arse,” John said, laughing. “You can see it’s finished already. There’s leftovers in the fridge for you tomorrow, just heat them up whenever you like.”

“I should do something,” Sherlock said and suddenly he was right there, crowding into John’s space and pressing him back against the cold wall. His voice dropped to a nearly subsonic growl. “You’ve done all the work.”

John was startled and a bit taken aback, though that didn’t stop his cock from thickening in his trousers at Sherlock’s proximity. Oh God, he smelled just as he always had, cotton-shampoo-shaving soap-wool, with a faint overlay of dusty book. Still, the whole thing felt just a little weird. In their kissing thus far Sherlock had been decidedly passive: undeniably enthusiastic, but letting John take the lead. Now he was holding John by the hips and licking his way down his neck, face turned so John couldn’t even see his expression. “Christ,” John gasped, clutching at the wall for support as Sherlock ran the flat of his palm over the hard bulge in John’s trousers. “We don’t have to—slow down, we don’t have to do this right now—”

“Why not?” Sherlock rumbled in John’s ear, fingers flicking deftly at his belt.

“If you’re not—if this isn’t—” John was having trouble maintaining coherent thought. What was he talking about? Sherlock certainly wasn’t acting as though this made him uncomfortable. His clumsy, shy kissing had left John convinced that he’d been right about Sherlock’s inexperience, but the way he slipped his hand into John’s pants told a whole different story.

“I’m not a virgin, John,” Sherlock breathed into his ear. “There’s no need to go slow.”

“Okay,” John gasped. “I just thought maybe—bed—”

“I don’t need a bed,” Sherlock said and he slithered down onto his knees. John could tell the move had hurt him and he was lopsided on his weak leg, but when John tried to reach for his arms Sherlock forestalled him by pulling down his trousers. Oh, shit. Sherlock clutched at John’s arse with his long fingers and moaned into his groin as though it were the most delicious thing he had ever seen, and then his mouth closed over John’s cock. Oh, shit. There was absolutely no doubt about Sherlock having done this before. His mouth was pure, practiced sin, and the only thing that saved John from complete embarrassment was that he’d wanked the night before, lost in a fantasy of Sherlock’s long body that had nothing on the real thing. His fingers tangled in Sherlock’s long hair—oh Christ, that hair—and he was trying so hard to hold back, but Sherlock tipped his head so that John slid straight into his throat. John bit back a moan and pulled back to let him breathe, but Sherlock clutched hard at his arse and he thrust again. “Oh fuuuuuck—” he was going to come, he couldn’t stop now for anything, he thrust again into that willing mouth and felt Sherlock’s clever tongue curling around him and sucking as he thrust again and then everything was warmth and wet and incandescent bliss.
When Sherlock had sucked down the last of his aftershocks John finally got the motor control to slide down the wall and collapse on the floor next to Sherlock, whom he immediately pulled into his arms. This was rather awkward on the hard floor, and they ended up with Sherlock sprawled between John’s legs, head tilted back on John’s shoulder so John could kiss him. Sherlock tasted like spag bol and semen, a surprisingly not-awful combination.

“God, that was amazing,” John murmured into the kiss. “Jesus, your mouth—if I’d known what else you could do with it…”

John could feel Sherlock’s smile against his own mouth. “I told you.”

“Yeah, you did.” John slid his hand over Sherlock’s chest and down to his trousers. “Now it’s my turn.”

“No--” Sherlock said quickly just as John cupped his hand over Sherlock’s groin. He was surprised to find Sherlock only half-hard—how badly did it hurt him to kneel anyway?—but Sherlock sucked in a gratifyingly sharp breath and bucked up into John’s hand.

“No?” John teased, running the heel of his hand down over the rapidly thickening bulge.

“No, yes—yes, like that, just like that, your hand,” Sherlock panted. His back arched a bit as John ground down again. John adjusted them so that he was leaning against the wall and supporting most of Sherlock’s weight against his chest, and then he worked Sherlock’s trousers open and pushed his hand in. Sherlock whimpered as John’s fist closed around him and his head fell back, breathing in huge, open-mouthed gasps. His hips twitched, but he didn’t seem to have the strength to thrust up—the muscles too weak perhaps, or too painful—and John felt a twinge of guilt for not moving this whole party to the bed a lot sooner. Too late now. Sherlock was so far out of his head one would think John was the one with the incredible blow job skills: he was shaking, moaning with every stroke of John’s fist, hands clutching frantically at his hair, the back of John’s head, his face. He came like that a minute later, one hand clenched in John’s hair and the other over his own mouth.

“Oh, Sherlock, that hurt you,” John said sadly. Sherlock’s orgasm had finally subsided, but he was still quivering, now curled up against John’s chest with one arm clutching at his bad leg. They were both a bit of a mess; John hadn’t been able to reach anything to wipe them off with.

“No, it’s fine.” Sherlock pushed himself to a sitting position with his arms. “I’m all right. The kneeling didn’t hurt me, anyway. You didn’t have to—I wanted to do that, for you. You didn’t have to…” He shrugged awkwardly, not looking at John.

John knelt up behind him. “I wanted to too,” he said gently. He didn’t want to touch Sherlock from behind, so he scrabbled around clumsily to get in front of him. “Maybe it would be a good idea if we…”

“No, I’m fine,” Sherlock said quickly, struggling to get to his feet. John, who had been about to say “talk about things a bit”, shrugged mentally and held out a hand.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s get you up, and some of your NSAIDs at least. And then your ice packs and bed. We can read a bit if you’re not sleepy.” Something in Sherlock’s averted face caught his eye and he said more tentatively, “Or kissing?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said immediately, meeting John’s eyes for the first time, and John grinned and lifted him to his feet.
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

The wonderfully talented Hamstermoon has made a fabulous cover, and endlessly brilliant Khorazir has made art for chapter 7!
A million thanks to cwb who taught me how to put pictures in the notes. She tried to teach me how to resize it so it wouldn't be, er, a billboard, but that was beyond me.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“So Sherlock and I, er. We, ah, we’ve decided…we’ve embarked on a relationship.” For God’s sake. When had he started talking like Mycroft?

“Yes,” Ella said. This bit wasn’t really news; John had told her about the night he’d been stranded at the abbey.

“Yes. Well. You see…well, I should explain, as far as I know, Sherlock’s never been in a relationship. With anyone. A relationship like this, I mean. A romantic relationship.”

“Yes,” Ella repeated patiently.

“So for the first few weeks—and mostly still—we just kiss. I mean for hours. We lie on his bed and hold each other and kiss. It’s fantastic, I mean, I’m perfectly happy doing that. I want to make up for all the time I wasn’t holding him and kissing him before. And I sort of thought, eventually, we’d move on to something more, when he was ready. Because the kissing—it’s fairly obvious it’s new to him. He caught on fast, don’t get me wrong, but, you know, you can tell.”

“But you’re happy with the way things are.”

“Yes. But. A few weeks ago he—Sherlock initiated—a sexual encounter. Rather out of the blue. And he’s been doing it ever since. Never when we’re kissing or in bed, it’s always just out of nowhere. And he always—the sexual act he initiates—it’s very one-sided, if you follow.” John was feeling quite red in the face.

Ella looked at him over her notepad. “Oral sex.”

“Yes. And he’s clearly very experienced at that. But afterwards he seems…” John grimaced, trying to put it into words. “I don’t know, distant. And I try to reciprocate but he won’t let me, you know. Only my hands.”

“You feel as though he views the sex as entirely separate from the affection that you share at other times. Kissing, for example.”

“Yes. That’s it exactly. So I’m worried…he has PTSD, right, and I have to be careful not to come up behind him or touch him if he’s not expecting it, when he’s working, say. But otherwise, if we’re in his rooms, he’s fine with me touching him. He likes it. And he touches me. So that’s good. But I still worry that when he was in prison, that, you know…”

“You’re worried he was raped.”
“Yes.” John exhaled, relieved to have it finally said.

“Hmm.” Ella touched her pen to her lips, thinking. “People respond to victimization in all sorts of ways, John, as you know. It’s possible he feels a need to assert control over that part of your relationship.”

“Which is fine,” John said hastily. “Whatever he needs, I’m fine with that. It’s just…I don’t feel like this is making him happy. I feel like he thinks he’s doing it for me.”

“Have you tried talking to him about it?”

“Yes. More than once. It goes nowhere, unless you count the time he got a bit snotty and started deducing my sexual past, which I’d be more than willing to tell about but not to have the worst bits picked out and waved in my face. And yes, I know it was a defense mechanism. It certainly worked.”

“It’s also possible that Sherlock just doesn’t have any experience with sex in the context of a loving relationship,” Ella pointed out reasonably. “Many men don’t.”

“True.” John considered. “You know, I don’t really have any experience with sex in the context of a loving relationship with another man. Maybe I’m the weird one.”

“But you do care for him.”

“Of course. Well, you know that, you knew it before I did, probably.”

Ella smiled at him slightly. “But does Sherlock?”

“Huh.” John considered. “It’s not like I don’t tell him…but maybe I’ll tell him some more, try to initiate things when we’re kissing, instead.”

It was a good plan. John put a lot of thought into it (and a session or two in the shower as well), but he never got to use it, because things blew up.

“The thing with the clams!” Sherlock said suddenly. John cooking their dinner on Saturdays had somehow become established routine, and they were poking around the village shop looking for dinner ingredients. John looked over to see Sherlock holding aloft a tin of clams.

“Oh yeah,” John said, remembering. He hadn’t made linguine with clam sauce in years; Mary had been allergic to shellfish. “I don’t think there’s linguine though, we’ll have to make do with spaghetti…we’ll need a white wine. Do you have a corkscrew?”

“I don’t know, but it doesn’t matter, I know a method to retrieve the cork without leaving a mark. Very handy for poisoning.” This was the type of thing Sherlock used to say all the time, but it was the first crime-related remark John had heard him make since his return, and it seemed a good omen. “How much wine do you need? Does it use the whole bottle?”

“No, why? Are you going to experiment on it?”

Sherlock gave him a you’re-an-idiot look. “I thought we’d drink it.”

John grinned. “Okay then. The thing with the clams it is.”
Now that John only drank once a week or so, he was almost as much of a lightweight as Sherlock. A glass of the wine (to be fair, a rather large glass—Sherlock didn’t have any wine glasses and they’d made do with deceptively large tumblers) and he was feeling fuzzy-edged and warm, happy and content as he sprawled on the sofa next to Sherlock.

“I’m happy as a clam,” he informed Sherlock, and then giggled at his own joke.

“Are you?” Sherlock leaned over to set his own half-finished glass on the desk. “I can make you happier.”

Sherlock’s pouncing on John for an after-dinner blow job had also become routine. A tiny part of John—the part that wasn’t worrying about the situation—found it hilarious that Sherlock of all people had fallen into a weekly date-night-and-sex routine, and at some point was hoping to tease him about it. He’d actually made an elaborate plan to lure Sherlock upstairs this time, but somehow he’d gotten distracted by the wine and ended up on the sofa, their usual trysting place, instead. So when Sherlock slid to his knees in front of John and pulled down his trousers with practiced swiftness it only seemed reasonable to put off his plan another week.

But it appeared Sherlock had something different in mind this time as well. When they’d reached the point that John was beginning to gasp and clutch at Sherlock’s hair, Sherlock suddenly pulled off in a slow, wet, cruelly tantalizing slide.

“Hey,” John managed, opening his eyes and trying to catch his breath. “Do you want to…” He trailed off. Sherlock had pulled himself to his feet and was shucking off his own trousers with a quick grace that usually eluded him these days; he must be feeling the wine more that John had realized. John had no idea what Sherlock had in mind, but he was sure he was up for it—right until Sherlock knelt down on the floor again. Facing away. He leaned forward and pressed his elbows and forehead to the rug.

John could only stare at him, shocked. Sherlock hadn’t even taken off his jumper.

“Go on,” Sherlock said, lifting his head slightly from the floor. “I want you to.”

John’s head was a whirl of incredulity and denial, but he seized on the first thing that came to mind: “We haven’t got any—“

“Yes you do. In your bag. You bought it after the first time.”

It was true, although John had almost forgotten, but he seized on the opportunity. “That’s upstairs. Why don’t we go up and, you know, maybe start this over? I want—you know I want you, Sherlock, but I don’t want to do it like this, I don’t want to just take you on the floor.” People who have been victimized might need to assert control—but this didn’t feel like Sherlock asserting control. It just felt wrong.

“Why not?”

Why did that question feel like a trap? “Because—I care about you, Sherlock. I don’t just want to just get off like you’re some stranger I picked up in a bar—“

“I don’t need special handling,” Sherlock cut in. He had knelt up now and was facing John, an unreadable tight expression on his face. “I told you, I’m not a virgin. I’m not some fragile flower.”

“It’s true, although John had almost forgotten, but he seized on the opportunity. “That’s upstairs. Why don’t we go up and, you know, maybe start this over? I want—you know I want you, Sherlock, but I don’t want to do it like this, I don’t want to just take you on the floor.” People who have been victimized might need to assert control—but this didn’t feel like Sherlock asserting control. It just felt wrong.

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“I don’t think you’re fragile,” John said carefully.

Sherlock’s eyes narrowed. “Then what? Is it because I’m not a virgin? Is that what you wanted?”
“Jesus, no—Sherlock, you know none of that matters to me. I don’t care what you’ve done or who you’ve been with in the past.” John felt as though he were picking his way through a minefield. “It’s not like I’m in any position to pass judgment—”

“Exactly,” Sherlock said. He had to put his hand down to keep his balance; this must be hurting him, John thought miserably. “You’ve never been picky before, why start now? I know you’ve had men before, you’ve had men in much rougher places, so what does it matter?”

“It matters to me,” John said, trying to keep his voice steady. “Being with you means something to me, Sherlock, I want to—”

“It’s just sex!” Sherlock shouted suddenly. His face was chalk white but his eyes were blazing furiously, hands clenched at his sides. “It’s just—muscle contractions! A biological imperative! It doesn’t mean anything!”

“Sherlock,” John whispered. He could feel himself shaking and he clenched his own hands. “Sherlock, it does. It does mean something between us. Because I’m not just trying to get off with you, I care about you.” He took a deep breath. Sherlock might never forgive him, but he had to know. They couldn’t go on like this. “Sherlock? When you were in prison, did someone…did someone force you? To have sex?”

Sherlock blinked at him. He seemed genuinely taken aback for a moment and then he began laughing, a terrible, mirthless laugh. He sat back on his heels and laughed, head tilted up toward the ceiling, as John stared.

“That’s what you thought,” Sherlock said finally, looking at John again. There was bitter amusement in his face. “You thought I was raped. Someone in prison made me his bitch? Bend over and fetch me that soap, pretty boy? Oh no. I promise you, John, I consented to every single act. I initiated it. I begged for it.” He practically spat the last words.

“You raise the stakes so that they eventually fail. John would not fail. He lifted his own chin. “Good.”

Sherlock blinked again. “Good?”

“Yeah. Good. I know what you went through there. If being with someone—if that gave you even a minute’s warmth, comfort, pleasure, anything, then good. I’m glad you had that. I’m glad that—”

Sherlock had knotted both hands in his hair. He was shaking even harder than John. “My God. You still don’t see! What, now—some cellmate romance, some—God! How can you not see?” He bent forward suddenly over his knees and John had a momentary terror he was going to start smashing his own head into the floor before he straightened back up. His eyes were glittering with tears. “How did you think I got those messages out? How do you think I got the drugs? Did you think I just charmed everyone with my delightful personality? I paid on my knees. I was a whore, John, I sold my body for drugs. I knew it would make you hate me and my only comfort was that I would never have to face you because I thought I would die. I hated myself. The only reason I didn’t overdose was because I had to finish the mission to be sure Mycroft would protect Mary. Now do you see?”

“Oh Christ,” John whispered. He slid off the sofa to kneel in front of Sherlock, but Sherlock had bent forward again and was curled over his knees, his fingers clenched tightly on top of his head. He was horribly afraid of saying the wrong thing, of being unable to make Sherlock believe him, but he had to try. “Sherlock, please listen to me. There is nothing you could do to make me hate you, nothing. That you had to—that you were put in that situation, where you had to, because of me
—Jesus. Jesus.” He was afraid he would be sick and clenched his jaw, trying to steady his voice. “Please, Sherlock, please, tell me if you can forgive me, tell me I can still make this okay.”

Sherlock lifted his head slowly. His hands were still clenched in his hair and his face was a mask of anguish, but his eyes were there, seeking for whatever he needed in John’s face. They stared at each other a long moment and then Sherlock’s face crumpled and John caught him and pulled him into a tight embrace. Sherlock pressed his face into John’s shoulder and gripped John’s back with his long hands, keening a low, wordless howl of grief and pain, and John clutched him tightly as his hot tears ran silently into Sherlock’s hair.

“One time,” Sherlock said, his voice hoarse and exhausted. “One time. I pretended it was you. Only once.”

John tightened his arms around him. They were lying in Sherlock’s bed in the window alcove. It was a clear night, very cold, and the sky outside was a dazzling glitter of stars. “Will you tell me about it?”

Sherlock sighed. He was resting his head in the hollow of John’s shoulder. “There was a guard captain. The others just…they only wanted someone to get them off, fast and expedient, but he was different. Kind. Once he sent for me and I…I couldn’t, I’d just been interrogated and I was…he gave me the painkillers anyway. For free. I preferred him to the others. Which was just as well, since he was the only one who had access to me after I was sent to solitary. The last time, I knew as soon as I saw him that something was wrong, and finally he confirmed what I already knew. That I was to be executed. I had…I had spent a lot of time in my mind palace in the Abyss, but I knew where the line was; I understood the difference between memory and fantasy, but that night…” He turned his head for a moment to press his face into John’s shoulder. “It was so real,” he whispered, muffled, so that John had to strain to hear him. “I wanted so much for it to be real.”

John stroked his hair and shoulder and kissed the top of his head and eventually Sherlock settled back. He sighed. “After that night I couldn’t hold on anymore. In Germany, I know you and Mycroft were there, but I saw other people too—Mary, Moriarty, other prisoners. It was terrifying. You remember I told you that in the cells in solitary that it was so cold and dark that I couldn’t even tell when I was standing on the ground—this was worse, I couldn’t trust anything, I couldn’t trust my own mind. It was the worst thing I ever endured, far worse than the interrogations or even knowing the date of my own death. That was why I refused visitors once I was moved to the psychiatric ward, and in Glasgow, and it was why I came here. It wasn’t only that I was ashamed for you to see me like that, though I was, terribly. I had to rebuild my mind from scratch, do you see? I had to know that when I saw you again, it was really you.”

“It’s really me,” John said. “It’s really me, and I will never let you go again. If you trust in nothing else you can be sure of that.”

“I know. When I first came here I had flashbacks all the time, every loud noise or bright light, but it’s much better now. Even when it happens, I know it’s not real.”

John shifted a little—he arm was falling asleep—and Sherlock rolled off him and stretched out on his side to gaze pensively up at John. With the lights on he might have looked awful, eyes swollen and face blotchy, but in the faint starlight he was unfairly beautiful with his soft lips and tumbled curls. John propped himself up on one elbow to look down at him. “I fantasized about you too, you know.”

Sherlock blinked. “You did? When you were…”
“After I came back to Baker Street. I tried not to, but…” John was grinning, half-embarrassed at the memory. “I never imagined this hair though.” He reached down to run a hand through Sherlock’s hair, which by now reached nearly to his jaw.

Sherlock grimaced. “I know, it’s awful.”

“No it isn’t! I love your hair like this. You’re a composer in a tower, you should have mad hair. Besides, it will send Mycroft mental.”

Finally, finally Sherlock’s eyes crinkled in a ghost of his beautiful smile. “True.”

John stroked his hair back from his face again, feeling the soft silky strands slide through his fingers. Sherlock shifted onto his back, grimacing a little, and John smoothed his hair so that it spread around him on the pillow in a dark nimbus. Sherlock looked up at him, eyes soft and solemn, and John reached to brush his cheekbones with his fingertips.

“Sometimes I can’t believe this can be real myself,” John said softly. “That after everything, all my stupid mistakes, almost losing you what, three times now? That you’re here, next to me, so beautiful, that you still want me.” He traced a light finger along Sherlock’s mouth. Sherlock’s lips parted almost involuntarily, and John leaned over to kiss them: bottom lip, then top, then both, and then Sherlock’s mouth was open and yearning underneath him, and John cupped his cheek with his free hand and kissed him and kissed him.

It felt like more, somehow, than their previous kisses: made richer by the weight of their new understanding. There was no longer anything between them, no secrets, and it was that knowledge that emboldened John to whisper as he touched his fingers to the fluttering pulse in Sherlock’s long tilted throat, “Can we try it my way this time?”

John undressed them both, carefully, under the covers. He wanted Sherlock to feel cherished, not exposed. There would be plenty of time to learn and explore, but for tonight he contented himself with the feel of Sherlock’s slender body pressed naked against him for the first time. “Oh,” Sherlock whispered. “Oh.” His long hands felt huge on John’s back. John could feel him beginning to tremble, so he slid his hand into that gloriously tangled hair and brought Sherlock’s mouth to his. He slid his other hand down to clutch Sherlock’s arse and was gratified when Sherlock had to break off the kiss to gasp for breath.

“I want to touch you,” John breathed into his ear. “And you’re going to touch me too. Okay?”

“I don’t---“

“Nothing fancy. Just touching. Whatever feels right.”

John slid his hand around and wrapped it around Sherlock’s long slender prick, which was satisfyingly rigid. Sherlock followed suit and John groaned: “Oh God, yes. Do it. Come on, now, like this…”

At first John feared it wasn’t going to work—Sherlock seemed to be on the verge of system overload, unable to decide whether to bend his formidable attention to getting John off or to enjoying John’s touch—but then somehow they ended up letting go and just rutting against each other. John was a little lower down than he would have liked; he could not see Sherlock’s face, which was pressed into the top of his head, and his own face was crushed against Sherlock’s shoulder. But the feel of Sherlock’s cock sliding against his, of their bodies pressed together, lit up his nerve endings in a way that even Sherlock’s skilled mouth had not managed. They fell into a rhythm, moving against each other in a way that soon had them both panting and thrusting.
Sherlock’s fingers dug into his shoulder blades almost hard enough to hurt and that sparked John’s arousal further. “Christ,” he gasped, gripping Sherlock’s arse and pulling to grind them closer together. Sherlock threw his head back with a choked cry and stiffened, thrusting hard against John and almost suffocating him as he pulsed hot warmth between them. John managed to get his head up enough to fasten his mouth on the base of Sherlock’s throat and suck, and he felt the rumble of Sherlock’s moan under his lips as his body jerked again.

“You feel--you feel so good—tell me if this hurts you,” John pleaded, pushing into the warm wet slickness coating Sherlock’s abdomen. Sherlock, apparently unable to catch his breath yet, shook his head and buried his face in John’s hair, bracing himself as John’s tempo picked up until he came all over Sherlock in his turn.

“All right? You’re all right?” John asked when he could speak.

Sherlock nodded, still breathing a bit fast. “Yes. That was…that was…ah…rather good.”

John gave him an incredulous look and then they were both laughing, possibly slightly hysterically. It had been a very long night. John leaned over and rummaged until he found his t-shirt, which he used to wipe them both off. Sherlock was limp from orgasm and exhaustion, and John pulled his pyjamas back on for him as carefully as he could manage. He felt rather done in himself.

“Can I sleep in one of your t-shirts?” he asked as he found his own pyjama bottoms.

“Of course,” Sherlock said sleepily. “I’d like that. I’ll wear it next week so I can smell you.”

“What do I smell like?”

“Tea. And that dreadful cheap soap that you use, and aftershave…I rather like the aftershave. When I came back before I found a bottle you’d forgotten in a cupboard and sometimes I would splash a bit in the basin so it smelled as though you were still there.”

John smiled a little sadly. How much time they had wasted. “If you promise not to laugh I’ll tell you a story about your shampoo…”

But before he had even finished Sherlock was asleep, cocooned in John’s arms with the whole of the sparkling galaxy spread out around them.

Chapter End Notes

I thought I made up long-haired Sherlock, but no!
John knew it was Mycroft’s turn for dinner, so he wore one of his nicer shirts to work, but he hadn’t expected the car to pull up in front of the Special Occasion Restaurant. “Don’t suppose you have another tie,” he said to the driver, who handed one back that matched perfectly.

“So what’s the occasion?” John asked, when he had been escorted to Mycroft’s table.

“As promised, we are celebrating the happy development in your relationship with my brother,” Mycroft said. “I believe you have now been a couple nearly two months, which means you have lasted approximately seven and a half weeks longer than any of my brother’s previous paramours.”

“You’re just saying that so I’ll ask about the paramours.”

“Not at all,” Mycroft said smoothly. “I am sure if you need to know, Sherlock will be delighted to tell you. Assuming he remembers, of course.”

“One woman, five men, all when he was at university,” John said. “He was with one of the men several times, but neither of them considered it a relationship, so you might be off a bit there,” Taught me to give a superlative blowjob, though I don’t remember much about him, Sherlock had said; either I deleted it or was too high to bother remembering in the first place. Sherlock’s sexual experimentation had coincided with Sherlock’s early cocaine experimentation, and he’d admitted to John that he didn’t even think he’d managed to climax with any of them. In fact, the only previous time Sherlock had had an orgasm with another person was the night he’d pretended he was with John, a fact that John found utterly heartbreaking.

“Ah. So he did remember then,” Mycroft said, perusing the wine list. John could tell that Mycroft still had another little bomb up his sleeve, so he waited. “When we spoke before, what I had meant to tell you was that I received Sherlock’s records from Germany, in my professional capacity of course. He declined a physical examination but agreed to screening via nucleic acid amplification for gonorrhea and chlamydia, as well as serology for HIV, syphilis and hepatitis B and C. All were negative, and his three- and six-month follow up tests for HIV were also negative. I trust you can assure me of the same yourself.”

“Again, Mycroft,” John said pleasantly, “not your business anymore. And I think you know me better than to have to ask me that.”

Mycroft narrowed his eyes, reading whatever was on John’s face—not, John hoped, the fact that he was inwardly kicking himself for never bringing the issue up himself. He knew he was clean and could therefore not hurt Sherlock; nothing else had seemed important. Whatever Mycroft saw seemed to satisfy him for he settled back into his seat and picked up the wine list looking, for the first time in John’s memory, a little lost.

“He’s in good hands,” John said gently. “You can let him go now.”

Mycroft gave him another slitty-eyed stare, but this time John made no effort to stare him down. He looked back with all his considerable compassion and affection, and finally Mycroft gave him a surprisingly genuine smile.

“Yes, he is. I think the occasion calls for rather a special bottle then, don’t you?”
On the way back to the flat John checked his phone and found he had several texts from Sherlock in varying degrees of petulance; apparently he was stuck on his Easter music. He decided to wait until he got back home to phone. Back at Baker Street he tiptoed with elaborate care past Mrs. Hudson’s door, frowned at the table where she left the post—hadn’t that journal been on top yesterday? Maybe he hadn’t any post today, or maybe he was just pissed—stumbled to the toilet, and finally up to his room.

“Sorry I missed your texts,” John said by way of greeting when Sherlock picked up. He was sprawled out on his bed with his shoes kicked off, feeling relaxed and happy and not a little horny.

“You’ve been drinking,” Sherlock said suspiciously and then in annoyance, “You’ve been drinking with Mycroft.”

“Yup,” John said cheerfully.

“You were talking about me.”

“Only a little, you narcissistic git.”

“What else could you have to talk about?”

John considered. “His job. My job. Your parents’ trip to Thailand. Mrs. Hudson’s French baking class.”

“God, no wonder you got drunk.”

“I’m not drunk, exactly…but I’m not not drunk either. I was thinking about you. What are you wearing?”

There was a second of silence—the aural equivalent of Sherlock blinking at him—and then Sherlock said warily, “Pyjama bottoms, two t-shirts, dressing gown, socks. It’s cold.”

“Mmmm. Where are you?”

“At the desk.”

“Go up to your bed. No, wait—take that lotion with you, from the bath.”

“Why?”

“Deduce, Sherlock.”

There was a longer stretch of silence, punctuated by the dragging shuffle of Sherlock’s limp. John didn’t know if Sherlock had correctly deduced and just didn’t know what to say, or if he had no idea what was going on and didn’t want to admit it.

“Are you upstairs?”

“Almost…yes.”

“Take your t-shirts off but not your bottoms. Take the dressing gown off too.”

“Socks?”
“Um...up to you. I’m going to imagine them off, but no need for your feet to get cold.”

“If you’re going to imagine them off then I should take them off.”

“Okay. Sure. Now lie on the bed. What bottoms are you wearing?”

“Grey cotton.”

“Mmm.” John closed his eyes and opened his own trousers. “Close your eyes. Now imagine I’m crawling up on top of you, and I’m rubbing against the front of your grey pyjamas. Put your hand on yourself. Rub yourself through the cloth, pretend it’s me.” In real life John could never put his full weight on Sherlock like this, but he was enjoying the fantasy. He pressed the heel of his hand into his growing erection, imagining it was Sherlock’s cock. “God, you feel good. Are you getting hard?”

“Yes,” Sherlock said, sounding a little strangled.

“Good. Now keep rubbing, it’s me grinding down on you, pushing you into the bed, and now I’m kissing your neck... you really like when I kiss your neck, don’t you.”

“Yes,” Sherlock gasped.

“Okay, slow down, no rush...yeah. Push back up against me. Mmm. Now run your hand over your chest, yeah, like that, brush your thumb over your nipple…”

“Which one?”

“Um, left. Oh yeah, you like that, don’t you. You’re so hard for me. Now flick it, that’s my tongue. Now the other one. “ There was a faint exhalation from the phone and John pictured Sherlock with his head tipped back, flushed, circling a thumb over his hard nipples, and he squeezed himself. “Now you’re going to take your bottoms off. Nice and slow, the way I’d do it.” John and Sherlock’s lovemaking had been progressing incrementally, due largely to John’s desire to take his time and Sherlock’s willingness to follow his lead, so in actuality John had yet to undress Sherlock where he could get a good look at him. No matter, he knew the heft and feel of that long slim cock in his hand. “Now slide your hand down over yourself, nice and slow. Slow.” There was a rustle and a soft thump.

“Sorry, dropped the phone,” Sherlock said breathlessly.

“Go ahead and put it on speaker, you’re going to need both hands,” John ordered and was gratified to hear Sherlock’s quick intake of breath. He prudently put his own phone on speaker and shoved off his trousers and pants, grabbing the as-yet-unused bottle of lube he’d retrieved from his overnight case and flipping open the lid. “Are you touching yourself again?”

“Yes.”

“Slow, remember. Now get the lotion on your hand. Let it warm up a little bit. Now imagine I’m bending over you, you can see the top of my head, I’m putting my mouth on you...stroke down.”

“Ahhhhh…”

“Slow, go slow,” John was getting a little breathless himself. He arched up into the slick feel of his own fist, imagining grinding down against Sherlock again. “Is it good?”

“Yes...oh.”
“Now spread your legs. Slide your hand down, slow, it’s my mouth, remember, and cup your bollocks. Swirl them around in your hand a bit, pretend I’m sucking them into my mouth.” Sherlock’s breathing was harsh and irregular over the phone, and John squeezed hard at the base of his own erection. “Christ. God, you’re hot. You like that?”

“Mnrg,” Sherlock said, having apparently been abandoned by his powers of speech.

“Spread your legs more. You okay? Do you have lotion on your fingers? Get some more. Now one finger—just one, it’s my tongue.” Sherlock choked and John grinned, unconsciously sticking out his tongue a bit and licking at the air. “No one’s ever done this for you, have they? Rub it around a little, imagine I’m sliding my tongue into your arse, I’m licking at you…”

“John,” Sherlock moaned.

“I’m here, beautiful, I’m right here.” John was massaging over the head of his own leaking cock, thinking that phone sex at least offered the advantage of being able to talk to Sherlock at the same time as he was supposedly tonguing his arse. “Now slide your finger in, just a little, I’m getting you all loose and wet. Is it all right? Yeah? Now all the way, I’m sliding my finger in you, and touch yourself with your other hand, I’m sucking your cock whilst I do it.”

“Oh God.”

“Let yourself adjust to it, just feel my finger, touching you. Opening you. There you go, there… now in and out, in and out, I’m touching every part of you. Slow down.” John made his voice as stern as he could, which was not very, since it was beginning to shake with the effort of holding himself back. “I’m going to tell you when you can come. Not so fast. Can you take another finger? Yes? Okay. Another finger. Nice and slow, no rushing. Now take your thumb and put it down, right under your bollocks—”

“Perineum.” Coherence restored by the opportunity to correct.

“Yep, know the term, thanks, now press.”

“Oh. Oh. Oh God, oh God, John—”

“Okay. You can move your hand now. Fast as you want, let go.” Sherlock’s voice had gone high-pitched and frantic and John wasn’t even sure he could hear him. “Go on now, let go, come for me.”

“Oh,” Sherlock said on an explosive exhale. “Oh, oh, oh.” The slick slapping sounds coming from the phone got a lot slicker and wetter and John saw it in his mind’s eye: Sherlock, legs spread with two fingers deep inside himself and come spurting between his fingers, and he jerked convulsively into his own fist.

“Jesus,” he gasped. “Oh fuck, I’m coming, God you’re so hot, I love you, I love you.”

John’s brain caught up with his mouth about thirty seconds later, whilst he was trying to wipe himself off with his pants.

“Uh. Sherlock?”

“Mmmmm.”

“I meant that. What I said. Wasn’t how I meant to say it the first time, but I do.”
“Mmm.”

“It’s traditional to say it back,” John said, amused.

“I died for you twice. Doesn’t that speak for itself?”

“Jesus, please don’t do that again just to get out of saying it.”

There was a brief silence. “John.” Sherlock’s whisper was at once quiet and loud, as though he had placed his lips very near the phone and then barely breathed the words.

“Yeah?”

“I love you too.”

John smiled. His eyes prickled and he squeezed them shut, suddenly feeling every drop of the expensive wine he’d drunk. “I miss you so much right now.”

“I’m trying—“

“No, I mean, I don’t wish you were here, I wish I were there. In your tower, with all the stars outside the window and that fucking wind blowing all the time and you like the Lady of Shalott with your music and your mad sexy hair.”

“The who?”

“It’s a poem, never mind.” John shifted into a more comfortable position on his side and pillowed his head on his arm. He closed his eyes again and pulled the phone closer. Maybe he could imagine he was there, with Sherlock. “What can you see out the windows?”

“Nothing, it’s entirely dark. The moon hasn’t risen yet. And anyway it’s raining, so you probably couldn’t see anything even if it had. Here.” There was a rustling, and a click, and then John heard a low soft rushing. “There’s the wind. And the rain.”

John imagined it: the astonishingly vast empty darkness, the low hum of the wind, the soft soothing sound of the winter rain. There was another click and the rushing cut off; probably too cold to keep the window open for long.

“John?”

“Yeah?”

“Say it again?”

“I love you,” John whispered. “I love you, I love you, I love you.”

John sat in his usual seat at Speedy’s, watching the damp spring drizzle outside as he sipped his coffee. Speedy’s had acquired a new regular, a glazed young woman in too-tight work clothing and a pram, clearly en route to dropping off her infant at the nursery or child-minder’s. Nose Ring had initially not approved of this addition and had spent the first week or so shooting poisonous glares at Zombie Mum, who fortunately was too knackered to notice. As the days went by without so much as a peep from the pram, though, Nose Ring had grudgingly come to tolerate Zombie Mum’s sharing her corner while she drank her XXL coffee.
“You done with that?” John asked Green Jacket, who had just set aside the international section. Sometimes he liked to read about the current situation in Afghanistan just to be glad he was out of it. Green Jacket passed the paper over.

“Oh, John, good,” Mrs. Hudson said, bustling out from the kitchen. “Are you taking the early train tomorrow?”

“Planning on it, yeah.”

“We’ve started mille-feuilles this week and I’m going to make some this afternoon. They need to stay cold, so I’ve got a little insulated carrier, and I’ll just pop it in your refrigerator, all right? You won’t forget?”

“Put it in front of the milk, I’ll be sure to see it in the morning,” John promised.

“Oh, and John, make sure you leave the windows closed, would you? Last week I went up to do the hoovering and the one in the back passage was open.”

John frowned. “Really?” He tried to keep the window bolted because it was next to the fire escape. Irene Adler had broken in that way once, as had Sherlock from time to time when he felt like avoiding the front door, but John hadn’t noticed anything missing. He probably ought to check Mary’s jewelry box. “I suppose I might have opened it to air out the passage; sometimes it gets a bit damp smelling back there. I’ll check it tomorrow before I go.”

Mrs. Hudson beamed at him. “I’ll leave an extra pastry for you for tonight.” She hurried off, and Green Jacket shook his head at him: “You’re a lucky, lucky man.”

“Believe me, I know it,” John said with conviction.

“John Watson? Dr. Watson?”

John, who was trying to turn his phone back on with one hand whilst navigating the Harrogate railway station and carrying his overnight case and the insulated carrier, had to look all around before he spotted the man hailing him.

“Dr. Watson, I’m Simon Fallows.”

“Oh. Oh, right! A pleasure to meet you. Er…”

“I’m to give you a lift to the abbey. Didn’t Sherlock text you?” Simon Fallows was quite tall, taller than Sherlock by a good few inches, and he held himself with a familiar ramrod straightness that made John automatically stiffen his own spine. He had close-cropped silver hair and steady, piercing blue eyes.

“Ah, I’ve had my phone off, I’ve only just turned it back on. My battery’s a bit wonky.” John peered down at the phone, which sure enough showed several texts from Sherlock. “I hope you didn’t drive all the way here for this. I told Sherlock I don’t mind taking the bus.”

“No bother at all. Sherlock rang me this morning and asked if I’d meet you at the abbey gate and see that you got in all right, but I said I was coming to Harrogate for some errands anyway and I’d fetch you from the station.”

“How is he?”
“Better by now, I hope. He didn’t want to take his medication because he was afraid he wouldn’t wake up when you arrived, but he was in a lot of pain.”

“He said he was up all night—it sounds like he got distracted with his work yesterday and stayed in one position too long, maybe.”

“Perhaps. But I told him I’d see you there safe, so that settled him, and he took his pills and went right off for a rest. Mind if we get a quick bit of lunch at that café? He’ll be sleeping another hour at least.”

“No, that’s brilliant. Would you mind very much if we went to a grocer’s after? I usually cook for us Saturday nights.”

The café was warm and steamy and noisy. Simon Fallows had opened his coat when they sat down, and John saw his clerical collar.

“Actually, Dr. Watson—“

“John, please.”

“John then. Call me Simon. As I was about to say, I was delighted to have the opportunity to meet you at last. I’ve been a fan of your blog for years—I was one of the earliest readers, I imagine, I found it looking for other soldiers. I’d just come back a year or so earlier myself. RAF chaplain.”

John grinned. “I knew it. Where? I was at Kandahar and Helmand…”

They chatted amiably through lunch; Simon already knew most of John’s story, having read it on the blog, so he filled him in on his own.

“…and when I came back I thought I’d like to get a bit of distance, you know. Plus I’d married a few years earlier and I wanted a bit more leeway in my schedule; my wife has a church in Bridlington. This way we see each other most every week—either I go there or she comes here, or we go to London—my stepdaughter’s in London. After I’d been here a few years I was asked if I’d run a retreat for veterans, PTSD, you understand, and I thought, why not? Now we’ve four a year and they always fill up. We’re thinking of adding another next year.”

“Well done, that’s fantastic,” John said taking a drink and wiping his mouth. “So you’re on staff at the retreat centre? That’s how you know Sherlock?”

“Quite right. I’m his chaplain,” Simon said brightly.

John stared. “How’s that going then?”

“Surprisingly rather well. Not at first. When I introduced myself he informed me that he already had a therapist and had no need of spiritual guidance since he didn’t believe in God.”

John snorted. “Sorry. That sounds like him.”

“It wasn’t the first time I’ve heard it, and I doubt it will be the last.”

“What d’you say?” John asked, genuinely curious.

“That it’s fine. God will still be there when you need him, and so will I. To which Sherlock responded, ‘Excellent, then you can get my shopping with yours when you go Tuesdays.’ Well of course I was delighted—I’ve already told you I’d read your blog for years—and I practically
begged for more, and he told me all manner of things right down to the side of the bed I sleep on.”

“Oh no.” John was grinning openly now. “And you stuck with him after all that?”

“Of course,” Simon said with serene confidence. “That’s why I’m a chaplain and not a vicar. I’ll always leave the ninety-nine to care for the one.”

“And he lets you?” John asked, skeptical.

“He lets me get his shopping and take his washing, and that way I see him at least twice a week, so I can keep an eye on things. I’ve driven him to Harrogate to the surgery for steroid injections when he’s too badly off to drive, and to the crisis centre.” Simon’s eyes crinkled. “He doesn’t talk to me at all, but I’m a detective in my own way. I know he’s been doing much, much better over the past few months. Now I see why.”

John shrugged, secretly pleased. “I’m surprised Mycroft hasn’t mentioned you.”

“Mycroft? Oh, is that the brother? He rang once at the beginning. Seemed to think I was going to report to him, but I took care of that.”

John realized as they went through the Sainsbury’s that he liked Simon Fallows. He seemed to combine the best qualities of John’s old commanding officer with Greg Lestrade, and John’s first, instinctive burst of jealousy had given way to gratitude that Simon had an eye on Sherlock whilst John was in London.

“How about the off license?” Simon asked when they’d finished, and John decided that he liked Simon quite a lot indeed.

“Just shove all that in the back,” Simon said when they got to his car, which had a haphazard pile of papers on the passenger seat.

John shuffled the papers to stack them and leaned over to drop them in the back seat. A flyer from the Bridlington Arts Centre caught his eye, and it jogged something in his memory. “Bridlington,” he said. “Your wife wasn’t the one who commissioned Sherlock’s Christmas piece, was she?”

“The very same. Have you heard it?”

“No, just bits of Sherlock humming it. I didn’t know he had a recording.”

“I sent him a copy. He probably never even listened. Here—“ Simon handed John his phone as he put the car in gear. “Plug in the cord, there, and look it up in the music files. I believe the name’s ‘Winter Solstice’, or maybe ‘Winter Solstice SH’.”

John found the file and hit Play. The clear treble voices of the children’s choir filled the car. The song was stark but beautiful, reminding John of the bleak Yorkshire winter with its cold short days.

“It’s lovely, isn’t it? I’d nothing to do with the other commissions, by the way. Nicola didn’t either, it was the choir director—she loved the piece and sent it out to her friends.”

“It’s beautiful. Would you mind if I forward myself a copy?”

“No, not at all.”

By the time they arrived back at the abbey the thin spring rain had become a soft white mist,
“Here’s the key,” Simon said, handing it to John on the landing. “You know he can’t rest unless he locks the door, but he said he wouldn’t bolt it, so you should be all right. Need a hand with that?”

“I’ve got it, thanks.” John had put Mrs. Hudson’s insulated carrier in with his shopping. It had been nice to be in a proper grocery for once—he’d finally be able to make the thing with the peas. “And thanks for the ride and the lunch. I’m glad we had a chance to meet.”

They shook hands and John set off up the stairs, a little out of breath by the time he finally reached the top. Maybe he should start doing those stair machines at the gym. “Sherlock?” he said softly, pushing the heavy door open.

No answer. Sherlock must still be asleep. John unloaded the shopping in the kitchen and put it away, placing his new bottle of whisky in the top of the cupboard. Then he slipped quietly up the stairs. The mist hung thickly outside the big windows, giving the impression that the tower rooms were suspended in cloud. Sherlock was lying on his side under the woolen blanket, fast asleep.

John just stood by the side of the bed looking at him for a long moment. Sherlock had always looked deceptively young and innocent in sleep. Even now he seemed sweetly peaceful, with the tightness around his eyes smoothed away and all his usual tautness relaxed and softened, hair fanned out behind him. John carefully toed off his shoes and slipped under the blanket, intending to close his eyes for a bit himself, but Sherlock blinked and tensed as the bed dipped.

“Shhh,” John said softly. “It’s me. Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you. How are you feeling?”

“Better,” Sherlock said, relaxing again as John reached to stroke his hair. He stretched experimentally. “Good. Better than good, I think. Why, did you have something in mind?” His hand slid along John’s side.

“I didn’t, but I’m sure I could think of something,” John said, smiling. He closed the distance between them and tugged Sherlock’s head to his, feeling his heart pick up as their lips met—every week, it felt like their first kiss all over again. They kissed, pulled apart for breath, kissed again; tongues sliding over each other and breath mingling, until John forgot all about having a kip.

Sherlock broke off the kiss and rolled onto his back. John pushed himself up on an elbow to look down at him and Sherlock held his gaze, eyes grave and steady. His fingers went to the buttons on his shirt and slowly, very slowly, he began to unbutton them. There was nothing coy or coquettish in his face or his movements. He was not teasing, he was giving himself up to John’s eyes for the first time, a gift; John felt the weight of it, of Sherlock’s trust and love. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I want you to know me,” Sherlock whispered back. “All of me. Do you understand?”

John nodded, wordless.

Sherlock came to the last of his buttons and reached to unfasten his cuffs. John helped him slide the shirt off his shoulders as Sherlock’s fingers went to his trousers and John pulled those off too, along with his pants and socks, and then John took off his own clothing and dropped it to the floor. Sherlock’s grey solemn eyes went sorrowful at the sight of John’s scar and he reached for him, pressing the side of his face to John’s chest and wrapping his arms around him. For the first time in his life, John felt a fierce joy in his scar, in its size and ugliness—it was bigger than any of Sherlock’s.

Sherlock hugged him one last time and lay back again, spreading his hands at his sides. John moved over him carefully and brushed a kiss over his lips before he pressed his mouth to
Sherlock’s neck just below his ear, a spot that always made Sherlock shiver, and dragged his lips downward. He kissed the hard ridge where Sherlock’s clavicle had been broken, and the bumpy irregularities over his ribs, and the pink-silvery circle Mary’s bullet had left. He turned Sherlock carefully and kissed over his back: the pale lines whose stories he might never hear. He kissed the shiny pink of healed burns and the scar on Sherlock’s eyebrow and the tips of his nail-less fingers. He kissed his weak leg. When he had kissed his way back up to the juncture of groin and thigh Sherlock spread his legs wider and said again, very softly, “All of me.”

John moved up so he could brush his lips over Sherlock’s hard cock. They had never done this before—he’d moved that way once, early on, and Sherlock had gone rigid with anxiety—but Sherlock was calm now, as quiet and peaceful as the grey mist. He trusts me, John thought, and felt a surge of fierce protectiveness. He took Sherlock in his mouth and suckled gently and Sherlock gasped, fingers digging into the bedclothes beneath him.

John licked and sucked until Sherlock was panting and thrusting into his mouth and then pulled off to collect the lube. He paused, sure Sherlock would snap at him but unable to help himself, and asked, “You’re sure?”

Sherlock did not snap. He merely nodded, looking up at John with his trusting, serious eyes. In the diffuse timeless light he seemed soft and ethereal, and John had the odd sensation that he was dreaming, that he would wake to find he had simply drifted off next to Sherlock after all.

John moved alongside him so he could take possession of Sherlock’s mouth and kiss him, moving his hand carefully down between Sherlock’s legs and stroking lower as Sherlock drew in a sharp breath and spread his legs wider. There might be, John thought to himself and at that moment his fingers felt the knot of scar tissue. There is. John felt immensely proud that he did not betray his feelings by even the slightest hitch; he just skirted the hard ridge gently and pressed a fingertip in.

Sherlock tensed and inhaled, turning his head to press his face into John’s neck. John immediately stilled, but Sherlock took a few breaths and turned his head back, stretching his arms over his head and arching his back and transforming instantly into the sexiest thing John had ever seen. “You are so fucking gorgeous,” he said involuntarily. Sherlock grinned with his eyes closed.

“Better get on with it then,” he said and tilted his hips up in invitation.

Now that he’d got past his nerves, Sherlock was the most responsive lover John had ever touched. It broke John’s heart to see him respond so gratifyingly, arching and moaning at every brush of John’s lips and fingers. He went as slowly as Sherlock would let him. Sherlock would no doubt scoff if he knew John’s thoughts, but this was the first time Sherlock had ever been taken in love—or even for reciprocal pleasure—and to John’s mind that made him a virgin in every way that mattered.

When Sherlock was grinding down around three fingers and his cock had gone purple-red and damp at the tip John withdrew his fingers and asked him, “Is this going to be okay?”

Sherlock opened lust-clouded eyes and blinked at John in confusion. “Oh,” he said finally, cottoning on that John was talking about the position. “Yes…if you don’t lean too hard.”

“I won’t,” John promised. It might be better for Sherlock on his hands and knees, but John desperately wanted to see his face this first time. He had to help Sherlock pull up his weak leg and hook it over his arm. Then he took a deep breath, positioned himself over him, and pushed slowly in. Christ. John hadn’t been with anyone since that last night with Mary, nearly a year ago now, and Sherlock was so gloriously tight and hot.
Sherlock made a small sound, not quite a whimper, and that brought John’s attention back in a hurry. He bent low over Sherlock, bracing himself on his elbows and kissing at his face and neck. “I’m here, I’m right here,” he breathed. “I love you, Sherlock, I love you. Take your time. Breathe. I’ve got you.”

Sherlock’s eyes focused on his face with such intensity that John felt as though no one had ever really seen him before. “John,” he whispered. “You were right.”

“What was I right about?”

“Everything.”

John looked into Sherlock’s burning pale eyes. *I want you to know me*, Sherlock had said, and that was exactly how it seemed to John: he felt known, connected, joined to Sherlock in a way he had never experienced. “I know you,” he said softly. “I know you. I love you.”

“Yes.” Sherlock said. His free hand found John’s and their fingers laced together on the bed. John leaned over to kiss him again and the movement shifted him deeper and Sherlock arched his neck: “Mmm.”

“Okay? Good?”

“Good.”

John rocked his hips minutely, letting Sherlock adjust to the stretch, and after a while his back began to cramp and he shifted a little to ease it. Sherlock let go his hand and stretched his arm over his head again, biting at his lip and clutching at the sheet, and then he hooked his free leg around John and tugged. That seemed like permission to John, so he braced his arms and began to thrust in earnest.

Sherlock squirmed and panted and thrust back, clutching at his hair, the sheet, the wall, his own mouth. John pulled his hand away, kissed him, and said, “Touch yourself now.”

Sherlock’s eyes flew open—he looked, for an instant, honestly shocked—but then he closed his eyes again and reached down. “Oh,” he breathed, arching his back and biting his lip again, and John encouraged him: “There you go, love, you’re so gorgeous like that, I could come just from watching you, go on,” and Sherlock quickened his stroke, panting.

John was close, close enough that he began to think he might need to finish Sherlock off the way he had started, which would be fine—this was the first time he’d done this without a condom, and the thought of bringing Sherlock off with John’s come still leaking out of him sent a hot shock of lust to his groin. He thrust hard, and abruptly Sherlock jerked and cried out, his body clenching rhythmically deep around John.

“Oh fuck,” gasped John. Now he really needed to finish; he could well remember how fast things went from *brilliant* to *far too much* after orgasm. Of course this thought made his surging climax start to recede, but just as he was on the verge of pulling out Sherlock suddenly caught him around the neck with his half-wiped hand, pulled down his head, and licked his ear. “Fuck,” John shouted, slamming his hips forward. “Fuck, fuck, fuck—” He came so hard it almost hurt.

“How,” John asked, when they were wiped off and cuddling afterward, “could you possibly know licking my ear would make me come like that? *I didn’t even know that.*”

Sherlock smiled like a smug cat, eyes closed. “I observe.”
“God. Well, keep it up, by all means.”

“John.”

“Yeah?”

“Does this feel a bit unreal to you?”

“Mmm. It’s the mist. It makes everything feel like a dream, or one of those scenes in a movie where someone is hallucinating.”

Sherlock suddenly grinned again, eyes, still closed. “I know you’re real though. Shall I tell you how? I never imagined you were that big.”

John burst out laughing. “I don’t know whether to be flattered or insulted,” he said and pulled Sherlock carefully into his arms.

Chapter End Notes

The source text for Sherlock’s solstice piece:

The days are short
The sun a spark
Hung thin between
The dark and dark.

From “A Child’s Calendar” by John Updike
“I’m going to fetch you from the station next week,” Sherlock said.

John had been lying on his side, watching the shifting patterns of sun and shade on the endless expanse of rolling landscape spread below him, the ever-changing vista of clouds and sky—not to mention the play of the light over Sherlock’s long, elegant naked flank—but that brought his attention back. “Why on earth? I don’t mind taking the bus, you know that. I like the bus.”

“I thought I’d take you to lunch.”

John frowned. They were lying in bed after a highly satisfying morning shag, and his mind had been drifting along as contentedly purposeless as the clouds. Where had this come from? “I don’t need to go to lunch.”

“I know you don’t. I do.”

“You need to—oh.” The bustling café in Harrogate: Sherlock wanted to brave it, and now John had been already, which made it feel less threatening. “Okay. Just…I hate for you to risk being in pain, all weekend, or after if you drive me twice.”

“I’ve gone by during the week after my appointments.” Sherlock closed his eyes as though ashamed to admit this to John, though his voice stayed quiet and calm. “I couldn’t quite manage going in. You could take the bus back Sunday and catch the earlier train, if it makes you feel better.”

John considered a moment. He hated to leave a minute earlier than he had to, but this was progress, really excellent progress, a solid step toward Sherlock regaining his old life in London. “Well, all right then. It’s a date.”

Sherlock smiled with his eyes still closed, and John reached to smooth his tangled hair back. “You know,” he said after a minute, “I understand why you like that side of the bed, facing the stairs and all, but it seems a bit unfair. Here I’ve got this fantastic view and the most gorgeous man in the world in front of me, and you’re looking at the wall.”

Sherlock opened his eyes. “I’m looking at you,” he said.

“And the wall.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes, staring at the wall as though never having seen it before. His eyes flicked to the stairs and for once John could almost read his mind: the door below was bolted and locked, John was between him and the stairs, he was safe. He could turn his back.

Carefully, Sherlock shifted over on to his back and then awkwardly to his other side, grunting a little at the pain of rolling over, and then settled back down. John smiled and scooted closer. He wrapped one arm around Sherlock’s narrow waist and rested the side of his face against the back of his neck. Sherlock twined his fingers with John’s and held tight, but his body felt relaxed under John’s arm, and his breathing was quiet and even.

After a while Sherlock untangled his fingers and began the laborious process of shifting back to his
usual position. John let go, moving over to make room, and Sherlock looked at him with his clear steady eyes and said, “I like this view better.”

“Well, I was going to say maybe we should switch sides, but now that I’ve had my cock pressed against your arse for ten minutes I’m not really interested in the view at all anymore,” John said, and he pulled Sherlock on top of him. It was the sole upside to only seeing Sherlock on weekends: they spent half their time in bed, since it felt like such a long time in between. Sherlock was mostly soft against him at first but he thickened fast, and soon they were grinding against each other like a pair of rutting teenagers in the back of a car. “Can you reach the drawer?” John gasped.

Sherlock stretched his long arm and made a pleased sound of triumph—“ha”—and rolled back clutching the lube. They’d taken turns sucking each other off earlier, so there was little mess except what had been missed the day before. John clutched his fingers into Sherlock’s buttocks and spread him open and Sherlock groaned, grinding down hard, and John smeared his slick fingers deliberately over Sherlock’s anus. He didn’t try to go further—he could feel Sherlock was still a bit swollen and tender from yesterday—but he pressed his thumb into Sherlock’s perineum as Sherlock spread his legs wider and thrust against him, gathering them both in one long-fingered hand. John braced his own legs and concentrated on keeping Sherlock spread open, gripping his thigh and massaging that soft stretch of skin, whilst Sherlock pushed up on one elbow and panted frantically into his ear, slippery grip pumping faster. Sherlock’s curls were tumbled into his face and his smooth white neck was so close that John could have closed his teeth on it and he wanted to, God how he wanted to, bite Sherlock and mark him, beautiful thing, John’s, only John’s, but instead he gripped Sherlock harder as he felt the heat and slick of Sherlock’s hand and abdomen rubbing against him in a mounting wave of pleasure. “You are so fucking gorgeous,” he managed breathlessly, “on top of me like this, so hot, I want to feel you come on me,” and Sherlock, always so sensitive to praise, stiffened and came into the close space between their bodies. “Oh fuck.”

John let go Sherlock’s arse to wrap his arms around his waist, pulling them together as Sherlock clutched and pulsed, the evidence of his pleasure hot and wet against John’s abdomen. Sherlock pushed himself up again, let go his own cock, and pumped John to completion in a few practiced strokes.

“God, I think that was even better than earlier,” John murmured after a few minutes. His mouth was now full of Sherlock’s hair. “I meant what I said—you are ridiculously hot. Forget the view. We could be in…” he searched for the least romantic place he could think of “…my old bedsit and just seeing you with your shirt off would make me hard as a seventeen-year-old.”

“That’s just as well,” Sherlock said, muffled against the side of his head. “Because now we’re a complete sticky wreck and we’re going to have to get up and argue about the shower, so no one is going to be admiring the view any more today.”

He really, really needed to go by the shop and see about replacing the battery on his phone, John thought, switching it on as the Harrogate railway station came into view. Or maybe a new phone altogether. Unfortunately, with his weekends taken up with Sherlock and the weekdays with work, he was hard pressed to keep up with errands these days. There was a single text from Sherlock—*In the car park. SH*—which made John nod in approval; better that Sherlock avoid the station if he was planning to tackle the café.

The sight of Sherlock in the car, looking tense and a little grumpy, made John beam like an idiot.

“Hello there, beautiful,” he said as he slid in. “Waiting for someone?”

Sherlock somehow managed to roll his eyes and glare at the same time. “Mrs. Hudson made me
croissants this week, and you’ve eaten one. I can tell by the crumbs in your jumper.”

“She sent a dozen, and they’re plain, and you only really like them with chocolate,” John said. “And besides, I had an ulterior motive. Can’t believe you didn’t notice.”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes until they practically disappeared. “Someone chatting you up,” he said through his teeth. “Asked if you were going to have breakfast, but you had bought coffee at the station and then you ate my croissant.”

“You still have eleven! You wouldn’t manage to eat eleven croissants before they get stale even if they weren’t plain!”

“I’d dip them in coffee.”

“Truthfully, they’re a bit burnt,” John said in a theatrical undertone, glancing over his shoulder as though afraid Mrs. Hudson had followed him from Baker Street to observe Sherlock’s reaction to her gift. “Apparently croissants are really tricky. Butter temperature, or something. She did say she was going to practice some more this week and then move on to chocolate. And you wouldn’t have wanted me having breakfast with a woman on the train, would you?”

Sherlock sniffed. “Don’t eat the chocolate ones.”

“I don’t like chocolate. I must say, you’ve really given Mrs. Hudson a new lease on life. She was practically pining without you there to fuss over, but now that she’s taking all these French baking classes she’s quite enjoying herself.” If it weren’t for John’s faithful after-work gym trips and cutting out drinking alone, he’d have been positively corpulent by now.

Sherlock drove the short distance to the café, parked in the designated spot near the door, and then sat staring at it with absolutely no expression on his face.

“Well, then, let’s go.” John put a snap in his own voice, a little steel—Captain Watson has your back, so move it, soldier—and opened his own door and got out. Sherlock was a bit slower, although that could be due mostly to his injury; getting out of the car was difficult for him. John waited until he had got straightened up and his door closed before turning briskly and striding off.

The café was busy and crowded and there were no seats along the wall, let alone at the back. John maneuvered Sherlock to a table as far from the noisy kitchen as he could manage, where Sherlock sat rigid as if carved from stone. John could see the fine muscles jumping along his jaw.

“Okay,” John said, keeping his voice light. “Any criminals?”

Sherlock blinked at him, startled, and then looked around, sweeping his piercing gaze over the room. “A number of people cheating--spouses, taxes, oh, that one’s cheating on his exams as well—but that’s not criminal, except the taxes…there’s a paedophile by the window.”

“Jesus. Should we do something?”
“No need. He’s never acted on it, and never plans to--he's taking medication.”

“Oh. Well, that’s good, I guess. Hungry?”

Sherlock barely touched his food, while John ate too much, too fast, and felt sick. Still, Sherlock seemed outwardly calm; he was actually less jumpy than the first time John had had tea with him at Lucy’s, possibly because the baseline noise level was so high that crashing and shouting barely registered. John got Sherlock talking about his music, which always helped to distract him. He had temporarily abandoned his Easter piece to work on a new commission, a hymn to St. Cecilia for an women’s ensemble.

“At least it’s an interesting challenge—they can sing harmony, even if there isn’t a bass section, far more fun than the children. It’s not as though there isn’t an abundance of St. Cecilia hymns, but few written only for women’s voices. I’m having trouble finding a unique text. It’s a shame you aren’t a poet; Britten had the advantage of having Auden for a friend.”

John couldn’t help laughing. “Sorry. Isn’t there a poet in residence at the Abbey?”

“Yes, but she’s dreadful.”

“How on earth do you know?”

“I observe,” Sherlock said acidly.

“If I write a poem it’s going to be an ode to your arse. Who was St. Cecilia anyway?”

They almost made it. Meal done—eaten in John’s case, abandoned in Sherlock’s—and bill paid, they were making their way to the door, John going slowly ahead to block anyone from getting in Sherlock’s way as he limped painfully through the crowded room. They were nearly to the front when the door opened to admit a swirl of backpackers, young and boisterous, Australian by their accents.

John automatically swerved to avoid them, knowing from a lifetime of riding trains that backpackers always underestimated how far behind them their packs stuck out, but not quickly enough: one of the young men turned to shout to his friend and bumped John squarely in the chest, making him stumble. He flung out a hand to catch his balance and then abruptly he was on the floor, cheek pressed to the grimy linoleum, ears ringing, unable to move. What the hell?

John closed his eyes and opened them again: still on the floor. He became aware of a hubbub of noise over him—the backpackers—and of an enormously heavy weight pressing him down. Sherlock. Sherlock had tackled John to the floor. Oh shit, John thought, and then suddenly the racket above him quieted into what sounded like a single indrawn breath.

John tried to lift his chin, forcing his eyes to focus. Sherlock’s right hand was directly in front of his face, and it was holding a long, very sharp hunting knife. Shit. They would be arrested, Sherlock in a cell, hundreds of miles from Mycroft or Lestrade…”Sherlock,” John said quietly. “Give me the knife.”

Sherlock did not move. John worked his right hand out from under the crushing weight and reached to Sherlock’s. He could not turn his head, but he could hear Sherlock’s snared-rabbit panting loud in his ear. “I’m fine,” John said as firmly as he could. “I’m fine. Let me have it.” He closed his hand around the handle and said, “Okay. Now let me up.”
The weight fell away and John got swiftly to his feet, keeping his right arm close to his body. Sherlock was kneeling on the ground with his head down, shoulders heaving, and John reached out with his left hand and with a strength born largely of adrenaline hauled him to his feet, praying he would not hurt Sherlock further. The backpackers were staring at them wide-eyed, the rest of the café having fallen silent as well at this interesting turn of events.

“Everything okay?” A man was shouldering his way through the little crowd; clearly the manager.

“Yes, fine, thanks,” John said, smiling through his teeth as he began to tug Sherlock toward the door.

“I was told someone had a weapon…”

“No, it was all my fault,” one of the young men said swiftly. He was the one who had bumped John; he had his pack off now. “I crashed right into him, knocked him down. I hope I didn’t hurt you,” he said to John. “Can I help?”

Up close he was older than John had realized, with a steadiness about his eyes. A brief flicker of understanding passed between them. “Get the door?” John still had the knife secreted under his right arm and was basically holding up Sherlock with his left. The backpacker held the door open for him and finally, finally John managed to get Sherlock and himself deposited safely into the car. The patrons inside the café had already lost interest and returned to their food.

John dropped the knife to the floor at his feet, leaned back, and blew out a long breath. Sherlock sat quietly beside him, staring at his hands. “I’m sorry,” he said.

“Okay,” John said. “Okay.” Two steps forward, one step back. He closed his eyes for a minute, feeling his heart rate return to normal, and then opened his eyes and looked over at the hunched bundle of misery in the driver’s seat. “Hey, it’s okay. We’re all right, and you were doing really well up until then, and now you know that something is likely to trigger you that you didn’t know before. So you can work on it. Yeah?”

Sherlock nodded silently.

“Where the hell did you have this?” John toed the knife at his feet.

“Ankle sheath. Under my sock.”

John considered that. “Have you been wearing it all along?”

Sherlock nodded. “Except in bed. I have it under my pillow. Not when you’re there, I…put it under the bed.”

“Okay,” John said again. He stared at the knife a long minute. “Sherlock, you know that could have gone really badly, right? Someone could have gotten hurt. Not me, because I can take care of myself, but one of those kids. Even if they hadn’t, if that backpacker hadn’t covered for us, the manager could have called the police.”

“I know.”

“You can’t wear it out anymore,” John said, as gently as he could.

Sherlock looked up at him for the first time. “But at the abbey? I can still have it in my rooms?”

“You really feel you need it?”
“For now, yes,” Sherlock said. There was naked terror in his eyes.

John sighed, but he supposed there was not a lot of trouble Sherlock could get up to; his only visitor seemed to be Simon, who would not do anything to startle Sherlock. “You swear to me you won’t take it out of your rooms?”

“I promise,” Sherlock said immediately.

“And you swear—you promise you won’t use this on yourself.”

“No. You know I wouldn’t, I’ve a safety plan.” John must have looked unconvinced, because Sherlock said, “I’ll give it up soon, but I can’t…I won’t be able to sleep without it right now, and if I can’t sleep…”

“All right,” John said on a long sigh.

Sherlock’s shoulders relaxed and he leaned back too, shifting a little to take his weight on his other hip, and closed his eyes. They just sat there a long minute, recovering.

“Crowds,” Sherlock said after a while, without opening his eyes.

“They’re hard for you?” John had his eyes closed now too. He felt queasy and exhausted and as though he would like a very long nap.

“They always have been. It was why I started observing, making deductions. Who would cause trouble, who would join in, who would stand by and watch, who would slink away.” John could hear a sardonic note in his weary voice. “Public school was excellent preparation for prison, as it turned out. Except that in prison no one was after me personally. But before I managed to negotiate a truce, a battle could break out any time, so I was always watching. And I always had a knife. I made it myself, but this one is much better.”

John opened his eyes and looked over at him. “Is that how you got that scar? It looks like a knife wound.”

Sherlock touched his fingertips lightly to the scar. “Yes. I was trying to protect Movsar. He had lost an eye decades ago, fighting the Russians, and his vision in his good eye was fading…but he spoke the mountain dialects far better than I ever would. He said he was the ears and I was the eyes, and as long as we stuck together we would be fine.”

*Mountain dialects.* “Movsar…he was one of the Muslims? I thought you were captured by them?”

Sherlock smiled. “I was. But even at the beginning Movsar called me his guest. I was never mistreated, even when they thought I was a spy. Later…later, I suppose he was my friend. The only one I ever had, aside from you. But I couldn’t save him in the end.”

Neptune, John realized. Movsar must have been Neptune. “I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Not really my area, *friends.*” Sherlock looked out the window.

“Yeah, okay, no,” John said. He reached over and took Sherlock’s hand firmly in his, giving it a little shake and bringing it to his lips to kiss the knuckles. “You are the best friend anyone has ever had, ever, in the history of the universe, leaving aside the whole pretending to be dead thing, which my wife shooting you officially cancelled out so we’re going to forget about that. You saved my life and my marriage and my wife, and you saved Movsar’s country, and anything else that happened was *not your fault.* Yeah? Now let’s go to the bloody Sainsbury and then home for a
nap.”

Sherlock squeezed his hand. “I trust you can manage without me if I stay in the car. I think I’ve had enough of being in public for one day.”

John rolled his eyes. “Like I ever expected you to help with the shopping.”

Sherlock fitted the keys into the ignition and started the car, looking out at the café with an almost fierce expression on his face. “And I’m coming back here. Next week. No knife,” he added quickly.

John had never loved Sherlock more than he did in that moment. “I’ll be right beside you.”

“Did you know Sherlock had a knife?” John asked.

Mycroft, who had just raised his pint to his lips, lowered it without taking a drink. He had just finished trouncing the entire pub at darts. “Ah. I had my suspicions, but his rooms were searched every time he was hospitalized, and no weapon was found. He must have learned some new hiding techniques in prison.” He frowned. “How do you suppose he obtained it?”

“Got one of his not-entirely-legal contacts to send it through the post, is my guess,” John said. He’d been a teensy bit suspicious that the knife had come from Mycroft himself, but Mycroft was looking convincingly irritated.

“I assume you confiscated it?”

“No, I didn’t.” At Mycroft’s look John said defensively, “I’d rather he give it up himself. He’s sworn to leave it in his rooms from now on, and I’d like him to get to the point where he decides he doesn’t need it anymore. Anyway, if I took it he’d just get another.”

“I could have his post stopped.”

“Look, he’s doing better, he really is. You’ll see for yourself when you go up.” Mycroft visited Sherlock every other month or so when John had to work the weekend, though he only stayed a few hours. Both Sherlock and Mycroft seemed to find this too long.

“Mmm.” Mycroft took a dainty sip of his pint, considering. John swigged from his own in hopes of encouraging Mycroft to drink properly instead of looking like he was enjoying a fine Sauternes. “I suppose you could be right. I’ll just have a word with his therapist.”

“Mycroft, you know that’s bloody unethical, don’t you?”

Mycroft smiled his tight enigmatic smile over the foam in his glass. “I didn’t become the British government by following the rules.”

John had to shove the heavy wooden door hard to get it to open against the wind, so he almost knocked Simon off the step when it finally swung open. “Oops! Sorry there, mate, you okay?”

“Fine, fine,” Simon said, smiling. A woman about John’s age was standing just behind him, swathed in a heavy cloak that billowed around her in the wind, her long hair a wild tangle around her face. “Cressida, have you met John? John Watson—he’s here visiting Sherlock. John, this is
Cressida Dearborn, our poet in residence.”

“Pleasure to meet you,” John said, extending his hand.

“Likewise,” Cressida said, taking it. Her face showed a curious mixture of surprise, disappointment, and avid curiosity. “So you’re Sherlock’s…?”

John realized that Simon had left that—probably deliberately—unclear. The changed nature of their relationship was known to all their friends by now, but this was the first time John had actually been called upon to out himself to a stranger. It was harder than he expected. “Partner,” he managed, and then a bit louder, “I’m his boyfriend. Yes.” Git, he thought to himself, that wasn’t so hard, now was it?

“Oh!” Definitely disappointment. Some things never changed, John thought wryly.

“I’ve heard a lot about you,” he lied, blocking out the memory of Sherlock calling Cressida’s poetry “dreadful” and making a rapid deduction of his own. “You made him one—you made him a Christmas cake, didn’t you? It was lovely.”

“Yes!” Cressida brightened, blushing a bit. She wasn’t unattractive, just a bit barmy-looking with her wild hair and dramatic cape. John could only imagine what her poetry was like and hoped she hadn’t written anything about Sherlock. “I’m quite glad you liked it.”

“Headed out?” Simon asked, coming to John’s rescue with evident amusement. “I’m off for a bit of a walk myself. We’ve an hour or so until dinner, and I like to get a bit of air. I’ll see you at dinner?” This was to Cressida in a clear gesture of farewell.

“Oh—yes. Enjoy your stay,” she said to John, bundling all her flapping ends of cloak and hair through the door and into the building.

“Mind if I join you then?” John asked. “I need to get out for a bit.”

“Of course. Lovely day, isn’t it? Feels like spring!”

The wind was as usual blowing hard enough to make John’s eyes water, but there was a definite warmth in it. “Could say that,” he allowed. “Haven’t you a retreat on? The car park’s full up.”

“We do, not one of mine, though I help with all of them. Everyday spirituality. Cressida was leading a journaling session; they’re quite popular, especially at the women’s retreats. How are you? Everything all right with Sherlock?”

“Fine,” John said, smiling. They had crossed the car park and now Simon struck out along a faint footpath running along a sheltered dip in the rocky landscape. Simon’s name badge whipped out almost horizontally and he pulled it off to tuck it into a pocket. “He’s been having a lot of trouble with this piece he’s been working on and it sounds as though the choir master told him they absolutely have to have it by this week, so now he’s in a frenzy. I thought it might be a good idea to make myself scarce for a bit.” He didn’t mind. It was good to see Sherlock engrossed in something again, even if it did involve him snapping peevishly at everything and yanking his hair until he resembled a deranged dropout from an 80’s hair-metal band.

“What’s the piece?”

“An Easter cantata, I think.”

“Ah, that explains it.” At John’s quizzical look Simon laughed and said, “Sorry, bit of a clerical
joke. It’s axiomatic that the Good Friday sermon is easy but the Easter sermon is hard. Because everyone’s experienced death, you see, but no one has experienced the resurrection, so it must be taken on faith.”

“Right,” John said.

Simon must have caught something in his voice because he stopped abruptly, turning to look at John. “But you have! I’d forgotten! When Sherlock was thought to have committed suicide, and then he came back! Or did you know all along?”

“I didn’t know,” John said. “And I rather failed to appreciate his resurrection at the time; I punched him. More than once, in fact.” He started walking again. Even after everything that had happened since, the memory still carried a jagged edge of hurt, and he didn’t like to dwell too much on it.

Simon walked along at his side in silence for a bit. “I probably would have done as well,” he said after a while. “And I’m fairly certain at least one of the disciples might have had a go at Jesus, now that I think on it. If they didn’t, surely one of the Marys must have slapped him.”

The image of Mrs. Hudson in a Nativity-style robe and headdress walloping Sherlock could not help but make John smile. “I’ll bet you’re right.”

“A recurring failure of mankind,” Simon mused, apparently thinking through something aloud. “The miracle is granted us unasked and unearned, like grace itself, but to recognize it—we have to learn that on our own.”

“Well, I can’t speak to the grace, that’s more your area than mine, but I can promise you we can learn to recognize the miracle. Because this time, there hasn’t been a day since Sherlock returned that I haven’t been grateful. I didn’t—we didn’t think he’d make it back, you see, and so every minute I have with him—” John had to stop and swallow hard against the swell of emotion. “I know how lucky I am. Every bloody minute.”

Simon smiled at him, eyes crinkling. “I think Sherlock is lucky too,” he said. “Ah! Here we are!” The path had opened out into a wide valley, ringed on three sides by rocky hills. Simon pulled out a pair of binoculars and began scanning the hillsides.

“What are you looking for?”

“Peregrine falcons. They usually nest here in the spring, but I haven’t seen—oh there’s one, look.” John followed his pointing finger and saw the graceful form of a bird high over one of the hills. “Is it hunting?”

“Probably. Here,” Simon handed John the binoculars and he adjusted them, looking at the falcon’s long tapered wings, until suddenly it was gone. “Look, there, it’s diving!” John took the binoculars away and was just in time to see the falcon’s headlong dive toward the ground. He handed the binoculars back to Simon, who gave him a breathless commentary as he followed the hunter’s progress toward the side of the hill. “There’s the scrape, there, in the rocks. Here, I’ll give you the binoculars, and if you look just by that big outcrop there…”

It took John a minute, but finally he focused the binoculars on the little patch of stone where an indistinct huddle of fluff seemed to be. “That’s the nest? It looks so bare.”

“They like to be high up. The parents can fend off any threats, don’t worry. They nest in skyscrapers now; I hear they’re all over London, though I haven’t seen any myself.”
John followed the mother? father? falcon with the binoculars as it took flight again, soaring in a graceful arc above the rocky hillside. Something about it reminded him of Sherlock, with his long graceful neck and proud carriage. He thought of Sherlock high in his tower. John’s miracle, remote and safe as the nestlings in their scrape.

A halfhearted rain spattered at them on their way back, so they hurried along without talking until they reached the cloisters. “I’m going straight on to the dining hall,” Simon told John, pausing outside the heavy wooden door as John swiped Sherlock’s card to unlock it, “but if you liked the falcons, I go every week about this time and I’d be glad of the company if you’d care to come.”

“Yeah, I think I would, thanks,” John said, pleased.

At the top floor John pulled out Sherlock’s keys and unlocked the heavy wooden door—Sherlock had left it unbolted for him—and found Sherlock hunched over his desk in the near-dark, shoving irritably at his hair. John went over to him, wrapped his arms around his shoulders, and nuzzled the top of his head.

“What,” Sherlock said crossly.

“Nothing. Just, I love you, and I’m so glad I have you, and I’m happy to see you again.”

Sherlock twisted his neck around to peer up into John’s face. “Did you stumble into one of those gratitude workshops?”

John laughed. “No, I went for a walk with Simon, and he was talking about how everyone experiences death but no one experiences resurrection, and probably the disciples didn’t even appreciate it, and it just made me realize how lucky I am.”

“Of course they didn’t appreciate it because the whole story is a load of—wait.” Sherlock stared at John with a familiar intensity. “Say that again.”

“What, how lucky I am?”

“No—the bit about—oh! of course!” Sherlock turned to his mess of papers, turned back, and planted a loud sloppy kiss on John’s lips. “You are a genius, you are a marvel, a miracle, thank you.”

So they were both miracles. “Anytime,” John said, pleased and a little mystified, and went to the kitchen to start on the thing with the rice.

Chapter End Notes

St. Cecilia was the patron saint of music, which is a very good way to get people to write songs about you. The Britten/Auden collaboration referenced by Sherlock really does have a stunning text (although, as far as I can tell, practically nothing to do with St. Cecilia) and can be heard here.
On the anniversary of the accident that had ended John’s old life he took the afternoon off—the first day off he had taken since he started his current job. It was a beautiful April day, far different from the chill grey he remembered from the previous year. At the cemetery he tidied around the smooth white tombstone, placed the fresh flowers in front, and then just stood for a long moment, remembering.

“I miss you,” he said, finally. “I know it sounds funny, but I do. Things happen at the surgery that I want to tell you about, or I hear a joke and know you would have liked it.” It was true. The quick, surgical end to their marriage had cauterized the spreading gangrene that would have destroyed it; he remembered his former wife without anger or pain. “We should only remember the past if it is pleasant, do you remember telling me that? I didn’t know it was from a book until Sherlock told me. Can you believe Sherlock read *Pride and Prejudice*? And didn’t delete it?” He smiled, imagining Mary’s warm laugh, and touched the carved letters of her name. “Good-bye, Mary. Be happy.”

Em was harder, though not so hard as her birthday had been back in January. He would have broken his vow about drinking alone if Lestrade hadn’t come through for him that time. Fortunately, John had taken the opportunity to fill Lestrade in about the change in his relationship with Sherlock, and that had kept them both distracted. He brushed his fingers over the words and felt a deep, genuine grief. Emilia Elizabeth Watson—Londoner, daughter of John Watson—was gone, as surely as if she had truly died a year ago. The little girl living far away would grow up with a different name, a different country, maybe even a different language. All that was left of Em was the memory John treasured in his heart, a faint whisper of baby shampoo and softness. “I love you,” he said quietly. “Always and everywhere.”

He straightened up and squared his shoulders. Think only of the past as its remembrance brings you pleasure: that was how it went. He gave Mary’s name a final nod—take care of our girl—and then he turned and walked away.

John went home after the cemetery. He felt peaceful but a little melancholy, not really in the mood for company. He thought about walking in the park for a bit—the day was so bright and sunny—but that seemed too self-consciously maudlin.

The flat was silent when he let himself in. Mrs. Hudson must be out. John climbed the stairs slowly, thinking with some pleasure about just putting around the flat with a cup of tea. He went into the kitchen to put the kettle on before going up to his bedroom to change. On the stairs he paused, frowning. A draft of cool air had brushed his cheek, but from where? The back window was closed—he’d seen it as he crossed out of the kitchen. John strained his ears but heard nothing but a distant clattering from the alley behind the building and the usual noises from the street. Nothing in the house, and yet John had the feeling, suddenly, that he was not alone.
That was ridiculous. He was just imagining Sherlock's presence as he sometimes did, wishful thinking, that was all. Still, John climbed the rest of the stairs quietly, all his senses on alert as he gained the landing and moved carefully into his bedroom.

Nothing. The room was empty.

John stood still, taking in the closed window, the neatly-made bed. His room was silent and still, but there was something in the air that made him feel someone had just stepped out. Dust motes swirled in the sunlight. He turned toward the window automatically but saw nothing. He turned back, puzzled, and caught a faint whiff of Mary’s perfume.

That was…that was impossible. John hadn’t saved her perfume, only the baby shampoo. He looked automatically at the wooden jewelry box on the chest of drawers and felt the hairs on the back of his neck stand up: the lid was open. John had not opened the box for months. He moved to it almost in a daze and touched the silk scarf lying folded on the top of the little pile. Surely he’d left the sleeper on top? He lifted the scarf out, catching that faint whiff of scent again, and looked underneath: ring, sleeper, shampoo bottle, all still there. John carefully replaced the scarf and shut the box. Then he went to his bed, sat down, and stared at it.

John didn’t believe in ghosts. He didn’t. There had been one time, when he’d thought he’d seen a friend he couldn’t save, just after he came back—but that had been a dream, he’d decided that for certain, especially after two years of looking for Sherlock every time he opened his eyes in the night, and if anyone was going to be a restless spirit…

…but Sherlock hadn’t been dead.

But Mary wasn’t dead either.

Was she?

The chill ran up John’s neck again. Of course Mary wasn’t really dead. Mycroft wouldn’t…but it had seemed incredible even at the time, hadn’t it? That Mycroft could have possibly pulled it all together so fast? Far simpler to have simply killed her and let John believe it had been an elaborate ruse.

But he promised Sherlock, John thought, and then in his head he heard Mycroft’s voice: protect you from your exceedingly poor choice of spouse. Mycroft hadn’t promised to protect Mary, he’d promised to protect John. And this way there’d be no loose ends, nothing to keep John from being there, ready and waiting and available, when Mycroft’s baby brother came back.

John shook his head as though to dislodge the thought. It was impossible. John had no illusions that Mycroft was incapable of dispatching anyone he thought a threat to his brother—even an infant—but if he had done it, he must have known that Sherlock would see through it.

Wouldn’t he?

Someone at work had told John about a Chinese restaurant in Harrogate that was located in the old Royal Baths, and a little research on the internet informed him that it had excellent dim sum, so that was where they had headed this week. Sherlock led the way inside, hobbling precariously but with his head high and shoulders confident. John lagged behind, not wanting to crowd him. He wondered uneasily if Sherlock might be getting slower. Still, he had set forth with no visible sign of anxiety, and John decided to feel optimistic about that side of things.
In the restaurant Sherlock seemed tense, though in a way different from the rigid anxiety to which
John had become accustomed; he was twitchy in a manner that reminded John of the old, easily
distracted Sherlock. He was wearing John’s favorite jumper, a dark blue cashmere that warmed his
pale complexion and deepened his blue eyes, and John found himself smiling at him. “What?”
Sherlock asked, catching John’s eye as he poured chrysanthemum tea.

“Nothing. It’s just that you’re looking very…out of my league.”

Sherlock scoffed and rolled his eyes, craning his neck to try and spot a cart with dumplings, but
John saw the faint pleased flush on his cheeks. He hid a grin. He should have known Sherlock
Holmes would be as susceptible to flattery as a teenage girl.

thing turn out? Did you get a recording?”

“Well enough; the sopranos were a bit too dramatic and the tenor section was weak, but with a
better choir I think it would have been rather good. They posted it on the internet.” Sherlock waved
off the turnip cakes and grabbed two plates of sesame balls, which John knew from experience he
would eat all by himself.

“Did you get a new batch of commission requests?”

“Several, but I turned them all down. I’m not taking any new commissions.”

John felt a wild surge of hope, which he tried and failed to tamp down.

“I’ve been selected to write the music for the dedication of the war memorial in Regent’s Park.”

The stab of disappointment was so acute John had to fake a coughing fit to hide his expression. But
he had caught a glimpse of the uncertain, self-conscious happiness on Sherlock’s face on the way,
and by the time he emerged, wiping his eyes and slurping water, he was able to beam at Sherlock in
unfeigned delight. “That’s fantastic! I mean, of course they were going to choose your piece, it was
amazing. Have you a lot of work to do now?”

“I have to learn how to write for the brass and woodwinds,” Sherlock admitted, “and the
percussion—didn’t you say you played the clarinet once? Maybe you could…”

John laughed so hard he choked on his dumpling, for real this time. “Oh no no no,” he managed
finally. “I’m just your muse. You’re on your own for any actual musical expertise.”

“My muse,” Sherlock said, tilting his head. He clearly liked the sound of this.

“Yes. Now finish up, your muse has never gone to bed with a famous composer before and I think
we need to change that as soon as possible, since you are going to need a lot of inspiration.”

John would have liked to have spread Sherlock out and sucked and licked and fingered him to wild,
screaming ecstasy, but Sherlock was still not comfortable feeling so exposed. John was not sure he
ever would be. So they lay on their sides facing each other, Sherlock wrapped around him, as John
rubbed the heel of his hand over Sherlock’s hard erection and cupped his bollocks and pushed into
him with slow, patient fingers. Sherlock’s hands skittered over his back and head as John mouthed
over his chest. Sherlock seemed to be having trouble relaxing into this today, John thought, in spite
of his evident enthusiasm, but John knew how to deal with that. “You know I think about you all week, right?” he breathed into Sherlock’s neck. “I think about your mouth, and your soft skin, and your beautiful fingers. And your hair, and your arse, and right here...especially right here.” He rubbed his fingers gently around the tight ring of muscle, which was loosening now. “I think about how good you smell and how you taste.” It was true. Sherlock had always been obsessively finicky about hygiene; even back at Baker Street he had often showered twice a day, and now John suspected he scoured his nether regions thoroughly on Saturday mornings in preparation for John’s fingers and mouth. “And then I get so hard...” Sherlock’s fingers were digging into John’s shoulder blades now and his breath was coming faster; he was beginning to thrust back onto John’s fingers. “God, I feel like I’ll explode if I can’t have you, I want you so bad, you can’t imagine.” Sherlock shuddered against him, trying to get some friction against John’s hand, but John had three fingers buried palm-deep in Sherlock’s arse and he could not get purchase.

“Take me then, take me now,” Sherlock said, trying to squirm closer. “I want it, I’m ready, take me now, please.”

John grinned, pleased with himself, and pulled his fingers out so he could roll Sherlock onto his back. Anyone else would have missed his slight stiffening, but even before they had become intimate John had been able to read Sherlock as no one else could. “No—this is hurting you,” he said, kneeling up in concern.

“It’s fine, it will pass,” Sherlock managed. “It’s just—” but John had already slid his hands under his hips and shifted Sherlock onto his other side. Sherlock started to protest but John clambered over him and pressed himself against his back, pulling Sherlock’s weak leg up and wrapping an arm around the inside of his thigh.

“Will this be okay?” John asked, unnecessarily—he had felt Sherlock relax as the position took the pressure off his damaged spine.

“Yes—that’s good.”

“Budge up a bit,” John advised, scooting them both forward, “There—put your hand on the window—that’s it. Now you’re the one with a view, aren’t you?”

“Who cares about the view, the view is boring,” Sherlock gasped. John chuckled, hitched his long leg up a little higher, used his other hand to line them up, and pushed in. Sherlock moaned, throwing his head back, and John tugged on his thigh to bring them flush against each other as he slid all the way in.

“Jesus, you feel fantastic,” John groaned. “Look how we fit together, we’re like two puzzle pieces.”

Sherlock was pushing against the glass in an effort to seat John even deeper. “I’m the lock,” he said, “and you’re the key that’s opened me.”

“I’m not going to beat that,” John decided, and pulled back a bit so he could thrust back in.

John took it slow at first, rocking gently with his cock buried deep, but after a bit when he pulled back Sherlock stiffened and gasped and John said, “Oh, like that? Right there?” Sherlock made an incoherent noise in response, so John began thrusting shallowly, pressing his toes against the wall at the foot of the bed in an effort to keep them in place. His grip on Sherlock’s thigh grew slippery with sweat as Sherlock panted and trembled, pushing back against the window.

“Oh God,” Sherlock said suddenly, flinging his head back again, “Oh—God—John—John
—John—“and John, astonished, felt Sherlock’s body seize and clench rhythmically around him, Jesus, he was coming from this, not a hand on him. John had never seen anyone come just from prostate stimulation before—should he keep going? Slow down? Stop? It didn’t seem to matter; Sherlock was still quaking and gasping, “Oh, oh, oh,” as he pressed back against John, and just as he finally descended into quivering uncoordinated shivers and John began to pull out, Sherlock exhaled hard and said, “No, go deep now, go deep,” and John did. He wrapped his arm even more tightly around the bundle of Sherlock’s leg, braced his foot and fucked Sherlock right into the window as he shouted out his climax.

“So now I’ve had the world’s only consulting detective and a famous composer,” John said. They were lying in bed close by the windows, Sherlock’s head on John’s chest. The angled side windows were cracked open, so a soft breeze fluttered his curls. John had cleaned them both up and brought Sherlock, unasked, his muscle relaxants and NSAIDs; Sherlock had taken them without comment and now seemed to be settling in for a nap.

“With your famous and fantastic phallus,” Sherlock said sleepily. “With which you made me come without my having to lift a finger. It’s a bad idea. You know how lazy I can be; I’m in danger of becoming horribly spoilt.”

John would have liked nothing better than to spoil Sherlock silly for the rest of his days, but it seemed a bit too close to coddling to say so. “So basically…you’re a fucking genius, and I’m a fucking genius.”

Sherlock groaned. “Please say you aren’t going to put that in your blog.”

“Nope,” John yawned. He was feeling a little sluggish himself, what with the dim sum and the sex. He yawned again and stroked Sherlock’s hair. “What happens in the tower stays in the tower, Rapunzel.”

Sherlock gave a halfhearted snort; he was already drifting off. John stroked his hair and thought about princesses in towers and brave knights and Sleeping Beauty, and how he wished he could kiss Sherlock and return him to how he had been before. He thought of Sherlock’s pills, which John checked every week as he put away the shopping, and how much more quickly Sherlock seemed to be going through them. He thought about the narcotics, which were now, worryingly, down to five.

And then, just on the other side of the window—almost close enough to touch if the glass had not been between them—one of the peregrine falcons swooped past in its elegant dive. John blinked in surprise. He had never seen one so close to the abbey, though he had been going out with Simon every week to watch the progress of the nestlings. He remembered their conversation the first time he had gone and turned his mind determinedly away from his worry. Instead John cuddled his sleeping beloved close to his heart, kissed Sherlock’s silky hair, and reminded himself firmly that he was the luckiest man alive.

By the next week Sherlock had acquired a French horn and, after John finally convinced him he did not remember enough to teach Sherlock the clarinet, an oboe. Initially this was not very pleasant—the French horn in particular sounded as though someone were murdering a duck—but Sherlock being Sherlock, he learned quickly.

“Are you going to learn every instrument in the orchestra?” John asked in amusement. “That’s going to take a while.”
Sherlock dismissed this with a sniff. “Only one from each section. Percussion doesn’t count; anyone can bang a drum.”

John laughed. “It’s harder than you think. I took drum lessons once from a bloke I knew…fancied myself a rock star. My parents wouldn’t buy me a guitar and I already knew I couldn’t sing. Turned out I couldn’t drum either.” Sherlock ignored him in favor of frowning at the video on YouTube he was currently studying. “Why are you learning all these anyway? Isn’t that the point of that composition program you use?”

“Not the same,” Sherlock said, hitting the pause button. Then he picked up the French horn, lifted it to his lips, and blew. A horrible squawk issued.

“Think I left my journals in the car,” John said, leaping up from his squashy armchair to grab the keys. With any luck he’d run into Simon and they could leave early for their weekly hike.

“So I assume you’ve heard Sherlock’s big news,” John said to Mycroft, when they were at dinner the following week. “If you had anything to do with it, please do me a favor and never, ever mention it.”

“I have no idea to what you are referring,” Mycroft said, taking a dainty bite of asparagus.

“Perfect,” John said.

Mycroft lowered his asparagus and frowned. “You misunderstand. I am not conveying a cryptic but mutually understood sentiment, I really have no idea.”

“The monument dedication? Seriously?”

“What monument?”

“The war memorial that’s being built in Regent’s Park. Are you really saying you had nothing to do with Sherlock being chosen to write the music for the dedication ceremony?”

Mycroft was beginning to get that look on his face, the one John did not like. “Sherlock hasn’t been chosen for anything.”

Now it was John’s turn to frown. Surely it wasn’t possible—Sherlock seemed to have got past his fear that John would only want him if he was dazzling and amazing; surely he hadn’t been lying? Or worse, what if he had begun to lose touch with reality and the selection was only a fantasy?

“How do you know?”

“John,” Mycroft said patiently, “I know when Sherlock fills a medication, borrows a library book, or is mentioned anywhere in the press. If he had been selected for something like a memorial dedication, I would know it.”

“Check it anyway,” John said stubbornly. “Text your assistant, Anthea or whoever it is this month, and have them find out. The war memorial in Regent’s Park.”

Mycroft sighed, dabbed his mouth with his napkin, and stood up; heaven forbid he do something so gauche as take out his phone in his fancy restaurant. John sat pushing his food around and trying to ignore the feeling of deep uneasiness in his gut until Mycroft returned, an odd look on his face.

“You are correct,” he said, resuming his seat. “The composer of the music selected for the
dedication is one William Scott Vernet. Vernet was—“

“Your mother’s maiden name, I know.” John was light-headed with relief. “I didn’t know he’d used an alias, but it makes sense that he would.” And this at least had left John completely certain that Mycroft had nothing to do with the selection process—which was possibly part of Sherlock’s reason for doing so, now that John thought about it.

Mycroft had pulled out his notebook and was making a note. “I must determine how large a donation will be necessary in order to secure my parents a plum seat at the dedication,” he muttered. Tucking the notebook away, he gave John his tightly insincere smile. “In your honor, of course.”

“Thanks,” John said, unsure whether to be flattered or insulted. Another thought had occurred to him. “Does that mean you don’t know about any of his other compositions?”

Mycroft arched a brow. “For the children’s choirs?”

“No—I mean yes, that’s how it started, but he’s made quite a name for himself now; he’s got a sort of specialty setting modern texts to plainsong. I think he still prefers writing for orchestra, but he did this piece with a women’s chorus called Brigid’s Cross that was amazing; they’ve been asking if he’ll do a collaboration when he’s done with the dedication, they’d like to do a whole album of his pieces…” John fished out his own phone and brought up the St. Cecilia hymn. “Here, you have to listen to this.”

“I hardly think—“

“Mycroft. I know you adore Sherlock, but it’s always been easier for you to see his foibles than his strengths. I mean, he’s your little brother, I get that, but you need to see what he can do.” John pushed the phone into Mycroft’s hands. “Your brother wrote this, and it’s beautiful. Listen to it.”

Mycroft sighed, got up, and walked out toward the cloakroom again. John ate the rest of his food. The St. Cecilia piece was five minutes long and Mycroft had been gone for ten, what was he doing?

Mycroft reappeared just when John was contemplating ordering a whopping dessert just to spite him, wearing an unreadable expression. John wasn’t sure what he expected Mycroft to say—praise, criticism—but what Mycroft said was, “Has our mother heard this?”

John blinked. “I don’t know. Ask Sherlock.”

“Hmm.” Mycroft handed the phone back and picked up his fork to finish his now-cold food. “Will you send that to me?”

“Sure, of course.”

Mycroft ate in silence for a minute. “You were right.”

“Yeah, it happens occasionally,” John said, smiling. “Why else would Sherlock keep me around?’’
other link on this story, listen to them sing "Gaudete".
Chapter 13

Sherlock mastered his new instruments and began to write in earnest. The peregrine babies grew feathers, got bigger, and were hunting on their own in a shorter time than John would have believed possible. In London, Zombie Mum’s baby also grew bigger (more slowly, in the way of humans) and began to take an interest in his surroundings. This horrified Nose Ring, who promptly moved seats and now glared at John and Green Jacket every morning as they exchanged their brief pleasantries. On the dales, the days grew longer and warmer and John acknowledged to Simon, reluctantly, that the country was not so bad after all.

John had seen no further signs of his ghost and was convinced that the whole thing had been the product of his grieving imagination. Entirely convinced. Most of the time. He never mentioned anything to Sherlock, or to Mycroft, and if occasionally as they sat together over dinner or pints he looked at Mycroft’s smoothly enigmatic face and felt a tiny stab of doubt, he always shoved it ruthlessly under again.

Sometimes, especially if he came home late or heard glassware rattling in the kitchen—rattling that always turned out to be Mrs. Hudson—John missed their old life together in Baker Street with an ache that felt like physical pain. But he always turned his mind resolutely away and focused on his hopes. This was just another chapter in his life, after all (The Composer and His Muse? John and Sherlock’s Long-Distance Relationship? The Princess in the Tower?), and John had lived through much worse chapters. He loved his weekends in the country: the lazy Saturday afternoons with Sherlock working away whilst John caught up on his charting or read journals or bought socks online, since he never had time to shop; his walks with Simon; lunches out and dinners in; worshipping Sherlock with his body in the long, long twilights and hazy mornings. Sherlock who had never seemed so beautiful, who was lit up with his music, who was acerbic and reserved during the day but who clung to John at night as though he were the only thing real in the world.

Sherlock whose body was failing.

“I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Simon said. They had been watching the young peregrines hunting in the cliffs and were tucking away binoculars—John had his own now—in preparation to heading back. “Is there anything that can be done for Sherlock? Only it seems as though—is it his back or his hip? He seems to be having quite a bit of trouble lately.”

“Shit. I’d been hoping I was making it out to be more that it was.”

“Oh no, you’re not. I’ve had to drive him in twice to get steroid injections. He can barely manage to walk these days.”

John sighed. “It’s a bit of both, mostly his back. A bad fracture that couldn’t heal properly. And to answer your question, there’s a good chance surgery would help, but he wouldn’t have it.”

“Why not?”

John had never actually asked, because there were so many reasons that asking seemed superfluous. The fear of putting himself into strange hands. Of the pain of surgery. Of the need for drugs that had nearly destroyed him. “I don’t know exactly,” he said slowly, “but I think the main reason…as long as he doesn’t have the surgery, he can believe that it will work. But if he has it and it doesn’t, then there’s no hope, you see? Because there’s a significant possibility it won’t help.”

“Ah.”
They walked along in silence. John found himself torn between hoping that Simon had some words of wisdom to offer and worry that he’d say something annoyingly holy.

“Isn’t this the part where you say you’ll pray for him?” he said finally, sounding a good bit more snappish than he intended.

“Of course I do. And for you too,” Simon returned, unperturbed. “But if I said so you’d just tell me what a fat lot of good it was doing.”

John couldn’t help laughing. “Okay, fair enough.”

“Has Sherlock said anything about what he’s going to do when his residency ends in September?”

“At this point I’m just hope he can manage those stairs another three months,” John said. “But, no, he hasn’t. Of course I really want him to come home, but I don’t think he’s ready yet, even if he were up to it physically. He seems happy with the composing and I know he can do that anywhere, but this place has been perfect for him. I’ll hate to see him leave.”

“I will too,” Simon answered. They climbed up the steeper part of the slope that led to the little rocky footpath back to the abbey. “Listen, John, I may be tied up next week. I have the PTSD retreat and some of those men need a bit of extra attention, so I often need to meet with someone in my free time.”

“Looking out for the lost sheep?” John said, smiling. “It’s fine. You have my mobile number, yeah? Just let me know.”

Sherlock was in excellent spirits that night, extravagantly complimenting John’s curry and talking about his progress with his dedication piece—which was nearly finished—and his ideas for the women’s chorus. It was easy at times like this for John to overlook the evidence of Sherlock’s disability and think hopefully that he might soon be returning to Baker Street.

Later, they lay stretched out on Sherlock’s bed in the lavender-blue shadows of the deepening dusk. John was stroking Sherlock’s acres of white skin while Sherlock arched his long neck, dug his fingers into John’s shoulder blades, and moaned, “Closer. I want to be so close I’m practically part of you, please John, please.”

John knew what he wanted. He wanted it too, but it had been getting progressively more difficult lately, and John had made a decision after last weekend. He threaded his fingers in Sherlock’s hair and cupped the back of his head. “I think this time I want you to know all of me.”

Sherlock’s eyes dilated to pure darkness in the fading light. “But you’ve never…”

“I want to with you.”

Sherlock shivered hard once. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

John smiled and stroked tenderly over his cheekbones with his thumb. “You won’t hurt me.”

A few months ago Sherlock would have rushed, his experience of sex limited to getting his partner off as rapidly as possible, but he had learned the joys of patience. He caressed John with infinite care, sliding the tip of one finger inside only when John was throbbing-hard and wet from his skilled tongue. “Uh,” John grunted, disconcerted; it felt weird.
“Push down,” Sherlock advised, stilling his hand.

“Push--?”

“Down, against me, as if—there, that’s right.”

Bearing down did help. The whole thing definitely took some getting used to, John thought, as Sherlock carefully rotated his finger in a sort of slow, in-and-out spiral. He couldn’t rightly say it was doing much for him, although Sherlock nuzzling and licking along his cock as he painstakingly relaxed John’s arsehole was certainly pleasant. Sherlock dumped half the bottle of lube on his fingers when he added a second, which helped a bit too.

“How do I find your prostate?” Sherlock asked, when John had relaxed around the second finger at last.

“Er.” John was a bit distracted by the conflicting sensations of stretch and pleasure. “It’s supposed to feel like a walnut, that’s what they always told us. You need to turn your fingers—no, the other way, forward, towards my dick. Yeah. Now I think you’re too deep so—fuck!”

“That doesn’t feel anything like a walnut,” Sherlock said, displeased.

“Oh Christ do it again,” John gasped.

Sherlock did it again, and then again and again, varying the speed and pressure until John was squirming around and begging. “Okay stop, stop, it’s too much, back off. God, that’s—wow. You can put another finger in now.”

John’s muscles had apparently surrendered the field, because he adjusted to the three fingers in practically no time at all. “I think I’m good,” John finally said, since Sherlock seemed unwilling to go further without specific permission.

“We don’t have to. I could stay like this, use my mouth if—“

“Nope, we’re doing this. I want to know what you feel like inside me,” John said and Sherlock pulled up awkwardly to kiss him.

They decided on elbows and knees as being easiest for both of them, and John arranged himself over a mound of all the pillows on the bed—that way he could take Sherlock’s weight if need be. He didn’t have a good way to get a hand on himself, but that was fine; he thought he was unlikely to climax anyway. “All right?” Sherlock asked, a bit breathlessly.

“Yeah.” John swallowed and breathed out hard, feeling the head of Sherlock’s cock pushing against him.

“Push,” Sherlock reminded him and John bore down and oh God, Sherlock was inside him, pushing forward with painstaking slowness. He felt huge. John blew out, pushed back, remembered to breathe in, and finally he felt Sherlock pressed against his buttocks.

“Oh,” Sherlock gasped. “Oh, it’s…”

…really, really uncomfortable, John thought. Sherlock leaned forward, draping himself over John’s back to press his face down against John’s head and clutch at his hands, and John squeezed his fingers and tried to concentrate on not gritting his teeth. Still: there was something about being joined together like this, pressed into the curve of Sherlock’s longer body, that was oddly satisfying. “You’re fantastic,” John managed finally. “I love you so much…go slow, okay?”
“I will,” Sherlock promised. He used his long arms to push up a bit and rocked his hips in tiny increments. The motion rubbed John’s prick against the pillow pile in a way that sparked a bit of renewed interest in the proceedings. He flexed his own hips experimentally, pushing back, and found that an improvement over Sherlock pushing forward, so he did it again. “Is it—“ he panted, “is it okay if I do this for a bit?”

“Of course,” Sherlock said, sounding strangled. John dug his elbows into the bed for purchase and concentrated on rocking his hips back and forth, dragging his rapidly hardening cock over the pillow, until he realized Sherlock had begun shaking with the effort of holding still. The whole thing was feeling a lot better now that he was warmed up, so he said, “Okay, go ahead.”

Sherlock exhaled hugely and began to thrust, uncertainly at first, but soon his rhythm picked up and his long fingers clutched John’s hard enough to hurt, his breath going high-pitched and frantic in John’s ear. His long hair brushed John’s face with every thrust and John groaned into the pillow, “God, you’re lovely, come inside me, I want to feel you come—“

“Oh,” Sherlock cried, surging, “Oh, oh, oh,” and then he was crumpled across John’s back, shaking and heavy and twitching.

John could hardly breathe, but now that Sherlock was taken care of he was rather desperate to get his hand on his own cock before the uncomfortable process of disentangling began. He let go Sherlock’s hand and worked his arm down, elbowing Sherlock in the stomach as he did, and by dint of wriggling backward a bit was able to open enough of a space that he could pump himself to orgasm all over the pillows.

“You didn’t much care for that,” Sherlock observed when they were finally cleaned up and settled in for the night.

“Well, I won’t say it was my favorite,” John admitted. “But I think it takes practice. We’ll give it another go next week.” Topping certainly seemed easier on Sherlock; he appeared to be in less discomfort than usual.

John woke in the night a few hours later with the kind of instantly-alert sharpness he had not experienced since Afghanistan. Something was wrong. It took him a few seconds to register that the something wrong was Sherlock, curled on his side grinding his teeth together to keep from whimpering.

“Oh love,” John said. He scrambled downstairs for the pills, cursing as he stumbled on the way back up and stubbed his toe. Sherlock swallowed down the handful of muscle relaxants and NSAIDs John offered him and gulped gratefully at the water, but he shook his head at the hydrocodone.

“Sherlock…” John said pleadingly. There were now three pills left in the bottle; had he been worse off than this when he took the others?

“I will in a bit if this doesn’t work,” Sherlock said shortly, using his hands to drag his weak leg back up into his fetal curl. John lay down beside him, feeling utterly useless. He was a fucking doctor, and he could do absolutely nothing.

“Can I do anything?”

Sherlock shook his head minutely. His jaw was clenched so tightly John could hear his molars scraping against each other. After a minute, though, Sherlock opened his hand, and John slipped his own hand inside it. Sherlock’s long fingers closed on his tightly.
They lay there. John hated this, hated everything about it: Sherlock’s pain, his own helplessness, the faceless interrogator far away who had hurt Sherlock, every mistake and wrong decision that had led them here. He tried to think of something hopeful, but sound of Sherlock’s uneven breathing tortured him. How long had they been lying here? It felt like hours. Was this how Sherlock had been on the occasions Simon had driven him to the doctor? Perhaps Simon would be willing to drive them in the morning. John certainly wasn’t leaving Sherlock like this, he’d call work in the morning. They were already shorthanded there with Sarah out but it couldn’t be helped. Sherlock came first, Sherlock would always come first…

After a long, long time Sherlock finally said wearily, “All right.”

John got up stiffly—he hadn’t realized how tensely he had been lying—shook himself out, and fetched the hydrocodone and the water. Then he lay back down and started worrying about what they would do if Sherlock couldn’t walk in the morning.

“I’ll be all right in the morning,” Sherlock said, as though reading John’s mind. “It’s just muscle spasms, it happens sometimes.”

“Oh,” John said. He rubbed Sherlock’s hand tentatively with his thumb. Then, emboldened by the fact that Sherlock had brought up the matter—however obliquely—he summoned up his courage and said, “Sherlock? Why won’t you have the surgery?”

Sherlock was silent for so long that John thought he was not going to answer, but finally he sighed. “I’m afraid,” he said in a very low voice.

“Oh, Sherlock. You weren’t mad. You were in withdrawal, and you’d been alone in the dark for weeks and were severely traumatized—“

“—and sometimes even now I think I’m back there,” Sherlock said. His voice was very even. “I pull knives on backpackers. I hear raised voices and I can’t breathe. I keep the lights off when you aren’t here because I feel safer in the dark. And that’s in a tower with thirty feet of empty space and a barred door between me and everyone else. If I make myself helpless—put myself in the hands of strangers, in a bright noisy hospital—I don’t know what will happen, John. And I can’t bear that.”

“Oh, Sherlock. You weren’t mad. You were in withdrawal, and you’d been alone in the dark for weeks and were severely traumatized—“

“Okay,” John said gently. “But you know I’d be there, right? Every minute, every second. You would never have to wonder if I were really there or not, because nothing would get me away from your side. And you’re getting better, you know you are. You’re ever so much calmer and stronger that when I first started coming here.”

“I know. But it makes me feel as though I’ve more to lose.”

John stroked his thumb over Sherlock’s hand again, rubbing in soothing little circles. Sherlock was no longer clenching his teeth, and his voice was beginning to sound a little slurry; the narcotics kicking in at last. “You will never lose me. No matter what happens, I will always be with you, always. I’ll never let you go again.”

Sherlock’s fingers tightened on John’s in wordless thanks. John brought his other hand up and took Sherlock’s. He felt obscurely lighter, as though perhaps voicing his fears would help Sherlock get past them more easily, though he didn’t delude himself that would happen anytime soon. It was
enough for now that Sherlock’s breath was evening out and his fingers were beginning to relax in John’s.

In the barely-there grey lightness of early dawn, Sherlock finally slept. And John, folded around their clasped hands, slept too.

Just as he had predicted, Sherlock seemed to be back to baseline the next morning, although he was so peeved and snappish from his painkiller hangover that for once John was almost glad to escape to the bus. He worried over the situation all the way back home, and first thing Monday rang Ella for an appointment.

“Caretaking can be extremely draining, as I’m sure you know from your work,” Ella said.

“No—I mean yes, I know what you mean, but that’s not it. It’s not as though I’m even there every day. Besides, I like taking care of him. I’m a caretaker, always have been; it worried him in the beginning, he thought I only had feelings for him because of that. Back when we lived together I was a bit of an enabler, really. I mean, here was this magnificent, brilliant man, and he needed me—it was a rush, especially the way I was back then. Between me and Mrs. Hudson we had ourselves convinced he couldn’t last a day on his own. Which was ridiculous, obviously. And now—I couldn’t be happier he’s doing so much better mentally, I want him to get better, but seeing him in pain like this…it’s horrible.”

“It’s hard to watch someone we care about suffer.”

“Yes. Yes, it is. And I’ve looked back over the notes I took in Germany and I’m sure the surgery would help him, but, you know.” John gestured in frustration. “I can’t make him.”

“You can’t change Sherlock’s behavior,” Ella observed. “What about your own?”

“What, say I won’t see him unless he has the surgery? I couldn’t do that!”

“Of course not. But you’ve said he’s increased the amount of driving he’s doing on the weekends to see you. What if you made changes so that was no longer feasible?”

John sat back. “Huh.”

John thought about it all week, off and on. He thought he had a plan, but was worried about how Sherlock would react; he kept trying and rejecting texts in his head. He still hadn’t made up his mind when he went into Speedy’s Friday morning.

“She’s on her way,” Vijay said, jerking his head toward the kitchen as he handed over John’s bacon sandwich and coffee before John even had a chance to open his mouth. “Where’s your mate today?”

“My who?” John had an absurd moment of thinking Vijay was asking about Sherlock.

“You know. The bloke in the green you share the papers with.”

“Oh. They’re his papers, really, I just borrow the international section sometimes. We don’t really know each other. I don’t know where he is today.” Even as he said it John felt a little guilty, realizing he probably talked to Green Jacket more than he did most of his actual friends. John was a
middling friend at best and he knew it; if it weren’t for Greg making an effort he probably wouldn’t see anybody in London but Mycroft. He remembered the way Mary had laughed at Sherlock’s birthday video (“All John’s friends hate him”), hand over her mouth and quickly stifling the laugh, but in a way that made him know it was true. He hadn’t really cared. Still: he wasn’t that bitter, angry man any more, and maybe this was a place to start showing it. John mentally vowed to ask Green Jacket his name on Monday, maybe what had brought him to London…

“John!” Mrs. Hudson, flushed and bustling. “Goodness, it’s warm today! Do you think we’ll get some rain?”

Friday night John took a deep breath and texted Sherlock.

*Had a brain wave. I’ll take the bus in tomorrow, and then Sunday you can drive me back if you feel up to it and we’ll have an early dinner.*

A few minutes passed.

*I should at least meet you at the gate. It’s supposed to storm tomorrow.*SH

*Not until later in the afternoon. If there’s danger of me being hit by lightning I’ll text you from the bus. Otherwise stay put and spare yourself the stairs. It will gain us an extra 30 minutes.* J

*20 at most.* SH

*What did Mrs. Hudson make me this week?* SH

*Queen something. Looks like a round croissant.*

*Kouign amann?* SH

????

*All right. Those will be all right on the bus.*SH.

*So really you just care about the pastries, not me.*

*You may come up with your own double entendre.* SH

*Your sexting is terrible. We really need to get you back in London,* John typed, then slowly erased it.

*Don’t stay up too late. See you tomorrow.*

*Good night.* SH

The storms did hold off, and John was glad: Sherlock was moving more easily than John had seen him in weeks. They had a lovely afternoon. Sherlock was working on his third movement now, which was mostly strings and therefore came easily to him, and he played brief snippets over and over on his violin whilst John sat in his squashy armchair in the window making good on his newfound resolution to be a better friend. He typed a long email to Bill Murray, whom he hadn’t talked to in ages, and a shorter one to Mike Stamford. John had long since abandoned his post by the door, although Sherlock still kept it bolted.
John had finished his emails and was poking around mindlessly on the internet when he suddenly became aware that Sherlock was plucking something different on the violin strings. It was the quiet little melody he had been picking out the first day John came to the abbey, the one that had haunted the back of his mind ever since. “What is that, that bit you’re playing there?” he asked. “I don’t remember it being in before.”

“Oh.” Sherlock’s fingers stilled on the strings. “It wasn’t. I was wondering whether to put it in.”

“But I’ve heard that. You played it once before, I loved it; I hear it in my head sometimes when I’m thinking of you. What is it?”

Sherlock looked down at his mutilated fingers resting on the fingerboard. “It was the music I heard when I thought of you. In the prison.”

“That was for me? That music? But that’s beautiful. Why haven’t you played it for me?”

“It wasn’t…” Sherlock made a small gesture of frustration. “It wasn’t for you, in the way that the wedding waltz was; it was you. It was you, in my head—I’m saying it badly.”

“No, I understand,” John said. He thought he did. For someone like Sherlock, it made sense that his endlessly brilliant mind would convert emotions to music. For just an instant John thought he glimpsed what it must be like for him: like speaking a whole other language, or seeing a color spectrum most humans could not, and he wondered all over again what someone like Sherlock could possibly see in someone as ordinary as John. “Do you think you will? Put it in?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Sherlock set down his violin and stretched, rotating his neck. “It’s not looking very promising for your walk,” he added, looking toward John’s window.

John looked out too. The clouds massing in the west were taking on a distinctly ominous green-grey cast, although they still seemed a good bit distant. “I think it will hold off an hour or so,” he said, and then his phone chirped. “Might not matter after all,” he said, reaching for it.

Sure enough, Simon’s text read, Sorry, can’t make it today—need to meet with someone on the break. See you next week! John pocketed it, thinking this was just as well; that storm could be very unpleasant if it hit whilst they were still hiking back. “No hike today,” he informed Sherlock, pocketing the phone. “Fancy a cuppa? Or I could just make an earlier start to dinner in a bit.”

“I’m fine,” Sherlock said, turning back to his music and picking up the violin again. “We could have dinner early, if you like.”

The sky grew steadily darker over the next hour or so, which was quite enjoyable when one was tucked up snugly in a tower with a great many windows and not trying to outrace an early summer storm. Sherlock had turned on the lamp by the time John finally hauled himself out of his armchair and gone to the kitchen.

“I’ve got some asparagus here,” he said, “d’you fancy—“

A knock came at the door.

“Expecting someone?”

“It must be Simon,” Sherlock said, looking up. “He was asking this week if you’d be interested in sitting in on some part of the retreat; I think it’s that PTSD thing this weekend, with the veterans.”

“Stay put, I’ll get it,” John said, crossing to the door and pulling back the heavy iron bolt. He
swung the door open and said “Thought you’d be at—“

He stopped. The man at the door was not Simon. He was so out of place that for a minute John could only stand gaping at him, as though a double-decker bus had suddenly appeared on the doorstep.

“Good evening, Dr. Watson,” Green Jacket said.
John became aware of Sherlock rising laboriously behind him at the same moment that he said in bewilderment, “What are—“ before Green Jacket stepped forward and pressed a gun to the side of his head.

“Let’s take this nice and easy,” Green Jacket said. His flat American accent seemed even more jarring here than it had in Speedy’s. “And then nobody has to get hurt.” He pushed John back through the door, swung it shut with his foot, and said, “Bolt it. You, stay right there and don’t move a muscle, or I blow his brains out all over this wall.”

John bolted the door. His mind felt like a lorry spinning its wheels uselessly in mud, unable to get traction. Green Jacket, his affable morning companion of the past several months—what was he doing here? Why? Had he been after Sherlock all along? But how—

“All right,” Green Jacket said pleasantly. He propelled John further into the room and pushed him down into the wooden chair John had been using as a foot rest. “Hands behind your back, please. You.” He jerked his head at Sherlock. “Sherlock Holmes, I presume? Come over here and tape his hands. Tight, or I’ll hurt him.”

Sherlock limped over slowly, face expressionless, but John saw the flicker in his eyes and knew he was swiftly cataloging everything he could discern about the man, searching for any clue that could help them. Green Jacket pulled a roll of duct tape out of his jacket and handed it to Sherlock, who silently taped John’s hands together behind the chair and then, at Green Jacket’s direction, taped his ankles to the legs as well.

Green Jacket looked Sherlock over. “You don’t look like much of a threat,” he observed. “And I need you a little more mobile. Still, no sense taking chances. Turn around.” He tucked his gun into his waistband long enough to tape Sherlock’s wrists behind his back, then gestured him to the sofa and sat, gun held loosely in his lap, in John’s armchair.

“So here we are,” he said, voice still as light and matter-of-fact as though they were discussing the breakfast offerings at Speedy’s. “Now, I think we’d all be happy if we could get this over with as quickly and, let’s say, neatly as possible, so let’s make it simple, okay? Where’s your wife?”

“My wife?” John said in blank astonishment. He caught a sharp flick of Sherlock’s eyes, darting over Green Jacket swiftly whilst his attention was focused on John; he was seeing something, but what? What could Green Jacket have to do with Mary? John hadn’t even met the man until months after he’d moved to Baker Street. “My wife is dead.”

Green Jacket sighed. “I was hoping we could do this the easy way. One more chance, hear me?” He leaned forward. “Where. Is. She.”

He couldn’t possibly know the truth, John told himself, he must be fishing. “I told you. She died, over a year ago. You can look it up—“

“Then where’s the money?”

John shook his head, bewildered. “What money? There wasn’t any money.”
Green Jacket stood up, jaw tightening, and in that moment Sherlock suddenly blurted out, “Neil Garrison.”

They both turned to stare at him. “Neil Garrison,” he said again. “That’s who you are. Aren’t you?”

“So you did know,” Green Jacket—Garrison?—breathed, starting to turn back to John, but Sherlock said quickly, “No. Not John. John doesn’t know.”

“What?” John said, briefly distracted by this. “What don’t I know? Sherlock, what the fuck don’t I know?” His voice was rising of its own volition.

“Mary put the story on a memory stick,” Sherlock said, speaking fast. “She asked John not to read it but left the choice to him. He burned it without reading it. He never knew.”

“You read it?” John said, incredulous.

“Of course I didn’t read it. It was yours, and you carried it around in your pocket for months anyway,” Sherlock said impatiently. “I worked it out. I’d nothing better to do, I wasn’t even allowed out of bed for weeks, and if I didn’t know Mycroft better I’d suspect he lowered the security on the archives just to keep me occupied. I pieced together the whole thing, and then when Mary came to visit when you weren’t there I asked her if I was right and I was. I promised I wouldn’t tell you.”

“Jesus Christ,” John said, stunned. “Then what—why didn’t—“

Garrison sat back down in his chair, smiling slightly as he watched John splutter. “How about you fill him in?” he said to Sherlock.

Sherlock glanced over to him. John could see him weighing the options, his word to Mary against the chance to keep Garrison talking, possibly gain some advantage. “Tell me.”

“All right.” Sherlock took a deep breath. “Mary was working for the CIA, stationed in Pakistan. She’d lost her partner a few months before and been assigned a new one, Neil Garrison. Garrison had had some trouble early in his career and had been working as an analyst. This was his first field assignment in years. She didn’t trust you,” Sherlock said to Garrison. “From the very beginning she thought you were a loose cannon.”

“Sherlock.”

Sherlock tched impatiently. “Mary was assigned to track and divert funds flowing to the Taliban from elsewhere in the Near and Middle East and Garrison had been doing similar financial tracking back in America. She had a Pakistani contact working undercover named Rehan Asif. It was Rehan Asif who learned about the Agra treasure.”

“The Agra—but I thought that was some kind of initials, it was on the memory stick—“

“It was both,” Garrison said. “We were the Agra treasure hunters. Amburgey, Garrison, Rehan Asif, you see? A.G.RA.”

“The Agra treasure had been hidden during the colonial period to keep it out of the hands of the British. Legend had it that a faithful servant had been trusted to take it up into the mountains and hide it, and he was never seen again. People had searched for it over the centuries of course, but it was assumed to be lost. As it turned out it had been passed down, father to son, through the generations, and now the current caretaker had had some sort of message from God that he was
meant to send the treasure to aid the jihad. Of course the treasure was still in its original form, gold and jewels—\textquotedblleft

\textquotedblleft It was in a chest,	extquotedblright Garrison said harshly. \textquotedblleft I never even got to see it open.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft—which was where Asif came in; the Taliban told him to make arrangements to liquidate it and transfer the funds to numbered accounts. Mary and Garrison would use the inside information to hijack the transfer. No one knew what was going on except the three of them and at some point, they decided to steal it.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft Kristin wanted out of the CIA,	extquotedblright Garrison said. \textquotedblleft She’d wanted out for years, but she knew they would never let her leave, not with what she knew. Rehan wanted to get his mother and sister out of Pakistan and pay for his sister’s education.\textquotedblright He shrugged. \textquotedblleft I just wanted the money.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft And you decided that it might be nice to have all of it,\textquotedblright Sherlock said. \textquotedblleft Mary knew, you see. After you tried to convince Asif to cut Mary out, he told her—he didn’t trust you either. Mary told him to play along and keep his eyes open. The arrangement was that the family who had the treasure would bring it down and meet with Asif and the men from the Taliban for the handover, at a designated location in the mountains. The terrorists believed they would then accompany Asif back to Lahore, where he had everything ready. In actuality you and Mary planned to hijack the caravan back to Lahore and then proceed as planned, but to accounts which the three of you had set up for yourselves. But things went wrong.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft The Taliban had sent a backup team.\textquotedblright A muscle in Garrison’s jaw twitched. \textquotedblleft We should have seen it coming—Kristin should have seen it coming. We took out the original guys, no problem, and then they opened fire.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft You and Asif were both killed,\textquotedblright Sherlock said. \textquotedblleft Or so Mary believed.\textquotedblright

Garrison laughed, harsh and bitter. \textquotedblleft Is that what she told you?\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft Yes.\textquotedblright Sherlock was frowning, as though considering his own memory for veracity. \textquotedblleft I think she was telling the truth. She’d no reason to lie at that point; she’d admitted everything else. So is Rehan Asif also alive?\textquotedblright

Garrison shook his head. \textquotedblleft No. No way. They blew off the top of his head; I was right there. I was shot in the chest and passed out, so I don’t know what happened after that or how Kristin got away.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft Then how—ohhh.\textquotedblright Sherlock’s eyes were bright and focused now, intent on the mystery before him; John knew if his hands had been free he would have steepled them under his chin. \textquotedblleft Of course. You were captured. When the original party didn’t return—\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft Not even that. I was picked up by a different bunch. They didn’t know what had gone down, but they thought I would make a nice enough prize, so I was a guest of Al-Qaeda for the next five years.\textquotedblright Garrison smiled without humor. \textquotedblleft I spent most of the time in a cave in the mountains. I barely saw anyone the last year or so; I think they might have forgotten about me.\textquotedblright

\textquotedblleft Jesus,\textquotedblright John whispered, appalled.

\textquotedblleft How did you—no, you didn’t escape, did you. You were liberated.\textquotedblright

Garrison nodded. \textquotedblleft The Pakistani army went on a crackdown and cleared out that particular area, and they handed me back to Uncle Sam, all proud of themselves. I’d been gone five years. Everyone thought I was dead. My wife was living with another guy; I think the only reason she was
glad I was back was that now she could go ahead and divorce me and get my shit out of her basement. And the Agency—they were sure at first I’d been turned, that I was some kind of sleeper agent. It took me months to get cleared. Finally I was allowed back to desk work, with everybody watching to make sure I didn’t blow up the whole place and martyr myself.” His laugh was harsh and mirthless. “As if I’d give them the pleasure.”

“When did you start looking for Mary?” Sherlock said softly.

John realized that at some point Garrison’s focus had shifted from John to Sherlock, drawn by that laser-sharp attention. It gave John a peculiar sense of unreality, seeing that intense look he knew so well in this bizarre setting.

“Kristin and Rehan were dead, that was what they told me. At first I didn’t care enough to think otherwise, but after a while I started to wonder. Kristin was estranged from her family, but when I tried to find Rehan’s mother and sister, guess what? They were in England, and his sister was studying at a fancy private school. I contacted his mother and she didn’t know where the money had come from—she’d been told the Americans had a fund to take care of their undercover agents’ families if they were killed. So that’s when I knew Kristin was alive. Ironic, isn’t it?”

John understood this to mean that if Mary, like Garrison, had been a double-crossing deceitful piece of shit, he never would have known she’d survived.

“So you,” Sherlock said slowly, with that look of working out a puzzle as he went, “contacted someone you knew, some British counterpart. Why? Why England?”

“They were talking once, Kristin and Rehan. He was saying he wanted his family to go to America but his sister had her heart set on England. Kristin said she understood; she’d always wanted to live there as a girl, she had a fixation with a book. *The Secret Garden.*”

Sherlock flicked a questioning look at John but John shrugged, bewildered; Mary had never mentioned that to him…Mary. He knew the basic story, everyone did. Kristin Amburgey had given herself the name of the heroine of her favorite book. Then he caught what Sherlock had said. “It was you!” he said. “You were the one who sent the request to find her!”

“And nobody got back to me,” Garrison said. “I waited a few weeks and called back. My pal told me that they’d had no luck with fingerprints so they’d put in a request to do a facial recognition software search, but there was a big backup; might be months. I’d read the damn book by then so I told him she might be in Yorkshire, might be using the name Mary or Lennox or fucking Misselthwaite for all I knew but he just said he couldn’t jump the queue for something like this unless it was urgent, and of course I had to say it wasn’t. Finally in summer I heard back from him. I was right, he said, she had been going by Mary Morstan Watson, but she’d died the previous spring in a car accident.”

“But you didn’t believe that.”

“Of course not. Not once I got the dates, and saw she’d supposedly died two days after my request. A little too convenient, don’t you think? I had the trail now, I wasn’t going to let go. I told my bosses that I couldn’t cope with being back, that I wanted to take some time off and go to be with Rehan’s family, see if I couldn’t get some meaning in my life looking after them. That was a crock of shit but they fell for it; I wasn’t any good at work anymore anyway. I had five years of back pay and nobody to give a fuck, so I came here.”

Sherlock’s eyes were narrowed, so focused on Garrison that he did not even seem to be uncomfortable. “You must have tracked down John fairly quickly. What took you so long to come
“Yeah, I found him. But what did that mean, that her husband was left behind? Was the whole thing a big setup and he was going to join her later? Did he know she was alive? I couldn’t tell, and if he was in on it I couldn’t risk tipping him off. Then there was all the stuff in the press about him. It took me a while to work out that Kristin’s death had received so much coverage not because her husband was famous for himself, but because of who his friend was. And what was I supposed to make of this Sherlock Holmes guy? He’s all over the press a few years ago, and then he’s just gone. Had he and Kristin gone off together?” His attention returned to John. “Were you a patsy or the guy who masterminded the whole thing? And why had you moved back to Sherlock Holmes’ flat? I couldn’t tell, but by that point I’d worked out that if the answers were anywhere they were in that flat. So I took a little efficiency close by, settled into the diner as a regular until I could learn your routine, and started breaking in. Jesus, I know every inch of that place by now—I know things about that flat you don’t even know.” He looked over at Sherlock. “Are you some kind of drug squirrel? You had stuff stashed everywhere.”

John was so outraged he could barely speak. “You were in my flat! All the times I thought something felt off or the window was open—“

“Oh, yeah, that landlady of yours almost busted me more than once. At least she was slow. That one day you came home from work early—I almost blew it that time, almost broke my fucking leg dropping out the window.”

John’s ears were ringing. There never had been any ghost; it had been Garrison all along. Mary really was alive, Mycroft—the spike of relief that Mycroft had been telling him the truth all this time was so sweet it almost drowned out the anger.

Garrison was still talking, apparently enjoying John’s shock. “I spent a lot of time hiding in the empty bedroom; she never went in there. I tapped your computer, I looked through your mail, everything. I got nowhere.”

For just an instant John felt a fleeting pity for Garrison, alone with his obsession in a strange city, reduced to haunting the life of a man almost as empty as his own.

“Then last fall there’s a break. You’re looking up train schedules and getting out your suitcase. Of course you’re going to Harrogate, not Fiji, but turns out Harrogate is in Yorkshire—I was sure this was it, Kristin was holed up there or she’d bought the Secret Garden house and she was coming back, or she’d stashed the kid there, or something, and you were going there to meet her. I had to know what happened when you went. But I couldn’t follow you, you knew my face by then. So I broke in, hid in the bedroom until you got in the shower in the morning, and bugged your phone.”

Sherlock closed his eyes. “The battery.”

“Yeah. It’s a great device, lasts as long as the phone does—uses the phone’s speakers and its antenna to boost signal—but it drains the battery.”

“So that’s—fuck.” John could have banged his head in frustration. All these months and he’d never bothered to just replace the damn phone.

“It’s not perfect—I can hear what you say on the phone and if you’re close by, or it’s in your pocket, but not if you leave it in another room. Anyway. That was close. I had to get up there, get it in, get out before you were out of the shower and be down at Speedy’s well before you got there. It was worth it though.” Garrison’s grin was feral. “At first I was so confused—why is he meeting a guy? Who the hell is this? And then finally I realize who it is, but what’s the great Sherlock
Holmes doing hidden away in the country and why hasn’t Watson met him before? But then it was okay.” He looked at Sherlock with an expression almost of affection on his face. “Because you gave me the proof I’d been looking for all that time.”

Sherlock closed his eyes again. John said urgently, “What? What are you talking about?”

Garrison glanced over at him. “Don’t you remember? I do. Holmes said he was sorry about your wife and daughter, and then he said, ‘I’m glad that you didn’t go with them’. And you said…”

John remembered. He flushed hotly. “I had a reason to stay.”

Garrison’s smile now was radiant. “I knew then. I knew. Kristin was alive and you knew it. Of course I still didn’t know where the money was or what the reason to stay was or how Holmes was mixed up in it, although it seemed the two of them hadn’t run off together after all. I’m kind of embarrassed how long it took me to work it out. I mean, don’t get me wrong, I don’t have anything against gays or anything, but I didn’t realize that he was your reason to stay until that night you called him for phone sex.”

“You fucking piece of shit,” John said through his teeth. He felt nauseated with fury at the idea of this man listening to him with Sherlock.

“So then it was pretty obvious. And finally I had what I needed: leverage to make you talk. Except I didn’t have it, because it turned out that Holmes was harder to get to than the fucking Queen.” He looked over at Sherlock again. “I came up on the train midweek and took the bus out, but I found out pretty quick that you can’t just turn up at this place and wander around. I don’t know if Church of England types are always this paranoid or if it’s because of you, but I’m guessing it’s you—you were all over the papers before you pulled the vanishing act, and the tabloids here are out of control.”

If they got out of this, John thought, he would thank Simon on behalf of the abbey staff. He’d had no idea.

“So I signed up for the first retreat I could get into, some spirituality thing, and came to get the lie of the land. Turns out they still aren’t keen on strangers wandering toward staff quarters, even if they’re guests, but I found a way around that—that poet who lives here. Jesus, that girl is dumber than a bag of rocks. She was more than happy to have me over for a drink in her rooms and tell me all about Sherlock Holmes, how mysterious he is with his scar and his limp, how they have this bond because she’s a poet and understands his tortured soul, blah blah blah.”

Sherlock was disgusted. “She’s met me twice.”

“Yeah, because you never leave your tower. Which she also told me. And the outside doors are always locked, as I found out when I came here with her…but I also found out that she wasn’t the only one who brought guests in. The Reverend Simon Fallows, who runs a special retreat for PTSD sufferers, is always having counseling sessions on the side. Getting into the PTSD retreat turned out to be a hell of a lot harder than the others though. There was already a waiting list, but I moved up it pretty quick. That’s the thing about guys with PTSD…the suicide rate is so high, nobody looks twice, even when there are three of them in a row.”

John felt sick, but Sherlock was outraged: “Three suicides amongst veterans who were all slated to attend the same retreat and nobody noticed? Tell me they didn’t all take place in London.”

“So here I am,” Garrison said, smiling slightly again. “Spent an hour with the reverend—he’s not bad, that guy, it’s not like I don’t belong at this retreat. Five years in a fucking hole, you think I
don’t have PTSD? I could have really used him when I came back. Maybe I’ll come for another one someday. Then I told him I wanted to take a walk and might not be at dinner, ducked up the stairs, and waited for everyone else to leave. So. Now that we’re all caught up, let me ask again: where is your wife?"

The silence stretched out for a long, long moment.

John shook his head slightly. “I don’t know.”

Garrison gave him a look of exaggerated disappointment. “Dr. Watson…”

“No, I swear to you, I really don’t know. I knew right away I couldn’t—as soon as I found out, I knew I wouldn’t go with her. She understood; she said she couldn’t ask it of me. It was amicable.” John felt a bubble of hysterical laughter rising in his throat. *Amicable* was a word for people who managed custody arrangements without killing each other, not for this. “It was better that I didn’t know.”

Garrison’s eyes were lethally sharp. “But somebody knew. Who told you that I was looking for Kristin?”

John swallowed. He didn’t dare look at Sherlock. If Garrison didn’t know about Mycroft—maybe they could use that, somehow—“I don’t know. Mary told me.”

“You’re lying.”

Sherlock snorted from the sofa. “Oh, good deduction. He’s the worst liar I’ve ever met. Which is exactly why nobody told him where Mary went.”

“Do you know?”

“No.” Sherlock shrugged, awkward with his hands bound behind his back. “I was out of the country at the time. In a hole in a mountain myself, as it happened.”

Garrison’s eyes narrowed. In the quiet, there came a long rumble of thunder. “But you know who the contact was.”

“No.”

“You’re a better liar,” Garrison said. “But I still don’t believe you.” He considered the two of them for a moment, and John could almost see him thinking: Sherlock had no reason to protect Mary, no child involved; he might even want her out of the way. “Just tell me,” he said, almost gently. “It will all be so much easier if you do.”

Sherlock smiled at him and John realized with a slight shock that on some level Sherlock was enjoying himself—it had been so long since he’d matched wits with someone capable of playing a long game. “Oh, easy. Easy’s boring.”

John was frantically trying to think one step ahead, the way Sherlock would—if they gave up Mycroft’s name, what would happen? Would Garrison call Mycroft from here and demand that he put him in contact with Mary, threaten Em if Mary didn’t transfer funds right there with him listening in? Would Mycroft phone the police? John had a momentary fantasy of the SEAL team that had rescued Sherlock rappelling through the windows in an avalanche of glass and bullets, like something out of a movie.

There was a deafening clap of thunder and a flash of lightning lit the room, so brilliant that for a
confused instant John thought it really was the SEALs. Sherlock and Garrison both flinched. A loud rush of rain hammered the western windows.

Garrison stood up and moved toward Sherlock, reaching behind him for his bound wrists. “Huh,” he said, considering Sherlock’s fingers. “Eastern Europe? Pulling out fingernails was always a favorite with the reds.” He tilted his head. “Incredible how much it hurts, isn’t it? You think a fingernail can’t possibly be that bad, but…” He flicked his own finger against Sherlock’s. Sherlock inhaled sharply, turning his head away, and John saw him clench his jaw. Garrison flicked again, harder. Again. Again. Sherlock twitched, trying to pull his hands out of Garrison’s grip, but Garrison pulled him back easily.

“I bet if I step on this,” he said conversationally, “it would hurt like hell, wouldn’t it? Probably make it hard to play all those instruments too.” In a burst of sudden violence, he jerked Sherlock off the sofa and onto the floor, where he sprawled at John’s feet. “But I think this would hurt worse,” he said and kicked Sherlock hard in the back.

Sherlock screamed, a high terrible sound that rent John’s heart, and struggled futilely to curl away. Garrison kicked him again. “Stop it!” John cried. “Leave him alone, stop!”

“I’ve got you to thank for that little tip, by the way,” Garrison said, looking over at John. “When you were out looking at those stupid birds? You always took your phone. I didn’t know what was wrong with him until you told Fallows. Broken back, right?” He kicked at Sherlock again and Sherlock cried out. “This could paralyze him, you know.” He looked down at Sherlock, who lay crumpled at his feet, no longer trying to get away. “Did Kristin tell you why I got busted back to desk work originally? Excessive use of force. My detainees had a tendency to end up dead.”

“Please stop,” John said helplessly, his throat feeling swollen and raw. “I’ll do anything, I’ll get a message to Mary asking for the money, I’m sure she won’t—“

“Not good enough.”

“John, no,” Sherlock gasped from the floor. “Your daughter—you can’t—“ His face was streaked with tears. John stared at him, agonized, and another flash of lightning lit the room.

Garrison hissed and swung his foot in a burst of fury, connecting hard with Sherlock’s hip. There was an enormous crash of thunder—the storm must be right over them—and abruptly the lights went out.

John blinked, disoriented, then thought, the storm, and then the screaming began.

“Get them back on! Turn them on! Turn on the lights! Goddamn you, turn them back on!”

Garrison, thought John in bewilderment, Garrison was the one screaming. He sounded utterly deranged. John could hear him stumbling, although what he thought he could accomplish John had no idea—it wasn’t as though he could fix a downed power line from inside the tower.

“Goddamn it fuck you turn them back on!”

The gunshot was so loud that for an instant John thought it was another clap of thunder. Oh Christ, was he shooting blindly around the room? Had he completely lost his mind? It sounded like it. Then Garrison was screaming again, but without words this time, just a long continuous shriek of pain or terror or fury or God knew what. There was a thudding crash and another gunshot.

“Sherlock!” John shouted, frantic.

Abruptly the screaming stopped. It was replaced by a low, horrible gurgling noise somewhere to
“Sherlock?” John whispered. “Sherlock?” He was shaking, bound to his chair in the dark. The gurgling went on. Lightning flashed, but in the brief illumination John saw no one. It was as though he were alone in the room.

There was a rumble of thunder but then the rumbling continued, and John realized that someone was pounding at the door. “John? Sherlock? John!”

“Call the police!” John screamed. “Get out of here, go, he’s got a gun!”

“John!” The voice was Simon’s. John could hear the door shaking, but he knew it would never give; the door was six inches thick, bolted with that heavy iron bolt. “I’ve called the police, Neil! Just put the gun down and everything will be okay!”

Over the racket of both their shouting John heard a new sound, a heavy irregular dragging. He strained his ears, but the rain and thunder made it impossible to pinpoint where it was coming from. The noise was getting softer, as though moving away. “Sherlock?” John tried again. “Simon! Did you tell them to send an ambulance?”

There was the sound of scraping metal and for an instant John froze, then realized with a rush of relief that it was the bolt on the door being pulled back. The door swung open and John saw the beam of a torch sweep down to the floor, the outline of a tall figure just barely visible behind it. Then the beam swung up into John’s face. John instinctively squeezed his eyes shut.

“Sorry,” Simon’s voice came and the beam swept away. John heard him draw a sharp breath. The light dropped—Simon seemed to be crouching—and there was a low murmur before it swept back up again, Simon moving into the room.

“John, I’m sorry, I’ll be with you as soon as I can,” Simon said quietly, striding past him. John turned his head and realized he could see the dim outlines of things now. The thunder rumbled again, less loudly; the storm must be passing. John looked back toward the door so fast his neck cracked but he could see nothing there. The desk blocked his view of the floor.

Unable to do anything to free himself, John sat. He had no idea where Sherlock was, or if he was alive or dead. He had no idea where Garrison was, for that matter, or who had opened the door. He was afraid to call out, for fear of who would answer.

Simon had set his torch on the floor near the stairs and now he seemed to be kneeling on the floor. John could hear the low continuous cadence of his voice. The rain slackened, and John could make out the words: some kind of prayer. John breathed in, breathed out, considered praying himself, couldn’t quite think of anything besides Sherlock.

The irregular shuffling noise started up again. John could make out a dark shape on the floor, moving toward him, and with an overwhelming rush of gratitude he realized it was Sherlock—he was half-crawling, half-dragging himself along the floor to get to John.

“Oh my God,” John said—softly, because of whatever Simon was doing. “Sherlock. Just lie still, okay? Don’t try to move. Simon said he called for help.”

Sherlock did not answer. He pulled himself around John’s chair and breathed hard for a few minutes, and then John felt his hand close around John’s wrist and the duct tape was sliced free. John’s arms fell numbly to his sides.

“Thanks,” John said gratefully. He rubbed at his arms to get the circulation back and pulled the
tape off his wrists, wincing at the way it tore at his arm hair. Sherlock appeared at his side and handed him something.

“Can you,” he said wearily and then just lay the rest of the way down on the floor.

John held the object up to his face and squinted in the dim light. It was Sherlock’s hunting knife. In an instant John understood: Sherlock had used the cover of the sudden darkness and Garrison’s hysteria to get the knife out of his ankle sheath and cut through his bonds. “Oh thank God, thank God,” he muttered, thinking he could pray right now, all right: thank God and anybody else who might be listening that he hadn’t taken the knife from Sherlock after all.

John cut through the tape binding his ankles to the chair and dropped to the floor beside Sherlock, who was breathing shallowly in a way that was not quite whimpering.

“Oh love,” John said, a lump rising in his throat. “Oh love, love, I’m so sorry.”

“Not your fault,” Sherlock managed.

“Well, for once it definitely wasn’t yours,” John said, and that made Sherlock cough out a weak attempt at a laugh. He tried to lift his head.

“Here—” John said, moving around and lifting Sherlock’s head to his thigh. He felt dampness and wiped the tears tenderly from Sherlock’s face with his thumbs. “Just be still, the ambulance is coming, okay?”

“Garrison…”

“I don’t know. Simon is with him.”

“I cut his throat,” Sherlock said softly. “I didn’t want to, John. I cut his Achilles tendon to bring him down and then I thought I could get the gun but he was too strong, and he kept firing…”

“You were brilliant,” John said forcefully. “You saved our lives, Sherlock. He would have killed us, and Mary, and my daughter too, maybe.”

“Mmm.” Sherlock closed his eyes, gritting his teeth and shivering a little, and John stroked at his hair.

There was a scraping noise as Simon got to his feet and John realized the gurgling noise had ceased. Garrison must be dead. John hated the man for what he had done to them, but now that he was no longer a threat he realized he also felt pity: for a life so empty, nothing in it but vengeance and greed.

“Sherlock, what can I do,” Simon said, kneeling beside them with the torch pointed at the floor.

“Get his pills,” John said, “All of them, and a blanket from the press, please. He doesn’t like to be cold.”

Simon nodded and hurried off to the kitchen, returning momentarily with the pills and then fetching the blanket.

“I’m going to go downstairs and turn the power back on and wait for the police and the ambulance,” he said, draping the blanket carefully over Sherlock. “Okay?”

“Wait,” John said in surprise. “You turned the power off?”
Simon nodded. “Pulled the main breaker switch. Good thing everyone else is at dinner or someone would have probably turned it back on.”

“How—“

“I knew something was off the whole time I was talking to him, but I couldn’t put my finger on it. Then when I went to dinner Cressida asked about him. She’d seen us going to my rooms and said he’d been here before, had asked a lot of questions about Sherlock. Of course I saw it then, that he’d just asked to come to my rooms so he could get into the cloister. I came back and listened at the door.”

“You knew,” Sherlock said. His voice was thready with pain and exhaustion. “You knew he was afraid of the dark.”

“Yes. God forgive me, I did. He didn’t tell me, but I knew.”

“Just as you knew that I wasn’t, though I never said.”

“You loved the dark. You felt safe in it.” Simon’s voice was rough. “So I thought…I thought it would give you a chance.”

“You were with him at the end,” John said. “He didn’t die alone. And you saved us.” At the end of the day, Simon would have to settle with his own conscience, but as far as John was concerned he was at least as much on the side of the angels as Sherlock had ever been.

Simon smoothed the blanket carefully over Sherlock’s shoulder, checking to be sure his feet were covered. John couldn’t see his face behind the torch. “Well. They should be here soon; I’ll make sure the paramedics come straight up.”

The room seemed very quiet when Simon had gone. The rain was slackening now, and John could make out shapes in the gloom.

“I can fetch another blanket if you’re still cold,” he said.

“That’s not me shaking,” Sherlock answered. “It’s you.”

John realized with a distant feeling of surprise that this was true. He was still catching up to the fact that it had all really happened: the gun at his head. Sherlock on the floor. Green Jacket—Neil Garrison, dead. Mary and Em. A fortune he had never known about. The most intimate moments of his life, exposed and picked over for clues. Simon, who had followed the lost sheep and then let him go to save the others. It suddenly hit him fully that he could have lost Sherlock for good this time, that Garrison might very well have killed him, and then he was shaking so hard his teeth rattled.

Sherlock’s hand came up and closed over his leg, squeezing gently. “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” John said. “Well, I will be. It’s just…shit. But as long as…what about you, are you okay?” He felt like kicking himself the moment he said it. Of course Sherlock was not okay. God knew what damage had been done to his back, and what kind of psychological ground would he lose after his sanctuary had been breached, his life threatened?

“I will be,” Sherlock said back, and then in a tone of dawning realization: “I will be. I will. I know it now. I’m going to be okay.”

John breathed slowly, deeply, until he felt the tremors die away. He stroked Sherlock’s hair back
from his face and bent over to rest his temple against Sherlock’s.

"John," Sherlock said, still sounding surprised, "I miss risking my life to prove I'm clever."

John laughed—a little shakily—and squeezed his hand. Suddenly the room sprang to life around them, the hum of the refrigerator loud in the silence and lamps filling the space with light. Sherlock closed his eyes.

“As soon as this is sorted I’m going to have the surgery,” he murmured. “Just as quickly as Mycroft can arrange it.”

“Oh shit, Mycroft,” John said. “Jesus, we have to phone him—what are we going to tell the police?” He was fumbling his phone out as he said this and then groaned: the battery was dead, of course. Fucking Garrison, having one last laugh from beyond the grave.

“Already done,” Sherlock said without opening his eyes.

“What?”

“My phone was on my desk. As soon as I saw a stranger at the door I hit contacts, Mycroft, speaker. Three buttons. It was done before he was properly inside.”

John craned his neck to look at the top of the desk, which of course he couldn’t see from this angle, and started laughing. “You never lost your head for a moment, did you? And to think I was worried about you managing back in London.”

Sherlock sniffed. “I don’t understand why there’s not a helicopter here already.”

“Because there’s a bloody hurricane out there, I shouldn’t wonder. Hold on.” John eased Sherlock gently to the floor and scrambled up to get the phone, which sure enough was sitting right out in plain view on the desk. He hit the speaker button to turn it off as he sat back down, slipping an arm under Sherlock’s shoulders to lift him back into his arms. “Mycroft? I’ve got Sherlock right here, I’m so sorry you had to hear all that, he’s okay…”

Chapter End Notes

The Agra treasure (for those of you who have found better things to do with your lives than memorize ACD canon) is the MacGuffin of “The Sign of Four”, which is the story in which Watson meets and woos Mary Morstan. Mary is supposed to be the heir to the treasure because her father colluded in stealing it. This is bad news for Watson, who feels it would not be honorable of him as a penniless ex-soldier to press his suit on a rich heiress. (The fact that the really honorable thing to do would be to RETURN THE FORTUNE to India does not, disappointingly, occur to anyone.) Happily for Watson, if not us, the treasure—which really is a chest of gold and jewels—falls into the Thames and is lost forever. The book ends with Watson prattling happily about his upcoming marriage while Holmes reaches for the cocaine. No, I'm serious, that's really how it ends.
I have loved each and every comment I've gotten on this, and I've tried my absolute best to reply to each and every comment. If I missed yours--especially if you commented on an earlier chapter when I was posting a later one, that gets me every time--please accept my sincere apologies! I love you all.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Excuse me, but may we have another blanket?” John asked. “He’s a bit cold.”

“It’s the drip,” the pretty dark-eyed nurse said kindly, spreading a blanket over Sherlock. “Drops the body temperature. And those gowns aren’t exactly warm, are they? I wanted to let you know they’re just about ready for you, should be along any moment now.”

Sherlock cracked an eye and peered blearily at her. “Your family will come around,” he told her. “They’re upset your fiancé’s not a Sikh, but when—“

“Thank you so much,” John said loudly, cutting him off. “Sorry, he gets a bit unfiltered with the sedative,” he added in an undertone.

“It was meant to be reassuring,” Sherlock protested.

“It was meant to distract you from thinking about being wheeled off to surgery in a bit.” John put his hands on either side of Sherlock’s face. “Now listen. I’m going to be right here when you wake up, and when it’s all over, you’ll be able to walk without pain.”

“Possibly.”

“Certainly.”

“Probability of eighty to eighty-five percent, hardly—“

John kissed him to shut him up. “You will. Faith, love; faith can move mountains.”

“That’s utter nonsense.”

“Shhh, you’re making the blood pressure monitor beep.”

Sherlock subsided, looking cross and unfocused. “Do you know what I’m going to do if you’re right?”

“What are you going to do?”

“I’m going to go with you to see those falcons. They can’t possibly be as fascinating as you make them out to be.”

John beamed at him, surprised and pleased. “That would be lovely. I’d really like that. In the spring, when you’re fully recovered and they’re nesting.”
Sherlock’s eyes drifted closed. “And then I’m going to tear all your clothes off and—“

“Ready to go?”

John jumped and clapped a hand over Sherlock’s mouth. “Yes! Sorry. Yes, he’s quite ready.” He pulled his hand away and leaned over to kiss Sherlock once more. “I’ll see you soon, love.”

Sherlock’s eyes opened in confusion and he reached up to try to grasp John’s hands. “John—“

“Go on now,” John said briskly, straightening up. If Sherlock wouldn’t let go on his own John would end up blubbery like a baby. He tried to smile reassuringly, but that much was beyond him, so he settled for looking calmly confident. He hoped. The trolley went round the edge of the door and the last John saw of Sherlock was his pale thin hand, hovering in mid-air as though he could still catch hold of John.

John’s brave expression fell right off his face and he had to swallow hard a few times. Right. Surgical waiting room. Loo first; he’d been dying to go for ages but hadn’t want to leave Sherlock. Then a cup of coffee. Yes. John took a deep breath, squared his shoulders, and marched out.

Planted in the most isolated corner of the waiting room he could find, John took a sip of coffee and grimaced. Terrible. Why was hospital coffee always vile? It wasn’t even hot. He sighed and took another halfhearted sip, then looked at his watch. This was going to kill him. It hadn’t been five minutes; Sherlock might not even be properly under yet.

A hand materialized in front of him with a takeaway cup that just had to be better than John’s. It even smelled better. The hand, unsurprisingly, was attached to Mycroft.

“Hey,” John said, surprised. “I thought you were still out of the country. Is that for me?”

“I returned day before yesterday,” Mycroft said, handing him the cup. “But matters required my attention.”

John sipped gratefully at the hot coffee. “This is brilliant. Thank you. I’ll never let Sherlock say a word against you again.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll wear you down quite soon.”

“You’ve only just missed him—they took him back a few minutes ago.”

“Yes. I planned it that way,” Mycroft said blandly. “There is not enough coffee in the world to repay the enormous boon you have given me by relieving me of the responsibility for caring for my brother in hospital.”

“Oh, he’s not—okay, he is. So how did everything go?”

“Quite well. I am assured by our mutual friend that there are no remaining loose ends. I have also met with the Americans, for whom Neil Garrison had become something of a concern before his disappearance several months ago. They do not seem dismayed to learn that he will not be returning to active duty. And as for the other matter…I am advised that there is no interest in pursuing the whereabouts of Kristin Amburgey. ‘Let sleeping dogs lie’ seems to be the presiding sentiment.”

John honestly had no idea if Mycroft had persuaded the Americans of the mutual benefit of this, or whether he now owed someone an enormous favor. He decided he didn’t want to know.
“I have a letter for you.” Mycroft pulled an envelope from his jacket and extracted a folded piece of paper, which he handed to John. It was thin and crinkly, a bit like the old air mail stationery John remembered from his youth.

Dear John,

I am so terribly sorry about what happened. I swear to you I had no idea that Neil could still be alive. No matter what else I might be guilty of, I never would have left him out there to die if I had known.

John found himself biting back a smile. His former wife’s moral code, like Sherlock’s, was highly specific: she wouldn’t have saved the man who tried to double-cross her, but she would have shot him in the head rather than let him suffer a lingering death.

I never wanted all that money. I just wanted out. I didn’t want to go and live on a yacht someplace, I wanted a life; a real life, one not built on lies, where I could help people. So I went to London and went to nursing school, and I made sure Rehan’s family was taken care of, and I set up a fund I could get to quickly if I had to run. And then I just let the rest of it sit. I thought about giving it all to charity, one of the ones where they build schools for girls, but it’s surprisingly hard to give away once you have it. Mycroft is going to help me. I want to use some to make amends to Sherlock, and he’s going to help me with that too.

Mycroft told me about you and Sherlock. I am so very happy for you both. I think Sherlock has loved you for a very long time, and if I can’t have you, then I want it to be him.

As for the other person we both love: you would be so proud, John, I wish you could see her. She is beautiful and clever and healthy and happy. She will grow up hearing what a wonderful man her father is, and when she is old enough she will know the rest. I will look after her, and you will look after Sherlock, and perhaps one day we will see each other again.

Love always,

Mary

John read the letter over twice. He was smiling, although his vision was a little blurry. She would always be his wife, just as his parents would always be his parents and Em his child. He would certainly never have another—although now it occurred to him for the first time that he might one day have a husband. He knew if he and Mary had tried to stay together their relationship would have dissolved into bitterness and acrimony, but now, in its own way, their friendship survived.

John handed the letter back to Mycroft, who folded it, took out a cigarette paper, rolled the letter into the paper, and sealed it. Then he tucked it into his breast pocket as John watched in amusement.

“Going to smoke that?”

“It’s surprisingly not unpleasant, although sadly lacking in nicotine,” Mycroft replied.

“What does she mean by making amends?”

Mycroft lifted the folder he had placed on the chair next to him. “When Sherlock was small, our family stayed several summers at the estate of a family friend in Sussex. There was a cottage nearby where an old man kept bees. Sherlock had no interest in the things our parents hoped would interest him—going to the beach or learning to ride a pony—but he was fascinated by the bees and he visited the old man every day. For years he wasadamant that when he grew up he too would be
a beekeeper and live in that exact cottage. A few months ago, when it became evident that Sherlock would need single-storey accommodation rather soon, I made inquiries, but it was far too expensive to rent for long. However…” Mycroft took out a sheaf of stapled pages and passed them to John. “Thanks to our mutual friend’s troubled conscience, you now own it.”

“What?”

“It’s much closer to London than Reigate Abbey. If Sherlock decides to return to his former profession, you could keep it as a weekend house, or sell it. If not…I think he could be happy writing music there.” Mycroft flipped past the first page, which showed a ridiculously charming little cottage overgrown with wild roses. “There’s a room downstairs currently used as a study that could easily be used as a bedroom until Sherlock is able to manage stairs again. The kitchen has been recently updated…”

John stared as Mycroft talked on about plumbing and roofs and the state of the hives. The cottage was lovely, but somehow he couldn’t picture Sherlock there. Sherlock belonged in London, or someplace that would not constrain his restless spirit. John thought with a pang of the tower, with its mournful winds and sweeping views—a place for a wild falcon. This place was, well, tame.

“The upstairs bedroom and terrace have a view of the sea,” Mycroft said as though reading his mind. He flipped another page.

“Oh,” John said softly. Sure enough, there was the long slope of grass and the sea beyond, rocks and cliffs and wheeling birds. This, John could picture—Sherlock out on the lonely downs, wind whipping his hair about, the ever-changing sea and sky making his eyes a kaleidoscope of green and blue and grey. “Yes. Yes, that could work.”

“I rather thought so,” Mycroft said, looking smug.

“How long? He’ll be in hospital some time, but if he doesn’t have to go to an inpatient rehabilitation unit—“

“Not long at all. I’ll take care of arrangements for the downstairs bedroom, or more likely have Mummy do it. She’s going to loathe his hair,” Mycroft said, looking deeply pleased.

John snorted and Mycroft handed him the folder. “The rest of the details. I must be going; I’ve quite a lot on my plate today and must make time for a cigarette before I go.”

“Hey—“John said and Mycroft paused, looking back. “Thanks. For everything.”

“Thank you,” Mycroft said with none of his usual archness. He paused, looking oddly uncertain. “There are no decent restaurants near your new home, but the village has a pub with a rather passable selection of beer.”

“Darts?”

“I may have noticed some when I stopped in.”


“Text me when Sherlock is out of surgery.”

“Like you won’t know before I do,” John said, and Mycroft cocked an eyebrow, pulled out his weird secret agent cigarette, and strolled off.
Time passed. It inevitably does, although the peculiarly elastic nature of time was something John pondered more than once in the long weeks ahead. When you were dreading the Sunday train, a whole week away from the person you loved, time seemed to fly by at the speed of light. When the person you loved was suffering, time crawled at a snail’s pace. But always it passed.

A man was buried in an unmarked grave. Somewhere a file was closed.

In Sussex, four physiotherapists demanded transfers or quit altogether. At least one had a nervous breakdown.

A man in Yorkshire prayed every day for the soul of Neil Garrison.

A tiny nation in the Caucasus celebrated the anniversary of its new national holiday.

The Malala Fund received an extremely large anonymous donation, and began planning for several new schools, as well as expanding their existing operations in Syrian refugee camps.

Leaves fell, and a memorial was dedicated in Regent’s Park.

A man of middle age thought of all he had learned in the past few years: to be patient, to recognize miracles, when to hold fast and when to let go. He decided that perhaps he was not, after all, too old to learn to drive.

A woman of a bit more than middle age, feeling lonely, closed up her house for a bit and went to Paris to study advanced pastry-making. Pour mes garcons, she told them there.

Winter came, and the days grew dark and cold. A new heating system was installed in an old cottage. “Top of the line, and I made a few tweaks myself—it’s like a sauna in there now,” the man who installed it told his mates over a pint. Then he wiped his mouth and went to take on the posh git whom—to his amazement—he finally beat at darts. He secretly suspected the man in the suit of losing on purpose, but that did not make the cheers of his companions any less sweet.

In London, a crisply professional woman went down on one knee before a thin edgy one and proffered a diamond set in a nose ring. “Yes,” Nose Ring cried, “Yes, oh my God, of course,” and burst into tears. The restaurant politely applauded, the waiters with secret relief—proposals were notoriously chancy, and this particular restaurant had had that incident a few years ago, when the hopeful suitor and the pretend waiter had…well, at least things turned out well this time. Nose Ring’s corner at Speedy’s stayed empty for a bit, but soon new regulars filled it, just as they had the seats that had once belonged to John and Green Jacket.

On the other side of the world, a little girl turned two.

Her mother fell in love.

Time passed, as it inevitably does. Spring came. The days grew longer and warmer, and the peregrines returned to their scrapes.

“Come on, John!”

“You might want to wait for me,” John called back. “Seeing as I know where we’re going and you don’t.”
“Of course I do. You’ve described it enough times.”

John rolled his eyes, but he was smiling. Sherlock had been able to outpace him for weeks now, but he still took a childish joy in it, like a toddler scampering away from his mum. Now he loped ahead on the rocky trail, the spring wind tearing at his hair in a way that John knew meant an hour working through the knots later. Sherlock had already announced his intention to get it cut when they were settled in Baker Street, a decision John mourned in private.

Sherlock was out of sight ahead of him now. This trip had been a good idea, John thought. They would be moving back to London for good the following week, and although they both knew he was ready, Sherlock’s residual anxiety had made him tense and snippy. John had proposed the trip back to the Reigate Abbey Retreat Centre mostly as a way to distract him, but it also served to remind Sherlock of how far he had come.

John rounded the bend and found Sherlock crouched over the trail, peering down at some footprints barely visible in the hard soil.

“Woman’s,” Sherlock said, “New, 39, but the length of her stride shows she’s taller than her shoe size would indicate. Her boots are too small. That’s why she was hobbling a bit when we met her. I’ll tell Simon to inform her she needs to take her boots back.”

“Who? The composer?” They had met Sherlock’s replacement as composer-in-residence, a dark-eyed, restless woman who wrote a great deal of crashing discordant music and according to Simon spent hours walking the countryside.

“Obviously.” Sherlock stood back up and the wind promptly whipped his hair into his face. “I should have cut this before we came,” he muttered.

“You know, the whole point of taking a walk in the dales is to enjoy the beautiful scenery and your charming companion,” John remarked. “So you might slow down a bit.”

Sherlock gave him a look of pure disdain. “Scenery is boring. I want to see these nesting falcons you went on about last year, and then I’m going to have you over a rock, and then we’re going back and getting out of this horrible wind.”

“What? I thought you were just babbling that time to distract yourself before the surgery!”

“I don’t babble,” Sherlock said superciliously, and he bounded off, turning unerringly onto the barely-visible path that led to the peregrines’ nesting grounds.

John shook his head and started after him. He rather hoped Sherlock wasn’t serious—the air was warm, but the wind was brisk enough he didn’t much fancy dropping his trousers. Still…John had grown to appreciate and even enjoy bottoming over the past months, but if anybody was getting fucked over a rock, it wasn’t going to be John. He could feel the smile tugging at the corners of his mouth as he anticipated Sherlock jumping out to tackle him and getting knocked on his arse.

It had been a long journey, much of it rockier than the path under John’s feet. The first month after Sherlock’s surgery had been particularly horrible; if John had a mind palace, he would have consigned the memory to the dungeon next to the hospital in Germany. There were still times even now when Sherlock had trouble breathing in crowds or on trains. He had not gone to the dedication of the memorial in Regent’s Park last autumn, and that had broken John’s heart a little: all those people falling silent, moved to tears by his music. Even Mummy. Even Mycroft. The coldest parts of the winter had been especially hard, and John had woken many nights to find Sherlock shivering and lost, fingers digging bloody gouges in his scalp.
But he always calmed in John’s arms, was warmed and soothed, found his bearings again. He’d stopped wearing his knife after that last night in the tower. In January they had begun going to London, to have dinner at Angelo’s and stop the night in Baker Street, where Mrs. Hudson made splendid desserts and shrieked at Sherlock’s hair, and Lestrade had come around casually with a few case files—“Just in case you’ve a bit of downtime; I know you’re busy with the music. Are you going to keep your hair like that?”

Molly had come to visit them in Sussex to bring Sherlock a grisly set of autopsy photos. “Is that some sort of revenge for John’s mustache?”

In February Sherlock stopped taking commissions, although John didn’t know about this until the day they had been riding the train back from London and Sherlock had said abruptly, “In the spring, I think. When I finish the rest of the pieces for Brigid’s Cross.”

Brigid’s Cross was the women’s choral group, with whom Sherlock was collaborating on an album. They had already recorded the title piece, also called Brigid’s Cross (“obviously, John”), and John thought it was the most beautiful thing Sherlock had ever done: the voices folding into a four-part canon and then into a single harmonious whole, much like the structure of the cross for which it was named. “Well, that shouldn’t take you much longer,” he said as casually as he could.

Sherlock had sniffed and looked out the window. “I’ve done all the fun ones and now I’m down to virgin martyrs. Dull.”

But he’d finished. And now everything was settled: the bulk of their things already moved to London, the flat cleaned and aired (and probably full of pastries). They would have the cottage to escape to for the next two months, but they’d arranged to let it for the summer—the extra income would come in handy in case business, or Sherlock, was slow to pick up. John had stopped work when Sherlock had his surgery and had no plans to return. Sherlock had an appointment to cut his hair. A new chapter: John and Sherlock Back at Baker Street (Finally!), and John couldn’t wait.

But Sherlock had got so tense and twitchy that John wouldn’t let him go to the shops for fear he’d return to cigarettes, so all in all this trip had definitely been one of John’s better ideas.

“Ha!” Sherlock shouted, pouncing on John and knocking him—fortunately—onto a springy hillock. “About time. I don’t see any falcons and I’m bored.”

“You bastard, I’ll make you wish you were bored,” John said, wrestling him over, and they rolled around getting grass-stained and winded until Sherlock pinned John and announced triumphantly, “You’ll need to make it up to me now that we’ve wasted all this time walking out here.”

“You have to use the binoculars, you git,” John said, reaching for them, and then promptly flipped Sherlock and pinned him in turn. “Who’s going to be making it up now—“

“Hallooo?” a voice called from the direction of the path.

John leaped up, mortified, but Sherlock groaned and grabbed his wrist, trying to tug him behind a large boulder. “Let’s go back here, nobody will see us.”

“Sherlock!” John hissed and then the voice came, a bit closer: “Sherlock! Sherlock, are you there?”

“That’s Simon,” Sherlock said, letting go of John and sitting up abruptly, alert as a retriever on point. “Something’s wrong.” He grabbed for John’s shoulder to get to his feet; he still had a bit of residual weakness in his leg.

“We’re over here! By the overlook!” John shouted.
Simon came around the bend, heaving for breath and clutching at his side. “I’m too old for this,” he panted. “Sherlock—I need—can you—“

“Is it someone missing or is someone dead?” Sherlock asked eagerly, and John gave a snort of laughter that he was too late to turn into a cough.

“Dead! The vicar—Thorpe Hesley—I knew something was wrong, asked to see me—“

“And he never showed up,” Sherlock said, already striding toward the path. “So you went to his room—shot or stabbed or poisoned? You haven’t called the police yet, have you? They’ll muck everything up.”

“Are you sure—“ John started.

Sherlock swung around and grinned at him, a fiercely joyful, wicked grin that lit his whole face. “Come on, John, holiday’s over. Time to go be us.”

And John felt himself grinning back. “Yes. It is.”

Chapter End Notes

Cue the obligatory backstory: I’ve spent a LOT of time in coffee shops over the years, and because I am both nosy and easily distracted, I like speculating about my fellow patrons. Years ago I used to see the same man week after week, always dressed for work and reading the papers. What was this guy doing, I wondered, sitting in a coffee shop at ten in the morning on the same day every week, all dressed up in a suit and tie? He must be staking someone out! Maybe he was an assassin! (He wasn’t. We struck up a chat at the counter one day, and it turned out he’d lost his job and was going to a weekly networking/support group that met nearby.) Still...I wish he’d been an assassin, and I could have foiled his dastardly plan in some daring way, although more likely I’d just have been collateral damage.

A great deal of my fics have been written in coffee shops (I'm sitting in one right now, and if you're in here talking on your phone, I'm giving you the stink-eye). In its little way, this story is my love letter to every one I've spent happy hours reading and writing in over the years. If you are nodding in agreement, please raise your mug or your cup or your glass or your go-cup and join me in this toast: to coffee shops! Haven of the tired and inspired! And Suit Guy, I hope you found a job.

A short list of excellent PTSD fics:
Augustbird's "Burn Down" (this may be the most brutally realistic fic out there--be warned that it does not have a happy ending, although "Reignite", which was written earlier but takes place later, does.)
Achray's "Nothing Else Matters".
This one is recent but if you haven't read it: CatilinFairchild's "Your Perfect Offering"
The PTSD is a small subplot in Merripestin's "Safe Distance", but it's just a terrific story so read it anyway.
I know there are others so send me the ones I missed and I'll add them!

Works inspired by this [podfic] The Ground Beneath Your Feet by aranel_parmadil
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!