The Prey

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The Prey

by AmandaLee, BloodylocksBathory

Summary

What started for John Watson as an idyllic vacation to the rustic wilderness with a girlfriend turns upside down when Sherlock Holmes joins them with the promise of a new case. But a secluded resort stirs past desires back to life, and the case becomes something neither detective nor doctor could have prepared for.
Prologue and Chapter 1

Prologue

A woman wandered along the dirt path, muttering the lyrics to some half-remembered song. She wore little else but a sarong loosely draped over her plump body, thin sandals protecting her feet from the ground. She was enjoying the beauty of the trees around her and the sounds of the forest.

Nothing entered her mind that she was being watched.

Two shadows, one large and one small, wordlessly watched from behind a grove of trees. Both were desperate to move or make a sound, but they had to be patient. Otherwise, their prey would be spooked and the hunt might end badly. The smaller figure was already salivating at the thought of sinking its teeth into the woman’s quivering flesh.

Then a sound reached her ears and she paused. She was trying to decipher the source of the noise, and she looked ready to turn and run. It did not matter. The creaking bow of a third shadow was aimed at her. The arrow would reach its target perfectly.

The woman did not even make three steps before she hit the ground. She looked up to identify her approaching attackers, but already her vision was fading. She could only see three shadows.

Chapter 1

Doctor John Watson closed his eyes, but that did little to block out the continuous drumming of Sherlock's feet against the wall. It had gone on for a while, and John knew better than to cater to the other's infantile need for attention - it would only exacerbate the situation - but it was still getting on his nerves. Especially as he was trying to focus on reading.

Only when the noises took on a decidedly angry tone did John give in and finally head down to check on his friend, flatmate and occasionally lover. Sherlock had been known to hurt himself before during his tantrums and not notice it until later, if he ever did.

Predictably, the consulting detective was sitting or rather half-lying on the sofa and ferociously kicking the wall with his right foot, which was starting to take on a rather angry shade of red from the abuse.

"If you don't stop, you could hurt yourself," John pointed out. "And I'm not taking you to the A&E again."

"Why would you have to? I have you to tend to me," Sherlock replied acerbically. "Doctor Watson."

John decided not to take the bait. "You're scaring Mrs. Hudson," he said instead.

Sherlock demonstrably ignored the warning and resumed his noisy habit, this time hard enough to make the wall, and everything attached to it, rattle. A painting crashed to the floor, inadvertently making John twitch.

"We could go out and have a bite," he tried. "I hear there's a new Thai restaurant..."

"I am not hungry for food," Sherlock cut in, emphasizing his statement with another kick to the long-
"You haven't eaten anything for over two days..."

"It is my brain that is starving, not my body!" the detective snapped. "I need a case, not greasy East-asian food! Something!"

John was undaunted. "Some food would likely deter your stress levels at this point."

"You and I both know that food is no way to deal with stress," Sherlock retorted, purposefully ignoring his friend’s point. "I don’t want to end up looking like you."

He received no response, but Sherlock did not have to turn his head to see the aggravated look which he knew had to be on John’s face.

"Behaving like a child is not going to change my plans on leaving," the doctor finally said.

This time Sherlock was silent. He continued kicking, this time with both feet, his expression blank. The kicking was vaguely reminding John of a child having a tantrum, which was not much of a stretch.

"This has been cast in stone for nearly two months now," he continued. I have a chance to go on holiday and enjoy some time with Mary. Your opinion of her notwithstanding, I am deeply looking forward to traveling with her."

"But to America?" Sherlock asked, incredulous. "What could possibly possess you to spend your vacation there?"

"It’s bloody better than Glastonbury, at least. The summer there is warmer, for one thing."

"More snakes, mosquitos… uncouth locals."

John rolled his eyes. "Not all of America is like an excerpt from shoddy horror film. Especially not all of the Appalachian Mountains."

"No, most of it is. Considering it was Marian’s suggestion—"

"MARY."

"Considering it was her suggestion, I’m not surprised she chose the destination… based on key distinguishing characteristics."

John’s eyes widened in bafflement and anger. "And that’s supposed to mean what?"

"Nothing."

"Was that a remark comparing her looks to those of some backwoods freaks of nature?"

"You said it, not me."

If John had ever been dangerously close to punching Sherlock in the face, now was that time. He balled his hand into a fist behind his back instead, biting back further objections, which he knew would only serve to rile Sherlock up.

"I do not care what you think," he finally said, keeping his head high. "This is no business of yours. You are not a part of this relationship, whether you like to believe so or not."
Sherlock responded by giving the doctor one of his derisive half-sneers. "Only when you find it convenient, isn't that right?"

John briefly felt his face heat up from shame. No, he would not allow himself to feel guilty about that. Sherlock was a grown man - even though his behaviour sometimes contradicted it - fully capable of making his own decisions. He had entered their so-called relationship very much aware that it might not work out. And they had remained friends... hadn't they?

"I'm getting something to eat," he announced. He needed to get out of the flat for a while, be away from Sherlock and his incessant noise-making. "Can I get you anything?"

"Don't bother," the detective snapped, his face now turned away from John.

The doctor left with a sigh, making sure that his phone was in his pocket before exiting the apartment. Maybe he could call Greg Lestrade, ask if he wanted to go out for a beer or two. He was, after all, one of very few people besides John himself who had even limited understanding of how Sherlock's mind worked. And what a pain in the arse he could be.

TBC...
Chapter 2

Chapter Summary

John and Mary leave for their vacation, but not everything works out according to plan...

Chapter 2

Mary’s excitement had been reserved for much of the time leading up to the day of departure, but two days beforehand, she was downright giddy.

“You’re rather enthusiastic all of a sudden,” John remarked playfully during their taxi ride to the airport.

“I can barely wait to be on the plane,” she replied with a wide grin. “we’ll finally be able to spend an entire week together.”

Admittedly her smile was infectious, and John found himself smiling as well. How could Sherlock possibly compare Mary to some repulsive, unwashed native of marginalized mountain society? If anyone were to resemble such a person, it would be Sherlock himself.

Mary blinked at the sudden series of laughs which escaped John, and she nudged him, puzzled.

“What’s so funny?”

“Nothing,” he said. “I think I’m very glad that it’ll be just the two of us.”

An eyebrow tilted on Mary’s fair face. “As opposed to the two of us… and your partner?”

“Exactly.”

“In that case, I’m equally glad. I truly don’t know how you can handle him. He seems like he can barely handle himself.”

Glancing out the window, John could see the airport coming into view, and he smirked. “Some days I worry he’ll require nappies, just for the attention.”

Mary chuckled. “Are you serious?”

“No, I don’t suppose so. He’s a little too egomaniacal to subject himself to that.”

The airport was getting close enough now that Mary could see it as well from her side of the taxi. She clasped at the arm strap of her carry-on bag in anticipation.

“Well, soon I won’t have to worry about him at all,” John concluded. “It’ll be just you and me.”

Something about the situation worried John. Sherlock had been much too gracious about letting him go, even going as far as to embrace him and wish him a "great time abroad" before he stepped into
the taxi that was to take him away from 221B Baker Street for an entire week.

It was far from typical behaviour from Sherlock. The detective was not known to give up that easily, and John feared that he would come up with some way to ruin their vacation yet.

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The transatlantic flight passed with surprising speed, which could at least in part be attributed to John’s eagerness to leave England behind. He had not been abroad since returning from Afghanistan, and that certainly had been anything but a vacation. Still he woke up certain nights, gasping and covered in cold sweat with the sound of gunfire roaring in his ears and the hot, desert sun baking him mercilessly.

John blinked a few times, adamant not to let his persistent PTSD accompany him to America. Sherlock knew about it, of course - it was hard to keep anything secret from the pompous git - but he had not yet told Mary about his recurring nightmares, and John feared that she might break it up with him if she learned about his complete medical history. Life with an ex-soldier was never easy.

John suddenly remembered his question to his friend, Mike Stamford, just before he’d first been introduced to Sherlock. Who'd want me for a flatmate? Would anyone want him for a boyfriend, either?

John and Mary passed through security without trouble and the flight departed on time. Their seats were coach class, and they thus had little space to move, but they still managed to sleep for some of the six hours of their first flight. They had to switch planes once they reached the United States, but their journey still went smoothly. Even so, John could not help a constant glancing behind him. He had to have been doing this every time they turned a corner. His behavior did not take very long to get noticed by Mary.

“Paranoid?” she asked, tugging on the arm locked in hers.

“Possibly,” he replied. “I just keep expecting to turn around and see him.”

“He’s not here,” she reassured him, not having to ask who the ‘him’ was. “The only way he’s here is in your head, and he probably wanted it that way.”

John smiled. “You’re right. It probably explains why he was so angelic when we left.”

“I wouldn’t say angelic,” Mary added slyly as they entered the domestic flights terminal at the JFK airport, to wait for their second and final flight. “He stared me down through the taxi window like an owl before we drove off.”

“He probably thought you looked delicious,” John said, though he knew the play on words sounded stupid.

“You’re so corny,” Mary said, though she laughed at his silly behavior all the same. It was good to hear him in a silly mood for once, and she hoped to see more of this mood during their holiday.

They had a two-hour wait for their connecting flight at the JFK airport, and they spent most of the time playing Wordfeud on their respective smartphones. John ached to buy a bag of crisps or onion rings - just something to munch on to keep himself occupied - but then he remembered Sherlock’s painful barbs about his expanding waistline and decided against it. Being short truly had its disadvantages. Every pound he put on was blaringly obvious, and for some reason it all congregated around his middle.
John had been to America before, but that was years and years ago, before he enrolled in the army. And he had never visited New York City. Regretfully he realized that the closest he would come to seeing it was from the airport, as a trip to the Big Apple was simply not cut out for his current finances. He had unceremoniously refused any funds offered to him by Sherlock, as he did not want to depend on his flatmate for a living, especially not where Mary was concerned.

He could not get far with his army pension, and he'd gotten less hours than usual at the surgery lately. And London was an expensive city to live in, even for someone with a medical degree. Detecting did not pay well. Most of the time, people were actually bloody ungrateful toward you.

"Oh look! I won against Charlotte!" Mary proudly presented her screen to him, so that he could see that she indeed won the round against her adversary. He had no idea who Charlotte was, but then again, he did not know much about Mary's social life.

The notion made him think of Sherlock’s remarks made about her, though it was a common remark he made about girlfriends the doctor had: you know nothing about her. This was an exaggeration – he did not need to hack into personal files in order to initiate a relationship, after all. This was indeed what John told his partner.

"Why not?" Sherlock had sneered.

“How are you faring?” Mary asked, shaking John from his thoughts. He gave a mock pout and showed her his screen.

“Oh, poor thing,” she gave him a peck on the nose for his less than stellar score. “Looks like ‘Shocker Ellshom’ is giving you quite a fight.”

“What a stupid sounding username…” he muttered as he continued playing. Granted, he was finding it difficult to concentrate against his challenger. Perhaps it was from his squirrely sense of his surroundings from his time in the armed forces. Perhaps it was from living with someone as observant and vigilant as Sherlock. Either way, John was persistently distracted by others around him. He could have sworn he heard familiar voices. Or he was going insane… what inconvenient timing.

He was being silly. This was some subconscious attempt to bring work with him, to worry about someone showing up to bring him back for a case or other emergency, away from his well-earned vacation. He needed to ignore it and pay attention to what he had with him at present. He needed to focus on the lovely woman at his side, smiling at him.

Another part of him, however small, could not help but worry, however. Without John to keep an eye on him, who knew what kind of stupidity Sherlock might get himself tangled up in? It was a well-known fact that Sherlock completely lacked anything that could be referred to as a common sense. If something happened to him...

Oh stop it! John berated himself. Sherlock managed to survive thirty years without you to watch over him. Surely he'll get through another week.

He could only hope that Sherlock's addiction-driven personality would not turn to drugs during his absence.

With an annoyed sigh, John clicked the current game away. He was hopelessly out-maneuvered by his opponent, and their flight would soon be departing anyway. He might as well fold.

Almost immediately after he had ended the game of Wordfeud, his phone beeped, announcing the
arrival of a text message. John dutifully checked it, not prepared to dismiss it as unimportant, and what he read almost made him drop his phone out of pure shock.

//It's not like you to give up that easily. -SH//

John’s eyes bulged at the message. He turned his head as though in a near panic, and finally saw a figure sitting nearby, reading a paper. Scuffed-booted legs crossed, the individual wore a gratingly familiar ratty overcoat and held a newspaper which obscured his face. The paper flipped over, and as expected, Sherlock sat with his phone activated.

He had only been sitting ten feet away.

Though the airport was loud and busy, a male voice shouting “OH BLOODY HELL!” rang out amidst the crowd, turning numerous heads. Sherlock calmly strode over to the couple as though he had not heard John’s outburst.

“What are you doing here?!” the doctor hissed out, standing up to face him.

“Surprising you. And it took damn forever. I couldn’t standing anymore waiting.” He turned his head to regard Mary, smiling politely. “Hello, Mary.”

The young woman did not respond, only glaring. Sherlock only sniffed at her in exchange. What John saw in her, he had no idea.

“You’re not the only one who noticed, by the way. Although it took you much longer…”

Sherlock held up his own phone, displaying a brief exchange between himself and another caller.

//Where are you?//

//Where else?//

John lifted an eyebrow, knowing who the correspondent was. “Has Mycroft sent anyone to retrieve you?”

Sherlock smirked. “Please. I wouldn’t have made it out of the country if that were the case. Besides, why would he send someone when he knew I was with you?”

A familiar wrinkle formed at the center of John’s brow, an expression Mary had now become familiar with. It seemed to appear most often whenever Sherlock was involved.

"Sherlock," John began, fighting to keep his calm, to not start shouting in the middle of a crowded airport terminal... "One week. That is all I asked for. One week..."

"A very badly chosen time to go on a vacation," Sherlock quickly interjected. "Considering we've got a new case!"

He thrust his phone in under John's nose, proudly presenting whatever that was on the screen. At this distance, John could not read it.

"I did not fly over here to work on a case," he snapped, shoving Sherlock's hand and the phone away. "And since when are you talking cases in America?"

"I had to do something, wouldn't you say? Besides, this seems rather interesting. I need you to work with me on this."
The consulting detective quickly rattled on to describe the outline of said new case, which apparently centered around some unexplained disappearances from a small West Virginian tourist resort. Sherlock did not specify why he claimed to find such an obviously mundane case of missing persons interesting, but John suspected that he had other reasons for taking it.

"I took the liberty of making reservations for us at the resort. I can promise you that the standard is higher than anything you could afford on your own."

"Sherlock, are you out of your mind? I'm here with Mary!"

Unsurprisingly to John, Sherlock behaved as though he had heard nothing. Perhaps he truly had not.

"Now there is a matter of taste with this resort, but I’m sure that if you could deal with me, a little lack of clothing shouldn’t be that difficult to adjust to."

"I wish you would please just listen. Mary and I – not Mary, YOU, and I, understand – had plans, and we had an agreement, that YOU were staying here, and…" The strength in John’s voice faded as he took a moment to think over his partner’s words. He glanced at Mary, who looked as though she had heard it quite clearly as well.

"Lack of…" he echoed. "Did you…" He rubbed at his face for a moment, as though letting the actual words sink into his skin. "It’s a nudist resort."

Sherlock only smiled.

John did not know what to say. And by the time he did, he did not get the chance to speak. An employee announced on an intercom that their flight was now boarding. John sighed and rubbed at the bridge of his nose.

Sherlock removed his ticket and boarding pass, and John wished he could have slapped that smug grin from his partner’s face.

"Shall we take off?" Sherlock asked.

John glanced at Mary, who looked like she had just drunk something and realized it was urine. The doctor was very close to deciding against the entire trip, just to spite Sherlock.

"We're not staying at the nudist resort!" John hissed at Sherlock as they were briskly walking toward the gates.

"Why not? I can promise you that the facilities are much more modern and better maintained than your choice for a resort. Seriously, John; 'Slumberland Motel'? If you were trying to impress your lady friend, you would have failed miserably. Did you really believe that Mary would fancy the sound of cockroaches scurrying about in the dark when she tries to sleep?"

"They offered free breakfast!" the doctor muttered stubbornly, although he was starting to suspect that his choice of lodging had indeed been really poor.

Sherlock made a dismissive gesture with his hand. "I took the liberty to cancel your booking. Fortunately I got to it in time. You will not be charged."

This time John did not argue. Every penny he could save up would be welcome.

"Who is paying for your little trip then? Mycroft?" he asked. He knew very well that due to his impulsive and often rash nature, Sherlock did not have access to any large amounts of money at a
time. Mycroft had long since managed his younger brother's finances.

"No."

"What then?" John demanded. "How are you going to pay for this?"

Sherlock was now doing his best to avoid his partner's stare. "I... sold some... stuff."

Eyes wide, John stared in disbelief. "What 'stuff'?" His voice was low, but still audible amidst the commotion of the airport.

"Before I answer," Sherlock said, "do not shout again, because we all know how jumpy airport security is..."

John pursed his lips. "What stuff?"

"Something that I might very well have brought with me," Sherlock replied, "had I been absolutely positive I could get past security dogs with it."

"John," Mary interrupted. "We'd better go." She pointed at the gate, where the line was beginning to thin. Sighing, John removed his own passport, ticket and boarding pass.

"For a moment, I was worried that you sold something of mine."

Sherlock scoffed. "Why? You have nothing worth selling."

John pretended he had not heard his partner's answer. With their carry-on luggage and boarding papers, they proceeded towards the plane.

"Where did you get your own passport?" John asked as they searched for their seats.

Sherlock's seat was nearby, though thankfully to the couple, not within five feet of them. Thus, he parted, but not before giving his reply. "You know I have my ways."

John turned back to Mary, who looked confused, and ready to ask for elaboration, but John lifted a hand to cut her question short.

"Asking will only stroke his ego, so it's best not to bother. Want me to put away your bag?"

Mary handed him her case in approval, but John's attempt at valiance ended in humiliation as he soon realized that he was too short to properly reach the overhead compartment where carry-on luggage was stored during a flight. Being forced to stand on his tiptoes, the doctor had to more or less throw the bag in, which earned him a few disproving glares from the passengers around him.

John also swore he could hear a very distinct, deep voice laughing, but once he glanced in Sherlock's direction, the detective was visibly busy stuffing his own luggage away.

The flight over to the BWI airport strangely enough felt longer than the transatlantic one, even though it lasted less than an hour. John was not in the mood to speak, and neither was Mary. Perhaps she regretted even going on this trip with him. As things were turning out, she had good reason to.

A throbbing headache had already started beneath John's temples, and the descent of the plane made it much worse. He wondered if he could blame that on Sherlock too.

When the plane finally did land, the group still had an issue of finding their latest destination. Originally John and Mary were going to take the Amtrak to a reputable camping ground, but thanks
to Sherlock’s intervening, they would have to find a different route.

“Well, the train doesn’t go into this town where the resort is,” John said, searching the Amtrak site on his phone.

“Of course it doesn’t,” Sherlock said nonchalantly. “It’s a small town of little over 500 people.”

“You’re the one who said that it was bad idea to even go into West Virginia,” John said, brow knit. “And now you have us headed to a town that likely has no electricity. Or more than five teeth, collectively.”

“That’s a rather ignorant statement to be making about the place, John!” Sherlock made a theatrically insulted expression. “After all, not all of the Appalachian mountain range is like an excerpt from a shoddy horror film.”

John’s free hand clenched into a fist for a brief moment, letting go. He looked at Mary.

“Can the train send us somewhere close where we can take a taxi?” she suggested.

John gave the idea some brief consideration, but he then shook his head.

“A taxi might not take us out to the town… also, what if we needed to get out in a hurry?”

“Expecting us to be attacked whilst we’re there, John?” Sherlock said. “So judgmental.”

“In case an emergency of some sort happens,” the doctor hissed through his teeth. He was beginning to think punching Sherlock would be worth the possible subsequent arrest by police for assault. Instead, he turned back to Mary. “Perhaps it’s better if we rent a car.”

"Do we have a map?" Mary asked hesitantly. "What if we get lost trying to find our way? I hear that area can be difficult to navigate."

Sherlock gave her a supercilious smile. "We won't need a map, when we've got something much better," he said.

"What on earth do you mean?"

The detective rolled his eyes as though he was talking to a simpleton. He pointed at his own head. "This."

TBC...
Chapter 3

Chapter Summary

Sherlock, John and Mary arrive at Avalon nudist resort, WV.

Chapter 3

Since the nearest train station was more than forty-five minutes away from their destination, taking the train turned out not to be an option. Besides, the threesome quickly found themselves running out of daylight hours. Time difference could be a real bitch sometimes.

"Whatever you decide on, get on with it!" Mary snapped irritably after Sherlock had spent over an hour trying to calculate the fastest route to the resort via the GPS system in his phone. For some reason, the machine would not cooperate.

"If we stay here any longer, we'll end up like that poor Russian guy Tom Hanks played!"

Sherlock frowned in confusion. "I'm sorry?"

"The Terminal. It's a movie. Never mind," John sighed. "Mary's right, though. We can't spend the night here. If we get lost, we'll just have to stop to ask the locals for directions."

"As if they'll know…" Sherlock said. "This country isn't exactly known for superior education."

"Who's being judgmental now?" John muttered.

"Not when it's a fact," Sherlock replied.

"Boys, please?" Mary interrupted them. "The more time we spend here, the later it's going to be once we arrive. And we don't know just how late their reception desk stays open."

"You're right," John said, picking up his luggage. "Let's go. We could use all the daylight we can get."

Renting a car was easier than expected, but John did not trust good luck. Sure enough, the Toyota Corolla they had rented looked to be on its last breath. At least it started up when he turned the key.

Sherlock – despite having only one suitcase – did not even bother loading it into the car, proceeding into the back seat instead and leaving his traveling companions to the luggage.

By the time they were all in the car, Sherlock had produced a map of the area.

"In case the GPS never does find it," he explained, holding the map in front of Mary’s face. She frowned and took it from him, unfolding and examining it, only to frown deeper. Expecting at least a circled destination, she was baffled to find random scribbles throughout.

"This looks more like someone was doing their calculus homework than directions!" she exclaimed.
“Oh, ignore those,” Sherlock said with a dismissive wave, lying back along the length of the back seats. “You wouldn’t have a chance of deciphering it anyway. Wake me when we arrive; those flights were exhausting.”

John was about to object but held his tongue when he thought the situation over: did he really want to put Sherlock in charge of a rental car in an - to them - unknown country? Just as impulsive as a driver as anywhere else, Sherlock was bound to at least cross a few speed limits assuming he didn't drive the car into a tree.

"That's it? You're not going to help us navigate?" Mary demanded, but Sherlock had already turned his back on them and pretended not to hear. Or perhaps he didn't have to pretend. The wiring of Sherlock's brain and his way of processing sensory impressions sometimes just shut down.

John decided to let it be and seated himself behind the wheel. Predictably, the GPS refused to reveal any coordinates for the Avalon resort. The biggest town in the area turned out to be Cumberland, Maryland, and he set the GPS to that instead. If things got really bad, they could hopefully at least find a motel.

Almost an hour passed in silence. John dreaded to say anything, knowing that Mary was everything but pleased about the development of their trip.

When she finally did speak, John failed to suppress a twitch. "So..." Mary began after clearing her throat. "Are you going to work on the case... with him?"

John glanced back at Sherlock, making sure the other man was still asleep. Then again, if Sherlock were truly awake, he would have been talking.

“I’m not really sure,” he answered, his voice low. “It just sounds strange.”

“How?"

“Sherlock barely takes most cases as it is,” John said, turning the car towards the fast lane. He found himself getting used to the traffic faster than he thought he would. “He only takes them if it can really stimulate his mind. He’s like a little spaniel or something, needing things to do or else he’ll chew up furniture... Anyway, a few disappearances in a resort that’s nestled away in miles of woods doesn’t quite sound like his cuppa tea. It just sounds too easy.”

Mary only made a noise of agreement. She had not interacted with Sherlock very much, but she had a very good grip on his behaviour, partly from John’s own descriptions and anecdotes, partly from observation alone. She felt like David Attenborough, witnessing the behaviors of mollusks.

“Does he?” she finally asked after a few minutes of silence.

“Does he what?” John responded, confused.

“Chew the furniture,” she explained, and John laughed so suddenly that he feared he had awoken the subject of their conversation.

“Sometimes,” he said jokingly. The GPS announced an upcoming exit, and as confirmed by the map, it was the correct one. “Almost there,” he said, changing the subject. “Not far to go once we reach the city.”

“Hopefully the rooms are comfortable,” Mary remarked. A hand touched John’s knee, making him squirm out of instinct. “With a nice big bed.”
“Maybe.” John was silent otherwise.

He understood the hint, of course; he was not that dense. Despite having dated for the past two months, John had not yet taken his relationship with Mary to the next phase, even though he’d had plenty of opportunities to do so. Something just made him hesitate. Would Mary find him lacking or inadequate in the size-department? Would she find the expanse of his waistline a turn-off? Would he be able to please her? Would he even be able to... perform?

John was not as fit as he’d been during his military days, and one casual, off-hand comment from Sherlock about the length of his endowment had affected him deeply. It had happened during one of their infrequent sexual encounters. Sherlock’s mouth, not rattling rude deductions for once, had been tightly wrapped around his cock, and John was doing his best not to simply grab his flatmate’s unruly curls and fuck his face hard.

Sherlock gave the best head. That was an undisputable fact. No one before him had possessed the same skill and technique, the ability to have John fighting back a climax less than a minute into the blowjob. Sherlock’s mouth was made for it, even more than it was made for incessant talking.

"You're so great at this, Sherlock," the doctor had said, hand tangled in the detective's sticky, damp curls after having shot his load down Sherlock's throat. "You're just a natural, aren't you?"

Sherlock smiled sardonically with his forehead still resting against John's inner thigh. "I can do much better," he said. "And you would know, if your... manhood could reach the back of my throat."

“Are you alright?” he heard Mary ask him, shaking him from his memories. He gave her a smile and took the hand which had been squeezing his knee.

“I’m fine.” He kissed the back of her hand and continued to hold it for some time during the drive.

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Asking for directions in Cumberland rewarded the group with derisive looks, though not to anyone’s surprise. When someone finally did look at their map – casting another sidelong glance in regards to the scribbling – John and Mary’s guessed route turned out to be correct.

They wasted no time dallying in the convenience store after their inquiry, as Sherlock’s poking around in the aisles was beginning to alarm other customers.

“It’s only a straight drive from here,” John announced as they drove down winding roads framed by trees and the occasional empty field. “Keep an eye out for… what was it? Owl Hollow?”

“Critton-Owl Hollow Road,” Sherlock corrected him, his tone quite irate. “We did not need to stop for directions.”

“You’re just angry that the employees called you mentally challenged,” Mary said with a chuckle.

Sherlock bristled. “Touched in the head was term they used,” he snapped. “Not that they have any sort of mental capacity themselves.”

“Now, now,” John interrupted. “We’ve been driving for over two hours now, and we’re all very tired. So have some patience.”

As he said this, they passed a peculiar sight. Abandoned houses and barns had increasingly been the norm as they made their drive, but this would be the first time any of them had seen an abandoned school bus. Permanently parked on an embankment and covered in weeds, the yellow exterior had
mostly peeled away and been replaced by rust. Several windows were broken, and the door itself looked as though it had been yanked off its hinges by some unknown thing.

“We’re nearly there,” John muttered, trying to turn his attention back on the destination.

"Who lives here?!" Mary suddenly exclaimed as if in disbelief of what her eyes had told her. "There are people who live here... aren't there? Actual people?"

"Depends on how you define "people"; " Sherlock replied. "Is walking upright a requirement?"

"Sherlock, that's enough," John warned his flatmate. "If you're having doubts, do us all a favour and remember that you were the one who wanted to come out here. It would probably be in your best interest to be somewhat civil. You're not in London anymore. These people - assuming we come upon any - are likely to have guns. As well as foul tempers."

Sherlock scoffed, leaning back in his seat. "Of course, that is the only way these "people" can communicate." He suddenly felt his thirst and regretted not buying a drink from the airport. John, however, had bought a bottle of 7up and stuffed it into his carry-on bag. Sherlock reached for the drink, thinking that he had preferred another brand - preferably something containing caffeine - but he decided not to mention it.

John turned onto a narrow dirt road just as the sun cast its final rays from behind the treetops. "Looks like we're there..." he muttered with rather muted enthusiasm.

“It’s a good thing we could spot that sign,” Mary remarked as they carefully navigated the twists and turns of the narrow road. “You would think the resort didn’t want anyone finding it.”

“It’s a nudist resort in the backwoods,” Sherlock said, impatience in his tone. “They’d rather not bring too much unwanted attention.”

When they finally reached the resort, they parked first at the reception office. As they got out of the rental car, two middle-aged men strolled by, completely naked, and waved at them, smiling. Mary tried to be polite and waved back, but Sherlock ignored them, heading inside. John, feeling vaguely uncomfortable, followed suit.

Once inside, John gave the woman at the front desk a fleeting look before he turned his head. Though she wore a skirt for hygiene purposes at a publically used desk and chair, she was otherwise topless. John could not help his physician instinct from taking over as he continued to give sidelong glances her way. From the neck - or what was left of it - down, she resembled an overweight man; he would have guessed visceral fat from the way her stomach stuck out further that her breasts. She gave what in her estimation had to be a welcoming grin as she greeted them. Her gapped teeth looked beyond yellow.

“Hi, welcome to Avalon!” she said. “Checking in?”

Sherlock gave her a curt little smile in return, one that was forced, but well-practiced enough to look convincing.

"Under the name Holmes, good woman," he replied.

“I love your accent!” she exclaimed as she looked up the name.

John secretly rolled his eyes.

"Yer from England?" the odd-looking receptionist asked as she lumbered away to bring the keys to
their cabin. The rear view of her was similarly unappealing, and John was grateful that she at least wore the knee-length wrap-around skirt that concealed certain parts.

"Yes, that's right," Sherlock muttered, now visibly impatient. He was never one to engage in small talk, and now he was not in the mood to even pretend. When Sherlock was tired, his anti-social nature became more apparent than ever.

"We don't get many foreigners out here," the woman continued, blissfully aware of the new guests' discomfort around her. "Especially not such good looking ones!"

John realized that the obese, middle-aged receptionist was flirting with Sherlock. Part of it made him want to laugh at the irony of it, but he was relieved not to be on the receiving end of the woman's attentions.

"Yes, strange, isn't it?" Sherlock countered, his bright blue eyes boring into the woman. "Don't you ever wonder why no decent-looking folks become nudists?"

John’s eyes widened, and suddenly he urgently wanted to be in his cabin.

“Oh, there’s more to it than just how people’s breasts hang and the size of a man’s penis,” the receptionist chattered on, leaving John all the more surprised. The woman did not seem to realize she had been outright insulted.

“So you admit that there are no attractive nudists,” Sherlock said.

“Umm, which cabin was reserved for two?” John blurted, stepping forward. He tried his best innocent grin and pointed at Mary, who was looking ready to come inside and ask what was keeping him. “The missus is rather tired. We’ve come all the way from JFK.”

He ignored the look he got from Sherlock.

The receptionist, now looking like she had caught onto Sherlock’s jab, was no longer smiling. At least it meant her teeth were no longer showing. She handed him some keys, their number engraved into the metal.

“There are two bedrooms in the lodge you’ve signed up for. The cabin is second to the left of the road. Your friend is really rude.”

“He knows,” John replied.

“And he’s very sorry. He’s a little touched in the head.”

“No, I’m not!” Sherlock argued. “I’m only genuinely curious!”

The woman was now beginning to raise her voice. “If you’re really here because you want to make fun of people who just want some peace and quiet when they’re not doing anything wrong—”

“I assure you, that’s not the case,” John said, desperate to simply leave and hope they would not have to sleep in the car due to Sherlock getting them kicked out.

"Cabin five, was it, boys?" Mary piped up and practically ushered John toward the exit. He had not even noticed her coming inside, but now he could only hope that Sherlock would follow before the woman behind the desk changed her mind about letting them stay.

He did, but not before blessing the receptionist with a few more of his scathing deductions.

"Sexually frustrated divorcee with a mid-life crisis," he informed them. "At least two adult children
she's not on good terms with. Recently had a liposuction based on the horizontal scar beneath her stomach, which, I believe, led to some medical complications. As well as stretched the skin of her belly to the breaking point. And she has her home in a proverbial pig sty!"

"Look who's talking..." Mary muttered with an eye roll. Sherlock and John's flat on Baker Street was rarely ever cleaned and looked like a hoarder's nest on the best of times. Sometimes, after one of Sherlock's experiments had gone awry, it looked like a bombsite. Mary also wanted to comment on Sherlock's irregular bathing habits, but she was too tired for the shouting match that was bound to follow.

The cabin was an old-fashioned timber cottage with very little space, although it did have - thank the lord - two separate bedrooms. Sherlock was quick to simply dump his luggage on the floor and immediately occupy the bathroom. John and Mary could soon hear the sound of running water. While John was pleased that his flatmate had decided to wash himself, he couldn't help but worry that there would be no hot water left for the rest of them.

After nearly half an hour, Sherlock finally returned. His dark curls, normally so messy, were plastered to his skull like a helmet, further accentuating his unusual facial structure, and his pale skin was bright pink in spots from the heat of the shower. The most striking thing, however, was that the detective was naked. Unashamed of this fact, Sherlock proceeded to throw his wet towel into a corner.

"We're at a nudist resort," he casually remarked upon noticing John's stare. "I suggest we try to blend in."

Mary raised her eyebrows for a moment, but went back to unpacking and putting away clothes in the bedroom, secretly wondering if she and John should hide their own towels. John simply looked up at Sherlock, stealing a glance downwards for a split second. Sherlock of course noticed the look and rested his hands on his hips. Whatever the opinion of his personality, his body indeed was an object of attraction for John in the past. The detective had picked up various bad habits throughout his life, but his flatmate had to admit, at least he had held onto an alright figure for this long.

"Who is this person you’re supposed to meet up with, by the way?" John asked, changing the subject. He was not about to scamper about naked outside. Or inside either, for that matter.

"A Bobbi Ferguson. We’re meeting tomorrow at the pool."

"Lovely," John said. "Interviewing Mr. Ferguson in public about these very sensitive disappearances..."

"Bobbi with an ‘I’," Sherlock corrected him. "Short for Roberta. And she’ll be leading us somewhere private to discuss the case."

"Yes, yes..." John replied, rubbing his temples. "And I’m sure it will be an engaging case indeed, but for now, it’s getting late and we haven’t had any proper sleep since before we were on a plane. I think Mary and I might turn in for the night."

"You’ll come with me tomorrow." Sherlock’s words were less a question and more a command.

"That depends on how much sleep I get tonight," John responded with a frown.

"Sleeping is boring..." Sherlock murmured, now busy examining every nook and cranny of the small lodge. The cooking possibilities were rather limited, and John hoped they would be served food at the restaurant at least once every day. Did this place even have a restaurant? And if so, would one
have to attend in the nude? Did the cooks also work in the nude?
Suddenly he was no longer so sure he wanted to eat at the restaurant.

Sherlock bellowed out from excitement when he opened the door to the first bedroom. "I'll choose this one!" he called over his shoulder at his flatmate. Had it just been the two of them, John would not have bothered to object. Sherlock was used to having space, and the doctor knew how impossible he could become if he was denied it. The problem this time, however, was that Sherlock had chosen the bigger of the two bedrooms, consequently also with the bigger bed.

"Sherlock, since there are two of us, and only one of you..." John began, but the detective whisked his protest away.

"Oh, you'll be fine," he said with a casual shake of his head. "What could be better for Mary and yourself, than a small, narrow bed where bodily contact at all times is, should I say, non-optional?"

The wrinkle between the doctor's brows deepened further, and was beginning to resemble a coiled snake. Teeth clenched tightly together, he grabbed Sherlock's bicep and dragged him into the moderate privacy the small kitchenette offered.

"Mary and I have not yet reached that part of our relationship!" he hissed angrily. "You knew that, Sherlock!"

Sherlock merely grinned. "Maybe now is your chance. It's what you want, isn't it?"

John tried to argue, but each time he tried to speak, his mind went blank.

“Don’t argue with me,” Sherlock said, locking eyes with the doctor. “There’s no argument, you want to have sex with her.”

“Yes, but there’s a certain pace at which these things happen,” John insisted.

“There wasn’t for us.”

John’s face went a deep red. At times like these, he wondered if his personal life had been better off had he not given in to impulse that night so long ago. The morning after, he had said that it had all been a mistake, though this statement had not kept them from engaging in the act over and over again. Perhaps it really had been a mistake.

“You were different,” he finally said, though he could tell from the look in Sherlock’s eyes that the detective knew he had hit a nerve.

“We were different,” Sherlock corrected.

John glared at him. “Do you want to help me with Mary or are you really just trying to drive us apart?”

“You tell me,” Sherlock replied.

The doctor put his hands over his own face, taking a deep breath. He was too exhausted and too damned angry for this.

“I don’t want to deal with this anymore. Take the damn room.”

Sherlock looked faintly surprised, perhaps a little hurt. “No arguments?”

“I’m not in the mood for arguments.”
Pursing his lips, Sherlock folded his arms. “You can have it. I’ve changed my mind.”

Sherlock did not put on any clothes for the remainder of the night. He dug out a lukewarm can of Coke from his suitcase and quickly downed it, followed by a power bar. He refused the offer of a sandwich from Mary, claiming that the brand of butter she used did not suit his tastes.

John and Mary ate their flattened sandwiches in silence, while Sherlock took out his laptop, placing it in his naked lap and giving a triumphant howl at the functioning WI-FI connection. The sound of the detective’s spiderlike fingers flying over the keyboard was the only sound for a long while after that.

John feared this might be the longest week of his life.

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Mary was the first to retire. John was not sure what was expected of him at this stage. Was she interested in anything besides sleep? After such a long and trying day, and with Sherlock next door, he did not believe so.

"You should get some sleep," Sherlock said admonishingly after John had remained seated by the table, indecisive. "I want to get started on this case early tomorrow morning, and I need you focused."

If I even go, John considered saying. But again, he did not feel like getting into another argument.

“It’s been a long journey,” Sherlock said, eyes fixed on the computer screen. “Go sleep.”

John sighed. At least he had won the larger bedroom.

The room was dark when John entered, but as his eyes adjusted, he saw that Mary was still awake. Lying under a sheet, she calmly looked up at him as he awkwardly removed his trousers and shirt. She turned over, expecting the dipping sensation of a body joining her in the bed, but instead she heard the shuffling of his feet against the carpet. Then John bumped into a drawer and she heard him whisper out a curse.

“Are you hurt?” she asked, turning back to look at him once more.

“No, I’m alright,” he said, his voice quiet and embarrassed. “Umm… which drawer did you put the pajamas?”

“I haven’t found an air conditioner. It’ll be too warm for those,” Mary replied, lifting her arm and extending it toward him. “You can get in as is.”

“O-oh…” he nearly stammered. “Alright.” Hesitant, he finally sat down on the edge of the mattress. Down to his boxer shorts, he realized this was the most naked he had ever been around Mary. He wondered how naked Mary was underneath that sheet. Supposedly he would find out in a few seconds.

This was not how John had imagined it in his head. Not in a small, musty room at some godforsaken resort for people who liked prancing about in the nude. Not with Sherlock next door. Not with...

Realizing that he was holding his breath, John let it out with a sigh. It was no use pretending anymore. He had been wanting to lose some extra pounds before taking their relationship to the next level. Take up a gym membership, start eating more actual food and less greasy takeaway, walk
rather than hail a cab...

Who was he kidding, anyway? Between his hours at the surgery and the time spent as Sherlock's steadfast assistant solving crime, he had very little time or energy for a healthy lifestyle. And to think that he would actually turn forty next year...

John carefully lifted the covers and joined Mary in bed. With equal amounts of relief and disappointment, he found out that she was not naked but wearing a form-fitting tank top and panties.

"So..." Mary said in the near-darkness and carefully edged closer. "Finally we're alone."

"Not technically," John uncomfortably reminded her. "We have company in the other room, and sometimes he doesn't sleep all through the night."

"Doesn't he have that case tomorrow?" Mary asked. "I don't mean to eavesdrop, but I could hear him discussing it with you."

"I came here to share this holiday with you," John said. He then brought his voice to a whisper. "Not engage in stupid cases that don't make sense."

One of Mary's hands caressed the center of John's chest. He automatically squirmed again, but instead of being offended, his girlfriend smiled, amused with his skittish nature.

"Sherlock has a hold on you," she remarked matter-of-factly. "I've know that since I met you. I understand that he's beyond difficult, and that you're one of the few people he'll willingly interact with. You may not have much of a choice tomorrow."

John's brow wrinkled, and he snuggled closer to her, minding that only his upper half did, and not his stomach.

"For now, let's just enjoy each other's company...?" he said, taking her hand. She nodded, nuzzling him until their lips met. John relaxed a little, fumbling with his caresses, but otherwise alright... until his belly touched her. His body tensed up, an action not missed by Mary, who cupped his face.

"It's alright," she said.

"This..." John said, "...is not at all what I had in mind for us..."

"It doesn't have to be all bad just because we had a rocky start," Mary replied. "We can still have an enjoyable time. This is my first ever trip to America."

"I didn't get to travel a whole lot when I was a girl."

"You're still a girl," John said with a cheeky grin.

"I'm thirty-four," Mary reminded him. "I don't feel like a girl."

"You look ten years younger," John assured his girlfriend, thinking that in reality it was just three or four. Sherlock, who was coincidentally also going to be thirty-four in December, looked much younger.

"Well, aren't you a charmer!" Mary playfully exclaimed and gave him a mock-slap. "Oh wait! You're just trying to charm my pants off, aren't you, you naughty boy!"

The doctor promptly sat up. He had only registered the words, not the good-natured, teasing tone.
they were uttered with. "No, Mary, that's not true...--!"

She giggled at his shocked reaction. "Calm down, soldier! It was a joke. But truth to be told..." She carded her hand through his sparse chest hair. "...perhaps I wouldn't mind if you did."

John's discomfort grew, and none of it could be attributed to arousal. All he could think of was Sherlock. Sherlock listening to every word of their exchange, maybe even cataloguing it for future reference. Sherlock bursting inside, once again showing his blatant disrespect of John's privacy. Sherlock's long, pale hand, fisting his cock...

"You know, it's been a long day, and we're both very tired," John said and grasped the hand stroking his chest. "We should probably... get some sleep."

Mary tried one last time to instigate some sort or arousal, tickling at one of his nipples.

"Are you sure?" she asked, and though she smiled, her eyes couldn’t hide her disappointment.

"I’m sure," John replied. Mary’s smile became a little sadder, but he gave him an affectionate kiss on the nose.

"Alright," she said. "Sleep well."

"Good night," John returned. He watched her turn over with a certain tinge of regret. She seemed to genuinely care about him, and it was clear she was not spending time with him just for a screwing. She curled up on her side, her back turned to him.

John felt like absolute shit. Neither of he or Mary were able to get to sleep very easily that night.

TBC...
Chapter 4

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John question Sherlock's new client, Bobbi Ferguson, about her friend's disappearance.

Chapter 4

“What do mean, they don’t serve food here?” John exclaimed the next morning, eyes wide with disbelief.

“Exactly what I said,” Sherlock answered. “Apart from Fridays evenings through Sunday, we would have to go shopping…” He paused for a moment, sidetracked by an attempt to remember something. “Did I not mention that earlier?”

“It would have helped before we got there!” John replied. “Where in the world are we supposed to find food, a petrol station?”

“Don’t worry,” Sherlock said, hands up defensively, as though the anger he was receiving was unfair. “I’ve asked around the resort, and they’ve said that yellow store in Paw-Paw has plenty of groceries. And near that, they have a convenience store that makes sandwiches.”


“Well,” Mary interjected, trying to diffuse the already volatile situation, “think of it this way: if we were at the original hotel, we likely would have had to eat from quite a few restaurants. Preparing our own groceries might be less expensive in the long run. And we’d know exactly what was going into our meals.”

John felt deeply embarrassed about the fact that Mary seemed aware of his dire financial situation and thus suggested something that would minimize their expenses. They were on vacation, dam it! Now was not the time to worry about expenses.

"Sad, isn't it, John, when your woman is more sensible than you," Sherlock said with a snort. "What did you expect? We're out on the sticks. You won't find a Michelin star restaurant around here."

"We should have gone to New York..." John muttered sourly. "This is no way to "experience" America."

Sherlock made a face that feigned surprise. "Oh! But I thought you fancied outdoor activities! Wasn't it you who said he wanted to get away from "stuffy old London" for a while? I specifically remember your expressing it that way, using those exact words---"

"I didn't mean West Virginia!" John exclaimed, now rather exasperated. "I never wanted to come out here!"

"But the first "hotel" you booked--"
"It was in Maryland!"

"It was a shithole. And you know it. You chose it simply because it was the cheapest you could find."

Mary, fearing that the argument might soon progress beyond verbal, stepped between the two men. "Sherlock, leave John alone!" she berated the detective. "You don't have to get on his case all the time for not having a trust fund like some others..."

"Speaking of cases, we do have one to solve," Sherlock retorted.

John looked about ready to whine like a child, and he felt like doing so as well. He glanced back at Mary. Why the hell had Sherlock followed them? To deliberately make John miserable?

“Go and do your business,” Mary calmly told him. She leaned in to whisper in his ear. “When you’re finished the interview, I’ll be waiting at the indoor pool.”

John finally managed a smile. As nervous as he had been last night to be intimate with Mary - and as much as he hated the idea of seeing the demographic of this resort flopping about naked in the water - he liked the sound of that. He would likely enjoy it much more after this morning having to humor Sherlock.

“Fine, let’s go.” He was about to walk to the door, but Sherlock stopped him.

“Where do you think you’re going in all of that?” he asked. “We don’t want the other guests to assume we think we’re better than them. Besides, if we look the part, Ms. Ferguson will be more comfortable to share the case.”

John grimaced. “I am not taking my clothes off!”

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Bobbi Ferguson meanwhile, was waiting for the detective and the doctor at the outdoor pool. As the weather was now warm enough, the pool outside was being used by substantially more people. Not to John’s surprise, most of them did not have particularly healthy body types. Not that John had ever thought of himself as especially prudish in the past, nor had he thought poorly of individuals who were overweight, as he hardly had the right to complain around some people, but suddenly seeing everyone so… exposed… It made him wary. Suddenly the thought of no clothes to separate him from others made him very nervous.

At least we made a compromise, John thought, gathering his bathrobe closer.

Sherlock seemed to have no qualms about walking around naked with just a towel folded over his arm. With slight annoyance, John also noticed that the detective was getting quite a few appreciative glances from the other nudists, women and men alike. Very few of them were even close to Sherlock's age, and John thought, with a sense of satisfaction, that if any of them were looking for a hookup, they’d be wasting their time.

Bobbi Ferguson was a heavyset woman in her late fifties with dyed blonde hair and a thick layer of make up on her face. She was nude, like the other visitors by the pool, but her hands were adorned with various rings and bracelets.

All of them were, Sherlock noted, fake, and had most likely been purchased from the accessory section at a Wal-mart.
"Mr. Holmes, I'm so glad you could make it!" she said and vigorously shook Sherlock's hand. "I've been trying to talk to the police, but they won't listen, and I really...--" She a suddenly interrupted herself and studied John from head to toe. "And who might you be?"

"This is my assistant, John Watson," Sherlock replied. "He'll be joining us for the interview. That's fine with you, I presume?"

"Your assistant... You mean your blogger?"

"Ma'am, I assure you I do much more than write a blog..." John began to explain, but Sherlock broke him off with an almost irritable hand gesture.

"Is there any place where we could talk in private, Ms. Ferguson? You need to tell me everything you know about Sarah's disappearance."

“Well…” she responded, looking around.

“How about that path?” John suggested, gesturing towards the nearby dirt trail. “It looks like it heads into the woods, and that would be—”

“No, no!” the woman blurted, loudly enough to bring the attention of several others around them. “If my suspicions are correct, we shouldn’t go into the woods.”

John lifted an eyebrow, but Sherlock continued to smile politely, though the doctor himself could tell that his partner was only pretending to be amused.

“Perhaps we should try somewhere indoors,” Sherlock offered. “Your residence, perhaps…?”

“Alright,” she waved behind her, towards the camping grounds. “I have a trailer set up there.”

“Lovely,” Sherlock said in false enthusiasm.

“My thoughts exactly,” John muttered as they followed her. He made a point of keeping his eyes to the ground or the sky, anywhere that did not lead to him looking at her retreating nakedness.

“It’s right there,” she said, pointing at a small cluster of trailers beyond the main road, huddled amidst some trees and foliage. “The red one.”

Technically the trailer used to be red. Time and sunlight had faded the paint into a dull pink. John and Sherlock looked around, noting that they had reached the U-turn which navigated cars back to the beginning of the main road. For someone so uncomfortable about being interviewed in the forest, Bobbi had her trailer incredibly close to it.

“Everyone else is out doing their thing,” Bobbi said. “Using the pool, the Nudsino...”

“The what?” John asked.

“A nude casino,” Sherlock explained. “Hence Nudsino.”

Against his will, John's interest was perked. This place had its own casino? He never would have guessed. Perhaps later, if they had nothing going on...

"Don't even think about going," Sherlock hissed at him as they entered Bobbi's mobile "home". "We all know that your habit of gambling plays a large part in your poor finances."

"I wasn't..."
"You were thinking about it. It's no use denying it."

John sighed. "I won't. Promise."

On the inside, the trailer was messy, with clothing haphazardly thrown about, as well as lots of stacked boxes. John was relieved not to see any obvious filth or dirt, but he would not have wanted to sit down on her couch with nothing between his skin and the fabric of the cushions. At least Sherlock had thought to bring his own towel.

"Please take a seat, gentlemen," Bobbi said. "Can I get you anything? Coffee?"

"Do you have tea?" Sherlock asked.

"Uhh... I guess..."

"Earl Grey, hot, milk, and a teaspoon of honey."

Bobbi looked troubled. "I think I've only got Lipton..."

"Then nothing for me, thanks," Sherlock said impatiently. "Now tell us about Sarah."

John closed his mouth, biting back his own response to accept the offer of coffee from their hostess. Sherlock had clearly forgotten that he was there.

Bobbi took a bottle of bottled water from her mini fridge and took a seat opposite them in the armchair. Sherlock elegantly crossed his long legs and leaned forward, resting his chin against the tips of his fingers.

"Sarah was... is... my best friend," she said, embarrassed to have been caught referring to her friend in past tense. "We met in high school and we've been close ever since. When we discovered Avalon a few years ago it felt like we'd finally found a place where we could fully be ourselves..."

"Tell me about her disappearance," Sherlock urged. "Why do you think there's foul play involved?"

"The police say she left voluntarily," Bobbi said, slightly stunned by Sherlock's brusque approach. "But I don't believe that. Rich - that's Sarah's husband - is kind of a dick. He's cheated on her in the past, he drinks, and he has a temper. I don't believe he's ever hit her, but once she told me he pushed her to the floor..." Bobbi caught herself rambling again and cleared her throat.

"So the cops think Sarah's left because of Rich. But I don't buy that. She'd never leave without letting me know where she's going. We've always told each other everything. Something happened to her. I know it!"

"Her belongings are gone?" John inquired. "Her luggage?"

"Well, no. But her car is."

Sherlock had been silent for the duration of Bobbi’s story, glancing at his surroundings. His behavior was not lost on the woman, especially when he yawned.

"If there’s something else you would rather be doing..." she began, her tone and face growing angry.

“Dick is the ex-husband,” Sherlock said, stopping her tirade. “Drinking, pushing, jaywalking. I’m listening.”
“Then what will you do about this?” she asked impatiently.

“Your photos were taken during your stay in the resort,” Sherlock replied, changing the subject of conversation. He waved in the direction of the screensaver on her nearby laptop. He gave her a sly look. “Taken on the actual grounds. Which is prohibited.”

Bobbi frowned at the statement.

“Granted, there are a few complaints I have with the rules myself, but that’s neither here nor there,” Sherlock continued, standing up and taking a step towards the laptop. “Your friend Sarah looks happy here.”

Bobbi nodded. “Yes, she does. So why would she want to—”

“All in good time,” the detective said. “Her luggage and belongings are still here, as my… intuitive assistant has asked.”

John glared for a second.

“Our next stop is her lodging,” Sherlock concluded. “Another trailer like yours?”

“Yes,” Bobbi said, standing up as well. “But I don’t have a key.”

“Not a problem. This resort doesn’t seem to have security cameras.”

Picking the lock on Sarah’s trailer took Sherlock less than a minute, and he only had a piece of steel thread at his disposal. If he’d had his usual lock-picking toolkit, John guessed he could have done it in thirty seconds.

Bobbi was starting to look uncomfortable. "I'm not sure we should be doing this..." she murmured, nervously wringing her bejeweled hands.

"Sarah is your best friend, isn't she?" Sherlock commented as the trailer door swung open. "You said yourself that she wouldn't keep any secrets from you. And we're investigating on your behalf, Ms. Ferguson."

Bobbi offered no audible reply to that. Sherlock glanced at the towel slung over his shoulder for a moment, as if contemplating where to put it, and then decided to wrap it around his hips.

The air inside the trailer was stagnant and stuffy, but John assumed it was simply from the amount of time the trailer had been uninhabited. Sarah Cavanaugh had been missing for six days.

"No one's been here since she left," Sherlock declared with his usual confidence.

"How can you tell?" John asked. "Someone else with a key..."

"The marks, John. Observe!" His long-fingered hands grabbed the doctor's head and turned it back toward the door. "The amount of dust present is consistent with the time the trailer has stood empty. Now look down. If anyone had opened this door after Sarah left, there would have been prior marks in the dust, as the door opens inward. Do you see?"

"But what if someone came in through a window...?" John tried, but was met with an eye-roll from Sherlock.

"Let's see what else we can find," the detective ordered.

More photos – again from the Avalon public grounds – decorated the tables and shelves. All of them
were of Sarah’s stay in the resort. No photos of the infamous Rich could be found. Though John was
careful to exclusively observe and not touch anything, Sherlock was more than comfortable in
moving things about, stirring up dust. The doctor’s nose twitched at the sudden irritation.

Bobbi still lingered outside, perhaps out of guilt over breaking into the trailer, perhaps out of respect
for her dead friend. Or, John surmised, she had something to do with Sarah’s disappearance.

“I doubt it,” Sherlock suddenly remarked, looking at the way John stared out the window at their
client. John glanced back, slightly startled. Sometimes he wondered if his partner really could read
his mind.

“I don’t think she has any role in Ms. Cavanaugh’s disappearance. There’s nothing to allude to that
just yet, anyway…”

The detective grasped the handle of a small refrigerator, hesitated, and finally opened it. As expected,
a smell of mold and spoiled food poured out. Sherlock ignored John’s groan at the stench and knelt
down, looking within.

“If she was planning on leaving, she wouldn’t have left so much food behind.”

“Considering the people we’ve seen on this trip so far…” John suggested.

“Notwithstanding,” Sherlock said, annoyed. “She would have taken the food with her, not wasted
it.”

He closed the door, much to the relief of his assistant, and moved on. John spied a nearby dresser-
drawer and, taking some initiative, opened one of the drawers. Sarah’s clothes were still folded
inside. Sherlock joined John’s side and patted the attire, feeling something solid within the folds. He
removed a framed photograph of Sarah in a wedding gown, a suited man at her side. The image
looked to be at least 20 years old, based on the level of fading color and image quality.

"That much be Rich," John said, more to himself than to Sherlock, but he was rewarded with another
eye-roll anyway.

"I believe we can have him ruled out as our culprit," Sherlock stated calmly and returned the
photograph to its original place.

"How can you possibly tell that from a photo taken some twenty years ago?"

"Because she's held on to it. Rich's assumed motive for murdering his wife would be to stop her from
leaving. Sarah was not going to leave. If you were going to walk out on someone, would you keep
their picture?"

John frowned; once again his own deductive abilities had failed him. "Good point," he admitted.

Sherlock crouched to look underneath the bed, his mouth pursed as he straightened himself.

"If Mrs. Cavanaugh had an affair, this bed has not been used for their activities."

John did not even bother asking how Sherlock could see that, but he felt like adding that it really
wasn't very helpful in finding their missing person.

“Tell me, Ms. Ferguson,” Sherlock addressed the woman as he and John exited the trailer. “Where
was Sarah originally parked?”
The walk to the parking lot was relatively quiet, save for distant bird calls from the trees, as well as a few muttered curses whenever Sherlock stepped on a rock or a branch. Though the resort encouraged nudity, clearly Sherlock had forgotten the necessity of shoes or sandals when wandering outside. Not that John was surprised. The intellect of ten geniuses, and yet all of that collected information often shoved the most obvious details aside.

John remembered once telling Sherlock that he would lose his head were it not screwed on tight enough, only to have Sherlock assure John that heads were not attached to bodies this way.

“This is where she usually parks,” Bobbi said, pointing to a corner of the parking lot. Peculiarly enough, it was still empty despite the length of time the woman had been gone.

“No one’s really been using her spot,” Bobbi remarked. “Like as if maybe they want to leave it open for her… in case she comes back.” She stopped only to begin to weep. Sherlock grimaced at the behavior and only continued looking around for clues, leaving John standing with some amount of discomfort about the situation. He was still nervous about the fact that he was the odd man out in a community of nudists, but he also felt terrible about the way Sherlock was once again ignoring a client’s heartbreak.

“You may as well give them a shoulder to cry on,” Sherlock once said, “you’re a doctor, you’ve got the bedside manner.”

Lifting a very hesitant hand, John patted her doughy, bare shoulder. “We’ll find her,” he said. “There ain’t a case Sherlock hasn’t solved.”

A small ray of hope seemed to pierce through the desolation in Bobbi's eyes. "Is that really true?" she asked tentatively.

"Well, yes," the detective admitted, "but as a fair warning, the answer is not always what the client hopes for."

Bobbi accepted the remark with surprising stoicism. "I understand that," she said. Her voice was not quite steady, even though she made a valiant effort. "But I need to know. Even if Sarah is dead, knowing what happened to her is preferable to staying in the dark."

TBC...
Chapter 5

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock have a bit of a row, and John tells Mary something he'd rather not talk about.

Chapter 5

There was nothing more Sherlock could deduce from the parking spot that Sarah used to occupy - the near-week that had passed since her disappearance had obliterated practically all traces of her in the public area - and Bobbi announced she would return to her trailer, claiming she needed some time by herself to "digest the news".

"Back to where we started, wouldn't you say?" John said, sighing, as Sherlock continued to stare off into the distance, his face slack and absent. The doctor knew that look; when Sherlock looked like that, he was fully inside his 'mind palace' and not receptive at all to outer sensory impressions.

"I wouldn't say that," Sherlock replied, two whole minutes afterwards. His head twitched; a weird tic the detective sometimes displayed when an idea hatched inside his brilliant mind.

"Why do people come here, John?"

"Uhh... to be naked with other likeminded people, I guess?" John offered.

"Exactly. I believe it's called social nudism, or naturism. A belief that nudity, when the weather permits, allows the person to live in greater harmony with nature."

John raised a questioning eyebrow. "You seem to be adapting to it rather well."

Sherlock shrugged. "I'll do what's necessary to blend in. This is no different. But Sarah... What if coming here was not enough for her? Her exhibitionistic streak might have eventually demanded something riskier... like the risk of being seen naked by someone outside the grounds of the resort."

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After she was told that she had been a great help and that they would contact her if they found out anything further, Bobbi Ferguson went on her way, with some slight resignation.

“Right, then,” Sherlock announced quietly. “Now we…” he trailed off as he turned to address John, realizing the doctor was no longer by his side. In fact, John was already walking down the main road.

“Where are you going?” Sherlock asked incredulously.

John turned to face him. “The agreement was that I assist you with questioning Ferguson. And we’re finished questioning.”
“The agreement,” Sherlock corrected him, looking quite cross as he advanced, “was that you help me today on investigation.”

John gritted his teeth before answering. “I am on vacation, Sherlock! This was supposed to be just Mary and I, if you’ve conveniently forgotten.”

“But isn’t this better than what you had originally planned?” Sherlock argued. “You were going to that dreadful little motel in the middle of a slum town!”

“And this is any different?!” John snapped, his voice loud enough for anyone to hear within a twenty yard radius. “You don’t get it! I thought you did, but clearly you don’t. This was my time away from everything! No emergencies, no cases, and no YOU.”

Sherlock did not outwardly react, if anyone else had seen his behavior, but John had been assistant to him long enough to pick up on a few mannerisms. The detective’s otherwise motionless face twitched just under the eyes, and he swallowed. He had been taken aback by John’s outburst.

“This is your case, not mine,” John said, glaring. “If the case really is that important. Why are you out here, really?”

Sherlock looked confused and, John realized, a smidgen hurt. Immediately John regretted his harsh words, even though it still puzzled him sometimes how profoundly ignorant Sherlock was of normal human emotions. Subtlety and hints were wasted on him.

"We're partners," Sherlock said, his voice quiet and subdued. "This is what we do."

"One week, Sherlock. That's all I asked for. It's not like I was going away forever. I just wanted a small breather."

"Away from me." Bitterness crept into Sherlock's voice and he averted his eyes, the small muscles around his jaw flexing as he clenched his teeth.

John knew he had to choose his words carefully so as not to walk directly into Sherlock's trap. Inexperienced though he was at emotional manipulation, Sherlock seemed to know how to guilt trip his best friend and flatmate.

"Come on, I didn't mean it like that. Unless you've noticed, we do live together as well as work together. It would do us both good to spend some time apart."

"Technically, you work at the surgery," Sherlock said. "Very long hours, I might add. And you spend most of your free time chasing after women. Women who don't even want you. I wonder why you bother."

John reacted as though he'd received a physical blow to the gut. Sherlock always knew where it would hurt the most.

"That's not fair, Sherlock. You were the one to pull away every time I tried to approach you."

Despite their vigorous and sometimes downright aggressive sexual romps, Sherlock shied away from every attempt by John to initiate emotional intimacy. He rarely touched John out of bed and did not appreciate being spontaneously touched. On the rare occasions that he did allow it, his body was stiff and coiled as tightly as a bedspring. Sherlock also preferred to sleep alone, claiming that he could not relax properly with another body beside him, and thus always withdrew to the sanctuary of his own bedroom after a session between the sheets.
Sherlock reached up to place a long, cool hand against the doctor's cheek. His skin was smooth and dry, without calluses. Besides working on his science experiments, Sherlock had not done much manual labour in his life.

John had to fight not to lean into the touch. "Sherlock, stop it," he warned. "This is inappropriate, I have a girlfriend now."

“She’s not right for you,” Sherlock insisted, refusing to take his hand away. “It’s not a good match, the two of you.”

“Neither were we,” John reminded him. “We never made it past the sex. And I’m sorry if what we had was enough for you, because it wasn’t enough for me.”

Sherlock’s lips tightened into a thin line for a moment. He finally took his hand away.

“We’re good for each other as partners,” John said. “And friends. But that’s all.”

Sherlock backed away, almost looking betrayed. He averted his gaze and gathered his hands into fists. John did not suppose he would be punched for whatever reason, but Sherlock had always been unpredictable in the past.

“I’m going to go look for the car,” he said, his voice low and even. He simply turned around to leave.

“Sherlock,” John called after him. “Sherlock, wait!” He was genuinely surprised when his partner actually obeyed.

“When you did… all this,” he gestured at their surroundings. “Be honest. When you came along and changed our plans… was it really for the case? Or was it to disrupt my time with Mary?”

"Of course it was for the case!” Sherlock shouted back. "Don't flatter yourself, Watson!"

The detective stomped off, letting out an occasional curse when something on the ground dug into the soles of his bare feet. John sighed, rubbing at his temples to stop the impending headache from erupting.

Sherlock only ever called him by his last name when he was angry with him. Even though he knew that the scolding had been justified, John did not like falling out with Sherlock. While he was sure that they would soon be on speaking terms again, Sherlock was known to hold grudges for a very long time; his relationship with Mycroft was a good example of that. John was not even close to knowing what had caused the rift between the brothers, and since neither was willing to talk about it, it didn't seem like he'd ever find out.

John wondered if he should have gone with Sherlock despite his reservations, just so that he could extract the detective from a sticky situation, should one arise. Then again, Sherlock had already disappeared from his field of vision, and John did not want to chase him down, like a puppy dog following its master.

Besides, he had promised to meet with Mary at the indoor pools after their talk with Bobbi Ferguson. Would his girlfriend be there already, waiting for him to show up?

Realizing he had forgotten a towel, John hurried back to the lodge to retrieve one. The resort expressly forbade wearing swimsuits, but he would be obscuring himself with both his towel and his robe.
At least I thought to wear sandals, he thought.

Opening the door to the indoor pool, John was hit with the strong smell of chlorine. Not that he was surprised. In a nudist resort, it made sense to maintain as high of a hygiene statute as possible. It was supposedly the reason people could not wear bathing suits when using the pool or hot-tub. Even so, enough stories of people contracting horrendous infections from public Jacuzzis had put him off to using them, chlorine levels or not.

Fortunately, luck was in his favor. Most of the resort-goers were using the outdoor pool and enjoying the warm weather and sunny skies. At the most, two men were entering the sauna at the far end of the indoor pool. Otherwise, the pool itself was empty, save for one. Mary was swimming the length of the pool, and as ordered by resort etiquette, was quite naked. She might not have had the most fit of forms, but she was still in much better shape than any of the women John had seen ever since entering Avalon. John found himself smiling at the sight of her body as she awaited his arrival.

True, he had sensed a certain uneasiness in her – though not nearly so pronounced as his own – when the group first checked in, but she had adapted very well.

Approaching the pool’s edge, he grinned as she finally noticed him and swam over. “Come in,” she urged him. “It’s lovely. And as you can see, barely anyone else around.”

He chuckled nervously. At least there was that. And no Sherlock. In fact, he was uncertain if Sherlock even knew how to swim. There were surprisingly many menial tasks that the genius did not know how to do, and had no interest in learning.

Mary tilted her head, now upright and treading water. She gazed up at him with slight confusion. "Aren’t you getting in?" she asked.

"Yes... Yes, of course." Knowing that he could not enter the pool wearing the robe, he finally discarded it, but not without a certain amount of hesitation. Mary had never seen him naked before, and his insecurities regarding his recent weight-gain weighed heavily on his mind, more than figuratively speaking.

He quickly dove in headfirst and resurfaced next to Mary, playfully poking her side. She squealed in a mixture of delight and terror, and was quick to deliver a jab of her own to his ribs. John was glad she had mostly missed the soft part of his paunch.

He had to admit, though: the water was close to heavenly. Obviously it was a place for the nudists to socialize, rather than exercise, and had thus been adjusted to suit their needs.

"So, tell me. How did it go? And where's that pesky friend of yours?" Mary asked.

“Pesky doesn’t begin to describe him,” John admitted. “We questioned the client and, uhh…” He lowered his voice on the slight chance that the men in the sauna could hear him, however slight that chance might be. “Investigated her trailer.”

Mary smirked and played along, whispering back. “Why is that such a scandalous thing suddenly? Oh wait, let me guess... you broke in, didn’t you?”

“Technically Sherlock broke in and I followed him inside,” John said with a sly smile.

Mary chuckled and gave him a little kiss on the nose. “He’s a very bad influence on you.”

“Admit it, you like a bad boy from time to time,” John said with a laugh.
“Most girls do,” she agreed. “But we also like someone dependable. You have that too.”

“Most of the time,” they both said at once.

They proceeded to swim together, back and forth. They both swam at a relatively similar pace, though Mary was just a little faster.

“We also took a look at her former parking space. Not much there, though, not to my surprise.” Reaching one end of the pool, he gripped the edge. “Sherlock and I had a bit of a row.”

“Uh oh,” Mary lingered next to him. “What this time?”

“He wanted to go find the missing woman’s car. I said no. After all, I had you waiting for me. And I’d rather be spending time with you as our vacation dictated instead of going on wild goose chases with someone who tagged along just to make me miserable.”

Mary smiled at the man’s devotion to her, but then her brow knit with worry.

“But suppose something did happen to her…?” she asked.

“If she did, Sherlock can find out easily, and without my help.”

The woman smiled. “If you say so.” She leaned forward and their lips met. John eagerly carded his fingers through her wet hair, kissing her back.

Mary's smooth, sleek body rubbed against his own underneath the surface of the water, and the contact predictably brought forth a familiar stir of arousal in him. His cock twitched with interest, accompanied by warmth pooling in the pit of his stomach which quickly spread downward.

Coupled with the slight embarrassment was also a strong sense of relief. He could evidently still get excited without thoughts of Sherlock... Oh drat.

Mary did not notice the sudden stiffening in his body, or she mistook it for something else. Encouraged by his initial response, she pressed even closer and gave him several open-mouthed kisses as one of her hands discretely snuck downward to investigate. Her touch made John twitch as though he’d been burned. Suddenly this all seemed like a very bad idea.

"Mary..." he admonished and caught her hand. "Not here... This is supposed to be a family friendly resort!"

She gave a high-pitched giggle and continued to fondle him. "Sweetheart, there's no one here. We can do whatever we want."

John decided to use a bit more force to still her roaming hand and simultaneously withdrew from the embrace. "Not here, Mary. We could get arrested."

Mary pouted for just a moment, but she knew John was right.

“Or at the very least, get kicked out,” she added. “And then where would we stay?” She played with a wet lock of John’s short hair as she cuddled close. “An abandoned shack in the woods? I think not.”

“Considering Sherlock, it might not take anything done by us to be forcibly removed,” John remarked, trying very hard not to squirm. Part of him was constantly saying over and over in his head that Mary did not care how he looked, that she liked him just fine despite the extra pounds. But
another nasty part of him gave him the urge to dash for his robe or towel as soon as he was so much as halfway out of the pool. He hated the way his belly pressed against Mary before anything else on his body did.

Thankfully, a distraction arose. Turning their heads at the sound of laughter, the pair saw the two men exiting the sauna. Mary grinned and swam back to the pool steps.

“Come on,” she said, rising from the pool and grabbing her towel.

John looked over to the doorway, then back at Mary’s smiling face. The nasty little voice came back for just a moment, but he ignored it.

“Oh… okay,” he replied, following her out of the pool, though he was quick to wrap his towel around himself.

Peeking inside, Mary grasped John’s hand. “All to ourselves,” she announced gleefully. “Let’s go!”

Much like how the chlorine had taken John aback when he first entered the pool, the sudden wave of heat within the sauna was a surprise, though John had expected it all the same. Already Mary was spreading out her towel and reclining on a bench. Not one to look as though blasé about any activities, John undid his own towel and took a seat next to her, although he put his arms in front of his torso, as an awkward attempt to obscure his stomach.

"I never thought I’d say this, but I feel really comfortable here,” Mary said. "That's crazy, isn't it, but after ten minutes without any clothes, you kind of forget that you're naked. We're all equals here. I like that."

"The... facilities are well-maintained," John offered in a feeble attempt to add to the cheerful atmosphere. He could sadly not say that he was very comfortable being seen without clothes. It would have been a blatant lie. The only aspect of coming here that pleased him was the fact that the bill was going to Sherlock.

John's throat was getting uncomfortably dry, and he suspected that the heat of the sauna was not the only reason. Though he knew it was silly, he couldn't help but believe that Mary found his physique lacking in many respects. At 5'6'' with a compact build, John had never been what most people considered classically handsome, but during his army days, he had prided himself on being naturally muscular and deceptively strong for his size. Now a layer of fat covered his previously well-defined body. Sherlock never missed an opportunity to poke fun at him for his expanding waistline, the verbal jabs sometimes accompanied by physical ones. To the detective, picking at other people was just as natural as it was for normal people to pick their teeth.

John glanced down at his form, disgusted at the rolls which formed whenever he sat down. Then his eyes moved lower to the bushy nest of brown curls which surrounded his manhood, short and thick like the rest of him, now completely soft. He hated the way his pubic hair concealed nearly half of the shaft, making it appear even smaller. He should have at least thought to trim it down a bit.

"Speaking of comfortable, how about Sherlock?"

John looked up, jarred out of his sour thoughts by his girlfriend’s voice. “Pardon?”

“He seems perfectly at ease going naked,” Mary answered with a small laugh. “Not that I blame him. He’s not terrible looking, body-wise. And such a cute little bum for someone so thin.”

John felt a slight lurch in his stomach at the remark. Even though Mary clearly did not like Sherlock, she still found him pleasing to look at. Did she think vice-versa about John, that she loved him as a
person but found him unattractive?

Mary was still finding the notion of Sherlock naked amusing when she looked up at John, who seemed to be stuck in another world.

“You know I was just joking, right?” she said with a gentle nudge of her hand against his side. John winced and managed a smile, but it was a lousy one.

“Was I too forward?” she asked.

John blinked, not fully understanding. “How so?”

“Just a short while ago,” Mary explained, sitting up and facing him. “In the pool, you seemed very tense. And it’s not that I was cross with you about getting intimate in the water where we could get in trouble. I just don’t want to go into this with the wrong impression.”

Her arms wrapped around her folded legs. John glanced at her and watched a rivulet of perspiration travel lazily down her neck and in between her breasts.

“I thought maybe you had been wanting to initiate something between us, but… lately, I’m not so certain anymore.”

John sighed, embarrassed. “Listen. I care about you. And I would love to go to bed with you at some point during this trip. So please, don’t think that I’m brushing you off. Far from it.”

"Why do I feel a "but" coming on...?" Mary asked, her previously jovial face clouded with worry. John hated himself for letting his insecurities affect their relationship negatively, but he also knew that there was no hope for them unless he was honest; or as honest as he could bring himself to be, anyway.

"There is no "but". I really do want to." He swallowed nervously, trying desperately to re-moisten his suddenly parched throat. What he was about to say was one of the most embarrassing things that could happen to a man, but Mary needed to be reassured that the problem was his, and his alone.

John had been suffering from occasional erectile dysfunction ever since he returned home from Afghanistan. He knew that his problems were psychological rather than physiological, since he had no trouble getting - or staying - hard when he masturbated, and the doctor he had consulted about his fears confirmed the diagnosis. His performance issues were due to a mental lock-up, probably a lingering result from the trauma he had undergone during his military service.

He could remember the two pathetic attempts at sex with his previous girlfriend, Dana. The first time he had managed to become erect, but came prematurely after less than a minute, and the second time he had stayed as flaccid as a snake with a broken neck despite repeated oral and manual attempts at stimulation from Dana. She had broken it off with him two days after that fiasco, her explanation the usual: she liked him a lot, but they were too different and not right for each other, and would be better off as friends. She did not state his performance issues as a cause for the break up, but when John looked into her eyes, he saw pity, as clear as day in them. Not that he could blame her. Pity was not a basis for a relationship.

John had returned home after midnight, drunk from the four or five beers he had consumed at a pub. The alcohol had dulled his senses, but it could not still the turmoil in his heart.

Sherlock was, from a single look in his direction, able to deduce the outcome of the evening and gleefully shouted deductions from his small laboratory set up on the kitchen table, until John could not take it anymore and retreated, wordlessly, into his bedroom. He had prepared for a lonely,
sleepless night in misery, but sometime later, with John still wakeful, Sherlock crept into the bed, naked, all lips and hands and cock, blissfully silent except for occasional gasps and groans. John had welcomed the contact, clinging to Sherlock while the detective fucked him, and almost-crying against his long neck. His own cock had kept up, despite the multiple beers, and he came practically in tandem with Sherlock.

Hands over his face in frustration and embarrassment, John desperately tried to get the words out.

“It’s alright,” Mary gently insisted. “Simply tell me.”

“I have… issues,” John finally said, his voice feeling weak from the dry throat. He felt a hand touch his bare knee, and when Mary spoke again, her voice was quiet, but even.

“What kind?”

“Ugh…” John rubbed at his face. “Must I say it? Thanks to my service in the Middle East… it’s… difficult when I have sex.”

“Do you get stage fright?” the woman asked.

John sighed. “That’s one way of putting it. Oh, Christ… I would have preferred to have gotten over it by now, but…”

“Well, it’s not really something one gets over right away,” Mary said, edging a little closer. “If this is an issue involving your mentality, it’s going to take time no matter what. The human brain is fully capable of betraying its owner at any time, after all.”

“I know,” John replied, taking one hand away and simply rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “I just… I figured I would be over it by now.”

He was not looking at Mary, so when she leaned in and kissed his cheek, he was a little surprised. When he looked at her, she was smiling. Perhaps the heat was getting to him, but he was almost sure he was looking at a genuine smile, not some pitying forced one.

“I guess it’s something we’ll have to work on then. If you’re patient with me, I’ll be patient with you.”

John finally returned the smile, though his was sad.

“You don’t have to, you know,” he stated. “You can still back out if you want.”

Mary playfully slapped him on the shoulder, though the blow was a little harder than usually delivered, and John gave a yelp of surprise.

“You dol!” she said. “Of course I won’t back out. I didn’t come all the way out here just for sex, you know. I actually like you!”

John itched to ask the question, ”but do you find me attractive?” Yes, he was overweight, short, and had bags underneath his eyes which blatantly told of his years as well as the harrowing ordeals he had been through. One could read about it on his face like a road map. Sherlock had said so once.

"I really like you too, Mary," he said instead, placing a clumsy arm around her sweaty, naked back. They briefly rested their foreheads together, and John felt somewhat at ease for the first time during the trip. He was glad not to have been faced with immediate rejection, but he still worried about her response to finding out the true nature about his relationship with Sherlock.
Until now she had not had reason to view the supple-bodied detective as a sexual rival, and John was certain that such a reveal would add further hostility to their already tense relationship... assuming Mary even wanted to continue seeing him after that.

The resounding bang with which the sauna door suddenly flew open made them both jerk in their seats and hastily pull away from each other. For a moment, John almost expected a member of the staff barging in on them to say that their behaviour had been noticed and would not be tolerated at a family friendly resort. The person, however, was Sherlock.

"John, I've been looking all over for you! I've made a huge breakthrough in our case. You'll have to come with me at once to review the evidence."

He quickly spun on his heel, ready to exit the sauna, when it occurred to him that John had remained seated and made no move to follow. His face took on a look of exhilarated desperation, bordering on mania.

"John, COME ON! Right now!"

Though it was fairly obvious that Sherlock had not been in the pool, his hair was soaking wet, his normally voluminous curls sticking to a forehead practically dripping with sweat. The glistening sheen which covered his entire form, added to the bright red color of his face, neck and shoulders, indicated that Sherlock had exerted himself to the point of exhaustion. He also seemed to have completely forgotten about sun block.

The mere sight of Sherlock, as well as his ridiculous interruption, left John and Mary only staring blankly at him. In his hand was a small bag closed with a zipper. Though it was mostly a blur due to how quickly it moved about in the detective’s hands, John could make out that it was likely a camera bag.

“This is what might solve the case utterly,” Sherlock said, speaking as though to ignorant children. “Now if you’ll just come with me…”

He dashed back out again, only to collapse just within the couple’s sight. John bolted upwards while Mary made a peculiar surprised shout, and they both hurried over. As annoying as Sherlock was, they did not want him passing out and hitting his head, or falling into the pool.

Sherlock sat on the tiled wet floor, legs splayed out like a dropped marionette with his head in his hand, looking dazed but otherwise unhurt. John was uncertain if his partner’s flushed face was from exhaustion or simple sunburns.

“Are you alright?” Mary asked him as he tried to stand on wobbling legs. John turned towards the small walk-in shower behind them and noticed something that might work to their advantage.

“There are seats in the shower stalls,” he said, putting his arms under Sherlock’s. “Uuup we go! “

Unsteady, the detective still managed to get to one of the shower stalls with John’s help. While Mary made a peculiar surprised shout, and they both hurried over. As annoying as Sherlock was, they did not want him passing out and hitting his head, or falling into the pool.

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Unsteady, the detective still managed to get to one of the shower stalls with John’s help. While Mary used the adjacent shower on her own, John remained with Sherlock and made sure he did not slip off of the seat. As a plus, this ensured that he was able to rinse off the sweat.

“I don’t think I required a shower, seeing as I didn’t use the pool or the sauna,” he remarked.

“Oh, stop whining,” John muttered. “Now what was it you were just dying to share with me?”

“In the bag,” Sherlock replied, waving to the item on the floor just a few feet away.
"What's that? Where did you find it?" John asked, hesitant to leave his friend's side, but nonetheless very curious about the item Sherlock had brought with him. Fortunately the bag had been dropped far enough from the showers not to risk getting sprayed, but there was no way of knowing if it had been otherwise damaged.

"Camera..." Sherlock said, panting and making dramatic gestures with his hands. "Sarah's... Found it... by a trail. Pictures..."

"Alright, easy now," John said, wanting to prevent another fainting incident brought on by Sherlock getting up too quickly. The younger man's breathing and heart rate were both elevated, which, together with the obvious dizziness, were signs of dehydration. Sherlock's only known fluid intake today had been a cup of tea for breakfast, and that was over six hours ago. On top of that, John was unsure of whether or not Sherlock had slept last at all night. He had slept just over five hours, and by the time he got up, Sherlock had clearly been awake for a while, bustling with energy.

Good God, no wonder his body could not keep up. John felt a stab of guilt knowing that Sherlock would likely not have gotten to this stage if only John had come with him.

The doctor's diagnosis was confirmed when he watched Sherlock lean forward to catch some of the shower drops on his tongue. The medical man in John responded in a flash, reciting the Latin names of at least ten pathogenic micro organisms that could potentially be found in the water.

"Sherlock, no! Don't drink that!" he snapped. "It could be bad for you."

"I'm thirsty," Sherlock argued.

"We'll get you something to drink in just a minute." John watched as the long, lean muscles in Sherlock's limbs began to shake, and he realized Sherlock was in danger of passing out again. He had to be rehydrated, quickly.

"Sherlock, will you be able to walk?" John asked, placing his arm around the detective's back to encourage him to stand up.

"I'm not a child," Sherlock snapped drowsily. His voice sounded resentful, and John wondered if in his ill state he was remembering something from the past. "Of course I can stand. Walking..."

He trailed off as he rose to his feet. Wobbling for a moment once more, he put a hand to his forehead. For a second, John expected him to swoon.

"Come on," John said, grabbing the camera bag and then placing an arm around Sherlock’s back. "We’ll deal with this at the lodge."

“How is he?” Mary asked, walking out of the stall next door. She glanced at the state of her boyfriend’s partner and gave a rather defeated look.

“He’s going to need some help back to the lodge,” John said, his tone almost apologetic. Mary rested her hands on her hips as she watched the pair hobble towards the door, but she finally hurried over to them, grabbing the camera bag, towels, and John’s robe, allowing him a better grip on Sherlock. John was starting to lose count as to how often he felt like garbage towards her.

TBC...
Chapter 6

Chapter Summary

John inadvertently discovers something when looking through Sherlock's coat for pain-killers and sees no choice but to confront his friend.

Chapter 6

Mary held the door open with her body as they left the building, and Sherlock leaned his head against John’s for a few seconds. John’s expression hardened as a thought occurred to him, that the detective was not quite as weak and disoriented as he let on, that he was merely conning some sympathy out of his assistant.

Sherlock plopped onto the sofa the moment he was led into the lodge. Now that he was inside, he seemed to be improving. Either that or he was beginning to act like his old self again.

“I’m fine, don’t touch me!” he snapped venomously as he reclined spread-eagle on the furniture. He looked nearly ready to snarl as John approached him with a penlight for further inspection.

For the umpteenth time, the doctor found himself dealing with yet another one of Sherlock's lightning-fast mood swings. He was capable of going from exhilarated to moody, from angry to easy-going, from clingy to distanced, in just a few moments. This was apparently going to be one of those occasions.

"You are dehydrated and likely also hypoglycemic," John patiently explained as he sat down on the edge of the sofa. "Now please let me examine you so that I can treat you accordingly."

"John, the pictures...!"

"They'll be there for later. Now please keep your head still and try not to blink." Despite the request, Sherlock blinked furiously when John checked his eyes, but fortunately his pupils seemed to respond as they should to light.

Sherlock squirmed uncomfortably as the rough fabric of the sofa scraped his sun burnt back and shoulders. John shuddered at how he would probably feel in a few hours, not to mention tonight...

Though Sherlock's heart rate was still 120 beats a minute, his breathing was less laboured than before, and John took that as a good sign. He brought a can of Coke for his friend, briefly holding the cool aluminum against said friend's overheated cheek. Sherlock's eyes closed, and a pink tongue snaked out to wet already moist, full lips. In another context, it would have been a highly erotic sight, and John had to remind himself that he was there as Sherlock's doctor, not lover.

"Drink this," he advised and popped the can open, uncertain if Sherlock in his current state could have done it without spillage.

The detective half-heartedly batted at the offered drink. "I want just water..." he muttered.

"No, you need this. Water, replacement electrolytes, and glucose. Now drink up."
John was prepared to be even more forceful, but fortunately further encouragement was not necessary. Sherlock gulped down most of the Coke, finishing up with a resounding burp.

"Is he alright?" Mary asked as she re-entered the main room, now clothed in a white cotton tank top - although no bra - and pink hotpants, her wet hair pulled back in a ponytail. "Is there anything I can do?"

“That kind of dress is against etiquette,” Sherlock said after one glance. “No dressing to titillate. This is no swingers' club.” Mary crossed her arms and glared at him.

“He’ll be fine if he actually rests and drinks,” John said, ignoring Sherlock’s cheeky little remark. The detective may have been right, but he personally had no complaints about Mary’s choice of clothing.

“My head hurts,” Sherlock argued, giving a frown which bordered on a childish pout. “I will not be fine. And give me the damn camera!”

Rolling her eyes, Mary got to the bag first and opened it, passing it into Sherlock’s impatiently gesturing hand. She truly did not look pleased with the situation, especially not with their companion.

Sherlock pressed the power button, muttering to himself unintelligibly and then shoving the device into John’s face, the playback screen facing the doctor.

“Look!”

John lifted an eyebrow, looking back and forth between the camera screen and his partner.

“Look… at what exactly?”

Sherlock narrowed his eyes irritably. “One would think that you were suffering from dehydration instead of me. It’s obviously…” he paused when he turned the camera back to himself and saw the screen for himself. It was blank. With a hint of desperation in his eyes, he repeatedly pressed the power button, and then finally cursed in resignation.

“Bloody bollocks… It WAS working just a moment ago.”

“Battery must be dead,” Mary suggested, looking over John’s shoulder at the device.


John considered “accidentally” dropping the camera.

“There’s a USB cord in the bag,” Sherlock continued. “We can hook it up to the laptop.”

“But we still need batteries,” John said, grip on the bag tightening. He could feel the cord beneath the water-resistant material.

"Hook it up to my laptop," the detective urged. He made an attempt to sit up and reach out for said piece of electronic, but the dizziness quickly overcame him and forced him to recline, hands pressed to his temples. New pearls of sweat broke out along his hairline, and he could feel them trickling down his forehead. John had soaked a small terrycloth towel in icy water and handed it to him; something Sherlock accepted without any grumbling this time.

"Should we try to get him to a hospital?" Mary asked, concern in her voice. Though it annoyed her to no end that the obnoxious detective had once again stolen all of John's attention, she did not want
him to possibly die on their hands.

"I don't need a bloody hospital!" Sherlock snarled from underneath the terrycloth which now covered his face. "John, hook the camera up to my laptop!"

The doctor realized that his friend would only become more agitated unless they did what he said, and dutifully connected the two pieces of portable electronics using the USB cord. The power bar on Sherlock's laptop indicated that the battery would soon need to be recharged as well. Had Sherlock even thought to bring an adapter for a US outlet?

The camera gave one lass dying buzz when John pressed the power button, and it was obvious that they would not get anything more out of it unless they replaced the batteries.

"Sherlock, did you pack any double-A batteries?" John asked, but he could already guess the answer.

"No."

"I did," Mary suddenly interjected. "My own camera runs on two double-A's."

“Thank you,” John said gently as he was passed the batteries. Tossing the dead ones, he inserted the replacements. “I’m sorry things are going so lousy.”

Mary gave a small smile and shrugged. “Not your fault.”

Pressing the button one more time, John was pleased to find that the camera worked again. The display screen lit up and was instantly filled with the color of flesh. John nearly blushed at the awkwardly lascivious poses of the subject.

“This must be…” John declared, though Sherlock drowsily cut him off.

“Sarah Cavanaugh,” he said, holding the rag to his forehead and briefly squeezing it to release excess water. Though he did not seem outright improved, he seemed much calmer than before, now that the camera was back in working order. He gave a half-hearted wave of command. “Look through them.”

Browsing through the images, John saw nothing amiss for the most part. Sarah had photographed herself in various self-indulgent poses as though she were being photographed for the shoot of an adult magazine. She had positioned herself in front of various trees and foliage. A naturist in nature, as it were. One of the last photos depicted not Sarah but the forest in general. The trees seemed to go on forever, the skies a deep blue with very few clouds.

“That could be anywhere,” Mary said matter-of-factly. John was about to nod when something caught his eye.

“What is that?” he asked, looking for the zoom option on the device. Finding it, he zoomed in on the sky. Fortunately, the scene had been photographed in high resolution, and the detail was still in clear quality. An area of the sky was slightly darker, stretching upward and dissipating.

“Smoke,” John realized aloud. “Either a bonfire, or most likely a chimney.”

He could understand Sherlock’s almost perverted exhilaration slightly better now; this was their first major breakthrough in the case. Still, the fact that Sherlock had been willing to push himself to the brink of a collapse was worrisome, especially as it hadn’t been the first time. If Sherlock had been even half as passionate about his relationship with John, then perhaps...
He banished the thought from his brain, determined not to go there again. He had a real shot at a meaningful and loving relationship with Mary; he must not screw that up by dwelling on the past.

"Somebody must have started it," John murmured. He opened the photo in a digital photo editing program on Sherlock's laptop and enlarged it further. "Sherlock, what do you make of...-

The rest of the sentence faded off upon the discovery of Sherlock being fast asleep. One of his hands lay limp against his thinly muscled chest, while the other one, which had been vehemently gesticulating at John moments before, hung off the couch. The terrycloth rag still covered part of his face, including his eyes, but John did not need to see them to know that they were closed, and would likely remain so for the next few hours. John checked his pulse just to make sure that this was natural sleep and not another collapse, and it was down to a calming 90 beats per minute.

"Mary, could you get a sheet from his bed?" John asked. "I know he's sweating right now, but once that stops, he'll be cold instead."

“Yes, of course.” When she returned with a sheet, she looked over Sherlock’s skin with concern. “He won’t be happy when he wakes up,” she observed. “Those sunburns look downright furious.”

“And he’ll be a massive infant about it,” John said, browsing the images on the software. His statement had no annoyance or worry about them. He knew how Sherlock would behave for a fact, and nothing would stop it. Short of a powerful sedative, anyway.

“I think I have some aloe salve in my bag,” Mary said, searching through the luggage.

“Yes, that would do very well,” John replied.

Mary gave a sly smile as she unscrewed the lid. “Do you suppose I should apply it while he’s asleep?” To her, the idea of smearing something onto a conscious Sherlock was like trying to give a rabid dog a flea bath.

John glanced back at the sleeping form on the bed. He could imagine his partner soon peeling with dead skin like some kind of shedding lizard.

“Well,” he said, giving the notion some serious thought. “Better not. He’ll want to do it himself. Ah-ha!” He reached the photograph from the display screen and pointed at the familiar shape on the sky. “There. It is smoke. See the width? A bonfire would be much larger. There’s a house out in the woods. A shack at the very least.”

“And that might be where she went next,” Mary concluded, looking over the doctor’s shoulder. Though he voice was mostly calm, John thought he could hear a tiny trace of anticipation in her voice. Her eagerness seemed genuine, and it stirred a sense of pride in John. The young adventurous boy in him was suddenly excited in the case and wanted her to accompany him in the investigation. An invitation he was sure he would never grant her, for fear of her wellbeing, but it was an amusing thought.

"Still, that could be anywhere," Mary pointed out. "There's no way to tell where it was taken."

"Sherlock just might," John replied, and unbeknownst to himself at the time, his voice was filled with pride. "He has eidetic memory. If he's seen a place once, he can remember it in perfect detail."

"That's quite remarkable," Mary admitted. "But if that's true, he's surprisingly forgetful about some things..."

"He's scatterbrained," John explained. "If he deems something unimportant at the time, he deletes it. I
have a feeling he did that quite a bit during his childhood."

He didn't deem it necessary to add that in many respects, Sherlock was still a child. A petulant man-child who could not be trusted to look after himself half of the time. A task, which, in the recent years, had been passed on to John. He wondered if at least Mycroft was able to live a fuller life now that Sherlock was not his responsibility alone.

The detective, whose sleeping body was growing increasingly aware of the searing sunburns covering a large portion of his skin, had rolled over to his side to relieve the pressure on his enflamed back.

I might as well prepare something for when he wakes up, John thought. Perhaps tea... spiked with Valium. He smiled briefly at the idea but quickly rejected it; Valium was an addictive substance, and one would do best to keep Sherlock away from those altogether.

What was the younger Holmes' preferred painkiller and anti-inflammatory drug nowadays? John thought back on his time living at Baker Street, and he could distinctly remember a bottle of Aspirin on Sherlock's shelf of the bathroom cabinet, and, come to think of it, sometimes also in his coat pocket.

Despite the summer weather, Sherlock still brought his coat with him. At least being in a nudist colony meant that he would not be wearing it. He might have additionally experienced a heat stroke, were that the case.

“I’m going to see if I can spot anything else in these,” Mary said, indicating the computer screen.

“Knock yourself out,” John said. “I trust you more with that software than myself.” Indeed he did. He had very little experience with photo editing, whereas Mary was a website designer and subsequently a graphic artist.

While Mary experimented with the photos, John went into his partner’s bedroom and carefully picked up Sherlock’s coat. The faintly superstitious part of his mind had a fear that the very moment he touched the article would cause Sherlock to bolt upright, like a spider sensing a strand of its web had been disturbed. Such was fortunately not the case, but John was careful not to rattle the pill bottle too loudly when he removed it from the pocket.

Pouring the pills into his palm, he took a closer look, and his brow knit at their features. Some of the engravings were from the usual painkillers, but others required that John search through his own personal memories as a doctor. He could not be positive, but his suspicions of the pills’ identity were worrying nonetheless.

Whatever Sherlock was storing in his Aspirin bottle, it wasn't Aspirin.

Leave it alone, John, the doctor urged himself. Sherlock's personal things are none of your business. Truth is, you're probably better off not knowing.

Part of him wanted to stuff the pills back into the bottle and replace it without further thought, but the more he thought about it, the less likely, he realized, it seemed that he would simply be able to forget. He trusted Sherlock with his life; could he really do that if he didn't know what his partner was on? Was there even a chance Sherlock had gone back to drugs? Did he keep illegal substances in an Aspirin bottle to avoid detection?

None of the potential answers to his numerous questions made him feel more at ease. He had to get to the bottom of this, even if it meant going behind Sherlock's back. Sherlock for sure seemed to
have no qualms about going behind his.

John replaced all of the pills except one. The one he kept dug into his sweaty palm and he had to force himself to open his hand, lest the engravings dissolve and render the pills unidentifiable.

Taking a deep breath, the doctor then left Sherlock's bedroom, almost hoping that his flatmate would never awaken so that John would not have to confront him about his findings.

Mary immediately noticed the dogged expression on his face, and her eyebrows shot up against her forehead.

"John, what's wrong?" She sounded alarmed.

"Nothing, I..." He tried his best not to fidget. "I'm just a little worried... about Sherlock." At least that was not an outright lie.

"Of course. Sherlock..." She glanced at the sleeping man on the sofa with weary contempt. It was strange how young and innocent he looked in his sleep; truly a strong contrast to his wakeful self.

"I'll make some tea," Mary announced, standing up. It was bad enough that she already felt like the fifth wheel on what was supposed to be a romantic getaway. "You want some?"

"Yes, tea would be lovely," John replied with a wan smile. As soon as Mary was out of sight, he opened his tightly closed fist to examine the mysterious pill closer. Round, approximately one centimeter in diameter, groove in the middle to make for easier splitting. The letters CPN were engraved above the groove, and the number below it said 100. 100 milligrams, then. 100 milligrams of what?

As Mary continued with the tea, John minimized the software window and opened the laptop’s internet browser, thankful that the resort had WI-FI connection. Searching for the abbreviation itself was not helpful, as the first results produced were the New York Stock Exchange and a carnivorous plant newsletter. Narrowing the search, he entered “cpn drug”.

The first entry involved antipsychotics.

Letting the notion sink into his brain, John leaned back on the chair. If the drugs were indeed antipsychotics, was Sherlock using them for a serious mental disorder? If so, then what kind of disorder was it? If not, he could have been using them to treat something within the autism spectrum, or an emotional illness. Either way, antipsychotics were not something to use casually or just some fun to be had by the usual substance abuser.

Pocketing the pill, John looked at Sherlock and considered waking him for a direct confrontation. But he stamped down the panicked impulse and simply sat. Sherlock would be unpleasant to deal with regarding the sunburns alone, and outright demanding answers would cause the detective to immediately retreat into his mind. Sherlock would respond like a tortoise being attacked by a predator, and thusly hide behind a shell, and rightly so. No, this would require gentility. Sherlock was oftentimes like a child, and so oftentimes he had to be treated as such.

Closing the browser, he heard Mary approach and smiled at her as she handed him his tea. Two cups were left in her hands.

“I didn’t know when he might wake,” she said, referring to the sleeping man, "but I thought I should make him some anyway.”

"That's very thoughtful of you," John managed, although his voice sounded hollow and weak.
It was almost unfathomable that Mary was willing to wait on Sherlock despite all the problems he had caused. He did not, however, want her to be present during the talk they were bound to have once the detective woke up. It would be a big enough challenge to get Sherlock to open up to him. Mary's presence would only exacerbate things.

As if on cue, the dark-haired man stirred in his sleep, his features crunched up from the pain caused by the movement. John could see the rapid fluttering behind Sherlock’s eyelids: he was in REM mode and would undoubtedly soon wake up.

John stood up and reached for his wallet, snatching out a 20 dollar bill and passing it on to Mary. She stared at him with confusion.

"What's this?" she demanded to know.

"I'm sorry I couldn't come up with a better solution, but you should leave for a while, Mary. Go to the pub, have a drink. Or the Nudsino. I hear it's a fun experience."

Mary looked flabbergasted at first, but when she spoke, she sounded decidedly offended. "John, I won't disturb him, I could go into the bedroom and read, or--"

"Sherlock and I have to talk," the doctor stated, and suddenly the pill in his robe pocket felt as though it physically burned his skin through the fabric. "It's... personal. We need a moment. Please, Mary."

The woman nodded and went to retrieve her sandals. John was grateful that his request had not led to a verbal argument, although it made his heart constrict when he saw how deflated Mary looked and probably felt as she almost dragged her feet toward the door.

"Do you need more money?" John asked and wanted to punch himself in the mouth the following moment.

Shaking her head, Mary even managed the ghost of a smile. "This is fine."

Sherlock groaned at the sound of a door closing with a little more force than was necessary and opened his eyes. His head was throbbing with a dull pain, and his entire upper body, including his face, felt like it had been doused with gasoline and set on fire.

"John..." he complained, struggling to sit up. "John!"

"I'm here," John said, his voice weary.

Sherlock looked towards the direction of the voice, seeing that his assistant sat motionless in a chair next to the laptop. He did not look happy. A blind person could have been able to tell. Not that Sherlock cared about how John was feeling. Priorities were presently different.

"If you could pass that to me within the next few hours..." Sherlock trailed off venomously, gesturing to the nearby bottle of aloe that Mary had left out.

John hesitated at first, but finally tossed the bottle to his partner, who caught it effortlessly, opened it, and poured a copious amount onto his palm. The room instantly filled with the peculiar scent. John only stared as Sherlock slathered the substance over every inch of his red body. He considered mentioning that the lotion belonged to Mary, but what good would it do?

"I'm going to need some help reaching my back. I expect you took a closer look at the photos," Sherlock said, oblivious to his partner's annoyed state. Only when he realized John was not going to
answer him did he look up. He raised his eyebrows, as though to say “I'm waiting!”

“They’re on the laptop now,” John said, his tone unreadable, at least to most people.

“Don’t tell me you don’t see what’s so blatantly obvious on those images.”

“I’d rather not discuss the images,” John said. “Not presently. This is a tender subject, but it needs to be addressed.”

Sherlock’s face screwed up in confusion. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“You complained of a headache earlier.” John’s expression softened as he finally got to the point of his confrontation. “I thought I might help by getting out your pill bottle.”

Sherlock blinked, his realization instantaneous. John reached into his pocket and removed the pill, placing it on the table.

The color gradually drained from Sherlock's face, except for two bright red spots on his cheeks. Breath hitched in his throat, and for a few seconds, he looked strangely absent, as if he was having trouble staying oriented.

"You went through my things?" he croaked out, as if he couldn't quite believe what he was seeing. Sherlock's features took on what John referred to as his 'snarly face'; eyes bulging, nostrils flaring, mouth curled. The detective was ready to defend himself, tooth and nail.

"Yes, Sherlock, and I already told you why." John knew he had to choose his words well, since this confrontation was going every bit as badly as he'd feared. "Normally, I wouldn't think this was any of my business." He gestured at the pill. "But I think it just might be. We're friends, right? Partners? Aren't we supposed to trust each other?"

"What was I supposed to say?" Sherlock spat. "Are you my handler all of a sudden? My nanny? Since when do I have to report to you?"

John leaned forward slowly, trying to establish eye contact with Sherlock, which the younger man seemed determined to avoid at all costs. His hands were trembling again - though for an entirely different reason this time - and John could also detect a twitch in his facial muscles which did not seem voluntary. Both were clear signs of drug withdrawal. God, why hadn't he noticed any of this before? Or perhaps he had, but then he'd attributed everything to Sherlock simply being Sherlock, not for once thinking that perhaps Sherlock was truly sick, in the most clinical sense.

"Sherlock," he tried again. "I did some research... online, while you were asleep. I know this is Clozapine."

"I have mood swings!" the detective cried out, his voice several pitches above its usual deep baritone. "Don't look at me like that, John! Don't look at me like I'm some goddamn... freak!"

John quietly shook his head. "I've got a medical degree, Sherlock. You can't lie to me now. Clozapine is an antipsychotic. In fact, it's often used as a last resort for patients who don't respond to anything else. So please, just be honest with me..."

"I'm not crazy, John!" Both Sherlock's voice and face now disclosed his desperation, that he was no longer defensive, but frankly terrified. He grasped the sheet in his lap and held it to his chest hard enough to make his knuckles whiten. Then he began to rock back and forth, unaware of the motion himself. John took the opportunity to sit down next to him.
"Sherlock, tell me," he gently urged, wanting to provide comfort even though he was unsure if it would be accepted. "I promise I won't judge you."

Sherlock buried his head in his hands, sifting long fingers through his dark, still-damp curls. John could hear him hyperventilating. "I'm not crazy," he repeated. "I'm managing it. I've been managing it since I was sixteen!"

Had his friend's shoulders not been so sun burnt, the doctor would have wrapped an arm around him. Though normally not one to require comfort, this was clearly going to be an exception. John carefully placed his hand on the small of Sherlock's back, where the skin was still more creamy than red, and thus not as sore.

"Do you have schizophrenia?" he asked. The word tasted like poison in his mouth.

The detective's shoulders arched up defensively. One pale blue eye peeked out from between the protective web of his fingers. "No. I'm not schizophrenic. I have bipolar disorder. I've been on Clozapine since I was twenty-one."

John nodded. Finally they were getting somewhere. "Does anyone know?"

Sherlock shook his head. "No..." he whispered. "Only Mycroft. Why do you think he's got me under surveillance?"

"Lestrade?"

"God, no!" Sherlock made a noise that could only be interpreted as a groan of despair. "He mustn't know, John! He'd never let me near another crime scene if he did."

"I think you're being too hard on yourself, Sherlock. You didn't choose this. No one would think less of you just because... because you have an illness."

Sherlock's head snapped up. "Is that right?" he said bitterly. "Weren't you just now wondering if you've been dealing with a crazy person? Would you even have wanted to move in with me if you'd known?"

John’s face developed that familiar wrinkle at the center of his brow. But he was not simply angry.

“First of all,” he said, “I have never thought of you as crazy. Never. I’ve only ever thought of you as yourself.”

Sherlock scoffed, in no mood to believe him.

“And second of all,” John continued, his tone sharper, “I was under the assumption that we trusted each other. I’ve trusted you with my life, you know.”

Sherlock was silent. His expression was unreadable, and John could not determine if he was taking the words to heart, or simply being his usual childish, stubborn self. He would not look at his assistant, so John knelt in front of him.

“I thought maybe you knew that,” he said. Sherlock finally did look at him, and indeed saw what he had not wanted to see. Disappointment. Pain. Sadness.

“I guess I was wrong. This was why we never worked. You wouldn’t let me in. You wouldn’t allow us to connect more than just physically.”
Sherlock’s face contorted in frustration. This was not what he expected to be discussing during this botched vacation, and whatever his expectations had been for John’s reaction, this was not it.

“And how did you think I could simply tell you that?” he snapped. “Just casually mention it over breakfast? Maybe I neglected to tell you because it was simply less painful! It’s been years since it was truly a problem, and it would have still not been a problem if you hadn’t found the damn pills.”

"If you’d told me, perhaps I could have been more... understanding," John said, thinking back on all those time when he’d thought of Sherlock simply being a condescending, self-absorbed git with no regard to the feelings and needs of other people. His rapid mood swings, low attention span, and oftentimes impaired judgment... it all made sense now. How could John, as a doctor, have missed all the signs? They had practically been under his very nose the whole time.

"Is this why you never wanted to spend the night with me?" he asked, very careful so as not to sound accusing or judgmental. "Because you'd noticed something?"

"Oftentimes I can't sleep," Sherlock explained. "My head... is filled with noise. My thoughts are racing, and I can't seem to make it stop. If I stay in bed, it only gets worse. So I go sit in the closet. Sensory deprivation helps. The noise becomes manageable, even if it never goes away completely. After a few hours in there, I can crawl back out and face the world again. Right as rain, as it were." He finished with a mirthless chuckle.

John was at a loss for words. He could picture Sherlock so clearly, sitting on the cold floor of his closet, knees drawn up to his chest, eyes staring blankly into the surrounding darkness with only the sound of his own blood coursing in his ears... Sherlock, all alone, with no one to confide in. John felt his chest constrict painfully.

"You should have told me," he managed to say. "I could have... helped you. Supported you."

"If you'd known, would you still have left me?"

John took his flatmate's twitching hand and gave it a gentle squeeze. "I haven't left you. And I never will. You have my word."

"You know what I mean."

John’s grip tightened momentarily on Sherlock’s hand. As he looked up at Sherlock, he considered the strange nature of his partner’s anxiety. For someone unable to connect to most of humanity, Sherlock was certainly desperate for some sort of genuine relationship between himself and John, as transparent and lacking in true intimacy that it was.

Although Sherlock was presently allowing his hand to be held…

“Maybe if this had been addressed before, we might not be in this situation now,” John replied, “or maybe not. This was always what separated us.”

Another twitch passed over Sherlock’s face. Both the doctor and close friend in John wanted to simply hand him the pill.

“Wasn’t I any good?” Sherlock asked, and all the accusation in his voice was strangely gone. Instead he seemed purely curious in his despair.

John managed a sad smile. “The best I’ve ever had. Honest. But I needed more than that. The thing is... I figured this was just how you were. And I wasn’t about to try and change you like some reform school kid.”
The thought that Sherlock really did have bipolar disorder weighed heavily on John’s mind. Had he known about this sooner, would he have had more patience with Sherlock? Would they still have been together?

Christ, this was problematic.

John suddenly recalled one of the numerous conversations he’d had with Mycroft, and how the nature of it had made him feel very uncomfortable at the time. Until now, he had not fully understood the purpose of the conversation, or the elder Holmes' aversion to there being anything besides friendship between the doctor and his little brother.

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John had decided to walk the short distance from the tube to their flat, despite the phantom pain in his leg, which tended to resurface whenever he got excessively tired. Doing two shifts at the surgery might have been a bad decision, considering he had yet another one starting in ten hours.

When a sleek, black car with tinted windows slid up beside him, he seriously considered using whatever strength he had left to run away. Mycroft had chosen an exceptionally lousy occasion to "kidnap" him for one of their - seemingly routine - chats.

Knowing that he had no choice to speak of, the doctor got into the backseat of the car, his leg thankful for not having to do anymore walking. It was, however, the only part of him that appreciated this.

Mycroft Holmes sat across from him, as always dressed immaculately in a three-piece suit that no doubt had cost more than John's monthly wage. Legs crossed, he stayed silent as the car softly rolled back into motion. Mycroft’s unwillingness to exchange pleasantries, which was the usual custom, made John go from exhausted to wary in a heartbeat. Whatever he'd "kidnapped" John for this time, it was serious.

"Doctor Watson, please do relax," Mycroft said in that posh upper crust accent of his, which always made John feel less than five feet tall. "You're not in any trouble. Yet, anyway."

John felt a wave of anger wash away some of the fear. "Why don't you just cut the bullshit, Mycroft, and tell me why I'm here?"

"To the point as always. I like that about you." The civil servant smiled. "We're here to speak about my brother, of course. I know that you had... relations with him three nights ago, and again last night... on the sofa. I'd like to know what your plans are."

"Plans?!” John sputtered, too dumbfounded to even form intelligible words.

"Yes, regarding your intimate relationship with my brother."

"That's none of your business!” the doctor snapped, his fury now overpowering any fear he might have had of Mycroft Holmes. "Sherlock is an adult, and he can make his own decisions. He's thirty-one, he doesn't need your consent to have sex."

"You're the older partner. More experienced."

"You make it sound like I'm some bloody cradle robber!” John exclaimed. "Besides, I know Sherlock wasn't really a virgin.” //Not when he sucks cock like a seasoned pro...//

"Not in a physical sense,” Mycroft said in a low voice. "But nonetheless, he is inexperienced at
relationships. You could hurt him, Doctor. Perhaps even break him. See that you don’t.”

John’s eyes narrowed, recognizing the vague threat. In times like these, John could not help imagining Mycroft as some kind of James Bond villain. All he needed was some weird health condition, or a fluffy white cat. In a way the mental picture helped lower his anger, but only by a smidgen.

“I can’t deny your concern for him is genuine,” John said. “But sometimes you have more than a funny way of showing it.”

Mycroft only gave a prim smile that did not quite reach his eyes, something John had noticed Sherlock doing countless times before. What John was uncertain of was whether they did so because they were never quite genuinely happy, or if they simply never wanted to reveal their true selves to others.

“Besides,” the doctor continued, “I think you’re getting a little too sensitive about what Sherlock can and cannot handle.”

“There are still secrets Sherlock keeps that would surprise you,” Mycroft quietly insisted.

“Such as…?” John retorted. “Oh wait, they wouldn’t be secret anymore if you told, right?”

Thin lips tightened until they were nearly gone from Mycroft’s face. As patient as the civil servant could be – and as approving as he was of Sherlock’s new assistant – he was still not someone to cross.

“As much as I disapprove of some of Sherlock’s personal business, it is still his personal business.” Mycroft said. “Putting it out for public display would gut him. Sometimes keeping a few things to himself is the only control he has. He is more fragile than you might be led to believe, so please… tread lightly.” He glanced out the window as the car slowed to a stop. “Your stop,” he said.

John pursed his lips and opened the car door, easing himself out. A twinge passed through his leg, but he ignored it, glad to finally be home.

“Rest well, Doctor,” Mycroft called out before the door closed. “Can’t have you drowsy on the job.”

TBC...
John's attempt at offering comfort turns into something else entirely...

"That's why I didn't tell you." Sherlock's voice pulled John back to the present, away from his recollections. "I was afraid you wouldn't understand."

John decided to try and lighten up the mood with some humour. "I wish you'd given me a bit more credit," he said with a wry smile. "You can trust me, I'm a doctor."

To his surprise, that actually drew a small chuckle from the detective. Sherlock's morose disposition quickly returned, however, after a series of rapid, repetitive eye blinks, which only served to remind him of his lifelong illness and the adverse side effects brought on by the medication.

"You forgot to take your pill yesterday, didn't you?" John inquired.

"I might have."

The doctor proceeded to pick up the small, white tablet from the table in front of them. "Then you should take it now. Or your withdrawal symptoms will get worse."

"I'm not taking that one," Sherlock said with a grimace. "You've had it in your sweaty palm! The engravings are all blotted out."

John rolled his eyes. Sherlock was, with or without his diagnosis, still a stroppy bastard. At least some things never changed.

"I doubt that matters. Now take it. Doctor's orders," he added in a mock-stern voice. To his surprise, Sherlock did not argue and washed down the 100 milligrams of Clozapine with some water.

"There are some areas of my back that I couldn't reach," he said, clearly having decided to switch gears. "You'll have to help me with that, John."

John gave the red, already flaking nature of his partner's skin another look and smirked.

"You really did a number on yourself, didn't you?" he muttered, picking up the bottle of lotion and squeezing out a small dollop into his palm.

Now that Sherlock had taken the pill, his assistant was feeling a little more at ease with the situation. Knowing the true reason for Sherlock's drug use - and possibly also much of his behavior and personality - gave him an odd sense of comfort. Had Sherlock been simply using antipsychotics for whatever unknown, bizarre reason other than true medication, John would have been deeply shocked, even for someone as unconventional and curious as Sherlock. That being said, he should have remembered that even the great Sherlock Holmes had limits.
“Turn around then,” he said, folding his legs and facing the detective. Sherlock did as asked and slumped forward as he relished the cool sensation on his red skin.

As he applied the aloe, John considered the possibility of how he had expected a little too much out of Sherlock. As Mycroft had said, his brother was more fragile than could have been perceived. In addition, his nature was such that he kept to himself, even around those he seemed to trust, which included John. Someone like Sherlock could not have possibly been accepted by the general populace as a child, so there was little wonder as to why John had not found out about the antipsychotics until today: really, how was Sherlock supposed to bring the subject to light?

Even so, John still did not consider his friend crazy, as predicted by Sherlock. How could he? Considering the man’s staggering, debilitating intellect, he could be locked away somewhere. But he was not locked away. He was managing, as Sherlock had said.

“Any better?” he asked.

Sherlock only made a small noise of confirmation. “Mmn.”

John smiled, squeezed out a tiny bit more aloe, and reached over to Sherlock’s face, applying it to his friend’s nose.

"I asked you to do my back, John. I can reach those bits myself." His words, however, lacked their usual acidity, and John thought he saw a smile tugging at the corners of Sherlock's mouth. Or it could have been simply another one of the tics caused by drug withdrawal. John chose to believe the former.

"You're really tense..." the doctor said, his hands no longer simply applying the lotion, but kneading the long, thin muscles of Sherlock's torso. He admired the expanse of skin, creamy pale where it wasn't burnt red, unmarred by scars or blemishes. So unlike John himself. He thought about puckered scar tissue that still surrounded his bullet wound on both sides, and how it felt to touch it. He had sometimes witnessed ill-concealed shock and even disgust on certain women's faces, but his scarred body had never been an issue with the detective.

Sherlock inhaled sharply, and immediately John withdrew his hands, afraid to have hurt the other. "I'm sorry, Sherlock."

"No, don't be; it felt nice." Sherlock, whose breathing had become decidedly heavier, turned so that they were once again facing each other. He grasped John's smaller hands with his own and replaced them on his body, this time on the front. The doctor took the opportunity to stroke the nearly hairless chest, and felt Sherlock's nipples harden beneath his fingers, turning into small, pebbled nubs. It was a familiar response, and one, he realized, he had missed.

"Touch me some more," Sherlock implored in a husky voice. John felt the first stir of arousal in the pit of his stomach, and then Sherlock was on him, kissing him ferociously while his hands did everything in their power to open John's robe without breaking the kiss.

Sherlock was nearly always like this when he initiated sex, but somehow it still surprised John every time. He wanted to return the tenacity, but he still had to mind his partner’s skin, no matter how eager Sherlock was.

“Slower,” John said, wrapping his hand over the back of Sherlock’s head, fingers nestled in the thick dark curls of his hair. “Just a little bit slower.”

Sherlock gave a sly little smile, as though doing as John said would be impossible. But he complied,
slowing his pace, without losing any enthusiasm. Peeling away the robe from the doctor’s chest, he opened his mouth and for a second his assistant thought a biting would happen. After all, John had only said slower, not gentler. Fortunately, the pain of teeth did not follow. Mere nipping was the worst of it, and John found himself groaning quite audibly as Sherlock nestled his lips and teeth into his chest, teasing his nipples every few seconds.

Both hands entangled in Sherlock’s hair, John tilted his head back, squirming beneath his partner. Luckily for the consulting detective, the worst of his sunburns were on his upper torso. Feeling playful, John wiggled one of his legs out from under the other man just enough so that the knee could bend, and he used his foot to tickle Sherlock’s groin. This time it was Sherlock’s turn to squirm.


"Sherlock..." John said as a half-hearted objection, but he made no attempts to push the other man away or disentangle himself from the embrace. In the back of his mind, he knew that he was about to do something that would most certainly be the death blow to his current relationship, and yet he could not bring himself to stop. He had already crossed the line when he allowed Sherlock to kiss him. Anything that happened now was irrelevant.

The pair made their way into Sherlock’s bedroom without any further talk, and the detective quickly maneuvered his doctor partner onto his back in the unmade bed, straddling him. John let Sherlock take control, knowing that the younger man would take responsibility for his own pleasure and not hesitate to take it. Sherlock’s assertiveness was perhaps why things had always worked so well between them as far as sex was concerned. It made John feel at ease.

Another kiss, followed by small nips at his throat. Not painful in any way, but nonetheless something that would leave marks.

"Like this, John?" Sherlock purred, his voice thick with need as his skilled fingers fisted John's engorged manhood. His grasp, stronger and steadier than a woman’s often tentative fondling, could have brought John to climax in less than a minute.

"Sherlock!" the doctor gasped, and his own hands travelled feverishly along the length of Sherlock's thighs, carding through the small, crinkly hairs which were too light too be visible, but could nonetheless be felt. He enveloped the younger man's leaking cock in his own rough, callused fist, not at all surprised to find out that it had already left a snail's trail of pre-come on his stomach.

"Fancy a shag, John?" Sherlock asked, and his hold on John's penis tightened further, thumb rubbing over the tip.

Breath deep and heavy, John tried to say yes, but he could barely make any intelligible words. Instead he only moaned and nodded, eyes closed to fully feel the blissful sensation of the hand closed around him. Sherlock smiled and kissed John’s stomach – just below the navel – out of playful affection, and then left the bed to rummage through his solitary luggage bag.

John watched him and the distraction allowed him to regain some sense of awareness again.

“Did you really bring lube with you?” he asked. He should have been annoyed at Sherlock’s planning, but he could not help being amused.

“You never know...” Sherlock said with a shrug. His innocence, of course, was utter nonsense.

“Just get back here already.” John was beginning to writhe on the bed, desperate to be touched
Sherlock chuckled, returning to the bed and straddling his assistant. “You’re just as bratty as Mycroft makes me out to be.”

“Can we not bring up your brother when we’re about to fuck?” John said with a groan that was partially out annoyance, but mostly due to Sherlock’s fingers wrapping around his cock once more.

Sherlock nuzzled John’s neck, just under his chin, and the doctor thought he could feel a smile there. A moment later, he felt a slick, warm hand returning to stroking his throbbing organ.

"Sherlock..." John said and gave the man above him a slight shove to get his attention.

Sherlock raised his head enough to look at his partner, a confused and impatient crease between his brows.

"Protection, Sherlock," John reminded him. "Did you bring condoms as well?"

The detective dropped his head, and a melodramatic sigh exited his lips. He was visibly displeased about the interruption. "Yes, I brought them," he murmured.

John lay back, lazily stroking himself as the younger man stood up to procure the condoms. His eyes drank in the sight of Sherlock from behind and tried his best to memorize it fully this time: the ectomorphic frame, nearly runway model thin, with legs that went on for miles only to connect with a surprisingly ample behind. John felt an ugly stint of jealousy at the thought of other men lustily grabbing that beautiful arse and bending Sherlock over to bury their dicks in him. He knew that still happened a lot, even lately. Sherlock might believe that John didn’t notice, but every now and then the detective slipped out of their apartment only to return a few hours later, hair tousled, lips bruised and swollen from kissing, sometimes even with a not-so-discreet hickey on the side of his long pale neck.

Sherlock never brought anyone home - that much John was certain of - so he assumed these casual encounters took place in a shoddy men's room, or in the backseat of someone's car. Perhaps even in the shadows of a dark alley way. What he could not be certain of, one way or another, was if Sherlock bothered to use protection.

John looked down as Sherlock easily worked the latex piece over his engorged organ. He caught the sight of several red marks in his peripheral vision and stared at them for a few seconds. The nips on his chest had been just enough to brand him, but only for a short while. Self-conscious and sensible, John preferred no marks at all, but if necessary liked these best. Though Sherlock could have cared less, he was considerate of his assistant.

He looked back up to watch Sherlock apply more lubricant, this time into the detective’s snug anal passage. Giving a clever little smirk, he walked forward on his knees, his own member drifting against John’s stiff penis, tickling to the point of sending a powerful shudder of satisfaction through the doctor. The younger man then guided John’s hand to the slick opening, a clear invitation to the obvious. John inserted first one finger, massaging for a few seconds, then inserted a second.

Sherlock was surprisingly reserved in his response, but he breathed deeply, his breaths audible but not yet reaching a moan. He leaned backward as his assistant and friend increased the depth of his fingers, playfully moving them inside him. Finally, he moved backwards, off of the fingers which penetrated him, and lifted himself over the other's erect cock. John expected the wonderful snug feeling which would follow, but instead Sherlock spoke.
“Are you ready?” The question was clearly a tease.

“Yes, yes!”

Sherlock slowly lowered himself onto his partner’s cock, shaky from the pleasure of being stretched and filled by the pulsating organ. John was not the biggest of men, but his girth exceeded average, and he was a ‘grower’ rather than a ‘shower’. A moment of burning pain accompanied the intense feeling of bliss, but it was over in seconds, Sherlock’s body adjusting quickly. He used the leverage to his full advantage, raising himself up on quivering thighs and slamming down with enough force to make the bedsprings creak below their combined weight.

John countered by meeting his friend’s thrusts, and their bodies came together in a series of fleshy slaps, interrupted only by occasional grunts and groans. Sherlock dug his long, thin fingers into the doctor’s chest, feeling the hard muscle of his pectorals still present underneath the soft layer of fat, and John answered by grasping the detective’s buttocks with equal ardour.

“Like that, John?” Sherlock panted throatily, head thrown back in ecstasy. Sweat now covered his neck and torso, giving his body a sleek, glistening sheen. It almost looked as though he was glowing, particularly in the sun burnt areas.

John moved his hands from Sherlock’s hips to clutch his forearms instead. Most of all he wanted to flip them around and pound Sherlock into the mattress, but despite two months of pent up sexual frustration, John realized he had to mind Sherlock’s burns.

“You mouthy little tart!” he spat out, knowing that Sherlock sometimes got off on being talked dirty to.

He was rewarded with a laugh instead of a moan.

“That alone indicates how long it’s been since we last shagged,” Sherlock said. “Surely you can do better than that!”

“Dirtier?” John offered, again more amused than irritated.

“Dirtier!” Sherlock snapped, clenching around his friend’s cock. It caused an unbearable, wonderful jolt of pain and pleasure to rush through John, reaching every extremity.

“Ahhh! Scrawny whore!” he cried, tightening his grip on Sherlock’s arms.

“Yes!” the younger man tilted his head back, bouncing on John’s swollen prick and feeling as though it plunged deeper into him than ever before.

“Is this what sluts like?” John murmured through his heavy breathing. Sherlock made some unintelligible cry of verification, and the doctor watched his neck, entranced by the bobbing Adam’s apple made all the more noticeable by Sherlock’s slick, sweat-covered skin.

John thrust harder, bucking like a goat and feeling just as horny as one. He was about to reach for his partner’s hard cock, but Sherlock beat him to the act, pumping away as he bounced harder. The doctor wondered if his hips would be bruised by the end of this incident. Presently he could not care any less.

“Take it, whore, take it all,” he moaned. Sherlock leaned forward, tugging his assistant’s cock with him and making John cry out.

Suddenly their faces were only inches apart, and Sherlock stuck out his tongue, licking a wet stripe
along the entire length of John's profile. Their teeth made a clicking noise when they connected, and a tongue invaded John's mouth, exploring his oral cavity with similar enthusiasm. He tried to snake his own tongue around it, force it into retreat, but the spongy muscle evaded capture and was free to continue its assault. Sherlock did nothing by half-measures, not even kissing.

John wrapped both arms around the detective's narrow waist and pressed their bodies together, his soft, burgeoning belly flush against Sherlock's almost concave one, the younger man's weeping arousal trapped between them. John could feel every single one of Sherlock's ribs through his skin, as well as the crests of his hipbones. For someone dangerously thin, Sherlock was certainly anything but dainty.

A few more seconds of wet, open-mouthed kissing and frantic grinding against each other, and John's pleasure finally erupted in a long-awaited climax. He thrust up into Sherlock until his spent cock flagged enough to make continued penetration difficult, and then fell back against the pillows, chest heaving and limbs simultaneously both lax and tingly from the intensity of the orgasm.

Sherlock slid off his doctor partner and flopped onto his back, ignoring the sunburns, and his right hand immediately took up the act of self-pleasure. John wondered if he should help, but Sherlock was so wrapped up in himself that John wondered if the detective was even aware of his presence anymore, his hand moving at near lightning speed.

Back arched, the detective came as well, squirting his release over his own stomach. Despite the haze clouding his brain, John could not help but notice that the amount of ejaculate - consisting of only two small pearlescent stains - did not match the apparent force of Sherlock's climax.

"It's the medication," Sherlock explained wearily, wiping his sticky hand on a paper towel. "Cessation of ejaculation is one side effect of taking Clozapine. My spurts are thus greatly reduced."

"You can't orgasm?"

"I said 'ejaculation', not 'orgasm'."

"Sherlock, I'm sorry," John said, inching closer to his friend. "Is this why you never...?"

"Wanted to come on you? Yes. I figured you'd notice and ask questions." Sherlock quietly passed the pack of tissues to his partner, and John removed the used condom before starting the task of cleaning himself up.

John was lucky enough that his friend was being so open with him now, so he decided not to press the matter. Instead, he scooted his body closer and carefully caressed Sherlock’s side with the back of his hand. Sherlock tensed under the contact.

"I don't want any pity," he warned. John did not remove his hand.

"I'm in no mood to give any," he calmly stated. "I just want to touch you."

Sherlock said nothing for less than a minute, and then gingerly eased himself closer to John. He knew very well that John enjoyed the ‘cuddling’ after sex, though he was not fond of such himself. Either way, John still seemed to be on Sherlock’s side, as it were. All things considered, their confrontation could have gone far worse. He might as well indulge his assistant for once.

Smiling, John nuzzled against the younger man as he placed an arm over a bare, pink chest. Resting his head on the detective’s shoulder did not seem to bother Sherlock, so he remained where he was. Silence followed for the next few minutes.
“I’m glad I gave you that shower in the pool hall,” John remarked teasingly.

“I’m glad you can still get it up,” Sherlock said in turn.

John pursed his lips. “Touché.”

“A peculiar thing, your condition,” Sherlock remarked. “Why do you suppose that is?”

John suddenly wanted to change the subject, but he knew Sherlock would not. He absent-mindedly trailed his fingertip along Sherlock’s slight stomach, feeling the occasional hair.

“I don’t know. Why do you?”

The detective's eyes narrowed slightly as he pondered the question. Deducing emotional responses was so outside his area of expertise, but he was willing to give it a try. Besides, he had some facts to go on.

"Whatever your problem stems from, it is not physiological," he said. "I can hear you masturbate almost daily; in your bedroom, in the shower, and you never have any difficulty producing or sustaining an erection at those times."

A blush crept over John's face. "You can hear me wanking?" he asked incredulously. "Are you spying on me?!"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "John, please! You're not exactly discreet."

"Sherlock, you know it's rude to listen to what people do in the privacy of their bedroom."

"Oh, believe me, John, I try not to," Sherlock said with a snort. "But not even the violin can drown out the noises you sometimes make."

John made a mental note to either mind his sounds of self-pleasure from now on, or getting his bedroom soundproofed. Both were probably a good idea.

"Your erectile dysfunction only manifests when you attempt intercourse with a woman," Sherlock continued. "I'm right, aren't I?"

The ex-army surgeon nodded; it was a painful and embarrassing subject to discuss with Sherlock, but he figured that since his friend had begun to open up to him, he owed Sherlock the same.

"It's more than the PTSD. It's like a mental block. I can't be with them." John listened to the now slow, steady beat of Sherlock’s heart within the thin chest. "I can be with you, though. That's strange, isn't it?"

Sherlock made a motion meant to represent a shrug, but the scraping of his skin against the sheets made him hiss from pain. John's weight atop his ribcage was not exactly helping matters along, but his partner needed this, and Sherlock wanted to oblige.

"Perhaps a woman is not what you need," he suggested.

John suppressed a groan and rubbed is forehead against the surface of his partner’s chest, a weak attempt to distract Sherlock from the subject. He felt a perky nipple against his hairline, and Sherlock subsequently wiggled at the sensation.

“But I’m…” John began, lifting his head. However, he knew he sounded enough like a broken record already. “Oh, what’s the use? Maybe I am and I never realized it.”
“Well, you’ve proven that you don’t mind shagging a man,” Sherlock stated casually.

“Yes, but somehow I was under the impression that I was predominantly straight. Ughhh…” He dropped his head against Sherlock again, causing the detective to wince. “I might be the worst gay man ever.”

“Is that so surprising?” the younger man replied. “Army vet with PTSD whose only friend is a…”

“ONLY friend?”

“Don’t interrupt me.”

“Alright, I get it. I’m fucked up,” John huffed, separating from Sherlock and rolling on his side, turning his back to the younger man. Sherlock was about to return to his analogy, but he could tell John was annoyed now, even with his inability to read others’ emotions. He turned his head and watched the steady rise and fall of John's side with each breath, garnering a certain amount of amusement from the soft, doughy nature of the doctor’s flesh.

“Perhaps so. But then again,” he said, “so am I. We complement each other.”

The doctor rolled his eyes at the remark. He yawned, and immediately felt the shift on the mattress of Sherlock sitting up and pulling a sheet over their bodies. John was grateful for the cover; now that they were no longer otherwise occupied, his self-consciousness over his body was gradually returning.

Facing away from his friend, he was surprised, but nonetheless pleased, when Sherlock wrapped one long, slender arm around his waist and interlaced their fingers. He wasn't sure if the sudden proof of affection from his friend stemmed from vulnerability or guilt, or something else entirely, but now was not the time to analyse it further. Made drowsy by his orgasm, John welcomed sleep when it finally came to him.

TBC...
Chapter 8

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John deal with the consequences of their little romp.

Chapter 8

Head buzzing from the two gin and tonics she'd drunk at the Nudsino - not really a casino, despite the name - Mary made her way back to the lodge on wobbly legs. The alcohol had sent her head into a familiar calming buzz and helped ease the turmoil in her mind, but being sent away by John in favour of Sherlock still hurt, even after intoxication had occurred.

Mary herself had turned down the advances of not one but three different men during her brief stay in the bar. Her first admirer had complimented her on her accent, called her an "English rose" and offered to buy her a drink. She politely declined, and the man had accepted the rejection with a surprising amount of grace. The same could not be said for the other two, and after being called a "snobby bitch" and then "uptight cunt", Mary decided to leave the bar.

The sun was setting behind the hills and treetops, and she felt the need to look over her shoulder several times to make sure no one was following her. Even though the place had felt relatively safe in the day, the resort was still in the middle of nowhere, and the darkness made it all the more unsettling. Mary had taken the chance to ask a staff member about the guidelines of the resort’s etiquette, and as expected, Avalon was expected to be anything but a swingers' club. Even so, as evidenced by the men who had approached her, some rule-breakers still slipped through the cracks.

In addition, she was not certain if the missing person case had gotten to her, but she could not help wondering if the abductor was one of the guests. Was he – She? They? – out on another little hunt now? Mary was not sure. But she did know she felt as though she was being watched by some unseen presence. Suddenly the warmth in the air of the summer evening was gone, and she shivered as she hurried, somewhat unsteadily, toward the lodge which was now in sight.

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Inside, John and Sherlock were still asleep. Their limbs tangled about one another, they remained under the sheet, looking to be in absolute unconscious bliss. John only stirred when he heard a noise. Lifting his head, he realized what it was, and might have gone back to sleep had the opening door not proceeded to shut. Jolting upward, he whispered a string of curses and dove for his discarded robe, wondering where the bloody hell the waistband had gone for it.

“Hmmm?” Sherlock sighed as he awoke. He stared drowsily at John’s mad dash for composure. “What’s going on?”

"My bloody girlfriend, that's what's going on!" John hissed, and shame over what he had done washed over him like a huge black wave of crude oil. What had he been thinking? And more importantly, what could he do to make things right?
"John?" Mary's voice called, and the doctor could tell from the slurred nature of it that she had been drinking. Perhaps there was still a chance that he could keep her from finding out...

"Coming, my dear!" John called back with mock cheerfulness as he struggled with his robe. The waistband was still nowhere to be found, and John had to accept the possibility that Sherlock might have pulled it loose and discarded it somewhere outside the room.

"John...?" Now the woman's voice had taken on a rather guarded, suspicious tone.

"Just a second!" Near-frantic, John folded his arms across his chest to keep his robe closed while trying his best to obliterate any proof of having slept in Sherlock's bed. Yanking out a pillow that had his head print on it, John failed to notice that Sherlock's head rested between that and another similar one. A clanking noise could be heard from the detective's skull hitting the headboard.

"What is your problem?!" Sherlock growled, and his hand shot out like a cobra's head to reclaim his cushion.

"Mary! She's---"

John's eyes bulged when the door handle suddenly turned, and he spun around, ready to throw himself at the door to keep it from opening, but it was too late. Mary stood in the doorway, her silhouette dark against the ambient lighting of dusk.

For a moment which seemed to last a lifetime, Mary simply stared at the sight. She might have been trying to decipher the clues laid out for her, but considering her inebriated state, her brain might have been staggering through some serious cerebral muck to reach a conclusion. If she truly was having difficulties from the sight of a flustered John, and sheet-covered Sherlock – as well as the smell of a fog of sexual musk – the discarded condom lying in a crumpled pile on the carpet was the clincher. She looked back up at John, who was at a loss for words.

“How was the casino?” he finally asked, desperate to sound casual. Instead he sounded like an idiot… or a smug bastard.

He was not surprised when she stared at him incredulously, her eyes wide with realization and anger, but his stomach sank all the same. Sherlock only observed their behavior, for once silent. He likely was curious to see how the rest of this fiasco would play out, like a biologist witnessing some rare behavior of an endangered animal.

Finally breaking from her astonishment, Mary numbly walked out of the room, still caught up in what she had just discovered.

“Mary, wait!” John followed her, but she hurried into their bedroom. As John entered, he saw that she was hurrying to get dressed.

“Please, Mary…” he pleaded. “What are you doing?”

“I'm going out,” she simply said. Though still in a daze from the alcohol, the shock had sobered her temporarily.

John ran to catch up with her and promptly stood to block her path. His every pore exuded desperation. Mary turned her face away from him, determined not to let those pleading eyes break her resolve.

"Mary, wait!" he babbled. "Whatever you think you saw, you got it wrong!"
"Got it wrong?!" Mary shouted, her voice raw. A hot tear escaped from the corner of her eye and trickled down her cheek. "You’re fucking Sherlock Holmes! How can I possibly be wrong?"

"It wasn't what it looks like," John argued, desperate to make Mary stay, even if it meant lying at her face. "I was just... putting Sherlock to bed. He’s had it rough. I was just trying to help."

The woman gave a short bark of laughter which contained no mirth whatsoever. "You really must think I'm stupid, don't you? I saw the bloody condom, you cheating bastard! Are you going to keep lying to me and think I'll buy your pathetic excuses?"

John recoiled from her wrath, practically deflating before her eyes. He briefly entertained the idea of claiming that Sherlock coerced him into the whole thing, but the last thing he needed now was making up more lies. He had been just as willing as Sherlock himself and would thus have to accept an equal amount of blame.

"Alright, you want the truth?" he offered, holding up his hands. "Sherlock is my ex. But I promise I haven’t slept with him during the time we’ve been dating. Except today. I made a mistake, Mary. I didn't... send you away intending to sleep with him. I never meant for this to happen."

"Oh, I feel so much better knowing it was accidental," Mary retorted, her rage having lost none of its potency. "Tell me, John... do you even like girls?"

“Of-of course I do,” John sputtered. “I know I should have told you earlier. I should have told you about this, about me… I’m sorry that I didn’t say it, that I’m not just attracted to women.”

“Yes, I see that bloody clearly,” Mary said, not even looking at her boyfriend anymore.

Frankly, John was not sure their relationship was salvageable for him to still be her boyfriend.

“And I’m sorry for that, I truly am,” John continued. Mary squeezed her eyes shut, angrier than ever.

“If you want me to stay in this half-hearted little apology,” she grumbled, “you had better stop saying ‘sorry,’ right this instant.”

John very nearly said the word again, but he managed to hold himself back at the last moment. He looked down and gave a deep breath. Sherlock had not made a sound since the reveal. John was personally grateful about his partner’s absence, as part of his mind that was not working on an apology had the deepest urge to punch him in his pleasurable little mouth.

“Alright,” he said, his voice quiet. His mouth suddenly dry, he swallowed and looked up at her once more, not finding those angry, betrayed eyes any less difficult to speak to. “You said it perfectly earlier. This trip wasn’t just to be taken lightly. I wanted to go with you across the ocean because I want to be with you.”

Mary looked away, though she still listened to the apology nonetheless. “I hope this isn’t some marriage proposal to win me back.”

“No,” John shook his head. “No, I’m not sensationalizing anything. I came with you because I wanted to. Yes, I’ve had problems. But you were the one I wanted to solve those problems for.”

"What about your friend?" Mary said hoarsely, emphasis on the word "friend".

"What about him?"

"I take it he'll always be there. And you clearly still have feelings for him. Where does that put us?"
John swallowed, trying to figure out what was the right thing to say. He could not abandon Sherlock; the eccentric detective's already fragile mental health had come to depend on John, and the doctor did not dare imagine what Sherlock might do if John left. He had a sudden horrific mental image of Sherlock stepping into a steaming hot bath and slitting his wrists, quite literally bathing in a sea of his own blood. Besides, Mycroft had said there would be consequences if he broke Sherlock's heart.

"Sherlock is my best friend," John said quietly. He reached for Mary's hand and brushed his thumb over her knuckles. "But I'm in love with you. I thought we had something special, and I hope one mistake on my part will not erase all that."

Mary pursed her lips, wanting so badly to believe every word John Watson was saying, to forgive him, to pretend he had not just shagged another man during her brief absence. Her pride and common sense, however, strongly advised against it. One did not simply forgive infidelity without at least thinking it through first.

"I'll need time, John," she said, her voice back to normal pitch. "By myself. Please don't speak to me anymore tonight. I need to think."

"But..." John objected, although he did nothing to stop her when she pushed past him into the kitchen area. She tore two cans out of the six pack of beer in their mini fridge and then wordlessly retreated into the room she - up until now, anyway - shared with her boyfriend. Whatever thinking she was required to do, it was clearly not something she wanted to do sober.

As predicted, Mary promptly threw out John's pillow and bedspread, sending one final indisputable message that she did not want him in the same room with herself. Not that John could blame her.

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Sherlock listened to the heated exchange taking place outside his room. He had not moved a limb since the drunk woman burst in and John immediately followed like a well-trained puppy dog, babbling frantic apologies and presenting transparent excuses for the situation she had walked in on. The doctor was lying, and when lies didn't get him off the hook, he offered half-truths.

A thick, heavy lump grew in Sherlock's chest when he heard John practically denounce him, adamantly claiming that the whole thing had been a mistake. Did that refer to their past relationship as well? Did he regret ever meeting Sherlock Holmes? Did he mean so little that John was willing to cast him aside to instead pursue a relationship that had never even made it past the 'dating' phase?

The constricting sensation in his chest was starting to impede his ability to breathe. Sherlock knew what was happening from a purely clinical viewpoint: he was close to having an anxiety attack. His earlier episode with John confronting him about the pills had already been a powerful trigger. One could only hold back the most basic emotional responses for a limited time, and Sherlock, who did not bend, tended to break when the pressure accumulated and finally overcame his ability to cope.

Curling up in a foetal position with a pillow - the one John had used - pressed tightly to his chest, Sherlock buried his face in the soft cotton fabric and tried desperately to quench the sobs threatening to break out of his throat. Moisture seeped from his eyes, gathering in his lashes and making them stand out in spikes. He was experiencing a gamut of emotions, ranging from despair to rage.

Sherlock had the deepest urge to leave the room and punch John dead in the face, but he was strangely able to restrain himself. Perhaps because he wanted to keep the older man out of his sight as much as Mary did. He was not sure if he could face John without losing his self-control.

His sobs muffled by the pillow, he realized his weeping was not going to be easily stopped when he
recognized John's scent in the fabric. Face twisted in despair, he threw the pillow across the room, though it obviously did not break upon hitting anything, so the energy spent gave him neither relief or release. He found another cushion and clung to it as though it provided him the very air he breathed, and he concentrated on his breathing, deep and slow, desperate to think of something else - anything - besides John.

For the second time in one day, he felt betrayed. He felt as if he hated his only real friend. This journey had been a mistake, and as childish as it sounded, he wanted to go home. He wanted Mycroft to come retrieve him.

Turning over, he scrambled for his phone, picking it up with unsteady hands and speed-dialing his brother's number. Silence followed on the other line for a moment, and to his disappointment, a recorded female voice stated that the call could not be completed due to a lost signal.

Lovely. This bloody country and its mountains...! Sherlock nearly threw his mobile phone as he had John's pillow, but he hardly wanted the phone itself to break.

Curling up back into his original position, he tried to retreat into his little mind palace within, but he found it difficult. Instead he listened for the sounds of crickets outside. In the distant trees he thought he could also hear an owl.

But then another sound reached his ears, and he realized it was coming from the bedroom next door. Though muffled by the wall, he could easily determine what it was.

So... Sherlock was not the only one John had reduced to tears this evening.

Oddly enough, the detective found no solace in the woman's tears. True, he hated her for having latched onto John and for the possibility that she might take John away for good, but despite everything, Mary was not to blame in this mess. John had, in a quite literal sense, screwed her over as well.

Sherlock blew his stuffy nose into a tissue and simultaneously wiped his leaking eyes, undoubtedly red and swollen to the point that even someone as obtuse as John would be able to tell he'd been crying. John must not know under any circumstances. It was bad enough that his friend now knew about the antipsychotics and his mood disorder - secrets he had kept well-hidden until now - but John knowing about the true depth of Sherlock's feelings could possibly be his undoing.

Sherlock gathered himself up from the bed and lit the ceiling lamp. The shade was a ghastly, soiled thing, probably white once upon a time, but now a faded yellow. Nevertheless, it did its job providing the room with illumination, bleary though it was, and Sherlock shuffled over to the small mirror hanging on one of the walls. The glass was scratched and held a few suspicious stains, but he could see himself just fine. He was a horrid sight. Giving a shaky sigh, the detective brushed his tangled hair back from his forehead and let his eyes slide shut. Then he inhaled deeply a few times and counted to ten. It helped slightly, but he still felt - and looked - a sodding mess.

All this because of a man, Sherlock? the voice of his younger self taunted him in his head. The voice belonged to the Sherlock Holmes he had been years ago, before he knew John Watson and still used drugs to relieve his near-constant boredom, and sometimes - which was more often than he wanted to admit - hustled to procure said illegal substances. Trading sex if he was low on money was simply another means to an end. A body was nothing but transport, and it could be sold when needed. The Sherlock Holmes that never got involved on an emotional level.

Sherlock reached into his suitcase and pulled out his burgundy silk dressing gown, slipping it on. The material was easy on his burnt skin, downright soothing. Sherlock normally felt just as
comfortable in the nude as with clothes on, if only the weather permitted, but now was going to be an exception. If he was to face John again this evening, he would require a layer between the doctor's eyes and his skin.

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John had managed to arrange his sheet, blanket, and pillow on the sofa as an improvised bedspread when Sherlock exited from his bedroom. The doctor tried to give a small smile, but his expression went largely unnoticed. The detective did not even look in his direction, shuffling off to the kitchenette, his face a blank slate. Utterly silent, he filled the kettle and set it on the stove to make some tea, wordlessly wishing he had brought his own from London. He was not terribly surprised that American tea was rather shit in comparison. But at present time, shit tea was still tea.

"Umm..." John said, somewhat desperate to break the silence that at this point was thick in the air like a rainy mist. Sherlock remained silent, not uttering a noise of confirmation, but not responding negatively either, so the older man continued.

"I did look through the photos. You were right, there's more to it than just woods out there. I saw the chimney smoke."

Sherlock stood still as a pylon, waiting for the whistle of a kettle which was seemingly taking forever. He was beginning to hate the sound of John's voice.

"It certainly sounds like our next destination," his assistant continued. "Shall we investigate tomorrow morning?"

The whistling was barely audible to Sherlock, but the faint sound was enough. He grabbed at the kettle urgently and poured it into his mug as though desperately making a life-saving elixir, not caring just how much or little the tea itself would steep. Unfortunately, his urgency also left him careless. The hot water splashed onto his hand and he jumped away, shouting a curse as the kettle hit the floor with a loud clatter.

John rocketed off the sofa like a tightly coiled spring and ran over to the younger man. "Sherlock! Are you alright?"

He briefly observed the practically scarlet mark which the boiling water had left on Sherlock's right hand - a second degree burn this time - and reached for the limb to examine it further. It would no doubt blister and become even more painful if left untreated. Sherlock pulled his hand away before John could grasp it.

"Don't touch me, John. Please don't touch me."

"I just want to help."

John tried to search the other man's face for clues to this sudden aversion toward him, but as always, Sherlock guarded his emotions well. What reason did Sherlock have to be upset? It wasn't his relationship that was on the verge of destruction, not he that would have to spend the night sleeping on the sofa because he was unwanted. Was Sherlock still angry with John for going through his pockets? Did he regret their most recent sexual encounter? None of it made any sense to John. Sherlock had been the aggressor; clearly he had wanted it... at least then. Why the sudden change of heart?

"I'm not you, Sherlock," John said with a sigh. "I can't know what's wrong unless you talk to me."

"All the better then," Sherlock retorted acidly. He marched over to the kitchen counter and ran his
burnt hand under a cold tap under absolute silence. Though John utterly failed to deduce what had caused Sherlock's pitch black mood, he could tell from his friend's bearing, as well as the granite muscles hidden beneath his silk robe, that it was a serious matter.

Once the water had done its job to alleviate the pain, Sherlock withdrew his hand and gingerly picked up the mug of tea which had survived the havoc. He did not reward John with as much as a glance in passing. The soft swish of silk as Sherlock padded back to his room was the only sound that could be heard.

John regarded the mess with which he had been left, and realized that Sherlock had no intention whatsoever to clean it up. Fortunately the kettle was made of stainless steel and had thus not broken upon impact, but other than this small detail there was nothing to be pleased about. Tea was everywhere, and it was still scalding hot.

He looked back up at the closed door that Sherlock had disappeared behind. The lodge was silent once again, no sounds coming from either bedroom, be they muffled or not. Any brief notion of bunking with Sherlock as opposed to taking up a spot on the sofa was no longer worth consideration.

TBC...
Chapter 9

Chapter Summary

John fears Sherlock is lapsing into a depression and turns to the one man he can trust with Sherlock-related matters: Mycroft Holmes.

Chapter 9

John was the first to awake the following morning, the sun hardly yet illuminating the sky. Sherlock had to have still been asleep, as no noises of the detective's usual bored activities could be heard through his closed door. No banging on walls, no dangerous experiments involving any household products he could find in the lodge... John opened the door as carefully and quietly as possible, peeked inside, and saw his partner curled up in a foetal position, limbs twisted in bedcovers as though he had lost a fight with them.

Turning on the coffeemaker in the kitchenette, John filled the filters, added water, and removed some sugar from the cupboard, curious as to the quality of the final product. Staring at the little machine and watching the slow drip, he stood silently, taking advantage of the quiet. He did not bother checking on Mary, as she was a light sleeper, and she likely would not be presently interested in seeing his face. The teakettle sat solitarily on the counter, still undamaged but slightly scuffed from its fall from last night.

John briefly wondered if this would be taken out of their lodging pay.

An hour passed, and no one emerged from either bedroom. John speculated that both Sherlock and Mary were trying to wait the other one out, equally determined so as not to be the first to leave their respective strongholds.

John stretched out on the sofa, being for once thankful for his short stature, as it allowed him to sleep without having to keep his legs perpetually bent, or his feet hanging off the end. He'd had breakfast: milk and cereal, and two cups of coffee to kickstart the day. Yet there was absolutely nothing to do, and John felt he might as well fall asleep again out of boredom. Was this how Sherlock felt most of the time?

He swept his eyes across the interior of the picturesque little lodge, seeing if he would discover something not previously noticed, until his gaze landed on Sherlock's laptop. John had hooked it up to an adapter last night before going to sleep, and he assumed the battery was fully charged now. Perhaps he could while away some time by surfing online? Granted the WI-FI connection was insufferably slow to someone who was used to the speed and comfort of modern broadband, but it was the only thing available, and John supposed they should be grateful for that. The area did not even have mobile phone service.

John pressed on the power button, and the device buzzed back to life. The photo he had been studying yesterday with Mary while Sherlock lay passed out on the sofa appeared on the screen, and John clicked it down to the taskbar. There were no more clues for him to figure out. He proceeded to the small Firefox icon on the desktop, half-fearing that Sherlock's internet access would be password-protected. The detective, however, was not that paranoid, and John thanked his lucky star for that, as he never could have been able to guess Sherlock's password.
Just as he opened up Firefox, a Skype window appeared, and the doctor was just about to check it off when it occurred to him that the username and password had already been entered.

Curiosity burning like Sherlock’s sun-baked skin, John clicked the sign-in button. The contact list was scant, to say the least. However, there was one name present which left John torn between surprised at its presence and not surprised whatsoever.

And it was online.

Wondering briefly if Mycroft's Skype account had been created exclusively for Sherlock, John selected the contact and skimmed through the previous conversation, although it involved little else but infrequent small talk, perhaps the occasional question of what Sherlock’s daily schedule was like. John couldn't help but wonder if the words were codes for something else.

Gazing over the messenger window and noting the video call option, he looked up at a tiny circle on the topmost border of the laptop. It had to be a web camera.

Though Mycroft Holmes was usually the last person John wanted to speak with, he was still an intelligent man who knew his younger brother better than most. Even if he was an overly-preened windbag. Mycroft would know what to do... hopefully.

The doctor clicked the video call button and waited. And waited. And still waited. Though he was fully aware of the time difference, this was still a difference between the morning and five hours from it. Mycroft would be busy "saving the world" and "leading Britain", but at least he would not be sleeping.

John was about to give up and close the laptop when the window expanded and a familiar face filled the screen. Already Mycroft looked vaguely annoyed and slightly puzzled to see not his brother but his brother's assistant.

"Good morning, Doctor," he said guardedly looking at John's blank expression.

"Good afternoon, Mycroft," John returned.

"Enjoying your little vacation to the Land of the Free?" the elder Holmes inquired, and as always, he was able to make a simple question sound like a disguised insult... or threat.

"Oh yes, very much," John said quickly, hoping that Mycroft would not be able to make any brilliant deductions from just seeing a somewhat blurry representative of his face. No body language or other non-verbal signals. Maybe he had a chance.

Mycroft leaned back, away from the camera, and John could see the inside of what was undoubtedly the civil servant's office. It would be past four in the afternoon in England, but the doctor knew, naturally, that Mycroft Holmes did not exactly occupy a regular desk job.

"What do you want, Doctor? And may I ask why you are using my brother's private Skype account? I had it set up so that he could contact me anytime at the event of an emergency."

"Sherlock's fine, I assure you," John hurried to say. Only to realize that it was a blatant lie.

"Well then, Doctor. I have to prepare for a meeting with the US foreign secretary in just one hour, and..."

"Sherlock is not fine," John broke in.
Mycroft raised a questioning eyebrow, face still impassive, but John could tell he was definitely more attentive now.

John cleared his throat. "I wanted to ask you about this... since you've known him longer than I. Or anyone, really."

The politician gave a weary sigh. "Did he bring cocaine with him?"

"No! God, no! Why would---"

"I see." Mycroft waved one elegant hand at John through the screen. "But you did find something else. The medication he sometimes "forgets" to take?"

John nodded. "Clozapine. He told me he has bipolar disorder."

"Which is true. It runs in the family, I'm afraid."

"Mycroft, are you saying that... that you...?"

John's question was met with a scoff from the red-haired man. "Not I, Doctor. I work for the government. I would never have been granted security clearance if I'd had a mental illness. But our father."

Mycroft then paused, his forehead creased from the apparently painful recollection. Yet his Ice-man mask did not falter.

"Has Sherlock ever told you about our father's death?"

"Only that he died when Sherlock himself was seven."

"He killed himself. Filled his pockets with rocks and walked into the Thames. I was in college when it happened, and because of this unfortunate event I had to delay my studies one whole semester. Mummy could not manage Sherlock on her own, not unpredictably, the little hellion he was. I stayed home until we could have him sent off to boarding school. Except for some disciplinary infractions, some bigger than others, my brother did quite well until he had his first manic episode at sixteen."

John could imagine how such an episode had played out, but only a little. Considering how both Holmes brothers behaved, their childhood had to have been far from ordinary, even without mental illness.

"I imagine things were more than a little difficult, especially after your father died," he said. He was not pitying, but sympathetic. His opinions of Mycroft notwithstanding, the doctor knew the man still loved his brother... in his own way anyway.

"Does Sherlock know you've discovered his medication?" Mycroft asked, faintly switching gears.

"He does." John replied, feeling a little more at ease with the particular memory. "He was defensive at first, which was understandable. But I assured him it changed nothing between us."

Even in the blur of the laptop screen, John could see Mycroft pursing his lips at the remark. He was getting suspicious of this conversation.

"And what is between the two of you, Doctor?" he asked. That tone was back again, sharp edges growing around his voice. "I would have thought someone of your fastidious temperament and mentality would be able to cope with Sherlock's condition... especially considering your profession..."
and... friendship with him."

John picked up on the way the civil servant said 'friendship'. The warnings from the past rang clear in his memories.

"So," Mycroft continued, "what is this talk really about? If this little revelation went as well as you claim, how is Sherlock 'not fine'?"

"He has not come out of his room since yesterday," John said slowly, unsure of how much he should reveal to Mycroft. "And he refuses to speak to me. He's not even invested in the case anymore. I fear he might be lapsing into a depression."

"Are you speaking as a medical man, Doctor Watson, or as a concerned friend?"

John hesitated for a moment. His emotional entanglement with Sherlock surely hadn't hampered his professional eye. He could still recognize depression when he saw it.

"Both," he finally admitted. "His behaviour is not normal, even for him."

"I see." Mycroft cocked his head to the side, and his forehead creased in a way that suggested wheels were turning inside his head, quite rapidly. "Anything in particular that might have triggered it...?" he then inquired. "Did you two have a quarrel, perhaps?"

"I suppose you might call it that," John confessed. "But we have them all the time. You know how he is!"

Any hope at garnering sympathy from Mycroft in this particular matter disappeared when he saw the politician's look of suspicion turn into a look of cold fury. For a moment he believed Mycroft would actually reach out through the screen and throttle him.

"What did you do, John Watson?" Mycroft snarled, his posh, public school accent laced with something that could only be described as primal. "I'm going to find out anyway, so you'd do well to remember it's in your best interest to tell me the truth."

John could both hear and feel the rush of blood in his ears. "Nothing that we haven't done a hundred times before," he murmured and purposely avoided looking into the camera.

When he finally gave a fleeting glance to the face on the screen, Mycroft's eyes had narrowed in a glare like a stern father who was attempting to get a confession from a badly behaved child.

"I swear it was nothing I did to him," John insisted, flustered yet trying to keep his voice down. "I wasn't even planning on shagging him! He wasn't even supposed to come with us. And then suddenly he's initiating sex between us the moment Mary's gone."

Reliving the memories was actually making John angry, and Mycroft could hear the anger in his voice, despite the doctor's attempt at speaking low.

"Christ, I couldn't believe it," John softly exclaimed. "Suddenly Mary's back in the lodge and here I am, stinking of sex musk with Mary knowing exactly what's happened."

John could not help feeling as though he should be laying down on a sofa as Mycroft took notes. He then had to wonder how Sherlock himself would do in a psychologist's office. He had to have been sent to a psychologist at least once in his past, and knowing Sherlock, the interaction could not have gone well.
Mycroft however looked uninterested in John's rant, or at the very least unimpressed.

"And...?"

"And so I'm trying my damnedest to win her back, convince her that it was all a mistake, that it wouldn't happen again. And of course she's not buying it, and..."

John saw Mycroft close his eyes, his expression grave.

"And yet you thought sex was the way to comfort my brother following a harrowing revelation such as the one you described? Especially since you are, as you say, now committed to someone else."

"I... I didn't mean it like that," John tried, but everything he could think of to use for his defense suddenly seemed hollow, if not downright ludicrous. Instead he had to fight back the urge not to simply scream 'I made a mistake, now tell me how to make it right!' Mycroft, for all his savvy, did not have all the answers. This was John's mess, and thus also his to sort out.

"My brother has feelings for you, and has had them for some time," Mycroft said. "Surely this can't come as a complete surprise?"

"He's certainly never made them known!" John snapped back, realizing that this was exactly the reason for his bitterness toward Sherlock. The detective had his chance with him, but he'd elected to ignore it.

"Of course not, he's Sherlock Holmes." Mycroft stated this as if it were the most natural thing in the world. "It's all new to him, Doctor. He's afraid - no, terrified - to let anyone close. And with good reason."

"What is that supposed to mean?" John demanded, getting angrier by the second. "You've had it in for me from the beginning, and why? I'm not good enough for a Holmes? Because of my upbringing? Or am I simply not clever enough to be deserving of your brother's attention? I'm just a poor ex-army surgeon, after all. Just your average bloke, not a bloody genius!"

"Yes," Mycroft said calmly, unfazed by the tirade. "I admit I was suspicious of you when you and Sherlock first got acquainted, but I assure you it had nothing to do with neither your upbringing nor your level of intellect. I was merely looking out for my brother, since Sherlock has previously had problems with your type."

"My type?!!"

"Yes, soldier fellows. Veterans, like yourself." Mycroft's tongue snaked out to wet his lips. "What if I told you that Sherlock's last 'boyfriend' was a Gulf war vet who trampled him half to death?"

The question mentally stopped John in his tracks. He frowned at the notion and stared at Mycroft's unreadable expression.

"Being serious..."

Mycroft gave him another stern glare as though daring John not to believe him.

"He never told me about that." John's voice was quiet, to the point that he thought Mycroft might not be able to hear his reaction.

"I don't imagine he's told anyone. I only knew about it because I was there to see the damage done to him."
TBC...
Chapter 10

Chapter Summary

Mycroft tells John the story of Sherlock's abusive ex. Summarized as a flashback.

Chapter 10

2003

As much as people believed otherwise, Mycroft did indeed sleep. In fact, he cherished those moments when he could truly shut himself away from the outside world. His brain, a well oiled machine though it was, worked far too fast, even for him, and though sleep brought dreams - mostly of memories both close and distant - it also brought relief. He thought himself lucky to actually have a full eight hours on this night.

However, he knew that luck was fleeting and dishonest. He had slept nearly two hours when his phone rang. As much as he would have loved to ignore it and turn over to go back to sleep, Mycroft was far too important to ignore a call.

Grabbing the phone, he paused for the briefest moment when he saw whose name was on the tiny glowing screen. He picked up the call, wondering what Sherlock had been arrested for this time.

"I trust you do know it's past two in the morning, don't you?"

Mycroft was able to tell from the first few words uttered by DI Lestrade that something very serious had happened. This was not simply a case of minor possession of drugs, solicitation or pickpocketing, or any other common misdemeanor that Sherlock often got himself arrested for.

"I'm sorry to bother you so late, Mr. Holmes, but it's about your brother..."

"Yes?" Mycroft breathed, his heart rate nearly spiking.

"He's been brought to the A&E. I don't know much, but... He's supposed to be in pretty bad shape," Greg Lestrade said in a grim voice.

Mycroft closed his eyes, images of his little brother, pale and still, with a dusting of white powder on his waxen face flashing through his mind; how Sherlock would look after the drugs had finally claimed his life.

"Overdose?" he croaked out, even though he had already guessed the answer. Lestrade's reply was therefore a shock to him, like having a bucket of icy water thrown in his face.

"No, sir. He's been assaulted. A woman reportedly called the police having heard commotion from the flat above hers. Your brother was found, alone. But we have reason to suspect that--"

"The flat," Mycroft interrupted, and his grasp on the mobile phone hardened instinctively. His brain had already formed another possible scenario, but he needed some more facts to confirm it. "Where is it?"
"In East End. We're working hard to find out who it's registered on."

"No need, I think I know," Mycroft ground out from between tightly clenched teeth. White hot anger was starting to replace the paralytic feeling of panic which the call had initially caused. "I'll meet you at the hospital, Detective Inspector. Be there."

"But I haven't told you which hospital," Lestrade said, sounding more than a bit baffled.

"I know which," Mycroft snapped. "Now we must get a move on!"

He hit the "close" button on his phone, ending the call. Considering where Sherlock had been found, it was not difficult to calculate which hospital, that had Accidents & Emergency admittance, was closest at hand: Royal London Hospital.

Mycroft dressed with quick, jerky movements, all thoughts of sleep banished from his mind. He was needed elsewhere.

"That lowlife! That wretched, twice-damned bastard!" he growled to himself as he exited his flat. The man would pay for hurting his brother, that much Mycroft could swear to.

Two phone calls were made en route to hospital. One of which involved a very private investigation of the flat where Sherlock's 'boyfriend' lived. Mycroft hated the idea of giving the two-legged beast who hurt his brother such a sentimental label. Though not a very physical man, Mycroft fantasized stepping on the evil shit's testicles nonetheless, slowly adding his bodily weight and causing the most heavenly cries of pain to fill the air.

Fortunately, Mycroft knew the value of friends in low places. His call was returned minutes later with the information required.

The second phone call had been completed by the time he walked into Royal London Hospital. As expected, the medical staff knew to step aside, and any who were new in the building had been warned ahead of time not to interfere.

Greg Lestrade was lingering in the corridor outside of intensive care when Mycroft arrived, looking to be in desperate need of a cigarette. The elder Holmes noted a hint of a smile on the detective inspector when he looked up and saw his approach, though Lestrade seemed to catch his own expression and quickly put an end to it.

"He's still alive," Lestrade stated.

"Clearly," Mycroft replied coolly. "Otherwise we would be in the morgue."

Swallowing nervously, Lestrade fidgeted with something in his pocket; a cigarette lighter, Mycroft deduced. An hour plus without a cigarette was far too long for a chain-smoker like Greg Lestrade. Mycroft was pleased that he had managed to keep his own smoking habit limited to the occasional social event.

"Tell me what you know," the politician ordered, his mask still fully intact.

"He's been roughed up pretty badly," Lestrade said. "Unconscious, hasn't been able to give us anything. There might have been drugs involved, to tell you the truth."

Of course, Mycroft thought. Hardly surprising. He was grateful, however, that Lestrade made no attempts to sugarcoat the truth.
"We're still investigating the name on tied to the flat where Sherlock was found. Obvious alias, search came up empty. Neighbours tell us that they've seen a tall, red-headed man with pale blue eyes move to and fro, though. Could be our guy."

"Let me guess... Well-built, late thirties, frightening appearance? An identifying scar on his right temple?"

Lestrade blinked, dumbfounded. "You know him?"

"I know of him," Mycroft said grimly. "Sherlock has been seeing him for a number of weeks now, against my wishes." He sighed, shaking his head. Since when did Sherlock ever do anything according to his brother's wishes? He was convinced that his dislike of the man Sherlock chose to call his 'boyfriend' played a large part in why the younger Holmes kept seeing him.

"I'm sorry," Lestrade offered with genuine sympathy. Though Sherlock was often a right pain in the arse for Lestrade and the Met, it couldn't be denied that the soon-to-be middle-aged DI cared about the tortured young genius.

"But he's twenty-three. Not a child anymore. Doesn't mean he knows his own best, though."

Mycroft nodded curtly, and the two men stood still as statues and just as silent as ones. Thick white curtains and screens prevented them from seeing into the intensive care unit, but Sherlock was in there somewhere, perhaps dying this very minute. If that were the case, he should at least not have to die alone. After fifteen minutes of torturous waiting, Mycroft was ready to hound down the next person in a white coat he saw passing.

As if on cue, they were approached by a rotund middle-aged man whose name tag identified him as a trauma surgeon.

"I'm Doctor Camden," he informed them, and Mycroft felt like telling him not to waste time on the obvious. "Are you waiting for news on the boy that was brought in?"

"Indeed so," the politician said. "How is he faring?"

"Are you police or family?"

Lestrade pulled a face that Mycroft did not miss. It was a look which said, "you're new here, aren't you?" Mycroft ignored it, staring the doctor down as though Camden were an insect he might flatten into the floor.

"I am entitled to the patient's information," he replied. "One can tell you have not been informed of this, but I trust you know it now. So... what is the condition of young Mr. Holmes?"

Doctor Camden gave him a wary look, but only stared for a few seconds before returning to his report. "The worst we've come across is his head..."

Already Mycroft felt his heart-rate increase in speed, but he revealed none of it in his stance or expression. He simply stared, unreadable and stone-faced as the physician continued.

"There's a fracture in his skull along the linea temporalis," he gestured to the side of his head behind the temple to explain out of instinct. Resulting directly with a subdural hematoma. We're doing our utmost to decrease the intracranial pressure. His attacker kicked him about quite a bit, leading to one rib broken and another cracked, as well as a ruptured spleen, and his arm is broken at two places in the ulna..."
“Will he live?” Mycroft asked. As far as he was aware, his expression still betrayed nothing, but he was beginning to dread the list of injuries and simply wanted to know the most important fact.

Camden swallowed dryly. His discomfort was clear now, as though he feared giving bad news to what was a very important and likely very powerful figure.

"The speed of his neighbor's response was key. If anyone had found him later, he would be dead now."

Would be dead, as in presently alive. Mycroft might have sighed in relief were he a weaker man. He heard Lestrade react in his place.

"Still unconscious, I presume?” Mycroft asked.

"Yes,” the doctor replied. "But there's yet no knowing when - or if - he'll regain consciousness. Or if he's sustained brain damage, and if so, to what extent. What we can do for now is to monitor his intracranial pressure and make sure the hematoma does not return. We've performed a craniotomy to drain the area and to repair the damaged vessels. There is nothing more we can do at this point. Only time will tell."

The doctor had begun to nervously wring his hands, visibly bothered by the two men's silence. "If you have any more questions..."

"I'd like to see him,” Mycroft said.

"Only family for now," Doctor Camden said quickly. It clearly had not struck him that Mycroft was of any relation to the strung out and badly beaten young man that had been brought in earlier.

"Is there a next of kin we can notify...?”

"That would be I," the civil servant said stonily. He was beginning to reach the end of his patience, and the last thing he felt like dealing with was a difficult physician. Not when Sherlock's life hung in the balance and the perpetrator was still out there.

"That's my little brother. Now take me to him, Doctor, or I swear you will never set your foot in another hospital again!"

Camden blanched, but he did not question or contradict Mycroft this time. The elder Holmes felt Lestrade's tired but sympathetic eyes in the back of his neck, as he silently followed Camden to where his little brother lay fighting for his life.

Lestrade had already caught a glimpse of Sherlock when he was brought into A&E, but the sight of the younger man was still alarming. He was personally very surprised that Mycroft could stay so still at first, then walk with such an even stride as he approached the bed, where the battered figure lay motionless. Either Mycroft Holmes was the most composed man Lestrade had ever met, or the most cold-hearted.

Perhaps a mixture of both, he considered. In the elder Holmes' line of work, having a heart was a liability.

As the silence grew thick, the DI awkwardly cleared his throat.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Holmes,” he offered. "I can't imagine what you're going through now."

Mycroft did not even turn to regard him.
“Your sympathies, though kind, are doing nothing to help my brother,” the civil servant stated. "If I were you, I would keep in communications with the police station. While you do your job, I would appreciate some privacy."

Holding back a rueful sigh, Lestrade nodded, even though Mycroft could not see it, and quietly left. The police officer in him wished he could have said something reassuring, but what?

Once he was quite sure he was alone with Sherlock, Mycroft slowly approached his brother. The already slender body laying unconscious in the bed seemed far too small now. Though he considered himself a rational man, he felt a fleeting hope that this unfortunate, mangled thing laying before him was someone else, that Sherlock was somewhere else, safe and sound and looking far less like a corpse from a vehicular collision.

Indeed, Sherlock was not even recognizable. His face was swollen and purple from the assault to the point that it likely could not move even if he were awake and attempting to speak. Mycroft felt a peculiar twinge in his stomach when he noted something protruding from the side of his brother’s head and realized it was a catheter, inserted for drainage. Suddenly feeling weak, he finally took a seat in a nearby chair.

The rhythmic beeping, wheezing and hissing of the machines currently keeping Sherlock alive did nothing to soothe him. Instead they were a constant reminded of the severity of the situation. Sherlock might never wake up again. Or even if he did, he could be so gravely brain damaged that he would wake up to a life not worth living. Mycroft knew that his brother would rather die than live the rest of his life as a vegetable, and the elder Holmes could sympathize with that. It would be his choice, also.

Mycroft had no reason to doubt the care provided at the Royal London Hospital; they had succeeded in keeping Sherlock alive so far, but he decided nonetheless to have his brother moved to a private facility as soon as he was strong enough to survive transport. Sherlock would be given the best possible treatment by the best doctors available, all of it done very discreetly. Sherlock abhorred the stench of hospitals and never wanted to stay, regardless if his condition warranted it. Mycroft was fairly certain that if his brother were conscious, he would try to leave even now, with multiples fractures and internal bleeding in his rake-thin body.

Glancing at the wall clock, Mycroft saw it was almost half past four. He might as well stay until he was needed at his office in roughly three hours. He had plenty of work planned for the day, stacks of paperwork to go through and several important meetings. The world did not stop because of one personal tragedy, even if it happened to one of the most important men in Britain.

Despite hospital policy dictating against it, Mycroft kept his mobile turned on, set to vibrate. He was expecting a call and was positive it would come before it was time for him to leave.

He expected to be informed immediately when his team had apprehended one Sebastian Moran.

TBC...
Chapter 11

Chapter Summary

Mycroft finishes telling John about Sherlock's history with Sebastian Moran.

Chapter 11

John settled back into his seat, at a loss for words. Like the discovery of Sherlock's medication, John somehow thought he would have been trusted with such information. But then again, after last night's row, perhaps he really did not deserve that trust.

He looked up at the face on the screen. If Mycroft was feeling any pain from the memory, he was certainly hiding it extremely well.

"So..." John said, his throat suddenly dry, "how long was he..." he hesitated, not at all liking the idea of Sherlock so monstrously treated, "... in hospital?"

"He was in a coma for two weeks, and then remained for another month, much to his refusal. Obviously the trauma did not rob him of any of his more... charming traits."

John managed a small, joyless laugh at the thought. He could not help wondering if his friend had gone into histrionics over the fact that the catheter had required shaving part of his head.

"And what happened to this Moran?"

"Arrested and successfully jailed," Mycroft simply replied.

John's brow lifted a little in disbelief. "Considering what he did to Sherlock, I'm a little surprised that you didn't have him done away with."

"Should he come back and attempt anything remotely similar..." Mycroft's lips thinned for a second. "Let's say that it doesn't do anyone well to try my patience."

Mycroft glanced aside and John nearly thought he saw vulnerability in the elder Holmes' eyes for a brief moment. He chalked it up to the choppy image on the computer screen.

"In fact, he is eligible for parole soon."

"Erm... how soon?"

"Next year."

The doctor scowled, unable to read Mycroft's opinion on the matter from the politician's face.

"Should we be worried?" he asked.

Mycroft responded with a derisive bark of laughter. "Hardly," he said. "Colonel Moran has not exactly been famous for his good behaviour in prison. I am confident the parole board will reject his
appeal, but in case they do not, I have the means to keep that beast of a man locked up for plenty more years."

John exhaled from relief. A vengeful lunatic with a major grudge against Sherlock was the last thing they needed to deal with at this time. Though his general opinion of Mycroft Holmes remained the same, John couldn't help but be grateful for the man's influence and resourcefulness.

"I felt responsible for what happened to my brother that night," Mycroft admitted. "Sherlock was so close to dying, and I could have stopped it."

"You didn't know that would happen. Even you can't predict the future," John objected.

"Quite right, but that wasn't the first time that man had hit Sherlock. He'd sported some suspicious bruises before, but he insisted it was nothing, and I didn't take action. I could have had Moran apprehended and incarcerated on a multitude of charges, ranging from assault to fraud to possession of narcotics, but I didn't. I suppose I didn't want Sherlock to despise me more than he already did."

John rubbed at his face as though in an attempt to clear his mind of the whole story. He finally sighed and looked back at the screen.

"Did he give any reason as to why he nearly killed Sherlock that night?"

Mycroft looked past John pointedly, clearly seeing something beyond the doctor's shoulder. "Perhaps you could explain it to him, Sherlock?"

John felt his chest tighten for a split second as he realized the situation and turned around.

Sherlock stood leaning against the wall, motionless as he stared at both man and laptop. He tried to maintain a blank expression, but his blanched blue eyes betrayed him. John suddenly had the strong urge to hurry forward and embrace him, but he had a feeling he might get pushed away or hit. He expected Sherlock to remained silent and possibly even walk away from the situation, but the younger man stayed put.

"He had cocaine hidden away in his flat. It took me less than five seconds to figure out where. I was impatient and tried pinching some when he was still home."

He brushed a hand through his thick curls and John was briefly reminded of the mental image of his partner's partially shaved head.

"Left me with a lot of time to do nothing but think... and go through cocaine withdrawal."

"At least you were alive to complain about it," John tried, but it was a lame attempt at combining comfort and humor.

"Try quitting drug addiction outright and see if you're still so optimistic," Sherlock retorted.

John remembered the blissful fogginess brought by the painkillers he'd been on after being shot, and how tempting it had been to keep taking them even after the pain abated. Other than that, John had never experienced substance addiction, even though he did his best to empathize.

"But you did it, Sherlock," he said. "You got clean. That takes plenty of determination and will-power."

"How long did it take for Sherlock to relapse that time?" Mycroft asked from the video feed. "Ninety-two days?"
"Close it down!" Sherlock shouted, making stabbing gestures at the screen and his brother's image. "If I have to look at that face one more second I'll be sick!"

Mycroft tutted. "Sick? Brother dear, you haven't eaten for over a day. How could you feel sick with nothing in you? Part of the good doctor's anatomy doesn't count," he added with that supercilious sneer they were both very familiar with.

John felt himself blushing furiously and was sorely tempted to simply slam the laptop shut. Maybe he would have done exactly that if Mycroft hadn't spoken up again.

"It seems you two have some things to sort out," the elder Holmes said. "So I'll leave you to it. I myself have a meeting to attend in fifteen minutes."

"Hey, don't let us keep you from running Britain," John said with a scoff.

"Indeed. I suppose you'll get in touch if you need any more advice concerning my volatile little brother."

"Thanks for the chat," John said, embarrassed that the topic of said "chat" was now known to Sherlock as well.

"Bye, Doctor. Sherlock." Mycroft gave them a small, tight smile before closing down the link, and as soon as his face was gone from the screen, a frustrated groan could be heard from Sherlock. John expected him to dart back to his bedroom or launch a string of curses upon John, angry and hurt that his only friend had betrayed his trust by contacting Mycroft behind his back, but Sherlock proved once again what an unpredictable man he could be. Staying silent, he sat down next to his partner on the couch, his face unreadable.

"Are you still angry with me?" John asked cautiously, knowing that Sherlock's rage was much like a bubbling volcano, ready to erupt at any given time.

"Why would I be angry with you, John?" the genius muttered, suddenly very interested in the accumulated dirt under his fingernails.

"I... I hacked into your Skype account, I went behind your back to talk to your brother--"

Sherlock snorted. "Please! You give yourself way too much credit, John. You didn't 'hack' anything. The password had already been entered. You simply clicked 'log in'."

"That's hardly the point. I still... kind of betrayed your trust."

"You were worried. I know you worry, John. You have that in common with Mycroft."

John wasn't sure how he felt about being compared to the Ice-man in any fashion, but he decided to let that one slide for now.

"So we're good, then?" he asked hopefully, giving Sherlock a playful nudge with his shoulder. "Still friends?"

The detective nodded mutely. He was still subdued, maybe even downcast, when compared to his usual hypo-manic self, but at least he had come out of his room and willingly talked with John. It was progress.

"Can I ask you a question, Sherlock?"
"What?"

"Mycroft said it wasn't the first time this Moran guy had hit you. Why did you let him do it?"

Sherlock stared at the floor for a few seconds before answering. John patiently waited for an answer. Patience was the least he could give him, after all.

"It didn't bother me, so I didn't bother stopping it."

John held back a frustrated sigh and instead placed his hand on one of his partner's own. "Please?"

Sherlock shut his eyes. "I wanted to leave. But I wanted the drugs more," he finally admitted. "And part of it was because Mycroft didn't approve. I wanted to be spiteful, to anger him. And..." He paused, eyes still closed. Perhaps he hated seeing the possible look on John's face in response to the truth.

"And I just wanted the attention."

A line formed at the center of John's brow in puzzlement. "Attention from your brother?"

"From Sebastian..." he replied, opening his eyes and quickly looked regretful. "From Moran."

His expression darkened, perhaps reliving a memory. John's squeezing of his hand caused him to look up.

"I don't miss him, not really" he said thoughtfully. He managed a rather false looking smile. "Perhaps that's indicative of how close we really were."

John pulled his hand away, feeling the gesture was somehow forced. After all, Sherlock was not overtly sentimental.

"Mycroft did mention a parole coming up. What do you think would happen if he was actually released?"

"Haven't thought about it," Sherlock muttered, trying his best to sound non-committal, but John knew that was a lie. It was obvious that thoughts of Moran's imminent release had plagued his mind quite a bit.

"The man nearly killed you. You're telling me you're not even the tiniest bit afraid he might try again?"

"Why would he?"

"You had him put away, for one. Ten years is a lot of time. He--"

"He got sixteen years for attempted murder," Sherlock interjected. "Added to all those other felonies he'd been piling up for quite some time. The parole board will never accept his request. Either way, Mycroft has a say in things, and he'll make sure it doesn't happen."

John nodded contemplatively, thinking back on his conversation with the elder Holmes, and how Mycroft had said virtually the same thing. Perhaps they could breathe out for now.

"You're lucky to have a brother like him," the doctor said, surprised to realize he really meant it.

Sherlock's response was a groan and an eye-roll. "Oh, shut it, John!" he exclaimed and pretended to swat his friend in the back of the head. It was the most animated Sherlock had been since last night,
and while John knew it probably meant he would go back to being an unthinking arsehole, it was very much preferable to the apathetic Sherlock who didn't even bother looking for clues to a case.

"I've made coffee and breakfast, do you want some?" John asked.

"Just coffee, please."

"You know you have to eat sometime--"

"Just the coffee, John!"

"Alright, alright. Don't get your knickers in a twist." John got up from the sofa to do Sherlock's bidding. "Although you're not wearing any that I can see."

When he returned from the kitchenette with two cups of coffee, one black and the other one black with three sugars, the laptop once again held Sherlock's undivided attention. The detective's keen eyes were fixed on something that on first glance appeared to be just a random collection of pixels in various shades of green. Sherlock had opened one of Sarah Cavanaugh's photographs and was zooming in on the area in the top right corner.

"What does that look like to you?" Sherlock accepted his cup of coffee and took a sip, but without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Umm..." John's brow screwed up in confusion as he too intently studied the pixels. Yet he could not see anything even remotely resembling, well, anything. "Branches, leaves... perhaps part of a tree trunk?"

Sherlock rolled his eyes and clicked on the small navigation window in the program.

"Thankfully, these photos were taken at high resolution. So one would hope that we won't lose much data when we zoom in." He looked back at John for a moment. "It also helps that your girlfriend did some adjustments on the shadowy bits."

John did not smile at the remark. At present time, he doubted the connection between himself and Mary was at all salvageable. The problem was, he loved both Mary and Sherlock, and he did not want to let either of them go, but almost immediately he realized how stupid and selfish he sounded. Mary did not seem the type to be anything but monogamous, and John was almost certain he was quite the same way. But he knew he had to grow some stones and decide who he truly wanted to be with: someone kind, patient and reliable, or someone who was not only a good lay, but a good friend.

"Ah-ha," Sherlock said, shaking John out of his not so pleasant daydream. The doctor leaned forward, scrutinizing the image. He was about to speak, but whatever he was going to say left his mind completely as he identified the shape.

"That is not a branch."

Indeed it was not. Sherlock carefully adjusted the lighting just a little more and then clicked 'sharpen'. His eyes narrowed, pleased at his discovery, while John's eyes widened.

The silhouette formed a torso and an arm.

"Someone was watching her," Sherlock said. John inwardly confessed that he felt the same breed of satisfaction his partner presently felt as well, that sense that they had uncovered another piece of the puzzle.
"Someone from the cabin?" he offered, even though he had a feeling this was indeed the connection they were looking for.

"Very possibly," Sherlock replied, leaning back with fingers interlocked.

"Although that doesn't prove he had anything to do with her disappearance," John felt forced to add. "Sure, he's probably a perv - a voyeur, if you will - but we have absolutely nothing that suggests he did anything but watch her."

"Look at the date, John." Sherlock zoomed back out until the little yellow digits in the lower right corner became visible.

"The same day Sarah went missing..." the doctor murmured, wondering if that too could be a coincidence. "It's still just circumstantial, Sherlock. We don't know if--"

"This man, whether he was involved in her disappearance or not, would have been one of the last people to see her alive. Thus we'll need to find him, and find out what he knows."

"Saw her alive...? We can't even be sure she's dead!" John objected.

The detective did another one of his frustrated eye-rolls and then looked at John as if he were a complete idiot.

"That's obvious, isn't it? There's been no demand for a ransom, no communication whatsoever that might suggest the abductor had any interest in keeping Sarah alive. All we can hope to find at this time is a body and one or more perpetrators to answer for their crime."

John had to admit that his friend, for all his callousness and cold-hearted reasoning, was probably right. Sherlock's lack of a heart was what allowed him to see things clearly without being hindered or dragged down by sentiment.

"Should we tell Ferguson?" John asked.

Sherlock shook his head. "Not yet. I'd like to have more to go on before sharing the news with my client." He took another sip of coffee. "We should investigate. I believe it is of vital importance to find the source of that smoke, as well as the man whose silhouette we see right here."

"How can you be sure it's a man?"

"I cannot, but judging from the angle the picture was taken, the individual caught on camera is well above average in both height and build. Added to this we have the indisputable fact that voyeurism is far more prevalent in men than women, which significantly lowers the statistical probability of this being a female. Am I wrong?"

John shrugged. "Good point."

He wished he had thought of the deduction himself, that he could be a little cleverer to keep up with his partner's train of thought, but with the exception of Mycroft, John doubted many people at all could keep up with Sherlock Holmes' train of thought.

The quiet of the room was interrupted by the sound of a door opening, Mary's bedroom door to be precise. Sherlock did not seem to respond whatsoever, still staring at the laptop screen, but John looked up at her as she leant against the door frame. Wearing an oversized t-shirt, she looked surprisingly well-rested for having cried herself to sleep the previous night, based on what he heard from sleeping on the couch. Even so, her eyes still betrayed the sadness of discovering John's
infidelity. John wanted to apologize but it just seemed empty to do so anymore. He had been an egotistical idiot and wanted to make things right, but he did not know how.

Sherlock glanced at John, and even though he hardly wanted to take part in the strife between his partner and Mary, he had to admit that John sitting there staring like a dead fish was bloody annoying. He cleared his throat, which apparently jarred John from his uncomfortable paralysis.

"I, uh..."

"We seem to have no food," Mary stated.

"Yes, you're right," John replied. He absent-mindedly scratched at his jaw, feeling stubble that needed to be shaved.

"There was that store we passed, day before yesterday," she said. "The big yellow one? Some other visitors said it has practically everything. Perhaps a grocery run is in order."

"Then perhaps you can see to that?" Sherlock inquired, raising an eyebrow. "John and I will be busy working on the case. Can you find your way there, or must I draw you a map?"

"Sherlock!" the doctor objected, noticing with despair how Mary's features closed up entirely once more.

"What?" The detective looked from his friend to the woman, wondering why they both seemed so cross with his proposal. It made perfect sense, didn't it? "I was only suggesting a way for dear Mary to be of some use while we investigate. Now how about that map?"

"Mary, pay no attention to him," John quickly said, wishing there was a way to throttle Sherlock, or at least make him shut his mouth. Perhaps he could sew the detective's mouth closed next time he went to sleep? He doubted a Darth Vader force-choke would work.

"No, he's right," Mary said to John's great surprise. "I'd rather have something to do than just sit here while you two are busy elsewhere."

It was impossible for John to miss the not-so-subtle stab delivered through her choice of words. Blushing, the doctor averted his eyes, while the detective gave a melodramatic sigh to demonstrate his opinion on the matter.

"That cabin won't discover itself, John," he reminded his assistant.

"Yes, I know!" John snapped. Just when they had some peace on this trip... "Mary," he said carefully. "Let's go outside for a moment."

He almost expected her to refuse, to storm out the lodge, but she looked at him, expression blank, and nodded. She crossed the room, giving Sherlock a fleeting look before opening the door and walking out into the sunlight.

"Don't panic," John said - not without a little impatience - to his partner before following. Sherlock only sniffed indignantly and returned his attention to the laptop.

John did not know the time, having not put on a watch, but based on the position of the sun, he surmised that the more prominent businesses had to be open. The three of them had heard the dollar store, being the closest and biggest source of food and supplies for miles, was open quite late in the day, so hopefully this also meant it opened early as well.
"Would you like some company?" he asked Mary. "An extra hand in carrying bags?"

"What about your case?" the woman returned. "Sherlock can't seem to get through it without you, after all." Her statement was slightly bitter, but it had also been an attempt at humor that used to come so easily between her and the doctor.

"Oh, he'll be fine," John replied with a smile. "He's been figuring everything out on his own."

Mary swallowed, her eyes distant, and she glanced at her incompletely adorned state.

"It's still a missing person case," she said. "It can't be ignored. You should keep working."

"You heard the lady," Sherlock interjected from his seat at the couch. "This takes precedence."

"Go," Mary said curtly. "We'll talk later." Though her words held some promise - at least they would be talking now, as opposed to last night - John was not sure it was a conversation he wanted to have.

"Can we at least get dressed this time?" John asked, looking down at his dressing gown and slippers with a critical eye.

Granted they were at a nudist resort, but John did not fancy the idea of roaming the woods without a stitch of clothing. Sherlock previous attempt had also ended in misery for everyone involved. John thought with some regret that unless Sherlock had scorched his skin in the sun and collapsed from dehydration and fatigue, John would never have had to discover his use of antipsychotics, which then led to his trying to offer Sherlock console (and the detective accepting it), which in turn led to an illicit roll in the hay. The Butterfly Effect, as it were.

"Sure, I was going to suggest you wear something appropriate for a stroll through the forest," Sherlock replied. "We are going past the perimeters of the nudist colony. Loafers will not do. You did bring some sturdy hiking boots, right, John?"

John had brought a pair, but his original intention for bringing them had been romantic outdoor activities in the American wilderness with his new girlfriend rather than clue-hunting with Sherlock.

"Right, John?"

"Right."

"Excellent. Bring the mosquito spray as well, the air is thick with them."

John's face twisted in annoyance at the notion, and he scrambled for the spray amidst his luggage. For someone who had wanted to vacation somewhere radically different from his home, he was really missing London.

TBC...
Mary felt the stab of guilt while she got ready to leave, despite the sense of betrayal she still harboured. A nasty part of her mind tried to convince her that she should have seen this coming, should have noticed clues, much like Sherlock did in looking over a crime. But she had no idea John and Sherlock had even been in a relationship in the past.

She was a little thankful that they needed to restock on groceries. It hurt a little too much to stay in the lodge at the moment, and going out for a couple of hours might be a fitting distraction. With a rueful sigh, she surmised that she must have still loved John for it to still hurt like it did.

What was going to happen between her and John? Should she make the effort to forgive him? Should she move on and try to enjoy the rest of the vacation as best as possible?

Rubbing at her eyes and grabbing her purse and the keys to the rental car, she exited the bedroom and noted that John and Sherlock had already left to further investigate. Partly she was a little relieved that she did not have to tell them goodbye in an already uncomfortable environment, and she left the lodge, started the car, and drove out of the parking lot.

It hurt how easily John had chosen Sherlock's company over hers even this very morning. Was that abrasive, ill-balanced lunatic really that much more interesting than she, Mary wondered, that John would rather run himself sweaty through a dense forest riddled with mosquitoes instead of spending a quiet, peaceful, relaxing day with her at the poolside?

The cruel little voice from earlier returned, suggesting that looking for clues was not all the detective and the good doctor were up to in the woods. Mary had a sudden and most unwanted mental image of Sherlock deep-throating John against a massive tree and almost swerved into a ditch.

She slapped the steering wheel in response to her inattention and, with considerable effort, pushed the image out of her mind. John had been genuinely sorry for breaking her trust and would not do it again. Or so she wanted to believe.

Why did she agree to go on a trip to this godforsaken place with him? Mary suddenly wondered if she ought to curse the day she met John Hamish Watson, as her life had turned exceedingly
complicated ever since they began dating, and not in a good way. In retrospect, she realized she most likely would have turned down the doctor's advances had she known about the tall, alabaster-skinned consulting detective he called his flatmate.

A life with John Watson that did not include Sherlock Holmes was unlikely to become reality. Mary suspected that if pressed, John would choose Sherlock over her any day. Who was she trying to fool, thinking anything but the obvious? What did she have to offer? She was just Mary Morstan, a boring and mousy graphic designer. Certainly not mysteries and adventure. Or a penis.

She briefly considered dropping everything and heading for the nearest airport to purchase a one-way ticket back home. She had everything of importance in her purse; passport, phone, credit card and enough cash to get by. Never mind that most of her luggage was left at the cabin, or that she was wearing a sleeveless top and denim shorts.

She sighed, utterly torn. She had no idea where to turn. And within seconds, focusing as much as possible on the road, she felt the same way quite literally.

The paved road was little else but winding twists and turns, and even craning her neck to look ahead at where the curves would lead was nearly impossible, as the grounds were thick with trees. Added to the problem were the forks in the road that seemed at first to be the right path, but simply rendered her more lost than before. She crept along, figuring that she had to reach an end in this marginalized, cramped place, and that at least she might be able to turn around or find someone to ask directions from.

She should have taken a map, as suggested. In her lack of focus, she had at some point in the drive taken a wrong turn.

Mary drove for several minutes, delving ever deeper into woods and finding no other separate paths, and she was worried. Suddenly being lost in somewhere like Sussex seemed like a breeze compared to this. Presently the pavement had come to an end and she was now driving on dirt. Coming to a complete stop, she considered making a three-point-turn in the middle of the road, but the thought of someone familiar with the path coincidentally careening through at that very moment made her nervous. Even now, remaining immobile was a potential hazard, and going back in reverse would be worse.

"I can't fucking believe this..." she muttered to herself, not yet ready to face the very real possibility of being lost. Thus anger was a way to shield her from the fear which was sure to set in once the severity of the situation had made itself known.

Why had she agreed to make this stupid trip to the dollar store in the first place? Because Sherlock Holmes was too high and mighty to get his own groceries? And because John Watson - who was supposed to be her boyfriend, goddamn it - was too busy worshipping the ground he walked on?

Mary felt a sudden tightening in her throat and before she even knew it, she was fighting back tears. She knew that driving in her current condition was not a safe option and hazarded a stop by the roadside, as far out on the shoulder as possible, just in case.

She tried to remember the turns she had taken and felt her frustration increase when realizing that she couldn't. Left, right, right again, left... It was practically hopeless. She did not have Sherlock Holmes' photographic - no, eidetic - memory to help her along.

Could it really be true that she was lost in the forests of West Virginia? She fished her phone out of her purse just to be sure, but it was as bad as she had expected. Probably one could not get a decent signal for miles and miles around these areas.
Mary felt the first sting of actual fear. How long would it be before she could flag down someone to ask for directions? Would that person even be able to help her? Would they be willing to?

Nearly as soon as she wondered what to do, she just so happened to look to her left and caught a hint through the trees of a distant yet bold red. She squinted, desperate to confirm her suspicion.

A stop sign. Her heart leapt. The sign was very small, but she could see it nonetheless, and a sign meant higher traffic. Opening the driver's side door, she lifted herself above the hood and tried to make out the location of the street beyond such dense vegetation. If she was seeing correctly, she would have to turn around and regularly stop to keep her bearings of the sign itself. But her hope had been reignited.

She began to descend instantly back into her seat, but she paused when she heard a noise. Looking at her surroundings, a little twinge of fear returned. She did not hear the sound perfectly, but she could have sworn it was a footstep, and not from a deer or a fox. For a moment she almost called out a hello, but she had been properly spooked. After all, John and Sherlock were investigating a disappearance, which very well could have been an abduction.

Giving the stop sign one more quick glance, she sat down, closed the door, and turned the rental car around, driving the opposite way.

Attempting to keep the traffic sign in sight made the drive go slowly, but Mary was determined to stay patient. Distracting herself from the task at hand had gotten her into this problem after all. When she came to a fork in the road, she had to lift herself above the vehicle once more, which made her nervous, thinking back to the possible footstep earlier. The left turn appeared to take her away from the stop sign, but the right turn was once again dirt.

She had once read that people choosing directions on random - like those who were lost in the woods - most often went in the direction of their dominant hand. Mary was right-handed, but something within her urged her to choose left; a feeling she could not describe but the closest she could think of was like a needle pressed to the end of her spine. The rational part of her brain baulked at the supposed 'hunch'. Her so-called female intuition, raised to such heights by many women, had caused her to make some truly catastrophic choices in the past. Like when it told her John Watson would be a catch.

In the end, she chose to take the right turn, not intimidated by the lack of pavement, as she had been driving on dirt roads for a good while now. She assumed it was more of a standard in these backwater communities.

Mary drove on for a while, clinging to the vain hope that the next turn would take her onto a bigger road, hopefully with more traffic and perhaps even road signs that would direct her back to Avalon. Though she would never confess it publically, she was dying to see a familiar face, even Sherlock's at this point.

The dirt road was beginning to get muddy, a peculiar thing since it had not rained for several days. However, looking past the trees again, Mary noted that the sign seemed even closer now, and it inspired her to drive onward.

How on earth was the ground so muddy? she wondered, completely baffled. As she continued to drive, the road just grew worse and worse. Where was the water coming from which had made all this mud? Certainly the weather was rather humid, but not to the point of having to drive through dirt the consistency of jam.

While navigating the mud, Mary tried to keep an eye out for the sign. And by the time she realized
what the car was approaching, the tires were sinking. She felt the downward lurch and though a crash did not follow, the vehicle still came to a full stop.

Now the panic had returned. Mary pressed the accelerator down, but the car remained still as a stone and the tires spun in the mud without traction.

"Fucking shit..." she cursed, hitting the steering wheel. "SHIT." Mary slumped in the seat, her breath slow as she tried to calm herself.

No way we'll be getting the deposit back on the rental, she thought. Were the circumstances different, she might have laughed.

Opening the door, she inspected the situation in disbelief. A creek traveled parallel to the road, but had also forked across it, thus creating the mud. Mary frowned when she noticed what looked to be a small, improvised dam at the other side of the road.

She started at it for a long moment, wondering if it was truly man-made and not something which - no doubt exceedingly rare - could have formed naturally, or by the intervention of wildlife, such as beavers. After a more thorough analysis, she deemed it unlikely. The height of the construction was far too great to have been done by a beaver, or even several.

But why? It made no sense at all... Unless, of course, the purpose of the dam was to stop the outflow of water from the road and favor the creation of mud. Which in turn would trap vehicles.

Mary's anger grew as she considered the possibility. Was this the 'southern hospitality' - or considerable lack of it - these areas were famous for?

"Fucking rednecks..." she muttered, pressing down once more on the gas pedal only to get the same disappointing results. She realized she would likely burn the engine by trying and instead turned it off, half-expecting to see smoke billow from under the hood.

What was she supposed to do now? Leave the car and walk? At least it offered a modicum of shade and protection from the elements. The sun was relentlessly and mercilessly baking the landscape with afternoon heat. If she couldn't find help, she might get even more lost and possibly die from heatstroke, like Sherlock had been close to doing the previous day.

With trembling hands, Mary reached for the capped water bottle in her purse, suddenly wondering if she ought to ration it. Keeping her breathing slow and her eyes shut, she unscrewed the lid, took a careful gulp, and fumbled with the cap as she tried to close the bottle. She could not stay hidden in the car all day, but the prospect of wandering in the woods all alone still frightened her. Mary took a deep breath, opened her eyes, and opened the door... And froze as she saw the movement of sunlight on metal not twenty yards away.

She wanted to excuse the fleeting sight as a figment of her imagination, of wet leaves being moved by a gust of wind... except the air was dead still.

Trembling hands gripping the door frame until they were white, Mary hardly gave another thought before the flash of metal hurtled towards her. The arrow whistled past her ear and lodged itself deep into the dashboard, and Mary fought every instinct to bolt out of the rental car and run. She had no bearings here and whomever was attacking her would quickly run her down and find her. And kill her. Likely amongst several other things.

Mary slammed the door shut, locked herself in, and hoped desperately that steel and glass would be enough between her and her attacker whilst she tried to get this damned vehicle to move, god damn
it, move!

The car, however, refused to cooperate. The wheels spun helplessly in the mud, failing to obtain leverage. Part of Mary realized that her panicked attempts to get the car moving were detrimental rather than helpful, but another part refused to admit defeat. Doing nothing equaled giving up, and there was no way she was going to do that. She would fight, tooth and nail, to the last breath to stay alive.

Another arrow was fired toward her, this time shattering the driver side window and embedding itself in the headrest of her seat. The pane of glass practically exploded, showering the woman's hair and features with tiny shards. Mary screamed, even though she could not feel any pain at the moment. Her adrenaline-fuelled body did not allow it; her two choices consisted of fight or flight, and thus far, she was set on flight.

Crouching down behind the steering wheel to make herself as small as possible to avoid being hit by an arrow, a bullet, or any other projectile that her attacker might feel like hurling in her direction, Mary considered abandoning the car to seek refuge amongst the foliage. In here she was an easy target; too easy. She would put herself at risk when crossing the road (she now thanked the fates for the narrowness of it), but if she managed to launch herself into the thicket, her chances of survival would increase by far.

She cowered at the floor by the pedals for another few seconds, which seemed to stretch on forever in her fear-riddled mind. She even asked herself the - mostly rhetorical - question: what would Sherlock Holmes have done? Rhetorical because she was not Sherlock Holmes.

Mary was trying to collect enough courage the fling the car door open and make her spurt.

"You can do it, you can do it, you can do it, you can do it...."

She kept chanting the words to herself, as if uttering them enough times would make them true.

Her decision was taken from her when something massive landed on the roof of the car, heavy enough to make a dent in the steel. A scream lodged deep in Mary's throat finally broke free, and she surrendered fully to panic.

A shrill cackle that nearly did not sound human followed from above. Whatever had landed on the roof was now laughing at her predicament, at her scream of terror.

The unseen figure jumped once in excitement on the roof, and with a horrible crash, it slammed its weapon against the windshield, sending a spider web of cracks into the glass. Shielding her face instinctively behind her hands, she doubted she would be able to break loose from the car and reach the woods in time. Whatever the thing from above was wielding, it would likely stop her. Already she could imagine her skull cracking the same way the windshield had.

Instead of continuing with the windshield, the cackling thing jumped down from the roof and took a swing at the front passenger window, shattering it and peering inside. Mary was in disbelief that a human being could look so horrible. Giggling and grinning with more gums than teeth, it reached through the broken window for the lock.

Mary backed up against the further end of the cramped space, bending her legs. Perhaps if she timed her defense well enough, she could kick the evil bastard when the door was finally forced open.

The hand fiddling with the lock, she realized, only had three fingers, and the skin was scarred and blemished, practically knotted in places, the fingernails scraggly and long, claw-like. The creature
was human, but just barely. It made another maniacal, high-pitched cackling sound as it finally
managed to unlock the door and reached to open it.

Mary kicked at the wretched creature and caught him clean in the face. Her only regret was the fact
that she was wearing Converse sneakers rather than stiletto heels, but she was nonetheless proud of
the force behind the kick. Her attacker staggered back for a moment, clearly surprised by her
ferociousness, but he did not howl or cry out, as one might expect from a fellow who had just
received a vicious kick to the head. A trail of blood leaked from his aquiline nose, staining the few
misshaped teeth he had left, but he quickly returned, wearing an expression on his scarred, deformed
face which suggested he did not simply want to kill her, or rape her, but literally gnaw the flesh off
her bones. He was actually salivating.

Mary threw herself at the driver side window, hell bent on getting out before this monster could get a
hold of her. She was blind to everything else, uncaring that she cut open the skin of her forearms
against the shards left by the broken window, or that she was likely to be intercepted by him as soon
as she had gotten to her feet. All that mattered now was to get out of his reach. The car was a fortress
she had to abandon. The siege was over.

Mary lashed out a second time when she felt his hand wrap around her ankle. The uncomfortable
angle greatly reduced the strength in her legs, but fuelled by panic, she was still able to dislodge him.
Feeling like a trapped caterpillar, Mary slid out of the car, landing heavily on her back. The fall
caused further abrasions, but she had no time to concern herself over those. What drew her full
attention were the boots which seemed to fill her entire range of vision. They were indeed the biggest
boots she had ever seen.

Looking up, she barely made out the hulking, enormous mass that was the giggling lunatic's
companion before it knelt towards her and drove a massive fist into her face. She knew nothing then.

TBC...
Chapter 13

Chapter Summary

The Baker Street boys head back into the woods for further investigation...

"This looks like the place," John announced, looking back and forth from the camera to his and Sherlock's surroundings. "Then again, all of the trees are starting to look the same."

"Your sense of perspective is ridiculous," Sherlock replied, continuing to walk as though he knew exactly where he was going. He likely did, John surmised.

"They don't all look the same. You're just letting it overwhelm you."

"Well, nobody ever said I was the outdoors type," John argued, following him.

"Then why go on holiday to an area that's prominently forest?" Sherlock asked, noting some peculiarly placed undergrowth.

"Well, the trip itself wasn't originally going to involve this amount of forest," John said, not without a certain level of exasperation. "Also, the trip wasn't originally supposed to turn into a case."

Sherlock seemed to be ignoring him. "Look here."

He waved towards the branches. Indeed, they looked as though someone had propped them up to block something from sight. Pulling them away, the men saw a worn down path leading deeper into the woods.

"A little too deliberately inconspicuous," John noted aloud. Sherlock made an affirming noise and, spotting something on the path, moved forward, leaning closer as he inspected it. Curious, John pocketed the camera and joined him. His eyes widened a little when he looked at it.

"What size would you say that is?" Sherlock asked, not bothering to wait for input. "I'm an eleven..." He carefully placed his own shoe next to the gigantic boot print. It was twice as large as his own shoe.

John swallowed thickly, standing up straight. He was suddenly reminded of the Golem, and briefly worried that the hit man was truly their culprit.

"Well it would certainly be easy for this fellow to abduct his victims, based on his size alone," he observed.

Sherlock stood and followed the path for a few minutes, John trailing behind and photographing the alarming boot print. Another set of prints were nearly mistaken for those of the giant, but were noted by Sherlock to be slightly smaller and of different make, and a third set were the smallest of the group, perhaps around the size of Sherlock's shoes. The doctor photographed all of them, as well as
the path entrance which someone (the owners of the tracks?) had tried to hide.

"Obviously we're dealing with more than one culprit..." John muttered, trying his hardest to see if there was anything more to be deduced from the boot prints apart from the fact that they had not been made by the same man. To his great aggravation, he could not think of anything meaningful to add.

Sherlock did not look up at his partner, too engrossed in studying the evidence at hand.

"There's no proof yet that any of these... men were involved in Mrs. Cavanaugh's disappearance," he said, "and a week of exposure to the elements has undoubtedly eradicated most if not all clues left."

"Then we're wasting our time, aren't we?" John asked sourly, whisking away an irksome mosquito that had been buzzing about his head for some time. "There's nothing to discover."

"Oh, I wouldn't say 'nothing'," Sherlock countered and finally rose to his full height beside John. "I can discern tracks from three different individuals--"

"And I salute your powers of observation!" the doctor snapped, angry and annoyed at the detective's need to gloat as well as his own shortcomings in the area.

"If you let me finish, I'll let you!" Sherlock growled back. "First, the giant. Well over two metres tall, judging by the size of his boots and the length of his stride. Now, if you look at the prints."

John dutifully looked where Sherlock pointed.

"Four sets of tracks by this man, going in opposite directions. Steel-toed boots, the brand is, if my memory serves me correctly, a Timberland Pro product. This fellow is too large to obtain his shoes from a common shoe store, so he'd probably have to get them custom-made. But he's not bothered to acquire new boots in the past fifteen to twenty years, so either he doesn't have the means to do so, or it's not on his list of priorities."

"Impressive, Sherlock," John said drily. "However..."

"There's more. The impression of his right foot is less distinct than the left. What does that tell you?"

"He has a limp," John suggested. "On his right leg?"

"Quite so, but do you see the uneven distribution of weight shown in this print? It suggests a congenital birth defect, a curvature of the spine, which renders this man's right leg shorter than his left."

"So, a giant with a curved back? Is that whom we're looking for?"

"Amongst others..." the detective murmured, his attention now focused on the smallest set of prints. "This one worries me," he said, pointing to them. "The stride is different. See?"

"So..." John suggested, "small stride, small person?"

Sherlock looked up at him with an annoyed glare. John gave an awkward smile, but it was clear that his partner was in no mood to joke.

"This one's a runner," the doctor said. "Also, the pathway by that set of prints isn't in so straight a line as the others. Maybe someone the giant was chasing?"

"No," Sherlock said, already sounding like he was thinking ahead on another clue. "Too many prints for this one as well, as haphazard as they are. It's a companion."
John looked a little taken aback. "So, added with this other set of prints, that's... three possible abductors?"

"Perhaps more..." The detective looked back at John. "But that's not definite unless we find more tracks. Or the group itself. But either way, the giant could be outrun or avoided on foot, short of him having a weapon. This little one here, no such limp. Man or woman, it would be more of a problem in a chase. Given any of them are in decent health..."

"What makes you say that?"

Sherlock stood, looking at the third set of prints, far bigger than the small ones, but not quite as large as those of the giant. Long strides again, and deep impressions in the dirt, suggesting a weight similar to the bigger man.

"Do you remember our little chat back at home about this part of the country?"

"Vaguely," John said, trying not to bristle. He did remember, as well as Sherlock insinuating that Mary likely wanted to come here to visit deformed relatives.

John lifted an eyebrow, slightly doubtful. "You think our possible suspects really are the stereotype everyone makes about Appalachia?"

"A group marginalized from society and its rules and taboos..." he trailed off, then waved to the tracks. "We have one giant with severe curvature of the spine and subsequent shorter leg. It's possible. Followed by another sizeable fellow... could be a family."

"Inbred mountain men?" John was flabbergasted by the mere idea. That kind of stuff didn't happen except in shoddy, low-budget horror movies, which he made a point of not watching.

"Think about it, John," Sherlock said. "Our giant fellow with the curved spine would be a most memorable figure, were he known in these parts, hardly someone who could hide in plain sight. The only way for him to stay unnoticed is to live like a hermit in these woods."

"That's hardly conclusive, Sherlock," the doctor objected. "In fact, it's a ridiculous theory, and unworthy of you. Just because someone appears to be taller than average and has a limp doesn't mean they belong to a family of inbred killer rednecks. Come on, this isn't 'Deliverance'!"

"What about the picture?" Sherlock insisted. "He was spying on Sarah Cavanaugh, exactly where we're standing now!"

"Okay, the guy might be a perv, emphasis on 'might', since we can't be sure it's even him in that photo, since we could only see a silhouette, but it still proves nothing."

"It's reason enough to find him."

John shook his head, wishing there was some way to talk Sherlock out of pursuing this trail. Not only was it illogical and against all common sense, but completely absurd. Even if they could locate the man in the photo, what would they ask him? If he had abducted any women recently? If he enjoyed hiding in the undergrowth to spy on naked hikers? If he was an inbred lunatic?

John could only imagine the man's response to such inquiries, and what his mind conjured up was not even remotely positive. With any luck, they would have time to get off the man's property before he returned with a shotgun.

"We've investigated for quite a while," John noted aloud, not without a little trepidation. "We should
"get going."

"We haven't been out that long," Sherlock retorted.

"Yes, but suppose we're trespassing...?" John replied, already heading back from where they came.

The younger man snorted at the suggestion. "Well now you're just being silly. What are we trespassing, their favorite bush for doing a wee in?"

John rolled his eyes. "We don't need to have you collapsing again, so I'd rather you not exhaust yourself today. There should be food by the time we get back, and you do need to eat, as much as you don't believe so."

Giving an annoyed sigh, Sherlock finally gave in, following his assistant. "Will you at least spoon feed me?" he asked slyly.

"What," John said, elbowing him, "is that what Mycroft used to do?"

"Maybe I'll stay out here all night," Sherlock muttered. "Get eaten by a bear. Or our culprits."

"Please," John laughed. "They would probably have other uses for you."

"Of course," the other man replied as he hurried on ahead, not surprisingly having memorized their route from Avalon. "None can resist my charms. Not you, especially."

*

By the time Sherlock and John made it back to their lodge, the time was a little after one o'clock in the afternoon. Sherlock would not admit that he was hungry, as looking forward to lunch meant looking forward to what Mary had bought, and the thought of Mary still reminded him of his unfortunate argument with John. Even so, he preferred to avoid anything close to what had happened at the sauna.

"Mary, we're back!" John hollered jovially as he entered and then quickly removed his hiking boots, which had gotten pretty muddy during their little excursion. Sherlock followed his example, too low on energy and frankly too hungry to take the argument which was sure to follow if he made a mess of the cabin.

Back on Baker Street, Mrs. Hudson could be counted on to keep a clean house, equipped with the patience of a saint and used to the bohemian ways of her young detective tenant, despite continuous claims that she was not his housekeeper.

"Mary?" John repeated, discouraged but not entirely surprised at the lack of response. He had no doubt she was still angry with him. Hell, she had every right to be after what he had done.

"She's not back yet," Sherlock informed him and flopped onto the couch in a most ungraceful heap of long, lanky limbs. At least it was an improvement from yesterday, when he had dropped down half-dead. Plus he had remembered to put sun-block on his face and arms, which was certainly promising.

"What...? You're sure? We've been out for ninety minutes." John called out his girlfriend's name once more and was met with nothing but silence.

"Maybe she took a wrong turn," Sherlock suggested. "I knew I should have drawn her a map even she could read," he then added with a slight tone of regret.
"Enough of that," John said, feeling as though he were reprimanding a child. The feeling was one he was quite used to. "Maybe we should wait a little longer..."

"Until what, the weekend when this place actually serves food?" Sherlock asked tiredly. "We'll starve by then. AND with the rental car gone, we won't be able to go get groceries for ourselves."

"Oh stop it!" John said, quite sick of his partner's behavior. He sighed and took a seat on the bed where Mary had slept. "It's unnecessary that you prattle on and on about nothing but yourself at the moment."

"It's not just about myself, John," Sherlock argued, standing up and entering the bedroom. "You'll starve to death too. Perhaps not as quickly as me..."

"Mary is gone!" John snapped, clenching his hands and standing from his seat. "Yes, she's taken the car, yes, we are without food, YES, our phones are not functioning. And I have no idea what my relationship with her is presently, but I still care about her and she is GONE."

Sherlock stared at his assistant for a moment, but then walked over to the closet as John continued to rant.

"And knowing what an utter shit I've been to both of you, she likely left for good and got a plane ticket back home." John rubbed his face with his hands and sank back onto the bed, feeling hopeless. "What the hell is wrong with me, Sherlock..."

"A book wouldn't cover all of it," Sherlock replied, opening the closet door. "And despite my opinion towards Miss Morstan, I can assure you she didn't leave you for being a twat."

John turned his head to look into the closet space. All of Mary's clothes, as well as her luggage bags, were still within. John stared mutely at the items for a few very long seconds while his over-worked and agitated brain did its best to process the sight and how it was connected to Mary's absence. The good news was that she had apparently not left for England in a fit of rage, but the bad news was that they had no idea where she'd gone.

"We should notify the authorities..." John murmured, pulling his hands over his face.

"She's only been gone one and a half hours, John," Sherlock replied, and his tone was surprisingly gentle. "There's hardly any cause for concern at this point."

"A trip to the dollar store shouldn't take ninety minutes! Something's wrong, I know it!"

Sherlock felt like adding that he could have made it to the store and back within forty minutes, and so would anyone with half a brain, but he managed to restrain himself, realizing that John likely wanted to hear words of reassurance rather than stone cold facts.

"Like I said, it's a bit premature to assume anything untoward has happened to her as of yet. Perhaps she got stuck in a queue?"

John gave a derisive snort. "Yeah, very likely in a place like this!"

"Alright, not very likely," Sherlock agreed. "But panicking when there's no cause for it is not going to do one lick of good for any of us." He carefully approached John and placed one long, white hand on his friend's shoulder, unsure whether this was the right thing to do. But John had criticized him in the past for not being tactile enough, and Sherlock wanted to show his assistant that he could improve.
John tensed at first, in slight disbelief at what his partner was doing, but he quickly calmed at the contact. Despite all which had happened within the past week alone, he appreciated the gesture, especially from someone who was never very keen on showing affection. He felt a squeeze from Sherlock’s long fingers and managed to give him a smile.

"Thank you," he said, his tone sincere.

Sherlock smiled back, but only for a moment.

"How do you manage to stay so calm?" the doctor said, walking into the kitchenette and preparing a kettle for tea. Sherlock leaned against the door frame of the bedroom, reminding John of how Mary stood that very morning.

"I don't, remember?" Sherlock said with a smirk. "I drive myself into fainting spells and fry my skin with the sunlight." He joined his assistant next to the counter as they waited for the water to reach the proper temperature. "And you do better than you think. All of that military training had to do with it, I imagine."

"Some of it doesn't take at times, though..." John noted plainly. "When it has to do with someone I care about. Mary, my sister... you."

"Oh, only sometimes," Sherlock replied, replacing his hand on the shoulder and giving a small smile when John took the hand in his own, squeezing back. "You handled me quite well when I collapsed in the sauna, after all. We'll have some tea, wait a little longer, and then take a look around, alright?"

"Alright."

TBC...
Chapter 14

Chapter Summary

Sherlock does some online research and has another talk with his client, Bobbi Ferguson.

Chapter 14

John's anxiety grew with each passing hour that Mary remained absent. He paced the lodge restlessly, wringing his hands and picking up on the slightest sound from outside that might indicate Mary's return. Sadly, every time he rushed to the windows, hoping to see his irate but unharmed girlfriend stomping toward the lodge, he was left disappointed.

Sherlock, meanwhile, had taken up a seat on the couch and not moved since. He had unceremoniously shoved John's improvised bedding aside and sat with his long legs crossed, balancing his laptop precariously on one knee. John hated the fact that a lousy internet connection was their only means of communicating with the outside world, short of asking to use the landline for the resort itself.

"She's been gone five hours now," John said when 4 p.m. rolled around and there had still been no word from Mary. "Something's wrong, Sherlock! You agree, right? Sherlock!"

The detective held up a hand to silence John while his other hand stayed busy typing on the keyboard.

"You don't even care, do you?" John spat out, furious at his partner's impassive and callous behaviour. "A brain without a heart', that's what someone said to describe you, and they're bloody right!"

"Save it, John," Sherlock snapped back. "Care alone won't bring Mary back to you. I've been doing some research that will hopefully bring our case forward."

"How can you possibly think about the case now?!"

Sherlock rolled his eyes. "You can either shout at me and call me a heartless wretch, or you can come look at my findings. Which is it?"

John opened his mouth to yell further insults at the detective, and though it would have been momentarily gratifying, he came to realize how unproductive it was, and Sherlock, despite his emotional shortcomings, did not deserve to be used as John's outlet for frustrations. He sat next to his friend on the couch and redirected his attention to the laptop screen.

"When Bobbi Ferguson first wrote to me, she mentioned "disappearances". In plural. When she described the case to me in closer detail, I paid no attention to her initial words, dismissing them as a simple typo, but today I began to wonder about their significance."

"Disappearances? You mean there's more?"
Sherlock nodded, clearly deep in thought. He opened a Firefox window displaying a newspaper article dating back to September 7th, 2007, and the headline made John's breath hitch in his throat. "Couple Missing" in bold print, followed by a grainy, black-and-white photograph of a middle-aged pair of people, the woman blond and overweight and the man slightly slimmer, but with a receding hairline.

"Disappeared without a trace, never seen since," Sherlock said. "They were guests here at Avalon. And there's more." Sherlock opened up another news article, this one dating back to 2003 and describing in intimate detail the disappearance of college students Richard Stoker and Hayley Smith, who had, according to friends and family, "failed to return from a weekend of rock-climbing".

"Where was that?" John asked, getting a closer look at the article. Sherlock opened a separate window for a map of West Virginia and its surrounding locales. The college students had vanished in a different location... but still within driving distance of the area.

"Too much of a coincidence?" he asked. Sherlock joined hands together as if in prayer, leaning back. A ghost of a smile moved his lips and was gone just as quickly as it had appeared. "I have a question or two to ask our client." Closing the laptop, he stood and began to remove his clothes.

"Dare I ask...?" John said, watching as his partner and friend stripped down to practically nothing.

"Gesture of good will, remember?" the detective replied. "Blending in with the natives as before and keeping their trust."

"Right," the older man muttered. "We may be dealing with savage abductors in the middle of practically nowhere, but this isn't some seventies' cannibal film."

"You never know," Sherlock said as he shrugged off his shirt.

The man was relatively nude save for his shoes, and a mental image occurred to John of his friend in nothing but his ratty blue scarf. He considered suggesting the notion one day to Sherlock, and immediately wanted to punch himself in the face. Sherlock, Mary... perhaps John was better off courting no one at all.

"Don't forget sun block," he said, both as a gesture to prevent a repeat of yesterday and an attempt to distract himself from his daydreams. Sherlock grabbed the nearby tube without hesitation and quickly slathered the lotion on, only to be interrupted by his friend's own hands, smoothing the rather sloppy application.

"I won't be very long," Sherlock announced, opening the door. He turned to look at John. "Stay here in case Mary comes back."

Oh, that was an instruction John did not require at present. He was prepared to stay put for days on end if it meant being there for Mary's return. However, Sherlock's most recent research had left him with a sinking sense of dread, and in a corner of his heart he had begun to doubt he would ever see Mary again.

Sherlock walked briskly toward Ferguson's trailer, trying to make haste without making it too obvious that he was in a hurry. He received several curious, inquisitive glances from the people he passed on his way, some of them openly appreciative and admiring, others slightly more reserved.

Rumors travelled fast in a place like this, and no doubt many of them had heard gossip of the English detective with the keen, piercing blue eyes and deep, sultry voice that had arrived in their little community. A pair of teenage girls lounging about by the outdoor pool went into a giggling fit when
he walked by, their heads together as they whispered and guffawed in a way that was downright rude, not to mention unladylike.

Sherlock, though tempted, held back any acerbic comments he could have thrown at them. If his suspicions were true, there was no time to lose.

The curtains were drawn in Bobbi Ferguson's trailer, and there was no certain way of telling if she was home. If his first destination failed, he could think of a few more probable places to look for her.

Even so, he still knocked. The trailer door rattled and he heard movement from within, followed by his client's voice telling him to wait "just a second". Looking around the location, Sherlock suddenly felt a chill, despite the summer temperature.

Thinking himself an unwavering stone of a man, he hardly wanted to admit that he was beginning to find the place - in fact the entire area of Avalon and that surrounding it - incredibly unnerving. A location which could have been comforting and beautiful in its unending nature and lack of the stressful 'real world' was now alien and foreboding in its disconnect from the help which civilization might provide. Even now, the trees were feeling more like prison bars and hovels where any threat could be hiding. Sherlock found himself trying to remember how many venomous animals lived in this particular tri-state area.

When the door opened, Ferguson was wearing only a t-shirt, and somehow it made her seem even more naked than to wear nothing whatsoever. Upon seeing the detective, her eyes widened with anticipation.

"Anything?" she asked, practically holding her breath for an answer.

"We've discovered an area where Mrs. Cavanaugh was wandering," Sherlock replied nonchalantly. "It had a certain amount of tracks made by others that has us... concerned."

"Us?" She gave the word a moment of thought, and then it occurred to her. "Oh, yeah, your partner."

Sherlock noticed the emphasis on the word partner, but said nothing in regards to it.

"Tell me," he said, "would there be any other people inhabiting these woods?"

"No, there wouldn't," the woman answered, but she looked aside. "Except..."

Sherlock lifted an eyebrow, patience wearing thin. "Yes?"

"This is gonna sound dumb," Ferguson said, and already Sherlock wanted to snap at her to get to her point. "But there's sort of a rumor that's gone around for the past few years. It's been around since before I got here and that was ten years now... Anyway, people have talked about something being in the woods, maybe even before the seventies. The resort doesn't really like to talk about it. I dunno if you have mountain men in your country...?"

Sherlock gave a short, dry bark of laughter. "Not much in the way of mountains in England," he said. "But I think I know the kind you're referring to."

Bobbi suddenly looked visibly troubled. "It's really just a bullshit story, Mr. Holmes. An urban legend, a campfire tale, something the kids tell their younger siblings to scare them. I didn't think to mention it, because knew you wanted hard facts, not silly rumours."

"My methods are built on the observation of trifles, details, no matter how small or insignificant they
may appear. By telling me, you could have been of great help, instead of leaving me to figure things out for myself."

Ferguson stared at him incredulously. "You can't seriously believe a group of mountain men have taken Sarah, can you? That's just..."

"Ridiculous?" Sherlock coolly returned the woman's stare. "Outrageous? There's something else, Miss Ferguson," he continued, taking a step towards her. "Aren't you going to invite me in?"

"Oh! Yes, of course." The woman stepped aside to let the detective pass, and Sherlock stepped inside the trailer, noting that nothing had really been changed since his first visit the previous day, aside from the pile of dishes in the sink, which had been added to. He also glimpsed two empty wine bottles in Ferguson's trash bin, and wondered if the woman had taken her comfort in drink.

"In your first email to me, you hinted at something. I dismissed it then, didn't figure it had any relevance. Now I believe it might have."

"Whatever are you talking about?" Bobbi asked, her eyes and mouth wide open with confusion.

"Sarah's not the first person to have disappeared from Avalon. There was that couple in '07. You've been going here for ten years, and you seem to be a pretty tightly knit community. Surely you knew them, or at least knew *of* them?"

Bobbi Ferguson nodded solemnly. "Phyllis and Chris..." she said in quiet, hushed tones. "I knew them."

"Terribly well?"

She shrugged. "Yes and no. They were sorta weird. The joke going around was that we liked their dogs better than them. Two little dogs: a mini pinscher and a pug."

Sherlock did not recall a mention of pets in the news article. "Did the dogs go missing as well?"

"No, they were still in the cabin. That's what clued people in. They heard the dogs whining and barking inside. Neither Phyllis or Chris would've have just left their dogs unattended like that."

"And their clothing and essentials were still in the cabin as well?"

"Yes," the woman replied forlornly. She gave a joyless chuckle as she reminisced. "They were celebrating their wedding anniversary and decided to go exploring the woods. We all joked that because they were drunk they were trying to be kinky out there, having sex with the wildlife watching them."

"Perhaps they were being watched," Sherlock muttered. "And by more than just the hedgehogs."

"The what?" Ferguson said interrupting his train of thought.

Sherlock sneered. "It's a small mammal that--"

"I know what a hedgehog is," she said, annoyed. "We don't have them. We have porcupines."

"Wonderful," Sherlock remarked under his breath. "My point is that we have suspicions of an unknown party hiding in the woods, making abductions."

"I knew it!" Ferguson stood up, hands clenched into fists in determination. "We need to call the police about this!"
"They would not believe us," Sherlock stated without hesitation and gestured for his client to sit back down. "All we have are rumours and some circumstantial evidence at best. To make them take us seriously, we're going to need more solid proofs of these individuals' existence."

"And how do you propose we get that?" Bobbi asked.

"I intend to find their nest and search it through. Look for anything that could be used to incriminate them." Like a body, or remains of one, he thought, but did not say it out loud, as he suspected Ferguson did not want to think of her friend in such terms.

"Do you think…" She swallowed, and her eyes suddenly brimmed with tears. "Do you think there's any chance Sarah might still be alive?"

"I think, Miss Ferguson… that you may have to prepare for the worst."

Unlike many seemed to think, Sherlock took no joy in giving people, especially his own clients, bad news. These people came to him for answers, not sympathy, callous though it sounded. A pat on the shoulder and meaningless words of comfort which held no truth offered no help whatsoever to someone in Bobbi Ferguson's situation, and Sherlock kept reminding himself of that as he explained his standpoint to his client.

"The best we can hope to recover is a body, and even there I have my doubts," he said.

* *

Sherlock heard a dramatic shuffling of movement as he ascended the stairs towards his own cabin, knowing immediately that Mary had not returned. Sure enough, the door flew open, and for that fleeting moment, he saw the look of hope on John's face, much like Bobbi Ferguson. John's face dropped however when he saw Sherlock, and his body sagged against the door frame.

"Our suspicions were correct," the younger man said gently. "Rumors have been going around for decades of something being in the woods.

John barely looked at him, lost in his own thoughts, and Sherlock knew what his assistant was thinking. The thought had crossed his mind as well that whomever was living out in the forest had now added Mary to their collection of victims.

"We should go back out," he said. John faintly nodded, but he did not seem to leave his reverie until a long pale hand touched his shoulder. He winced, but finally looked Sherlock straight in the eye.

"You'll have to get dressed again," he said.

Sherlock smiled. "A shame I didn't try to smuggle a gun."

John looked sad for a moment. "If you had, you would have been held back in Heathrow. We would have found out later about our motel room, but at least we wouldn't be here. We wouldn't be in this mess."

Sherlock's face was an icy mask, devoid of emotion as he let the words sink in.

"Stay here," he said plainly. "I'll get dressed and then we'll go back to the woods."

TBC...
Chapter 15

Chapter Summary

Another search through the woods near Avalon, and our heroes discover some very disturbing clues...

Chapter 15

They left Avalon with only a few words uttered between them. The sun was quickly descending into the west, and John estimated they had less than two hours of daylight left. He hardly dared to consider the options if they came up with nothing on this excursion.

Was a person required to have been missing for twenty-four hours before the police would officially file a missing persons report? If Sherlock's suspicions turned out true, Mary did not have twenty-four hours. In fact, she might not even be alive anymore.

John quenched the painful thought and tried to banish it from his mind, but it kept returning like a stubborn fly drawn to a sugary substance. If their motive for abducting Mary was truly what he feared, John saw no reason why they would keep her alive for any period at all, as opposed to slaying her on sight.

The doctor felt like slapping himself for having such thoughts. Really; a clan of cannibalistic mountain men living off of unsuspecting townsfolk and tourists? The rational part of his brain refused to acknowledge that such a notion could even be possible in a civilized country in the 21st century. Although, he then thought, anything resembling 'civilization' seemed even more remote in these parts than the idea of murderous hillbillies.

John knew that he had created a rift between himself and Sherlock with his unthinking words about Sherlock being the cause of their troubles. The detective could not have foreseen these events anymore than John himself, and did not deserve the blame for something he had no influence over. John wondered if he should try to apologize, but at the same time, he did not want to disrupt Sherlock's concentration.

The detective was closely scrutinizing the ground, looking for tire tracks that would help determine the route Mary had taken previously that day. John wished there was something - anything - he could do to help, but for someone without Sherlock's astute powers of observation, looking for tire tracks was a lost cause.

The clues were clear that Mary had lost her way when trying to find the main road leading to the dollar store. In some paths of the road, she had doubled back and driven through multiple times, suggesting she had not noticed in some moment of lost nerve. John looked around at the trees, noting they all started looking the same after a while. Someone would have to pay very close attention to details to keep track of where they were.

Like Sherlock.
"John!" the younger man called out, causing John to flinch. He hurried over to where his partner stood and his blood ran cold at the sight.

The copious presence of thick, deep mud likely obscured other clues, but the most telling were also the most frightening to John. Fragments of broken glass from a vehicle, deep tire tracks from said vehicle, likely stuck in the thick muck... and a trail of blood leading away from the scene.

"This is recent, of course," Sherlock noted aloud, "based on the blood alone."

He looked up at John, silently noting the sudden lack of color in his assistant's face, and though John's blame of their current situation still stung, he felt a need to provide some measure of comfort. However, comfort would wait. The kidnapped still needed to be found and their abductors sought out.

"We'll find her," he said, taking a step toward John.

The doctor seemed in a daze, but he swallowed, his throat feeling so dry, and then nodded. "Shall we go back to the trail we found earlier?" he asked, steeling his mind and desperate to stamp out his faint feeling.

"No, we've already examined it, and it's a dead end," the detective murmured, his brow furrowed deep in concentration. "We should follow these tracks instead."

Sherlock pointed, and though John obediently followed his direction, there was nothing the doctor could deduce from the mishmash of tracks in the gravel.

"Our car, with Mary probably still in it, was towed by a second vehicle," Sherlock explained, unusually patient with John's lack of understanding. "You can see the presence of a second vehicle, and judging from what I can see here, it's a pickup truck that has not had a tire-change in at least twenty years. The imprints in the rubber have almost completely worn off."

John found it difficult to look at the trail of blood, knowing whom it came from. What had the animals done to Mary to cause such bloodshed? Was there a chance that she was still alive in the first place?

"John? John!" Sherlock's voice broke through the doctor's dark thoughts and momentarily drew him back to their present location. The younger man's smooth, cool hands enveloped John's flushed, sweating face and turned his head up toward Sherlock's own. The detective's pale blue eyes held John's firmly.

"She could still be alive, John," Sherlock said slowly, but the tone of his voice revealed that he found it unlikely. "The amount of blood found here is not conclusive with a lethal injury. Alright? We have to keep looking."

John nodded, but his behaviour left Sherlock unconvinced that he was up for the task. The doctor was practically shell-shocked, the look in his eyes distant, as if he had mentally left this horrible scene far behind.

"I need you with me, John. I cannot do this without you," the detective tried, his voice an octave higher than normal, and he shook his assistant, first very gently and then harder, in his attempts to reach through to him.

John took a deep breath and closed his eyes for five solid seconds before he looked at Sherlock.

"Yes, of course," he muttered half-heartedly, but then cleared his throat. "Yes. We have to see this
through.”
His voice had steeled and he gave his partner and friend an expectant glance which asked him to lead the way. Sherlock nodded and together the two men walked the road, following the tire tracks. Though neither spoke, both were hoping they could reach the destination of the criminals before nightfall. Thank goodness for summer hours.
Sherlock ploughed on and only stopped when John insisted he rehydrate, and even then John nearly had to shove the bottle of water into the consulting detective's mouth. The second time he offered his water, Sherlock refused, but only because he saw something further down the road, and he bolted onward, wordless in his expectation of his assistant to follow. Chasing after him, the source of Sherlock's interest soon became clear to John. In the distance were the familiar colors and shapes of cars.
Heart pounding from the apprehension and sudden dash towards the vehicles, John lost sight of Sherlock once they made it to the clearing, which was much larger than had been anticipated. John wandered to the center, estimating around thirty or more cars. Nearly all of them showed the obvious signs of forced entry or a collision of some form, clear indications that those unfortunate victims within were taken from their transports against their will.
Varied possessions - camping equipment, travel-sized games for children, sports gear - had been left haphazardly about the site, deemed useless by the criminals. Much of the blood stains he saw had gone brown with age, and John wondered just how long these bastards had been committing their acts of cruelty. According to the news articles, the stories went as far back as the fifties, but had this group - no doubt several generations of a family - been preying on the innocent even longer?
He started when he saw movement to the left of him, but when he realized it was only Sherlock, he hurried toward him.
Sherlock gestured at John to be quiet and follow him, and together they hurried along the edges of the field, the detective clearly intent on showing something to his partner. Though Sherlock's stony mask of a face did not reveal anything, his near-spasmodic grip on John's wrist suggested he had made an unpleasant discovery.
"Sherlock!" John whispered after nearly tripping in his attempts to keep up with his long-legged partner's strides. "You're hurting me."
"I'm sorry." Sherlock loosened his hold but did not let go entirely. His clammy fingers pressed against the pulse point in John's wrist, and the doctor wondered if he was doing it on purpose, perhaps to check John's stress levels.
"Sherlock, what's wrong?" John tried again, but before he could make any further inquiries, the detective suddenly halted, causing John to collide with his back. The doctor had an annoyed reprimand on his tongue, but the sight before them, no doubt what Sherlock had discovered in the short time they were separated, made John's throat constrict painfully, allowing no sound to pass.
It was their rental car, dumped on this field amongst dozens of other confiscated vehicles left to corrode and deteriorate, their owners abducted, sometimes killed or severely wounded on location if the blood stains were anything to go on.
John only received a brief visual of the red stains dotting the driver's side door before he was crying out.
"MARY!" he shouted, about to dart past the car and search anew when skinny white fingers grabbed
him by the shoulder and clamped over his mouth.

"You idiot," Sherlock hissed, pulling them down behind the rental so roughly that both would have bruises. "You'll alert them to our presence!"

John was listening, though he did not appear to be. Eyes squeezed shut to block the tears from their release, he breathed slowly, trembling. Sherlock took a cautious, quick look past their impromptu hiding place, and ducked back again to find John muttering some unintelligible chant under his breath. He listened closer, wondering if his assistant had inconveniently checked out emotionally, and realized what he was hearing:

"Hamate, capitate, trapezoid, trapezium, scaphoid..."

"What are you doing that for?" Sherlock asked, though he knew the answer. The mantra reminded him of something from a program he saw late on television as a child, of a boy reciting the names of birds to ward of some nightmarish thing.

"Thinking up every bone in the body was something I did during my service in Afghanistan. It helped bring me back down."

"Is it working now?" Sherlock said, a doubtful eyebrow lifting.

"It has to," John said, fighting back the dread of the situation. "All of the things we've done, the times I've hallucinated some hellhound, thought I was about to be blown up... I've never been so afraid... when someone I care about is hurt..."

"Use it, as always," his friend said. "Think of it as the same scenario as all others. Mary won't be found without us."

John wanted to ask Sherlock if he believed there to be anything left of Mary to be found, but he was afraid to hear the answer, as Sherlock never skirted around the truth.

"John? Are you with me?" the detective asked, having noticed his assistant was zoning out once more. "Are you up to this? Tell me the truth."

Sherlock very much wanted to continue the search, but unless John managed to contain his emotions, he would be of no use, perhaps even a danger to them both. Though the abductors hardly possessed the intellect of a criminal mastermind, they were undoubtedly dangerous folk, and if the clan truly had managed to evade capture for the past sixty years or more, they were a force to be reckoned with.

"What are we supposed to do now?" John asked, feeling helpless. "It's getting dark, and we still have no idea where they've taken her. We can't just keep going on random. We'll never find her in time!"

Sherlock nodded gravely; he agreed wholeheartedly that their time was scarce. If Mary was still alive, she would not be for much longer.

"They either drove the cars here, or had them towed," the detective whispered. "There's a clue."

"What?"

"There must be another road leading to this place, probably from their 'nest'. They would not want to stash their spoils too far from where they live. Which suggests their home is within a mile of this place, probably less. We can find it, John. It must be accessible by car."
"Hopefully it's far enough away that they didn't hear me," John reflected with regret.

Sherlock said nothing, once again cautiously looking around before standing upright. He glanced through the shattered front passenger door. As he suspected, Mary's purse and other belongings were still within, of no interest to her captors. When carefully lifting the purse open, he noted her money was still present as well. Of course, the group of criminals had no use for money if they were simply living in the middle of the woods like wild animals, likely not having access to electricity or plumbing either.

"No wallet," he noted aloud. John stood and joined his side, looking with a blank expression at the evidence.

"They took her identification," he observed. "Somehow I didn't expect them to be so clever."

"They've been getting away with this for decades," Sherlock replied. "Either they've picked up a few hints on how not to get caught over the years... or out of pure coincidence they've made a very good choice on their trophies."

Sherlock lightly grasped John's wrist for just a second and walked off in search of where their culprits could have gone. Not five minutes later, he spotted a clear path where the familiar worn-down tire tracks led away from the field.

Daylight was rapidly becoming increasingly scarce, and John cursed himself for omitting to bring a flashlight. Sherlock often forgot even the most essential equipment; it was John's job to plan ahead, be responsible, and make sure the detective did not simply throw himself headfirst into dangerous business. Could he blame his lack of preparation on the fact that Mary's disappearance had made him, as Sherlock would say, 'emotionally compromised'? Damn it, he had even forgotten to bring his Swiss army knife. The astoundingly clever piece of equipment lay unused in his suitcase; his original reason for bringing it having been a desire to impress Mary by showing her how good he was with tools, but it was useful for a lot more things than he had anticipated. Like picking a lock. John doubted Sherlock had brought his lock picking kit, useful though it might be.

They followed the path for about half a mile, an oppressive silence heavy between them. Sherlock had done a better job than John keeping his emotions reined in, but the way he clenched his jaw suggested that the detective was either very nervous or upset; probably a mixture of both. John couldn't help feeling like a liability that had done nothing except inconvenience Sherlock the whole time, and there was no doubt the younger man still held a grudge toward John for his earlier words.

Though tempted to bring the subject to light of only to simply apologize, John decided against it. For all he knew, he had alerted the criminals to their presence from screaming like an idiot for Mary. If so, had his crying of her name cause them to panic and thus kill her? His brain was traveling in loops upon retread thoughts and worries, and it was doing neither him or his partner any good. Instead, he kept his eyes wandering as they traveled the road, following the tire tracks.

"This place looks familiar," Sherlock said, his voice very low as he came to a complete stop.

John glanced at him, then back at their surroundings, but could not find himself in agreement. Even though he had attempted to memorize small details like his friend had, the trees still all looked the same to him.

Then it occurred to him.
"From one of the photographs?" he tried. Sherlock looked at him with a tiny, triumphant smile and turned on the camera. At least they had thought to bring that with them... And charged it.

"If it's the one I'm thinking of," Sherlock said, going through the images, "then we are very, very close." He paused on a photo, looking down at John in both trepidation and the excitement of finding their target.

"If we were standing right here," he remarked, then pointing to the left of himself and John, "and our family of hunters were using their chimney... there would be a trail of smoke right over there."

They both looked in the direction of Sherlock's finger, but not even the slightest trail of smoke could be seen. The angle was right, and even John had to admit he recognized the environment from the photograph; it all matched up. Only the smoke was absent.

Relief flooded through John, quenching any disappointment he might have felt over not being on the right track. All his instincts told him that something was horribly wrong, to flee, not to keep pushing their luck by pursuing the culprits in a dense, dark forest mostly unknown to them. John was painfully aware that lives were at stake, but he had also learned to trust his instinct, as it had saved him from getting shot or blown up numerous times during his service abroad. Oh, well... if one discounted that one time he had taken a bullet to his shoulder.

"Maybe there's no cabin," John said. "What we saw in the photo could've been just a bonfire. This is a police matter now, anyway. We should leave this to them."

Sherlock looked at his flatmate as if John had suddenly grown a second head - or lost his mind.

"The cabin is there," the detective insisted. "Behind that hilltop. I've never been more sure of anything in my life."

"Sherlock..." John stood before his friend, faced with the mammoth task of trying to talk him out of going, based on a hunch alone. Sherlock sneered derisively at 'hunches' not substantiated by hard-boiled, empirical data. And still, John's gut told him that they were both in grave danger, and if he could not convince Sherlock to abandon the search, he could at least say he tried.

"We shouldn't go there alone," he said. "These guys are crazy! You've seen what they've done. They're fucking serial killers. And we're not even armed."

"They've got your girlfriend," the detective replied. "I thought you were interested in rescuing her?"

"I am!" John shouted, realized his error, and quickly lowered his voice. "Listen, Sherlock... If we hurry back to Avalon and call the police on their landline, they could be here within one hour. They'll believe us if we tell them about the cars. They'll have to! And--"

"It could be too late," Sherlock broke in. "They probably already suspect that we're on their tail, and by the time we've managed to convince the incompetent fools with the so-called local police force that there are murderous mountain men roaming the woods, they'll be long gone. And Mary will be dead."

Breathing deep and slow, John considered their options. Sherlock was a stubborn bastard, and in a situation such as this, the doctor could not simply leave without him; it was too dangerous. Frankly, John wondered just how his partner had managed on his own before the two of them met. Did Mycroft have to plant hidden cameras every two feet and employ spies in every public place Sherlock frequented?

The detective did have a point. They could be wasting valuable time. Wordless in their decision, they
continued onward.

"I don't suppose there would be a point to improvising some weapons out of branches...?" John said, half in jest.

"I'm sure we'll find something to use when we get there," Sherlock said. "Also, they are probably quite used to victims that cannot fight back. We may be able to surprise them yet."

"I hope so."

TBC...
Chapter 16

Chapter Summary

Some unpleasant discoveries are made, and our heroes suddenly find themselves engaged in a game of life or death.

Chapter Notes

Some general unpleasant imagery to follow in this chapter. Sensitive readers be warned!

Chapter 16

A strange smell lingered in the air as Sherlock and John approached the source of the chimney smoke, and both men quickly recognized it, chills travelling down John's spine. Even as a doctor and a soldier, he had never quite gotten used to the smell of dead bodies, especially now that the fate of his girlfriend was in question.

"You would think this might attract bears, coyotes... whatever animals are indigenous to the area," John remarked quietly.

Sherlock shook his head. "I get the feeling that any large predators that did live in these woods have long gone. Hunters such as these would need to bide their time between human victims so as not to get caught. They'd either exhaust the food supply of meat around here or drive the species away."

The entire scenario was ridiculous bordering on surreal; a clan of cannibalistic hunters preying on actual people... And having managed to evade detection for several decades. Just what exactly did the police force in small backwoods West Virginia towns do to cash in their paychecks? Gorge on donuts while on duty, as the stereotype of American police officers often suggested? Any actual crime investigation was out of the question, as they had evidently managed to miss something of this magnitude for an extended period of time.

The detective and his assistant made their way up the hill behind which Sherlock had claimed they would find the cabin. John momentarily lost his balance, sending a small current of rocks tumbling down the slope. Sherlock's hand shot out like the head of a striking cobra, grasping the doctor's arm, while his other hand wordlessly gesticulated the need for absolute silence.

Sweaty, parched, terrified, and now also irritated, John wanted to ask his partner if he thought John had done it on purpose, but that would mean more unnecessary noises, so he repressed his frustration and instead tried to watch where he put his feet.

As almost always, Sherlock had been right. The cabin soon came into view; a primitive, squat, and altogether ominous piece of construction that looked completely out of place in a contemporary setting. Built for sure without modern commodities such as electricity, running water, or even a toilet,
John wondered if the cabin had been erected sometime during the American civil war. Possibly when the clan first arrived here. The mere thought made him shudder.

The yard was littered with junk the clan members had likely gathered from multiple victims over the years, as well as skeletons of various cars, rusty and faded.

Sherlock did not need to advise his partner to take care as they entered the property. By all rights, their mere arrival could have inspired the residents to open fire on them, but as far as both John and Sherlock could see, no one was in sight. Not yet anyway. So at present, they needed to be as surreptitious as physically possible.

Think like a cat, John's sister had once said when they were children trying to sneak a pastry from their mother's kitchen counter. Except this time he and Sherlock would not alert a stern mother but homicidal lunatics.

The sun was beginning its lazy descent past the mountains, and the place was getting dark, helped all the more by the trees surrounding the cabin. John really wished he had thought to bring a torch. Or a penlight. Or even a cigarette lighter would have been better than nothing.

The stench of decomposing flesh got worse as they snuck under the windows and to the side of the cabin where a small shed had been slapped together some time ago. The door was fastened shut, but not locked, likely to keep out small scavengers as predators were, as deduced, infrequent in this clan's territory. Sherlock walked right past it, taking a significant look at the path toward the backyard.

"The worst of the smell is back here," he noted. He turned back and saw John reaching toward the latch, hesitating. "Careful."

John nodded, moved out of the path of the door, and allowed Sherlock to lift the latch. The door slowly swung open with a slight creak. John, now standing at an angle where he could not yet see the contents, watched as Sherlock cautiously peered inside... and a look of recognition altered his expression.

"Sherlock?" John said, his voice wavering as he stepped forward. A hand shot out and held him back.

"Stay there," the detective hissed.

John fought against the hold, not caring about the ruckus he was making or that his display was most certainly going to attract the attention of the cabin's unsavory inhabitants. He had to see what Sherlock had discovered, he had to know, had to be sure, even if in his heart he already knew what he would find behind that door.

"Let me in, Sherlock! I have to see it!" he yelled, now practically frenzied in his attempts to dislodge the taller man. John was the heavier of the two, but Sherlock, despite his willowy frame, possessed a wiry strength that was difficult for John to counter.

"John, I said stay there! I do not want you to see this!" Sherlock shouted back, giving an undignified grunt when John, using the force utilized by his stout, compact physique, suddenly shoved him back-first into the doorframe. Sherlock knew the battle was lost as soon as John's hand made contact with the doorknob, but he made one last valiant attempt to spare his friend the gruesome sight which waited within.

"John, please..."
The doctor, naturally, paid him no regard. John yanked the door open, and the first sensory impression made aware by his brain was the sickeningly sweet, tangy odor of blood and rotting flesh combined. It struck him in the face like a physical wall, and he instinctively reared back from its pungency, not even helped by his medical training which he believed to have desensitized him to the smells associated with death and decomposition.

The sight, he knew, would be stuck on his retina for a very long time, perhaps the rest of his life. Mary, or what had once been Mary, was hanging from the ceiling by her feet, naked and livid with a large pool of blood on the dirt floor beneath her, still seeping from her wounds in a slow trickle. The woman's throat had been cut with a blunt object, the jagged edges gaping lewdly as if spread open in a morbid invitation.

Mary - his Mary - had been butchered and hung from the ceiling like a slab of meat in a slaughterhouse.

A guttural, half-choked cry left John's throat, slowly turning into a wail as his legs gave way from underneath him, and he would have collapsed had Sherlock not caught him in his arms and held him firmly against his own chest, supporting nearly all of his weight.

"Don't look, John…" he whispered, manually turning the doctor's face away from the carnage. "I told you not to look, but you had to anyway."

John coughed and gagged, but he did not throw up. He would not; he refused to.

"This was my fault," he murmured. "She's dead because of me."

"Enough," Sherlock said, pulling the other man away from him so they could look one another in the eyes. Though tears poured freely down John's face, he stared into nothing, eyes wide and color drained from his face.

"We will stop these bastards from ever doing this to another person ever again," Sherlock said, his voice and resolve firm and steady. "They will be brought to justice... but only if we keep a clear head and push on."

John's eyes regained focus, as opposed to staring through his partner's head like Sherlock were made of glass. As he looked into Sherlock's eyes, he saw them soften.

"Yes?"

John wiped his tears away. "Yeah."

"We still have the camera," Sherlock stated. "We'll photograph more evidence. Grab something for a weapon while you're at it." He glanced aside as though to indicate those responsible for this mess.

"Wherever they are, they have to come back eventually."

John remained on his knees on the ground for a few seconds while Sherlock rose, and he stared at the dirt while the shed door was closed behind him. Clearly this was an attempt to lessen some of John's pain at the discovery, but Mary's mutilated corpse was still only a few paces away, visible or not.

He wanted to find these monsters. He wanted to kill them.

When Sherlock nudged him on the shoulder, he looked up to see a crowbar being offered to him. Clenching his fists for a moment, John stood up and took his weapon.
Glancing toward the now closed shed, hiding the macabre sight within, John was struck by a thought. He did not want to go back into the shed, never again. And yet…

"I can't leave Mary in there," he said hoarsely, shaking his head.

She might be dead and thus beyond rescue, but he did not want to treat her remains like trash to simply be dumped and left behind. At the very least her parents - whom he had sadly never gotten to meet - deserved to get back an actual body for a proper burial, and that would be far from certain if they left her to these animals.

"John..." The detective's tone was exasperated, but in his eyes were a silent plea. Sherlock might have outwardly kept his composure, but inside he was just as shaken up and terrified as his partner. "I know you're going to hate me for saying this, but now is not the time for sentiment. We can't lug around on a body. There will be a time to grieve for Mary later."

"Fuck you!" John hissed with such vehemence that the detective actually took a step back from him, visibly startled. "You're no better than they are, you fucking sociopath! You're probably even pleased she's dead!"

Not that he was angry with Sherlock, not really; rather this was a case of redirected aggression with Sherlock as the only available outlet for John's indescribable rage, and under normal circumstances John would have realized this and instantly apologized to his best friend for the harsh and unfair string of accuses. This was, however, as far from 'normal circumstances' as one could get, and at that moment it felt good to hurt Sherlock, to make him experience just a fraction of the pain Mary had been made to endure in her final moments before death.

"That is not true." Despite valiant attempts to keep his voice from shaking, Sherlock failed.

John's jaw quivered and he looked ready to argue otherwise, but then he shook his head and looked back at the shed. Sherlock watched, alternating between disbelief and a lack of surprise as John sat back down, back pressed against the shed's door.

"I can't leave her, not even now," he said, his voice flat and without emotion.


"I let her down too many times before," John said torpidly. "I'm staying. Don't worry, I'll keep a lookout. If anyone gets near her..." His grip on the crowbar tightened for emphasis.

Sherlock backed away hesitantly. He thought for a moment that perhaps John had snapped. He certainly hoped not, not only for the chance that John would become a liability or undependable (would he wander off for some unknown reason?), but because losing his partner and dearest, closest friend was unthinkable.

"I will be investigating the cabin," he said. "Stay safe, alright?"

John glanced at him, his eyes vulnerable for a second. "You too."

Entering the backyard, Sherlock first saw several wrought iron racks, one of which had a skin stretched out on it and left to dry in the sun hours ago. Sherlock wished the skin had belonged to an animal. Though the criminals had been lucky in choosing to collect purses and identification, their actions on their own property were sloppier, not that this was a surprise.

Access to proper cleaning supplies or at least water would have helped greatly. A bucket covered in
grime sat nearby, flies buzzing over the intestines which lay in a pile within. He first thought they were Mary's, but her corpse had no slit along the belly, and these had clearly been rotting for much longer, if the coloration and presence of maggots had anything to indicate.

Sarah Cavanaugh? It was certainly a possibility, unless the clan had killed more people in the past week except poor Mary.

Despite what John said, he had not wanted her to die. There were times when he'd wished she would disappear out of John's life, when he'd purposely tried to drive her away and alienate her by his rude and uncouth behaviour, and when he had, admittedly, done his very best to sabotage her budding relationship with John using methods his friend referred to as 'morally depraved'. But he had never, ever wished the life out of her.

The door to the cabin was predictably unlocked. The stench inside was even worse than in the shed, a multitude of foul odors mixing together to create an almost tangible atmosphere. Sherlock felt bile rising in his throat and had to bury his face in the crook of his arm until he managed to procure a napkin through which he could breathe in order to filter out the worst of the stink.

The cabin was, frankly put, unfit for human habitation, but after seeing what these individuals were capable of, Sherlock doubted they could even be classified as people. He made a mental note to remind himself of this the next time someone complained about his untidiness at Baker Street.

On the wooden table, which took up most of the cabin's single room, were several plates, jars and cups which seemed to have never been washed throughout existence. Remains of a past meal - or more likely several - were on a stove that looked positively archaic, and the detective couldn't help but wonder if the poor unfortunate person whose entrails he had found outside in the bucket was the main course.

Wary that someone might still be lying in wait for him, he carefully navigated the interior. Anyone nearby had to have been deaf to not hear the brief shouting match between him and John, but he still took care not to bump into or knock over anything. In addition, a chance, however small, still remained that the hunters were out in the woods somewhere, and in their return home, they might notice something moved or broken.

He could hear the rumbling drone of some kind of machine, which immediately suggested the presence of some kind of appliance, likely a freezing unit. Otherwise, he doubted they would be able to hold onto meat as long as they wanted, given the waiting period for taking victims.

The generator growled on in a room connected to the main space of the cabin, and already Sherlock was thinking about dismantling the thing to somehow gain an iota of control over these filthy, primitive bastards.

Something in a corner of the cabin caught his eye, and he took a closer look. A collection of photographs, some of their frames cracked, sat on a small shelf, and one of which hung on the wall. Though faded from time and exposure to light, the contents were still very much visible. Black and white images, perhaps taken a hundred years ago, told a tale of just how long this family had been living in the mountains. Though some - likely much earlier generations than the others - had plain features, others already possessed the telltale disfigurements of inbreeding.

Sherlock was frankly surprised any members of the clan were left, based on the damages done by mating within the blood, especially at this length of time. Either they had developed a habit of adding to the bloodline through abducted victims, or - and he hoped this was the case - not many of the family were left.
A mosquito whined in his ear, causing him to reflexively swat, and he moved on, this time to the beds. Only two were present, and they further strengthened his suspicion of the group being relatively few in number, unless they shared sleeping space.

He fished Sarah Cavanaugh’s digital camera out of his jacket pocket with deft fingers and snapped a few pictures, flash off so as not to alert anyone outside of the activities. He was fairly sure that if the family were home, he would have heard from them by now.

Were they out preying on a new victim? Mary had only been dead a few hours; they would not be needing more meat for at least a week, unless they had a habit of ‘stocking up’ during the summer months to last through the harsh Appalachian winter.

The other, even more disturbing possibility was that they sometimes hunted for fun without harvesting the meat. Was that what they had done to Mary? Apart from bleeding her out, her killers had left the body intact, and hot, humid temperatures such as these caused dead flesh to decompose at an alarming rate. Sherlock was intimately familiar with the chemical processes of decomposition; he had conducted many thorough studies on the topic, sometimes using subjects from St. Bart’s morgue for his experiments.

He suddenly realized that he should have secured photographic evidence of Mary Morstan’s remains the moment he discovered them. John probably had no desire to re-enter the shed, but Sherlock knew that emotional distress could make people do the most foolish of things without any thought of the consequences. In this case, he suspected John might very well mess with the crime scene, perhaps by attempting to cut Mary down from the beam.

Ready to dash out of the cabin, he fought to restrain himself, to repress the sudden feeling of dread. As determined to stay put as John had seemed, ready to bash someone’s brains out for so much as looking in his direction, something - anything - could have happened. Call it instinct, call it the practical concern of tampered evidence, but Sherlock felt an immediate sense of alarm at being separated from John.

Heart racing, he headed back the way he came, pausing at the door to listen for sounds that suggested he had been caught, hearing none, and finally yanking the door open. He slunk along the exterior of the cabin, again stopped, and carefully peeked around the corner. John remained where he sat minutes before, though the events of the day had tensed his body into defense mode, ready to spring up and use the crowbar. He was looking right in the other direction, as though he had heard something in the woods, but he was still holding a stubborn, loyal vigil over Mary.

A tiny twinge of guilt struck Sherlock’s core, but he swallowed it down, focusing instead on the matter at hand. Taking a deep breath to prepare facing his friend, he was met with the ever-present stench of the yard and cabin, and he was not quite sure if he could ever be desensitized to the foul odor of blood, entrails, rotting flesh, sweat and...

Backing himself away from the corner, he sniffed the air again, realizing that never before in their investigation of the property had there been a smell of sweat and unwashed, vile bodies. He looked around at the backyard and then finally toward the cabin roof, where something seemed to move. Before he had time to consider what the thing was, it stepped forward, and the first clear thought Sherlock had was that it was holding a knife. By then, the figure was leaping off of the roof and towards him.

He had just enough time to take a step to the side when the creature pounced, or he would have been caught underneath it and probably killed on the spot. With nearly catlike grace, the attacker landed and then righted itself, holding the knife Sherlock had glimpsed seconds before. The fading light revealed a man, Sherlock’s height or shorter, and slight in build, but nonetheless sporting a well-
developed musculature. Those, however, were the extent of his humanlike qualities.

The man - though loath to admit it, Sherlock found himself doubting his attacker's sex - was probably the result of generations of inbreeding, disfigured to the point that it was doubtful if he could still be classified as a Homo sapiens. Bald except for a few strings of filthy blond, shoulder-length hair, the man was scarred and lumpy, some of his disfigurements probably congenital while others seemed acquired; perhaps caused by prey, human or otherwise, that had fought back.

A high-pitched cackling sound, akin to laughter, erupted from deranged mountain man's grinning mouth, and the very next moment he took a swing at Sherlock with his bowie knife. The detective managed to dodge but was not fast enough. The knife's edge grazed his left cheek, slitting up a wound dangerously close to his eye. He could feel the warm trickle of blood on his face, even though a surge of adrenalin momentarily blocked out the sensation of pain.

Shocked at not only the ferocity but also the surprising strength and agility shown by the deformed mountain man, Sherlock realized with a sinking feel of dread that for all his mental prowess, this was a fight where he was very likely to be outmatched.

Not a complete stranger to hand-to-hand combat, he countered with a strike of his own: a side-kick aimed at the attacker's shin. The attempt at disabling his attacker would have sent anyone else to their knees, he was certain of it. What surprised Sherlock was that the wiry beast continued to move as though the kick had not even been delivered, save for the sheer force moving his foe's entire leg back. Otherwise, the inhuman thing showed no sign of pain whatsoever, and Sherlock hardly had time to marvel over the strange lack of a reaction.

The blade shot toward him, and by sheer luck, he just managed to avoid the knife entering his eye. In his dodge, he caught sight of a bucket on the ground just a foot away, filled with gravel. It would be heavy enough to heave at the hunter, but it would also be heavy enough to possibly hurt his wrist, and badly. But in that moment less than a second in length, an injured wrist was the least of his worries. He ducked the next thrust of the blade and grabbed the bucket in both hands, hurling it upwards and connecting with his attacker's ugly face.

Using both hands had kept him from hurting himself, but not the same could be said for the mountain man. Whether or not the move had hurt it the detective did not know, but it was at least thrown off balance, and Sherlock took this opportunity, no matter how brief, to turn and retreat.

And ran into a solid wall of flesh.

Huge, hairy hands closed vice-like around his shoulders and he found himself crying out. The brute lifted him off the ground, foul breath beating against his face as the monstrous thing scrutinized him with misaligned eyes. His heart lurched as he made the connection: this had to be the owner of those giant footprints.

TBC...
Chapter 17

Chapter Summary

John has to decide on whether to save his own hide, or to risk everything by going in after Sherlock.

Chapter Notes

More unpleasantness ahead! If you're a sensitive person, please proceed with caution.

Chapter 17

John, having heard the cackling followed by a scream moments before, tensed and looked toward the location of the backyard.

"Sherlock?" He bolted up to his feet, gripping the crowbar until his knuckles were white.

The lack of a response was not encouraging at all. While John was aware of his friend's total disregard for social niceties, which sometimes included not answering when spoken to, he was fairly certain that Sherlock would never ignore him on purpose under circumstances such as these. Self-proclaimed sociopath though he was, he would know that John would never forgive him for such callous behaviour.

"Sherlock, I swear to God, if you're not answering just because you 'don't feel like it', I'm gonna…"

John moved as stealthily as he could along the outer wall of the shed, craning his neck (and wishing, not for the first time, that he were taller) in his attempts to see past the junk and foliage. Sweat was practically flowing down his spine, causing his skin to itch terribly and his clothes to stick to his body like a damp second skin.

Why had he chosen to wear the jacket over his T-shirt? It offered a degree of protection against the mosquitoes and gnats which populated the forest air, but it was also making him overheat profusely. And what had become of his supposed partner?!

"Sherlock…" he tried again, and this time his tongue very nearly glued itself to his palate, his entire mouth behaving as though his saliva glands had stopped working altogether.

John knew the possibility that Sherlock hadn't heard him was highly unlikely; the detective's hearing was as acute as his other senses, and he had proven many times over that he picked up stuff that weren't even intended for his ears. No. Something was wrong. John's gut had been trying to tell him that for some time.

His grip on the crowbar tightened further as he rounded a corner that would offer him better insight into the backyard. The doctor later supposed he had his army days to thank for his above-average
reflexes, because the moment he stepped into view, a hatchet was swung at him and very likely would have severed his head from his neck had he not dodged before his conscious mind was made aware of the danger.

Even so, the dodge caused him to lose hold of the crowbar and it fell quite useless to the dirt. John barely gave the thing lumbering toward him much thought, save for the fact that it had been the same individual who had thrown the hatchet, and that it was coming right for him - and that from the brief sight of it, the creature was dreadfully ugly. John turned on his heel, nearly slipping, and ran for his life, his weapon forgotten.

Where the hell was Sherlock? John thought he had heard Sherlock cry out, but there had been no subsequent calls for help. Then again, since when did that insufferable man ever call for help? The lack of a voice from Sherlock - as well as his complete physical absence - indicated that he had likely been apprehended. Unless he was already dead.

No! John refused to think it. Instead he continued his run into the woods surrounding the cabin grounds. He could hear that... thing following him, deep, gravelly voice laughing like a child as it lumbered along. Careening into the undergrowth and feeling the scrape of shrubbery against his skin, John glanced back only briefly, worried he might stumble or collide with a tree or low hanging branch. Though large and bulky in stature, the freakish man was still fast. John could only hope that he might be able to outmaneuver his attacker - or even better, outsmart it. If so, the doctor would have to think fast and hope he could keep his bearings better than a criminal who had been living in these woods all its life.

Was the hatchet-wielding lunatic alone? Sherlock had mentioned three different sets of tracks when they examined the path earlier, one of which belonged to a giant. Was this the giant? John had not gotten a very thorough look at the assailant, being busy running for his life and all; only that the man was substantially larger than himself both in height and girth.

Crouched down behind a moss-covered boulder, John decided to hazard a glance in the direction of the childish laughter and was able to observe his attacker properly for the first time.

The man was tall but by no means a giant; perhaps six-four with a large build, although he also seemed to be lugging around on a few excess pounds. He wore a checkered shirt, which had probably once been red but was now more a ruddy brown, but at least it made him stand out amongst the many shades of forest green. The man's skull was lumpy and his face misaligned with a notable scar running across his left eye.

Wait… His left eye was gone. John was being chased by a one-eyed attacker. No doubt the mountain man knew these woods like the back of his own hand, but at least he had a limited field of vision and most likely also impaired depth perception, and these things might very well work in John's favour.

Something else that struck him as odd was the big man's jerky gait, his childlike laughter, and the candid look of joy on his face as he swung the axe around, seemingly on random, with what could only be described as great enthusiasm.

This mountain man was, John realized, most likely retarded.

John's hands felt desperately empty. He wished he had not dropped his weapon and hoped he could find something out here in the forest... but why would anyone, even these bastards, leave their weapons out in the woods? One of them was mentally deficient, but they could not all be so. Otherwise, how would they have functioned for this long without being discovered?
The brute was getting agitated now, frustrated that he could not find his quarry. He whined like a
dog as he looked around and rushed forward as though he might flush out his prey through surprise,
as if John were a bird. The doctor's hands blindly sought purchase on a large stone by his feet,
hoping perhaps if he were to be found, he could use it to bludgeon his assailant. His heart nearly
stopped when lifting the stone set loose several smaller pebbles, which audibly rolled away.

The oafish monster's head perked as he looked around, having clearly heard the small sound. He
listened closer, hoping to hear more. John's heart had of course not stopped, though presently he
wondered if his pursuer would now hear it pounding.

Then another noise arose, though it came from the yard from which both hunter and hunted had run.
One of the other criminals was barking out some unintelligible command, and the large brute turned,
whining once more. Hesitating for only a moment, he lumbered off toward the voice, obviously
obeying the call to return home.

John let out a breath he hadn't released he was holding, and slowly he also released his spastic hold
on the stone. The immediate danger seemed to be over for now, but the doctor was utterly lost as far
as how to proceed from here. Without Sherlock he truly was lost, both literally and figuratively. The
detective always took the initiative and made the decisions, John blindly following his experienced
lead. He had virtually been doing the same in Afghanistan; taking orders from his superiors without
question. It made him feel… secure, somehow. Forced to make his own decisions, John quickly felt
his fate spiraling out of control.

Now Sherlock was gone, held captive by a bunch of inbred psychopaths. Unless… No, John did not
want to go there. He could not bear to lose both Mary and Sherlock, on the same day no less. His
friend had to be alive.

John's self-preservation instinct told him to get himself someplace safe, which in this case meant as
far from the wretched cabin as possible. If he simply ran, in whatever direction, he was bound to get
to a road sooner or later… wasn't that so? He was fairly sure he would not find his way back to
Avalon without Sherlock to guide him.

John quenched a sob and pressed his hand against his mouth to muffle any further sounds. Why was
this happening? Just a few hours ago this had just been a regular case, and now he was literally
fighting for his life. His own life, and Sherlock's. Mary's had already been brutally taken from her.

He looked up at the trees, which seemed all the more taller and oppressive in the dimming light, and
he deeply wished and he were home in London, that he had never left home in the first place.
Perhaps in his native country, even a crime as gruesome as this could have been battled much more
efficiently.

He heard an impious laugh back at the grounds and winced. Perhaps not even in all of Britain could
they have faced something so awful. If Sherlock was still alive to count as the 'they' in question.

The notion steeled John's resolve once more. Sherlock would not be dead, and he would not die, not
if his friend and assistant had any say in it. John had been a pig and a lout for long enough, and he
would make things right. He would save Sherlock and go through each and every one of these
monsters if required.

John glanced down at the stone still in his hand and dropped it to the dirt. If he was about to set
things right again, he would need more than rocks. If he might have a chance to rescue the one
person he had left in this awful godforsaken place, he would have to focus, and keep his head clear.

Night had fallen completely now. Lights flickered in the windows of the cabin, perhaps oil lamps.
John heard nothing from Sherlock or the criminals at this distance, but it did not matter. His resolve was made of steel, after all. Fists clenched, he stood up from behind the hiding place, taking a step forward.

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Sherlock slowly opened his eyes, and it took him a moment to recollect the recent events and orient himself. He was lying on his side on a cold, dry wooden surface, and though he could see absolutely nothing, he sensed that he was enclosed in a tight place with a dank, musty smell. Most likely underground, or at the very least on ground level. His hands were tied behind his back, secured firmly by duct tape, as were his legs, tied together both at the knees and ankles, which left him about as mobile as a caterpillar. A piece of the tape had been placed over his mouth as well, its polyethylene taste seeping through his lips.

A dull, throbbing ache pulsated in his skull. He could not remember anything after the giant had clubbed him in the head, but judging from the texture of the congealed blood which covered the entire left side of his face and hair, he had been unconscious for at least an hour, perhaps more. The good news was that he didn't believe he had sustained any fractures or brain hemorrhage; maybe a mild concussion at worst. Scalp wounds always bleed profusely. It meant nothing. The bad news was that he was trapped with no means of escape.

Sherlock uselessly tugged on his bonds, reaching the conclusion he had already suspected: there was no way he was getting out of here on his own. The unnatural and static position he had been forced into began to take a toll on his body in general, and his shoulder joints in particular. The detective prided himself on having a high tolerance for physical pain. Oftentimes he was able to ignore amounts of it that had stronger men crying like newborns. But even the great Sherlock Holmes had limits.

What would it be now, he silently asked. Would he be eaten like the others? It hardly made sense, as the group already had plenty of meat on hand, but then again, no one said that these brutes were capable of rational thinking. He considered possibility that they might keep him as a slave of sorts, for their own perverse indulgences, and though he hoped not, he could not deny the very real possibility of it. If not, he seriously doubted the chances of being held for ransom. Obviously these men (did they even qualify as men?) had no use for money, and even if they might, they likely would not understand the concept of ransom.

Unless they decided to let him slowly starve to death...

What had happened to John, he wondered. Had he escaped? Sherlock hoped so, but considering the near catatonic state the older man had assumed at the shed where Mary likely still hung, he could have been easily apprehended. Then again, Sherlock heard no indication that John was nearby. He hoped John was not dead.

What if John had simply run off to save his own skin? Had the doctor reached that level of apathy to not care about anyone but himself?

Sherlock shook his head, angry. Their bond had been strained in the past few days, but would the events of the week have been enough to allow John to escape with no further thoughts of his once partner, friend, and lover? No, not possible. Sherlock knew John much better than that. John was a soldier, loyal to the end.

Even so, the detective had to consider his current predicament. He needed to determine a way to escape, or at the very least be ready in case his captors were going to return. He thought about trying to reach the phone he carried in his jacket pocket, but there was no way of doing that with both his
hands and feet tied, and besides there was no reception to be had in this area even if he managed. Sherlock wondered if it was pure coincidence that the culprits had chosen to set up their base of operation here exactly.

Making a subtle change to his position in an attempt to alleviate the pain in his shoulders, the detective had to admit defeat when the change did nothing except worsen the ache. Blind, immobile, and only able to breathe through his nose, he tried to utilize the only sense he still had control over by listening for sounds that might indicate either the return of his captors, or - as Sherlock desperately hoped - his saviour.

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The shaking of John's legs increased by each step he took toward the nightmarish lodge. He had found a rusty old metal rod in the woods near the backyard which he now carried with him. Still he heard no sounds from the cabin. John stubbornly refused to admit the possibility that the silence meant there was nothing left for him to save.

Back against a tall pine tree, the ex-army surgeon contemplated his options. Damn it, he was supposed to be better at this. He was a soldier, after all; however not a strategist. Making a plan of attack had never been his forte.

Pressed against the tree trunk like a squirrel, he crept around its circumference until he could see the cabin and its grounds. Though his eyes had adjusted to the darkness, the nightfall had not brought moonlight with its arrival, and looking for anyone creeping about on the property proved difficult. In addition, the flickering lamplight brought moving shadows that deceived his vision. Despite the difficulty, he heard no footsteps, and he considered this a good sign.

"Stay strong, Sherlock," he whispered, though he did not doubt the detective could hold his own. John only hoped he could be half as strong as his friend.

Almost as though fate had granted him a favor, John spotted something only a few paces away. Even in this poor light, he could see it. The tree stump had several ugly marks in it already, and hopefully the damage in the wood indicated that the axe presently lodged into it was very sharp. He nearly gave into the impulse of running straight out into the open to snatch the newfound weapon, but he restrained himself at the last possible moment. Being cautious was vital now, with every move he made. John listened again, desperately hoping he was not about to run straight into the welcoming arms - or shotgun as it were - of an unseen attacker. He peered into the darkness, seeing nothing and no one.

Think like a cat.

Taking careful steps and keeping close to the ground, he crossed the space between tree and stump within five paces and closed his hands around the handle. He struggled for a second, feeling his heart rate increase, but finally pried the axe loose. The very moment it was in his possession, he ducked behind the stump itself, and he let loose a breath he had not realized he was holding.

John did not know how it was possible for a human body to be sweating and freezing at the same time, but it was happening to him in this very moment. Sour-smelling pearls of perspiration were trickling down his torso in a slow drizzle, but at the same time his extremities, first and foremost the hands holding the axe, felt like ice.

John was also not sure how much time he had left to free Sherlock. Mary had been killed within six hours of being abducted, and the doctor estimated half an hour - more or less - had passed since he last heard from his friend.
His heart took a tiny leap when his ears suddenly picked up the very distinct sound of creaking hinges. The front door opened, and a man stepped out onto the primitive porch. Not the axe-wielding mentally deficient lunatic John had encountered, but a man even bigger and, John quickly realized, also uglier. Standing at least 7 foot tall, the giant sported a cleft palate and upper lip offering John a good view of the sharp, pointy teeth not concealed by anything. Like his close relative, this mountain man had only patches of hair scattered across his skull, but unlike the axe-wielder, he wore a long, matted beard, which somehow made his grossly deformed features look even more inhuman.

When the giant took his first few steps in John’s presence, the doctor could tell that Sherlock had been right in most of his assumptions. The mountain man did walk with a distinct limp, and though undoubtedly strong and cleverer than his partner-in-crime, he simply could not be very fast.

For a split second, John considered the possibility of being about to outmaneuver this man as well, but he was quickly proven wrong when the giant adjusted his grip on a rifle.

Of course, he reminded himself. It could never be so easy. The soldier in him dared not take anything for granted.

Heavy footsteps grew louder as the oafish man who had pursued him wandered outside as well, chuckling as though ready to play what had probably felt to him like a game in searching for their escaped quarry. He still brandished his axe, and even if he was mentally challenged, he likely did not take much concentration to hit anyone with the sizeable blade. He lumbered into the front yard and glanced about the property with a childish glee that seemed even more unnerving than the stoic concentration of his taller relative.

Glancing back at the giant, John's blood became ice water when he saw the man staring in his direction. Yet the brute turned away, much to the doctor's relief. John was resolute to keep his breath even and remain as calm as physically possible, given the circumstances. He could not afford to give away his position now.

Superior vena cava, he thought to himself. Arteria pulmonalis. Right atrium. Right ventricle...

He heard a gruff shout, barely any words he could decipher. Did this clan even speak or understand English anymore, he wondered. The shorter creature all but toddled over to the tallest and received a harsh jostle for his troubles. Though neither of the monsters were ideal to combat, John hoped that few would remain few, and that no others were waiting to surprise him. The last thing he or Sherlock needed was to combat ten inbred lunatics.

The taller of the pair gestured towards the woods in a direction opposite of John, and grumbled out another unintelligible command. Shortly thereafter, they grabbed an oil lamp, ignited it, and walked in that direction.

John, holding the axe against his chest, realized that this was probably his one and only chance. A more ample opportunity was not likely to present itself soon. There was no doubt the murderous mountain men had headed back out into the woods to search for him. Their survival as a cannibalistic clan and capability to continue as they had depended on leaving absolutely no loose ends.

John sprang to his feet as soon as he was certain the two mountain men were out of hearing range and sprinted the short distance over to the cabin. Still no sounds came from within, so if Sherlock was alive, he was either unconscious or had been silenced some other way. John winced at the thought of what those animals could have done to his friend in such a short time nonetheless.

Had Mycroft felt a similar anguish following the hours after Sherlock’s assault when his little brother was in critical condition? No doubt the Ice-man was more adept at handling stressful situations than
John himself, but he must have felt *something*.

If John failed to get Sherlock out alive, he had absolutely no doubts about his own fate at the hands of Mycroft Holmes. He would be, quite literally, a dead man regardless if he got away from these cannibals if Sherlock did not.

John paused outside the front entrance, listening intently, but all he could hear besides his own pounding heart was the faint rustling of leaves nearby. As silently as possible, he pulled the creaking door open and entered.

A stench of a family without concept of personal hygiene invaded his senses as he stood within. Indeed, even the cooking ware and platter looked as though they had never been cleaned. Two beds seemed to confirm his suspicions of the small clan, and though he was not deeply surprised at the stains on the ragged mattresses, the notion of these monsters having killed victims on their own beds - and then still slept in them - made his stomach lurch.

Peering in the lamplight, he scanned the entire room for both signs of hidden attackers and Sherlock himself before creeping towards a closed door. Unlocked, the door gave way easily, and John's grip on his weapon tensed, though in vain. The room, though it smelled irrevocably foul, held no one. What surprised John was the presence of a toilet and bathtub within, though clearly neither had been used in a very long time. Both were clogged to the brim with unknown fluids; fluids that John did not identify, mostly because he did not want to.

A faint noise reached his ears, and John went still as a stone, listening. Either John had been found out, or (and he hoped it was the latter) Sherlock was alive. Leaving the room, he slowly moved towards another door.

The scrabbling was coming from within, joined by the sound of breathing. Whomever was behind that door, their breathing came heavy and erratic, a clear sign that they were frightened. John pressed an ear to the door, worried at the chance of a trap.

"Sherlock...?"

"MN!" was all a frantic voice could return. Sherlock was indeed behind the door, but from the sound of it he had been gagged.

"It's alright, I'm here," John said, almost wanting to laugh. Sherlock was alive, and now he would be saved. The doctor tried the doorknob, and as expected, it was locked. Would he have the time to try picking the lock, or would he have to risk the noise of shoudering the door in himself? No, he could manage to pick the lock. If the age of the door, indeed the entire cabin, were any indication, he could have his friend out in no time at all. He hurried for a tool of some sort, and found a screwdriver.

"I'll get you out of there," he said, setting to work on the ancient lock. "Don't worry."

Further fumbling suggested Sherlock was trying to right himself or possibly move away from the door.

"It's alright," John repeated. "I'm quite alone. Those bastards are out looking for me in the woods. Don't worry. Both of them are far away."

The scrabbling stopped very suddenly, causing John to hesitate, but only for the briefest moment. He concentrated, trying to ignore the frenzied voice that returned on the other side. A click, and then another, and the knob turned.

The area behind the door was very small, barely more than a pocket built into the wall, and it offered
just enough space to accommodate Sherlock's prostrate form on the floor. The detective lay bound and gagged, effective immobilized by duct tape, and John was momentarily horrified by the amount of dried blood on his face. What would he find when he looked beyond those voluminous curls: a cleft skull?

Relief was the first emotion to flood Sherlock's open and very aware eyes when the door was opened and revealed John. Immediately he sputtered muffled words into his gag, and his long, thin body renewed its struggles against the bonds. John hurried to kneel by his friend's side, setting the axe down beside him as he pulled away the piece of duct tape covering the detective's mouth. Sherlock winced from the obvious pain it caused, but at least he had the sense not to berate his assistant. John could not wait to free him, but he would need something sharp to cut through the many layers of duct tape.

"Where are they?" Sherlock asked. John did not have to guess to whom his partner referred.

"They're gone," he replied. "Looking for me in the woods. You're safe now. We'll get out before they come back."

"Three!" The detective's bloodied face twisted into an ugly grimace of despair. To John it was a surprise every time to see the beautiful man's features make such a sudden and drastic transformation.

"What?"

"John, there are three!"

The doctor reached for his axe just as Sherlock's eyes bulged and fixated on something behind John's back. He had just enough time to see a shape approach him from the right and hear a maniacal cackle he'd believed until now could only exist in nightmares. The creature swung its own weapon against John's head, and the following moment everything went black.

Sherlock watched his small, brave friend collapse into a heap on the floor, and briefly wondered how John would have felt knowing he landed face-first in Sherlock's lap.

TBC...
Chapter 18

John's head was feeling several sizes too big when he blurrily came to. He could feel himself being carried, and not at all with consideration or gentility. Whomever was lugging him about did so as though he were a sack of grain. He did not reach full consciousness until he felt rough hands lifting him by the arms and tying him to something from above, thus leaving him hanging rather painfully by his wrists. Like his partner, his mouth was bound with duct tape, and he could only make muffled noises of protest.

Vision blurred and red, John squeezed his eyes shut, hoping he could quickly clear them of the blood that likely came from the blow that had rendered him unconscious in the first place. A hook light hanging above him was the only light source in the space, and as he steadily regained focus, he could see that he was not alone. The two men were back from their excursion into the forest, the tallest having his back turned to him. The other sat on a nearby stool, grinning in excitement and bouncing a little on his seat.

Just as John found himself wondering where the third was, he felt spindly fingers grab the back of his neck, jolting him with surprise. Gnarled fingernails dug into skin for only a second, and he felt hot breath beating against his cheek as the creature laughed. John turned his head away on instinct, and saw that to his right was another figure similarly bound and hanging.

Sherlock.

The younger man was also awake, and though he tried to keep his expression neutral, his eyes told of the fear he felt within every inch of his body. The same feeling was taking hold of John as well.

The smallest of the three mountain men gamboled out from behind their prey, his movements much like the middle creature, except sped up to a hyper, erratic pace. It hurried over to the giant, who was

Chapter Summary

The true horrors begin when Sherlock and John are caught...

Chapter Notes

Due to the large amount of flames sent to us recently, my co-author and I have decided we need to make something infinitely clear. This is a horror story. This is your last warning, people, so if you're not a horror fan (particularly of the slasher/splatter genre) you're encouraged to seek out something else that suits your tastes better. We do not seek to offend anyone, and we only want willing readers.

Thank you.
fumbling with something metallic, as indicated by the sharp clattering noises made in the process.

Was this it? John wordlessly asked himself. Was this how Sherlock Holmes and John Watson were to meet their end, not battling the likes of a criminal mastermind, but slashed to ribbons as food for inbred degenerates?

The giant spun around, and though he did not hold a knife, the slim, pointed awl in his huge hand was of no comfort to his restrained subjects. John turned his face away, eyes squeezed shut. He wanted to be spared the sight of having it plunged into himself, but watching it being done to Sherlock and not be able to do a damn thing to help his best friend was an even worse scenario.

The detective, defiant as always, kept his eyes firmly trained on the three cannibals. Under normal circumstances, meaning if their captors had been fully human, Sherlock would have been nattering off deductions, some of them very delicate and personal, in order to provoke the criminals and throw them off balance, which in turn would leave room for mistakes that might grant Sherlock and his stalwart partner an opportunity to escape. There was, however, not a language the detective could speak that would not sound like meaningless gibberish to these men.

They had not replaced the gag on Sherlock, so supposedly the younger man had realized words were a lost cause and accepted the virtue of silence.

Sherlock’s full lips parted slightly as he witnessed the display. The giant spun the awl between his two monstrously large, scarred, hairy hands, as if contemplating the most efficient - or entertaining - way to use it. Meanwhile the smallest of the three had chosen a knife for himself. Sherlock recognized it as the same one being used to combat him, the blade rusty and covered in filth. It had nicked him in the face; just scratches, really, but he might still need to have his tetanus vaccination renewed. Assuming, of course, that he got out of their clutches before they turned both him and John into their own twisted version of beef jerky.

The smallest one was excited to the point of practically vibrating. Only when the toothsome giant gave a gesture did he move, and when he did, the burst of speed forward caused both detective and doctor to expect Sherlock be reduced to tatters in seconds. Sherlock could not help the small yelp which escaped his lips when the gangly creature set upon him, but he realized very quickly that his flesh was not being sliced. Instead, the knife cut through his clothes, and the articles were ripped away from his pale body in little time. John watched in horror as his friend dangled naked in front of their filthy audience.

The one-eyed man-child bounced in his seat and giggled.

In less than a second the smallest was behind John once more, teasing the surface of his skin with the tip of the knife. John hoped he would only be stripped as his partner had, but one could not be certain with unbalanced men such as these; for all he knew, he might get stabbed in the neck just for a laugh.

John was starting to feel numb all over from the fear. He heard his clothes rip before he felt them yanked from his body. Even so, he preferred the bastards play with him instead of Sherlock. Not that he expected them to ignore Sherlock entirely, but he would rather he took the worst of it.

Then again... were that the case, how would he be able to get Sherlock out of this hellhole?

The feeling in John's arms returned painfully when the skinny freak behind him wrapped arms and legs around him, hanging by the doctor off of the ground. He felt the fine edge of the dirty blade against his throat, saw the underdeveloped stump of what would have been a middle and ring finger on the monster's left hand, which held the knife. A drop of spittle landed on the junction of neck and
shoulder. But John could do nothing; the three-fingered monstrosity was wrapped around him tightly, stuck on him like a leech.

The giant grumbled out an order and John felt relief as the smallest let go, landing on the floor again.

Flaky, red marks left by the mountain man's scraggly, unkempt fingernails now crisscrossed John's arms and shoulders. He tried not to dwell too much on the different kinds of pathogenic microbes that in all likelihood dwelt beneath those fingernails, or if he would live long enough to find out.

John yelped when the three-fingered lunatic suddenly pinched the flesh of his torso. Its very distinct laughter sounded again, and the creature doubtlessly seemed pleased about the discovery. The doctor choked back a desperate plea of mercy when the giant approached as well, enormous hands stretched out toward John to cop a feel of his own.

The following minute consisted of intense and very humiliating scrutiny in the shape of poking, prodding and more squeezing, as if John were not even a person but a Christmas hog about to be taken to slaughter. To these men he supposed that's all he was. Not a sound escaped Sherlock while his friend was examined, but his erratic breathing and unwillingness to watch were clear indicators of his true emotions.

"Mmph!" The doctor tried his best to voice a protest through his gag when the smaller creature cupped his genitals and began to roll his testicles with mock gentility. Were they going to geld him? Emasculate him? He had a horrific mental image of the three-fingered cannibal tearing his penis off using only its teeth and then sharing the treat with his two companions.

John glanced back at Sherlock once more, and saw the way his friend gritted his teeth, glaring at their captors. Despite their horror, both doctor and detective shared in the anger of the idea of harm directed toward the other. Still, though he looked desperate to speak (a silent Sherlock Holmes was a rare thing indeed) John's friend remained silent. Any other individual might start begging, but not Sherlock. Even if they could understand English, what was the use of reasoning with monsters like these?

The one-eyed brute jumped up from his seat and rushed forward towards Sherlock, but the detective did not so much as flinch, ever defiant. Sherlock might have also suspected a clan member this childish might not be as big of a threat as a blithering psychopath or a tower of muscle, but John was nervous all the same. After all, people were capable of awful things when they did not know any better.

Fortunately the man-child only seemed interested in getting a closer look, lifting a leg here, inhaling the scent of the neck there, and looking to be deeply fascinated with the detective's head of thick curls. The other two ignored him, which presently suited both partners just fine.

Sherlock looked to be ignoring the brute as well, and the distant look in his blue eyes read of more than just an attempt to mentally escape the situation. Sherlock was trying to think of a way out of this. He was scanning the place for something to help them escape.

Watching Sherlock had distracted John from the tortuous inspection by his captors, and he yelped in both pain and surprise when he felt the hand squeezing his stomach replaced by the tip of the awl. The smaller man cackled at his reaction. John looked down instinctively to inspect the damage, but he could not see if skin was broken from the angle at which he hanged. Even so, he felt no dripping of blood. Another prod with the awl had him shouting muffled curses of anger and pain, but again he did not think he was bleeding.

They were teasing him.
Sherlock wished that John would not scream from underneath his gag. Provoking a reaction from their victims was exactly what these primitive psychopaths were after, and John was handing it to them without the slightest bit of fight. The wisest plan of action at present was to show as little emotion as possible; anything to make their captors to lose interest and thus allow Sherlock to start planning their escape.

Had they wanted to simply kill us, they would have done it already, the detective thought.

There had to be a purpose as to why both John and himself had been strung up and put on display rather than butchered outright and stashed in the shed like Mary. Sherlock had already ruled out the possibility of a ransom. These men lived outside the society that dealt in money. They were hunters, trappers, scavengers... murderers. Meat was all that mattered in their small, twisted world, and currently they had more than enough of it.

The sudden realization hit Sherlock like an anvil. The mountain men were planning to keep them alive in order to prevent their meat supply from going bad. It was a nauseating thought, but it also provided an iota of hope.

According to the detective's calculations, it would take forty-eight hours of silence on his part before Mycroft began making inquiries, perhaps sixty, depending on his brother's schedule. If they could manage to stay alive that long…

Sherlock failed to suppress a wince when his friend next to him emitted a particularly heart-wrenching cry of pure agony, and from the corner of his eye, the detective could see that they had indeed drawn blood this time.

_Hurry, Mycroft…_

***

Sawtooth was pleased with the development of things. He had been worried for a while after One-Eye, stupid as always, had let their second quarry escape into the woods. He'd feared that the fat little man would be clever enough to evade capture and perhaps even bring the piggies, with the flashing lights and loud, obnoxious sirens, into the heart of their den.

Fortunately none of that had come to be. The little man had behaved in a predictably foolish way by returning to the den to rescue his companion. He had been an easy target for the experienced Three-finger, and Sawtooth felt something akin to pride when he thought about his eldest son and his skills as a hunter. He observed the way Three-finger dangled off of the heavier one, not giving it much thought after so many years of behaviour based merely off of impulse. His eldest got the job done, unlike the youngest, and thus had freer rein in the household. And if Three-finger's behaviour caused a few more cries of pain, then so be it.

The thinner man currently being sniffed at by One-Eye had the possibility of being a problem though. They had caught people like this in the past, defiant and refusing to cooperate. But they always screamed. Work at them long enough, they always scream. They always beg and cry. They cooperate then.

Even so, something in this tall, skinny prey had aroused Sawtooth's interest. This one was different from most others. The patriarch had noticed it when he first had the young man in his grasp, taking in the details of the face. Meat was meat, and those the clan took for such uses were not treated in the same regard as the family, but sometimes, once in a great while, prey would come along that almost looked... appealing. Familiar in a way. Though otherwise despicably smooth and resembling any other prey, this one's bright blue eyes were set far apart, and his jaw was weak, his neck long and
Though he was at first loath to admit it, the younger man’s appearance brought back long forgotten memories of Sawtooth's deceased mate. She had died giving birth to his youngest son, who had entered the world as a tiny, screaming, pink, dumb lump and eventually evolved into a big, fat lump, all grown but still just as dumb. Had Three-finger not been so attached his younger sibling, Sawtooth would have put him on a spit and roasted him before he got to experience his fifth spring. He could tell by then that One-Eye was useless and dumb and would never contribute to feeding the clan. Now, twenty-eight springs later, all the clan's youngest was good for was manual labour.

Sawtooth stared at the skinny, unblemished body hanging so delectably before him with a sudden hunger that was different from the kind that demanded he fill his stomach. He desired this Outsider. As a food source the man would be poor; his body, as had been established, consisted mostly of skin, bone and sinews. He was considerably lighter than a man his height should be, which suggested he'd been starving. Outsiders rarely starved these days. Rather they were fat, slow, big to the point that hunting them down came easy.

This man was none of that. He'd even held his own against Three-finger before the patriarch himself got involved. Probably he had fought battles before, perhaps with his life at stake. His feisty nature coupled with his unusual appearance titillated Sawtooth. He would take great pleasure in cowing the spirited Outsider. Despite his years, Sawtooth always enjoyed a challenge.

He watched as his son tormented the short, pudgy man, making him scream. That one was meat, pure and simple. They still had the whore from earlier to chop up, and Sawtooth was positive his little clan would feed off of her for at least a week. All they had to do was keep this one confined until it was his turn to be butchered.

The scrawny one's eyes were shut, but they snapped open when Sawtooth grasped his hanging, naked body and pawed at it unashamedly. The man writhed from disgust, his Adam's apple bobbing up and down in a way that was almost comical. The moment his lips parted to suck in some well-needed air, Sawtooth grasped the opportunity to shove two large fingers deep down the man's throat. Finally he made sound, choking out a rebellious cry as he was invaded. Three-finger and One-Eye giggled at the futile attempts of fighting back. The weak jaw tightened and Sawtooth paid it no mind; he knew the little rat was instinctively biting down, but it made no difference. Prey always thought they had a chance at hurting the family, but they did not feel the pain, not nearly to the capacity of Outsiders. It was truly a satisfying, sweet thing to experience, the realization that they could not hurt their attackers, and subsequent discovery of the pain the family was capable of causing.

The plump one cried out from beneath his gag, clearly trying to get the patriarch's attention, likely arguing against his companion's treatment. Sawtooth only ignored him, and his relatives turned their interest towards the whining piece of meat, Three-finger clawing playfully at bits of flesh and One-Eye rubbing his hands against a disgusted face.

The skinny thing gagged around thick fingers; the response Sawtooth was hoping for. He loved when they squirmed. He removed his scarred hand, and the newfound freedom of the full-lipped mouth allowed the thin young man to eject a full gob of mucus and spit right into Sawtooth's eyes. Snarling, Sawtooth backhanded the little wretch.

"MN!" the plump one objected. He got a lick across his face by One-Eye for the protest, as well as a hard jab with a jagged-nailed finger.

The skinny one's head hung for a moment, dazed by the blow, and Sawtooth moved behind him. The awl was still in one meaty hand, and he drifted its tip up the length of the man's spine. He felt
and saw the small start of the pale body, and his cloven mouth spread into a grin as he closed his free hand around one half of his prey's backside, squeezing at the supple, curved flesh. The body beneath his touch stiffened as though stricken with rigor mortis, but only for a few seconds.

The skinny Outsider's posterior was practically the only part of him that carried any substance. Other than that he was rake-thin; all long, sinewy limbs and visible bones beneath pale skin. A few moles and birthmarks marred the otherwise perfect smoothness.

Sawtooth lifted the subject by his arse, thereby taking some of the weight off his straining wrists. He knew he was causing pain by digging his fingers into the soft, pliant flesh, even though his quarry was fighting hard not to let it show. More muffled protests sounded from the pudgy one, and Three-finger playfully pinched his upturned nose, as if disciplining a wayward child.

Sawtooth forced one thick, blunt finger into the skinny Outsider's hole, and by then he was already fairly certain the man was a whore; the type who enjoyed another man's attentions before a woman's. Was the stumpy little man perhaps his dominant partner? It was obvious they had a close bond, and yet they shared no physical characteristics whatsoever, so they couldn't be family.

Finally the skinny pale one emitted a noise; a low, keening moan communicating both dread as well as pain. He also thrashed about in an attempt to dislodge the digit buried inside him up to the second knuckle, failing miserably.

His prey's fear aroused the giant mountain man. It never took much to break an Outsider's resolve. If all else failed, the following would do the trick every single time. Sawtooth leered, exposing his row of misshapen teeth, and lifted his victim off of the hook which kept him upright.

The man made some vain attempts to kick him, but he failed to gain any leverage and thus his blows lacked the strength to do any damage. Sawtooth held his prey at eye level, letting his foul breath wash over the man's face. Briefly the patriarch toyed with the idea of tearing out the whore's full lips and consuming them before the eyes of him and his stout friend. He decided against it, thinking he might find a better use yet for those lips.

TBC...
Chapter 19

Chapter Summary

Following a horrible violation, Sherlock and John are left to organize a plan of escape.

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes explicit non-con. Proceed with caution.

Chapter 19

Though he knew it would do nothing, John wished desperately for the ability to speak. The instinct to object, to shout, to do... *anything* was clawing at him from the inside. As it was now, he could not even mumble without that disgusting, salivating maniac pinching and jabbing at him with filthy fingernails. Nevertheless, he hated being restrained and gagged, utterly incapable of interrupting the horrible treatment of his closest friend.

John winced as he saw the way Sherlock stiffened like a board, as though he felt the pain on the younger man's face himself. Sherlock only stared blankly as the giant did whatever he was doing, and though from the doctor's angle he could not see the specifics, he had an impression of what might be happening.

But he would not remotely begin to place himself in his partner's position, to pretend that he could understand how all of this felt. John was spoiled in comparison to the past that Sherlock had, and their present predicament felt like a culmination of the abuse doled out to the detective from preceding years.

How ashamed was Sherlock as he was invaded by this monster? Had he reached a place in his mind where he no longer felt shame from such cruelty?

Instinct brought John to struggle in vain against his bonds. However, his snarl was rendered pathetic by the gag, and he received a punch to the stomach for his troubles. He could only watch as his partner was hoisted off of where he once hung and carried away by the giant like a slab of meat.

Sherlock was struggling now, slithering in the giant's grasp like a possessed snake. He had to know what was coming, and the knowledge made him frantic. With his wrists still bound, the amount of resistance he could offer was rather limited, and the strength in his blows, though fuelled by panic, had no effect on his captor's huge, muscular body.

With a shout of triumph, the giant threw Sherlock down onto his bed. The detective's head banged hard against the metallic headboard, and John almost wished his friend would lose consciousness and thus be spared the experience awaiting him.
No such luck, though. A gnarled, oversized hand entangled in Sherlock's nest of dark curls and jerked his head back to the point of seriously straining his neck. Veins and tendons bulged under the fine porcelain skin, protesting against the violent treatment, while the brilliant young detective's hands desperately clawed at the filthy mattress he was pressed deeper and deeper into.

John wanted to block out the sounds of Sherlock calling his name, of being reminded that he was present and could do absolutely nothing to help his friend. He wanted to look away, and yet something compelled him to keep his eyes firmly trained on the scene taking place before him. He watched as the giant held down Sherlock with one hand and freed his bloated member with the other. Predictably it was huge, proportionate to the rest of his body, and bound to tear Sherlock up, especially if inserted dryly.

Again John wanted to be able to speak, to tell Sherlock that things would be alright. He felt like an idiot for it, but he still wanted to say it, despite the situation. But he could not, so he convinced himself that providing comfort was useless.

He was broken from his trance by the repulsive sound of the toothy giant's throat driving up a noxious concoction of phlegm and saliva, spitting it into his palm, and John knew precisely where the event was headed. It nearly made him sick. He felt he should be crying, but the shock of what was about to happen left his eyes dry. Instead, he felt tiny rivers of sweat pouring down his naked skin, shivering as he hung exposed and manhandled by the two remaining clan members. He barely paid them any attention, watching in horror as their leader rubbed himself slick and pulled the struggling young man's legs far apart. Sherlock gave a choked cry of insolence and fear that might have sounded funny in dreadfully different circumstances, and he frantically tried to escape the giant's grasp, but the struggle did absolutely nothing to change his fate. Dirty nails dug into the flesh of his bottom and spread the cheeks open.

John flinched as a scream filled the cabin, and he nearly cried out as well. He had no idea then whether the scream was more out of pain or humiliation, although it was clearly a combination of both. Again Sherlock struggled to escape, even to crawl away from under the crushing weight, but he was locked in the grip of a beast which barely deserved to be called a man, and he was going nowhere.

The mountain man was grunting like a pig as he drove himself into the body beneath. Though his rapist's massive frame almost completely covered Sherlock's, nothing failed to muffle his cries of pain, anguish and despair, all mixed into one.

John finally chose to look at the floor under his feet. They dangled helplessly at least three inches above the frayed, filthy boards which constituted the floor of the cottage. The static position and his inability to change it caused lactic acid to form in his arms and shoulders, but that pain was nothing compared to what Sherlock must be feeling in this very moment.

A tear escaped the doctor's eye, and he lifted his gaze for just a second, perhaps to make sure his friend was still among the living. Sherlock had given up his struggles and lay more or less limp under his rapist, and his defiant screams had been reduced into a pitiful, constant whimpering.

Almost immediately John looked away. He could not bear to see his friend treated in such an abhorrent way. Sherlock was so very, very proud, and to watch his honour be taken from him by a clan of inbred degenerates was truly breaking John's heart.

Why couldn't they have chosen him instead? He was a soldier, used to taking the brunt of an enemy's cruelty to protect others. He had, however, failed to protect both Sherlock and Mary, the two people closest to him. Was this his punishment for his fecklessness, John wondered, to watch his loved ones suffer and die before his very eyes?
One of the men lingering around him gave a disproving grunt. A slender hand grabbed him by the jaw and jerked his head forward again, toward the horrible sight.

Of course. They wanted him to watch. They could tell he and Sherlock were friends and delighted in tormenting him just as much as his partner. The skinny one giggled and shook the face in his hand. John deeply wanted to bite, to reduce the fingers on the little bastard all the more. Maybe that would be painful enough for one of these assholes to feel.

Instead of biting, he strained to turn his head away once more, but a hand from the bigger man joined from the other side. His face was firmly held right toward Sherlock's rape, which did not seem to end.

No. John angrily resisted. No, he would not play their game. He squeezed his eyes shut, refusing to look. They could force him in this direction all they bloody wanted, but he would not look.

Another jab of a fingernail and John gave a muffled yelp. He was certain it had been in one of the wounds caused by the awl. Both of the man-child's meaty hands held the doctor's head forward, and his skinny relative pried open John's eyes with bony fingers. He did not bother wondering what filth was being transferred from fingers to eyes at present, not when the giant in front of him relentlessly, furiously ploughed into Sherlock, nails scraping against pale skin and leaving angry red marks.

John had stopped counting the minutes long before the abominable man - after what seemed like an eternity - released himself into his victim. Vision hazy from the harsh treatment of his eyes and the near-unbearable emotional stress he was experiencing, the doctor was still able to witness the mountain man pulling out of Sherlock, his vile member covered in specks of blood. Sherlock's blood.

The giant tucked himself back into his trousers without wiping his soiled penis. Sherlock made no attempts to rise, even though the crushing weight was momentarily taken off of him. John could hear him quietly sobbing into the sullied mattress.

Was Sherlock crying?

Despite everything they had gone through together, John had never, not once, seen or heard Sherlock Holmes cry. He had seen the detective screaming in fury, laughing like an uncontrollable maniac, and practically everything in between. Many times he had seen his friend's features contorted in ecstasy following a toe-curling orgasm, and each time he had felt intense pride at being the one responsible for such deep, uninhibited pleasure in a normally untouchable man. But he had never seen Sherlock cry.

Until now.

The hare-lipped giant moved his massive bulk off the bed and stood up, clearly pleased with his accomplishment. Sherlock remained where he was, at least until he was picked up and thrown over the mountain man's shoulder once more. This time there was no squirming or writhing on the detective's part. It was as though he had already given up hope, and John found the idea incredibly sad and also disconcerting. Without Sherlock's wits and drive their chances of escaping this hellhole decreased exponentially.

The very notion of his friend crying made tears fall from John's eyes, and he resisted a sob of his own when the two men finally let go of his face.

He barely had time to consider what might happen next when he was bitten. Though John's voice was muffled, he had still shouted quite loudly from the bite, and the giant jolted in surprise at the sharp cry of pain. The mere sight of the furious brute stomping towards John frightened him, and he
expected a huge fist to hit him hard enough to break his neck, or dislocate his jaw at the very least. So it surprised him that the mountain man stormed right past him - Sherlock still hanging limply over his shoulder - to slap the childish one for biting.

John was now close enough to Sherlock where they could see one another's faces. To the older man's confusion, Sherlock's eyes held no tears. The detective looked right at him, and though he looked miserable and in utmost agony, he was staring at John pointedly, expressing a wordless message to his partner.

He had not been crying after all. He was tricking them. Sherlock had a plan.

John hardly felt the sensation of his bonds being untied, and he wobbled for a moment when his feet met the ground. He glanced down at his waist where the idiot had bitten him, and though the skin was not bleeding outright, it had been broken and was now quite red. If the detective and his assistant were to get out of this hellish ordeal alive, they might just die of infection from God knew what bacteria lingered in the mouths of these men.

John considered making a mad dash for the door the moment his wrists were lowered down, but the soldier in him told him that would be most unwise; the degenerates were bound to catch him within seconds, and even if he somehow managed to evade recapture, he'd be leaving Sherlock to a horrible fate.

The giant threw Sherlock callously into one tiny stall and proceeded to slam the door shut. John had hoped they would at least allow their two captives to share space, but it seemed such graciousness was out of question. John was shoved into the adjoining stall by the two smaller men, and the three-fingered lunatic finished by delivering a playful kick to his bottom while he stood on all fours. The doctor fell forward, humiliated, and he could hear the man-child laugh behind him as though it was the funniest thing ever.

Both their doors were sealed with sturdy padlocks before the mountain men finally decided to leave the two men alone. Inside the room ruled utter darkness.

John received a face full of dirt upon hitting the floor, and he hoped he was not tasting excrement. Spitting the worst of it out only launched the remaining dust back into his face.

Looking up proved impossible at first from the cramped space of his tiny cell, but he managed to gain enough wiggling room to right himself. He tried to ignore the stains on the walls around him, despite the close proximity, and he did not have to think very hard to realize they were from the blood of countless victims from the past. Instinct told him to curl up into himself, but he resisted. He heard the rustling of Sherlock getting his bearings in the adjacent cell and turned on his side to address him.

"Sherlock?" his voice quivered as he spoke.

Sherlock did not breathe as he turned over to face the shaky slab of wood separating the two men, exhaling sharply once he was in the proper position.
John noticed a fault in the boards of the wall, uneven and badly nailed together, possibly from an attempted escape by a previous victim. A very small gap allowed him to glimpse movement in the other cell. The doctor considered muscling the board away, but he knew the attempt would be heard by their jailers. Instead, he pressed his cheek against the wood, wishing he could have been able to hold his friend. Even if Sherlock denied him the chance, John would have held on and his arms would have required the jaws of life to let go.

"John..." The gap was infiltrated by pale fingertips, and John quickly put his own hand forward, their fingers meeting. The contact was not much at all, but it was something.

"Sherlock," John replied. "Are you..." He stopped, knowing the question would be idiotic. His partner answered nonetheless.

"I've been better."

The slightly sarcastic delivery of the line suggested that Sherlock was, despite everything, still his old self. Only the slight tremor in his voice revealed that something was amiss in the first place.

"How about you, John?" the younger man asked in an obvious attempt to steer conversation away from himself. "I saw what they did to you, with that awl."

"I'll live," the doctor quickly replied. "It's nothing serious, just a superficial nick."

They had managed to draw blood, but the flow had stopped minutes after the wound was inflicted, and John, having a medical degree, was fairly certain they had not hit any vital organs or major blood vessels. In truth, he was more concerned about the bite from the idiot, but he saw no reason to make his concerns known to his already agonized friend.

"Are you... are you badly hurt, Sherlock?" John asked tentatively, already knowing that his friend was injured, just not to what degree. A cock practically the size of a tree trunk had been forcibly shoved into his body with barely any lubrication. In the best case scenario, the bleeding was caused by a minor tear. In the worst case scenario, Sherlock was currently hemorrhaging to death.

"I'm still bleeding," a quiet, pained voice said. "It's less than a flow, but more than a trickle. It should slow down in the next few hours if I do nothing to aggravate it."

It amazed John how rational and objective his friend was being despite the distressing circumstances and the horrific violation he was just recently subjected to. Was Sherlock using logic as a means of coping? John had witnessed the abject panic in Sherlock moments before he was held down and penetrated against his will, and he was absolutely certain it had been genuine.

"You put up quite a fight," John said, unsure of what would be the right thing to say.

"He was three times my size. There wasn't realistically any way I could hold him off," Sherlock replied, sounding bitter.

At least he hadn't made it easy for the big bastard, John thought.

"I couldn't stop him, but it occurred to me I could do something else," Sherlock added. "So I did."

"What?" John asked. As far as he had seen, Sherlock had been unable to do little else but struggle in vain and take the abuse given to him. Still, he remembered the look in Sherlock's eyes when the giant had gotten close enough to John.

The small contact between them was broken, causing a slight lurch in John's stomach, but Sherlock's
hand returned, this time holding a very small object. As the doctor instinctively took the object, he cringed at the slick surface. In the darkness, the fluid looked black.

"I grabbed it when he carried me past a table," Sherlock explained. "And don't worry, I didn't have to smuggle it up my arse. Not that I couldn't." His voice once again became bitter. "At this point the pain is enough that I could cram a jam jar up there and not notice any difference."

"I seriously doubt that," John replied, inspecting the object. It was fashioned with a wooden, rounded handle, the metal half ending in a sharp scoop. John guessed it to be some kind of carving instrument.

"Even if you inserted it handle first..." he trailed off, repulsed at the idea, despite the desperation of their predicament.

Sherlock shrugged, though he knew his older friend could not see the gesture. He gave a joyless laugh, though it hurt him to do so.

"What's so funny?" John asked, thinking nothing could be amusing about their situation.

"Nothing." Sherlock admitted, placing his fingers through the gap of the wall to once more make contact with his assistant. "I was just thinking about how it wouldn't have been the first time."

Against better judgment, John chuckled as well as one very memorable incident bubbled up to the surface of his memory. That day he had learned that his then-newfound friend sometimes used his rectum as an emergency storage space... and also gotten to know Sherlock much more intimately; perhaps more so than he was ready for at the time.

Even though he was impressed with the fact that Sherlock had shown enough presence of mind to grab something and hide it despite the shock and pain inflicted on his person, the tool had little use as a weapon. A knife or even an awl would have been much more useful.

The detective seemed able to sense his friend's hesitation through their linked fingers.

"Dig, John," Sherlock said imploringly. "This wall..." he rapped at the wall in question with his knuckles, "...faces outdoors. You can dig yourself out beneath it. Use the instrument as a spade. Hurry, though. The soil is tightly packed. It won't give easily. If they catch you..."

The doctor shuddered at the thought of what the punishment for running away might be. If he wasn't killed outright, their captors would probably not hesitate to chop off a limb or even two.

"Make sure you have somewhere to hide it if they come in to check on us," Sherlock reminded his partner. "Someplace other than your rectum."

John managed a small chuckle and tested the strength of the wood gauge against the ground. Sherlock was, as always, correct. Breaking enough of the tough soil to get underneath the barrier would require speed, but also care, so that he would not break the damn metal piece off of the handle. Hoping his progress would not be overheard, he began to scrape away at the dirt, passing the time by thinking back on an event which in retrospect felt less uncomfortable and more humorous.

TBC...
Chapter 20

Chapter Summary

In the beginning of their acquaintance, John learns of Sherlock's unorthodox way of smuggling evidence.

Chapter Notes

Flashback scene, included as a break from the horrors. :)

Chapter 20

2010

"Johhhhhnnn..."

Sherlock's voice, though not frantic, sounded concerned nonetheless. John was beginning to decipher the level of immediacy in Sherlock's various tones of speech, and he figured at present his reaction time was not important, just yet anyway.

"Right this moment," the doctor muttered, not bothering to move an inch.

After I finish this page of my book...

"JOHN."

Rolling his eyes, John shut the hardcover book with a snap and stood up from his chair. He felt like a parent trying to get some sleep while his child demanded a glass of water. Though he would have rather not bothered to reply at all, he knew Mrs. Hudson would rather not have to hear Sherlock screaming like a brat for the next two hours.
“Yessss, Sherlock?” he said, his voice nearly a hiss as he waited at the top of the steps. His friend was nowhere in sight, likely either in his own bedroom or the toilet.

“I require assistance,” was the answer the older man finally got. Now that he had garnered his assistant’s attention, clearly Sherlock no longer needed to shout.

Bathroom then, John thought. He had heard Sherlock return roughly an hour ago and not heard from him until now, but since the eccentric, quirky genius oftentimes ignored him for great lengths of time without announcing his presence - except when he needed something - John had not thought too much about it.

The doctor in him couldn’t help wondering if Sherlock had somehow gotten himself injured whilst trying to solve his current case. If so, it had to be out of the ordinary if he was asking for John’s assistance, as the pig-headed detective had been known to sit around with second degree burns, heavily bleeding cuts, and even fractured bones without making a peep.

"Sherlock, what's wrong? Are you hurt?" John felt forced to ask before entering the bathroom. He decided he would take his friend to the A&E if he deemed it necessary, regardless of what the great detective himself said.

"No, it's nothing like that. I'd rather not explain it to you through a door. Why don't you come in and see for yourself?"

John, suspecting he might regret this, did his friend's bidding without any further questions. He had expected Sherlock to be bleeding all over the bathtub, attempting to reset a dislocated shoulder, or perhaps even a broken nose after having his face refurnished by some thug.

Anything but the sight which greeted him.

Sherlock stood in the center of the bathroom with his trousers and underwear around his ankles, hands on his hips impatiently, as though this were a common occurrence. Perhaps it had been in the past. John very nearly considered feeling sorry for Mycroft.

Even with Sherlock standing naked from the waist down, with his todger out and about like a store window display, John had become rather used to strange behavior from his friend by now. He merely gave the sight before him a brief glance and cleared his throat.
"Does this have to do with you needing my assistance?" he asked.

Sherlock only pursed his lips, giving him a look which questioned his partner's intelligence.

"If this is beyond your capabilities..."

"No, no!" John interjected, holding up his hands defensively. "Just making sure. So... how did you reach this... dilemma in the first place?"

Whatever the dilemma was, anyway...

"As you know," Sherlock replied, "the London police force constantly tries to deter any progress I attempt of solving cases, as much as DI Lestrade insists otherwise."

John found his friend was being a bit harsh on Greg Lestrade. At least the detective inspector tried to help them on occasion, and he seemed to genuinely have faith in Sherlock's genius and capabilities, unlike some other members of his team. Still the doctor remained silent and waited for the younger man to further explain.

"Thus, if I am to make any breakthroughs, sometimes I have to hide evidence from them myself. Sometimes, this means I have to procure it in secret, even smuggle it out of the crime scene."

As the realization dawned on John, his eyes widened. "So..."

Sherlock rolled his eyes, likely to avoid John's gaze, and crossed his arms. "SO... I've been trying to remove said evidence myself for the past fifty-three minutes with no such luck."

Slowly the truth began to dawn on John, even though it was somewhat difficult to comprehend.

"So you stuffed it up your backside?" he said incredulously, and before he could restrain himself, a high-pitched giggle had escaped his throat as well. John realized that laughing at Sherlock's predicament had been a huge mistake when he saw the younger man's countenance change from impassive to fuming.
"A man's freedom is at stake here!" Sherlock snarled, and the doctor suspected only the dropped trousers kept him from lunging at John with intent to do harm. "Unless I can retrieve this airplane ticket in one piece, an innocent man named Harry Dunham will face life imprisonment for a crime he did not commit. Do you, John Hamish Watson, want to explain to his wife and children you could have helped exonerate him but chose to laugh instead?"

"I'm... really sorry, Sherlock," John managed to say, and he could literally feel his face and ears taking on a scarlet hue. "But whatever possessed you to think this was a good idea to begin with?"

"Anderson insists on checking my pockets," Sherlock grumbled irritably. "It was the only place I was sure they wouldn't check. Trust me, if I'd had a vagina, I would use that instead. No danger of things disappearing up that route."

"Uh huh..." John drummed his fingers against his thigh. "And you've tried to retrieve it yourself? With your, umm, fingers?"

"Would I be asking for your help if I hadn't?"

The doctor sighed, knowing this would be a tough nut to crack. "Then put your pants and trousers back on, Sherlock. I'm taking you to the A&E."

Sherlock did not look surprised at the conclusion, but he was annoyed nonetheless.

"That's the exact opposite of what I wanted to hear, you know," he said, speaking in a condescending and disappointed tone. "Even if I wanted to go to A&E - and I DON'T, mind you - do you think I'd willingly subject myself to that?"

John sighed. Yes, he knew Sherlock too well to have expected him to concede to allowing anyone else to know that he a.) stole evidence and b.) got it stuck up his asshole. A normal person would never admit to something like this, let alone someone like Sherlock. After all, he had his pride. Most of the time.

And he could not get his cases solved when he was getting found out and possibly subsequently arrested.

"I take it that's a 'no', then," John said.
Sherlock glared at him, nostrils flaring. John restrained his laughter this time.

Closing the door behind him, John entered doctor mode. He instinctively washed his hands at the sink, asking Sherlock to get on his hands and knees for best visibility, and opened the medicine cabinet. Fortunately the pen light was still within, not having disappeared for one of Sherlock's countless, unexplainable experiments like so many other objects in the apartment. He also removed a set of tweezers, considering that if Sherlock could not remove the evidence with such spidery fingers, then John's own stubby digits had absolutely no chance.

He knelt down on the floor behind Sherlock and neither said anything. They had reached a phase in their friendship where most events were not incredibly surprising, and even though some moments were still a little uncomfortable - such as now - both knew there was no room to spend time on the awkwardness.

Spreading the cheeks and taking a look, he frowned after a few seconds. "I might have to get the speculum," he confessed. And then an amusing thought occurred to him. "Otherwise, I'll be losing the penlight just as easily."

"You'd be a shitty doctor if you did," Sherlock said with a scoff, still retaining all of his usual arrogance despite the humiliating pose he was in. He chewed briefly on his bottom lip, not wanting to admit the possibility that John might fail in recovering the small rolled up plastic bag containing the airline ticket, and what the consequences were if he did. It left Sherlock with two other options: the public humiliation of disclosing his problem with the A&E, or the even greater humiliation of asking his brother for help.

Both of those options made him shudder in revulsion. John had to find a way.

"Have you tried squatting and pressing with all your might?" the doctor asked, finding himself a little too mesmerized by the smooth, ample globes of Sherlock's backside. How was it possible for a man so thin to have an arse like that? John felt his blush return and wondered what he was thinking, poking at his friend's orifice without surgical gloves. He was a medical doctor, a professional, and Sherlock had come to him, confided in him, as a patient with a serious issue namely a foreign object lodged in his colon.

John had always held very strongly to the ethic of avoiding all sexual connotation when working on a patient. There was hardly anything worse than a doctor taking advantage of his position when dealing with the sick and injured. It didn't change the fact that as a red-blooded and not-entirely-heterosexual man, he found his flatmate's body incredibly attractive, but he simply had to overlook such matters in his current role as a physician.
"Using abdominal pressure to force it back out, and all that tripe? Yes, for eight whole minutes and it didn't work." Sherlock sounded so testy and bad-tempered that John suspected he was not receptive to further "unnecessary" questioning from his "clueless" friend. It was better to head straight for the main event.

"This isn't the right place for rectal exams," he said. "I'll need you on your back with your legs elevated. Ideally in stirrups, but..."

A flush of heat passed through John's body as he realized just how suggestive his words had been, but he quickly regained his composure, making a mental note to get a pair of surgical gloves.

Hurrying to his own supplies upstairs, he removed a pair of latex gloves, as well as a container of Vaseline lubricant and a cardboard case. Within the case was a small, transparent, tube-like device.

"There you are," he muttered, returning down the steps and to the toilet, which was currently empty. Of course. Sherlock had - not surprisingly - thought ahead about the requirement of elevation. Stepping out of the bathroom, the older man glanced into the bedroom, where Sherlock was laying on his back on the bed. At either side, he had stacked several pillows for when his thin, spread legs needed to be lifted.

John felt a tingling throughout his body at the sight, but he quickly stamped out the thoughts of what Sherlock's position suggested and returned to his mindset as a doctor. Pulling on the gloves, he then removed the sterile tube and showed it to his partner.

"I've managed to find a disposable speculum," he announced. Sherlock rolled his eyes.

"Thank god," the detective retorted. "I was about to have a nap whilst I was waiting."

Ignoring Sherlock's spite, John knelt back down in front of him and dipped his finger into the Vaseline. From the looks of his partner's backside, lube had already been applied during attempts at removal, but applying more could not hurt.

"I'm just going to apply some lubricant to you here," he explained, his instincts as a medical professional making the delivery of his words gentler. Sherlock, however, was not impressed.
"Enough with the bedside manner," he snapped. "Just get on with it."

John shut his eyes to obscure their rolling. Man's freedom hanging in the balance, he reminded himself.

"Fine," he said, inserting a slick, latex-clad finger. Sherlock barely seemed to respond, staring at the ceiling, impatiently waiting for the evidence to be retrieved.

John had performed a prostate exam more times than he could count, and though he did not specialize in proctology, he was exceedingly familiar with the procedure of looking into a man's rectum. It was quite amazing what kind of problems army men sometimes got themselves into. Removal of objects deliberately inserted into the anus had ranked high on his list of doctor's duties.

At least Sherlock seemed uncommonly relaxed about the whole business. John didn't think he'd have any problems inserting the speculum, but it was custom to ask the patient if they desired the use of a local anesthetic.

"Alright, Sherlock... this might feel a bit strange, perhaps even painful," he began, not sure if he was supposed to look at his friend's face or his hindquarters. He decided on the latter, pretending to be intently focused on the task at hand. It was certainly better than letting Sherlock deduce the other thoughts so plainly written on his face.

Like wondering how Sherlock's delectably pink asshole would look - and feel - stretched around his cock.

John wanted to slap himself. These thoughts were unacceptable. His task here was anything but sexual, and besides, his was his friend. His best friend. Sherlock had made it very clear that he had no such interest in John during their first day of acquaintance. Hadn't he?

How was their friendship, not to mention partnership, going to survive if John flushed and had to try clear his head every time Sherlock said something even mildly suggestive? Or licked his lips? Or paraded naked through the flat, acting as though that was the most natural thing in the world?

"I could apply some lidocaine gel, if you want, to numb the tissues," he murmured while he busied his hands with coating the glass speculum with a generous layer of Vaseline.
The detective sighed dramatically and rolled his eyes. "Just get on with it!" he groaned, and John was able to observe a slight muscle twitch in his outer sphincter, mirroring the one in his face whenever he expressed annoyance. John would have laughed had he not been so focused.

"Alright, here we go," he said, and he inserted the tube, albeit gently. Despite knowing the level of apathy Sherlock was capable of, John still felt a slight surprise at just how little his friend responded. Even though he did not have the same skills of deduction his partner had, John was not completely sheltered from Sherlock's private life. He wondered just how much of the detective's numbness to the situation came from years of sexual experience or simple meditation to ignore the sensation, escaping to his "mind palace," as it were.

Penlight in his mouth as the speculum was set in place, John took a close look and thought that perhaps he could see the much anticipated evidence. Replacing the light in a free hand, he looked closer, but could only make out the hint of something reflecting the glare of the penlight.

"I think I see it," he stated. "You would have had to have put it in a plastic bag, wouldn't you?"

Sherlock only made a small noise to confirm.

"I'm definitely going to need the tweezers for this," John said. "You really wanted to keep this away from Anderson, didn't you?"

"I was overzealous, I admit it," Sherlock retorted, annoyed. "But I hadn't meant to shove it so far up."

A thought occurred to John when he heard the reply. "How exactly... did you manage to procure this thing in the first place with everyone all around you?"

Sherlock glanced at him. "Very carefully."

John finally allowed himself another chuckle.

"Actually, I had it in my pocket first and excused myself to another room. Anderson did throw suspicion on me once I came back out, but sure enough, my pockets were empty."
John gave another small laugh, readying the tweezers and carefully going in. From the looks of the bag, it had been just out of reach even for Sherlock's long, thin fingers.

"I'm curious," he said, hearing the sigh of impatience from his friend. "How does it feel? With this thing stuck so far inside?"

"It doesn't really feel like anything," Sherlock said. "I knew it had gone too far in because I couldn't feel it. No chafing, no… You've never experienced the feeling yourself, then?"

John felt his ears heat up. "Never had anything stuck up there, no…” he murmured, going in with the tweezers. His hands were absolutely steady; a treasured quality in an army surgeon.

"You've done this before, though. I can tell." The detective suddenly giggled and a tremor went through his body, causing his insides to contract and John to lose his precarious hold on the small, rolled up plastic bag.

"Sherlock!"

"Of course you have," Sherlock continued, undaunted. "Army chaps are some of the filthiest, most perverted kind. And being stationed in a place like the Afghan desert, I'll bet some of them resorted to rather desperate measures."

"You're right. Some of the objects I found were quite… unconventional."

"What was the strangest case you've had to deal with?"

John did a quick browse-through of his time as an army surgeon before answering. "There was this bloke from my regiment," he then said. "He had a habit of pleasuring himself with various household objects. I believe it served him rather well until something got stuck."

"Oh my!" Ripples of laughter passed through the younger man's supine body, and John was forced to withdraw the tweezers out of fear of accidentally hurting Sherlock. He wiped the sweat from his brow with his forearm and exhaled sharply.

"You really need to keep as still as possible if you want me to do this. Sherlock, are you listening?"
"You do realize," he said, "that if you're not careful, you might just clench hard enough to break the speculum. Inside you."

"Please," Sherlock argued. "I doubt that would happen."

"Would you still want to risk that, though?"

Sherlock gave a long sigh in an attempt to end his giggling, allowed one final bark of laughter, and was silent once more. John both welcomed and dreaded the silence. Though it granted him a bit of concentration, the absolute quiet also felt uncomfortable. In a sense, distraction would have helped to keep his mind from wandering to those damnable thoughts he had earlier, of wondering how Sherlock would feel if the doctor's hand was up inside him for different reasons, how the sensation of the detective writhing around his fingers might feel...

Nervously clearing his throat again, he carefully reached inside. "Now stay very still," he finally said, "because I believe I've got it."

"By George, I think you do," Sherlock sneered. "Don't worry about how rough it might be, just pull it out."

John was not sure if his friend had meant to choose words with such a raunchy double-meaning. His flushed face and ears still burned with embarrassment nonetheless. His grip on the bag firm, he carefully wiggled it loose first, to prevent tearing the plastic casing. Ignoring the impatient drumming of Sherlock's fingers against the bed, he gently pulled until the evidence was within the speculum, allowing him a better hold of the bag, and removed it in its entirety.

"Finally!" Sherlock said as he reached for the removed object, not once considering that he still had a large glass tube still inside his rectum. He understandably winced as he tried to sit up.

"Careful!" John pressed Sherlock back down onto the bed and handed him his coveted evidence. "Here. Occupy yourself with it while I remove this."

John was grateful that the speculum came out without traces of fecal matter on it. Surely even Sherlock Holmes had to take a shit sometimes just like regular people, no matter what he liked to tell himself. Although considering his infrequent intake of food...
As soon as his rectum was once again empty, Sherlock bounced up to place the recovered evidence almost reverently in a glass jar. John tried not to stare at his round, pale ass hanging unashamedly out of that purple shirt he seemed to be wearing more often than not.

"Remind me to tell Harry Dunham to thank you," he said, eyeing the object inside the jar like it were some rare historic artifact of infinite value. "I believe you've just secured his freedom."

"You're not going to inform your client about this particular part of the adventure, are you?"

"Mr. Dunham did not hire me; his wife did," Sherlock replied distractedly. "And don't worry, this stays between us." He gave another throaty chuckle. "If only to keep Anderson from learning how I managed to smuggle the evidence out of the building despite having searched me."

If he finds out, he might know where to look next time… John thought, and the notion was enough to make him join in on the laughter. Then something else occurred to him; his friend was till naked from the waist down.

"Err, Sherlock…"

"Yes, John?"

"If you're done with activities involving your backside this evening, maybe it's time to put your trousers back on?"

Sherlock turned his head to glance at him with a sly smile. "Now why would I do that?"

John grimaced. His partner was clearly trying to get a reaction out of him. Feeling his ears heating from the blush, he knew the attempt had worked.

"In fact," Sherlock said playfully, "perhaps our little operation might have been more uncomfortable than I was letting on. I may need some sort of massage to set myself right again."
John would not even bother replying. In fact, he would outright refuse if need be. He simply shook his head, walking away to wash his hands and dispose of the equipment they had used to remove the evidence. He looked back once more before leaving the room and could have sworn that Sherlock had arched his back, causing his rear end to protrude just a little higher in the air. The heat now to the point of overwhelming, he hurried out the door.

The glass speculum was made to be discarded after one use, but John still felt the need to clean it beforehand. Partly, he needed an excuse to stay away from Sherlock for a while, and God forbid Sherlock decided to be even bolder and join him in the bathroom, likely to use the toilet just to bother him. The bugger always demanded attention.

The real debate that now bounced back and forth inside John's head, however, was whether Sherlock's behavior was a simple attempt to tease his assistant or a genuine flirtation. And if the detective's intent was the latter, John had to decide whether he should be worried or welcome the attention.

TBC...
Chapter 21

Chapter Summary

Sherlock and John are desperately trying to escape their forest-dwelling cannibal captors.

Chapter Notes

The ending of this chapter is going to be a huge cliffhanger. Just thought I'd mention it. :) Keep the comments going, we really appreciate it!

Chapter 21

John worked tirelessly for hours, scraping away hard-packed dirt with a measly little carving instrument whose intended use was probably something very different. Still so much better than doing it with his bare hands, though. John had to bite back a cry of triumph when he'd finally managed create a hole large enough for his arm. A few more hours of hard work, and he would have his freedom. He and Sherlock.

John was not particularly worried about the boarded space between their stalls; it was sloppy work and he was confident that he could clear a large enough space for Sherlock to crawl through in no time at all. Something that did concern him was Sherlock's state of health. Would his friend be able to keep up the pace needed for a successful escape? Would he be able to run in the first place? Would running aggravate his injuries?

John only noticed dawn was approaching upon realizing that he could see things more clearly. He could hear Sherlock breathing in the stall next to his; it was a rhythmic even flow of inhales and exhales. He didn't sound like someone who was in terrible pain, but then again, John knew how masterful Sherlock was at hiding his true feelings.

In pausing to ascertain the state of his friend, John thought he might have heard the rumbling of an empty stomach. As though in agreement, his own stomach gurgled as well. He was a little surprised they had not felt the sensation sooner. As far as he could recall, neither he nor Sherlock had eaten since the previous morning, hours before they had decided to search for clues. And Mary.

John rested his head for a moment against the plywood, fighting the feelings of defeat that doggedly returned every so often.

"I don't suppose you thought to bring any spare food for our trip...?" he said, trying for more humor and failing. Both men had returned to that place in their hearts where nothing seemed very funny at all.
"I'm not in the mood to talk," Sherlock said, his tone unreadable. John was uncertain whether his partner was busy thinking of more ways to escape their dilemma, or if he was truly worse off than he seemed.

"Just keep digging," the detective said, his voice gentler this time. "Don't worry about me."

Hoping but still in doubt, John placed his fingers through the gap in the boards again. He began to think Sherlock would not do the same, either too weak or too dejected to bother, but the doctor felt thin fingers against his own.

Feeling resolute again, John returned to his digging. Though the sun was rising and giving him a better view of his progress, dawn was beginning to make him nervous. He had not heard their captors for quite some time, which meant they were possibly sleeping. What exactly was the cycle of their sleep? Would they be waking again soon?

What if they were listening now?

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Three-finger rarely slept for more than an hour at a time. His overactive body and mind made him constantly wakeful and agitated, and the closeness to his younger brother's large, heavy frame made any kind of rest difficult to find in their shared bed. One-Eye had refused to move into a bed of his own. Despite having grown to a size twice that of his older sibling, One-Eye needed Three-finger, perhaps even more now than he did as a baby.

At first when he tried to rise, One-Eye's arm tightened around him and held him back; an unconscious response by the sleeping man-child. Three-finger murmured soothing nothings in his ear and scratched his sibling's flea-ridden scalp; two things he knew from experience would calm One-Eye. The arm around his waist quickly relaxed, and he was able to gingerly free himself from One-Eye's grasp while the youngest member of the clan remained asleep.

Three-finger thought about the two Outsiders they currently held captive. The plump one wasn't anything to worry about, but Three-finger had an uneasy feeling about the scrawny one. Why had Father insisted on keeping him alive? They rarely came across such willful and unruly prey. The wiry hunter could smell trouble a mile away, and his instincts had so far played a large part in the family's continued survival. Letting one's guard down was a fatal mistake which could cost the clan their home, or in worst case scenario, their lives, or at least their way of life.

The more he thought about it, the more agitated he became. A plan was beginning to form in Three-finger's brain, and as time passed, he grew more and more convinced of its validity.

The scrawny whore needed to die. He would sneak in whilst Father and One-Eye were still sleeping and slit the troublesome Outsider's throat. Bleed him out like a pig.

Despite knowing he would provoke Father's wrath for going against his wishes, Three-finger cared little. He could take whatever punishment Sawtooth choose to dish out for his disobedience. Be it a beating or a week of starving. He could take it. The safety of the clan mattered more.

Not only was this pale one smart, he was defiant too. Neither bode well whenever the clan held onto victims as sources of amusement. Even stupid prey could be difficult to control if they were rebellious. One-Eye had only been a few summers old when he happened into the path of a victim who was fighting back like a caged beast and had found an improvised weapon in the form of a barbecue fork. The event nearly cost the boy his life, but instead only robbed him of his left eye, and thus gained him his present name.
Defiance and cleverness were a dangerous combination. Three-finger did not care about wasting meat, or depriving Sawtooth of his new pretty little plaything. This was for the good of the family. He grabbed an ancient set of shears on his way to the holding pen. He was going to kill that little bitch.

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The sun was shining brightly now in the sky, but the day was still early enough that the heat had not yet surrounded John and Sherlock in their tiny prison. Even so, John was sweating in tiny rivers. For the past hour and thirty minutes, he had been madly digging at the dirt like a mutt desperately trying to hide a recently acquired bone. Sherlock had been silent for the duration, but John could still hear him breathing evenly, or so the doctor persisted, desperate not to worry or think of anything which would slow down his digging.

Wiping perspiration from his dirtied brow, he sat back on his knees and breathed deeply, taking a look at his advancement thus far.

"Sherlock," he whispered. "We may have enough room to get out."

There was a pause before the detective gave any sort of response.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Sherlock asked, sounding just a little too doubtful for John's taste. Did his friend really have so little faith in him and his abilities? He might not be a genius, but he was well-aware of the consequences bound to follow an erroneous judgment. The mental image of getting stuck while trying to wriggle through the hole he had dug was, in a sense, comical, but the humorous aspect was quickly erased when he imagined one of their captors finding either him or Sherlock in such a helpless state.

John was fairly confident he could squeeze through despite his plumpness, and if he managed, Sherlock would not have any difficulties.

"Yes, it's enough," he said after another moment of internal deliberation. John did not want to waste any time digging unnecessarily, not when their captors could catch them red-handed any moment. So far he hadn't heard any sounds indicating the monstrous trio of mountain men were awake, but it was all prone to change in a heartbeat. He also still needed to remove the boards separating him from Sherlock.

John had planned to simply assault the dry, brittle plywood until it broke and allowed him to break the boards free, but before he could get started, Sherlock's fingers shot out through the crack to grasp at his hand.

"Try to be as quiet as you can," the detective advised. "The small one is a light sleeper. Even the smallest noise might rouse him."

John did not bother asking how Sherlock knew such a thing, not when his partner was the master of deducing the seemingly unknowable from people, and especially not when the hyperactive behavior of said freakish individual made the deduction so obvious. He nearly asked Sherlock how they might get the boards loose without making much noise, but he took a deep breath and examined the quandary himself. The wood gauge was still in his hand, and as he rolled it in his fingers, he happened to glance at the nails in the wood.

Plywood could give easily. His grip on the gauge tightened.

He set to work on the wood surrounding the nails. Some were easy, having been hammered more
quickly and rather sloppily than others, and he easily pried them loose with very little digging. John chipped away quickly and nearly launched a splinter into his eye, but he remained resolute. He continued to tell himself that they would escape, that they were going to survive and return home.

"Almost there," he whispered, though he spoke not only for Sherlock but also himself. The last two nails had been the deepest, and he began to struggle with maintaining some level of patience. He could feel from the carving that the tool had dulled against the grain, but he persisted. Finally the last nails could be wrenched loose, and he carefully pried the boards away.

He was never so happy to see Sherlock's face. Sherlock allowed himself a smile, and though his expression was marred by discomfort and pain, his smile was genuine.

John tried not to look at the crusting of dried blood still clinging to the left side of Sherlock's face. It was but a minor scalp wound, and decidedly not the worst of his friend's injuries.

"Come on," he breathed, reaching out his hands, and Sherlock took them without hesitation, grimacing while twisting his long body to fit through the narrow opening John had created. It was obvious that the movement hurt him greatly, but not a sound escaped Sherlock's lips as he - gracefully, despite the state of him - slid over to the doctor's side of the pen.

John did not hesitate to envelop Sherlock in his arms as soon as it became physically possible. After last night's horrific turn of events he had not dared to hope he would ever be allowed to touch the other man again, to feel him, and if this was his last chance to do so, he intended to make the most of it. Sherlock accepted the embrace but hardly returned it. Leaning his head against John's neck for a moment, he then pried loose the arms desperately clutching him.

"You first," he said, glancing at the hole his friend had spent the better part of the night digging. They would fit. Maybe.

John immediately shook his head. "No way. My girth could get me stuck, and if that's the case, I want you to have a chance to escape first."

"You said you were sure, John!"

"I'd rather not risk it." This was really an exceptionally bad time to be arguing about anything. The longer they dallied, the more likely it was that their little stunt would become public knowledge.

Sherlock nervously glanced back toward the door, such a small thing to separate them from their captors. He seemed to remember too that they had no time to waste. His face pinched together as though he were swallowing down his physical pain, he silently leaned forward and entered the hole. He took a cautious look first in case of a welcoming party on the other side, but luckily for him and his assistant, no one awaited them.

The detective took care in negotiating his escape, not only to maintain silence, but to avoid exacerbating his wounds. Even so, his movements must have been felt through every frayed, battered inch of his assaulted form. A strained whisper of a groan escaped his lips as he pulled himself free from the hole.

"Hurry," Sherlock hissed, desperate to be rid of this place and these horrible bastards once and for all. John saw the willowy fingers outstretched beyond the hole and nearly took hold of them on the spot. Instead, he eased himself onto his stomach and crawled forward.

He had been right; it was a dangerous fit. He did not imagine being absolutely stuck like some amateur spelunker in an unfamiliar cave, but he would need to go very slowly and carefully, lest he
catch himself and make enough noise to alert their loathsome keepers.

John was halfway through when Sherlock's outstretched hands took a loose hold of his own.

"Easy," he said, his tone encouraging. "Just a little more."

John tried to inch forward, pushing with legs already trembling from exhaustion, but he could move very little. Or not at all, in fact.

Damn it all to hell. He was stuck.

The boards constituting the wall above him cut painfully into his back, and the doctor felt his eyes tear up from the struggle to withstand the impulse of crying out. Sherlock's grip on John's hands became more forceful when he noticed the lack of progress by his friend, and he tugged with increased effort.

"Come on, John!" the detective ground out. "Move!"

"I can't… fucking move…" the now deeply distressed doctor panted back. A looming sense of hopelessness suddenly overcame him, and he ceased his squirming in an attempt to regain his breath and make his frantically beating heart slow down to a more manageable level.

"You CAN move!" Sherlock insisted and knelt down in the grass next to his struggling friend. He retained his hold on John's hands but did not pull. To have any chance of getting the older man loose, they needed to synchronize their efforts.


That's easy for you to say, John thought. You're not stuck and probably looking like some grotesque version of Winnie the Pooh clumsily grappling for a pot of honey.

"Focus," Sherlock repeated, his eye contact firm and unmoving. John nodded and shut his eyes, clearing his mind and attempting to regain a sense of calm.

"Latissimus dorsi... serratus anterior... external intercostal..."

"Internal abdominal oblique?" Sherlock offered.

John allowed himself a smile and began to wiggle along, slowly this time, sucking in his stomach when needed, and exhaling when appropriate. He was not going as quickly as either he or his partner would have liked, but at least he was making progress.

"Nearly there," Sherlock encouraged him. His grip on John's hands tightened for a moment and tugged as his friend squirmed past the wood.

"I am there," the older man corrected triumphantly.

Just as he was about to pull himself loose from the hole, both detective and assistant heard the sound of a door being unlocked behind them. John's eyes bugged and he hurried to escape, but before he was in the clear, a hand closed its spindly fingers around his ankle.

The realization of being found out and caught removed all sense of secrecy, and John screamed at sensation of being grabbed. Sherlock tightened his grip again, a lucky thing to do, as the skinny beast that had John in his clutches was surprisingly strong, yanking the doctor backwards against
the hole. But, as he had been unfortunate to catch himself on the wooden boards moments ago, John was fortunate to not easily slide through towards the hunter. He hated to think how easily his skin would have been stripped away if one of the bigger mountain men had been the one to grab him.

"Sherlock, run!" he shouted over high-pitched yowls as his partner engaged in a tug of war with the lunatic. "Save yourself, damn you!"

Sherlock, however, did nothing of the sort. He stubbornly held on to his friend, determined not to give an inch, even though it was obvious he was running out of strength. If the struggle went on for any length of time, the duo were very unlikely to come out on top.

How long would it take for the skinny bastard's equally fucked-up relatives to notice what was going on? Were the two of them - the giant and the idiot - spurting around the lodge to intercept the runaways this very moment?

John doubled his efforts upon imagining the hare-lipped, hairy giant laying his hands on Sherlock again and forcing the young genius to do unspeakable acts in order to break down his spirit. He could not allow that to happen again. If Sherlock was foolish enough to stick by him no matter what, he at least owed his friend to put up one hell of a fight.

At the moment every single muscle in John's body was fighting just to keep his stance and prevent being pulled back through the hole in the ground. He was thus unable to retaliate in any way toward the hunter. Doing so would risk being uprooted, and John knew his only chance was to maintain a low centre of gravity by trying to make himself as heavy as possible.

Would the hunter tire before they did? Unlikely, since the little psychopath had demonstrated practically superhuman endurance and strength. Sherlock, while possessing a wiry strength deceptive of his slender frame, was simply too much of a lightweight.

The long, ropey muscles in Sherlock's arms were stretched to the breaking point as he fought to keep most of John's body outside the shed. The force he had exhibited thus far - an effective combo of adrenaline and willpower - was starting to wear thin. They had to do something. Quick.

"Kick him, John..." Sherlock ground out between breaths that sounded like a pair of bellows. "Kick him!"

"I... can't!" the doctor groaned back, wondering why Sherlock hadn't reached the same conclusion he had: doing anything that would upset the current equilibrium was equal to a death sentence.

"Listen to me, John... He had a knife in his hand when he came in. Or scissors... I can't be sure which. He's using both hands now, but when he lets go to pick up his weapon, he'll have to spare one. That's your chance. Kick him. And make it count."

John wanted to argue that it would do no good. These monsters did not seem to care about getting hurt. What if kicking made no difference whatsoever?

Wiry arms of steely muscle and sinew adjusted, and John realized no matter the odds, he had to take the chance as it came. One hand let go to reach for the shears, and John kicked as hard as he could.

The little beast did not cry out, not at first, but the grip of his remaining hand loosened. John took the moment to his advantage and jerked himself free. Sherlock had anticipated the moment of the mountain man losing his grip and after feeling the kick, he pulled hard. The remainder of John slipped through the hole and he was jumping to his feet instantly, though he swore he heard the sound of the shears being plunged into the dirt where his feet had been only a second before.
Sherlock all but dragged his assistant to his feet and shoved him forward.

"Run, run, run!" Sherlock cried. John did not even need to be asked. In fact, he was surprised that his friend could run at all, considering his injuries, but he did not linger on the thought for much longer than the time it took to enter his mind. Sherlock was running just like him, and they were finally escaping.

"We should head for the road," John shouted as they entered the woods, hearing the demented cries of outrage and bloodlust fill the cabin. "Back the way we came--"

"No." Sherlock tugged his arm and lead him behind a thicket, the scratching of twigs nothing compared to what their pursuers were capable of. "As stupid as they might seem, they'll assume we would retread familiar paths. We need to lose them, like you did when they first attacked."

The front door of the cabin swung open with a loud bang, and the smallest hunter was out like a shot, followed by the lumbering man-child and their leader, who carried not only a shotgun but a bow and quiver full of arrows. They carefully looked around, considering where their quarry had run off to, and it gave John an idea. He picked up a stone at his feet, but this time it would not be used as a weapon. Taking wary aim in the direction opposite to himself and Sherlock, he threw the stone.

All three ugly heads perked at the small crashing sounds in amidst the vegetation, and, thinking this to be their prey, ran straight for it.

Despite the surprising effectiveness of it, the simple diversion would not fool them forever. John grimaced as he and Sherlock ran through the underbrush and heard twigs snapping every time their feet came in contact with the ground.

The small one was their biggest concern. The giant, though vicious due to his size and brutality, was neither fast nor agile, and the idiot was simply too dumb to follow even a decent trail. As if on cue, he heard the little beast's manic giggle echoing between the trees, and it sounded as if the crazed psychopath was almost upon them.

Probably an auditory hallucination, he realized, and though he was hardly a whimsical person by any standards, it was easy to imagine being targeted from all directions in a situation as extreme as this.

For a split second John believed his mind had also conjured up the whistling sound of an arrow passing just above his right shoulder and embedding itself into a nearby tree. Seeing Sherlock's response quickly convinced him that the threat this time was far from imagined.

The big bastard was firing arrows at them, and judging from the accuracy of the shot, he had a very good aim. Excellent marksman skills had likely developed from the giant's shortcomings brought on by his size and bulk, which made him slow and clumsy when pursuing his targets on foot.

John hated to be reminded of his time serving in Afghanistan, of being in range of enemy fire. He had made it back home, physically in one piece, but with a psyche that was not only broken but shattered. Many of his comrades hadn't made it back at all. Some had vanished without a trace never to be heard from again, while others were shot down or blown up by strategically placed landmines. One of his duties as a doctor had been to collect body parts after an explosion and try to make a positive identification from what was left, which oftentimes was not much.

Now he was practically in a warzone again, only this time with a person he had sworn to protect, someone he could possibly not live without.
John felt as though his heart was quite literally ripped out from his chest by the smallest psycho’s eight fingers when Sherlock suddenly went down followed immediately by a gut-wrenching cry of pure agony.

The older man spun on his heel and faced his fallen friend. Amidst the running and desperate attempts to ignore the pain and find a means of losing their attackers, Sherlock had not noticed a bear trap under the vegetation. Sherlock was desperate not to scream a second time, but the pain proved this to be impossible. Muffled cries escaped him as he struggled with the trap like an animal.

Strangely, John found himself getting angry at the sight. Whatever happened to Sherlock noticing everything? But the anger was gone as quickly as it had flared, replaced by the sick, sour feeling of fear that crawled throughout his body as he fell to his knees and inspected the wound. He tried to force the ancient looking atrocity open but found his fingers, as well as Sherlock's were sliding uselessly over the contraption from profuse bloodshed.

How ironic that John should think of landmines when their attackers used a similar method of preventing prey from escaping.

John felt himself fighting the urge to vomit, something he had never felt in the service, even when seeing comrades he thought of as friends gravely injured or even killed. Though the scenario felt so familiar, the victim was different. This was his best friend, and at times even more so.

"Please, please, please," he begged, forcing his grip into the trap's jaws and prying with all his might.

The trap, an archaic and heavy contraption but nonetheless very effective, did not yield to his desperate attempts. At most John figured he might be able to pry the rusty, serrated jaws open a few centimeters, but by doing so, he would cause his friend a new set of puncture wounds when the trap once again slammed shut. Because it would before Sherlock had any chance of freeing his trapped limb.

Sherlock had stopped his useless thrashing and lay unmoving on his side, shallow-breathing and covered in a layer of sweat emphasizing his already ashen complexion. How much more of this could his body take before it shut down?

John had no idea how much time had passed since Sherlock went down - the moment felt like it stretched on forever while in reality it could not have been more than thirty seconds - but he knew their pursuers drew closer by each passing second. Looking around in despair, John tried to see if there were any other options short of prying the trap open. His gaze fell on the chain attached to the hellish device, its metal as ancient and corroded as the jaws themselves, but without obviously faulty links. He tugged on it experimentally a few times to determine where it was fastened, but Sherlock's cries of anguish made him promptly cease. Every movement, no matter how small, caused the jagged edges to burrow just a fraction deeper into Sherlock's meager shin, and the pain had to be near unbearable.

Who was he kidding, anyway? Even if he found the stick and uprooted it, did he seriously expect Sherlock to run with THAT dangling off his leg? The blood trail alone would be a dead giveaway for the twisted pack of hunters.

The now despondent doctor sat down on the ground down next to his partner, and not knowing what else to do, he settled for what he was still capable of namely providing comfort.

"Sherl?" he whispered, laying his hand on a very sallow, clammy cheek.
Sherlock's eyes were closed but opened slowly when he heard John use the affectionate nickname for him. He hated it, of course, and John knew that, but it was needless to point out now.

"It would seem we've reached our journey's end," John said in a quiet voice reeking of resignation. At least we're together, he wordlessly added in his thoughts.

Sherlock's eyes shut again, and a tremor passed through him from the pain. Soon he would go into shock, not feeling anything and not even caring.

"I have."

John did not need further explanation. "No," he pleaded. "No, no, no! You refused to run without me, and now I'm doing the same."

"You were still capable of running on your own," Sherlock argued calmly, perhaps a little too calmly. "I'm useless now."

John felt his eyes sting with tears, and he blinked them back, only to have his vision blur into a haze of reds.

"No." He was angry again, furious that Sherlock was right. He would have to be left behind, and nothing could be done about it otherwise.

"I can't... I just can't." The tears fell freely this time, and he clasped his hands around his friend's waxen neck. The pulse there was so fast, so very fast.

"You have to," Sherlock argued, his voice nearly a frustrated growl. "I'm not about to have the both of us killed by these evil bastards."

John heard approaching footsteps snapping vegetation in the distance, as well as that sickeningly familiar cackle.

They'd been running side by side. Why couldn't he have been the one to step into the bear trap? Why did it have to be Sherlock? He would have gladly given his life to aid Sherlock's escape from this horrible place, and now fate was so cruel as to spit in his face by doing this instead?

Mycroft would kill him. John was sure of it. And even if he didn't, John would wish it.

"John, you have to go." Sherlock closed his bloody fingers around John's wrist in a surprisingly tight grip. He then pulled the older man down toward him to whisper in his ear.

"Your best chance is to head that way." The detective pointed in a direction approximately ten o'clock from where they now lay. "Try to run in a straight line. In no less than half a mile, you will get to a river. If you manage to cross it, they will likely not be able to pursue you At least not the giant or the idiot. I might be wrong about the small one, but I doubt any of them can swim. John, do you hear me?"

The doctor nodded. The high-pitched giggle sounded again, this time decidedly closer. If he was to have any chance of evading recapture, now was the time to run. The rational part of his mind tried to force his body into gear, but another part rebelled fiercely against it.

"I'll be back for you," John whispered, resting his own forehead against Sherlock's for the briefest moment. "I'll bring back the whole cavalry. I swear it, Sherlock. I won't let either of us die."

And with those words, John sprang to his feet and ran.
TBC...
Chapter 22

Chapter Summary

John and Sherlock continue to fight for survival - separately.

Sawtooth sniffed the air and could swear he smelled the presence of their game. They were close and would soon be much closer. He nearly had them moments before, but they had slipped away. These sweet little morsels were clever, but not clever enough. Like so many others before them, their disadvantage was that the woods were not their home. The plump one would become food like past prey, and the pretty one would be theirs until his death... which might not be far off if he continued to defy them.

A scream echoed through the trees, and a familiar scream at that. One of the pair had stepped in a bear trap. Sawtooth hoped this meant the downed man's companion would linger in an attempt to help free him. Past victims usually did.

Less than a minute later, Three-finger's distant laughter picked up in excitement, and Sawtooth knew this meant their meat had been found. One-Eye was likely not far off, and as useless as the oaf could be at times, he could at least be trusted to hold onto their prey with a grip of iron if need be. Though not quick, Sawtooth hurried onward, grip on his bow tightening in anticipation.

The smell of fresh blood became stronger and stronger the closer he got to his trapped prey, and mixed with it was also the very distinct smell of fear; something the seasoned mountain man had learned to distinguish extremely well in his long life as a hunter. It had taken more than usual to bring out the fear in this particular Outsider, but it was definitely there now. The scent was almost intoxicating in its sweetness, and Sawtooth felt his member stiffen beneath his dirty overalls simply from smelling the scrawny whore's pain. There would be a lot more of that to come.

The frantic screaming began and quickly increased in magnitude before Sawtooth had reached his target, and when Three-finger's excited cry of triumph followed, the clan leader realized that his eldest son had already reached their fallen prey. The notion angered him for some strange, primitive reason. He had not given his son permission to play with the scrawny whore, and Three-finger had been taking far too many liberties lately. Perhaps it was time for Sawtooth to assert his dominance, lest the insolent pup forget who was making the decisions.

Lifting his shotgun, the seven-foot-one hunter stomped forward like the veritable bull he was, cleft lip curled and serrated teeth exposed in a snarl.

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Sherlock counted the seconds between John finally leaving and the first of the deranged inbreeds showing up, and if perception of time was still accurate (he believed so, despite the pain eating away at both his body and mind) his calculations told him John definitely had a chance.
If his friend could maintain a constant running speed of twenty kilometres per hour, which equaled 5.6 metres per second, he would need approximately eighty seconds to reach the river.

The other two are nowhere near as fast as John, he reminded himself. If only he could avert the small one’s attention long enough to secure John’s freedom...

Rapid footsteps came louder until the giggling madman was suddenly upon him. Sherlock could not help the scream that erupted from him when their bodies connected, and he silently hoped John would not double back just from hearing his cries.

The skinny fiend straddled Sherlock, and a line of spit dangled from his lips until landing on his victim. Sherlock had no false expectations of how this would end. He was stuck to the ground and unable to do much else but feel the agony of jagged metal teeth clamped over his leg. Struggling while still in its grip would only worsen the damage and spill more precious blood, and once he succumbed to shock, he would be utterly useless to himself. He only wished the damnable beast above him would not savor the moments leading up to his death as he rightly predicted.

Drooling in excitement, the lunatic watched Sherlock's face intently as he leaned backwards and pressed down on the trap's jaws. Sherlock nearly threw up at the pain, and he felt bile climb up his throat when his attacker leaned forward again, hot puffs of foul breath beating against his face.

"Just kill me already, you sick bastard," Sherlock snarled.

The mountain man's face pressed against his as he reached at his belt for something, and when the object was removed, Sherlock realized he might just get his wish. An old revolver was cocked in the maniac's mismatched hands, and as it was aimed right between his eyes, Sherlock was resolute to keep his eyes open, to look past the gun and at his killer.

The trigger was pulled.

When Sherlock heard no thunderous bang, he thought perhaps he had died instantly, but he quickly caught on to what had happened. A look of confusion, then anger spread over the pointed features of the mountain man's ugly face.

The gun had jammed.

As if refusing to believe it, the deranged creature pulled the trigger three, four, five more times, his frustration growing by each time the weapon refused to do his bidding. The revolver - a Smith & Wesson model 42 - was old, Sherlock realized, and likely not regularly used. It was still employed as a service revolver by American police in some districts, and that was likely where these lunatics had gotten it. How many police officers had they managed to slaughter and do away with over the years?

Sherlock's thoughts momentarily drifted to contemplate the obvious and glaring inefficiency of the local police department and their inability to even protect their own, but the furious howl of his attacker, no longer in a playful mood, quickly made him forget thoughts about anything but the present.

The little madman spun the revolver in his fully developed right hand and decided to use it as a blunt force weapon instead. Sherlock barely had time to raise his arm to shield his neck and face from the blow that followed, and he could hear a sickening crack when the gun barrel connected with his forearm.

A fracture, the detective instantly deduced, and a familiar one at that. Sebastian Moran had already done his best to grind that particular bone to pulp ten years ago and managed to break it in two...
places. The arm had held together reasonably well with the help of a surgically inserted titanium screw, but taking the brunt of such a ferocious attack turned out to be too much, even for said piece of near-indestructible metal.

Out of instinct rather than a conscious act of will, Sherlock lashed out with a blow of his own and managed to knock the revolver out of the little beast's hand, although he failed to dislodge the creature itself, which immediately started pummeling him with new blows, this time using its bare fists. The smallest but undoubtedly the most psychotic of the three mountain men seemed hellbent on killing him then and there.

When simple use of fists did not please it, the little beast finally slammed its head against Sherlock's. The detective flitted in and out of consciousness from the blow, and his vision blurred when he tried to look up at his attacker. Disoriented, Sherlock instinctively struggled to remain conscious until the pain of his arm and leg snapped him into full awareness again.

A sound of edged metal flicking against leather reached his ears as the mountain man removed a knife from a tattered belt. The curved blade - bowie, Sherlock thought - gleamed dully in the sunlight as the man above him teased at bare skin, like some sick mockery of intimacy.

The pain of both fractured bone and metal-ravaged flesh had Sherlock feeling the pull of sleep, and though he fought it, he feared he would fall unconscious and not even be aware of the slitting of his throat before he finally died.

He was jarred back awake when he heard the roar of a rough voice that made the scrawny fiend straddling him stop and look up. More footsteps, much heavier, approached, and Sherlock turned his faltering gaze to the leader of the clan. The detective did not need to know their language to understand that the giant was vastly displeased.

And so, apparently, was the skinny little psycho. Snarling like a predator protecting its kill, it exposed its inflamed, swollen gums and crooked, mismatched teeth and hissed at the larger mountain man. The knife remained poised at Sherlock's throat, scraping at the outmost layer of skin but not yet drawing blood.

Furious at being challenged, the giant gave a toothy snarl of his own, soon followed by a thunderous roar, not unlike that of a bear. Sherlock dared not move his head in fear of slitting his own throat, or provoking the little beast to actually slice him, but his eyes keenly followed the heated exchange about to take place. Even now he could not stop his brain from jumping to a chain of deductive reasoning triggered so easily by the slightest observation. Right now it was trying to calculate probability as for which of the two would come out the victor in case the small one kept challenging their leader, which in turn could mean life or death to him.

The giant: size, weight, brute strength, experience. But his size is also a drawback, as well as his advanced age. A son challenging his father for leadership? The small one: fast, agile, dexterous, and quick-witted, but psychotic. The last can work as an advantage as well as a disadvantage. Not nearly as strong as the giant, naturally, and he's used to bending to his father's will. Will he this time?

Within the fraction of a second it became obvious to the detective that the small one was not going to take heed of the giant's warning bellow. Instead the creature flipped the knife in its hand and lifted it above its head, and Sherlock watched it coming toward him in a slow, murderous arc, appearing trapped in suspended animation for a moment that seemed to go on forever.

At the last possible moment, the skinny monster was knocked aside, thrown off of him and bashed from its grip of the knife, which fell harmless on the ground next to Sherlock. If he could manage to fight the haze brought on by pain and head trauma, he might be able to procure the blade for himself.
He would not be able to defeat both of them, but he might have a chance of killing at least one, rage of the survivor be damned.

Rolling onto his side, partly to get closer to the knife, partly to recoil out of instinct, he watched as the skinny hunter staggered to its feet, reeling a little from the impact of the butt of the leader's shotgun against its head. Even with a pain threshold like few other creatures, a concussion was not something to simply shrug off. Still, the maniac hissed and sputtered like a cat, yammering out some unintelligible argument, and stepped forward to once again challenge the giant. But following the blow to the head, the shorter hunter was now the slower of the two, and the clan leader grabbed his troublesome head by the neck.

Sherlock half-expected the brute to ring it. Instead the smaller mountain man was throttled against a tree, and an arrow was removed from its quiver, pressed dangerously against the smaller creature's temple. The giant muttered something, clearly a warning, and though his brood twitched and grumbled, the two stood back up on peaceful terms.

Of course, Sherlock considered. With only three members of their clan - the third appearing to be relatively useless in comparison - killing off anyone within their group would only be a last resort. Still, the massive alpha had been dead serious in his threat, because his smaller companion had finally acquiesced.

In his slow creep towards the blade and dazed observation of the two hunters, Sherlock had not realized he had an audience.

The idiot had also arrived on the scene and was now staring at him with a questioning look in its one remaining eye. The scar, which had blinded him on the left side, had distorted his features to the point of giving him a permanently surprised expression on his otherwise slack face. The creature, however, was not so retarded as to being completely unaware of its surroundings. The single eye, now focused on Sherlock, was gleaming with obvious childish interest. Like a child with an eye for a shiny new toy.

There was not enough strength or vigor left in the detective's mangled body to make a lunge for the blade. His right arm was useless from the elbow down; his fingers, even though he could still feel them, were no longer obeying the commands from his brain. Likely the result of motor nerve damage on top of the broken ulna, Sherlock deduced, possibly in the risk of becoming permanent unless…

A new wave of white-hot pain flared through his trapped leg and further into every fiber of his being when he was suddenly yanked back with excessive force. The idiot had grasped the chain of the bear trap and tugged on it, snorting gleefully at the detrimental effect it had on their plaything.

The combined laughter of the cleft-mouthed giant and the three-fingered madman joined the man-child's infantile guffawing, and to Sherlock's surprise and then utter disgust, the idiot began to touch him with something that could only be described as mock tenderness. One large, filthy hand stroked his damp nest of curls and he swore he could hear hushing noises of comfort leave the medium-sized lunatic's mouth.

At this point, Sherlock was tempted to knock himself out.

The giant barked some form of command at the one-eyed brute and turned to leave, the skinny one all but skipping after the clan alpha. The oaf remained behind, grinning at Sherlock, who could only hope that the trap which he worried would never come off would not be tugged on anymore. Big hands, their prints and grooves coated in dirt and fingernails caked with Lord knew what, patted the detective like he were a dog, squashing at hollow cheeks and pulling at curly locks of hair. Though Sherlock thought himself to have an impressive gag reflex, the moment the foul-smelling man closed
a palm over his lips, he thought he might throw up.

Even so, he despaired at the absence of the beast's two relatives. He did not need to be a detective or a genius to know where they were going, and what they would do when they reached their destination.

John…

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John was presently muttering out every expletive he could think of. He had reached the river quite quickly, but the current was immeasurably strong. John thought himself a decent swimmer, but this surge would unquestionably wash him downstream. The doctor considered running along the shore until he could find a more manageable area to swim across… but what if he was followed? What if the water there was shallow enough for his attackers to wade through?

There were many "what ifs" and John suspected that if he stayed around to analyse them all, his chances of getting out of these woods alive decreased by each second. After all, he was not…

Oh God, how was he expected to do this without Sherlock? What was happening to his best friend this very moment? Had the savages found him yet? Had they killed him on the spot? If not, what were they going to do with him?

Stupid question, John realized, as he had seen with his own eyes last night what the inbred lunatics thought Sherlock was good for. The memory of his partner being violated by the biggest - and ugliest - of the mountain men, of having to watch his unwilling body being used as an outlet for such animalistic urges made John's throat constrict painfully, and he had to stop for a moment to collect himself and choke back the anguished sobs which threatened to break free.

John was, of course, well-aware of rape conducted as a type of psychological warfare, especially in primitive cultures, but he had never expected it to happen to Sherlock or himself, not on this side of the globe. He'd truly believed he had left such atrocities behind when leaving Afghanistan. Clearly that had been an erroneous judgment; one that had cost him greatly.

Swallowing his pain, physical as well as spiritual, he once again gave the river his full attention. His body was doing its best to remind him that he was no longer twenty-five and wounded on top of that. The recent exertion had made him sweat rivers, and he had not drunk any fluids since yesterday.

No, no, no! This was not the time to be thinking about such matters. He'd have plenty of time to rehydrate and recuperate in a hospital if he managed to get out of this fucked up mess, but he wasn't out of the woods yet - quite literally.

John navigated his way along the riverbank, cursing the fact that it was so steep. He needed to watch where he put his feet, or he would soon be rolling down the slope like a big, bouncy marble.

He had barely started his descent before he heard that damnable laugh in the distance, something that he might hear in his nightmares if he were to survive this ordeal. Stumbling as he climbed, he scrambled downward and clung to a small wall where land had been carved out from floods in the past, suggesting that for all of the trouble he would have in crossing the river, at least the waters were not as deep as they once had been. He pressed against the wall, listening as the deranged giggling became steadily louder.

Had they found Sherlock? And if so, had they killed him? John silently tried to convince himself that they had completely passed his friend by, but the chances of that were one in a million. And now
they were coming for him.

Still, John had not been injured very seriously, at least not compared to Sherlock. Perhaps if he surprised the bony little maniac, he could toss it into the current. It might not kill the hunter, but the river might carry him downstream and thus far away.

The laughter died down as the mountain man approached, giggles replaced by a heavy breathing. John doubted his attacker was out of breath. The little bleeder sounded more like he was sexually excited at the notion of attacking and killing. The doctor's thoughts wandered back to his poor friend, and what level of abuse these monsters would continue to inflict upon him if they had not killed him already. Unless they would not stop even when he was but a lifeless corpse.

At least a corpse would not mind being raped, John grimly found himself thinking.

As he listened to try and get an impression of where the smallest hunter was, John realized he could no longer hear its presence. The slope was silent, save for the rushing of the river's current. His heart hammered furiously as he strained to sense any sign of the despicable thing's presence.

Before he could form an idea of what to do, he caught a flash of movement in the corner of his eye, and he could barely realize this was an outstretched arm as the creature's blade whistled past his ear and into the dirt inches from his face.

John had his army combat training to thank for his above-average reflexes, and those were what saved him from being skewered by the pointed object thrown at him. Just a fraction of a second slower, and he would have lost an ear. A full second, and the creature would be licking grey matter off the blade after pulling it out.

John made his decision in the blink of an eye. His entire body twisting in a feat of athleticism that was unbecoming of his overweight, nearly-forty-year-old self, the doctor went for the knife. He managed to close his hands around the hilt - both of them - but he had definitely not expected the damnable object to be stuck. John struggled for the briefest of moments, using his legs for traction. He felt the knife shift, just marginally, but enough for him to keep trying.

He had expected the creature to come at him, but somehow the beastly little thing still managed to catch him by surprise. A sudden weight collided with him and dislodged him from his stance. Four thin but incredibly strong limbs, all long, wiry sinews and muscle, coiled around him with the lethal strength of a large constrictor. The deformed little psychopath had jumped onto his back and caught his head in a chokehold.

John's vision dimmed within seconds, and he realized he would be rendered unconscious very soon unless he managed to break out of the sleeper hold and reestablish the blood flow to his brain. He clawed frantically at the thin, unbending arms of his attacker, but he might as well have been tearing at a pair of steel shackles. As the lure of sleep beckoned to John, growing stronger by each second, he knew he had to resort to desperate measures. Putting his left foot against the wall of dirt which constituted the river bank, he used his last remaining strength to push as hard as he could.

Gravity did the rest. The inbred creature lost its balance and stumbled, but the steely arms did not loosen, and John felt the dreadful sensation of falling backwards down the slope. Both bodies rolled halfway down, and finally John was freed from the thing's grip. He scrambled to his feet as quickly as he could, but unsurprisingly, his opponent was quicker, having an entire life's worth of practice. Muscles tensed under the mountain man's arms like steel cords, and without a knife, he resorted to spreading his spidery fingers like claws. What had once been dangling spittle was looking dangerously close to frenzied foam.
How appropriate that this clan resemble rabid dogs, John considered.

They only circled for three seconds before the three-fingered man lunged forward. John reacted on pure instinct, letting his training take over. They struggled, and the doctor felt the long, broken, filthy fingernails digging into his skin, causing new sores which allowed germs to be transferred between them.

Then the fiend bit him.

John cried out in pain, though he surprised himself at how the cry sounded more like a roar than a high-pitched yelp. It appeared that fighting to survive against these monsters had him resorting to behave a little like them, and the very idea chilled him.

More than thirty paces away, John had an unseen witness. The giant leader had been able to approach without notice due to the fight, and he now calmly took aim at the struggling pair.

The blast of a shotgun tore through the air moments later, and John felt a sudden and intense pain in his right shoulder. The greater part of the leaden shots fired at him had missed their target and entered the coursing waters beneath him, but a few embedded themselves in his body with enough force to throw him back several feet. John landed heavily on his back, momentarily stunned, and could now discern the massive alpha standing on the rocky ledge above him. But more importantly, he saw the giant loading a new pair of cartridges into the double-barreled shotgun.

There goes my other shoulder, the doctor thought, realizing that fate was indeed not without a sense of irony.

Had it been like this when he was shot for the first time in the Afghan desert? He could remember the raw pain, the blazing sun, the crisp desert sand against his face, the deafening, smattering noises of bullets fired in all directions, and human voices shouting in a mixture of languages, some friendly, others not.

Besides the occasional flashes of memory which came back to haunt him, John remembered very little of the actual moment he was wounded. He found out afterwards that the man who had shot him was gunned down moments later by his comrades, but the knowledge brought him no satisfaction. The man - an enemy soldier, but still a man with dreams, hopes and goals, much like himself - had died for his conviction, much like he and everyone else who served had committed themselves to.

These three twisted men did not believe in anything besides degradation and suffering. John wanted to move, but the raw pain had spread from his right shoulder into the rest of his body, including his three uninjured limbs, rendering them practically useless. He watched the giant raise the shotgun, take aim… but before any shots were fired, the salivating little madman grabbed both his ankles and jerked him forward, thus disrupting the alpha's plans.

John could do very little with a shoulder full of buckshot. Sherlock was still out there, possibly dead, and if not, a subject of the clan's cruel amusement. Two mountain men were trying to kill him, and one of which had more cartridges for his shotgun on top of a bow and arrows. Behind him and his steadily winning opponent, a river raged. Death was imminent from nearly all sides.

No way out. The three-fingered beast before him knew it and grabbed John's neck, baring what few teeth it had and licking the man's skin as though savoring the flavor of a freshly cooked meal.

"I swear to god, if you bite me again..." John muttered.

Instead, the lunatic stood up, lifting its prey as it did so. John thought he could smell rotting meat on
the thing's breath as it laughed.

Only one way out, and said way might just kill him. But if it meant getting away, if it meant the possibility of getting further away from these bastards and a little closer to help... he would gladly take the risk.

John gave up what strength he had left in his legs and let his full weight take both him and the psychotic fiend off the solid ground. They disappeared from the giant's sight and into the rushing current of the river. The coldness of the water enveloped John and he felt his foe release its hold on him.

Between the gulps of air and mouthfuls of water his struggling body could not help but swallow, John was aware of very little. He struggled to keep his head above the surface, but the currents were too strong, and he was too weak from shock and loss of blood to successfully battle the river. White foam filled his vision and the roar of gushing water filled his ears, leaving him deaf to virtually all other sounds.

He would drown, he realized now. Strangely accepting of his fate, he stopped fighting the stream, instead allowing it to take him below the surface. At least if he died like this, his body had a chance of being discovered and not end up as some fucked up steak tartare for a bunch of sadistic, inbred degenerates. It might not be much, but having a body to bury would at least offer some sense of closure for Harry and the few friends he had left. Closure was always preferable to the ever-present limbo of not knowing what had become of a missing loved one. So in a way he'd been lucky.

But Sherlock… Oh God, Sherlock. He had promised to come back for his friend. If there was even the slightest possibility that Sherlock was alive, John owed it to him to try. He owed it to Mycroft as well, having solemnly promised to keep his little brother safe (or as safe as one could considering Sherlock's restless nature and his taste for the bizarre).

John picked up his struggles against the unforgiving forces of nature, forcing his oxygen-deprived brain back into action, which in turn commanded his muscles to move. The will to live was the most fundamental component of all in a matter of survival, and John was not prepared to give it up just yet. He resurfaced and his straining lungs greedily inhaled.

TBC...
Chapter 23

Chapter Summary

Sherlock is brought back as a captive and starts reflecting on his past.

Chapter Notes

Some more unpleasant imagery ahead. Sensitive people be warned, but if you've come this far and are still reading, we really needn't warn you.

Chapter 23

Sawtooth was furious. His eldest son's impetuousness had once again ruined things for him, this time by getting in the way of a clear shot. Now their prey had slipped out of their reach, and even worse, the plump piece of meat had managed to drag Three-finger with it.

Eyes darting back and forth among the rapids, he lumbered along the riverside, and he called for his son, keeping a sneaky sense of dread from just bubbling over. Panicking would do no good at present, but he also could not afford to lose Three-finger, his best on-foot hunter.

After all, how would he be able to eke out a living his family had been following for generations without help? Also... who the hell would look after One-Eye?

Sawtooth called out a second time, hoping perhaps a little naively that his eldest could hear his voice above the roaring din. Just as he thought he had lost him for good, he heard a splash far different from the current. A lumpy head popped up from the water and wiry arms clamped around a large rock in a grip of iron. The giant clan leader hurried as quickly as his cumbersome form could allow and stepped carefully onto the stones, arm outstretched to guide his waterlogged son onto dry land. Three-finger coughed and hacked up some river water but seemed otherwise unharmed. If anything, he seemed just as annoyed as his father that the plump Outsider had slipped from his grasp, and he picked up a stone within his reach and hurled it downriver.

No good being angry now, though. Sawtooth squeezed the smaller hunter's shoulder and tugged him backwards, nodding toward the trees. They still had one Outsider captive, and if they wanted to keep it, they could not dally, as Sawtooth was not sure just how long he could trust someone of One-Eye's intellect to look after their sole prisoner.

The pair headed back the way they had come, confident that the river would finish the job for them. There was no way the wounded, fat little man would escape the current. His body might be washed up on the bank further down the river or found floating by some Outsiders, perhaps tomorrow, in a week, or even a month, but there would be nothing on him that could possibly be tracked back to the clan. If anything, Sawtooth was sad to lose the meat. The plump one, if utilized to full extent, could have fed the three hunters for close to a fortnight.
Instead they had to make do with the scrawny whore. Sawtooth licked his row of serrated teeth and stomped toward his quarry.

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Sherlock lay limp in the grasp of the huge oafish man-child, trying to force his senses to shut down and his mind to block out the vilenes of his keeper. The creature's thick, muscular arms were wrapped around him so tightly that he could barely breathe, and the thing pressed his face against Sherlock's neck, nuzzling the short, curly strands of hair on his nape and inhaling the scent of his terror. At least the one-eyed degenerate had stopped tugging on the chain to the bear trap, which was still very much attached to the unfortunate detective's limb.

Sherlock wondered if the other two monsters had found John and hence killed him. He knew they were out to kill, not to capture, as they clearly had no interest in his friend besides turning him into meat. If John was brought back, it would be as a corpse.

Suddenly a wet, slobbering tongue reached out from the idiot's maw to lick the moisture and crusts of dried blood from his left cheek. Sherlock was utterly revolted by the gesture and writhed despite the pain it was bound to cause him. Predictably he cried out, his breath coming out as small, quick puffs.

Sherlock thought he might have blacked out from the pain, because the sudden presence of the man-child's relatives remained undetected by him until the giant leader stepped right into view. He growled and shoved the heavy oaf off of their quarry and was soon joined by the smallest, who closely inspected the leg which still sat in the grip of iron jaws. The scrawny madman was soaked through, clearly having gone into the distant river. John was not with them presently, but blood still decorated wet overalls. Sherlock's powers of deduction were beginning to suffer from his current state, and rational thoughts of reassurance made way for the awful fear that his best friend was now dead.

Never before had he wanted so badly to die. Trapped with these monsters with his one chance at rescue thwarted and the person he cared most for possibly gone for good, the detective saw no point in living on, especially if it meant only more agony and torment.

The sudden sensation of huge hands prying open the jaws of the trap made him scream, though the piercing sound did not seem to bother or surprise his captors whatsoever.

Sherlock tried not to struggle, as he knew it would only make his wounds worse and bring the loss of blood to a faster pace, but at the same time he feared the giant might lose his grip or sadistically let go, allowing the jaws to slam shut again.

The moment he had enough room to move his leg, he pulled it out of the bear trap. Would these primitive brutes even treat his injuries, or would they simply let him bleed out where he lay before taking him back to their cabin and to dismember him? At the moment, this outcome sounded preferable.

Sherlock tried to utilize his normally astute powers of observation to predict his captors' next course of action. It was not as simple as he was used to. His eyesight was becoming hazy and blurred, and his brain refused to work as the well-oiled machinery it was. Instead it now behaved like a clockwork struggling to operate despite sand being thrown into the gears.

The little madman was visibly fidgeting. Sherlock chalked it up to more than the creature's innate restlessness; how the three-fingered mountain man's hand returned over and over to touch the blade stored in a sheath by its belt only to let go the following second, as though catching itself doing something it shouldn't.
He still wants to kill me, Sherlock concluded. He wants to, but he won't dare go against the alpha, not after what happened. But why?

Sherlock prided himself on his ability to anticipate possibilities; something he had begun to develop from a very early age and come close to perfecting during his thirty-three years of life. Anticipating the human mind - a fickle organism - was decidedly more difficult, as one also had to take into account the volatile emotional factor: a driving force in most interpersonal relations.

These three, however, could not be predicted to behave even like the most capricious human. Sherlock had no idea what their motives were, apart from the obvious desire to fill their stomachs.

The sound of a belt being unbuckle reached beyond the detective's shocked haze and into his ears, and as he drowsily looked up, he saw the giant alpha had indeed removed a belt.

Of course, Sherlock realized, not with fear, but sad resignation. They had found him to be an ideal source of revolting sexual pleasure, and he would remain this to them until he eventually died.

A choked cry escaped him as his wounded leg was harshly seized and lifted. He looked again at his captors, expecting them to be removing more clothes and stroking themselves hard, but instead they were looping the belt (which was likely coated in decades' worth of grime) around the gouged and torn flesh. The leader tied the belt tight, and Sherlock briefly wondered if the improvised tourniquet would be so tight as to cut off all circulation in his foot. The detective's thought process did not go much further, as he finally began to sink into wonderful unconsciousness, though he perceived that he might have been picked up and thrown across a broad shoulder.

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Sherlock drifted in and out of awareness as he was carried back to the cabin. His first moment of consciousness brought the odd sensation of bits of his hair being tugged on, and the deep-throated chuckles of the inbred madmen caused him to realize that he was being teased and played with by the mid-sized cannibal, who had become very fond of his dark curls. Sherlock passed out once more.

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The next time he had some clear sense of his surroundings, however brief, was when the cabin door opened and the family entered, unceremoniously dumping their dazed captive onto the dilapidated, grubby mattress of one of the beds. One discernible thought flickered most prominently in both dreams and wakeful state of mind: John was dead.

He had known from the start that John's chances of survival on his own were slim, but not non-existent, and somewhere in his heart, Sherlock had nursed the most treacherous of feelings: hope. He should have foreseen the outcome and accepted it rather than giving in to hope. This pesky human emotion had earned him nothing but heartbreak in the past, and this time was no different.

Sherlock did not know exactly what time it was. The cabin was too dark to let in much sunlight, and the detective knew he had lost some time during his bouts of unconsciousness.

Early afternoon? Judging from shadow length at the time of John's and his attempted escape, it had been no later than eight but no earlier than seven-thirty. How many minutes - hours? - had passed since his recapture? Sherlock didn't know. He also no longer trusted his senses to provide his brain with the correct information.

He tried to objectively consider his chances of being rescued now that John was gone. The only person with knowledge of his whereabouts besides John was Mycroft, and his brother was worlds
away. At least another thirty hours could be expected to pass before Mycroft would start making inquiries, and despite being accused of omniscience by some, Sherlock doubted even the elder Holmes could anticipate this.

He was drawn back to his miserable state of existence by the giant alpha's harsh voice barking out an unintelligible order to the small one. Though clearly still displeased about the situation, there was nothing defiant in the three-fingered maniac’s body language. He returned to his father moments later with a battered, oil-stained cup containing some kind of liquid.

Sherlock's unending fog of despair immediately brought him to thoughts of improvised lubrication for further endeavors of violation, but as the cup came closer, he quickly perceived that this fluid was not nearly thick enough. His new suspicions were confirmed when the cup was all but shoved into his face. Water.

The family could have the distinct intention of poisoning him, but then their little toy would not last as long as they might like. These brutes were primeval, but they knew the basics of keeping someone alive. Pain was an entirely different matter, but if they wanted their victims to stay alive, they would at least try their bloody hardest to meet basic physical needs.

Sherlock was not entirely surprised at the bits of grime and dust floating in the water, but he cringed a little nonetheless, even though he likely had drunk fluids of similar quality during his drug use. He gulped the contents down greedily, trying to take as much as possible before the scrawny hunter decided to pull away.

If the clan was to be providing him drink, they would likely provide food, which was another concern. Would they give him anything of proper nutrition, or purposefully feed him garbage? If they gave him definite nutriment... it would almost definitely be meat. Sherlock was not at all looking forward to what kind.

He tried to remind himself that at least it would not be John's, as the inbred hicks had not brought a body with them when they came back for him. The amount of blood on the little one's overalls suggested a successful kill, but what had they done with his friend's remains? Dismembered him for easier disposal?

He also thought of Mary Morstan and whether she was still hanging upside down in the shed, naked, with her throat slit and glassy eyes, now clouded over, staring into vast nothingness. What had been the last thing Mary had seen? How long had she been alive after having her throat slit with a blunt, serrated knife? Sherlock knew that Mary had been alive when she was strung up and bled out like a pig slaughtered according to Kosher dietary laws, but he had purposely omitted sharing that information with his friend.

Finding her body had already sent the gentle doctor to the brink of mental collapse. Knowing she was tortured as well might have been a blow John could never recover from.

Although what difference did that make now? John was dead. His feelings no longer mattered. A corpse could be neither hurt nor comforted. Sherlock began to wish he were a corpse as well. Maybe if he wished hard enough, he could make it come true.

The raw pain in his leg and arm had abated to a less intense, pulsating ache, which was somewhat more manageable but nonetheless taxing on his systems. Clammy and trembling, he wondered how much more pain and blood loss he could take before finally passing out, perhaps for good.

What wouldn't I do for a shot of morphine, Sherlock thought wistfully. He fondly remembered the comforting haze brought on by the drug and how it slowed down the rapidly turning gears of his
brain to a more controllable level. How he had craved it, the momentary relief it provided, and how
his whole life had come to revolve around scoring the next fix.

An eight-week stay at an exclusive detox clinic arranged by Mycroft had cured his physical addiction
to opiates, but Sherlock, who found a life without artificial stimulants increasingly dull, simply
substituted one drug for another, and hence began his addiction to cocaine.

Hell, he'd even take cocaine at this point; anything to distract him from where he was now... but then
again, it would make his perception of the situation much worse. He hardly wanted to be violated by
one of these monsters with his awareness heightened at its absolute peak, heart pounding as though it
could burst at any moment.

As he lay on the bed with his eyes shut, desperate to hide within his own personal world, his "mind
palace", he felt rough hands jerking his wrists behind his head. To bind his hands, he predicted. Sure
enough, he felt a rope looping around his forearms and attaching him to the bedpost. Sherlock briefly
considered figuring out how to undo the knots when he was not being watched but decided he might
as well not bother. Even if he managed to break free from his bonds, what then? Try to sneak away,
out into the woods on a useless leg? He was just too tired, too disheartened, to care.

His last conscious thought was that he was tired and felt like sleeping. So he did.

TBC...
Chapter 24

Chapter Summary

Retarded mountain man One-Eye displays an interest in Sherlock that has consequences for himself and the detective.

Chapter 24

Sherlock thankfully did not remember his dreams, but he was still in a dreamlike haze when he awoke to the feeling of something jabbing into his side. He barely had his eyes open before he could recognize the sensation was coming from someone's finger. The detective found himself whining, as though he were a child again, being awoken to get ready for school. But a snarl entered his ear from mere inches away, and he quickly remembered where he was, feeling the vice-like grip of despair reclaim him.

"What do you want…?” he muttered, opening his eyes to the ugly visage glaring at him.

The idiot was leaned over him, its one functioning eye intently focused on his face. Sherlock doubted the simple creature could understand much if any of the pain they inflicted upon their victims, but as always, the mid-sized cannibal studied him with practically childlike inquisitiveness.

It smiled, passing one large, filthy hand along the length of the detective's torso. The contact made Sherlock's skin crawl. His heart sped up, pounding against his ribs like a caged animal desperate for freedom, and a new layer of cold sweat broke out on his brow. The thing's foul body odour filled his nostrils, and though Sherlock would freely admit to neglecting his personal hygiene at times, the smell currently assaulting his senses was almost too much to stomach.

It seemed the other two family members were out at the moment. It surprised the detective slightly that they trusted the idiot to be left alone with a captive. Granted he was tied up and largely incapacitated, but he didn't doubt for a moment that the giant and the scrawny one were unaware of his wits and resourcefulness.

Sherlock was convinced his attempt at escape would have been successful if he had not stepped into that ill-fated bear trap. Why hadn't he noticed it was there? He should have noticed. He really should have. He had made a mistake, and now John was dead because of it. John had depended on him to survive, and Sherlock had let him down.

Was this guilt, the detective wondered. Did he feel responsible for John's death? Was the guilt truly justified, or was it yet another one of those pesky human sentiments that clouded a person's judgment? Sherlock suspected he would never find out. Emotions on a whole were an undiscovered country for him, and now was too late to start exploring. Could learning to express feelings, or at least to interpret them ahead of time have prevented this disaster?

Sherlock thought back to his relationship with John. Getting John had been easy; keeping him was what posed the real challenge. How many times had he half-heartedly rejected his friend's attempts to initiate post-coital snuggling on the simple basis that he was not a "cuddly" or "touchy-feely"
person? Then leaving, adamantly claiming they would be more comfortable sleeping separately? He had taken John for granted, assuming the doctor's blatant admiration for him, for his brilliant mind, would be enough to keep John at his side without any commitment on his part to meet John's emotional needs. He had misjudged, and John had moved on to find someone who could better fulfill his desire for intimacy. A woman.

Sherlock knew he could have tried harder. If he had, John might not have wandered. No Mary, and thus no trip to America. No being captured by inbred lunatics and consequently raped and murdered.

The idiot's rough, callused hand squeezed his hip experimentally, as if testing the texture and quality of his flesh. Sherlock tugged uselessly on his bonds and groaned at the pain it sent flaring through his broken arm, but he preferred it to the touch of this creature.

The grasping, sweaty hand began to travel further towards Sherlock's groin, as though the idiot was inspecting some fascinating new thing. Though the mountain man was no doubt exposed to victims and the abuse of said victims for years, Sherlock hardly thought the other members of the clan would encourage someone of this intellect to join in. Still, this mangy oaf still likely had sexual parts, unless the generations of inbreeding had done otherwise. Perhaps that was why so few were left.

The breath of the foul creature became heavy as it fondled Sherlock's groin, and when it pressed the length of its heavy body against him, he quickly realized this brute was a man, and very much intact. He shuddered at the hot breaths beating against his face and the stiff organ poking into his hip. The erection did not feel incredibly big, especially not compared to the size of the giant's, but Sherlock still did not want to feel anything inside his inflamed channel, let alone some filthy, disease-ridden cock. And if he was indeed about to be violated, he could not rely on his attacker to think to use lubrication, not even from saliva.

Sherlock strained his arms again, wincing at the pain which shot through his forearm. The detective considered simply continuing to pull against his bonds so that the pain would distract him from the seemingly inevitable rape. It might further destroy his bones, but at least it would take all of his focus.

The oaf pressed even closer against him, drooling against a white neck.

He felt the wet, spongy sensation of its tongue on his skin, and the creature snickered, clearly fascinated by the response it generated. Could he perhaps lure it to free him? No, it might be stupid, but surely not that stupid. The clan would not have lasted this long if the idiot could be persuaded to release captives.

Standing on all fours over the bound, slender detective, the retarded mountain man continued the intimate groping and exploration of Sherlock's body, but it made no attempts to spread his legs or to free its engorged member from the layers of clothing. Instead it seemed content to simply dry hump him, thrusting aimlessly and slobbering like an over-excited dog.

Did it refrain from penetration to avoid leaving traces that could be discovered by the massive alpha? Sherlock realized it was highly unlikely that the idiot possessed the capacity for such foresight. There was a more distinct possibility that the dense creature was imitating behaviour conducted by its relatives, but lacking the knowledge to carry it out.

After several uncomfortable grunts, the brute sluggishly lifted itself and edged towards the bedpost. Big clumsy hands scrambled with the rope which held Sherlock's wrists. Though the act took nearly a full minute, the knots came loose at last, and wrists which had been rubbed raw came loose from the restraints. Sherlock had not expected this whatsoever, but he soon inferred the purpose. The idiot was freeing him so that the detective could be flipped over.
Minding his broken forearm, Sherlock turned as he was pushed to his side and subsequently onto his stomach, only able to hear his keeper instead of seeing him. Not much of an improvement, as he could still smell the stench and feel the prodding of that repulsive erection.

Perhaps I was somehow wrong, Sherlock thought. Perhaps this moronic lump of a man really was able to understand how to violate him...

But the sound of a removed belt or unzipped trousers did not occur. A hard member was still covered with material as it nudged against the small of the detective's back. The hot breath beat against Sherlock's neck and he cringed as he felt the thick, overwhelming body envelope his shaking form. Even with the mountain man's hard sex straining against trousers and unable to penetrate him, Sherlock was still at risk of being hurt, possibly by being crushed or suffocated. He whimpered when he felt the creature's full weight lay on top of him, resuming that terrible humping motion.

His hands were free now, but that hardly made a difference, with one arm useless and the other outside grasping distance of anything that could be used as a weapon. Sherlock briefly entertained the idea of lunging for something (a mad dash, in lack of better words) sharp and pointy that could be driven deep into the slow creature's neck. He pictured twisting the weapon - cutting through the carotid, jugular, and trachea in one fluid motion - and being showered in a spray of the creature's blood, his fading strength momentarily fuelled by adrenaline and perverse satisfaction.

What then? Even with the oaf dead, Sherlock still had a broken arm and a torn leg, not to mention disorientation brought on by extensive blood loss and several blows to the head. He could not be expected to walk, let alone search his way out of the woods in hope of finding something akin to civilization.

Doomed if you do, doomed if you don't…

The dull creature's large, filthy hand, sticky with sweat, suddenly clamped over his face, blunt fingertips probing past already swollen lips to reach his oral cavity, seemingly entranced by the warm, wet nature of it. Sherlock made his decision on pure impulse, his repulsion too great to be overshadowed by a more rational assessment. He bit down on the fingers in his mouth, hard, and did not stop even when he heard the sickening crunch of enamel scraping against bone.

The one-eyed creature yelped as it pulled the hand away, struggling at first, as Sherlock was determined to keep his grip. Sherlock was genuinely surprised. Either these monsters had some capacity - however small - to feel pain, or the thing above him was just incredibly annoyed.

He was unable to deduce further, however, because the hand which pulled away from his teeth formed into a fist and slammed down on his head, sending him into oblivion.

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One-Eye rubbed at his hand, examining the teeth marks on his fingers. It did not hurt, not really, but he had still felt it. And prey was not supposed to bite and get away with it, not as he'd seen for himself in the past. If prey, be they meat or simply whores, fought back, they were to be punished.

Oh no!

Panicked, One-Eye leaned over the pretty pale whore that he had thumped on the head. It wasn't moving. Grasping it by the shoulders, he shook the body a little to wake it. No response. Either his toy was in too deep a sleep to react... or he had broken it.

Sawtooth was going to be very angry.
This prey had been chosen by his father. It was his property and no one else's. When he and Three-finger returned home, they would both know the killing was One-Eye's fault. If he was lucky, he might only be throttled without the additional punishment of being locked in the woodshed all night. The spasmodic grip he had on the motionless form beneath him released, leaving a red outline of blood from his bite wounds.

One-Eye glanced at his bitten fingers. Three-finger could have a look at it, perhaps fix the damage done... if he was in a forgiving enough mood.

As a small child, One-Eye had at times envisioned his hand being similar to that of his primary caregiver, but now that such a possibility was imminent, he no longer wanted it. He tried flexing his fingers, and though all five digits obeyed his command, the two which had been bit were slower to respond, and the movement caused fresh blood to seep from the gashes.

One-Eye got off the bed, twitching from agitation much like his older sibling did at times. The pale whore continued to simply lie there, showing no signs of waking up. The youngest of the small clan scratched his scalp, trying desperately to think of a way to solve the problem.

Thinking was not something One-Eye normally did or was even encouraged to do. Obeying without question was the best way to keep Sawtooth happy; something One-Eye had learned at an early age. He had also learned not to touch his father's tools or anything else without permission, and this Outsider definitely counted as one of Sawtooth's things.

On pure impulse, the one-eyed man-child gathered his quarry off the bed and looked around for a suitable place to hide the pale whore. It still wasn't moving, head lolling limply over One-Eye's shoulder as he lifted it. His gaze fell on a wooden apple crate, half-filled with bloodied old towels used to mop up blood and remains. It was large enough to contain the gangly Outsider and would hopefully hide One-Eye's transgression from the Patriarch's watchful eye.

By the time he was finished, he could hear the familiar grumble of the clan's truck coming down the way. Sawtooth and Three-finger had gone off for some errand that One-Eye could not quite remember, but they promised to be back soon, but "soon" did not translate very well for the simple man. Soon sometimes felt much longer, and ideas for what to do in order to pass the time were few and far in between.

Hearing the rattling doors of the truck slam shut, One-Eye nervously glanced back at the figure in the crate, rearranged a few rags, and - for lack of any other ideas - moved to sit on the bed where the Outsider once lay. Perhaps his relatives might not notice...

Both Sawtooth and Three-finger were already frustrated when they arrived home. They had gone downriver to search for the chubby Outsider, but instead of the waterlogged corpse they had expected to recover, they found no trace of their prey. Either the river's current had taken him much further than preconceived (and much faster at that), or the Outsider had somehow managed to break free and escape... and both hunters seriously doubted the latter.

Alive or dead, the game was lost. Hopefully the little pig was dead.

Sawtooth was first through the door and Three-finger nearly bumped into him, not expecting the leader to stop mid-entrance. One-Eye sat on an otherwise empty bed, looking all the more suspicious in his attempts to appear innocent. The whore was nowhere to be seen.

The patriarch's eyes narrowed, growling out a question as to the location of their captive, and immediately his dim-witted son looked up at him from a lowered head. Three-finger darted forward for a quick search. One-Eye hadn't somehow lost the half-conscious, broken little whore within the
short time of being left alone, had he?

Suddenly a muffled groan rose from beneath the rags in the apple crate. One-Eye sighed in relief, realizing he hadn't killed his family's new plaything. Sniffing at the towels and spying a hint of naked skin amidst the stained material, Three-finger poked at the body within, resulting in the startled twitch from the whore. Though the smallest hunter chuckled at his discovery, Sawtooth was not amused in the slightest. He snarled an order for the pale man to be returned to the bed, which his eldest son promptly followed through with, hauling the naked body from the crate and dumping it beside One-Eye. Though One-Eye moved to pat the waking man's thick curls, his father lurched forward, whipping his arm at him like a bear clawing at a rival.

The man-child reared back, whimpering pitifully and raising a hand to shield his face from blows. Sawtooth, not easily swayed by displays of submission from his dumb youngest son, delivered yet another swipe for good measure. This time One-Eye more than whimpered; he virtually howled, and a disgruntled hiss sounded from Three-finger, protesting against further punishment inflicted on his sibling.

Sawtooth gave the smallest hunter a warning glare. He had not forgotten Three-finger's earlier defiance, not by a long shot. Would he need to assert his dominance for the second time in less than a day? Perhaps a blow to the head was not enough to cow the rebellious streak his eldest seemed to have developed lately. Perhaps some more extreme measures were indeed required. Sawtooth would not hesitate to use the methods he had used to subdue the stubborn Outsider on his own son.

Fortunately Three-finger withdrew from the impeding confrontation, eyes downcast, before things had a chance to progress further. One-Eye hesitantly glanced up at his father, not sure if the crisis had been averted or not. He flinched when the patriarch moved, and once again his right hand went instinctively to his face. It was then that Sawtooth noticed the lacerated and grossly swollen state of his son's middle- and index finger, marks very obviously caused by teeth. The scrawny whore had bit One-Eye, and from the looks of it, he had done quite a number on the poor oaf's hand.

Sawtooth's fury was instantly redirected on the Outsider. He grabbed the damnable man by the throat and slammed him down against the mattress, hard. Their captive emitted a choked gurgle, and blood - not all of it his own, Sawtooth suspected - bubbled up from between his lips. The massive alpha gave his eldest son a wordless command with his free hand, and Three-finger was not slow to follow it.

Despite their occasional disagreements, Sawtooth and his firstborn shared a unique bond which allowed them to practically read each other's thoughts, and Three-finger intuitively knew exactly what his father demanded at this moment. A pair of dirty old pliers were passed into the leader's outstretched hand, and Sawtooth pried the whore's mouth open by applying pressure to his mandibles. Predictably, the whore squealed and struggled against the treatment, but his struggles were kitten-weak and Sawtooth had no difficulties restraining him.

Now he was going to show their captive how the clan dealt with biting bitches.

Pressing a knee against the whore's hips, Sawtooth maintained his full weight on the naked body beneath him, and he did not ignore the cries of fear and discomfort; in fact he reveled in them. Three-finger cackled at the pathetic Outsider's pain, gleeful like a child over the inevitable.

Sawtooth crammed his fingers inside the yelping mouth. His hands were far too big to allow any sort of power in a rebellious bite, and even so, if the whore tried in any way to fight back, the giant could easily grab onto the tongue inside and do whatever he wanted with it. The Outsider squirmed and his back arched, but he was powerless. His squeals became muffled shrieks when the pliers entered and closed around a tooth. Licking the gap of his split lip and gums, Sawtooth gripped tightly and pulled.
The whore screamed. The tooth seemed to be a healthy one. It thus proved stubborn to remove, but Sawtooth twisted the pliers, not bothering with any amount of gentility. The body beneath him was hard as iron, rigid in agony. Finally the tooth came loose, and blood sprayed in a red mist from the Outsider's mouth as he continued to scream.

Three-finger was still laughing at the little creature's torment as he found a thick thread to stitch One-Eye's wounds shut. Leaving his youngest sibling in charge of the Outsider, even for a short while, had been a poor idea. Still, he was happy that One-Eye's injuries had been seen to and that reprisal had been served. He had not trusted having this new plaything in the cabin, but perhaps if punishments continued this way, the clan had nothing in the department of fighting back to worry about.

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Sherlock fought not to swallow too much of his own blood, as his empty stomach was bound to have a bad reaction to it. He did not want to find out what these monsters would do to him if he threw up, and on top of everything, he had to try to hang on to his liquids.

Sherlock's tongue instinctively went to feel the gaping hole where his missing tooth - a lateral incisor on his upper jaw - had been forcibly removed. It wasn't the first time he had lost a tooth violently; when he was eight, another boy his age or slightly older had planked him in the face and subsequently knocked out one of his teeth. Sherlock had deleted most his memories around the fight, but he remembered in detail the events that followed; Mycroft pressing a cotton compress against the cavernous hole in his mouth to stop the bleeding while simultaneously grumbling on and on about how he could be so stupid as to provoke a bigger kid and not expect anything bad to come from it.

*Quick wit and an even quicker mouth will get you in trouble, Sherlock.*

Those were the exact words the elder Holmes had used that day in the car, all the while stressing the importance of guarding one's tongue. Sherlock, being unable to do much else besides listen with Mycroft's fingers in his aching, bleeding mouth, had dutifully nodded but not taken his brother's advice to heart.

This had gone on throughout the painfully slow ride to the A&E, and Sherlock suspected their driver found the ordeal every bit as bothersome as he. Wasn't he the one who had quit only a few weeks later? Mr. Soames had been his name, if Sherlock's memory still served him correctly… A simple man with simple daily needs who could not take the drama and controversy surrounding the Holmes family. Mummy had been upset, almost personally affronted, by his abrupt quitting, and Mycroft had said "good riddance" with a derisive snort. Sherlock didn't remember having an opinion himself.

The family had gone through several employees in the same fashion, and Sherlock had barely ever put any thought into the reason why. Even when he had, he decided it was the fault of the incompetent hired help, and never his own for being so difficult, Mycroft's opinion be damned.

Perhaps it was the pain from the violation and missing tooth combined with a lack of food and water that was muddling Sherlock's brain, or maybe even the despair which was closing about him closer and closer following John's death, but the detective's doubt was becoming ever more powerful. It was snagging its curved thorns throughout his brain and making him wonder... had Mycroft been right? After all, words John had said concerning the importance of tenderness were proving to have merit... far too late.

The pliers were tossed aside and Sherlock felt slight relief, glad to keep the rest of his teeth. True, he did not take care of himself as much as others did, but his teeth were not as bad as they could have been; he would have preferred to keep them, even if he was likely to experience a slow and painful
death in the near future. Some strange sense of self-preservation lingered within him, possibly whatever was left of his narcissism, still fighting to remain. Also, he simply was not certain if he could withstand the pain.

Alas, the absence of pliers was no indication of mercy from his tormentors. A massive hand grasped his jaw and turned Sherlock's head toward the patriarch, who inspected the bloodstained lips, prodding at them with a dirt-covered finger.

Even though his first impulse was to inflict another bite, the detective was still rational enough to deduce the likely consequences of such an impromptu act. If provoked, these men might very well pull out every single one of his teeth just to make a point, or perhaps even go one step further and sever a limb... or some other body part he did not want to part with. Sherlock balked especially at the thought of losing his tongue. Though he was likely never going to subject anyone else to his acerbic deductions - not in this life - Sherlock still wanted to keep his most prized asset.

The huge mountain man proceeded to manually part his lips, as though inspecting his gums and remaining teeth. Seemingly pleased with his findings, the giant withdrew and turned his back on his captive, muttering some unintelligible command to his two smaller relatives. The scrawny psycho took the idiot's hand - the uninjured one - and tugged, first gently and then with growing impatience, as the oaf seemed much more interested in the proceedings involving Sherlock than anything else.

Finally a barked order from the giant followed immediately by a harsh shove to the shoulder got the man-child moving, his brother skipping ahead of him toward the kitchen area. The giant remained by the bed, his beady, misaligned eyes, one of which deviated outward, fixed intently on his prisoner. Clearly the leader had requested some time alone with Sherlock.

Sherlock was not very surprised at his fate, but he did find it peculiar that even primeval monsters such as these would value privacy. Then again... they were only human.

Breath heavy and hard, the giant unhooked his stained overalls and let them fall to his ankles. Apart from the tattered shirt - Sherlock briefly wondered where on Earth these brutes could find such a size - the clan leader was naked. Meaty hands clamped at both sides of Sherlock's head, and they seemed strong enough to crush the young man's skull. But crushing skulls was clearly not on the monster's mind, not when his frighteningly large cock was beginning to perk with arousal.

What little was left inside Sherlock's stomach lurched dangerously, but he swallowed down the urge to throw up. He had already felt the nasty thing inside him before, but he would have rather taken it where it had entered previously than allow it in his mouth. Climbing onto the mattress, the mountain man pulled his prisoner closer, guiding a bloody face towards his groin.

"Please..." Sherlock begged, feeling stupid for saying it. "Nooo..."

Initially he thought he saw pre-ejaculate weeping from the head, but based on the reddened surface and clusters of irritation, he quickly changed his conclusion. Gonorrhea. He might just throw up after all, and possibly choke on the vomit as the hardening shaft was driven into his mouth.

Sherlock squeezed his eyes shut, wishing he could also block his senses of taste and smell. He was too weak to fight back, and even then, he would only be hurt worse than before, and still be forced into pleasing the bastard orally. The best he could do presently was escape into his mind in an attempt to block out what was about to happen. This had not been the first time he had done so (willingly or otherwise), and depending on the response of his captor, it might not be his last.
TBC...
Chapter 25

Chapter Summary

Flashback to an event which contributed to making Sherlock Holmes the man he is today. What part did Anderson play in that?

Chapter Notes

This chapter does not have any overtly violent or gory imagery, but it's still disturbing in its own right.

Chapter 25

2001

Sherlock thought about heading home. He’d gotten what he came for; a tiny bag of white powder lay safe and secure in his pocket, and every few minutes he felt an almost compulsive need to touch it with his hand, to reassure himself that he hadn't lost it. It wasn't much, but it would help him get through the night.

'Home' for the 21-year-old cocaine addict was a single room in a seedy, decrepit building in East End owned by a man with dubious morals. Rats and cockroaches were a regular occurrence. As were various other substance abusers and the disorderly behaviour which followed in their wake. Waking up to the sound of sirens approaching at full blast was something all residents were used to, and no one rarely even batted an eyelash.

Sherlock himself tried to avoid the police at as much as possible. Getting arrested meant attracting the attention of Mycroft, and even worse, he always depended on his brother to bail him out.

At least he was now lucky enough to have a place he could call his own. Sherlock had spent too many nights sleeping in missions and shelters, squeezed in amongst a variety of people with different problems and dispositions: the homeless, the alcoholics, the drug addicts, the mentally ill and the social outcasts. Shelters in general only had one rule: they demanded you be sober.
He had not intended to start hustling when he left home three years ago with one hundred pounds in his pocket, stolen from Mycroft's wallet. But with no place to go and a very costly drug habit to support, there had been little choice. In the beginning he hadn't thought of it as prostitution. If he went home with a guy to have a place to crash and some food in his belly, where was the harm in that? Employers weren't exactly lining up to hire a college-drop out with a history of substance abuse, and even so, Sherlock's mind abhorred the idea of a white-collar job and the stagnation connected to it. If the choice came down to comfort or freedom, he would take the latter any day of the week.

Sherlock walked along the pavement, shivering in the cold beat of the autumn wind. He needed a new jacket for cold weather and made a mental note to include this in his financial planning, lacking though it was.

He reluctantly stopped when a panda car suddenly pulled up beside him and wondered what about him could have possibly attracted the attention of a law enforcement officer. He knew that his brother paid DI Lestrade to keep him under observation from time to time, but this was not Lestrade. Sherlock felt his skin crawl with unadulterated disgust when the man inside the police car revealed his identity.

The smile that greeted him through the window was just as sickeningly familiar as the face sporting it.

Anderson.

"Well, it's certainly a fine night for a stroll, isn't it?" the officer remarked, resting an elbow on the frame of the car window.

God, I hate him, Sherlock silently said to himself.

Indeed he did, worse than the others at the precinct. Lestrade was at worst an annoyance, only doing "what was right" and following Mycroft's orders. The stuffy prick, as though he knew what was right simply because he was Sherlock's brother...

One night when he had to deal with Lestrade, Sherlock made certain suspicions very clear about why the detective inspector agreed to be on Mycroft's payroll, besides the obvious excuse of money. The suggestion had been mean-spirited and crude, not that Sherlock cared, and it inspired a very red-faced Greg Lestrade to hold him in a cell for the night to cool the young Holmes down.
Still, the DI was doing his job - and his sworn duty - and had been fair in the past. Anderson, on the other hand, was downright nasty and used his badge as an excuse for his unsavory disposition.

"Sergeant," Sherlock finally said in confirmation. He had learned in the past that ignoring Anderson counted as "resisting an officer," and it was always believed by the precinct. After all, it was his word against that of a whorish drug addict who always had a snide, deep-cutting remark ready on his tongue.

"And where are you off to at this hour?" Anderson asked.

"Home," Sherlock replied swiftly, ready to walk away as soon as he had the chance.

"And where are you returning home from?" the officer countered.

"Nowhere in particular. Now if you'll excuse me, I'm really tired and all I want to do is get some sleep," Sherlock refrained from looking at Anderson while at the same time not appearing too confrontational. He really did not need to give the unsavory policeman an excuse to take a closer look at him, not with his 'prize' so obvious in his pocket. Sherlock began to walk faster and hoped Anderson would think it too much work to further pursue him.

Anderson, however, was undaunted and continued trailing Sherlock at walking speed from his police car, his beady rat's eyes practically gleaming with interest.

"Sleep, you say?" the sergeant asked, pretending to mull this over in his head. "You're not tricking off, then? Or perhaps you prefer the term "solicitation"? We've busted you a number of times for that, Holmes. Surely I don't need to remind you, with your so-called photographic memory and all."

"It's 'eidetic memory', you asinine prick," Sherlock snapped back, wishing he could spit in Anderson's self-righteous face. However, he knew the consequences that would follow. "I told you, I'm going home! Now leave me alone!"

"It's your night off, then?" Anderson taunted, pleased with himself for having succeeded in provoking Sherlock into an emotional outburst. "What's a night off for a crack whore? Do you go to church or something?"

Sherlock was not, and never had been, a crack user, and he knew Anderson knew that as well, but
he was not going to take the bait this time. To escape the policeman's attentions, Sherlock promptly cut into a side street, too narrow for Anderson to navigate with his car.

"Don't you walk away from me, Holmes! I wasn't finished with you!" Anderson shouted at the young man's rapidly disappearing back. "Hey! Look at me when I'm talking to you, you filthy junkie bitch!"

Fists clenched, Sherlock kept walking. He was not going to feed this degenerate's moronic yammering, nor cater to the Sergeant's lizard-like, shriveled insecurities.

He heard the car door swing open, but the young Holmes fought not to respond. He deeply wanted to take a swing and let his fist collide with that rodent face, but more than anything, he just wanted to go home, to use what he had been out to obtain in the first place and just collapse. Though it was sorely tempting, the brief satisfaction of making Anderson bruise or bleed was not worth the assault charge.

"And don't walk away from me, or else I'll have you detained!" Sherlock felt a hand grip his arm, squeezing painfully as it yanked him back to face the officer.

"Fuck off!" he spat at Anderson as they glared, inches apart from one another. Both had placed their hands on the other, one in attack, the other in defense.

"Oh, no, I don't think so," Anderson sneered, reaching into a pocket before Sherlock could interfere. "Not at all."

Sherlock desperately grabbed at the small plastic bag as the weasel of an officer plucked it away from him.

"Well, well, well... what have we here?" Anderson announced triumphantly, and not at all quietly. "Coming home from nowhere in particular, eh? I didn't figure you had such a low opinion of your little smack dens."

Sherlock's jaw tightened at the officer's discovery. So much for plans of going home and "enjoying" the remainder of his night.

Mycroft would be furious, and Sherlock knew he would have to endure another tedious lecture, perhaps even outright threats of incarceration from his brother. His freedom was the only thing
Mycroft could still threaten to take from him, but Sherlock didn't think the elder Holmes would go as far as sending him to jail, not when he knew the inevitable outcome of such a decision. Mycroft would see to that he was charged with a petty offense, pay his fines, and have him released back into the world with imploration to quit the drugs and get his life "back on track".

What track, Sherlock often wondered. His life had never been on track, so how could he possibly get it back there?

Anderson did a brief visual examination of the bag's contents and chuckled at the discovery.

"Pretty good stuff, from what I can tell. High purity. Not the brown shit that's often sold on the streets. Must have cost some money." The malicious gleam had returned to the policeman's eyes. "How many cocks did you have to suck to afford this? You do bareback? What do you charge for a bareback shag, Holmes?"

"Why? Are you interested?" Sherlock cut in, momentarily satisfied to witness the expression of poorly disguised shock on the Sergeant's face. Anderson was no prize, but Sherlock didn't think he had to take sex from prostitutes he arrested. Especially not if the prostitute in question was someone whose guts he hated. Nonetheless, it had felt good making Anderson sweat, if only for a moment.

The following happened with no preamble; Anderson grabbing Sherlock's wrist and twisting it, as he nimbly plucked out a pair of handcuffs and shoved his suspect against the brick wall with more force than was strictly necessary. The cuffs clicked shut and moments later Anderson's growled words, followed by sprinkles of spit, reached Sherlock's ear.

"Sherlock Holmes, I'm hereby arresting you for unlawful possession of drugs. You have the right to remain silent. Everything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law. Do you understand your rights?"

When Sherlock did not answer, Anderson put his weight against him, again pressing the young man into the wall.

"DO YOU?"

"Yesss," Sherlock hissed. The brick surface scraped painfully against his face. It would not break the skin, but his face was in danger of being rubbed raw, not exactly good for promoting oneself in exchange for drugs. Although some clients barely ever looked at faces... after all, looks had nothing
to do with the quality of a fuck or blow job. Sherlock kept this in mind so that he could manage to resist the urge to kick Anderson in the scrotum.

"Good. Now come on."

Anderson yanked at the cuffs, sending a jolt of pain through the young man's shoulders. Sherlock feared the risk of a pinched nerve, or perhaps even a shoulder getting wrenched out of its socket. He would not find it completely unbelievable that an officer with Anderson's level of self-entitlement could easily excuse such injuries as the inevitable result from a criminal resisting arrest. And with Sherlock's lifestyle demanding he be very physical - be it for pleasuring or evading any breed of pursuer - he could not afford a ruined shoulder. Thus, he begrudgingly went as guided, towards the patrol car with very little fuss or resistance.

"In you go," Anderson ordered, opening the door to the back passenger seats. Sherlock dodged as he was carelessly shoved inside, managing not to hit his head. He did not put his expectations past the little rodent to "accidentally" send him into the framework of the vehicle. Even so, Anderson could only get away with so much before the brutality became blatantly obvious.

"Try as you may," the officer said, buckling his safety belt and starting up the car as he frowned into the rear view mirror at Sherlock's reflection. "You'll just keep getting yourself arrested. You're all the same. You seek out your own destruction."

"Don't pretend you know me, Anderson," Sherlock snarled quietly. "You don't know a thing about me."

The Sergeant snorted as he steered the panda car away from the curb and back into the flow of the central London traffic. "I know what matters, Holmes," he said. "You live on the streets, you steal, you lie, you pick pockets, and you whore yourself out to strangers to support your rather costly and very much illegal drug habit. You were born with a fucking silver spoon up your arse, and yet you've chosen this as your life. What does that say about your character?"

"Stick to your own little world, Anderson. This one just confuses you."

There was a momentary flash of anger in the policeman's gleaming rodent eyes, but it passed as quickly as it had appeared. Anderson sounded just as smug as earlier when he spoke again.

"You know, Lestrade is going to be so disappointed," he said with a melodramatic expression of
mock dread. "This is actually his day off, but since your posh git for a brother has appointed him your personal keeper, we'll have no choice but to call him. How are you going to explain yourself, Holmes?"

"I wasn't intending to."

"Too bad, because he's going to demand you do. As for your brother, what will you tell him this time? He's a busy man, that Mycroft Holmes, is he not? Must be troublesome, having to adjust his schedule according to his kid brother's antics. Do you suppose there'll ever be a time when he won't have your back anymore? There's a limit to everyone's patience, and I think you're testing his. Insufferable prick, thinking he can just waltz into the station with his umbrella and three-piece suits and order us around like we were cattle."

Anderson let out an indignant sniff, as if personally affronted by Mycroft's meddling.

Sherlock tried to subtly shift in his seat to relieve the pressure on his shoulders without Anderson noticing. The man was like a vulture in that sense; first sign of weakness and he instantly picked up on it.

"You might be going down for a serious offense this time, Holmes. Maybe even your brother's influence won't be enough to get you off the hook."

"And?" Sherlock argued, glaring out the window. He was childish in his attempts to sound unmoved and disinterested. Truly he wanted to sit in silence for the duration of the drive. At least in a cell he would be away from Anderson's idiotic, self-served rambling.

"And you likely won't even last an hour before you piss of the wrong inmate."

"Oh, I hope not," Sherlock snorted. "I'd hate to see how Mycroft would react if that were to happen."

Anderson's grip on the steering wheel tightened. His expression looked as though he had eaten something very bitter. Sherlock did not take the opportunity to gloat. He had silence in the car at last, and he was going to enjoy it.

Staring out the window, he awaited their arrival to the precinct peacefully, and at first he did not
give any thought to a turn Anderson made. After all, the way to the police station could be taken by several paths. But he soon recognized that Anderson's choice of a route was not the quickest. In fact, the car was taking the longest route.

Sherlock looked into the rearview mirror, searching for some sort of clue as to the officer's motives. Anderson glanced fleetingly back at him, but otherwise kept his eyes on the road.

Despite the wooden expression, a wicked smile briefly flickered into the sergeant's eyes. He had plans, and he was determined to see them out. Sherlock instinctively tested the strength of the handcuffs. With his wrists bound and no means to pick the lock, his options were very few, short of a well-aimed kick and a poorly balanced sprint to God knows where.

"It's no use, Holmes," Anderson said calmly, his eyes never leaving the road. "You won't get out of those, unless of course, you're willing to break your own thumb and twist it out of place. But you're not quite that desperate yet, are you?"

Sherlock swallowed, trying to suppress the uncontrollable feeling of panic bubbling up from the pit of his stomach. His every instinct told him that he was in danger, despite the fact that his rational self should have scoffed at such a notion; Anderson might have been a slime, but he was still a policeman, and directly under Greg Lestrade's command. The mere idea that he would do something to hurt Sherlock - to actually hurt him - when he would risk serious repercussions to himself was ludicrous. Wasn't it?

"Where are you taking me?" Sherlock demanded, his voice a pitch higher than normal. "This isn't the way to the station. What are you doing?!"

"Keep your knickers on, Holmes," Anderson said, then chuckled at his own poor attempt at a joke. "We're just taking a little detour. You don't mind, do you? It's not like you have anywhere to be."

Sherlock shook his head. He didn't want to admit it, let alone show it, but he was becoming very frightened. He had clearly misjudged Anderson; the man was not merely a serpentine skulk with an unsavory disposition and a mildly sadistic streak, but something much more sinister. How could he have missed this in all his previous dealings with Anderson?

However, in his own defense, Sherlock took in consideration that this was probably a side of himself which the Sergeant - for the most - part kept well-hidden from others.
"Take me to the station," Sherlock said. "I want to call Mycroft."

"Sorry, mate. No phone calls allowed."

"I'm under arrest, aren't I? I'm entitled to a phone call!"

"Maybe you are, maybe you aren't."

Again, Anderson had that stupid smug smirk on his face. Sherlock wanted to kick his teeth in.

"Will you stop being so bloody cryptic and tell me what's going on?" he asked.

"Really?" the officer replied in mock surprise. "All of this brilliance you supposedly have and yet you can't guess what's going on?"

"If there is a possibility that I am not under arrest," Sherlock said. "Then to what end am I in this car and going the long way to the station?"

"Oh, we're not going to the station," Anderson said, voice high with slightly theatrical cheer. He clearly thought he had been very clever to mislead Sherlock in such a way.

"Is this some elaborate attempt to get me to boost your ego?"

Anderson grinned, though there was something rather hateful behind his eyes when he smiled. "I suppose you could say that."

The car made an abrupt left turn that caused Sherlock to momentarily lose his balance on the seat. He quickly glanced out the window to see. Warehouses all around. Empty lot. No lights, save for a street lamp in the distance. No dogs barking in response to their presence. Most likely abandoned.

An ideal place to kill someone, with a low chance of anyone happening across the body anytime in the near future. Was Anderson truly capable of committing such a crime?
The Sergeant turned off his patrol car engine and exited, eerily silent. Likely to prolong the suspense of whatever it was he was about to do. He opened the door to Sherlock's seat. Sherlock sat very still, like a cat about to strike a potential threat... except presently he was very much incapable of clawing at anything.

"Alright, out you get."

"No." The young man still didn't move, convinced that any movement, no matter how small, would provoke the predator to strike. His eyes took in Anderson’s appearance as the man leaned into the car, well aware that he was fully at the mercy of a possibly murderous sadist, and no deduction, no matter how pertinent, would be of any aid to him.

Sherlock's brain, however, worked at express speed, much like a turbo-charged engine, and sometimes it moved too fast even for his conscious mind to catch up.

Anderson bought expensive suits but his shirts and ties were of inferior quality; clearly it was a way of saving money. A Sergeant's salary would only take you so far. Did he have a way of making money on the side? Shoes shined, wedding ring buffed, collar ironed with great care. Obviously not by the man himself. His wife? A maid? On first glance Sherlock wouldn't have taken Anderson for the type to employ a maid, but he was decidedly not on good terms with his wife, so it seemed unlikely that she would go to such lengths to care for his appearance. A maid then. Probably a young illegal immigrant from a less privileged existence somewhere in Eastern Europe. Perhaps Poland...

Anderson carried his wallet in his right front trouser pocket, keys on the opposing side. Was the key to the handcuffs on that same keychain? Sherlock wanted to think so, but even if that were true, how was he supposed to get it without the use of his hands?

To his surprise, Anderson appeared amused rather than angry over Sherlock's refusal to cooperate.

"No? What's your plan? You gonna move into my squad car, Holmes?"

Sherlock knew his best chance was to stay inside the car. If Anderson did anything to him in here, he was bound to leave traces that could be detected by his colleagues, even those less than qualified for a job in forensics. And Sherlock was intent on leaving his DNA on as many places as possible.
Granted the Sergeant could - and probably would - try to have him bodily removed from the vehicle...

"Whatever is about to happen," Sherlock said with a sneer, "your attempts at secrecy are still something to be desired. There may not be dogs or security guards... but think of the population of homeless that might stumble upon this spectacle."

Anderson lifted an eyebrow, glancing aside in thought. A rather unexpected response, Sherlock thought. At worst he expected the officer to express rage at the unavoidable truth that he would still run a risk of being found out for murder.

Anderson sighed, frustrated. "Fine."

This time Sherlock lifted an eyebrow, perplexed. "Fine?"

"It'll be a little uncomfortable, but we'll do this in the car."

Sherlock was utterly confused now. Was Anderson really so unbalanced that he would rather coat the interior of his panda car with evidence of a murder? The young man edged away on his seat, ready to put his legs forward so that he could kick his assailant in the face. Presently he did not care if he would be subsequently charged in the near future with assaulting an officer of the law. If he could somehow escape from this, perhaps with the promise of reporting the ratty little bastard to his brother...

His plans were interrupted by a dismissive laugh from Anderson.

"Oh lord," the Sergeant rubbed at his eyes as though he had been amused to the point of tears. "You think I'm going to kill you, don't you?"

Sherlock blinked, and in the span of that blink, he realized the truth. If he had been led to an abandoned place instead of being arrested, and was not about to be murdered...

Of course. He had whored himself in exchange for other favours to his benefit, so why not also to avoid detainment?
Sherlock regarded the lizard-like policeman with the bitter, gleaming eyes, and was suddenly struck by his almost uncanny resemblance to the cartoon character Wile E. Coyote. The thought of having sex with him was absolutely repelling, and yet Sherlock had with barely any hesitation gone down on some of the filthiest, most depraved men in London. He tried to avoid cops, though, and this particular cop was someone he would not poke with a ten-foot pole.

Anderson let out a dry bark of laughter. "Oh my, Holmes. You almost look like you’d prefer the killing."

The young man tried to control his shaky intake of breath and meet the other’s gaze without any fear. He wondered if forcing prostitutes and other second class citizens to pleasure him sexually was a regular extracurricular activity for Anderson or if this was a fluke. Sherlock was willing to bet on the former. The look in the man’s eyes was confident, calculating, scheming. He had definitely done this before and gotten away with it.

"I won’t do it," Sherlock said, almost as surprised by his own words as Anderson. He was headed down a dangerous slope, refusing a man who had him under complete control, but his pride would have it no other way.

In an instant, the smug grin was replaced by a glare of repressed fury. "You will if you want to stay out of the precinct, especially one with a cellmate who would like to do much worse to you than I would."

Sherlock frowned back and would have crossed his arms like a petulant child, were his hands free.

"Oh don’t make that face," Anderson said, his mouth curling in the smallest of smiles. "You look so ugly when you’re angry. Now if we could just proceed with our little exchange, both of us can go on our merry way and you’ll be home safe, and I can forget I ever saw you tonight."

"Maybe I’d rather go to the station," the younger man spat. He was not entirely telling the truth, but he presently felt as though he’d rather die than pleasure this bastard.

The click of a button inspired him to look back at Anderson, who was now opening a pocket on his coat. With a smirk he produced not only his apprehended suspect’s bag of substances but also a second bag. It appeared Sherlock had spoken too soon. Instinctively he strained against the handcuffs. His wrists were being rubbed raw by this point, the pain the only sensation amidst numbing arms.
"Perhaps this will help you make up your mind better. Yours and this one combined... I'd say you could be tried for possession with intent to sell."

"That's a load of bullshit!" Sherlock exclaimed, momentarily forgetting to keep his cool. For some reason, the suggestion that Anderson would plant evidence to implicate him infuriated Sherlock more than anything the despicable policeman had said or done thus far. He could stand taking the blame for things he was guilty of, but drug dealing was not a crime he had ever committed and thus did not want on his (admittedly quite extensive) criminal record.

More than anything, he was not going to let this nefarious scumbag ruin his life with false accusations.

"You wouldn't get away with something like that, Anderson."

"Oh, wouldn't I?" The Sergeant's wicked smile broadened. "You can deny it all you want, but they'll never take your word over mine. You're a habitual liar, Holmes; a druggie, a thief, and a whore. I know it, you know it, Lestrade knows it, and your posh brother knows it better than anyone."

"Mycroft would believe me," Sherlock argued, but his voice lacked conviction. In truth, he was beginning to doubt his own words. He had disappointed Mycroft so many times already. The day would come when his brother decided to stop wasting valuable resources on him, family or no family.

"Do you really want to risk it, Holmes?" Anderson wondered, casually leaning into the car while pretending to poke at some dirt under his fingernail.

Perfectly manicured, Sherlock noted. The bastard seemed to have more than his fair share of money to spend.

"If he doesn't believe you, your best theatrics won't save you from going to prison. You can count on three months minimum, six if you're unlucky." Anderson laughed gleefully. "If you mouth off to the judge, you're bound to get the maximum sentence. You just can't help mouthing off, can you? It's in your nature. What do you think will happen to you in prison? Those blokes aren't known for being gentle. A pretty young queer-boy like yourself, you'd already be a target. Add to that your glib tongue and superiority complex..."

Sherlock knew. Lestrade knew, and Mycroft knew as well, which was why he'd always negotiated on
behalf of Sherlock to avoid landing the young man a prison sentence.

"What do you want?" Sherlock asked, voice low and reeking of defeat.

"A blowjob," Anderson replied conversationally, as if he'd just asked for a pack of cigarettes from a drugstore cashier.

Of course, Sherlock thought. With his hands bound, performing fellatio would keep his legs a fair distance away from doing any kicking or fighting back, especially in the cramped space of a car. Lips thinning, Sherlock stared toward the front of the vehicle and happened to catch his reflection in the rearview mirror. He had not taken a real look at himself in a long time, not much caring for whatever would look back at him.

Squeezing his eyes shut, he refused to look at Anderson as he gave his answer. "Get it over with."

He was glad he was not looking in the Sergeant's direction, because the sickeningly satisfied smile on Anderson's face would have made him want to bite into the officer with every ounce of strength he had. Presently it was the only action he would actually be happy to perform.

"I knew you'd see reason," Anderson said. "Move back then."

Sherlock suddenly found himself barely able to move. His limbs felt replaced by lead, and his stomach stuffed with rocks, yet he still managed to shuffle into the far side of the vehicle. The seats felt far too firm, the upholstery harsh as burlap. Experimentally, he flexed his jaw and found it difficult to move. Hopefully its limited mobility indicated that he would not instinctively bite down.

Anderson removed his overcoat and suit jacket, perhaps to gain more mobility himself, but likely because he didn't want them soiled. Sherlock fought not to wince when the policeman reached down to unzip his trousers. Of course the small but still detectable twitch did not pass by Anderson unnoticed.

"Are you scared, Holmes?" he taunted, placing one hand on Sherlock's knee and squeezing while cupping himself with the other through his Calvin Klein underwear. The bulge he sported so far at least did not look all that big, thank God.

"Are you scared of my cock? What kind of whore are you? Or this that an act?" The man scoffed.
“Do your clients like it when you fake virginal modesty? I bet you’re really good at playing the Catholic schoolboy.”

I’m not scared, merely repulsed, Sherlock thought, but he did not speak the words out loud. With any luck, it would be over in less than ten minutes and he’d be on his way home.

He did not want to watch when Anderson lowered the elastics of his boxers to free his budding erection, but his eyes were inexplicably drawn to it, like a person about to witness a train wreck.

“This situation does not particularly arouse me,” Anderson said. “You will have to draw that from me.”

Sherlock swallowed, and the hand squeezing his leg travelled up to harshly grasp his neck. Body tense as a board, Sherlock momentarily resisted the grip attempting to force his head down into Anderson’s groin.

“Do it, Holmes,” the Sergeant ordered, his tone no longer playful. “Show me that those lips of yours are good for more than just giving lip.”

Sherlock imagined Anderson thought himself very clever for the comment, which only made him wish the insufferable bastard could spontaneously combust... preferably outside of the squad car.

The younger man simply stared at his target, inexplicably horrified. He had fellated countless repellant characters in the past, but those moments were a means to support his habits and afford the occasional meal or rent payment. If he could somehow treat this as one of those times, instead of a pathetic bribe to keep himself out of prison...

“Remember some foreplay,” he heard above him, and he cringed, gnashing his teeth. Sherlock barely practiced foreplay even for customers. Most of the time it was never requested, and either way, Sherlock hated any sort of intimacy. He cared nothing for these people, and he never felt the urge to be romantic even with the less detestable ones.

Still, Anderson was calling the shots. Desperate not to let this bastard see him tremble, Sherlock stiffly nuzzled at the hardening organ. Everything about Anderson repulsed him now; even the scent, which at least was cleaner than some of the previous customers, made him want to gag.
"Oh, yes..." Anderson said, bucking a little at the touch and hence driving his cock into Sherlock's face. "Yes, you could afford to do a little more of that."

Sherlock wished he could employ the use of his hands. Not only would he feel less helpless with his wrists unbound and perhaps regain an iota of control, but he could also have used his quick, dexterous fingers to make Anderson come faster. Now he had to do everything with his mouth, which would only prolong the ordeal.

"Could you please uncuff me?" Sherlock asked, putting emphasis on the 'please' and making sure he did not sound the least bit cutting or confrontational.

"No," Anderson said simply. "I asked for a blowjob, not a handjob. I'll uncuff you once you're done."

Sherlock knew that trying to persuade Anderson to do otherwise was meaningless and a waste of time, so he did not argue. Instead he aggressively enveloped the despicable officer's cock in his mouth and began sucking at a quick pace focused on force rather than finesse or technique. His experience in this field had given Sherlock fairly good control over his gag reflex, and he was grateful for it now. Vomiting in Anderson's lap would hardly increase his chances of getting home tonight.

The Sergeant's hand had a firm hold on Sherlock's thick, silken curls, slightly oily from going two days without a shower, and pumped the young man's head shamelessly up and down.

"Oh my..." Anderson said, slightly out of breath from the activity, "you're good at this. You should give yourself more credit!" The statement was followed by a supercilious snicker which made Sherlock want to bite down on the member currently filling his mouth. Anderson, knowing that his charge was hardly in a position to talk back, continued his taunts.

"Do you practice these skills on the Boss?" he asked. "Is that the reason he's always so easy on you?"

No, that role goes to my brother, Sherlock wanted to say. But he had no way of talking back, a frustrating thing indeed. And biting was out of the question. So he used his anger, bobbing even faster, curling his lips over his teeth to keep things gentle... not that he wanted to. With his efforts, hopefully he could get Anderson off within a few minutes.
Among the things he hated - apart from being unable to speak, of course - was the eager thrusting into his face. He had dealt with such behavior in the past, but previous clients... well, they were clients. Those moments would end with money, or drugs. For all he knew, Anderson would change his mind even after a very good climax and send him off to the precinct anyway.

After about five minutes - which felt like thirty - Sherlock felt the testicles begin to constrict against his chin. If he timed this properly, he could pull away before Anderson ejaculated. Even though Sherlock was not really looking forward to getting a load of the bastard's spunk on his face, he would have rather dealt with that than the filth being sent down his throat.

As he anticipated the release, he began to pull away. Then a hand clamped over the back of his head, fingers gripping his hair and yanking painfully. Sherlock gave a muffled yelp, unable to budge in time.

The ejaculate filled him, and he felt it practically coat the inside of his mouth all the way down the back of his throat. He gagged, kicking at the door of the far end and struggling frantically. After ten agonizing seconds, the hand entangled in his hair released.

Air deprivation had set in, and Sherlock began to cough violently the moment he was free to pull off Anderson's pulsating cock. Vision hazy, he hacked and sputtered in a highly undignified manner as the leering policeman wiped away the evidence of their exchange and tucked himself back into his expensive trousers. Not a spot had landed on them, and Sherlock figured the disgusting wretch was probably relieved to avoid of the charge of having them dry-cleaned.

"Not a swallower then, Holmes?" Anderson casually wondered, again patting Sherlock's upper thigh. "I thought that was non-optional in your line of trade."

He snickered at his own remark. Sherlock, though he was now free to speak, did not. All he wanted was for Anderson to unlock the cuffs and send him on his way. Though he was miles away from his apartment complex and would need to spend the better part of an hour to get back there, Sherlock did not want to ask the Sergeant to drive him. If only he could remove those goddamn handcuffs...

"I'll be remembering this, you know," Anderson continued, although it seemed more like he was talking to himself now. "Next time that ugly posh arsehole walks into my precinct, swinging around his umbrella and acting like he's bloody royalty, I'll be thinking about what I did to his precious little brother, how I fucked his mouth and made him swallow like the cheap whore he is. He can order me around all he wants, but I'll always remember this."

Sherlock kept his eyes steadily trained on a lamp post some eighty feet from the car. If he looked at
Anderson now, he was afraid he might do something he'd later regret.

"Oh well..." Anderson straightened where he sat and briefly stretched his back. "Since you held up your part of the bargain, it's only fair that I fulfill mine." He fished the key to the handcuffs out of his trouser pocket and finally freed the younger man's hands.

"Sherlock Holmes, you're free to go."

Instinctively Sherlock flexed his wrists, feeling the sting of raw skin. He considered the possibility of having to treat them, but presently he hardly cared if his hands rotted and fell off. For a moment, he wished the same could be said of his mouth, but he would never willingly rid himself of his ability to speak.

As soon as Anderson had moved out of the way - which of course he took his good bloody time with - Sherlock scrambled to get out, stumbling as his feet hit the pavement. Already as he was standing up strand, massaging his red, scraped wrists, the Sergeant was in the driver's seat, buckling the safety belt and putting the key in the ignition. Only when he heard the car turn over did Sherlock remember something very important.

"My bag," he said, careful not to be specific in the very slim case that they had an audience.

Anderson either did not hear him or pretended not to, most likely the latter, and his window was up. Beginning to get very nervous, Sherlock tapped on the window. The wanker within mockingly acted as though he just now became aware of a second party and rolled down the window with theatric innocence.

"Yes?"

"My bag." Sherlock repeated, his already miniscule patience wearing thin. "If our little transaction is complete, then I would like my possessions back. Now."

Anderson grinned widely. "I said I would let you go. I didn't say anything about your coke."

"Dammit, Anderson! You promised!" Sherlock shouted, slamming his palm against the frame of the panda car. His desperation was apparent now, oozing out of every pore like pus from a raw, festering wound. He needed the cocaine more than ever tonight. There was no way he could make it
through the night without the artificial stimulant.

The Sergeant snorted. "I promised I wouldn't haul your ass to the precinct. Now get out of here before I decide to arrest you for disorderly conduct."

Those were going to be Anderson's final words on the subject; he made that very clear to Sherlock by pushing the button that rolled the window back up and almost breaking the young man's fingers in the process.

Then Anderson was off, not even sparing the young addict a glance in the rearview mirror. His shift had ended, and he was likely headed home to well-maintained house and a very accepting wife, who either was or wasn't aware of her husband's indiscretions. Perhaps not even wanting to know. Anyone who had made the choice to marry Anderson had to be lacking deeply in both taste and judgment.

Sherlock shivered in the cold of the English November night. In distance he could see the lights of the inner city and thought about the multitude of people - literally millions - living their lives within the area that made up the capital of England. Day in and day out, blissfully ignorant of the horrors, the tragedy that befell on those less fortunate than themselves.

Wrapping his thin jacket tighter around his lanky frame and sticking his partially numb hands into his armpits, Sherlock began to walk back toward the city.

The walk home itself was uneventful and without risk.

How lucky for me, Sherlock thought bitterly, and part of him had wished he could have been attacked. Being beaten nearly to death was almost preferable to the pain of withdrawal he was about to experience.

Stumbling into the doorway of his apartment, he resisted the urge to simply collapse on the stained sofa before him, moving past it and into his bathroom. Turning on the dim light, he grabbed a toothbrush. He ignored the toothpaste, what little he had of it, and instead opened the rickety medicine chest, clumsily groping for the bar of soap within.

His hands were shaking now, though not from cold. Once he had enough of a lather, Sherlock shoved the suds into his mouth and scrubbed. Only then did he begin to gag, reliving what had happened only an hour before. He brushed every inch of the inside of his mouth, be it teeth, tongue, and even further. Still, he felt he might taste Anderson for weeks afterwards. He could only hope that he would not suffer flashbacks with any future clients. If so, his chances of keeping the apartment he
had would be ruined, as well as any hope of scoring more substances to feed his demonic addiction.

Several times Sherlock rinsed out his mouth, gargled the water, spat it out, and shoved more soap within. On the third time of spitting out the concoction of soap and water, he glanced at the mirror above his sink, the second time tonight that he would begrudgingly look at his own reflection.

He saw a hollow-eyed and pale young man, mature beyond his years in some ways, but childlike in others. Bouts of acne marred his otherwise unblemished skin, and there was only a hint of stubble on his jaw despite the fact that it had been almost a week since he’d last shaved. Sherlock’s boyish appearance had earned him many customers that otherwise would have been repelled by his aloof and abrasive personality. On occasion he was even approached by men who were only interested because they perceived him to be underage.

The stale, alkaline taste of soap lingered in his mouth even minutes after he’d washed it out. Still, Sherlock preferred it to the taste of Anderson. He drank some water next and spat out the residue, not surprised to discover strings of blood in the mix of saliva and sputum. He had clearly broken through the sensitive flesh of his gums while scrubbing them raw. It was of no consequence. He just had to avoid strenuous oral activities that presented a high risk of transmitting an infection.

Sherlock wanted to wash himself, but there was no shower in his small, poorly equipped bathroom, and he was much too tired to head down into the basement where the communal showers were. Perhaps a night’s sleep was what he needed the most now.

Stumbling out of the bathroom, the exhausted young man slowly undressed and then crawled into his plain single bed with its creaking, lumpy mattress and stained sheets, contemplating his living situation.

He was behind on his rent again. Sayid, his landlord, had accepted sex as a form of payment on a few occasions but had informed Sherlock in no uncertain terms that he would require money in the future if his young tenant wanted to keep his room. Despite the man’s shady morals, Sherlock did not mind Sayid much. Compared to some of his other ‘regulars’, he was decent and even agreed to use protection while fucking Sherlock.

Curling up in a foetal position, long legs pulled against his chest, Sherlock lay still as a corpse for the better part of an hour, thoughts racing and bouncing seemingly at random with the near-infinite amount of things he had observed and recollected. Sleep would not come to him.

His mind raced over what had conspired, as did certain questions. Would what happened between himself and Anderson remain exclusive to this night? Would the disgusting little weasel now pursue
him and continue to demand sexual favors in exchange for a night away from a jail cell?

Though he preferred to keep his problems to himself, he considered the possibility of having to tell Mycroft about this event, and he hated what might happen as a result. He did not need his stupid self-righteous brother meddling any further, nor did he need to be even more on Mycroft’s bad side.

His life had to change. Sherlock told himself this many times, that something had to change, perhaps not his surroundings, because that was virtually impossible. If anything were to change, as much as he hated to face it, then it would be himself. After all, he could only perform sex acts for a living for so long.

TBC...
Chapter 26

Chapter Summary

Whatever happened to John?

Chapter 26

John had long since given up fighting against the current. Instead he focused his remaining strength on keeping his head above the surface, which turned out to be quite a challenge in itself for a wounded man with limited mobility in his upper limbs and having suffered major bloodloss. Occasionally he inhaled too early, or a fraction of a second too late, and water entered his mouth, threatening to fill his lungs.

Already having experienced one near-death event, John knew that what they said about your whole life flashing by in a flurry of images was not true, at least not as far as he was concerned. All he saw was darkness, penetrated only by the occasional glimpse of light when he managed to break the surface of what was very likely to be his watery tomb.

It was different from last time. His conscious mind had blocked much of what happened when he was shot as a coping mechanism, but certain bits remained accessible in his dreams; not as coherent, structured memories but fragmental pieces from here and there. The blazing sun, the blue sky, the baking hot desert sand against his face, and what was perhaps the most pungent memory of all: the smattering noise of machine gun fire coming from a variety of directions.

The deafening memory of the explosions collided with the intense white noise of the current around him, and he was knocked back and forth between past and present as though he were slammed against the rocks of the very river he could not escape.

John realized he must have blacked out because the next thing he was aware of was that he was motionless and face down. As his brain slowly crawled its way into painful consciousness, he became aware that he was on somewhat solid land, likely the edge of the river. He did not know if he had been washed ashore out of pure chance or bodily removed from the water. Sunlight was dim through his closed eyelids, and despite the fact that he could barely breathe, he could feel the mud and stones beneath him, and his entire body ached as though he had been assaulted with a cricket bat.

He was alive.

Once he had ultimately decided he was indeed not dead, he was made aware of another sensation. Something was poking at him. A branch being blown in the wind? No, he could not feel a breeze of any sort. Perhaps some carrion bird was already taking the opportunity to eat him. Opening his eyes did not help much at all, for his view was limited to the ground. John would have loved to lift his head and get a better look at his surroundings - as well as his visitor - but he could barely move. Was he even able to speak after that harrowing misadventure in the river? Opening his mouth, he managed a raspy moan.
Almost immediately he heard a gasp which simultaneously conveyed many emotions; excitement, surprise, joy, even fear. But it was decidedly human in nature, and for a moment John dared to hope for rescue. He couldn't be so unlucky as to be found by the clan of deranged cannibals and be brought back to the cabin of horrors a second time… could he?

Then a voice spoke up, nasal and high, words twisted almost beyond recognition by the customary mountain drawl accent, but a speaking voice nonetheless. It was human.

"Come take a look at this, Pa! Lookit what Ah found!"

A kid. The speaker was a kid. Good lord. John tried to form words, to express a plea for help, but breathing alone had become so incredibly hard, and all he could manage was an inaudible whisper. Did he have a punctured lung? Two punctured lungs? Was he dying?

The child's shout out soon brought the approach of heavy footsteps, and John heard a man's voice, although his accent was possibly even thicker than the child's and the doctor could not make out the words.

"Ah think it's alive, Pa!" the child - most likely a boy - eagerly explained. "But it's hurt. Can ya help it?"

"Ah'll be damned…" "Pa" muttered and crouched down next to the prone man covered in mud but otherwise as naked as the day he was born. He stuck out a hand and held it in front of John's face to check if he was breathing, and once he had positive affirmation, he turned back to his son.

"Now ya listen to me, Eli. This here's a man, and he's been shot. Run back up to ya Mama and ask her to call an ambulance. We gotta take this man here to the hospital, or he gonna be dead. Can ya do that, Eli?"

"Uh huh!" the nasal voice drawled, and the boy was gone in a brief smattering of muddy footsteps. John had begun to ignore his would-be saviors somewhere at the middle of their brief talk and was desperately willing his limbs to cooperate with his brain. He was beginning to think he had been paralyzed until he finally managed to gather himself into a foetal position.

"Are y'alright?" the man next to him asked, likely out of instinct. John had a feeling he did not look 'alright' at all. In fact he felt like he should rightly be dead.

"Don't move," he heard, but he ignored it. He was wasting time just lying here in the mud. For all he knew, Sherlock was dead now. It did not matter; he would not leave him to rot away in the cabin of the repulsive monsters who were once men. He turned over and came face to face with the man who knelt at his side. Several teeth were missing on a scruffy unwashed visage. His breath smelled of far too many beers drunk each night. For a moment John felt as though he was back in the hellish cabin. His vision blurred, then became clear again.

"Can ya gimme yer name? What's yer name, son?"

John was done with the trivialities. He could not stay here any longer. Struggling to speak to the eagerly listening stranger, all he could think of was his friend.

"Shuh…"

The stranger nodded, trying to make out his speech.

"Sher..."
John finally found his voice. He had to find him. He had to save...

"Sherlock!"

A moment of silence followed. John wondered if he had successfully managed to convey his message to the simple but seemingly kind-hearted local, until the man spoke again.

"Shelluck? What ya say?"

Of course, John figured. The man had probably not even caught on to the fact that 'Sherlock' was a name, as it was not something people would commonly name their male children in this area. Not that that was true for any part of the world, considering…

Any hope of communicating the situation was thereby crudely stomped into the dirt, as John didn't believe he had the strength to produce the words required to elaborate. Every sound made by his aching lungs made him feel as though a horse had pulverized his ribcage with a vicious and well-aimed kick.

John swallowed, hoping it would at least temporarily ease his laboured breathing. It didn't, and when he made another attempt to explain himself, he quickly realized his muted flow of words sounded more like gibberish than properly enunciated speech.

"S'alright…" the scruffy-looking man murmured, and he, much like John himself, seemed at a loss for words. Probably these kind of situations were not part of his usual daily routine. The doctor, however, appreciated when the local removed his denim jacket, filthy though it was, and used it to cover his naked charge.

"Name's Jedidiah, but my friends call me Jed," the man introduced himself. "Now you just hang in there, yer gonna be alright… ambulance's on its way."

Ambulance? Where the bloody hell were they going to get an ambulance? As far as John knew, he was surrounded by miles upon miles of forests. According to the information about the area, the nearest hospital was forty minutes away. Nearly two hours of driving, and then God only knew how long he would be treated before he could tell anyone about a second person needing medical care...

"Stay still," the stranger known as Jed - God, how predictable - advised him. "Don't move now. Ya don't know if ya got broken bones."

I'll manage, John thought, but he could not even manage to utter the words. He started to speak again, but was cut off by the horrendous cough which rattled his insides and sent him collapsing onto his stomach once more. He likely had pneumonia. He would withstand diphtheria if he had the chance to get back to the cabin and find Sherlock.

And kill those filthy degenerates.

"That's right," Jed encouraged. "Jest lie there. Stay put and relax, and ya'll be in a hospital in no time."

John desperately tried to think of names of bones or muscles, but his mind was giving up on attempting any sort of focus. He could feel the pull of sleep closing its steely fingers around him, making him numb to the outside world.

No... no, I can't... he thought in despair. I have to help... Sherlock! But his lungs were exhausted and battered and the numbing that swiftly overtook his aching body was so damned inviting.
Eventually John stopped fighting it. He experienced brief moments of clarity following, during one of which he attempted to write Sherlock's name in the ground beneath him. It did not go well. The mud was too loose, the ground too soggy, and the letters he formed disappeared before he could start working on the next.

John was close to despair, but before he could suffer the full impact of it, unconsciousness claimed him and, momentarily at least, obliterated all dark thoughts and guilt from his mind. It didn't matter anymore if he never woke up again.

TBC...
Chapter 27

Chapter Summary

Sherlock endures further abuse at the hands of his inhuman captors. Added to that, it's dinner time for the deformed residents of Bear Mountain.

Chapter Notes

This chapter includes graphic depictions of cannibalism. If that offends you, proceed with caution.

Chapter 27

Sherlock curled up as best he could with rope once again binding his wrists together above his head. He had thrown up once after being forced to perform oral sex on the giant with the diseased cock, (not much in his stomach besides water, stomach juices, and also the vile creature's semen) and to stop that from happening a second time, the clan alpha had covered his mouth with a piece of duct tape. Sherlock knew that if he vomited now, he would likely die from choking on it.

He closed his eyes, trying to emotionally distance himself from the horrors going on in the physical world and finding solace in the inner riches of his mind palace. He had paid regular visits there throughout his adult and semi-adult life when the noisiness and stress of the real world became too much to handle; something people commonly referred to as "zoning out" and disregarded as yet another dimension of the quirkiness that was Sherlock Holmes and his eccentric ways. What they didn't know was that without his mind palace, Sherlock might not have survived.

But finding his way inside the palace now was proving difficult. He so wanted to escape inside, to be numb to all around him. At this point, it did not matter where he would go within the palace. He wanted to be in his apartment, watching bloody horrible reality programs, rather than be here in this hellhole.

At least his leg still hurt, and it had no suspicious odor yet, he mused with a combination of fear and relief. Had it gone numb, he would be far more worried. Sherlock could not closely inspect the wounds caused by the bear trap, and he was not presently certain if he would have wanted to. What was the point of looking for signs of septicemia if he was slowly dying here anyway?

He heard a shuffling at his side and did not even have to open his eyes to identify his visitor. The breathing at the mattress edge (someone eager to get a close look at him) as well as the weight of the figure leaning there (not the skinny one) was enough for an identification.

Fuck off, Sherlock wanted to say. The duct tape kept him silent.

A grubby finger poked at his face, dirty fingernail scratching chapped lips. Sherlock fought the urge
to bite again. His jaw still throbbed from the missing tooth after his latest outburst.

A voice in a higher octave interrupted their somewhat lacking conversation, and the bony maniac was approaching. Sherlock still kept his eyes closed, not much caring. The three-fingered one must have been telling his sibling to come away, because after a few seconds, the heavy weight left the mattress and both mountain men walked off.

Inside his head, far from the tangible world, Sherlock entered his favourite place in all of his mind palace: a mnemonic representation of 221B Baker Street, accurate down to the smallest detail. It was a relatively new addition to his system, but unlike any of the previous rooms, most of which were created solely for the purpose of storing and categorizing information, Baker Street felt like home. That and John…

John Watson, who lived only in Sherlock's memories now.

A single tear formed in the corner of the detective's left eye and slowly trickled down his cheek, leaving a clear trail of clean, visible skin in its wake. Sherlock himself was unaware of the tear. He watched the John of his memories, busy doing all kinds of domestic chores abhorred by Sherlock himself; filling the kettle, heating the kettle, pouring tea into a pair of mugs, one for Sherlock and one for himself, then adding milk and a teaspoon of honey to Sherlock's tea and two bits of sugar to his own.

Sherlock was able to move through the rooms of his memory palace with preternatural speed, and his next destination was John's bedroom one story up. There, in the doctor's modest wooden-frame bed, he saw himself and the doctor having sex for the first time.

The bedroom was certainly not the locale Sherlock had become used to over the years when it came to sexual interactions. In fact it was an improvement over the usual places where years ago he would offer favours of pleasure in exchange for money or drugs... or money to buy the drugs. Here it was warm, and much cleaner, and he was with someone he trusted and - though he would not quickly admit it out loud - cared about.

John had been that combination of anxious and overjoyed, as though he were a virgin again. His hands accordingly fumbled, and he tripped in his own clothing as he disrobed during their brief foreplay. He chuckled bashfully at his small nervous mistakes and eagerly kissed and caressed, his approach romantic and intimate. As far as Sherlock could remember, the climax was amazing for his friend.

Sherlock on the other hand had been comparatively reserved. He allowed most of John's enthusiasm, but the sex itself had been what entrapped the majority of his attention. He delivered one of his perfected blowjobs, easy money after so many years, and allowed John to be on top.

After all, John had clearly shown guarded interest in the male gender in the past, though he thought he had hidden such interest... but he clearly had not enacted upon it in years. Allowing the doctor to penetrate would be fitting for the transition. The sex had been good, excellent in fact, but as soon as affectionate hands tried to stroke him in the post-coital bliss, he shrugged off the attention.

A stab of guilt struck Sherlock. Once he actually thought about it, their union had become more about his own climax, and anything felt by John had become incidental. After John had become huffy over the lack of touch, the detective simply concluded that John should be grateful that his friend had been interested in him, that the doctor should feel lucky that they were not only partners and friends, but now also comfortable with providing such pleasure for one another.

Suddenly the little room in his memories was no longer such a reassuring place to be.
Sherlock withdrew from the construction of his mind and re-entered the physical world, albeit reluctantly. He knew what was awaiting him there, and he preferably would have wanted to die rather than face his repulsive captors again. Sadly he could not will himself dead, despite some previous displays of impressive control over his bodily functions.

None of the three cannibals were currently watching him, and Sherlock exhaled in relief. Practically every part of his body was aching, he was thirsty and needed to relieve himself, but at least he didn't have to return to a session of torture inflicted upon his person. Very carefully, he tested the strength of his bonds. Raw pain immediately shot through his fractured right arm, but he bit back the consequent cry which formed in his lungs.

What difference did it make? He was not going anywhere.

***

Three-finger regretted having to chase One-Eye away from their new plaything, but the big oaf was unpredictable and there was a chance he'd cause the scrawny whore some irreparable damage if left unattended. Sawtooth had made things very clear earlier. He did not want One-Eye to play with their captive, and Three-finger did not want his little brother to be punished for breaking their father's rules.

However… He would not mind at all if the scrawny whore happened to die. Considering Sawtooth had decided he wanted to keep the whore, there was nothing Three-finger could do without drawing attention to himself and thus earning a hefty punishment. Unless… the Outsider died by itself.

There were not many ways to make the little whore's death look like some kind of "accident", not when it was tied to a bed and incapable of doing much but lay there. Three-finger stared at his father's plaything from across the cabin, from this angle only able to see a pair of dirty, pale feet. He didn't like this Outsider. The torment his family granted it was not worth the threat it posed to their wellbeing.

He glanced upward at the large pot boiling on the stove, watching how Sawtooth occasionally tended to it, and even One-Eye would glance inside, either to look at the bubbles or to inform their leader if the contents might be in danger of boiling over. Supper would be ready soon, and like it or not, the "guest" would have to be fed as well, or else he would starve, much to the anticipation of Three-finger and disappointment of Sawtooth. Three-finger huffed at the predicament, sniffing and snorting and wondering if the family had any green potatoes lying around. After all, those were bad...

The thought aroused an idea in the skinny hunter's warped brain. Glancing back at his family once more and judging them to be too distracted to notice, he scurried off to a cabinet and searched until he found a specific bottle.

COOLEX ANTIFREEZE was printed on the label in bold blue letters, though he could not read or decipher the letters themselves. He knew what the fluid was used for, and what could happen if someone were to drink it. Three-finger experimentally shook the bottle, listening to the slosh of the chemical within. It would be enough. Grabbing an nearby roll of industrial tape, he strode to the bed where the Outsider lay. The little whore's eyes were closed, but he had visibly winced at the sound of someone approaching.

It possessed a great amount of self-control, Three-finger had to admit that. Most other prey would be blubbering and crying by now, yanking at their bonds and attempting to kick and bite anyone who approached. This one at least knew well enough to save its energy.
Three-finger loathed the wretched creature. The sooner he was gone, the better for the clan.

The Outsider didn't move until Three-finger poked at his ribs with his thick, malformed middle-finger which had earned him his name. The whore twitched, attempting to twist away from the mountain man so as to avoid his touch. Three-finger giggled, prodding the whore even harder, this time leaving a red mark on its skin.

It recoiled from him when he reached toward it to pluck away the duct tape covering its mouth, and he could tell from the look the Outsider gave him that it had no clue what was going on. Three-finger smiled, holding out the bottle containing the poisonous liquid. The whore regarded him with confusion and suspicion. Then it slowly dawned on their captive that he was expected to drink from the bottle, and immediately the thing began to shake its head.

"No!" it sputtered, tugging on the bonds despite the pain it must have inflicted on the broken arm.

Three-finger would waste no more time dallying. He grabbed the whore's hair and tried his hardest to keep its head still as he thrust the mouth of the bottle into the mouth of the whore. Then he tilted the bottle.

The Outsider took in a mouthful of the foul liquid, but he refused to swallow. Three-finger was not surprised. A clever whore like this had figured out his plan very quickly. Once it swallowed, it would vomit. Three-finger would replace the tape when that happened, and if it was not enough, he had another roll to reinforce the barrier. The bitch would choke and drown in his own sick, and with a little luck, the chemical would not be detected by the time Sawtooth discovered the death of his plaything.

For now, the only problem was getting the damned whore to swallow. The wretched creature's eyes bulged and its body tensed under Three-finger's hold, straining at the hand clamped over its mouth. Just a little longer...

A loud voice behind them caused Three-finger to instinctively jolt, pulling away from the whore, who promptly spat out the noxious fluid over the side of the bed, coughing but otherwise unharmed. Bristling, Three-finger calmed at the sight of One-Eye, but only slightly.

He had not been found out, but his plan had failed.

Supper was ready, and the youngest had been sent to tell his other sibling. Replacing the whore's gag, Three-finger begrudgingly followed, returning the bottle to the cabinet. He tried to match his brother's enthusiasm for the meal, knowing that at least their prisoner would still face further torment when food was served.

The blonde whore still hung upside down by her feet in the shed, and she was collecting flies now, even though she had only been dead for a little more than a day. This warm weather caused meat to spoil much quicker than usual, and unless the clan wanted their food to rot away and go to waste, it was time to have it prepared.

Sawtooth cut the rope holding the blonde whore up and threw the body over his shoulder. The pool of blood on the dirt floor from her slit throat had congealed into a thick, rubbery, dark brown sludge. Three-finger had witnessed on several occasions when his younger sibling bent down to lick coagulated blood off the floor, especially during the colder months when food was scarce.

Three-finger himself had cut the whore's throat and watched her choke and gurgle on her own life fluid moments before she gave up the ghost and passed from this world. He had regarded with great interest and intensity as her eyes clouded over and the look in them became glassy and distant. She
had large eyes, not the same bold blue as the scrawny whore, but a beautiful colour nonetheless. No one in the clan was ever born with blue eyes. It was a trait that only occurred in Outsiders with a pasty complexion.

Three-finger had noted over the years that blue eyes were generally tastier than brown ones.

The family left the shed with Three-finger leading the way in his usual twitchy, manic gait. Sawtooth, carrying the body, lumbered on in a pace he found more comfortable, with One-Eye trailing closely behind. The youngest of the clan was eager to start chopping up the dead whore; one of few tasks One-Eye could be expected to perform expertly.

Eager to taste the lifeless meat hauled on the patriarch's shoulder, One-Eye plucked at the open wounds, sucking the gore from his fingertips. He could barely contain his excitement; not only had they found three Outsiders to chase, but the clan had caught two of them, one to be used as a shiny new toy and the other as a meal. He did not know if Sawtooth would eventually grow tired of his plaything, or if the Outsider would stay until he could no longer scream or move, to then become a meal, but he hoped for the latter. He liked their current guest and wanted it to stay as long as possible.

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Sherlock gagged for a moment from the mere taste and smell of the vehicle antifreeze which had been forced down his throat, but he did not vomit. He was especially relieved that he managed to keep himself from swallowing. Of course, the intent behind the wiry bastard's actions was not unreadable. Even an idiot could have deciphered what had nearly happened.

The young detective never thought he would have been thankful for any of the feral family members, but he did feel a twinge of gratitude when the lumbering idiot had interrupted the murder attempt.

Sherlock felt a bizarre inner conflict at his possible fate. The smallest hunter clearly hated him and wanted him dead, no matter the consequences, but being kept alive by the leader in exchange for the torture and violation was hardly preferable. In fact, Sherlock was beginning to wonder if he really wanted to stay alive anymore in this hot, foul-smelling hellhole.

He was grateful for the short reprieve he was granted when all three clan members left the cabin for a few minutes, obviously to check on something outside. Had they caught another victim in one of their insidious traps? Or perhaps slain one earlier when he was left in the "care" of the idiot and woke up inside a wooden crate after biting the dull creature?

Whichever was true, Sherlock suspected he would find out soon enough.

Rustling was heard from the doorway, and the hyper-active, skinny monstrosity predictably skipped in first, soon followed by his two lumbering relatives. Sherlock would have had to twist his head and look over his shoulder in order to see them, but he purposely refrained from doing that so as not to attract attention to himself. As soon as the trio entered, however, he could smell something that was not simply unsavory body odour.

Rotting, dead flesh. They had brought a corpse with them.

The giant promptly dumped their prize on the old wooden table, and the mountain men exchanged a few words - sounding more like a pig's grunts to an outsider's ear - between themselves, the giant likely doling out commands to his two sons. Sherlock buried his face in the crook of his good arm and prayed they would not take notice of him, until he heard the sickening sound of a hand saw eating through a limb. The monsters were dismembering the body.
Mind palace, mind palace, he silently chanted inside his brain. But the more he tired to focus, the louder the hacking and sawing became. *JUST LET ME GO TO MY MIND PALACE.*

One of the mountain men belched. Sherlock swore he could detect the foul smell from across the room.

Eyes shut and head turned away, he could only hear the approach of one of them and feel the hot breath beat on his cheek for a moment. The idiot, he thought. He personally found it unremarkable that he was beginning to recognize his captors individually without so much as looking at them, curse his powers of deduction.

Thankfully the lumbering young brute only sniffed at him for a moment and went away again. For much of the time that the dismantling of the dead meat took place, Sherlock was ignored. This suited him just fine, but suspicion lingered as to why. Had the family planned something for him? A mental image formed of them stuffing him inside an animal carcass like some hellish version of a Mongolian nomad's dinner.

The lack of food and water must have been taking its toll on him. Either that or his injuries were making him delirious. Neither was a good sign.

Sherlock felt his ear twitch when he heard something sizzling, likely pieces of the meat. He was determined to refuse any meat they might provide. Was there any chance that the carcass they'd brought in was that of an animal? Knowing what he did about the monsters holding him captive, he doubted it. There had to be other things to eat, right? Fruits, vegetables, roots… The family would have developed scurvy otherwise. If anything, the clan might also gather canned goods or nearby berries from the woods. He would only eat these, and not what was sizzling in the nearby pot, because the more he thought about it, the less he could convince himself that the meat being prepared was not Mary Morstan.

Eventually, the lumbering man-child lost interest in preparing the meal and strayed from the kitchen area. Sherlock hoped dearly that it would not turn its attention toward him, but it was a vain hope, considering he was probably the most stimulating subject inside the primitive little lodge.

Not long passed before the idiot was once again standing by the bed, his two filthy hands pawing at the detective's bound form. Sherlock did not lift his head to look at the mountain man even when the creature leaned in to place an experimental lick on his ear.

The giant alpha soon bellowed the idiot back, obviously displeased with the younger one for shirking his chores. Cowed, the one-eyed man-child went back to stirring the pot roast simmering on the stove in an ancient copper casserole.

Sherlock focused on breathing deeply and tried his best to block out the disturbing aromas and noises assaulting his senses. He could not re-enter his mind palace now - his body was in too much agony to allow for such an escape - but he could attempt to apply a meditation technique taught to him by his first psychotherapist, to whom he had been referred as a young teenager for “anger management issues”. The meditation technique was the only useful thing Sherlock had picked up from months of therapy, although it had helped him little in his dealings with life later on.

The meditation seemed to help, but only as far as making the duration of the dinner preparations. A clang of metal brought him out of his self-induced fog, a ladle against the pot. Eyes flying open instinctively, Sherlock looked up at his keepers, who were a little too happy to see him. The only reason they were smiling was because they had something unpleasant in store for their "guest". The one-eyed idiot was gnawing on a severed, boiled hand with the remaining molars he had left. The skinny psycho happened to be holding a barbecue fork. Their gigantic leader had produced a tray
table, setting it down and covering the surface with a large bowl filled with slices of freshly boiled meat.

Sherlock's fingers clenched into tight fists at the gap-toothed grins above him.

The simple-minded man was ordered to pull him up into a more seated position, likely to prevent him from choking. Sherlock glanced at the meal on the tray table, knowing it was meant for him. An idiot such as the one lifting him up could have figured this out.

*They cannot make me*, he chanted in his brain. They would not and they could not. They could not make him eat the meat. The stink of the prepared flesh was undeniably human, and from now on, Sherlock would always face the chance that whatever meat served to him would not be from a deer or other mindless beast. No, this monstrous clan's preferred livestock was of the bipedal variety. 'Two-legged mutton' as some old cultures jokingly dubbed it.

Perhaps Sherlock himself would be added to the food storage one day... but for now, he refused to be involved in their sick game.

Let me starve, he thought resolutely. Let me wither into skin and bones. I will not eat this.

The skinny hunter impaled a piece of boiled flesh onto the barbecue fork and lifted it, smearing the greasy hot morsel against Sherlock's tightly closed mouth. When the young detective refused to comply, the meat was jabbed against his face. Sherlock was surprised that the teeth of the fork had not skewered his cheek.

"I won't!" he growled from between tightly clenched teeth and simultaneously sent his tormentors an eyeful of hate. The mountain men of course ignored any attempts at defiance from their captive, and the skinny one poked him with the fork again, this time marginally harder.

Sherlock still refused to open his mouth. He would not eat. He would starve to death sooner than revert to cannibalism.

After a few tries, the skinny hunter's playfulness turned into aggravation, and in its frustration at Sherlock's unwillingness to cooperate, it poked the detective's lip hard enough to puncture the skin and draw blood. And yet Sherlock would not open his mouth.

The giant patriarch finally stepped in, calmly shoving his agitated son aside. Sherlock instinctively recoiled from the abominable man that had already raped him twice and probably would not hesitate to do so again. The giant was not nearly as impetuous as the skinny fiend, which also - unfortunately for Sherlock - meant it was more calculating.

An enormous scarred hand grabbed the thrashing young man by the neck, thus effectively immobilizing him, and with his other hand, the clan leader pinched Sherlock's nostrils shut. For a moment, everything blackened before Sherlock's eyes, and when he came to several seconds later, he was gulping for oxygen like a fish on dry land. The mountain men had achieved the desired reaction in their victim, and while Sherlock was greedily inhaling mouthfuls of air, the smallest hunter shoved a forkful of meat into his mouth.

The very thought of where the meat had come from washed over Sherlock's mind in overwhelming waves until every inch of him felt saturated with the blackest, meanest... evil.

Sherlock immediately wanted to throw up, but a massive hand clamped over his lips. The smallest hunter held him down with its own weight to keep the young detective from struggling. He felt himself back in the same place only hours before, about to be poisoned and choked by the giggling
maniac. This time he found himself unable to vomit, perhaps from the plain and terrible fact that he was far too hungry and weak to be sick from a mouthful of human flesh. Instead he chewed. He hated it but he chewed, feeling the juices crawl down his throat.

After about thirty seconds, the hand on his mouth quickly went to his jaw, like someone forcing their dog to swallow a pill. And swallow he did. He nearly began sobbing, but he swallowed.

The cackling of the mountain man pinning him rang in his ears. He hated looking at the leering faces around him, so he turned his head, glancing beyond the giant. He wished he had not. Behind the leader was a wooden counter, draped with a weather resistant tarp. In the center lay a putrid disembodied head with familiar blonde hair.

Mary. Sherlock recognized the bad peroxide dye job she'd had done to cover up a previous one that was even worse. Her mouse-brown roots were visible even now, when most of her hair was covered in dried blood and dirt. Below the forehead, however, Mary Morstan was no longer recognizable. Not much was left of her face. The mountain men had effectively sliced away all soft tissues, including the woman's lips, cheeks, eyes and tongue. Only her nose remained, looking bizarrely out of place surrounded by what was practically a grinning cranium, surreal in its ghastliness when compared to the vibrant woman it had been just little over a day ago.

Sherlock's shock and dismay presented a second opportunity for the skinny madman to shove another forkful of human meat into his mouth. This time the detective swallowed on his own, no coercion required from the giant alpha.

TBC...
Chapter 28

Chapter Summary

John fights for his life, and Mycroft is alerted of the situation.

Chapter 28

A little over two hours passed before the long-awaited ambulance finally arrived to pick up their patient. In the meantime, Jedidiah Granger and his eldest son, Nehemiah, moved the severely wounded, naked man onto a faded green tarp and carried him to their front porch.

They weren't able to understand much of the man's intermittent ravings during the periods of time he was actually conscious, although Mabel, Jed's wife, remarked at some point that he spoke what sounded like "English" English. Jed himself was doubtful. What would an Englishman be doing in these parts of West Virginia?

The few times John had been lucid enough to understand the voices around him, he heard someone mention that paramedics were on their way. How would they get here again? Where the hell was he? Where was Sherlock? Was he even alive?

Stretches of time were lost to his brain thanks to the bouts of unconsciousness. The last time he was conscious on the local's porch, he could hear a familiar sound... the repetitive cacophony that he just couldn't place in the fog of his delirium... until he actually saw the maker of the sound hovering over the house.

Helicopter. What for?

Right. He was almost dead. His brain was barely working. He felt time moving like molasses. The progress of the paramedics could not seem to go any slower.

John glanced to his right, toward the yard of the family who had saved him. Their property did not have enough open space for the aircraft to land. The paramedics would have to walk - or rather run - the rest of the way. Hopefully they did not have far to go.

John suspected he had passed out once again, because in the length of time he took to blink, he noticed he was being moved, albeit very carefully.

"Hold still, sir," someone said above him. Paramedic? He opened his eyes and saw the blur of a blue shirt before closing them again from the dizzy sensation that washed over him.

"Did you get a name from him?" a voice asked.

The man who dragged him from the riverbank answered. "I dunno, all I got was Sherlock. Izzat even a name?"

"Sherlock?"
John's face twisted in confusion, baffled at the voices. For a moment he forgot their exchange and
writhed at the sound of his friend's name. Was Sherlock nearby? Had they been rescued? No, of
course not. John Watson was still in some redneck's yard, carried by paramedics, while Sherlock was
likely getting raped or eaten.

"Can you hear me, sir?"

John only moaned.

The paramedics had obviously decided to quit trying to get any information out of him, because the
next thing John noticed was being lifted and placed on a stretcher - one could probably not even
work a gurney on ground such as this - and carried toward the helicopter. The deafening sound of
the rotors slicing through the air filled his ears, and for a moment John imagined the paramedics
throwing him against the rotor blades and laughing as parts of his dismembered corpse were strewn
about.

No. These were good people. Not everyone in these woods was a sadistic freak. He was safe now.
…but Sherlock wasn't.

The noise abated once the paramedics entered the helicopter with their patient. John kept his eyes
closed for the most part, picking up a few words here and there, mostly medical jargon which he
knew quite well. An oxygen mask was placed over his face, and he felt one of the paramedics
searching for a suitable vein on his arm - the left one - to insert an IV catheter.

"BP 80 over 40, this man's lost a lot of blood," a male voice said, and another one responded.

"Shotgun wound in the right shoulder, some smaller puncture wounds on his lower torso. Found on
the riverbank, so he's likely been in the river. He's hypothermic and appears to have respiratory
problems, no foreign objects lodged in his airways. Possible infection, appears lucid at times, but is
unresponsive to speech. Pupils react normally to light, so there's no present suspicion of brain
damage."

John felt a small sting when the catheter punctured his skin and a cold sensation when the fluid
resuscitation, lactated Ringer's solution, most likely, entered his venous system. A moment later
everything faded to black.

***

Mycroft Holmes stared at the computer screen as he might stare at an insolent colleague who was not
aware to whom he was speaking. Thin white fingers traced the grooves of the armrest of his chair as
he sat otherwise unmoving, looking at the glow of the screen.

Sherlock had not updated.

Not that Mycroft was at all surprised, not where his younger brother was concerned. But after John
Watson had entered their world, the civil servant had to admit that a few - only a few - improvements
had been made. Sherlock had for the most part agreed to keep his brother reassured as to his present
condition, whether or not he was taking his medication and where he was located, if Mycroft was so
lucky. It was a suitable bargain, as it left Sherlock feeling less intruded upon and mothered, and
Mycroft remained satisfied.

The most direct way involved the younger Holmes' personal website. Others might not think much
of a banal post with the occasional typo, but Mycroft easily translated, reassured that a pill had been
swallowed. And if Sherlock forgot - or likely was not in the mood to update - John would do so for
him on his own blog, at least as far as his flatmate's whereabouts were concerned. After all, the doctor hadn't known about Sherlock's medication until recently.

And this was what troubled him about the blank slate of his computer screen window.

Sherlock sometimes slipped up, but John, ever the soldier, was like a clockwork. John had not updated. Not for days. A cold feeling dripped down Mycroft's spine.

The Ice-Man feeling the cold grip of terror? Now there was something.

Mycroft poured himself a generous helping of whiskey and leaned back in his chair, letting the liquor warm his mouth and insides. He tried to convince himself that nothing untoward was going on. Only two days had passed, and his brother and John Watson were on a vacation.

Correction: John Watson and his current beau, Mary Morstan, had been going on a vacation to the Appalachian mountains, and Sherlock had joined them, uninvited, with the promise of a case. A case. In America.

Mycroft, now pleasantly buzzed, snorted at the transparency of the excuse. Sherlock's sole reason for joining Doctor Watson and the Morstan woman had been jealousy, pure and simple. Sherlock was in love with his assistant and abhorred at the idea of John spending quality time with someone else. And John Watson, the fool, had virtually no idea, as he'd demonstrated during their webcam chat a few days back.

To Mycroft it now felt like it happened years in the past. Of all the men Sherlock encountered in his line of 'work', was it absolutely necessary to fall for one with such a lacking intellect?

His whiskey gone, Mycroft shut his computer with a small "click". It was past midnight, and he needed to get some sleep. First thing tomorrow morning, he would arrange for someone to call the nudist colony - Avalon, was it? - and have them ask question regarding their British guests.

Knowing that sleep would be hard-earned, Mycroft went to his medicine cabinet before bed to get a sleeping pill. At the moment he was too dejected to heed the obvious warning not to take the pills combined with alcohol.

No sooner had he readied the pill in his palm with intent to swallow that his mobile rang. He instinctively picked up, replacing the capsule into its bottle.

His caller ID identified Anthea as being on the other line. Contacting him after midnight for any reason had to be a serious event. His thoughts of Sherlock and John's strange absence still fresh in his mind, he fought his hands from trembling as he picked up the phone.

"Yes?"

Predicting the phone conversation made the reality no less terrifying. Most others who might have seen Mycroft at present would think him the unequivocal picture of apathy, and at almost any other time, the presumption would have likely been true. Were Sherlock present, however, the signs would have been clear as day. Mycroft's stillness was as great as the panic which scrambled through every corner of his brain. He swallowed away the dryness and found himself unable to sufficiently wet his throat.

"Yes, I see. Very good."

Anthea had already arranged a flight for immediate travel over the Atlantic Ocean. Ever reliable, she had made all the arrangements; not that Mycroft was incapable of making them himself, even in
situations worse than this, but having a trustworthy PA certainly made things easier.

Still mostly dressed, he threw his jacket and belt back on and found himself readjusting his tie in the mirror and smoothing down some askew hairs on an arched eyebrow. Avoiding his own gaze in the reflection, he straightened his spine and brusquely walked out of the bathroom as though ready to trot off to work, desperate to ignore the wooziness of the alcohol sloshing in his stomach.

TBC...
Chapter 29

Chapter Summary

Mycroft interrogates a severely injured John at the hospital.

Chapter 29

Mycroft Holmes was one of few 'minor' British government officials who had been provided with his own private Jet. The times when Mycroft actually utilized it were few and far in between, as it was typically much easier to book a seat on a public aircraft (as long as there were seats available in first or business class; Mycroft Holmes did not fly 'coach') than to get the various permits to take off and land with and a private Jet.

Tonight was an exception, and it only required a quick exchange over the phone with an official at the BWI airport laced with some thinly veiled threats to acquire an immediate landing permit.

He was Mycroft Holmes, and there was no stopping him when national security or the safety of his little brother were at stake.

***

The eight hour flight across the Atlantic Ocean passed in a slow kind of agony. Anthea sat opposite him the entire time, and although her attention was mostly focused on the screen of her smart-phone, she, like the ever-dutiful PA that she was, occasionally asked in a low, pleasant voice if there was anything he required.

Mycroft's answer was always a curt headshake. What he wanted was more alcohol to dull the rest of his senses and what he needed was at least a few hours of uninterrupted sleep, but presently he could not afford either.

Sherlock Holmes.

A grievously injured man with a shotgun wound and other multiple injuries had been admitted to a hospital in West Virginia, and he had given his name as Sherlock Holmes.

***

Returning to consciousness felt like a tiny taste of hell, the sensation of every fibre of feeling coming back utterly indescribable. At first John felt as though his eyes refused to open - perhaps they did - and when they finally opened, the room was a blur. Before his vision could properly adjust, he made out the steady beeping of an EKG and an unending hiss of a device strapped to his face. A ventilator. The only thought which he could process was that he must have needed it.

Once his vision had become clear, he began to truly feel the relief of being in a hospital room. However, he was not alone in his thoughts for more than two seconds before he realized he had a visitor. Upon recognition he wondered if he really was in hell.
Standing over his bed was Mycroft Holmes. He did not look happy, not one bit. John had a feeling he knew why, but he was presently too buggered up to figure it out.

"Am I alive?" he wanted to ask, but he was unable to. Damned ventilator. His failed attempts at speech were not lost on the elder Holmes.

"Perhaps you can imagine my disappointment," Mycroft began, "at crossing the ocean and reaching this damnable hospital, only to find that the Sherlock Holmes who was interred here is not Sherlock Holmes at all."

John wanted to sputter out an angry explanation, a demand that the pompous hog's prick would hurry out to rescue Sherlock, but of course he was struck dumb by his breathing apparatus, so all he could do was scowl. Damn, he wished he had taken courses in sign language.

He watched as Mycroft produced from behind his back a notepad and pencil and dropped it in the doctor's lap. As John glanced up at his visitor, he saw a darkness pass over the elder Holmes' face that was not the usual condescending disproval, nor the annoyance which bordered on comical. No, this was the face of a man who ran the country and was not someone to be trifled with.

"Where is Sherlock?"

Had John's throat not already felt like sandpaper (with the respirator making it even dryer) it most certainly would have dried at the question posed by Mycroft Holmes. It also frustrated him to no end that he could not - in a quite literal sense - give the other man an answer. The device breathing for him did not allow him to speak. No matter how badly he wanted to yell at Mycroft to take his ever-present goons and do something useful for once, that did not include spying on his younger brother or kidnapping a certain ex-army surgeon for questioning, he could not.

Only after his initial frustration had eased slightly did he notice the writing equipment the other had passed him. He might not be able to speak nor move his right arm a whole lot, but John was left-handed and fortunately his left hand still obeyed his brain's commands relatively well, even though it was shaking moderately when he picked the pencil up and positioned it over the lined paper.

He tried very hard to think of something he could write down that would summarize their entire horrible experience with the deformed cannibals in the most informative, concise manner possible. Mycroft at present did not need to know that his brother had been raped by a disfigured giant, even though that memory was forever going to be etched to John's retinas.

//Kidnapped// he wrote, and offered the pad back to Mycroft.

The redhead scowled very slightly, and for someone very attuned to the feelings of others, a momentary slip in his near-unnatural self-control - not more than a slight hitch in the flow of breath - might have been noticeable.

"How?" Mycroft asked in a steely voice. John wondered if the Ice-man pitied him at all, or if all Mycroft felt toward him was rage for making it back when Sherlock hadn't.

John began writing some more. //Mary gone. Search. Found dead. Taken. Tortured. In the woods. Mad//

Mycroft blinked, a concentrated effort, as though in the full second that his eyes had closed, he was composing himself. As much of an arsehole as Sherlock's brother was, he still cared... just a little.

"People at the resort are being questioned," he replied. "Discretion is difficult due to the locale and structure of the place, much to my annoyance. It escapes me that any institution could be so poorly
organized, but perhaps that says something of this country... my point being that we are continuing to search for clues as to where you've been. Perhaps something can be shaken from your brain...?

John shook his head in equal frustration. By pure dumb luck, he and Sherlock had happened upon Mary's path towards the cabin, not to mention the cabin itself. On top of that, the trauma he had experienced within the past day was hammering out chunks of his memory at one time, then jamming them back in later, only to knock out another piece. He scribbled down more words and showed Mycroft what he had written.

//Cabin. Men. Inbred//

A subtle surprise passed over Mycroft's face, which also read of predictable disbelief. Of course, anyone who might have been told the situation would have found it a hard yarn to swallow. Stories like these came from movies and lurid novels.

"And...?" Mycroft said.

//Road is maze. Redirected streams trap cars//

And then, remembering the photos, John scribbled some more:

//Chimney smoke//

Mycroft laughed cruelly - at least that was how it sounded to John's ears - and then said, "Are you suggesting that my brother and yourself were kidnapped and held captive by a group of deformed, inbred, insane locals? Are you raving, my dear doctor? I was informed you have pneumonia. Double-sided, I might add. You could be delirious from the fever and the trauma."

Now John was angry on top of every other emotion currently plaguing him. His infamous temper flared like a beacon, and he wrote one word, two letters, both capitalized, before practically throwing the notepad at Mycroft.

//NO//

Mycroft arched one finely plucked eyebrow. "No? Then you're going to have to give me something a bit more tangible, Doctor Watson. How about a location?"

Had John not been so weak and unable to even form words, he would have shouted at Mycroft to stop being such a condescending windbag and instead use his not-inconsiderable power to find Sherlock and bring him back to them, hopefully alive and still in one piece.

However, all he could do was give the other man a glare which hopefully conveyed his message pretty well.

//Don't know location// he wrote. //North of Bear Mountain// He thought of a moment. When searching for Mary, had they gone south? Where had the sun been? No, likely east. Yes, east.

//East of Avalon//

Mycroft studied the writing as if trying to decipher a coded message. John figured he was likely judging the truth of the doctor's claims. John felt like strangling him. At the same time he could tell, even from a hospital bed, that Mycroft Holmes wasn't at his best. The man's complexion, while pasty by nature, was a sallow gray, and his sharp, piercing eyes were surrounded by puffy bags which suggested either too little sleep or too much alcohol, perhaps a combination of both. Mycroft's eye-whites were bloodshot, and John noticed he blinked a lot. Dry eyes from being on a plane for hours?
Or was there something more behind it?

The consideration of the other man's present state granted John a slight bit of patience, and he wrote down another comment, underlining it:

//He's a plaything. Will die from abuse//

Doubt still shone in Mycroft's eyes, but the concern also present was becoming less vague.

"What was the extent of his injuries when you last saw him?"

John instinctively tried to chew on the inside of his cheek, but obviously was unable to. He wrote down his answer, hesitated, and regretfully added the remainder. As Mycroft read the response, the doctor could have sworn he saw a hint of a shudder.

//Bear trap on leg. Rape//

"One can presume there will be worse damage as time continues," Mycroft said with an eerie evenness, staring at the paper, almost as though he refused to look at John. When he finally did, he saw the helpless look on the doctor's face. He swallowed and blinked, eyelids fluttering, before peering down at the infirmed man.

"How exactly did you escape such a fate?" he asked, his voice sharp and biting. "Moreover, why did you, if you were so inclined to protect a man with whom you share such a close bond?"

Anger and frustration flared again. Fists clenched, he tried to remain calm as he wrote out his explanation. He had not wanted to leave his friend, partner, and lover behind. In fact, he still cursed himself for leaving Sherlock's side, especially when all it got him was being stuck and voiceless in a hospital bed with a condescending ginger bastard giving him the third degree.


"Supposing I do believe your story..." he said, and this time John did not feel anger at the words, as the civil servant clearly was now accepting the scribblings, "then we have no time to spare on dallying here. Which means that I regret to inform you that you would be unable to accompany on this search. This is most inconvenient, as you could have possibly recognized the territory..."

John gestured at his breathing apparatus, which was unfortunately now a necessary evil. The American doctors had obviously decided that his lungs were not strong enough to manage the oxygen transport to his body's tissues just yet, and John was tempted to believe them. He felt like shit run over twice. He was most likely also being given intravenous antibiotics to counter the pneumonia and every other infection his body might have picked up. With a slight shudder, John wondered if any of the shotgun pellets were still embedded in his flesh.

As long as Sherlock was found and rescued, the doctor cared little about what happened to his own body. As bad as things were, he had gotten off easy compared to his poor friend.

Was there any chance that Sherlock was even still alive?

John scribbled down a quick question on the notepad for Mycroft to read, although he dreaded the answer.

//Today's date?// it said.
"Thursday, 4th of July," the civil servant replied. "A festive day for the Yanks, I believe. Not quite the same can be said for us."

John wasn’t sure if Mycroft’s "us" was a reference to Brits as a people, or just the two of them, and he didn’t ask. He could care less about the Americans and their patriotic celebrations. He would only celebrate if his best friend and lover was brought back to him alive. Mycroft’s information regarding the date was troubling.

More than forty-eight hours had passed since Sherlock and he were abducted, and roughly thirty-six since he managed to escape. Alone. John quenched a sob threatening to break out, partly because he feared how crying would affect his respiration, but also because he did not want to cry in front of the Ice-man.

//Find Sherlock//

Mycroft tilted his head in a condescending look. There was the Mycroft Holmes that John Watson knew.

"Of course I will."

TBC...
Chapter 30

Chapter Summary

A re-telling of an event that helped shape Sherlock Holmes.

Chapter 30

Pain shooting through his arm was what awoke Sherlock. He nearly wanted to cry. Or throw up. Somehow he could not do the latter at the moment, almost as though the meat he had been forced to swallow was determined to digest in his stomach. Opening his eyes - which in turn triggered a headache - he saw that his bonds were being unlocked from the bed frame. He could have tried to struggle loose once no longer attached and... no. He was too weak. He hurt too much.

Listening to the heavy breath above, which beat against his face like a foul smelling steam, he lay limp as he was lifted from the bed by the giant.

Would he be raped again? Would part of him be eaten? Sherlock’s brain still worked well enough to deduce that he would not. He heard no cackling from the skinny psycho that might indicate the excitement of oncoming torture. Glancing aside, he happened to see the idiot standing nearby, yawning and rubbing at his solitary eye. It was then that Sherlock realized the darkness of his surroundings was not from weakened vision, but rather from the approach of night. Obviously the hunters wanted to use their beds, and their wretched guest was taking up too much space.

Sherlock expected to return to the likely now repaired plywood prison from which he and John - oh, dearest John - had escaped, but instead he was lowered onto a tattered, lumpy cushion on the floor. He yelped when his arms were deliberately moved, binding him to the rusty leg of a heavy iron stove, but otherwise, he was left where he lay.

He blurrily watched the three mountain man retire to their beds, the leader getting his own while the idiot and psycho shared another. Seemingly in but a few minutes, they had fallen asleep while Sherlock lay on the floor in the dark, wide awake.

Sherlock’s head drooped as he wondered how long it would take him to fall back into sleep. He preferred being there as opposed to hellish consciousness. In fact, the waking world was beginning to feel more dreamlike than the realm of sleep, and the notion frightened him. Had he not known better, he would have thought the huge man who carried him from the bed had been Sebastian Moran.

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2003

Sherlock began to doubt if moving in with Sebastian had been such a good idea, after all. Granted he now had a place to sleep, food (when he required it, which was not very often) and he no longer had to walk the street to support his expensive habits. Sebastian had that all covered, and all he demanded from Sherlock in return was sex. Sex and companionship. Two things the 22-year-old
cocaine addict was more than happy to offer, because he liked Sebastian. He liked him a lot, even though at thirty-seven, he was fifteen years Sherlock's senior and so different from him that they might as well have been from two separate worlds.

Sebastian was a soldier; a Gulf war veteran, to be precise, and held the rank of colonel. He could probably have risen further, had he not been dishonourably discharged from the British Army for punching a senior officer. According to Sebastian himself, it had all been one great misunderstanding where he had received an unjustly harsh punishment, but despite his general distrust in authorities, Sherlock was inclined to believe they had made the right decision discharging Sebastian Moran.

Sebastian was a people person; the polar opposite of Sherlock himself, and it was no secret that he used gambling and card play to add to his meager army pension, sometimes with great stakes involved. Also, like Sherlock, Sebastian was a cocaine user. People, men and women alike, were susceptible to his charms, and Sebastian utilized this to its full extent, not the least bit hesitant to use other people for his personal gain.

This notion didn't particularly bother Sherlock; Sebastian looked out for him, and that was all that mattered. Plus he made sure the young man's needs were provided for, thus sparing Sherlock the danger and indignation of having to sell his body or trade it for drugs. But Sebastian had a temper. Not in the way that "normal" people did, Sherlock himself included, but Sebastian had a *really* short fuse, and once his temper flared, something in him… changed. Sherlock had noticed it in his eyes. Sebastian's eyes were a lighter blue than Sherlock's own, but when the older man became angry, his pupils dilated until they filled the entire iris, making Sebastian's eyes seem black. Black with rage.

Yesterday Sherlock had been on the receiving end of Sebastian's anger for the first time. The argument had started with a harmless discussion as to whose time to go out and get takeaway food, and some good-natured teasing from the younger man had suddenly provoked the army veteran into a fit of violent rage.

"Takeaway again, Seb?" Sherlock asked with mock-surprise. "Do you ever eat anything else? Have you perhaps heard of the four food groups?"

Sherlock had expected Sebastian to respond with a jab of his own, still in good humour, but instead the army veteran's weathered features contorted into a menacing scowl, and the "black" appeared in his eyes. Sherlock had seen it happen before, naturally, but this was the first time it was directed at him, and suddenly he was frightened.

Sebastian's thickly muscled, tattooed arm shot out like a snake - a black mamba came to Sherlock's mind - and grabbed the younger man by the hair, yanking his head toward himself. Sherlock cried out from the pain of having his neck twisted in a most unnatural angle, but he was too flabbergasted to object to the harsh treatment, let alone put up any kind of resistance.

"Don't you dare lecture me, you lazy little bitch!" Sebastian hissed in Sherlock's ear, and his grip tightened further to the shock and horror of the younger man. "I take you in, I feed you, I provide you with snow, and this is how you choose to thank me? You think you're so clever, don't you? You think you can order me around suddenly because you grew up in some fucking mansion and speak with a posh public school accent?"

"Seb, no! Stop it!"

"Stop what?" the bigger man taunted. "You want to leave now, is that it? You want to go back to the streets? Sucking cock and spreading your legs for paying customers, is that how you want to live
"Let me go, Seb." Sherlock's voice was trembling, and the rest of him wasn't far behind.

A few seconds passed, during which Sherlock feared Sebastian Moran might decide to break his neck then and there. Then the ex-colonel let him go and finished by shoving him off the couch where they'd both sat watching TV until the topic of today's dinner came up. Sherlock rubbed his sore neck and swallowed rapidly one time after the other to restore moisture to his throat that had become bone-dry.

Then he glanced up at Sebastian. The red-haired man looked completely unfazed as he lit a cigarette and took a draft from it, blowing smoke out of his nostrils like some kind of dragon. A dragon in human guise. Sherlock wondered if what just happened was even real. Sebastian's anger seemed to have evaporated as quickly as it had built up. His eyes were back to their usual shade of pale blue without a hint of black.

He involuntarily twitched when the older man reached into his trouser pocket and pulled out a 20-pound note, which he then handed to Sherlock.

"Now go make yourself useful," Sebastian said with casual grin. "Pick up something at that new Thai place around the corner. Thai Phat. Yeah, that's what it's called. Fanta for me, pick whatever you want for yourself. Oh, and you can keep the change."

He then affectionately stroked the neck he had almost twisted out of place a minute ago and continued smoking as Sherlock slowly got up and left the apartment. He was still smoking when the younger man returned twenty minutes later carrying two white plastic bags of takeaway, but now there was also a glass of whiskey on the coffee table next to him.

That was yesterday. Sebastian had left early in the morning and now it was eight o'clock in the evening and he still wasn't back. Sherlock had spent the day chain-smoking and busying himself by solving crossword and Sudoku puzzles in old magazines that lay stacked in piles all over the flat. It was boring. Booooriiiiiiing. It required absolutely zero effort on his part. Sherlock derisively thought of the tiny little minds of other people who tried to solve these and found it challenging, and the even tinier minds of the ones who had made them, believing they had created a challenge. Pathetic.

Sherlock lit yet another cigarette - his 28th so far that day - and leaned his head back against the sofa cushion. He was beginning to feel the familiar post-high depression setting in. Sebastian and he had done several lines last night before bedtime, and now there was nothing left. Seb would get more, though. He always got more. Sherlock did not care how or where he got it, as long as he was willing to share.

Another hour passed, and the young Holmes smoked another three cigarettes. His ashtray was full to the brink of overflowing and needed emptying, but Sherlock was too disheartened and dejected to care, let alone do something about the problem. Damn it, Seb! He needed to come back, preferably with enough cocaine to last them both through the night.

When he finally heard the sound of the front door opening and quickly slamming shut, he breathed a sigh of relief, but Sherlock did not want to appear too clingy or desperate, so he did not rise from his spot on the couch to greet Sebastian.

The older man did not even have to enter the room for Sherlock to know that he was in an intensely bad mood. His footsteps gave all that away before his physical appearance. Sebastian Moran was a man with ginger hair and fair skin that burned easily when exposed to sunlight, and the shade of red currently on his face suggested Sebastian had either spent too long in the sun without proper sun
screen, or he was angry. Sherlock was willing to bet on the latter.

The younger man gave his lover a quick look-over and instantly deduced a few possible reasons for Sebastian's anger. One: he had lost a great deal of money in card play. Two: he had been humiliated. Three: he was afraid - genuinely so - and overcompensated by showing a disproportionate amount of aggression. These three reasons combined made for one volatile mix, and Sherlock suddenly wished Sebastian had stayed absent.

The red-head threw his leather jacket on the couch next to Sherlock but otherwise acted as though he hadn't even seen him. Sherlock stayed where he was and glanced up at the older man from behind his dark curls, trying hard to predict his next course of action. Seb was not like most other people in that sense. One never knew what made him tick, and thus he became extremely unpredictable.

Someone had been making trouble for Sebastian, and Sebastian's way of dealing with trouble was to spread the wealth. Truth is it wouldn't have mattered what Sherlock was doing when Sebastian came home. The older man simply wanted an excuse to start a fight, and since Sherlock had not (yet) given him a reason, he had to come up with one of his own.

"What the hell are you doing sitting here lazing about?" Sebastian growled. "I *told* you to clean up this motherfucking mess!" He gestured at the living room, packed full with stacks of old papers, milk and fast food cartons, empty liquor bottles, beer cans and other disposable items that could be expected to pile up in a not-so-tidy single man's household. Although Sebastian hadn't been single for the past three weeks, it did not mean Sherlock would be the one to clean up his messes for him. Sebastian hadn't even mentioned it until this day. Never, not once, and Sherlock was not going to take this crap.

"No, you didn't," the young Holmes calmly replied, suspecting Sebastian knew the truth. "And even if you had, what makes you think I would want to do that? I'm not your maid, Seb. Clean up your own messes."

"What'd you say?"

Sherlock did not have to look into Sebastian's eyes to know they were back to black. But when he did, he also couldn't help but notice the lack of expression in them. Seb's eyes were as glassy and dead as shards of glass twinkling on black asphalt on a hot summer day.

Dear God, the man's insane, he began thinking, but before Sherlock could take his thought process any further, a fist collided with his head, causing first a shocking jolt of pain, followed immediately by starry darkness, which, Sherlock later realized, was a brief fainting spell. When he came to, he was lying prostrate on the floor with no memory of how he'd gotten there.

Sebastian Moran stood over the younger man, his glassy black eyes fixed intently on Sherlock. His rage had not yet passed. There was more to come.

"Seb..." Sherlock began, his speech slightly slurred from the blow to his head, but he never made it further with his protest because Sebastian quickly sat astride him and delivered another blow to his face, this time using a backhand. Sherlock's head rang from the abuse. His feet pedaled weakly, unsuccessfully trying to move him away from his attacker.

Blood flowed from the younger man's nose, tricking into his nasal duct and from there down his pharynx, which caused a vehement bout of coughing to occur. His head felt heavy in a way it hadn't felt since he was nine years old and swerved his bicycle to avoid a pothole in the pavement... and instead ended up hitting the asphalt headfirst. Sherlock still had a scar on his temple from that
incident, which had required seven stitches and an overnight stay at the hospital. Mycroft had stayed with him throughout the night, sleeping uncomfortably next to him in the narrow children's hospital bed, and only because Sherlock had insisted on it.

He had been punched before, and even kicked, but not by anyone with Sebastian's strength and technical accuracy. This was a man who outweighed Sherlock by fifty pounds minimum and had been trained to kill with his bare hands. For a fleeting moment Sherlock wondered how many "enemies" Sebastian had killed during his military career and if he'd enjoyed the killing itself. If he lived through this, he wanted to ask Sebastian that very question.

IF he lived through this.

A hand closing around the lower half of his face brought his attention back to the man he considered his lover. The vice-like grip squeezed against hollow cheeks. He would doubtlessly have bruises afterward.

“You should see yourself right now,” Sebastian growled. “How stupid you look. You look much better when that mouth of yours is closed or around a fucking cock.”

Sherlock did not speak. While his lover's breath was deep and hard, he barely dared to breathe, cursing himself for being so frightened, but damn it, he really was. But he did not show it. Never show fear to a vicious animal.

Sebastian's nostrils flared as he exhaled through his nose, and he finally let go of Sherlock, tossing him aside with nearly enough force for the smaller man's head to hit the floor. Shuffling out of reach, Sherlock composed himself as he listened to the heavy footsteps which trailed away towards a table. Telltale sounds of a thin object clacking and scraping against the surface made Sherlock perk up, and he stood up on wobbling legs, movements of a foal learning to take its first steps. His head was still ringing, but the sound of the preparing of cocaine was stronger than the urge to sit down and recover from the assault.

Moran's back was turned to him, bent over, as the sound of a snorted inhale filled the room. Slowly approaching the table, Sherlock noted with some element of pleasant surprise that a straw and several lines had been made for him.

Then it occurred to him that he could not possibly snort the substance with his nose swollen and gushing like a faucet. Sherlock pressed his forearm against his face to stop the bleeding and swayed slightly on his feet. Sebastian had hit him. And not just give him a small smack or a slap, but really beat him up. And for what purpose? He had given Seb lip before, and usually the older man took it in stride or responded with a barb of his own to counter Sherlock's smart remarks.

Sebastian went about his business as if nothing special had happened, and once he had done his two medium-sized lines, he leaned back in the couch and momentarily closed his eyes as he waited for the drug to take effect. Sherlock stood riveted to the spot, unsure of how to proceed, and a faint 'plip' noise could he heard when drops of blood from his abused nose hit the hardwood floor beneath him.

When the colonel opened his eyes and saw what was going on, he scowled disapprovingly and snapped his fingers to bring Sherlock out of his haze.

"Go clean the fuck up, you dumb shit! You're dripping blood all over my floor!" he shouted.

Sherlock jumped at the angry roar, and he numbly turned to retreat into the bathroom. Only when he shut the door and turned on the light did he truly lose composure, shaking like a tiny animal in a cage. Not caring to wait for the faucet to bring him water that was not brown, he splashed the result
on his face. Breathing deep, he looked at his sunken, bloodied reflection. At present, a cage was
definitely what he felt like he was trapped within. Seb was acting as both the iron bars and the guard
who ensured he did not escape.

For not the first time, Sherlock thought about leaving, about running away from Sebastian. But
where would he go? And considering the red-haired man’s behavior tonight, would he be the sort of
man who would track Sherlock down? Kill him as well?

Convincing himself he would make a proper decision after he had some sleep, he grabbed some
toilet paper and began to stop up the bleeding.

Sebastian had really done a number on his face. When paper alone did not suffice to stop the
nosebleed, Sherlock soaked a towel in ice-cold water and pressed that to his face instead. It did not
do much for the pain, but at least he could feel the flow gradually cease, and it also helped reduce
the swelling. Was there a chance his nose might be broken? Sherlock didn’t think so, but if it was, it
would have to be set right manually. Meaning he’d probably have to go to a hospital to have it done
properly.

Sherlock loathed hospitals, and if he went, everyone would know how he’d acquired the damage to
his face. Mycroft would show up, give his standard lecture followed by condescending remarks, and
then use force to make Sherlock go with him if the younger Holmes still refused to comply. "For
your own best", the pompous fat bastard would say.

Mycroft hadn’t liked it one bit when Sherlock announced he was moving in with Seb. He had loudly
proclaimed that Sebastian Moran was a scoundrel, unreliable, violent, and possibly even dangerous
and that Sherlock was making a very big mistake believing that such a figure was looking out for his
well-being.

"He’s using you, Sherlock," Mycroft stated grimly. "When he tires of you, which he will, because he’s
a sociopath, he’ll either kick you out on the street or kill you. Whichever he does will depend on his
mood at the time. You have noticed it can change in a heartbeat, haven’t you?"

Sherlock had told his brother that he was wrong. Sebastian was good to him; he’d even offered him
a place to stay with no charge for food or utilities, as well as access to all the drugs he ever needed.

Mycroft didn’t plead, but he came dangerously close to it when Sherlock could not be wooed by
warnings, admonitions or even threats. Stubbornness was a very prominent Holmnesian trait,
shared by both brothers, and it was the reason most of their arguments ended with a stalemate with
neither willing to give an inch. Sherlock had gone victorious out of this particular power struggle,
and he was absolutely certain Mycroft would not quickly forget.

If he went to a hospital with a smashed face, it would be the same as admitting to his brother that
he’d been right. Mycroft would gloat, and Sherlock might never get to see Seb again. Despite what
had happened just now, Seb had been exclusively good to him in the past three weeks. And then
there were the drugs. He could not live a life without drugs. Every attempt so far had failed. The
world was intolerable for someone of Sherlock Holmes’ nature without the help of artificial
stimulants or suppressors.

Seb had been very good at fulfilling those needs on a daily basis, demanding very little in return.
Leaving him now would be stupid. Was the danger and humiliation of life as a street prostitute really
preferable to being slapped around a little every now and then? It wasn’t as though Sebastian had

tried to kill him…

Seb did not tolerate insolence. Sherlock had to respect that, to learn how to. Doing out insults was
as natural to him as breathing, but he could change. Yes, he could change. He'd have to. He must not jeopardize what he had now because he had trouble keeping his tongue in check. He was difficult; he'd been told so most of his life by everyone around him, family included.

"Difficult" at his best, "impossible" at his worst. Those had been his father's words shortly before the Holmes patriarch had stuffed his pockets with rocks and walked into the Thames, having decided life was not worth continuing. Mycroft had never said it out loud, but Sherlock knew that his sibling at least partially blamed him for their father's worsened mental state and consecutively also his suicide. And who knew; perhaps Mycroft was right. All Sherlock did was ruin everything.

Gathering up some crumpled clumps of toilet paper to stop the last of the bleeding, he considered remaining in the toilet for the rest of the night, but Seb wouldn't have that. Taking a deep breath, he opened the door and returned to the table.

Sebastian did not seem to pay him any regard at first when he approached, sprawled out on the sofa. Sherlock's share of the lines remained on the tabletop, not a priority to look after for someone already high from his own dosage. At first he looked to be sitting perfectly still, but upon stepping closer, Sherlock realized the bigger man was practically vibrating. Already an irritable man, Sebastian would be even worse with so much blow in his system. Where someone high on cocaine would be loud and frenetic, the soldier was thankfully quiet... but this did nothing to comfort Sherlock.

In one jittering hand, Seb held some rolled up weed, which had already been lit. The sight of it inspired Sherlock to grab for his own cigarettes, plucking a small box from his pocket and removing a fag.

Damn it, where was his lighter?

Feeling he had nothing else to do before finding the damnable thing, he placed the fag between his lips to pat himself down, seeing it quiver in his peripheral vision.

Sebastian must have finally looked at him, because he sat forward and handed the young man not a lighter, but his dope. Hesitating, Sherlock stared at the joint for a moment, wondering for a split second if he should take the offer at face value, or if it was a lure to get him close enough for another slap. However, he only wondered for the briefest of moments before finally accepting. He inhaled as he slumped onto the sofa next to Sebastian, welcoming the high which finally came to him. It was not cocaine - he imagined his remaining share of blow would eventually be going up Seb's nose as well - but it was something.

A long while - perhaps an hour, perhaps longer; the weed made Sherlock's perception of time unreliable - passed without neither man speaking a word. Sherlock began to gradually relax around Sebastian again when the colonel showed no signs of wanting to 'discipline' him further. Perhaps it was simply an isolated incident and they could go on as before, preferably forgetting this ever happened? Sherlock realized he was very willing to forget, even though his nose would have none of it at the moment.

"You know it's your own fault, right?" Sebastian Moran said suddenly; the first words uttered since Sherlock returned from the bathroom. "I can't take it when people mouth off to me, not when I'm in a bad mood. You had it coming for provoking me. Couldn't you tell? I mean, you like to pretend you know everything, so why didn't you know I was gonna lose my temper?"

Sherlock said nothing. He hoped Seb would not interpret his silence as insolence and beat him up a second time. But he also feared anything he might say would make things worse. He'd never been a very proficient liar.
Sherlock's nose had become numb within the duration of being stoned. In fact, if he imagined well enough, the rest of him was quite numb as well. The lack of sensation seemed somewhat appropriate for his present dilemma. He waited until Sebastian looked away from him before he finally decided to speak. He hoped his current drugged state had not slowed his reaction too much.

"I'm sorry, Seb."

Sebastian looked back at the smaller man, his face unreadable, even for Sherlock - although this could have been because of the marijuana. Sherlock gave what he hoped was a sad, guilty expression.

"I'm a stubborn little arsehole," the younger man said. "I just needed some sense knocked into me. I promise it won't happen again."

Sebastian continued to stare, almost as though he were uncertain how to interpret the apology, and Sherlock felt more than a little frightened that he had not convinced his lover whatsoever. Hopefully the weed had dulled the colonel's senses as well.

"We'll see," he listlessly said. "Give me the remote."

Obeying the command - like a dog retrieving a bone, he thought - Sherlock kept his distance on the otherwise intimate closeness of the sofa, allowing Sebastian to turn on the telly and switch to some episode of Brookside where a corpse had been found under a patio. Sherlock found himself wondering if Seb would have the drive and determination to do such a thing to hide his body if he were to mouth off one too many times. Would he ever be discovered? Would Mycroft still gloat?

TBC...
Sherlock remembered the first time Sebastian beat him up with shocking detail and clarity; at such times an eidetic memory was definitely more of a curse than a gift, and this was a particular piece of information his brain had not managed to delete, despite repeated attempts.

At least he had no discernible memories from the last beating which nearly killed him. He hadn’t even needed to delete them; they’d gone away on their own.

Because of the shock, his doctors said. Deleting memories that were potentially harmful and might prevent recovery was a coping mechanism for the human mind. Not that Sherlock had much in common with most of humanity, and yet… Thank God for small favours.

Sherlock tried hard to remember where he was, but his senses were sending his brain conflicting information. He was in a lot of pain, everywhere, but he could not see anything or recall how he’d gotten himself in trouble. Had Sebastian returned to do what he swore to do during the trial, namely kill him?

Sherlock could remember the sour, acrid stink of Sebastian's sweat, present whenever he blew up in heated anger and became violent. He could detect a similar scent in the air now, but did it originate from the colonel or someone else?

There were other memories, mostly fragments, buried deep in Sherlock's subconscious that occasionally resurfaced. His various therapists had called them 'repressed memories', blocked by his unconscious mind due to the high level of trauma contained in them. This particular scent brought forth a glimpse into his childhood when he was a boy of four or five, being ushered into a closet by a teenaged Mycroft with great urgency, while Father, drunk and violent, staggered around outside and shouted threats to break the skin of his two sons when he got his hands on them. The stench emanating from Father had been very similar to what he could smell now.

The shuffling of a large body sounded to his right, and at that moment of remembering his past, Sherlock thought either Moran was approaching, or his father had somehow returned from death. In his delirium, he was prone to believe the latter. Opening his eyes did him no favours either, as the space was still quite dark. He was handcuffed to something bolted to the floor, and his body was wracked with agony, especially in one arm and leg. Yes, he could remember being tied up, and he could remember breaking his arm. Something with teeth had closed around his leg a short time ago... but damn it, he was barely able to remember the why and the how.
The figure in the dark shuffled around, hulking and terrible. It seemed to pay him no attention, distracted by some object it was working on. In its work, it dropped something which clattered to the floor.

The very sound caused Sherlock to wince, and in an instant his mind once again plunged into the icy abyss of his memories. He was no longer handcuffed to a filthy floor but held in the tight grip of his brother; white, freckled arms wrapped around him in the dark confines of a closet. Something made of glass had hit the hardwood floor outside - not a vase, Sherlock deduced, but something smaller, perhaps a tumbler. A voice filled with rage and slurred by drink demanded both boys show themselves, venomously spitting out hurtful words.

Sherlock tried not to listen, desperate to concentrate on the sound of Mycroft's breath only inches away from his face. He wanted to hide further, somehow disappear from the scene altogether, but even slobbering drunk, Father would eventually find them, think to look in closets.

He can't keep doing this, Sherlock would think in their hiding places. The horrible thing their father would become from the drink needed to be stopped. But... damn it, Sherlock could not remember. Something about finally trying to face this awful towering man, shouting at him to stop...

Then a hand, not Mycroft's, not even Moran's or his father's, grabbed Sherlock by the chin and pointed his face upward. In the dim light - morning, the detective thought - he saw a hateful grin, all inflamed gums and missing teeth.

His brain had a moment of clarity, and reality returned to him with the speed and impact of a colliding train.

The skinny fiend snarled at him, and Sherlock returned the snarl with an equal amount of gusto. This only seemed to amuse the demented mountain man. His trademark giggle filled the cabin, and the three-fingered psycho decided to further entertain himself by dealing out several slaps across their bound captive's head. Had the one-eyed idiot been awake to see it, he surely would have doubled over from laughter.

Sherlock pinched his eyes shut and tried hard to cover his face despite his bonds. The repellant memory of Mary Morstan's severed head laid out on the table caught up with him, and for a split second he wondered if it was still there. All the 'edible' parts had already been cut away, so there was no logical reason to keep it.

Sherlock immediately scoffed at his own thinking. "Logical reasons" and these beasts should not be mentioned in the same sentence.

He received the answer to his question regarding the whereabouts of Mary's head sooner than he had expected and not in a very pleasant manner. Suddenly a putrid scent signaling the presence of decomposition filled his nostrils, and he felt hair dragging against the exposed parts of his face and neck. Long hair. Amidst the smell of rotting meat and congealed blood, he could, very faintly, make out the brand of shampoo used by Mary.

Now Sherlock really felt like crying. He resisted, but fighting back the tears only caused them to escape, and the rivulets left glaringly clean lines amidst the grime and blood of his face. A gnarled hand, its middle digits fused together, smeared the tears and mucus over Sherlock's face, then wiped drool from the lunatic's lips onto the detective's own, a childish spur-of-the-moment gesture. Even worse, the rotten hunk of bone, hair and meat was still in the creature's other hand, lolling about like some demented party favor from hell. Mary's eyes were gone, but the empty sockets still seemed to stare at him. Accusingly.
Trying in vain to stifle his sobs, Sherlock edged away from the swinging object of torment, whimpering when he came near to straining his broken arm against the restraints. Chortling at the response, the mountain man shoved his deformed fingers into the younger man's mouth as an improvised gag, and with a sickening smile, placed the severed head in his victim's lap.

It did not take Sherlock long to understand the psychopath's attempts at making the head fellate him, and he desperately tried to ignore the sensation of a slack jaw, moist with putrefaction, against his cock.

*Mind palace*, he chanted in his head, straining to mentally escape. Mind palace, fucking mind palace, God help me...

He could not go. Whether the difficulty be from medication withdrawal, the wearing down from torture, or both, he could not hide inside his mind. He felt everything.

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His eldest son's ruckus had awoken Sawtooth, accompanied as usual by loud, screeching noises and giggles. Already before he reached full consciousness, the patriarch was angry. Three-finger had no business disturbing his sleep before the sun was up, but no matter how many times he punished the cretin, Three-finger still forgot. Unless, of course, he did it out of deliberate disrespect, which was even worse. Either way, Sawtooth was going to teach him a lesson.

When the clan leader stood up, he could spot his son in the corner, hunched over and back towards him, busy playing with the scrawny whore. Some of the shrieks had been from their captive. Sawtooth let out a guttural growl of warning, but Three-finger was so wrapped up in his own game that he didn't even hear it.

That settled it. Saw-tooth grabbed a frying pan from the nearby stove and stomped toward his son and the scrawny whore. He swung the object at the smaller clan member, but fortunately for Three-finger, he had developed the reflexes of a cougar and managed to dodge the blow. The frying pan made a loud clattering noise against the old iron pipe, and although it missed its target, the move had at least attracted Three-finger's attention.

For a moment the two simply stared at each other in a silent challenge. Things had been tense between them ever since their initial disagreement regarding their captive, and the tension was still present, much like an electric charge. Sawtooth cursed his eldest's stubborn nature. He should have known Three-finger would not give up that easily. Perhaps some further use of discipline was indeed required.

He took one step toward his unruly son, and Three-finger snarled defensively, standing his ground. This expression of impudence had been a bad idea, and a scarred, massive fist shot outward and grabbed him by what little of his blond hair he had, shoving him to the floor with an audible thud. It still intrigued the patriarch that someone so small could still hit the ground so loudly. Sneering at the whore nearby, Sawtooth stood over his willful son and began to unfasten his own clothing.

A moment passed before Three-finger woozily lifted his head. He might have felt the pain of the impact had so many decades of his family's peculiar breeding not stunted his ability to feel pain, but he did taste the coppery blood pouring onto his lips from his nostrils. Within seconds, his tattered overalls were being wrenched off of his skinny frame. A familiar occurrence by now. He glanced at the whore, still chained where it sat, now acting as audience... and unwilling by the looks of it. Much to Three-finger's satisfaction, he could see that the head had not been removed from between the Outsider's thighs.
He felt Sawtooth enter him, immediately thrusting into his spindly body. He could take it, every plunge. He endured the treatment, as he always had, and listened to the peaceful snuffling and snoring of his brother, who lay blissfully unaware of what was going on. One-Eye had never in his life been approached, and Three-finger was glad for it. Instead, he locked eyes with his father's plaything, and the pleasure he felt at the terror on the whore's face was enough to help him reach a release of his own.

Sawtooth never lasted long, and this time was no exception. The clan leader finished with a grunt and lay limp atop his smaller charge, breathing heavily as he waited for his strength to return. Three-finger squirmed, more out of annoyance than actual distress.

The little wretch could take it. He had brought it upon himself by defying Sawtooth, so it was only fair that he should suffer for a while.

Eventually the aging giant gathered his weight off his son and struggled to his feet. He was getting old; there was no denying that. The thought of his eventual passing left him agitated every time. Who would lead the clan when he was gone? Three-finger? How would his reckless, impetuous son fare against the hordes of hostile Outsiders which threatened the family practically on a daily basis? A clan member always had to be on his guard nowadays. The Outsiders kept sending out their piggies, with their ridiculous hats and annoying little guns, believing they could best the clan. Fortunately most piggies they'd happened upon had been young men lacking in both wit and experience, thus making them easy prey.

One-Eye was useless. He could not be expected to contribute to the clan's living, let alone candidate for leadership. The dumb oaf was nothing but a burden, and the only reason he was allowed to live was Three-finger's fondness of him. Perhaps Three-finger had craved a child of his own and seen One-Eye as a reasonable substitute.

At times such as these, Sawtooth wondered if parting from the rest of their family had been a poor decision. Several mountains over, more of their kind lived in similar circumstances... or at least he thought they still lived. For all he knew, they had already been found by Outsiders, too many to be controlled or killed. Sawtooth hoped not, though. He and his mother may have separated from the clan to set out for their own years upon years ago, and bad blood might still exist between them despite the long time apart, but they were family.

And look at how things had progressed. Two sons, one of which killed their mother when she finally spat him from her loins and grew up to be a half-wit. The other was showing the worst of his nature by acting out, just because of Sawtooth's latest prisoner.

The patriarch glared down at Three-finger, who was getting dressed, twitching and snorting through his nostrils like a giant hairless weasel. Glancing back at the whore that was still trying in vain to get the head away from itself, Sawtooth kicked at his son, snapping at him to get up and go scout the woods.

Three-finger seethed at the order, although he knew well enough to keep his impudent response to himself. Scouting was something the family took turns doing - or rather two of them did, as One-Eye easily got lost on his own. It was important to keep Outsiders from intruding on their home, but the skinny hunter knew the reason behind the command easily.

Sawtooth wanted him out of the house so as to have time alone with his pathetic, sobbing toy. Begrudgingly, he did as told, grabbing a shotgun before he left the cabin.

Sawtooth could not perform again so shortly after his latest climax - which he'd regrettably wasted on Three-finger - but that didn't mean he could not have fun with his new toy in other ways. He
considered making the whore clean his member using its tongue, but knowing his luck, the smooth little rat would probably puke all over his lap, just like it had when he made it suck him the previous day.

He undid the knot binding the whore's hands to the old iron stove and then seated the creature upright. He doubted it would live for much longer. Quivering, trembling, its body hot and sticky from a raging fever, the pale Outsider was probably close to dying. Its left foot, sloppily bandaged to prevent further blood loss, was turning grey. Sawtooth knew what would come of that. First grey, then blue, then black. The limb was dying and would have to be severed to keep from poisoning the rest of the body.

Glancing at the hatchet he’d used to dismember the blonde whore, he briefly considered using it on his current plaything and by that perhaps postponing its imminent death, if only for a few days.

No. The Outsider's poor state of health dictated against it. Rather than making it live longer, such a drastic action could, and probably would, kill the whore on the spot.

The only option was to enjoy his prisoner while it still lived - perhaps even a little after that - and simply let it die on its own. What a shame that would be. They might just find it cold and lifeless on the floor one morning. Funny. For something so willful and eager to resist, the creature had turned out to be very delicate. Not so much like them as he had originally hoped, after all.

Sawtooth reached for the whore's head, his massive hand easily covering the sweating face. The whore whimpered, vivid blue eyes glazed and watery and white skin flushed and glistening. Feeling the shudder beneath his palm pleased him like nothing else, and for a moment he wanted to cut into the outsider's cheek just to lick the dripping blood from the gash. But even that small amount of blood loss would take the whore closer to death all the sooner. Still, he could have some fun with his plaything without having to spill blood.

Grip tightening on the whore's head, he shoved, smiling at the pained yelp as his captive's battered body hit the floor. That wrecked arm had to be agonizing.

Limbs were splayed out like an animal ready to be skinned. Licking the split of his lip and gums, Sawtooth lowered his hand and slowly inserted a finger into the whore. He relished the squeal which escaped the quivering body he had penetrated, as well as the near vibration of pain around his finger. He removed his hand... and inserted two fingers.

The whore cried and clawed at the floor, struggling to escape, but in vain. The commotion woke One-Eye, though the big oaf did not seem to mind. He watched the torment for a short while, then simply got up and went looking about in a pile of clutter for something to bide his time with until Three-finger returned.

Good. One-Eye was an idiot, but he had picked up on a few things throughout the years, such as not bothering Sawtooth when he was busy with a whore, and by now a sight like this was a commonplace as putting out clothes to dry.

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Three-finger was still angry when he left the cottage to go scouting, and that anger grew when he was left with time to himself. He wanted to kill something, destroy it, grind it into the ground and tear it apart, limb by limb.

Curse that pale whore! Everything had gone amiss since they procured it, and now it seemed to have some strange hold over Sawtooth, compelling him to keep it alive. Three-finger wanted nothing more
than to see it die.

The skinny hunter stopped dead in his tracks and twitched when he suddenly heard movement to his right. He sniffed the air. Just as he'd thought; a rabbit. Sawtooth had forbidden him from wasting valuable shotgun slugs on small game, but there was no way Three-finger would let this little rodent pass. Instead of firing it, he spun the shotgun in his hand and swung it at the skipping rabbit like a club. His timing and aim were both perfect. One single blow was enough to crush the animal's skull, and for a moment the rabbit lay there, feet twitching, as though the body had not yet caught up with the fact that the head was pulp.

Three-finger dug in. A rabbit was not the same as the pale whore, but it would do for now. Besides, he was hungry. The clan usually cooked or fried meat before eating it, but Three-finger had always preferred the taste of raw meat. He used more force than necessary when eviscerating the animal, pretending he was doing it to Sawtooth's little plaything. The meat was good; juicy, tender and ripe, just the kind you could expect from a young, healthy rabbit. It certainly tasted a lot better than that nasty blonde whore they feasted on the previous day.

When the red sticky mess coated his hands and much of his face, he moved on, savoring the feeling and not minding the flies which now buzzed around his gore-soaked visage. The rabbit was not quite the same as his ideal target, but for the moment he was satisfied. Imagination was enough for now while he scouted.

Thus far, nothing set off his suspicion. No strange smells in the air, no sounds save for the wildlife, a breeze, and a nearby air vehicle chopping away in the sky. However, as he continued to walk, he perked up as the last noise increased in volume. Three-finger looked upward, searching for any sign of the machine. Normally when they flew overhead, they passed by without fuss. This one was getting louder. It was getting closer.

Fighting the panic hammering in his heart, he dashed into a clearing to get a better look at the sky. Yes, the machine was bigger in the blue sky than they normally were. It may land. Outsiders would come out of them. Because of their newest prey? Had others come looking for them?

That whore seemed to cause more and more trouble the longer they held it, he thought bitterly. And even more likely, its plump little companion had survived its escape and told the piggies. His grip tightened on the shotgun, and he resisted the urge to furiously shoot the damnable thing down from the sky. Instead he turned about and ran as fast as he could, straight back to the cabin.

Perhaps the latest news would finally compel Sawtooth to get rid of the pale whore.

TBC...
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

The clan of cannibals make a decision regarding Sherlock's future existence.

Chapter 32

One-Eye, as usual, greeted his brother with great enthusiasm when Three-finger had been gone any length of time. One hour or one day, it never mattered to the big oaf, as he seemed to lack understanding of time.

The older hunter impatiently shrugged off his brother's bothersome advances and One-Eye withdrew, disappointed and shaken by the rejection. Three-finger usually always had time for him.

The scrawny whore lay on the floor, fresh blood coating its thighs and ass-crack. Three-finger threw a hateful glance at it, hoping it would bleed out. If only they'd killed it and its pudgy little companion at once, they would not be in this mess. Now Outsiders were threatening their home, their very existence, all because Sawtooth had wanted a shiny new toy.

The exchange which followed between father and son was brief yet to the point. Sawtooth and Three-finger often disagreed on things, but they were on the same page concerning the safety of the clan, which always had to remain their number one priority.

It did not take them long to reach a decision. This side of Bear Mountain was no longer safe for their little group of three.

At first Sawtooth was reticent in making a choice, despite the serious matter at hand. Neither of his sons had been born when the clan split and took residence in separate territories. The parting that sent himself and their mother miles upon miles away had left bad memories for him, especially towards his family. If they had not separated, perhaps they could have had more help.

Perhaps his mother could had lived many years longer.

He did not want to go back. But they would have to. Fists clenched, Sawtooth roared and turned away, taking his fury out on a nearby counter. Plates and cutlery scattered and crashed under his huge fist. The whore shivered and curled up; a weak attempt at protection from the dispersed shards.

Three-finger glared at their prisoner, wanting to kick the little rat despite the raging outburst happening before him. Instead, he glanced at One-Eye who was beyond confused at what was transpiring. Taking big meaty hands into his own bony ones, he announced that they were going on a trip to meet more siblings, hoping he sounded cheerful enough to win his brother's enthusiasm. With luck, he would be eager enough to help their urgent departure, or at least stay out of the way and remain in the truck.

As his eldest proceeded to prepare for their emergency evacuation and leading the youngest outside, Sawtooth glowered at the whore, still unshackled on the floor in a little ball. Based on the trembling alone, the pathetic creature was likely unable to get up and escape even if it wanted to. But what
would be done with it? The clan was going to escape detection, but their captive had a distinct chance of being nothing but a liability in their journey.

Sawtooth did not want to give it up just yet, but apart from being used as emergency provisions during the trip across the mountain, the whore had no use. It was sick. Perhaps even dying. And they still had plenty of meat left over from the blonde female whore which would last them throughout the trip.

Fingering on the sheath of his ever-present dagger, the clan leader considered his options. He could kill their captive on the spot, or he could try to stash it in a place where he could hopefully reclaim it later… assuming this ruckus with the Outsiders had blown over and the clan could return to their home.

A moment of pondering, and Sawtooth realized it was all wishful thinking on his part. The whore needed to be dealt with, preferably at once. There was no alternative except to kill it. Their grim situation demanded immediate action.

The cleft-palated giant freed his serrated hunting knife from its sheath and knelt beside the whore's glistening, trembling body to finish the job. He touched its smooth, hairless chest one last time, feeling the rapid hammering of a panicked heart within. Though he regretted it, that heart needed to be stopped for good.

He bent the whore's head backward, exposing the long, pale throat and preparing to slit it. Before he could do the deed, however, Three-finger grasped his forearm, his misaligned eyes glinting from behind a heavy brow. The smaller of the two needn't even speak out his request. He wanted to be the one to finish off the scrawny whore.

Sawtooth bristled at the unspoken request. The possessive part of him still saw this little wretch as his property, and thus his to do with as he desired. But the whore was of no use to him anymore. What should he care.

Fine.

He released his grip on the quivering body which was now shaking its head and whimpering, and gave his plaything a harsh shove towards his eldest. Three-finger eagerly caught the near hysterical thing up in his wiry arms, chuckling at his new prize.

The Outsider's writhing amplified, and Three-finger grabbed at the busted arm, causing a shriek of pain. The squirming ceased almost immediately. Three-finger grinned, gently stroking a pale cheek.

All mine now, he thought, prodding at the bruised lips. The possibilities were endless. He could do whatever he wanted with the little whore... Anything...

The slamming of the front door jarred him out of his daydream, and he looked up to see Sawtooth trudging along with a large bundle - short-range weapons by the looks of its shape.

The patriarch growled out a reminder: they had little time to waste. That certainly put a damper on his son's plans. Perturbed, Three-finger pressed his face to the whore's neck and inhaled the stink of sweat, infection and fear. He had to think of something. Something swift and satisfying, that left the little creature to suffer.

The bleary little bitch was too feverish to give him any ideas. Pursing his lips as best he could over malformed teeth, his thoughts were interrupted by an audible crash, followed by an impatient bark from Sawtooth. Worry possessed the smallest hunter for a moment, thinking One-Eye had easily
become a source of annoyance. Glancing out the door, Three-finger saw that their leader was directing the youngest to remove unnecessary excess from the vehicles required for their quick departure. At least One-Eye was being useful.

As junk was removed from the truck to make room for more practical trappings, One-Eye tossed aside a large suitcase on wheels. In fact, it was large enough to hold a person, if they were thin enough...

Three-finger's steely grasp on the writhing prisoner tightened as an idea formed. He turned to glance for a brief moment towards the far end of the cabin, in the direction of his clan's "backyard". If he could get the whore into the suitcase, he knew exactly where that case would go.

The whore had not moved from its spot in the short time taken to run outside, retrieve the suitcase, and return. Haphazardly tossing aside whatever contents lay within, he took up the bitch in his arms, ignoring its weak protests, and stuffed it inside. Zipping the flap closed, he took little care in hauling the case onto its wheels, pulling out the handle and trotting outside, giggling as he hauled the prisoner toward the desired destination.

***

He'd been placed somewhere dark, with little room to so much as squirm. He was moving, pulled along by whomever had stuffed him into this... thing. Deciphering what was going on and where exactly he was proved difficult. Sherlock's feverish delirium had a chokehold on him now.

Speaking of choking…

The space where he had been sequestered was sealed shut. He had no air. He clawed at the material, whimpering. Where the hell was he? Who was doing this to him? Seb? His father? He was in a body bag, he was sure of it. He was dying, possibly dead already...

The pulling suddenly shifted to a drop. If he really was not dead, he would have a new array of bruises to add to the old.

Just as he thought he would draw his last breath and suffocate, a flap above him was unzipped. Sherlock gasped for the air, feeling some brief bit of clarity in his brain. Zippered lid, rectangular cramped space... This was not a body bag, but a suitcase. Though he had merciful air, it reeked of excrement. Had he been dropped into sewage? Something entered the opening, shoved into the case with him, long and thin. A hose of some kind? The flap was zipped shut again, leaving the hose stuck in its place.

What was this? What was going on?

With precious oxygen still running through, Sherlock's mind went elsewhere, running amok in the mind palace until a peculiar sound came above him. Something thrown on top of the suitcase.

Suitcase. In a hole. Gravel or dirt thrown atop...

Sherlock tried to scream, but it came out as an unsteady wailing. He clawed at his tiny prison, but he was too weak. Struggling now only made the dirt come in, and he did not want to knock the hose out of the opening. He was being buried alive. And the hose... was it to keep him alive until they (they? who were they?) decided to bring him back up? Was it to keep him alive until...

Until he starved to death.

A raw cry escaped his lips as the dirt became heavy above him.
TBC...
Chapter 33

Chapter Summary

John thinks back on his 'break-up' with Sherlock.

"I'm sorry, Sherlock. This isn't working out." John breathed out noisily after uttering the words. At least he'd said it now. His lover's response was not something he could control.

"What are you referring to?" Sherlock's deep voice asked from behind a raised newspaper, his tone unreadable. For all his genius, the man sure could be obtuse at times. Or pretending to be obtuse. The doctor couldn't decide which he found more annoying.

"We, us, this," John said and quickly realized he was babbling. He would not have expected it to be easy; he was, after all, breaking up with Sherlock, and breakups were never easy, especially if you were the one to initiate them. John had included in his calculations that he might have to look for new living quarters in a not too distant future. There was also a distinct possibility that Sherlock would want nothing to do with him after this. He risked losing not only his lover, but his best friend. But honesty was the basis of every sound relationship, and romantically they just weren't working out. Romantically? The thought of their relationship in those terms almost made him want to scoff. They were little more than friends with benefits.

"Sorry?" Sherlock asked, but at least he lowered the newspaper to peer at John across the table.

"Sherlock, you know what I'm talking about. Us being..." Boyfriends? Partners? "...together. It's not working out."

Sherlock swallowed, but it was the only physical reaction exhibited by him. At least until he spoke again. "Are you saying you want to leave, John?" Now he'd definitely caught on to what the other man was talking about.

"No!" John exclaimed. "Not leave, not like that...! I'd still like us to be friends, flatmates, and all that. I just think... we should see other people."

Sherlock stared down at his hands, laying before him on either side of his breakfast plate. It was always John who made breakfast. Sherlock could never be bothered. The scrawny rake of a man rarely ate unless other people pushed him.

"Is it a woman?" he asked quietly, softly.

"No, Sherlock." John shook his head. "There's no one else. We're just not working out... as a couple, you know. I'd rather we just be friends." He decided to leave it at that. He respected Sherlock too much to make up some lame excuse proclaiming "it's not you, it's me" or "the circumstances are all wrong", or whatever one usually said when the truth was not an option and feelings were in the danger of being hurt.
The taller man put the newspaper down, folding it carefully, and gave John one of his lightning fast smiles, gone from his face almost before it could get noticed. "Alright. Fine," he murmured. "It’s all fine."

The doctor found himself in disbelief. "Really?" he asked. He hadn't expected it to go this well. He’d expected shouting, things being hurled in his direction, being told in no unsafe terms to leave and never show himself again on 221B Baker Street. Instead Sherlock was calmly sitting across from him and telling him that all was… fine?

"Yes, really, John," the detective said, then scoffed. "You seem to have overestimated your own importance in my daily activities. I don’t need you to bugger me senseless every night to lead a meaningful existence."

John blushed, still not used to his partner’s sometimes crude use of the English language, spoken in such sophisticated tones. And it wasn’t like they had sex every single night. The previous occasion had been five nights ago, and sometimes weeks had passed with no sexual activities - joint ones, anyway - whatsoever. John was unsure if his partner even masturbated. Sherlock’s libido was an unpredictable thing, very much like the rest of him. The detective never gave any reason for his disinterest in sexual intimacy during those times and simply stated that he was not "in the mood". On the other hand, there had been days when Sherlock could easily manage five orgasms before noon and still be craving more…

"So... still friends then?" John tentatively asked.

"Of course."

"And I can stay here? As your flatmate?"

"Really, John. I believe I’ve answered that already."

"And I can still accompany you on cases, as your assistant?"

"You do make for a decent assistant."

Sherlock unfolded his copy of the newspaper and raised it, thus hiding his face from John. His body language sent a very clear message that as far as he was concerned, this conversation was finished. John himself was not sure whether to feel insulted or relieved. He had not expected Sherlock to give so easily, and though he was pleased not having to participate in a shouting contest, he felt… dismissed. As if their relationship, or rather the end of it, meant nothing to Sherlock.

The doctor cleared his throat. "Sherlock, I… I want you to know you mean a lot to me. As a friend. I'd really hate it if things got… weird. Between us."

Sherlock sighed from behind his newspaper. It was aggravating trying to have a conversation with someone who did not want to show his face.

"Then perhaps you should stop talking now, John."

Pursing his lips, John fought the impulse to shout something he might regret later. Most of all he wanted to rip that goddamned newspaper away and force Sherlock to meet his gaze. How were they supposed to communicate and reach through to one another if they couldn't even look each other in the eye?

John clenched and unclenched his hands and tried to focus on breathing through his nose, nice and easy. He must not lose his temper. He had to prove himself as the more mature of the two.
"Could you please look at me, Sherlock?" he asked, pleased with how neutral his voice came out sounding.

"There's really no point, John," the detective answered. "I have no trouble picturing you in my mind, and I'd rather not lower the paper only to see I was right."

Silently the ex-army surgeon wondered how many times Sherlock had been beat up as a child by his peers... and how often the beatings had been justified, or even warranted.

Why had he befriended this man? And more importantly, how could he have ever thought that becoming his partner in every sense of the word was a good idea? Was he really that desperate to get laid? Bloody hell, he wasn't even gay, even though everyone seemed to believe that.

John wiped his mouth with his napkin and then threw it back down, right on top of his half-eaten breakfast. He was not going to stick around to finish it, not with his so-called "partner" exuding an aura of haughty derision from across the table.

"I have to go to work..." John murmured and stood up.

"No, you don't," Sherlock retorted. "Your shift doesn't start until two in the afternoon. It's 8:23 now."

"You know what, Sherlock? Fuck you!"

If Sherlock had a witty comeback in store, John was not going to stick around to hear it. Leaving the kitchen in a hurry, the doctor stomped loudly up the stairs to his bedroom. The good news was that Sherlock rarely came up here (except to fuck) and John thus stood a chance of being left alone. The bad news was that he had approximately five hours to kill before it was time to head to work. Damn it all, he didn’t even have his own telly!

It could have gone worse, he reminded himself. You, John Watson, could be looking for new living quarters by now. Sherlock could be throwing your things out on the street to publically humiliate you.

John tried to objectively analyse his decision and figure out of any part of him regretted it. Apart from the sex, he didn’t think he would regret ditching the aloof, abrasive genius. Sherlock was not known for the warmth of his affections, and it was foolish to believe that he could be any different with John. At least he had given the younger man a honest chance. It wasn’t his fault that Sherlock was an emotionally stunted, narcissistic, socially awkward prick with no interest or knowledge of true intimacy.

By pure chance, John happened to glance in the general direction of his bed and was taken aback by a sudden memory. The two of them were sitting side by side, still naked and sweating after a session between the sheets, but instead of engaging in post-coital touching or cuddling, they were intently focused on searching for clues to a case. Sherlock had delegated part of it to his assistant, namely the part that involved ploughing through old newspaper articles. According to the detective, John had a great eye for finding things in "traditionally printed media".

John had known that as soon as Sherlock found what he was looking for, he would leave. He always did. Not once had he asked to spend the night with his so-called boyfriend. Sherlock claimed he was too restless a sleeper to share a bed with anyone else. John took his word for it, never once pushed Sherlock. Sherlock was Sherlock. Who was John Watson to try and change one of the arguably greatest minds of his generation?

The sex itself was great; more than great, bordering on perfect. Who would have ever guessed that a
man, and such an eccentric one at that, would be the one to break John's destructive cycle of sexual dysfunction?

'One hundred percent in his head', his therapist claimed. John believed she was right. He'd had himself checked by a urologist as well as an endocrinologist, and both had stated that there was nothing wrong with his body, from a physical point of view. No medical, hormonal or neurological causes could explain his performance issues. That left mental reasons, and it wasn't like he didn't already have a stack of those. Sherlock had been the first person to break through John's mental barriers since his return from Afghanistan, and because of that he had been foolish enough to think that maybe - just maybe - they had a future together. He and a fucking frigid, untouchable smart aleck. He'd been nothing but a man-sized sex toy for Sherlock all along. One to use whenever he, Sherlock Holmes, wanted.

The realization made him practically seethe with anger.

John would start dating again. Most of his attempts so far hadn't led to anything beyond a second or sometimes a third date, but the key was not to give up. There had to be someone out there for him, as much of a cliché it was. John could picture Sherlock's response to such a statement very clearly in his head. Haughty derision. Scorn. Contempt.

John sat very still, breathing loudly through his nose and squeezing the wooden armrests of his chair until his knuckles whitened. He felt a familiar throbbing in his temples; a prelude to a real killer headache.

A loud crash suddenly sounded from downstairs and startled the doctor from his gloomy thoughts. Any doubts that the action which caused the noise had not been intentional were eliminated when another crash immediately followed, and this time John could identify it as crushed china. It appeared Sherlock was more upset about the breakup than he wanted to admit.

TBC...
Chapter 34

Chapter Summary

John ponders his fate as he lies afflicted with pneumonia.

Chapter Notes

Apologies for the lack of updates in the past few months. Myself and BloodylocksBathory are in the process of moving. Enjoy. :) We promise there will be more!

Chapter 34

John had not seen Mycroft or any of his associates since the elder Holmes' rude awakening of him. He had no idea how much time had passed. He was only conscious some of the time, spending long intervals either unconscious or in a haze that could only be described as something between sleep and wakefulness. It was difficult to draw a clear line between the states.

John only assumed that he must have been asleep because of the dreams.

Dreams of Sherlock, of their abominable captors, of the river and the never-ending woods. Auditory elements such as the skinny psycho's manic giggling or the deafening roar of coursing water mixed with the flashing images (memories?) projected by his traumatized senses.

The only constant sound was the beeping and wheezing of the various machines surrounding him. The ECG monitor supervising his heart rhythm, the respirator assigned to take care of his breathing, the pulse oxymeter to measure the oxygen saturation in his blood… John was pretty well-versed in intensive care medicine himself, even though the conditions he was used to working in normally did not live up to this standard.

A nurse occasionally walked in to check his vitals and inject something into his catheter, probably a strong analgesic to make the pain manageable. John wondered if he stood a risk of dying. Perhaps his wounded body was too weak to fight off the pneumonia, as had often been the case in war-torn Afghanistan; a country where weapons were common, while nutritious food and antibiotics were scarce. Even easily cured ailments such as tonsillitis sometimes led to death. He had seen it happen too many times, especially in children. When the parents finally headed out to seek help, it was oftentimes already too late and all that could be done for the poor afflicted child was to make their final hours as comfortable as possible as bacteria spread through the bloodstream and slowly poisoned them from within.

Was that what was happening to him this very minute?

During one fleeting moment of total clarity, John wondered who was going to pay for his care. He knew that no hospital could turn down a patient in need of emergency medical treatment regardless of legal status or citizenship in the US, where public health insurance did not exist. He had, however,
actively chosen not to sign up for travel insurance that covered medical expenses, as such an expense would have put an increased strain on his meager budget.

And Sherlock never thought of such precautions either...

Oh, Sherlock. Sherlock.

The arm which was not presently stuck with needles reached up, covering his eyes. The impact of the sudden grief which overwhelmed him caused a horrible sobbing to escape his lungs. Thankfully no members of the staff had heard him, and he was left alone to finish crying like a child and finally compose himself. He could not do anything else now. He was unable to help, to find out where Sherlock was, or if he was still alive.

John sobbed for perhaps two minutes before he was able to get a hold of himself again. He hardly needed any further burden to his breathing, and he had allowed himself his moment of tears.

I'm stronger than that, he said to himself. If only he could believe the words. He had to be strong. He was certain that if Sherlock was still alive, he would be strong, despite the agony dealt against him.

God, what if he was dead? John managed to hold back another sob. He had resigned himself to that fact that a truly intimate relationship between himself and his friend would never be realistically possible, that distance between them was important... but he had not wanted them to be apart, and not like this, never like this.

TBC...
Love conquers all... right? Flashback to a morning when Sherlock chose his work over John.

Chapter 35

That damnable phone beeped again from Sherlock's bedside table - annoying little piece of electronics - and for the second time in less than five minutes, the younger man's attention shifted from John over to the sleek black iPhone 4S and whatever it wanted to communicate this time.

He couldn't believe he had to compete with a phone - a phone - over Sherlock's attention. Not now, not when they were finally engaging in sex for the first time in two weeks. Granted John couldn't place all the blame on his partner; his own schedule at the surgery had been rather hectic, and this was his first day off in - John did a quick check-in with himself - six days. It was also Sunday morning, and John had counted on spending it quietly in the company of Sherlock Holmes, his best friend, flatmate and lover. Except they hadn't behaved very much like lovers recently. In fact they had barely even interacted, except on a most basic level. Anytime either of them entered the flat, the other seemed to be in the process of leaving, and there wasn't much to be done about it, either. Sherlock was busy with his work, and John had plenty to do himself; it was flu season, after all, and twelve-hour shifts were not uncommon when one had to manage the excess load of patients.

Today was supposed to be a break from all that. John had prepared meticulously, getting up shortly before eight to make Sherlock breakfast in bed: a proper full English breakfast consisting of sausages, bacon, poached eggs, roasted potatoes and buttered toast, served with a slice of red tomato and fresh-squeezed orange juice, just the way Sherlock liked it, on those rare occasions that he took the time to actually eat breakfast. Practically always such an event occurred when his rising from bed coincided with John's and the breakfast was already plated and ready for consumption. Sherlock, despite his various other talents, was not much of a cook.

John had, however, never before brought Sherlock breakfast in bed, and he thought it would be an excellent way of showing his commitment to their budding relationship. The reason why so many relationships failed nowadays was because the parties forgot how much the little things mattered. Or so he'd read.

Sherlock's response to being awoken by a jovial doctor carrying a tray was slightly more muted than John had hoped, but ultimately positive. ("Oh, you brought breakfast? How... superb, it's been two days since I last ate.") He ate approximately two thirds of what was on the plate before setting the tray aside, and, in his usual straightforward manner, deduced what was on his friend's mind.

"Did you come here for sex, John? There must have been a reason why you went through all this trouble."

"Sherlock!"

"It's your day off. You never rise before ten on a day off. Your doing so means you had a purpose."
"Are you saying I can't do nice things for you without an ulterior motive?" John was frankly hurt.

"I didn't say it was a bad thing. People can be whimsically inventive when there's a prospect of coitus. And this has been one of your best efforts so far."

"Really, Sherlock, it wasn't a--"

John's objections were promptly cut short by the sight of Sherlock removing his T-shirt and immediately afterwards shimmying out of his boxer shorts. His cock was already at half-mast, clearly interested in the proceedings.

The detective smiled slyly and pulled a still slightly baffled John in for a kiss. "I never said I was un receptive to your advances," he chuckled, his voice deep and resonant but at the same time mellifluous. Sherlock only sounded like that when he had gotten exactly what he wanted. "I just wanted you to know how transparent they were."

Despite the grieving suspicion that he had been insulted, John could hardly complain; he'd managed to make Sherlock eat, and they were engaging in sexual conduct, quite ardently. For all his coldness and indifference outside of bed, Sherlock as a lover could be both passionate and excitable. The contrast was an interesting one, and John was proud to be one of (probably) few people to experience this side of Sherlock.

They quickly reached an unspoken agreement that Sherlock would top this time. On most occasions the opposite happened; Sherlock's obvious preference was to be penetrated, and John, despite lacking a distinct preference for either, was quite happy to oblige him.

It hurt a little at first, as always, before his body adjusted to the intrusion. At least Sherlock wasn't very big and also had the common sense to start out slow.

Sherlock's long, lean body, positioned atop John's, trembled as the younger man fought for control, buried to the hilt inside his lover. His exhales, small puffs of hot, moist air, felt soothing against John's neck. John could not see his face, but he was certain that Sherlock's normally pale countenance was presently a delightful shade of pink.

The doctor trailed his own steady hands down Sherlock's smooth, narrow back. He loved the feel of the skin there, now slightly damp from perspiration. "It's alright," he whispered. "You can move. You won't hurt me."

Most of the pain had passed by the time Sherlock started moving in earnest, making way for the most exquisite form of pleasure. It didn't take long before John was moaning and breathless, all four limbs clutching at the detective with seldom-seen desperation. Legs clamped firmly around his lover's waist, John almost wished he could keep Sherlock there indefinitely.

Then the phone beeped for the first time, signaling the arrival of a new text message. Sherlock's head immediately snapped up, keen blue eyes regaining their focus as his attention shifted from John and their act over to the portable piece of electronics.

"Just ignore it, Sherlock," the doctor urged, anxious for the younger man to resume his well-aimed thrusts against John's prostate. He tenderly stroked his partner's slick, damp curls and pulled Sherlock down for a kiss. "It's nothing. Be with me, here."

Though he complied, Sherlock's focus remained scattered, and when the phone announced the coming of yet another text by making that dreaded beeping noise John had come to hate, he knew he was battling a lost cause. Sherlock raised himself onto his arms, taking most of his weight off his
partner, and though he did not yet pull out, their connection for the moment had been severed.

The young genius' catlike eyes narrowed in consideration. "It could be Lestrade. Maybe he has a case for me."

"Sherlock, it's Sunday. We're in bed, otherwise engaged. Can't you just ignore it?"

Sherlock grimaced for a moment, as if faced with a conundrum of epic proportion. "Not an option, I'm afraid." He disengaged fully from John, pulling the crumpled condom off his wilting erection and tossing it into the trash before scooting over to check his phone. John guessed that the messages were to Sherlock's liking, judging from the look of near-manic glee which formed on the detective's face as he scrolled them through.

"I assume Lestrade's asking for your… input then?" John asked, aware of how caustic and bitter his tone was. Normally he could count on Sherlock to deliver that kind of acidity whenever something displeased him, but this went beyond what he normally endured with impressive stoicism. John just felt horribly slighted and quite frankly betrayed. It would have felt wrong not to express that somehow.

"Not Lestrade, but Dimmock," Sherlock replied casually. He seemed completely oblivious of John's emotional turmoil and was already in the process of getting dressed after giving himself a sloppy wipe-down with an unscented wet wipe. "A man's body has been found in a parking garage. They've ruled out any natural cause of death as well as suicide and Dimmock wants me to have a look over to see if I can spot something they've missed." Sherlock snorted. "In all likelihood they have, and there's nothing even remotely interesting about the case. But I have to be able to say I had a look."

Sherlock pulled on a pair of slacks and reached for a shirt that lay thrown over the armrest of an easy chair. The same shirt, John noted, he had been wearing yesterday.

"Aren't you even going to take a shower before you leave?" the doctor asked, his voice a mixture of disbelief and distaste.

Sherlock turned to face him with a confused scowl. "Why would I want to take a shower?" he asked, sounding genuinely perplexed.

"Because you stink, that's why!" John exclaimed, not able to contain his infamous temper any longer. "You stink of sweat and lube and pre-come and my fucking aftershave!"

"You're right. It's not a very flattering smell, is it?" The detective sniffed the scent wafting off of him with flaring nostrils, and for a second he looked repulsed enough to take measures, but ultimately decided to shrug it off. "Quite dreadful, actually. And if we're being technical, what you're using can't even be called 'aftershave'. It's eau de cologne, the cheapest kind. Your lack of taste notwithstanding, even you would not pick anything so awful. You probably got it as a gift, didn't you? And you keep using it because you believe the person who gave it to you would be affronted if you didn't."

"That's not the point!" John was yelling now and not even caring. The aftershave - even if it technically didn't count as that, he'd learned just now - had been a gift from Harry, but he didn't think that counted as relevant information either. "The least you can do if you're going to be amongst people is smell somewhat decent!"

Sherlock's eyes narrowed, and suddenly he was regarding John with the quizzical look he usually reserved for his experiments. He had definitely caught on to his partner's anger now, no question about it. But knowing Sherlock, he was more interested in deducing the factors around it than
finding out the true reason. Always one to approach everything from an analytical perspective.

"Oh, I see, John," he said slowly. "You're worried someone at the Met might find out that you're shagging me. And we can't have that, can we?"

"No, that's not the reason, you bloody moron!"

"So you're saying I'm wrong?" Sherlock countered. "What is it then? Are you angry because I didn't finish you off? You tend to be pretty good at doing it yourself, so believed you wouldn't mind, but if you're that desperate…"

To John's absolute disbelief, Sherlock began to roll up his sleeves while approaching the bed where his naked partner lay.

"I guess I have time to make you come before I leave," he said, looking more annoyed than anything. "But I'd rather not have to undress again, so I hope you don't mind if I keep my distance."

John instinctively batted at the hand reaching for his privates, and for the briefest of moments he felt an overwhelming urge to throttle Sherlock. The candid expression on the younger man's face, appearing perfectly frank, only served to further infuriate him. How could someone so brilliant be so utterly lacking in normal human decency and supposedly not even know it?

"Don't touch me!" John growled, pulling up the bedcovers to cover himself. His erection was long gone at this point, and he didn't imagine it would return anytime soon, not even by the 'magic' of Sherlock's incredibly skilled fingers. All he wanted now was to be left alone.

"Fine."

The detective finished dressing in a series of jerky movements, his face as impassive as a stone gargoyle and just as unreadable. John couldn't even begin to think what was going on inside that impenetrable mind of his. He wasn't even sure he wanted to know.

"I'll be going then," Sherlock announced, slipping into his long dark wool coat that had more or less become his trademark. People would hopefully not catch a whiff of his body odour from underneath that thing.

John did not reply.

"I'm not sure how long this will take. Enjoy your day off, John. Catch up on some sleep. Use my bed; you're already so comfortably settled in."

Tears of rejection and pain burned beneath John's eyelids, but he was determined not to make a sound that would alert Sherlock to said fact. Sherlock had proven many times over that there was absolutely no point seeking emotional affirmation from him.

"Just go, Sherlock," the doctor said in the steadiest voice he could currently muster. He thought he sounded pretty convincing. At least his voice didn't break, or tremble. He had fooled Sherlock before by pretending things were alright when the opposite was true.

Sherlock went.

TBC…
Chapter 36

Chapter Summary

Mycroft accompanies a SWAT team searching for Sherlock and the disfigured perpetrators in the woods.

Chapter Notes

Yes, we finally have an update! To compensate our loyal readers for the long absence, we will provide you with a longer-than-average chapter. Enjoy!

Chapter 36

The only sound which entered Mycroft’s consciousness from the outside world was the roar of the helicopter. Eyes shut, he felt the craft ascend in the sky, and taking a deep breath, he opened them once more.

John’s information had not been ideal, and Mycroft Holmes knew trusting the word of someone stuck in an analgesic haze was unwise. Even so, the surrounding woods near the nudist resort had given them a vague area to comb through. If these demonic people indeed lived in a cabin, there had to be some sort of clearing for said cabin. John had also mentioned a field of stolen vehicles, likely far easier to spot from above. He could not help imagining just how much the location had to have resembled some twisted, industrial graveyard.

Though Mycroft kept his attention on the trees below, scanning for any vague hint of the presence of his brother’s kidnappers, his mind was doggedly harassed by that horrible little feeling of worry. Sherlock had been his responsibility ever since the puerile little brat had been born. He was supposed to protect his brother. And yet somehow Sherlock always found a way, deliberately or otherwise, to prove his efforts were in vain.

How foolish he’d been to think he could entrust John Watson with Sherlock's safety. Mycroft tried to quench the feeling of guilt which suddenly threatened to overcome him. He'd spent all his life wishing his younger sibling had never been born, for various reasons. Sherlock had always been a problem to be managed, to be contained; a break shoe holding Mycroft back in all areas, mentally and emotionally if not physically. Yet despite the secret, ever-present wish for a life devoid of Sherlock, Mycroft loved his brother more than anything in the world.
After thirty-three years of existence, Sherlock had become an irritating but valuable constant in the elder Holmes' life, and the idea of a world without Sherlock was not only daunting, but terrifying to Mycroft. Since the age of twelve, his sole purpose in life had been keeping Sherlock safe; or as safe as possible considering Sherlock's habits. If Sherlock was to die…

Forest. Acre upon acre of forest, as far as the eye could see. It was truly one of the least developed states in all of America. Mycroft wearily rubbed his temples as his keen, expert gaze swept across the fluttering green treetops far below. A vast field of nothingness.

Mycroft closed his eyes for just a moment, fighting against the pull of dizziness. He knew that on top of the psychological stress caused by Sherlock's abduction, he had neglected the basic needs of his human body: food, sleep, even hydration. Anthea, ever the dutiful PA, had obviously sensed her boss' thoughts, because the following second, an already opened can of mineral water was gently thrust into Mycroft's hand. He abhorred the taste but drank several gulps, both to please Anthea and his own over-strained system. The most acute symptoms of exhaustion abated, and Mycroft felt he could manage another few hours.

Trees, trees, mountains of trees… occasional clearings in the seemingly endless forest caught his attention, but they always appeared to indicate nothing of importance. A man with any less self-restraint might scream. Mycroft simply kept searching.

Not until he saw the reflection of sunlight did he look closer. It could have been from a body of water, but…

“Turn right,” he directed the pilot, wanting a closer look. He was prepared to have been too hopeful, to realize his suspicion was in vain. Still, he had to know.

The pilot did as told, and though the day had been long and sunlight was now only available for a few hours more, a glittering caught Mycroft’s eye again, and the aircraft made its way toward a clearing, quite large by the elder Holmes’ estimate. Instead of a pond, he found himself staring with wide eyes at a massive gathering of automobiles.

His grip on the nearly empty bottle of water tightened until he crushed it.

“That’s it!” he shouted to the pilot. “Find a place to land!”
Locating a suitable spot to land turned out to be rather easy, but Mycroft had another concern: the sounds generated by the helicopter might alert the twisted group of locals to their arrival. The same group that presumably held Sherlock captive. The same group that could barely even be considered human, if John Watson's statement was true. Doctor Watson was delirious and had suffered extensive head trauma, which made him a less than reliable witness, but he had definitely not been lying. Ninety-nine times out of a hundred, Mycroft could tell when someone was lying, and this was not one of those times. John had believed every word he said… well, wrote, given that the ventilator didn't allow him to make any sounds other than wheezing.

Mycroft felt momentarily lightheaded when he rose to his feet to exit the helicopter, now safely on the ground, but he was adamant not to let it show. Not to Anthea, and most certainly not to the men - Americans - who were escorting him. Mycroft would have preferred to have been accompanied by his own British specially trained unit, but there hadn't been enough time to pull the right strings, and Mycroft Holmes, a man who valued diplomacy whenever possible, had quickly made the decision to accept the help the Americans offered. He'd been promised "the best out of the best", and although he didn't trust these men like he trusted the ones he'd picked himself, they seemed to know what they were doing. Mycroft appreciated the fact that none of them had made an attempt to initiate small talk inside the helicopter.

Mycroft absently swatted a fly buzzing about his left ear as the group - five heavily armored SWAT team members each carrying an assault rifle and a ballistic shield, Mycroft himself, and Anthea - started toward the obvious path out of the clearing. The civil servant did not wear any heavy body armor, although the captain of the SWAT team had insisted he wear a bulletproof vest underneath his suit jacket and coat. Anthea had been forced to accept one as well, and her usual three-inch stilettos had been replaced with a pair of sturdy hiking boots.

The vehicles in the clearing sat like shining headstones and tombs, some far older than others, and Mycroft speculated that the number of victims had to be in the hundreds. How long exactly had this family been doing this? John had mentioned only three... but what if there were others, hidden away in these seemingly endless forests in the mountains?

A very obvious path was located by the SWAT team, treaded enough times to be the path towards the clan's home. Even an idiot did not need John's personal account of the place to figure this out. Mycroft took a breath as they continued onward down the path, hating the feeling of uncertainty that gripped him. It made him feel helpless. Either the lunatics were waiting, prepared to defend their land by any means necessary, or they had evacuated and taken Sherlock with them. And in either scenario, Sherlock could already be dead. He loathed the doubt he felt.

This will be within your control, he silently told himself. The actual discovery of the property from above had been the difficult part. The rest will be within your control.

He wished he could believe himself.
The team kept their weapons up and Mycroft in their midst as they approached the cabin. The grounds were alarmingly quiet, though this could have been simply that no one remained. And by no one, did that also entail Sherlock?

"Cabin's empty," an officer called out through a window. One more piece of the puzzle in place, both comforting and worrisome. The team "ordered" Mycroft not to explore, but he ignored them, walking towards a small shed nearby. Flies buzzed about it.

Mycroft recognized the scent of relatively fresh blood and meat in the early processes of decay. Part of him feared what he would find beyond that door. Flies would congregate around any available piece of rotting flesh, but they were notoriously known for following mankind even to less than hospitable regions.

Shouts from one SWAT team member to another announced that they had cleared the area. Mycroft was shoved aside none-too-gently and the decision to open the shed door was taken from him by one of the heavily armoured Americans whose name tag identified him as J. Bening.

A quick glance at the man told Mycroft that he had spent somewhere between three to five years stationed in Iraq, and though his record appeared spotless at first glance, there was a reason why J. Bening had never advanced above the rank of corporal in the military. The man had a fondness for gambling and prostitutes, some of which were on the young side.

Mycroft had felt the officer's resentment at first glance. The most likely explanation was that J. Bening had probably had some past altercation with an Englishman that made him wary of anyone with a British accent, and the elder Holmes knew by now that his personality rarely drew out the best in other people. Showing open hostility would jeopardize his employment as a member of the SWAT team, and J. Bening was well aware of this. His temper had not done him any favours in the past. Smoldering glances and an attitude that could at best be guised as cold professionalism was as far as he was willing to take it.

The smell hit against them like a physical wall when the shed door was opened and revealed the macabre contents. Mycroft had seen - and smelled - his fare share of corpses in various stages of decomposition, but nothing could have prepared him for the sight dangling from the ceiling.

The decapitated corpse had been mutilated to the point that it was impossible to tell if it was male or female. Strung up by its ankles, the amount of dried blood on the floor below it strongly suggested that the killing had taken place in the shed. The body was virtually devoid of soft tissues, further hindering identification.
Mycroft had reflexively pressed a hand to his mouth to block out the nauseating smell, but his eyes had never stopped observing. Fly larvae were crawling about in abundance in what remained of the rotting flesh, and their current size gave Mycroft an estimate of the time of death. No more than 48 hours, likely no less than 36. Not Sherlock then. John Watson's account of the events confirmed the younger Holmes to be alive less than 24 hours ago.

Mycroft swallowed down his impeding dark thoughts. A lot could happen in 24 hours…

The corpse was Mary Morstan. The lack of a skull would make a formal identification difficult, but Mycroft was positive.

"It's not Sherlock," he muttered. A team member - thankfully not Bening - happened to overhear.

"How can you tell?"

"Decomposition is in too late of a stage to be him. Also, this corpse looks to be shorter... my brother is six feet tall."

"Doesn't it look shorter because it has no head?"

Mycroft actually looked the officer right in the eye with a glance that could have wilted flowers. When the object of his irritation did not speak, he strode past him and continued to inspect the grounds.

Where were you, Mycroft asked his brother wordlessly. No one left absolutely nothing in their wake. There had to be clues, somewhere.

Wandering through the bare, grassless yard, he happened upon a patch of disturbed soil. Recently disturbed at that. The doubt returned again, gnawing at him with the thought that this was an improvised grave, that Sherlock was truly dead. Was his brother merely feet below him in the cold ground?

Mycroft hesitated ordering (no, "suggesting"; he had to remind himself he was on US soil and technically had no jurisdiction here) the SWAT team to unearth the grave, fearful of what they might find. He tried to convince himself that it would not make any sense for the mountain men to have buried a freshly killed corpse, as their primary motivation for hunting humans was to put food in their bellies, and that the recently upturned soil was more likely to contain meat buried for preservation purposes.
The civil servant was suddenly overcome with a pang of dizziness and felt momentarily lightheaded. He had not slept for almost forty-eight hours and eaten less than twenty-four hours ago, not counting the energy drinks Anthea kept passing him at regular intervals to keep him alert and functional. The sense of vertigo only lasted for a few seconds and Mycroft was fairly sure he had not outwardly showed anything, apart from perhaps the tiniest flicker of giddiness in his features, unnoticeable except to those that knew him exceedingly well, like his PA, or…

Mycroft wiped a thin layer of sweat from his brow with a custom-made handkerchief which carried his initials, MH, written in stylish copperplate in one corner. The irritating buzz of a mosquito circled about his ear and he batted at it, sourly remembering bits and bobs from his childhood, and why he had loathed country life.

"What's the matter, Mr. Holmes? Can't take the heat?" Mycroft slowly turned his head to regard the SWAT team member taunting him. The man was short with thinning black hair and olive skin, a bit on the stocky side, and judging from his accent - which he'd worked hard to shed - a second generation immigrant from a Latin American country. The civil servant made several more deductions concerning the law enforcement officer's origins and family situation and concluded that much of the animosity projected toward the outside world in general and him in particular was in fact poorly concealed concern over a sick family member, most likely an elderly mother or grandmother.

Mycroft bit back a scathing retort in the last possible moment and settled for a glare. It would not do to antagonize these people, idiots though they were…

"There's no one here," Bening, the anglophobe with a military background, suddenly announced. "Let's take Mr. Holmes back to the helicopter."

Mycroft lingered, scanning the area. He knew hope was a foolish thing to have, but he could not shake the feeling that something was here. Something that somehow even he was missing. If only he could come to his damn senses and get past the exhaustion and bleariness of the liquor and empty stomach. About to turn and join the people urging him to the helicopter, he gave the disturbed soil one final look.

He nearly continued on his way when something caught his eye. There in the dirt was... he stepped closer and inspected the interruption amongst the grit and ground. Once he saw it, he hardly knew how he could have missed it: a tube, just peeking out from the dirt.

The connection between the tube and the disturbed soil shot through Mycroft's brain quicker than lightning.
"Someone get a shovel!" he exclaimed, grasping for composure even as his heart began to hammer in his chest. When the team only stared at him, he explained, resisting the urge to call them idiots. "There's a tube leading under the soil! Hurry!"

While two team members automatically obeyed the order, the Latino officer - of course - vocalized his doubt.

"So what, it's a tube."

"As you saw with the body, it's blatantly clear these criminals are not above torturing their victims. They've buried something here and settled the dirt around a tube." Mycroft's jaw clenched as he stretched out his last little iota of patience. "Put the pieces together, if you would be so kind."

Contrary to expectation, the SWAT team leader, a surly, stout man in his early fifties who reminded Mycroft of the late general Douglas McArthur - a historical personality this man no doubt idolized - verbalized an order to find a shovel and unearth whatever it was that had been buried.

The American law enforcement officers in their standard black SWAT gear, strangely reminiscent of ants or worker bees, shouted commands and exchanged information at decibel levels that were decidedly damaging to the civil servant's eardrums, and Mycroft suddenly wished he had received the phone call after he had taken the sedative he'd been seconds from ingesting when the fateful news of Sherlock's overseas interment reached him. At least then he would have had an excuse not to take immediate action.

"Sir…?" Anthea approached her employer, gently touching his sleeve and offering tacit moral support in a way that was hopefully not too obtrusive. Despite being famous for his tactics of diplomacy and proficiency in office politics, Mycroft Holmes was an emotional dwarf with the same aversion to being touched as his younger brother.

"I'm alright, Anthea," Mycroft sniped, a bit too defensive to be viewed as truthful.

"It might not even be him," she offered weakly. "We mustn't assume…"

The elder Holmes glanced up at his PA, and for a split second his unyielding dark blue eyes - a different shade than Sherlock's, but no less piercing - looked ready to shoot flashes and Anthea feared he would actually strike her. Immediately she wished she could take back her pathetic attempt
at comfort. It was not her place.

She was spared offering an awkward apology when one of the Americans suddenly voiced the discovery of something in the newly exhumed grave.

"We've got something here!" It was J. Bening.

Mycroft hurried forward, desperate to ignore the wooziness of his brain.

"Careful, sir," an officer said, holding out an arm to prevent him from coming any closer. "You don't want to fall in."

How would you know what I don't want, Mycroft considered sarcastically asking. His exhaustion and lack of nutrition was beginning to wear him down, but adrenaline maintained his awareness. He craned his neck to see past the working men and saw the hint of a suitcase. As they stepped aside from having cleared it off, he could see it was a very large one. Just as he had suspected, the tube led straight into an opening in the zip.

"Open it," Mycroft found himself saying automatically.

"What if there's a bomb?" Bening interjected.

"They may be feral psychopaths, but I doubt they're at the level of Ted Kaczynski," the Englishman snapped at them. Bening looked ready to give some venomous retort at the challenge, but the McArthur lookalike once again stepped in.

"There ain't no proof they've been making bombs," he said. "Open the luggage, now."

Again, the members stood in the way of Mycroft's view, carefully unzipping the case and lifting the flap.

"Jesus Christ," an officer exclaimed.
Instinctively Mycroft craned his neck again, and he saw the pale, dirty flesh of a shoulder.

The officer who had unzipped the suitcase and was consecutively the first to behold the contents promptly ran over to set of bushes to throw up. The sound of his (rather loud) retching could be heard by his colleagues as well as Mycroft, and they all, elite tactical team training aside, seemed hesitant to look into the suitcase again.

The elder Holmes tried to steel himself for the discovery. He had been working toward mentally preparing himself for this exact finding with dogged determination, but even though his logical brain had predicted the outcome, and accepted it, his feeling side - small, underdeveloped, and deeply repressed - would have no part of it. Mycroft was not ready to emotionally accept his younger sibling's demise.

"Get out of my way," he growled at the Americans blocking his path. "Let me look!"

"You may want to skip this one, sir," said the Hispanic officer - identified as Hernandez by his name tag - and moved to physically restrain Mycroft, who suddenly wished he hadn't left his umbrella in the helicopter, as he currently wanted to use it to bash the man's head in.

"Unhand me at once, or I will make sure that your mother will have to live off of food stamps for the rest of her life!" the civil servant retorted in a mixture of a hiss and a snarl, taking momentary pleasure in watching the man's suntanned face go visibly pale.

"Let him through," the team leader ordered, his words accompanied by a weary sigh. Mycroft guessed he was close to retirement. "It's his brother."

The SWAT team members scattered and offered their British escort a free pass to the newly unearthed grave. There, packaged up in a dirty old suitcase, most likely snatched from a previous victim, lay the long, narrow body of Sherlock Holmes, the world's only consulting detective. Despite the roominess of the case's storage area, Sherlock's body had been folded almost in half to fit, forced into a position a human - with the rare exception of certain Yoga champions - could not maintain for more than a few minutes without severe pain. Sherlock was naked, and his normally smooth, pale skin scraped and bruised in more places than it was unmarked as well as caked with dirt, dried blood, and various other bodily fluids.

Mycroft's eyes were immediately drawn to the jagged, festering puncture wounds on the corpse's left leg, recalling what John Watson had said about the bear trap, and in that moment the elder Holmes openly and viciously wished that the ex-army doctor had been the one lying dead and buried in the suitcase instead of his brother. It could have been John. It should have been John!
Nothing more than a mere twitch passed over the Ice-man's impassive features, and for the next few seconds a deadly silence descended over the small glade and the eight people (minus Sherlock’s corpse) that were present.

Without consciously registering his actions, Mycroft sunk to his knees, his hand moving of its own accord toward the slack, lifeless, mangled face of his brother. Sherlock had never liked to be touched, particularly not by him, and Mycroft would honour his wish, even in death, but he just wanted - no, needed - to feel him, only one last time…

"I'm sorry, sir," Bening interrupted callously. "But you mustn't touch the body. It's evidence now."

Mycroft's first conscious desire following was to stab Bening in the neck with his pen, but it was quickly overshadowed by pure shock when he felt the gust of a weak exhale against his wrist.

Already Mycroft had started to accept the death of his brother, so much so that when he felt that breath, he wanted to excuse it as his imagination. After all, he reasoned, if Sherlock was somehow still alive after the damages done, how could he ever recover? That leg looked to be beyond hope. His older brother already knew from Watson's scribbled answers that the younger man had been raped on top of the blatant physical torture, and the fluids present on his person were quite telling. No, Sherlock had already been through enough in his life and he did not need any of this.

Still, Mycroft felt another breath, weak but still not imagined. He placed a hand against his brother's throat and felt an equally fragile pulse.

"He's alive," he said dully, coming to terms with the discovery.

"What?" a member of the team replied, incredulous.

"He's alive!" Mycroft shouted, standing up. "Bring a gurney, don't just stand there...!"

The relentless shock of discovering Sherlock, believing him dead, then realizing he was alive collided with exhaustion. In standing up, Mycroft felt a numbness pass through him so fleetingly yet so powerfully, enough to make him dizzy and lose balance. His hand shot out and landed in the dirt surrounding him and the suitcase, preventing complete collapse. Even so, his exhaustion was painfully obvious to the SWAT team.
"Easy there, Mr. Holmes," the team leader said, offering a strong hand to keep him steady. He turned to bark some orders to his crew. "Hurry up on that medivac!"

At the moment it didn't feel like it would have mattered if he fainted and fell into the recently exhumed grave Sherlock's assailants had dug for the tortured young genius, and nobody bothered to pick him up. Fuck the Americans. Fuck the British government. And fuck John Watson.

Mycroft knew that his deeply seated anger at the doctor was hardly rational, as Sherlock's chosen companion had been through his own personal hell, but he simply could not get over the fact that John Watson had abandoned Sherlock, and given the chance, chosen to save his own hide. Mycroft would never forgive him for it. Not as long as he drew breath.

Sherlock's breath was currently a bigger issue. Barely there in the first place, it was becoming increasingly laboured. The elder Holmes realized something was obstructing his brother's airways and quickly inspected the confines of Sherlock's oral cavity with his finger, only to discover that the younger man's mouth was filled with dirt.

Sherlock moaned miserably and his body twitched, most likely reminiscing the recent sexual assault.

"It's me, Lockie," Mycroft whispered, using a pet name he had not used for ages. "Don't be afraid, it's only me…"

The one of Sherlock's eyes that was not grossly swollen shut made a feeble attempt to open, and Mycroft could see the flash of a well-known turquoise iris, now surrounded by a blood-red eye-white; subconjunctival hemorrhage. Sherlock could not speak, but a flicker of recognition passed over his tormented and abused features, suggesting that he had retained sight in the bloodshot eye.

"Stay with me, Lockie," Mycroft pleaded, although it came out sounding more like an order.

He stroked the stiff, filthy dark curls, caked with dried blood and vomit, as well as something that could only be semen. Sherlock had soiled himself while confined within the suitcase, and the onslaught of foul smells emanating from him was almost too much to bear for Mycroft's delicate nose.

That nose had been helpful in the past, such as identifying the qualities of a brandy or fine wine, or deducing a man's background by the cheapness of his cologne, but in his current state of accelerated
stress, he was not doing himself or his brother any favors.

"If you could step aside for the medivac team, Mr. Holmes..." the team leader said, his voice gruff but not uncouth. Mycroft looked up at him, noting the name on his tag: Ruppenkamp. Whomever he outranked likely made sure to never mispronounce or mishear that name.

The medical evacuation members were quick and efficient as they entered the hole, escorted the elder Holmes back to the rest of the team, and began to treat his brother. Sherlock's airways were cleared of the dirt and his lungs ensured fresh oxygen, and an IV was inserted into his arm. Mycroft was surprised that his brother was able to provide a large enough vein in his present state of dehydration.

"I'm fine," he muttered as someone placed a hand on his arm, clearly to lead him toward the helicopter. He struggled to maintain his icy frontage as he watched Sherlock, oxygen mask in place, get gingerly placed on a gurney. "I will walk there myself."

Sherlock's bout of consciousness fortunately did not last long. Mycroft abhorred the thought of his little brother being aware of what had been done to him - that he had not only been raped and tortured, but buried alive - and silently thanked the fates when the younger man slipped back into oblivion, showing no further signs of recognition or awareness. A fleeting thought also wormed itself into the mind of the government official, banned by his higher brain functions before it could take conscious form: perhaps it would be better if Sherlock died.

The younger Holmes had already cheated death on far too many occasions, and every time he had miraculously come out unscathed, or at least without acquiring lasting damage. That, Mycroft realized, was not strictly true. Certain events, some of which happened quite early in his relatively short life, had left Sherlock with permanent and incurable psychological scars.

Mycroft was also well-aware of the fact that he was personally to blame for at least one of these events, and Sherlock had never really forgiven him for it. It was a disheartening thought that now he might never get a chance to earn his brother's forgiveness. Mycroft, of course, had never expected Sherlock to live a full lifespan, not with the way he chose to live on the edge practically on a daily basis, but he had somehow always hoped for more time. Mycroft Holmes, who was famous not only for his rapier wits and unprecedented powers of observation, but his equally sharp management and organizational skills, was at a loss when it came to managing Sherlock.

Despite the littered ground Sherlock's move to the helicopter was swift and efficient. Stepping out of the way, Mycroft watched his brother pass. The tendons in his jaw tightened, and for a moment he wanted to keep in step with the gurney, to perhaps fulfill some natural contract of keeping an eye on him like a real big brother would. A mental image passed of him clasping Sherlock's hand like some serialized medical drama. But it passed without incident. This was not how he did things. Even so, his current state would have likely put him on the ground after only a few hurried steps, and then he
would have been of no use to anyone. Instead he followed at his own pace, Anthea trailing close behind as though even the uneven terrain of this hellhole meant nothing on feet used to parading around in heels.

"Western Maryland Health System is relatively close to us, and its supplies are more up to date," a medivac worker shouted out in suggestion as they all gathered inside the thunderously loud aircraft.

I doubt that, Mycroft thought as he removed a handkerchief and patted his face. The entire tri-state area looked to be stuck in the seventies as far as resources were concerned. Still, it wasn't West Virginia, a state which he had more than his fill of even after speaking with John.

"Pretty far from where the other survivor is stationed..." the worker continued.

"The institution where Dr. Watson is located is a disgrace," Mycroft interjected. "Send Sherlock to the Maryland hospital."

"Shall we move Mr. Watson to the same hospital?" Anthea asked.

Mycroft sharply looked towards her, and his face took on the quality of a storm cloud, dark and foreboding. "Why on Earth would I do that?"

Anthea did not answer. She knew her employer's body language and personality inside and out, and though she had her own opinions about John Watson's validity to Sherlock's recovery, she kept them to herself. If anything, Mycroft likely agreed with her - albeit begrudgingly - that John and Sherlock should reunite. But that was not up for discussion now.

All that mattered at present was young Mr. Holmes' health.

At one point during Sherlock's transport to the medical facility, the detective's blood pressure dropped dramatically, as signaled by the monitoring equipment, and a few seconds later he subsequently went into cardiac arrest. Mycroft watched with seeming dispassion as the medical crew bustled around the badly injured body of the young Brit, trying furiously to resuscitate him. After less than one minute and a sizable injection of epinephrine straight into the heart muscle, Sherlock's pulse beeped back into existence, and a relieved murmur passed through the aircraft. The younger Holmes's condition had been stabilized. For now.
Mycroft was perspiring profusely. It did not help that the helicopter had air conditioning or that it was undoubtedly in use, he was still practically melting into a puddle within his tailored three-piece suit, the bulky bullet proof body armor that the Americans had insisted he wore, and his wool overcoat. His forehead a dripping mess, the civil servant wiped it for the sixteenth time since climbing aboard the aircraft and silently contemplated his body's rapid fluid loss. At this rate, they would have to check him in along with Sherlock once they arrived at the hospital. He tucked away his handkerchief, now soaked through as well, into the breast pocket of his coat. The adrenaline rush of finding Sherlock buried alive in his shallow grave had passed, and it was replaced by a feeling of profound exhaustion. Mycroft Holmes could not remember last time he had felt this drained and figured he should probably thank God for small favours. Sleep deprivation was an unfortunate but non-optional side-effect of working in his line of trade.

The steady monotonous hum of the rotor blades was soothing, perhaps even downright hypnotic, and if he weren't feeling so sticky, so sore, so uncomfortable, he might even let it lull him into a sleep… Not actual "sleep" sleep, where you lay down in a bed and closed your eyes, but perhaps an episode of microsleep, a brief lapse in consciousness, a momentary relief from the arbitrary sensory stimuli hammering at his brain and demanding constant attention…

No one other than Anthea noticed the soft thump of the elder Holmes' head as it lolled against the wall, nor the twitching of his limbs when he jolted back into consciousness thirty seconds later. She was tactful enough to pretend it had gone by her unnoticed.

The helicopter was about to land.

TBC...
Chapter 37

Chapter Summary

Sherlock is brought into surgery. Mycroft awaits the news of his brother's condition.

Chapter 37

Already a team of medical technicians were waiting on the helipad. Mycroft's cynicism, having taken over long ago in the day, caused him surprise that the hospital was capable of that much. Adrenaline propelled him forward once more as he followed the gurney carrying his brother out of the helicopter and indoors, which was convenient, because when the time finally came for him to sleep, he would be dead to the world.

He was alert enough to catch the nod one of the medivac crew gave toward him when greeting a nurse. She promptly approached the civil servant, and he immediately prepared himself to stand his ground no matter the issue. In fact he had a very good idea as to what the problem was.

"Hello sir," the woman - five foot six, dark wavy hair in a ponytail, name tag "Missy", mid-thirties, kind face, but lines on her brow suggested she had experience with difficult patients, clearly deliberately chosen to deal with him - automatically greeted him. "Are you feeling alright?"

What about my appearance remotely suggested that? Mycroft thought disparagingly. Clearly this was a well-rehearsed greeting she had asked countless patients.

"I am remaining with my brother for the remainder of his care," he immediately replied, not slowing in his steps. The nurse held out a hand, though she thoughtfully did not touch him.

"Ah, I'm afraid you can't go into the O.R.," she said, keeping in pace with the man. "There's paperwork that also needs to be done, and--"

"My assistant can take care of that," he interjected, never keeping Sherlock out of his sight just a few feet down the hallway.

Missy was not deterred. If Mycroft was not faced with the fate of his brother and figuratively running on petrol fumes, he might have been impressed by her.

"Also, you need medical attention yourself, sir," she continued. "And we need to let the doctors take care of your brother now."

"I assure you, I don't need medical assistance," he retorted, but she seemed to ignore him completely. Priding himself on not resorting to physical force, he was nearly ready to shove her aside.

Missy's arm unexpectedly shot out, connecting with the wall closest to them and nearly causing Mycroft to walk into it, throat first. He was practically ready to throttle her, and the only deterrent factor was knowing that if it came down to a physical confrontation, he would probably not come out victorious in his current state.

"I'm sorry, sir," the nurse spoke slowly, as if she were spelling things out for a child with attention deficit problems. Mycroft hated to think that was how she viewed him. "But we cannot allow you
"I told you, my assistant…"

"And I told you these are the rules of the hospital. Everyone has to follow them." The hard lines on Missy's face momentarily deepened, and her shoulders bunched up. Clearly she was preparing herself for a confrontation, perhaps even a physical one. Mycroft wasn't all that surprised at the nurse's readiness to handle conflict. This was a rural area and this woman had dealt with her share of difficult patients and family members alike, drunken rednecks demanding privileges they were not entitled to. He could almost sympathize.

"We'll take care of your brother. He's in good hands." She hesitantly lowered her arm, still suspicious of him but apparently willing to negotiate. He did not doubt, however, that if he continued to make trouble for her, she would not hesitate to call security and have him bodily thrown out of the hospital. Considering he was not in his natural element, it might take him several hours to pull the right strings to get things moving. Sherlock did not have a few hours. He had to play along and at least give off the pretense of cooperation… for now.

The hard-headed nurse's expression softened when she sensed his admitted defeat. "Maybe you should sit down, sir," she suggested. "Have a cup of coffee, or tea. No offense, but you aren't looking too well."

"Thank you, I'm well aware," Mycroft retorted, but his words lacked bite. He was simply too exhausted.

Missy still did not touch him, but she determinedly steered him toward a small clutter of uncomfortable-looking plastic chairs reserved for visitors, clearly intending him to take a seat in one of them. Mycroft's sore, aching body abhorred at the thought, but he did not have it in him to protest. He sat down, holding back a pained groan. He must have pulled a muscle, crouching in that goddamn ditch.

"I promise you, sir, you'll be alerted the moment there's news of your brother's condition," the nurse said, bending over him and very nearly violating his personal space. He could smell her skin crème, a blend of honey and nectar, and the fabric softener she used for her sheets…

"Do you have anyone to stay with you while you wait?"

"There's… my PA. She--"

"Anyone you'd like us to call?"

A curt headshake from the Ice-man. "No."

Missy froze for a moment, seemingly considering something, and Mycroft was just about to tell her to make herself scarce when she presented her suggestion.

"We don't normally do this, but I could make an exception for you. There's a room in the back, it used to be an office but hasn't been used for years, people didn't like there not being a window…" She seemed to realize she was babbling and reined herself in. "The doctors on call sometimes use it to sleep. If you want to, you could use it. Lie down, while you're waiting for news…?"

Something about the notion of laying down to sleep, to be at his most vulnerable in front of these people, unnerved him. No, that was not true. Sleep was not the most vulnerable he could have been. To do so would have involved openly weeping, and he would never do that.
"That will do," he finally acquiesced, standing up slowly so as not to make himself dizzy. "I need that time to better compose myself. To think."

As he had anticipated, the space was not far away from the O.R., and as promised by the nurse, it was dark and quiet, and presently unoccupied.

"Don't worry, the sheets and blankets are clean," Missy said, the civil servant's general appearance not lost on her. Her observant nature and proclivity for catering to people's requirements clearly made nursing an ideal career for her... not to mention her steadfast stubbornness in case someone were to overstep certain boundaries. In his own career, Mycroft knew the importance of playing to someone's strengths, weaknesses, and wishes.

"If you need anything, should I come to you or...?"

"My PA is here to handle things when I'm otherwise occupied," he replied, taking a seat on the nearest bed. "But if it involves my brother..."

"Gotcha. But just in case, there is a paging device here by the door," she pointed at said device on the wall. "All the numbers are labeled. Get some rest, you'll be fine."

Ever the care provider, Mycroft thought.

"Thank you," he said curtly.

His drowsiness must have been taking over now, because Missy seemed to vanish within the blink of an eye. Stifling a yawn, despite having no audience, Mycroft first removed the damnable Kevlar vest he had been wearing for hours now, though it felt more like days. The coolness which reached his sweat-soaked shirt and skin placed a mental note in him to get a shower after he awoke. Still taking the time to smooth out his suit before settling himself, he lay staring at the ceiling for a half minute until he closed his eyes. He found the racing thoughts inside his brain slowing much sooner than expected, and within minutes he was asleep.

*

When Mycroft slowly came to, he felt possibly even worse than prior to falling asleep; in his head was this throbbing ache, his stomach was knotting in cramps and threatening to rid itself of its meager contents (limited basically to bile and stomach acid at this point) and the muscles in his back and thighs ached horribly from the disproportionate amount of exercise to which he had subjected his body hours earlier. Succinctly put, Mycroft Holmes felt like crap.

Apart from the nerve-wracking pain, there was the unpleasant feeling of being covered in dried sweat, some of which was the oily, foul-smelling kind, and coming to realize that he was in desperate need of a shower. A shower which sadly would have to wait. He had more pressing concerns than his own personal hygiene, no matter how much it pained him to leave it unattended.

Mycroft slowly struggled into a sitting position, unsuccessfully trying to hold back a pitiable whimper when the stiff, sore muscles in his back had to be straightened. Good God, he was in worse shape than he'd let on. Even to himself.

The absence of a window in the small office-turned-resting space made it impossible for him to estimate the time he'd been asleep, but if his internal clock was anything to go by, he'd guess no more than two hours... but the jetlag might also have impacted his sense of time. There was no way to be sure.

Sigh.
Despite his fatigue and poor physical condition, Mycroft's memories of the past twenty-four hours were as sharp and detailed as ever. Low blood sugar apparently did nothing to impede his cognitive functions or his uncanny eye for detail. Sometimes he almost wished there was some way - any way - to slow down his brain that did not involve alcohol or sleeping agents. It was a Holmesian trait he shared with his brother, except that Sherlock's condition was further exacerbated by his bipolar disorder. Had shared with his brother, anyway. It was far from certain that Sherlock would even pull through, let alone that he would come out of this with his extraordinary mind intact.

The lack of communication on the part of the medical staff suggested that Sherlock's condition had not changed in any direction. Most likely a surgical team was still working on the younger Holmes, doing their best to salvage what could be salvaged. Mycroft was loathe to think what that really meant.

Pushing back the blanket which covered him (blanket? he could not remember there being a blanket when he lay down to rest) he swung his legs over the edge of the bed and promptly realized that whomever had tucked him in with a blanket had also removed his shoes. And not only that, but the (presumably) same individual had laid out a new clean set of clothing for him (nothing fancy or tailor-made, but nonetheless something that looked like it would fit him) as well as a bag of toiletries which would help him make himself somewhat presentable when it was time to rejoin the world. On top of it all, they had left a tray of bread and cold cuts (again, nothing fancy, but certainly not the stuff hospitals served to patients) along with a small plastic cup containing two water-soluble Aspirin tablets.

Anthea. Thank God for Anthea.

So eager was he to rise and prepare himself for what lay ahead that he almost stood straight up, caution be damned, but ever the rational Holmes brother, he kept a cool - albeit throbbing - head as he composed himself. He slowly but steadily consumed some of the bread and meat before taking the tablets, silently meditating and reorganizing his thoughts. Shower or no shower, headache or no headache, he would be of no use to anyone, especially not his brother, if he left the infinite space of his mind in utter chaos.

Finishing his meager breakfast, Mycroft put on his shoes and slowly stood up, taking his essentials and new change of clothing with him. Leaving the sleeping quarters, he was about to head to the waiting room where Anthea would likely be, only to see her come around the corner. At times such as these she almost seemed to have a sixth sense.

"They're still with him," she said. "I've been given directions to a shower available for your use. It's normally for medical staff. You won't be disturbed."

Mycroft never thought himself the superstitious type, but he was the type who could never be too cautious. Part of his mind nagged that the moment he stepped away to freshen up, something might happen... although even if it did, was he able to do much about it? He was about to make up his mind when a doctor, face initially obscured by a surgical mask, turned the corner to join them.

"Mr. Holmes?" he said, removing the mask. "I'm Doctor Nasim. I've been seeing to your brother." His accent complimented his surname. Suddenly Mycroft felt a little more like he was back in Britain.

"How is he doing?" the elder Holmes asked, both desperately wanting to hear the news of Sherlock's condition as well as wishing he could postpone the inevitable and not have to face the grim reality of the situation. What if the news weren't... the least bit good? Mycroft wanted to berate himself for his thoughts; he had been a die-hard pragmatist since adolescence and was not about to turn back from that path at this age. Whatever Nasim had to tell him, he could bear it.
The surgeon momentarily hesitated before speaking, and from experience, Mycroft knew that that was never a good sign. People were always eager to tell you the good news but hesitant to deliver the bad ones.

"That's what I wanted to discuss with you, Mr. Holmes," Nasim said. There was blood on his green surgical scrubs; Sherlock's, Mycroft wondered, or blood from a donor bag to replace the vast amounts his brother had already lost?

He patiently waited for the Indian to explain further, determined to keep his features impassive and devoid of any emotion.

"We have a trauma unit working to repair the damage done to your brother. The best of the best. I want you to know that he's being given the best possible care--"

"Get to the point, if you may, doctor," Mycroft interrupted icily. "I run a tight schedule."

Nasim looked guilty and allowed the rest of the sentence to trail off. He nervously wrung his hands, covered in bloodied surgical gloves. The man was an esteemed orthopedic surgeon; indeed one of the best available on such short notice. His reputation, however, did nothing to diminish his immense respect or perhaps outright fear of the British government official whose younger sibling's limb he had spent the past three hours trying to salvage. In vain. He did not look forward to delivering the news of his failure.

"Young Mr. Holmes is alive. His blood pressure is stable after we transfused him with two units of blood. We have successfully extracted the soil from his airways and relieved his intracranial pressure."

"But he is still in surgery?" Mycroft asked suspiciously.

"Yes, that's what I came to inform you about. Because Mr. Holmes is not conscious, we need your consent to proceed with the following procedure."

Process of elimination concerning Sherlock's injuries was nonexistent. It had to be one thing.

"His leg needs to be amputated," Mycroft stated. Based on the way Nasim looked at him, the assessment was correct.

"We tried to save it as best we could, but there's too much dead tissue. It would have to be removed below the knee. If we don't..."

"Yes, I understand fully," Mycroft interjected. Clearly the doctor had become quite used to having to defend the choices of the medical staff and reason with family members who expected too much. The civil servant held back a sigh when he thought about how Sherlock might react to finally waking with half of his leg missing, but nothing could be done about that.

"Do what you must."

Dr. Nasim still seemed a little surprised at how well the elder Holmes was taking the situation, but he did not waste time asking if his was certain. Still, his well-practiced ritual of a proper bedside manner persisted one last time.

"Everything will be fine," he said.

Mycroft nodded, a curt gesture to express he was done with the man, and the doctor nodded back, turning on his heel and disappearing around the corner. Mycroft and Anthea stood there in silence,
save for the tapping of a finely manicured nail on a tablet screen.

"I'm forwarding you some therapists in both rehabilitation and psychology," she declared. "Both locally here and in London."

"Fine," Mycroft simply replied, his tone flat and listless. At present time he could care less about what she was doing. If only his assistant could make the time go by faster.

*TBC...*
Chapter 38

Chapter Summary

Mycroft waits for news on Sherlock's surgery and busies himself by seeing to the practical arrangements.

Chapter 38

Mycroft went ahead with his shower. As Anthea had promised, he was not disturbed throughout the procedure of freshening up. The brand of soap provided by the hospital was nothing short of abominable, and the elder Holmes was grateful to his assistant for remembering to include a bar of his personal choice in the bag of toiletries.

It took him less than half an hour to shower, shave and dress himself in a new, fresh set of clothing. He decided to forego his usual grooming session, which included plucking his unruly eyebrows into a more conservative shape and applying concealer to his face to cover up his abundant freckles. Mycroft was accustomed to getting ready on short notice and saw no point in dallying.

Anthea was waiting for him outside the men's changing room, clipboard in hand. She had been awake for as long as he had, and yet she showed no signs of exhaustion or fatigue, her outfit, hair and clothing as impeccably perfect as always. He envied her. Whatever her secret was, he wished he could possess it.

"Good day, sir," she said, managing somehow to sound both soothingly calm and chipper at the same time. "There are some paperwork for you to sign, regarding Mr. Sherlock's care here at Western Maryland Health System. Is this a convenient time, or should we...?"

"Now is a perfect time," Mycroft cut in, taking the clipboard with the documents from her. He knew, naturally, that Sherlock's treatment in America would not be given for free, but money had never been a problem for the Holmes family, and he would happily finance anything that was needed to ensure his brother's recovery out of his own pocket. Sherlock, given his lifestyle and the dangers that went with it, had not enjoyed paid-for health insurance in years, instead having relied on the NHS and Mycroft's influence as a "minor" government official to fund his - admittedly rather frequent - use of medical resources.

Mycroft dispassionately scribbled his signature onto the documents and thrust them brusquely back into Anthea's hands.

"Clear my schedule and cancel all my appointments for the next two days," he ordered. "And find me a place to stay until the need arises, should it come to that, to find something more... permanent."

Mycroft had tacitly accepted that it would be a while before his brother could be returned to London, assuming he ever could. Until he was sure Sherlock would live, he did not want to waste resources.

He rubbed at his eyes as he thought over the events of the past two days, as well as what else might unfold or need to be dealt with in the near future. Somehow it felt as though the most powerful stimulants, legal or otherwise, would not be enough to fully invigorate him for this disaster.
Anthea was not finished with her tablet; she would likely only be finished with it when she was dead, and some probably doubted she would stop even then.

"The two nearest hotels are relatively close to each other," she informed him. "Although one is overlooking a river while the other is right next to a railroad track."

"Quaint little town," Mycroft said, his sarcasm thick enough to cut with a knife. "The former, obviously."

Anthea nodded, though she had already predicted his answer and chosen it for him. Hell, an idiot could have predicted it.

"Shall I contact any therapists or doctors in Britain yet?" she asked. "Psychiatrists? Perhaps one of your personal contacts?"

Her wording made Mycroft glance at her. He hardly wanted to think that far into the future, but he did nonetheless, out of necessity and practicality.

"Not yet."

Sherlock's previous experiences with therapists had not been positive. Besides, there was no point discussing or making plans concerning the younger Holmes' mental health until they were sure he was going to survive the ordeal.

More soft tapping of Anthea's fingernails against the surface of the tablet. "What about Doctor Watson?" she asked then.

Mycroft's expression immediately hardened. "What of him?"

"Should he be alerted of Sherlock's condition?" Anthea's tone was still light and friendly in a professional manner, but it made the question she asked no less poignant. Mycroft paid her to take orders and execute them, not to offer her personal opinions, and it was very rarely indeed that Anthea breached their contract by interjecting something of personal value.

"Not at the moment," the civil servant said from between clenched teeth. He was no idiot, of course, and knew what she was hinting at, but he couldn't deny the almost perverse feeling of triumph it brought him to leave John Watson in the dark and imagine the anguish it brought the other man, not knowing if Sherlock was alive or dead. Good. Let the bastard sweat…

"Sir?" Anthea's voice took on a decidedly guarded tone. "He's Sherlock's partner, surely you agree he deserves to be informed--"

"They're flatmates, nothing more, and John Watson has no legal right to information regarding my brother's state of health or the course of treatment chosen for him!" Mycroft growled. He was quickly becoming angry, and felt a rush of heat flowing to his face, most likely making his ginger skin glow bright pink. It was why he, under normal circumstances, preferred to wear makeup during public appearances. Anything, even a subtle change in room temperature, could make him break out into a sweat as well as a furious flush, and a man who was sweating could easily be perceived to be hiding emotional turmoil. While Mycroft had long since learned to control his emotional displays, the same thing could not be said for his bodily functions.

"You are not to mention this again unless I bring it up first," he continued, fixing his assistant with a steely glare. "Understood?"

"Yes, sir."
Anthea usually never intruded with personal opinions; she understood how her employer operated and Mycroft - being Mycroft - understood how she operated in kind. He knew his personal assistant had to have a reason for giving her view on the matter, but to hell with that trivial matter. Even without the resentful factor of John Watson being found first, Mycroft hardly wanted the doctor present in a time such as this.

The idiot likely would have wanted Sherlock to somehow keep his leg. Well... perhaps not. Mycroft's sighing as he took a seat was so quiet even Anthea could not have heard it. Over the next two hours, he silently dreaded the inevitable reaction when Sherlock finally awoke, when he would see one leg half-missing and be alert enough to remember what had happened to him. Hearing the outbursts from the amputation would be bad enough, but what the local examples of bipedal putrescence had done to him was barely something to be shelved away in the mind palace. It was a miracle that Sherlock had turned out as well as he had, what with...

"Mr. Holmes?"

Mycroft recognized the voice of the woman who approached him. Missy looked a little less on her guard as she walked over to him, and the look in her eyes suggested things were going well. Either that or she had been in the profession long enough to have a stunning poker face, which he doubted could have tricked even him.

"Doctor Nasim should be here in a few minutes," she said, "but I just came back from the OR where they were working on your brother."

"And?"

Missy considered sitting down next to the distraught Englishman waiting for news on his little brother, and giving him a thorough retelling of Sherlock's current status, but doing that would have suggested intimacy that simply did not exist between them. She elected to stand instead, vaguely disconcerted by his surprising apathy. She had seen the more passionate side of him when he first entered the hospital, trailing after the gurney transporting his younger brother, but all the emotion exhibited by him then had been thoroughly wiped out and replaced by a cold mask of indifference. He looked as though he cared little whether his sibling lived or died.

"The surgery went well, and your brother is in recovery," she said, fingering the stethoscope around her neck. The British government official exhaled almost inaudibly.

"He's been taken to the PACU where he will undergo anesthesia reversal and extubation," Missy explained. The man seemed familiar enough with medical jargon on this level, and she continued relaying the news of his brother's surgery.

"All things considered, the operation went very well. The estimated blood loss was not as great as anticipated. His recovery from here on depends on many different factors. We could be facing postoperative complications of varying severity, but it's too early to tell at this point."

Mycroft nodded mutely, assuming that "things went well" translated to "the leg was severed and successfully removed" without explicitly wording it so.

"Are there any pre-operative health problems we should know about?" the nurse inquired. "Any hereditary conditions or...?"

"No," Mycroft said curtly. He didn't believe that Sherlock's history of drug abuse or mental illness was in any way relevant to his postoperative health status. "Apart from being slightly underweight,
my brother is in good health."

"Any medications he's currently taking?" she naturally asked next.

"Clozapine," Mycroft replied. "100 milligrams a day, if he's following the instructions. He's been taking them since age 21 for bi-polar disorder."

A nurse's duties included restraint from passing judgment, but Mycroft caught the micro-expression of surprise she was unable to hide when she heard the answer. He found himself wondering on an unrelated note if Clozapine was a frequently prescribed drug in this part of the state.

"And then we have to ask this next one," Missy continued, and Mycroft knew what the question would be. Of course. "Has he been using any illegal substances?"

"Not lately."

Missy stared at him for a few seconds, knowing the implications of his wording. But before their conversation could go any further, Doctor Nasim entered the waiting room, clipboard in hand.

"Hi, Doctor," the nurse greeted him with well-practiced cheerfulness. "I'm just bringing Mr. Holmes up to speed on his brother."

"I see, Missy." The orthopedic surgeon smiled in the cautious manner of someone used to delivering less-than-stellar news. "You're a rock, but I'll take it over from here."

"Of course." Missy inclined her head and sauntered off, but not before giving the doctor a quick yet pointed glance, as if wordlessly asking "how did it go?" The smile remained on Nasim's face, friendly but strained. Mycroft was fairly sure of the type of news he was going to share.

"If you'd like to talk someplace more private?...?" the physician began, glancing toward Anthea seated two chairs away from the civil servant, but Mycroft silenced him with a raised hand.

"That won't be necessary. My assistant can hear anything you have to say, Doctor."

"Oh... okay." Nasim pulled out a chair of his own and sat down, seemingly repeating a well-practiced sentence in his own head before speaking out loud. "The surgery was completed without any undue complications. Your brother is at the PACU, and if things go well, he should come out of the anesthesia and be able to breathe on his own no later than tonight."

"Your nurse has already told me all that," Mycroft said tiredly. For a moment, he could have sworn Nasim looked disappointed. "You were supposed to give me a more detailed account of his condition and... injuries."

"Mr. Holmes, I..." The surgeon quickly reined himself in. "I'm sorry, I know you're a busy man. I'll try to fill you in on your brother's status."

Mycroft remained silent, raising one eyebrow superciliously as he waited for the Indian to speak.

"As you know, Mr. Holmes, the leg was not salvageable. We explored every option available--"

"I'm well aware," the elder Holmes cut in. "I'm interested in the parts of him that you were able to salvage," he dryly pointed out.

"Oh yes... I see. You want to know about the extent of his injuries."

"Yes, isn't that why you came to speak with me?" Mycroft was quickly losing his patience with the
nervous, rambling man and thought about how he would have preferred to receive the information from Missy instead, even though she was merely a nurse and not a medical specialist.

"Well, to put it mildly: your brother was banged up pretty bad. The amputation itself went without additional complications, but you should know there is a considerable risk of infection, which, I assure you, we will do our best to contain. Mr. Holmes is currently receiving two different kinds of intravenous antibiotics. The surgical wounds are one thing, but at present the biggest concern is the dirt your brother has inhaled into his lungs, as it poses a risk of pneumonia."

None of which was new or unknown to Mycroft. He had seen the state of Sherlock's abused body with his own two eyes, after all.

"He also has a minor traumatic head injury; a small epidural hematoma, but we got to it before it could pose a serious threat to his life, or his brain functions. He should recover fully, if he..."

"Survives his other injuries," Mycroft finished the doctor's statement for him. There was more; that he also knew. He had caught a glimpse of Sherlock's swollen, lacerated anus when the younger man - at the time presumed to be deceased - was lifted out of the suitcase, and the sight would most likely haunt him forever.

"What of the damage to his rectum?"

Nasim briefly looked away, obviously hesitant to bring up the subject and surprised at the straightforward question, but when he spoke his voice was steady. "We have stopped the bleeding and stitched up the area with four stitches. He might not be able to control his bowel movements until it's healed up and should be kept on a liquid diet for at least two weeks."

Mycroft maintained his cool exterior as always. Most might not have noticed any change from his usual facade, but he found his apathetic display much easier to manage now that Sherlock had become more of a patient, as opposed to a potential corpse. It seemed no matter how many times Mycroft expected to hear about his brother being found dead from whatever destructive path he had taken, the news would always hit that part of his brain which still held sentiment. He finally nodded at the doctor's explanations.

"Is there anything else?" he inquired.

"There was a fracture in his right forearm. Now it already had a titanium screw from a previous break, but we were able to set it again..."

That damnable arm. The face of the monstrous bastard who had broken it the first time appeared in Mycroft's mind for just a moment.

"... also, one of his molars was forcibly removed, but so far it's not at risk of infection thanks to the antibiotics."

Torture of course, simply for the sake of torture. Part of Mycroft wanted to order the whole mountain struck by napalm, innocent bystanders be damned. The temptation was just as brief as the mental image of Sherlock's long gone abuser.

"I would like to see him," he finally said.

"Oh yes, that should be fine," Nasim said without hesitation. "He's not awake now..."

Obviously, Mycroft thought.
"But you can come take a look at him."

Mycroft felt like asking if doctors at this hospital habitually referred to their unconscious patients as if they were museum artifacts, or if the cavalier way of phrasing the question had to do with English not being Nasim's first language. He bit back the scathing comment and trailed after the surgeon to the post-anesthesia care unit.

The ward was quiet, save for the off-beat whoosh of a fan and the hissing and beeping of various machines designed to keep critical and unconscious patients alive. There was no laughter or chatter to be heard, either from the patients or the nursing staff. He might as well have entered a morgue.

"Mr. Sherlock Holmes is this way, sir," Nasim said, opening the door to a room with the number 462. A wad of paper which he presumed to be Sherlock's surgical journal was in a slot on the wall next to the door.

Mycroft was grateful that the hospital staff had at least had the common sense to give Sherlock a room of his own. The younger man would not be pleasant to deal with when he woke up. Correction - if he woke up. Despite the tentatively positive odds, Mycroft Holmes was a man who knew better than to rely solely on hope. Hope could devastate you.

The doctor eyed through the chart attached to the footboard of Sherlock's bed - likely his sedation and anesthesia journal - and quickly turned his attention back to Mycroft.

"As you can see, he has yet to regain consciousness, and thus we haven't extubated him," Nasim said.

Indeed a ventilator was now breathing for Sherlock, and a memory of his brother's previous time hooked to one of those machines flitted through Mycroft's memory. The staff had not kept a close enough eye on Sherlock, and it ended with the younger Holmes removing his endotracheal tube without the hospital staff present, or even knowing their patient had literally taken things into his own hands before the deed was already done. Sherlock was prone to making drama happen and also detested waiting.

The thought quickly dissipated when Mycroft redirected his attention to the bed containing his younger brother. He had seen Sherlock in a hospital bed before, of course, badly beat up and in critical condition. The slender form, still covered in a multitude of bruises, scrapes and swellings from top to bottom, was slightly more recognizable now that the dried blood, dirt and grime had been washed away. Sherlock was naked save for the thick plaster cast on his right forearm, likely for practical purposes, although a plain white hospital sheet had been pulled up to his waist for modesty's sake. One particular area was extra difficult not to ogle. The shape of the detective's bony physique was painfully obvious even beneath the sheet, and thus the absence of anything below the left knee was particularly jarring.

There was nothing. An indent rather than an outline. Sherlock would never walk again without crutches or a prosthesis.

"Is he in any pain?" Mycroft asked in a muted voice. The graveyard atmosphere of the ward made him hesitant to speak up at his usual volume.

"He's given a continuous flow of morphine in his IV," Nasim replied. "When he wakes up, the pain should be under control."

Mycroft briefly debated with himself over whether to mention that Sherlock had a history of opiate abuse and thus should not be given morphine for a multitude of reasons, but he did not voice his
concern. Partly because he knew his brother would be in a lot of pain no matter what, and there was no substance that was quite as effective as morphine, and also because he presently could not be bothered to care whether Sherlock developed an addiction. That he was alive was a miracle in itself.

After at least ten more seconds of gazing at his brother, Mycroft nodded as though in approval, then turned to the doctor.

"You'll alert me should his condition change."

Nasim was a little surprised, as family members and loved ones usually begged for more time with the patients, but he had gotten enough of an impression of the elder Holmes to not be outright shocked that he was leaving already.

"Of course," he answered. "We'll leave the contact information with your assistant...?"

"Yes, that will do." Mycroft flexed his fingers, his hand feeling strangely naked without an umbrella in it. "I have business to attend to, but I shall be staying nearby. Thank you for taking care of him."

The final statement was not the warmest, simply an automatic gesture of proper etiquette, though he was grateful for the work done by the medical staff. It could have been worse: the rescue team could have taken Sherlock to the hospital where John was sent.

Before leaving, he glanced back at his brother's motionless form one final time. Anyone else might have spoken a farewell or reassurance to their own sibling were they in Mycroft's situation, perhaps held his hand, but the civil servant did not. Sherlock was unconscious; what good would it do?

Anthea stood waiting for him just outside, the essentials she had provided for him under one arm.

"A taxi is here to take us to the hotel," she announced, walking with him and waving toward a hallway where an elevator awaited.

Mycroft's stomach knotted slightly at the thought of the hotel, a Hampton Inn, no doubt poorly managed. Hopefully his stay there would be brief. Also, he had to tell Anthea to look into leasing a car that came with its own chauffeur, as Mycroft did not want to rely on this area's taxi business as his sole mode of transport. Then he had to think about what to do with his upcoming commitments in Whitehall, as it doubtlessly seemed like he would be spending more time in America than he had initially counted on. Less than twelve hours ago, he had been set on bringing back his brother's corpse, if that. Now he suddenly had a whole new set of problems to deal with.

Mycroft rubbed his forehead, wishing he could stop his brain from wanting to structure, organize, improve, strategize... every second of the day. He followed Anthea out to the hospital parking lot, where his taxi was waiting, trying not to visualize the multitude of unsavory characters that had sat in the seats before him. He gripped his scented handkerchief, just in case the stench inside the vehicle was overwhelming.

"Hampton Inn, please," Anthea told the driver, and Mycroft appreciated the silence which followed. At least the man behind the wheel had enough discretion so as not to make an inane comment about British accents.

TBC...
Chapter 39

Chapter Summary

Sherlock wakes up, confused and agitated, and we learn some more about his elusive past.

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains depictions of physical and sexual abuse. Proceed with caution.

Chapter 39

The first tangible thought which occurred to Sherlock was muck. He felt as though he were moving about in muck. As he trudged through towards awareness, he found himself asking questions: where was he? What was this dull ache throughout him? Why did he hurt?

Opening his eyes seemed to be both the easiest and most difficult thing to do, but he needed to know where he was. Whatever had happened, he was too stuck in the mental mire to take solace in his mind palace...

What IS a mind palace? Oh, that's right...

He could barely move. He moaned, initially thinking his own voice was coming from someone else. He was drugged, he realized. Was he captured? Somewhere in his memories he had images of imprisonment. Wherever he was, the place did not have the same smells of those which came with his memories.

Finally he managed to open his eyes...

Only to realize that he couldn't see anything. Darkness. He was enshrouded in darkness. The momentary relief of not being assaulted by bright light quickly passed into a feeling of great unease. Why could he not see anything? Where was he? Memories of having been shoved into a closet flitted through his memories, first by Mycroft to keep him safe from Father, and later by Sebastian as a punishment for angering his then-boyfriend. In recent years, Sherlock often sought out the closet on his own accord, as it was the perfect place to quiet the noise inside his head.

But he was not in a closet now. The smell was all wrong. Closets usually smelled of shoe polish, starch and old mothballs, not... iodoform and rubbing alcohol. A hospital, then. St. Barts?

Sherlock tried to lift his hands in order to feel his surroundings and thereby hoping to gain information that his eyes currently weren't able to provide through his other senses. A sharp, stabbing pain shot through his right arm, and the detective realized the limb was much heavier than usual and also slow to respond to commands from his brain. Now on the verge of panic, Sherlock began to trash about, desperate to free himself from the equipment restricting his mobility.
Trying unsuccessfully to sit up, he clawed at his face with his functioning left hand, and discovered, with increasing terror, that there was a device attached to his face, filling his mouth and reaching all the way back into... Oh God. The constant hiss ought to have been telling enough. It was a breathing apparatus. He was hooked to a ventilator.

The beeping sound from the EKG monitor increased in both strength and frequency when Sherlock’s heart rate sped up, and seconds later he could hear the sound of several people entering the room. The individuals - one man and two women - were shouting medical jargon at each other, and there were hands on his body, holding him down and restraining him, and Sherlock's panic rose with his restricted mobility, making his frenzied struggles increasingly desperate.

"Get me ten cc's of propofol, now!" the male voice shouted, and Sherlock found himself quickly sinking back into a bottomless abyss after the drug was injected into his IV.

American, he thought before everything went quiet. The staff at the hospital was speaking English with American accents... Why?

*

2002

"Suck harder."

The command was forceful, curt, and exuded authority; no doubt a remnant from Sebastian's army days, but underneath the harsh tone was an undertone of anger, as well as - Sherlock realized - desperation. He had been sucking on Sebastian's knob for a good fifteen minutes, and yet the older man had been unable to get more than half hard. Sherlock had already deduced the reason within the first few minutes; overuse of cocaine and the simple fact that Sebastian Moran was fast approaching middle-age were the two main factors, but Sherlock deemed it unnecessary to point out. Unnecessary and potentially dangerous. The former colonel did not respond well to bad news and had the unfortunate habit of wanting to kill the messenger.

Sherlock obeyed, increasing the force and frequency of his ministrations, but it did nothing to make the cock in his mouth engorge. Sebastian had done four mid-sized lines that evening, and though cocaine had a reputation of being a powerful aphrodisiac, the grim truth was that prolonged use inevitably resulted in sexual impairment. Sherlock knew this from personal experience, although sex with Sebastian did not require him to be physically aroused and had long since become perfunctory and even downright painful. Sebastian did not only ignore Sherlock's pleasure - he'd always been a selfish lover - but lately he had been going out of his way to make their sexual encounters as uncomfortable as possible for the younger man.

This time was no exception. Sebastian's hand was buried in Sherlock's thick, oily curls, roughly pumping his head up and down as he seemingly did his best to tear the hairs out with the roots. Sherlock's jaw was sore and aching from the abuse, his throat raw. He knew that his struggles were in vain; if Seb had failed to get hard before now, things would not miraculously change if he doubled or even tripled his efforts.

After another two minutes and twenty seconds of dutiful oral ministrations from the young genius, Sebastian finally appeared to grasp the futility of his attempts and harshly pushed Sherlock off his cock, his face, neck and chest flushed red in heated anger. Sebastian's skin turned bright pink when his temper flared, and Sherlock could tell just from his complexion that his boyfriend was close to the breaking point. Failing to sustain an erection was a hard blow to his ego.

Sherlock sought through his extraordinary brain for the right thing to say in a situation like the one
playing out before him. Nothing came up, and he remained silent, eyes transfixed on Seb’s ruddy, pink cock, an impressive size even when flaccid. Sebastian Moran was a big man, in every sense of the word, and his privates were no exception. Sherlock could still remember the first time he had pulled down Sebastian’s pants and gone down on him with impressive detail; his glee and excitement at the sight of such an impressive tool and being given free range to play with it. There had been a small amount of pain involved the first time Seb had fucked him - bareback, of course - but when compared to the strong, intense pleasure and arousal derived from the act, the discomfort was negligible and something he was more than willing to tolerate. That was then. Before Sebastian purposely started using his genitals to hurt Sherlock.

The younger man absentmindedly wiped at his mouth and then massaged his mandibles in an attempt to alleviate the ache in his jaw. Never mind that he had been told countless times that he had the perfect facial bone structure for giving fellatio; strenuous, prolonged oral activities still made his jaw hurt.

No longer being engaged in a physical activity made Sherlock aware of the cold - Seb's landlord was stingy with the heating, even in the winter - and he shivered, reaching for his boxers and T-shirt which lay discarded on the floor next to the bed. Sebastian always demanded he be naked even when things did not progress any further than oral stimulation. Before he could reach his clothes, however, the colonel’s hand shot out and grabbed his wrist, jerking him back into the bed quite ungracefully.

"Where the fuck are you going? You ain’t done here!" Sebastian snapped, squeezing the limb in his grasp with more force than strictly necessary. Sherlock imagined he could hear the two bones in his forearm grinding against one another, and the pain certainly wasn't slow to suggest he was right.

"It won't work tonight, Seb," he said, trying hard not to make it sound as though he was lecturing his lover. Seb had "disciplined" him on a number of occasions for doing exactly that. "You have too much cocaine in your system. Trying at this stage would be a waste of time."

Sherlock half-expected to be slapped for voicing his candid observation, but instead Moran tightened his already bone-crushing hold on Sherlock's wrist until the younger man predictably cried out from the pain. He would not be able to masturbate Seb with his right hand in the upcoming days and momentarily wondered if said piece of information would convince the older man to go easy on him. Probably not.

"I'm sick of that attitude, you mouthy little whore!" Sebastian snarled and let go of Sherlock's wrist only to haul him up by the arms and slam him against the cold, metallic headboard of the bed. The wrought iron bars constituting the bed frame dug painfully into his back, and Sherlock knew that even if Seb restrained himself and stopped immediately, he would still be left tender and aching with a colourful variety of bruises to show for it.

"Look at yourself!" the older man continued, his tone seething and hateful, spit sprinkling his own face as well as Sherlock's, and Sherlock did the only thing he was currently able to do; he turned his head away, grimacing when Sebastian shoved him even harder against the metal bars.

"How am I supposed to get it up when I have to look at that ugly fucking retard face of yours? HUH? You're so fucking useless I don't have words! You can't even suck cock and your slack arse feels like a tepid puddle of piss! If I had any sense left, I'd throw you out on the street and replace you with the mongoloid chick that lives across from us. She ain't no prize, but I probably wouldn't have to listen to her deducing my ear off sounding like a right toff. That what they teach you at Eton, Sher-lock? I'd have thought you’d be better at cock-sucking, it being an all-boys school and all that tripe. But what do I know? I'm just a poor ol' chav, and you're one of the gentry!"
Sherlock said nothing, all too aware of the fact that he was violently trembling. Speaking up now would be the same as begging to be put in the hospital - or worse. He ducked his chin so that it covered his neck, hoping that an instinctive human body-language signal of showing submission would placate Sebastian on an unconscious - or perhaps conscious - level and spare Sherlock from further abuse.

But colonel Moran was unpredictable, and Sherlock knew that what had initially attracted him to the Gulf war veteran might very well become the thing that killed him. Sebastian did not possess many of the natural boundaries that were taken for granted in "normal" people, and the violence inhibition mechanisms that triggered innate compassion in a mentally sound individual were completely absent in him. As a convenient proof of his amygdala dysfunction, Sebastian responded with more reactive aggression and delivered an open-palmed slap across Sherlock's face. The younger man cowered, biting back the "fight or flight" response firing through every neuron in his brain. At present, he could do neither, and even if he somehow managed to dislodge Sebastian long enough to get out of his hold, what then? He was naked, and it was in the middle of the winter. He had nowhere to run.

"Don't you fucking eyeball me!" Sebastian hissed with a snarl, his features so contorted by rage that they were virtually unrecognizable. He looked more like an ogre than a human being. "You think you can take me on, Sherlock? Lemme see you try, you little shit! Do your worst!"

Sherlock weakly shoved at the thick, muscular forearm lodged against his chest, holding him in place, to no avail. Sebastian was in another league strength-wise, and the younger man suspected that the challenge was simply an attempt to bait him into trying something that would give the colonel a reason to rough him up even worse.

The punch to his solar plexus took Sherlock by complete surprise, and he would have doubled over, nauseated and gasping, had Sebastian not been propping him up with his own massive frame. A derisive snort escaped the older man, quickly followed by a bout of gleeful laughter at Sherlock's pained response. Seb took pleasure in witnessing the suffering he caused, that was no secret. Not at this point. If only Sherlock could have found that out before he handed over complete control of his body and mind to a violent sadist...

Sebastian's glee evaporated almost instantly, and his face shifted back into a veritable storm cloud. He took a step back from headboard, no longer supporting Sherlock's body, and the younger man fell into a heap on the bed, coughing and clutching at his abdomen.

"You pathetic little cunt," the colonel taunted. "Look at yourself! One punch and you go down like a lead balloon! My ol' mum could take a beating from my dad any day of the week and still be standing after half a dozen blows to her stupid, witless skull. Taught me well, he did, my ol' man."

Sherlock wanted to ask Sebastian what his abusive father had thought about having a queer son, or if he was the reason why Sebastian was still mostly closeted at age thirty-seven, and undeniably bursting with self-loathing as a result of strong internalized homophobia. Any psychologist would have a field-day with Sebastian as their patient, although the colonel's unwillingness to engage in any kind of psychotherapy was only equaled by Sherlock's own.

Sherlock tentatively raised his head from the mattress only to realize that he was on eye-level with Sebastian's cock. The appendage, sizable even in a completely flaccid state, seemed to have increased notable in size and hardness since Sherlock ceased his attempts to orally stimulate it. The younger man wondered if his eyes were playing tricks on his brain, or if inflicting violence - four lines of coke be damned - was exciting enough to give Sebastian Moran a hard-on.

His body tense as a bedspring and prepared to accept another blow, Sherlock slowly sat up, rubbing the numb spot on his cheek where Seb's first slap had landed. He could breathe more easily now,
grateful that his boyfriend had seemingly not cracked any of his ribs. He could not yet exclude a hemorrhaging diaphragm, but...

For the next few minutes, the two men, both naked and covered in a sheen of sweat, sat staring at each other across the expanse of the bed. Sebastian's pale blue eyes, surrounded by a fine network of crow's feet, fixed Sherlock with the same deadly precision a lion used to pinpoint the movements of a gazelle.

"I know what you're thinking, little Sherly," Sebastian said. "All this talk about how you can know someone's secrets just by looking at them, and yet you believe your own are completely impenetrable. You're not the only one who can read people, you know. Ever played poker, Sherly? You win by reading your opponent, not the game itself. It's what you gotta do, if you can't do the fuckin' Rainman thing. I know what you're thinking now. You want to know if you can reach the door before I catch you. The answer's no, little birdie. Wanna know how I made it back from Iraq? I was born with good reflexes, and I put them to use. Dodged when I had to. And didn't hesitate to pull the trigger. The ones that hesitated were sent back - in a coffin. I'm a soldier, Sherlock. You're a prissy little toff who thinks he's clever, and you can't go until I say you can go."

"I need to use the toilet," Sherlock said. The trembling was back. "It's getting urgent." It wasn't urgent, not yet, but Sebastian had been working on his kidneys for months, and Sherlock couldn't hold his urine as long as he used to. Not to mention that his piss was often tinged with pink.

"Or what?" Sebastian taunted. "You're gonna wet the bed?"

"It's your bed, Seb," the younger man pointed out. "Would you really prefer I did that?"

"You wouldn't dare."

Sherlock wanted to mention the occasion a few weeks back when Sebastian, foul-tempered and high as a kite, had decided to humiliate Sherlock by urinating on him. He - perhaps wisely - kept his mouth shut then as well as now.

"Go on, then," Sebastian said after a brief moment of silence. "You have one minute, then I want you back here. I'll clock you."

Wanting to point out that there was absolutely no rational reason for Sebastian to clock his bathroom visits except for a misdirected and sadistic sense of control, the younger man nonetheless nodded in agreement. He felt highly uncomfortable and exposed getting up from the bed and walking across the room with no clothes, all under the colonel's intense scrutiny.

Sherlock knew that it was technically possible for him to urinate and return to the bedroom in less than a minute, but due to the fact that his pelvic muscles had clamped up during his earlier altercation with his boyfriend, it took longer than usual to get the flow going. He hadn't locked the door. The measly little lock was designed to keep curious houseguests from intruding on each other's bathroom visits, and would do absolutely nothing to keep out Sebastian in case the colonel wanted to get inside. Besides, Sherlock knew that anything that Seb broke during a fit of rage would be blamed on him, which in turn meant more abuse.

Sixty seconds had stretched into ninety-five when Sherlock was finally finished emptying his bladder. He had no trousers to zip up or pants to tuck himself into and settled for wiping the drop of excess fluid from his penis with a piece of toilet paper. He flushed the toilet and the dread of having to go back out and face Sebastian grew exponentially. He washed his trembling hands to buy time, glancing at his reflection in the bathroom cabinet mirror. The slap mark on his cheek was turning red and would most certainly develop into a bruise within the next few hours. Oh well. It was
nothing he couldn't cover up with a bit of makeup, and the bruises on his torso didn't have to be seen by anyone else.

Another minute passed, and then Sherlock heard the dreaded sound of the doorknob turning. Sebastian stood in the doorway, practically filling the narrow space with his hulking frame. Pearls of sweat adorned his slightly receding hairline. His hair was cut in the classic military close-cropped hairstyle, despite the fact that Sebastian had not served in active duty for years.

Sherlock avoided meeting his lover's gaze in the mirror, and instead focused on poking and prodding a small scab on his forearm. It was one of his most common injection sites, offering access to a vein damned near perfect for shooting cocaine, and Sherlock was normally very careful not to wear it out or overuse it. Lately, however, he had been a little too generous in indulging his cravings, and the vein had suffered as a consequence of it, becoming inflamed and irritable. He needed to find another location to shoot into, perhaps in his other arm, or even in his groin... And if unable to do that, he could always do what Seb did and snort the substance. The high gained from that was not nearly as strong or intense, but it lasted slightly longer, and he wouldn't need to worry about collapsed veins...

Sherlock's train of thought was interrupted by the colonel stepping up behind him and placing his hands on Sherlock's bare, prominent hips. Seb had remarked once before on how Sherlock's hipbones made perfect handles, and there were always fresh fingertip-sized bruises of varying colours on his skin to show for it. With their bodies lined up neatly against each other, Sherlock could feel every exposed inch of Sebastian's front against his back and tried to remember times when the feeling had actually aroused him. It was just as much of a distant memory as a life without drugs. He could hardly remember what it felt like.

As expected, there was the feel of Sebastian's limp cock against his arse-crack. Under normal circumstances, Sherlock would have been able to figure out his 'punishment'; being fucked hard with nothing except spit to ease the way until he was raw, aching and possibly bleeding as well, depending on Sebastian's degree of ferocity. The recent issue of cocaine-induced impotence made matters considerably more complicated, and - Sherlock suspected - dangerous for him.

Sebastian's hands travelled up Sherlock's body, from his rather generous pelvic region, to his petite waist and from there on to his chest, where the colonel's callused fingers found the small, tight buds of his nipples, which he proceeded to squeeze painfully.

"Who the hell do you think you are, defying me when I give you an order, hmmmm?" Sebastian growled in the younger man's ear, nibbling almost playfully on an attached earlobe. Only someone who did not know Sebastian whatsoever could have mistaken his behaviour as teasing or good-natured.

"How'd you like me to remind you who's boss around here, Sherly?"

"No need, Seb. I'll remember," Sherlock whispered. Sebastian's right hand was wrapped around his neck now, not yet squeezing hard enough to constrict the airflow, although there was little doubt that he could feel the pulse beating under Sherlock's skin like the flutters of a dying butterfly.

"How are we gonna make sure?"

Sherlock was going to point out that Sebastian knew full well that Sherlock had an eidetic memory and never forgot anything unless he deliberately chose to delete it, but before he could formulate his reply, his head was driven into the mirror and the world around him faded into black.

When Sherlock regained consciousness moments later, he felt no pain, although the sensation of
something warm and wet - blood, he reminded himself, it could be nothing if not blood - trickling slowly down his forehead was undeniably present. Unless Sebastian had urinated on his face while he was knocked out cold? Sherlock touched the warm liquid to confirm his suspicions and all doubts were erased when he withdrew his hand and saw the red coating his fingertips.

Sebastian stood leaning over the disoriented younger man, and once he was positive he held Sherlock's attention, he spoke.

"Oh good, you're awake now," the colonel said casually and snapped his fingers a few times only inches from Sherlock's face. Sherlock blinked dazedly, wondering what he was supposed to focus on. His actions following were conducted on pure impulse. A sudden sense of panic caused Sherlock to recoil when Sebastian reached his hand out to grab him, and without thinking about it, he lashed out, slapping the limb about to touch him and simultaneously twisted his body around to escape Sebastian's inevitable retaliation.

He made it almost to the door, having caught the bigger man by surprise with his sudden rebellion. But even for a man of six-foot-three-inches with plenty of cocaine in his system, Sebastian was frighteningly fast. He threw himself at Sherlock and caught the fleeing young genius around the waist with one arm as he expertly looped the other around his neck in a chokehold. Sherlock clawed at the massive forearm, desperate for a continued oxygen transport, but Sebastian flexed his muscles even harder, signaling that resistance in this case equaled death.

Had he been able to, Sherlock would have screamed but all he could manage at this point was a choked gurgle. Sebastian lifted him until his feet were helplessly dangling at least three inches above the floor, and all hope of gaining leverage was lost. He uselessly kicked at the air a couple of times, but it did absolutely nothing to prevent Sebastian from hauling him off in direction of the bedroom.

Head reeling, Sherlock began to wonder if he'd even live through the night. Despite having thought about suicide so many times - and one or two occasions when he'd come very close to attempting it - he realized he was afraid of dying as much as the next person.

Every ounce of air exited Sherlock's lungs when Sebastian harshly threw him onto the bed only to straddle his prone body immediately afterwards. The colonel's hard, muscled body on top of Sherlock's felt impossibly heavy, and he didn't even attempt to struggle, knowing it would get him absolutely nowhere. He did cry out, however, when Seb wrung his right arm behind his back brutally enough to make him wish he'd possessed the joints of a contortionist.

"Please don't kill me, Seb..." Sherlock managed, immediately hating himself for having resorted to begging.

"Kill you? I ain't gonna kill you, Sherly," the older man said, his voice thick and throaty with arousal. "I'm just gonna teach you a lesson, that's all."

Sherlock's inability to see the other man made his fear increase. If he could see Sebastian and deduce his plan of action, he could, if not stop it, at least physically and mentally prepare for the abuse about to be inflicted on his person. At present he could do neither.

"I know how disappointed you are that you couldn't get cock tonight," Sebastian continued, punctuating his statement by shoving Sherlock even deeper into the mattress. "But don't worry. I've got something even better for you!"

The weight on top of him momentarily disappeared as Sebastian reached for an object on the bedside table, and Sherlock definitely knew where things were heading when his legs were forced apart by Sebastian's thigh. No preparation, no lubricant, not even the substandard spitting in one's
palm and believing that it would be enough to ease the entry for the receiving party. He steeled himself for the pain.

The object that breached his orifice was sleek, cold and very hard. It took him only a fraction of a second to realize he was being cornholed with a longneck beer bottle. Sherlock had been asked by clients to masturbate with a variety of strange objects throughout the years, and if the client paid well and the object requested was not hazardous to his health, he usually agreed. At those times, however, he was in control of what went up his arse, and also how far. Unlike now.

The first few inches consisting of just the bottleneck did not hurt all that bad, but Sherlock knew, of course, that Seb would not settle for anything less than painful.

"That feel good for ya, Sherly?" the monster on top of him panted, and Sherlock realized just how aroused Sebastian was, even though he currently did not have an outlet for it. "You like a dick that never goes soft, don't you? You worthless whore."

Sherlock's body did its best to cope with the unwanted intrusion, but he couldn't help clenching up when the tip of the bottle poked at the sharp bend of his sigmoid colon. If Sebastian forced it past this point, he might very well end up with ruptured innards. At this point Sherlock doubted he would have cared. He almost began to hope the bottle would break.

Sebastian seemed to realize there was a limit to what Sherlock's body could take and decided not to push his luck. Instead he pulled the bottle out almost all the way and repeated the action of thrusting it into Sherlock, who, despite the pain, did not let a sound escape him. Begging had gotten him absolutely nowhere, and he was determined not to give Sebastian the pleasure of hearing him cry. Though he would have readily laughed at the old myth of biting into a pillow to find some relief from the pain, Sherlock discovered there was a certain merit to it, even though the piece of fabric accessible to him was part of a duvet rather than a pillow.

The worst part was not knowing when his "punishment" was going to end. Unlike when Seb fucked him into submission, he could not rely on his partner's stamina to determine the length of the abuse. If Sebastian wanted to, he could keep it up for hours. Sherlock realized suddenly that the sheet underneath his face was wet, and not only with saliva, but tears. He had managed to bite back his sobs, but he was powerless to prevent the flow of tears from his eyes.

The lack of squealing and thrashing from his victim eventually bored the sadistic former military man, and he withdrew the bottle from Sherlock's rectum with an audible pop. After delivering a hard slap to the younger man's behind, Sebastian finally released his hold on Sherlock's arm and took his weight the smaller man's back. A derisive snort followed, and Sherlock heard him mutter something about pillow-biting whores and a good punishment.

The following thirty seconds or so were spent in a standstill. Sherlock dared not move in fear of provoking Sebastian to dole out further "punishment", and only when the colonel moved off the bed did he gain the courage to finally move his limbs. Every single part of his body hurt in some way or another, but he did not cry out or otherwise announce his pain. He would live through this, as he had lived through everything else in his short but eventful twenty-two years of existence. Assuming Sebastian allowed it.

Sherlock curled up in a foetal position, unaware of where Sebastian was or what he was doing. It hardly mattered at this point, as he would be unable to prevent anything his boyfriend had in mind for him. The smell of cigarette smoke eventually reached his nostrils, as did the sounds of Sebastian getting dressed. Eyes still closed and swollen and with drying tears in his lashes, Sherlock very nearly stopped breathing when the colonel once more approached the bed and stood over him.
"Come on, up you go, Sherly," Sebastian said impatiently. "You don't think I'm buying your bullshit, are ya? I know you're not really out of it."

Sherlock did not want to be punished for disobeying a "direct order" a second time, and struggled to sit up, but his efforts went unnoticed by Sebastian, who thought him too slow and sped up the process by harshly yanking him up by the upper arms. Sherlock hissed at the stabbing ache that shot through his lower abdomen when he was forced to put his weight on his abused backside. He also felt something slipping past the sphincter, something loose and probably liquid, perhaps blood, or - God forbid - a mixture of blood and fecal matter. Seb might beat him again when he found out Sherlock had soiled his precious sheets.

"Look at me when I'm talking to you, you little shite!" the older man snapped irritably and bopped Sherlock on the cheek with his middle finger; an action that made the young genius want to retreat further into himself. "Are you lost in your head again? Zoning out? You're not listening to what I'm saying, and that's a problem. What do suggest I do with you?"

"You don't have to do anything, Seb," Sherlock assured. "I'll stay out of your way."

Sebastian nodded and for a moment he seemed to be considering the suggestion. "You know, that's very good," he said. "Except I don't believe you. Do you know why I don't believe you, Sherly? Because you're a fucking liar, that's why." The colonel smiled grimly. "The moment I let you out of my sight, you're gonna run out on me and tell your fat fuck for a brother about what just happened, aren't you? Am I right?"

"No, Seb, I won't tell, I promise."

Sebastian's large, sinewy hands, lightly dusted with ginger hair and freckles, cupped Sherlock's thin face with mock tenderness, stroking the bruised skin; something that made the younger man flinch. Leaning close enough to brush his lips against Sherlock's ear, he then whispered, with a puff of warm exhale, "How am I gonna make sure?"

Sherlock desperately wracked his brain for some form of an answer, but he knew the futility of it all. No matter what he said, it would not be enough for Seb. It never was.

"Because..." he hung his head, hopeless as ever. "Because I won't."

Sebastian's condescending laughter rang in his ears. He would have shaken his head at the pointless, unchanging absurdity of this, but anything said or done would have instigated things even further.

"I thought so," Sebastian said. "You know, for a supposed genius, you're a big fucking idiot."

Go ahead, Sherlock thought, ramble on. For nearly a full second he hoped the colonel would talk himself down from his rage, but Sherlock chalked up that hope to delusional thinking from his head injury.

"I gotta make sure you don't run away, you wayward little bollocks," the older man continued, his grip tightening. "I'm gonna put you where you can't get out."

Sherlock felt his heart race, not out of fear, but out of - damn him - anticipation. Did this mean what he thought it meant? If so...

"No," he said, hoping his dry sobbing sounded convincing enough. "No, I don't want it."

Seb laughed, dragging his young lover across the floor. "You don't want. You never want! But
you're gonna get it! Because naughty boys go in the closet!"

Sherlock tensed like an iron rail, pushing against the former soldier and hyperventilating. "No! Not there!"

"Yes there!" A broad hand slapped Sherlock's face, then opened the closet door. The space was enough for a grown man to stand in or sit down, as long as he did not move excessively, for there were nails jutting from the walls from slapdash carpentry. The young man tried to land as safely as he could as he was tossed in like an bag of laundry.

"Sleep well," Moran all but sang out mockingly as he slammed the door, ignoring the cries beyond the wood. As done many times before, he grabbed a nearby chair and propped it against the door, the backrest insinuated beneath the doorknob. If Sherlock tried to escape, the scraping of the furniture against floorboards would be loud enough to wake his captor... who would punish him again for his impudence.

Sherlock, careful where he pressed with his bare skin, gave a few more cries of torment, then eased into a whimper. Seemingly satisfied, Sebastian walked away, his footsteps growing quieter as he entered the loo and did his business. The young man ceased his whimpering and listened to his lover urinating, then carrying through with the rest of his bedtime routine. In less than ten minutes, the military man was retiring to his bed, the springs creaking with his weight. With a click, the light seeping through the sliver of space between door and floor disappeared. Only when Sebastian finally began snoring did Sherlock allow himself a sigh of relief.

The cramped space of the closet would make sleeping incredibly uncomfortable, and he always awoke with a dreadful kink in his neck after every night within. Still, he hoped his frantic attempts at resisting had convinced Seb. If the older man somehow got wise to his deception, if he realized that Sherlock had been putting on an act of fearing the closet, he would doubtlessly stop. He would find something much worse. No, Sherlock welcomed the tiny dark space.

Sebastian continued to snore, and as horrible and erratic as the colonel could be, he at least did not beat Sherlock in his sleep. By such logic, Sherlock should have thus been comforted by the sound of the snores, but it was still a reminder that his abuser was just a short distance away.

Instead he desperately clung to the notion of the small, dark space around him, welcoming his sweet little prison. It was familiar to him, and though it brought him back to places in his past that were terrible and frightening, those memories still had moments of solace. He remembered hiding in closets to avoid certain mean drunkards, and he felt his battered, bruised head begin to lull, immediately soothed. The bad people couldn't find him here. As he fell in and out of unsteady sleep, he almost swore he could feel arms around him, holding him still, and a breath at his ear as the heart of the arms' owner hammered against his back.

TBC...
Chapter 40

Chapter Summary

Mycroft continues to negotiate with the doctors about Sherlock's care. John makes his presence known.

Chapter 40

Mycroft slept until morning, though whether or not he rested was another matter entirely. Anthea had stepped forward to check him into the hotel the previous night, as she had picked up on the chaos that was clearly brewing in his mind. The establishment was not incredibly shabby, and for a moment he considered just falling into the bed without bothering with a sleeping pill, but he knew the moment he put his head down he would fall into an endless spiral of those chaotic thoughts, and then he'd be of no use to anyone in the morning.

He woke by the alarm on his phone, finding hospitality's wake-up courtesy call unnecessary, and promptly rose to take a shower. The main windows were sealed shut, of course, but a tiny window in the bathroom had hinges and a screen for ventilation. Mycroft realized, however, that he should have kept it closed. Immediately amidst the scents of soaps and shampoo was a stench, like soggy moldering refuse. Shutting the window despite the inevitable steam fog, he knew the odour had to have come from the supposedly scenic river the hotel overlooked.

Even the Thames did not smell this foul.

Finishing his shower, he allowed himself a rare frivolous thought of inhaling the shampoo like cocaine in order to rid his nostrils of the offending smell, then found himself wondering what else the locals could withstand if they regularly dealt with that river.

Though a coffee maker was readily available in his room, alas the options for tea were limited. He headed downstairs to the dining hall, where his choices were sadly only slightly more varied. Hopefully the temperature of the water would kill anything which might be thriving within the teabags.

Mycroft had put his mobile phone on mute to give himself a semblance of peace and quiet, and it was hardly a surprise that he had over a dozen missed calls from Whitehall by the time he settled down for breakfast. He'd have to delegate even more of his work to Anthea in order to cope with the increased workload now that he had Sherlock's care to arrange as well.

He had received no calls from the hospital, which could only mean Sherlock's condition was unchanged. Mycroft felt ambivalent about it. Part of him - the biggest part - hoped for a speedy recovery, but another, hidden part wished that Sherlock would remain comatose for the rest of his life simply so that Mycroft did not have to deal with the consequences. If he'd been one to carry sentiment, he almost would have been ashamed of his thoughts. Mycroft Holmes was never one to take the easy way out because he did not want to work hard. Unlike Sherlock. Realizing his bitterness, he pushed those thoughts aside.

He finished his breakfast quickly and in silence, doing his best to ignore the fact that the tea was
watery and the scones tasted like dry paper towel. He decided it didn't matter. What he needed at this point was carbohydrates to provide energy for his brain and last him through until lunchtime.

Mycroft politely declined a refill of tea from the dining hall wait staff and headed back up to his room to make a phone call to the hospital.

He was ambivalent - as he often had been in the ways of the Americans - about his trust in the medical system of this shoddy area. On the one hand, he surmised he would not be shocked at any mistakes by the staff, but on the other, he hoped that they would be at least be bloody professional about it.

Holding back a sigh, Mycroft called the hospital and was directed to Sherlock's doctor.

"Yes, Mr. Holmes, hello," Nasim greeted him.

"What is the state of my brother?" Mycroft calmly asked, skipping the pleasantries before they could begin.

"Well, he's still stable, all of his vital signs are very good," the doctor replied. "There was even a moment of consciousness..."

"When?" Mycroft's tone was curt and threatening to excuse all good will.

"Around 4:45. He was understandably in distress because of his unfamiliar surr"--

"Why was I not called?" The civil servant interrupted him. "You were to contact me if anything important occur, and Sherlock regaining consciousness, much less waking in distress is important."

"He was only awake for a minute, maybe less," Nasim explained, obviously backtracking.

"We placed him under sedation, we thought it best since he was upset and you weren't there."

Mycroft held back the urge to sigh into the phone.

"I gave you very precise instructions, Dr. Nasim, and you failed to follow them," Mycroft told the attending surgeon in no uncertain terms. He'd spent a considerable amount of time bandying words with medical staff over the years, practically always regarding Sherlock's care, and doling out reprimands came almost as naturally to him as breathing. There was one vital difference, however. This was America, not Great Britain. His authority did not extend nearly as far on American soil and if he attempted to call in favours just to spite certain people, it might put a crick in international relations.

"You should have alerted me," he continued, gripping the receiver to the point of whitening knuckles.

"I was not present at the time. The decision was made by my colleague, Dr. Sandstrom," Nasim explained, a hint of defensiveness creeping into his voice. "You may voice any concerns you have to him, but he'll give you the exact same answer I'm giving you now. It was a medical decision, and Dr. Sandstrom was the attending physician. It was his call to make."

Mycroft deliberated threatening to bring up the question of misconduct to the hospital review board, but he reined in his momentary anger, realizing that cooperation and diplomacy were undoubtedly the best methods to achieve results in times like this. Unnecessary antagonism was counter-productive.
"Did he say anything while he was awake?" Mycroft asked, hoping the answer would help rule out any kind of brain damage. Sherlock had been lucky enough to keep his cognitive and motor abilities intact after Moran's brutal attempt on his life, and he had cheated death on many occasions following that. Though Mycroft's temperament did not allow him to believe in nonsensical concepts like karma or fate, he was sometimes plagued by the nagging feeling that someday Sherlock was going to run out of luck. Perhaps that day had indeed arrived.

"No, nothing," said Nasim. "Your brother hadn't yet been extubated at the time, so he was unable to speak. But he was visibly agitated and nearly pulled his IV out. Had he not been sedated, he could and probably would have exacerbated his injuries."

"Has he been extubated now?"

"Yes, at 6:23 this morning. His respiration rate is normal, and his oxygen saturation is also within limits of normal range, considering--"

"Yes, thank you, Doctor," Mycroft broke in. He would rather be briefed on the specifics concerning his brother's progress and health status in person, and he expected to be as soon as he arrived at the hospital. "I'll be there in twenty minutes. We can continue this discussion then."

He hung up before the doctor could get another word in and instead speed-dialed Anthea, ordering her to get him a taxi. Mycroft loathed having to wait for menial things like transport with nothing to do in the meantime. With a small amount of luck, his leased car along with its own chauffeur would be readily accessible by midday.

Of course for all he knew, private chauffeuring in this town would mean a rusty old lorry truck. He pinched the bridge of his nose; pessimism and stress from the situation was definitely getting to him. His expectations were exceeded when he received a text not ten minutes later from Anthea, reporting the taxi's arrival. Sighing, he checked himself in the mirror - grimacing - one more time before leaving his room, joining with his assistant, and exiting the Hampton Inn. He noted a wrinkle of Anthea's nose and knew that at least he was not the only one perturbed by the river.

Meanwhile, the stench was not quite so offensive inside this particular vehicle. Mycroft wondered if perhaps he was simply becoming desensitized. Within seconds, however, he detected a specific scent and, glancing toward the front of the cab, located an aerosol can with a flowery pink illustration. At least this driver was making an effort, if a dreadfully lazy one.

The sooner they could leave this city, the better. But that matter was entirely up to Sherlock.

Though some nurses welcomed them to the unit where Sherlock was being kept and cared for, Nasim did not seem to be present when the pair arrived. He was likely seeing to the business of another patient, but Mycroft considered the fleeting but still amusing thought that the doctor was actively avoiding him out of fear. Even so, the civil servant was eager to embrace the opportunity to spend some time (relatively) alone with his unconscious brother.

"He'll be right over," a deeply tanned young female nurse informed him and his PA, speaking of Nasim.

"Fine," Mycroft said coolly, glancing through the window at his brother's motionless form before reaching for the door.

Sherlock looked no different than the previous night, with the exception of the ventilator being gone. In its place was a simple nasal cannula, securing a flow of supplemental oxygen to aid the younger
Holmes' respiration. Mycroft could not see a portable oxygen canister and thus assumed the oxygen was delivered through a wall connection via a flowmeter. Sherlock's breathing was slightly laboured, but considering the amount of dirt extracted from his airways, anything less than "laboured" would have been a miracle.

Mycroft had never believed in miracles.

The younger Holmes' hands lay placidly on top of the bedspread, clearly having been arranged that way by the hospital staff after his brief return to consciousness and subsequent meltdown. Amongst the numerous hoses and monitoring equipment surrounding his brother, Mycroft spotted a translucent plastic bag containing a yellowish liquid attached to one side of the hospital bed. His gaze followed - not without a certain amount of disgust - the flexible silicone tube leading away from the drainage bag and disappearing under the sheet.

Of course Sherlock had been catheterized; anything else would have been unthinkable given the severity of his injuries, although the elder Holmes wondered if the doctors had been so eager to go ahead with the procedure if they'd known about Sherlock's absolute hatred of wearing a latex tube in his urethra. The urinary catheter - same as the IV - faced the very real possibility of being forcibly yanked out once Sherlock was made aware of their existence and regained enough of his motor skills to do it himself.

"Mr. Holmes."

Mycroft turned his head toward the slightly accented voice of the orthopedic surgeon primarily responsible for Sherlock's care. Dr. Nasim wore a white coat on top of his scrubs and his body language suggested he was in a hurry. Most likely he had at least one surgery scheduled for the afternoon, and Mycroft intensely disliked wasting anybody's time, so he went straight to the point, skipping any and all pleasantries.

"Dr. Nasim," he said in acknowledgement with a slight inclination of his head. "I want you to tell me if it would be safe - from a medical aspect - to give my brother something to counteract the barbiturates responsible for keeping him asleep."

"It's possible, of course, but I cannot make a decision on my own. I'd have to consult my superiors."

Of course. Mycroft's lips thinned for less than a second. Consultation might lead to a battle of characters, and he had enough experience in hospitals to know that sometimes the egos of doctors outdid those of politicians.

Looking back down at his brother, his eyes scanned over every injury. A battle strategy diagram of wounds. Sherlock seemed well enough to be awoken... if he were any normal human being. But the tragic reality was that he was not normal, and his very probable frenzied reaction was going to prove disastrous when he had so many things attached to him. Mycroft glanced at the surgical drain leading away from his brother's scalp and wondered if the same would have to be done to the stump which was once a leg.

It had to happen eventually, he conceded to himself. Unless Sherlock simply stayed asleep, never having to worry about the agonies that came with the trauma. But that was the option only a coward would take, no matter how many times he could weakly excuse it to himself as doing his little brother a favor.

Damn it all, why did this even happen in the first place? If Watson had not gone on this damnable holiday...
If Sherlock hadn't been a child and bloody followed him and changed the itinerary.

"Please consult them then," he finally told the doctor. "I wish to have him revived."

Nasim left, and Mycroft was once again left alone with his unconscious sibling. Sherlock looked slightly less like a gross and mutilated corpse now that he had been cleaned and had his wounds dressed, but even now it was painfully obvious that parts of his skin would be left with permanent scarring.

Sherlock habitually gave off an air of not caring about his "transport", but Mycroft knew the truth where others did not: Sherlock was on all accounts very vain, and being left scarred on top of physically disabled would be a hard blow to his ego. The younger Holmes had throughout his life received attention and admiration for his slim, athletic, well-proportioned physique, and regardless of whether Sherlock would ever admit to it, even to himself, he valued his appearance highly. A broken body, even if it still housed a brilliant mind, was worth nothing to someone of Sherlock's constitution.

Mycroft both wanted Nasim to hurry up as well as to postpone the inevitable. He took a seat in one of the uncomfortable plastic visitors' chairs and suddenly felt a dire need for a cup of strong, black coffee, awful though it was in this region. Lunch was still several hours away, and he needed something to sustain him until then. It was tantalizing to head down to the cafeteria and order something high-calorie and sugary from their appetizing if somewhat limited menu, but Mycroft did not want to sabotage his diet, not when he'd finally managed to reach his target weight after so many years of carrying excess pounds. He could resist whatever cravings that came over him. The ability to do that was what always separated him from his brother.

Well-aware that it might take several hours until he received an answer from Nasim and his superiors, Mycroft fiddled with his phone and sent a quick text to Anthea asking her to bring him a cup of coffee. He would have liked a croissant to go with that but quickly shoved those thoughts into the far recesses of his mind. A cup of coffee would do just fine.

Anthea asked no questions, and not quite two minutes later, Mycroft was holding a paper cup full of steaming hot coffee, which he experimentally sipped once it had cooled down to sustainable levels. His PA dutifully stood by him, obviously awaiting further instructions. Mycroft had a feeling she wanted to tell him something.

"Anything else?" he asked with a slight scowl.

"One thing, sir. I've received a number of voicemail messages from John Watson. He's asking about your brother. What would you like me to tell him?"

Sighing, Mycroft lifted a hand, a clear gesture that he be handed the phone. Anthea complied and he listened over the past few messages. The earlier voicemail entries were the usual demands to know what was going on, the whereabouts and condition of Sherlock, and so on, but the most recent was not only the longest but most specific.

"I may not be a genius like you or your brother or even your great aunt, I'm sure, but I know a little how you operate. And if you're still in the US like you clearly bloody are, then it's clear you found Sherlock and he must be bloody alive. So if it isn't too much bloody trouble, I would appreciate if you TELL ME WHATS HAPPENING, I'm fucking telling you."

Mycroft pursed his lips at the message and visualized a hedgehog on its back and angrily squealing, even more so when Watson's voice was still strained from the use of a ventilator. The temper tantrums of a useless minder for his brother was not what he needed to deal with at present. Well...
not completely useless, but Mycroft could care less about that minute detail.

*Know a little about how I operate, do you?*

He decided he might as well use the well-practiced method of 'restrained truths'. He used this method all of the time in his line of work, and it was quite simple. Be honest, reveal little, and rely on the other person's assumptions to do the rest.

A shame he could not simply text via a landline, but alas. Rising from his seat, he left the room, dialed the number on a nearby public phone, and listened to the ring. A female staff member answered.

"I've been receiving a number of messages from a patient by the name of John Watson. I would like to leave him a message."

Waiting for her to acquire a pen and paper, he gave her the information:

"Yes, he's alive. His current condition requires privacy."

The woman repeated the message and asked if anything else should be written, but Mycroft politely concluded his phone call and the conversation came to an end. He knew full well that John would not leave things at that, but he frankly dealt with worse people for a living.

*  

John's heart made an extra beat when he was informed by a nurse that he had a message waiting for him, happy to finally be acknowledged by Sherlock's condescending windbag for a brother, but also terribly anxious about the contents of the message. Though Mycroft's continued presence in the US was likely to mean good news, there was a nagging voice in the back of John's head that kept telling him Mycroft was staying simply to have Sherlock's body prepared for transport.

"Yes, he's alive. His current condition requires privacy."

The nurse read the scribbled message for him, clearly oblivious of the subject matter. John balled his functioning left hand into a fist.

"That's all?" he sputtered, feeling a strong urge to want to throttle Mycroft Holmes. It was surpassed only by the even stronger urge to end the lives of the abominable men who had done such terrible things to Sherlock. *His* Sherlock. Who was now apparently off-limits to him. That bastard Mycroft. That wretched dastardly prick.

"Yes, that's it. Are you alright, mister? You look kinda pale." The nurse took a hesitant step toward him, hand stretched out in front of her, but the look in John's eyes made her stop dead in her track.

"Leave, please," he rasped out.

"But, you…"

"Now! Get out! Go! GO!" John's lungs burned from the strain of having to raise his voice and he was loath to frighten a woman who was innocent of everything except delivering Mycroft's despicable and dismissive message, but he could not help himself at this moment. He needed to be alone.

The nurse left without further ado. John hoped he had not scared her badly enough to have her call security on him, but it would not be a surprise at this point. Nothing would. Nothing mattered, either.
Except Sherlock.

Leaning back in his hospital bed, now practically drenched in sweat, John reached for his oxygen mask. The first few lungfuls of pure oxygen managed to sate his damaged body's need for something his own lungs were currently unable to provide, but it did nothing to ease the turmoil in his mind.

Sherlock had been found, and he was alive, but that was the extent of the information Mycroft was willing to share. Did Mycroft blame John for what had happened? Was he justified in doing so? The questions were plentiful, and it seemed the elder Holmes was not willing to provide any answers. It meant John had to take matters into his own hands. He would start by asking for a list of hospitals within a hundred mile radius and then call up every single one of them and ask questions until he was given something - anything - to work with. He would get to it as soon as he'd regained enough energy to devote his full attention to the very daunting task.

John Watson, licensed physician and Captain of the Fifth Northumberland Fusiliers, slipped into an uneasy, fever-induced sleep which was consistently plagued by nightmares.

TBC...
Chapter 41

Chapter Summary

Another attempt is made at waking Sherlock.

Chapter 41

Mycroft sat quietly and calmly back in the room where his brother still lay unconscious, only looking up when the door opened to reveal Dr. Nasim. The physician was smiling, but doubt shone in his eyes.

"Mr. Holmes," he greeted the Englishman, "your request to revive your brother has been approved."

Ah. After the outburst last night, the doctor was hesitant to bring on a repeat, which was far from unlikely. Mycroft only hoped that they would not be trapped in a stupid cycle of Sherlock waking, panicking, and being sedated all over again. He had to rely on the shaky, but still possible chance of his own presence being able to prevent it.

"Very good," he finally replied, rising from his seat so that he could be within Sherlock's view for the awakening.

"He might react badly when he's awake," Nasim warned. "Since he woke badly last night..."

"And I would have been here to deal with it accordingly if someone had contacted me," Mycroft swiftly replied, a warning of his own clearly written in his expression. "Now please..."

Looking a little defeated, Nasim put his hands in his coat pockets and turned to a nurse.
"Becca, could you prepare 10 cc's of methylphenidate, please?"

The nurse assisting him complied, retrieving the solution as the doctor himself disengaged the IV bag of lactated Ringer solution with propofol.

"If we give him about ten minutes, he should come around by then," Nasim informed the elder Holmes brother as he injected the new chemical into Sherlock's IV.

The nurse was quickly dismissed, but Nasim did not seem to know what to make of himself. Doctor's ethics as well as hospital procedure demanded that he remain by his patient's side throughout the revival procedure, but on a personal level, Nasim was intimidated by the pervasive presence of the Ice-man and the younger Holmes' history of being uncontrollable and aggressive.

Mycroft's upturned senses registered every flicker of the second hand on the large, impersonal wall-clock situated above Sherlock's hospital bed as he waited for signs of increased consciousness in his sibling. He also observed Nasim; the doctor was displaying a variety of nervous tics, including but not limited to fingering almost obsessively on his stethoscope every few seconds and moving his pen in and out of his breast pocket. Having him in his constant field of vision was driving the already highly strung civil servant crazy.

"You're excused, Doctor," Mycroft said, his calm demeanor a sharp contrast to his current inner turmoil.
Nasim's head snapped up. "Sorry?"

"You may leave. No, let me rephrase that. I want you to leave. At once."

The orthopedic surgeon voiced a weak protest. It was in clear violation of protocol to leave a reviving patient unattended, and no doubt the possibility of getting a lawsuit filed against the hospital had surfaced in his mind. Mycroft wondered if the man knew he was as easy to read as an open book.

"I know how my brother's mind works," Mycroft explained. "If I let you remain here, it will be much more difficult to make him focus on the person he needs to be focusing on, namely me."

Sherlock's breathing rate had already gone up, and if that was any indication of his level of consciousness, he was due to wake up very soon.

"I take full responsibility for what happens," the elder Holmes continued. "You yourself or the hospital need not fear repercussions."

This was good enough of an explanation to Nasim, and the doctor went on his way with a mumbled encouragement to page him if something went amiss.

Mycroft slowly took a seat on the edge of Sherlock's bed, careful not to disrupt his brother's injured body in any way. The fingers of Sherlock's left hand twitched, and Mycroft could also observe a flutter of rapid eye movements behind Sherlock's closed eyelids. The area around his left eye was still swollen and horribly discoloured, but at least he should be able to open it… to a degree, anyway.

Mycroft tried to mentally prepare for the sight of Sherlock peering at him with blood-coloured eye-whites. Sherlock had, perhaps due to his mental illness, always been exceptionally sensitive to signs of rejection or contempt - real or imagined - on other people's faces, and Mycroft knew that his best efforts side, Sherlock would be able to tell if his sibling experienced disgust in response to his appearance.

Again Sherlock found himself trudging through what felt to him like a very tactile fog. As his awareness slowly, uncomfortably returned to him, he only found himself not wanting to move from where he had been for the past few hours.

No, I don't want to go, a voice in his brain whined. Why did he have to wake up anyway? Was it time for school?

Less than a second later he remembered the following in succession: there was no school. He was too old for that. He was an adult. He was Sherlock Holmes. He was Sherlock Holmes regaining consciousness. The last time he had been awake...

"Sherlock."

Mycroft's voice was instantly recognized, breaking Sherlock from his unsteady train of thought. The tangible fog still clinging around his brain left him assuming he was home, except that very telling smell was back. The smell he remembered from his last waking.

Finally opening his eyes, he grimaced, horrible unavoidable reality crashing down around him.

"Mycroft," he muttered, pain evident in his voice, though whether the pain was physical or otherwise was not yet known to his elder brother. Though is attempts at speech were greatly hindered by his trauma, his sibling caught enough of the word to decipher it.

"Yes, I'm here," Mycroft replied. His tone, though quiet, was not one of gentle reassurance, but rather plain confirmation; though a relative keeper of the peace of their home country and a born
diplomat, he was not exactly known for his bedside manner.

Sherlock moaned, the sound tapering into a whimper as he shut his eyes. He wanted to be asleep again, oblivious from the truth. He lifted a willowy, shaking hand towards his brother, grabbing at his sleeve and twisting.

"Far be it from me to ask unnecessary questions," Mycroft said, one of his own hands instinctively closing over the one which grasped him. "But do you know what's going on?"

Grip tightening, Sherlock ignored the query and began to lift himself. He did not care if his leg hurt, or that Mycroft was trying to stop him. He wanted to get up, he needed to...

Opening his eyes, he realized the reason behind the surreal pain and numbness of his limb. In his daze he thought his leg was all but dead from the knee down. No, this was much worse.

This was all too much. This was a nightmare.

His leg was not there at all.

Sherlock maintained his grip on Mycroft's sleeve and gradually tightened it to the point of whitening knuckles, as if his spasming muscles could wordlessly communicate the terror and helplessness he was feeling. Awareness of the pain wracking seemingly every single cell of his body permeated his senses, and he desperately wished he could go back to sleep.

"Mycroft," the younger Holmes repeated, and due to his cognitive haze, he initially failed to realize how distorted his pronunciation was, particularly regarding the consonants. Mycroft's name, spoken by him now, sounded more like "Nyy-clofth".

Mycroft's grip, initially intended to provide comfort, shifted into an attempt to restrain his brother. While Mycroft was relieved to discover no obvious deficits in the younger Holmes' motor control, Sherlock's injuries demanded that he remain relatively still for the time being. But being restrained only increased Sherlock's struggles. Another string of sounds escaped the injured detective's bruised, swollen lips, but this time even Mycroft was not able to discern any words.

"Calm down, Sherlock," he commanded, using his most authoritative tone of voice. It was the voice normally reserved for troublesome subordinates or difficult younger brothers.

Sherlock's typical response was increasing obstinacy, and had been so since he learned to speak, but there were a few rare occasions when the younger man was thrown off enough to actually listen and take heed. Mycroft hoped this would be one of those times.

But Sherlock continued to squirm beneath him like a slithering snake. A spray of tiny blood droplets hit the civil servant's sleeve when the catheter inserted into the back of Sherlock's hand was forcefully yanked out. Mycroft swore under his breath.

"Sherlock, listen"--

Talking would do no good, despite Mycroft's immediate reflex to reason with him. Still, the more Sherlock struggled, the worse he made the situation; technology monitoring his life signs continued to break loose.

The medical staff would be only be too glad to say goodbye to their patient when he finally departed, Mycroft considered. If he would finally depart.
Despite his poor state and compromised health, Sherlock fought as though at the zenith of his strength. In his distress he either noticed his impaired speech or had foregone speech entirely in his panic, because now he simply shouted and wailed. Nurses would very well be showing up at any moment and running straight into what likely looked like a failed exorcism, based on Sherlock's carrying on and agonized contorting alone.

A flicker of the past emerged in Mycroft's mind: an image of home, the home he and his brother knew decades ago. In the fleeting moment of regaining such a memory when the two of them were mere children, Mycroft Holmes responded to long practiced ritual. In a motion unbecoming of a dignified civil servant, he leapt onto the hospital bed and wrapped his arms around Sherlock's twisting body. Though he did not wish further physical harm, he knew he had to squeeze tightly or else his brother would break loose and try to hurl himself off the bed.

"Shh," he whispered. "We must be quiet now. Do you understand?" Mycroft held his grip, surprised at his own strength. After all, the younger Holmes was far stronger now than he had ever been the last time he needed to be restrained into stillness.

Sherlock had clearly regressed to a much younger version of himself, and Mycroft, whilst aware of the detrimental long-term effect of regression, knew that desperate times needed desperate measures. He had time to worry about the damage to Sherlock's psyche after he had managed to subdue his brother here and now.

Sherlock had not adopted the use of his middle-name until the age of sixteen, and in his current state of agitation, his memories were likely to be an amorphous, muddled mess. Perhaps, Mycroft thought, he would get through to his brother by calling him by his given name, like when Sherlock was a little boy.

"Will?"

The younger man's head snapped back, narrowly missing Mycroft's nose. For a moment fresh panic shone in his swollen, blood-shot eyes, and despite the gross state of Sherlock's delicate features, Mycroft would have recognized it instantly, anywhere in time. His brother only ever had look in his eyes when Father was near. Not one since Mr. Holmes the elder's premature death by drowning had anyone managed to goad a similar look of abject terror from the consulting detective.

Blood continued to seep from the perforated vein on the back of Sherlock's hand, onto the bed sheets and Sherlock's own naked skin. Mycroft could feel the raw, feverish heat radiating off of his brother's struggling body even through the several layers of cloth between them. The smell of sweat, terror, and hospital disinfectants made for one heady mixture in the small space, and Mycroft felt momentarily nauseated. At least the urinary catheter prevented any potential humiliating accidents involving bladder control from occurring.

Then again, knowing their luck, Sherlock would shit himself. Mycroft shoved the thought away and focused on his brother's distressed state, not to mention how to make it right. Perhaps not make it right, but to quiet it for a while.

"Will, I need you to understand that we're going to be very still," he said softly, his tone even and clear. "And we're going to be very quiet. And we're going to be very calm."

Quiet was good. Quiet meant that no one could get to them. No one could hurt them. They were safe there.

As promised by the memory, he stayed safe. The arms around him were strong and did not let go.
The smells and sounds of his surroundings did little to distract him in his little bubble of security.

He jolted at the sudden opening of a door, though Mycroft still held him fast. A nurse entered, confusion inherent on her face at the sight before her.

"We received an alert that his monitoring equipment wasn't working."

"Everything's alright," Mycroft said, though whether he directed this statement more to patient or medical staff was unknown. He looked up at the nurse. "He's awoken in emotional distress, but I've managed to calm him." He nodded to the younger man stiff as a coiled spring in his arms.

Still thrown off focus by the sight, the nurse pointed vaguely behind her.

"I'll alert the doctor on call."

"Don't," Mycroft ordered and figured he had to explain himself upon noting the surprised, skeptical look sported by the nurse. "Not yet. I've got this under control. Another stranger coming here to prod at him will only cause him further distress."

"But he's bleeding--"

"It's superficial," the elder Holmes ground out, body taut in his attempts to bodily restrain his brother and prevent further damage to the other's already badly mauled body. Now hyperventilating, Sherlock wrapped the long digits of his uninjured left hand around Mycroft's wrist and squeezed to the point of pain; whether it was a desperate attempt to break free or a silent plea for comfort was impossible to tell.

The nurse had left, but Mycroft had no doubt she would notify her superiors despite his urgent request not to. An American hospital could not afford being sued for malpractice, and the woman clearly valued her job enough not to risk such serious repercussions.

Mycroft hooked his leg around his brother's only existing one to keep him firmly secured, wondering if Sherlock had taken note of his missing limb just yet. How much of the situation did he comprehend? Mycroft had to remind himself that the inability to speak did not necessarily suggest the inability to communicate in other ways, despite the Holmes' obvious preference for oral communication.

Suddenly he had an idea, its success dependent on Sherlock's hearing as well as his ability to interpret spoken information. Mycroft knew there was a possibility of a language disorder - temporary or permanent - caused by the brain trauma despite Sherlock clearly having recognized him and his voice. There was only one way to find out. He decided to take advantage of his brother's spasmodic hold on his arm.

Mycroft spoke slowly, over-enunciating the syllables for clarity. "Do you know your name? Squeeze once for 'yes', and twice for 'no.'"

A few seconds passed, and the civil servant began to fear Sherlock hadn't understood the instructions. Then the fingers wrapped around his wrist delivered one very particular squeeze.

'Yes'.

Encouraged, Mycroft queried again. "Do you know who I am?"

Sherlock turned his head away, eyes shut in a grimace. He squeezed once.
The younger man's thoughts were but autumn leaves in a gust of wind. As Sherlock struggled to calm himself and get his bearings straight, he wished he could speak. He wished his eyesight were good enough to communicate through a notebook. He wished he had never followed John on this journey.

Sherlock clung to his brother in a desperate but weak grip as he attempted to focus. The strangely random thought occurred to him that for having such issues with his weight, Mycroft had always possessed very thin, delicate wrists. The consulting detective could distinctly remember those wrists, recall the smell of almond moisturizing cream on them when both brothers were young.

Mycroft hesitated before speaking again, but finally asked an unavoidable question.

"Do you remember what happened to you?"

Sherlock wanted to lie, both to Mycroft and himself. He did not want to remember anything from his stay in this damnable country. But his brother would no doubt retell what he knew of the story. The younger Holmes finally squeezed once.

If only he could return to that sweet oblivion where he lay just minutes before.

Mycroft spoke again, likely asking another question, but Sherlock, now fighting consciousness, was unable to make sense of the words. Everything sounded like a garbled mess, and it took all of the injured detective's effort not to zone out and retreat - possibly forever - into a secure little corner of his mind palace, where the evils of the world were unable to reach him.

"Yes or no, Sherlock?" the elder Holmes pressed, clearly waiting for his brother to deliver the correct amount of squeezes.

Considering he had not picked up on Mycroft's question, he could not reliably answer "Yes" or "No" now, but lacked the means to communicate it to his brother. Frustrated by his limitations and increasingly aware of the pain wracking his body, Sherlock did the only thing in his power - he lashed out at Mycroft and attempted to break out of his protective grasp.

"Answer the question, Sherlock," the older man admonished, but the imploration - conveying more than enough patience, according to Mycroft himself - did not have the desired effect. The civil servant swore under his breath as he once again had to increase his efforts just to keep Sherlock from inflicting further harm upon himself.

The muffled curses, undignified for a gentleman of Mycroft's staunch character, were not enough to drive Sherlock over the edge, but the disappointed sigh, undoubtedly accompanied by a familiar eye-roll, which followed them was.

Only one man in the world could make Sherlock feel so small, so young, so stupid, so… entirely useless without even uttering any words, and callous bastard that he was, Mycroft always exploited it to the limit. Unable to launch a verbal comeback, Sherlock felt more powerless than ever. He wanted to scream, kick, scratch, tear, bite… Anything to unleash the overpowering feeling of anger and helplessness forced so cruelly upon him.

The sudden proximity of Mycroft's left hand caused him to act on pure impulse, and he bit into the limb, catching his brother completely off guard. For a brief moment he thought he could taste blood and was instantly assaulted by an assorted flash of recent memories, most of which involved the deformed faces of his inhuman captors leering down at him and trying to make him eat.

Mycroft's angry cry of pain brought him back to the present, and Sherlock fully expected to be struck
across the face for his insolence. Mycroft had struck him before, twice, if Sherlock's memory still served him correctly, and only when he'd truly deserved it. Sherlock would freely admit to having struck his brother many more times than vice versa. This particular provocation, however, was not something that Sherlock expected his sibling to tolerate without retaliation, and therefore it temporarily stunned him into silence when Mycroft's hold on him softened and he felt the distinctive nuzzle of a pointed nose against his scalp, intended to provide comfort. Awkward and clumsy though it was, there was no mistaking the intent. The Ice-man was attempting to show affection; something that hadn't happened since Sherlock was…

"Shhh… Sherlock, calm down," Mycroft said, speaking in soft tones so different from his usual commanding staccato delivery. "Do you want to tell me something?"

He shook his head in a negative gesture, although the purpose of the response remained vague.

Finally he slowly removed his arms from the hold and put his hands forward, the one restrained by a cast stiffly zig-zagging and twirling over an open palm: the miming of written words. Mycroft doubted just how well his brother could write at the moment, but Sherlock was eager to communicate more than just a yes or no.

"Yes, let me find you the proper means to do so..." Mycroft slowly, cautiously released his grip, knowing that at any moment Sherlock could again attempt something rash. Careful to listen to his brother's movements as he searched for a pen and paper, he found a large notepad amongst the magazines just outside the door. Yes, this would work.

Hurrying back before the younger Holmes got any other ideas, he was about to remove a pen from the inner pocket of his jacket when he saw that he was already too late.

Where the IV needle had been attached was now being irritated by the young genius, forcing blood to resurface even more profusely. Sherlock's vision was compromised, as was the strength in his body, but he "wrote" in large letters, smearing the claret across his sheet. At the current size of the writing, Mycroft was able to decipher the crude penmanship across the pathetic thread-count linens.

JOHN

Mycroft kept his expression like a blank slate, not only from the grotesque sight before him, but the question put forth. He hardly wanted to think of Dr. Watson at the moment, his own emotions barging in against rational thought.

When his elder brother did not immediately answer, Sherlock's impatience came forth in the frenetic smearing of the name.

That blasted little midget. It was still tempting to put the full blame for what had happened on John Watson, but there was no way the rational part of Mycroft's brain could justify it. Sherlock himself bore the brunt of the responsibility for what had happened to him.

Mycroft quickly thought over the options available to him. If he refused to answer, Sherlock would become even more agitated, which in turn might impede on his recovery, but if he told him the truth, Sherlock would undoubtedly demand to see John.

John - even his name was boring and unoriginal - was an unassuming, simple, dull little man who had nothing of importance to offer the world, and yet he had managed to make Sherlock Holmes fall in love with him. Mycroft could not quite put his finger on it, but something about that realization infuriated him. What did his brother see in a former army surgeon whose most interesting topic of discussion revolved around the various types of rashes and upper respiratory infections he had...
diagnosed during his shift at the clinic at which he worked? Mycroft had never taken Sherlock for the type to… settle.

Sherlock proceeded to slam his cast-covered forearm hard against the side bars of his hospital bed, pulling Mycroft from his thoughts. A sickening crack of something breaking could be heard, and the elder Holmes dearly hoped it was the cast and not the ulna Dr. Nasim had spent hours piecing together in the operating theatre. He hated the thought of Sherlock losing another limb due to his own stupidity.

Mycroft flung himself at the bed again to restrain his brother once more, but this time he jabbed at the red button to summon the staff, having realized - somewhat regretfully - that he would not be able to manage the situation on his own. On the other hand, Sherlock's tantrum had given him the opportunity to dodge the urgent question concerning John Watson, and for that he was grateful.

Sherlock's outburst proved that gentility would no longer be effective. All Mycroft could presently do was hold on.

Medical staff wasted no time in their response to the call button and arrived within less than a minute. Whilst one nurse attempted to retrieve his IV so that it could be reinserted, another joined the civil servant in holding Sherlock down. The look on her face, more a frown than a glare, was directed right at Mycroft. She was looking to him for an explanation. Granted, the smeared blood on the sheets justified her mystification.

"He became frustrated," he said, not waiting for any questions, accusatory or otherwise. He expected the usual subsequent questions. The inquiries of just how often Sherlock gets "frustrated", the demand to know what his older brother had done to provoke him. Instead, the women acted upon the matter at hand, recognizing that calming Sherlock was their major priority. Mycroft surmised that perhaps the nurse staff had been made aware of their patient's earlier outburst. Either that, or they were quite used to patient tantrums in this area of the state, likely from use of methamphetamines.

"Sir," the other nurse, realizing very quickly that Sherlock would never stay still for reinsertion, let alone keep the needle in place. "We're going to need to turn your brother over to sedate him."

Your brother, Mycroft noted. His suspicions that Sherlock's general situation had been explained prior were confirmed.

With the combined effort from both Mycroft and the second nurse, Sherlock, despite his raging and flailing, was turned onto his side as the first nurse prepared a syringe. After their patient's bare backside was exposed, the first nurse drove the needle into one of the soft, pale cheeks.

A few more seconds of fervent thrashing, and then the squirming body of the young detective went limp from the drug. Mycroft breathed a sigh of relief when he was finally able to let go and straighten himself. Normally he would have been ashamed of his brother's appalling behavior, but right now the elder Holmes could not be bothered with keeping up appearances; Sherlock was going to reach a state of notoriety amongst the hospital staff after this no matter what he said, and Mycroft could hardly blame them. Nurses were underpaid and overworked as was.

The older of the two nurses suspiciously glanced at the blood-stained sheets and then proceeded to view the spray of blood on Mycroft's shirt.

"He woke up disoriented and I had to restrain him," Mycroft said with a hint of defensiveness. Who was this woman to be giving him dirty looks? "His IV was torn out."

He angled his hand so that she wouldn't be able to see the bite mark inflicted by Sherlock. Now that
the rush of adrenaline was fading, the wound painfully throbbed in time with his heartbeat. He would tend to it later, perhaps clean it with peroxide to prevent infection. God only knew the kind of pathogens that could be found in Sherlock's mouth, especially after something like this.

The nurses reinserted the IV needle into a different vein a few inches from the previous site and hooked the younger Holmes to another saline bag. The cast on his right arm was found to be cracked but not so damaged as to require removal.

When Nasim arrived, Mycroft pointedly stayed out of the doctor's way as he checked Sherlock's vitals and eventually discharged the nurses, who were more than happy to get away from their troublesome patient. Well aware that he had wanted Sherlock awoken against the physician's recommendations, Mycroft did not attempt to interrupt or defend himself when Nasim addressed him.

"He's stable for now, but we don't want a repeat of this, so until your brother has come to his senses, he will be placed in restraints," Nasim announced, tight-lipped and severe.

Restraints for a one-legged patient? Mycroft thought derisively but did not speak the words out loud. He agreed it was the best option available.

"Fine," he simply said.

Nasim made a point out of looking straight at the bite mark on the civil servant's hand. "Do we need to worry about more of that?" he asked gravely.

"No," Mycroft said, omitting to mention the numerous incidents that had once earned Sherlock a week in solitary confinement while in rehab, as well as the nickname "the hitter, spitter and shitter". That was a long time ago, and Mycroft hoped such behavior was indeed in the past, but given how his brother had regressed to the level of a disgruntled toddler, he couldn't be sure.

He left Sherlock’s hospital room in search for Anthea, whom he found calmly pacing the corridor by the nurse's station. She for once did not have her phone out, which suggested that she had heard the racket going on in Sherlock's hospital room and was expecting to be approached by her employer. Mycroft gave her a quick once-over before getting straight down to business. He did not attempt to conceal his bloodied shirt or hand, knowing that Anthea, ever perceptive despite her nonchalant disposition, was going to notice anyway.

"That list of recommended therapists," he said. "Let me look at it again."

Anthea produced the list as though she had envisaged that her boss would ask for it. He wearily skimmed through the names, recalling details as his eyes retread their steps. Though his brain still worked as unswervingly as ever, already he was growing physically exhausted by the day's events. He would be changing attire as soon as possible, and the mere sight of him would without question mean a new suit would be awaiting him at the hotel thanks to Anthea... if the competence of this damnable city's postage workers and hotel staff could be relied upon, anyway.

As he reviewed the list, Mycroft returned to a certain name repeatedly. Said professional was one he had heard of before, for positive reasons, unlike most reputable people the civil servant had heard of. The good doctor's repertoire of education and achievements were impressive alone, almost unnaturally so. Either he was an impeccable self-promoter, or he truly was as remarkable as he seemed.

We'll see, after Sherlock has his time with you, Mycroft thought cynically, despite the hope that crept in the back of his mind.
Checking the location of practice, Mycroft lifted an eyebrow. Almost as though the man were too good to be true, he was also located relatively close by: still within the state of Maryland.

"Get me more on this one," he said, tapping the name and handing the list back to his assistant, turning to leave without another word. Telling her to keep him updated on his brother would have been superfluous.

TBC...
Chapter 42

Chapter by AmandaLee

Chapter Summary

A look at the formative years of The British Government and his little brother.

Whilst Anthea pulled any and all references possible for the potential therapist, Mycroft sat staring at Sherlock. The younger Holmes was asleep, his IV back in place at the elbow as though his outburst had never happened, save for the new bruises splotching the skin like excessive watercolor. Part of Mycroft had been surprised that the needle had not been inserted at the forearm or hand, not only from Sherlock's dehydration, but for the likely poor condition of his system from so many years of substance abuse. If Sherlock Holmes was good at one thing, it was the capacity to exceed people's expectations.

Though the lack of movement beneath his eyelids indicated Sherlock did not presently dream, his brother had to wonder what was unfolding in his brain when he did. Was the flurry of images stifled by his sedation, or did they still lurk unnoticed by the outside world? Either way, his little brother had always been a victim of disruptive sleep. If Mycroft were to nod off, he half expected Sherlock to wake him with some problem. It had happened so often when they were young...

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Mycroft was not yet quite asleep when he heard the sound of a doorknob being turned, immediately followed by soft, padding footfalls. He considered faking sleep and hope his brother would eventually give up and leave his room, but he realized it was a vain hope; even though he was only four years old, William would never fall for such an easy ploy.

The little boy quickly crossed the distance to his older sibling's bed and unashamedly shook the considerably larger body bundled up underneath the comforter. Mycroft emitted a long-suffering groan and turned around, slowly reaching for the nightlight. William was so… bold. At almost five, he should have picked up on the idea of boundaries and personal space by now, but he behaved every day as if such didn't exist. At least in regard to Mycroft.

"Yes, William, what is it?" the red-headed boy asked, eyes squinting at the sudden shift from complete darkness to dim light from a low-wattage bulb. As expected, his little brother stood by the bed in his pyjamas, two bright red spots glowing on his pale, freckled cheeks. It had happened again. Mycroft needn't even glance down to know his assessment had been correct.

When the child finally turned to meet his gaze, the embarrassment was heavy in his eyes.

"Mycroft, I had an accident..." William began, his voice small and weak, perhaps hoping it would pass by unnoticed by his brother.

"I figured as much, Will, my dear," Mycroft said and beckoned his brother closer. The first whiff of urine could be detected when William came within arm's reach. The stores offered no baby nappies in his brother's size, so the Holmeses had started ordering them via mail from strange places around the country. However, acquiring the nappies was the least of their worries. William being almost five
and still needing them was a much more pressing concern.

"I had a nightmare," the boy explained, as if rationalizing the embarrassing phenomenon of bed wetting would somehow make a difference. William had memorized most of the period table of elements and already mastered basic algebra while his peers struggled to learn the alphabet, and yet he remained unable to control his bladder. Oh, the irony…

"I know, dear," Mycroft said, struggling to keep the judgment out of his voice. He stood up and reached for his little brother's hand. "Let's get you cleaned up then."

The house was dark, silent and still when two shapes, one large and one small, holding hands, emerged in the dimly lit doorway and began to make their way toward the bathroom. William's keen eyes nervously darted around their darkened surroundings, searching for signs of their father's presence.

Mycroft's heart momentarily constricted at the display of blatant fear, and he bent down to whisper in his brother's ear. "Daddy had a lot to drink tonight," he explained. "He's fast asleep by now. He can't hear us." He was fully aware of the inappropriateness of detailing their father's drinking habits to a four-year-old child, but William was far ahead of other four-year-olds in his cognitive development and had no trouble grasping the concept of inebriation. It didn't mean, however, that he could comprehend the emotional aspect of his father's behavior. At sixteen, Mycroft wasn't fully convinced that even he could.

Silent - perhaps refusing to speak now that they had left the imagined safety of his brother's room - William finally nodded and picked up the pace of his walk. They entered the bathroom, closing the door behind them before turning on a light. This routine had been practiced down to a well memorized step-by-step process.

Giving William an outright bath at this time of night may cause a little too much noise, Mycroft reasoned. Flannels and a sink would have to do for now; the bath itself would have to wait until morning.

"Let's proceed then," the older Holmes quietly advised, lightly jostling the small hand in his own in a playful manner to try and lighten the somber, tense mood. Only when William jostled back did Mycroft let go and turn the tap on, waiting for the water to reach the right temperature: hot, but not too hot, as his sibling had instructed in the past.

Water and flannel had been easy enough to get through, but the boy's eyes focused throughout on the little cabinet door beneath the sink itself. William knew what was under that sink, as he had it well memorized: cleaning products (both for people and surfaces), a spare toilet brush for when the original would need to be replaced, a set of sponges of various textures, extra bars of soap wrapped in wax paper, and a package he had hoped he would never have to use again. Clearly tonight had proved otherwise, but he did not want to believe that.

Mycroft placed William's soiled pyjama bottoms in a plastic bag before dumping them in the laundry bin and then turned to the arduous task of cleaning his little brother. William had developed a diaper rash on his buttocks and groin, making his delicate, pale skin puffy, red and sore. The Holmeses had attempted to treat the troublesome condition with various ointments and powders throughout the years, but Mycroft knew that as long as his brother was required to wear diapers, the rashes were prone to returning.

William stayed blissfully quiet throughout the procedure of getting cleaned until his older brother reached into the cabinet to take out a fresh diaper for him to wear. The little boy's previously placid face scrunched up at the sight of the hated object and morphed into an expression of pure disgust, and before Mycroft could react, William lashed out, knocking the folded piece of plastic and stuffing
from his hands.

"No! I don't want it!" the four-year-old yelled, stomping his bare feet against the bathroom tile floor for added effect.

Mycroft's first impulse was to slap William at the back of the head for his audacity, but he quickly quenched it, not wanting to take after their odious father. He had been rudely pulled from his much-needed sleep and could already feel a budding headache forming behind his eyes, but he would not resort to physical violence. His brother did not respect him, and likely never would, but Mycroft was not going to lower himself to the level of his four-year-old sibling and use his larger frame to bully William into submission. He was not a brute, after all. He was supposed to be the reasonable one. The adult.

"William," he admonished. "We already had one accident, and we don't need another."

"No!" William cried with continued defiance. "It burns, Mycroft! I don't want it!"

"William," Mycroft hissed, his voice low and quiet despite its sharpness. "Our father will wake and he will seek us out if you carry on like this."

His face read of deeply wanting to defy the need to be quiet. Though he resisted, the temptation was terrible. Mycroft would hate to find out how his brother would be as an adult... if he lived that long; William already gave the dreadful impression that he would get countless people cross with him in the future.

Little Will tried to see things his brother's way, but what about his way? Certainly the cream helped for his rash, and deep down he understood the purpose of the diapers for his inevitable accidents, but he resented the need for both, the sense that he was still being treated like a baby. Were he older, he might have realized the irony of his predicament.

Mycroft rubbed at his brow with his thumb and forefinger, deliberating. "What do you say to a deal?"

William looked up at him, interest piqued. As immature as he was, the youngest Holmes was intelligent, and he appreciated being spoken to like a grown-up.

"If you wear this for the rest of the night," Mycroft suggested, "then you can sleep in my bed with me."

The boy considered. The offer almost had a certain superstitious ring to it, as though his brother's bed were a little invisible hovel of protection. Protection from other accidents... from their father, possibly. William wanted to believe he was too old to believe in such things, but the notion was terribly persuasive.

Mycroft patiently waited for an answer while his little brother deliberated with a theatrically pensive expression on his young face. He was willing to spice the deal with a few additional touches if William refused, as the boy was known for driving a hard bargain, no doubt presently weighing the pros and cons in his mind.

William truly detested wearing the diaper, but he also cherished the times when he was allowed to sleep with his big brother. It had gone from being a frequent occurrence to an increasingly rare one, because their parents - particularly Father - did not agree with it. Father would say allowing such behaviour was infantilizing William and was totally inappropriate for a four-year-old. Mycroft would agree on principle, but he would have liked to point out that Father never had had to deal with the
consequences of his decision, as William never went to him for comfort. He never even noticed
William except when the boy did something to displease him, and was for all intents and purposes
not much of a father at all.

Suspiciously squinting with eyes that were unusual in both shape and colour, William peered up at
the older boy as if he was expecting Mycroft to purposely trick him.
"Bee can come too?" he asked.

Mycroft nodded, secretly relieved to have sealed the deal. "We can go get him after we've put on
your nappy."

"Fine." William reluctantly stayed in place while his big brother secured the diaper on him. He hated
everything about it; he hated how it restricted his movement, how it made his skin itchy and red, and
most of all he hated that it could be seen from the outside that he was wearing one underneath his
clothes. Almost no kids his size wore diapers anymore. Except for the ones with "special needs",
which was really just fancy adult-speak for saying that there was something wrong with them. There
was nothing wrong with him. He was not stupid, so why did he keep wetting himself?

"Alright then, let's go get Bee," Mycroft murmured and carefully held down the door handle to avoid
any unnecessary noise. He let out a breath he didn't realize he was holding when nothing but silence
greeted him outside the bathroom. It meant Father was still asleep. Thank goodness.

William, barefoot and naked except for his diaper, stopped dead in his track and tugged imploringly
on his brother's sleeve. "Pick me up, Mycroft," he demanded.

Almost sighing, the older of the two walked on for two more steps until he allowed the little luxury.
At least when William was lifted and carried along, he stayed still. Mycroft had to accept that at least
he had won in the trivial battle of getting the boy to wear a nappy. When Will demanded physical
comfort, he didn't just want it; he required it, at least in his own little mind, and if it meant he would
concede to the diaper, this was a small but welcome price to pay for the resulting victory.

However, once in his sibling's freckled arms, William gave the clear impression of shivering, a
motion which eased off within seconds as he clung like moss to the larger body. Of course, Mycroft
realized. Being in only a diaper, the boy was cold. Mycroft silently chastised himself for his biased
judgment. Someone of his sense and rationality should not have been so quick to be swayed by his
frustrations, even with someone as tiresome as his brother. He would have to watch himself in the
future for similar assumptions.

Latched to one another, they journeyed the rest of the brief way back to the boy's room, retrieved
"Bee" and a new set of pyjamas, and returned to the redheaded young man's bed.

Mycroft was glad he gave his little brother that toy in the first place. He had actually made the plush
whilst at school and named it himself. Bee had been short for Busby, chosen as such for the obvious
similarity to the words "buzz" and "bee". William, of course, preferred the nickname over his
brother's choice, which he had outright said was stupid. Still, he scooped up the toy in his arms near
immediately upon being presented with it for the first time, so Mycroft's gesture was not a total loss.

He nearly shook his head. His little brother insisted on not being treated like a baby or even the small
child he was, and yet he still needed comfort from physical contact and plush companions.

Mycroft held out the sleeves of the pyjama top to facilitate his brother's dressing, despite the fact that
William had been able to dress himself since he was three and never hesitated reminding him of it.
Indeed, the boy's small fingers demonstrated advanced levels of dexterity, sleekly moving across the
buttons of his pajamas with speed and accuracy unparalleled within his peer group. So why was
William unable to learn to control his bladder? His little brother was a frustrating mystery of contradictions, and Mycroft didn't like mysteries. Not the ones he was unable to solve, anyway.

With the eagerness of a child knowing they had a special occasion coming up, William leapt into his sibling's bed and giggled gleefully as he crawled in underneath the comforter, Bee firmly clasped in the bend of his elbow. The mattress squeaked out a protest at being pounced on so roughly, and though he knew it was unlikely, Mycroft worried that any sound out of the ordinary might rouse the slumbering Holmes patriarch.

"William," he admonished," what have I told you about---"

"Jumping in bed, I know!" the little boy said with scowl. "You always tell me not to do things." William crossed his eyes and adopted a purposely goofy expression as he lowered his childishly high voice to imitate the darker, nasal timbre of his elder brother, "You mustn't do this, or that, or anything, because it's all bad, and I'm never allowed to have any fun, because I'm boring as hell!"

The actual result did not sound much like Mycroft at all, and he would have been loath to admit that a four-year-old had managed to wind him up, so Mycroft bit back his retort and decided not to scold William for his cussing and apparent disrespect. He was sixteen, and his brother was only four. One of them had to be the bigger man, and it wasn't going to be little William.

"My feet are cold," Mycroft heard next, and he already knew he was going to feel a pair of small, cold feet insinuate themselves between his fleshy calves after he got in under the covers with his brother.

William was such a strange little creature, small and frail like a baby bird with pale, almost translucent skin and a body that perpetually failed to keep him sufficiently heated. The heaviest part of the boy was undoubtedly his head, made to look even larger by his thick, voluminous dark curls, and there were times when Mycroft wondered how his brother was even able to keep his head upright.

As expected, William's feet made contact with his legs through the fabric of his pyjamas the moment they were both in a horizontal position. "Stop that, William," Mycroft half-heartedly scolded but did not have the heart to physically shove the boy away.

"But my feet are cold," William said, as if that were the most obvious answer in the world and Mycroft was an idiot for not understanding his reasoning.

"Just go to sleep, little brother." Reaching for the night light to switch it off, Mycroft hoped that would be the last he'd hear from William that night. He was disappointed but not surprised when his brother proved him wrong once more.

"Can you tell me a story, Mycroft?"

"Not now, Will. It's too late. I'll tell you one tomorrow."

"First thing?"

"After you've had breakfast." Mycroft hoped Will would settle for that. He was way too tired to negotiate any further.

"Can you read to me?"

"Tomorrow, Will. Whatever you want."

The boy's breath momentarily hitched in his throat from excitement. "Can you read me 'Animal
Mycroft instantly regretted his generous offer to read "whatever his brother wanted". It was totally inappropriate. Of course William was going to choose something inappropriate. Next he'd be requested to read 'Lady Chatterley's Lover' out loud! "No, you're too young. You wouldn't understand it."

"Yes, I would!"

"You'd understand the words, but not the concepts. I'll let you read it yourself when you're seven."

Will pouted. "But it'll take ages before I'm that old."

"Not ages. A little over two years."

"Whatever. It feels like ages."

"We must think of something to keep you occupied while you're waiting, but right now, we really must go back to sleep."

Mycroft's bed was wide enough for two adults to sleep on separate sides, but William had no such intentions. He deftly tucked himself into the curve of Mycroft's larger body as if he belonged there and even gave a contented snuffle as he once again readied himself to sleep, hopefully without any more embarrassing, wet accidents to spoil his rest. The elder of the two reluctantly allowed it, thinking he could always extradite himself from the embrace once his baby brother had fallen asleep… perhaps, assuming he didn't give in first.

**

As of present, Sherlock had no trouble sleeping, not when he had some persuading from the medical staff and their drugs. Mycroft gave a quiet sigh. How useful sedatives would have been when they were younger, although back in his earliest years back he would have likely gotten wise to drugged food and drink. Perhaps a tranquilizer gun would have been useful...

Mycroft began to feel the pull of sleep as he watched his brother's motionless form, and he nearly considering giving into the urge when Anthea extended her arm, indicating her phone. With a quirk of the corners of her mouth, she showed a phone number on the screen, complete with extension: the therapist's personal number.

Mycroft tilted an eyebrow and might have smiled for the one moment of jest between himself and his PA.

"A little more discretion, a little less impertinence," he muttered. Certainly he always approached any and all scenarios with caution, but those he met did not have to know this. After all, this was the inspection of a potential therapist, not the interrogation of a criminal.

Please, he silently scoffed to himself. If his career - not to mention childhood - had taught him, anyone could be a threat.

Scrolling back on the screen display, Anthea revealed the previous number she had been able to seek out: the main number to the therapist's office. She stood silently at her employer's side as he made the call. When a receptionist answered, the man squandered no time in getting to the point.

"I need to place a meeting." A pause as he listened, then gave a response. "As soon as possible. It's a matter of haste."
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